

St. Romanos the Melodist

Kontakion on the Nativity of Christ

From St. Romanos the Melodist, *On the Life of Christ: Kontakia*
(Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, tr.: Harper, San Francisco, 1995),
pp. 1-12.

Introduction

A “kontakion” is a poetic form frequently encountered in Byzantine hymnography. It was probably based in Syriac hymnographical traditions, which underwent an independent development in Greek-speaking Byzantium. We can perhaps best describe it as a “sermon in verse accompanied by music”. In character it is similar to the early Byzantine festival sermons in prose, but meter and music have greatly heightened the drama and rhetorical beauty of the speaker’s often profound and very rich meditation. The form generally consists of 18 to 24 metrically identical stanzas (called “oikoï”, or “houses”), preceded, in another meter, by a short prelude (called a “koukoulion”, or “cowl”) . The first letters of the stanzas form an acrostic, which frequently includes the name of the poet; the last line of the prelude introduces a refrain, which is repeated at the end of all the stanzas. This form became especially popular after the magnificent work of St. Romanos the Melodist during the 6th century.

The main body of a kontakion was chanted from the pulpit by the preacher after the reading of the gospel, while a choir, or even the whole congregation, joined into the refrain. The length of many kontakia, and the epic character of some, point to a kind of recitative, but unfortunately, the original music which accompanied the kontakia is now all lost.

The oldest datable kontakia are those of St. Romanos, and the present one is his best-known work and in fact is the composition that seems to have first brought him to the notice of the public of Constantinople. For many years, it was sung at the royal banquet on Christmas Day. The prelude, one of the best-loved hymns among Orthodox Christians, and the first stanza are still used for the feast of the Nativity in the Orthodox Church

Little is known about St. Romanos himself. He was born in the late 5th century, probably in Emesa, Syria, of Jewish descent. He served as deacon in the church of the Resurrection in Beirut before coming to Constantinople during the reign of Anastasius I (491-518). According to his *Life*, he was miraculously endowed with the gift of writing

kontakia. The Virgin appeared to him in a dream on Christmas eve, and gave him a scroll which he swallowed. The poet rose from sleep, gave praise to God, went straight to church and, mounting the pulpit, chanted the kontakion which appears below. We know that he lived beyond the middle of the 6th century, and that he was buried in the church of the Virgin in the Kyrrou Quarter of Constantinople. He is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on October 1st, along with his disciple Ananias.

Eighty-five kontakia attributed to Romanos have survived, but not all of those ascribed are genuinely his. Of these, thirty-four are on the person of Christ, and the others deal with other figures of the New and Old Testaments, various martyrs and saints, and so forth. He wrote in an Atticized literary koine— i.e., he had a popular, but elevated style—and abundant Semiticisms support the view that he was of Jewish origin. Arresting imagery, sharp metaphors and similes, bold comparisons, antitheses, coining of successful maxims, and vivid dramatization characterize his style.

Most of the present poem takes the form of a dialogue between the Mother of God and the magi, whose visit to the newborn Child is celebrated in the Byzantine rite on 25th of December, rather than on the 6th of January, when Western Christians celebrate the visit (Jan. 6 is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ in the Orthodox Church).

The basic Gospel text is Matthew 2.1-14.

On the Nativity of Christ

Prelude

Today the Virgin gives birth to him who is above all being,
and the earth offers a cave to him whom no one can approach.
Angels with shepherds give glory,
and magi journey with a star,
for to us there has been born

*a little Child, God before the ages.*¹

1

Bethlehem has opened Eden, come, let us see;
we have found delight in secret, come, let us receive
the joys of Paradise within the cave.

¹ Cf. Isaias 9.5, Psalm 73(74).12.

There the unwatered root² whose blossom is forgiveness has appeared.
There has been found the undug well
from which David once longed to drink.³
There a virgin has borne a babe
and has quenched at once Adam's and David's thirst.
For this, let us hasten to this place where there has been born
a little Child, God before the ages.

2

The mother's Father has willingly become her Son,
the infants' saviour is laid as an infant in a manger.
As she who bore him contemplates him, she says,
"Tell me, my Child, how were you sown, or how were you planted in me?
I see you, my flesh and blood, and I am amazed,
because I give suck and yet I am not married.
And though I see you in swaddling clothes,
I know that the flower of my virginity is sealed,
for you preserved it when, in your good pleasure, you were born
a little Child, God before the ages.

3

"High King, what have you to do with beggars?
Maker of heaven, why have you come to those born of earth?
Did you love a cave or take pleasure in a manger?
See, there is no place for your servant in the inn,
I do not say a place, not even a cave,
for that too belongs to another.
To Sara, when she bore a child,⁴
a vast land was given as her lot. To me, not even a fox hole.⁵
I used the cavern where willingly you made your dwelling,
a little Child, God before the ages."

² A double allusion to Isaias 11.1 and the virgin birth.

³ Cf. 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel) 23.13-17, 1 Chronicles 11.17-19.

⁴ Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham, is one of the most frequent types of Christ.

⁵ Cf. Matthew 8.20.

4

As she spoke such words in secret
and entreated the One who knows what is hidden,
she heard the magi seeking the babe.
At once, the Maiden cried to them, "Who are you?"
They answered her, "And you, who are you,
that you have borne such a Child?
Who is your father, who is she who bore you,
that you have become mother and nurse of a son without father?
On seeing his star we understood that there had appeared
a little Child, God before the ages.

5

"For Balaam laid before us precisely
the meaning of the words he spoke in prophecy,
when he said that a Star would dawn,⁶
a Star that quenches all prophecies and auguries;
a Star that resolves the parables of the wise,
and their sayings and their riddles,
a Star far more brilliant than the star
which has appeared, for he is the maker of all the stars,
of whom it was written of old, 'From Jacob, there dawns
a little Child, God before the ages.'"

6

When Mary heard these amazing words,
she bowed low and worshipped the offspring of her womb
and with tears, she said, "Great, my Child,
great is all that you have done for me in my poverty;
for see, magi are outside seeking you.
The kings of the East
seek your face,

⁶ Cf. Numbers 24.17. In the Greek Bible, the prophecy says, "A star will dawn out of Jacob and a man [not a 'staff' as in the Hebrew] will rise out of Israel". This makes the messianic reference clearer.

and the rich among your people beg to see you,⁷
for truly your people are those to whom you have been made known as
a little Child, God before the ages.

7

“So, since they are your people, my Child, bid them
come under your roof, that they may see
rich poverty, precious beggary.
You I have as glory and pride,⁸ therefore I am not ashamed.
You are the grace and beauty
of my dwelling⁹ and of me. Nod and let them enter.
My poverty does not worry me;
I hold you as a treasure that the kings have come to see,
for kings and magi know that you have appeared
a little Child, God before the ages.”

8

Jesus the Christ and truly our God
secretly touched his mother’s mind
saying, “Bring in those I have brought by my word,
for it is my word which shone on those who were seeking me.
To the senses it is a star,
but to the mind a power.¹⁰
It accompanied the magi as my minister,
and still stands fulfilling its service
and showing with its rays the place where there has been born
a little Child, God before the ages.

⁷ Cf. Psalm 44(45).13(12).

⁸ Cf. Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 1.11.

⁹ Cf. John 1.14. That the words “grace” and “dwelling” may be a discreet allusion is made more explicit by the Western manuscripts of the kontakion which read “truth” for “beauty”.

¹⁰ St Romanos here echoes the comment of St John Chrysostom on the star of Bethlehem. For him, it was not an astronomical phenomenon, but an angel, made visible as a star. There is also an allusion to Psalm 103(104).4: “Who makes spirits his angels and a flame of fire his ministers”.

9

“Therefore now receive, holy Lady— receive those who have received me,
for I am in them as I am in your arms;

I did not leave you and yet I came with them.”

She opens the door and receives the company of the magi.

She opens the door— she, the unopened
gate through which Christ alone has passed.¹¹

She opens the door— she who was opened
and yet in no way robbed of the treasure of her purity.

She opened the door, she from whom was born the door,¹²

a little Child, God before the ages.

10

The magi at once hastened into the room
and, seeing Christ, they trembled as they saw
his mother and her betrothed.

And in fear they said, “This is a son without ancestry.”¹³

And how is it, O Virgin, that at this moment we see
your betrothed within your house?

Was your conceiving blameless?

Will people not find fault at Joseph’s living with you?

You have a multitude of jealous people enquiring where there has been born

a little Child, God before the ages.”

11

“I will tell you”, Mary said to the magi,

“why I keep Joseph in my house:

to refute all those who slander me.

He will tell what he has heard about my Child.

For in his sleep he saw a holy angel

who told him how I had conceived.

In the night a fiery vision told

¹¹ Ezekiel 44.2: one of the most frequently used types of the virgin birth in the liturgical texts.

¹² John 10.7, 10.9.

¹³ Cf. Hebrews 7.3 where the word is used of Melchisedek as a type of Christ.

the creature of thorn¹⁴ about the things which grieved him.
That is why Joseph is with me, to show that there is

a little Child, God before the ages.

12

“He proclaims clearly all he has heard.
He declares openly all that he has seen
in heaven and on earth:
the story of the shepherds, how beings of fire sang praises with ones of clay,¹⁵
that of you, magi, how a star hastened before you,
lighting your way and guiding you.
And so, leaving aside all that you said before,
now recount to us what has befallen you.
Where have you come from, how did you understand that there had appeared

a little Child, God before the ages?”

13

When the Shining One had spoken thus,
the lamps of the East said to her,
“Do you wish to learn from where we have come here?
From the land of the Chaldaeans, where they do not say, ‘The Lord is God of
gods.’¹⁶
From Babylon, where they do not know
who is the maker of the things they reverence.
From there it came, the spark from your Child,
and raised us from the Persian fire;
we have left an all-devouring fire and see a fire which brings dew:¹⁷

a little Child, God before the ages.

¹⁴ Cf. Psalm 118(119).12, Isaias 33.12. This use of “thorny” to refer to humans, especially in connection with fire, is frequent in St Romanos. The immediate inspiration is almost certainly St Ephrem the Syrian, but the source is the Old Testament imagery of thorns devoured by fire. See also “On the Apostle Thomas”, stanza 2, p. 184.

¹⁵ Cf. Luke 2.13-14 and 20.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 10.17.

¹⁷ An allusion to the “Fiery Furnace” in the book of Daniel, which became like dew (Daniel 3.50). The “fourth man” in the furnace (Daniel 3.92(3.25)) is taken as a type of Christ.

14

“Everything is vanity of vanities.¹⁸
But there is none among us who thinks this,
for some deceive while others are deceived.
Therefore, Virgin, thanks be to your Offspring, through whom we have been
freed,
not only from deception but from hardship
in all the countries through which we passed,
of nations unknown, of tongues incomprehensible,
as we wandered through the earth and searched it,
with the lamp of the star¹⁹ seeking out where there had been born
a little Child, God before the ages.

15

“But while we still had this lamp
we journeyed through all Jerusalem,
fittly fulfilling the words of the prophecy.²⁰
For we had heard that God had threatened to search her thoroughly,
and with the lamp we wandered,
wishing to find a great judgment.
But it was not found, because her Ark
had been taken away with all the good things It had held before.
The things of old have passed away,²¹ for he has renewed all things
a little Child, God before the ages.”

16

Mary, Scripture says, said to the faithful magi,
“So, have you journeyed through all Jerusalem,
that city which slays prophets?²²
How did you pass unharmed through the city malevolent to all?

¹⁸ Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) 1.2.

¹⁹ Cf. Sophonias (Zephaniah) 1.12.

²⁰ Sophonias (Zephaniah) 1.12.

²¹ 2 Corinthians 5.17.

²² Luke 13.34.

How did you avoid Herod,
who breathes out murder, not justice?"
But they answered her, "Virgin,
we did not avoid him, we mocked him.
We met them all and asked where there had been born
a little Child, God before the ages."

17

When the Mother of God heard this from them,
she said to them, "What did King Herod
and the Pharisees ask you?"
"First Herod, then, as you said, the leaders of your nation
inquired of us exactly the time
of this star which is now visible.
And when they knew, as though they had not learned,
they had no desire to see the one of whom they sought to learn
because, for those who seek, there must be seen
a little Child, God before the ages.

18

"They thought us mad, the fools,
and asked, 'From where have you come and when?
And how have you journeyed by unseen paths?'
But we in turn asked them what they already knew,
'But how did you of old journey through
the great desert which you crossed?
He who guided those who came from Egypt
himself now guides those who come to him from Chaldaea;
then by a pillar of fire,²³ now by the star which shows
a little Child, God before the ages."

19

[missing from Lash; I have supplied]

"Everywhere the star traveled on ahead of us,

²³ Exodus 13.21.

just as Moses once carried a staff before you—
a lamp shining with knowledge of God.
Of old the manna nourished you, and a rock gave drink:
as for us, hope of Him has made us full.
Nourished on joy of Him
we could not tarry in Persia;
we took in mind to travel the trackless road
desiring to see, to worship, and to glorify
*a little Child, God before the ages.*²⁴

20

These things were spoken by the unerring magi,
and they were all sealed by the holy Virgin.²⁴
And what both had said was confirmed by the infant;
he left her womb unsullied after childbirth,
and showed their mind, like their steps,
unwearied after their coming.
For none of them had undergone toil,²⁵
as Avvakoum had not been wearied when he came to Daniel.²⁶
For he who appeared to the prophets was the same who appeared to the magi,
a little Child, God before the ages.

21

When they had told all their story,
the magi took the gifts in their hands and worshipped
the Gift of gifts, the Myrrh of myrrh.
They brought Christ gold and myrrh and then incense
and cried, "Accept our triple gift,
as you do the Thrice Holy Hymn of the seraphim."²⁷
Do not reject them like those of Cain,

²⁴ Luke 2.51.

²⁵ Cf. 2 Esdras 19.21 (Nehemiah 9.21).

²⁶ Daniel 14.35-8. A Syriac version of the Infancy Gospel says that the angel who took Avvakoum (Habbakuk) by the hair to Babylon was the same angel who guided the magi to Bethlehem.

²⁷ Isaías 6.3.

but embrace them like Abel's offering,²⁸
through her who gave you birth, and through whom you have been born for us,
a little Child, God before the ages."

22

When the blameless Virgin saw the magi bringing
new and radiant gifts and worshipping,
the star showing him, the shepherds praising him,
she implored the Maker and Creator of all these, saying,
"Accept, my Child, a trinity of gifts,
grant her who gave you birth three requests.
I pray to you for the seasons
and for the fruits of the earth and for those who dwell on it.
Be reconciled to all, because through me you have been born
a little Child, God before the ages.

23

"For I am not simply your mother, compassionate Saviour;
it is not in vain that I suckle the giver of milk,
but for the sake of all I implore you.
You have made me the mouth and the boast of all my race,²⁹
and your world has me
as a mighty protection, a wall and a buttress.
They look to me, those who were cast out
of the Paradise of pleasure, for I bring them back.
May all things understand that, through me, you have been born
a little Child, God before the ages.

24

"Save the world, O Saviour. For this you have come.
Set your whole universe aright. For this you have shone
on me and on the magi and on all creation.
For see, the magi, to whom you have shown the light of your face,³⁰

²⁸ Genesis 4.4.

²⁹ Judith 15.9.

fall down before you and offer gifts,
useful, fair and eagerly sought.
For I have need of them, since I am about
to go to Egypt and to flee with you and for you,
my Guide, my Son, my Maker, my Redeemer,

a little Child, God before the ages.”

...oOo...

³⁰ Cf. Psalm 4.2, Numbers 6.35.