

‘GOOD’ CORRUPTION: PATRIARCH METHODIUS’ MUSINGS ABOUT THE DIVISIBILITY OF GOD

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Abstract

In this brief article I discuss a passage from Patriarch Methodius’ *Encomium* of Agatha. I attempt to show that Methodius was a creative thinker who developed a complex interpretative framework. I argue that he radically deviated from the Patristic mainstream, declaring that corruption is necessary if there is going to be activity.

Keywords: Methodius of Constantinople, Agatha, Platonism, incorruptibility

‘İyi’ Yozlaşma: Patrik Methodios’un Tanrının Bölünebilirliği Üzerine Düşünceleri

Öz

Bu kısa makalede, Patrik Methodios’un Agatha onuruna yazdığı *Encomium*’da yer alan bir pasaj tartışılmakta ve Methodios’un karmaşık bir yorumsal çerçeve geliştiren yaratıcı bir düşünür olduğu ortaya konmaya çalışılmaktadır. Methodios’un Patristik ana akımdan radikal bir şekilde saptığı ve eğer eylem gerçekleşecekse yozlaşmanın gerekli olduğunu ilan ettiği savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Konstantinopolisli Methodios, Agatha, Platonizm, yozlaşmazlık.

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The Methodius of Syracuse (d. 847) is today best known as a leader of the Iconophile resistance during the Second Iconoclasm (814-842) and as the patriarch who presided over the reinstitution of image worship (843).¹ Yet he was also a prolific author. He penned *lives* of his contemporaries, and also *encomia* of Late Antique saints, which are based on older material.² One of these latter texts was devoted to the Sicilian martyr Agatha (BHG 38).³ In his reworking Methodius retained the structure of his model, which conformed to the traditional template of *passiones* – a pagan governor attempts to win over Agatha through threats and blandishments and eventually has her tortured – but added comments of his own that were meant to help the audience grasp the hidden meaning of the story as he understood it.⁴ This feature is most obvious in the proem where Methodius characterises Agatha in a series of short statements, which show her in different roles. In-depth study of several of these statements reveals that he was a highly original thinker who departed radically from the theological consensus. The first set reads as follows:

38 Γυνή παρθένος ὁ συναγωγεὺς ἡμῶν, ὃ θεόφιλοι, γυνή μιᾷ τῇ φύσει, οὐ προαιρέσει, ὣν ἡ συνήθεια καὶ τυπικῶς τεκνοτροφεῖν διεσπούδακεν, ἐν τοῖς μαιρακισμοῖσι πως ἀθύρμασιν, ἀλλὰ παρθένος, μηδὲ κἂν σχηματισμοῖς ἀναπλάσασά ποτε τῆς παιδιᾶς τὰ κυήματα.⁵

A wife virgin is our convener, beloved of God; a wife in one nature not in will, for whom (sc. women) it is customary to strive to breastfeed even figuratively in their teenage games, but a virgin who not even in the pretence of childish play ever feigned pregnancies.⁶

¹ See Beate Zielke, “Methodios I.”, *Die Patriarchen der ikonoklastischen Zeit: Germanos I.-Methodios I. (717-847)*, (ed. Ralph-Johannes Lilie), Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 183–260.

² See most recently Stephanos Efthymiadis, “Les premières traductions grecques: la *Passion* anonyme (BHG 554) et la *Passion* de Méthode (554d),” *Bibliothèque de l’École des Chartes*, 172 (2014), p. 101–114; and Dirk Krausmüller, “Patriarch Methodius, the first hagiographer of Theodore of Stoudios,” *Symbolae Osloenses*, 81 (2007), p. 144–150. On Methodius’ distinctive style see Martin Hinterberger, “Wortschöpfung und literarischer Stil bei Methodios I.,” *Lexicologica Byzantina. Beiträge zum Kolloquium zur byzantinischen Lexikographie, Bonn, 13.-15. Juli 2007*, (ed. Erich Trapp and Sonja Schönauer), Bonn 2008, p. 119–150.

³ *Encomium* of Agatha, ed. Enrico Mioni, “L’*encomio* di S. Agata di Metodios patriarcha di Costantinopoli,” *Analecta Bollandiana*, 68 (1950), p. 58–93, esp. p. 76–93.

⁴ On the original *passio* see Luciana Brusa, “Gli Atti del martirio di S. Agata,” *Rivista di Cultura Classica e Medievale*, 1 (1959), p. 342–67; on Methodius’ reworking see Dirk Krausmüller, “Exegeting the *Passio* of St Agatha: Patriarch Methodius of Constantinople on Sexual Differentiation and the Perfect ‘Man’,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 33 (2009), p. 1–16.

⁵ *Encomium* of Agatha 3, ed. Mioni, p. 77.

⁶ The term γυνή can, of course, also just mean ‘woman’. Yet in Methodius’ argument it clearly has the meaning of ‘wife’ just as ἀνὴρ means ‘husband’ and not simply ‘man’.

In this passage Methodius characterises Agatha as a wife and as a virgin and then adds in each case a qualification. First he states that the saint was not socialised as a prospective wife because she did not act like one even in her childhood. Then he avers that she did not play at being pregnant. There is an obvious difference between the two statements: breastfeeding is a typical behaviour of wives whereas pregnancy is not reconcilable with virginity. As Agatha was indeed a virgin who never got married one gets the impression that the term 'wife' does not apply to her. Yet this is not Methodius' last word. Later in the text he speaks about the saint's martyrdom whose most distinctive feature was the amputation of her breasts. In this context he makes two statements. First, he lets Agatha assert that she has an inner breast, which she has offered to the Christ child.⁷ Then he interprets the forward movement of the severed outer breasts as an act of breastfeeding.⁸ It is evident that the statement about Agatha as a wife is phrased in this manner because it points forward to the martyrdom.⁹ Thus we can conclude that Agatha is also a wife and a mother.

That Methodius is not content with making negative statements is also obvious from the subsequent passage about Agatha as a 'wife virgin'.

Γυνή, εἶπα, ἀλλὰ παρθένος προσέθηκα. Γυνή, διὰ τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς παρὰ τοῦ σοφοῦ Ἀδάμ – ἔτι γὰρ τότε σοφὸς ὡς ἀνόλισθος – ἐπιτεθὲν ὄνομα, ὃ γράφων Μωϋσῆς ἀφθόνως καὶ τὸ ἐρμηνευθὲν αὐτῷ τοῦ ὀνόματος ἐπιθέτη Ἀδὰμ διεσήμανεν εἰπὼν· Αὕτη κληθήσεται γυνή ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς ἐλήφθη, παρθένος, διότι ἐκ τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ λόγου, κἂν δι' ἐμὲ ἀνθρώπου φθορᾶς γευσάμενου τῆ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ, τοῦ ἐνὸς καὶ ἀμερίστου υἱοῦ ἐξελήλυθεν, ὡς φησιν ἡ θεολόγος φωνή· Ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς αὐτόν, οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων, οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς, ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. Γυνή τοίνυν παρθένος, ἡ

I have said 'wife' but I have added 'virgin'. Wife because of the name that at the beginning had been given by the wise Adam – for then he was still wise since he had not yet slipped –, writing down which Moses graciously also indicated how it had been interpreted by the name-giver Adam: 'This one will be called "wife" because **she was taken out of her husband.**' Virgin because she came **out of the incorruptible God Word**, even if he had tasted the corruption of man in his flesh because of me, **the one and indivisible Son**, as the voice of the Theologian says: 'All who have received him, he has given to them the power to become children of God, to those who believe in him, who have been born not out of blood, nor

⁷ *Encomium* of Agatha 18, ed. Mioni, p. 85.

⁸ *Encomium* of Agatha 19, ed. Mioni, p. 86.

⁹ See Krausmüller, "Exegeting the Passio", p. 6–7.

δαιτυμῶν τῆς ἡμετέρας εὐλαβοῦς ἐστιάσεως, γυνή, ἢ **καλῶς ἄρμοσθεῖσα ἐνὶ ἀνδρὶ τῷ Χριστῷ**, ταῖς ἀποστολικοῖς τοῦ Παύλου παστοπλοκίαις, παρθένος, ἦν ὁ αὐτὸς νυμφαγωγὸς ἐξαπατηθῆναι ὡς τὴν προμήτορα τῷ τοιχωρῶχφ ὄφει Σατάν οὐ πεφύβηται.¹⁰

out of the will of a man, but **out of God.** A wife virgin, then, is the host of our pious meal, a wife because **she has been joined well to one husband, Christ**, through the apostolic bridal-chamber-pleatings of Paul, concerning whom the same bridal guide did not fear that she would be deceived by the wall-digging Satan, as the foremother had been.

This is quite a complex statement, which needs to be carefully unravelled. When characterising Agatha as ‘wife’ Methodius refers to the Biblical story about Adam and Eve. In Genesis 2:21-22 we find the well-known account of the creation of Eve whom God fashions from a rib that he has taken from Adam. Yet Methodius does not quote these verses but instead opts for Genesis 2:23b where Adam declares: ‘She will be called wife because she has been taken out of her husband’ (αὕτη κληθήσεται γυνή ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς ἐλήμφθη αὕτη). By introducing Adam as the ‘wise’ (σοφός) name-giver he points his audience to Genesis 2:19 where Adam gives all creatures their true names. Accordingly, Methodius takes the causal clause to be the ‘interpretation’ (ἐρμηνεία) of the name ‘wife’. This is decidedly odd since normal women are not taken out of their husbands. The thrust of Methodius’ reasoning becomes clear when we consider the ‘virgin’ part. There he quotes John’s statement that those who have received the Word ‘have been born out of God’ (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν), from which he concludes that Agatha has come out of Christ. This means that the roles of ‘wife’ and ‘virgin’ are identical.

The two spheres then are collapsed into one in the last part where Methodius paraphrases II Corinthians 11:2-3: ‘I have joined you to one husband, Christ, but I fear that as the serpent deceived Eve in his wickedness your thoughts will be corrupted from the simplicity of your relationship with Christ’ (ἡρμοσάμην γὰρ ὑμᾶς ἐνὶ ἀνδρὶ τῷ Χριστῷ, φοβοῦμαι δὲ μήπως ὡς ὁ ὄφις ἐξηπάτησεν Εὐάν ἐν τῇ πανουργίᾳ αὐτοῦ φθαρή τὰ νοήματα ὑμῶν ἀπὸ τῆς ἀπλότητος τῆς εἰς τὸν Χριστόν).¹¹ Here Agatha’s husband is identified with Christ and the reference to

¹⁰ *Encomium* of Agatha 3, ed. Mioni, p. 77.

¹¹ The part φοβοῦμαι δὲ μήπως ... φθαρή τὰ νοήματα ὑμῶν ἀπὸ τῆς ἀπλότητος τῆς εἰς τὸν Χριστόν is not quoted by Methodius but this does not necessarily mean that it has no function in the argument: the references to corruption and simplicity would fit in with the main topic of Methodius’ speculation. Unfortunately, there are no further clues that might help us understand its significance.

Eve establishes a typological link between Christ and Adam on the one hand and Agatha and Eve on the other. We can conclude that Agatha becomes the first 'true' wife since Eve because she is not only joined to her husband as ordinary women are but has also come out of him.¹²

Even so there is still a difference. Methodius declares that as God the Word remained 'uncorrupted' (ἄφθορος) and 'undivided' (ἄμεριστος) when Agatha went forth from him, since only the human flesh that he assumed was subject to corruption. This is in stark contrast to Adam who had to lose his physical integrity in order for Eve to be created. Here the extraction can be regarded as 'corruption' (φθορά) and the rib as a 'part' (μέρος). This contrast becomes even clearer when we juxtapose Adam's words in Genesis 2:23a: 'This is now ... flesh out of my flesh' (τοῦτο νῦν ... σὰρξ ἐκ τῆς σαρκός μου), and John's claim that the followers of Christ are 'not born ... out of the will of the flesh' (οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκός ... ἐγεννήθησαν).

Again, however, this is not Methodius' last word. Further down in the same passage we find the following statement:

Αὕτη καὶ ἀγαθὴ τῷ ἀνδρὶ αὐτῆς θεῷ ὡς
ἐξ αὐτοῦ μερὶς χρηματίσασα, καὶ πάλιν
ἡμῖν τῇ μεταδόσει τ' ἀγαθοῦ φερωνύμως,
Ἀγάθη παρὰ τοῦ ὑπεραγάθου κυρίου
κεχάρισται.¹³

This one (sc. was) also good **for her husband God** as having been a **part out of him**, and again through the imparting of the good to us in such a way that her name reflects her being she has become Agatha through the grace of the Lord who is beyond goodness.

In the first part of this statement Methodius explains that Agatha is out of God and joined with God as her husband. At first sight this appears to be a mere recapitulation of what has been said before. Yet a closer look reveals the presence of a new element. Methodius adapts the verse 'a good wife is a good part' (γυνὴ ἀγαθὴ μερὶς ἀγαθῆ) from Ecclesiastus 26:3. In Ecclesiasticus this is a bland statement about the need for conjugal harmony. In the new context, however, it acquires a technical meaning. What has come out of God is a 'part' (μερὶς) of God. Here the reader is forced to conclude that Agatha's coming forth from God amounts to a 'division' (μερισμός), which contradicts the previous characterisation

¹² See Dirk Krausmüller, "Divine Sex: Patriarch Methodios' Concept of Virginity", *Desire and Denial in Byzantium: Papers of the Thirty-First Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, (ed. Elizabeth James), Aldershot 1999, p. 57–65.

¹³ *Encomium of Agatha* 4, ed. Mioni, p. 78.

of the Son of God as ‘indivisible’ (ἀμέριστος). Moreover, since Methodius uses the two terms ‘indivisible’ (ἀμέριστος) and ‘incorruptible’ (ἄφθοartos) in parallel statements and thus indicates that they are interchangeable, the reader will assume that the latter term is also gainsaid and that Agatha’s procession from God also amounts to a ‘corruption’ (φθορά). Thus the previous juxtaposition of the corruptible flesh and the incorruptible Son and Word is superseded and the parallel with Adam is completed: as we have seen he, too, loses a part, the rib, from which Eve was fashioned.

Significantly this theme is closely related to sexuality: Methodius states that it was in her role as a ‘virgin’ (παρθένος) that Agatha went forth from the ‘uncorrupted’ (ἄφθοartos) Christ and thus reminds his readers of the close connection between virginity and lack of corruption. Accordingly Christ, too, can be called a virgin, and Agatha mirrors the archetypal divine virginity in the sphere of created being. However, this mirroring is again only possible if Christ becomes corrupted, a paradox that is based on the fact that human virgins owe their existence to sexual intercourse and that a man needs to lose his virginity in order for him to father a virginal child.

For Methodius, however, integrity of being is not lost for good since the part returns to the whole. This is already the case with Eve who is not only taken ‘from the flesh’ (ἐκ τῆς σαρκός) of Adam but also becomes ‘one flesh’ (σὰρξ μία) with him. For Methodius this is not simply a transient coupling but rather a restitution of the archetypal oneness. In analogous fashion Agatha is joined to the Word as her husband. Yet here it is not a union of the flesh but a union of the spirit as can be seen from I Corinthians 6:17: ‘He who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit’ (ὁ δὲ κολλώμενος τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν πνεύμα ἔστιν). Accordingly it is as ‘spirit’ (πνεῦμα) that Agatha leaves Christ and returns to him.

Thus Methodius appears to create a dichotomy between flesh and spirit. I would, however, argue that this is again not his last word. At this point we need to consider the martyrdom of Agatha, which affects her body and not her soul. We have already seen that the theme of breastfeeding in the proem is inspired by the specific form of Agatha’s martyrdom, the amputation of her breasts, which Methodius interprets as an act of breastfeeding. Now it is equally evident that the breasts are a ‘part’ (τεῖμα, μέρος) of Agatha’s body. Thus one can hypothesise that the martyrdom is a manifestation in the flesh of the spiritual severing mentioned in the proem. This would not, however, be a straightforward parallel. Instead, one would have to assume that Agatha takes over the role of the divine Word and that the Word is in turn represented by Agatha’s breasts. In itself such an interpretation is not impossible since Methodius lets Agatha become Christ’s mother and Christ Agatha’s mother, thus reversing the relationship.¹⁴ Yet it can only be defended if

¹⁴ See Krausmüller, “Exegeting the Passio”, p. 11–12.

one can show that Agatha's martyrdom mirrors all parts of the process described in the proem. Here we run into difficulties. The description of the martyrdom implies that Agatha's breasts end up on the ground rather than being rejoined with her. I would, however, argue that an alternative interpretation is possible. It hinges on the meaning of the phrase τέκνου στόμα as the destination of Agatha's breasts. The obvious reading is 'mouth of a child', which is undoubtedly intended since it establishes the breastfeeding theme. Yet it is possible that it has another meaning. When we assume that τέκνου is a Genitivus objectivus we can translate the phrase as 'mouth for a child'. In this case the mouth would be the *os uteri* (στόμα τῆς μήτρας) as part of Agatha's sexual organs.¹⁵ According to this interpretation the severed breasts would enter the vagina and thus become 'one flesh' (σάρξ μία) with the remainder of Agatha.¹⁶ There is, of course, no way to substantiate this hypothesis. Yet one should not rule it out *a priori*. As we have seen Methodius is a highly sophisticated author who creates analogies between phenomena that at first sight are unrelated to each other.

This leaves us with the question: how are we to contextualise Methodius' speculation? In his own time he was an isolated figure. His contemporaries devoted all their energies to the defence of icon worship. Yet even when we turn to the Late Ancient period when theologians had broader interests we find little that is comparable. They would have rejected the notion of a 'good corruption' out of hand because they regarded the incorruptibility of God as a fundamental doctrine.

This is, however, only one aspect of an overarching framework. For Methodius a part only goes out in order to return to where it has come from. This circular movement was clearly of great importance to him. It may owe something to the Neoplatonic dyad of 'procession' (προόδος) and 'return' (ἐπιστροφή) although no Neoplatonist would ever have spoken of extraction from and addition to the whole of a part. This hypothesis can be supported through further analysis of the last passage that I have quoted. There 'God' is characterised as being 'beyond goodness' (ὑπεράγαθος), which suggests that he has an ontological status that is higher than Agatha who is merely 'good' (ἀγαθή) and thus also higher than the 'God' of which she is a part. Here one is immediately reminded of Pseudo-Dionysius' distinction between the transcendent deity and the divine 'paradigms' (παράδειγματα) or ideas, which have eternal hypostasis from God and in turn have an impact on creation. The fit is, however, not perfect. Unlike Pseudo-Dionysius' God, Methodius' 'Lord beyond goodness' is very much involved in the governance

¹⁵ See Soranus, *Gynaecia*, I, 4, ed. Paul Burguière, Daniele Gourevitch, Yves Malinas, *Soranus d' Ephèse, Maladies des Femmes*. Vol. 1. Book 1, Paris 1988), p. 10.

¹⁶ One could then further argue that the breasts are typologically assimilated to a penis, which would impregnate Agatha. Methodius does state that the martyrdom leads to the growth of Christ in her. See Krausmüller, "Exegeting the Passio", p. 11–12.

of the world. It is he who gifts Agatha to the human beings. By contrast, the God of whom Agatha is a part appears to be passive: Agatha goes out from him, and she is joined to him. Thus one can argue that Methodius rather had in mind the Platonic demiurge who creates according to the paradigm, a scenario that had long been Christianised. The demiurge-turned-God ‘imparts’ (μεταδίδωσι) the idea of ‘the good’ in which each human being ‘participates’ (μετέχει). Yet this good is not an immanent impersonal force but rather a human being. Here the notion of incarnation comes into play. In Agatha the idea of the good became flesh and dwelt among us. It is in this way that she has an effect on the human beings, who are first turned to her and then through her to the ‘Lord beyond goodness’.

This brief article does not pretend to have exhausted all the possible meanings of the text. One may ask whether the parallel between the paradigm and Adam’s body is not more than just an analogy. Methodius may have been aware of the Gnostic notion of a cosmic Adam, who provided the model for creatures in this world. Likewise, the ‘bridal-chamber-pleating’ (παστοπλοκίαι) of the Apostle Paul and the description of Satan as ‘wall-digger’ (τοιχωρύχος) will probably also have had a function in the argument.

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