

General Characteristics of East-Syriac Tradition

William Toma

I. Important of studying of Syriac tradition

In the last several years there has been a renewed interest by Western scholars in the “recovery of Syriac Christianity.” The importance of the work of the Syriac tradition can be summarized in threefold:

First: The important of Syriac language:

- a) Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic” and thus an idiom of the language spoken by Christ and all those “fishermen, peasants, and tax collectors” who gathered to hear Christ speak.
- b) Syriac Orient represents to some degree direct heirs to, the Semitic world out of which Christianity born.
- c) Syriac language was “adopted as the vehicle for the spread of Christianity in the East.

Second: the work and writings of early Syriac writers Aphraha and Ephrem is important because it reflects the thinking of early Christian and pre-Christian and Jewish people that extend extended back into the Palestine of the first century AD and before.

II. Syriac Theology

Scholars point out two poles of Syriac theology and literature: the Semitic and Hellenic poles. The first four centuries of Syriac literature, till the end of 400 AD, are usually considered the Semitic pole. The difference between them is not only linguistic rather it is basically a difference in theological approach. The Greek approach a *philosophical and analytical while the Semitic approach is symbolic and synthetic*.¹ These two approaches in theology are not based on differences in the central truths of Christianity, but rather in the different modes of understanding and presenting these truths. They complement rather than contradict each other.

Since Syriac tradition sprang from Jewish core, its language, vocabulary, thought-categories and imageries were very related to those of Mesopotamian Jews. Both communities (church & synagogue) had close contacts in a Zoroastrian pagan milieu.

- 1) The Church adopted the Jewish Scripture, the *Pshshitta* Old Testament.
- 2) Early Syriac theology and literature were greatly influenced by a specific form of Jewish literature called *haggada*². For instance, Ephrem (d. 373) used post-biblical Jewish literature e.g. *Targumim* (Aramaic translation of the Bible) and *Midrash*.³ Syriac fathers used a creative tension between God's grace and righteousness.
- 3) Their theology was much more eschatological and apocalyptic⁴ character.

¹ Synthetic approach means synthesizing or combining of different process, components or system in order to understand the entire process. Analytic approach is the process of taking an involved procedure and portionating it into parts in order to comprehend how it function.

² It means literary narration. It refers to one of the two classes into which the traditions of Jewish piety were divided in the Rabbinic period, denoting a particular literary style (non-legalistic exegetical texts) including legends, anecdotes symbolism.

³ It is an exegesis of Torah texts along with homiletic stories.

⁴ Apocalyptic means unveiling something that is usually hidden; ii) end of the world. It tells us how fleeting and passing all things of this world e.g. Luke 21 and Daniel 12. Both Jesus and Daniel as they compressed time as to see now what would take place in this world.

- 4) Syriac theology approaches *divine reality* through eye of faith and not through intellectual scrutiny. ***Faith is a necessary condition to understand divine revelation in Nature, Scripture and in the person of Christ. Without faith one sees only the exterior historical meaning of Scripture. Hence of Syriac fathers, theology is the 'science' of faith and a theologian is a man of faith.***
- 5) Ephrem views theology not so much as "faith seeking understanding," because he is all too aware of the fragility of real understanding but as "faith adoring the mystery," reaching out through limited understanding to adoring in silence the mystery of God is. Ephrem implies that real knowledge of self is the prerequisite for any knowledge of God. If real knowledge of God is sought, it will be found in God's revelation of himself in the person of Jesus.

III. Mysteries and Liturgy

The concept of mystery is central to understand Syriac thought and liturgy. According to Syriac fathers, nothing of God could be known by man if God had not taken the initiative to reveal Himself through types and symbols. Ephrem says: "Lord Your symbols are everywhere, yet You are hidden from everywhere." Symbolic language is the language of mystery and helps the human spirit go deeper into deeper reality of God. How? ***By providing the awareness of the immanence as well as the transcendence of God.***

Mystery is a reality of eternal order that manifesting itself in power in time through a visible corporate action of the Church to those already initiated the mystery and living by it. The idea of mystery conveys the meaning of "mysterious symbols." of a superior world, which are able to introduce us in an efficacious way to that world. For example, Baptism and Eucharist are made up of matter informed by spirit.

Theology as the living dialogue with Christ is taking place mostly in the liturgical celebration. Syriac theology is synonymous with spirituality. Spirituality is 'living the faith' in the Church. This is one and same faith celebrated in the liturgy.

IV. Biblical Theology

Early Syriac theology, greatly influenced by the thought patterns of Scripture, use a typological approach. However, ***it was used not just as a method to interpret Scripture***, but as the ***main vehicle of doing theology***. For these writers, ***types and antitypes*** were not only indicators of ***the plan of salvation but became the means by which to understand how salvation and divinization would be achieved***. **What is typology?** Typology is an interpretive principle; it is the study of Biblical types. Type is a divine analogy of the new covenant found in the old covenant. While analogy is something that we use in comparison since it has profound similarity and dissimilarity. **Type** is itself a historical reality, but it is also representative of something greater. Moses prefigured Christ, though Moses himself was a man. The manna prefigured the Eucharist, though the manna itself was a miracle. In the New Testament, fulfillment was far greater than the sum of the Old Testament types. Fulfillment was the abiding presence of God Himself: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us" (John 1:14).⁵

⁵In the Church, the study and prayerful consideration of biblical types is called *typology*. For example Adam – Jesus's typology is in St. Paul's First Letter to Corinthians (15:45-49) and Romans (5:14.) Early Christians understood that the Old Testament was full of types or pictures that were fulfilled or realized in the New Testament.

Early Syriac theologians approach **Scripture** and their interpretations of the biblical texts is both spiritual and practical. They regard Scripture as the incarnation of God in human language.

Historical exegesis of the Scripture, generally, is not the primary concern of the early Syriac fathers rather they emphasize the spiritual exegesis which proceeds from faith. The inner meaning of scripture can only be perceived by the inner eye of faith.

V. The Pneumatological Emphasis (Holy Spirit)

Pneumatology is a strong theme of Eastern Christianity in general. It has an essential role in the theology and liturgy of the Church of the East. In the early Syriac literatures and fathers, wind, fire and oil are symbols of the Spirit. *Throughout the New Testament, the Holy Spirit denotes a substantial role for the completion of Christ dispensation; The Church was anointed on the day of Pentecost to carry on His ministry. The same Spirit works here as the transforming force on the elements and on the believers who partake of them (e.g. Incarnation, Pentecost, baptism and Eucharist...).*

VI. Syriac Christology

For Syriac tradition, incarnation and soteriology are intrinsically related to each other. Incarnation is the high point of their soteriology which is built around the imagery of clothing. From creation to fall, through incarnation to the sacraments and on to the final resurrection is graphically and cohesively presented through the image of 'robe of glory.'

The Christology of the Church of the East can be seen mainly through the liturgical prayers that the Syriac traditions maintained their Christology. Eucharist is at the same time participation in the eschatological dimension of the mystery of Christ.

There are various prayers in the Divine Liturgy exposing the East Syriac Christology. In the ancient hymn *LakhuMara: Christ is presented as the sovereign Lord, the Lord of the universe and heaven. He is the quickener of bodies and the saviour of our souls.* The hymn summarizes the salvific works of Christ and glorifies him as the Resuscitator.

The first part of the third prayer of the Assyrian Church Eucharistic celebration focuses on the ontological Christology with references to the New Testament and the early Councils. It begins with a **descending Christology**, a **Christology from above**. *The Word, the hidden offspring from the bosom of the Father (Jn 1.8) and his image (Col 1.15, Heb 1.3), emptied himself and became a servant (Phil 2.6-8).* This is the *kenosis* Christology and the two-stage Christology speaking of the one divine person in the two stages of his existence as God and man (Rom 1.3ff). The mystery of incarnation is always presented as Christ putting on the body. According to the Syriac Fathers like Aphrahat and Ephrem, the whole dispensation of salvation has its source in the human body of Christ.

The second part of the same Prayer of Inclination in the Divine Liturgy contains **functional Christology with references to the great salvific actions of Christ**: "You put on our humanity in order to vivify it by your divinity and have exalted our low state, raised us who are fallen, vivified our mortality, forgiven our debts, justified our sinfulness, enlightened our knowledge..." Christ is presented as the unique mediator in the divinization of man. The humanization of Christ was to give life and give it more abundantly (Jn 10.10). The typical eastern theme of deification (*theosis*) is presented in the patristic line of thinking: 'God became man so that He may make us Divine' or 'the humanization of God is for the divinization of man.'

VII. Eschatological Dimension

Eschatological can be understood as a process that focuses attention on the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in Christ when creation is restored to its original state. Eschatology of the Syriac fathers cannot be reduced to a mere belief in last events or to a map of future events such as death, judgment, heaven, hell or believe in the ultimate victory of God in Christ. But it is at the same time, the realization of the fact that as Christians we already possess that in which we believe. That is, their eschatology is to be understood more in terms of a realizing or realized eschatology. *Baptism and Eucharist restores the condition of the first Paradise and anticipate our future state. Through the mysteries of baptism and eucharist each believer becomes member of the Church, the pilgrim community on its way to the father-land. It is the pledge of salvation and the foretaste of the happiness to come.* Therefore, in Syriac theology, mysteries of the church (sacraments) and eschatology are co-related to each other. The sacraments belong to the present time of the pilgrim Church, but they also possess an eschatological tension.

VIII Monasticism in Syriac Tradition

The beginning of monasticism is often associated with Egyptian style of monasticism. However, there existed in the Syriac tradition a native form of Mesopotamian monasticism, quite distinct form and independent of Egyptian monastic system which scholar call, 'proto-monasticism.' Later, however, it fused with the Egyptian monastic tradition. In the history of monasticism it was very often forgotten and neglected.

The ascetical thrust is one of the main characteristic of early Syriac theology, especially on the ways of Christian living, focused on the whole hearted discipleship of Jesus. The 'proto-monasticism' could be exemplified by the movement called "sons/children of covenant." It refers to the group of people who led some form of consecrated life, with a vow of chastity which was probably made at the time of adult baptism. The group, living in towns and villages, seem to have formed the core of the local Church community. The life style of the community could be presented by the term *ihidaya* which refers to the three basic concept: singular, individual, unique; single-minded, not divided in heart, and single in sense of unmarried, celibate.

The motivation force behind the ascetical idea, based on baptism, in the early Syriac Christianity are mainly three: i) the mode of Christ as the Bridegroom to whom individual Christians are betrothed at baptism; ii) the model of baptism as a return to Paradise; iii) the model of baptismal life as the marriageless life of the angels.

Marriage, in Syriac tradition, is the sacred sign of the union of Christ and the Church (Eph 5: 28-32). However, in the consecrated virgins, both men and women, are in immediate contact with the holy reality of which marriage is the sign. An ascetic by becoming single-minded accepts circumcision of heart (Josh 5: 2) and puts on Christ. Their covenantal relationship with Christ was for attaining the original state of the humanity of Adam and Eve before the fall.