

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies* (old series) can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

APHRAATES AND MONASTICISM: A REPLY.

I HAVE read with great interest the criticism made by my friend Dom Connolly on my interpretations of Aphraates¹. Among other things I have learned the exceedingly elusive nature of some of Aphraates' statements and the difficulty of extracting his exact meaning from them. As, however, I still adhere to my main contention, viz. that full communion in the early Syriac-speaking Church was reserved for those who were under a promise of strict continence, and that these persons were known as the *B'nai Q'yāmā*, I feel I owe it to the readers of the JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES to attempt to make my position clear.

Let me begin by stating some points about Aphraates in which Dom Connolly and I agree. We agree that Aphraates holds the ordinary Catholic theory that the full Christian life is only lived by the communicant, i.e. one admitted to the sacramental meal of the Eucharist, and further that admission to the Eucharist is confined to the baptized. Again, we agree that Aphraates considers the married state perfectly respectable and even honourable (*Aphr.* xviii 8), though greatly inferior to virginity. I do not know what civil formalities, if any, were needed in the Euphrates' Valley in Aphraates' day to constitute a legal marriage, nor do I know what customs were generally observed at weddings; but I do think that the language of Aphraates in vii 20 excludes the supposition that the Church gave an official blessing. Indeed, it is not maintained that there was any religious ceremony. Finally, I agree with Dom Connolly that *ʿyāḥṣūthā* means Penance.

And here I must make a concession to my opponent. I did not express myself with complete accuracy in *Early Eastern Christianity*, for I entirely left out the consideration of post-

¹ See *J. T. S.* July 1905, pp. 522-539.

baptismal sin,—sin, I mean, of so serious a nature as to require formal penance before reconciliation. Such sins, alas! do occur, but Aphraates hopes they will not be frequent, or the baptized penitents numerous: 'Do not thou come to need penance . . . This hand is reached out to sinners, but the righteous require it not . . . Have no need to ask for physic' (vii 17). At the same time, our Lord alone has been victorious over sin; all men have sinned, and so all need *ʿyāβūthā* (vii 1). Thus Aphraates contemplates a state of things in which the unbaptized penitents are necessarily many, the baptized penitents few and occasional. In the rapid sketch of early Syriac Church organization which I gave in my lectures, I assumed as normal the state which Aphraates regarded as an attainable ideal. I omitted the baptized penitents. This left the penitents co-extensive with the Catechumens.

The real difference which remains between Dom Connolly's view and mine is this: I believe that in the branch of the Church to which Aphraates belonged, if a baptized person lapsed into the state of matrimony, Communion was refused until such time as he or she was willing to live singly for the future. Dom Connolly, on the other hand, believes that the married person was allowed to be a communicating member of the Church.

This is the essential point on which all depends. If I am right, the *B'nai Q'yāmā* are simply the communicants; if Dom Connolly is right, they are a special order of ascetics.

Dom Connolly says (p. 524): 'What then could this act be by which penitents (in the sense of Catechumens) were to obtain forgiveness of their sins? It could only be one thing—baptism.' That is true in a sense, but in another it is not quite accurate, if we confine 'baptism' to its strictly technical meaning of the mere ceremony with its concomitant supernatural graces. You do not directly exhort a penitent catechumen to baptism; you exhort a penitent catechumen to 'repentance' (or 'penance'), in order that he may prepare himself to receive baptism. The state of *ʿyāβūthā* (repentance or penance), which the unbaptized person is exhorted to enter, is the necessary act on the part of the penitent; baptism is the act of the clergy and the Holy Spirit. We have seen that Aphraates looks upon serious lapses among the *B'nai Q'yāmā* as exceptional; I do not therefore

think it strange that he should regard his exhortations to 'Penitents' as issuing naturally in their baptism.

Aphraates illustrates his teaching about Baptism by the story of Gideon; indeed, he may almost be said to base his teaching on that story. Here is another point of difference between Dom Connolly and myself. I cannot help being persuaded that, after all, the story of Gideon, if pressed into details as Aphraates presses it, is fundamentally irrelevant. Gideon really has nothing to do with Christian Baptism. It does not help us even if we take the story of Gideon for actual history and hold the highest doctrine about baptismal grace. The fact remains, that by a miracle the unfit became immediately manifest after Gideon's water test, while in Christian Baptism the unfit do not become immediately manifest. It is agreed that Aphraates warned off as candidates for baptism 'those whose heart was set to the state of matrimony' (vii 20); even so did Gideon, when he would take none but eager volunteers and sent back the rest. But the parallel fails at the second stage, at least, if we suppose with Dom Connolly that it refers to the institution of a third class of Christians, distinct from the adherents who (for whatever reason) are not actually in communion, and the Solitaries who continue in full communion. Of course a man who has been baptized and then has lapsed cannot be baptized again. But for practical purposes the excommunicate and the Catechumens may be put together; they only differ by the details of the rite which is needed before they can become temples of the Spirit.

What happened to 'those whose hearts were set on matrimony' when they were warned off from baptism? They 'turned back' (vii 20). What happened to those who are 'slack and feeble' 'after baptism' (vii 21), those that correspond to Gideon's volunteer who 'lieth on his belly to drink the water' (vii 19)? These also were 'sent back'. Surely the state and privileges of those who 'went back' at first, and those who after trial are 'sent back' are the same. The second class have been tried by the water of baptism and found wanting; they ought to have turned back at first. Neither the one class nor the other is a scandal to the community; they are not blamed, but Church privileges are not for them, they are not to live the Church's

life, they have retired from the 'contest'. In one word, they are out of communion.

And when we ask what is the concrete meaning of 'lapse', 'slackness', 'feebleness', and the other vague terms which Aphraates (like most preachers) generally makes use of, we are reduced to the only definite explanation which Aphraates offers, viz. what is spoken of in vii 20, a heart set to the state of matrimony and the love of possessions¹.

The same conclusion appears to me to emerge from the xviiith tract of Aphraates 'Against the Jews and on Virginitv'. This was written, as Aphraates tells us, because he heard of a Jew 'who reviled one of our brethren, the sons of our Church², and said to him, "Ye are unclean who take no wives; we are more holy who beget and multiply seed in the world"' (xviii 12). Nothing in the tract tends to shew that the Jew aimed his attack upon a particular class of Christians and not upon the whole body. Nor does Aphraates hint in his reply at the existence of persons who are full members of the Body of Christ although they be married. Aphraates' hero is Moses. He challenges his Jewish opponent to shew that Moses, from the time that God spoke with him, ever 'attended to the business of matrimony' (xviii 4). 'Moses', says Aphraates, 'a prophet, the illumined eye of the whole people, who was standing continually before God, and mouth to mouth was speaking with Him, how could *he* be concerned with matrimony? If God spoke with Israel after being hallowed only for three days, how much better and more pleasing are those who all their days are hallowed and watch and are prepared to stand before God? Will not God more especially love them, and His Spirit dwell in them, as He says, "I will dwell in them and walk in

¹ According to the view advocated here and in *Early Eastern Christianity*, communion would be refused by Aphraates to those engaged in worldly affairs as much as to married folk. And by those engaged in worldly affairs I mean government officials, soldiers, those administering landed estate, and all those who practised a trade or profession for more than mere daily bread.

² 'Our brethren' might be used exclusively of monks, but 'Sons of our Church' can hardly be a technical term for ascetics as distinct from ordinary Christians; and it is evident here that the 'Sons of our Church' are celibate. As Dom Connolly points out, Aphraates seems to distinguish (at the end of Tract X) between the *Enai Gyãmá* and the 'Sons of our Faith'—in other words, between those who merely believe and those who have 'taken vows', baptismal or other.

them'' (xviii 5). And, in the same tract, a little further on, Aphraates explains that the Father and Mother whom a man forsakes when he marries a wife are God the Father and the Holy Spirit (xviii 10). Would he have ventured to say such a thing, if his Church admitted married folk to full communion?

A further illustration of the attitude of the Syriac-speaking Church of the fourth century may be found in St Ephraim's treatment of Marcion. As compared with Tertullian, he keeps a significant silence on two points. The first point is that he does not accuse Marcion of mutilating St Luke; he only says vaguely that because Marcion *added* what was false to the Gospel the Church cast him off and threw him away¹. The second point is that he is absolutely silent about Marcion's rejection of marriage. The first omission is easily explained from the known custom of the Syriac Church of Ephraim's day; Ephraim was accustomed to the *Diatessaron*, not to the Four Gospels, so that Marcion's Gospel merely struck him as something strange, not as a mutilated version of a familiar work. Similarly we may explain Ephraim's silence about the Marcionite rejection of marriage. Ephraim cannot have been ignorant of this; but, unless I am mistaken, it seemed to him neither strange nor reprehensible. An examination of the genuine works of Ephraim will, I venture to think, shew that he occupies much the same position as Aphraates. He considers faithful wedlock a respectable, though scarcely a holy, state, but virginity is exalted above it and Baptism makes virgins. He even knows of some wicked and unrepentant women who have already been baptized, women who now that they are married resort to heathen charms and washings. But he is exhorting them to repentance, and there is nothing to shew that they are at present, or that they would be in any case, admitted to full communion.

Before bringing these remarks to an end, let me once more make it clear that I do not accuse Aphraates and his fellow churchmen of advocating subversive social practices. It is not a question of social practice at all, but of Sacramental theory. Aphraates did not think marriage wicked; but I believe he regarded it as a disqualification for receiving the Sacraments, just as to-day marriage is a disqualification for receiving Holy

¹ *Ed. Rom.* v 485 B.

Orders among Roman Catholics. It is true that Aphraates says that if a *Bar Qyāmā* pledged to continence wishes for one of the *B'nāth Qyāmā* to keep him company it were better for him to take a wife openly (vi 4). But he does not say that such a one would expect to remain unexcommunicate. For my own part I cannot but think that the best such a one could hope for would be the fate sketched by Epiphanius, in words which Aphraates would have thoroughly approved (*Panarium*, Haer. lxi p. 512): 'He hath sin and punishment who casteth away God's virginity and despiseth the contest. For the athlete who violates the rule of the contest is scourged and cast out of the contest; even so he that violates virginity is cast out of that Race and Crown and Prize. But better is it to have punishment (κρίμα) and not damnation (κατάκριμα). For those who commit adultery, doing it secretly in order not to be brought to shame before men, under a pretence of the solitary life or chastity, make their profession not to men but to God who knoweth secret things and doth convict all flesh at His Coming, what each hath sinned. It is better therefore to have one sin and not many. It is better to fall out of the race and openly to take a wife in a legal way, and after virginity has been long lost to be brought back again as a penitent into the Church, as one who has done evil, as one who has fallen and been broken and has need of healing, and not be wounded every day by secret darts of evil launched by the devil.'

F. C. BURKITT.