

The Church as Bride in the East Syrian Liturgy

by

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The Syrian liturgy generally uses the term *Edta* to indicate the Church. In Hebrew the corresponding root is used to signify an encounter, a meeting, an assembly, the congregation of Jahweh, the congregation of the Israelites (Ex. 12 : 3; Num. 27 : 17) or a meeting of the assembly by previous appointment in a fixed place and specific time (Neh. 6 : 2; Amos 3 : 3).¹ In the Psita version of the New Testament, *Knusta* (the corresponding Hebrew root is used in the sense of “gather” at Est. 4 : 16; Ez. 22 : 21) is used to indicate the synagogue. In the East Syrian Liturgy *Edta* indicates the church and the place of worship, and *Knusta* the congregation assembled.²

Several synonyms for the church, based on the Old Testament and the New Testament, are used in the East Syrian liturgy. *People of the Lord* is the equivalent of *qahal jahwe. Reign of God* is often used to indicate the church, and consequently Christ is called “King” in the liturgy. *City of God* is understood as a place where the faithful live with Christ in their midst, with Christ at the same time being a fortress to the church. The church is the *Mother of the Faithful* giving birth by the work of the Spirit who descends and forms the immortal foetus in the womb of the water.³ The church is also called the *Legacy of the Lord*, since the Lord has given it to His followers after his earthly sojourn is completed. But pre-eminently the Church is the *Bride of Christ*.

Church as the Bride of Christ

The concept of the wedding of Christ with the Church is illustrated very well in the East Syrian Liturgy, especially in the liturgical seasons of Epiphany and Dedication of the Church, as well as in the Sacrament

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of matrimony.⁴ Two Syriac terms in this connection are noteworthy: first, *Kaltha*, which means the crowned or garlanded one, and its derivation, *M'kallaltha*, which indicates the coronation in the wedding; and second, *M'keertha* which signifies the bride-price, and in the liturgy this term is used chiefly to show the price Christ paid as ransom to obtain the church.

In the liturgical texts not only the Son, but also the Father, is called the Spouse of the Church: "Blessed are you, O church, crowned bride of the Father, the King of kings"⁵; "O Church, the adorned spouse, engaged one of the King and the daughter of the King, glorify and thank the heavenly spouse who sanctified you."⁶ As Engberding points out, this sort of attribution to the Father is not a mistake in the text, but an oriental-biblical expression where the strict relation of parenthood of one person is attributed to another.⁷ Here it is very important to know how the liturgy relates the Father to the Church. It teaches that the primordial church was established by the Father on Mount Sinai: "O Father who established your dwelling place on Mount Sinai and filled it with sanctity of your glory, fill with glory also the temple dedicated to your love."⁸ In the rite of consecration of the altar with oil, it is said: "On the day of the consecration of the holy church, let us sing glory to the Father who designed her on Mount Sinai."⁹ The work of the Father is continued by the Son: "Blessed are you, O church, for the great feast of your consecration is completed. The Father is pleased in you and He built you up; the Son has decorated your foundations."¹⁰ "Hence the angels and men glorify in you (church) and praise in your dedication, which the Father founded, the Son built and completed . . ."¹¹

These texts show the relation of the Father to the actualization of the plan of salvation of mankind in His Son through the church, and hence the liturgy, albeit infrequently, qualifies the Father as the spouse of the church.

Betrothal to Christ

When was the Church taken in betrothal by Christ? Liturgical texts indicate that the betrothal took place in Jordan at the time of the baptism of Jesus. The feast of the Epiphany and the season of Epiphany tell us that Christ purified the Church on that occasion. He accepted her, with John the Baptist witnessing to the betrothal.¹²

That the Church was purified by Christ is made clear in different ways. Referring to Old Testament betrothals which took place at pools or wells, an Epiphany prayer reads: "At the well Eliazer chose in betrothal Rebecca

for Isaac (Gn 24 : 10), and at the well Jacob betrothed Rachel (Gn 29 : 9), and at the well Moses betrothed Sefura (Ex 2 : 15). So our Lifegiver betrothed the church in the Jordan through the mediation of John the Baptist and cancelled the debts of the human race.”¹³

Christ has not just purified the church but has sanctified it as well: “O church, the adorned one and betrothed to the King of kings, and daughter of light, glorify and thank the heavenly spouse who purified (*hasi* = justified) you with the water of baptism and sanctified (*kaddesh*) you in his grace.”¹⁴

The idea is that before the betrothal the church was full of filth, impurity and wounds, alluding to the state of mankind after the Fall and of Israel before the coming of Messiah. “I was abandoned and maltreated, and the Son of the king saved me in his love, medicated me with oil and water. I was stinking and he filled me with sweet odour.”¹⁵ To avoid all such ugly appearance, the church was to be purified and sanctified by Christ before she was accepted by him as his bride. Thus the bath on the day of Epiphany was not just a ceremonial washing, but had profound salvific import.

After the purification and sanctification, Christ adorned the church with every glory (*sub'ha*), splendor (*hedra*), and beauty (*supra*). “He dressed you with the gown of glorious and unending light and he placed on your head a glorious and brilliant crown”; and “there is no beauty equal to yours, O church, holy spouse of the King.”¹⁶ By this the church becomes “daughter of light” and “filled with spiritual beauty” and she is “adorned with the crown of splendour and glory.” She is vested with the gown of incorruptible glory and “the gown is made by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ And, after vesting, the church is adorned with a nuptial garland — the crown of gold. This crown of the church is spiritual and divine: “O church, O queen, clap your hands and praise and rejoice, O daughter of light, for He adorned you with precious stones, he made the crown of glory and placed it on your head . . . The Son of God crowned the church he espoused with glory and splendour.”¹⁸

In conclusion, Christ wanted the church to be betrothed to himself. But she was ugly and filthy; hence she was purified in the Jordan. Since she was to become the spouse of the Divine she was sanctified and was adorned with all beauty and grace.

The Wedding

Christ, before marrying the church, would liberate her from sin and pay

the bride-price for her. He would liberate (*harar*) her from the evil which was dominating her. This action would be completed at great cost — the sacrifice of himself. “He saved her by his lifegiving Cross . . . from the slavery of the powerful devils.”¹⁹

The church was subject to two yokes: idolatry and error.²⁰ “Rejoice with me, O people, for I am free and I have come out of the slavery of the idols.”²¹

As in the Orient, so in the church, gifts and bride-price (*Rahvone*) are given on the occasion of a wedding, which gifts are expressed in the term betrothal (*M'keertha*). The bride-price which Christ gave is his life: “He gave you his body as ransom.”²² “Never has a man given his body and blood as bride-price at his espousal.”²³ “With his blood he has confirmed his betrothal.”²⁴ Christ did all this in his loving-kindness. It was he himself who purified the church and initiated the espousal. Hence the church is asked to be faithful and grateful to him. “You who are espoused to Christ should not look for another spouse, because he is the true bridegroom.”²⁵ He has linked the church closer to himself by his death on the Cross.²⁶

The Bridal Chamber

Christ leads the church, after the wedding, to the bridal chamber (*g'nona*), which is spiritual, heavenly and eternal.²⁷ The Divine spouse takes the bride to the bride chamber, which is also called the heavenly Jerusalem.²⁸

The church has to await the Second Coming of Christ, when he will take her “above” to eternal joy. Thus it can be said that the church has a bride chamber on earth which is a preparation for the one above.²⁹ An anticipated rejoicing of the heavenly Jerusalem is given to the church through participation in the Eucharistic banquet.

The Wedding Banquet

For the wedding banquet (in Mesopotamia) there is generally a long preparation. Invitations are sent to friends and relatives, and when all have come there is eating and drinking and dancing. The Liturgy speaks about the food and drink and hymns of the nuptial feast for Christ and the church. On the last Sunday of the season of Dedication, mention is made of the guests who participate in the feast. These are the priests, prophets, apostles, martyrs, angels, and the people. In this feast the bride brings the bridal gown made by the Holy Spirit, which is nothing else than

the baptismal grace preserved intact. Those invited are also supposed to come with this garment, the baptismal grace. Each one brings a gift to the banquet: the priests come with the dignity of their ordination; the prophets bring their revelation; the apostles their preaching; the martyrs their life-blood; the angels their glorious praise; and the people their adoration.³⁰

The bread given to the guests is the one once given to the Chosen people, manna and flesh; and the drink is the blood of the Spouse mixed with water. The Eucharist was prefigured in the manna, and the liturgy assigns the role of waiter to the angels and also volunteers from among men.³¹ Only those guests who bring with them the robe of baptismal purity can enter the banquet hall, and hence the liturgy also appoints door-keepers: "At the door of the church custodians stand day and night, protecting it from the evil one; and they are: Simon, its foundation, Paul its architect, and John its patron and friend."³²

Conclusion

In the East Syrian Liturgy, Christ is called Pastor, physician, light, judge, guide and leader, protector and fortress, life and truth and spouse. Of these, the term spouse is particularly expressive in showing the relation between Christ and the church. This is very well illustrated in Eph 5 : 26-27 which is read for weddings in this liturgy: "Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He did this to dedicate the church to God, by his word, after making it clean by the washing in water, in order to present the church to himself, in all its beauty, pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle, or any other imperfection." To the oriental believer, the detailed and imaginative description of the espousal, wedding, bridal chamber and wedding banquet is very appealing and impressive, since it is based on local and biblical customs. But the liturgy leads the worshipper from the table of the wedding banquet to the table in the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the completion of the feast on earth.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. Gesenius-Tregelles, *Hebrew-English Lexicon to the Old Testament*, 1857 (Grand Rapids, 1957), pp. 607-608.
- 2 T. Aude, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Chaldéenne* (Mossul, 1897), p. 207.
- 3 *Breviarium juxta Ritus Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*. In 3 vols.

- Ed. P. Bedjan, Paris 1896-1897, reprod. Rome, 1938. I, 250. Hereafter cited as *Breviary*.
- 4 H. Engberding, O.S.B., "Die Kirche als Braut in der ostsyrischen Liturgie" in *Orient. Christ. Periodica*, III (1937), 5-45; F. Graffin, "Recherches sur le thème de L'Église-Épouse dans les liturgies et la littérature de la langue syriaque" in *L'Orient Syrien* III (1968), 317-334.
 - 5 *Breviary* III, 409.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 410.
 - 7 Engberding, *art. cit.*, p. 9.
 - 8 *Breviary* III, 419.
 - 9 *Pontificale Syrorum Orientalium*, Rome, 1957, p. 23.
 - 10 *Breviary* I, 216.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, III, 395.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, I, 403-406.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, I, 403.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, III, 410.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, III, 441.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, III, 430.
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 *Ibid.*
 - 19 *Ibid.*, III, 392; III, 410.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, III, 410.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, III, 441.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, III, 397.
 - 23 *Ibid.*
 - 24 *Ibid.*, III, 314.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, III, 397.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, II, 346.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, III, 340.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, I, 426.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, III, 392.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, III, 432.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, III, 432.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, III, 441.