

## Book Reviews

Denis F. Sullivan, Alice-Mary Talbot & Stamatina McGrath (eds), *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger. Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Moscow Version*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 45, Washington DC, 2014, ISBN 9780884023975

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While working on the image of the Jews in Byzantine ecclesiastic literature, I discovered the Greek-English edition of the life of *St. Basil the Younger*, written in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century. It seems to be a gold mine for researchers of Byzantine Christian Anti-Judaism. The *Vita* of Saint Basil is indeed an „immense artefact”<sup>1</sup> of middle-Byzantine literary creation and proves to be a wealth of information for present-day Byzantinists, philologists and theologians, as the text reveals luscious details of daily life in 10<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople. Among various ordinary events, one can also find in this text a description of a vision on the Last Judgment that occupies half of the entire text. Although it is called the life of St. Basil, a significant part of the narrative contains the experiences of Gregory, St. Basil’s disciple, who is the one that receives this vision on the Last Judgment.

It is interesting that the vision on the Last Judgment was triggered by thoughts that Gregory had on the fate of the Jews, as a result of his Biblical readings, as he was well trained in all the stories from the Old Testament (ἐξήσκηκώς, p. 347) – not commonplace for Christians of 10<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium. He confessed these thoughts to St. Basil, his spiritual father. Gregory initially draws positive conclusions from his Biblical reading on the final fate of the Jews, or at least of the descendants who have nothing to do with those that had crucified Jesus Christ. However, his spiritual father insists and harshly admonishes him over these thoughts. What follows is a long argument based on Biblical quotations that favour the damnation of all Jews after Jesus Christ.

The disciple finds it hard to believe and dares to request – through the intercession of his spiritual father – a vision upon how things will be at the

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<sup>1</sup> See the review of this book written by Jonathan Zecher in: *Sobornost* 37 (1/2015), 89-92.

Last Judgement. In the first night that follows he is granted a vision and it is in this vision that we find numerous pages on the faith of the Jews before the judgement throne. Already during the preparations for the coming of the Lord on the judgement throne, “even more than the others the Christ-killing Israelites and their descendants grew dizzy and trembled and severely gnashed their teeth with very much fear and consternation.” (p. 431) They reach the conclusion themselves that: “our lot will be in the eternal fire of Gehenna.” (p. 415) But after countless angelic retinues appear, the Lord comes and speaks to the Jews in a very severe voice, reminding them of the miracles and benefactions that He has made during His earthly lifetime. His speech is interlarded with numerous quotations from the Gospel according to John (p. 613ff.), and the reader who is accustomed to byzantine liturgical hymnography will surely recognize here the possible inspiration of the author of the *1<sup>st</sup> Stichiron of the 12th Antiphon* from the Orthros of Holy Friday (“This is what the Lord Almighty says to the Jews...”).

The Jews dare ask the Lord to bring Moses, so that he can be blamed for the misfortune to which he had lead them through the Law that he had given them on Mt. Sinai. However, Moses comes and proves to be equally merciless:

„o foolish ones, slow in heart to believe in all declaration of the prophets and the law itself, the very law which I gave you about the glorious incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, you are not sons of Abraham but of Satan. (p. 624) Woe to you, you pitiful and base creatures, because you did not make it your concern to believe in His holy name and be saved, but you were brought to naught by your arrogance and you hardened your heart in not receiving Him (ἐπωρώθητε τὴν καρδίαν μὴ προσδεξάμενοι αὐτόν)” (p. 628).

After the Lord’s speech and the apparition of Moses, the Jews are thrown into the fiery sea by the angels (p. 633). Then Gregory is dignified by the apparition of the Lord Himself, who speaks to him directly and brings him direct clarifications on the fate that the Jews deserved (here the Jews are called *sons of perdition*, υἱοὶ τῆς ἀπωλείας), again making frequent usage of passages from John (p. 681).

What is interesting for me in these writings/texts – is the fact that the author of the *Vita* seems well acquainted not only with the Biblical, but also with liturgical texts, surely as an active participant in the religious life of Constantinople. Not many decades before the writing of this text, the *Hymns* of Theodore the Studite († 826) had been written and collected by Joseph the hymnographer and other monks of the Byzantine capital hymns that make up the collection of liturgical hymns to be used in the

time before Easter (*Triodion*) up to the present day and which contain many anti-Jewish elements. A short list of key terms used to characterize Jews for the Last Judgement is extremely suggestive in this respect that is because all the expressions below, taken from Gregory's vision, are also to be found in liturgical hymnography and it is quite plausible that their source is precisely in the liturgy:

οἱ παράνομοι Ἰουδαῖοι – lawless Jews (p. 434)

ἀπειθεῖς Ἰουδαίους – unbelieving Jews & disobedient Jews (p. 418)

Θεοκτόνων – Killers of God (p. 352)

Χριστοκτόνων – Christ-killers (p. 412)

υἱοὶς τῆς ἀνομίας – sons of the lawlessness (p. 602)

υἱοὶ τῆς ἀπωλείας – sons of perdition (p. 682)

υἱοὶ τοῦ Διαβόλου – sons of Devil (p. 350)

ἐπράτους Ἰσραηλίτας – accursed Israelites (p. 680)

From the examples I have mentioned above we can conclude that the *Vita St. Basil* may be proof of liturgical influence on the crystallisation of an anti-Judaic attitude among 10<sup>th</sup> century Christians. Moreover, one can show that the author knew the passage from *Rom* 9-11 very well, with its positive perspective on Israel, but he preferred a different version.

While J. Zecher proposes that Orthodox Christians – who live the Byzantine rite and use such hagiographic writings – “reframe their debates about death and judgement, and the dogmatic standing of the ‘Tollhouses’”, I would like here to draw attention to the major influence that such writings have had on Eastern Christian faithful in framing their anti-Jewish attitude. Contextualising such interpretations and the tendentious interpretation they have had on the Jewish fate can therefore be reconsidered within Eastern churches and theology as well.