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Joyful Songs About
the Nativity

Let us Praise with the Angels

By St. Jacob of Serugh

Homilies on the Nativity 1

Joyful Songs of the Glorious Nativity

Let Us Praise with the Angels

By St. Jacob of Serugh

Preparation and Commentary

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Homily on the Nativity

Celebrating the Major Feasts

Many celebrate feasts only as a habit but those with enlightened sight celebrate every feast with great joy and feel that each feast is unique. This is why:

1. They examine the reason for the feast, discovering God's superior love for humankind who delights in human beings and expects their continuous renewal and edification.
 2. By knowing the meaning of the feast, they come to possess the spirit of discernment, wisdom, and knowledge.
 3. The glory of the feast is not to glorify God as if He were in need of our praise or thanksgiving, but rather it is in acquiring a deeper communion with the source of our life, joy, and glory. God thus becomes glorified in us.
 4. In this enlightened spirit, events that took place centuries ago are transformed into a new experience and the enjoyment of the pledge of eternity, such as the birth of Christ, His entry into the temple, His escape to the land of Egypt, and His baptism. What seemed distant becomes embedded deep within us and very close to ourselves.
- ❖ Every time you celebrate one of the feasts of our Lord, reflect first upon the purpose of the feast, because from the purpose discernment will stir up in you so that you will provide honour to each feast as it

deserves. For, nothing is more useful to the soul than letting discernment stir it into (its) action; indeed, numerous are the actions which are performed out of habit and not out of discernment. But you, O friend of spiritual profit, let discernment stir you to your action, and not habit. Let us consider the feast of today with the lucid eye of the soul for which it is easy to see the distant things as if from close at hand.¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

Who am I to speak of the mystery of Your divine incarnation?!

St. Jacob of Serugh always is concerned with the attitude, reactions and feelings of the believers, because he feels they are all his friends who will one day meet him face to face and live with him forever.

When the saint praises the Child of the manger and sings to Him, he feels helpless and then he gazes at the hosts of the cherubim to find them also in wonder! How can it be that the One sitting on the throne of His glory has become a child in the manger without leaving the cherubic chariot?! The explanation of His incarnation was given to St. Mary by Archangel Gabriel, yet St. Mary stands in astonishment because His mystery surpasses every mind and every language.

¹ Targum 218 on Pain in: Behnam Sony, *Tarjama men Al-Suryania Ila Al-Arabeyya Wa Derasa Ala Myamer Al-Malfan Mar Ya'coub Al-Serugy (A Translation from Syriac to Arabic and Study on the Mimre of the Teacher Mar Jacob Al-Serugy)*. Part One (Baghdad, 2003), adapted.

❖ Your revelation is exalted above all human words and how is it possible
that I who am feeble should narrate the story of your nativity?
O Lord, the whole world is not able to narrate your story
and how shall I, all unworthy, hasten to relate your story?
Your Father alone knows how your birth took place,
and it being but dust by what mouth shall the soil speak about you?
Veiled is that human revelation of yours even from your mother
so who is there to deal with your divine nativity?
There is no mouth that can exhaust (the telling of) you except that of
Your Father.
How then and by what means shall my tongue reach out to your
hidden (being)?
Concealed is your story even from the angels and by what expression
shall I send to you the gifts of my frail words?
Cherubs, the servants, have never learned where your abode is,
and to which place shall my mind proceed to speak about you?²

St. Jacob of Serugh

Where do I seek You and Sing for Your beauty, O Wondrous Son?

St. Jacob of Serugh wonders in amazement: should he praise the greatness of His majesty proclaimed on the cherubic chariot or should he talk about

² Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, translated by Thomas Kollamparampil, CMI. Rome: (Centre for Indian and Interreligious Studies, and Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997), FH 1.

the greatness of His love and humility in becoming a child St. Mary carried on her knees?!

❖ Where shall I seek you because being not afar? nevertheless you are concealed....

For which place shall my senses fly to capture you? To which place shall I look and see you as you are invisible?

Whither shall the mind tread its way to seek you there and on which path should the word move to recite your glories?

Where will you be found, upon the chariots or with Mary; with your Father, or with Joseph in the land of Judea?

In the bosom of your Father or indeed in the bosom of Mary;

Can one find you on the fiery wings of dense feathers, or are you carried about in the arms of the young mother?

Shall I see you on the backs of the Cherub

or does your majesty dwell upon the knees of the believing woman?'

Is your brightness in the legions of sparkling rays of fire

or are you girdled round as a pauper in swaddling clothes in the manger?

Are you carried high above the eloquent wheels?

or are you honoured by the hands of that daughter of David?

Here below, indeed, shall I search for you, above shall I gaze on you?³

St. Jacob of Serugh

³ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

Do I Sing at Your birth or Remain Silent?!

The saint stands in bewilderment between his intense longing and ardent desire to give praise, and his painful awareness of how inadequate any expression really is, and this renders him silent. In his love for God and for the sweetness of praise, he wishes never to cease singing, but he fears his words may distort the truth because he feels unable to express it fully, and so he feels obliged to remain silent. This invites him to cry out to God to accept all his organs of speech like a harp on which the fingers of the Lord play and His Holy Spirit sanctifies so that the words would come forth as though from the Lord Himself. The saint considers praise a divine gift that is bestowed upon him by God's grace.

❖ Shall I choose silence? But it breeds harm, seeing that it belongs to inertia.

shall I venture to speak? But there is fear there, which frightens me.

I am perplexed between the two and which shall I take hold of? I am afraid to be silent and I fear to speak, so what shall I do?

I am giving the harp of my words to you and let me borrow your finger;

and in your hymns let the sound whisper to your glory.

By the impulse of the spirit let my mind bring forth the homily of your praise,

for I am not competent for your homily: please speak through me.

I am the flute, when your word is breath, and your story is the voice.

Please take control of it, and by your means may we sing to you using what is your own.

since your first birth is concealed even from the angels,
make me worthy to sing out concerning this latter one from the daughter of David.⁴

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Accepted Offering of Praise

The saint believes that praise is a gift that God grants to those who love praising and they lovingly offer it back to His, like people making a crown that God Himself has fashioned, and like an offering, a sacrifice of praise and the two mites of the poor widow (Mark 12:42)

❖ Let me frame a crown by my phrases and I will offer (it) to Him,
to the King who humbled himself among the poor.

Let me make up the gifts of mixed voices and bring them into the presence of the 'Radiance-clothed one' who became human from the daughter of David.

Let me approach and present my words as my offering, as I worship the Priest who came to become a sacrifice on behalf of sinners.

Let me place my farthing upon his table, while I am offering for the Shepherd who descended to become a victim among His flock.

My word will enfold His story and I will offer (it)

to the word who came and became flesh but was not changed.⁵

⁴ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

⁵ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

The Archangel Gabriel's Dialogue with St. Mary

St. Jacob of Serugh believes that God sent Archangel Gabriel to St. Mary so that she would not be confused by her pregnancy when she was unmarried. He depicts a marvelous dialogue that took place between them when she heard his voice.

He said to her: "My Lord is with you!" so she realized that the one speaking to her was a servant and was astonished at the Master whose servant has this wondrous splendor!

Thus, the saint compares between Archangel Gabriel and the One dwelling in the womb of St. Mary, in her words:

1. If the messenger servant angel is clothed in glory like lightning, then what is the glory of his Master who will take flesh from me?
2. The appearance of the angel in the house filled it with glorious incense so how could the mountains bear the presence of the One dwelling in me?
3. With the angle's footsteps live coals fall away, so how can the mountains not be destroyed when his Master steps on them?
4. If the angel's voice thundered in her ears, wouldn't his master's voice shake the earth and split rocks?

St. Mary asked him about the name and location of his Master, and he responded that He is hidden, yet He dwells in her. His place is far from all. He reveals to her his secret as she will become His mother.

❖ If you are a servant clothed with lightning upon your members, then your Lord is entirely fire as you say.

If your countenance is sun and (its) flame is powerful then not even the sun can look on your Lord in that He dazzles it.

If from your breathing the house goes up in smoke because you are a fiery one, then not even a mountain can bear your Lord in that (case) it will be dissolved.

From your footsteps live coals fall away, and how is it then that your Lord treads upon the rock and He does not burn it up?

Although you are a servant your clothes shed fire, then your Lord will rain down flame by His power.

If in your cloak sparks are interwoven, as I have seen, the garment of your Lord is concentrated light, and it cannot be contained.

If your voice resounds like the voice of armies in my ears when that sender of yours speaks the earth trembles.

If it is that from your lips goes out thunder your Lord's voice, if sent out, would crack the rocks.

If you are a servant, do not conceal from me who is your Lord.

Reveal and explain to me the whole of your story: I myself have marvelled in you.

How is His name; which is His people and where is His place?

Is He far distant or is He from this region? Manifest to me everything!"

The angel said: "It is enough girl, conclude your discourse!

My Lord is concealed, and His place is hidden and His name is a secret

He is exalted above us and He is concealed from you and is hidden from all.

He is distant with His Father, and He dwells with you, and how can you investigate?

I have not seen Him, but to you who are His mother, behold He will be made manifest.

He is concealed from our race and how I should speak of him, I do not know.

His voice is heard by me but as for His appearance, I am not capable of (seeing Him).

His voice is in my ears while His place is alien to my eyes.

That He is coming to you, I have heard from Him, and behold, I have announced it to you.

May be He is in you; learn the truth from Him."⁶

St. Jacob of Serugh

⁶ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

The Virgin Insists on Knowing the Divine Mystery

More than once, St. Jacob compares the new Eve St. Mary to the first Eve. The former knew when to be silent and when to speak whereas the first Eve erred both in her speech and her silence.

The first Eve conversed with the serpent about the divine commandment and questioned the commandment. The new Eve questioned the angel so she could rejoice in the knowledge of the divine mystery, and when she realized that the command came from God, she submitted to it saying: "Let it be to me according to your word." She remained silent and kept all these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2: 19, 51).

St. Irenaeus of Lyon believes that St. Mary's obedience supplanted her mother Eve's disobedience. The latter's disobedience had complicated matters, but her daughter came to resolve the issue with her obedience.

- ❖ Mary became alarmed at the wonder that the angel told of, but she was not convinced that she should not ask a question because she was sagacious ...

She pressed on prudently to learn from the angel

"O fiery one, if you are not propounding any explanation in my ears the story that you are telling, will not be accepted.

Make manifest your word, do not speak to me by way of signs.

I am not hasty as my mother Eve who was cajoled! because she believed out of a single saying, she tasted death.

She did not ask her messenger (the serpent) that how it would happen that from the tree divinity should reach her.

If she had asked, she would have vanquished him, I am not an infant like her who became a snare to her husband, for unless I have learned the truth, you shall not depart.

Behold, she had wanted (to become) a goddess which would be beyond (her)

Nature and you have announced to me a conception without marital union.

The purpose is the same if the explanation does not distinguish it.⁷

St. Jacob of Serugh

How can this be?

St. Ambrose says: [Mary did not refuse to believe in the words of the angel, nor did she refuse to accept them, but was ready to accept his words. Her question 'How can this be?' does not express doubt but rather a question of how the angel's words will be fulfilled. She is trying to find a solution to the issue ... It is her right to know how the miraculous birth will take place.]

- ❖ How it is possible for this to happen which I have heard from you when no man has known me (carnally) from the time of my birth?
Which earth has given forth a sheaf when it has not been sown, and what cluster has sprung up from a vine without it being tilled?
What fruit has there been in a tree without irrigation?

⁷ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

What field has arrived at a heap (of corn) without a ploughman?

He saw that she was eager to inquire about the truth

He was prepared to demonstrate it to her exactly.

I am magnifying my Lord, I am giving you His peace, for I have not slandered Him before you as in the case of your mother.

I am not stripping you of glory, as happened in the garden; I have brought a cloak (so that) you can cover your forefather who was stripped bare.

I am not weaving for you a garment of shame from leaves.

I have brought a garment of glory for Adam to be clothed in it.

My Lord is true, and I am announcing the truth to you and since you asked me, "how it will happen" hear and understand.⁸

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Holy Spirit will come upon You

The angel's answer revealed the secret of God's work in her to achieve this birth: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1: 35). The Holy Spirit comes upon her to sanctify her, spiritually and physically, so she would be prepared for the work of the Father who sends His Son in her womb to be incarnated from her. Truly, what a supreme divine mystery, in which God proclaims His wondrous love and honor for humankind!

⁸ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

❖ The Holy Spirit will come to you in a holy manner and the power of the Exalted One will abide upon you lovingly.

The Fashioner of babies will fashion for him a body in you and clothe himself (in it).

Behold, He resides in you while not departing from His Father and comes to you while He (also) is visiting all the ends (of the earth).

You should not find marital union necessary to receive conception, because he who would dwell in you makes marital union fruitful by his command.

No male will approach you so that you should bear fruit from him because the power of the Exalted one will become a babe in your virginity.

The guarded seal of your youthfulness would not be destroyed.

The serene Radiance will thrust itself in, will enter and recline in your womb.

Dismiss carnal thoughts from your mind because the conception of your womb is the Son of God; do not inquire into it further:

And that utterance of my words should be believed by you clearly.

I am giving you also a demonstration to persuade you.

Behold, Elizabeth, your next of kin, has conceived; the aged who is grown old, sterile for a long time; she has an offspring residing in her latter days.

Dismiss carnal thoughts from your mind because the conception of your womb is the Son of God; do not inquire into it further:

I am giving you also a demonstration to persuade you.

Behold, Elizabeth, your next of kin, has conceived; the aged who is grown old, sterile for a long time; she has an offspring residing in her latter days.

And if a sterile stem which lay in waste has given fruit, how is it difficult for you to receive conception in your virginity?⁹

St. Jacob of Serugh

Comparing Zachariah's & Mary's Questions

Zechariah the priest doubted that his wife could give birth, but the virgin believed and, in her obedience, accepted the work of God. St. Ambrose says: [Her faith was higher than the faith of the priest. The priest sinned and hid, and the Virgin corrected the mistake.] Thus, Zachariah remained silent because of his doubts and the virgin bore the incarnate Word: the Divine Utterance that would not remain silent.

❖ The angel blamed the priest because he asked: "How it shall happen?" But to the young girl he gave the crown of explanation, not blaming her.

Not having believed (at first), Thomas shone forth (later) in faith for that womb of doubt too gave birth to the truth.

But with regard to Eve the lack of doubt produced death for by the fact that she gave credence she was won over because she did not debate.

The aged Zachariah was convicted because he had questioned, for he was there where there was not even any need for questions.

⁹ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

Since Mary inquired, she crushed inquiry from the audacious and by her question she set down silence to the disputations.

Blessed is Mary who became an occasion for the hidden matter, so that it might be said clearly by the angel.¹⁰

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Power of the Highest will Overshadow You

Some believe that the angel's saying: "The power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1: 35) refers to the role of the Father in the divine incarnation. St. Jacob of Serugh believes that "the power of the Highest" refers to the Word of God Himself, as the Apostle says: "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1: 24).

❖ If it was that the Spirit and the power of the Exalted One dwelt in the girl, then who will neglect the child who is perfect in divinity?

The Power of the Highest is the true Son without investigation; He is the power of the Highest and the greatness of His divinity.¹¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.

By saying, 'Behold, I am the maidservant of the Lord', St. Mary revealed her inner faith and submission, and disclosed that her questioning 'how can that be?' was not skepticism but an earnest desire to comprehend the mystery.

¹⁰ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

¹¹ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

- ❖ She heard the voice (saying) that the power of the Exalted One is coming to her, and again she did not inquire into the matter of how, and by whom or on what account.

She sprinkled her pure temple with love before the Holy One'

She swept her house with the holiness that was within her, and she embellished its inner walls with all kinds (of acts) of reverence.

She threw, as sweet spices, the sounds of praise into the fire of her love and from her thanksgiving breathed the fragrance of choice incense.

She answered the angel with great love, "Let your Lord come. Behold, I am prepared so that according to His will, He might dwell within me."

She by her will opened the door and then the King entered. So that through free the perfect seal might be honoured.

As when Moses announced to the people as he descended the heights and when they were sanctified, then the Father descended upon the mountain.

Thus the angel brought the good news to the believing woman and when she had heard it, she prepared herself and then He dwelt in her.

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St. Jacob of Serugh

The One with the Father shone from Mary

St. Mary bowed her head in submission and faith and the divine incarnation took place through her obedience and acceptance of God's plan. At that

¹² Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

instant, the Sun of Righteousness dwelled in her. She became a bright moon, enlightened by Him who was incarnate from her as she carried His glory within her. She was adorned with Him and He became her inner beauty.

❖ He had entered into the womb, but heaven was filled with His glory. He shone forth in the young girl, but his light was bright over the chariot.

In the womb is His conception but the wings of the angels are set on fire from Him.

He is totally in Mary and He is fully in His Father and He is in all.

He stirs the cherubs, He is clothed with the members (of the body),

His power is extended over created beings, but He is concealed in Mary. He retains jurisdiction over the heights and the depths yet dwells in His mother.

He fashions and seals rational images within wombs once He had resided in her, the thoughts of the believing woman were enlightened, and she carried brightness and it inflamed the beauty of her youthfulness.

The palace resounded with the Lord of Kings who had entered and dwelt in her.

The virgin exulted in the Lord of sanctuaries whom she carried.

And as an object of wonder she was shining, modest, dignified, and eager, perturbed; and while being fearful, she was courageous, rejoicing, pure and chaste.¹³

¹³ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

St. Mary's visit to Elizabeth

The divine Word was incarnate in the womb of St. Mary and she became a second heaven, a bearer of divine mercies who watered every parched land she encountered and enabled it to bear spiritual fruit. She became a representative of faithful humanity and a representative of the church because she believed God's promise and submitted so the word of God may dwell in her. The Word now within her, she could not help but "*go into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah*" (Luke 1: 39) to meet her cousin Elizabeth. This is a vivid picture of the church carrying the Bridegroom in her who does not rest but sets off across the mountains – or across time and generations – in order to present her Bridegroom to all people. By human logic, she might have hidden herself to rethink the matter and discuss it with her betrothed so as to manage this matter of conception and birth. But in her womb, she carried the One who is in charge of all heavenly and earthly creation and therefore, in the spirit of service she went to the mountains to the city of Judah, to serve Elizabeth. If we carry our Christ within us, we go forth with an open heart and depart away from our egos. We seek to love all and long to serve everyone!

The maiden virgin whispered in the ears of her relative and the infant John the Baptist started dancing before the infant Jesus: the lion's cub lying on the cross. The preaching baby moved in awe with joy and cheer. He performed his first evangelical task before he was fully grown or even born, and he

called his mother to adore the incarnate Logos. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and joined the angels in their praise.

❖ The cloud, Mary, full of compassion burst forth and ascended to go to water the thirsty land in which a fruit had come up.

The King sat on the chariot full of strength to go out and to visit the house of his servants in diligence.

Virginitly stood up that it might be raised to the house of the old woman so that in youthfulness as well as in seniority wonder might increase.

The lion's cub roared in its (His) mother, as Jacob has written and the calf, the son of old age, who heard His voice, quaked.

The young girl whispered gently in the ears of the aged woman.

The voice crept in and entered and impelled the messenger of truth.

Swift exultation seized the infant in cheerfulness, before the son of David who had danced (for joy) in front of the Ark.

He persistently kicked his mother to go out to adore so that his Lord who came to visit him may not remain at the door.

The spirit poured forth from the Holy One upon the aged sterile woman, infused into her the power to proclaim the truths to His mother.

The daughter of the Levites became filled with the Holy Spirit and she sang with her lips hymns that were full of praise.¹⁴

St. Jacob of Serugh

¹⁴ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

The Praise of Elizabeth

St. Elizabeth felt her infant's rejoicing and awe of the incarnate Word of God. She counted her beloved son as straw compared to the Word of God, the divine Fire. She realized that her son was like a small lamp before the Sun of Righteousness! St. Ambrose says: [The blessings of the visit of Mary and the presence of the Lord appeared at once, because when Elizabeth heard the voice of Mary's greeting, the baby leaped joyfully in her womb and was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Elizabeth was the first to hear Mary's voice, but John was the first to be moved by grace. Elizabeth knew the arrival of Mary, but John felt the presence of Christ. The woman felt the presence of the lady, and the baby felt the presence of the baby, and while the two women were talking about grace, the two babies were achieving within the work of divine mercy. The baby leaped, then the mother was filled with the Holy Spirit, she was not filled before the child.]

❖ How much blessings are there to me that I am made worthy to see you,
blessed woman!

the new heaven that has travelled and come, entered with me.

Your womb is more awesome than the cloud upon the mount Sinai.

For, behold, in you resides the tabernacle of the exalted one in a holy
manner.

"Go, powerful woman, remain in your place and give birth there,

Go, withdraw the Lion's cub into your calm house because the lamb
that is in my womb fears to come to birth on account of Him.

For he would not go out unless that Powerful One departed because it is not proper that the King should be attending to the lowly.

It is not good that the Lord should stand and the servant should, and there is no means by which the Fire should serve before the straw.

Because of that the offspring thrusts itself back in the womb and fears to go out so that he himself may not be dazzled, by the flame of the one who dwells in you.

Let the sun go and behold, the small lamp can shine on the earth.

Departed from this place, your-fruit will not be dishonoured by us.¹⁵

St. Jacob of Serugh

Joseph the Righteous

St. Jacob of Serugh portrays St. Joseph's reaction after St. Mary's return, quite visibly pregnant. A baby is obviously in her womb and yet he could not ignore his experience with St. Mary; she is a pure beautiful dove! He was very confused and noticed that the pure Mary had realized what he was thinking. She said within herself: 'Behold, my son will testify that He is from above and I myself am not aware of any man.'

❖ Joseph, her just spouse, saw her and wonder took hold of him.

He gazed upon the chaste, modest, young girl and his heart became alarmed.

Her manner was chaste, but her womb was full and what should he say?

¹⁵ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

Her appearance. Was pure but her womb was bearing (a child) and how should he look on?

Her appearance is humble, her offspring stirs and how should he be silent?

She is-glorious in her house and he-is aware of her conception and what he should approve?

Regarding her dignity he had wondered seeing how much she was shining forth; from the reality of the conception which he saw he was fearing much.

And how patient Joseph was about the affair, the womb cried out on account of the offspring conceived that dwelt in it.

And how patient Joseph was about the affair, the womb cried out on account of the offspring conceived that dwelt in it.

And while he was guarding the mystery so that it might not be spoken by him, he saw people pointing to the womb that carried the conceived.

He approached gently and spoke kindly,

Tell me young girl, what has happened to you without you being aware of it?

O guarded ship, where has your swift (bow) sunk?

And which sea snatched away your merchandise amidst its waves?

O honourable dove, who has cut off the wings of your beauty and plucked and carried off the sound feathers of your virginity?

O chaste woman who has become flighty, who has seized your pearl, and damaged and snatched out the precious seals of your continence?

O honourable on all days, when have you lost your honour? And on which day did the band of robbers fall upon and seize your virtue?
O powerful city, which captor has pulled down your fortification and removed your booty with captives to the strangers?
O guarded field, who has thrown into your stolen seed?
Because the heap of grain that is placed in the middle is not ours.
Mary said: the pearl is guarded in me and it is not stolen, and the seal of virginity stands firm, and no one has damaged it.
And if you hold me as well as those things to be false, behold, my son will testify that He is from above and I myself am not aware of any man."¹⁶

St. Jacob of Serugh

Dialogue Between Joseph and Mary

St. Jacob of Serugh imagines St. Joseph hearing St. Mary's words on how the One in her womb is from on high and no man has ever known her. Surely, he was astounded. But how was he to verify something that had never happened before and or even heard of in any previous generation? A virgin conceives without the seed of man?!

St. Mary answered him, explaining to him that nature permits the birth of children without marriage of a man and a woman:

1. To whom did the earth marry when it gave birth to its son Adam (Genesis 2: 7)?

¹⁶ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

2. How did Adam, the man, give birth to Eve without marriage (Genesis 2:21)?
3. How did the tree give birth to a ram tied to its horns to be sacrificed by Abraham (Genesis 22:13)?
4. Whom did the rock marry, giving birth to rivers from which the people drank in the wilderness (Exodus 17: 6)?
5. How did Aaron's rod miraculously sprout and bring forth buds (Num. 17: 8)?
6. How did the jaw of the dead donkey give birth to drinking water from which the mighty Samson drank (Judges 15:18)?

All these happened in extraordinary ways, so would it be impossible for the Holy Word of God to take flesh from a virgin? As for Scripture, the words of Isaiah the Prophet witness that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call His name Emmanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

❖ Joseph said: this has altogether not been heard of with women, that without a man there should be an offspring for virgins.

Where and when or with whom has it ever been achieved?

It is hard for me to be convinced about this vision which I have heard from you.

While neither scripture nor nature teaches this,

How is it possible in your case for it to happen against normal custom?

Mary said: "If you seek testimony for my words it is easy for you to hear both from Nature and from Scriptures

Who was united (in marriage) to the virgin earth that gave birth to Adam? and even Adam, with whom was he joined for the birth of Eve?

Who was united (in marriage) with the tree when it gave birth to the Lamb? or who knew the rock when it gave birth to rivers?

By what spirit did the staff sprout forth in an unusual manner?

Or by what marital union did a lifeless jawbone bring out water?

In these wombs who has generated these offspring, for, is this alone, that which happened in me, untrue?

And if you are not convinced by nature, although it is very much true, Scripture too will not be able to teach you by its secrets.

Read in the prophets and see the story that resembles mine! There are many things to be found in all the books.

Indeed, have you not heard from Isaiah when he proclaimed,

'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and give birth to Immanuel'?

Is this saying true for you or is it false?

Has it been believed by you or is there still suspicion in your mind?"

She turned her eyes towards her womb discerningly, having fixed her eyes on her womb affectionately.

"O True One, for whom I am wronged, manifest your truth; let the truth of your mother be not hidden from the needy ones

Reveal your action to the foster father whom you have there for you on earth, lest he be alienated from the mystery of your nativity.

O Merciful one, merciful as you are, have pity on his righteousness and with your revelation let his heart rejoice and let him forget his suffering¹

My Son, do not hide your conception from him so that he may not perish, defend your mother so that he may not be in doubt

And because you have made me worthy as his spouse to receive you, make him also worthy so that he should approach your nativity full of holiness

Do not again abandon him to be tormented by scandal on account of your conception.

Make him reach the haven of your faith, full of hope."¹⁷

St. Jacob of Serugh

An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph

St. Jacob of Serugh believes that the one who preached the truth to St. Mary (Archangel Gabriel) flew to Joseph to dismiss his doubts. St. Jacob describes him as blowing like a wind, shining all around him, ablaze like a fire, and speaking in a sound like thunder. The words of the angel came out of his mouth like coals of fire and by his appearance the house was filled with clouds. Seeing such an appearance in a wondrous dream, the righteous Joseph was in terror! Gabriel then offered him the reassuring message that the baby was Emmanuel!

¹⁷ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

❖ And while during the sleep of the still night the just one rested himself, the Son of the Virgin made a sign to the angel and he came towards him.

The ambassador who had brought the good news to the womb of His mother descended to reveal the mystery to Joseph the husband of the believing woman.

The herald came to manifest the truth to the one who doubted and to explain to him the revealed truth in a hidden vision.

The spiritual one flew and reached him swiftly to drive away all doubtful thoughts from him.

In the vision of the night he approached towards him kindly so that in fright and with caution he might accept his words.

A perturbing appearance, glorious and amazing, did he reveal and made manifest to him

so that he might fearfully hear the truth from him.

He blew like wind and flew on high like lightning and reached him.

He was inflamed like fire, resounded like thunder, and spoke with him.

He became a man and brought forth lightnings from his flame.

He shone forth like sun and filled the house with his flashing light.

The light of flame flashed out and Joseph was shaken.

He opened his mouth and burning coals showered down from his lips.

He stretched out his wings and the house became clothed in a cloud of fire and he began to speak and the just one trembled on his bed.

Called and said to him: "O son of David, do not be in doubt.

The light of flame flashed out and Joseph was shaken.

He opened his mouth and burning coals showered down from his lips.

He stretched out his wings and the house became clothed in a cloud of fire and he began to speak and the just one trembled on his bed.

Called and said to him: "O son of David, do not be in doubt.

At the beginning of his phrase he gave the crown to him, seeing that he is the son of David.

If from Judah or from the household of David is her lineage from her will shine forth the one to whom belongs the government.

Do not be alarmed or doubtfully afraid of her because the one who dwells in her is truly the Son of the Exalted one.

Behold, in truth, in your betrothed is Immanuel because His is the power, and its Immanuel explanation is, our Lord is with us.¹⁸

St. Jacob of Serugh

Joseph takes Mary to his home

After the angel's conversation with the righteous St. Joseph, the latter was assured that St. Mary is the mother of the King, the chariot of the King of Kings, the true bearer of the Lord, the Lord of the angels to whom the heavenly fiery hosts obey, for He is the Son of God. He confessed to her that his temporary suspicion obliged him to testify to the truth before unjust opponents. The simple carpenter had been transformed into a pure servant with a fiery heart.

¹⁸ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

❖ The angel departed and Joseph was awakened and terrified, fearing, trembling, amazed, shaken, astonished, and afraid.

He was agitated, alarmed, assured, confessing, afraid, rejoicing, confident, strengthened, glorifying, confessing! blessing, and adoring.

He saw the virgin, he folded his hands and prostrated before her.

"Peace be with you, the mother of the King-who has come to our world
I am adoring the womb, the conveyance of the Lord of Kings.
I am believing you, young girl, who carries the Lord of truth.
Because that one who dwells in you! is the Lord of the angels, as I testify, and the orders of fiery ones obey Him because He is the Son of God.

Now that I have learned, I will not cease from His praise.
I would become a herald of truth for Him among the calumniators.
And because I doubted a little while concerning your conception, my tongue will proclaim all my life long the truth of your offspring.
Joseph led the believing woman and she entered with him,
And the virgin lived with the holy man in continence.
The carpenter became-a cherub of flesh for the Artificer of the universe, and with virtue he took up the service in great fear.¹⁹

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Census in Bethlehem

Caesar was busy organizing a census across the Roman Empire so every person would pay tribute to the Roman colonial state, while the King of

¹⁹ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

Kings came to register the names of the believers in the Book of Life and free them from Satan's bondage. The earthly king demanded that every person go to his city to be registered in it and the Heavenly King desired that Adam and his sons be registered not in the Garden of Eden, but in the heavenly book of Paradise.

- ❖ The commands became thronged together, one from the height and the other from the depth because two kings in the two places were going to enumerate people.

Caesar writes men in the human census, but the son inscribes the offspring of Adam in the book of life.

One devises how men should be in debt to him, but the other is solicitous to acquit the debtors

They came across each other, the eloquent books of two kings because they wrote the names, the king on earth and the Son in heaven.

While the enumeration of men came close to servitude, their liberation was again written down by the exalted One.

The commandment was issued that everyone should inscribe his name in his own country.

Therefore, for Adam. He [Christ] inscribed his [Adam's name,] in Eden, for it is his own country.²⁰

St. Jacob of Serugh

²⁰ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

In Bethlehem

The virgin set out with Joseph her betrothed to Bethlehem, Ephrathah, to give birth in a cave to the Fashioner of babies. He was born in a stone cave in order to raise from her a new heaven. The master was born in a borrowed place. The rich One lived amongst the poor.

- ❖ The young girl carried the Lord of kings in her pure womb, and she travelled, and ascended with Joseph to Ephrathah.

And when they had arrived at the place of the king, He knew His own, and He prepared himself to enter in to dwell within His domain.

Birth pangs smote the young mother so that she might give birth to the babe, because the time had arrived for the birth of the Fashioner of Babes.

He had recognized the town of David and entered and dwelt in it so that in the abode of the king His Father might be honoured'

But because there was no place for His mother in Bethlehem 'they turned aside into a cave, a house of stones, to dwell there'

The poor (parents) entered with the Rich one to the borrowed habitation the feeble dwelt with the Powerful One in the hollowed cavity'....

The young dove rested in her virginity so as to beget the young eagle, the Great King, in the small cave'.²¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

²¹ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

While remaining God, He came and became the Son of Man!

The One born from the Father before all ages, whose eternal birth is hidden from the heavenly ones, was born among humans. Hidden in His divinity but seen in His humanity, who can examine His divine mystery?!

❖ He is divine and in a virgin manner the womb bore Him

He is human too because the womb gave birth to Him corporeally one (alone) is the Child, the true Son, perfect and wondrous.

Begotten from the Father, hidden from the angels, adored by men'

From the (divine) essence and from humanity, single is the only Begotten.

Son of the Majesty and son of Mary, a single redeemer'

From the exalted One and from the daughter of David, a single Lord of all

From the fiery beings and from the corporeal ones, a single Powerful One.

Hidden in His (divine) being, revealed in His humanity, and who can search into Him?

Hidden in His (divine) nature and real in His body, wonder in all things.

He sustains the races and sucks milk, who is able (to understand) Him?

He gives rains but grasps the breast and behold the wonder.²²

St. Jacob of Serugh

²² Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

Glory be to God in the Highest

Who can describe the processions of the Heavenly hosts that hastened to descend from heaven to light up the night with its splendor in a borrowed cave?! The heavens shook because the heavenly hosts came down to glorify Him who was born as a man, transforming the earth into heaven.

❖ The fiery beings shone ablaze, spiritual beings breathed, and the choirs gathered.

Thousands with myriads praised with marvellous voice.

The desert place resounded with the army of the heavenly and the splendour of the angels broke through the night with its vehemence.

The heavenly beings descended, walked upon earth and they made it a heaven.

The heavenly and earthly beings have mingled each with the other and interlaced a diadem of thanksgiving to the single Lord of all.²³

St. Jacob of Serugh

Angels and Shepherds

The sky moved in astonishing amazement, and everyone longed to prostrate themselves before the incarnate, the lover of His creation. While there was terrible silence on Earth, the heavenly ones moved to awaken the simple shepherds – who were watchful in their tasks – to go to the Heavenly Shepherd, the Savior of humankind. The King of kings and Savior of the world is in a simple manger. He is not wearing crown or royal clothes, is not

²³ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

carrying a sword, nor is a royal chariot prepared for him. He does not need such manifestations of authority and power.

❖ The angels hastened to announce to the pastors for the pastor has come to the rational sheep that were lost,

Good Tidings to you, o earthly ones, the heavenly beings called out,
The Lord Messiah [Christ] has shone forth for you in the town of David.

Behold, the Redeemer has come to the captives, but they were not aware of Him, and the chief pastor stood by His flocks, but they did not recognize Him.

Rise up go and see the King who has come to redeem His people.
Despised and humble, but by His gentleness He will re-establish the earth.

Not as His appearance is His power, and His mighty dominion is not depicted in His clothing.

Although He is the redeemer lance and sword are not in His hands
neither is any adorned horse beneath Him although He is King.

No two-horse chariot is yoked for His glory to be carried about in it. In the despised manger He is wrapped round in swaddling clothes and is laid like an infant.²⁴

St. Jacob of Serugh

²⁴ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

Let us go to Bethlehem

Despite the size and poverty of the cave, it became a meeting place for heavenly hosts and humble humans. In their own tongues, each praised this exalted divine act. The virgin stood in amazement and St. Joseph looked in awe at this situation. He gazed at the wondrous lying child.

- ❖ The innocent, simple, sincere, pure, and true for they – set apart, took, offered the tithe, and brought it, and they chose and offered.

Lamb for the Priest, milk for the Infant, praise for the King, the discerning men carried; the company of the angels thronged; they approached the cave.

And they entered and saw Him, and they bowed before Him with their gifts.

Angels and men crowded together before the Infant.

Angels and shepherds mingled up and they gave praise.

Ethereal melodies mixed with corporeal ones, and the intermingled chants from all regions ascended to the son.

The infant is silent, the ranks are extended, the melodies are raised up

The angels sing with mingled acclaim, men give thanks.

Confined is the cave, miserable is the manger and the mother is a virgin Joseph trembles, praise whispers out and the Son is humble.²⁵

St. Jacob of Serugh

²⁵ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

The Virgin speaks to Jesus

St. Jacob of Serugh imagines St. Mary, who saw the heavenly powers of angels, cherubim, seraphim, and heavenly fiery chariots, requesting that she be allowed to speak to Him. The gentle virgin stood before Him asking Him to make room for her to bow down before Him, and to give her arms strength like the cherubim so that she could carry Him, to sanctify her tongue that she could praise Him with the seraphim, and to give her feet the power of the heavenly chariots so that she could go with Him to the land of Judea.

❖ Mary marvelled and became alarmed, stood beside her child.

Her pains have fled and without suffering she adored her son

She folded her hands and fell down before Him to pray.

She opened her mouth and with lullabies sang to her Son:

"Son of the falsely accused woman, permit your mother to speak to you.

O Lord of His mother, bid your handmaid to talk with you.

Dismiss the legions to ascend to your place, let them not be put to trouble.

Behold, you are there, the angels should go to the heights to you.

Rebuke the fiery ones and let them give room so that I may approach you.

Command the Seraphs to raise their wings so that I may come to you.

Give to my shoulders the strength and power of the Cherubs so that they may escort you in a holy manner among the poor.

Set upon my tongue the Seraphs' shining (cry of) 'Holy, holy, holy' so that my mouth shall unceasingly hold out sanctification.

Make to dwell in my mind that great trembling of the Cherubs so as to bless your exalted Father who is hidden from all.

Bestow upon my feet the vehemence of the eloquent wheels, so that they may carry you solemnly on the land of Judea as it has pleased you.

O Son of the King, give great strength to the lap of your mother and as (on) the chariot with great power may you be honoured on it.²⁶

St. Jacob of Serugh

This is the Great Day

All days are the Lord's, and so how much more is *this* day: the day of His birth in which the Son of man accomplishes the salvation so earnestly desired by the Holy Trinity! It is the joyful day of the Lord for Adam, who fell when he and Eve thought that they could become like God, only to lose their life and the beauty of their nature. Now they have gained the right to partake in the divine nature as they rejoice in the icon of the newborn with their faithful children! Today, the prophets and the pious kings rejoice, for Emmanuel whom they prophesied about has come. Today, those in the graves rejoice because the Sun of Righteousness has shone upon them.

- ❖ On this day let the earth with everything in it exult and instead of thorns let it bring forth the blessings from your nativity.

²⁶ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

On this day let Adam, the head of the race, rejoice

On this day let Eve give thanks more than Adam because the infant who will remove the pains of her suffering has shone forth from her.

On this day let the garden exult together with its trees because in you the expelled heir has returned to Eden, his habitation.

On this day let the peoples in all confines (of the world) give thanks because they were scattered among all kinds of religions, but they are gathered by You.

On this day let the band of the prophets rejoice because, behold their secrets are explained by your nativity.

On this day let David, your father, touch his chords and with his harp let him sing about your nativity, because it has appeared openly.

On this day let Isaiah too be aware in his tomb because behold, the Immanuel has come, as he prophesied?

On this day glory shall shine forth over their tombs (of the Prophets) for he will awaken them to give praise with their harps.²⁷

St. Jacob of Serugh

Let us Praise with the Angels

The reader becomes aware of St. Jacob of Serugh's feelings as he nears the end of his homily. He looks to St. Mary as her dialogue with her Son mingles with the chants of the heavenly ones. He sees in St. Mary a representation of the Church, the bride rejoicing with her Bridegroom. With the birth of this wondrous child, the time of grief and sorrow that had prevailed over

²⁷ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

humanity since the fall of the forefathers, has come to an end and the time of glorious joy has come. He describes humanity before the coming of the Savior as being sorrowful, but when humanity believed in the newborn, it became "*a joyful bride with the heavenly hosts.*"

Humanity had been a humiliated slave enslaved by the enemy of goodness and bound to idolatry, but now she has become the free bride, freed by her bridegroom from Satan's fetters. It had been trapped in darkness, and now the sun of righteousness has shone upon it and it is enlightened. It was like a homeless person whose house had collapsed, but a heavenly engineer has come and built an eternal home for it. It had been carrying the troubles of the perturbed Adam, and now it was granted the peace of the new Adam.

❖ On this day with these chants Mary, the virgin sparrow, sang sweet music to the silent babe.

He mingled her lullabies with the chants of the heavenly beings and joined her chant with the eloquent resonance of the Seraphs.

Her utterance surpassed the joyful noise of the sons of heaven because she sang eagerly to her son lovingly.

Great is the glory of this day above all days and glorious is the beauty of this feast above all feasts.

Be awakened, O Church, with your beautiful chants and offer to the Son gifts of praise on the day of His nativity.

Who had been thrust down, of her own will, in the shrine of demons?

On this day, the sorrowful woman who had been repudiated has exulted because the Bridegroom has come and collected and gathered her from among the idols.

On this day, the lamenting woman has exulted, because there was the marriage feast at which she has been comforted from her distresses.

Today freedom has come for the enslaved woman who had been bound to minister to idolatry.

Today the one who was persecuted for a long time has been released, because the Mighty One stood up and broke the fetters of her imprisonment.

Today the maidservant of the demons has obtained freedom because the great Lord has put them to flight and led out what belongs to Him.

Today the imprisoned (woman) has gone out of darkness because the Light has shone out and shattered the gates of the house of darkness.

Today the Master-builder has rebuilt the house that had fallen, and so that it might not fall, the support of divinity entered in.

Today his Lord has reconciled Himself with Adam because the Son who shone forth has set peace between the two sides.²⁸

St. Jacob of Serugh

He is the Shepherd, the Physician, and the Savior

On this feast, the captive servant has been transformed to a joyful, free bride who shares the lives of the heavenly ones. Human flocks have become

²⁸ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

acquainted with their heavenly Shepherd, and He is unique in His care and love. His love is evident in how:

1. He proclaims His glory with His love, so He carries the lost sheep and brings them into His heavenly pasture, paradise!
 2. He destroys the plan of the wolf (Satan) who does not cease to isolate the sheep from their Shepherd.
 3. He binds the rebellious Satan, destroys his home, and sets off with the sheep to the heavenly fold.
 5. He is called the liberator, because he alone is able to liberate us from the bonds and ties of sin.
 6. He is the caring physician who heals wounds and cure diseases.
 7. He presents himself as the salt that fixes the corruption that has befallen us.
 8. He strengthens the relaxed souls, removes the deceitful desires.
 9. By the birth of the Son, the Father offers His treasures so that all may be enriched.
- ❖ Today the Shepherd has found the sheep that had gone astray; and upon His shoulders He lifted up and carried it into Paradise. Today the flock of the peoples has been made return, because a hidden wolf had disturbed them from the Pastor of all.

Today the Mighty One has stood up against the rebellious one and laid hold of and bound him and ravaged that had been flourishing.

Today the Warrior has come to the captives and bound the captor with power and made to return His own.

Today the Physician has come to the wounded bandaging, healing, and giving reward to those who are healed.

Today the Salt from the Most High has descended to season our insipidity with His stable taste.

Today the enfeebled soul is strengthened by Him: it has abandoned and forgotten all the lures of (lustful) desires.

Today forgiveness has proceeded from the King's court, because on the day of the nativity of his Only Begotten, He (the King) has enriched everyone.²⁹

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Fruit of Life

Amid the bitter cold one does not find a cluster on a vine. This is why the incarnate Word of God offers Himself as a divine cluster that the faithful may receive and rejoice with.

- ❖ In this month which is without fruits the Fruit of Life was sent to us, in order to nourish us with its soundness.

²⁹ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

In this month in which the buds on the branches are seared off (by cold)

The Offshoot of the virgin gave fruit from her womb.

In this month that sheds the leaves from the trees

The leaves of Adam have been exchanged for the garment of light.

In this month that deprives the earth of all luxuries

The Great Blessing has been sent to all persons

In this month in which night holds back from the day

The light has touched the soul that was darkened.³⁰

St. Jacob of Serugh

Peace on Earth

On this day, the Heavenly One descended to earth, and turned it into a fierce battlefield.

1. The King of kings, the King of Peace, came.
2. A decree was issued by the Savior to bless the dead with divine mercies.
3. The gates of heaven were opened, and the angels descended with their spiritual harps, praising the Savior, so that people would participate in their praise.
4. On this feast, the earthly people were granted the right to share with the heavenly ones, their worship on a heavenly level.

³⁰ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

5. On this day, our life was transformed into a great and joyful journey.

❖ On this day in which the old things have been renewed

The Lord of kings has renewed for us the things of former times.

On this day in which the orders multiply for the judges the judgement of mercies has been sent to the mortals.

On this day in which kings also command innovations

The new commandment has proceeded to the earth so that peace shall reign.

On this feast in which the angels made joyful noise to sound on their harps

Let the redeemed peoples again praise with their tongues.

On this feast that is observed by the heavenly beings let there be glory to the Son worshipped by the earthly

On this feast I have sung praise to your divinity,

On your great day may I see the mercy of your divinity.³¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

Gifts of the Feast!

St. Jacob of Serugh concludes the homily by pointing out the gifts of the feast:

1. St. Jacob only offers the church *this homily* to spread the spirit of joy in all.

³¹ Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.

2. The church's gift to humanity is *the person of the incarnate Son*, who desires that the believers be brethren in the eternal inheritance. This is the gift of the feast to every human being.
 3. The saint bids us *glorify the Holy Trinity* who eternally showers His mercy on humanity.
- ❖ On this feast I have given the gifts of my words to your church,
In the eternal feast let me be a wedding -guest at your marriage feast.
On the feast glory be to your Father and to You exaltation,
And to the Holy Spirit the crown of victory and mercy be upon us.
Amen³²

St. Jacob of Serugh

³² Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, FH 1.



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St. Jacob of Serugh

