Sermon 52. On Maccabees

Severus of Antioch (c. AD 465–538)

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Bensly is online at Google books, but is hard to access outside of the USA, and the presence of this translation in it is generally unknown. The following notes appear in the introduction to Bensly's text: All the above documents are connected with the Commemoration of the Maccabean Martyrs which was held both in the East and West on the First of Ab (August 1). This festival was early in its origin and popular in its reception. All Syriac speaking Christians observed it. It is noticed in Monophysite, Nestorian, and Maronite liturgies; it has its proper lesson (Mat. x. 16 ff.) in the Melchite lectionary published by Miniscalchi; it is found noted at the present day in the Surgada or Calendar published for the Eastern Syrians at Urmi. As regards the documents found in this book it will be noticed that Nazianzen (p. 57, 1. 14) alludes to a yearly festival of the Maccabean Martyrs, Severus (p. 76,1. 6) speaks as though it were a customary thing to pronounce a panegyric upon them, and the colophon of the Anonymous Discourse mentions the First of Ab as the day of Commemoration. The Hymn of Ephrem which follows is found in part at least in use in the liturgies; and the Anonymous Poem, the last of the six documents, breaks out (1. 629) into the exclamation, How pleasant and fair is thy commemoration, O Martyr Shamon!

The two succeeding documents in this book are two different translations of a single Greek homily of Severus of Antioch, Monophysite Patriarch (A.D. 512-519). Fragments of the original text are given in Mai, Script Vet. Nova Collectio, t. ix. p. 725. The first form is edited from Brit Mus. Add. MS. 14599 (fol. 138, r. 2) = Wright DCLXXXVI. The MS. is dated A. Gr. 880 (= A.D. 569). It contains "the Second Volume of the πιθρόνιοι (homiliae cathedrales) of Severus, Patriarch of Antioch, in a more ancient translation than that of Jacob of Edessa, comprising homilies 31 to 59. It is perhaps the version of Paul of Callinicus (see Assemani B. O. II. 46)." The second form is edited from Brit Mus. Add. MS. 12159 (fol. 98, v. 2) = Wright DCLXXXV. This MS. contains the homilies of Severus translated by Jacob of Edessa A. Gr. 1012 (= A.D. 701). They are 125 in number and are divided into three parts or volumes. The MS. is dated A. Gr. 1179 (= A.D. 868). A translation of the first form of the homily on the Maccabees is given below.

The chief interest of this discourse of Severus is to be found not in its treatment of the Maccabean story, but in its references, somewhat meagre it is true, to the circumstances of Severus' own day. Plainly the Jews were still a great power in Antioch as they had been

in Chrysostom's time and long before. The Manichees were still to be reckoned with; and astrology was still a trouble to the Church. [Translated by W. Emery Barnes]

A Memra of Mar Severus

The Panegyric of the Maccabean youths is thought on account of the glory of the conflict they sustained to supply rich intellectual materials to those who pronounce it, but in that it surpasses all power (finding) of words it convicts of poverty those who panegyrize. And [even] in that which is before us (in the midst) they greatly fall short of the truth; for even a painter, if he see anything strange and unusual of endless beauty of created nature, and takes pains to copy this with pigments, paints indeed an image beautiful and very fair agreeing with this beautiful and lovely prototype; but he is overcome in that he is not able accurately by means of art to attain to that natural beauty. So we also desiring to paint with the pigments of words the spiritual beauty and the manly struggle of these seven youths for piety say indeed things beautiful and very beautiful, for such is the subject, but we stand at a distance from their greatness of deeds, as we are removed even from nature. For merely to hear that seven youths, who, being now of youthful age, went forth by the same gate of youth, who overtopped one another a little in age like the steps of a ladder, but nevertheless youths all of them, that they suffered one and the same death on behalf of piety, and were constant under (in) various kinds of tortures; and before them Eleazar elder and priest, and instructor rather in sufferings for piety than in the Law—and of their aged mother— that she endured manfully the scourgings of her sons and denied that she was a mother, what obedience unfearing! What a soul not dismayed! And what a wealth of words do the events need to be able to extol them to the height!

It putteth down therefore [the eloquence] which promises with sighs by study and art to write praises, and it flieth to that which is of heaven; and it lifteth up itself with its own wings and not with artificial and alien wings; and to God who crowns the contest of piety it cries with the prophet: Of thee is my glory in the great congregation. And as regards that which I bring to the remembrance of the Church, I have evolved a certain truly divine and secret thought from the struggle of these valiant martyrs. For it seems to me that the old man holds forth a type of the Law which has waxed old in the Scriptures, and that the youths who were disciples to the old man together with their mother fulfil [the conditions of] the type of the Church of the Nations, which was indeed of old without child, but afterwards had many sons; which formerly was taught by the Law with symbolic teachings of piety; concerning which Hannah the prophetess said: The barren hath born seven. Because the Synagogue whose sons were formerly many hath waxed feeble.

But bring before your eye as it were into that stadium of virtue him whom time hath not darkened, who contended that he might annul former things. Moreover that which is sung by every man when it sounds as it were in the ears new and undefined of those who desire sustenance which is old indeed in the passage of years, but new in affection and freedom from cloying..... (3) And Antiochus the tyrant sat and was cruel in his mind, in a certain lofty place, for such is loftiness of spirit that it causeth perverseness to those who are troubled

with it, namely, that they stand upon the earth with the rest but think they are fixed in the air when they walk on the tips of their nails, and lift up their eyebrows and exalt themselves as the cedars of Lebanon, as said the Holy Scripture, displaying their bareness of fruit and their haughtiness.

And there was standing before him girded in armour all the assembly of the soldiers (”Romans”) and of the servants bearing lances, a sight sufficient to cause astonishment (dismay) in the beholder. And there were set in the midst instruments of every kind of torture which threatened various kinds of punishment And there were some of them not yet made ready and as yet known only as a danger, which threatened by their very appearance bitter and violent death; and with scourgings very fearful, if it were possible, so to speak, lacerating with the body the soul also, and almost separating it from the bond of its fellow. (4) And first into the midst came Eleazar the priest, hoary of hair but shewing youth in mind. And he was urged to eat of heathen sacrifices and flesh of swine, and herein that he should renounce his pure reverence for the Law; for the tyrant thought that if he overcame this man, he would overcome the Law, yea the Priesthood itself; and he thought that to overthrow the old man was to dissolve these (Law and Priesthood). For with these was his war and not with the sons of men. And he hoped again that the master would be followed without a struggle also by the young men his disciples. But his hope and his expectation disappointed him. For with the body the old man and infirm triumphed over the torments, and strengthened the youths strong as they were in body, and proved that the Law was spiritual and the Priesthood heavenly. And he made known that there was in them a good and ready hope for the sake of which it was also right to suffer, even though these things were not yet established unto [? legal] form and writing.

For Antiochus indeed laughed much at him as though he were suffering in vain and [in vain] rejecting that pleasant taste of swine’s flesh; and he called it a servant of nature and he reckoned it folly that he should take death in exchange for a single food. For he was mixing his very threats and at the same time mocking the man and frightening [him]. And sometimes he spoke both pitying and being grieved for [his] weakness and old age and worthiness; and the self-same sneers his servants also held forth. Being armed even thus on the king’s side and helping him in every way, they were surrounding this old man as a tower of virtue. But he was not to be taken nor known nor subdued by them. (5) For he said: Our Law, O Antiochus, is verily The Law, for it is the work and gift of God and the teaching is not of one of the sons of men. Hearest thou not of Moses and his fast of forty days and the purity and brightness which came from him? And of the top of Mount Sinai and the cloud, and of Him who spoke to him from thence, and of the tables graven with the finger of God, which were written on both their sides, within and without; declaring to those who were heavy (brutish) in their minds the external things of the word, but to those who Feared hinting carefully the theory of the deep things of the Spirit?

From thence we derive our refusal of the food of the flesh of swine, for it teaches us to restrain gluttonous desires, and not to pursue after pleasure, and that therein we should maintain constancy.

Reverence therefore either the Lawgiver who is God, or the high estimation of the Law. For irrational beasts are permitted, as I have said, to make use of the abundance of nature, and to possess the lust of unrestrained pleasures. But for rational man the Law is appointed that he may neither eat nor do all the things that are natural; for some are withholden, and the rest are permitted him. On account of this we even call those barbarians beastly who bring all things under the tooth, obeying nature and not the Law. The counsels of the Law therefore are such as they are because they remove men from irrational follies. For I speak even to your untaught obedience and heathenishness. And what shall I say? For the sake of decency (that is reverence for the High-priesthood) I reverence the worked tunic which giveth oracles by means of various colours, making it known that it is fit for the high-priest to be clothed with the whole various host of virtues. I reverence the ephod of judgment and the Urim and Thummim which we who are worthy to exercise the priest's office carry upon our breasts when we enter within the Holy of Holies, that we may gain eloquence of soul and that the adversary may be turned back rather with a word than in wrath and in lusts; that we may be able to judge the things that are fitting, and as in a vision may receive revelations from above and teachings of truth, and may offer answers clear of falsehood to those who are initiated. I reverence the tiara which crowns the head of the priest, as [of] one who has mastered the passions.

I tremble at the sacred plate of gold seeing that he carries on it the name of God which is without reproach, for this is engraved on the seal, even things ineffable, that it may give light to the face and may direct him that he may see Qod only. As I think these thoughts and more than these, how can I betray the law of my fathers? And how can I be overcome by one irrational food? How can I defile my mouth? Herein thou hast, Antiochus, proof of my soul; try now my body also! (6) But he was smitten with these truly philosophic words as with goads, and now commanded that he should be scourged with torments. And immediately the cruel servants began smiting him with fists and jumping on him with kicks (bringing down kickings on him); and with blows of whips they broke and pierced his ribs and they carded his flesh and his blood ran down in streams.

But the old man fixed his eyes on the heavens, and running with swiftness the heavenly course, was oppressed with sweat and panting. And at last when he was not overcome even so as to utter one unsound word, he was delivered to the fire. And when the rest of his body was melted there after prayer on behalf of the people and dying words [addressed] to God, he flew away to the blessed roofs of the angels and the holy fathers. (7) But these youths with like divine learning embraced the struggles of the teacher, and meditated therein (in the learning) very diligently and carefully. And more than the teachings of the Law, the constancy of the old man which they learnt and enjoined while he suffered they kept in remembrance with a certain keen diligence. And in nothing at all did they fall short of that

which was learnt; they made known and proclaimed it, not the more by the tongue, but by the like manhood under tortures. For every one of the youths according to the order of his age came into the midst, the tyrant thinking that by means of the punishment inflicted on the first he would bring the others to submission. For who is there that would not faint with fear when he saw the flesh of his brothers cruelly lacerated ?

But this did not so fell out. But these armed ones, Piety's trained ones, shewed the snare set for their submission to be an occasion for the display of their manhood. For the eldest of the brethren thought that the example [set by] his teacher was due from him [also]. And the second one thought that the virtue of his brother, as well as that of his teacher (Rav), was due from him. And the third one contended to surpass those who had contended before him, and that he might be an example of manhood to the rest And all of them were associated together in the contests; and every one of them was glorified, not only in his own martyrdom but also in that of his fellow, for he who preceded was a kind of monument inspiriting him who followed, and a fresh type of encouragement, sufficient and able to draw him to like zeal. But the later ones who drew near to the stadium were more constant in the contests of their brothers than they who were suffering, and were made ready for that which was to follow, fearing lest they should be passed over, and [desiring] that they might display in the body a brotherly unanimity of constancy under (in) varied torments of skilled tormentors.

(8) For one of them was stretched upon the wheel and the bond of his joints was loosened, and when he was revolving with the circle of the wheel at the same time also he was burning, because coals of fire were placed beneath. And another one was stripped of his skin with claws of iron as a lamb is stripped. Another when his tongue was ordered to be cut out, of his own will put this forth for cutting off, declaring that even if one of those things hidden in the deep, that is to say, his inner parts, was demanded of him to give up to tortures, even this, if it were possible, he would willingly put forth. For each one of them was striving in regard to fresh kinds of tortures to shew fresh readiness of will, and to be tried in all his members and to bear many trials of [his] faithfulness, before his soul departed from his body. For they judged that it was [the function] of beasts to fall (as is generally the case) with one death, but that it better suits those who are made men to bear upon their bodies many marks of manhood, and to draw near together to the sword of the enemy, and that their blood should drop upon enemies and upon kindred. Such was the stedfastness of those manly youths that I will not occupy myself with many particulars, while I relate [once for all] as to every one of their tortures, that such was the prepared readiness for their conflicts of these invincible martyrs.

For as those who fix in crowns of gold these precious stones seek not one colour but various for the increase of one beauty, these men leapt with the same banner over strange and varied inventions of tortures and desired the crown of martyrdom which comes by contests of all kinds which diversify it as with precious stones. (9) When therefore the six brethren had finished the good course, and had attained to the crown of the City which is above, the youngest and seventh was left, prepared ("whetted") by six contests and exceedingly

vehement in the strength of piety. The tyrant being afraid of this one, tried to weaken him with flatteries and promises. And when he saw that he despised even these things, he commanded that his mother should stand by him, in order that he might take compassion as it were upon an old and childless woman; for he even thought that it would be enough, if she seemed only to be saying, Forbear, to weaken and subdue that athlete to nature. But it had escaped that self-sufficient one that it was she who had anointed the others for the contest and had sent them on their way to heaven. For when she was near, like the sum of virtuous strength, she was reminding (warning) these champions of piety, going round hither and thither and considering, and trembling lest any of her sons should stumble and fall from piety.

While she was testifying with each one and shared the torments with them and thought (seemed) that she burned indeed and was indeed cut in pieces, like a tree whose own children, the branches, are cut in pieces. And so to speak she cried the cry of Paul, My sons, of whom I travail again , until Christ be formed in you! (10) These things therefore she thought and taught and did secretly and not visibly. But when she stood openly by her youngest son according to the command of the tyrant, she cast in Hebrew speech one word not only into the ears of her son but into his mind. And she did not speak in his father-tongue to hide it from the servants, but that, she might remind the champion of the glorious deeds of the ancient and chief fathers (of the ancient fathers and patriarchs) and draw him to like zeal.

And she made the heart of the youth boil exceedingly and as if he were admiring bitter death, he hastened to swallow [it] as something sweet. And he cried out to those who stood by, Loose me from the bonds. And when he was readily loosed by those who erroneously supposed that he was changed from his manly mind, he leapt into every one of the frying pans which were set [ready] and flamed with fire, and he found more quickly even than he wished his desire and was added to the heavenly chorus of his brothers. And by him also his mother cheerfully (readily) stood and was tried with like ills. And when she was crowned in the seven contests of her sons, she herself crowned her sons, and shewed by deeds from what a root these manly shoots sprang and grew up. Not so [truly] did the candlestick of seven lights which made glorious the temporal tabernacle give light, as did this woman with the seven human (rational) lights, her sons, give light to the Church of Christ.

(11) Hear these things, O mothers, and so bring up your sons, and let them go to the church and urge them to the learning of sacred worda And strangle them not with youthful cares. For the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal, as Christ crieth who speaketh in Paul O holy mother! O manly soul of a woman's body! O harmony of sons who shewed us one patience and one virtue and one constancy, on behalf of one hope or one equal death. What will they say to these things, they who compound fate (compose horoscopes) from the planetary motion of stars ? For their mother did not bear them as the orbit(s) stood still, in the self-same hour, nor did they all have in themselves a special portion from one ruling-star ("ruling-influence "), according to the folly of the Manichaeans.

But because the Almighty Reason had (found) one thing in them, It prepared one and the same crown of martyrdom for them.

(12) These though they girded themselves from the Law's Teaching were forerunners of the martyrs of the Gospel, as John also was the forerunner of Jesus. For those three youths also and Daniel the man of virtuous desires were delivered from the fire of the Babylonian furnace and from the pit of lions, in order that they of Israel might turn the barbarians towards Jerusalem which is below, [and] by means of signs they were shewn to be virtuous. But the Maccabean youths, when the coming of Messiah and the resurrection were standing at the door, and when [that] Jerusalem whose architect and creator is God, and the preaching of the Kingdom of Heaven were about to be made known, departed from the stadium of conflict to heaven. And they first teach us the hope of the life to come and prepare us for it But otherwise, if this had not been thus ordered by Providence beforehand, would not the blind Jews say, Whom of the martyrs who testified for Christ have ye seen die in torments ? And these things they say because they look not to that glorious hope by the brightness of which we shine by the grace and mercy of Him who called us to this. To whom be glory for ages. Amen.

[Selected notes]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.