

SEVERIAN OF GABALA AS A SOURCE FOR THE CATHEDRAL RITE OF CONSTANTINOPLE AROUND THE YEAR 400

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Abstract:

The early Greek Church Fathers may be used, with caution, to reconstruct early liturgy. An example of this are the homilies of Severian of Gabala, which very explicitly refer to biblical lections in the service and show that parts of the Old Testament lectionary, also called prophetologion, go back to AD 400, if not earlier.

Key Words:

Byzantine liturgy, Old Testament lectionary

The Old Testament was used quite extensively in the Byzantine church, although not as much as some scholars would want. The Septuagint is a very large book which not even the Jews recite in its entirety, and the early Christians had a very practical view on the book: they took what they could use, just as the authors of the New Testament had done, and they saw the entire Old Testament as a potential prophecy of Christ. Thus Moses, David and Solomon were all considered prophets, and any quote in the church from the book was a prophecy of the New Covenant;

there is one exception, the course readings,¹ or quasi-lectio continua on weekdays of Lent in Constantinople, when Genesis, Proverbs and Isaiah were recited from beginning to end, albeit with large text omissions.

Some scholars maintain that the Old Testament “originally”, that is, in the first few hundred years of Christianity, was recited at the “full liturgy”, as the Greek manuscripts call it, i.e. the Eucharist; however, other scholars consider this a myth for which there is no evidence.² In Constantinople, the Old Testament was recited from very early on, but not at the Eucharist. As a prophecy, it had its proper place before the New Testament, but not in the same service: it belonged in the evening service of Lent and on the eve of a great feast. Some of the scholars who believe that the Byzantine Eucharist contained a triple-lection series (Old Testament reading, Epistle, and Gospel) also believe that at some point in the 7th or 8th century the Old Testament lections were transferred from the Eucharist to the evening service,³ a rather clumsy and, to my mind, unnecessary theory, because it can be shown that Old Testament readings belonged in the evening service of Lent in Constantinople from quite early on. The reading program was slowly enlarged, first from one lection to two, and later to three readings every weekday of Lent, and gradually also readings for the eves of great feasts were added.⁴

This theory is supported by evidence from homilies by Severian of Gabala, who preached in Constantinople around the year 400 while he was *locum tenens* for the archbishop, John Chrysostom. I shall touch on three areas: the readings from Genesis during Lent, the readings from Job during Holy Week, and the singing of the Old Testament Psalms.

¹ I use the terms reading, lection, pericope, lesson synonymously, in the sense of a biblical passage read out in church.

² For the discussion, see: Sysse G. Engberg, “The *Prophetologion* and the Triple-Lecture Theory – the *Genesis* of a Liturgical Book”, *Bolletino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* 3 (2006), 67–91; online: <https://www.academia.edu/11905564/>, Robert F. Taft, “Were there once Old Testament readings in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy? Apropos of an article by Sysse Gudrun Engberg”, *BBGG* 8 (2011), 271–311, and Sysse G. Engberg, “The Needle and the Haystack – Searching for Evidence of the Eucharistic Old Testament Lection in the Constantinopolitan rite”, *BBGG* 13 (2016), 47–60; online: <https://www.academia.edu/36017045/>

³ Günther Zuntz, *Lukian von Antiochien und der Text der Evangelien*, hrsg. B. Aland und K. Wachtel, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter 1995, 49.

⁴ See Sysse G. Engberg, *Profetie – Anagnosmata – Prophetologion* (forthcoming).

The church of Constantinople did not, as that of Jerusalem and other churches, collect all biblical lections into one book, but had three separate books, for the Gospel, the Epistle, and the Old Testament readings; the latter is now most often referred to as prophetologion.⁵ The oldest complete Greek manuscripts are from the 10th century, but two palimpsest prophetologia attest to an earlier version of the lectionary, before AD 630.⁶ The readings for Lent and Holy Week are found in almost all prophetologion manuscripts, and this part of the lectionary is extremely stable, both in the choice of readings and in their text form, and also in the sung material associated with the Old Testament readings; this is clearly a very old layer, the nucleus around which the rest of the book has developed.

Scholars have tried to establish the early lectionary of Constantinople from biblical quotes in contemporary homilies, the most ambitious being the dissertation from 2015 of Gary Philippe Raczka,⁷ who used the homilies of John Chrysostom, Severian of Gabala, Proclus, and Leontius presbyter, as well as the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist as sources for the early lectionary of Constantinople. However, this enterprise requires strict criteria: only when the author himself makes explicit mention of a reading as having taken place in the service ἀγτίως, meaning “a little while ago”, or “just now”, can we be sure that the quote is evidence of such a reading; a mere quotation from the Bible does not suffice as evidence of a biblical reading in the service. Nor is a match between an Old Testament quote and a reading in the 10th-century prophetologion sufficient evidence; rather than the homilist referring to a lection, it might be the other way around with the lection referring to the homily, or both texts may, independently of each other, have used the same *typos* from the common pool of Old Testament prophecies.

⁵ In the Slavic world it is called parimejnik. The Greek prophetologion exists in a scholarly edition, to which I shall refer in the following: *Prophetologium* I–II (Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae, Lectionaria I), ed. Carsten Høeg, Günther Zuntz, (Sysse) Gudrun Engberg, Hauniae: Munksgaard 1939–1981; online: <https://www.igl.ku.dk/MMB/series-transcripta-2.html>

⁶ Sysse G. Engberg, “An Early Greek Lectionary Recovered: The Palimpsest MS Cambridge Westminster College WGL 9/2”, *BBGG* 15 (2018), 2020, 61–96.

⁷ Gary Philippe Raczka, *The Lectionary at the Time of Saint John Chrysostom*, unpublished dissertation, University of Notre Dame 2015; online: <https://www.academia.edu/111779164/>

It is obvious from John Chrysostom's homilies on Genesis that consecutive lections from that book were recited in church on the evening of lenten weekdays, similar to what is found in the prophetologion. The problem is the question of where his homilies were delivered: in Constantinople where he was patriarch AD 398–404, or in Antioch where he spent many years before that. The continuous reading of Genesis might have been a custom of Antioch only, as Alfred Rahlfs assumed more than a hundred years ago.⁸ But since Severian of Gabala was *locum tenens* for Chrysostom in Constantinople, he must have delivered his homilies there, either in St. Sophia itself or in one of her sister churches. Here, however, the problem is the disagreement as to which homilies are actually by Severian, but his Genesis homilies are considered authentic.

The Danish scholar Holger Villadsen has analysed the use of the Bible in Severian's homilies in his dissertation from 1974, unfortunately unpublished and unfortunately in Danish.⁹ In this study he follows the principle of the explicit reference to a reading (the "ἀρτίως criterion") and establishes, among other things, that they attest to a consecutive reading from Genesis, recited in the evening of the weekdays of Lent in Constantinople at the time, beginning on Monday of the first week of Lent; he even finds evidence that there was an already established series of pericopes from Genesis that the preacher might interpret in his homily, but which he did not necessarily follow. The beginning of the homily *Of Noah and his sons, and of the Cherubim, and of the prophet Hosea who married a prostitute* (CPG 4232) shows that Severian was in the middle of a series about Noah, but preferred to digress in a different direction in this particular homily: "The previous sequence [of homilies] about Noah, and the whole story of him, invites to be talked about and wants [us] to follow the usual procedure in good order (...), but let me reserve this

⁸ Alfred Rahlfs, *Die alttestamentlichen Lektionen der griechischen Kirche*, (Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse), Berlin 1915, 114–122.

⁹ Holger Villadsen, *Bibelanvendelsen i de på græsk overleverede homilier af Severian af Gabala* ("The Use of the Bible in the Greek Homilies of Severian of Gabala"), unpublished dissertation, University of Aarhus 1974.

story for a different sermon”,¹⁰ whereupon Severian continues preaching about Adam’s Fall from grace, the cherubim, Hosea, and a number of other themes. This opening clause shows that there was a series of Old Testament readings about Noah, which the homilist was supposed to follow, but also that he was free to choose a different subject.¹¹ The story of Noah is very prominent in the prophetologion, told over nine pericopes recited from Friday of the second week to Tuesday of the fourth week of Lent (L 14b–22b). When Severian, in his homily *De Noe et de arca* (CPG 4271) treating Noah after the Flood, mentions that it is now Mid-Lent, this corresponds quite well to the Old Testament reading Gen. 8.21–9.7, recited on Monday of the fourth, or middle week of Lent.¹² Villadsen concludes that there is reason to suppose a general agreement between the Genesis homilies of Severian and the Byzantine lectionary, as we know it from later sources.¹³

Villadsen made yet another, unexpected discovery: the “ἀρτίως criterion” shows that either Old Testament, or New Testament readings are referred to in each of Severian’s homilies, not both in the same sermon. This means that no service reflected in Severian’s homilies contained readings from both Old and New Testament and, consequently, there was no Old Testament reading at the Eucharist, a conclusion Villadsen did not publish in English till quite recently. From his material, Villadsen reached the same conclusion that I did, many years later and from a completely different perspective.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ἡ μὲν τῶν προηγουμένων ἀκολουθία ἐπὶ τὸν Νῶε καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν κατ’αὐτοῦ ὑπόθεσιν προσκαλεῖται τὸν λόγον καὶ βούλεται τῇ τάξει τὸν οἰκεῖον λόγον ἀποδοῦναι δρόμον (...) εἰς ἑτέραν διάλεξιν ταμιευσάμενος ταύτην τὴν ὑπόθεσιν (...), *Homiliae pseudo-Chrysostomicae: Instrumentum studiorum* I, ed. K.-H. Uthemann, R. F. Regtuit, J. M. Tevel, Turnhout: Brepols 1994, 89.

¹¹ Holger Villadsen, “The Lectionary System in Constantinople according to Severian of Gabala” (Preliminary paper, April 1987), 3; published online in 2024: <https://www.academia.edu/117220539/>

¹² *Prophetologium* II 237–238, L 20b, and Juan Mateos, *Le Typicon de la Grande Église*, (OCA 165–166), 1962–1963, II.40.

¹³ Villadsen, “The Lectionary System”, 4.

¹⁴ Holger Villadsen, “Three or Two Readings in Early Byzantine Liturgy?”, *Patristica Nordica Annuari* 35 (2020), 99–107; see also his “The Lectionary System”, 5; Engberg, “The Prophetologion and the Triple-Lection Theory”.

Three of Severian's homilies on Job, which have recently been edited and discussed by Juditha Oosterhuis-den Otter,¹⁵ are accepted as genuine by scholars such as Sever Voicu, Holger Villadsen (although with some hesitation), and Harald Buchinger.¹⁶ Internal evidence shows that they were preached at evening services during Lent, shortly before Easter, that is, during Holy Week, exactly when the book of Job is recited in a much shortened course reading, according to the prophetologion. This cannot be a coincidence, but must signify that the recitation of Job in Holy Week goes back to around AD 400.

Severian also testifies to some of the sung parts of the service, and he refers to responsorial singing, as already observed by Sergey Kim.¹⁷ Severian stresses the importance of singing in church, as in *De legislatore* (CPG 4192): "If you sing of God with truth (...), then you shall also find God while singing and be filled with the Holy Spirit. For he who sings genuinely, renewing his soul, becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit";¹⁸ this may indeed reflect the practice in St. Sophia of the sung office, the ἀκολουθία ἀσματική. He even refers to the special singing of the Old Testament Psalms which in the prophetologion manuscripts are labelled "prokeimena", songs consisting of a few verses of a biblical Psalm, sung reponsorially before the recitation of an Old Testament lection. These prokeimena have a characteristic structure: first a verse taken, not from

¹⁵ Juditha J. Oosterhuis-den Otter, *Four Pseudo-Chrysostomian Homilies on Job* (CPG 4564, BHG 939d-g) – Transmission, Critical Edition, and Translation, Amsterdam: VU University Press 2015; see also: Juditha J. Oosterhuis-den Otter, "The Authorship of Four Pseudo-Chrysostomian Homilies on Job (CPG 4564; BHG 939d-g)", *John Chrysostom and Severian of Gabala – Homilists, Exegetes and Theologians*, eds. J. Leemans, G. Roskam, J. Segers, (Bibliothèque de Byzantion 20; Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta 282), Leuven: Peeters 2019, 167–178.

¹⁶ Oosterhuis-den Otter, "The Authorship", 173; accepted by Sever J. Voicu, "A Century of Progress on the Homilies of Severian of Gabala", *John Chrysostom and Severian of Gabala*, 259–283 (273); Harald Buchinger, "Festal Homilies and Festal Liturgies in Antioch and Constantinople – Innovation and Convention: John Chrysostom and Severian of Gabala, with Particular Attention to their Epiphany Sermons," *John Chrysostom and Severian of Gabala*, 65–86 (76); by Villadsen in private communication.

¹⁷ Sergey Kim, "Liturgical practices mentioned in the homilies of Severian of Gabala" (in Russian), *Bulletin of the Ekaterinenburg Theological Seminary* 4.12 (2015), 131–143 (141).

¹⁸ Migne, PG 56, 401–402: Ἐάν γὰρ ᾄδῃς τὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ μετὰ ἀληθείας (...), εὐρίσκη καὶ ἄδων τὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ, καὶ πληρούμενος Πνεύματος ἁγίου. Ὁ γὰρ γνησίως ψάλλων, ἀνακαινίζομενος τὴν ψυχὴν, ἀποτελεῖται ναὸς τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος.

the beginning, but from the later part of the Psalm; then the first verse is sung as *stichos*, and if there are more than one, then verses two and three become *stichos* two and three, as in the first prokeimenon for Monday of the first week of Lent: Ps. 1.8 with the *stichoi* ps. 1.1, 2, and 3.¹⁹ Presumably the prokeimenon itself was sung by the reader (ἀναγνώστης) and the *stichoi* by the choir, with the prokeimenon sung in response after each *stichos*, but the manuscripts give us no information as to this.

In his homily for Epiphany, Severian refers to Ps. 79 “which we have just sung reponsorially”, which complies with the “ἀρτίως criterion”; he then proceeds to quote the verses of this Psalm in the exact same order as found in a prokeimenon for Epiphany in the prophetologion: Ps. 79.8, 2, 3, where verse 8 probably functions as a refrain sung after the *stichos* Ps. 79.2, alternatively after each of the two *stichoi* Ps. 79.2 and 79.3bc.²⁰ Thus the prokeimenon singing known from the prophetologion was in existence in the early fifth century. Moreover, this very prokeimenon is found in a restricted number of prophetologion manuscripts, mostly older, from the 10th century onwards;²¹ later it disappears from use, which could indeed indicate that it was an old prokeimenon that eventually was removed or forgotten.²² When one compares the prokeimenon with Severian’s quote, it becomes clear that the two texts are identical. They even share three variants in relation to the traditional

¹⁹ *Prophetologium* I. 120. In most cases there is only one *stichos*, but some manuscripts have two, while others have three *stichoi*.

²⁰ *In Dei apparitionem* (CPG 4212), Migne PG 65, 17 & 20, compared to *Prophetologium* I. 72. Buchinger (“Festal Homilies”, 84) comments Ps. 79.8 (20) and refers to the prokeimenon, something I was not aware of when writing the present text; I do not see the necessity of assuming, as Buchinger does, that the whole Psalm was sung, and not just the *stichoi* quoted by Severian.

²¹ The Epiphany prokeimenon is found in seven prophetologion mss from the tenth century, eight mss from the eleventh century, six mss from the twelfth century, and three from the thirteenth century, in one of them as a marginal note; furthermore, in the Slavic Grigorovichev prophetologion, see *Grigorovichev parimejnik*, eds. Zdenka Ribarova, Zoe Hauptova, Skopje: MANU 1998; also in Mateos, I.178, lin. 9–11. For a full discussion and collation of the text, see Engberg, “The sung Psalter: Prokeimena”, *Liturgical Traditions: Their Use and Value for Critical Editions of the Bible*, ed. Felix Albrecht (forthcoming).

²² In the Latin rite, this is sung as graduale for Saturday of the third week of Advent, see *Graduale Romanum*, Venetiis 1745, 9: Ps. 79.8, with 79.3 as *stichos*; this is perhaps another indication that the Byzantine prokeimenon is indeed old.

Septuagint text: verse 79.8 (80.7 in the Western style) omits the first word and has only ὁ θεός τῶν δυνάμεων ("O God of hosts"), where the *textus receptus* has κύριε ὁ θεός τῶν δυνάμεων ("O Lord God of hosts"); in the first *stichos* (79.2 = 80.1) the two texts have the singular πρόβατον ("a sheep"), against the normal plural πρόβατα ("a flock"); and finally, both texts omit the whole phrase of 79.3a = 80.2a, ἐναντίον εφραϊμ καὶ βενιαμιν καὶ μανασση ("before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh"). Clearly, it is the same text version in both lectionary and homily, even if the division into *stichoi* is not quite identical.

Conclusion

If these three elements (Genesis readings during Lent, Job readings during Holy Week, prokeimenon singing) go back to AD 400, or before, it leads to further conclusions.

It is not known whether, at the time, there was just one Old Testament reading, taken from Genesis during the six weeks of Lent, and from Job in Holy Week, or whether there were already two readings each day. In either case, the Genesis reading would have been completed before Palm Sunday, when there was a shift in the reading program: it is only natural for Holy Week to have a different program from Lent, one which points to Easter Saturday with lections from Job, who is a prefiguration of the sufferings of Jesus and his resurrection. This structure, with the shift at Palm Sunday from Genesis and Proverbs in Lent, to Exodus and Job in Holy Week, is what we find in the Florence palimpsest from the 7th century, and it remains unchanged to the present day; since it is attested already in Severian, the shift must go back to AD 400. Whether or not the Proverbs reading belonged in the program in Severian's time is not known at present, but it is possible that it was there in the 5th century.

The Epiphany prokeimenon "hidden" in Severian's homily indicates that this form of singing the Old Testament Psalms existed in his time. Whether the systematic prokeimenon singing was already in place, involving Ps. 1 to Ps. 139 (in the fully developed prophetologion) over the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, is uncertain, but given the stability of the Lenten reading program, it is at least possible.

Another conclusion is that the text form of the Old Testament readings should be studied separately, according to when the readings were established. Obviously, the text from Genesis in Lent must represent an

older version, whereas the text of a lection chosen for a feast established in the tenth century would have been taken from a different, much younger *Vorlage*. The Old Testament text of the prophetologion should not be treated as a homogeneous block, but each separate feast should be placed in its historical context.²³

²³ A shorter version of this paper was first read at the nineteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford 2024. I am grateful to Laura Höger, Holger Villadsen, Katherin Papadopoulos, and Harald Buchinger for fruitful discussion and input on the subject.

Prophetologion Prokeimenon singing

Rubrics for Epiphany Eve (*Prophetologium* i. 72).

The prokeimenon sung consists of: Ps. 79:8 (20), 2, 3bc = Ps. 80:7(19), 1, 2b

καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο προκείμενον ἦχος βαρύς·

ὁ θεὸς τῶν δυνάμεων ἐπίστρεψον ἡμᾶς· καὶ ἐπίφανον
τὸ πρόσωπόν σου καὶ σωθησόμεθα:

Ps.79.8 (20)

στίχος ὁ ποιμαίνων τὸν ἰσραὴλ πρόσχε· ὁ ὁδηγῶν ὥσει πρόβατον
τὸν ἰωσηφ· ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τῶν χερουβιμ ἐμφάνηθι·

Ps.79.2

[στίχος β' ἐξέγειρον τὴν δυναστείαν σου, καὶ ἐλθέ εἰς τὸ σῶσαι ἡμᾶς:]

Ps.79.3bc [this line only in two mss.]

καὶ εὐθέως ἀνέροχεται

ἀνάγνωσμα ἱ' κριτῶν: (L 2k: Jud. 6.36-40)

English translation:

And after this, prokeimenon in the third plagal mode:

*Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine
that we may be saved!*

Ps.80.7(19)

stichos *Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a sheep
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.*

Ps.80.1

[stichos 2 *Stir up your might and come to save us!*]

Ps.80.2b

and immediately after this,

the tenth reading, from Judges (L 2k: Jud. 6.36–40)

Severian of Gabala Prokeimenon singing

Severian of Gabala, *In Dei apparitionem*, CPG 4212, PG 65.17 & 20

17B ὁ μακάριος Δαβιδ..ὕμνον ἔλεγεν, ὡς ἀρτίως ὑπεψάλλομεν·
(...)

ὁ θεὸς τῶν δυνάμεων ἐπίστρεψον ἡμᾶς· καὶ ἐπίφανον
τὸ πρόσωπόν σου καὶ σωθησόμεθα:

Ps.79.8 (20)

(...)

17C ὁ ποιμαίνων τὸν ἰσραηλ πρόσχες· ὁ ὁδηγῶν ὥσει πρόβατον
τὸν ἰωσηφ·

Ps.79.2ab

ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τῶν χερουβιμ ἐμφάνηθι, ἐξέγειρον
τὴν δυναστείαν σου, καὶ ἐλθέ εἰς τὸ σῶσαι ἡμᾶς.

Ps.79.2c, 3bc

Severian of Gabala, *Homily for Epiphany*.

English translation:

17B The blessed David...sang a hymn, as we have just sung responsorially
(...)

*Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine
that we may be saved!*

Ps.80.7(19)

(...)

17C Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph
like a sheep

Ps.80.1a

*You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Stir up your might and come to save us!*

Ps.80.1b,2b