

ROMANOS MELODOS, 'ON THE MASSACRE OF THE
INNOCENTS':
A perspective on *ekphrasis* as a method of patristic exegesis

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ABSTRACT

The rhetorical genre of *ekphrasis* was widely employed by patristic and Byzantine authors, especially in their homiletic output. Here we have especially in mind the descriptive homily: As opposed to the exegetical homily, in which the Fathers followed a line-for-line commentary, the descriptive homily follows a methodology according to which the preacher starts from a given (scriptural) episode or passage and then proceeds to develop it freely and elaborately, dramatising it by introducing lively dialogues, monologues and vivid descriptions, in this way taking the audience back in time and inviting them to partake in those far-off biblical events, and in the process rendering those events more vivid. In this form the patristic and Byzantine homily was actually an *ekphrasis*. In this paper the extensive use of *ekphrasis* in kontakion 3 (15) of Romanos is analysed as method of exegesis.¹ It concerns the description of war, in this case Herod's slaughter of the Innocents of Bethlehem. Romanos, in line with his model (Basil of Caesarea), closely follows the instructions for the composition of a war description prescribed by the pagan teachers of rhetoric (Theon, Hermogenes).

¹ Kontakion 3 in P. Maas & C.A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica. Cantica Genuina* (Oxford 1963 repr.) 17-26; and hymn 15 in J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode. Hymnes II: Nouveau Testament. Sources chrétiennes 110* (Paris 1965) 199-225.

1. Introduction: *ekphrasis* or formal description

Henry Maguire points out that ‘among the rhetorical genres cultivated by the Byzantines, one of the most popular was *ekphrasis*,² or formal description.’³ According to ancient pagan textbooks on rhetoric, the purpose of *ekphrasis* was to render the narration of events, places, seasons and persons in such a way that the reader would seem to see what was narrated or described before his very eyes. Thus Theon (*Progym.* 2.118.6 Spengel) defines it as follows: *ekfrasi- eṣti; logo- perihghmatiko- eṃargw- up’ olyn agwn to dhloumenon* (*‘Ekphrasis* is the art of descriptive narrative that brings the subject distinctly or clearly before the eyes’). One has therefore to distinguish in this regard between mere narration and formal description: the former merely reports an object in general, while the latter describes the object in detail. According to Hermogenes and Nikolaos, this genre was used to describe natural phenomena, places, times, persons, the seasons of the year, deeds, buildings and works of art.⁴ Such descriptions can be traced back to the earliest Greek literary products,⁵ in which we find descriptions of various objects, for instance descriptions of *weapons*, like the shield of Aeneas in Homer (*Il.* 18.467-82), or of Achilles in Euripides (*El.* 432-86); and *buildings*, like the palaces in Homer (*Od.* 7.81-82), the temple of Apollo in Euripides (*Ion* 1122-66) and the Cheops pyramid in Herodotus (2.124-25); also *descriptions of nature*, especially spring, for example in Sophocles (*OC* 668-93). The description of spring became very popular in patristic literature, and especially patristic homilies. In fact, *ekphrasis* in general was, as Kustas has obser-

² See especially G. Downey, ‘Ekphrasis’, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 4 (Stuttgart 1959) 921-44; A. Hohlweg, ‘Ekphrasis’, *Reallexikon zu byzantinischer Kunst* 2 (Stuttgart 1971) cols. 33-75; H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton 1981) 22-52; J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen & B. Dehandschutter, ‘Let us die that we may live’. *Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria c. AD 350-AD 450* (London & New York 2003) 34-35. Romanos the Melodist and others often exhibit the use of *ekphrasis*. In the case of the ‘Massacre of the Innocents’, Basil of Seleucia is an important source antedating the kontakion of Romanos – see below.

³ Maguire (note 2) 22.

⁴ Cf. Hermogenes, *Progym.* 10 (ed. H. Rabe, Leipzig 1913) 22.9.

⁵ See e.g. B.E. Perry, ‘The early Greek capacity for viewing things separately’, *TAPhA* 68 (1937) 403-27.

ved,⁶ 'received early into the homily and whole sermons are in form actually *ekphrasei*- of a new church or an especially beautiful set of icons or mosaics. If we recall that the homily is part of the liturgical drama, we can appreciate the contribution which the *ekphrasi*- made to the beauty of the divine service and its effect on the emotions of those participating in it.'

In general the function of *ekphrasis* in patristic and Byzantine homilies is both artistic and didactic, as Downey has pointed out:

'Wenn griechische literarische Typen u. Vorbilder schliesslich allgemein von den christl. Schriftstellern übernommen wurden, so stand ihnen die von den klassischen Autoren vollentwickelte E. zu didaktischen, exegetischen u. devotionalen Zwecken ebenso wie für rein schmückenden Gebrauch bereit.'

And in connection with hagiographical literature, he writes:

'Die während des 4. Jh. Entwickelte hagiographische Literatur verwendet die E. mit bemerkenswertem Erfolg als literarischen Schmuck zur Erhöhung ihrer Anziehungskraft, wie als didaktisches Mittel.'

Especially important are his remarks on the use of *ekphrasis* in the time of Romanos:

'Das Regime Justinians brachte, vor allem in Kpel, eine grosse Zahl von E. hervor; in Kpel war es damals literarische Mode, kurze ekphrastische Epigramme über Gemälde u. Statuen zu verfassen.'⁷

Regarding human actions such as *wars*, the narration of which constitutes almost the whole of Romanos' kontakion 'On the Massacre of the Innocents', Hermogenes gave clear instructions for composing such descriptions. The orator should divide his composition chronologically into three sections: 1. the prelude to the action; 2. the action itself; and 3. its aftermath. Hermo-

⁶ G.L. Kustas, *Studies in Byzantine Rhetoric* (Thessaloniki 1973) 58.

⁷ Downey (note 2) 933, 936 and 940. See also Leemans *et al.* (note 2) 35: '... just like the other stylistic means ... , the *ecphraseis* in our panegyrics served more than only ... (an) artistic purpose; they also contributed to conveying to the audience the homily's messages.'

genes explains this, when applied to the description of a war, illustrations of which are found in both Latin and Greek textbooks on oratory:

‘First we shall tell what happened before the war – the levying of troops, the expenditures, the fears; then the engagements, the slaughters, the deaths; then the trophy of victory, then the paeans of the victors, and the tears of the defeated and their bondage.’⁸

The massacre of the innocents, narrated by Matthew in his gospel (2.1-23), was particularly reworked into a formal description. The *massacre itself* is related by Matthew in merely one sentence: ‘when Herod saw how the magi had tricked him he fell into a great passion; and he gave orders and massacred all the children in Bethlehem and its neighborhood, of the age of two years or less’ (Matth. 2.16). This is merely reporting an event (mere narration), and it was, according to Maguire, ‘a natural temptation for a Christian preacher with a classical education to elaborate upon Matthew’s brief narration for the benefit of his hearers, and turn it into a description.’⁹ Maguire continues:

‘If the homilist had been trained in ancient rhetoric, the task of embroidering Matthew’s account would be easy for him; he could simply borrow from pagan oratory the conventional description of wars, and apply it to Herod’s slaughter of the innocents.’¹⁰

In Christian literature the most influential of the Greek sermons on the massacre of the innocents was composed by Basil of Seleucia.¹¹ Basil also divided his composition into the three phases of prelude, action and aftermath. Maguire writes:

‘There was some justification in the Gospel for this rhetorical division of the story: the brief text mentions that Herod gave orders before he massacred

⁸ Translation by Maguire (note 2) 22.

⁹ Maguire (note 2) 23.

¹⁰ Maguire (note 2) 23.

¹¹ Homily 37, *De infantibus* (PG 85, cols. 388-400).

the children, and it obliquely refers to the third stage, the lament after the Massacre, by quoting Jeremiah.¹²

Basil went far beyond the canonical text – his motive was to mock Herod, who went through the whole procedure of a war in order to slay the defenceless infants of Bethlehem. Basil's vivid portrayal of the massacre follows a pattern that became standard for Byzantine descriptions of this episode,¹³ and living in the 6th century, Romanos turned this conventional description *from prose into verse*, incorporating it into a kontakion that was probably the first to have been composed¹⁴ for the Feast of the Innocents, celebrated on 29 December.¹⁵

Kontakion 3 is not highly regarded by Grosdidier de Matons:¹⁶

'... le style comme la composition en sont faibles, parfois jusqu' à l'obscurité. Ainsi, dans le semblant de péripétie qu'offre le discours des soldats répondant pour refuser, puis pour accepter l'ordre d'Hérode, à aucun moment la suite des idées n'est claire, ce qui tient peut-être à l'imitation d'un modèle, autre kontakion ou plus probablement homélie plus détaillée, que le poète aura résumé maladroitement.'

A further defect is undoubtedly the inconsistency of the refrain, which is even abandoned at the close of the kontakion (strophe 18).¹⁷ Finally, there are a large number of metrical irregularities. But such technical defects do not, to my mind, mar the overall quality of the kontakion, as Gharib has already stated: 'l'inno rivela in pieno il modo di Romano, emergente nonostante alcuni difetti di stile e di composizione ...'¹⁸ Moreover, the objective of this study is not an evaluation of the poetic or literary quality of this specific

¹² Maguire (note 2) 25.

¹³ For the presentation of the 'Massacre of the Innocents' in Byzantine Art, see Maguire (note 2), figures 2-16, which depict various aspects of the massacre and illustrate the popularity of this theme in Christian art.

¹⁴ De Matons (note 1) 199.

¹⁵ Cf. L. Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien* (Paris 1920) 251-84.

¹⁶ De Matons (note 1) 200.

¹⁷ This, according to De Matons (note 1) 200, may even point to the spuriousness of the final prayer of the kontakion.

¹⁸ G. Gharib, *Romano il Melode. Inni* (Rome 1981) 204.

kontakion, but a presentation thereof as an example of *ekphrasis* used as method of exposition or exegesis. In this regard it is important to point to Maguire's statement that formal descriptions 'grace poetry as well as prose, and they enliven religious writings such as sermons and hymns ...'¹⁹ But it should also be noted that in the process of formal descriptions that enliven such writings (artistic function), they also facilitate comprehension on the part of the audience (didactic function).²⁰ This is, one should add, one of the most important objectives of the homily as liturgical text, the kontakion being in essence a verse homily or sung sermon.

To this we should add two other important techniques by means of which Romanos, in line with other patristic and Byzantine homilists, involves his audience in the events he is describing and thus further facilitates comprehension and enlivens his narrative. Firstly, *dialogue/monologue* and *apostrophe*, both forming an integral part of the *ekphrasis* in kontakion 3. The insertion of direct speech (fictitious discourse)²¹ in the form of dialogues and monologues, renders these poetic homilies into highly dramatic compositions; for while indirect discourse rather puts events and persons in a narrative at a distance from the audience or reader, direct discourse *involves* the audience or reader in the narrative world. Secondly, very much the same, from a different perspective, results from the use of apostrophe,²² which also presents the characters to the audience *as if they were present in the congregation*. Thus Petersen points out:

'By means of their speech, Romanos endowed his characters with a hitherto unknown psychological depth. His characters reveal their motives, doubts and fears; they are more than one-dimensional "teaching aids" or foils for divine action. The people in Romanos' hymns are, above all, believable

¹⁹ Maguire (note 2) 22.

²⁰ For literature on the preacher and audience, see J.H. Barkhuizen, 'Proclus of Constantinople, *Encomium* on "All the Saints" (*Homily* 34). Translation and analysis', *AClass* 47 (2004) 24 n. 74.

²¹ See R.J. Schork, 'Dramatic dimension in Byzantine hymns', *Studia Patristica* 8 (1966) 271-79. For other literature on this aspect, see also Barkhuizen (note 20) 24 n. 73.

²² For the use of apostrophe in Romanos, see J.H. Barkhuizen, 'Narrative apostrophe in the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist with special reference to his hymn "On Judas"', *AClass* 29 (1986) 19-27.

psychological portraits. The result is that they take on an extraordinary immediacy for the listener. A drama is being played out in his mind; he hears the voices, has the physical setting ascribed, and now is invited to enter the scene.²³

And Leemans writes in this regard:²⁴

‘Another means of making the homily more lively is to insert *direct speech* (*prosopoiia*) in the form of monologues and dialogues ... Inserting fictitious monologues equally makes the homily more lively and provides the homilist with the opportunity to introduce another perspective into the narration, to show the events from another person’s viewpoint. It can also be an opportunity to bring some emotion into play ...’

2. Romanos and the ‘Massacre of the Innocents’

2.1. Preliminary remarks

In line with the compositional structure of the description of war put forward by Hermogenes, according to which one should distinguish three basic stages in the narrative or formal description, the following structure can be posed for Romanos’ description of the massacre. First of all, however, the narrative of Romanos should be compared with the report of Matthew 2.3-21. In Matthew the order of events is as follows:

1. Herod is informed of the birth of Christ, and gathers information concerning the Christ. He requests the Magi to keep him informed of the event (2.3-8).
2. The Magi’s adoration of the Christ child, and the warning not to return to Herod (2.9-12).
3. The warning to Joseph as to Herod’s motives, and the consequent flight to Egypt (2.13-15).

²³ W.L. Petersen, *The Diatessaron and Ephrem Syrius as Sources of Romanos the Melodist, CSChO 475* (Louvain 1985). The dramatic element of the kontakion, especially in the hands of Romanos, is pointed out in most of the substantial studies on Romanos and the kontakion. See especially Schork (note 21).

²⁴ Leemans (note 2) 33-34.

4. The massacre of the infants (2.16-18).
5. The return from Egypt (2.19-21).

In Romanos:

1. Whereas Matthew places the flight to Egypt after the visitation of the Magi, but before the actual slaying of the infants, which is the chronologically proper sequence, Romanos places the flight to Egypt after the massacre. In doing so he has constructed his narrative in line with the structure put forward by Hermogenes *et alii*, the flight to Egypt thus forming the third phase, the Aftermath.²⁵
2. Secondly, the entry into Egypt is expanded beyond the New Testament narrative by Romanos' reference to the destruction of the idols and the angel who served the Christ child in Egypt. Romanos often alludes to this episode, taken from the *Infancy Gospels*, based on Isaiah 19.1.
3. Romanos ignores the final event, namely the return from Egypt.²⁶

2.2 Outline of the compositional structure of the massacre

A. Prelude: cause, result and preparations for war²⁷

1. Cause: the threat to the kingdom and power of Herod posed by the birth of the Christ.
2. Result: this implies a threat to Herod's power, instilling fear, jealousy and wrath in the heart of Herod.
3. Preparations: Herod summons his army, and they prepare for the war, albeit one against infants!

²⁵ Gharib (note 18) has noted this shift in the story line: 'il Melode concentra l'attenzione sulla figura di Erode e, per contrasto, sugli abitanti di Betlemme, lasciando in sottofondo Gesù bambino e sua Madre.' The reason for this, as has been pointed out above, is because it has become for Romanos the final phase of the war-*ekphrasis*: the defeat of Herod and the victory of Christ.

²⁶ Note also that the final strophe (18) does not form part of the *ekphrasis*, and could even be spurious; see De Matons (note 1) 200.

²⁷ Cf. *ol pol emo-* (4.10), *Hrw dh- pol emh/*(8.12), *pol emon e khgeire* (13.3).

B. The action: the massacre proper

In this section the audience is presented with all the action: the search and brutal killing of the infants, including the wailing of the mothers as well as their fearful and impetuous reactions. The section is characterised by three aspects: (i) a metaphorical description of the massacre, (ii) a realistic description of the brutal details of the massacre, and (iii) an invective against the Jews and Herod.

C. The aftermath

Usually in the case of the description of war, the aftermath, as Hermogenes has envisaged it (see p. 4 above), consists of the triumph of the victor and the sorrowful plight of the conquered. However, in the case of Romanos' kontakion 'On the Massacre of the Innocents', the following should be noted:

1. Romanos has inserted the sorrowful plight of the parents of the infants, namely their wailing and sorrow, within the description of the massacre proper (second section), where it seems to fit in place. But the aftermath still conforms to the structure put forward by Hermogenes, consisting of (a) the failure of Herod in killing the Christ child (the defeat of Herod), because (b) Christ (!) has fled with his parents (!) to Egypt, where he overthrew the idols and was served by an angel (the victory for the one being persecuted or against whom the war was waged).
2. Romanos clearly states that *Christ* has fled (15.6-8), for the focus is on Christ, not on Mary and Joseph. He is the 'mighty God' (2.9) against whom the war is waged.
3. In the section on the flight to Egypt he includes the use of apostrophe.

3. Analysis

3.1 *The Prelude (prooimion, strophes 1-7)*

3.1.1 The technique of foreshadowing (prooimion, strophe 1)

As he so often does in the prooimia and initial strophe(s) of his kontakia, Romanos foreshadows motifs that he will develop in his homiletic narrative.²⁸ In the prooimion three such motifs are alluded to: (1) the birth of Christ the King in Bethlehem, visited and worshipped by the Magi, who were guided by the star, serves as the primary cause of the massacre, for this implies (2) the destruction of Herod's power (the motif of the refrain throughout, except for the final strophe), and hence his fear and self-pity,²⁹ which again (3) drove him to the slaying of the Infants.³⁰ Thus: Christ the King born in Bethlehem (with the Magi from Persia and the star from above as centre-piece) vs. king Herod and infants – this has all the ingredients for the preacher's exposition in terms of a description of war. The image of mowing or reaping (here in line 4 in the form of a comparison) is one of several that form part of the agricultural imagery employed by Romanos in his narrative, and by means of which he adorns and enlivens his narrative.

The technique of foreshadowing is continued in the first strophe. In four *antithetical* statements Romanos first refers to the dire outcome of the massacre: while there is joy below and above because of the birth of Christ, wailing and sorrow could be heard (symbolically referred to as Rachel's lament) (1-5):

- eujfrainomenwn ... qrhno- afmetro-
- epagal letai ... ojuretai
- ajegnwrismqh ... stenazei
- ulywqh ... klaiei

At this stage Romanos interrupts himself to address his audience and directs their attention to the biblical text that forms the basis of his exposition, a technique which is typical of his homiletic art and homiletic art *per se*. In this

²⁸ The term 'homiletic narrative' here refers to Romanos' descriptive exegesis or exposition of his biblical material.

²⁹ tarassetai ... ojuretai (4).

³⁰ qerizei ta;nhpia w- siton (4).

instance he employs the formula *deute ... iplwmen*, referring indirectly to the biblical text of Matthew, including foreshadowing of the negative outcome of the massacre³¹ as well as the massacre itself.³² Romanos adds to this another character trait of Herod, for in addition to his fear and self-pity, mentioned in the proimion, Romanos points to his utmost cruelty.³³

Foreshadowing or allusion further occurs in 1.10-11: gathering of information concerning the birth of Jesus, and the sending of his soldiers to slay the infants on account of Jesus.³⁴

Note the repetition of (Rama and) Rachel in this strophe in order to emphasise the aspect of lament. Rachel is used (i) as historical person (3-5), (ii) as geographical denotation (*pemya~ eij- Bhql eem ajteknoi thn Rachel*)³⁵ and (iii) as symbolical figure (11-12) (of the future church: *ajl j ekein eñ cara/huře pal in aujta*).

3.1.2 Initial development of the narrative description (strophes 2-3)

From this point onwards Romanos replaces mere foreshadowing with a more detailed development of his *ekphrasis*. In this section as well as in the following, Romanos uses *indirect statement*, *monologue* and *dialogue*.

In strophe 2 Romanos firstly focuses on Herod's fear, which stems from Isaiah's prophecy of the Christ, who in the strophe is called by various titles: *paidion*, *uibr*, *pantwn pathr*, *twñ aijmwñ despothr*, *basileu~ tou panto~*, *megal h~ boul h~ aggelo~*, *qeio~ ijscuro~*, *pantacou ajcwrhto~*, and the one who has the government (*ajrchñ epei*) on his shoulders. Herod's fear of this King is expressed in the following phrases and words: *fobo~ ... aujtw/mh; boul omenw/, dedoiken, fobhqeir*. Secondly, the audience is told how Herod, on account of his fear, carefully gathered in information concerning

³¹ *to; ojdurmon kai; to; penqo~ (1.6); cf. qrhnei (1.7).*

³² *aper nun katesfaxen Hrwdh~ (1.8).*

³³ *ol wjnotato~ (1.8).* This adjective is also applied to Nebuchadnezzar in *kontakion 8.7.4 (= 46 Oxf.)*.

³⁴ *hkrwbwsen ... pemya~ ... ajteknoi ... dia; to; brefo~ Mariam.*

³⁵ Rachel was buried on the road of/to Ephrata (Gen. 35.19), on the border of Benjamin and Ephraim; Ephrata has been identified with Bethlehem by a gloss inserted in the text of Genesis 35.19. This gloss (probably) supplied Romanos with a geographical denotation of the name Rachel in line 11. For the two sons of Rachel, see De Matons (note 1) 207 n. 1.

the child of Mary, indicated by the following phrases and words: mel ethsa~, ejxemaqe, hkribwse ... maqein, eñmaqe ajyeudw~.

The following strophe (3) is dominated by Herod's monologue. But in the introduction to the monologue and in the monologue itself, the audience is again reminded of the Christ child who is also a mighty king, and has instilled so much fear into the heart of Herod.³⁶ Learning (maqwn, 4) the name and power of this child-king, has overwhelmed him with fear³⁷ and has taken away that peace and quiet, which have up to now characterised his life. This peace and quiet are effectively expressed in the image of a (rude) awakening from sleep.³⁸

The monologue of Herod (3.6-14) is part and parcel of the dramatisation technique used by patristic and Byzantine homilists as method of exposition, and the whole monologue serves to give the audience an in-depth look into the heart of Herod: his fears/anxiety and aporia (cf. aporwn, 4.1). This anxiety or aporia (helplessness) is effectively characterised in the following ways:

1. by the phrase in line 4, preceding his monologue: the mixture of laughter (gelwti) and sorrow (penqo~) points to a confused and uncertain mind (cf. twñ aql iwn logismwn, 3.7);
2. by the fact that he, who became master of sea and land,³⁹ is like a child himself, afraid of a child, whom he has not even seen (3.6, 8, 9);
3. by his questions of doubt and uncertainty about his action for the present and the future (3.10);
4. and finally by the fact that the Magi have proclaimed this child as a mighty king who will destroy his kingdom: basileā ijscuron kaqairounta thñ eñhn basileiān (3.11-13) – a fact to which he refers as

³⁶ tou tecqento~ to: oñoma, thñ dunamin tou breifou~, basileā ijscuron kaqairounta.

³⁷ Notice the accumulation of words of fear: fobw/ suneiceto, eñtreme, penqo~, ptooumai, tremw, tarattei me, qrhñw.

³⁸ upñwsa~ eñ eijrhnh/alfñw hgerqh kai; hñ tetaragmeno~ upo; deilia~.

³⁹ This qualification is also applied to Nebuchadnezzar in Romanos' kontakion 'On the three holy children' (8.6.5 French edition = 46.6.5 Oxf. ed.: th~ gh~ kai; pontou añax).

twn ajlokhitwn kakwn (6). This concept of evils unforeseen clearly picks up the image of line 1: the rude awakening out of quiet sleep.

3.1.3 Preparations for the massacre: dialogue between Herod and his soldiers (strophes 4-6)

In strophe 4 Romanos turns to the meeting between Herod and his army, a scene in which he prepares the audience for the actual massacre.

By means of the verb *aporwn*, Romanos again focuses on Herod's confused mind, and subsequently moves on to his decision⁴⁰ to kill⁴¹ the child of whom the Magi spoke.⁴² Romanos, with a view to the actual massacre, further cleverly moves from Herod's helplessness (*aporwn*) to his cruel and unmerciful person. He does so by introducing three phrases into lines 1-5: the urgency of the matter (*dia; tacou-*), the boldness (*parecei parrhsian*) with which he summoned his army, and the cruel sound of his voice (*traceia/ fwnh*) with which he addressed them. This indeed prepares the audience for what is to follow.

Herod's command to his soldiers consists of four elements:

1. the actual command towards action;⁴³
2. the reference to location and subjects to be slain;⁴⁴
3. the disposition of the soldiers: armed to the teeth they should display haughtiness and act as if clothed in mercilessness,⁴⁵ the clothing image employed again emphasising the cruelty on the part of Herod;
4. finally Romanos has Herod point to the authoritative nature of his command, which will permit no one to hinder them, but will fill the people with fear and an attitude of non-resistance.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ kinwn tou- logismou-.

⁴¹ kaqaireqhsetai, the verb used in the refrain of the kontakion!

⁴² to; nhpion oper magoi ekhruxan.

⁴³ poreuesqe ... pempw ... apokteinate.

⁴⁴ pol ei- ... cwra-, Bhqleem ta; ekgona, breifh dieth kai; truferai

⁴⁵ kaqwpl ismenoi ... gegaurwmenoi ... ajsplagcnian ejdedumenoi.

⁴⁶ prostagma basilikon, olkwlawn oupei-, pante- tremousi, ouj legousi pote; ofti to; krato- aytou kaqaireitai tacw

The response of the soldiers (strophes 5-6) at first reveals their own discomfort and embarrassment with the nature of the command. This would certainly result in mockery on the part of the people when they came to realise that an army was commanded to fight mere children, and although they refer to the people in derogatory terms as fools (twn ajfronwn), their embarrassment seems real: dedoikamen mhpw- gelw- genwmeqa ... oti kata; nhpiwn strateuomeqa.

Nevertheless, they respond positively and even assure him that no one will blame him for his accurate gathering of information on which his subsequent decision has been based. They consequently urge him to overrun the One who came down from heaven to earth. Two aspects should be underlined: the emphasis on the way information concerning the child born in Bethlehem is gathered⁴⁷ and the fact that Herod should not be concerned in this regard;⁴⁸ and the urgency that has suddenly conquered their embarrassment. This is represented by the fact that they will act on his command to undertake a thorough search as soon as possible,⁴⁹ and by the repetitive use – for the sake of emphasis – of the idea of killing the child: katadrame, katadrame.

Their enthusiasm is, for a moment, curtailed when they remind Herod of the reputation of Bethlehem in producing great kings, like David, whom Goliath feared as much as they now fear the child born in Bethlehem. David, serving as *exemplum*, is not without significance, since Jesus is from the Davidic line according to the flesh, and this could imply grave danger – compare their advice to Herod to be careful of Bethlehem: mh; proskroush/aujth/, as well as the phrase ton qelonta thn shn (sc. Herod) basileian ajfelein (6.11). It would therefore seem necessary that they should immediately act and search the whole of Bethlehem⁵⁰ and find the child.⁵¹ The

⁴⁷ ejreunan, aper ejnaqe-.

⁴⁸ mh; frontize tou pragmato-.

⁴⁹ kel euson hma- ... oti hn taco- diereunwmen, barei- kai; oi kou-.

⁵⁰ The soldiers' reference to the fact that they should search Bethlehem and its surrounding areas, both estates and houses, in strophe 5.6-8 and strophe 6.5, picks up Herod's reference to 'cities and towns' in strophe 4.6.

⁵¹ De Matons (note 1) 211 has sufficiently and correctly referred to this inconsequent disposition on the part of the soldiers. He has consequently suggested *inter alia* that

soldiers again remind Herod of the accuracy of his information in a line that displays a rhetorical balance we so often find in Romanos:

ol toko~ ephl wqh soi
kai; ol topo~ egnwsqh soi (6.9).

This renewed urgency is emphasised by several references in strophe 6 to the actual command to kill the child⁵² and the soldiers' encouragement that he should not be afraid that his power will be destroyed, even if the Magi have deceived him and the prophets have instilled fear into him.

3.1.4 Herod's murderous wrath and clouded mind as final preparation or motivation for the war against the infants (strophe 7)

Following the speech of the soldiers, Herod's murderous disposition is immediately presented to the audience when Romanos refers to him as ol paidoktono~, which sets the tone for strophe 7 covering Herod's wrath and clouded mind. Imagery plays an important part in this portrait of Herod. Acting on the soldiers' encouragement, he became *like fire*, letting his wrath loose *like missiles*,⁵³ a fire, not destroying thorn bushes, but murdering infants, in the process colouring the earth red with their blood. This is followed by another image: his mind has been concussed and beclouded, not by *drunken stupor*, but by jealousy, becoming a *bunch of grapes* full of bitterness (botru-pikria~). Romanos again employs the technique of foreshadowing, alluding to the massacre, and again in metaphorical terms, continuing with the image of the vineyard (tou~ nebu~ kladou~ etemen ... toutou~ ... apekoyen), and at the same time he does not let the chance go by to point to Herod's evil personality (ol aþiko~). For the first time the audience is also prepared for another stage in the narrative, namely, Herod's failure to kill the Christ child (anticipating section C. The aftermath): ekeinon ... ouk elfqase – a fact

Romanos has probably suppressed a section of the conversation between Herod and his soldiers taken from his source.

⁵² eij ouh dokei soi ... ejeunhqhtw, neuson ouh toi~ soi paisiv... affel wmeqa aujtou thn zwnh apo; gh~. Note also eufwmen breifo~ kai; ajel wmen aujtou (6.7-8).

⁵³ pur egeneto kai; bol ida~ ekepempe th~ ojrh~ ta; orhmata.

which filled him with excessive anger and persistent sorrow because of the voice he heard that his power would be destroyed.

3.2 *The massacre proper (strophes 8-14)*

3.2.1 Metaphorical description of the massacre (strophes 8-10)

Strophes 8 and 9 present the audience with the massacre proper mostly painted in metaphorical language.

The first image (8.1-5) relates to a well-known activity, often painted on ancient vases, namely a hunting scene: Herod is described as the jackal (ajl wphx)⁵⁴ tracking down Christ, the lion cub (skumnon), sending his soldiers forth like hunting dogs (tou- kuna-). But by typifying Herod as jackal and the dogs as kakour-, the evil character of the hunt is sharply underlined: usually it is the prey (to; qhrama) that is seen as the negative element of the hunt, and the hunters and dogs as the positive element. However, this is no normal hunting scene, but a murderous undertaking. The urgency of the hunt is emphasised by the phrase ešwqen kai; ešwqen Bhqleem as well as the use of the present participles (peritreconta- kai; zhtounta-) to indicate duration of time. The conclusion of the image focuses on the failure on the part of the hunters, who are therefore again seen as transgressors: the dogs scattered the lambs (afna-), but not the lion (leonta), because they could not face him.⁵⁵ Both words have positive implications: the infants are seen as lambs which, in a biblical context, suggest tenderness⁵⁶ and figuratively point to children belonging to the fold of Christ.⁵⁷

The second image (8.6-8) relates to vultures seeking out the eagle. Again the negative perspective is on the hunters, since vultures are scavengers, while the concept of the eagle usually carries a positive note. Again the failure on the part of the vultures is pointed out, the failure being due to the

⁵⁴ Romanos applies this qualification to Herod the Great, probably borrowing it from Luke 13.32, where it is recorded that Jesus referred to Herod Antipas as 'the fox'.

⁵⁵ Notice in this statement the play on words: tw/ blemmati ... toutou ouk ajtofqalmei.

⁵⁶ Cf. truferaused by Herod of the infants (4.11).

⁵⁷ Cf. the image of the shepherd in John 10.

fact that the eagle is in hiding, while caring for and protecting⁵⁸ its nest with its wings (i.e. Mary), whom God has created before with his own hand.⁵⁹ By means of the phrase ‘created before with his own hand’ (8.9), Romanos turns from metaphorical language to the real world of creation, referring to Christ as the one who was just recently (aḡti) born of the Virgin whom he had created (8.10). The strophe concludes (8.11-14) with emphasising again the failure on the part of Herod and his army (again anticipating section C: kaḡ Hrwdh- polemh/kopiwn aḡwfelw-:qrnhhsei de; ayeudw- ktl).

Continuing with metaphorical language, Romanos in strophe 9 draws the massacre instigated by Herod in colours of darkness (gnorfon skotei-notaton, eḡskotisen aḡanta-, 9.1-3) – this is in contrast to the cloud of light (the birth of Christ) that has enfolded Judea.⁶⁰ Thus Herod, Romanos states, has instantly turned the playful and laughing nature of children into bitter wailing, and the land’s recent joy over the birth of Mary’s child into wailing (9.4-8). The slain children are likened to a flower, which has fallen to the ground on the same day, pointing to their premature death. The nature imagery is followed by musical imagery or symbolism: everyone joining in with Rachel singing a dirge instead of a song of joy.⁶¹

Strophe 10 continues with the image of sound: the wailing of the parents, weeping over their young ones, mourning them in unison,⁶² is likened to the sound of thunder on earth, while the hills, ravines or gorges were also echoing with the sound of their wailing. Blood covered the whole country, even in deserted places, for Herod’s wrath reached even those uninhabited places to which mothers were driven. Romanos heightens the effect of the scene by pointing to Herod’s evil personality: he is paranomo- kai; oḡtw- uḡperhḡano-. The last word reminds one of Luke 1.51: in Mary’s ‘Song of

⁵⁸ For God being likened to an eagle protecting its young, see Deut. 32.11-12. The image of ‘a hen gathering her brood under her wings’ in Matth. 23.37 conveys the same idea.

⁵⁹ Christ is both creator and son of the Virgin.

⁶⁰ According to the Proto-gospel of James (19.2) a cloud of light covered the cave of Bethlehem at the time Christ was born.

⁶¹ mel o- oḡunhron aḡti; aḡmato- terpnou, aḡti; uḡnou glukerou ... klauqmon. See De Matons (note 1) 217 for the problems this poses for the refrain. The same misfit of refrain and strophic content can be seen in strophe 12.

⁶² sunepascon aḡl hḡoi- sugkoptomenoi.

Praise', she refers to God who has scattered the $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho\eta\phi\alpha\nu\omicron\upsilon\text{-}dianoia/kardia\text{-}a\upsilon\tau\omega\nu$. Turning again to metaphorical language, Romanos relates that the children were seized from the mothers' arms like young birds from the nest ($\omega\lambda\text{-}strouqia\ neossou$) and, while still singing their sweet song, were slaughtered without any knowledge on the part of Herod as to the consequences of his acts.⁶³

3.2.2 Gruesome details of the massacre (strophes 11-14)

In depicting the gruesome details of the massacre in which Romanos, like Basil of Seleucia, seems almost to delight in presenting his audience with such brutal detail, interrupts himself by commenting on the perpetrators of this cruel deed. He does so by means of invective directed at both the Jews (str. 11-12) and Herod (str. 13). The description of the gruesome details of the massacre serves as perfect background for Romanos' invective. The audience is thus made to share actively in the preacher's indignation towards Herod and the Jews when the audience is confronted with the horrific detail of the massacre. De Matons' repugnant attitude in this regard⁶⁴ is understandable, but irrelevant as far as the patristic and Byzantine homiletic perspective is concerned.

The opening line of strophe 11 depicts the gruesome confrontation between the soldiers and the mothers carrying their infants. The use of juxtaposition ($\tau\alpha\iota\text{-}mhtrasi\text{-}gumnw\ tw\ xifei$) effectively recreates the scene for the audience. Driven by fear, the mothers react in different ways, Romanos explaining this behaviour by means of an aside referring to the nature of the female gender, which is both timid and impulsive: $deilon\ gar\ fusei\text{-}propete\text{-}\dots\ kai\ qrasutaton$). Firstly, the women's fearful nature could be seen in the fact that they threw away the infants they were carrying and nurturing with love. This behaviour is emphasised by the very first words of line 3 – $\phi\omicron\beta\omega\lambda\ de\;ptooumenai$ – which contrast sharply with the final words of the line: $\alpha\pi\epsilon\rho\ (ta\;breifh)\ poqw\ ephlazon$. Secondly, the women's impulsive nature is highlighted by referring to the fact that others pleaded with the soldiers (here aptly called $\tau\omicron\upsilon\text{-}foneutai$), wishing to be

⁶³ $mh\;nown\ oldusmenh\text{-}o\tau\iota\ toiauta\ poiwn\ to\ krato\text{-}aultou\ kaqaireitai\ tacur$

⁶⁴ De Matons (note 1) 200: 'La strophe 14, qui décrit le massacre des enfants avec plus de réalisme que de bon goût ...'

beheaded⁶⁵ rather than seeing their infants killed before their eyes. The strophe is concluded by reference to the mothers calling out bitterly that, though the infants be killed, they will nevertheless be received by Abraham as he did once receive Abel, the first human who was killed innocently. This biblical reference to the murder of the first human being serves as technique of anticipation and association, for in the next strophe (12) Romanos will point to several biblical persons who were killed by their own people, the Jews.

In referring to the spilling of the innocent blood of the infants, Romanos reminds his audience of the murderous behaviour of the Jews, and the two opening sections of strophe 12.1-2 effectively contrast the 'evil' of the soldiers with the 'innocence' of their victims:

rainontwn tw n ajnomwn ...
tw n ajkakwn nhpiwn ...

He then refers to several biblical figures serving as examples of this behaviour on the part of the Jews: Abel (picking up the reference to Abel in the preceding strophe), Zechariah, Moses, Isaiah,⁶⁶ and now the infants of Rachel. The whole strophe, as well as the following one (13), employs the technique of diatribe or invective as example of exposition often found in patristic and Byzantine homilies.⁶⁷ In strophe 12 the Jews are characterised and reviled for both what they were (ubristaii paranomoi, foneutaii ajsunetoi, nomon parabainonte-) and what they did (rainontwn ... ajpwbn ai]na, ektanqh, ajpokteinantwn, h]pethsan ... e]prisan, katasfarttousi).

The technique of invective with negative characterisation of Herod is continued in strophe 13 directed at Herod in the form of *exclamatio*. He was

⁶⁵ tou- au]cena- au]toi- pareicon.

⁶⁶ Isaiah being cut into two is a Jewish tradition reflected in *The Ascension of Isaiah*. For text and translation, see P. Bettiolo, A. Kossova, C. Leonardi, E. Norelli & L. Perrone (edd.), *Ascensio Isaiae* (Turnhout 1995). See also C. Moreschini & E. Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature* (translated by M.J. O'Connell) (Peabody, Mass. 2005) 93-97.

⁶⁷ For this see especially K.-H. Uthemann, 'Forms of communication in the homilies of Severian of Gabala: a contribution to the reception of the diatribe as a method of exposition', in M. Cunningham & P. Allen (edd.), *Preacher and Audience. Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics* (Leiden 1998) 139-77.

evil and mad, without any pity or care, except when it came to himself, and he was drunk with wrath, and therefore went against all like a wild animal.⁶⁸ In line 11 there is again reference to the sorrow resulting from the massacre – the wailing of fathers and mothers.⁶⁹

In strophe 14 we find a continuation of the description of the massacre itself, Romanos focusing here on some gruesome details of the massacre, of which Maguire says, 'Like Basil of Seleucia, Romanos seems almost to delight in brutal detail.'⁷⁰ The opening statement of strophe 14 paints the general picture of the massacre:

macairai~ ajhlew~ apoktanqenta
wl~ ejn schmati fonou, ajnempta brefh.

This is followed by some gory details: some infants were transfixed and others cut in two; the heads of others again were severed from their bodies, while still breastfeeding, in such a way that they were still hanging onto their mothers' breasts, with the nipples still clenched between their delicate teeth, the mothers thus being physically separated from their young.

In the second part of the strophe Romanos points to the increasing depth of sorrow on the part of the mothers forcibly separated from their infants (an intensification of 13.11): *diplai tote gegonan odunai kai ajforhtai ktl.*

3.3 *The aftermath: Herod's failure – the flight to Egypt (Strophes 15-17)*

With strophe 15 we reach the third section of the *ekphrasis*, the aftermath, in the form of two motifs: (1) Herod's failure to kill the Christ child because (2) Christ had fled to Egypt with his parents.⁷¹ The whole of the strophe is expressed in metaphorical language, Romanos employing throughout the

⁶⁸ Cf. the following words and phrases reflecting his evil personality: *kakia*, *mania*, *ajnoiktisto*~ *tropo*~, *ouje*; *wkteirhse*, *ouc upemnhsqh*, *ouk wkteire*, *ouden ton ajaidh ejnele peri: aijtwn ... ojrgisqei*~ *ejnequsqh ... wšper qhron agrion*.

⁶⁹ *patere*~ *eqlaion uibu*~ *kai; mhtere*~ *sun aijttoi*~.

⁷⁰ Maguire (note 2) 26.

⁷¹ In reality it was Mary and Joseph who fled with their child to Egypt, but Romanos makes Christ the subject of this motif: he has fled, for he is the powerful God and invincible adversary of Herod.

strophe an agricultural image relating to the vine (Mary) and the bunch of grapes (Christ). Having failed to kill the Christ child, Herod is pictured as one who could find only an unripe bunch of grapes on the vine, because it was out of season. This idea of 'it being out of season' firstly refers to the fact that Christ was born in the winter, and secondly, to the fact that Christ was already fleeing to Egypt, pointing to the idea of Christ not being available for Herod to harvest. Away from Herod and the barren land of the Jews – a land that lacks all that is good –, Christ was to be planted in Egypt and there to bear fruit.

In strophe 16 Romanos continues the motif of the flight to Egypt (1-5), now employing an image involving the idea of 'hunting'. Snares were woven and set for the fawn of Mary, but they were broken, and thus Christ, according to the prophet Micah, escaped to Egypt.

In lines 6-12 Romanos, as he does so often, finds an occasion to dwell on some Christological feature, in this instance Christ's omnipresence. By employing the technique of apostrophe⁷² directed at Christ, Romanos puts various questions to him regarding the reason for his flight, since he is present everywhere and controls everything.

In the final strophe, which forms the concluding part of the *ekphrasis*, the motif of the flight to Egypt is continued and concluded. Romanos first states in lines 1-2 the reason for flight in general: he who flees, flees because he does not want to be discovered by those seeking him. But this rule has been overturned by Christ, for Jesus has indeed fled physically (*twi ... schmati*, 3) from Herod, yet he made himself known to all through his works in Egypt (3-4), namely, when he brought the idols down (5-6). Romanos is quick to point out that Christ thus instilled the same fear into the idols as he did into Herod. Continuing with the idea of Christ's omnipresence, he states that, although Christ was hidden in his mother's bosom, he still acted as God. This is not only evident in his acts, but also in the fact that an angel from above served him in his flight. Romanos concludes by reminding the audience that Christ had fled willingly as a poor child, yet had proclaimed himself in his richness (*wl- plousio-*) to all. That Christ willingly became man, and suffered, or fled, as in this instance, is another trademark of Romanos' Christological perspective.

⁷² For the function of apostrophe, see above, and also Barkhuizen (note 22).

This strophe also sees the final occurrence of the refrain relating to Herod's failure and sorrow in view of the fact that he has lost the battle and that his power will soon be destroyed.⁷³

4. Conclusion

The general methodology followed by Romanos in his *kontakia* or poetic homilies is one in which he starts from a given (scriptural) episode or passage, and then proceeds to develop it freely and elaborately. In this way *ekphrasis* became for Romanos an exegetical *modus operandi*, and by enlivening his homilies with additional techniques such as dramatisation and invective (diatribe), he could reveal Scripture vividly, dramatically and – in a didactic sense – successfully to his audience. And however we, as modern readers, may judge the 'moral' quality of such a *kontakion* as that 'On the Massacre of the Innocents', with its display of gruesome (almost sensational) detail, there can be little doubt that it was greatly applauded by the contemporary audience. The popularity of the *kontakion* as dramatic homily in the hands of Romanos, both in his early years at Berytus and later in his mature years at Constantinople, testifies to his success as preacher and exegete.

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⁷³ The final strophe (18) does not form part of the homiletic narrative of the massacre, and contains a different refrain. This could point to either the fact that it is spurious, or that Romanos has inserted a different refrain that suits his final strophe containing an exhortation to the audience to join him in a prayer for deliverance and compassion, something which would be rendered ridiculous had he used the regular refrain of the *kontakion*.