



Joyful Songs of the Glorious Nativity



An Urgent Meeting around the Manger Child!

By St. Jacob of Serugh

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Translated by: Monica Sami Mitri

Homilies on the Nativity 4

Joyful Songs of the Glorious Nativity IV

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around
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Introduction

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God. Amen.

The past few years have filled my heart with an intense longing to share my enjoyment of St. Jacob of Serugh's wondrous feelings of joy with all my brethren. Every time I read a homily he wrote, I am struck again by how profoundly his inner depths experienced heaven and delighted in God's overflowing love for humanity's salvation and eternal glory.

Many of our Syriac fathers and brethren, and several scholars of St Jacob's writings are concerned with studying his writings and translating them into the modern languages; and this is a wonderful scholarly enterprise that edifies every soul longing to enjoy the gospel and grow in grace. As for myself, I do not approach this work as a scholar but as a servant who yearns to elevate all human hearts to experience a taste of heaven! This is what my heart desires, and why I have decided to focus on St. Jacob's thought and present excerpts of his writings on the feast of the holy Nativity.

His writings on this topic contain much that can uplift our hearts in this world until we encounter the incarnate Word of God, who is actively preparing a place for us in His Father's bosom, and who will come in His heavenly chariot on the clouds, gather us unto Him and take us to eternal glory in gladness and joy.

Characteristics of His Writings about the Nativity Feast:

1. *The Work of the Holy Trinity*: What inflames the heart of St. Jacob of Serugh is how the Holy Trinity loves humanity and is engaged with it, for He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2: 4). If the Word of God loves us and became incarnate for us, it is God the Father who loved the world and sent His only begotten Son for us, and it is the Holy Spirit who prepared the Virgin Mary for the incarnation and who continuously sanctifies us to bear the icon of Christ.
2. *The appearance of the new Adam and the new Eve*: In the writings of St. Jacob of Serugh, he reveals the bitterness of humanity before the incarnation of the Word of God and His human birth. Mankind suffered from corruption, the curse that befell the earth. Humanity suffered violence, injustice, and hatred: all features of Satan's kingdom. Idolatry spread and the whole world came under the sway of the wicked one. When the Savior the Messiah, the new Adam, came as a heavenly bridegroom, He transformed humanity from its corruption to a pure and chaste virgin (2 Corinthians 11: 2), whose constitution is love and whose goal is the heavenly life. This is the new Eve who, through baptism, gives birth to the children of God, guided by the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and renews them constantly and shapes them in the image of their Creator. The life of the believers has become a heavenly

wedding, so that they are occupied only by the bridegroom who prepares a place for them and who will come again to take them to His heavens. In general, the saint's writings motivate us to be concerned ourselves with our new position and the new divine capabilities that the second Adam confers upon us as members of His church, the new Eve.

3. ***Joyful dialogues:*** St. Jacob's homilies are filled with many jubilant dialogues that inspire a spirit of hope and joy in believers' lives. These include dialogues between angels, demons, St. Mary, St. Joseph the Carpenter, St. Elizabeth, the wise Magi, the shepherds, Herod the King, and the Jewish leaders.
4. ***The Collapse of Satan's Kingdom:*** The saint dedicated a homily to present the disappointment of Satan and all his powers as they saw the sun of righteousness rise, dissipating their darkness and destroying their authority over mankind. In a joyful Scriptural view, the saint envisions the demons holding a meeting under the leadership of Satan himself, in which they assess what the kingdom of darkness has experienced after the birth of the Sun of Righteousness who shines upon those sitting in darkness (Luke 1: 79) with healing under His wings. During this meeting, they review some of the events of the birth of Christ and study the plan of their great teacher, Satan, to get rid of this newborn. The wicked demons reveal their view of Satan as a dangerous teacher and administrator of his kingdom, with his authority as well as his mighty intellect and his ability to take action. With all these capabilities, the saint did not tire of highlighting the authority given to the believer against Satan and all his demons and their plans, plots, and deceptions!
5. ***Wonderful Glory and Supreme Humility:*** The saint compares the work of God with the wise men of Babylon (the Magi), to whom He sent a special star to signal the glory of the One who came for their salvation, that the Word of God took flesh, humbled Himself in His childhood and went to the land of Egypt that enslaved His people for a long time. He is the glorified and humble Savior who uses every way to save His beloved people.

An Urgent Meeting around the Manger Child!

The Manger Child and the Destruction of Satan's Kingdom¹

St. Jacob of Serugh is unique in imagining how Satan's kingdom reacted to this wonderful child. In his deep spirituality, vivid imagination and captivating style, he imagines an urgent meeting being held around the child lying in the manger. Those in attendance at the meeting are the demons and their leader, Satan himself, as they realize that the kingdom of darkness is being destroyed by God's Word becoming incarnate! This scene so captured my heart and occupied my mind that I found myself obliged to present it here, and though I will do so briefly, I will attempt to preserve St. Jacob's own style in his homily.

I feel obliged to publish this homily with accompanying comments, to enable us to realize the power we now have, with the manger child, to defy the kingdom of darkness and to utterly banish outside ourselves! It is a homily that touches our own lives, our victory and our glory in Christ, the destroyer of evil and bestower of righteousness. Through it, we can experience our Lord's promise in our lives: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12: 32).

The Manger Child and Satan's Position

The manger child is the Word of God, **the living consuming fire** (Deuteronomy 4: 14). He is wrapped in swaddling clothes and yet the demons tremble in front of Him; they resemble the thorns that fire turns into ashes. He is the shepherd who has become a lamb, and yet the wolves flee from His face because if He falls prey to them, He will destroy their very bellies. He is the **light that shines throughout the universe** and makes the darkness and the idols of Satan flee.

Satan met his demons as though they were in a meeting and they discuss this wondrous child of the manger who has destroyed their plans. What happened in that meeting? What do they decide on?!

The saint starts with the opening session of their meeting in which the president gives a brief word about his great disturbance and his complete inability to present a logical analysis of what has befallen him and his kingdom.

*The **Living Fire** wrapped itself round within the swaddling clothes; And the briars and thorns that became aware of it, fled from its presence.*

*The Shepherd of the earth became a **lamb** within His own pasture
And the wolves saw and began fleeing in their fright.*

¹ For the homily used here, refer to: Jacob of Serugh, *Mwa'ez Al-Serougy (The Sermons of Serugh)*. (Cairo: Misr Al-Fagalla Publishing House, 1905), homily 22 p.279 ff.; Jacob of Serugh. *Select Festal Homilies*, trans. Thomas Kollampampil, CMI. Rome: (Centre for Indian and Interreligious Studies, and Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997), Homily III (used with adaptations).

*A flash of light has shone forth suddenly upon the whole world,
and the earth has been enlightened but the whole of idolatry has grown dark.
The evil one said, "Me too, the Flash of Light has blinded.
Unless I learn what is its reason, I do not understand.
It seems to me that some kind of distress will come upon our place, for I trembled greatly when
I saw the idols that fell and were overthrown.
Who shall be uncovered by the appearance of light except myself,
seeing that in darkness I am diligent to accomplish all my desires?
The light that shone forth is indeed increasing, and what shall I do
seeing that I introduced idols everywhere in darkness?
Within darkness I sat and devised deities
and if the light shines out upon them, they will be useless.
I am industrious, I am skillful in all kinds of harm,
but I cannot set my paths in the light.
I am a hater of light from the beginning and I am diligent
so that I and you may sit in darkness forever.
For I know that if our fraud is exposed in the light
the whole of creation will hate and rebuke our deeds.
"We do not travel on the paths of Light", says Error,
"Do not be patient with it or it will depose you from all places."¹*

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Demons request an Explanation

The demons hear in shock. This is their chief, Satan, whom they thought was the most powerful of all, and now they see him in great weariness. The demons felt the danger and could not remain silent; they wanted him to answer their questions and clarify matters for them:

*The demons speak to Satan: "What shall we do?
you are our teacher and we are trained in your instruction.
who will inform us of the cause of the trembling that terrifies us,
if not you, Satan, who is our teacher?
The evil one says: "There is no time for long (speeches);
I am in a hurry to see my action, for it makes me afraid.
Now be silent, as for me I shall proceed and go to investigate
whence the Light has shone forth which has shaken and terrified us.
I shall roam the earth, I shall fly on the heights, I shall spy out the depths.
I shall reach afar, I shall search into the abysses, I shall watch the clouds.
I shall set off over the (river) crossings, I shall reach the firmament, and I shall descend into the
earth."²*

St. Jacob of Serugh

¹ Select Festal Homilies, FH II.

² Select Festal Homilies, FH II.

A Wonderful and Fearsome Angel!

Satan felt obliged to leave the meeting and go off to research this catastrophe that befell him and his demons, or else they would lose faith in him! On his way, he saw something fearsome indeed. What was it?!

*As [Satan] left, he looked from afar towards Bethlehem as an angel was passing awesome and glorious, clothed in flashing light.
Flying around and coming, full of joy and haste, beautiful and pleasant:
his fire blazing and his voice pouring forth great light.
Satan saw him and as he concealed himself with trembling from him;
he waited to see where that fiery being was going.
Now that angel alighted among the company of the shepherds
and began announcing about the-redeemer of the whole world.
Simple men, pastors of the sheep, ordinary innocent people
They began learning from the angel the good news he had brought
And the fiery one stood there and raised his voice to the guileless men; he began announcing
about the infant with an exalted voice.
"Behold, I am announcing to you today," he was telling them, "A great joy that is full of riches
for the whole world."
I am announcing to you about the Redeemer and about the Savior
Who is the Lord Christ who has shone forth from the house of David.
Behold at Bethlehem, a newborn babe that is girded round, an infant lies.
In a neglected manger, and He is the Lord and the Redeemer."
And before the angel had finished speaking,
Behold, all his host of angels descended to glorify.
They made the night of the nativity there as a day because their flame was far powerful than the
sun.
The earthquakes at the glory that issues from their mouths, and the place resounds from the
chanting of their tongues.
Sincere praise and a sweet voice in a mighty mouth, a hymn of wonder with a melody that gives
the soul bliss.
Fire that sings to the Light that has shone forth amidst the darkness and the flame that raises
up praise with an exalted voice.¹*

St. Jacob of Serugh

Satan admits the dangerous catastrophe

Satan realized just how dangerous the situation was; indeed, he had never experienced anything like it since he was created! With a bitter heart, he stealthily crept away like a thief and crestfallenly went back to his demons. He had no idea how to inform them of this impending disaster that he predicts for them and for himself; for he had realized that the manger child is the joy of the heavenly ones, and no doubt he offers humanity something that exceeds all imagination. Satan started to realize that his own deceptions

¹ *Select Festal Homilies, FH II.*

and trickeries would be exposed before human beings and that his kingdom would not prevail among believers anymore.

Satan saw the gathering of the angels, and the rebellious one trembled, and little by little he deserted and departed like a thief.

In the dazzlings of the sons of light, darkness was swallowed up, and like smoke in the wind it departed from them.

*The evil one had turned back carrying misery for the company of his side
And his mouth was filled with news full of all kinds of distress.*

"Come, go and see the terrible event that has happened at Bethlehem,

For from there is the cause of the trembling that is troubling us.

Come, let us go, and hear the resounding of the angels that is at Bethlehem

For the earth is rent by the sound of their shouts of joy.

*Come, from afar, let us see the gathering of the heavenly beings
but let us not approach so that their dazzling's may not blind us."*

Then Error, while trembling, led off her children

*It saw the newborn swaddled and laid in a poor fashion,
having neither radiance nor appearance nor majesty.*

*They, the forces of the adversary, were struck by bewilderment,
and what to say about the child, they did not know.*

*When they were encouraged by His smallness to treat Him with contempt
they saw that, that a virgin is His mother, and they cried out in wonder.*

The demons say to the evil one, "Explain about the child.

Is he a human being? Is he God? Or who is he?

Is he from the heavenly, is he from the earthly, is he from the spiritual beings?

Is he from among the corporeal beings or where is he from? You explain to us.¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

Satan is Disturbed and Confesses his Ignorance and Helplessness

The demons were used to Satan's pride and haughtiness, and how he considered himself the all-knower, the instructor of the universe and the one who comprises all manner of knowledge and mysteries. But now Satan's self-importance was almost non-existent in their eyes, because he was obliged to admit his ignorance, foolishness and utter inability to act. Ever since Adam and Eve's fall, Satan had rejoiced at every human birth because he would stand there as if he were receiving this child like a slave who would never be free. He would record that child's name in his kingdom's records. But this babe, this child is different! His mother is a virgin even while she nurses him. "What is this? How can this be?" the evil one asks himself. There is no answer! Who is this child who is born without the seed of man? Who is His father? Could He be the Son of God without the seed of man? But He has flesh and a human soul!!

¹ *Select Festal Homilies, FH II.*

*The evil one says, "Until now I was wise
 But here I am defeated, then how to understand anything, I do not know.
 Behold ever since Cain was there was no birth that I have not seen, and birth pangs have not
 smitten any woman giving birth without me.
 I am proud of the sentence on Eve, seeing how much she has been smitten.
 In this child a mystery is concealed from me and it is veiled and I am not able to understand His
 story clearly.
 When the young girl conceived, I was not aware how she conceived, nor was I close at hand to
 see her newborn when she gave birth.
 Now she is a virgin and what shall I say about her babe?
 This marvel of the child terrifies me because it is inexplicable.
 Behold, from Eve until this daughter of the Hebrews,
 Virginity and milk in the same body have not been seen.
 Because she is virgin it seems to me that He is God
 but because He is corporeal, I think again that He is human.
 The whole way of this child is outside (my experience) and it disturbs me, and how I should
 speak about Him I do not know.
 When I saw how His conception was without marriage,
 I perceived Him; His nativity too is exalted beyond explanation.
 A virgin is His mother but who is His father, is he is an earthly one?
 Whose Son should I call Him and who is His father? I do not know.¹*

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Demons are Agitated

As the demons realized that Satan's kingdom was being destroyed with the Savior's advent, their trust in him greatly diminished, and they pressed him to act quickly. If this child has so disturbed their kingdom just by being born, what will it be like when he grows and acts powerfully?! At this point, Satan's ignorance and foolishness had become crystal clear compared to what this child could do, and now his whole kingdom was greatly agitated and expecting the most severe and unpredictable failures and disasters.

*The demons say: "What shall we say about the child, for, if the matter of his nativity is not
 revealed even to you, who will tell us?
 You are skillful, you are wise and crafty, distinguished and learned; practiced and sharp and
 prepared for the wickedness of all who are begotten.
 If the newborn babe subdues you, the great one, and you did not know Him, what will He do to
 us after a while, as you say?
 If from today He has thus subdued your tyranny if He grows up, what will happen to you if He
 meets you?
 If you are patient with Him, He will carry away your crown, Your crown He will overthrow,
 idols He will remove, images He will unmask.
 Sacrifices He will stop, altars He will pull down, temples He will destroy.
 Oracles He will dismiss, and idolatry He will disgrace.*

¹ Select Festal Homilies, FH II.

*While He is a babe devise something against Him in your cunningness, so that He will not drive us out from the regions, or else we will become a laughing stock. If from today the earth has become to be enlightened by Him, After some time He will make the abysses too to rejoice with His brightness. Woe to us because He will unmask us and trouble us, and the earth will be able to run after Him, and it will mock us.*¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

News from Persia

St. Jacob of Serugh imagines that one of the demons arrived during their meeting and told them that pagan Magi were travelling to honor and worship this unique newborn King. The demons were dumbfounded, because the submission of these pagan wise Magi to the child isn't any less dangerous to them than the appearance of the heavenly angels to the simple Hebrew shepherds. This is a sign that the gentiles and the Hebrews are uniting together to become one flock under one shepherd! And Satan – the lover of dissension – cannot bear this spirit of true unity!

And as the forces of the adversary were terrified, another report came from Persia and it troubled them.

One demon, an expelled son of darkness, arrived in haste, wailing and anxious, full of trembling and bad news.

He says to them: "Now I have come out of Assyria, because I saw there an unusual wonder that took place:

A great star whose light is not from the firmament appeared there and shone and behold, it [Assyria] was alarmed by the sign it saw.

And when the Assyrian wise men were gathered, they said that the King who will disband the oracles will appear in Judea.

And behold the Magi carry and bring their offerings to Him because of that I entered beforehand to see Him who has terrified me so much.

*This is a great disaster. Unless we get in first and devise something against Him, He will take control of the whole of creation and will mock at us."*²

St. Jacob of Serugh

Satan's Counsel

Satan had no choice but to request the meeting members not to be hasty because he feared that his image before them would be shaken. But it was already happening, although in the past, it would have been unimaginable that the demons would lose their trust in him!! Satan tried to emphasize that he had planned a multitude of deceptions that no living being in heaven or earth could imagine, and which would enable him to destroy this child's work.

¹ *Select Festal Homilies, FH II.*

² *Select Festal Homilies, FH II.*

The evil one says: "I am not able to approach Him because a great power from Him terrifies me mightily.

*Now let us be silent about the child because He is stronger than us;
and let us seek the time and occasion that will give opportunity for battle.*

I cannot any longer keep a distance from His presence Because I (need to) look carefully at Him to see His movements and actions.

I have no other concern, except with regard to Him; and if I can have the opportunity and time, I will strike at Him.

Until the arrival of the Magi let us keep quiet about the affair, but once they have arrived, I will arouse the sword on account of them.

I have envy and Herod has the sword.

I will give him envy and he will give his sword also.

I will murmur to Him: "This child will be King, and He will carry off your kingship from you if you disregard Him."

I will secretly temper him with envy and I will intoxicate him and I will make him to sharpen the sword against the infant."

I have tricks and plans, deceits and treachery as well as the snares of iniquity and nets of falsehood.

I will not be negligent or silent or quiet about the newborn until I have subdued Him, if I can. Mary is tranquil and the infant still and Jacob is humble but the demons are agitated because they saw the wonder that troubled them.

The evil spirits were dismayed, agitated in their own different manners.

Demons were shattered, confused in various ways.

Satan became sad, bent downwards as he stood with his legion.

and all his side was trembling and shaking on account of the infant.

When they looked and saw the virgin who giving Him milk, they wailed, out of the wonder that was shaking them on account of the affair.

The Fruit that had come into being without marital union bewildered them, since the womb of the mother was sealed and preserved in virginity.

The heavenly beings stand in awe of the infant laid in the manger;

He is placed in the cave, and His glorious manifestation moves the Babylonians.¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

Satan's Deception and Trickeries upon the Hebrews

St. Jacob of Serugh shows how Satan had no choice but to pretend to submit to and care for the child. He hid his deep hatred for Him at the time. He planted this trick in the hearts of the Israelites who appeared to be searching for the Savior Messiah while in reality they wanted to get rid of Him.

The tyrant said, "as for me, I am concerned from now on about the infant and I am planning and plotting, and I will conquer Him.

I have a dear friend who hates truth like me, She is instructed in blood and she sets her sword against the innocent.

¹ Select Festal Homilies, FH II.

*She is trained in deceit and is skilled in falsehood.
I am proposing to her a way because she can perform all my desire and, as is her custom, she will encounter the child and put an end to it.
She stoned Hur¹ and through Aaron she cast the calf.
She reviled Moses and threw Jeremiah into the well.
Let us therefore, set in array the daughter of Jerusalem against the child and she will encounter Him as she knows how to, for she is full of treachery.²*

St. Jacob of Serugh

A Joyful Finale of Praise

St. Jacob ends his homily with the joyful praising that he offers to the manger child, the child who has destroyed Satan's kingdom, reconciled heaven and earth, and nation with nation.

*It is a wonder to narrate how the babe was still in the swaddling clothes; yet the whole side of the group of the left trembled on account of Him.
Through the road of nativity, He entered creation and made the demons ignorant, so that none of them would know His place.
Through His nativity He reconciled the earthly and the heavenly and He established peace between those above and those below.
The supernatural beings rejoiced, the earthly exulted, creation was enlightened by the Son who came to renew them by His nativity.
The angels rejoice, men are glad and the demons are sad; evil spirits are wailing because they saw the light that troubled them.
Heaven praises and the earth exults and (its) extremities rejoice, because the great Redeemer has shone forth to creation from Bethlehem.
The Magi are travelling with their provisions and their gifts of honor, likewise the shepherds with their offerings and praises.
The angels make joyful noise with their hosannas and their chants, and Mary rejoices in her virginity and in her babe.
His nativity has gladdened and given joy and light to all of creation.
Glory to the Father who sent Him to give life to the whole world.³*

St. Jacob of Serugh

Sending forth the Star

The Word of God attracted the Magi with light because He has been sent as a quiet messenger who speaks with the language of light!

*Why was the star sent?
And why were the Magi called with its great light?
Why not preach to them through a prophet as in Nineveh, or an evangelist like the son of Amittai?*

¹ Cf. Num 31:8

² Select Festal Homilies, FH II.

³ Select Festal Homilies, FH II.

Why did he not descend and teach them like Isaiah, that the virgin shall bear a child and give birth without marriage?

Why not open a pathway to prophecy, that calls the Magi with divine revelations?

For what purpose did a star of light descend; how did they hear the glad tidings of this birth?

A quiet messenger who speaks not but illuminates; how was his instruction taught and how was it accepted?

Why not sent a prophet like you said, and why does a star replace the way of preaching?

The strong (the Magi) fell on their faces in front of Him, and the virgin mother pondered prudently in her heart.

The Blessed One [Mary] said these words

to the Magi who knelt to the Son and honored Him:

“Who told you of His kingdom, O people, where did you see a king?

Who sent you? Tell me your secret

Where is His crown, if He is a king like you say?!

Here you see His ever-present poverty

And I, His mother, poor and needy!

What loyal peoples do you see surrounding Him,

And how many servants honoring Him at His gates?!

How many armor bearers are around Him

And how many cavalry like you say?!

How many envoys has He sent?

Or how many crowds of His servants do you see?

What in Him resembles a king as you say

And who forced you to seek Him face with oblations?!

You receive Him in poverty and want; Who informed you about His real kingdom?!

I did not marry to become a mother, my virginity is sealed, and I have a child as you see.

I became as one married, although I do not know marriage. I don't know women's suffering, for I gave birth in holiness without knowing a man.

I saw no man, and conceived in an exceptional way

I am unmarried and a mother without marriage.

Spiritually I was planted with a wondrous annunciation,

Conceived without a man and I am pure.

I had asked him, what is this you say?

And he said, the Holy Spirit will come on you,

The Almighty's power will overshadow you

And you will bear Him whose kingdom shall never end.

With that, I accepted the wonderful, miraculous birth,

And bore a king, of whom no one is aware except you.

I am wronged because of Him; be you my witnesses in front of my oppressors

So that I can bare my face and despise them, for they greatly wronged me.

You who came from afar, come and speak to those close by,

Rebuke them, then perhaps they will know He is the Son of God!

Shout in the ears of the deaf people, so they can Hear you and appreciate your good news!”¹

St. Jacob of Serugh

¹ Jacob of Serugh, Homily 6 on The Star seen by the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents in: Behnam Sony, Tarjama.

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