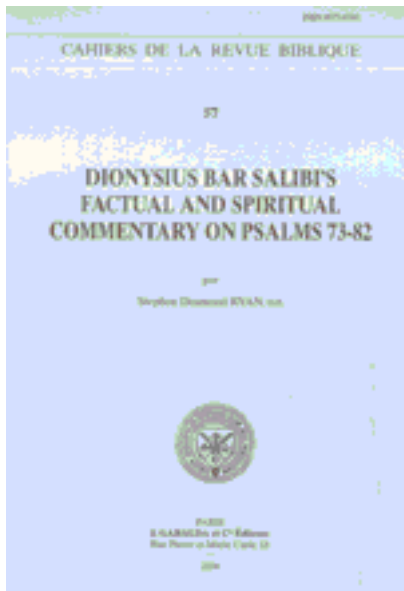


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**Ryan, Stephen Desmond**

***Dionysius Bar Salibi's Factual and Spiritual  
Commentary on Psalms 73–82***

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The work under discussion is a revised Ph.D. dissertation by Stephen Desmond Ryan, O.P., worked under the direction of James F. Coakley of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University and published in the prestigious series Cahiers de la Revue biblique. Ryan offers a critical edition of Dionysius Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 73–82*. Modern scholars, Ryan notes (xvi), are willing to learn from the successes and failures of the ancient interpreters, so there is a growing need for critical editions of the ancient commentaries, and Ryan makes a substantial contribution to a field struggling through its infancy. If Ryan's work is any indication, the study of ancient commentaries will become a significant area of future textual exploration.

Why study Bar Salibi? As J. R. Harris put it in 1927, because he had a “great library.” Greek and Syriac sources nowhere else preserved are found in his writings. He is a kind of Theophilactus of Ohrida (twelfth century), who functioned as a repository for earlier Greek fathers, especially Cyril of Alexandria. In a nutshell, Bar Salibi is “a magazine of early traditions” (xvii).

The need for a critical edition of Bar Salibi's *Commentary on the Old Testament* to recover the text of the Syro-Hexapla was signaled in late 1960s by W. Baars and more recently by Sebastian Brock. But Ryan's work is more than a critical edition, which in

itself would be a notable contribution. It is precisely what Sebastian Brock urged from Syriac scholars, a kind of interpretation/analysis of an ancient commentary within the broader context of the interpretive traditions. Ryan's work is more than a linguistic or philological treatment of Bar Salibi's commentary. It is, as the author states (xviii), a critical edition and an analysis of Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 73–82*. As Ryan notices, he chose these psalms in order to complement Marjorie Helen Simpkin's dissertation dealing with Bar Salibi's work on Pss 1–72.

The book is divided into seven chapters, starting with a survey of Bar Salibi's life and writings, followed in the second chapter by a discussion on the topic of biblical commentaries. The writer's purpose in composing a dual "commentary" (i.e., factual and spiritual) and his use biblical citations and of different biblical versions is discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 4 deals with Bar Salibi's use of sources. One of the values of Bar Salibi's commentaries is that they can contribute to the recovery of ancient sources, such as lost passages of Ephrem. Chapter 5 discusses the manuscript tradition of Bar Salibi's *Commentary on the Psalms*. Chapter 6 represents the center of Ryan's work, namely, a critical edition and translation of the *Commentary on Psalms 73–82*. Chapter 7 places the commentary in a wider interpretive context, namely, that of medieval Jewish and Christian exegesis.

Ryan begins by introducing the reader to the historical background of Bar Salibi's life and works (ch. 1, "The Life and Works of Dionysius Bar Salibi"). Dionysius was a bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church (in opposition to the Chalcedonian churches of the Byzantine Empire). By using Western (Greek and Syrian Orthodox) and Eastern (Isho'dad of Merv) sources, Bar Salibi played an important role in bridging the Syrian churches. His father perhaps participated in one of the early crusades, hence his name Bar Salibi, which may be rendered "son of a crusader." The Syrian writer Dionysius Bar Salibi (d. 1171) lived in a period described as the "Syriac Renaissance." Bar Salibi played an important role in this climactic phase of the history of Syriac literature and theology. There are two sources of information with respect to Bar Salibi's life and activity: the chronicles of Michael the Great and Bar Hebraeus.

Jacob bar Salibi was born in Melitene in the beginning of the twelfth century. When he was elevated to the episcopacy (in 1154) he took the name Dionysius. Bar Salibi was one of the most prolific authors in Syriac literature. Ryan divides Bar Salibi's literary and theological production into six groups: homilies and liturgical works, canon law, commentaries on classical and patristic works, polemical writings, theological works, and biblical commentaries. Very useful is Ryan's observation of Bar Salibi's references to Psalms found in works other than the *Commentary on Psalms* (e.g., inter alia, pp. 9–10, 16).

In chapter 2, “Previous Studies on the Biblical Commentaries,” Ryan reviews the main studies done on Bar Salibi’s *Commentaries* on the Old and New Testaments, beginning with Dudley Loftus’s (1619–1695) translation into English of Bar Salibi’s *Commentary on the Gospels* (Dublin, 1672). The first complete survey of Bar Salibi’s extant works was done by Joseph Simon Assemani (1687–1768) in *Bibliotheca Orientalis*. The study of Bar Salibi’s *Commentary on the Old Testament* began later, in the 1920s, in the wider context of the Peshitta project at Chicago University. After listing the most important studies on Bar Salibi’s work with the Old Testament, Ryan dwells on the book of Psalms. He notes two important contributions to the study of Bar Salibi’s *Commentary on the Psalms* (22–23). One is an unpublished dissertation (1934) by Walter Robert Roehrs; the second is Marjorie Helen Simpkin’s 1974 dissertation, which is a thorough analysis of Bar Salibi’s *Commentary on Psalms 1–72*. In her study Simpkin deals with the liturgical use of the Psalms in the West-Syrian tradition and the use of the commentaries in the monasteries. However, she offers only a sample critical edition of seven psalms (16, 18, 22, 36, 45, 51, 68).

Ryan concludes chapter 2 with a survey of more recent biblical and Syriac studies that impacted his work in one way or another. First, the Leiden Peshitta critical edition of Psalms (1980) and the Syro-Hexaplaric Psalms by Robert Hiebert (1989) aided his evaluation of Bar Salibi’s use of these versions with respect to the Psalms. Another important study cited and used by Ryan is an edition of Isho’dad of Merv’s *Commentary on the Psalms* by Ceslas van den Eynde (1981). One may note that Bar Salibi’s *Commentary* relies greatly on Isho’dad’s work, which often is dependent on Theodore of Mopsuestia. Another influence on Bar Salibi was Daniel of Salah, hence the importance of the forthcoming edition of Daniel Salah’s *Great Psalm Commentary* by David Taylor.

As Ryan clearly puts it, the uniqueness of Bar Salibi’s *Commentary on the Old Testament* is that it contains two separate commentaries, one factual and another described either as spiritual or as factual and spiritual. The material of these commentaries is presented most often synoptically in separate columns. In chapter 3 (“Factual and Spiritual”) Ryan insists on Bar Salibi as interpreter and his methodology of separating commentaries. The author divides this chapter into a number of sections. The first, on terminology, discusses Bar Salibi’s varied use of terms: “factual,” “spiritual,” “factual and spiritual,” “mixed” versus Bar Kepha’s distinction between the two types of interpretation, one done “bodily,” and another done “spiritually”. The second section addresses the structure of the *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Here the author argues that previous studies of the structure of Bar Salibi’s *Commentary on the Old Testament* focus exclusively on one book and draw the general conclusion that the entire commentary follows the same pattern. Ryan’s contribution is to show that the variations in structure of Bar Salibi’s exegetical work are determined by the biblical books. Ryan then conducts a thorough

analysis of these variations in structure for the *Commentary on the Psalms*. Up to Ps 26, the commentary has three columns, with two columns for spiritual interpretation. Significantly, Bar Salibi uses both versions, Septuagint and Peshitta, to draw his spiritual explanations. In any event, Bar Salibi was the first Syriac interpreter to divide his commentaries (factual and spiritual) into synoptic, rather than sequential, columns. In the third section, on Bar Salibi's explanations for the two commentaries, Ryan notes that, when he distinguishes between the two commentaries, Bar Salibi always insists on the fact that the spiritual commentary is longer and more important than the factual one. The fourth section addresses the distinctions between the two commentaries. Examples are taken from Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 73–82*, namely, from those cases where the Syriac writer comments on the same lemma in both commentaries. In the fifth section, on Bar Salibi's biblical citations of the Peshitta and Syro-Hexapla, Ryan reviews the previous studies on Bar Salibi's biblical citations, noting that his intent is to offer a critical edition of Bar Salibi's commentary and not to study the biblical citations spread throughout the commentary. Bar Salibi's factual commentary relies on the Peshitta, while the spiritual commentary is based on the Syro-Hexapla. Simpkin located over six hundred biblical citations in the factual commentary on Pss 1–72. In most cases, the biblical citations were taken from the Peshitta. Bar Salibi's commentaries refer to biblical readings found in the Peshitta, Hebrew, and Greek, but never to Aquila, Theodotion, or Symmachus, unlike Isho'dad.

Bar Salibi himself recognizes that his commentary is not an original work but rather a compilation. In chapter 4, "The Sources of the Commentary," after a short examination of Bar Salibi's own statements regarding the sources for his commentary, Ryan traces the sources used by the Syriac writer: Andrew and Zur'o, Isho'dad, Athanasius, Daniel of Salah and Daniel of Tella, and Moshe bar Kepha. The most important are Isho'dad and Moshe bar Kepha. Yet, Bar Salibi shows a great amount of freedom in choosing the verses to be commented upon. Ryan's merit is his side by side placement of texts from Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 73–82* and its theological-literary models. And Ryan takes his examination as far as the linguistic differences between his commentator and those sources mentioned above.

In chapter 5, "The Manuscript Tradition and Introduction to the Edition," the author deals with the manuscripts he used to compile his critical edition of Bar Salibi's *Commentary*. The last section of the chapter explains Ryan's method of editing, offering at the same time an introduction to the critical edition and the proposed translation.

Ryan used nine manuscripts for his edition and presents them in chronological order, beginning with the earliest, R (Mardin Orthodox 66, A.D. 1189 [?]) and ending with J (John Rylands Syr. 37 [A.D. 1911]). He surveys each of these manuscripts with great care

and an obvious taste for minute details. Another nine manuscripts containing portions of Bar Salibi's *Commentary* were not used by Ryan in his edition. A brief description of these manuscripts follows.

In reconstructing the relationship between the manuscripts used in his critical edition, Ryan tests the stemma proposed by Simpkin for Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 1–72*, which stemma shows a bipartite division at its top [ $Z < (X) > (Y)$ ]. The reading of (X) can be reconstructed only with the agreement of ZA or ZR. In case of disagreement between Z and (Y), the editor must use his discretion, notes Ryan, by pointing out that priority should be given to Z as an accurate channel of manuscript transmission.

Bar Salibi's commentary on Psalms survived in full and in abbreviated forms. The author discusses briefly the abbreviated versions by pointing out their value for the history of the work. Although many manuscripts of Salibi's work are not accessible, the opinion of the author is that these manuscripts should belong to one of the three main channels of text transmission, namely, A, R, Z.

Ryan notes: "The basic question to be decided is whether to create a diplomatic or an eclectic edition" (105). According to René Dragnet, diplomatic editions should be produced for the Syriac texts. In other words, one must select one base manuscript to be printed. The variant readings provided by other manuscripts or fragment-manuscripts are listed in the critical apparatus. Simpkin's work is a diplomatic edition of Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 1–72* using Z as a base manuscript and recording the variants in the apparatus. Ryan's decision to offer an eclectic edition was done on the grounds that the "microfilm of Z was often out of focus and extremely difficult to read" (107). Out of nine microfilms, only four (PHMJ) contain the entire text of Bar Salibi's *Commentary on Psalms 73–82*. Ryan concludes, "Given the nature of the witnesses available to me, I have decided to make an eclectic edition which constitutes the text on the basis of individual readings. My goal has been to restore the original form of the text as far as possible and to record all the variant readings in the apparatus" (107). Acknowledging the gravity of the argument invoked by Ryan, I would, nevertheless, note the weakness of an eclectic edition in its combination of two kinds of work, editorial and textual critical, on the same page, as opposed to a diplomatic edition, which allows for further textual critical investigation to be done by Bar Salibi's exegetes.

P was used as the reference text for collating. Z and (Y), even though incomplete, were used as primary sources for reading. The readings placed in the apparatus are considered to be secondary. The final product, the eclectic edition of both commentaries, is a full collation of nine manuscripts. A list of sigla and abbreviations used in Ryan's edition follows.

Chapter 6, “Critical Edition and Translation of Psalms 73–82,” is divided into two parts: “The Factual Commentary: Text and Translation” and “The Mixed Commentary: Text and Translation.” Very interesting is Ryan’s discussion in footnote (A) on page 123 regarding the reading in Ps 76:5, “You are splendid.” With the exception of Z, all the manuscripts extend the lemma with the words “and you are anointed.” This reading is found in almost all the Peshitta manuscripts. Another interesting passage is Bar Salibi’s interpretation that the “wicked angel” is not “wicked” by nature but rather his wickedness is only the impression of those struck by him (133). And the interpretation of Ps 82:1 alludes to a divine council of sorts: “In the assembly of the angels.” Bar Salibi comments, “That is, he calls the judges ‘angels’ because of the rank of their being judges. He said ‘in the assembly,’ i.e., wherever they were assembling and judging. He will say that he is ready to judge them, and he shall expose their evil. The Greek: instead of ‘angels’ it says ‘gods’ i.e., because even the priests and the judges were honored by this name” (143). Note Bar Salibi’s spiritual interpretation of Ps 82:1, where he sees a reference to incarnation, and ‘angels’ is a label for Jews and priests, Christ’s contemporaries (p. 209).

Turning to the second part, it is rare in patristic writings to have both types of interpretations (historical/factual and spiritual) in the same place, as is the case with Bar Salibi. Interpreting Ps 73, Bar Salibi notices that “until” (73:17: “Until I enter”) does not have here an absolute meaning (“until the end”) “as in other instances.” As Ryan notes (149, n. [D]), this could be a reference to “until” in Matt 1:25, where the Syriac interpreter sees a proof of the perpetual virginity of Mary. The interpretation of Ps 74:11, “And your right hand from the midst of your feast-day,” states “That is, he calls the general redemption of mankind ‘the feast-day,’ that which occurred by the incarnation. The Son he calls ‘your right hand,’ that right hand of the Father that redeemed us” (155). A typological interpretation may be found in Bar Salibi’s commentary on Ps 81:6: “‘He established his testimony in Joseph.’ That is, all the things (written) of Joseph signified Christ. Joseph was hated by his brothers, as (was) Christ by the Jews. They put him in a prison, as Christ was imprisoned in the house of Annas (John 18:3). Joseph was sold, as (was) Christ by his disciples, and understand the rest likewise” (205).

In the final and concluding chapter of his work, Ryan analyzes Bar Salibi’s commentary within the larger context of patristic and medieval commentaries on selected psalms (e.g., 78:25a; 82:1, 6, 7). This comparison is significant in that it underlines the originality of Bar Salibi’s exegesis. As an illustration, the “bread of angels” in Ps 78:5 was not the manna (as interpreted by early Jewish and Christian commentators) but rather the “mystical nourishment,” namely, the mighty works of God and the observance of the divine will. A similar explanation is found in a Jewish source (*Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*), which equates the “bread of angels” with Torah. Unlike other Christian interpreters (e.g., Cassiodorus), Bar Salibi’s commentary on this lemma is not christological (213–15).

The contribution of such an important piece of ancient Christian interpretation to the field of biblical exegesis cannot be overstated. Ryan's scholarship is impeccable and persuasive, and this should prove to be a seminal work in the field.