APOCALYPSE OF SEDRACH
(Second to Fifth Century A.D.)
A NEW TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION
BY S. AGOURIDES

The Apocalypse of Sedrach begins with a sermon by Sedrach on the necessity of unfeigned love and on its paradigmatic expression in the sacrifice of the Son of God. At the conclusion of the sermon, Sedrach hears the voice of an angel and is taken up into the presence of the Lord. Sedrach asks the Lord why the world was created, and when the Lord replies that it was created for man, Sedrach reproaches him for the condition of man in the world. Sedrach’s objections are centered on the problem of evil in the world, while the answers offered by the Lord in reply to Sedrach’s charges are centered on man’s own responsibility for evil. In the end, Sedrach pleads that the Lord will be merciful to men.

At this point, the Lord directs his only begotten Son to take the soul of Sedrach and place it in Paradise. Sedrach resists the attempt with a series of questions and lamentations. Christ reminds Sedrach that he has been promised Paradise, but still Sedrach resists, for he is concerned with the fate of sinners. The Lord promises Sedrach that if a man lives a hundred years of sin and then repents for only three years, he will be saved. Then Sedrach, with the help of the archangel Michael, gradually persuades the Lord to reduce the required period of repentance to twenty days. Having been thus satisfied, Sedrach allows his soul to be taken to Paradise.

Although the word “apocalypse” is not found in either the title or the body of the text, the ascent of the seer into heaven to speak with God face to face certainly justifies the classification of this work as an apocalypse. The seer is identified only as Sedrach; but, since the only Sedrach known to Byzantine writers was the character from Daniel 3:12, it is probable that he is intended as the author.

Text

The Apocalypse of Sedrach is preserved in only one fifteenth-century Greek manuscript, which is located in the Bodleian Library: Cod. Misc. Gr. 56, fols. 92–100. The text was published in part by M. R. James. James omitted as irrelevant to the main theme of the work the largest part of the sermon on love with which the manuscript begins. The text published by James was translated into English by A. Rutherford. The text published here issues from an independent reading of the Greek and differs with that of James in several respects, the principal difference being that the text of the sermon is here included in its entirety.

Original language

There is no reason to doubt that Greek was the original language of the Apocalypse of

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1 I am grateful to the editor and his staff for polishing this introduction. M. R. James, Apocrypha anecdata, pp. 130–37.
Sedrach. The extant Greek text is replete with patristic and Byzantine vocabulary and syntax, although elements of modern Greek also appear.

Date

Although there is general agreement that the Apocalypse of Sedrach dates, in its final redacted form, to the Byzantine period, the probability that the apocalypse is shaped out of much earlier material is accepted by most scholars. It is the opinion of M. R. James and A.-M. Denis that the Apocalypse of Sedrach received its final form around the tenth or eleventh century A.D., but that the author drew upon materials which extended back to an earlier age. M. E. Stone and J. H. Charlesworth have argued that the materials so used must have dated from the early centuries of the present era.

Much of the doctrinal content of Sedrach is atypical of medieval Christianity and many other elements of the Apocalypse are more Jewish than Christian (see below, “Provenance”). Where “Christ” is briefly mentioned, the term seems to be a substitute for the name of the Jewish archangel Michael. While no precise dates can be given, it appears that the Apocalypse was originally composed between A.D. 150 and 500, and that it was joined together with the sermon on love and received its final form shortly after A.D. 1000.

Provenance

The Apocalypse of Sedrach appears to be from a Jewish original for the following reasons: First, the role of Sedrach as explorer of the divine will and mediator for divine compassion does not fit the Christian tradition of either the earlier or later period. In popular Christian tradition this role is attributed to Mary, the mother of God. For example, in the Apocalypse of Mary, she travels through hell, sees the torments of the sinners, and tearfully pleads with her son for them. As a result he grants them a respite of fifty days in Paradise between Easter and Pentecost.

Second, the final period of twenty days’ repentance agreed to by the Lord at Sedrach’s pleading seems to be in conflict with much of later Church discipline. Most of the serious sins in the later Church require several years of repentance.

Third, Christian elements such as the incarnation or the cross are conspicuously absent. Christ plays practically no role at all. He is sent for Sedrach’s soul; but this motif probably originates with the role of Michael, who appears elsewhere in the text. The Christian redactor here has substituted the figure of Christ for the figure of Michael.

Fourth, one can detect a change not only in content but in style, when moving from the first section to the last. The difference between the bombastic rhetoric of the sermon on love and the more subtle tones of the apocalypse itself is readily apparent. The contrast is accentuated by a sudden transition from the sermon to the ascent of Sedrach. All of these indicate that the author of the second section is not the author of the Christian homily.

Fifth, the theme of man’s debate with God is typically Jewish and the reluctant reduction of the period of penitence at the badgering of the favored seer qualifies as the leit-motif of the Apocalypse of Sedrach. Other Jewish features of the Apocalypse are the bat qol received by the seer, and the belief that the soul filled the entire body. The tradition about the creation of Adam and Eve, and their comparison to the sun and the moon, is typically Jewish as is also the angelology of this document. Finally, those things represented as most beloved by God are: “among the rivers, (the) Jordan; among the cities, Jerusalem.”

It appears that the original Sedrach apocalypse was at some time put together with one or more Christian sermons on love, repentance, orthodoxy, and the second coming of Christ. In the course of time all but the sermon on love and the apocalypse itself dropped out, with the remainder of the collection still bearing the more inclusive title, but now being attributed to the main character, Sedrach.

3 James, Apocrypha annotated, p. 128f.; and A.-M. Denis, Introduction, p. 98.
6 As it is, for example, in TAB.
7 As R. Meier relates in GenR 14:9.
8 ApSedr 8:2.
It may be fairly stated that the sermon on love is a product of Byzantine Christianity and that the apocalypse itself originated in Jewish circles, but nothing further can be said about the place of composition.

Theological importance

The main theme of the Apocalypse of Sadrach is the love of God and his compassion for the sinner and full understanding of man’s weakness. This theme ties together both the sermon and apocalypse portions of the text and gives them a thematic unity which M. R. James did not recognize. Particular emphasis is placed on the mercy of God, who reduces the period of repentance required of even the most inveterate sinner, and who, in a unique passage (14:5), grants salvation even to the unbaptized. The mercy of God, for the author of Sadrach, overcomes all confessional barriers if only man will repent. Even man’s capacity to sin, the gift of free will, is granted to man as a result of God’s unbounded love. Thus God’s love and mercy are emphasized in three ways: first, in his granting to humans their freedom of choice; second, in his accepting of long-delayed repentance; and third, in his granting salvation to the unbaptized. The universality evident in the unrestricted application of God’s mercy to all is contradictory to most contemporaneous Christian views on the subject, and only serves to emphasize how thin the Christian veneer on this document is.

The analogy of a prodigal son found in the apocalypse has a most un-Christian twist to it: The father does not forgive, but takes back the inheritance from the prodigal and casts him out. It is uncertain whether this analogy is related to the famous parable of Jesus, but if it is, it may represent a Jewish form of the parable that was later adapted by Jesus to make a different point.

Finally, the description of the beauty of the human body (“... your hair is known from Theman, your eyes from Bosra ...”) and the lamentation over the prospect of separation from it surely have brought a blush to the cheek of many Christian ascetics. Sadrach laments over the human body that decays in the grave as one laments over the body of his sweetheart. This glorification of the body seems anomalous with the ascetic ideal of later Christianity.

Relation to canonical and non-canonical books

Scholars recognize the indebtedness of the Apocalypse of Sadrach to the canonical book of Job, the Apocalypse of Baruch, and the Testament of Abraham. The most striking parallels, however, are to the book of 4 Ezra. James cites many resemblances in language and subject matter, and there is no question that the author of the Apocalypse of Sadrach has borrowed from 4 Ezra. There are major differences between Ezra and Sadrach. The latter is not set against a background of biblical events, not even those relating to the person of Sadrach. There is no eschatological interest about the end-time, and the national problems of the Jews are not mentioned. However, the main theme of the Apocalypse of Sadrach, namely, the compassion of God for the lost sinner, is also one of the main themes of 4 Ezra.

The idea that man was created superior to the angels, who were invited to worship him, and that Satan’s refusal to prostrate himself led to his exile from heaven, is found in the Life of Adam and Eve.

The statement of J. H. Charlesworth that “very little critical work has been published on this pseudepigraphon” is woefully correct. A more complete introduction and a commentary to the text of Sadrach are needed. It is hoped that the present translation will stimulate further research on this rich but neglected document.

10 James, Apocrypha anecdota. pp. 128f.
11 Vita (ApMos) 16.
12 Charlesworth, PMR. p. 178.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


James, M. R. *Apocrypha anecdotata*, T&S 2.3; Cambridge, 1893; repr. 1963; pp. 130–37.
THE APOCALYPSE OF SEDRACH

A sermon by the holy and blessed Sedrach on love, and repentance, and Orthodox Christians, and on the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Master, grant (th) blessing.

1 Beloved, we must prefer nothing more than unfeigned love. •We commit many faults every hour, day and night, and for this reason let us acquire love, because it covers a multitude of sins. •What do we gain, my children, if we possess everything yet do not have saving love? •How does one benefit, my children, if one gives a great banquet and invites king and nobleman and prepares every sort of expensive fare in order that nothing should be missing; nevertheless, if there is no salt, that banquet cannot be eaten; and one not only bears the expense but one also wastes (his) efforts and is disgraced by the guests. •It is the same in our situation, my brethren; what will we profit, for what grace do we possess without love? •Our every deed is false, even if one has virginity and fasts and keeps vigil and prays and gives a banquet for the poor. •And if one brings gifts to God, or offers the first fruits of all his goods, or builds churches or does anything else without love, it shall be counted by God as nothing, for (these things) are not acceptable. •Thus the prophet says: “The sacrifice of the impious is an abomination Proverbs 15:8

2 to the Lord.” •Do not be advised to do anything without love. •If you say, “I hate my brother but I love Christ,” you are a liar, and John the Theologian rebukes you, for how can one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, love God whom he has not seen? •It is clear that anyone who hates his brother but thinks that he loves Christ is a liar and is deluding himself. •For John the Theologian says that we have this commandment from God, that he who loves God should also love his brother. •And again the Lord himself says, “Upon these two (commandments) depend all the law and the prophets.” •Oh, how extraordinary and paradoxical is the miracle that he who has love fulfills all the law: love is the fulfilment of the law. •Oh, power of love beyond imagination; oh, power of love beyond measure!

3 There is nothing more honorable than love, nor is there anything greater either in heaven or on the earth. •This divine love is the capital (virtue); among all the virtues love is the highest perfection in the world. •It dwelt in the heart of Abel; it worked together with the Patriarchs; it guarded Moses; it made David the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit; it strengthened Joseph. •But why do I say these things? Tlos 17:1f.

4 The most important is that this love brought the Son of God down from heaven. Through love all good things were revealed; death was trampled down, Hades was made captive, Adam was recalled (from death), and through love one flock was made thereafter of angels and men. •Through love Paradise has been opened; the kingdom of heaven is promised; the waste places it made into cities, and filled the mountains and the caves with song; it taught men and women who were treading the narrow and sorrowful path. •But how long shall we prolong this sermon on the achievements of love which even the angels cannot accomplish?

5 Oh, blessed love which bestows all good things! •Blessed is the man who possesses true faith and unfeigned love; for, as the Master said, nothing is greater than love for which a man lays down (his) life for his friends.

6 And he heard a hidden voice in his ears: “Here, Sedrach, you who wish and desire to talk with God and to ask him to reveal to you the things that you wish

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1 a. Gk. to telos tou kosmou, “the ideal (or goal) of the world.”
2 a. Lit. “he received a voice invisibly (aoratōs).”
2:2 APOCALYPSE OF SEDRACH

3 And the Lord said to him, “Welcome, my dear Sedrach. What kind of complaint do you have against the God who created you, for you have said, ‘I want to speak with God face to face’? Sedrach said to him, ‘Indeed, the son does have a complaint against the Father: My Lord, what did you create the earth for?’ The Lord said to him, ‘For man.’ Sedrach said, ‘What did you create the sea for and why did you spread every good thing upon the earth?’ The Lord said, ‘For man.’ Sedrach said to him, ‘If you have done these things, why did you destroy man?’ And the Lord said, ‘Man is my work and the creature of my hands, and I discipline him as I find it right.’

4 Sedrach said to him, ‘Your discipline is punishment and fire; and they are very bitter, my Lord. It would be better for man if he were not born. Indeed, what have you done, my Lord; for what reason did you labor with your spotless hands and create man, since you did not desire to have mercy upon him?’ God said to him, ‘I created the first man, Adam, and placed him in Paradise in the midst of (which is) the tree of life, and I said to him, ‘Eat of all the fruit, only beware of the tree of life, for if you eat from it you will surely die.’ However, he disobeyed my commandment and having been deceived by the devil he ate from the tree.’

5 Sedrach said to him, ‘It was by your will that Adam was deceived, my Master. You commanded your angels to worship Adam, but he who was first among the angels disobeyed your order and did not worship him; and so you banished him, because he transgressed your commandment and did not come forth (to worship) the creation of your hands. If you loved man, why did you not kill the devil, the artificer of all iniquity? Who can fight against an invisible spirit? He enters the hearts of men like a smoke and teaches them all kinds of sin. He even fights against you, the immortal God, and so what can pitiful man do against him? Yet have mercy, Master, and destroy punishment; otherwise receive me also with the sinners, for if you will not be merciful with the sinners, where are your mercies and where is your compassion, O Lord?’

6 And God said to him, ‘Be it known to you, that everything which I commanded man to do was within his reach. I made him wise and the heir of heaven and earth, and I subordinated everything under him and every living thing flees from him and from his face. Having received my gifts, however, he became an alien, an adulterer and sinner. Tell me, what sort of a father would give an inheritance to his son, and having received the money (the son) goes away leaving his father, and becomes an alien and in the service of aliens. The father then, seeing that the son has forsaken him (and gone away), darkens his heart and going away, he retrieves his wealth and banishes his son from his glory because he forsook his father. How is it that I, the wondrous and jealous God, have given everything to him, but he, having received them, became an adulterer and sinner?’

7 Sedrach said to him, ‘You, Master, created man; you know the low state of

b. Or “mouth to mouth.”

4 a. Or “education,” paideusis.

3 a. Or “educate,” paideuein.

b. Kolasis should not be translated as “hell,” but as “punishment.”
his will and his knowledge and you send man into punishment on a false pretext;
2.3 so remove him. •Am I alone supposed to fill the celestial realms? •If that is not
4 so, Lord, save man also. •Pitiful man has transgressed by your will," O Lord."
5.6 "'Why do you throw words around me as if they were a net, Sedrach? *I created
7 Adam and his wife and the sun and I said, 'Look at each other (to see) who is
8 illuminated.' •And the sun and Adam were of one character, but the wife of Adam
9 was brighter than the moon in beauty, and she gave life to her." •Sedrach said,
10 "'What is the use of beautiful things if they wither away to dust? •How is it that
11 you said, Lord, 'Do not repay evil for evil'? •How is it, Master, for the word of
12 your divinity never lies? •And why did you thus repay man, if you do not wish
13 (to return) evil for evil? •I know that among the four-footed beasts the mule is a
14 crafty animal," it is none other; yet, with the bridle we turn it where we wish.
15 You have angels; send them to watch (over man) and when he makes a move
16 toward sin hold onto his foot, and he will not go where he wants.'"

8 God said to him, "If I hold his foot, he says, 'You have given me no grace in
9 the world,' and so I left him to his own desires because I loved him and thus I sent
10 my righteous angels to watch him night and day." •Sedrach said, "I know that
11 among your own creatures, Master, you loved man first; among the four-footed
12 creatures, the sheep; among trees, the olive; among plants which bear fruit, the
13 vine; among things that fly, the bee; among the rivers, (the) Jordan; among the
14 cities, Jerusalem. •But man also loves all these, Master." •God said to Sedrach,
15 "I will ask you one thing, Sedrach; if you can answer me, then you have rightly
16 challenged me, although you have tempted your creator." •Sedrach said, "Speak."
17 The Lord God said, "Since I created everything, how many people have been
18 born, and how many have died and how many shall die and how many hairs do
19 they have? •Tell me, Sedrach, since the heaven and the earth have been created,
20 how many trees have been made in the world, and how many shall fall and how
21 many shall be made, and how many leaves do they have? •Tell me, Sedrach, since
22 I made the sea how many waves have billowed, and how many have rolled slightly,
23 and how many will arise, and how many winds blow near the shore of the sea?
24 Tell me, Sedrach, since the creation of the world of the ages when the air is full
25 of rain, how many drops have fallen upon the world and how many shall fall?"
26 And Sedrach said, "You alone know all these things, Lord; you alone are
27 acquainted with all of these; I only beg you to make man free from punishment,
28 for otherwise I myself am going to punishment and am not separated from our
29 race."

9 And God said to his only begotten Son, "Go, take the soul of my beloved
10 Sedrach, and put it in Paradise." •The only begotten Son said to Sedrach, "Give
11 me which our Father deposited in the womb of your mother in your holy
12 dwelling place since you were born." •Sedrach said, "I will not give you my
13 soul." •God said to him, "And why was I sent, and why did I come here, and
14 you make a pretense to me? •I was commanded by my father not to hesitate in
15 taking your soul; hence, give me your most desired soul."

10 And Sedrach said to God, "From where will you take my soul, from which

7 a. Lit. "of what kind of will and what kind of knowledge we are."
   b. Or "Pitiful man has transgressed your will, O Lord." Within the present context alone, sou thelematos hemarten would be translated normally with sou thelematos (your will) as the object of the transitive verb hemarten (to sin). However, this phrase should be viewed in conjunction with a similar occurrence in 5:1, in which sou thelematos appears with a passive verb and is rendered "by your will." The double occurrence of this phrase suggests that sou thelematos is an idiomatic expression used by the author to indicate means or agent. The verb hemarten in 7:4 should probably be understood as intransitive. This rendering of 7:4 suits the overall spirit of the present document and provides a better climax for the argument that Sedrach is developing in 7:1–4. —J.H.C.
   c. The Gk. is alogan. See Lampe.

9 a. Or "an excuse," prophasizein.
And God said to him, “Do you not know that it is placed in the middle of your lungs and your heart and that it is spread out to all the members? It is removed through the pharynx and larynx and the mouth; and whenever it is due to go out (from the body) it is drawn with difficulty at the beginning and as it comes together from the fingernails and from all the members there is, of necessity, a great strain* in being separated from the body and detached from the heart.”

When he had heard all these things, and recalled the memory of death, Sedrac was very troubled and he said to God, “Lord, give me a little while that I may cry, for I have heard that tears accomplish much and can become a sufficient cure for the humble body of your creatures.”

And crying and lamenting he started saying, “O wondrous head, ornamented like heaven; O sunlight upon heaven and earth; your hair is known from Theman, your eyes from Bosra, your ears from thunder, your tongue from bugle, and your brain is a small creation; the head, the movement of the whole body, is trustworthy and very beautiful, beloved of all but as soon as it falls in the earth it is unrecognized. O hands which hold so well, which are easily taught and hard-working, through which the body is fed. O hands so adept, gathering materials, together you ornamented houses. O fingers, beautified and adorned with gold and silver; even great structures are made by the fingers; the three joints stretch the palms and they gather good things together; but now you have become strangers to this world. O feet, which walk so well, moving by themselves so very quickly and untiring. O knees, thus joined, without you the body does not move; the feet run together with the sun and the moon, night and day, gathering all things together, food and drink which nourish the body. O feet, so swift and well moving, stirring up the face of the earth and ornamenting houses with every good thing. O feet, which bear the whole body, which walk straightway to the temples,* making repentance and supplicating the saints, and now suddenly you are to remain unmoved. O head, hands, and feet, till now I have held you fast. O soul, what placed you in the humble and wretched body? Yet now, separated from it, you ascend where the Lord calls you and the wretched body goes away for judgment. O beautiful body, hair shed by the stars, head like heaven adorned. O face sweet-smelling,* eyes like windows, a voice like a bugle’s sound, a tongue which talks so easily, a beard well trimmed, hair like the stars, head high as heaven, a body adorned, the illuminator* elegant and renowned, yet now after falling within the earth, your beauty beneath the earth is unseen.”

Christ said to him, “Stop, Sedrac, how long will you shed tears and groan? Paradise has been opened to you, and after dying you will live.” *Sedrac said to him, “Once more will I speak to you, Lord, while I live, before I die; and do not ignore my supplication.” *The Lord said to him, “Speak, Sedrac.” *(And Sedrac said,) “If man lives eighty or ninety or a hundred years, and lives them in sin but in the end is converted and the man lives in repentance, for how many days of repentance do you forgive (him) his sins?” *God said to him, “If he returns after living one hundred or eighty years and repents for three years and bears the fruit of righteousness and death should reach him, then shall I not remember all his sins.”

Sedrac said to him, “Three years are too many, my Lord. His death perchance will arrive and he will not fulfill his repentance. *Have mercy, Lord, upon your image and be compassionate, because three years are too many.” *God said to him, “If, after a hundred years, a man lives and remembers his death and confesses before men, and I find him, after one year* I will forgive all his sins.”

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* The Gk. is to phōtogōn. This is also translated in the same verse as “window.”

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10 a. Lit. “there is great force in being separated…”


b. Lit. “well anointed with sweet oil.”

13 a. Chronos, “a time.”
Again Sedrach said, "Lord, I beg for your mercy again upon your creature; one year is much, and his death will perchance arrive and suddenly snatch him away."

The Savior said to him, "Sedrach, my beloved, one question will I ask you, then you can resume your inquiries; if the sinner repents for forty days, shall I not indeed remember all the sins he has done?"

And Sedrach said to the archangel Michael, "Hear me, strong protector; help me and intercede that God may be merciful to the world." • And falling upon their faces, they besought God and said, "Lord, teach us in what way and through what repentance man may be saved, or by what labor." • God said, "By repentances, supplications, and liturgies, through draining tears and fervent groanings. Do you not know that my prophet David (was saved) because of tears, and that the rest were saved in one moment? • You know, Sedrach, that there are nations which have no law, yet fulfill the law; they are not baptized, but my divine spirit enters them and they are converted to my baptism, and I receive them with my righteous ones in the bosom of Abraham. • And there are some baptized with my baptism and anointed with my divine myrrh, but they have become full of despair and they will not change their mind. • Yet I await them with much pity and much rich mercy, that they may repent. • But they do that which my divinity hates, and they did not hear the wise man who asked and said, 'We in no way justify the sinner.' • Are you not at all aware that it is written, 'And those who have repented will not see punishment'? • And they heard neither the apostles nor my word in the Gospels and they cause sorrow to my angels, and of a certainty in my meetings and in my liturgies they do not heed my angel and they do not stand in my holy churches; they stand and do not prostrate (themselves) in fear and trembling but they pronounce long words which neither I nor my angels accept."

Sedrach said to God, "Lord, you alone are without sin and very merciful, showing pity and grace to sinners, but your divinity said, 'I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.' " • And the Lord said to Sedrach, "Do you not know, Sedrach, that after changing his mind the robber was saved in one instant? • Do you not know that even my apostle and evangelist was saved in an instant? [. . . but sinners are not saved] because their hearts are like decayed stone; they are those who walk along impious paths and who perish with the Antichrist."

Sedrach said, "My Lord, you also said, 'My divine spirit entered the nations which though having no law yet do the things of the law.' • However, as the robber and the apostle and evangelist and the rest who have stumbled (are) in your kingdom, my Lord, in the same manner forgive those who in recent days have sinned against you, Lord, because life is full of toil and (is) obdurate."

The Lord said to Sedrach, "I made man in three stages; when he is young, I overlook his mistakes because of his youth; again, when he is a man I watch over his mind; again, when he grows old I preserve him so that he may repent."

Sedrach said, "Lord, you know and are acquainted with all this; yet have compassion with sinners." • The Lord said to him, "My beloved Sedrach, I promise to have compassion even less than forty days, as far as twenty, and whoever remembers your name will not see the place of punishment but he will be with the just ones in a place of refreshment and rest, and the sin of him who copies this admirable sermon will not be reckoned for ever and ever." • And Sedrach said, "Lord, also whoever preforms a liturgy in honor of your servant, rescue him, Lord, from all evil." • And the servant of God, Sedrach, said, "Now, Master, take my soul."

And God took him and put him in Paradise with all the saints. • To him be glory and power for ever and ever, amen.

14 a. The source for the two quotations is unknown.

b. The Gk. here is ekklesiæai. Cf. n. 11.a.

c. Or "boast of things," megalorêmein.

15 a. The clause in brackets is in Lat.

b. ep' eschaton, lit. "in the last (days)."