The Peri Pascha Attributed to Melito of Sardis: Setting, Purpose, Sources

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Introduction

Identifying the Issues

Stories

The streets were crowded with women busy shopping for their family’s dinner, children playing in the dust, and men talking earnestly in small groups. Melito saw none of this as he made his way with single minded purpose to a pleasant home just off the busy commercial street. He called a short greeting at the doorway, then entered. The group was expecting him, and were waiting, though he was not late. He washed his dusty hands in the small bowl of water provided, and accepted the hot drink offered. The liquid felt good on his dry throat, but after just a few swallows, he faced his audience, and began to teach them earnestly. Within a few minutes, his passion grew and his voice rose. Gesturing with his arms, pacing up and down the room, he spoke of the terrible things that would happen to Jews across the Empire now that God had rejected them in favor of Christians. The group nodded in agreement, sometimes calling out an “Amen.” After about one hour, Melito stopped preaching and sank into a pillow provided, exhausted. The group, however, was energized, and left the house with a new sense of purpose and calling—and a renewed hatred for their Jewish neighbors.

Meanwhile, across town, another Melito walked slowly and with some ambivalence down a small side street. Coming to the house he was looking for, he walked hesitantly up to the door and after a pause, knocked. Within a minute, it was opened by one of the town’s rabbis, who stood back to let Melito enter. But Melito shook his head, then said in a low voice, “I will need no more lessons, rabbi. I will do my own studying now. The festivals, the rituals, the scriptures, are better understood through Christian eyes, and as a Christian, I will best explain them.” With that, he turned and walked down the street. Never again would he talk with the rabbi, nor watch the celebrations and services at the synagogue. He felt confident that he understood, perhaps better than
many of the local Jews, just what their festivals and scriptures meant, and he would teach Christians in the town how to understand Christian teachings fully.

The two reconstructions above are a brief attempt to highlight the very different pictures scholars have painted of Melito, bishop of Sardis. In the first story, we see a man violently opposed to Judaism, who incites his congregation against local Jews. In the second story, we see a scholar who learned about Judaism and his own Christianity by interpreting rabbinic tradition. Of course, those stories are my own distillation of various scholars’ descriptions of the enigma called Melito, but it seems important to put “flesh” on these theories.

As I proceed to evaluate the various positions on our homily, its author and provenance, I will be drawing upon other second and third century writings and authors as they impact or illuminate our homily’s context. A few of these ancient writings reveal contact between real Christians and Jews (see Chrysostom), while others are patently devised as inflammatory rhetoric against a caricature of the other. Most fall somewhere in the middle, and scholars debate where on the continuum each should be placed.

My purpose is to determine from an inductive look at the homily itself the likelihood that it reveals or even hints at actual encounters between contemporary Christians and Jews. In what follows, I will explain why I am persuaded that our homily reflects, not a historical struggle between some Christians against Jews, but rather a struggle within its own Christian community to define itself. I chose to tip my hand early to the reader so as to eliminate at the outset any possible misunderstandings of my motives or agenda. I am not trying to suggest that our homilist is somehow less guilty of offense against Jews when I say that the homily reflects an intra-Christian debate. I am not arguing that our author is somehow relieved of any charges of anti-Jewish sentiment when speaking of Jews symbolically. Though I do not believe that our text will answer whether its author (or any other member of this Christian community) acted viciously toward Jews, I would not excuse any such behavior if it happened. I am not hinting that the violent words composed by our homilist are more acceptable than physical harm or property damage. Simply put, in pursuing the evidence of the homily, I have concluded that it offers no firm information upon which to build a theory on contemporary Jewish Christian relations.

**Brief Summary of the Homily**

The homily’s 105 passages (803 lines) speak of model and fulfillment, of the old order and the new way, of “Israel” (author’s own term) and
the “church.” The homily begins with a careful explanation of the “old,” the Passover account in Ex. 12. Emphasizing both the slaughter of the lamb and the death of the first born, the author concludes that this biblical story foreshadows the Passion. Before explaining its significance, however, the author argues not only that humanity is utterly sinful (alluding to Gen. 2-3), but also that Jesus can take humanity to the “heights of heaven.” Launching into a lengthy demonstration on how Jesus fulfills the prophets’ promises, Jesus’ salvific qualities are underscored, often in direct opposition to Israel’s alleged responsibility for the Passion. God is said to have meted out Israel’s punishment and with a final exultant description of Jesus, the author closes the homily.

Unless one endeavors to understand the author’s view of Jesus, attempts at interpreting the homily will fall short.¹ Throughout the homily, our author communicates what is the “new,” “immortal” “grace” of “Christ.” This emphasis begins and ends the homily. It helps explain the author’s antagonism against “Israel,” as well as the apparent drive to define the “true” Christian faith.² It controls the choice and usage of scriptural material, as for example in PP 67-68, where our homilist uses lamb/sheep imagery to characterize Jesus, who exemplifies the true significance of the Passover.

In the middle of the homily (PP 56-72), the author maintains that humanity has sinned greatly, so as to deface the “Father’s image” (BCG has tou patros [ΠΠΣ] eikôn, A has “the Spirit’s [ΠΝΣ] image” PP 56). The mystery of the Pascha is the remedy for this human predicament. The author expounds on how the “mystery” was in one sense no “mystery” at all—it is foretold by the Law.

The homily addresses the reader’s senses by offering a list of “the prophets” who allow the reader to see the mystery foretold in their example. One is to “look at Abel who is similarly murdered, at Isaac who

¹Our author uses the name Jesus in two of his doxologies, in PP 10 and 45. In both places, Jesus is identified as the Christ. In PP 6, A reads “Ch[In In,” (i.e. Christon lêsoun abbreviated) and B reads, “Chn” overlined.
²Many scholars assume our author’s orthodoxy, which leads to assumptions about the author’s goals and enemies. While the term “orthodoxy” is anachronistic, the homily itself does exhibit similarities with other writers usually grouped in the emerging “orthodox” camp. Moreover, there seem to be significant differences between the homily’s ideas and those of Marcion or of the gnostic groups. The homily does not seem to share with Jewish Christianity the latter’s interest in the Law (circumcision and Sabbath observance) or the apostles Peter and/or James, nor is our homily particularly anti-Paul, as is the Ps. Clementine Recognitions, for example.
is similarly bound” (PP 59)\(^3\) and so on\(^4\) (this list is repeated with significant variations in PP 69). Next the reader is urged to hear the mystery proclaimed by “the prophets,” as the author cites the catena of verses where Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Isaiah’s voices are heard (PP 61-64). One could infer that the reader’s sense of touch is targeted next, when the author claims that Jesus is clothed with the suffering one. The “Christ” was able to kill “death, the killer of men” (PP 66) through the body and its suffering.

History of the Text

Campbell Bonner identified the Greek text in 1940,\(^5\) and equated its author with the Melito, bishop of Sardis, mentioned by Eusebius. After the 1962 discovery of a large, seemingly wealthy synagogue during the Sardis excavations,\(^6\) theories were formulated to interpret the homily in the context of an apparently influential and extensive Jewish community.

The homily has played a determinant role in understanding social relationships among Jews and Christians in second century Asia Minor. It is to Eusebius that most scholars turn in formulating the background, authorship and provenance of our homily.\(^7\) Based on his description, our homily’s author is identified as Melito, second century CE bishop of Sardis, representing the Quartodeciman perspective. Enticed by this, some scholars have postulated a rather close tie with rabbinic Judaism.\(^8\) Others posit that our author was Jewish, and thus the alleged “Jewishness” of the homily is accounted for “naturally.”\(^9\) A variation on

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\(^3\)In PP 59, the verb is *sumpodizomenon*, in PP 69, the verb is *detheis*. The possible ramifications of this difference are examined in Part One.

\(^4\)After PP 59 is the phrase, “Look also at the sheep which is slain in the land of Egypt, which struck Egypt and saved Israel by its blood.” It is interesting that here the sheep is the agent of destruction, a task elsewhere reserved for God (PP 14) or his angel (PP 15).


\(^7\)Mention of Melito of Sardis is found in Eus. EH 4.26.3-11, 13-14; 5.24.2-6.


\(^9\)Alistair Stewart-Sykes, “Melito’s Anti-Judaism,” *J. Early Christian St.* 5:2 (1977):271-283. I regret that his work, *The Lamb’s High Feast*, was unavailable to
this theory put forth by a few suggests that Quartodecimans, the homilist included, drew indirectly from Jewish practices without necessarily acknowledging their debt. These scholars promote that our author used a Passover Haggadah model (perhaps unselfconsciously) in composing the homily.\textsuperscript{10} Some scholars connect the Quartodeciman label with the homily’s virulent anti-Judaism, explaining that the author wished to distance their brand of Christianity from Judaism, especially as their Christianity shared many similar practices and festival dates with Judaism.

The homily’s provenance is likewise secured from Eusebius, as in almost every case, scholars have accepted a second century Sardis milieu and used it to explain the author’s anti-Jewish rhetoric. The fact that the synagogue remains were initially dated to the time of Melito made a Sardis provenance attractive. This seemingly powerful Jewish community evidenced by the extravagant synagogue is contrasted with the vindictive accusations hurled by Melito. Some scholars emphasize the religious battle,\textsuperscript{11} while others explain the conflict as stemming from social or political conflict between the “haves” (Jews) and the “have-nots” (Christians).\textsuperscript{12}

Recently, some scholars have questioned whether the excavated building functioned as a synagogue in the late second century, thus raising reservations as to whether the Jewish community in Melito’s time should be equated with the group who met in the excavated synagogue. Even when subscribing to a later dating of the synagogue, however, most scholars still consider a Sardis origin for the homily.

The various reconstructions of the homily’s historical context, however, suffer from the debilitating flaw of equating our homilist with Eusebius’ Melito of Sardis. It is my purpose in this monograph to allow the Peri Pascha itself to judge Eusebius’ material. Such an inductive approach reveals the fragility upon which most of the arguments concerning our homily are built.

\textsuperscript{10}Stuart Hall, “Melito in the Light of the Passover Haggadah.”
Date of the Homily

The date of the homily can be best secured, not from Eusebius' information, but from an examination of the manuscript evidence. The homily in Greek was unknown until 1940, when Campbell Bonner identified it in the Chester Beatty/Univ. of Michigan papyrus codex [A], dated to the fourth century C.E. Prior to this, fragments of the text were known only in the Coptic P. Oxy. 1600 and two Syriac versions, one attributed to Alexander of Alexandria. In 1960, Michel Testuz edited the Bodmer papyrus codex [B], dated to the third or early fourth century C.E. Recently, James E. Goehring published the Coptic (Sahidic) Crosby-Schoyen codex MS 193 [C-S], which is also part of the Bodmer collection, dated to the third or early fourth century C.E. There are several other Coptic fragments which are essentially similar to the C-S. The homily survives in a Georgian version and in a Latin epitome.

The manuscript evidence allows that the homily could have been written in the late second century, during the time of Eusebius’ Melito, bishop of Sardis. Suggestive of a mid to late second century date is the homily’s rhetorical style, characteristic of the Second Sophistic movement. The absence of any direct citations from the New Testament (one does find several allusions to incidents also found in the NT) also indicates a second century date. The latest possible date for the homily is

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15M. Testuz, *Papyrus Bodmer XIII*. Turner tentatively dates the Bodmer Codex XIII to the fourth century. He has a brief discussion of the Bodmer composite codex in his *The Typology of the Early Codex*, pp. 79-80, 133.
16James E. Goehring, “Melito of Sardis on the Passover,” in *The Crosby-Schoyen codex MS 193*, Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 521, ed. J. E. Goehring (Louvain: E. Peeters, 1990). According to Goehring, the Bodmer collection was probably from a Pachmonian monastery which was monophysite until Justinian changed it by force into a Chalcedonian monastery. Turner offers a third to fourth century CE dating, *The Typology of the Early Codex*, p. 137.
17The significant differences between the Coptic texts and the preserved Greek texts deserve special mention here. Goehring notes that, in general, the Coptic tends to harmonize the biblical phraseology to the OG. He concludes that C-S is based on a Greek Vorlage different from either of the preserved Greek texts, though he suggests that C-S is closer to A. Goehring goes on that behind the Greek used for the Coptic versions as well as behind the two Greek MS is a single Greek Vorlage. See pp. 5-7.
18Bonner’s text is missing the last several lines (*PP* 104-105, lines 788-801), while the Bodmer Codex does not preserve the first six passages. The C-S is damaged until *PP* 49. The Latin epitome, not surprisingly shorter, shares some textual similarities with the Georgian against the preserved Greek.
sometime in the third century, perhaps early enough in that century to allow for three possible Greek recensions and a Coptic translation. Thus, we should consider our homily to be a second or early third century C.E. work.

**Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in the Homily**

A significant problem in understanding our homily remains, namely the author’s anti-Jewish rhetoric. With the provenance of the homily questioned as the pertinence of Eusebius’ information for our homily is challenged, we cannot make more than general assumptions about the author’s contemporary Jewish neighbors. Moreover, scholars are increasingly aware that anti-Jewish sentiment in early Christian writings might be merely a foil for intra-Christian squabbles or attempts at self-definition. If such is the case, then any effort to recreate the homily’s “Jews” might simply add another fictitious layer onto the homily’s already a-historical presentation. Further complicating matters, the anti-Jewish rhetoric does not permeate the homily but appears primarily in the later sections, indicating perhaps that the author’s anti-Jewish sentiments, while important to current questions about early Christianity, may not reveal a pervasive social situation of hostility by Christians against Jews.

**Scriptural Quotations**

We are left with the text itself, but within the text there may be ways to assess inductively both the homily’s purpose as well as its social setting. One potentially valuable datum is the Jewish scriptural quotations and allusions. An analysis of these quotations and allusions may help clarify the homily’s arguments, in part because these quotations seem to inform the homily’s reasoning. Specifically, the homily seems to take its organization from the Passover account from Ex. 12 quoted in PP 12-14, and develops its Christology from a series of quotations in PP 61-64. Far from giving the impression of a last minute addition, the quotations are integral to the author’s polemic, propelling its movement along specific lines.

Not only do the quotations and allusions seem to further define and establish the author’s purpose, but a careful reading of the small group of explicit quotations reveals some intriguing textual similarities with quotations from other early writings. Moreover, they often feature variant readings from the preserved OG texts.
Method and Organization of this Study

The explicit quotations provide one avenue of exploration into the homily, as well as into early Christian thought and dialogue. In investigating the territory of scriptural quotations in early Christian writers and our homilist, scholars have suggested several maps: (1) the homilist was fluent in the scriptures, (2) biblical texts were at hand, (3) derivative-biblical materials were within reach or in memory. It will be the task in the second half of this monograph to examine the various theories explaining the place of these quotations in the homily itself and in the life of the early church.

Before taking a close look at the scriptural quotations, however, an effort will be made toward greater understanding of the homily’s setting and its purpose as it reveals something of Jewish Christian relations in the early centuries. Because Eusebius’ evidence is enigmatic and problematic, a prudent place to begin the analysis of the homily itself is with his evidence. Thus I will tackle the complex problems surrounding Eusebius’ evidence in Part One, including the label Quartodeciman and the Sardis provenance, to determine how helpful his material is in assessing the authorship and setting of our homily. Also useful in this pursuit, the Fragments attributed to Melito of Sardis will be examined to better establish the authorship question. Finally, this section will appraise the anti-Jewish section of the homily, assessing modern scholars’ approaches to interpreting our author’s vindictive language. The purpose behind our author’s diatribe against “Israel” will be defined within the context of the author’s overall argument illuminating the “real” (i.e. christological) meaning of the Passover.

Part Two, with its focus on the author’s sources, begins with the use of the Passover account in Ex. 12 as decoded by our homilist. The homily will be compared with roughly contemporary writings in an effort to appreciate the homilist’s intentions, as well as to highlight any similarities with other editions of the Passover story. Next a careful examination of the several quotations impacting the homily’s Christology will be compared with similar quotations and their contexts found in early Jewish writings and Christian writings of the first three centuries CE. The homily’s message encoded in these quotations will be

19I will use the qualifiers “biblical” and “derivative-biblical” to be more precise about the proposed sources. By “biblical” I suggest a complete biblical book (Job or Judges, for example) as one would find in the earliest preserved Bibles or Targums; “derivative-biblical” refers to those biblical texts in contexts outside their biblical book, found in school traditions, liturgies, commentaries, testimony books, anthologies or any other writing which might include parts of a biblical book outside of its setting in its particular biblical book. These works could also be described as “secondary-biblical.”
analyzed for textual variants which may (or may not) find parallels in other contemporary sources.

The Conclusion consolidates information concerning our homilist’s sources and suggests new approaches to the study of the Peri Pascha.

I struggled with how to present my research and ideas, fearing that I might place the cart before the horse in the reader’s mind. In the initial stages of investigation, the quotations’ textual variants as well as their place in the argument of the homily consumed me. As I reflected on other scholars’ commentary, however, I noticed they were at variance with my own. Behind this difference lay Eusebius’ evidence used to explain the homily. Thus to interact with the contemporary debate surrounding the homily, I left the inductive study for a critical analysis of Eusebius. I realized that my findings from the homily did not match Eusebius’ description. This monograph developed in a pursuit to resolve or explain the incongruities. I have traced for the reader my exploration into Eusebius’ evidence. It is my hope that the interplay between my inductive study of the homily prior to coming to Eusebius, who then forces me back into the text, will be helpful.