

THREE OR TWO READINGS IN EARLY BYZANTINE LITURGY?

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Abstract:

The following article will draw attention to some remarks in the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala about the number of biblical readings in the early Byzantine Liturgy. Severian held several homilies in Constantinople AD 401–402 and was substitute for John Chrysostom. In the Eucharist there were most likely only two readings, and they were both from the New Testament: Apostle and Gospel.

Key Words:

Severian of Gabala, Constantinople, lectionary system, Old Testament readings, Byzantine liturgy, Eucharist, homily

Introduction

It has often been argued that in the first Byzantine centuries there were three readings in the liturgy: first the Prophet, then the Apostle and last the Gospel. For example, we can find a reconstruction of the Byzantine liturgy before the seventh century in an appendix to F. E. Brightman's

book *Liturgies, Eastern and Western*.¹ Here there are three readings: Prophet, Apostle and Gospel. The reconstruction is based mostly on evidence from John Chrysostom.

According to this common theory the first reading from the Old Testament disappeared in the seventh century.² A reform of the Byzantine liturgy was made, and the result can be seen for example in a Typicon from Constantinople in the tenth century with only two readings: Apostle and Gospel.³ The same order and number of readings have been used since in the Orthodox Church.⁴

I am sceptical concerning the traditional theory, that in the early Byzantine centuries there were three readings in the liturgy beginning with a reading from the Old Testament. My scepticism comes from remarks in the homilies by Severian of Gabala.⁵

¹ See Appendix O in F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies, Eastern and Western, vol. I: Eastern Liturgies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1896, 527–534 (527).

² See e.g. Juan Mateos, *La célébration de la parole dans la liturgie byzantine* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 191), Roma: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium 1971. According to Mateos, the Byzantine church had originally three readings, beginning with the Prophet, but the first reading from the Old Testament disappeared in the seventh century (p. 130–133).

³ Edited and translated by Juan Mateos, *Le Typicon la Grande Église: Ms. Sainte-Croix N° 40, X^e siècle*, vol. I–II (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 165–166), Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum 1962–63.

⁴ See e.g. A. Kniazeff, “La lecture de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Testament dans le rite byzantin”, *Lex Orandi* 35 (1963), 201–251. See also Job Getcha, *The Typicon Decoded: An Explanation of Byzantine Liturgical Practice*, translated by Paul Meyendorff, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 2012.

⁵ In 1982–88 I was preparing an edition of all the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala. See the revised plan for an edition in C. Datema, “Towards a Critical Edition of the Greek Homilies of Severian of Gabala”, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 19 (1988), 107–115. According to this plan I should publish the homilies on Genesis. The plan was not realised, but several dissertations about homilies by Severian of Gabala was published at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, e.g. R. F. Regtuit, *Severianus van Gabala: Contra iudaeos et graecos et haereticos, tekst, inleiding en vertaling*, Doctoralscriptie, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1987, and Remco F. Regtuit, *Severian of Gabala: Homily on the Incarnation of Christ (CPG 4204)*, Amsterdam: VU University Press 1992. Another result was the preliminary edition of some Pseudo-Chrysostomic homilies, among them some unedited homilies by Severian of Gabala: *Homiliae Pseudo-Chrysostomicae*, ed. Karl-Heinz Uthemann, Remco F. Regtuit & Johannes M. Tevel, Turnhout: Brepols 1994.

Severian was staying in Constantinople for some years when John Chrysostom was patriarch, and he held several homilies in Constantinople in AD 401 and 402, especially in the months when John Chrysostom was on a journey to Asia Minor.⁶ His homilies can be used as a source to the lectionary system in Constantinople in the beginning of the fifth century.

I did not start by being sceptical. When I, in 1973, first studied the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala,⁷ I expected to find a lectionary system with three readings (Prophet, Apostle and Gospel) according to the common opinion for Constantinople at that time. But I did not succeed in finding traces of three readings in the same homily.⁸

Many years later, in 1991, I studied the evidence in the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala once more and tried to find out how the early lectionary system in Constantinople was according to Severian. In this study my conclusion was that evidence in the homilies points in the direction of a lectionary system in the Eucharistic services on Saturdays and Sundays with only two readings, both from the New Testament:

⁶ The homilies by Severian of Gabala are in the Greek manuscripts mostly found under the name of John Chrysostom and mostly edited as Pseudo-Chrysostomica. An older but still useful dissertation about Severian is Hans-Dietrich Altendorf, *Untersuchungen zu Severian von Gabala*, Tübingen 1957. Altendorfs dissertation is basis for the list in Mauritius Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum: Vol. II ab Athanasio ad Chrysostomum* (Corpus Christianorum), Turnhout: Brepols 1974 (abbreviated CPG). About Severian of Gabala see CPG 4185–4295 (p. 468–488). Since then, more homilies have been identified and edited, see Sever J. Voicu, s.v. “Sévérien de Gabala”, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 14 (1989), 752–763, and several other articles by Sever J. Voicu, latest: Sever J. Voicu, “A Century of Progress on the Homilies of Severian of Gabala”, in J. Leemans, G. Roskam & J. Segers (eds.), *John Chrysostom and Severian of Gabala: Homilists, Exegetes and Theologians* (Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta, 282), Leuven: Peeters 2019, 259–283.

⁷ In 1974 I was rewarded a gold medal for a prize thesis at the University of Aarhus about the use of the Bible in the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala. The prize thesis has not been published. One of the aspects which I analysed was the liturgical use of the Bible.

⁸ The corpus of homilies which I was studying in 1973 was based on the German dissertation from 1957 on Severian of Gabala by Hans-Dietrich Altendorf, *Untersuchungen zu Severian von Gabala*, and included 37 Greek homilies. It is nearly the same as the list in CPG 4185–4215.

Apostle and Gospel. In homilies held on such occasions there are no traces of liturgical readings from the Old Testament.⁹

This does not mean that texts from the Old Testament were not used as liturgical readings in Constantinople around AD 400, but rather that they were used at different kinds of services, most probably at Vespers. Severian of Gabala held a series of homilies on Genesis in the late afternoon on weekdays, and here there was certainly a liturgical reading from the Old Testament, but there are no traces of readings from the New Testament in this context.¹⁰

Aimé Georges Martimort

I am not the only one who is sceptical concerning a supposed old structure with three readings in the liturgy of Constantinople, nor the first to utter such scepticism. Among the sceptics I will primarily mention Aimé Georges Martimort, who, in 1984, wrote an article about the number of readings in the liturgy.¹¹ In his article, he not only discusses the situation in Constantinople, but also in Rome, Jerusalem, North Africa (Augustine) and Cappadocia.

Concerning Constantinople, he examines the evidence from John Chrysostom, which has been collected and analysed by Frans van de

⁹ Holger Villadsen, "Det tidlige perikopesystem i Konstantinopel ifølge Severian af Gabala" [The Early Lectionary System in Constantinople according to Severian of Gabala], in *Florilegium patristicum*, ed. Gösta Hallonsten, Sten Hidal & Samuel Rubenson, Åsak 1991, 101–127.

¹⁰ *De creatione mundi* 1–6 (CPG 4194), ed. PG 56.429–550, and *Quomodo animam acceperit Adamus* (CPG 4195), ed. Savile 5.648–653. See Johannes Zellinger, *Die Genesishomilien des Bischofs Severian von Gabala* (Alttestamentliche Abhandlungen, VII. Band, 1. Heft), Münster in Westf.: Aschendorff 1916. The series of homilies on Genesis by Severian of Gabala is probably longer than the seven homilies. See Villadsen, "Det tidlige perikopesystem", 236–238; and Voicu, "A Century of Progress", 281 (no. 39, 41, 42 & 46).

¹¹ Aimé Georges Martimort, "A propos du nombre des lectures à la messe", *Revue des sciences religieuses* 58 (1984), 42–51. A later critical article about readings from the Old Testament in the Constantinopolitan Eucharist is Sysse Gudrun Engberg, "The Prophetologion and the Triple-lection Theory: The Genesis of a Liturgical Book", *Bollettino della Badia greca di Grottaferrata*, Terza Series, vol. 3 (2006), 67–92.

Paverd in his book about the liturgy in Antioch and Constantinople according to John Chrysostom.¹² Martimort analyses the texts used by Paverd, and, according to him, they do not demonstrate a system in Constantinople with three readings in every Eucharistic service.¹³

I will leave the evaluation of the evidence from John Chrysostom to others and concentrate on Severian of Gabala.¹⁴ In his homilies from Constantinople a thorough analysis will reveal interesting and relevant information about the number of readings in Constantinople.

In Centurionem (CPG 4230)

I will first concentrate on one interesting remark in the homily *In Centurionem* by Severian of Gabala. The editio princeps of this homily was made in 1983 by Michel Aubineau.¹⁵

In Centurionem is a homily preached in Constantinople, probably on a Saturday when there was a horse race in town. In a homily on the following day, Severian complains that people the previous day left the church and instead attended a horse race, and refers to the homily *In Centurionem* as being held on that occasion.¹⁶

The Gospel of the day was the text from Luke about the centurion (Luke 7.1–10). In the introduction to the homily Severian mentions that

¹² Frans van de Paverd, *Zur Geschichte der Messliturgie in Antiocheia und Konstantinopel gegen Ende des vierten Jahrhunderts: Analyse der Quellen bei Johannes Chrysostomos* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 187), Rome 1970.

¹³ Martimort, “A propos du nombre”, 50.

¹⁴ See the dissertation from 2015 by Gary Philippe Raczka, *The Lectionary of the Time of Saint John Chrysostom* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame 2015). He uses among other patristic sources also homilies by Severian of Gabala (pp. 281–297) and upholds the traditional view that there was an Old Testament reading from the Prophets in the early Byzantine Eucharistic Liturgy (p. 319), but he has not found evidence for this conclusion in the homilies by Severian (p. 296), so the basis for his conclusion is other patristic sources.

¹⁵ Michel Aubineau (ed.), *Un traité inédit de christologie de Sévérien de Gabala: In Centurionem et contra Manichæos et Apollinaristas* (Cahiers d’Orientalisme 5, Genève: Patrick Cramer 1983).

¹⁶ *In dictum apostoli: Non quod volo facio* (CPG 4203), ed. PG 59.663–674. See Aubineau, *Un traité inédit*, 46–49. The reference to the horse race the day before is found in the beginning of the homily *In dictum apostoli: Non quod volo facio*, PG 59.663.

Luke 7.9 has been read.¹⁷ In the next section he compares the faith of the centurion with the heretics. And now comes the remark, which I find very interesting. Severian says:

On the contrary the heretics, who read both the Law, the Prop-
hets, the Gospels and the Apostles, did not recognize the dignity
and did insult the authority of the Only-begotten by saying, that
he is submitted under the power of the Father, and not knowing,
that the authority is common for the divine essence, and that the
power is indivisible. For "I and the Father are one". But let us now
return to the matter.¹⁸

In this small digression Severian says, as I understand it, that someone at that time had four readings, and that they were heretics. If this understanding of the remark is true, it is a remarkable statement.

Severian of Gabala understood himself as an orthodox bishop and would certainly not want to have something in common with heretics.¹⁹ So, according to this statement, the orthodox in Constantinople did not have four readings.

If there were heretics who, according to Severian, had four readings at this time around AD 400, then who were they? Severian is not explicitly stating who the heretics were, but he gives a short description of their theology, and according to this description the heretics seem to be Arians. Elsewhere in the homily he is arguing against Manichaeism and Apollinarianism. But they do not fit with the description of the

¹⁷ Προηγείται δὲ τῶν πάντων ἡ πίστις, ἦν καὶ ὁ σωτὴρ ἐν τοῖς σήμερον ὑπαναγνωσθεῖσιν ἐπεθαύμασεν λέγων· «Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐδὲ ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ τοσαύτην πίστιν εὑρον.» Aubineau, *Un traité inédit*, 108. See also Aubineau, *Un traité inédit*, 53–54.

¹⁸ Οἱ δὲ αἰρετικοί, καὶ νόμον καὶ προφήτας καὶ εὐαγγέλια καὶ τοὺς ἀποστόλους ἀναγινώσκοντες, ἠγνόησαν τὴν ἀξίαν καὶ ὕβρισαν τὴν τοῦ μονογενοῦς ἐξουσίαν, ὑποκείσθαι αὐτὸν λέγοντες τῇ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἀθθεντία, οὐκ εἰδότες ὅτι τῆς θείας οὐσίας κοινὴ ἡ ἐξουσία καὶ ἀμέριστος ἡ ἀθθεντία· «Εγὼ» γὰρ «καὶ ὁ Πατὴρ ἐν ἐσμεν.» Ἄλλ' εἰς τὸ προκειμένον ἐπανέλωμεν. Aubineau, *Un traité inédit*, 108.

¹⁹ In his homilies Severian is very often arguing against heretics, especially Arians. See e.g. Johannes Zellinger, *Studien zu Severian von Gabala* (Münsterische Beiträge zur Theologie 8, Münster in Westf.: Aschendorff, 1926), 146–173.

heretics in this section of the homily. So it seems to me most probable that Severian here is talking about some Arians.

Three or Two Readings?

If there were some heretics, most probably Arians, who used four readings in the liturgy, both from the Old Testament and from the New Testament, what was then the practice among the orthodox in Constantinople?

The traditional answer is that they had three readings, the first of them taken from the Old Testament. This answer is primarily based on the evidence from texts by John Chrysostom. If we instead look at the homilies preached in Constantinople by Severian of Gabala, it seems to me more probable that there were only two readings in the liturgy, and that those readings were both taken from the New Testament.

Among the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala I have found two where he more or less explicitly mentions the number of readings. The first homily is *De Christo pastore et ove*.²⁰ Here Severian says that the two readings of the day run together.²¹ The Gospel of the day is the text about the Good Shepherd from John 10.11–30.²² It is, however, not quite clear where the first reading is from. It could be from Isaiah 53.7, but more likely it is from the Acts 8.32, where there is a quotation from Isaiah.²³

The second homily is *De paenitentia et compunctione*.²⁴ The Apostle is 1 Corinthians 12.21 and the Gospel is Mark 2.5.²⁵ Here Severian again says that the apostolic reading and the gospel reading of the day run together.²⁶ The number of the readings is not mentioned, but Severian

²⁰ CPG 4189, ed. PG 52.827–836.

²¹ τὰ γὰρ δύο ταῦτα συνέδραμον σήμερον ἀναγνώσματα, PG 52.827.34–35. [The line numbers used here and in the following are not found in Migne, but are added by me].

²² See PG 52.827.10–14 and PG 52.831.45–48.

²³ See PG 52.827.34–37.

²⁴ CPG 4186, ed. PG 49.323–336.

²⁵ PG 49.323.8–12 and 22–27.

²⁶ Συνέδραμε δὲ σήμερον τῆ ἀποστολικῆ ἀναγνώσει καὶ ἡ εὐαγγελικὴ τοῦ Σωτῆρος αὐθεντία, ἀμαρτιῶν ἄφεισιν ἀφθόνως χαριζομένη. Τὸν γὰρ παραλυτικὸν ὁ Σωτὴρ

seems to presuppose that there are only those two readings: Apostle and Gospel.

There are, in homilies by Severian, a large number of references to liturgical readings, but in no case have I found homilies with more than two readings. And I did not find homilies with readings both from the Old and the New Testament.

The homilies can be divided in four groups with readings from: (1) Genesis, (2) other parts of the Old Testament, (3) the Apostle and (4) the Gospels.²⁷ Homilies can belong to more than one group.

Homilies from the first group with readings or texts from Genesis seem to be held on weekdays in Lent at some sort of Vesper, similar to what is known from the Byzantine liturgy in the tenth century.²⁸ And there are no traces of readings from the New Testament. They belong to a special sort of service without Eucharist and without readings from the New Testament.²⁹

The second group with readings from other parts of the Old Testament is important in this context, especially if, among the homilies, there were examples with readings both from the Old Testament and a Gospel. But I did not find such homilies, only three possible references, and they are so questionable that it seems justified to exclude them.³⁰ In this

ἰόμενος ἔλεγεν, ὡς ἀρτίως ἀκηκόατε· Τέκνον, ἀφέωνταί σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου αἱ πολλαί· PG 49.323.22–27.

²⁷ A list of the forty Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala used in the analysis can be found in Villadsen, “Det tidlige perikopesystem”, 245–249. A handwritten index (from 1974) of biblical quotations and allusions in the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala can be seen in my private home page: www.sejrupvilladsen.dk/SG-01.pdf.

²⁸ See Mateos, *Le Typicon*, vol. II, 12–65.

²⁹ Homilies with text or reading from Genesis are: CPG 4194 (six homilies), 4195, 4208, 4232 and 4271. See Villadsen, “Det tidlige perikopesystem”, 236–239.

³⁰ See Villadsen, “Det tidlige perikopesystem”, 239–242. In a homily for Whitsun, *In sanctam pentecosten* (CPG 4211), Severian interprets Exod. 19, Acts 2 and 1 Cor. 12. None of the texts are mentioned as liturgical readings, but it could perhaps be a Eucharist with four readings. In the beginning of *In pretiosam et uiuivicam crucem* (CPG 4213) he mentions “a prophetic word to day” (Combefis 1556, 224). If he is referring to a reading from the Old Testament, the reading could perhaps be Num. 20.11 which is mentioned in the beginning of the homily (Combefis 1656, 227). In a homily for Epiphany, *In theophaniam* (CPG 4212), Severian interprets Is. 35.2 at the end. It could reflect a liturgical reading, but

group there are also homilies with liturgical use from the Psalms, but the Psalms belong to another category and are not relevant here.³¹

In the third group there are eight homilies with readings from the Apostle.³² In all homilies, except one, Severian also mentions the Gospel of the day, but he does not mention a reading from the Old Testament.³³

There are, in the fourth group, a considerable number of references to readings from the Gospels, and most of them are explicitly mentioned as liturgical readings.³⁴ In several cases they are combined with a reading from the Apostle, but in no cases are they combined with a reading from the Old Testament.

Conclusion

Evaluated as a whole it seems justified to conclude that, according to the Greek homilies by Severian of Gabala, readings from the Gospels in the Eucharistic services in Constantinople around AD 400 were only combined with another reading from the Apostle and not with a reading from the Old Testament. The same structure is found in the later Byzantine Lectionary.³⁵

if it is so, it most probably belongs to the vigil before Epiphany, cf. Mateos, *Le Typicon*, vol. I, 182–183.

³¹ Homilies with liturgical use of the Psalms are: CPG 4190 (Ps. 96.1), 4191 (Ps. 95.1), 4192 (Ps. 96.1), 4194 (Ps. 118.105 and 140.2), 4196 (Ps. 65.4) and 4212 (Ps. 79.2–4).

³² The 8 homilies are: CPG 4186, 4187, 4189, 4191, 4196, 4200, 4203 and 4215. See Villadsen, “Det tidlige perikopesystem”, 242–243.

³³ The homily which only mentions the Apostle is *In Non quod volo* (CPG 4203). In two homilies the Gospel is not from the same day as the Apostle: CPG 4187 and 4200.

³⁴ A list of the homilies and references to readings from the Gospels can be found in Villadsen, “Det tidlige perikopesystem”, 243–245. The homilies are: CPG 4186, 4187, 4189, 4191, 4192, 4193, 4196, 4200, 4201, 4202, 4205, 4207, 4209, 4210, 4213, 4214, 4215 and 4230.

³⁵ This article was first held as a short communication at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford August 2003. The text has been revised and notes added for this publication.