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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Memorializing a Lethal Saint: The Sanctification of Violence in the *Life of Barsauma*

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Abstract

Samuel's *Life of Barsauma*, a little-studied, late fifth-century Syriac text, commemorates the ascetic career of a nasty saint. One of the most noticeable features of this monastic hagiography is the high degree and diversity of violence: Barsauma is frequently portrayed as the victim of violence by his adversaries and the perpetrator of violence against his adversaries. Yet, the *Life of Barsauma* stands out from other late ancient monastic hagiographies because of its enthusiastic depiction of the saint's lethality. According to Samuel, Barsauma uses his curse to kill an array of individuals, and the mere presence of him and his disciples leads to the mass deaths of Jews gathered in Jerusalem. For most late ancient hagiographers, a saint's performance of violence was something to be downplayed or specifically rationalized, and rarely if ever would a saint's performance of holy violence lead to the death of one person, let alone many people. The *Life of Barsauma*'s deviation from contemporary hagiographical convention compels this article's investigation into the meaning that Samuel hoped to communicate through his thorough depiction of a lethally violent saint. I argue that Samuel's *Life* constitutes the literary amplification of a memory about the historical Barsauma, and an exhortation for the monks of Barsauma's monastery to imitate him with similarly violent actions. In the end, Samuel's defies the conventions of monastic hagiography in order to authorize readers to perform their own acts of violence as they construct and police the monastic community's sectarian boundaries.

Keywords: Barsauma; Syriac Christianity; Religious Violence; Miaphysite Christianity; Late Antiquity

I. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed the continuation of a longstanding debate about whether Christianity is a violent religion. Some have argued on one side that violence is the natural product of Christianity's presumed exclusivity.[1] Others have countered that

[1]For example, David Hume, *The Natural History of Religions* 9.3 (ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, *David Hume: A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion. A Critical Edition*, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 61) and Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Volume 1*, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 447 (volume 1, chapter xv). Similar arguments have been made about monotheism: see Regina Schwartz, *The*

the hallmarks of Christianity's origins are pacificism, nonviolence, and inclusivity.[2] Zeal, killing, compelled conversion, sectarian hostility, property destruction, just war, and crusades constitute an expression of either the intolerance endemic to Christianity or any monotheistic tradition (according to the former), or the foreign influence of imperialization, national politics, ethnic identity, collective trauma, or some other "non-religious" factor (according to the latter).

Theoretical advances in Religious Studies, though, have complicated this debate by allowing scholars to identify the common but problematic practice of reification, a conceptual process whereby Christianity, or religion broadly, is constructed as a discrete entity with agency, characteristics, and tendencies.[3] A reified Christianity exists apart from specific and contextually located individuals; it transcends any historical social, political, or cultural forces; and, more often than not, it bears whatever features the reifier wants to impute upon it. With respect to whether Christianity is violent or not, some identify zealous exclusivity as its essential feature, while others nonviolent pacificism.

Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 25–38; Barrington Moore, Jr., *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–26, 100–104; Thomas Sizgorich, "Sanctified Violence: Monotheist Militancy as the Tie That Bound Christian Rome and Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 (2009): 895–921; Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 13–14; Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: La montée de l'intolerance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010), 39–41. Religion too: see Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005), 93–112, with the same argument continued in *The Reality of Religious Violence: From Biblical to Modern Times*, Bible in the Modern World 72 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019). New Atheist thinkers have propagated similar claims in public-facing venues; see, for example, Sam Harris, *End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 25–45; and Richard Dawkins, "Religion's Misguided Missiles," *The Guardian*, 15 September 2001 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety1; accessed 28 October 2024).

[2]For a recent articulation of this view, see Charles Kimball, "Religion and Violence from Christian Theological Perspectives," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 424–434. In three articles on Christian intolerance in late antiquity ("Lambs into Lions: Explaining Early Christian Intolerance," *Past & Present* 153:1 [November 1996]: 3–36; "Intolerance, Religious Violence, and Political Legitimacy in Late Antiquity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79:1 [March 2011]: 193–235; and "Monotheism and Violence," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6:2 [Fall 2013]: 251–263), H. A. Drake wonders how "how it can be that a religion whose foundation texts include the injunction to love one's enemies and 'turn the other cheek,' whose central figure relied on the pastoral imagery of the shepherd and his flock, and who himself became characterized as a sacrificial lamb—how can it be that such a religion was also inherently disposed to accept coercion as a means to implement its goals? How did lambs become lions?" ("Lambs into Lions," 6, with the same query reworded at "Monotheism and Violence," 252). While Drake deconstructs and dismisses some answers to that question, he does not challenge the constructed paradox – that peaceable Christians practiced violence – at its center. For post-Constantinian violence as originating in the collective trauma of pre-Constantinian persecution and martyrdom, see, for example, Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 39 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 43–45; Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*, Divinations: Re-reading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 7–8.

[3]See Robert Ford Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)," *History of Religions* 42:4 (May 2003): 287–319, with insights just as applicable to scholarship on "the Church" or "Christianity" as it does to scholarship on Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15–56, for a deconstruction of the reification of religious violence.

This debate endures precisely because reification creates a thing – Christianity-as-essentially-violent or Christianity-as-essentially-nonviolent – that exists only in the scholar's mind, and thereby eludes critical scrutiny or verification. Stimulating research has already been published on the history of the diverse reifications of Christianity over time, and more remains to be done.[4] For now, though, a responsible treatment of Christianity and violence ought to begin with the acknowledgment that the vast diversity of Christian individuals, communities, ideologies, and ethical commitments renders any categorical statement about true or essential Christianity historiographically useless.

Still, Christians have performed, on many occasions and under the auspices of religious identity, community, tradition, and authority, a diverse array of actions that can be classified as violent by any reasonable measure. These include, among other things, personal assault, beatings, verbal derogation, property destruction or confiscation, theft, human trafficking and kidnapping, riots and mob action, forcible conversion, forced relocation, public shaming, sanctioned warfare, capital punishment, bodily torture, crusades, genocide, massacres, and murder. Any reader of this journal will be able to call to mind, I would wager, specific historical examples from their own area of expertise. The challenge for the historian lies in determining how to interpret those acts without soliciting them as examples or explaining them away as exceptions in an argument about Christianity's inherent belligerence or pacificism. In a study of religious riots in early modern France published more than five decades ago, Natalie Zemon Davis encouraged scholars to keep their focus on the ground, so to speak, by investigating the goals and legitimations of violent acts as well as the social, political, economic, and religious dynamics that facilitate performances of violence.[5] Davis's work pushes historians to look for local, situated meaning, to regard performances and representations of violence as communications comprehensible within (but not necessarily justified by) their historical social arrangements, political conditions, and cultural logics. Scrutinizing historical acts and literary representations of violence within their local social and cultural dynamics allows us to track the communicative work of the violence or its portrayal, and historians have indeed followed Davis's model.[6]

This is a fruitful approach for studying the subject of this essay, a single Syriac monastic hagiography – Samuel's *Tale of the Triumphs of the Chosen One and Head of the Mourners, the Holy and God-Clothed Teacher, Mar Barsauma the Northerner* or, for short, the *Life of Barsauma*.[7] Likely dating to the second half of the fifth

[4]One example that provides a model for historians of other time periods and geographies is Matthew Bowman, *Christian: The Politics of a Word in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[5]Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: The Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past & Present* 59:1 (May 1973): 51–91.

[6]For the Hellenistic period, see Michael Champion and Lara O'Sullivan, "'War Is the Father and King of All': Discourses, Experiences, and Theories of Hellenistic Violence," in *Cultural Perceptions of Violence in the Hellenistic World*, ed. Michael Champion and Lara O'Sullivan (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 1–20. For late antiquity, see Ari Bryen, *Violence in Roman Egypt: A Study in Legal Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 51–85; Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), offers a particular rich and lengthy example of contextualizing acts of and debates over violence among Donatists and Catholics in fourth and fifth century North Africa. See Cam Grey's response, "Shock, Horror, or Same Old Same Old? Everyday Violence in Augustine's Africa," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6:2 (Fall 2013): 216–232. For the Middle Ages, see David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, new paperback edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[7]SOP 361:89v: ܬܫܥܝܬܐ ܕܢܨܚܢܘܗܝ ܕܓܒܝܐ ܘܪܝܫܐ ܕܐܒܝܠܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܠܒܝܫ ܠܐܠܗܐ ܘܪܒܐ ܡܪܝ ܒܪܨܘܡܐ ܓܪܒܝܝܐ. Unless otherwise noted, as in this instance, I cite Andrew Palmer's translation of the *Life of Barsauma* in *The Life of the*

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century,[8] this text narrates the ascetic career of a Miaphysite archimandrite celebrated at the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 but maligned and deposed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The *Life*'s most notable feature is not its narration of the saint's derogatory speech, public insults, bodily assaults, coerced conversions, incitement of riots and mob action, property destruction, arson, vandalism, and generally forcible and intolerant opposition to any act, attitude, or speech regarded as deviant or disobedient. Rather, its notable feature is its portrayal of a lethally dangerous saint, someone whose effective speech directly causes many deaths.

This portrait is anomalous among the hagiographical literature from late antiquity. No doubt, many monastic hagiographies narrate their subjects' violent deeds. (Ps.-?)Besa tells of how Shenoute punched Nestorius at the First Council of Ephesus; Severus tells of how Martin destroyed pagan temples in rural Gaul; Callinicus tells of how Hypatius chopped down sacred trees in the forests of Bithynia; the anonymous author of the *History of the Monks of Egypt* tells of how Apollo immobilized a pagan religious procession so that participants roasted in the desert sun; an anonymous hagiographer tells of how Rabbula smashed idols in Heliopolis to provoke his own martyrdom; and Mark the Deacon tells of how Porphyry destroyed the Marneion at Gaza.[9] Potent speech – curses – also populate late ancient monastic hagiographies as tools that saints use to forcibly compel some action for a positive effect. For example, Theodoret's *Religious History*, a fifth-century hagiographical collection focusing on holy women and men in the Syrian countryside, features stories of saints uttering holy curses that, in the end, reconcile estranged neighbors, provide impoverished peasants with economic relief, exact vengeance on an exploitative landowner, enact social change, and combat injustice.[10] Christ de Wet has observed that

Syrian Saint Barsauma: Eulogy of a Hero of the Resistance to the Council of Chalcedon, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 61 (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), with reference to the text's only complete (but unedited) manuscript – Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate 361:89v–119v (= Damascus 12/17), abbreviated as SOP 361. I remain grateful to Archbishop Patriarchal Secretary Mor Joseph Bali for sending me high-resolution images to examine alongside Palmer's translation.

[8]On the date, see Andrew Palmer, "The West-Syrian Monastic Founder Barṣawmo: A Historial Review of the Scholarly Literature," *Orientalia Christiana, Festschrift für Hubert Kaufhold zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Peter Bruns und Heinz Oto Luthe (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 399–413, at 408; Andrew Palmer, "A Tale of Two Synods: The Archimandrite Barsumas at Ephesus in 449 and Chalcedon in 451," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 66:1/2 (2014): 37–61, at 39; and Volker Menze, "Introduction," in *The Wandering Holy Man: The Life of Barsauma, Christian Asceticism, and Religious Conflict in Late Antique Palestine*, ed. Johannes Hahn and Volker Menze, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 61 (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 8–10; also Johannes Hahn, "'It Is Not Lawful for Samaritans to Have Dealings with Christians!' Samaritans in the *Life of Barsauma*," in *Wandering Holy Man*, ed. Hahn and Menze, 121–148, esp. 145–146. Their arguments have corrected Ernst Honigmann, *Le couvent de Barṣaumā et le Patriarcat jacobite d'Antioche et de Syrie*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 146 (Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1954), 15–16; Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East, II: Early Monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 197, 17 (Louvain: Sécretariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), 197, and Lucas Van Rompay, "Barsawmo," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron Michael Butts, George Anton Kiraz, and Lucas Van Rompay (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2011), 59.

[9](Ps.-)Besa, *Life of Shenoute* 129; Sulpicius Severus, *Life of Martin* 15.1–3; Callinicus, *Life of Hypatius* 30.1; *History of the Monks of Egypt* 8.26; *Life of Rabbula* 16; and Mark the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry of Gaza* 66–75.

[10]For one example, see the story of James of Nisbis using effective speech to pulverize a stone and terrify a judge into reversing an unjust decision at *Religious History* 1.6 (ed. Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy-Molinghen, *Théodoret de Cyr. Histoire des moines de Syrie. «Histoire philothée» I–XIII*, Source chrétiennes 234 [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1977], 170). See the classic discussion of Theodoret's cursing monks in Peter

curses also operate within the context of a cosmic war between good and evil and, as such, function as the weapons of God's ascetic armies.[11] Still, de Wet notes, Theodoret never assigns the "shame of the executioner" to the saint by framing such speech as lethal.[12] This holds true not just for Theodoret, but also for other late ancient hagiographers. Understandably so: attributing the death of adversaries to a saint robs an author of opportunities to narrate recovery, repentance, conversion, and social change. On the rare occasion when a saint's violence does lead to someone's death, extenuating circumstances provide the rationalization. Pseudo-Dioscorus's *Life of Macarius of Tkōw*, for example, tells of how its subject ordered a mob of pious Christians to burn the priest Homer alive inside the temple dedicated to the god Kothos in response to him ritually murdering Christian children.[13] Even though Homer's gruesome atrocities necessitate a lethal response, the text still distinguishes the saint's punitive action from his holiness: Homer dies not because of Macarius's curse – the special power of the saint – but because a group of Christians or, as one manuscript has it, Macarius himself as a human being, physically attacks him.

Yet, Samuel shows no hesitation in scripting Barsauma's role as executioner. To what end? What good does it do for the saint's posthumous authority or memory to portray him not merely as a violent iconoclast but as a figure who strives both to suffer death and to inflict death on his adversaries? I argue that Samuel deviates from hagiographical convention in order to memorialize a saint who, historically, performed acts of lethal violence in the service of his ascetic identity, and was known to do so by contemporaries. I demonstrate this by tracing the theme of lethal and non-lethal violence in the *Life* and by working through the evidence preserved in the minutes of the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 and the acts of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which is contemporary to Barsauma and directly pertains to his reputation.[14] While the minutes of Ephesus II and the proceedings of Chalcedon predate the *Life* by several decades at least, and were perhaps unknown to Samuel, they corroborate Barsauma's activity and reputation and confirm that the historical Barsauma was indeed violent. Samuel was then faced with a

Brown, "The Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101. On cursing in various late ancient contexts, see David Frankfurter, "Curses, Blessings, and Ritual Authority: Egyptian Magic in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 5:1 (January 2005): 157–185; David Brakke, "Cursing Monks: The Early Monastic Context of Two Christian Prayers for Justice from Egypt," *Studia Patristica* 124.21 (2021): 139–156; Bradley K. Storin, "On the Death Curse in Late Antique Hagiography," in *Discipline, Authority, and Texts in Late Ancient Religion: Essays in Honor of David Brakke*, ed. Ellen Muehlberger and Bradley K. Storin, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 43 (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

[11]Chris L. de Wet, "The Discipline of Domination: Asceticism, Violence and Monastic Curses in Theodoret's *Historia Religiosa*," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*, ed. Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Christian R. Raschle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 323–344, at 326.

[12]de Wet, "Discipline of Domination," 342–343, referring to Michel Foucault's discussion of the executioner's shame in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 9–10.

[13](Ps.-)Dioscorus, *Life of Macarius of Tkōw* 5.1–11. On this accusation of a pagan sacrificing children for ritual atrocity, see David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 107–108.

[14]Barsauma appears several times in the *Acts* – twice in laudatory letters written by Emperor Theodosius II in the run-up to Ephesus II in 449 (*Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum. Tomus Alter. Volumen Primum. Pars Prima* [= ACO] II, I, 1.47–48 [ed. Edward Schwartz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1933), 7]), once in the minutes of Ephesus II (ACO II, I, 1.109 [ed. Schwartz, 85]), and twice by hostile bishops at Chalcedon (ACO II, I, 1.851 [ed. Schwartz, 851]; ACO II, I, 2.77–81 [ed. Schwartz, 116]).

decision as he drafted the *Life*: should he whitewash Barsauma's memory by minimizing or extracting his lethality, running the risk of making the saint into something unrecognizable to the community of readers, or should he amplify this aspect of his legacy and make it the defining feature of his sanctity? Samuel opted for the latter so that, on the one hand, he could pay homage to an undeniable lethality for which Barsauma was beloved by admirers and detested by detractors and, on the other, he could offer a model to later readers in Barsauma's monastery for how to enforce with their own violence the boundaries of this Anti-Chalcedonian monastic enclave, a community that felt persecuted by the Chalcedonian regime. For this besieged group of readers, Samuel's hagiographical portrait conveys a sharply defined, uncompromising model of sanctity that authorizes readers to perform in their own lives lethal violence in the service of policing their community's theological, communal, and moral boundaries.

II. The *Life of Barsauma* and Its Tales of Violence

The text survives *in toto* in a single twelfth-century manuscript, Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate 361:89v–119v (= Damascus MS 12/17), while a few other fragmentary manuscripts also exist along with medieval Ethiopic and Armenian translations.[15] Each of the sixty-one folios contains three columns of legible, mixed estrangela-serto script.[16] The text's organization is unusual, divided into ninety-nine "signs," thirty "distinctions," and four "pilgrimages" (they are numbered in the manuscript's margins and titled within the text itself); Andrew Palmer's English translation divides the text into 165 chapters, noting the appropriate sign, distinction, or pilgrimage with each chapter heading.

The author Samuel becomes known to readers in two colophons. The first features the author writing in the first person but, with the spirit of monastic humility, refusing to identify himself. He apologizes for the narrative's extreme length but notes that he excluded many of Barsauma's deeds. He claims to be an eyewitness and promises readers that other monks can corroborate the narrative's veracity (164.1). In the second colophon, a later editor identifies the author as "Samuel the priest" (or "the elder"), "one of Barsauma's first disciples," and someone who has "written down [these things] in truth."[17] The editor notes that Samuel also wrote "many metrical homilies … and teaching-songs … and sermons … on the faith and on various subjects; and refutations of all superstitions; and a refutation of the Dyophysites; and fine commentaries on the scriptures."[18] It is possible but uncertain that the second colophon constitutes another act of monastic humility.

Both the author and the later editor, whoever that may have been, likely dwelled in the monastery established by Barsauma at the foot of Mount Nemrut, northwest of Samosata and southwest of Melitene (outside modern Kâhta in eastern Turkey).[19] Later generations of monks, beginning in the eighth century, resettled the community on the mountain itself. Over the centuries, it underwent renovations and expansions, and survived fires, earthquakes, and hostile treatment from neighboring Kurdish tribes. A major center of ecclesiastical organization and learning through the seventeenth century, the monastery

[15]Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient, II: Early Monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria*, 196.

[16]See Michael Penn, R. Jordan Crouser, and Philip Abbott, "Serto before Serto: Reexamining the Earliest Development of Syriac Script," *Aramaic Studies* 18:1 (2020): 46–63.

[17]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 165.1 (trans. Palmer, 139; SOP 361:119v: "Samuel the elder," ܫܡܥܘܢ ܩܫܝܫܐ).

[18]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 165.2 (trans. Palmer, 139; SOP 361:119v).

[19]See Honigmann, *Le couvent de Barṣaum*ā, 36–46.

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housed several members who would go on to become patriarchs and metropolitan bishops in the Syriac Orthodox Church.[20] The *Life of Barsauma*, then, provides witness to the career and deeds of the community's founder.

Victim

Samuel introduces the theme of violence early in the *Life.* As a child, Barsauma is attacked by dogs in a village near Samosata, and they drag him all around a field. Some passers-by chase the pack away only to express shock upon finding the boy unscathed. The paradox, though, is meaningful, as Samuel explains:

> All this came to pass because of the trials to which the devil would one day subject [Barsauma], and because of his future struggles with the pagans and the wars of the heresies; for in due course these, too, would attack Barsauma. By this men already knew, when Barsauma was but a child, that victory was his as a chosen one, destined to win all his contests and be delivered from all harms. For just as he fell into the jaws of savage dogs without any harm to his body, so he was destined to fall into deep contests without any harm to his soul.[21]

The attack constitutes a typological sign, not a true threat to the saint's well-being. The dogs symbolize the Devil, the pagans, and the heretics with whom Barsauma would later contend, and his intact and unharmed body represents the later unblemished state of his soul. Samuel scripts the reaction he wishes readers to have in the declaration one of the villagers: "This child has been chosen by God to be his instrument. He is destined to attain high rank in God's service. This sign which has been seen in him was not performed for nothing."[22] Barsauma's spiritual excellence attracts malevolent forces, but he ultimately prevails against them.

Violence also connects with Barsauma's ascetic performances, which include ceaseless standing, donning an iron tunic, living exclusively in the open air, and making semi-regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem.[23] His first such pilgrimage sets the tone, as Samuel notes that the many pagans, Jews, and Samaritans throughout Palestine, Phoenicia, and Arabia (the regions through which Barsauma had to travel to get to Jerusalem) pummel and torment Barsauma as he passes through.[24] However, the ascetic performances are laden with visceral imagery and comparisons. Barsauma's ceaseless standing is an act of perpetual crucifixion that links Barsauma's asceticism to the violence of Christ's passion.[25] His iron tunic, remaining outdoors, and refusal to drink water combine to

[20]See Honigmann, *Le couvent de Barṣaumā*, 47–51, and Hubert Kaufhold, "Notizen zur späten Geschichte des Baraumô-Klosters," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3:2 (2000[2010]), 223–46. For the clergy members who spent time here, see Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 17.9, 17.11, 21.2.

[21]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 3A (trans. Palmer, 21; SOP 361:90r).

[22]Ibid.

[23]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 4.1–2, 5.1, 7.1–2, 17.1, 22.1, 25.1–3, 32.1, 76.1, 89.1. On the violence of the monastic life broadly, see Christine Luckritz-Marquis, *Death of the Desert: Monastic Memory and the Loss of Egypt's Golden Age*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 15–19.

[24]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 4.2. See Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, "Cleansing the Sacred Space: The Holy Land and Its Inhabitants in the Pilgrimage Narrative of Barsauma," in *Wandering Holy Man*, ed. Hahn and Menze, 104–120.

[25]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 7.2–8.1.

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roast his body – hence, his nickname, "the Roasted"[26] – making it resemble "a fish that is fried in a pan" or "the skin of a lamb when it blisters in a fiery oven."[27] His desiccated body fulfills a prophecy from Jeremiah 17:7–8 and merits typological comparison to both the rod of Aaron from Numbers 17:16–26 and the three youths in the furnace from Daniel 3:19–30.[28] Moreover, Barsauma practices intense fasts (in the summer he eats once every two days, but in the winter, he fasts from one Sunday to the next) and keeps to an austere diet (naturally growing roots, ruffage, berries, and fruits, but no bread, farm-raised meat, fruit, vegetables, wine, or even water).[29] All this makes Barsauma a "mourner," an ascetic who perpetually laments humanity's sins and participates in Christ's sufferings through his bodily sufferings, torments, and exertions.[30]

Yet, Barsauma's station only frustrates him, not because he is the perpetual target of violence but because the violence performed against him never causes him any real harm. Barsauma frequently asserts his desire to suffer martyrdom while his holiness simply refuses to allow it. After traveling to a "large and prosperous city," he bemoans the adulation he received from all quarters. Peace will only come to him, he proclaims, when his eyes "see many people stoning me for the sake of the Crucified," and a Christianized world only dashes his dreams of martyrdom.[31] If he were really to be "the Slave of Christ," he would be persecuted like the prophets, stoned like the apostles, or crucified like the Lord.[32] So, he travels to Persia to provoke persecution: he will "demolish the temple of the fire which [the king of Persia] worships, insult his Majesty, strike the Magians, revile the pagans, and so provoke him to have him killed."[33] Again, he is thwarted but now because "fear and trembling" take hold of his hoped-for persecutors, and they refuse to retaliate.[34]

Another opportunity for martyrdom presented itself in the wake of Chalcedon when apostates (as Samuel calls Chalcedonians) rose to power and overwhelmingly populate the clerical ranks. With potential persecutors in power, Barsauma "jumped for joy. His mind was delighted. His face lit up and seemed to flash like lightning. Yes, he was filled with gladness and praised Christ."[35] The tension reaches its climax in a dramatic scene where, after much conspiring against Barsauma,[36] the apostates array themselves for battle and hurl stones at him: "One man threw a white stone which hit Barsauma above his left eye, giving off a loud report. Those who heard it thought that it had broken his skull. But all of a sudden something just like that stone came out of the air and struck the man who had thrown it and broke his skull, devastating his face and pushing his left eye out of its socket."[37] The other apostates hurled their stones, but a disciple used his body to shield Barsauma from the onslaught, and miraculously "all those stones fell down and piled up

[26]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 28.1 (trans. Palmer, 33; SOP 361:92v: ܚܡܝܪܐ).

[27]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 17.1 (trans. Palmer, 29; SOP 361:92v).

[28]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 17.4, 6.

[29]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 10.1–2, 19.1.

[30]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 3b.8, 11–12 (trans. Palmer, 21–22; SOP 361:90v). On Syriac mourners, see Sebastian P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen* 20:1 (1973): 1–19, esp. 18–19.

[31]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 110.4 (trans. Palmer, 97; SOP 361:108v).

[32]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 110.7–9 (trans. Palmer, 97–98; SOP 361:108v).

[33]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 110.15 (trans. Palmer, 99; SOP 361:108v–109r).

[34]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 110.16 (trans. Palmer, 99; SOP 361:109r).

[35]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 145.2 (trans. Palmer, 124; SOP 361:116r).

[36]Marcian sends military troops to enforce Chalcedon and arrest Barsauma (Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 119.1–4, 121.1–3); the Chalcedonian clergy curses him and tasks one bishop with assassinating him (Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 120.1–11, 133.1–4, 143.1–5).

[37]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 145.16 (trans. Palmer, 125; SOP 361:116v).

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around them."[38] Immediately, the tables turn as the apostate perpetrators of violence become the victims of violent retribution. A great gust of wind "bowled those stoning Barsauma right over," and they flee to the mountain for protection as a rainstorm pursued them: "It was pitch-dark, and there was a torrential rainstorm. They thought Barsauma was pursuing them, and fled headlong in fear and trepidation, tripping up and falling on the rocks. All night long they were getting tied up in knots and encountering difficulties on the steep mountainsides, their bodies scratched by the thorns, their faces bruised by the rocks."[39] The bodies of the persecutors now bear the scars and marks that they tried to inflict on Barsauma. The episode concludes with the apostates fleeing in terror because "the curse which was written long ago in the Law had come true for them… . You will shudder and you will flee, although there is no one pursuing you. Your enemy will be glad because you scream and flee."[40] While it is Samuel the author who links the scriptural language with the fate of the apostates, it is the apostates themselves who believe the rainstorm on the mountain was really Barsauma pursuing them, with their leader running to Samosata to warn his colleagues, "Look out, Barsauma is on his way here to attack you!"[41]

Perpetrator

The role of violence in Barsauma's ascetic performances and his futile desire to be victimized by persecutors serves as the pretext for the authorized violence that he enacts against his adversaries. The saint's violent performances start early in the *Life*. As Barsauma goes on his second pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he "began to demolish the Jewish Sabbath-houses, destroy the Samaritan synagogues, and burn down the pagan temples."[42] The saint's reputation for violence grows so fearsome that pagans "armed themselves and took up their positions on the wall for battle" whenever he approached. However, his destructiveness is neither predictable nor systematic: "Barsauma turned aside and passed by some of these cities; others he overpowered and entered."[43] Sometimes Barsauma's violence compels iconoclasm and conversion. One such episode tells how the pagans of Reqem d-Gaya (modern Petra) granted safe passage to Barsauma and his disciples so long as they promise not to destroy anything. Once inside the city, Barsauma preached, and the crowds responded by requesting that he miraculously end an ongoing drought. He obliged, and, his previous promise notwithstanding, a four-day-long rain flooded the city and caused the walls to collapse. Amidst the chaos, demons came to possess the chief priest's virgin daughters, and Barsauma only exorcised them on the condition that the city's pagan priests smash their idols. The episode concludes with a mass conversion when "all the inhabitants of that city became Christians," followed by a reflection on the terrifying peace created by the saint: "Barsauma left that city in peace. In every place he came to, he worked wonders; and at his coming every country trembled with fear."[44]

[38]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 146.1 (trans. Palmer, 126; SOP 361:116v).

[39]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 147.1, 148.8 (trans. Palmer, 126–127; SOP 361:116v–117r).

[40]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 148.12 (trans. Palmer, 128; SOP 361:117r). The language of the "curse" is a concatenation of Dt 28:15, Ps 62:3, Lv 26:36, and Dt 28.25.

[41]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 148.8, 14 (trans. Palmer, 128; SOP 361:117r).

[42]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 34.1 (trans. Palmer, 37; SOP 361:93v). The sentiment is repeated at Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 45.1.

[43]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 34.2 (trans. Palmer, 37; SOP 361:93v).

[44]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 36.5–6 (trans. Palmer, 42; SOP 361:95r).

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While the flood at Reqem d-Gaya spurs mass conversion and subsequent idol smashing, another episode involving the synagogue at Rabbat Moab focuses not on conversion but on outing a false disciple whose commitment was inspired by desire for worldly riches. The Jews cast "arrows and stones" down on Barsauma and his disciples as they approach the synagogue, but his entourage enters the synagogue unharmed and burns it to the ground. No one converts, and the synagogue is not mentioned again.[45] Instead, Samuel's focus shifts to "a stranger," who feigned discipleship.[46] Once the blaze begins the man sneaks away to plunder gold bells, but another disciple spots him and informs Barsauma, who subsequently utters the curse: "Take this darkness, then, which you have loved more than your life, and go and receive your inheritance along with Achor, your fellow gangster!"[47] The gold gets "swallowed up in front of his very eyes," and the man goes back to Barsauma, who, in an uncharacteristically merciful gesture, "released that man from the curse, but still he drove him out from his company."[48] All the violence of this episode – the Jews' attack on Barsauma and the destruction of the synagogue – concludes with collective purification as the unholy brother is expelled from the group.

Similarly, the next episode in the *Life* tells how a disciple performing violence on Barsauma's behalf destroys a pagan temple in the Valley of Arnon. As with the synagogue destruction, no conversions result. Rather, the episode gives Samuel an opportunity to reflect on the totality of the annihilation: "Not one stone, however small, escaped that furnace. All were turned into a fine ash; and a great wind began to blow and scatter the ashes from the burned naos, as the chaff flies away from grain which is winnowed in a breeze. Just so, the ashes were swept off in the direction of the wilderness."[49] Here violence is the means by which Barsauma dominates the landscape.

The Death Curse

Everything discussed so far – iconoclasm, property destruction, arson, forced conversion, interpersonal confrontation – conforms to the conventional narration of holy violence in late ancient hagiography. Samuel's deviation from that tradition come in his descriptions of Barsauma's enthusiastic pronouncement of death curses. Consider the deaths of three rich and powerful men who variously exploited poor people, which Samuel narrates in three consecutive episodes with striking generality. The locations are noted only as outside of a "certain city" or as "another great city"; the three targets of Barsauma's curses are identified only as "a certain rich man," "[a city] administrator," and "a rich man there, who was the mayor of that city."[50] The first rich man, who refused to acknowledge the payment of debt so that people were charged a second and third time, rebuffed a meeting with Barsauma under the pretense of being bedridden by illness; the second man, the administrator, who generally oppressed poor people, denied the meeting with no

[45]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 39.1 (trans. Palmer, 43; SOP 361:95r).

[46]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 42.3 (trans. Palmer, 44; SOP 361:95v).

[47]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 42.6 (trans. Palmer, 45; SOP 361:95v). Achor (ܥܟܘܪ) refers to the valley where the Israelites stoned Achan and his household for stealing items commanded to be destroyed (Joshua 7).

[48]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 43.2 (trans. Palmer, 45; SOP 361:95v).

[49]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 44.6 (trans. Palmer, 46–47; SOP 361:95v).

[50]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 62.1, 61.2, 63.1 (trans. Palmer, 54–56; SOP 361:97v). SOP 361 places Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 61 after 62, but Palmer asserts that other manuscripts switch the order. Ultimately, the sequence does not affect the narrative.

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excuse.[51] Barsauma places the first man under a death curse: "If he is really ill and not feigning illness, may Christ restore him to good health! But if he has deceived us, may they take him from the bed on which he is lying to the grave!"[52] Against the second man, though, Barsauma passes sentence: "God will soon take his soul from his body for this. He will not live much longer to oppress the poor."[53] Both men died immediately after he spoke. The third curse in this triptych – against the mayor of a great city – is slightly different. The text identifies him as "a friend of the emperor" in whose favor "the bishops and judges" are biased even though he committed "a great crime in that district."[54] After Barsauma confronts him, the mayor angrily threatens to tell the emperor of the saint's brashness. Barsauma replies, "It is my hope in Christ, whom I serve, that you shall not see your patrons' face, because you have cut off your hope from the true God and have hung it on a spider's web."[55] Indeed, the man suffers a fatal accident shortly thereafter.

Barsauma deploys the death curse also against anyone who blurs the boundary between the spiritual and the worldly. Samuel previews this theme when Barsauma curses two vineyards, one belonging to a fellow mourner and the other belonging to a disciple, because their very existence indicates preoccupation with worldly plants; however, he amplifies it in a bizarre and tragic episode involving a "Daughter of the Covenant" that has been abducted by an Isaurian raider.[56] Barsauma dispatches eight disciples to re-abduct her and escort her home, but nearby villagers interrupt the re-abduction and forcibly send her back to the Isaurian to cool his wrath. Barsauma then responds with his first curse: "By the Crucified, whom I worship, I hope He will send the Grim Reapers to that village very soon."[57] A fatal plague befalls the village, and only after the elders prostrate themselves before Barsauma does the plague dissipate (Barsauma's plague, the text intimates, killed many people). The Isaurian himself follows suit and releases the Daughter of the Covenant to Barsauma, who forgives the abductor but places the abductee under a second curse: "Take my advice! Go to a convent and serve God as a nun! If this man comes to take you out of there, the angel of the Lord will strike him down on the road. His flesh will teem with maggots, and he will die. If you leave the convent and try to go back to him, you will receive the same punishment and die."[58] She ignores the death curse and returns to her Isaurian abductor. Sure enough, "the angel of the Lord struck her down. Her flesh teemed with maggots, and she died."[59] Her disobedience and violation of her ascetic vow – the only agency she exerts in this story – illustrates the danger awaiting any ascetic who elides the spiritual and the worldly.

Barsauma also utters death curses in the context of competition or dramatic threats. One lethal curse strikes an apostate chorepiscopus who leads a mob to imprison the saint and his disciples. As he approaches Barsauma, the chorepiscopus's "heart shook, for all his insolence, and his bones knocked together. He nearly died of fear. He vomited, loosed his bowels, and was in mental torment … His underclothes were soiled, and his outer

[51]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 62.3.

[52]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 62.5 (trans. Palmer, 55; SOP 361:97v).

[53]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 61.2 (trans. Palmer, 55; SOP 361:97v).

[54]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 63.1 (trans. Palmer, 56; SOP 361:97v).

[55]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 63.6 (trans. Palmer, 56; SOP 361:97v).

[56]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 52.1–2, 53.1–3 (plants), 66.1 ("Daughter of the Covenant"; my translation; SOP 361:98r: ܒܬ ܩܝܡܐ).

[57]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 66.3 (trans. Palmer, 58; SOP 361:98r).

[58]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 67.1 (trans. Palmer, 58; SOP 361:98r).

[59]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 67.2 (trans. Palmer, 58; SOP 361:98r).

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garment was filthy with the contents of his stomach." The man flees back to Samosata "but died after a long agony."[60] Another story tells of how Satan enters the Chalcedonian clergy at Antioch and spurs them to bribe "a certain man, a pagan and a rebel" to rise up against Barsauma, but the saint's death curse ends his life: "'As our Redeemer, the Christ whom I worship, is true to me, that rebel will fall and suffer two breakages.' A few days later, that pagan fell from his horse and broke his leg, dying shortly afterward. In this way, Barsauma's prediction that he would suffer 'two breakages' came true. The second 'breakage' was his death."[61] In the context of spiritual competition, Barsauma curses the father of a clairvoyant boy after trying to persuade the man that his son's power, which convinced "even priests and learned men … that he prophesied by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit," was actually the result of a "fortune-telling demon"; the man barked, "Do not be envious of my son … just because his celebrity is equal to your own! This country is big enough for both of you."[62] Barsauma swiftly repels the accusation with a death curse: "If I say this to you out of envy … may the lance of the Lord be directed straight at me! But if I have spoken to you in love, you will soon pay the penalty."[63] Subsequently, the man "fell down and burst open in the night."[64]

No one is exempt from Barsauma's curse, not even Emperor Marcian or Empress Pulcheria. Barsauma curses the latter for her apostasy and imperiousness in commanding him to return to his monastery – "It is Christ's will that I go in peace to my native country. It is not at your command that I go to my monastery … As the Crucified, whom you have doubted and denied, is true to me, you will vacate your throne!"[65] Indeed, she "fell into a cruel torment, which ended with her swallowing her own tongue and dying in agony."[66] Barsauma curses the former after learning that Marcian had sent a cohort of soldiers to arrest and escort him to Constantinople: "Exultant, [Barsauma] made a solemn statement: 'I have an unshakable faith in Christ that Marcian's authority will never be imposed on me. He will not see my face in this world, nor I his hateful visage. I place my hope in the victorious Crucified, whom I, at least, have not denied, that my death is going to rid this world of Marcian.'"[67] Indeed, Barsauma dies after that curse, and Marcian dies almost immediately thereafter, causing Samuel to reflect that "everything turned out just as [Barsauma] had requested."[68]

On a few occasions, the text's characters express a keen awareness of just how deadly Barsauma can be. In one episode, after an imperial magistrate interrogates the saint before Emperor Marcian, Barsauma issues the death curse: "As Christ, whom I serve, is true to me, you shall not judge any other case in this world! The case of God's slave, Barsauma, will be your last!"[69] Immediately, the magistrate realizes his fate: "I am going to die. Barsauma has killed me … He put a curse on me … and killed me. The curse is like a sharp arrow, which has struck my heart and broken it. I have this sharp, stabbing pain in my

[60]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 149.7–9 (trans. Palmer, 129; SOP 361:117v).
[61]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 109.1, 3 (trans. Palmer, 95–96; SOP 361:108r).
[62]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 86.2 (trans. Palmer, 74; SOP 361:102v).
[63]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 86.4 (trans. Palmer, 74; SOP 361:102v).
[64]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 86.4 (trans. Palmer, 74; SOP 361:102v).
[65]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 128.2–3 (trans. Palmer, 114; SOP 361:112r).
[66]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 128.5 (trans. Palmer, 114; SOP 361:112r).
[67]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 153.1 (trans. Palmer, 133; SOP 361:118r).
[68]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 159.1 (trans. Palmer, 136; SOP 361:119r).
[69]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 123.2 (trans. Palmer, 110; SOP 361:111r).

heart. I can feel my soul fluttering to make her escape from my body."[70] The magistrate's wife begs Barsauma to reverse the curse, but Barsauma refuses: "You had better believe what I say: your husband will never judge another case. Very soon his soul will be taken because he has ingratiated himself with wickedness by persecuting Christ, who is going swiftly to take him out of the world to stop him oppressing his servants."[71] Illness strikes the magistrate, and he dies soon thereafter. Other emissaries from Marcian would learn what happened and beg Barsauma to "not put a curse on me!"[72]

Barsauma's lethality is most horrifically illustrated in the depiction of a mass murder of Jews in Jerusalem.[73] If the residents of the Holy Land pummeled Barsauma without reservation or regret during his first pilgrimage to Jerusalem,[74] how much more would Barsauma and his disciples be the instrument with which the Jews would be pummeled during the fourth and final pilgrimage to Jerusalem. A confabulation with nothing historical about it,[75] this story begins with the saint and his disciples arriving outside the city; Barsauma does not enter Jerusalem but stays in the monastery of Photina on Mount Zion. Twenty of his disciples, though, do enter the city and travel to the Temple Mount where they witness a throng of Jewish men and women – "about one hundred and three thousand" – gathering for the Feast of Tabernacles.[76] An unnamed disciple looks upon the crowd and declared,

> "There are two predictions in the Prophets … which are about to come true.[77] But look out! We must hurry away from here! The Wrath of the Lord is on the point of striking the Jewish people!" … A sudden clamor was heard from the Jews. They were screaming in terror and running in all directions. A frightening vision had appeared to them: God's armies were bearing down on them from heaven. The Jews could see this apparition, but the Christians could see nothing. One or two of the disciples did, however, see sand rising up like a cloud and covering the Jews. Many stones were flying through that cloud and raining blows on the Jews. No one could tell where those stones were coming from. All the Jews had cut skins and broken bones. Many of them died there and then, many others a few days later. As for the rest, they were badly wounded. Many were maimed, or lamed.[78]

Afterward, clergy and soldiers pointlessly attack the disciples, who fight back: "The brethren landed plenty of blows on the clergy and the soldiers," despite the fact that "the soldiers, the clergy, and the Jews acted together."[79] Like Barsauma, his disciples ready themselves for martyrdom, get imprisoned, and await a trial before a judge.[80] As the story gets more and more complex, Samuel narrates the deaths of one Jewish woman and five

[70]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 123.14–15 (trans. Palmer, 110–111; SOP 361:111r–111v).

[71]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 123.20 (trans. Palmer, 111; SOP 361:111v).

[72]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 124.1 (trans. Palmer, 111; SOP 361:111v).

[73]On this episode in the *Life of Barsauma*, see Hagith Sivan, "Subversive Pilgrimages: Barsauma in Jerusalem," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 26:2 (Spring 2018): 53–74, esp. 65–74.

[74]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 4.1–2.

[75]See Jan Willem Drijvers, "Barsauma, Eudocia, Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount," in *Wandering Holy Man*, ed. Hahn and Menze, 89–103.

[76]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 91.8 (trans. Palmer, 79; SOP 361:103v).

[77]Palmer suggests Is 31:5, Jer 31:23, or Dn 9:24–27 as candidates for prophecies, but the *Life* keeps it vague.

[78]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 92.2–4 (trans. Palmer, 79; SOP 361:103v).

[79]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 93.3, 4 (trans. Palmer, 80; SOP 361:103v).

[80]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 93.8.

Jewish men, each dying to convince the text's Christian characters (some had supported permitting the Jews to worship openly in Jerusalem) that the stone-storm and its aftermath were manifestations of God's judgment against the Jews: "[The massacre and deaths] convinced the entire Christian community. Now everyone acknowledged that the blow which had fallen on the Jews had come from God."[81] That the saint is missing from the massacre is certainly puzzling, but his absence guides the reader's gaze toward the effective cause for the death and destruction – the Christian God. Prophesied in the ancient scriptures, shown to the Jews in a vision that Samuel notes Christians could not see for themselves, God and God's armies march against them just as Barsauma's disciples arrive in Jerusalem during this final pilgrimage.

Violence pervades the *Life*. For the sake of holiness, the saint experiences violence from his ascetic performances and from his adversaries (even if readers know that there is little that actually threatens him). More than that, though, Samuel frames Barsauma's endurance of violence as an authorization for his lethal violence against others. Whereas his adversaries are not permitted to harm or kill him, he is permitted to harm and kill them since, from Samuel's perspective, his cause is righteous. He kills ten individuals with his curse, although many more unnamed people die as a consequence of Barsauma and his disciples' presence, words, and action (in the Jerusalem massacre, in the flooding of the pagan village, in the plague that afflicts villagers protecting the Isaurian raider). Samuel's portrait of the saint, then, weds holiness to lethal violence.

III. Interpreting Lethal Violence in the *Life of Barsauma*

Making sense of Samuel's depiction of Barsauma as lethally violent has proved challenging to historians. The assessment of some remains superficial and glib: Lucas Van Rompay describes Barsauma as an "energetic monk, converting non-Christians and fighting against Jews and pagans," while Jean-Maurice Fiey remarks that Barsauma is a "moine rigide" who merely "chassa de la Ville Sainte les juifs auxquels l'impératrice Eudocie avait permis de revenir."[82] Others have offered interpretations that, while more sophisticated, still remain unconvincing or incomplete. Michael Gaddis's suggestion that Barsauma is a Joshua-like prophet who wanders around the Holy Land "levelling synagogues and pagan temples with evenhanded thoroughness" is unpersuasive both because the *Life* never compares the saint to Joshua and because Barsauma's infrequent destruction of synagogues and pagan temples, while important set pieces, are not one of the text's major themes.[83] Volker Menze has argued that Barsauma's violence reflects the authorial context and the difficult realities that bore down on Barsauma's monastic community in the decades after Chalcedon. As a response to the regulatory and cultural changes that Chalcedonian officials and clergy members imposed, Barsauma's Anti-Chalcedonian monastic community became a besieged minority, and Samuel tells of his subject's violence to delineate "the exclusiveness of the non-Chalcedonian faith" and the "puritan Christian way of life" while leaving outsiders "to fear elimination by the

[81]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 94.1–9, 95.1–2 (trans. Palmer, 83; SOP 361:105v).

[82]Van Rompay, "Barsawmo," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, 59; Jean Maurice Fiey, *Saintes syriaques*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004) 49.

[83]Gaddis, *There Is No Crime*, 188. For destruction of synagogues and temples, see Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 34.1–36.7, 42.1–6, 44.1–7, 45.1.

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wrath of God."[84] Menze is attentive to the text's details in a way that Gaddis is not, but neither he nor any other reader of the *Life* notices how the prevalence of lethality is precisely what distinguishes Samuel's work from other contemporary monastic hagiographies with a similarly sectarian outlook and concern for communal purification.[85]

I argue that Samuel's deviation from hagiographical convention owes to something historical about Barsauma, or at least to something for which he was (in)famous. Barsauma, almost certainly, I posit, performed acts of lethal violence during his own career and was known to do so by both admirer and detractor alike. We are in the fortunate position of possessing testimony about Barsauma outside Samuel's hagiography, which also happens to be more chronologically proximate to the historical Barsauma. The acts of the Council of Chalcedon, which preserve not only the proceedings of Chalcedon but also documentary material pertinent to the Second Council of Ephesus in 449,[86] mention Barsauma several times, with his admirers at Ephesus praising his combative zeal and his detractors at Chalcedon maligning his lethal violence.[87] While it is not difficult to imagine that the historical Barsauma was indeed lethally violent (the only two primary sources for his career say as much), the more important point is that his lethality was so interwoven with his legacy that for Samuel's *Life* to exclude or even downplay it would be to deny what had by then become conventional wisdom about the saint's memory.

Three testimonies to Barsauma's violent reputation survive in the minutes of the Second Council of Ephesus (preserved in the acts of Chalcedon). Barsauma first appears as the addressee of a letter written by Emperor Theodosius II on May 15, 449:

A divine letter sent to the most devout archimandrite Barsauma.

[84]Volker Menze, "The Dark Side of Holiness: Barsauma the Roasted and the Invention of a Jewish Jerusalem," in *Motions of Late Antiquity: Essays on Religion, Politics, and Society in Honour of Peter Brown*, ed. Jamie Kreiner and Helmut Reimitz, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 231–247, quoted at 241.

[85]For example: Callinicus's mid-fifth century *Life of Hypatius* describes the purificatory efforts of the founder of the Rufinianae monastery just outside of Constantinople. See Bradley K. Storin, "Monastic Identity and Violence in Callinicus' *Vita Hypatii*," *Studia Patristica* 129 (2021): 155–166; also, Bradley K. Storin, trans., *Callinicus: The Life of Our Sacred Father, Hypatius of the Rufinianae*, Cistercian Studies 301 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2024), 32–35.

[86]The Greek version of the acts of Chalcedon was likely published as soon as 454 or 455; see Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, Translated Texts for Historians 45, 3 vols. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 1:79. No systematic evidence for the production and dissemination of either the acts of the Second Council of Ephesus or the acts of the Council of Chalcedon exists; see Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II (408–450)*, Sather Classical Lectures 64 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 237. However, a Latin translation of the acts of Chalcedon was produced in the sixth century, while two Syriac versions of the acts of the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 survive, both dating to the sixth century; see Fergus Millar, "The Syriac Acts of the Second Council of Ephesus (449)," in *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils, 400–700*, ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 45–69. Moreover, while in exile in the Great Oasis in Egypt, Nestorius's *Bazaar of Heraclides* refers to details such as the death of Flavian and the deposition of Dioscorus at Chalcedon contained in the acts of Chalcedon, thereby suggesting his possession of a copy and the swiftness of textual transmission (ed. Paul Bedjan, *Nestorius. Le Livre d'Heraclide de Damas* [Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1910], 471, 514–515).

[87]ACO II, I, 1.47–48 (ed. Schwartz, 71); ACO II, I, 1.109 (ed. Schwartz, 85); ACO II, I, 1.851 (ed. Schwartz, 179); ACO II, I, 2.77–81 (ed. Schwartz, 116).

> It has not escaped Our Piety how the most godly and holy archimandrites in the eastern parts are *arrayed in combat*, *battling* on behalf of the orthodox faith and *opposing* some of the bishops in the cities of the Orient who are infected with the impiety of Nestorius, while the orthodox laity *share the combat* with these most godly archimandrites. Since the great labors that Your Holiness has endured on behalf of the orthodox faith have come to the notice of Our Piety, we deem it right that Your Sacredness, with your reputation for purity of life and orthodox faith, should go to the city of Ephesus and as the representative of all the reverent archimandrites in the east take your seat at the holy council that has been ordered to assemble there, and with the other holy fathers and bishops decree what is pleasing to God.
>
> Issued on the day before the Ides of May at Alexandria.[88]

Ascetic holiness and Miaphysite orthodoxy were not the only things that spurred Theodosius to elevate Barsauma to so high a position, but also his participation in the conflict against impiety.[89] As to what form his combativeness took (refutation of heretical arguments? shuttering the conventicles of heretics? physical confrontations?) and what form his partnership with the orthodox laity took, the letter remains silent. However, it testifies to Barsauma's reputation, as does the second mention of Barsauma, which comes in another letter of Theodosius's, written the following day to bishops Dioscorus of Alexandria and Juvenal of Jerusalem in order to solicit their help in guaranteeing that Barsauma would act as the general representative for all archimandrites everywhere and occupy a prominent seat amidst all the bishops.[90] As the Second Council of Ephesus unfolded, Barsauma lived up to his reputation. During the proceedings, just after Basil of Seleucia affirmed "two natures after the union," a commotion broke out, and Barsauma along with attendant monks and a group of Egyptians threatened everyone present by saying, "He who says two natures should be cut in two!"[91] Certainly this could have been just a theological acclamation that rallied Miaphysites, but its gravity seemed real enough to Basil that, out of fear for his life, he recanted.[92]

The proceedings of the Council of Chalcedon two years later also testify to Barsauma's reputation for violent zeal but now mention how it could turn deadly. At Chalcedon's first session in October 451, the minutes from the Second Council of Ephesus were publicly read aloud, which included Theodosius's letters to Barsauma, Dioscorus, and Juvenal along with Barsauma's threat of violence under the cover of theological acclamation against Basil of Seleucia and dyophysites. Later in that same session, Basil justified his flip-

[88]ACO II, 1, 1.48 (ed. Schwartz 71; trans. Price and Gaddis, 1:137, modified, my emphasis). Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 107 presents the hagiographical version of this letter written by Theodosius, which differs considerably. That Samuel even knows about this letter is noteworthy, though. Of course, Samuel's knowledge of both the letters and Barsauma's reputation does not require his access to a copy of the acts of Chalcedon.

[89]See also Volker L. Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria: The Last Pharaoh and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Later Roman Empire*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 113–114.

[90]ACO II, 1, 1.47; ACO II, 1, 1.109 (ed. Schwartz 71, 85).

[91]ACO II, 1, 1.176 (ed. Schwartz 93; trans. Price and Gaddis, 1:160). It is noteworthy that, among all the monks and clergy, only Barsauma gets mentioned by name.

[92]ACO II, 1, 1.851 (ed. Schwartz 179).

flopping at Ephesus by accusing Barsauma of deploying the *parabalani* – the notorious monastic hatchet men – to enforce Dioscorus's tyrannical leadership[93]; at the fourth session, Diogenes of Cyzicus leveled the more explosive allegation that Barsauma had murdered Bishop Flavian of Constantinople at Ephesus.[94] These two accusations, again, confirm Barsauma's reputation but re-value it as beyond the pale.[95]

At first glance, Diogenes's allegation smacks of the polemical hyperbole so characteristic of theological conflict in late antiquity. Andrew Palmer characterizes the allegation in one article as a "diversionary manoeuvre" meant to forestall the procedural motion of publicly reading of a petition by drawing the Council attendees' gaze to a galling atrocity (the murder of a bishop).[96] In another article, Palmer flatly declares Barsauma's innocence but argues that modern western historians have maligned him as a heretic and murderer based on the prejudicial, villainizing portrait in the acts of Chalcedon.[97] However, the minutes of Ephesus and the proceedings of Chalcedon provide the evidence, I think, that explains why Samuel refused to sanitize Barsauma's memory and why he laid down lethal and non-lethal violence as a cornerstone of Barsauma's sanctity. Samuel's *Life* contains an episode that generally corresponds to the accusation leveled in the acts of Chalcedon. Here, Samuel has Barsauma articulate a response to an accusation that looks quite similar to Diogenes's charge at Chalcedon:

> The magistrate began to speak harshly and menacingly, "You are Barsauma," he said, "the wizard and false guide; the emperor's enemy; the *murderer of bishops.*"
>
> Barsauma said: "I am Barsauma, the Christian. I have not abandoned the Word of truth, nor denied Christ, as you have. I am no enemy of believing emperors, no murderer of *true priests.* I am, however, the enemy of rebellious emperors, a hater of unbelieving priests. I have never killed a bishop. The Lord, however, will kill a priest who denies the truth."[98]

The *Life* narrates this episode not merely to record the man's death, but rather to highlight Barsauma's righteousness in killing him. The saint does not deny the accusation that he killed a bishop but debates its terms. It is not him who kills, but the Lord; it is not a bishop who died, but an unbelieving, apostate priest. The magistrate's articulation of Diogenes's general accusation provides Samuel with an opportunity to repackage the bishop's death as divinely sanctioned violence.

That the *Life* presents a similar accusation to the one leveled against Barsauma at Chalcedon does not necessarily mean that Samuel had access to the acts of Chalcedon, but he would not have needed it, since Barsauma himself or perhaps members of his

[93]Ibid. On the *parabalani*, see Glen W. Bowersock, "Parabalani: A Terrorist Charity in Late Antiquity," *Anabases* 12 (2010): 45–54.

[94]ACO II, 1, 2.77–81 (ed. Schwartz 116). Elsewhere in the *Acts*, for example, ACO II, 1, 1.853 (ed. Schwartz 179), bishops also blame Dioscorus of Alexandria for Flavian's death.

[95]It is possible that Nestorius in exile knows about the charge too; he alludes to a "murderous man" (*Bazaar of Heraclides*, ed. Bedjan 515: ܓܒܪܐ ܡܩܛܠܢܐ) perhaps thinking of Barsauma, and to "those who were murderers" (*Bazaar of Heraclides*, ed. Bedjan 515: ܕܡܩ̈ܛܠܢܐ ܐܝܬܝܗܘܢ) more general reference to Flavian's attackers.

[96]Palmer, "A Tale of Two Synods," 37.

[97]Palmer, "West-Syrian Monastic Founder Barṣawmo," 401.

[98]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 123.3–4 (trans. Palmer, 109, my emphasis; SOP 361:111r).

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entourage could have conveyed the report of the accusations back to the monastery after the Council. Rather, its importance lies simply in its corroboration of Barsauma's reputation for lethal violence deployed against a clergy member among both admirers and detractors. The debate was not whether he had killed a bishop, but what the value of that memory was – did it confirm Barsauma's holiness or unholiness? The very charge at Chalcedon that served as the basis for rebuke and exile becomes an opportunity for Samuel to explain the rationale behind Barsauma's use of lethal violence. Samuel does not hesitate, to return to De Wet's phrase, to apportion to Barsauma the shame of the executioner and it is precisely because of that, that Palmer's declaration of Barsauma's innocence remains unsatisfying.[99]

How would Samuel's laying down the most controversial feature of Barsauma's sanctity have resonated within the immediate community of readers? Without direct textual, material, epigraphical, or archaeological evidence, answering this question must be speculative, and yet the *Life*'s break from hagiographical convention compels us to consider the issue of reception. Here, literary context may shed light. Monastic hagiographies like the *Life* centered around a saint whose unflinching holiness is made manifest by a strict ascetic regimen, a preternatural ability to teach and attract disciples, an innate understanding of theological orthodoxy, an ability to work miracles, and a talent for waging spiritual warfare against demons and Satan as well as heretics, pagans, and Jews. Monastic hagiographies utilize stock characters, expositional conventions, and standard structures as they memorialize the sanctity of their protagonist to illustrate, with no room for doubt, that the source of the saint's power is divine, their teachings true, their intentions pure, their relationships with disciples unimpeachable, and their miracles incontrovertible.[100] Well aware of the "dangers of homogenized characterization" of their saintly subjects, authors exploited the very features of hagiographical texts that modern historians find so frustrating – their predictability, derivativeness, repetition, fantastical absurdity – and played with, even subverted, readers' expectations.[101] Monastic hagiographies constituted a literary venue where an author could prescribe ethical standards and theological orientation, where an author could articulate how to live the monastic life, how to forge monastic community, how to engage with clergy members, government officials, Jews, pagans, and heretics. In short, monastic hagiographies provided narrative space where authors could construct a vision of how things should be.[102]

[99]Palmer, "West-Syrian Monastic Founder Barṣawmo," 401.

[100]See Marc van Uytfanghe, "L'origine et les ingredients du discours hagiographique," *Sacris Erudiri* 50:1 (January 2011): 35–70, and "L'hagiographie: un 'genre' chrétien ou antique tardif?" *Analecta Bollandiana* 111 (1993): 135–188, especially 147–149; Claudia Rapp, "'For Next to God, You Are My Salvation': Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man," in *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Anthony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 63–81.

[101]See James Corke-Webster and Christa Grey, "Introduction," in *The Hagiographical Experiment: Developing Discourses of Sainthood* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1–26, quoted at 11. For conventional hagiographical portraits, see Robert Browning, "The 'Low Level' Saint's Life in the Early Byzantine World," in *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. Sergei Hackel (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 117–127.

[102]See the various topical and thematic essays in Stephanos Efthymiadis, ed., The *Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, Volume I: Periods and Places*, Ashgate Research Companions (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), and Stephanos Efthymiadis, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, Volume II: Genres and Contexts*, Ashgate Research Companions (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

Building out narratives of a saint had the corollary and intentional effect of setting down a model for readers to embody, often made explicit when authors called on their readers to imitate the life and career of a saint. Indeed, as Claudia Rapp notes,

> the holy man's teachings are inscribed by *imitatio* in his disciples and the saint is performed, as it were, by his audience… . It is not the author's primary aim [in a hagiographical text] to make a saint by celebrating the subject of his narrative, but rather to make saints out of those who encounter his work. In this manner, the holy man himself and definitely the literary efforts of the hagiographer become, ultimately, redundant. The text dissolves in the teaching that is enacted by the disciples. What remains is the eternal existence of the saint as he is rendered present in the life of his followers.[103]

Athanasius, for instance, summons readers of the *Life of Antony* to imitate all aspects of Antony's ascetic life.[104] Callinicus, who wrote the fifth-century *Life of Hypatius*, similarly invites readers to regard these texts as models of holiness that ought to be enacted in their own lives.[105] For their part, readers did precisely that. Jerome confirms, in his *Life of Paul*, that Antony's example had served later generations of desert ascetics as a model,[106] and Augustine of Hippo confessed that his response to the *Life of Antony* some three decades after its publication was an *imitatio*: when he found a psychological certainty that he had not previously known after taking up and reading Romans 13:13–14, Augustine was imitating Antony's response to the Matthew 19:21.[107] Whatever literary or rhetorical work Jerome and Augustine are performing is beside the point; both acknowledge that late ancient readers read hagiographies as models to be imitated.

Just as Samuel's *Life of Barsauma* corresponded to the generic features of late ancient monastic hagiographies, so too might the dynamic between text and audience. That is, for Samuel and his readers, Barsauma is a model to be imitated. This is traceable in the *Life*'s sanguine miracle-stories: not only do they express Barsauma's connection with God and Samuel's values, but they also offer a script for readers to act out in their own lives. Barsauma increases a loaf of bread, sweetens bitter roots and sour grapes, brings about an abundance of food for his monastery in a time of scarcity, finds new sources of water, performs many exorcisms, enables a woman to give birth, heals a Samaritan woman, and ends plagues among villagers and livestock.[108] Of course, readers were unlikely to perform Barsauma's miracles, but they could provide relief to disenfranchised and marginalized people, facilitate spiritual and physical health, or promote adherence to their orthodoxy. In these miracles, readers encountered a model of piety for their own lives.

The same dynamic is operative in the narratives of Barsauma's lethal violence and death curses. Just as Barsauma (his invincibility notwithstanding) is the target of violence from malevolent forces throughout his life, so too will his followers be targeted by their adversaries; just as Barsauma, with his speech, performs lethal violence to legitimize

[103]Claudia Rapp, "Author, Audience, Text and Saint: Two Modes of Early Byzantine Hagiography," in *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1 (2015): 111–129, quoted at 122–123.

[104]Athanasius, *Life of Antony* prol.3.

[105]Callinicus, *Life of Hypatius* prol.6–8.

[106]Jerome, *Life of Paul* prol.1.

[107]Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29, referring to Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 2.3.

[108]Samuel, *Life of Barsauma* 9.1, 14.1–4, 18.1–3, 27.1, 28.1–2, 48.1, 49.1–4, 59.1–5, 60.1–3, 64.1–4, 68.1, 69.1–3, 70.1–73.1, 76.1–4, 77.1–4, 80.1–5, 82.1–4, 85.1–2, 88.1–4.

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Miaphysite orthodoxy, compel conversions, uphold ascetic purity, or simply destroy his adversaries, so too are his followers authorized to perform their own acts of violence. But why would Samuel want to encourage his readers to perform any violence, whether lethal or non-lethal? The situation of Miaphysite monastic communities in the late fifth and sixth centuries provides some helpful context.[109] These hagiographical tales of violence constitute a response to the cultural whiplash that Miaphysites broadly and Barsauma's monastic community specifically experienced in the mid-fifth century. At the tail-end of Theodosius II's reign, Barsauma enjoyed influence and clout at the highest levels of ecclesiastical politics, but Marcian's accession and the proceedings of the Council of Chalcedon led to his political and cultural isolation. The Council's fourth and twenty-third canons (the former discussed at the sixth session, the latter appended afterward by Marcian's fiat) sought to curtail the influence of Barsauma and other wandering monks, confining them within the walls of their monasteries and subjecting them to the ecclesiastical authority of their bishop.[110] In the wake of Chalcedon, Barsauma returned to his monastery under the perception of imperial persecution. The history of Miaphysite responses to Chalcedon suggests that the *Life*'s earliest readers in the late fifth and sixth centuries engaged with the text under the same fraught circumstances through which Barsauma, and Samuel after him, lived. While it is unclear whether the canonical dictates had any material effect, they certainly contributed to a climate of distrust between Barsauma's Miaphysite monastic community and the Chalcedonian regime, a climate that would endure through the rest of the fifth century and into the sixth. Many Miaphysites, especially rigorous monastics, shared an experience and perception of imperial persecution, which in turn shaped a consistent worldview across various geographical and chronological contexts.

Amidst a widespread distrust of the imperial regime and Chalcedonian clergy, Samuel's hagiographical narrative depicts an image of heroic and violent resistance, while articulating a vision of a community with staunch boundaries. The holy violence contained in the *Life* communicates that any accommodation to or compromise with those outside the persecuted enclave – Jews, pagans, Chalcedonian apostates, imperial officials, or wealthy exploiters of poor people – would violate its delicate boundaries. Of course, monastic hagiographies were well suited to this kind of work. Samuel's *Life* was part of a wave of monastic hagiographies disseminated by Miaphysites to galvanize readers. In these flattering portraits of heroes like Cyril and Dioscorus of Alexandria, Anti-Chalcedonians created and preserved the memory of perceived Chalcedonian offense and persecution of orthodox Miaphysites.[111] For the first generations of Anti-

[109]On the diversity of Miaphysite communities arrayed against Chalcedon, see Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018), 14, 105. For a classic history of the Miaphysite movement, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). For a classic overview of three important Miaphysite theologians, see Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); see now the lucid précis of Mark DelCogliano, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings, Volume 4: Christ, Chalcedon and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), xxiv–xxxii.

[110]See ACO II, 2, 2.4, 23 (ed. Schwartz, 159, 162). On Canon 23 among those appended without formal conciliar approval, see Price and Gaddis, *Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, 3:92–93.

[111]For a Palestinian context, see Bernard Flusin, "L'hagiographie palestinienne et la réception du concile de Chalcédoine," in *ΛΕΙΜΩΝ: Studies Presented to Lennart Rydén on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. J.-O. Rosenquist, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 6 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1996), 25–47, and Jan-Eric Steppa, *John Rufus and World Vision of Anti-Chalcedonian Culture*, Gorgias Studies in Early Christianity and

Chalcedonians who used the past for the construction of communal identity, the Council's treachery and subsequent perception of persecution became major points of reference.[112] Samuel's *Life of Barsauma* participated in this act of memory preservation, using its narratives of violence to calcify the memory of Marcian and Chalcedon's wickedness as well as Barsauma's zealous resistance to that wickedness. Within the isolation and enclave mentality of Barsauma's monastic community, the literary parade of lethal violence that so defines the *Life* only confirmed the community's sense of itself and thereby prompted readers to adhere to the same violent and uncompromising model of piety that the saint evinced.

IV. Conclusion

Samuel's *Life of Barsauma* did little to challenge or soften the rough edges of Barsauma's legacy and instead offers its own assessment about the meaning and valence of his frequently lethal violence. At a basic level, the *Life* uses Barsauma's violence as a way to convey his authority: he is a living martyr of sorts, someone subjected to relentless bodily torment from persecuting adversaries, and a divinely authorized persecutor of apostates, heretics, pagans, and Jews. Rather than evince any anxiety or self-consciousness about venerating a lethal saint, Samuel amplifies Barsauma's violence and inscribes it as the central feature of his sanctity: Barsauma did not cause the death of merely one person but of many – magistrates, lapsed ascetics, apostate clergy, imperial officials, pagans, Jews, and even an emperor and empress. Samuel went even farther, framing the violence that Barsauma performed as concomitant to the violence with which he was (without harm) victimized by his ascetic regimen and adversaries. Such a portrait, Samuel reasoned, would resonate with the marginalized Miaphysite group that venerated Barsauma, the very group to which Samuel belonged, a monastic sect that perceived itself as undergoing the same persecution that it remembered its founder experiencing. The hagiographical narrative of Barsauma's lethal resistance to Marcian's regime scripted their resistance to later Chalcedonian successors.

It is difficult to assert that Samuel's depiction of deadly piety in the *Life of Barsauma* inspired the saint's admirers to commit acts of lethal violence; after all, drawing conclusions about how audiences received any text, let alone one as anomalous as this one, remains speculative since extra-textual evidence offers little insight. Here the sole post-hagiographical evidence for Barsauma or his community is the existence of the monastery as mentioned by later sources.[113] And yet, scholars have begun to take hagiographical tales of violence as forceful in and of themselves. Mar Marcos regarded the many hagiographical tales of temple destruction as templates that readers used in the process of creating religious conversions[114]; David Frankfurter even posits that "mere representations of violence also have a function in instigating real acts of aggression. Martyrologies, legends of persecution,

Patristics 4, second revised edition (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2014), xxvi–xxxvi; also Jan-Eric Steppa, "Heresy and Orthodoxy: The Anti-Chalcedonian Hagiography of John Rufus," in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, ed. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 89–106.

[112]See Volker L. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

[113]See discussion above.

[114]Mar Marcos, "Religious Violence and Hagiography in Late Antiquity," *Numen* 62:2/3 (March 2015): 169–196, at 190–191.

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can inflame groups – monks, villagers, militias – with the idea that mythic threats are at hand, that our enemies are again threatening us with persecution, or our children with ritual slaughter, that we must act immediately and forcefully to eliminate what threatens us."[115] Given the thematic pervasiveness of lethal and non-lethal violence in this text, as well as the protreptic force of monastic hagiographies and the context of social and political marginalization in which this Anti-Chalcedonian monastic enclave existed, we can reasonably posit that Samuel's *Life of Barsauma* positioned readers to follow in the saint's footsteps with lethal resistance to an apostate regime. But even more, the stories of Barsauma's lethal violence catalogued above reinforced readers' solemn view of the ascetic vow as well as their distrust of the rich, suspicion of Chalcedonian clergy and imperial officials, animosity toward magic and paganism, and resistance of any efforts to dechristianize and rejudaize the Holy Land.

Samuel's descriptions of the saint's lethal curses constitute the sanctification of a memory about a historical figure. The historical Barsauma likely used lethal violence in his career (as the minutes from the Second Council of Ephesus in 449 and the proceedings from the Council of Chalcedon in 451 show) and Samuel captures that memory while simultaneously sanctifying it: now Barsauma's lethal violence stems from the special power of the saint – the curse. But in doing so, Samuel creates a model for readers to follow. They may not be able to imitate the verbal potency of his curse – after all, that is the gift of the saint – but they can enforce the same communal boundaries and Miaphysite worldview as Barsauma with their own performances of lethal and non-lethal violence.

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[115]David Frankfurter, "'Religious Violence': A Phenomenology," *Ancient Jew Review* (24 February 2016) (https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2016/2/24/religious-violence-a-phenomenology; accessed on 25 June 2024). Wendy Mayer's overview of scholarship cautiously endorses this stance, but she reminds readers "we cannot go back into the past and test the impact of narrated violence on individuals or groups via interviews, surveys and media footage. The conclusions drawn as a result of this kind of approach can only ever be and will always remain speculative" ("Religious Violence in Late Antiquity: Current Approaches, Trends and Issues," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World*, ed. Dijkstra and Raschle, 251–265, quoted at 264).

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