

Baby Varghese

The Early History of the Syriac Liturgy

Growth, Adaptation
and Inculturation

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Martin Tamcke

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Foreword

Most studies of Syriac liturgy focus on particular topics or aspects and, while certain areas are well covered, above all that of the Eucharistic liturgy and the many anaphoras, there remain many others areas on which little or no serious study has been undertaken. One result of this situation is that can be hard to see the wood for the trees, and an overall picture of developments in the Syriac liturgical tradition over time is difficult to grasp. In this pioneering work the Rev. Dr. Baby Varghese, who has written extensively and authoritatively on many areas of Syriac liturgy, has now provided a well-informed overview of the general development of the Syriac liturgical tradition, covering from the beginnings to the earlier Middle Ages, paying especial attention to the ways in which particular developments are often shaped by the changing cultural contexts over the course of time.

Among the notable features of the Rev. Dr Baby Varghese's study, three might be singled out. Firstly, the significance he attaches to some of the earliest witnesses, above all, the Odes of Solomon, for understanding the earliest developments of Syriac liturgical poetry. As he stresses, they need to be seen against a wider background than just their more immediate historical context, which is hedged around with so many uncertainties and imponderables. Secondly, he has made excellent use of the evidence available for liturgical history tucked away in the pages of William Wright's wonderfully detailed *Catalogue* of the Syriac manuscripts acquired by the British Museum from Dayr al-Suryan in Egypt in the mid nineteenth century, now housed in the British Library. The importance of this collection lies in the fact that almost all the oldest surviving Syrian Orthodox liturgical manuscripts, of the 9th/10th century onwards, have thanks to the dry Egyptian climate, been preserved intact over the centuries in the library of Dayr al-Suryan. Thirdly, creative use has been made of the scanty and scattered evidence both from Central Asia and from the Tang and Yuan (Mongol) dynasties in China, materials for the most part ranging in date from the 8th/9th century to the 13th/14th century.

Since the aim of his book is to take the history of the East and West Syriac liturgical tradition up to the around the end of the 13th century, it does not cover the author's own country, India, since it is virtually impossible to discern anything of its liturgical history prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in south India at the end of the fifteenth century. Only from the sixteenth century do written Syriac liturgical sources survive, and to trace the complex history of the Latinization of the East Syriac rite and the later introduction of the West Syriac rite, with the continuing controversies surrounding both of them, would require a separate volume; such a volume, which one hopes might one day be written *sine ira et studio*, would certainly provide many fascinating insights on how liturgies can develop and change due to altering outward circumstances.

Sebastian Brock
Emeritus Reader in Syriac Studies
Oxford University, GB

Vorwort

Father Baby Varghese habe ich 1980 kennengelernt, als er hier nach Göttingen/Goslar zum *Symposium Syriacum* kam. Das war das erste *Symposium Syriacum*, an dem ich teilnahm, wenn auch nur als Hilfskraft, die gerade sich an ihrer Dissertation versuchte. Göttingen war damals ein weltweit anerkannter Standort der syrologischen Forschung und beherbergte an der Theologischen Fakultät einen Lehrstuhl für Syrische Kirchengeschichte (Werner Strothmann, später mit Wolfgang Hage und Jouko Martikainen und Lorenz Schlimme fortgeführt als Orientalische Kirchengeschichte), an dem zahlreiche Arbeiten zur Geschichte der syrischen Liturgien und Hymnen entstanden. Baby Varghese hat lange am Orthodoxen Seminar in Kottayam und am St. Ephraem Ecumenical Research Institute daselbst gelehrt, hat seine Kirche bei ökumenischen Veranstaltungen vertreten, wenn es um deren historische und liturgische Tradition ging, gerade weil er in seinem umfangreichen wissenschaftlichen Bemühen aus dem üblichen Rahmen in Kerala in vielfältiger Weise heraussticht.

Zur Bedeutung des vorliegenden Werkes hat der Kollege Sebastian Brock aus Oxford in seinem Vorwort bereits einige wichtige Aspekte hervorgehoben. An diesem Band zeigt sich die ökumenische Weite Vargheses aber auch daran, dass er die Perspektive auf die ostsyrische Tradition weitet, ohne die die frühe Kirchengeschichte Indiens kaum zu denken ist. Ein besonderer Verdienst ist es, dass er mit seinen Beobachtungen früh einsetzt und damit darauf hinweist, dass wir mit liturgischen Elementen wohl schon in biblischer Zeit zu rechnen haben. Erst jetzt läuft die Forschung zur früheren syrischen Literaturgeschichte Indiens intensiver an, auch wenn sie nach wie vor erst mit dem Auftreten der Portugiesen intensiver greifbar wird. Immer war es eine offene Frage, inwieweit etwa die bestimmten Personen zugeschriebenen Hymnen tatsächlich auf diese zurückzuführen sind, oder ob etwa unter dem Namen Ephraem auch andere Texte überlebt haben. Chancen und Grenzen eines darauf zielenden historischen Ansatzes sind bis heute kontrovers diskutierte Möglichkeiten, die liturgischen Quellen auch über ihren Sitz im Leben hinaus fruchtbar werden zu lassen.

Wie kaum eine andere Quelle, so prägt die Liturgie bis heute das kollektive Bewusstsein und die kollektive Erinnerung und wirken so tief auf das alltägliche Leben ein. Dabei ist, das kann schon aus diesem Buch gelernt werden, die Geschichte der Liturgie, die nicht unbedingt deren Tradierung durch die Zeiten sein muss, durchaus vielfältig und selten einfach einseitig positioniert. Im Gegenteil bilden sich unterschiedlichste Prozesse in der Liturgie mit ab und zeigen so, dass auch Liturgie den historischen Veränderungen unterworfen ist, wenn in der Regel auch mit viel Langmut und Nachhaltigkeit. Zum Verstehen genügen westlichen Interessierten da nicht die Übersetzungen von Liturgien (etwa nun gerade ist die Liturgie/Qurbanakramam seiner Kirche in Deutsch erschienen, Kottayam 2020) und deren musikalisch-spiritueller Genuss, es bedarf auch eines kompetenten Vermittlers, der historische Linien dazu aufzeigen kann. Genau dazu verhelfen viele der Arbeiten Baby Vargheses, den wir immer gern in Göttingen zu Gast hatten.

Dieses Buch nun versucht einen besonders auf die Geschichtlichkeit abhebenden Ansatz. Es ist ihm zu wünschen, dass es westliche Leser in die Hand nehmen, um sich der li-

turgischen Tradition und Geschichte einer Geschwisterkirche nähern zu können, und sie es in das ökumenisch-liturgische Gespräch aufnehmen. Ohne Frage wird die eigene liturgische Tradition bereichert, wenn eine andere hinzutritt und das einseitige Verständnis einer Polyphonie Platz macht, die die Vielfalt ehrt, indem sie die je besondere Tradition auch je gesondert als Bereicherung empfindet. Nicht weniger ist zu erwarten, wenn man sich mit Baby Varghese auf den Weg durch die Geschichte der syrischen Liturgie macht.

Dr. Egbert Schlarb habe ich wieder zu danken für die sehr aufwändige Druckvorbereitung des Manuskriptes.

Martin Tamcke
Universitätsprofessor für Ökumenische Theologie und
Orientalische Kirchen- und Missionsgeschichte
Georg-August-Universität zu Göttingen

Preface

The present work is the result of my one year stay at the Yale University as ISM (Institute of Sacred Music) Fellow and Visiting Professor at the Yale Divinity School (2013-14). There are many who have inspired and supported me in my researches on the West Syriac Liturgy since 1979. The list may be very long. But I want to mention Dr Sebastian Brock (Oxford), my friend and supporter since our first meeting at the third *Symposium Syriacum* in Goslar, Germany in 1980. He has read the draft of this book and made several important suggestions, and wrote a foreword. However, I am solely responsible for the mistakes and inaccuracies.

This is an *essay* to trace some aspects of the encounter between the Syriac Christianity and its surrounding world. I have tried to maintain a balance between East and West Syriac traditions. Chapters II and III cover elements common to both traditions. Chapters IV-VI deal with the West Syriac tradition. In chapter VII, I have briefly discussed the liturgical reforms in the East Syriac Church. Finally, chapter VIII focuses on the ‘inculturation’ in the East Syriac liturgy in China and Central Asia, which was originally presented as a paper in a Conference held in Almaty, Kazakhstan in June 2019. Other chapters were never presented in the form of lectures or conference papers, though some aspects were discussed in my published works. In this study, I have not discussed the history of Eucharist and baptism, as I have already done in my previous publications.

Many topics are not discussed here mainly to limit the size of a monograph. I am not competent to discuss the Arabic and Islamic influence on the Syriac literary genres and hymnography. Possible Byzantine influence on several areas of the Syrian Orthodox Church needs to be explored, especially on the liturgical year, on the liturgical vestments, liturgical objects, as well as on liturgical services. Likewise, the interactions between the East and the West Syriac liturgy also need to be studied.

I am building on the works of several scholars like A. Baumstark, H.J.W. Drijvers, H. Husmann and S. Brock. This is far from being complete or perfect. But I think it is important to put together the fruits of my labour, so that the researches on Syriac liturgy may be continued. I am living in Kottayam, South India, where all the published materials are not readily available. Some of my friends in Europe, USA or West Asia have kindly sent me the electronic versions of publications.

My friend Dr Martin Tamcke, Göttingen, accepted to publish this work in the Collection *Göttinger Orientforschungen/Syriaca*.

Kottayam, 10th October 2021

I. Introduction

The word ‘inculturation’ became part of the theological vocabulary rather recently and is used as synonymous with ‘adaptation’, ‘indigenization’ and ‘contextualization’. A.J. Chupungco, who is regarded as the godfather of ‘inculturation’ in the Catholic circles, proposed the definition of inculturation as follows: “Liturgical inculturation may be described as the process whereby the texts and rites used in worship by the local Church are so inserted in the framework of culture, that they absorb its thought, language and ritual pattern”¹.

It implies the integration of the Church with the language, culture and symbolic system of the country. Since its origins, the history of Syriac Christianity provides examples of such integration. We shall begin with an overview of the early history of Syriac Christianity.

1. Early history of Edessa

Edessa, the earliest centre of Syriac Christianity, was founded in 304 BC by Seleucus I Nicator as one of his military colonies, and he named it after the Macedonian city bearing this name². In later Syriac, the city was known as *ʿwrhy*, *Orhay*. According to later Syriac tradition, as recorded by Bar Hebraeus, Urhay (Orhay) was the smallest of the 180 cities built in the days of Enoch³.

But its recorded history begins with 132 BC when the Seleucids retreated westward over the Euphrates and abandoned Mesopotamia to the Parthians. Soon the Kingdom of Osroene was established with Edessa as capital. The dynasties, which succeeded each other in this kingdom over some 350 years (132 BC–AD 224), were mostly Nabatean Arabs or Parthians. Otherwise the population of the region was of varied origins, descendants of Macedonian colonists, Persians and Jews. The ethnic diversity ensured the coexistence of different religious currents in the paganism of Edessa. Alongside Babylonian divinities like Nabu and Baal, the goddess Atargatis and the god Hadad of Harran were venerated, and all the gods of the pantheon of the desert Arabs. Castration in honour of Atargatis, goddess of fertility was widely practiced; Chaldean astrology was much in vogue⁴. Moreover, Edessa’s medicinal springs gave it the prestige of a centre of miraculous cures. Probably it was in this context that Christ was presented as the “Physician who heals without medicine” (*Doctrine of Addai*, *Acts of Thomas*). The stories related to the evangelization of Edessa under-

1 Chupungco (1989), p. 29. See also, pp. 23ff: “Approaches to Adaptation: Acculturation, Inculturation and Creativity”. When more than one work by an author is quoted, an abbreviation of the title will be indicated (see note 4).

2 See Lavanant (1992), p.263 (excellent article with Bibliography). See also Segal (1970); various works by Drijvers.

3 Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography*, tr. by. E.A.W. Budge, I, (Oxford, 1932), p. 5.

4 Drijvers (1980), *Cults and Beliefs*; also, Healey (2019). Drijvers (1982), *Facts and Problems*, in id. *EA*.

score the healing ministry of St Thomas and Addai, who were, according to tradition, the first evangelizers of the region.

In Mesopotamia (around Edessa), the language spoken by the majority of the population was Aramaic with its different dialects. We may assume, however, that Greek was in use at least among the upper class of society, and for administrative purposes⁵. Epigraphic evidences confirm this fact. Thus inscriptions in Aramaic, or both Aramaic and Greek or purely Greek ones were found (even Latin)⁶.

The art of Edessa is commonly called Parthian because of several common features⁷. Palmyra represents oriental Hellenistic art that developed in Mesopotamia after Alexander the Great. Paganism continued to be popular for many centuries, even after Christianity became well established in Edessa. However, all different religions and cultural traditions used the local Aramaic dialect which was later called Syriac, "which was also used to express philosophical ideas stemming from Hellenistic traditions"⁸.

This complex situation of the co-existence of different religious traditions sharing a common culture raises the questions of mutual dependence and influence. Moreover, Edessa is situated at a junction of the Silk Road. As Drijvers has observed, "Edessa's history, clearly related to its geographical situation in northern Mesopotamia, where it was open to various influences, makes, 'The Blessed City' an example of this cultural assimilation, especially in the field of religion"⁹. Because of the highly active cultural life, Edessa was often called the Athens of the East.

Regarding the paganism of Edessa, Drijvers says: "Grosso modo we therefore can discern three main components of Edessa's religion in pagan times: Babylonian deities, divinities worshipped in the Syriac area that belong mainly to the traditional religions of Aramaic speaking population of that region, and Arab gods"¹⁰.

There was an active Jewish community in Edessa at the time of the origins of Christianity. The Jewish presence in Mesopotamia goes back to the Babylonian exile. According to the accounts of Josephus (75-79 AD), there was a strong Jewish presence in Syria, especially in Antioch (*War* VII, 43). Following the Jewish rebellion of the Palestinian Jews, the Syrian Jews also suffered violence and massacres. In Edessa, there was a small Jewish community with two Synagogues¹¹. The first Christian converts of Edessa were probably the Jews. This explains several Jewish features in early Syriac Christianity¹².

5 Drijvers (1980), *Cults and Beliefs* p. 3.

6 *Ibid.* p. 4.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.* p. 7.

9 *Ibid.* p. 18.

10 *Ibid.* p. 176. According to Drijvers, there is no evidence of Iranian religious influence at Edessa. p. 176. The religion of the ancient Arameans was an Amalgam of Mesopotamian, Cananite, Phoenician and Hittite gods. See. Claude Selis, *Les Syriens Orthodox et Catholiques, Fils d'Abraham*, (Editions Brepols, Turnhout, 1988), p. 143. This preligious pluralism would perhaps explain the popularity of various forms of Christian 'heretical' groups in Mesopotamia.

11 On the Jewish Presence in Edessa and Mesopotamia: Segal (1970), pp. 41-43; Drijvers (1985), *Jews and Christians*, reprinted in HRAS.

12 Rouwhorst (1997).