

A HOMILY ON GURIA AND SHAMUNA

COMPOSED BY MAR JACOB

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SHAMUNA and Guria, martyrs who made themselves illustrious in their afflictions,

Have in love required of me to tell of their illustrious deeds. To champions of the faith the doctrine calleth me,

That I should go and behold their contests and their crowns. Children of the right hand, who have done battle against the left,

Have called me this day to recite the marvellous tale of their conflicts:

Simple old men, who entered into the fight like heroes,

And nobly distinguished themselves in the strife of blood: Those who were the salt of our land, and it was sweetened thereby,

And its savour was restored, which had become insipid through unbelief: Candlesticks of gold, which were full of the oil of the crucifixion,

By which was lighted up all our region, which had turned to darkness: Two lamps, of which, when all the winds were blowing

Of every kind of error, the lights were not put out;

Good labourers, who from the spring of day laboured

In the blessed vineyard of the house of God right duteously: Bulwarks of our land, who became to us as it were a defence

Against all spoilers in all the wars that surrounded us: Havens of peace, a place also of retreat for all that were distressed, And a resting-place for the head of every one that was in need of succour: Two precious pearls, which were

An ornament for the bride of my lord Abgar, the Aramaean's son.

Teachers they were who practised their teaching in blood,

And whose faith was known by their sufferings. On their bodies they wrote the story of the Son of God

With the marks of combs and scourges which thickly covered them. They showed their love, not by words of the mouth alone,

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But by tortures and by the rending of their limbs asunder. For the love of the Son of God they gave up their bodies: 715

Since it beseemeth the lover that for his love he should give up himself. Fire and sword proved their love, how true it was;

And more beautiful than silver tried in a furnace of earth were their necks.

They looked on God, and, because they saw His exalted beauties, Therefore did they look with contempt upon their sufferings for His sake. The Sun of righteousness had arisen in their hearts;

And they were enlightened by it, and with HIS light chased they away the darkness. At the idols of vanity, which error had brought in, they laughed, Instinct with the faith of the Son of God which is full of light. The love of the Lord was as a fire in their hearts;

Nor could all the brambles of idolatry stand before it. Fixed was their love on God unchangeably:(1) And therefore did they look with scorn upon the sword,(2) all athirst as it was for blood.

With guilelessness and yet with wisdom stood they in the judgment– hall,

As they had been commanded by the Teacher of that which is true. Despising as they did kindred and family, guileless were they; Forasmuch, also, as possessions and wealth were held in no account by them. Nor guileless only: for in the judgment–hall with the wisdom of serpents too

They were heedful of the faith of the house of God.

When a serpent is seized and struck, he guards his head,

But gives up and leaves exposed all his body to his captors: And, so long as his head is kept from harm, his life abideth in him; But, if the head be struck, his life is left a prey to destruction. The head of the soul is men's faith;

And, if this be preserved unharmed, by it is also preserved their life:(3) Even though the whole body be lacerated with blows,

Yet, so long as faith is preserved, the soul is alive; But, if faith is struck down by unbelief, Lost is the soul, and life has perished from the man.

Shamuna and Guria of the faith as men(4)

Were heedful, that it should not be struck down by persecutors: For they knew that, if faith is preserved,

Both soul and body are preserved from destruction. And, because of this, touching their faith were they solicitous,

That that should not be struck down in which their very life was hidden.

They gave up their bodies both to blows and to dislocation,(5)

Yea to every kind of torture, that their faith should not be stricken down;

And, even as the serpent also hides his head from blows, So hid they their faith within their hearts;

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And the body was smitten, and endured stripes,

and bore sufferings: But overthrown was not their faith which was within their hearts.

The mouth betrayeth the soul to death when it speaks,

And with the tongue, as with a sword, worketh slaughter. And from it spring up both life and death to men:

Denying a man dies, confessing he lives, and the mouth hath power over it. Denial is death, and in confession is the soul's life;

And power hath the mouth over them both, like a judge. The word of the mouth openeth the door for death to enter in;

This, too, calleth for life, and it beameth forth upon the man. Even the robber by one word of faith

Won him the kingdom, and became heir of paradise,(6) all fraught with blessings. The wicked judges too, from the martyrs, the sons of the right hand, Demanded that by word of mouth only they should blaspheme; But, like true men holding fast the faith,

They uttered not a word by which unbelief might be served.

Shamuna, beauty of our faith, who is adequate to tell of thee?

All too narrow is my mouth for thy praise, too mean for thee to be spoken of by it. Thy truth is thy beauty, thy crown thy suffering, thy wealth thy stripes,

And by reason of thy blows magnificent is the beauty of thy championship. Proud of thee is our country, as of a treasury which is full of gold: Since wealth art thou to us, and a coveted store which cannot be stolen from us.

Guria, martyr, staunch hero of our faith,

Who shall suffice thee, to recount thy beauties divine? Lo! tortures on thy body are set like gems of beryl,

And the sword on thy neck like a chain of choice gold. Thy blood upon thy form is a robe of glory full of beauty,

And the scourging of thy back a vesture with which the sun may not compare. Radiant thou art and comely by virtue of these thy sufferings, so abounding;

And resplendent are thy beauties, because of the pains which are so severe upon thee.

Shamuna, our riches, richer art thou than the rich:

For lo! the rich stand at thy door, that thou mayest relieve them. Small thy village, poor thy country: who, then, gave thee

That lords of villages and cities should court thy favour? Lo! judges in their robes and vestments

Take dust from thy threshold, as though it were the medicine of life. The cross is rich, and to its worshippers increaseth riches;

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And its poverty despiseth all the riches of the world.

Shamuna and Guria, sons of the poor, lo! at your doors

Bow down the rich, that they may receive from you supplies for their wants. The Son of God in poverty and want

Showed to the world that all its riches are as nothing, His disciples, all fishermen, all poor, all weak,

All men of little note, became illustrious through His faith. One fisherman, whose "village" too was a home of fishermen,(1)

He made chief over the twelve, yea head of the house.(2) One a tentmaker, who aforetime was a persecutor,

He seized upon, and made him a chosen vessel for the faith.

Shamuna and Guria came from villages that were not wealthy,

And lo! in a great city became they lords;

And its chief men, its judges also, stand before their doors,

And they solicit their charity to satisfy their wants. From their confession of the faith of the Son of God

These blessed men acquired. riches beyond compute. Poor did He Himself become, and the poor made He rich;

And lo! enriched is the whole creation through His poverty.

The chosen martyrs did battle against error,

And in the confession of the Son of God stood they firm like valiant men. They went in and confessed Him before the judge with look undaunted,(3)

That He too might confess them, even as they confessed Him, before His Father. There arose against them the war of pagans like a tempest;

But the cross was their helmsman, and steered them on. They were required to sacrifice to lifeless images,

But they departed not from their confession of the Son of God. The wind of idolatry blew in their faces,

But they themselves were as rocks piled up against the hurricane. Like a swift whirlwind, error snatched at them;

But, forasmuch as they were sheltered by the crucifixion, it hurt them not. The Evil One set on all his dogs to bark, that they might bite them; But, forasmuch as they had the cross for a staff, they put them all to flight.

But who is sufficient to tell of their contests,

Or their sufferings, or the rending asunder of their limbs? Or who can paint the picture of their coronation,(4)

How they went up from the contest covered with glory?

To judgment they went in, but of the judge they took no account;

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Nor were they anxious what they should say when questioned. The judge menaced them, and multiplied his words of threatening;

And recounted tortures and all kinds of inflictions, that he might terrify them.

He spake great words,(5) that by fright and intimidation, By menaces too, he might incline them to sacrifice. 717

Yet the combatants despised the menaces, and the intimidations,

And the sentence of judgment, and all bodily deaths; And they prepared themselves for insult and stripes, and for blows,

And for provocation, and to be dragged along, and to be burnt; For imprisonment also, and for bonds, and for all evil things,

And for all tortures, and for all sufferings, rejoicing all the while. They were not alarmed nor affrighted, nor dismayed,

Nor did the sharpness of the tortures bend them to sacrifice. Their body they despised, and as dung upon the ground accounted they it:

For they knew that, the more it was beaten, the more would its beauty increase; And, the more the judge increased his menaces to alarm them,

The more did they show their contempt of him, having no fear of his threats. He kept telling them what tortures he had prepared for them;

And they continued telling him about Gehenna which was reserved for him.

By those things which he told them he tried to frighten them to sacrifice;

And they spoke to him about the fearful judgment yonder. Truth is wiser than wise words,

And very hateful, however much it may be odorned, is falsehood. Shamuna and Guria went on speaking truth,

While the judge continued to utter falsehood. And therefore were they not afraid of his threatening,

Because all his menaces against the truth were accounted by them as empty sound.(1)

The intercourse of the world they despised, they contemned and scorned, yea they abandoned;

And to return to it they had no wish, or to enter it again. From the place of judgment they set their faces to depart

To that meeting-place for them all, the life of the new world. They cared neither for possessions nor for houses,

Nor for the advantages of this world, so full of evil. In the world of light was their heart bound captive with God,

And to "that" country did they set their face to depart;

And they looked to the sword, to come and be a bridge

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To let them pass over to God, for whom they were longing. This world they accounted as a little tent,
But that yonder as a city full of beauties; And they were in haste by the sword to depart hence
To the land of light, which is full of blessing for those who are worthy of it.

The judge commanded to hang them up by their arms,
And without mercy did they stretch them out in bitter agony. A demon's fury breathed rage into the heart of the judge,
And embittered him against the steadfast ones, inciting him to crush them; And between the height and the depth he stretched them out to afflict them:

And they were a marvel to both sides, when they saw how much they endured. At the old men's frame heaven and earth marvelled,
To see how much suffering it bore nor cried out for help under their affliction. Hung up and dragged along are their feeble bodies by their arms,
Yet is there deep silence, nor is there one that cries out for help or that murmurs.

Amazed were all who beheld their contests,
To see how calmly the outstretched forms bore the inflictions laid upon them.(2) Amazed too was Satan at their spotless frames,
To see what weight of affliction they sustained without a groan. Yea, and gladdened too were the angels by that fortitude of theirs,
To see how patiently it bore that contest so terrible that was. But, as combatants who were awaiting their crowns,
There entered no sense of weariness into their minds. Nay, it was the judge that grew weary; yea, he was astonished:
But the noble men before him felt no weariness in their afflictions.

He asked them whether they would consent to sacrifice;
But the mouth was unable to speak from pain. Thus did the persecutors increase their inflictions,
Until they gave no place for the word to be spoken. Silent was the mouth from the inflictions laid on their limbs;
But the will, like that of a hero, was nerved with fortitude from itself. Alas for the persecutors! how destitute were they of righteousness!

But the children of light how were they clad in faith! They demand speech, when there is no place for speaking,
Since the word of the mouth was forbidden them by pain. Fast bound was the body, and silent the mouth, and it was unable

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To utter the word when unrighteously questioned.

And what should the martyr do, who had no power to say,

When he was questioned, that he would not sacrifice? All silent were the old men full of faith,

And from pain they were incapable of speaking. Yet questioned they were: and in what way, if a man is silent

When he is questioned, shall he assent to that which is said? But the old men, that they might not be thought to assent,

Expressed clearly by signs the word which it behoved them to speak. Their heads they shook, and, instead of speech, by a dumb sign they showed

The resolve of the new man that was within. Their heads hung down, signifying amidst their pains

That they were not going to sacrifice, and every one understood their meaning. As long as there was in them place for speech, with speech did they confess;

But, when it was forbidden them by pain, they spake with a dumb sign. Of faith they spoke both with the voice and without the voice:

So that, when speaking and also when silent, they were alike stedfast.

Who but must be amazed at the path of life, how narrow it is,

And how straight to him that desires to walk in it? Who but must marvel to see that, when the will is watchful and ready, It is very broad and full of light to him that goeth therein? About the path are ditches; full also is it of pitfalls;

And, if one turn but a little aside from it, aditch receives him.

That dumb sign only is there between the right and the left,

And on "Yea" and "Nay" stand(1) sin and righteousness. By a dumb sign only did the blessed men plainly signify that they would not sacrifice,

And in virtue of a single dumb sign did the path lead them to Eden; And, if this same dumb sign had inclined and turned down but a little Toward the depth, the path of the old men would have been to Gehenna. Upwards they made a sign, to signify that upwards were they prepared to ascend; And in consequence of that sign they ascended and mingled with the heavenly ones.

Between sign and sign were Paradise and Gehenna: They made a sign that they would not sacrifice, and they inherited the place of the kingdom.

Even while they were Silent they were advocates for the Son of God:

For not in multitude of words doth faith consist. That fortitude of theirs was a full-voiced confession,

And as though with open mouth declared they their faith by signs; And every one knew what they were saying, though silent,

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And enriched and increased was the faith of the house of God; And error was put to shame by reason of two old men, who, though they spake not,

Vanquished it; and they kept silence, and their faith stood fast. And, though tempestuous accents were heard from the judge,

And the commands of the emperor were dreadful, yea violent, And paganism had a bold face and an open mouth,

And its voice was raised, and silent were the old men with pain, Yet null and void became the command and drowned was the voice of the judge,

And without speech the mute sign of the martyrs bore off the palm. Talking and clamour, and the sound of stripes, on the left;

And deep silence and suffering standing on the right; And, by one mute sign with which the old men pointed above their heads, The head of faith was lifted up, and error was put to shame. Worst in the encounter were they who spoke, and the victory was to the silent: For, voiceless they uttered by signs the discourse of faith.

They took them down, because they had vanquished while silent; And they put them in bonds, threatening yet to vanquish them. Bonds and a dungeon void of light were by the martyrs Held of no account yea rather as the light which has no end. To be without bread, and without water, and without light, Pleased them well, because of the love of the Son of God.

The judge commanded by their feet to hang them up With their heads downwards, by a sentence all unrighteous: Hanged up was Shamuna with his head downwards; and he prayed In prayer pure and strained clear by pain. Sweet fruit was hanging on the tree in that judgment-hall, And its taste and smell made the very denizens of heaven to marvel. Afflicted was his body, but sound was his faith; Bound fast was his person, but unfettered was his prayer over his deed. For, prayer nothing whatsoever turneth aside, And nothing hindereth it not even sword, not even fire. His form was turned upside down, but his prayer was unrestrained, And straight was its path on high to the abode of the angels. The more the affliction of the chosen martyr was increased, The more from his lips was all confession heard. The martyrs longed for the whetted sword affectionately, And sought it as a treasure full of riches.

A new work has the Son of God wrought in the world That dreadful death should be yearned for^[1] by many. That men should run to meet the sword is a thing unheard of, Except they were those whom Jesus has enlisted in His service by His crucifixion. That death is bitter, every one knoweth lo! from earliest time: To martyrs alone is it not bitter to be slain. They laughed at the whetted sword when they saw it, And greeted it with smiles: for it was that which was the occasion of their crowns. As though it had been something hated, they left the body to be beaten: Even though loving it, they held it not back from pains. For the sword they waited, and the sword went forth and crowned them: Because for it they looked; and it came to meet them, even as they desired. The Son of God slew death by His crucifixion; And, inasmuch as death is slain, it caused no suffering to the martyrs.

With a wounded serpent one playeth without fear; A slain lion even a coward will drag along: The great serpent our Lord crushed by His crucifixion; The dread lion did the Son of God slay by His sufferings. Death bound He fast, and laid him prostrate and trampled on him at the gate of Hades; And now whosoever will draweth near and mocketh at him, because he is slain. These old men, Shamuna and Guria, mocked at death, As at that lion which by the Son of God was slain. The great serpent, which slew Adam among the trees, Who could seize, so long as he drank not of the blood of the cross? The Son of God crushed the dragon by His crucifixion, And lo! boys and old men mock at the wounded serpent. Pierced is the lion with the spear which pierced the side of the Son of God; And whosoever will trampleth on him, yea mocketh at him.

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The Son of God He is the cause of all good things, And Him doth it behove every mouth to celebrate. He did Himself espouse^[2] the bride with the blood which flowed from His wounds, And of His wedding—friends He demanded as a nuptial gift^[3] the blood of their necks. The Lord of the wedding—feast hung on the cross in nakedness, And whosoever came to be a guest, He let fall His blood upon him. Shamuna and Guria gave up their bodies for His sake To sufferings and tomes and to all the various forms of woe.^[1] At Him they looked as He was mocked by wicked men, And thus did they themselves endure mockery without a groan.

Edessa was enriched by your slaughter, O blessed ones: For ye adorned her with your crowns and with your sufferings. Her beauty are ye, her bulwark ye, her salt ye, Her riches and her store, yea her boast and all her treasure. Faithful stewards are ye:^[2] Since by your sufferings ye did array the bride in beauty. The daughter of the Parthians, who was espoused to the cross,^[3] Of you maketh her boast: since by your teaching lo! she was enlightened. Her advocates are ye; scribes who, though silent, vanquished All error, whilst its voice was uplifted high in unbelief.

Those old men^[4] of the daughter of the Hebrews were sons of Belial,^[5] False witnesses, who killed Naboth, feigning themselves to be true. Her did Edessa outdo by her two old men full of beauty, Who were witnesses to the Son of God, and died like Naboth. Two were there, and two here, old men; And these were called witnesses, and witnesses those. Let us now see which of them were witnesses chosen of God, And which city is beloved by reason of her old men and of her honourable ones. Lo! the sons of Belial who slew Naboth are witnesses; And here Shamuna and Guria, again, are witnesses. Let us now see which witnesses, and which old men, And which city can stand with confidence^[6] before God. Sons of Belial were those witnesses of that adulterous woman, And lo! their shame is all portrayed in their names. Edessa's just and righteous old men, her witnesses, Were like Naboth, who himself also was slain for righteousness' sake. They were not like the two lying sons of Belial, Nor is Edessa like Zion, which also crucified the Lord. Like herself her old men were false, yea dared To shed on the ground innocent blood wickedly. But by these witnesses here lo! the truth is spoken. Blessed be He who gave us the treasure—store of their crowns!

Here endeth the Homily on Guria and Shamuna.