

SYMBOLS OF MARY'S VIRGINITY IN THE WRITINGS OF MAR JACOB OF SERUGH

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Introduction

Mar Jacob of Serugh (451-521), was a prolific Syriac Christian poet and theologian who lived in the sixth century and received education from the School of Edessa. His writings are characterised by rich and evocative imagery, and he often employed many symbols to convey profound theological truths. Among these symbols, Mar Jacob used a series of vivid metaphors to elucidate the significance of the Virgin Mary in Christian theology. These symbols include Mary's Virginitly, The Closed Door, Sealed Letter, Unploughed Land that Produces Corn, Unpruned Vine that Produces Grapes, Thirsty Land, and Gideon's Fleece on which Dew was showered. According to Mar Jacob, Mary's virginity was not a controversial topic to be investigated but a hidden mystery to be approached with love and passion from a biblical perspective.

The Closed Door: The Vessel of the Divine

Mar Jacob took the imagery, of a 'closed door' from Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 44,1-3). This symbolises Mary's womb as a sealed vessel, untouched by human intervention. Just as a closed door conceals what lies within, Mary's womb concealed the divine mystery of the Incarnation. Through this symbol, Mar Jacob emphasises that Mary is a perpetual virgin and her progeny is the Son of God. In the Old Testament closed door represented man's sinful condition whereas in the New Testament, it represents virginity.

Sealed Letter: The Mystery of the Incarnation

The concept of Mary as a 'sealed letter' is another metaphor used by Mar Jacob to emphasise her role as the bearer of the divine message of the Incarnation. The biblical reference of the term sealed letter has two aspects; man's sinful situation and the divine mystery that man fails to understand. This symbol highlights the idea that Mary contained within herself the divine Word, just as a sealed letter holds a hidden message. Her purity and her consent to God's plan allowed her to carry this message to the world. The sealed letter symbolises the aspects of mystery in Christ's incarnation, the perpetual virginity of Mary and God's intervention in the salvation of Man.

Unploughed Land that Produces Corn: Fertility and Abundance

The image of Mary as ‘unploughed land that produces corn’ is a symbol that underlines Mary’s purity and her role as the fertile and untamed vessel through which the Incarnation took place. This metaphor highlights the idea that, like untilled land producing corn, Mary bore the spiritual fruit of Christ’s presence in the world, providing spiritual nourishment for the faithful. The theological significance of the symbols is Mary’s perpetual virginity, salvation as a total gift of God and the choice in God’s selection (Lk1.47).

Unpruned Vine that Produces Grapes: The Perpetual Virgin and Mother

In Mar Jacob’s writings, Mary is portrayed as an ‘unpruned vine that produces grapes.’ St. Ephrem also used the same metaphor. In the Old Testament, Israel is portrayed as the vineyard of the Lord (Is 5:7, Ps 80:8) The ‘unpruned’ in the Old Testament is a symbol of sinful condition and the unproductive nature as its curse. Whereas in Mary, infidelity was substituted by fidelity and the wrath of punishment was transformed into forgiveness and hope. The unpruned vine symbolises her unaltered state and her role as the source of the ‘grapes’ of Christ. It emphasises her perpetual virginity and her unique ability to bear the spiritual fruit of salvation. Mary, like an unpruned vine, is a symbol of untouched purity and fruitful motherhood.

Thirsty Land: Humanity’s Spiritual Longing that Germinates a Shoot

The symbol of ‘thirsty land’ represents humanity’s deep spiritual longing and need for salvation (Ps 63:1, Ps 42:1). The symbolism of the plant that comes from a thirsty land illustrates Mother Mary’s virginal conception. Mary is depicted as the source of that salvation through her role as the Mother of God. Just as a thirsty land longs for water, humanity longs for a Savior, and Mary is the channel through which the spiritual ‘water’ of salvation flows to quench this profound spiritual thirst.

Gideon’s Fleece on which Dew was Showered: Divine Selection

Mar Jacob of Serugh compares Mary to Gideon’s fleece, which received the divine dew (Judges 6 12-40). This is the best biblical means of teaching how God is present in a special way in a particular object according to His wishes and will. This metaphor stresses Mary as the chosen vessel to receive the divine presence and bear the Savior. Just as Gideon’s fleece was selected by

God to reveal His will, Mary was chosen to bring forth the Son of God. The dew symbolizes the divine grace and presence that descended upon her.

Conclusion

Mar Jacob of Serugh's use of these symbols provides a vivid and metaphorical way to express the theological concepts related to the Virgin Mary's unique role in the Incarnation and the salvation of humanity. Through Mary's virginity, her role as the closed door, the sealed letter, the untilled land, the unpruned vine, the thirsty land, and Gideon's fleece, Mar Jacob emphasizes her purity, her motherhood, and her central place in the Christian spirituality. These symbols serve as a testament to Mary's significance in Christian theology, spirituality and devotion and continue to resonate with believers, inspiring contemplation of her extraordinary role in the divine plan of salvation.