

T'aks'a d-'al r'az'a q'adish'a d-zuw'ag'a - A textual and theological analysis of the order of marriage in the East Syriac Tradition

In this research work I mainly examine on the Syriac manuscript of the ritual for marriage of the East Syrian Church kept in the library of the Arch bishop house of the Church of the East, Trichur, numbered as 76 written in 1861 A.D. Translation of the manuscript and comparison with the printed text of Mar Thomma Darmo is the main concern. A textual analysis of the order bringing out its theological significance is done in the work. Historical, theological, linguistic, patristic and social aspects of the order of marriage are dealt with properly.

General Introduction

St. Thomas Christians trace their origin to the apostolate of St. Thomas in India in 52 AD.¹ According to available historical sources they were closely associated with the Church of Persia. The St. Thomas Christians were under the jurisdiction of the Catholicos of Seleucia – Ctesiphon in Persia, received bishops from them and followed the East Syrian liturgy.² The four Syrian Churches viz. Church of Persia, Edessa, Seleucia - Ctesiphon and India, founded by St. Thomas and his disciples share a common East Syriac tradition. Their liturgical language was Syriac. St. Thomas Christians were always proud of their rich Syrian heritage. The missionaries from the west tolerated this Eastern and Indian Church at first, but later tensions and frictions appeared in Malabar. The principle of Latinization was approved in the synod of Diamper (1599) convoked by the missionaries for the Malabar church. As a result Malabar Church lost its identity and rich Syriac patrimony.

¹ Cf. A. E. Medlycot, *India and the Apostle Thomas: An Enquiry with a Critical Analysis of Acta Thomae*, David Nutt, London, 1905, 22.

² P. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, St. Paul Publications, Bombay, 1970, 29-30.

Marriage was one of the important sacraments that affected most in the latinization process. Till the end of the 16th century, the Thomas Christians followed the same marriage liturgy of the Chaldean church. The second Council of Goa (1585) ordered that the Latin marriage ritual be translated into Syriac for the use of Thomas Christians³ and thus a Syriac version of the ritual of the Archdiocese of Braga (Portugal) was prepared.⁴ Diamper synod prohibited many rituals and social customs that were common among the Malabar Christians in connection with the marriage. This situation prevails even today. The second Vatican Council clearly demands to every Eastern Church to return to the sources and keep up its own apostolic traditions. So it is very useful to examine critically the original East Syrian marriage rite. This dissertation is an attempt to explore the rich theology that lies under the marriage rites of the East Syrian Church. The theology of the East Syrian Church is to be found in her liturgy, sacraments and other liturgical prayers.

Scope and relevance of the study

In the East Syrian liturgical family the Chaldean Catholics and Assyrian Church of the East follow the same text. Syro Malabar Church used the same text up to the Diamper synod with slight Indian adaptations like the use of Thali and Vilaku thodeel (touching in veneration the lamp representing Jesus, the light of the world). So the restoration of the original text helps the church to enrich its theology. We have very few extant documents on the matrimonial practices of the early Malabar Christians, but the existing traditional customs and the indications in the reports of the missionaries and in the decrees of the Synod of Diamper shed sufficient light on the matter. Even though marriage was considered as a sacrament at very later period, the style, contents, customs and the very tone of the East Syrian marriage rite clearly indicate that they are of very ancient in origin and most of them are coming from the Jewish background. Furthermore the symbolism

³ Synod of Diamper, III.7 in Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima Collectio*, (Paris 1903-1972) 35:1189, as cited by L. Edakalathur, *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition* (Mar Thoma Yogam, Rome, 1995) p.157.

⁴ E. Tisserant, "Syro-Malabare (l'Eglise)" in DTC XIV, 2 (1941) 3089-3162, as cited by Edakalathur L., *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition* (Mar Thoma Yogam, Rome, 1995) p.157.

and mysticism of marriage was always a fascinating theme for all the Syriac fathers. Of the various oriental rites, that of the East Syrian rite is less known but most substantial and most developed, especially rich in its imagery and symbolism. Above all, this liturgical rite has a didactic character, a delicate pastoral attention to the mystery of marriage and to the union of man and woman. With great artistic skill this tradition exploits the treasure of revelation to elevate the spouses to the level of a divinely instituted state. An investigation into this liturgical text will bring forth the richness of East Syriac literature.

Objective

The objective of this study is to make a scientific and comprehensive study on the East Syriac marriage rite bringing out the linguistic specialities and rich theological insights.

Sources and Method

This study is mainly based on the Syriac manuscript of the ritual for marriage of the East Syrian Church kept in the library of the Arch bishop house of the Church of the East, Trichur. I have made a comparison of the manuscript with a printed text by name 'Order of betrothal, blessing, crowning and interweaving of the bridal chamber' (The Marriage Ritual of the Church of the East) which was published in Mar Narsai Press Trichur in the year 1960 by deacon Yousep Thomma, with the permission and blessing of Mar Thomma Darmo, the Arch bishop of Malabar. Some other liturgical sources used for this study are the Hudra (Cycle, or the Prayer of the Church), the Chaldean ritual of marriage edited by the Dominicans of Mosul, and the liturgical commentaries on this celebration.

The method used for this research is descriptive and analytical. Translation of the manuscript and comparison with the printed text of Darmo is the main concern. Historical, theological, linguistic, patristic and social aspects of the marriage are dealt with systematically.

Procedure

This study is developed under six chapters. The sacramental, theological and Christological aspects of the marriage ceremony are dealt with precisely together with a translation of the text. Finally I am trying to find out the close relation between Jewish and East Syrian liturgy of marriage.

Chapter 1

The very first chapter is an attempt to explore the historical evolution of marriage as an independent sacrament. Marriage was originally considered as a social celebration. Slowly it has got a religious dimension and was considered as a sacred rite. From early time onwards Christian marriage was considered as chaste and legitimate union and as a sacrament of love. Marriage was seen as an image of the union of Christ and the Church. Later the solemnity of marriage increased by adding new elements of celebration such as presence of the priest and of the lay people, of the cross, of the blessed water and of the ring etc.

In the early East Syrian Church the celebration of marriage was purely a family affair. The Acts of Judas Thomas present Apostle Thomas blessing the marriage of a royal couple. It shows that there was some prayer invoking God's blessing on the couple. The custom of the celebration of marriage in the Church began only later. The insistence of Mar Narsai (+502) on the presence of a priest at the marriage celebration may be the first reliable evidence in the ancient Syrian sources regarding the intervention of the Church in the celebration of marriage.

This chapter also deals with the Eastern concept of sacrament which is different from that of Western understanding. The sacraments are best expressed in the Eastern churches as *R'āzā* (mystery) than to the Latin sense of the term *sacramentum* (sacred) which has more legalistic connotation. It is a mystery in the sense that the act of the church transcends the existential moment. It both represents the past redemptive act of Jesus Christ on the cross and points to the future eschatological expectation of his second coming. More precisely, *R'āzā* is a symbolic action founded on the economy of salvation

in Christ which is performed by the Church as a salvific action with eschatological dimensions through the ministry of a bishop or priest.

In the sacred tradition of the Eastern Church priestly blessing is absolutely necessary at the celebration of betrothal. The priest is the official minister of the sacrament of marriage, for divine grace is conferred on the spouses through the ministry of a priest. It is God who unites the man and woman in the wedding service and accomplishes the sacrament of marriage. In the Western tradition the consent of the bride and the bridegroom is the most essential element of making a Christian marriage. However, the marriage liturgy of the East Syrian tradition seems to suggest that giving the mutual consent is not the important element of the liturgical celebration of the marriage. For them it is essentially a prerequisite for marriage. It has more social implications than theological implications. As they understood liturgy as the work of the Holy Trinity, they emphasize the work of God in the celebration of marriage. Marriage is a pledge for the heavenly marriage feast for which God invited all the generations. God Himself is the accomplisher of this sacrament and so the official minister of the sacrament is the priest.

Marriage is a covenant, but not the contract of western canon law. It is a covenant reflecting and grounded upon the covenant between Christ and his Church and is unilateral. The bond arising from the marriage ceremony had the same nature. God's initiative of love and invitation of Israel into a personal communion with himself is reflected in the events of the Exodus and the encounter on Sinai. In the same manner here the groom takes the initiative of love in presenting a ring to his bride. The acceptance of this ring by the bride is a symbolic gesture of her consent. It is primarily Christological rather than juridical in nature. The marriage is celebrated in the presence of Christ, but it is also a mystery which recalls the covenant of Christ, and the sacrifice of the lamb.

Chapter 2

The second chapter is the translation and comparison of the manuscript with the printed text. The main printed text used to compare is that of Mar Thoma Darmo. According to internal evidences the manuscript is written by a priest by name Osana son of Yokanis

from the city of Gundektha (Middle East) in the month of Adar (March) in the Greek year 2172 (i.e. 1861 A.D.). An English translation of the manuscript is given side by side with the Syriac texts and the omissions and additions from the printed text are given as footnotes. Darmono corrects some discrepancies found in the manuscript and at times he replaces certain *'ōnyātā* and sometimes inserts some additional hymns or omits certain stanzas of the *'ōnyātā*.

Chapter 3

In the third chapter I am trying to expose the structure and theology of the east Syrian marriage rite. The use of many Syriac terms typical to the early East Syrian liturgical texts are noteworthy here. It clearly indicates that these prayers are of ancient origin and in direct connection with Jewish prayers. When we consider the history of the sacrament of marriage the East Syrians always preferred to call the sacrament of marriage as *ṭaksā d-burākā* rather than *ṭaksā d-zūwāgā* which is closer to *'berākā*' the marriage blessings of Jews. The invocation of the "name" of God, which is a precise cultural act of the Temple, is prevalent in this liturgy. The extensive use of the "right hand" of God, which manifests the protective power of God, is a specialty of this rite. The right hand is a place of power in the Jewish understanding.

The marriage service is celebrated in a Christological and Eschatological context. All the prayers sound that marriage is a combined act of the heavenly and earthly church. The liturgical text seems to be more concerned with the betrothal of Christ and his Church than with the actual marriage of the couple in presence. As in the Jewish marriage ceremonies the role of grooms man and bride's maid is very important in this rite. Importance given to OT Fathers and Psalms, and the importance given to OT Exemplary Couples are special characteristics of this rite. The East Syrian marriage ceremony *ṭaksā d-burākā* itself is a chain of blessings as its name indicates. These blessings are directly associated with the blessings given to Abraham and other patriarchs. We can notice many ecclesiastical and Christological Parallels of the marriage ceremonies from the prayers. For example Christ the eternal bridegroom gave His Bride Price to the Church by shedding blood on the cross.

When we analyze the structure and theology of the East Syrian marriage rite we understand that all the ceremonies clearly indicate that marriage is both social and ecclesiastical institution in which society and church have a vital role to play. The preparatory service essentially has a civil character. This ceremony guarantees the liberty of the girl, the feeble partner, in choosing her life partner. The East Syrian Churches are very vigilant in safeguarding the right of choosing a partner freely. The rite of exchanging the right hands of the representatives of the two families means that marriage is not just a sacrament and a contract between the boy and the girl but an entering into a contract and a relationship between the families of the boy and that of the girl.

In Eastern countries there was a prevalent custom of giving *mahrā* for the bride by the bridegroom. The father or the bridegroom himself fixes a bride price for the bride and it is given to the father of the bride to get her as his own. The Father offers a bride-price of great value, indicative of the value He places on the bride. Christ the eternal bridegroom gave His Bride Price to the Church by shedding blood on the cross. The high price of the *mahrā* indicates the value the Father placed on the bride.

The betrothal service mainly includes the blessing of the chalice, the blessing of the ring, the blessing of the chalice with the cross, the benediction of the *ḥnānā*. The groom and bride drinking from the same cup of wine is a symbol of covenant relationship in the Jewish tradition. In the blessing of the ring only one ring is used because it signifies not a bilateral covenant or mutual exchange, but the unilateral love of God and the covenant made possible through Christ. The blessing of the chalice with the cross indicates that Christ's new covenant is sealed on the cross, and throughout the rite there is constant reference to the cross of Calvary. The benediction of the *ḥnānā* and its mixing with the wine has an eschatological significance. This mixture brings the heavenly ecclesia quite literally inside the bride and groom, thus sealing them as an eschatological sign.

The drinking from the same chalice by the spouses is a powerful symbol originating from the Eucharist. Drinking from the same chalice signifies the perfect communion of life and the indissoluble union of marriage bond.

In the ceremony of 'blessing of the garments' the garments make us remember the 'rob of glory' of Adam and Eve which they lost when they sinned. Here they are the Symbol of incorruption and renewal which the believers put on from water and spirit. This is also a symbol of unity. As the garments stick to the limbs, so the couple stick to each other in love and affection and unite each other in concord and fear of God. Garments are also symbols of glory by which Christ the king adorns the Church like a queen. The blessing of colours indicates the perpetual provision of God and the renewal of human nature in the new world with incorruptible garments. Christ perfected the beauty of the Church his bride. He clothed her the robe of magnificent and unceasing light and placed on her head the excellent and splendid crown of glory and before all men sweetened her odour like pure incense and increased her beauty like rose flowers and spring blossoms.

The Crowning is the "form" and the heart of the Mystery. They are crowns of royalty, Kingdom of God, and of martyrdom. Crowning is a sign of the mystical approach in the marriage. The mystical approach of the Eastern Church primarily sees in that relationship between Christ and the Church, as St Paul talks about. Marriage is something, which needs to be lived out in a continual state of seeking God's Grace and Guidance. Crowning is a real sharing in the spiritual Kingship of Christ where the willingness to suffer one another's faults is the fullest expression of love. Christian marriage is depicted as a foretaste of the happiness that awaits all who share in the marriage feast of the Lamb. Crowning which is the heart of the marriage ceremony clearly indicates that the couple enjoys a royal status in the kingdom of God, is separated before God as holy, and has a prophetic mission that they have to bear witness to the presence of Christ in their lives and in the world.

The erection of the bridal chamber and its blessing constitutes an important element of East Syrian marriage celebration. Making of the Bridal Chamber and its blessing intends to implore for the divine help to keep the couple from the wicked and to get God's grace to accomplish Lord's will in their words and deeds. The bridal chamber symbolizes the holy of holies hidden behind the veil, where male and female can become One New Perfect Creation. It has a Christological and eschatological implication. The prayers of the blessing of the bridal chamber clearly indicate that this bridal chamber is

the pre-figuration of the final bridal chamber in heaven where the eschatological union of Christ with Church takes place. The Church is awaiting the second coming of her bridegroom when he will take her to the bridal chamber, which is also called the heavenly Jerusalem.

Chapter 4

In this chapter we analyze the concept of marriage developed in the liturgical ritual and in the liturgical seasons of the East Syrian Church. The East Syrian Church views the sacrament of marriage, in its theological aspects, as an image of Christ's love for the Church. The grand theme running through the entire service is that of Christ and His spouse, the Church. The various hymns chanted at the celebration of marriage convey the theme of union of Christ with the Church. Alternating with the actual marriage ceremony of the two individuals involved is the picture of marriage of Jesus and the Church. Very extensively Christ is depicted as the heavenly bridegroom and Church is pictured as the adorned bride in the text. The prayers of the liturgical seasons especially that of epiphany and dedication of the Church, unfold different phases of the mystery of the marriage between Christ and the Church. Beginning with the betrothal at the River Jordan it culminates at the consummation in the heavenly bridal chamber with eternal happiness. All the prayers point to the fact that every marriage is a symbol and image of the spousal union and covenant between Christ the bridegroom and Church the bride. The union of husband and wife is elevated and sanctified by linking it to the union between Christ and the Church.

Underlining all other themes, there is at the center of the liturgy the idea of joy. It is mainly told in the many blessings that keep "showering" upon the couple during the celebration and finally brought by the "mysterious" presence of Christ, similar to the "physical" presence at the wedding of Cana of Galilee. This joy is the fore-shadow of the joy in the eschatological union between Christ and Church.

Chapter 5

The fifth chapter is an attempt to find out the Christological and Eschatological aspects of marriage on the basis of early Syriac writings. For the Syriac fathers marriage

is a symbol of the covenant established between God and mankind. The relationship and love between God and His people is symbolized by marriage. They always look on marriage in a Christological and eschatological point of view. Christ as the "Heavenly Bridegroom" and church as his bride dominates much of the early Syriac literature. By the nuptial imagery Syriac fathers meant the whole economy of salvation in which it depicts the person and activities of Christ who gives salvation to all. The whole economy of salvation is symbolically depicted in terms of 'marriage feast'. The Syriac writers are very interested to symbolize the whole life of Christ such as the incarnation, baptism, the public life and death on the cross in marital terms. They describe Christ's incarnation as a 'marriage' with the human race. For them, His baptism symbolizes the betrothal with the church and His presence in Cana as that of a bridegroom. According to fathers the death of Christ on the cross is the wedding with the church. In all these events, the true identity of Christ the Bridegroom is fully revealed. For them the Church is the bride of Christ betrothed at the Jordan, but wedded to him on the Cross where her dowry is written in the blood which flowed from his side. At Golgotha the betrothal becomes consummated with the Bridegroom's total self-giving to the bride as the dowry. The body of the Bridegroom is placed as food for the guests. This feast finds its fuller realization in the eschatological kingdom. The Church lives in an 'already and not-yet' of the heavenly bliss which cannot be more effectively expounded unless through the imagery of the betrothed woman looking forward to the marriage feast. Eucharist is the marriage banquet, a pre-figuration of the eschatological wedding feast.

Chapter 6

The sixth chapter brings out the fact that many marriage customs of the Syro-Malabar Christians are of Jewish origin. The first converts to Syrian Christianity were mostly Jews. So here we examine the Jewish background and culture which is closely related to the East Syrian marriage ceremony. The structure and stylization of East Syrian marriage rites are very much influenced by the Jewish marriage traditions. Some of the important similarities we are finding are in the level of Old Testament practices, which are typical Jewish customs. One of the important characteristic of East Syrian marriage service is the extensive use of quotations from the Old Testament and direct references to Old Testament personalities. This is a clear indication of the Semitic crucible in which

this and the rest of the East Syrian rite took shape. Many references to the marriage of the Fathers of Old, especially Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are considered as the pioneers of the first covenant and whose marriage represented the prototype of the actual one are seen in this rite. We find many links between the East Syrian and Jewish liturgies of marriage in several matters. Especially in the rite which prescribes the need of giving conscious consent, the rite of joining the right hands of the stewards, important roles of the bridal friends, ritual gift to the bride (ring or coin), shared cup with benedictions, one year gap between betrothal and marriage proper, dressing of bride and bridegroom, bridal procession, making of *Huppah*, thematic and linguistic similarities of wedding songs, dancing at wedding, crowning of bride and bridegroom, seven days of celebration etc.

Conclusion

East Syrian marriage rite is, from a theological point of view, one of the richest in the entire repertoire of Christian liturgy. The text unfolds a very interesting and primitive theology that underlies in it. The East Syrian liturgy of marriage is very ancient and in direct continuity with the Jewish liturgy of marriage. The sacrament of marriage in the East Syrian Church was closely related to the Old Testament. The structure and theology of the East Syrian marriage rite as a whole clearly indicate that marriage is both a social contract and a religious rite instituted by the church. The conjugal symbolism of Christ and the Church is well expressed in the prayers and hymns of the East Syrian marriage rite. The contribution of Syriac fathers to the liturgy of marriage is very great. Many of the images and symbols used in the marriage service derive mainly from the writings of Syriac fathers. The fathers express the whole life of Christ – His incarnation, His baptism, His public life and His death – in marital terms. The rite of marriage unfolds the economy of salvation in a Christological and eschatological context and at the same time it clearly expresses the spirituality and theology of the East Syrian tradition.

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