

L. Wm. Countryman

WHEN GOD'S FRIEND BECOMES GOD'S PROBLEM: THE PUNITIVE
ELIJAH AND THE LOVING GOD ACCORDING TO ROMANOS THE
MELODE

Distinguished Faculty Lecture, The Graduate Theological Union
PSR Chapel, Thursday, November 2, 2006

I begin this evening with a sixth-century text that addresses an enduring challenge of religion—one that is once again very much before us in our own time. Religion is, on the one hand, an effort to look beyond itself and point toward the ultimate reality that allows human life to thrive. I suspect that all religions share a conviction that human life can come into some kind of engagement, even if only temporary, with what is ultimately real and that we ourselves may become, in a metaphorical sense, "more real" by so doing.

The very symbols that point toward the ultimate, however, also define a kind of righteousness, whether of rites or symbols or beliefs or theology or ethics or whatever. And there is a strong pull for the religious to focus on this righteousness as if it could not be distinguished from ultimate reality itself. If religions are capable of great cruelty—and we know that they are—I suspect that this is one reason. The representation has become confused with the reality and is being defended as if it were itself the divine truth toward which it points.

The text I bring before you this evening is struggling with these issues, not from a detached scholarly perspective, but from within the religious framework. It is a *kontakion*, a genre that is both poetry and homily, written in the sixth century of the Common Era by one of the great figures of the Greek Church, who is still little known to Western Christians: Romanos the Melode, Romanos the Poet, Romanos the Hymn-writer.

We cannot say very much about the life of Romanos. The little that has come down to us is largely legendary, but he was probably born in Emesa in Syria (the modern Homs), perhaps of Jewish parents. He seems to have been made deacon in Beirut. He later moved to Constantinople, probably in the reign of Anastasius (491-518). He achieved fame for his *kontakia* and was canonized soon after his death. His works were esteemed enough to be recopied even after the *kontakion* form was largely abandoned in favor of another type of liturgical poetry, the more loosely organized *kanon*.¹

¹José Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 159-98.

While few of his kontakia can be dated, his floruit clearly belonged to the reign of Justinian, that extraordinary time of creativity and destruction, civilization and brutality, hope and anxiety, tyranny and uncertainty.² He was himself one of the creative forces of that era. I remember hearing my teacher Constantine Trypanis, a poet himself as well as a formidable scholar, say of Romanos that he was the greatest poet in the Greek language between Euripides in the fifth century B.C.E. and C. P. Cavafy in the early twentieth century of our era. Heady company. And well deserved. Romanos has Euripides' capacity to make you stop breathing in sheer astonishment at the power of words. And he has Cavafy's capacity to see things from an unexpected angle.

THE WORK

Romanos's kontakion *On Elijah* is long enough that, if we were to read the whole thing through, there would not be much time to talk about it. I propose instead to "walk you through" it by reading some passages from a translation of my own³ (a pale reflection, I'm afraid, of the original) with a bit of commentary and then to raise some significant issues.

But first, a brief word about the kontakion as a genre. It was a homiletic poem, presumably sung by its author, since the manuscripts routinely specify the music, though they do not give it to us in annotated form. Each kontakion begins with a *hirmos* or proemium, followed by a series of *oikoi* (stanzas). The two parts are tied together by a refrain introduced in the proem and repeated at the end of every stanza and also, in most cases, by an acrostic composed of the first letter of each stanza and sometimes naming the author. We do not know whether the refrain was performed by the soloist or by a choir or even by the assembled congregation. But there seems to have been a desire, not always fulfilled, to keep it exactly the same from verse to verse. The poetic character of the genre appears not only in its metrical structure, but in a certain freedom in the use of language that might not be allowed to a writer or speaker of prose.

Romanos begins this kontakion by appealing to Elijah himself:

Foreteller and foreseer of the great deeds of our God,

²Paul Maas and C. A. Trypanis, eds., *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Genuina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), xv-xxiii.

³For the Greek text, see Maas and Trypanis, 367-80, and José Grosdidier de Matons, ed., *Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes*, vol. 1, *Ancien Testament*, SC, no. 99 (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 308-341. For the translations (all my own), I have followed the edition of Maas and Trypanis.

Elijah of great name—you that halted by a mere word the water-streaming
clouds—
intercede for us with the
only Lover of humankind.

The poet treats Elijah with the greatest respect, as the piety of the Eastern Church, then and now, demands. He asks for the prophet's intercessions. He describes him as "foreteller and foreseer," thus preparing us for a turn toward later events that will come at the very end of the poem. But what is most interesting, in terms of the development of the narrative is that Elijah is described above all in terms of his destructive power, power to bring drought and with it, by implication, famine and starvation. God, on the other hand—the God Elijah is requested to intercede with—is described as "the only Lover of humankind," words to be repeated over and over again as the poem's refrain.

Elijah is not only God's prophet and friend, but, in Romanos' retelling of the story from 1 Kings 17, God's challenger:

1: Seeing the great lawlessness of people and God's great love of humankind,
the prophet Elijah shook with rage
and roused against the Compassionate One words without compassion,
shouting, "Get angry with the people who are mocking your authority,
Most Righteous Judge!"
But not at all did he move the Good God's mercy toward punishing
those who ignored him. For God is always waiting for the conversion of
all—the
only Lover of humankind.

Elijah's failure drives him to extreme behavior:

he was moved to madness and called the Merciful One to witness:

"I will take charge myself and punish the impiety of those who are making
you angry! . . ." (2)

At first, one thinks there is some mistake: "those who are making you angry!" Elijah's problem is precisely that God is *not* angry in the way Elijah wants. But this is clearly what Romanos wrote. Elijah inadvertently reveals, through this strange choice of phrase, his own inability to distinguish his anger from that of God.

Elijah, accordingly, decides to take matters into his own hands by swearing an oath that will give him exclusive power over the rains. God cannot nullify this oath without disowning Elijah's friendship and so allows it, despite the misery spread by drought and famine:

6: So famine laid siege to the land, and the inhabitants were being destroyed,

wailing and stretching out their hands to the All-Merciful.
But the Master was hemmed in on both sides.

Though opening his compassion to the supplicants and moving quickly
toward mercy,
he is ashamed for the prophet and the oath he swore—and gives no rain.

God tries to bring Elijah to an awareness of the human cost of what he is doing by allowing him to starve with the rest. But Elijah's ascetic discipline, one of the traits admired in him by ancient Christian writers, enables him to endure:

8: The stomach defended nature and secretly applied the laws of nature,
practicing on the old man to produce change.
But he remained unfeeling as a stone,
possessed of zeal in place of food—and content with that.

Elijah's asceticism, however, will not keep him from starving to death; and that is more than God is prepared to allow.

God sends the ravens to feed him and then lectures Elijah on natural history, claiming that the ravens normally do not even feed their own nestlings. Shouldn't Elijah be ashamed of being so "misanthropic" when even these birds are doing better than he? God even pleads with him:

How am I to endure the wailing of infants and their tears, yes, and the
wordless bellowing
of the beasts as well? For I suffer with them all as their Shaper . . . (11)

Elijah's answer is a resounding "No."

12: At these words, the prophet went wild and answered the Master,
"Don't send your raven servants to feed me, Master.
I prefer to be destroyed by famine, All-Holy One.
I'll still punish the impious, and it will give me rest.
I don't hesitate to die along with those who reject you. Don't pity me.
Don't spare me as I starve. Just wipe the impious off the earth,
only Lover of humankind."

It's an appalling speech, not only for what it reveals about Elijah's intransigence, but for the arrogance and even contempt with which he addresses God, ending with the refrain "only Lover of humankind," which turns into an insult in Elijah's mouth. Romanos describes it as a "wild" speech—"wild" as in "wild animal." Elijah, it seems, is kin, in his cruelty, to the unreformed ravens, not the ones that do God's bidding.

God would be justified in responding with anger; but, instead, God "hatches a clever plan" to awaken some sense of love in Elijah, this time by sending him to Sarephtha, where he will be fed by a woman Romanos describes simply as "the starving widow." God hopes, it seems, that Elijah may be troubled by the idea of eating what a Gentile woman would cook and so forced to reflect on his own passion for righteousness; but that hope is defeated. Elijah marches right up to the woman and demands to be fed:

"Woman, I'm ordered to collect what you owe to the
only Lover of humankind." (14)

Just to make sure you get the point, Romanos characterizes this speech as "completely rude."

But Elijah may now have met his match. The widow makes no concession to the prophet, who finds himself surprised by at least a glimmer of human feeling:

15: . . . the widow wasted no time in telling him,
"I don't have so much as a biscuit—just a handful of flour. I'm going
indoors
to bake it and eat it with my children.
Beyond my handful of flour lies only death."
But Elijah was moved by the woman's voice and felt sympathy with her,
thinking,
"This widow is more wasted than I and is being worn away in the
famine—unless God does something, the
only Lover of humankind.

16: "Now her situation oppresses me. If I am hungry, I'm on my own.
But the widow with whom I find myself has children starving with her.
Let me not, as a guest, become ambassador of this woman's death.
Let me not be reckoned a child-murderer in this hospitable house, but let
me look toward mercy now.
Though I act hostilely toward all, with this woman I am different. I'll get my
soul used
to taking pleasure in mercies. After all, the Cause of all things is merciful,
the
only Lover of humankind."

If this sudden conversion seems too good to be true, it is. Elijah will feed this household, but he is not about to extend his compassion any further. God has to come up with another plan. Romanos frames it as delicately as he can. He doesn't say that God killed the widow's son, only that "God presented the widow's son as dead" (18). The widow knows at once, however, that this

death has to do with Elijah's presence. The very thing Elijah had hoped to avoid, being "reckoned a child-murderer," has befallen him.

And the consequences go far beyond any private sense of guilt or distress he might feel. The widow becomes an avenging—and very public—fury. I'll read several stanzas here in order to give an impression of the inexorable pacing of the events:

19: When the widow saw her son dead, she rose up against the prophet,
saying, "I wish I had died of famine before I laid eyes on you!
It would be better for me to have been long dead of starvation
and not see my son laid out in your presence.
Are these the wages of the beautiful reception I gave you? I was replete with
children
before you came, fellow. But you came and left me childless with all your
talk of the
only Lover of humankind."

20: The man who held power over clouds and rain found himself in a
widow's grip;
the man who constrained all people with a word was held back by one
woman.
And an utterly wretched woman, without a shred of power,
grasped this man who thought he grasped the heavens by word and
power—grasped him like a criminal.
With a crazy wrestling hold, she dragged him like a murderer into court,
shouting out,
"Give me the child you killed! I don't need your flour! Don't feed me and
play host, you
'only lover of humankind.'"

21: "You sowed bread in my belly and my womb's own fruit and branch
you uprooted. You're selling me edible gifts <at the price of my son>.
You worked out your little scheme: a life for some flour and oil.
But I'm suing you to overturn the contract and make you give back what
you took.
Are you not satisfied with the deaths of your own people that you were so
eager to get a grip on my household?
Release my son's soul! Take mine instead of his! And become a
lover of humankind."

22: The words pierced Elijah like thorns. He was shamed to have the
screaming widow
browbeating him as if he had himself wrenched away her son's life.

Though he wanted to appease her, he could not do it with words.

He knew she would not believe him if he defended himself, for she was wailing without stop.

The repetition of "lover of humankind," though sometimes awkward in the way it is worked into the woman's speech, serves to underline over and over again where the prophet has gone wrong.

Even so, Elijah does not fully repent. He simply acknowledges that God has gotten the better of their contest of wits.

This is the device of your wisdom, Sinless One;

you've engineered against me a merciful necessity so that when I ask you, 'Raise up the widow's dead son,' you can answer me straightway,

'Pity my son Israel, now in torment—and all my people,' for you are the *only Lover of humankind.*" (23)

And God replies in no uncertain terms:

"Hearken now quite clearly to my words and hear me as I speak.
I lament, I am eager for an end of the punishment.

My deep wish is to give food to all the starving, for truly I am
compassionate.

When I see their streams of tears, I bend down like a father. I have pity on
those drained

by want and tribulation. For I want to save sinners through conversion—I
the
only Lover of humankind.

25: "So listen, prophet, with an open heart and mind. I am truly eager for you
to know

that all humans beings carry with them the signed warrant of my mercy,
the document of my covenant—that I don't want to behold the death
of those who offend, but rather their life. So don't make them see me
as a liar. Instead, accept my prayer. I give you an embassy.

Only the widow's tears have touched you. But I am, for all,
truly Lover of humankind."

God wants conversion—and is ready to be as patient with Elijah as with anyone else. But there is no avoiding the cost. Elijah must submit to love and must change his behavior. His singular allegiance to righteousness must give way. He will have to begin by bringing the rains.

29: Reverencing the command, then, the prophet ran to Ahab
and declared good news to him as the Compassionate One had said.
And at once the clouds, at their Maker's behest,

big with water, swam through the air, gushing rain.
 And the land rejoiced and glorified the Lord. The woman
 received her boy, risen from death. The earth and all beings took delight
 and blessed the
only Lover of humankind.

This is the climax of the work, with the resurrection of the child folded into the general revival of nature. Romanos has telescoped the events of 1 Kings 18 by omitting Elijah's bloody contest with the priests of Baal. But he has created a narrative that perfectly fulfills his needs.

There remains only a kind of epilogue, which redirects the hearers' attention toward themselves and the implications for their religious faith and lives. Over time, God sees that Elijah is again growing restive because of God's patience with the wicked. And, for the sake of humanity, God issues an invitation: "Come away, my friend, from the dwelling of people" (31) and "inhabit the sinless realms of my friends" God, in turn will undertake to go down and seek the conversion of humankind:

And I—strong enough to carry the strayed sheep
 on my shoulders—I'll go down and call to those who stumble,
 'All you sinners running at full speed, come to me and rest. For I have come
 not to punish those whom I have made, but to snatch them back from
 their irreverence, the
only Lover of humankind.'" (32)

The concluding stanza of the work returns to the idea of Elijah as "foreteller and foreseer." His taking up in the fiery chariot is the type of Jesus' ascension and the dropping of his sheepskin cloak to Elisha the type of the sending of the Holy Spirit on the baptized—which, Romanos says, means *you*, the hearers.

Since it would be easy to hear this as one more quasi-Marcionite example of contrasting the Old Testament with the New, let me say that Romanos doesn't suggest anything of the sort. The Only Lover of Humankind is the Creator, is the God who loves Israel as an only child. The Incarnation is interpreted in terms of God's ongoing work. And Elijah, as I shall suggest, is functioning here not as a relic of an inferior past revelation, but as a stand-in for some Christians Romanos knew.

THE SOURCES

The kontakion on Elijah is genuinely surprising, given the more usual conception of Elijah in Romanos's world. But that does not mean that it was entirely without precedent. Romanos came from a Syriac speaking part of the

world, though it is by no means certain that he himself knew the language.⁴ Some have asserted that there are hints of ambivalence about Elijah in some Syriac Christian writers, but I have not yet been able to verify these. More commonly, they seem to have treated Elijah as an archetypal ascetic, forerunner of Christian monks and hermits.⁵

There is also the tradition that Romanos was born to a Jewish family. On the Jewish side, there can be no question that Elijah gave rise to some doubts. He had, after all, inflicted grave suffering on Israel and seemed to be essentially uninterested in the welfare of his own people. Champion of monotheism that he was, he remained a single-minded and, one might reasonably say, bloody-minded example of religious rectitude turned to intransigence and exercising violence.⁶

Romanos could find all the confirmation he needed for such a treatment of Elijah in the biblical text itself, which he read carefully.⁷ He takes the spare narrative of 1 Kings and fleshes it out with a sense of the human passions. His widow of Sarephtha is as vivid and intense a character as Euripides' Medea, though inevitably less complex, given her briefer time "on stage." He also recasts the story as a contest between Elijah and God, a contest in which God is determined to continue loving both the prophet and all the rest of God's creation. Remember God's lament over "wordless bellowing of the [starving] beasts"(11).⁸ Romanos's version of the story brings to the fore the question of Elijah's motivation and the quality of Elijah's inner life in a way that the biblical narrative does not. In this way, Romanos contrives to form a potential link between Elijah and the hearer.

Romanos did not, however, simply produce all this directly out of his own imagination. He also had one more immediate model for his work in the form of a sermon by Basil of Seleucia, who lived a generation before him.⁹ There can be no real question as to which of these is the superior work of art. Basil's homily is prose—and occasionally prosaic. Basil tends to wordiness. He is more prone to explain and less prone to give us a living

⁴Crosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode*, argues that Romanos is unlikely to have known Syriac, 181.

⁵Michel Hayek, "Élie dans la tradition syriaque," in [Gustave Bardy et al.], *Élie le prophète*, vol. 1, *Selon les écritures et les traditions chrétiennes* (Les études Carmelitaines; [Paris]: Desclée de Brouwer, 1956), 159-78.

⁶Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968) vols. 4, 195-202; and 6, 316-25.

⁷Cf. Moshe Reiss, "Elijah the Zealot: A Foil to Moses," *JBQ* 32 (2004), 174-180; John W. Olley, "YHWH and His Zealous Prophet: The Presentation of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings," *JSOT* 80 (1998), 25-51.

⁸Romanos may well have borrowed this motif from Jonah.

⁹PG 85, 148-57; quotations here are my own translation.

drama. If you would like a social analysis of exactly how Elijah's oath bound God, Basil is your friend. If you want more detail about the natural (or unnatural) history of ravens, Basil has it for you. All of this is in fact rather interesting. And I don't doubt that Basil's preaching was well-received. The mere fact that we still have a substantial number of his sermons confirms it.

What is most vivid and significant in Romanos's work is his own creation, even if he was reworking an existing text. And yet, he was not alone in taking this approach. What we are left with is that, within the rather narrow timespan of a couple of generations, two creative intellects were drawn to present Elijah in this unusual fashion not only as God's friend, but as God's problem. They relied on earlier and apparently non-Greek tradition, and they created a picture of Elijah that seems never to have taken hold or reemerged in the Greek-speaking world.¹⁰

THE CIRCUMSTANCES

What shared circumstances could have prompted these reflections on the potential conflict between righteousness and love? It may help to note that both our authors were related to the sphere of Antioch, Basil because as metropolitan of Isauria he was subordinate to the Patriarch of Antioch, Romanos because he was born and educated in Syria and probably came into the beginnings of his poetic art in Beirut before moving to the imperial city. What sort of church was Antioch in the late fifth and early sixth centuries?

One thing that is clear is that Antioch lay at the heart of the contemporary christological controversies. On the one hand, Nestorius and a number of the greatest voices that came to be associated with him were connected with it: figures such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, his teacher, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Ibas of Edessa. Alexandria, by contrast, was the center of the opposite perspective, embodied in the writings of its patriarch Cyril. The Council of Chalcedon attempted to mediate between the two schools, though leaning more toward Cyril. But, even though the Antiochene school appeared to have lost more heavily, insistent heirs of Cyril continued to insist on a formula of "one nature," from which they acquired the nickname "Monophysites."

Antioch was the great battleground in the ensuing struggle between Chalcedonians and Monophysites. The followers of Nestorius found themselves relegated to Persia, where the ruler was apparently delighted to

¹⁰There is, among works falsely ascribed to John Chrysostom, one other surviving sermon of similar character (PG 56, 583-86). It is clearly later than both Basil and Romanos but otherwise hard to place. Efforts to date this work before both Basil and Romanos are unpersuasive; Grosdidier de Matons, 251, n. 54.

see the local Christian communities detached from those in the Roman world. Egypt belonged securely to the Monophysite camp. The question was where the vast patriarchate of Antioch would settle. The victorious voices, ultimately, were those of Monophysite leaders like Severus of Antioch and Jacob Baradaeus, whose ceaseless labors of organizing and aiding distressed Monophysite communities made him the eponym of those Christians who are sometime still referred to as "Jacobites."

This was a period of church politics played for keeps, with periodic interventions on the part of the imperial government, now on one side, now on another. The penalties for being found on the wrong side included condemnation of one's writings, deprivation of office, exile, anathematization. These were difficult rapids to negotiate. Like some other ecclesiastical figures, Basil of Seleucia seems to have been on every possible side of the fence at one point or another. W. H. C. Frend referred to him as a kind of "Vicar of Bray," recalling another period of dangerous church politics and a theologically adaptable vicar who, in the refrain of the song about him, sings, "Yet this is law I will maintain/until my dying day, sir:/That whatsoever king may reign/still I'll be the Vicar of Bray, sir!"

Perhaps Basil was motivated purely by interest in preserving his job or perhaps he just had more concern about shepherding his diocese through a time of bewildering change than he had about perfect christology. In any case, he was certainly conscious of the dangers around him. He came out a Chalcedonian, but not, it seems, a violent one.

Severus was something of another matter. I don't mean to characterize him as particularly violent, but definitely as a "true believer," unprepared to tolerate other perspectives. When, under a pro-Monophysite emperor, he became Patriarch of Antioch, he at once set about getting rid of his Chalcedonian counterpart in Jerusalem, the Patriarch Elias I.¹¹ Worse yet, the very creation of the Jerusalem patriarchate, from territory formerly subject to Antioch, dated only from the Council of Chalcedon and he may well have seen it as simply one more affront from that accursed gathering.

Severus, it seems, was insistent on having a doctrinally pure church and would make little or no compromise with those who questioned the teaching of Cyril. At the same time, he did endeavor to work with the

¹¹W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972) 54, 228. Interestingly, Elias I may have been the author of another kontakion on Elijah, of which we have only a fragment and not enough to be sure whether Romanos may have known or used it. See C. A. Trypanis, *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica* (Wiener Byzantinistische Studien 5; Vienna: Hermann Böhlau, 1968), 102-104.

imperial authority in the way that had become normal for Eastern bishops by that time. His aim was not to set up rival ecclesiastical structures, but to capture the existing ones. Only as the failure of this effort became apparent did the division between Chalcedonians and Monophysites harden into two parallel jurisdictions as the Monophysites began consecrating bishops of their own for cities where the officially recognized bishop was Chalcedonian.¹²

Where did Romanos fit in this picture? His doctrine was Chalcedonian, though he did not attack the Monophysites in his *kontakia*.¹³ This isn't much to go on, but his association with Beirut may offer us a little more. It was in Beirut, that Severus, then a law student, was converted to asceticism and to the Monophysite position. And the church there was not only a dependency of Antioch, but quite close by. It seems to have been one place where Severus early on exerted his authority against the Chalcedonians. One scholar has suggested, plausibly enough, that this may have been part of Romanos' reason for moving to Constantinople.¹⁴

While Severus, however, could certainly use a heavy hand in administering his church, he seems also to have been regarded by people of both parties as a person of great personal holiness and dedication. If others found him problematic, it was rather in terms of his single-mindedness and unwillingness to seek mutually agreeable solutions with the Chalcedonians.

Earlier, in the time of Basil of Seleucia, Severus had a counterpart in intransigence, Dioscorus I, the patriarch of Alexandria. He dominated the so-called "Latrocinium" or "Council of Robbers" at Ephesus in 448, which vindicated Monophysite teaching. Three years later, at Chalcedon, he was overruled and temporarily silenced; but, whether because he was respected or because he was feared, he was not anathematized.¹⁵

Given such circumstances, if a preacher wished to warn against too rigid and intransigent attachment to a single definition of religion, without merely demonizing an opponent (who might, in fact, command legitimate respect), how to go about the task? I suggest that both Basil and Romanos were using the figure of Elijah to achieve precisely such an end.

In the work of both, Elijah figures as God's esteemed and beloved friend. But he is also portrayed as one who committed violence and inflicted suffering because of a single-minded and unwavering commitment to righteousness: It is impossible to think that either Basil or Romanos meant to speak ill of righteousness. Both, however, in their different ways—that of Romanos the more dramatic and immediately affecting—both insisted on

¹²Frend, 201-20, 284-87.

¹³Maas and Trypanis, xxii-xxiii.

¹⁴Frend, 202; Grosdidier de Matons, 185.

¹⁵Frend, 25-48.

subsuming the passion for righteousness under the larger umbrella of God's unfailing and unwavering love of the creation at large and, specifically, of humanity. Elijah is not evil. But Elijah has not yet caught the full vision.

AND TODAY?

The fifth and sixth centuries give us a picture of church division not altogether unfamiliar in our own time. As I read W. H. C. Frend's *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* this summer, I more than once had the uneasy feeling that, if I were to change the names of the protagonists, I could be reading about current events in the Anglican Communion. I suspect that there are parallels in other Christian traditions, too.

In such situations, there is usually more than enough blame to share. Both Chalcedonians and Monophysites were capable of using power in destructive ways. Both were capable of cruelty and oppression. Both were capable, certainly, of demonizing their opponents. The same is true on all sides today.

What has impressed me most deeply about the *kontakion* on Elijah is that he found a way to acknowledge the sincere devotion of both sides in his own time while also calling them to a higher level of responsibility. And he did this, following Basil, by a creative and very attentive reading of scripture, discovering in the figure of Elijah the same kind of spiritual and moral ambiguity that we may find in ourselves, precisely when we are most committed to the cause of righteousness.

Romanos and Basil are heirs of the writers of Ruth and Jonah, willing to smudge the clean lines that separate the good from the evil, the insider from the outsider. They have a vision of the unity of the God's goodness that implicitly includes even those who were endeavoring to exclude them from that community.

This has not been an easy vision for Christians to attain. Similar tensions seem to devil people of other religious traditions in our time as well. The challenge is how we are to learn, like Romanos and his Elijah, to honor righteousness without abandoning love.

St. Romanos the Melode

"Kontakion on Elijah"

trans. L. Wm. Countryman, based on the text of Paul Maas and C. A. Trypanis,
Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Genuina (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1963) 367-80.

Proem: Foreteller and foreseer of the great deeds of our God,
Elijah of great name—you that halted by a mere word the water-streaming
clouds—
intercede for us with the
only Lover of humankind.

1: Seeing the great lawlessness of people and God's great love of humankind,
the prophet Elijah shook with rage
and roused against the Compassionate One words without compassion,
shouting, "Get angry with the people who are mocking your authority,
Most Righteous Judge!"
But not at all did he move the Good God's mercy toward punishing
those who ignored him. For he is always waiting for the conversion of
all—the
only Lover of humankind.

2: Then when the prophet saw the whole earth in its transgressions
and the Most High not altogether angry, but patient,
he was moved to madness and called the Merciful One to witness:
"I will take charge myself and punish the impiety of those who are making
you angry!
These people have all scorned your prolonged patience. They've not thought
of you
as merciful Father. But you, Lover of children, you pity your sons,
only Lover of humankind.

3: "Now I'll pass judgment on behalf of the Creator and wipe the impious off
the earth.
My verdict is for punishment. But I fear the divine goodness,
for it takes only a few tears to embarrass the Lover of humankind into pulling
back.
How, then, am I to counteract so much goodness? I have it! I'll put a stop
to mercy
by confirming my sentence with an oath, so that the Righteous One,
embarrassed by this, will not undo
the decision but confirm my judgment as the Rule, the
only Lover of humankind."

4: The oath precedes the judgment—it forms the preamble for the sentence.
But, if you will, let's hurry to the Bible and learn the words.

The prophet speaks in anger, as it is written:

"As the Lord lives, no dew or rain will come down, except by my word."

But the King answers Elijah at once, "If I see conversion
and tears welling up, I cannot refuse to extend compassion to the people—I
the
only Lover of humankind."

5: The prophet goes right on with his speech and urges the justice of his oath:
"Against you," he says, "the God of all, I have sworn, All-holy Master,
to keep it from raining except by my word.

When I see the people transformed, I'll intercede with you.
It's not within your authority, then, Most Righteous One, to undo the
punishment
from the oath I've taken. Respect the oath. Put your seal to it. Pull back
your compassion,
only Lover of humankind."

6: So famine laid siege to the land, and the inhabitants were being destroyed,
wailing and stretching out their hands to the All-Merciful.

But the Master was hemmed in on either side.

While opening his compassion to the suppliants and moving quickly
toward mercy,
he is ashamed for the prophet and the oath he swore—and gives no rain.
Instead, he fashioned a device to constrain and cause tribulation to the
prophet's soul—the
only Lover of humankind.

7: Seeing the Tishbite puffed up against the people of his own tribe, the
Master

decided to punish the righteous man with famine alongside the rest,
so that, wrung by lack of food, he might have
more generous thoughts about his sworn sentence and halt the
punishment.

Terrible indeed is the stomach's inexorable demand, and God keeps watch
over every living thing,
rational and irrational alike, providing food by divine wisdom—the
only Lover of humankind.

8: The stomach defended nature and secretly applied the laws of nature,
practicing on the old man to produce change.

But he remained unfeeling as a stone,
possessed of zeal in place of food—and content with that.
When the Judge saw it, he tempered the distress to his starving friend
not thinking it right for the just man to starve with the unjust and
lawless—the
only Lover of humankind.

9: So the All-Merciful prepares food for him with surpassing wisdom.

He orders the ravens, creatures without compassion, to feed him.

Now the tribes of the raven have not a particle of compassion.

They don't give food even to their nestling children, which are fed from
on high.

So, since Elijah, too, had taken on the manners and purpose of a child-hater,

God used child-hating ravens to minister to this misanthrope. How wise of
the

only Lover of humankind!

10: "Let not your great love of the divine" (God said to Elijah)

"give you a misanthropic disposition. Consider the ravens:

always hostile even to their own offspring in the nest.

Suddenly, as you see, they're quite generous with you. They're
transformed now.

They've shown themselves servants of my compassion by providing you
with food.

But I see I cannot forcibly change your nature toward people, I the

only Lover of humankind.

11: "You should show some respect, prophet, and imitate the ready obedience
of irrational animals—

how, merciless as they are, they have been instantly transformed out of
respect for me, the Compassionate.

I honor your friendship, and I am not overruling your decision.

But I cannot bear the universal lamenting and tribulation of the people I
have made.

How am I to endure the wailing of infants and their tears, yes, and the
wordless bellowing

of the beasts as well? For I suffer with them all as their Shaper, the

only Lover of humankind."

12: At these words, the prophet went wild and answered the Master,

"Don't send your raven servants to feed me, Master.

I prefer to be destroyed by famine, All-Holy One.

I'll still punish the impious, and it will give me rest.

I don't hesitate to die along with those who reject you. Don't pity me.

Don't spare me as I starve. Just wipe the impious off the earth,

only Lover of humankind.

13: The Creator, on hearing these words, removed the prophet from there,
commanding the birds not to bring him food as before,

and sent him to Sarephtha, to the starving widow,

saying, "I'll tell a woman to feed you." God was hatching a clever plan.

For the woman to whom God sent him was a widow and a Gentile—and she had children to care for.

Hearing the gentile woman's name, Elijah would cry out, "Send the rains, *only Lover of humankind.*"

14; It was forbidden at the time for Jews to eat with people of other nations.

This is why God was sending Elijah off to a foreigner, so that, revolted by the food she offered,

he would immediately demand rain from the Lover of humankind. But Elijah took no account of exile among the Gentiles. He ran right up to the woman, asking food of her in a completely rude way: "Woman, I'm ordered to collect what you owe to the *only Lover of humankind.*"

15: Hearing this, the widow wasted no time in telling him,

"I don't have so much as a biscuit—just a handful of flour. I'm going indoors to bake it and eat it with my children.

Beyond my handful of flour lies only death." But Elijah was moved by the woman's voice and felt sympathy with her, thinking,

"This widow is more wasted than I and is being worn away in the famine—unless God does something, the *only Lover of humankind.*"

16: "Now her situation oppresses me. If I am hungry, I'm on my own.

But the widow with whom I find myself has children starving with her. Let me not, as a guest, become ambassador of this woman's death.

Let me not be reckoned a child-murderer in this hospitable house, but let me look toward mercy now. Though I act hostilely to all, with this woman I am different. I'll get my soul used

to taking pleasure in mercies. After all, the Cause of all things is merciful, the *only Lover of humankind.*"

17: The prophet answered the widow, "You have, as you say, a handful of flour.

The jug you keep it in will not run out, and the flask of oil will keep bubbling forth."

With words Elijah gave a blessing,

and the Creator, generous and merciful, at once added the reality. The All-Wise spoke, fulfilling the prophet's intent, and, giving her what is more real than the most beautiful speech, bestowed on the widow great bounty—the

only Lover of humankind.

18: God bowed to the prophet's words and provided food for him and the widow.

But Elijah was still not wholly given to compassion, but remained unbending.

And when the Compassionate One saw the people being destroyed and the prophet refusing to obey, God, being just, moved on to another, wholly wise device.

God presented the widow's son as dead so that, once Elijah saw the widow's tears

and the rest of her situation, he might call out, "Give the rains,
only Lover of humankind."

19: When the widow saw her son dead, she rose up against the prophet, saying, "I wish I had died of famine before I laid eyes on you!

It would be better for me to have been long dead of starvation and not see my son laid out in your presence.

Are these the wages of the beautiful reception I gave you? I was replete with children

before you came, fellow. But you came and left me childless with all your talk of the

only Lover of humankind."

20: The man who held power over clouds and rain found himself in a widow's grip;

the man who constrained all people with a word was held back by one woman.

And an utterly wretched woman, without a shred of power, grasped this man who thought he grasped the heavens by word and power—grasped him like a criminal.

With a crazy wrestling hold, she dragged him like a murderer into court, shouting out,

"Give me the child you killed! I don't need your flour! Don't feed me and play host, you

'only Lover of humankind.'

21: "You sowed bread in my belly and my womb's own fruit and branch you uprooted. You're selling me edible gifts <at the price of my son>.

You worked out your little scheme: a life for some flour and oil.

But I'm suing you to overturn the contract and make you give back what you took.

Are you not satisfied with the deaths of your own people that you were so eager to get a grip on my household?

Release my son's soul! Take mine instead of his! And become a

Lover of humankind."

22: The words pierced Elijah like thorns. He was shamed to have the
screaming widow

browbeating him as if he had himself wrenched away her son's life.

Though he wanted to appease her, he could not do it with words.

He knew she would not believe him if he defended himself, for she was
wailing without stop.

But looking into heaven, the blameless witness cried out, "Alas, Lord,
for this woman who let me share her house. It's you that have stirred her
up to demand the child of me,

only Lover of humankind.

23: "I don't believe, all-powerful Savior," the prophet cried to God,
"that death has befallen this child in the course of nature, as it comes to all.
This is the device of your wisdom, Sinless One;

you've engineered against me a merciful necessity so that when I ask you,
'Raise up the widow's dead son,' you can answer me straightway,

'Pity my son Israel, now in torment—and all my people,' for you are the
only Lover of humankind."

24: Wanting to save the land, the All-Merciful answered Elijah at once,
"Hearken now quite clearly to my words and hear me as I speak.

I lament. I am eager for an end of the punishment.

My deep wish is to give food to all the starving, for truly I am
compassionate.

When I see their streams of tears, I bend down like a father. I have pity on
those drained

by want and tribulation. For I want to save sinners through conversion—
the

only Lover of humankind.

25: "So listen, prophet, with an open heart and mind. I am truly eager for you
to know

that all humans beings carry with them the signed warrant of my mercy,
the document of my covenant—that I don't want to behold the death

of those who offend, but rather their life. So don't make them see me
as a liar. Instead, accept my prayer. I give you an embassy.

Only the widow's tears have touched you. But I am, for all,
truly Lover of humankind."

26: Mind and will and ears Elijah then subordinated to the words of the Most
High

and submitted his soul and adorned it with words
and said, "Your will be done, Master.

Bring the rain and also life for the dead boy. Bring all things to life.

God, you are life and resurrection and redemption. Give your grace
to humans and to animals. For you alone can save all things,
only Lover of humankind."

27: As soon as the prophet said these things, the Merciful One answered,
"I accept your decision and praise it—and I am quick to honor you.
On their behalf, I accept your gift;
but be, yourself, the mediator and lead the chorus of my grace. For I cannot
bear
to be reconciled without you. Go and announce the gift of the rains
so that all may cry aloud, 'The one who was once merciless has now
suddenly proved to be
Lover of all humankind.'"

28: "Go quickly, then, prophet! Appear to Ahab and tell the good news
while I order the clouds to give drink to the land with their waters.
Make known the provision of these things, my friend,
and I'll confirm your announcements and honor your cooperation."
As soon as Elijah heard this, he bowed low to the Most High and cried to the
Merciful One,
"I know you are greatly merciful. I recognize that you are truly generous,
my God, the
only Lover of humankind."

29: Reverencing the command, then, the prophet ran to Ahab
and declared good news to him as the Compassionate One had said.
And at once the clouds, at their Maker's behest,
big with water, swam through the air, gushing rain.
And the land rejoiced and glorified the Lord. The woman
received her boy, risen from death. The earth and all beings took delight
and blessed the
only Lover of humankind.

30: Still, as time passed, Elijah saw the evil of humanity
and took it in mind to issue a sentence of heavier punishment.
And when the Compassionate One saw it, he responded,
"The zeal you have for righteousness I understand; and I know your
intention.
But I sympathize with sinners when they're punished beyond measure. You
get angry, blameless as you are,
and you cannot endure it. But me! I cannot endure for any to be destroyed,
I the
only Lover of humankind."

31: When the Master saw how severe Elijah was toward human beings,
he took thought for the human race and separated him from their world:

"Come away, my friend, from the dwelling of people.

I'll go down to them in compassion, having become human myself.
Come up, then, from earth, since you cannot endure their stumblings,
but I, the Heavenly One, will be with sinners and rescue them from those
failures, I the
only Lover of humankind.



32: "If you cannot live with people who offend, prophet,
come over here and inhabit the sinless realms of my friends.
And I—strong enough to carry the strayed sheep
on my shoulders—I'll go down and call to those who stumble,
'All you sinners running at full speed, come to me and rest. For I have come
not to punish those whom I have made, but to snatch them back from
their irreverence, the
only Lover of humankind.'"

33: And so, you see, Elijah, taken up to heaven, was revealed as a pattern of
things to come.

The Tishbite was taken up on a chariot of fire, just as it is written,
and Christ was taken up with clouds and powers.

Elijah dropped his sheepskin cloak to Elisha from the heights, and Christ
sent down
to his own apostles the Comforter, the Holy One—whom we all received
when we were baptized and through whom we are being made holy. So
teaches the
only Lover of humankind.

2006 Distinguished Faculty Lecture with L. William Countryman

What	Pacific School of Religion Lectures and Seminars Students GTU Faculty General Public
When	11-02-2006 from 07:30 pm to 09:15 pm
Where	Pacific School of Religion Chapel, 1798 Scenic Avenue
Add event to calendar	 vCal  iCal

2006 Distinguished Faculty Lecture

7:30 pm. [L. William Countryman](#), Sherman E. Johnson Professor in Biblical Studies at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, will address **“When God’s Friend Becomes God’s Problem: The Punitive Elijah and the Loving God According to St. Romanos the Melode.”** Mary Donovan Turner, Dean for the Faculty and Carl Patton Professor of Preaching at the Pacific School of Religion, will respond. An Episcopal priest, Dr. Countryman is the author of numerous books, including *Forgiven and Forgiving*; *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood for All*; *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church* (with M. R. Ritley); *Interpreting the Truth: Changing the Paradigm of Biblical Studies*; and *The Good News of Jesus*. A reception will follow in the Richard S. Dinner Boardroom, GTU Hewlett Library, 2400 Ridge Road. Free of charge. gtudean@gtu.edu or 510/649-2440

[Log in to add comments](#)

