

***Takso d' Denho* in the West Syrian Tradition:**

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(*Takso d Denho*)

**A Study of the Feast of Epiphany in the Malankara Orthodox Church**

This research is an attempt to explore and appreciate the theological themes of the liturgical order of the Feast of Epiphany (*Denho*) in the West Syriac Tradition. Along with this, the study describes the origin of the Feast and the reasons behind the celebration of the Feast on 6<sup>th</sup> January. Four different texts of the order of the Feast of Epiphany from the West Syriac tradition are compared to understand the main features and common themes of the service itself. An English translation from Syriac text of the present order, which has been used in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church since the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century is also given in the appendix.

As the liturgical celebration of feasts in the Syriac Orient is not merely a remembrance of the past events which Jesus has fulfilled in His earthly life, but is a re-enactment of the same in a most fitting manner by means of prayers, hymns and liturgical gestures, the present study uses the method in which the liturgical text itself is being allowed to explain the content and the theological themes of the Feast as it is reflected in the prayers, hymns and liturgical actions.

**General Introduction**

The Feast of *Denho* is celebrated on 6<sup>th</sup> January. The main event commemorated in this Feast in the West Syriac tradition is the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, but in Western Latin tradition and in Greek Eastern tradition two other events, namely the arrival of Magi and the miracle of changing water into wine at Cana were added to it, even though the Latin west, Greek east and Syriac Oriental traditions share a thematic unity of the celebrations of this Feast in the

present time. This Feast is the liturgical expression of the ideas of redemption, renewal and restoration of all creation, which was distorted by the fall of man, through the incarnation of the Son of God. The Greek tradition gives more emphasis to the event of the manifestation of the Holy Trinity and celebrates the Feast mainly as the Feast of Light. The Armenian Orthodox Church still celebrates this Feast on 6<sup>th</sup> January as the nativity of Christ.

The four main themes expounded through this study are the Feast of Epiphany as the Feast of Divine Manifestation, as the Feast of Baptism, as Bridal Feast and as the Catechesis of the Living Water on the basis of Christ's baptism in the river Jordan. These theological themes are analyzed in the light of the prayers and hymns of the order, the liturgy of the hours and the teachings of the Syriac fathers who wrote a great deal about the significance of this single Feast. The Biblical, Jewish and patristic backgrounds of the themes are dealt with in detail in order to comprehend the theological vicissitudes of the themes.

## **Chapter 1**

The first chapter deals with the origin and the development of the Feast of Epiphany and a few comments about the theories of the date of Epiphany. The Jewish Christian communities, which formed the early Syriac Church, continued the practices and traditions of Judaism, namely the festivals, worship styles and basic theological understandings of God and the coming Messiah which were fulfilled in Christ. Through this eschatological fulfilment of the Old Testament in Christ, the festivals of the Jews were transformed into Christian festivals, retaining much of their thematic and ritualistic heritage. Out of the three main Jewish feasts, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, Passover and Pentecost obviously continued to be celebrated in the early Church. It is not so obvious how the Feast of Tabernacles

was continued; however, with a comparison of the rites, readings and themes of the Feast of Epiphany, especially according to the Syriac Fathers and compared to the current Syriac liturgy, one can make a reasonable argument that the Feast of Epiphany is the continuation of the Feast of Tabernacles in the early Church. From this, one gets a better understanding and insight of the many themes of the Feast of Epiphany.

## **Chapter 2**

The second chapter constitutes the analysis of the structure of the West Syriac order of the Feast. The discussion includes the development of the order, a short history of its use in the Malankara Church and a comparison of different Syriac versions of the order. The present investigation deals with two of the surviving early manuscripts, a short recension (Add.14495) and a long recension (Add.14499) both found in the collection of oriental texts entitled *The Blessing of the Waters on the Eve of the Epiphany* edited by Budge E.A.W in 1901. The present study also examined in detail *M'ad'dono*, which is the West Syriac festal breviary. The main focus of this study, however, is the order used in Malankara at present, which is 'The Order of the Feast of Epiphany' from the festal breviary *PAMPAKUDA*.

The value of using a current text to study this ancient tradition is particularly clear through an understanding of the development of the liturgy in the East. When the early liturgies were written down, they developed through the revisions of those in worshipping communities that would transcribe their own versions of older manuscripts, as seen by the work of Jacob of Edessa in the seventh century. The main themes and structures are preserved in this development, just that new layers were added on. Through an analysis of different manuscripts and versions of the Feast of Epiphany which are available, it is found that, throughout the versions, the

structure, elements and themes are preserved and added upon. This method of development supports the use of the current liturgy to gain insight into the earlier liturgies, as the most fertile ground for studying this Feast is the latest version – the most thematically rich and developed version of the order of the Feast of Epiphany.

### **Chapter 3**

This chapter discusses the antecedents of the themes of the Christian Feast of Epiphany based on the Tradition of the Church found in the Jewish origins of the Syriac Church, the Holy Bible and the context of the age out of which it developed. Namely, the chapter describes how the themes of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, the Johannine narrations of Jesus Christ and the response of the Church to the Arian heresy affect the development of the observation of the Feast of Epiphany in Syriac Christianity.

All the cardinal themes of the Feast of Epiphany have their precursors in both Jewish and Biblical New Testament tradition. The Feast of Tabernacles includes the themes of the manifestation of the *doxa* of God, the acceptance of the covenant with God by the current generation of His people and the universal nature of salvation, not limited to just all mankind but the whole creation as well. While considering the Feast of Epiphany, the themes exposed in it parallel the themes from the Feast of Tabernacles, including the manifestation of the Holy Trinity through the revelation of the Son of God, the covenant with God made through the Holy Baptism, and the salvation offered by Christ to all creation.

This association of the theme of the Christ as the Savior of all and the Feast of Tabernacles begins in the Gospel according to St. John when the author exposes Christ as the Living Water for that all who believe in Him, as the Light of the world and as the Son of God, not just the son of Abraham, extending the salvation He

brings to all mankind, through the accounts of Christ's teachings in the temple during this Feast recorded in chapters 7 and 8. This tradition was continued in the early Church through the development of the Feast of Epiphany on the foundation of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Though the Feast of Epiphany was widely observed in the East from the first century, the spread of this Feast grew greatly in the West in response to the Arian heresy. Because of its liturgical expression of the revelation of Christ as the Son of God, the observance of this Feast became more widespread during the 4<sup>th</sup> century to reinforce the Church's faith in the eternal divinity of Christ.

#### **Chapter 4**

The description of the Feast of Epiphany as the Feast of Divine manifestation is the main concern of the fourth chapter. It expresses the magnificence of the Feast of Epiphany as the manifestation of the Holy Trinity on earth at the time of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. The public ministry of Jesus was inaugurated with His baptism in the Jordan, where He was revealed to the world as God through the witness of the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Baptism of Jesus was the Theophany of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity in a very unique manner. The manifestation of the Holy Trinity is made known to St. John the Baptist through three human senses. According to Syriac tradition, the role of the Holy Spirit in Christ's baptism is as the 'finger of the Father' to bear witness to the Son of God. The Father is manifested to the world through His profound voice testifying to the Son, the Holy Spirit is manifested in the form of a dove that rested on the Son, and thus the Son is revealed as God and as a Person of the Holy Trinity, now manifested on earth for the first time in history. Moreover it emphasizes the life and work of Christ, the entire economy of salvation, as a Trinitarian conception.

This idea of salvation as a Trinitarian action is depicted in the order of the liturgy. Christ is described as the redeemer of the World, heavenly salt and the coal of fire, which sanctified the whole creation from the stain of sin. Moreover the Messianic Kingship of the Son is proclaimed at the time of His Baptism in the river Jordan.

## **Chapter 5**

This chapter deals with the theological theme of the Feast of Epiphany as the Feast of Baptism. The study tries to expose the meaning of Christian baptism in relation to the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, and also how this action is the means for the restoration of the cosmic order through the blessing of the waters.

Syriac Fathers define Christian baptism as a 'rebirth' from 'water and Spirit' on the basis of the Johannine view on baptism. In the early Syriac tradition, the event of Christ's baptism was seen as the fountainhead of Christian baptism. They describe the difference between Christ's baptism and Christian baptism by illustrating the gifts of the latter: sonship, indwelling of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. Thus the churches in the East celebrate this as the Feast of Baptism, commemorating both the baptism of Christ and the baptism of the believers, in which they were adopted as the children of God.

The Jordan event was considered by Syriac Fathers as the institution of Christian baptism similar to the Last Supper as the institution of the Holy Eucharist. Moreover, the descent of the Holy Spirit is described as the prefiguration of the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian Baptism to sanctify, anoint and provide the robe of glory to the believers. The restoration of the fallen image through baptism for which the Son of God humbled himself out of His love for humanity is a favourite theme for the Syrian Fathers in the interpretation of Christ's baptism in the river Jordan. The Feast of the Epiphany of Christ is not a recalling of the baptism of

Christ in an isolated, abstract sense; it is the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ, the recognition of the intrinsic relation between His Baptism in the Jordan and His Death and Resurrection.

The West Syriac traditions commemorate this Feast concentrating on its cosmic aspects in order to highlight the divine plan of cosmic redemption through the Son of God. When man sinned in the Garden of Eden, all of creation, which began by the Word of God and the hovering of the Spirit, was defiled. When Christ was revealed by the voice of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the waters in which He was baptized were sanctified and restored to their primordial condition. This is ritualistically represented through the blessing of water in the Feast of the Epiphany.

## **Chapter 6**

The sixth chapter narrates the significance of the Feast of Epiphany as the Bridal Feast of the Church. The nuptial theme of the Feast describes the selection of the Church as the bride of the divine Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The significant background behind this theme is universal salvation and the inclusion of the Gentiles as the people of God through the incarnation of the Son of God. This is the great mystery of the Salvation Economy and thus the baptism of Jesus is considered as the betrothal between Christ and the Church as in the Old Testament background of betrothal, done on the banks of a well. The role of John the Baptist as the friend and voice of the bridegroom is also described in this chapter. The ministry of John the Baptist is also significant in the Salvation Economy. The interpretation of John the Baptist as the priest and adorer of the bride and the servant of the bridegroom is apt and meaningful in the betrothal context.

This interpretation of the Feast of Epiphany as the bridal feast of the Church widens the field of vision of mankind and opens up new horizons. God no longer manifests himself to a single race, a privileged people, but to the whole world: the good news of salvation is addressed to all men and women of every tribe, nation and tongue.

### **Chapter 7**

Epiphany as the catechism of the Living Waters is the main content of the seventh chapter. Living Water in the Syriac tradition is interpreted as the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and as the Sacraments. The analysis of the lessons read in the Feast and in the Epiphany season help to understand the Syriac methodology of catechesis through liturgy and the last part of this chapter describes this in detail, along with the instructive significance of the river Jordan.

Blessing of the water, the central act of the Feast of the Epiphany, is the liturgical expression of the experience of Christian Baptism, the expression of the experience of the 'living water.' This act fulfills the catechetical purpose of reminding the believers of their baptismal experience and its meaning in their life, mainly their redemption, renewal and restoration. The role of the river Jordan as an instructive symbol of Living Waters may also be connected with the theme of baptism and is clearly reflected in the prayers and hymns of the order of the Feast. To the fathers of the Church, Jordan is a figure of Baptism. It is described by them as the baptismal font, as an instrument of renewal and redemption, and as the first fruit of sanctification. Moreover, they compare Jordan with the womb of St. Mary and that of Sheol.

### **Conclusion**

This study supports the view that the Jewish heritage of the Feast of *Denho* is quite central to the development of the origin and theme of this Feast. When one analyses



the West Syriac order of the Feast of *Denho*, he understands how much this Church transformed and modified Jewish liturgical traditions in its faith celebrations. Through the study of the theological themes of this Order, many unique lessons can be brought out regarding the faith and practices of the early Church. By investigating the theology of the Feast itself, it is clear that the themes and practices of the Feast developed in such a way that they could be used by the Church for the education of the people, particularly in response to the heresies of the day. It is by returning to this spirit of relevance in the lives of Christians that the Feast itself can be restored to the prominence it enjoyed in the early Church, when it was one of the three main feasts, along with Easter and Pentecost.

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