

Such a Great Salvation: Response to Paul Miller's Article

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Bio

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Such a Great Salvation

On January 23, 1999, in a small village in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, an Australian missionary named Graham Staines was burned to death with his two sons by an angry Hindu mob. Though known for his work among lepers, Staines also engaged in activities of evangelism that created controversy in the local context.¹ The deaths shocked many in India and around the world, happening at the end of a century that had seen perhaps 45.4 million Christians martyred, more than all previous centuries together.²

In Hebrews 2:1-4, the writer exhorts readers to “pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.”³

In response to Paul Miller's article earlier in this journal, this “great salvation” will be examined from the reality of martyrdom, which is perhaps in itself a gift of the Spirit. Those who die for the faith attest through their death to its worthiness and value. Miller is rightly concerned of the danger of broadening salvation to a “wider hope”, writing that a growing inclusivism “guts Evangelicalism of its very heart, strips it of its central contribution to the world, badly distorts Scripture, and misunderstands the Catholicism to which it looks for support.”⁴

Miller further asks the questions “Is any of this a problem? Need Evangelicals be worried by these developments? This paper answers with a resounding “Yes.”

¹For a recent and full account of the Staines murders as well as a larger examination of issues related to martyrdom, see Nayak (2011)

²Barrett, Johnson, and Kurian (2011:11)

³Revised Standard version.

⁴Paul Miller, pg. 1

Inclusivism is a problem because it actually guts Evangelicalism of its central message and reason for being, thereby nullifying its central contribution both to the non-Christian world and to the wider body of Christ.”⁵

While agreeing with Miller's conclusions related to the need for vigilance concerning a widening of the categories and recipients of salvation, this response will bring out the importance of the literally life and death issues of “such a great salvation”. These are not just doctrinal questions about which theologians might argue endlessly, but truth that people around the world are willing to die for, and increasingly are doing just that. In just the next little over a decade up to 2025, it is estimated that there could be another 150,000 martyrs alone.⁶

In Miller's last section, he counsels Evangelicals to learn from Catholics and their own responses to inclusivism.⁷ In this response to his article, the importance of martyrdom in the history of the Church of the East in Asia will be explored. Using the title for them of “Nestorians”, Western scholarship at times ignored or dismissed the Church's history in Asia as the story of a heretical Church even though that history predated the Christological struggles of the fifth century. In the latter part of the nineteenth century there began to be a reassessment in Western circles as to whether Nestorius was indeed a heretic, driven by the discovery in 1897 of a Syriac manuscript of one of his writings, the *Bazaar of Heracleides*.⁸ The existence of this work was then made known to the English-speaking world generating a reappraisal of Nestorius.⁹ The Church of the East, also called the East Syrian Church, grew from Edessa, a city now called Urfa and located in far-eastern Turkey, with its Christological position consistent with the stance of Antioch believing in both the divinity and humanity of Christ but attempting to articulate that mystery in their own linguistic and theological terms. For over one thousand years they were one of the great missionary movements in history.¹⁰

Early church historian Sozomen wrote of the advance of Christianity into the east beyond Edessa.¹¹ Sozomen brought together in his history stories of Church of the East missionary monks in these early centuries. A representative of the Church's proto-monasticism that Sozomen describes was the Persian sage Aphrahat (d. 345 C.E.). Much of his work is not extant but among his surviving writings are twenty-three *Demonstrations* [a ‘showing forth’ or ‘argument’] composed between 337 and 345.¹² It includes *Demonstration 6* which deals with the centrality of Covenant [in Syriac the word *qyama*] and the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant [*bnay qyama* and *bnat qyama*]. In

⁵pg. 4

⁶Statistic from Johnson, Barrett and Crossing (2011) in Nayak (2011:48)

⁷pg. 13ff

⁸See Driver (1925) for English translation of Nestorius' work.

⁹Bethune-Baker (1907)

¹⁰See Moffett (1998) for one of the best single volumes overview of the history of the Church in Asia, including the Church of the East.

¹¹Sozomen (d. 450) focused on the period 323-425 C.E. See Schaff (1952) for an English translation of his work.

¹²For the English translation from Syriac of the *Demonstrations* see Valavanolickal (2005)

an extensive series of admonitions and expositions of Scripture passages Aphrahat provides a rule of life for those called to intentionally live together in faithfulness to God's call.¹³

Two streams in Syrian monasticism from the beginning were *coenobitic* [living in community] and *anchoritic* [living separate but often near community]. Reading Aphrahat's sixth chapter indicates that both streams were included in his conception of monastic life. It also included the spiritual elite as well as the more common believer. In one passage in *Demonstration 6*, Aphrahat lists some of the qualities necessary for both streams:

Above all else, it is appropriate that the man upon whom the yoke [of Christ] is laid should have a sound faith, in accordance with what I wrote to you in the first letter; he should be assiduous in fasting and in prayer, he should be fervent in the love of Christ, he should be humble, composed and alert; his speech should be gentle and kind, he should be sincere-minded with everyone, he should speak [carefully] weighing his words, he should make a fence [barrier] for his mouth against any harmful words, he should distance himself from hasty laughter, he should not have a liking for finery in clothing, nor again should he let his hair grow [long] and adorn it; it is not appropriate for him to use on it scented unguents, nor should he take a seat at banquets.¹⁴

Aphrahat also writes in *Rule 12* of *Demonstration 6* to those living together in covenant:

For it is from the spirit of Christ that the prophets received, each of them in so far as he was able to bear; and what is being poured out today on all flesh is from the spirit of this same Christ, with the result that sons and daughters, old and young, servants and maid servants are prophesying [Acts 2:17-18; Joel 3:1-2].¹⁵

Monastic community was encouraged by the receiving of "the spirit of Christ" and it being poured out "on all flesh", quoting from an Old Testament prophecy of Joel repeated in Peter's sermon in the New Testament Book of Acts. A pouring out so it can be divided even more was not without an emphasis on suffering and even martyrdom. In *Demonstration 21* Aphrahat extols the importance of the tradition of martyrdom from Jesus and the Apostles:

Great and excellent is the martyrdom of Jesus. He surpassed in affliction and in confession all who were before or after.

¹³Brock (1973:3) says that this work of Aphrahat 'represents Syriac Christianity in its purest form, virtually uncontaminated by Greek influences.'

¹⁴*Demonstration 6.8.143* English translation by Valavanolickal (2005: 143)

¹⁵*Demonstration 6.12.149-150* (: 149)

And after this, Apostles in turn had been martyrs. And also concerning our brethren who are in the West, in the days of Diocletian there came great affliction and persecution to the whole Church of God, which was in all their region. The churches were overthrown and uprooted, and many confessors and martyrs made confession. And the Lord turned in mercy to them when they had been persecuted.¹⁶

The tradition of martyrdom that Aphrahat wrote about continued in the Church of the East in the coming centuries representing not only the end of earthly life due to persecution but also the daily life of sacrifice. It involved both virginity and holiness, two qualities important to Church monastic identity.

A key Syriac word that encompassed these two qualities of virginity and holiness as well as both *coenobitic* and *anchoritic* streams was *ihiduyuta*. It had at least three converging meanings of singleness: singleness in a physical celibate sense, single-minded in devotion, and a special relationship to Christ in singleness as the Heavenly Bridegroom.¹⁷ With a similar theme as Aphrahat in his emphasis on the witness of a martyr Church, Robert Murray describes these monastic witnesses as “deliberately homeless followers of the homeless Jesus on their ceaseless pilgrimage through the world.”¹⁸

Theological foundations for the idea of martyrdom in the monastic mission of the Church of the East can be seen not only in the work of Aphrahat but also in the sixth century Church leader Narsai (c. 520). One of Narsai’s homilies that described the calling of the Church to outward witness is in his *Homily to Paul and Peter*.¹⁹ In this homily, one that also espouses the value of martyrdom, the emphasis on the Spirit’s empowering is included in over fifty-five references. Sunquist writes: “Narsai’s theology must be understood within the missiological framework of its original context. We might have expected this dimension to his theology judging from the rapid and extensive spread of the East Syrian Church, but little has been said about the theological foundation for the geographic spread.”²⁰

In another homily of Narsai, *Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany and Ascension*, he writes:

Your [task] is this: to complete the mystery of preaching. And you shall be witnesses of the new way which I have opened up in my person. You I want to seal with your signature, the testament which I have written in blood for the sons of Adam. You I send as messengers to the

¹⁶*Demonstration 21* English translation by Young (1969:280-281)

¹⁷See Murray’s article (1975) for an expansion of the meaning of the word *ihiduyuta*.

¹⁸Murray (2004:28)

¹⁹For a translation of this homily see Kruger (1958). Also, Scott Sunquist has written on Narsai’s mission dimension to his theology in his unpublished PhD dissertation (1990).

²⁰Sunquist (1990:127)

four quarters [of the earth] to convert the Gentiles to kinship with the House of Abraham. By you as light, I will banish the darkness of error; and by your flames, I will enlighten the blind world. Go forth, give freely the freedom of life to mortality!²¹

In this exposition of Acts 1 in the New Testament, Narsai imagines the commission of Christ to his disciples that describes elements of involvement in mission activities. Included are “the mystery of preaching”, being “witnesses of the new way which I have opened up in my person”, and being sent “as messengers” to the whole earth. The Church is called to be light by which darkness will be banished and as flame to “enlighten the blind world.” Narsai has Christ’s closing words to be “Go forth” and they will “give freely the freedom of life in mortality.”

Missionary dimensions in Narsai’s theology included martyrdom for Christ, a special calling of Christians to be a witness to the world, the importance of the teacher in that calling, and the universal nature of that mission call to the whole earth. Of that universal calling, Narsai writes:

In the temple of Jesus’ body, He willed to receive the worship of men; and in his visible [nature], to show the universe the power of his [hidden] nature. Mortality, filled with passions, I have sought to examine; because it has suddenly become a spring that pours forth life to the universe. He fulfilled the will of his Sender by [His] redemption of men; and accomplished [His] active work [or salvation] for the universe.²²

Above elements in Narsai of martyrdom in witness and the calling to universal mission are also seen in a letter of Isho-yahbh III (d. 658) who was Patriarch of the Church in the period of Islam’s early growth stage:

The perfect life of the Christians is proved by two indications: by a holy life, and by Divine miracles which they can perform; and above all by this, that they match a faithful life with a faithful death. They wondrously achieve these three things, because they first received the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism. But the Spirit Himself is rightly and justly given by the priestly power for the Holy Church of God, conferred by the laying-on of hands and the Apostolic succession, which is imparted canonically in the Holy Church of Christ our Lord.²³

Isho-yahbh’s exhortation to Christians is that a “faithful life” is to be matched with

²¹English translation in Sunquist (1990:127). For full translation of homily see P.O. Vol. 40:1:182. Moffett also comments on this homily in (1998:202).

²²English translation in Sunquist (1990:114)

²³*Letter 14*, Latin in Duval (1905) and English translation in Young (1969:322)

“a faithful death”. Believers can achieve this in part by receiving “the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism”, continuing a similar emphases in Aphrahat and Narsai that included the calling of martyrdom with the giving of the Holy Spirit for service. In the Patriarch’s letter, the “perfect life” is proved by both inner and outward dimensions: the life of holiness and the performing of ‘Divine miracles’.

Liturgy was important in the daily shaping and forming of the monks’ spiritual lives and provided part of an overall framework of life and devotion. East Syrians primarily used the liturgy of two figures important to early tradition of the church. They were Addai (Thaddeus) and Mari and had been sent out from Edessa in the first and second century. The English translator of the liturgy, M.J. Birnie, calls Addai and Mari the “disciplers of Asia” for this early role in the Church’s tradition of mission involvement.²⁴ It is not clear how often the full liturgy of Addai and Mari was sung or read in the monasteries. Perhaps portions of it were involved in each of the daily times of service as included in the lectionary.

Below is a prayer from this liturgy:

O my Lord, in your many ineffable mercies, make a good and acceptable memorial for all the just and righteous fathers who were well-pleasing before you through the commemoration of the body and blood of your Christ which we offer you upon your pure and holy altar, as you taught us. Bring to pass your tranquility and peace in us all the days of the world. Yea, our Lord and our God, bring to pass your tranquility and peace in us all the days of the world, that all the inhabitants of the earth may know you and know that you alone are God, the Father of truth, and that you sent our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son and your Beloved, and he, our Lord and our God, came and taught us in his life-giving gospel all the purity and holiness of the prophets and apostles, of the martyrs and confessors, of the bishops and teachers, of the presbyters and deacons, and of all the children of the holy catholic church - who have been signed with the living seal of holy Baptism.²⁵

In the words of this prayer, part of a liturgy central to the East Syrian church, several aspects should be noted. First, the just and righteous fathers who have gone before are remembered and brought before the altar as a living memory of their faithfulness. As in the words of one of their historians Thomas of Marga, remembering these holy athletes of God²⁶ was part of the daily lives of the monastic community, here enshrined in the liturgy of the community.

The prayer also includes the mission call to the whole earth: “That all the

²⁴Birnie (2013)

²⁵English translation of portion by Chorbishop M.J. Birnie (2013)

²⁶ 1.2.22 of *Historia Monastica*, translated into English by Budge 1899 (reprint 2003)

inhabitants of the earth may know you and know that you alone are God, the Father of truth, and that you sent our Lord Jesus Christ, your son and your Beloved". In this portion the prayers for tranquility and peace are in the context of "all the inhabitants of the earth" knowing God. For the East Syrian Church, using both the liturgy of Addai and Mari who were known in tradition as sent out apostles and a lectionary by the monastic founder of Beit Abhe provided resources for their monastic mission activities.

Each time this liturgy was used this prayer helped the monks remember that all the inhabitants of earth were included in activities of witness. These inhabitants included the Muslim communities around them. Whether that direct application was made is not known but the monks were nonetheless praying this prayer for mission "to the whole earth" regularly.

A third part of this prayer following a call to the whole earth included God sending "Our Lord Jesus Christ, your son and your Beloved." Monks in Beit Abhe and other monasteries were regularly remembering as part of their liturgy that the Gospel of Christ was central to their activities daily and this same Gospel had also been central to Addai and Mari in the days of Edessa in the early period of their Church. Remembrance of their faith in the sending of Christ for the whole world was part of a link in meaning and reality with a continuity of their Church's history.

The story of monastic activities in mission is in part the Church of the East as a *martyr* Church. Involvement of the Church in these activities was strengthened by their conscious foundation of liturgy that gave them regular disciplines of memory. It was a memory that included martyrs who had gone before and were remembered in the daily prayers in the monasteries. Being a *martyr* Church did not only mean the sacrifice of physical life but an ongoing tradition of sacrificial living that went back to their early history in the work of Aphrahat and Narsai. A lifestyle of mission involvement over centuries centred in the monasteries experienced periods of ebb and flow in the relationship with Muslims and other faiths around them.

Explored in this response to Paul Miller's article was mission involvement at particular periods in Church of the East history that had continued understanding of a *martyr* identity lived out for "such a great salvation." In recounting the story of his own conversion, Miller describes the role of a man named Hiram Hyratt and the interest he took in a wandering hippie. Miller asks the question, "Why should Hiram have crossed that street, if I was already saved?"²⁷ Indeed, in the response of this article on the importance of martyrdom, it may be further asked, "Why should Jesus have needed to die on the cross, or why have countless martyrs down through history, from the Church of the East to Graham Staines and his sons, counted the salvation of Jesus worthy to die for?"

²⁷Miller, pg. 7

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