

THE BOOK, 'MEDICINE OF LIFE' OF ST. EPHREM

Fr. Sebastian John Kizhakkethil

Introduction

Ephrem, the pride of Syriac tradition, produced an enormous body of ecclesiastical literature that differs in method and in style from non- Semitic world. This paper is a study into the concept of 'medicine of life' which is for Ephrem, a primary symbol of Eucharist. The mystery of the Eucharist is not something that just becoming God to bread but this tiny host contains the mystery of salvation history. The symbolism of 'medicine of life' is one among the imageries he used to explain the salvation and the process of healing of the humankind. The study aims to provide a brief look into the history of salvation of humankind, starts from genesis to the eschatology, which he explained by using the medical imagery of medicine of life.

Method of Ephrem

Sebastian Brock says, "so astounding is the nature of Christian mystery- God not just becoming man, but becoming the very bread for man to eat – that it is often more meaningful to describe this paradox in the language of poetry, where parable, myth, and symbol can perhaps approximate to spiritual reality rather more successfully than straightforward theological description."¹ St. Ephrem used enormously the poetic language to explain the incomprehensible mysteries of salvation. For Ephrem, Jesus himself is the 'medicine of life' and he is both 'medicine' and 'life'. Ephrem's concept of medicine of life is not just a symbolism but this symbolism contains the whole salvation history.

Historical Background of the Term, Medicine of Life

The concept of medicine of life or the medicine of immortality existed in all religions and in all the cultures. It is true to the time of Ephrem's period, for he was exposed to the middle eastern religions and cultures, where, existed in the Semitic, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian cultures. Among them, Mesopotamian culture is predominantly based on supernatural concepts.

¹ SEBASTIAN P. BROCK, "The Harp of the Holy Spirit", Studies Supplementary to Sobornost, No.4, 1983, 5.

Scholars suggests that the concept of Medicine of Life is taken from Mesopotamian Culture.² Because there also existed the concepts of tree of life and medicine of life.

Ephrem views the Eucharistic body of Christ in dynamic continuity with the actual body of the historical Jesus. Ephrem's draws attention to the physical reality of Christ's body, which he calls 'treasury of healing'. This is remarkable in the context of the influence of Marcionites, Manicheans and Gnostics, all of whom encouraged some degree of dualism that seriously denigrated the physical body of Christ.³ It is also a possibility that he formed this concept out his life situations of that time, where plague and draught ruined both east and west. Ephrem presented Eucharist as the medicine to encourage the faithful.

Ephrem's Understanding on Healing

Ephrem uses the imagery of healing to explain the process of salvation and particularly the concept of medicine of life. He presents two states of man i.e., the state of good health and the fallen state. Man needs to be restored to state of good health from the spiritual sickness. In paradise man enjoyed good health, but after the fall they come under the curse and suffer pains because they had sinned. They start their life on earth in the fallen state and came under mortality and afflictions. Therefore, man needs to be healed and restored. For Ephrem the salvation means the restoration of man from his diseased state into good health. It is also the process of healing. In the Old Testament period God provided medicines and physicians in the form of patriarchs, prophets, etc. and finally, God sends his son.⁴

Christ; The Physician and the Medicine of Life

Physician and the medicine of life are the two titles frequently used for Christ in Syriac literature, especially in Ephrem⁵ and presenting Christ as the physician is easily found in the Syriac tradition. This title is also shared with the apostles and the bishops of early church. This

² JOBY JOHN, "St Ephrem's Vision on the Medicine of Life", in *Ensygloge; An International Journal for Arts and Science*, Vol.2, Issue 1, Jan-Jun, 2022, 28.

³ JOSEPH P AMAR, "Perspective on the Eucharist in Ephrem the Syrian", in *Worship*, Vol. 61, No.5, 1987, 444,446.

⁴ ROBERT MURRAY, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, British Library, London, 2006, 200, The title already shared in some other texts, especially in *Acts of Thomas* and Aphrahat addresses Jesus 'wise physician'.

⁵ MATHEW PAIKKATT, *Life, Glory and Salvation in the Writings of Mar Aprem of Nisibis*, OIRSI, Kottayam, 2001, 153, The title already shared in some other texts, especially in *Acts of Thomas* and Aphrahat addresses Jesus 'wise physician'. See, MURRAY, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 199-200.

title is found in the *Acts of Judas Thomas* where Jesus is presented as the physician of souls.⁶ The word medicine of life generally refers to the life-giving action of Christ in the Eucharist. It is because of the hidden presence of the Eucharistic body that the Eucharist becomes the medicine of life. The invisible power (fire and spirit) that dwells in his physical and Eucharistic body is the source of this healing.⁷ Thus, Jesus provided complete healing for both individuals as well as for the whole of humanity and creation.

Biblical Evidences of Medicine of Life

The imagery of Medicine of Life is present in the Holy Bible from Genesis to Revelation directly or indirectly. The concept of Medicine of Life is visible in many of the incidents in the Old Testament. Those indirect indications are given below.

- Creation (Gen. 1)- creation is the result of love of God. Therefor the aspect of divine love incorporated into this imagery
- Sin and promise (Gen.3)- the fall resulted in the loss of divine life
- Great flood (Gen.7)- it is medicine of life because it purified the society
- Aaron's miraculous rod (Ex. 7,8)- miraculous nature of imagery symbolizes Christ himself
- Bread from heaven (Ex 16)- it revitalized them to continue their exodus
- Bitter water made sweet (Ex 1)- at the verge of death, the bitter water turned to sweet and gave life to them
- Water from the rock (Ex 17)- water became the medicine of life
- The decalogue (Ex 20)- it was also a medicine of life.
- The blood of the covenant (Ex 24)- it symbolizes the blood of Jesus by which Jesus made the new covenant.
- The ark of the covenant (Ex 25)- it stands for the presence of God and therefore it is a medicine of life.⁸

Jesus with his incarnation made possible the physical⁹ and spiritual¹⁰ healing of the individuals. The process of healing has not come to an end with the death, resurrection and

⁶ MURRAY, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 199-200.

⁷ PAIKKATT, *Life, Glory and Salvation in the Writings of Mar Aprem of Nisibis*, 206.

⁸ JOHN, "St Ephrem's Vision on the Medicine of Life", 28-29.

ascension of Jesus into heaven. The ministry of healing continues through the disciples and their successors to the fallen nature of humanity. We take part in the healing process of Jesus through the sacraments of Church namely, Baptism and the Holy Eucharist.

The healing and the restoring effects of Eucharist as the medicine of life are even beyond the limits of the history extending to *sheol* to bring remedy to the dead. The holy communion for a believer is a means for the passage from death to life.¹¹ As medicine of life the Eucharist liberates us from the chains of sin, purifies and remits our debts which are the consequences of sins naturally it leads to the sanctification and new life.¹²

Conclusion

Ephrem's concept of medicine of life is a comprehensive explanation of the process of salvation where God is at the centre. God did not avoid the fallen humanity eternally but provide the medicine for their mental, spiritual and physical sickness, caused by the sin of Adam and Eve. God send the real medicine of life, his only son, Jesus, in person, to heal the wounds of humanity. The act of healing the world and the humanity does not break by the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus but continued through the Apostles, Bishop i.e., through the Church and its sacraments, especially through Baptism and the Eucharist.

⁹ Healing of the Paralytic (Mt 9:1-8), the Centurion's servant (Lk 7:1-10), Peter's mother-in-law (Mt 8:14), the leper (Mt 8) and the soldier's ear (Mt 26:51). Are some of the examples of physical healing.

¹⁰ Gadarene demoniac (Mt 8:28-34), the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28) and the epileptic demoniac (Mt 17:14-21) are examples of spiritual healing and healing from evil spirit.

¹¹ KALMBUKATTU, "The Medicine of Life; St. Ephrem's Musings on the Holy Eucharist", 31.

¹² PAIKKATT, *Life, Glory and Salvation in the Writings of Mar Aprem of Nisibis*, 207.

Bibliography

- AMAR, JOSEPH P., “Perspective on the Eucharist in Ephrem the Syrian”, *Worship*, Vol. 61, No.5, 1987.
- BROCK, SEBASTIAN P., “The Harp of the Holy Spirit”, *Studies Supplementary to Sobornost*, No.4, 1983.
- JOHN, JOBY “St Ephrem’s Vision on the Medicine of Life”, *Ensygloge; An International Journal for Arts and Science*, Vol.2, Issue 1, Jan-Jun, 2022.
- KALMBUKATTU, NAIJU JOSE, “The Medicine of Life; St Ephrem’s Musings on the Holy Eucharist”, *Ephrem’s Theological Journal*, Vol 23/1, Mar, 2019(25-35), Satna.
- MURRAY, ROBERT, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, British Library, London, 2006.
- PAIKKATT, MATHEW, *Life, Glory and Salvation in the Writings of Mar Aprem of Nisibis*, OIRSI, Kottayam, 2001.