John bar Zo’bi, An extract from a metrical homily

Late Syriac writers (13th century)

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On the foundation of the two holy sacraments of the Church, viz. Baptism and the Body and Blood of our Lord.

"I confess two sacraments in the holy Church,—one the sacrament of Baptism, and the other the sacrament of the Body and Blood. The foundation of these two is laid in the flesh of our Lord, and it is fit that I should explain this for the edification of the sons of the Church. Peter the Apostle wrote this account, and I am therefore bound to record it without any alteration. When our Saviour was baptized of John in the river Jordan, John beheld His greatness, i.e., His Divinity and humanity, and understood that He did not submit to be baptized on His own account, but in order to set us an example that we should be baptized even as He was. And this blessed John was graciously inspired to take from Christ's baptism a little leaven for our baptism. So when our Lord went up out of the water whilst the water was yet dripping from His body, John approached our Lord and collected these drops in a phial; and |152 when the day of his martyrdom arrived he committed it to his disciple, and commanded him to preserve it with great care until the time should come when it would be required. This disciple was John the son of Zebedee, who he knew would become our Lord's steward. Accordingly, after His baptism, our Lord called John, and made him His beloved disciple;

and when He was about to close His dispensation, and His passion and death drew nigh, on the evening preceding the Friday He committed His passover to His disciples in the bread and wine, as it is written, and gave to each a loaf; but to John He gave two loaves, and put it into his heart to eat one and to preserve the other, that it might serve as leaven to be retained in the Church for perpetual commemoration. After this, when our Lord was seized by the Jews, and the disciples through fear hid themselves, John was the only one who remained. And when they crucified the Lord in much ignominy with the thieves, John alone was present, determined to see what would become of Him. Then the chief priests ordered that the crucified ones should be taken down from the cross, and that their legs should be broken, in order that if yet alive they might die outright. The soldiers did this to the thieves, but when they came to our Lord and found that He was dead already, they brake

not His legs, but one of them with a spear pierced His side, and straightway there came out blood and water, of which John was witness. Now this blood is a token of the sacrament of the Body and Blood in the Church, and the water is a token of the new birth in believers.

John was the only one who perceived this sepa-rateness of the water and the blood, and he bare true witness thereof, as he says, that we might believe. He declares that he saw them unmixed, and that he did not take of them together, but of each separately. He took of the blood upon the loaf which he had reserved from the paschal feast, and he took of the water in that same vessel which had been committed to him by John the Baptist. The very blood of His body, therefore, mixed with the bread which He had called His body, and the water from His side mingled with the water of His baptism. After He rose from the grave and ascended up in glory to His Father, and sent the grace of His Spirit upon His disciples to endow them with wisdom, He commanded His apostles to ordain |153 in His Church that same leaven which they had taken from His body to be for the sacrament of His Body, and also for the sacrament of Baptism. And when the disciples went forth to convert the nations, they divided this leaven amongst themselves, and they took oil of unction and mixed it with the water which was kept in the vessel, and they divided this also amongst themselves to be a leaven for Baptism.

The loaf which John had, and which was mixed with the blood which flowed from His side, they bruised into powder, then mixed it with flour and salt, and divided it among them, each portion being put into a separate vessel to serve as leaven for the Body and Blood of Christ in the Church. This is the account which I have read, which bore the sign of Peter, and I have written it as I found it for the benefit of such as may read this our Epistle. The presbyter Rabban Shimoon, who first related the narrative to me, and then afterwards showed me the written account, can witness to the truth. From an ancient work by Yohanan Bar Zöobi.

Note to the online text John bar Zo'bi was a Nestorian writer who flourished around the end of the 12th century. He wrote metrical homilies, partly in seven syllable, partly in twelve-syllable verse, on the chief points of the Nestorian faith. One of these is mentioned by Assemani, Bibliotheca Orientalis, iii. 1, 309, note 1; and has been translated by G.P.Badger in The Nestorians and their rituals. This translation, which is not properly attributed by Badger, is given here. John bar Zo'bi is better known as a grammarian, however, and is one of the last writers of Syriac. He is not mentioned in S.Brock, A brief outline of Syriac literature (1997) however. So this information comes from W. Wright, A short history of Syriac literature, (1894) pp.258-9.

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them. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.

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