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John the Solitary's Homily on the Poor in Spirit: Edition and Translation

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines an early fifth-century homily by John the Solitary of Apamea on Matthew 5:3, which I have called *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*. Mar John wrote the homily to other monks, arguing for the importance of renunciation and voluntary poverty in the life of a monk and exhorting them to develop this practice in their own lives. Although he is understood to be a prominent and influential author during his time, Mar John has received relatively little attention by modern scholarship. Neither an edition nor a translation of the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* has been published, and the work remains almost entirely unstudied. The primary goal of this project is to produce a Syriac edition and English translation of the homily, in order that it might be accessible to scholars and students alike.

In addition to the edition and translation, the thesis contains a rhetorical analysis, which identifies and examines Mar John's use of Scripture, from mere echoes to direct quotations, throughout the homily. Scripture is prominent in the homily; Mar John echoes or quotes the Bible over twenty-five times. After collecting and categorizing the references, they have been studied in order to ascertain how they are used by Mar John within the argument presented in the homily. The analysis clearly shows that he uses Scripture to present exemplars of renunciation for the monks to imitate, to offer practical advice and wisdom, and to provide additional authority to the argument in general.

John the Solitary's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*: Edition and Translation

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Daniel Robert Marolf

May 2017

This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Council of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

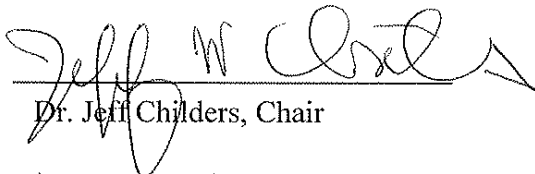


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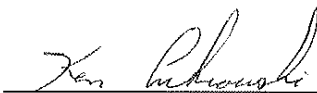
Thesis Committee



Dr. Jeff Childers, Chair



Dr. Kelli Gibson



Dr. Ken Cukrowski

To my beautiful wife, Lindsay

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This thesis project would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of several individuals. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Jeff Childers, who has patiently and tirelessly assisted me throughout this project. He went above and beyond in order to help me complete this project, and I can honestly say that I would have been entirely unable to complete it without his guidance and assistance. I am also thankful to Kelli Gibson for her advice and support in assisting with several especially difficult passages of text. Additionally, I would like to thank Ken Cukrowski, who is probably unaware of how needed his encouragement was in the early stages of translation. To these three, all members of my thesis committee, I am very grateful. Their positive influence can be seen throughout the pages of this thesis project. I am also grateful to the Center for the Study of Ancient Religious Texts (CSART) for purchase of the manuscript images and several other resources that enabled me to be able to do this project in the first place. I am thankful to my parents, whose prayers and encouragement inspired me often. Finally, I thank my wife, Lindsay, who stood by my side and encouraged me during the numerous times that I doubted myself, while working through this difficult text. Her unwavering support and reassurance throughout this entire project have been vital. I am incredibly lucky to have her.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the early beginnings of the faith, starting with Judaism and extending into Christianity, the Holy Scriptures have held an important place in the eyes of the faithful. Enormous amounts of attention throughout the history of the Church have been paid to the reading and interpretation of the Bible, and many additional texts have been produced that interpret, discuss, and comment upon the texts of Scripture. Many of these spiritual treatises written about Scripture are then themselves highly revered, as readers find them to be illuminating and helpful aids for reading the Bible and attempting to live the life of faith. Unfortunately, many of these writings have been lost over time and many others simply remain unexamined and inaccessible to the wider public. Such is the case with John of Apamea's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*.

Mar John¹ was an influential, Christian monk, who wrote spiritual treatises during the first half of the fifth century. While his influence on several important authors within the Syriac tradition has been noted by scholars, relatively little attention has been given to his work as a whole. Consequently, many of his works have been identified, but most have not been edited or translated, let alone studied. His *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*, an exhortatory work based on Matthew 5:3, is one of these works. The primary goal of this study is to contribute to the study of Mar John's corpus by providing an edition and

1. "Mar" is a Syriac word, which means "Lord." This is often a word used to refer to God, but it also came to be used as a title of great respect and reverence, used of saints and spiritual heroes.

translation of this treatise. Chapter 1 of this thesis provides an introduction to Syriac asceticism, to Mar John as a historical figure and as an author, and to this spiritual treatise. The Syriac edition and English translation can be found in chapter 2, which has been structured in such a way as to be helpful and accessible to both scholars of Syriac and those who are not. The edition was transcribed and edited, utilizing the best current practices of paleographical analysis² and text editing³ in order to produce a Syriac version of the text. Additionally, the most current grammatical and lexical tools were applied in order to ensure an accurate reading. Of particular interest is the way in which Mar John uses Scripture throughout the homily. This is examined in Chapter 3, which provides a rhetorical analysis of the manner by which Mar John uses Scripture to undergird his argument throughout the homily. These references to Scripture were identified and categorized using rigorous text-critical criteria for patristic citations. Then, they were analyzed for their rhetorical function based on a method regarding intertextuality, which was modified from Richard Hays' *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*.⁴

Syrian Asceticism

Since Mar John and his work are both products of Syrian asceticism and monasticism, something must be said about this movement in general. Prior to the fourth century, Syriac Christianity is somewhat unknown. There are very few primary source materials that exist prior to the fourth century when authors such as Ephrem and Aprahat

2. E.g. see Alessandro Bausi, ed., *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: An Introduction* (Hamburg: COMSt, 2015), 252-66.

3. Text editing will follow the standards set for the eminent series, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO).

4. Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

began to write.⁵ For this reason, we will need to rely some on the ascetic and monastic movements in general. Marilyn Dunn defines asceticism as “a discipline or collectivity of disciplines which aim at the transformation of the self and the construction of a new one.”⁶ Most often, this involved some form of “abstention or avoidance”⁷ of things which were perceived to be “stumbling blocks to the pursuit of heroic personal or communal goals, life styles, and commitments.”⁸ However, at the heart of asceticism was the belief that human beings could be transformed and improved through ascetic practice. For this reason, ascetics engaged in practices like fasting, renunciation, and celibacy in order to help themselves achieve a single-minded focus on the things of God and become ever more transformed into his likeness. Their focus on self-disciplining the body was not simply for its own sake, but for the sake of improving “the self.”⁹

Specifically, Syriac asceticism and monasticism of the fourth and fifth centuries has been characterized in a couple different ways. First, it has been viewed as more radically ascetic than similar movements in the West. While there seems to be some truth in this assertion due to groups such as the Stylites arising in the East, Sidney Griffith encourages students of Church History to hold off on broad, sweeping characterizations. Additionally, he notes that some of this understanding of Syrian asceticism can be ascribed to the mistaken attribution of five Syriac ascetic texts to St. Ephrem the Syrian,

5. Sebastian Brock, “Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 362.

6. Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 6.

7. Vincent Wimbush, “Introduction” in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 10-1.

8. *Ibid.*, 2.

9. Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 17.

when they were actually written long after Ephrem's death.¹⁰ Second, much evidence exists to suggest that ascetics in Syria tended to remain in and around the church, providing wisdom and guidance. The offices of the *ihīdayē* ("solitaries")¹¹ and *bnay qyamā* ("children of the covenant") were created for these purposes and were highly respected within the church.

Scripture was a highly significant and important part of the life of the ascetic. The monks viewed the words of Scripture (and the writings of the saints of the Church) not as simply limited to the past, but as words and ideas that transcend and that could be lived into.¹² Furthermore, they understood Scripture to have more than just one meaning. Therefore, they could read portions of the Old and New Testament and reinterpret those texts for their own times and places. Additionally, the monks primarily interpreted Scripture by putting it into practice. As Douglas Burton-Christie eloquently explains, "In the desert, Scripture's surplus of meaning endured not in the form of commentaries or homilies but in acts and gestures, in lives of holiness transformed by dialogue with Scripture."¹³ In this way, people came to be influenced both by reading the texts and by experiencing the texts embodied in a holy person, and a person's holiness was defined "by how deeply [that] person allowed himself or herself to be transformed by the words

10. Sidney Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Richard Valantasis and Vincent Wimbush (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 224-5.

11. Discussed later in conjunction with Mar John and his likely inclusion in this office.

12. Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20.

13. *Ibid.*, 20.

of Scripture.”¹⁴ As a product of this specific time and context, Mar John conceives of Scripture in these ways, and this understanding of Scripture’s way of functioning within ascetic life and practice will prove to be an important factor in the rhetorical analysis section (chapter 3).

John the Solitary of Apamea

Having now considered Mar John’s thought world, we must now ask some questions about the man himself. Over the course of history, Mar John the Solitary has been confused with a few other “Johns”; indeed scholars have debated exactly how many “Johns” with which this author should be identified. Some have said that there is, in fact, just the one John, and others have claimed as many as three.¹⁵ However, current scholarship seems to favor the identification of at least two or three, so that it is important to distinguish our Mar John:

1. A certain John of Apamea, whom Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523) rejected as heretical (also referring to him as “John the Egyptian”).
2. A certain John the Solitary, whom Timothy I of the Church of the East condemned in 786-7 CE; he seems to have been referring to an eighth-century writer, not the writer of this homily.
3. The third John, usually referred to as John of Apamea or John the Solitary, both names of which seem to be referring to the same person.¹⁶

14. Ibid., 23.

15. René Lavenant, “Le problème de Jean d’Apamée” *OCP* 46.2 (1980): 367-90. In this article, Lavenant describes the arguments of both Werner Strothmann and Irenée Hausherr. Strothmann is the main proponent for the singular John theory. Hausherr argues for the three-John theory.

16. Robert Kitchen, “Yohannan Ihidaya,” *EDSH*, 442; Mary Hansbury, *John the Solitary On the Soul*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 32 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), viii; Sebastian Brock, *A Brief History of Syriac Literature*, Môrân ’Eth’ô 9 (Kottayam: SEERI, 1997), 31-2.

This third John is given credit for the authorship of several works, including a commentary on Qohelet (Ecclesiastes),¹⁷ a discourse on prayer,¹⁸ several letters and dialogues,¹⁹ a discourse on the soul,²⁰ and several homilies on the beatitudes, including the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*,²¹ which is the subject of the present thesis. In short, the author of the latter homily is taken to be the third John listed above and is to be distinguished from the others listed.

Mar John the Solitary was an influential Christian monk during the first half of the fifth century.²² He lived in and wrote from Apamea, which was a Hellenistic city within Syria (about 90 km south of Antioch).²³ Due to the Hellenistic influence on the city as well as evidence found in his works, he was most likely educated both in Syriac and in Greek, but his writings have been preserved solely in Syriac. Furthermore, it is nearly universally believed that all of the texts attributed to him were written in Syriac in the first place.²⁴

17. Werner Strothmann, *Kohelet-Kommentar des Johannes von Apamea*, GOF I,30 (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1988).

18. Sebastian Brock “John the Solitary, On Prayer” *JTS* 30 (1979), 84-101.

19. Sebastian Brock, “Letter to Hesychius,” in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 78-100.

20. Hansbury, *John the Solitary On the Soul*.

21. Strothmann notes that Mar John has extant homilies on Matthew 5:3, 4, 8, and 9 (Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea* [PTS 11; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972], 13-4).

22. Kitchen, “Yohānann Ihidaya,” 442; Thomas A. Carlson, and David A. Michelson, “Apamea – ܐܡܝܢܐ,” *The Syriac Gazetteer*, <http://syriaca.org/place/11.html>.

23. Lucas van Rompay, “Apamea,” *EDSH*, 23-4.

24. Hansbury, *John the Solitary On the Soul*, ix; Brock, *Brief History of Syriac Literature*, 32.

From his title, “The Solitary” (*īḥīdayā*), one can ascertain some additional things about him. In the fourth-century writings of Ephrem and Aphrahat, *īḥīdayā* was a term used to describe both men and women who were typically celibate (therefore, single with regards to their bodies), single-minded in purpose and devotion to God, and who had a special relationship with Jesus Christ, “The Single One,” of whom the term was also used.²⁵ The *īḥīdayē* (plural form of *īḥīdayā*) occupied a special place and status within the church, not as ministers, bishops, or deacons as those offices came to function. Sidney Griffith compares the office of *īḥīdayā* to that of the virgins and widows in the New Testament and early church.²⁶ Therefore, Mar John would have been recognized by the designation “the Solitary” (*īḥīdayā*) as a holy man with some authority to speak on spiritual matters.

Mar John’s reception by later authors is impressive. He is cited by Babai (ca. 551-628) as a prominent spiritual figure, placed among the ranks of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) and Evagrius of Pontus (ca. 345-399).²⁷ Dadisho of Beth Qatraya, a prominent seventh-century ascetic and author, quotes Mar John frequently and refers to him as “a seer and a prophet.”²⁸ Additionally, Sebastian Brock has shown that Mar John heavily influenced Joseph the Visionary (eighth-century) and Isaac of Ninevah (late seventh-century) in their writings.²⁹ All of these authors come from the Church of the

25. Sidney Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria,” 224-5.

26. *Ibid.*, 223.

27. Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 3 vols. CSCO 500 (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 1984) 3:99.

28. *Ibid.*, 99.

29. Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, 79.

East, but Mar John's influence extended even into the ranks of the Syrian Orthodox Church, as he is honored by Moses Bar-Kepha (d. 903), Dionysius Bar-Salibi (d. 1171), and Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286).³⁰ Having secured such a following by prominent theologians on both sides of a theological divide, Mar John is clearly influential. Furthermore, André de Halleux suggests that Mar John can be seen as a link between Aphrahat, Ephrem, and *the Book of Steps*, from the early period of Syriac patristic literature, and the later authors Philoxenos and Saint Isaac the Syrian. He posits the potential dependence of Philoxenos on Mar John's corpus.³¹ Several ancient authors also adopt "his conceptualization of the tripartite 'orders' of the spiritual life,"³² as he creates a threefold schema, distinguishing between the way of the life of the body, that of the soul, and that of the spirit.³³

Unfortunately, even though he is noted as having influenced so many people, he has received relatively little attention from modern scholarship. Over the past hundred years, only four of his works have been translated into English,³⁴ two into French,³⁵

30. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 3:99.

31. André de Halleux, "Le Milieu Historique de Jean le Solitaire: Une Hypothèse," in *III Symposium Syriacum, 1980: Les contacts du monde syriaque avec les autres cultures* (ed René Lavenant; Orientalia Christiana Analecta 221; Roma: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1983), 299-305.

32. Kitchen, "Yohannan Ihidaya," *EDSH*, 442.

33. Hansbury, *John the Solitary On the Soul*, xi; Brock, *Brief History of Syriac Literature*, 31-2.

34. Brock, "John the Solitary, On Prayer," 84-101; Brock, "Letter to Hesychius," *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*; Hansbury, *John the Solitary On the Soul*; Lucas Van Rompay, "An Ascetic Reading of the Book of Job. Fragments from a Syriac Commentary Attributed to John the Solitary," *LM* 119 (2006): 1-24.

35. Irénée Hausherr, *Dialogue sur l'âme et les passions des hommes, Jean le Solitaire*, OCA 120 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1939); René Lavenant, *Jean d'Apamée, Dialogues et Traités*, SC 311 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984).

two into German,³⁶ and one has been published just in a Syriac edition.³⁷ Many other works of Mar John remained untranslated and relatively unstudied, including three other homilies on beatitudes.³⁸ More work needs to be done on this eminent author, and the hope is that this thesis contributes in some way to filling this major gap in knowledge of study of Mar John the Solitary.

Homily on the Poor in Spirit

The present thesis is based on Mar John's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit (HPS)*, which is a homily formed around Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." As Manel Nin points out, the text has less to do with exegesis and more to do with exhortation.³⁹ In other words, the homily does not necessarily try to ascertain the original meaning of Jesus' words, as one might expect to see in a modern commentary on Matthew, but instead attempts to use these words as a platform for a discussion about renunciation. In the homily, Mar John primarily addresses other monks, or as the first line of the homily describes them, "...those who seek to draw near to the virtuous glory of the perfect way of life."⁴⁰ He never uses terms that mean "monk" or "ascetic," but one can infer from his use of the word "brothers"⁴¹ and the

36. Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea*; Strothmann, *Kohelet-Kommentar des Johannes von Apamea*.

37. Lar Gösta Rignell, *Briefe von Johannes dem Einsiedler* (Lund: Ph. Lindstedts Univ.-Bokhandel, 1941).

38. William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838*, 3 vols. (London: British Museum, 1870-2), 2:454-8; Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea*, 13-4.

39. Manel Nin, "Il Commento di Giovanni il Solitario a Mt. 5,3," *The Harp* 5 (1992): 33.

40. *HPS* 1 (pg. 20 below).

41. *HPS* 11 (pg. 30 below) and *HPS* 19 (pg. 36 below); I translated it as "brothers and sisters" in both cases for the sake of gender neutrality (see pg. 16-7), but the word is literally "brothers."

contents of his discussion about separation from the world⁴² and union with Christ,⁴³ that his primary audience is, precisely, fellow ascetics.

Some work has already been done on this homily by Manel Nin. He published an article in Italian that gives an overview of the text⁴⁴ and translated several of homilies on the beatitudes in his dissertation.⁴⁵ Other than Manel Nin, there has been no work done on Mar John's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*. It remains effectively unedited and untranslated, leaving a gap in our knowledge of this important ascetic author. This thesis aims to bridge that gap, providing a Syriac text and English translation of the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*. The hope is that this work can help gain some traction in the field of Syriac studies for the study of John the Solitary.

42. *HPS* 1 (pg. 20 below).

43. *HPS* 7 (pg. 27 below).

44. Nin, "Il Commento di Giovanni il Solitario a Mt. 5,3."

45. Nin's dissertation was completed for the Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum in Rome, Italy, in 1992. It was entitled "Juan el Solitario. Los Cinco Discursos sobre las Bienaventuranzas." From the name and additional research, it seems that this work was a text and translation into Spanish of five homilies of John the Solitary on the Beatitudes. In my research, I have only been able to identify four homilies on the beatitudes by Mar John, so I am unsure what fifth homily Nin is referencing. Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to consult this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

HOMILY ON THE POOR IN SPIRIT: EDITION AND TRANSLATION

This edition and translation of Mar John the Solitary's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* is intended to be accessible and helpful to both those who read Syriac and those who do not. To that end, the goal has been to produce the Syriac text with an English translation in parallel columns. On the English side, important notes and alternative translations will be provided in order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the Syriac and appreciation of the author's message, his reliance on Scripture, and so forth. In the Syriac column, the reader will find notes about the manuscript and uncertain or corrected readings. Both columns divide their texts into numbered paragraphs, devised by the editor for easier readability and to aid the reader in comparing the text and translation. Also, references to locations in the manuscript will consist of the folio number along with an "r" (for *recto*) or a "v" (for *verso*) to describe the orientation of the page. For example, the lemma of the homily starts on the bottom of the right column on the *recto* side of folio 14. In this case, the notation would be 14r.

Editorial Notes

The Syriac edition below is a diplomatic text based on BrM 573/Add 17170. This manuscript was chosen as the base text for two main reasons: (1) Add 17170 contains the full text of Mar John's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*. There are four other manuscripts that contain parts of this text, and two of those also provide the full text as well. The other

two only contain minor sections.¹ (2) Add 17170 is the oldest extant manuscript of this homily. This manuscript comes from the eighth century, and three of the other four manuscripts containing this homily are from the tenth century or later. The fourth is Add 12170, which is dated between the eighth and ninth centuries, but it contains only a fragment of the homily.² Therefore, Add 17170 contains the oldest complete version of the homily, making it the best choice for the text presented here.³ Additionally, this manuscript is very well preserved and produced by a relatively legible hand.

The basic details of the manuscript are as follows:⁴ it is a $9\frac{1}{2}$ in. by $6\frac{5}{8}$ in. vellum manuscript, consisting of 88 leaves with two columns on each page, and recording various works of Mar John the Solitary, including works covering two additional beatitudes, Matthew 5:8 and Matthew 5:9. Due to a note in the colophon in which the scribe records the date, this manuscript can be dated confidently to between 774 and 775 CE. The hand is that of a regular estrangelo, using black ink, aside from a rubricated lemma and some sporadic rubrication in the punctuation.⁵ Every folio has two columns per side, with between 25 and 38 lines per column. The *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*,

1. Strothmann, *Johannes von Apamea*, 13.

2. Ibid., 13.


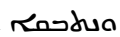
3. The scope of this thesis is limited, so I am just creating a diplomatic text instead of a critical edition. As I mention later in the paper, producing a critical edition would be an important next step in the study of this text.

4. William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts*, 2:454-8; I am indebted to the Center for the Study of Ancient Religious Texts (CSART) for the purchase of these manuscript images for the use of my thesis project and for several other helpful resources.

5. For further info on paleography and codicology, see: Bausi, *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: An Introduction*, 252-66; and William Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2002), 3-44.

specifically, occurs on folios 14r–27r (13 leaves), in a section that has roughly 30 lines per column.

The Syriac edition below maintains the use of the estrangelo script. Rubrication is indicated in the edition by the use of underlining. This occurs within the Syriac text of the lemma. However, the red ink within the punctuation markings throughout has been tacitly omitted. The scribe strives to justify the lines in order to produce uniform columns, producing features that are tacitly omitted from the presentation of the text. For the sake of illustration, here are the main techniques the scribe uses to justify the text:

- (1) In certain cases, the scribe splits a word, placing the first part of it on one line and finishing it on the next. He gives no indication for having done this, but simply expects the reader to notice and understand. One such case occurs on 14r with the word, .
- (2) Oftentimes, the scribe lengthens the distance between letters in the same word, lengthening the horizontal joiners within word. Similarly, he may draw a horizontal line directly after a word, in order to complete the line of the column.
- (3) In several instances, the scribe writes a *serto* letter *alef* rather than an *estrangelo* letter *alef* in order to conserve space at the end of a line. For example, he does this with the word  on 19v.

In the Syriac column, to indicate a transition between the folio, the folio number has been placed in parentheses along with either “r” or “v,” indicating which folio and on what side the following text can be found.⁶

6. This system is omitted from the English column because it is not helpful in aiding the translation and the paragraph numbering system is already in place to line up the texts.

All diacritical and vowel marks are reproduced without alteration as they appear in Add 17170. As is often the case in Syriac manuscripts, the scribe is somewhat inconsistent in his use of punctuation. The edition represents the punctuation as accurately and consistently as can be determined from the manuscript. Also, the scribe uses some punctuation marks for which no simple glyphs occur in available electronic fonts. These are described briefly below:

- (1) Three dots arranged in a vertical line, of which the top and bottom are red and the middle dot is black. A good example can be seen on 14v. Lacking the glyph for this mark, the full stop or paragraph marker (⋈) has been used in the edition.
- (2) Three horizontal dots, of which the left and right dot are red and the middle one is black. A good example of this mark occurs on 15r, and it will be treated just like the horizontal dots (discussed above), using a full stop (⋈).
- (3) Three diagonal black dots. Two instances of this are on 16r. Lacking the glyph, I have attempted to replicate it, by placing a period immediately after a slanted partial stop (e.g. .Მ).

While there are no discernible erasures in the portion of the manuscript in which this homily occurs, there are several clear instances of at least two other hands at work. Throughout the homily, a later scribe or reader added “cross-like” symbols⁷ in the margins next to the text.⁸ They appear to mark off sections of text either for liturgical or personal reading and reference. These marginal symbols are not original and have been

7. In one case, there is a pair of what look to be “upright” *shin* used in a similar way to these “cross-like” symbols.

8. In a few instances, one can recognize a faint earlier cross in the margin that has faded, with another cross inked on top of it.

omitted from the edition.⁹ Additionally, there are situations where a later hand has re-linked faded text, but careful examination indicates they are not corrections as such. These occur sporadically and have been tacitly omitted from the edition as well. Lastly, in several places, words appear to have been added either at the very end of a line or in the gap between words. Since it is not clear whether these were additions by a later hand or just shortly after by the same or contemporaneous scribe, these have been footnoted in the Syriac edition.

Translation Policy

The English translation of the homily was created with the following principles and guidelines in mind:¹⁰

Dynamic Equivalency

This translation of the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* is intended to remain as close as possible to the sense of the text. Wherever possible, the syntactical structure of the Syriac has been retained, but not in cases where it would lead to an unnecessarily confusing translation. In such cases, the intention is to preserve the meaning of the Syriac text, not simply the words, and to provide a meaning for meaning translation. Furthermore, attention has been given to a sensible rather than formal rendering of idioms. For instance, on 15v Mar John uses the phrase ܠܝܬܐ ܠܝܬܐ (*šaqḷā` wašrāyā`*), which literally means “taking and releasing.”¹¹ However, this is a known Syriac idiom,

9. For the reader who would like to examine these, refer to folio 15v in the manuscript for one example.

10. This translation method is based on the Translation Policy of *The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation: Matthew* (Jeff Childers, *The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation: Matthew* [Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012], xvii-xxi.).

11. *HPS* 6 (pg. 25 below).

meaning “trade and commerce.”¹² This translation will take idioms, such as this one, into account, utilizing dynamic translations as opposed to woodenly literal renderings of words. Another example comes from Mar John’s style of writing, which involves the use of complex syntactical forms. The Syriac language accommodates this style very nicely, but such is not the case in English. In several places in the homily, Mar John composed “sentences” which are half a page long or more. In these situations, the sentence has been broken up into shorter sentences for the sake of providing a more readable English translation.

Gender Inclusivity

The Syriac language often uses gendered language for objects and concepts that would be considered neutral gender in English. In these cases, where the context indicates gender neutrality, the translation opts for gender inclusive language. This has been done in several ways, but here are a few examples: (1) on 15v, there is a sentence which literally reads, “For there is not *one* from among people who seeks to draw near to the height of good things unless first, *he* has been convinced by *himself* to possess very little.”¹³ There is nothing distinctly masculine to the concept in view here, so the translation uses the plural to create a more gender neutral rendering.¹⁴ (2) Earlier on that same column (15v), there is a sentence which literally reads, “For *he* whose mind is bound by wealth cannot withdraw from *him* (i.e. the wealth) unless *his* mind assents to

12. Jessie Payne Smith, “*ܐܬܝܬܐ*,” *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902), 594.

13. *HPS* 6 (pg. 26 below).

14. “For no one seeks to draw near to the height of good things unless first *they* have been convinced by *themselves* to possess very little.”

meagerness of *his* possessions.”¹⁵ The gendered language in this sentence makes it more confusing to read and understand, so the translation uses “it” as the direct object which refers to the wealth (a grammatically masculine word), removes extraneous pronouns, and uses “his or her mind” because the gender of the person is not directly specified.¹⁶

(3) If the sentence ever begins with “the one who...,” “the person who...,” or “whoever” and is followed by a pronoun, that is an instance of gender neutrality. The Syriac solely uses masculine pronouns in this case, but this translation will alternate between genders. There are, however, some instances where the context requires a gender-specific reading, and, in these cases, the grammatical gender has been retained. For example, on 24r, Mar John gives Moses as an example of incredible self-emptying. In all of the places where Moses is the subject, Mar John’s use of masculine pronouns has been retained.

Explicit subjects and objects

In general, Syriac, when compared to English, is more comfortable with vague or unstated subjects and objects. The Syriac reader is expected to be able to make sense of these instances. However, in the English language, implicit or vague subjects and objects tend to be made more clear and explicit. To avoid ambiguity, implied and/or vague subjects or objects have been bracketed in my translation for the sake of readability in the places where a more literal rendering of the Syriac would lead to confusion in the English. For example, on 15r Mar John literally writes, “For *they* are lower than *their* majesty just as *their* knowledge is elevated above those who are in the world.” Two different groups are being contrasted in this sentence, but Mar John uses third person,

15. *HPS* 6 (pg. 26 below).

16. “For one whose mind is bound by wealth cannot withdraw from it unless his or her mind assents to meagerness of possessions.”

masculine, plural pronouns to talk about both. I have translated the text to read, “For [the former] are lower than the majesty [of the latter] just as the knowledge of [the latter] is elevated above those who are in the world.”¹⁷ This translation improves the readability of the passage by removing the ambiguity.

Translating “Poverty” and Other Loaded Ascetic Terms

In this homily, Mar John uses several different words that all essentially mean “poverty.” These words are: *meskīnūtā* (used 11 times), *snīqūtā* (9 times), *msarqūtā* (5 times), and *ṣrīqūtā* (2 times). These are translated contextually, but for the sake of continuity, I have attempted to use the synonyms consistently. All five times that *msarqūtā* occurs in the text, I have translated it “renunciation,” and I have not used renunciation as a translation for any other word.¹⁸ I have translated *ṣrīqūtā* once as “voluntary poverty” and once as “need.” For the nine instances of *snīqūtā*, I have translated it as “poverty” five times, “neediness” twice, and “need” twice. Finally, all eleven instances of *meskīnūtā* have been translated “poverty.”

In the English translation, instances of citation and allusion to Scripture are indicated in the footnotes. For those places where biblical references are fairly explicit, the verse reference is simply stated in the footnote (Matthew 5:3). For places where they are implicit or understated, the reference has been suggested to the reader in a footnote, using the Latin abbreviation for “compare” (cf. Matthew 5:3). In the analytical section

17. *HPS* 5 (pg. 23-4 below).

18. I have chosen “renunciation” as a translation of *msarqūtā* because of the inherent theological connotations of this word. *Msarqūtā* is a word that was created based on Christ’s kenotic act in Philippians 2. For this reason, I went with “renunciation” because I think it carries some of the weight of the Philippians 2 passage, while remaining true to what Mar John is trying to discuss. For more discussion on this topic, see Sebastian Brock, “Radical Renunciation: The Ideal of *msarqūtā*,” in *To Train His Soul in Books*, ed. Robin Darling Young and Monica Blanchard (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 122-33.

(Chapter 3), more explanation will be provided in categorizing the citations and allusions based on their varying levels of explicitness, but these two categories provide sufficient nuance in the translation.

Footnotes in the English column are intended to help non-Syriac readers with alternative translations and explanations for the text. For this purpose, several other notations and abbreviations can be commonly found.

- Lit. stands for “literally” and has been used in cases when I have had to stray further away from the literal meaning of the Syriac text. In these cases, I have provided a more “wooden” and literal translation of the Syriac.
- Footnotes that begin with the phrase “in other words” provide clarifications of vague or confusing concepts or sentences. In places where I think something needs to be explained to facilitate understanding, I use a footnote like this.
- Bracketed words are used for anything added by me to clarify the translation of the text. As mentioned earlier, the Syriac language can tend towards ambiguity, especially with regard to subjects and objects. In cases where I think that there might be unnecessary ambiguity (not limited to just ambiguous subjects and objects), I have supplied words in the translation, but bracketed them off, so that the reader knows they are my inclusions.

Finally, Mar John’s *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* is a challenging text. The author is capable of writing highly sophisticated, discursive prose with a great deal of abstract

concepts and sustained argumentation. His style is complicated by regular shifts in genre (e.g. from discourse to doxology to exhortation, and back again). For the sake of rendering the style and argument as transparent as possible, this translation strives for a very literal rendering of the Syriac. In several places, the precise sense of the text remains unclear. Nevertheless, the contents and basic sense of Mar John's arguments are clear, illuminating a great exegete, theologian, and spiritual director in action.

Edition and Translation

Now again, Memre¹⁹ from the same Mar John the Solitary, On the beatitudes, which the Lord gave in the first gospel. [This memra is] concerning that passage: “Blessed are the poor in spirit because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.”²⁰

1) For those who seek to draw near to the virtuous glory of the perfect way of life, the beginning of their approach is this: separation from the world. For the mind is hindered from the course by human shackles. Unless a person looses herself

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19. “Memre” is a Syriac word that means “speech” or “discourse,” possibly even “sermon” or “homily” (J. Payne Smith, ed. *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary: Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], 247).

20. Matthew 5:3

from the world, she will not be able to travel on that road, the instruction of which occurs through the sufferings of the Messiah, our Lord. For the road of the world is an obstacle to the road of salvation,²¹ and for those who are on a journey in the world, this is the course of their expectation: the love of wealth, the discovery of possessions, and the enjoyment of their temporal delights. But as for those who are walking on the road of salvation,²² this is their expectation: a perfect life and promises to come, which are laid up in the place of glory. A person is not able to travel on two roads. Therefore, we will compare them in our teaching²³ so as to see what is useful for our salvation²⁴ and [what] will bear us toward perfect hope, and by it, that we may

[illegible]

21. Or “life”

22. Or “life”

23. Lit. “Knowledge, information”

24. Or “life”

gather our salvation²⁵ into the pathways
that have strength²⁶ from the might of the
Messiah, our Lord.

2) Praise be to you, Messiah, perfecter of all, because you alone are perfect – your perfection being hidden in you – and you alone hold the completion of everything. For by you is the filling up of what is lacking and the completing of what is deficient. For you are the crown²⁷ of all because it is in you that they who have been perfected by you are completed.

3) Allow us, Lord, to depict that image of your perfection in our persons. If our strength is deficient, Lord – since you know it is weaker than your perfection – make us worthy so that though we are not the body of perfection, even so we might

(2) \vec{r} and \vec{r}' are

ה. כ. י. ח. ג. ב. א.

ՀԱՅԿԻ ՆՊԻՍՏԱՆԵՐԸ

אז איר זענט אירעלענדער. איר זענט אירעלענדער.

محلہ کے اہل علم: محلہ کے اہل علم۔

ಕುಡುಕು ಚಿಕ್ಕ ಚಿಕ್ಕ ಜಿಗಣೆ. ಇವು ಚಿಕ್ಕ ಜಿಗಣೆ

האם זה נכון?

പ്രതിപക്ഷം അതേ കമ്മിറ്റിയിൽ²⁸ (3)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

॥ श्रीगणेशाय नमः ॥

କଳାକାରମାନଙ୍କର ସମୀକ୍ଷା

മതം: ക്രൈസ്തവം

25. Or “life”

26. Or “help”

27. Or “completion/finishing.” The root *kal* (“to finish, to complete, to crown”) occurs three times in the context.

28. A contraction of: \supset and \lrcorner .

the knowledge of [the latter] is elevated above those who are in the world. But pay attention to this aforementioned example, because those who seek to be exalted to the height of the air, may reach [it] by degree, gradually, so that they will arrive at exaltation one step at a time. Indeed the teacher of our salvation has instituted [a process of] perfection by degrees,³¹ so that we will not become weary through our ascent, since those who draw near to being exalted support themselves on that first step of the Messiah's poverty, by which they will begin to be exalted from the earth and arrive at those things that are virtuous.³²

6) For endurance is necessary for those who have renounced everything. For to those who have restrained themselves by means of the neglect of the world, renunciation has not been difficult.

[illegible][illegible]

31. In other words, “he set it up so that perfection would occur in stages.”

32. Or “excellent”

Endurance of sufferings or afflictions or hunger or nakedness or the sufferings of mourning that will subsequently meet them, is found to be comparatively easy, since [the Messiah] put the way of mourning after renunciation in his teaching, so that he would be our teacher.³³

Unless a person first cleaves to renunciation, he or she will not be able to draw near to the suffering of mourning. For if those who mourn in a human fashion alienate themselves from the trade and commerce of the world until they get through [their] days of lamentation, how much more necessary is it for those who have determined that their whole manner of life would be in the suffering of mourning, so that they be better than everything? For indeed those who want to absolve themselves by righteousness are not able to bring their thoughts to action unless the love of poverty has been stirred within

וְשִׁעָרָא דְּמַרְתָּלִי נָא. אִם גִּחְסָא אִם (15v)
 גִּחְלִילֵיהּ: אִם וְשִׁעָרָא דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ גִּחְ
 כֹּחִי בְּפִיכִי מִן: לֵה אִלֵּל עֲבִיסָא. בְּ
 לִגְוִיָּא דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ כֹּחִי מְעִימֵיהּ מִמֶּנּוּ
 מִלְּפִיסָא. וְגִחְסָא מִמֶּנּוּ לֵךְ. אִלֵּל לִמְנָר
 אִם בְּפִי לְמְעִימֵיהּ: לֵךְ יִישׁ אִם גִּחְסָא
 לִשְׁעָרָא דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ. אִם גִּחְסָא מִמֶּנּוּ
 דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ מִמֶּנּוּ מִלְּפִיסָא: בְּכִיכִי אִם
 לְפִילֵּה מִלְּפִיסָא דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ: בְּכִיכִי
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 לֵךְ גִּחְסָא מִמֶּנּוּ וְכִיכִי מִלְּפִיסָא
 דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ: מִלְּפִיסָא דְּמַרְתָּלֵיהּ לְכִי
 מִלְּפִיסָא: לֵךְ לִמְנָר אִם גִּחְסָא מִמֶּנּוּ
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 נָא: אִם אִם גִּחְסָא מִמֶּנּוּ לְכִי מִלְּפִיסָא

33. Cf. Matthew 5:2-4

toward the expectation of grace,⁶⁴ we have stripped ourselves from the glory of the name. Thus, we have no diligence concerning the life to come, as to how we will be found in it before the judgment-seat of the worshipful Son, so long as our concern about the temporal life is great, so that we are lacking in absolutely nothing. Great is the wonder mixed with weeping about the learned, namely, that the people who have readied themselves for crucifixion all day long would be avoiding [even] the breath of affliction, and so that they might not be afflicted in some way, fear shakes them.

26) Have pity on our lives,⁶⁶ Messiah, our Lord, which were bought by you with your honorable blood. Guard our souls before you, uninjured, and perfect your grace with us, Lord. Enable us to be seen by the world

וְכִי־שֶׁכֶּה־נַעֲלָמָה־כָּפִי־מִכְּדוֹרֵי־כָּבוֹד
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 חַל־מִנְחָתִי־וְנִשְׁמָכִי־לִּי־וְנִסְמָכִי־מִכָּל־דְּשִׁלְפֵי־חַבְלֵי־כָבוֹד
 לִנְשִׁמָכִי־וְחַל־נַפְשִׁי־וְנִסְמָכִי־מִכָּל־דְּשִׁלְפֵי־חַבְלֵי־כָבוֹד
 וְנִשְׁמָכִי־לִּי־וְנִסְמָכִי־מִכָּל־דְּשִׁלְפֵי־חַבְלֵי־כָבוֹד
 וְנִשְׁמָכִי־לִּי־וְנִסְמָכִי־מִכָּל־דְּשִׁלְפֵי־חַבְלֵי־כָבוֹד

(26) וְנִשְׁמָכִי־לִּי־וְנִסְמָכִי־מִכָּל־דְּשִׁלְפֵי־חַבְלֵי־כָבוֹד
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 וְנִשְׁמָכִי־לִּי־וְנִסְמָכִי־מִכָּל־דְּשִׁלְפֵי־חַבְלֵי־כָבוֹד

64. The meaning of portions of this section is unclear.

65. The *waw* prefixed to the front of this word appears to have been added after the fact.

66. Or “salvation”

as lights so that by us they will see you. Let your love grieve about this, Lord: that in place of your having established us to be a light in the world, greatly [have] we [become] stumbling-blocks for people in the world by the darkness that [comes] from us because we will not speak, so that they stumble on us as in the darkness.

Lord, restrain by your grace the abundance of iniquity, lest your love turn away from people. Strengthen our weakness, Lord, and heal our sickness, so that we will be an utterly healthy body for your praise. With all the forces that draw near with us, let your strength accompany us against them. Let us accompany you perfectly, victorious Messiah, and do not distance us at all from your love to which we cleave.

27) For it is not possible for someone to cling fast to your love, unless she first convinces herself to abstain from

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to one refuge of salvation,⁷¹ so that we might attain to good deeds. As for those whose minds were too weak for your perfect training, Lord, you admonished them by your helpful word, so that their departure from this world would come through virtuous conduct of righteous acts.⁷² That way, after their resurrection from the dead, they may find refreshment in their true shelters. And to those who have eagerly pursued your glorious love, by [your] word you proclaimed that they take up the crucifixion all day, and then follow you.⁷³ When they heeded your perfect instruction and earnestly desired it, even the statements of hindrance that they spoke, you cut off [and] cast away. Praise be to you, because you taught that a person should be trained by you from his or her whole mind!

71. Or “life”

72. Or “alms”

73. Cf. Luke 9:23; Also, cf. §19 above.

[illegible]

let us be assured of the promise about it.

Let it be for us a banqueting hall, at which all are needing to be refreshed. Therefore, your power is capable of sustaining life in both worlds!

32) For our few needs do not worry us, since the abundance of everything will not be a yoke-fellow with us in the new world. This is because of the love of that Lord of all, to whom our love is the greatest of all of his possessions. Because of this, be comforted and take heart in that hope of salvation,⁸³ and do not let that which is despised in this world trouble us. For this world is not perfect so that it may fulfill all our needs, and because of the fact that we are in want in it, let us realize in it that it is lacking. How can that which is lacking be the fulfiller of the needy? Therefore, let us not seek anything from it because indeed it

חלום ופנימיות ונשמה. חייך מן החלום

(22v) שלם למעשה ונשיב בחינתו

חלום⁸²

(32) לא חייך חסר לך ונשמה ונשמה

חלום ונשמה חייך חלום חסר: לא מן חלום

חייך מן, חייך חלום ונשמה. חלום חלום

חלום חלום חלום חלום: חלום חלום

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82. This punctuation was added later. It was made with red ink on top of a horizontal line, used to justify the end of the line.

83. Or "life"

world, in which he is preparing to give everyone rest accordingly. For their troubles in the here and now are the cause of their rest there, and their griefs here are the cause of their consolation there.

33) Consoler of all by [your] declaration,
console our souls by your hope! Comforter
of all by [your] teaching, comfort our mind
by your expectation! May your grace,
Lord, which has given us rest in the life
here, give us rest in the life there. May
your mercies, which have overflowed upon
us in the manifestation of your birth,
overflow upon us in the revelation of your
glory. Lord, may your grace that created
us, increase our exaltation on the day of
your glory. May your mercy, Lord, which
caused you to be in need of that which
belongs to us for the sake of our wealth,
fulfill our needs with everything for the
sake of your grace. May your love, Lord,
which made you poor when you were rich
and [had] your wealth concealed in you,

[illegible]

make our poverty rich by your promises.⁸⁵

For in you, Lord, you have taught us concerning that which belongs to us, that just as you dwelled meagerly in our world while the sum of your wealth was hidden in you,⁸⁶ likewise, while people journey meagerly [through life], the wealth of their promise is concealed in them by the hope of their faith concerning you. Praise be to you, Hope of our salvation,⁸⁷ because by yourself, you have told us about that which belongs to us!

34) Come, hear, and learn how you may live⁸⁸ by your virtues, that in no way will be stolen away! Give heed to the perfect aim,⁸⁹ established by the Lord so that you may separate yourselves from this world by his teaching. Because those who become

וּמִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים בְּפָתְחֵי מְלָכִים

וּמִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים בְּפָתְחֵי מְלָכִים

וְנִשְׁמָהּ וְכִי מִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים.

(34) הָאֵלֹהִים מְלָכִים וְנִשְׁמָהּ וְכִי מִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים

וְנִשְׁמָהּ וְכִי מִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים

וְנִשְׁמָהּ וְכִי מִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים

וְנִשְׁמָהּ וְכִי מִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים

וְנִשְׁמָהּ וְכִי מִלְכּוּתָם לְחַיִּים

85. Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9

86. Cf. Colossians 2:2-3 and Ephesians 3:8

87. Or “lives”

88. Or “be saved”

89. Or “sign, emblem”

of his company. By the two coins of faith, he declared about the readiness of [the widow's] mind that it was greater than all the rest of the gifts that were piled up in heaps, her glory being elevated above all of them. For as many as would be raised up to renunciation for the sake of God should reach the level of her willingness and that would be enough – she, who offered all that she possessed.⁹⁶ And because you do not have possessions to give to him, offer him the possessions of sobriety along with true thoughts. Therefore, let us pursue after the love of God, pulling ourselves away from everything and cleaving only to that Lord of all.

38) Now for the sake of helping [your] obedience, so that you may heed the words of the Lord harmoniously, we will discuss the meaning of the fact that sometimes he had them renounce everything and the fact that on the day of his crucifixion, he

לֹא נִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל
כִּי אֵין מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל

(38) וְעַתָּה נִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה'
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל
וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ מִלְּפָנֵי ה' מִשְׁכָּל

96. Cf. Luke 21:1-4

expunged from them due to their fear, as they lifted up their eyes on all sides out of fear. But the Lord sought to show them the weakness of their minds and also wanted to help them understand his assistance for them. For his strength accompanied them everywhere they were being sent, and fearlessly they would preach the Gospel of his Kingdom, even though he would not let them take anything. Instead, he sent them devoid of everything, so that because of the fact that they were not expected to have anything on them, they might know that his aid was accompanying them in everything. For if they had taken something, because they were not yet perfect it would have seemed to them that their comfort was in their ways of life; but because of the fact that they were deprived of everything, his strength that accompanied them was made known to them, so that they understood that he was the fulfiller of their needs in everything.

[illegible]

their deliverance – for the wound that [Peter] inflicted on those opponents when the zeal of his love stirred him to do battle for the Lord¹⁰³ – but because of the preparedness of their minds he was revealed. For it came to pass...¹⁰⁴ time of his permission to take swords with them, while the Lord showed perfect grace at that time, so that instead of bad things, we would do good things to each other, these things barely sufficing. And if the command of the Lord to the apostles has not been explained perfectly by us, I hope that we have shown your love by [this] feeble account that [for] the flight of preaching¹⁰⁶ it was said to them to possess something.

41) But may God, who has made us worthy
and brought us near to this glorious way of

[illegible]

(41) אלהים יתברך ואלהינו יחד

103. Cf. Matthew 26:51-4, Mark 14:47-8, Luke 22:49-51, and John 18:10-11

104. The meaning of this sentence is uncertain.

105. This word has been amended. The original reading was: *ܝܕܝܪ*.

106. The meaning of this phrase is uncertain.

life, in which is depicted the likeness of the new life, enable us by his compassion and by the riches of his mercy to be completed in it according to his pleasure. May his holy name be praised among us by all our actions, and may his helpful strength accompany us until the end. May his love increase in our eyes most of all, and may everything be despised by us besides his mercy. May his grace preserve all of us, and may it cover us with its wings on the great day of his coming. Let us lift up praise to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

[illegible]

CHAPTER 3
RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Methodology

By referencing Scripture throughout the homily, Mar John creates intertextual echoes, which contribute to his argument in meaningful ways. Concerning intertextuality, Jonathon Culler explains, “it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written.”¹ Furthermore, any sort of allusion or reference to a prior text appropriates the text for the new context. In other words, “the rebounds of intertextual echo generally... distort the original voice in order to interpret it.”² Therefore, as Richard Hays writes in his seminal work, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, “the twofold task of a criticism attuned to such echoes, then, is: (a) to call attention to them so that others might be enabled to hear; and (b) to give and account of the distortions and new figuration that they generate.”³ The goal of this rhetorical analysis is to do exactly that with respect to Mar John’s use of Scripture in the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*. While providing a general overview of the argument of the

1. Jonathon Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 103.

2. John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1981), 111.

3. Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 19.

homily, this analysis will also identify and categorize Mar John's references to Scripture, explaining their purpose and function in his overall argument.⁴

The first step to this analysis is to adopt a method able to identify and analyze Scripture within the discourse. Patristic texts of all kinds typically rely heavily on Christian Scripture. In an effort to aid in the study of patristic citations of Scripture for the purpose of textual criticism, Gordon Fee proposed three categories of scriptural use in a patristic text: allusion, adaptation, and citation. He defined allusion as "Reference to the content of a biblical passage in which verbal correspondence to the [New Testament] Greek text is so remote as to offer no value for the reconstruction of that text."⁵ Adaptation differs from allusion for Fee in that adaptation does have a "clear verbal correspondence to the Greek [New Testament],"⁶ but it is altered by the author for the sake of style or theme. Therefore, the main difference between the two is the level of explicitness with which the text is referenced. Fee's category for citation follows the same trend and is reserved for the most explicit of references to the text. He defines instances of citation as "those places where a Father is consciously trying to cite, either from memory or by copying, the very words of the biblical text."⁷ Furthermore, Fee notes that there is some amount of subjectivity in this category, as one can have some citations that are more "genuine" and some that are "loose."

4. Please refer back to pg. 4-5 above for the necessary discussion on Scripture within ascetic discourse.

5. Gordon Fee, "The Text of John in Origen and Cyril of Alexandria: A Contribution to Methodology in the Recovery and Analysis of Patristic Citations," *Biblica* 52 (1971): 362.

6. *Ibid.*, 362.

7. *Ibid.*, 362.

Building on Fee's categories, Carroll Osburn refines the method, adding a more robust technique for identifying various allusions and adaptations. Osburn proposes five categories: citation, adaptation, allusion, reminiscence, and locution.⁸ The first two categories of citation and adaptation are roughly the same as in Fee's method, for both involve intention to cite a passage of Scripture. However, they differ in that, for Osburn, citation requires exactness and some sort of explicit or implicit cue to the reader of the presence of a quote, whereas, adaptation does not. The reference is an adaptation when "much of the lexical and syntactical structure of the text is preserved and woven unobtrusively into the patristic context."⁹ Allusion involves some verbal correspondence with intent to provide "only the gist of the text rather than to cite."¹⁰ Reminiscence has a clear referential text, but simply echoes the text with the author not intending to cite the biblical material. Finally, locution is simply the use of biblical language very generally without an identifiable referential text.

Fee and Osburn are concerned primarily with methods that will ensure the precise recovery of an author's biblical text. Although that text critical link is not an interest of the present thesis, their categories are still very useful as the basis from which these biblical references may be identified, categorized, and discussed. However, in order to be able to demonstrate more fully the rhetorical significance of Mar John's use of scripture, the terminology must be adapted further. Borrowed from Richard Hays' works on the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, the term "echo" will be used most often in

8. Carroll Osburn, "Methodology in Identifying Patristic Citations in NT Textual Criticism," *Novum Testamentum* 47 (2005): 318.

9. *Ibid.*, 318.

10. *Ibid.*, 318.

place of “reminiscence.” “Quotation” will refer to all citations and adaptations.

“Reference” will signify all quotations, allusions, echoes, and locutions.

Even with the categories and terminology in place, there is great difficulty in identifying and categorizing allusions and echoes within a text, simply because this is somewhat subjective in nature. To aid discerning whether or not an allusion is real or not, Hays develops a system of seven tests: 1) availability – was the source text available to the original audience?, 2) volume – how distinctive or prominent is the original text?, 3) recurrence – is the text cited elsewhere?, 4) thematic coherence – how well does the allusion fit within the argument?, 5) historical plausibility – could the author have plausibly meant it and the readers understood it?, 6) history of interpretation – have other readers recognized it as an allusion?, and 7) satisfaction – does it all make sense?¹¹ For the purposes of this analysis, some of these tests are more helpful than others, but they all provide a helpful structure and method by which to identify and categorize the references, especially the more difficult and “dull” echoes.

All of that aside, Sebastian Brock notes that there is significant difficulty and ambiguity in discerning between patristic references on the textual side as well. He observes that even in cases where the author introduces a text as a quotation (for instance, with *lam*), one still cannot assume that what follows is indeed a proper quotation. In some instances, the author might insert his or her own gloss of a word within the quotation. In others, as Brock points out, an author might fuse the wordings of two different, but similar, passages. Furthermore, he makes the case that this alteration of a biblical

11. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 29-32.

quotation is sometimes an intentional decision by the author, not simply an accident.¹²

With these things in mind, all citations have been evaluated using the most reliable editions for comparison.¹³ However, the intention of this paper is not to reconstruct Mar John's New Testament or address questions of textual criticism and the history of the textual tradition. The goal is to analyze Mar John's rhetorical use of Scripture in his homily, and these text-critical methodological refinements are a means to that end.

Table 1: Scriptural References in the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit*

Biblical References	Page Number	Section / Paragraph Number	Type
Matthew 5:3	Pg. 20	Lemma / N/A	Citation
Matthew 5:2	Pg. 25	First Exhortation / §6	Reminiscence
Matthew 5:3-4	Pg. 25	First Exhortation / §6	Allusion
Matthew 5:3	Pg. 29	Second Exhortation / §10	Citation
Luke 12:15	Pg. 29-30	Second Exhortation / §10	Adaptation
Luke 16:13 or Matthew 6:24	Pg. 30	Second Exhortation / §10	Citation
Luke 9:62	Pg. 30	Second Exhortation / §11	Allusion
Matthew 20:1-16	Pg. 35	Second Exhortation / §17	Allusion
Matthew 5:3	Pg. 35	Third Exhortation / §18	Citation
Luke 9:23	Pg. 37	Third Exhortation / §19	Citation
1 Kings 17	Pg. 40	Fourth Exhortation / §23	Reminiscence
Hebrews 11:37b-8a	Pg. 41	Fourth Exhortation / §24	Allusion

12. Sebastian Brock, "The Use of the Syriac Fathers for New Testament Textual Criticism," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, NTTSD 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 420-1.

13. Regarding overall methods, the following manuals have been helpful: Bart D. Ehrman and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, 2nd ed., NTTSD 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2013). For references within the Gospels, I am using four different critical editions: Burkitt, *Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe*, George Henry Gwilliam and Philip Edward Pusey, *Tetraevangelium Sanctum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), George Kiraz, *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels*, 4 vols. (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2002), and Lewis, ed., *The Old Syriac Gospels or Evangelion da-Mepharreshe*; for Paul's epistles (including Hebrews): Barbara Aland and Andreas Juckel, eds., *Die Paulinischen Briefe*, vol. 2 of *Das Neue Testament in Syrischer Überlieferung*, Arbeiten zur Neutestamentlichen Textforschung 14, 23, 32 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1991–2002); for Isaiah: Sebastian Brock, ed., *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*, 3/1 *Isaiah* (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

Table 1 (continued)

Biblical References	Page Number	Section / Paragraph Number	Type
Allusion to the various stories of Jesus' calling of disciples	Pg. 45-6	Fourth Exhortation / §27	Allusion
1 Corinthians 3:1-3 & Hebrews 5:12-14	Pg. 47	Fifth Exhortation / §28	Reminiscence
Luke 9:23	Pg. 48	Fifth Exhortation / §28	Allusion
Matthew 19:16-22	Pg. 49	Fifth Exhortation / §29	Allusion
Matthew 19:21	Pg. 49	Fifth Exhortation / §29	Citation
Hebrews 4:12 & Ephesians 6:17	Pg. 51	Fifth Exhortation / §31	Reminiscence
Hebrews 12:1-2	Pg. 51	Fifth Exhortation / §31	Reminiscence
2 Corinthians 8:9	Pg. 54-5	Fifth Exhortation / §31	Reminiscence
Colossians 2:2-3 & Ephesians 3:8	Pg. 55	Fifth Exhortation / §31	Locution
Luke 9:1-6	Pg. 57	Sixth Exhortation / §35	Allusion
2 Corinthians 8:9	Pg. 57-8	Sixth Exhortation / §35	Allusion
Isaiah 53:4-5	Pg. 58	Sixth Exhortation / §35	Adaptation
Hebrews 11:24-6	Pg. 59	Sixth Exhortation / §36	Allusion
Matthew 5:3	Pg. 61	Sixth Exhortation / §37	Allusion
Luke 21:1-4	Pg. 62	Sixth Exhortation / §37	Allusion
Allusion to various stories of Jesus calling disciples to renunciation	Pg. 62-3	Commentary on Jesus' Commands and Conclusion / §38	Allusion
Luke 9:3	Pg. 63	Commentary on Jesus' Commands and Conclusion / §38	Reminiscence
Luke 22:36	Pg. 63	Commentary on Jesus' Commands and Conclusion / §38	Citation
Luke 9:1-6 & Luke 22:35	Pg. 65	Commentary on Jesus' Commands and Conclusion / §39	Allusion
Matthew 26:51-4, Mark 14:47-8, Luke 22:49-51, & John 18:10-11	Pg. 67-8	Commentary on Jesus' Commands and Conclusion / §40	Allusion

Argument Structure and Introduction (§1 - §3)

Mar John structures his homily in the following way: an introduction (§1 - §3), followed by six long exhortations to poverty (starting at §4, §10, §18, §22, §28, and §34, respectively), then a commentary on two apparently contradictory commands of Jesus about possessions (Luke 9:3 and Luke 22:36) (§38 - §40), ending with a conclusion in the form of a doxology (§41).¹⁴ The lemma, written by the scribe of the manuscript, contains a citation of Matthew 5:3. In this way, the homily begins as a flowing out of this passage. The introduction lays out the concept of there being two paths for the reader: “the road of salvation” (or “life”) and “the road of the world.” The exhortations that follow examine the role of renunciation in treading on the “road of salvation” and call the readers to practice it as a spiritual discipline. No scriptural references occur in the introductory section.

First Exhortation (§4 - §9)

The first exhortation is a call to poverty based on the authority of Jesus as a teacher, the authority of Scripture, and the vocation of a monk. Mar John mentions that sufferings (in general, but notably the sufferings of mourning) would be relatively easy for those who have renounced everything “since [the Messiah] put the way of mourning after renunciation in his teaching, so that he would be our teacher.”¹⁵ That Jesus is a

14. Manel Nin only counts five exhortations and does not mention where they begin or end (Nin, “Il Commento di Giovanni il Solitario a Mt. 5,3,” 33). Mar John’s argument throughout these exhortations is cyclical. He frequently changes topic and frequently returns later to similar points of argumentation. Furthermore, even while exhortation is a good description of the main goal of this middle section (and really the homily as a whole), Mar John moves rather fluidly between exhortation, complex discourse, exegesis, and doxology. Therefore, though I have concluded that it is best to identify six exhortations, my doing so is more of a comment on the flow of the homily, rather than distinguishing six different arguments for poverty.

15. *HPS* 6 (pg. 25 above).

teacher is a major theme throughout Matthew, so Mar John could be drawing from any number of verses. However, I think this is a reminiscence of Matthew 5:2, where Jesus is said to sit down on the mountaintop, open his mouth, and *teach* the disciples at the Sermon on the Mount. That highly familiar context forms the most natural narrative backdrop to the homily. However, whether this is actually a reminiscence of Matthew 5:2 or simply locution based on somewhere in the Bible is not important. The key is that Jesus, the image of perfection and example of poverty (as we will see later), has taught his disciples something about the way of renunciation, and his authority adds to the importance of the exhortation in general. Also, in the above quote, there is mention of Jesus putting the “way of mourning” *after* renunciation in his teaching. With this, Mar John seems to be indicating that Jesus intentionally placed the first beatitude (“blessed are the poor in spirit”) before the second beatitude (“blessed are those who mourn”). Thus, he says, “Unless a person first cleaves to renunciation, he or she will not be able to draw near to the suffering of mourning.”¹⁶ Mar John must believe that a monk’s calling self-evidently necessitates a lifestyle of mourning. For this reason, he is able to give the comparison between the mourning process for a lay person and ascetic mourning, claiming that if a lay person ceases from trade and commerce in mourning the death of a loved one or other tragedy, then monks ought not to have any possessions at all because their whole manner of life consists of mourning. Thus, by paying attention to the order of the first two beatitudes in Jesus’ teaching, Mar John is able to make an argument that relies on the authority of Jesus and Scripture, while asserting that a monk ought to renounce all possessions.

16. *HPS* 6 (pg. 25 above).

Second Exhortation (§10 - §17)

In Mar John's second exhortation, he encourages the readers to remove all hindrances and obstacles from their lives, namely the love of and desire for possessions. The language of obstacle and hindrance (*ūwākā*) ought to remind the reader of his introduction, where Mar John describes the "road of the world" as a hindrance (*ūwākā*) to the "road of salvation." This "road to salvation" is equivalent to the ascetic pursuit of perfection. At the end of paragraph 11, Mar John writes, "...it is hard for me to say which was better: her service in perfection, or [being allowed] to continue unhindered in the course of her [original] journey." In this instance, the phrase translated for "unhindered" literally means "without an obstacle (*ūwākā*)." In other words, John is writing to monks and ascetics, people already on the path to perfection, and exhorting them towards renunciation of possessions. This acquisition of possessions is normal for those who are on the road of the world, which is why Mar John says that someone who begins treading on the path of perfection, only to return to the road of the world, might have been better off never heading towards perfection because they only hindered their path in the world.

Within this second exhortation, Mar John uses five different references to Scripture. The first two occur as a part of prescription by a doctor, namely Jesus. Mar John equates these obstacles (*ūwākā*) to the path of perfection as "things which cause illness." Therefore, just as a doctor would tell her patients to avoid certain things which could be bad for their physical health, Jesus cautions against obstacles of our spiritual health. Within this image, he offers an adaptation of Luke 12:15 and a citation of Luke 16:13 (or Matthew 6:24). Mar John's use of Luke 12:15 as an example of caution by Jesus is a perfect example as Jesus literally uses the same root in 12:15, saying, "Be

cautioned.” Both references benefit Mar John’s argument in that coming from the mouth of the Lord himself, there is a caution against the love of possessions over against the love of God.

The next reference within this exhortation is an allusion to Luke 9:62, where Jesus calls for radical discipleship. Allusions have the ability not only to point to the text that is mentioned, but to the surrounding text of the passage. By alluding to Luke 9:62, Mar John is bringing to the recollection of his reader the surrounding context of the passage, namely Luke 9:57-62. In these verses, Jesus is asking people to follow him. The first responds by saying, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”¹⁷ But Jesus responds with “Let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and spread the news of God’s kingdom.” Another says to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say good-bye to those in my house.” Luke 9:62 is Jesus’ response in saying, “No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for God’s kingdom.” Mar John takes this verse and adapts it to show two different options. In his retelling, one could either be the kind of person who puts his hand to the plow and looks back, or one could be the kind of person who is fit for the kingdom of heaven. In other words, Mar John is asking the reader to question his or her own levels of commitment to the path of perfection, this radical, ascetical pursuit of Jesus, because both of these things cannot be “perfected” in the same person. Furthermore, the monk is one who leaves the world in pursuit of God, so this image of beginning to plow, but turning back, is insinuating someone who begins the ascetic life but attempts to cling still onto their previous life as well.

17. All quotations of the New Testament, which are not pulled directly out of the homily itself, come from the Common English Bible (CEB), unless otherwise stated.

Finally, the last reference occurs at the end of this long second exhortation, as Mar John calls for perseverance from his readers to live in poverty and suffering for the sake of Christ. In this, he alludes to the parable of the workers at the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. This parable is often read today as revealing something about the radical grace of God in giving all people equally what they do not deserve. However, Mar John focuses on the equal desire of all of the workers. Those in the eleventh hour desired to work in the vineyard just as much as those who started the day there, and they were all rewarded “not according to their labor alone... but according to their willing desire.”¹⁸ This hermeneutical move aids Mar John’s argument in saying that renunciation is less about the physical activity (although he certainly believes that that is an important aspect) and more about the desire behind the action.

Third Exhortation (§18 - §21)

The third exhortation, like the second, begins with another citation of Matthew 5:3. Functionally, this helps to break up the homily, but also to remind the reader again (for the third time if one includes the lemma) about the overall message of the homily. After citing this passage, Mar John reminds his audience that this is “their calling” as he begins to exhort them to pursue this “divinely-mandated” calling of renunciation. The rest of this exhortation focuses on imitating the kenotic movement of Jesus at his incarnation, who though he was “rich” with divinity became “poor” by taking on our humanity.

18. *HPS* 17 (pg. 35 above).

Within this exhortation, Mar John cites Luke 9:23, saying, “Whoever wants to follow me should deny themselves, take up their crosses daily, and follow me.”¹⁹ He explains this passage by making the case that a person cannot take up his or her cross without renunciation because without renunciation there is no “suffering,” “affliction,” “vexation,” “nakedness,” or “hunger pains.” In fact, he claims that “[poverty is] the storehouse of all sorts of discomforts.”²⁰ Furthermore, Mar John believes these things to be the “cause of the cross”; he believes that they are absolutely vital in a person’s pursuit of perfection. Therefore, Mar John argues that if the Lord says that we should deny ourselves and take up our crosses (an appeal to his authority) and the taking up of crosses necessitates renunciation, then we ought to begin with the act of renunciation. Furthermore, since Jesus took upon himself this crucifixion and poverty, this renunciation can be seen also as the imitation of Christ.

Fourth Exhortation (§22 - §27)

Similar to the previous exhortation, where Mar John calls his reader to imitate the poverty of Christ, the fourth focuses on imitating the poverty of other major spiritual figures. The first of these figures is the “great prophet Elijah,” whose self-denial Mar John esteems as the greatest of all people. Mar John praises his self-denial, saying, “Not only did he lack abundance, but he did not even acquire [possessions to satisfy] his [basic] needs.”²¹ There is no explicit reference or any further details given to indicate what exactly he has in mind, but in light of the story of Elijah as a whole, 1 Kings 17

19. *HPS* 19 (pg. 37 above).

20. *HPS* 20 (pg. 37 above).

21. *HPS* 23 (pg. 40 above).

seems like a likely candidate for this echo. 1 Kings 17 tells the story of Elijah obeying the word of God in the midst of great famine. During this time, he is completely reliant on God's providence for his daily sustenance, being fed by ravens at first and then the divinely-replenished jar of flour and bottle of oil at the house of the widow Zarephath. Thus, he has renounced himself to the point of lacking even the little bit of food he needs each day for survival.

The second reference to the poverty of spiritual figures in this section is actually a reference to “many others,” who similarly denied themselves. At first glance, this appears to be general enough that it could be a general formulation of Mar John suggesting that there are many other examples of this praiseworthy renunciation throughout Scripture and the wider Christian tradition. However, his use of the phrases “covered with the skins of lambs and baby goats” and “people of whom the whole world was not worthy” reveals an allusion to Hebrews 11:37-8. Throughout chapter eleven, the author of that book describes the sacrificial faithfulness of a number of biblical figures. Mar John specifically focuses on Hebrews 11:37b-8a, which says, “...They went around wearing the skins of sheep and goats, needy, oppressed, and mistreated. The world didn't deserve them...” For the author of Hebrews, this was just one more piece of evidence of the incredible faithfulness of this group of people; however, Mar John emphasizes their voluntary poverty, that they were wearing the skins of lambs and baby goats (which he also describes as “rags”) because they did not have cloaks to provide them relief from the cold. The same roots of the words translated as “oppressed” (from the root *ʾlṣ*) and “mistreated” (from the root *ṭrp*) above in the quotation of Hebrews 11:37 appear in Mar John's work as well in his claim that these people remain “firmly attached to his

praiseworthy lordship in all the sufferings, afflictions (from the root *ʾlš*), and troubles (from the root *trp*).” By alluding to this passage, Mar John attaches this self-denial to some of the heroes of the Christian faith, makes them exemplars to be imitated, and further adds to the legitimacy of his exhortation by appealing to the authority of Scripture and the Christian tradition.

After this call to imitate the examples of these heroic figures, Mar John reminds the reader yet again that renunciation is a necessary prerequisite to total devotion towards God. He begins this thought by saying, “For it is not possible for someone to cling fast to your love, unless she first convinces herself to abstain from everything and to seek your company.”²² This statement is just general enough to elicit multiple different stories of Jesus’ calling of disciples. One example of such a call is the calling of Peter and Andrew in Matthew 4:18-22, when Jesus calls out to them while they were fishing, saying, “Come, follow me and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” After this call, the two of them immediately stop what they are doing, leave their father, and follow Jesus. Another example would be Jesus’ calling of Matthew in Matthew 9:9-13, when Matthew immediately gets up and follows him. The allusion is present in Mar John’s text, but flexible enough to apply to a number of different contexts. The necessary conditions are a calling, a challenge to renounce and leave things, and a response. In these two previous examples, the response was positive; however, the allusion does not necessitate a positive response. In fact, the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22 can also be read into this allusion. Jesus calls the young man to renounce his possessions and follow him, but “when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many

22. *HPS* 27 (pg. 45-6 above).

possessions.” The rich young ruler experienced the call and the challenge to renounce what he had, but he was not willing to do that.

Fifth Exhortation (§28 - §33)

The fifth exhortation begins with a doxology, praising God because He has provided Scripture for his people with teachings for “every person according to his or her strength.”²³ Mar John uses several images to explain this, one of which compares God’s placing of instruction and precepts in Scripture to a doctor storing all sorts of medicine in a sort of medicine cabinet.²⁴ Because of this, the spiritually mature and immature alike can benefit from the word of God. In explaining this, Mar John appeals to the image of “milk” versus “complete food” and the biblical concept found in both 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 and Hebrews 5:12-14 that a person ought to be taught depending on his or her spiritual maturity.²⁵ Relying on this concept, Mar John explains that “those whose minds were too weak for your perfect training” would be saved through their “virtuous conduct of righteous acts.” In other words, those who did not choose daily crucifixion (i.e. lay people) also have a path towards salvation, paved through righteous acts, such as the giving of alms. However, those who have been called to pursue perfection are called by

23. *HPS* 28 (pg. 46 above).

24. This conception of Scripture is common in the Syriac tradition. Both Ephrem and Aphrahat make similar claims about Scripture (e.g. Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 1.19, 7.22, and Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 5.25, 22.26), and the anonymous *Book of Steps* actually applies this concept, differentiating the target audience of different biblical commands (e.g. *Book of Steps* 2.1-6 for some of the commands to the “Perfect” compared to some of the commands to the “Upright” in *Book of Steps* 7.1-2).

25. It is hard to say whether Mar John is actually alluding to 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 or Hebrews 5:12-14. The image is basically the same for both, so it does not change the meaning if the reader prefers one over the other. One could make the case that Hebrews 5:12-14 ought to be preferred due to the sheer number of Mar John’s clear references to the book of Hebrews. However, I have chosen to highlight both because preferring one over the other ultimately does not contribute to a better understanding of Mar John’s argument.

the Lord to “take up the crucifixion all day, and then follow [him].”²⁶ This is an allusion to Luke 9:23, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.” Mar John clearly sees this as a mandate for these “perfect” ones, whom he believes are called to a higher standard than the others. However, both groups find instruction within Scripture, and both groups are called to discipleship in definite ways.

After suggesting these two different paths, Mar John addresses the person who is caught in the middle. He is clearly addressing ascetics who are attempting to become perfect but have not quite separated themselves from their possessions. He reminds these people of Jesus’ command to the rich, young ruler in Matthew 19:21, “If you wish to be perfect, sell everything you have and give [it] to the poor, and take up your cross and follow me.”²⁷ As far as Mar John is concerned, this command describes clearly the way that these people ought to live and behave themselves. In contrast to this, he describes the punishment of those who create this sort of unnatural division in their lives, attempting to be perfect and yet still grasping firmly onto possessions. Then, he exhorts his reader to remove any hindrances from his or her life, saying, “Let us draw the sharp sword, which is the word of God, and let us cut off and throw down from us all those burdens that are hindrances, so that nothing will debase us from the height of the Father of all.”²⁸ The concept of the word of God as a sword can be found in both Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews

26. *HPS* 28 (pg. 48 above).

27. *HPS* 29 (pg. 49 above); In short, although this appears to be a conflation of Matthew 19:21 and Matthew 16:24 (or Luke 9:23), it is actually a reading from the Old Syriac version of the New Testament. For more conversation on this, see footnote 75 on page 49.

28. *HPS* 31 (pg. 51 above).

4:12,²⁹ and “throwing down from us all burdens” is an echo to Hebrews 12:1-2. This appeal to the word of God as a sword that can help to cut away things that hinder people from the pursuit of God is especially fitting in light of Mar John’s constant allusions to Scripture. He is calling for his readers to heed the words of Jesus and Scripture and change the way that they live their lives accordingly.

The fifth exhortation ends the same way it begins: with yet another doxology. The Lord is praised for his grace and mercy and asked for his continued blessing in the lives of the author and his audience. These praises and requests seem to have the two-fold intention of being a prayer, but also a reminder to the readers of the lengths that the Lord has already undergone on their behalf. To this end, Mar John’s doxology contains several parallel statements in which he asks the Lord to provide (or rather to continue providing) his grace, mercy, or love to himself and his readers. In these brief statements, Mar John provides a description of the trait, which rhetorically reminds the reader that this trait of the Lord is praiseworthy. For example, Mar John writes, “May your grace, Lord, *which has given us rest in the life here*, give us rest in the life there,”³⁰ and “May your mercy, Lord, *which caused you to be in need of that which belongs to us for the sake of our wealth*, fulfill our needs with everything for the sake of your grace.”³¹

29. An argument can be made for either of these as the allusion intended by Mar John. The construction translated as “sword..., which is the word of God” is identical to the Syriac of Ephesians 6:17. However, the word meaning “sharp” (*harīpā*) is used in both our text and the passage in Hebrews 4:12. Also, the reader might prefer the Hebrews passage due to the fact that the book of Hebrews is repeatedly cited and alluded to. Whatever the case, the concept of the word of God as a sword is pretty understandable and identical in both.

30. *HPS* 33 (pg. 54 above).

31. *HPS* 33 (pg. 54 above).

One of these parallel statements contains two references to Scripture: an echo of 2 Corinthians 8:9 and locution related to Colossians 2:2-3 and Ephesians 3:8. Mar John writes, “May your love, Lord, which made you poor when you were rich and [had] your wealth concealed in you, make our poverty rich by your promises.”³² For the sake of comparison, 2 Corinthians 8:9 reads, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.” This echo is interesting because Paul originally attributed this description to the grace (*ḡaybūtā*) of Jesus, not his love (*ḡūbā*), and he made no mention of “*our* poverty,” just Christ’s. Mar John seems to be relying on the concept and some of the language from this passage as a part of his prayer, but he makes his own definite alterations. No one will claim (nor should they) that Christ’s *grace* is the same as his *love*, but they are certainly connected, and not as separate as one might initially assume. One could argue that the grace of Jesus flows directly out of his love and that his gracious activity is an expression of his love. Surely, both love and grace factored into the kenotic, incarnational activity of Christ expressed in this passage of Scripture. Evidently, Mar John believes this as well. The more interesting part is that he retains the “poverty” (“[Christ’s] poverty” – *meskīnūteh*) in the second half of the passage, but attaches a different possessor to it, making it “our poverty” (*meskīnūtan*). This new rendering doesn’t disagree with the previous meaning. Christ is still the one making people rich through his becoming poor, but in Mar John’s rendering, Christ enriches the *poverty* of his followers by his promises. Originally, this was a passage aimed at just describing the kenotic action of Christ, but through this change, it becomes a plea for Christ to bless,

32. *HPS* 33 (pg. 54-5 above).

specifically, the poverty of Mar John and his reader through his kenotic love. By doing this, he wraps Scripture around his plea, enhancing and elevating the prayer.

The locution related to Colossians 2:2-3 and Ephesians 3:8 is evident in Mar John's mention of "wealth concealed in you" and "the sum of your wealth... hidden in you."³³ Both of these passages of Scripture deal with Christ's wealth, with the first even describing "the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in him." There is not enough verbal correspondence in either passage to elevate this reference to a level higher than locution, but it seems evident that Mar John's vocabulary is saturated with the language of Scripture. Therefore, it is highly likely that this concept entered into his vocabulary through passages such as these within Scripture. This language also gives him the opportunity to exhort the reader to imitation of Christ while still in the midst of prayer. He does this by comparing the wealth concealed in Christ to the "wealth of their promise," which is hidden in them "by the hope of their faith concerning [Christ]."³⁴

Sixth Exhortation (§34 - §37)

The sixth and final exhortation has in mind a contrast between lay people who serve God in their giving of alms (because they have possessions to give) and the perfect, who imitate closely the example of Jesus. Mar John explains that for both groups, whoever is found to have the love of the Lord within them will give what they have for the sake of the needy. The contrast occurs in that while the lay person gives from his or her excess, the perfect will give even of his or her necessities. He argues that this is a more perfect response and that it is consistent with the command that Christ gave to his

33. *HPS* 33 (pg. 54-5 above).

34. *HPS* 33 (pg. 55 above).

apostles (in Luke 9:1-6) and with the imitation of Christ himself (2 Corinthians 8:9). This is the second reference to 2 Corinthians 8:9, with the first occurring as an echo just a couple paragraphs earlier (§33). Mar John alludes to this passage as the content of a section about the likeness of the Messiah. He writes, “For this is perfection: that the likeness of the Messiah, the Lord of all, be found in us. He took it upon himself to become poor, so that we might be made rich, and took our poverty that he might give us his wealth.”³⁵ Unlike earlier, when he echoed this passage as part of a plea for the love of the Lord to enrich the poverty of himself and his readers, Mar John seems to be equating “our poverty” to the lowly state of humanity as compared to the “wealth” of divinity. This kenotic action of Christ is what Mar John calls these pursuers of perfection to imitate and emulate. Additionally, the fact that Paul couches this description in terms of “wealth” and “poverty” further helps Mar John’s argument, as he is able to call upon his readers to imitate Christ by this kenosis, but also by *literal* poverty. Also, in making this case, Mar John adapts Isaiah 53:4-5, claiming that the perfect share in Christ’s afflictions and that by their afflictions due to their poverty, they will bring relief to others as did Christ, he who “bore our sufferings, carried our sicknesses, and by whose wounds all of us are healed.”

Despite renouncing themselves and suffering in this way, the perfect, Mar John believes, also ought to strive to be the most renounced and most ascetic. To this end, he appeals to two examples of people in the Bible who were praised for their renunciation. The first of these examples is Moses, but instead of alluding to Exodus, Mar John is almost certainly echoing Hebrews 11:24-6, which describes the faithful descent of Moses

35. *HPS* 35 (pg. 57-8 above).

from a position of power and wealth among the Egyptians because “He thought the abuses he suffered for Christ were more valuable than the treasures of Egypt, since he was looking forward to the reward.” Mar John praises Moses in this same way, suggesting that he is a model of renunciation because he was born in absolute wealth, but “[chose] something for himself lower and more despised than all people,”³⁶ since he had a mindset that was focused on future promises and blessings. Mar John encourages his readers to adopt that same mindset. The second example is of the widow with the two copper coins in Luke 21:1-4.³⁷ She was said to give everything that she had, even though it was little, and because of the “readiness of her mind” and her willingness, Jesus prized her offering over the rest. Mar John encourages his readers to adopt this same mindset in their approach towards possessions, concluding the exhortation by asserting, “Therefore, let us pursue after the love of God, pulling ourselves away from everything and cleaving only to that Lord of all.”³⁸

Commentary on Jesus’ Commands and Conclusion (§38 - §41)

This final section of Mar John’s homily examines Jesus’ seemingly contradictory command to his disciples to acquire swords on the day of his arrest. His goal is to help the reader understand the circumstances for this command, explaining that it is not a universal command and therefore is not contrary to his previous commands, which call for renunciation. At the onset of this section, Mar John alludes generally to the fact that

36. *HPS* 36 (pg. 59 above).

37. This story also occurs in Mark 12:41-4, but since there is no evidence for favoring the Markan passage over the Lukan one and since Mar John seems to be favoring the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, not yet having referenced John or Mark, I am working off of the assumption that Luke 21:1-4 is the referenced passage here.

38. *HPS* 37 (pg. 62 above).

“sometimes [Jesus] had [his disciples] renounce everything.”³⁹ By doing this, he is able to allude to multiple passages of Scripture at the same time. For instance, Luke 5:11 and Luke 5:28 both provide examples of disciples leaving everything in response to the call of Jesus, the first telling the story of the calling of Peter, James, and John, and the second telling the story of the calling of Levi. In Luke 14:33, Jesus explains that “... none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple.” Finally, Luke 9:3 (which Jesus himself actually alludes to in Luke 22:35 before he gives the command in question) provides another good example of this radical call to renunciation as the Lord calls his disciples to leave everything behind as he sends them out to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God. In doing this, the disciples leave behind any sort of provisions that might help them, making them completely helpless. Mar John points out, as Jesus himself does in Luke 22:35, that even though the apostles had nothing, neither did they lack anything. Mar John explains that Jesus wanted them to not rely on anything that they had, but on his assistance alone. Jesus desired that they understand their weakness and also his assistance. According to Mar John, sending them out completely without provisions would help them understand this concept, and the small encouragement that they got from having swords would not prevent them from experiencing utter fear and recognizing their weakness. Alluding to the zeal of Simon Peter in the story of Jesus’ arrest, as he attacked the opponents of Jesus, Mar John pointed out even further that the swords were useless to them and they ended up being fully aware of their weakness. In the end, this allowed Jesus to make them fully aware of and fully reliant on his aid.

39. *HPS* 38 (pg. 62 above).

Poverty as a Hermeneutical Lens

The *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* is saturated with references to Scripture. In many places throughout, Mar John cites or adapts biblical passages for the sake of his argument, and in others the allusions, echoes, or locutions are downplayed. Some of the references seem solely to exist because Mar John thinks and writes using the vocabulary of Scripture, and others are clearly purposeful. After one identifies and analyzes all of these references, it is apparent that Mar John is interpreting Scripture through the lens of poverty and renunciation. Every biblical reference within this homily has been read by Mar John through this lens, which in turn guides the interpretation of these passages and their rhetorical use.

This hermeneutical lens influences Mar John toward either using Scripture that directly relates to the use of possessions or creatively interpreting passages to speak to this topic. For example, Mar John cites Luke 16:13 (or Matthew 6:24), “You cannot serve both God and Mammon” because it is a passage that directly speaks to the proper orientation of a person towards both God and wealth. The reason for this citation is very clear and apparent. However, he also cites Luke 9:23, in which Jesus calls upon his disciples to deny themselves daily, take up their crosses, and follow him. He connects this to poverty in saying that the necessary sufferings which entail “taking up one’s cross” require renunciation as a prerequisite. Thus, when Christ calls his disciples to “deny” themselves there, he is implying some amount of renunciation and poverty. This interpretation is not as apparent to the modern reader, and it shows that Mar John’s lens by which he interprets Scripture for this homily is the important ascetic ideal of renunciation.

The entire thrust of the homily is an exhortation of the “perfect” to a life of poverty, and to this end, Mar John uses Scripture in three distinctive ways: 1) for providing exemplars for imitation, 2) for giving practical advice and wisdom, and 3) for justifying his point with an appeal to a higher authority. In several places, Mar John provides the reader an example of a Biblical figure to serve as an exemplar, worthy of imitation. In doing this, he relies heavily on Hebrews 11, the so-called “Hall of Faith,” to provide examples of sacrificial faith, especially that which involved suffering and renunciation. Mar John gives the examples of Moses, who went from being among the elite to the “most despised” (Hebrews 11:23-9), and the unnamed “others” from Hebrews 11:32-38, who were said to have become “needy, oppressed, and mistreated” because of their faith. Mar John turns also to Elijah, who was so reliant on God that he did not even possess his “daily bread,” but was fed by God through ravens and the generosity of a foreign widow. He exhorts the reader to imitate the widow in Luke 21:1-4, who gave the little that she had unto God. Finally and above all else, he calls these “perfect ones” to imitate Jesus, saying, “For this is perfection: that the likeness of the Messiah, the Lord of all, be found in us. He took it upon himself to become poor, so that we might be made rich, and took our poverty that he might give us his wealth.”⁴⁰ By appealing to Scripture, heroes of the faith, and the likeness of the Lord himself, Mar John not only adds to the authority of his argument, but he gives these practitioners of the faith concrete examples, so that the Word of God can be seen more easily among them.

In terms of actions, Mar John brings forth Scripture to provide practical advice and wisdom for those struggling “perfect ones.” Advice such as that is found in Luke

40. *HPS* 35 (pg. 57-8 above).

16:13 (or Matthew 6:24), “You cannot serve both God and Mammon,” and Luke 9:62 that a person cannot head towards perfection, turn back, and not be hindered in the process. His allusions to the parable of the workers at the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) and to the widow with the two coins (Luke 21:1-4) both help to show that renunciation, practically, has more to do with the willingness of one’s desire. The actions are important, but if someone has uprooted the “root of avarice” from his or her mind, then like a tilled garden, seeds of perfection can be planted into a person’s mind.⁴¹

Furthermore, Mar John has Jesus speak to the reader as he did to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21, “If you wish to be perfect, sell everything you have and give [it] to the poor, and take up your cross and follow me.”⁴² Recalling that ascetics primarily interpreted Scripture by putting it into practice and that one’s holiness was defined “by how deeply [that] person allowed himself or herself to be transformed by the words of Scripture,”⁴³ Mar John’s appeal to Scripture for practical advice and wisdom about renunciation would have been extremely compelling and effective.

Lastly, by citing Scripture (especially the words of Jesus himself), Mar John appeals to a higher authority, one that his fellow ascetics would certainly have respected. One obvious example is Mar John’s claim that Jesus intentionally put “Blessed are those who mourn...” after “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit...” in his teaching. In doing so, he appeals to the authority of Jesus as teacher and makes a case for renunciation as an important first step before a lifestyle of ascetic mourning. Additionally, this rhetorical use

41. *HPS* 27 (pg. 46 above).

42. *HPS* 29 (pg. 49 above).

43. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 23.

overlaps with the other strategies listed above. The understood authority of Jesus and the figures of the Bible make Mar John's exhortations to their imitation effective. Also, practical wisdom and advice are only as credible as the source, which in many cases throughout the homily is the Lord himself. Furthermore, Mar John's appeal to the authority of Christ and Scripture appears even more marked when one considers how little he appeals to other things, e.g. other textual authorities. In minor cases, he appeals to the logic of an argument as demonstrated through certain images and their conventional wisdom (e.g. a doctor practicing medicine or a swimmer coming out of the water), but generally, his main arguments and exhortations are based almost exclusively on Scripture. Therefore, this appeal to authority was certainly one of Mar John's main uses of Scripture throughout.

Conclusion

This thesis offers an edition and translation of the *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* by John the Solitary. The introductory chapter sought to answer the question of who Mar John was. To this end, I wrote about the question of Mar John's identity, first in comparison to others with whom he was falsely attributed, then as a Syrian ascetic from the fifth century. As I explained in that chapter, his influence on the Syriac spiritual tradition has been noted by several scholars over the last hundred years, but relatively little attention has been given to studying his material. Prior to this thesis, Mar John's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* had not been edited or translated, which makes this work an important contribution to the study of this influential author.

The *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* is an ascetic discourse, which is written to fellow ascetics, reminding them that the path to perfection and union with Christ is denial

of the world and the renunciation of property. Mar John encourages the reader throughout to give up his or her possessions, so that nothing would hold them back from fully cleaving to the Messiah. Due to the complex, cyclical nature of the argumentation, a consistent thread of argumentation is hard to follow. This difficulty is further compounded by Mar John's writing style, as he transitions freely between abstract discourse, exhortation, and doxology. Overall, I have identified a structure, which begins with an introduction, followed by six exhortations to poverty and a brief commentary on a seemingly contradictory command of Jesus, ending with a doxological conclusion. Throughout all of these sections, Mar John has a heavy reliance on Scripture, which is consistent with his Syrian ascetic context. These references to Scripture reveal Mar John's hermeneutical lens of poverty, which undergirds both his choice of various passages and his interpretation and use of the references throughout. These main uses are: 1) to provide exemplars, 2) to offer wisdom and advice, and 3) to appeal to the higher authority of Scripture and the Lord himself.

Overall, my hope is that this edition, translation, and Scriptural analysis of Mar John's *Homily on the Poor in Spirit* would contribute to the major gap in knowledge of the study of John the Solitary. In order to increase in our knowledge of this author, the production of critical editions and translations of his various works is a necessity. Mar John has many other texts, which have been untouched by scholarship, and these also deserve further attention and study. Creating these editions and translations would allow for scholars to study Mar John more closely and compare his work to that of later authors, looking for more instances of influence, and for the church to benefit from the depth of his spiritual writings. Mar John is clearly an impressive spiritual writer, whose

words have the ability to somewhat transcend place and time, speaking to readers in much different contexts than his own. This is apparent in his acceptance by later Syriac writers of widely different theological backgrounds, but also in a cursory reading of his homily. Aside from the obvious benefit to the field of Syriac studies, I hope that the wisdom found in this homily might inspire Christians today to consider their use (or misuse) of possessions, as it inspired many Christians centuries ago.

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