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The Vision of Eschatology in the East Syrian Qurbana

Introduction

Eschatology is a branch of theology which studies about the eternal realities such as death, resurrection, heaven, hell, final judgment and the second coming of Christ. Holy Qurbana is the celebration of the paschal mysteries of Christ, namely, His passion, death and resurrection. Through the Qurbana, the Church contemplates the eschatological truths and foretastes the second coming of Christ in glory. The celebration of the paschal mysteries of Christ is an image of what is happening in heaven at present and in future. The main thrust of this paper is to find out the eschatological allusions seen in the East Syrian Qurbana.

1. Main Divisions of the East Syrian Qurbana

The important parts of the Holy Qurbana are the liturgy of the Word, the liturgy of the Mysteries (Anaphora) and the liturgy of the Holy Communion. In the various prayers of each section, we can see a lot of eschatological reflections.

1.1. Liturgy of the Word

At first, let us analyze the different prayers, hymns and liturgical actions contained in the liturgy of the Word. The solemn procession of the celebrant to the Bema accompanied by other ministers, the Cross, candles and incense make the second coming of the Lord (*Parousia*) a living experience to the community of

the faithful.¹ One of the first import elements of the East Syrian Qurbana is the *Marmitha* which comes after the *Puqdankon*. According to the Anonymous Author of the ninth century, the psalm 145 (I will praise you...) used in the Qurbana typifies the end of the times and the victory of Elijah, the confusion of the son of perdition and the resurrection of the dead.²

The hymn *Lakumara*, a unique element of the East Syrian Qurbana, is called “resurrection hymn par excellence” or “hymn of Adam”.³ The story behind this hymn is that when Jesus descended into *Sheol* after his death, then the dead ones welcomed him to the Sheol singing the *Lakumara*. Jesus’ descent into *Sheol*, the kingdom of death (1Pet 3:18, 4:16), marked the beginning of the decline of death’s reign.⁴ The hymn professes its faith in the resurrection of the human bodies and the salvation of human souls. It acknowledges that Jesus is the ‘quickner of our bodies’ (ܡܢܫܝܩܬܗ ܕܦܝܕܘܒ) and the “saviour of our souls” (ܦܩܕܬܗ ܕܢܦܫܘܬܗ).⁵ Jesus affirms “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (Jn 6:54). It is after the hymn Trisagion, that the liturgy of the Word proper begins. Most of the OT and NT readings prescribed for the Qurbana are eschatologically oriented. The OT readings unfold the creation of the world and the redemption of Israelites through the Law and Prophets. The reading of the Epistles signifies the exalted words of John the Baptist concerning Jesus Christ. During the time of these readings, the priests sit on the Bema to signify the mystery of death and eschatological judgment. G. Qatraya writes:

The sitting of the priests on the Bema at the time of the readings is for a demonstration of what our Lord said to his apostles, “You have left everything and followed me, when the Son of Man shall come in His glory, you too shall sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28)”⁶

¹ *Exposition of the Church Services*(ECS), (R.H. CONNOLLY, ed. & trans.) Part II, Romae, 1915, 8/10.

² ECS II, 4/7; F. PITTAPILLIL, *Celebration of the Holy Mysteries*, Kottayam, 2011, 142.

³ V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Resurrection, Life and Renewal: A Theological Study of the Liturgical Celebration of the Great Saturday and Sunday of the Resurrection in the Chaldeo-Indian Church*, Bangalore, Kottayam, 1982, 62.

⁴ *Proprium Missarum*, 158, 262; *Supplementum*, 103, 160; *Propria* II, 447. See also EPHREM, *Hymns of Nisibis*, 36:13-17; 38:1-6.

⁵ Cfr. *Yuganthayadeivasastram* (Mal.), Syro-Malabar Commission for Doctrine, Kochi, 2018, 60–66.

⁶ Cfr. *Yuganthayadeivasastram* (Mal.), Syro-Malabar Commission for Doctrine, Kochi, 2018, 60–66.

Another element which carries eschatological symbolism is the rite of dismissal. This rite typifies the eschatological judgment by which the sinners are sent to the darkness of hell. The deacons who stand before the door of the Sanctuary make three admonitions for the dismissal of the unworthy, namely, the non-baptized, the non-signed (those who do not have the seal of life) and the non-communicants. The deacon Gabriel proclaims “Go you listeners, and watch the doors”⁷. The commentators find in this proclamation the symbol of sending the sinners into hell which is a place of darkness and condemnation. Ps. Narsai says: “By her expulsion (of these) Holy Church depicts typically those that go forth into that darkness which is in Gehanna”.⁸ According to the Anonymous Author of the 9th century, the closing of doors the church against the unworthy is the symbol of the reception of the worthy and the expulsion of the unworthy from the kingdom of heaven. After the entry of the Lord, the doors of heaven are closed against the sinners. The Author compares this to the closing of the door against five foolish virgins (Mt 25:10-12).⁹ The subdeacons separate out the unworthy from the worthy just like “at the end, the tares will be separated out from the midst of the wheat” (Mt 13:30). But those who remain ‘with clear garments’ remind us of those who with ‘the robe of glory’ and enter the Paradise.

1.2. The Liturgy of the Mystery (Anaphora)

The liturgy of the Mystery is the centre and climax of the Eucharistic celebration. In the pre-anaphoral part, we can see the symbolism of eschatological purification and messianic banquet in the kingdom of heaven in relation to the liturgical rite of washing the hands of the celebrant, Onita d’Raze and the Creed.

Washing of the hands by the celebrant during the hymn Onithad’Raze symbolizes the eschatological purification of the sinners, that they “may thus enter the

⁷ G. QATRAYA, *Commentary on the Liturgy* (S. Brock, trans.) Hugoye, New Jersey 2003, 16; The other liturgical commentators also give symbolic meaning to the sitting of the priests during the time of Old Testament and Epistle readings. Cfr. ABRAHAM BAR LIPHA, *Interpretatio Officiorum*, (R. H. Connolly, ed. & trans) Part II, Romae, 1915, 158; J. BAR ZŌ’BĪ, *Explanation of the Divine Mysteries*, (T. Mannorampampil, trans.) Kottayam, 27; TIMOTHY II, *On the Mysteries of the Body and Blood from the Book of Seven causes of the Mysteries of the Church by Catholicos Patriarch Timothy II (1318–1332)*, (J. Kochupampil, trans.), 59.

⁸ *The Order of Raza*, SMBC, 1989, 26; R. MATHEUS, *A Commentary on the Mass by the Nestorian George, Bishop of Mosul and Arbel (10th Century) Translated from the Syriac by R.H. Connolly*, Kottayam, 2000, 66, Note 23.

⁹ PS. NARSAI, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 3. *Gehenna* (جَهَنَّمَ) is a small valley in Jerusalem. It is considered as the place of punishment and destruction of the wicked (Jer 7:31, 19:2-6) where both soul and body could be destroyed (Mt 10:28) in unquenchable fire (Mk 9:43); *Yuganthyadevasastram*, 96.

kingdom purified from sins and faults”.¹⁰ St. Paul speaks about the eschatological purification of each one’s work thorough the fire. “The work of each builder will become visible for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. The builder will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor 3:12-15). Pope Benedict XVI says that the eschatological judgment is an encounter with Christ, the supreme judge. He writes “Before His gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with Him, as it burns us, transforms and free us, allowing us to come truly ourselves”¹¹. We will be purified by his inflammable love which enables us to stand before the eschatological judgment with confidence and openness of face.

With regard to the sitting of the bishop and the priests at the Bema during the Onithad’Raze, the Anonymous Author of the 9th century:

The anthem (Onitha) announces His passion, death and resurrection and all His dispensation... then Simon Peter, the bishop, who is the head like his Lord and all the disciples with him, typify the death with Christ.¹²

The invariable part of the Onithad’Raze describes the condition of the departed faithful in the following way: “Behold, all the departed have fallen asleep in you, in the hope that through your glorious resurrection, you would raise them up again in glory”.¹³ The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed used in the Qurbana, is filled with eschatological views.¹⁴ Reciting the Creed, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead”¹⁵ (ܘܢܫܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ) the worshipping community experiences the sacramental parousia of the Lord. The second coming of the Lord will be with power and glory (Mk 13:26) and the judgment of God will be either a judgment

¹⁰ ECS II, 31/31. Later the same idea is developed and interpreted eschatologically by the Anonymous Author of the 9th century who writes, “The doors of the church, which has been closed, are the type of the doors of the Kingdom, closed against the infidels”. ECS II, 79/73.

¹¹ ECS II, 36/35. Various commentators interpret this rite with an eschatological symbolism. Cfr. THEODORE, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, 94; Ps. NARSAI, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 3; G. QATRAYA, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, 49.

¹² BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 47.

¹³ ECS II, 33/33.

¹⁴ *The Order of Raza*, 31: *Taksad’Raze of the Syro-Malabar Church in Syriac*, Kochi, 2017,82. It says: “you would raise them up again in glory” (ܘܢܫܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ ܘܠܗܘܬܗ).

¹⁵ The Apostles Creed develops the concept of Christ’s descent into Sheol after his death. Sheol is the place where the dead ‘sleep’ or wait until the time of the resurrection (Jon 2:2). The idea of descent of Christ into Sheol is explicit in the third G’hanta prayer of the Anaphora of Nestorius. It says “He descended into Sheol and loosed the bonds of death and because it was not right that he should be held in Sheol by death, he rose on the third day and became the first fruit of those who slept..” *Anaphora of Mar Nestorius*, The Syro-Malabar Commission for Liturgy, Kochi, 2018, 54.

of salvation or that of damnation. But the time of the coming of the Son of Man is unknown except to the Father (Mk 13:32). The Creed ends with the profession of faith in the resurrection of the body and the everlasting life. In the diaconal proclamation after the Creed, the departed faithful are remembered according to the order of their ministry in the Church and prayers are offered to them.¹⁶ The diaconal karozutha reveals the faith of the Church in the effectiveness of our prayers for the dead and the importance of the prayers and intercession of saints and martyrs in our Christian life. According to the Anonymous Author of the 9th century the theme of judgment and retribution is contained in this diaconal karozutha.¹⁷

The Diptychs (ܕܒܩܝܬܘܬܐ) known as the “Book of the Living and the Dead” (Sepharhayyeumite), contains the names of the dead and the living who are to be specially remembered during the Eucharistic celebration on a particular day.¹⁸ According to the liturgical commentators, the Church commemorates the living and the dead in the Qurbana in order to show that both the living and the dead are profited by the oblation.¹⁹ Anonymous Author of the 9th century says that the reading of the “Book of the First Born” (ܕܒܩܝܬܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ) is an eschatological reward for the just who lived and believed a worthy life. They are invited to take part in the banquet of the Lamb in the kingdom of heaven.²⁰

The admonition in the prefatory dialogue of the Qurbana “Let your minds be on High” (ܕܠܝܒܐ ܝܫܘܥܐ) is with eschatological meaning. The commentators interpret the meaning of the term ‘High’ in relation to Heaven. Ps. Narsai says that ‘High’ is the place where Christ sits at the right hand of the Father (ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ).²¹ The Anonymous Author of the 9th century describes that ‘the High’ is the place:

where the whole adobe is pure and the dwellers thereof are glorious- where the angles in the awful place cease not from flying and honouring the nature of Godhead and with hallel praise and sing to His Lordship and with pleasant sounds, with honour

¹⁶ *The Order of Raza*, 33.

¹⁷ *The Order of Raza*, 32; *Taksad’Raze of the Syro-Malabar Church in Syriac*, 29.

¹⁸ *The Order of Raza*, 33.

¹⁹ ECS II, 42/41; F. PITTAPILLIL, *Celebration of the Holy Mysteries*, 202–203.

²⁰ *The Order of Raza*, 35.

²¹ PS. NARSAI, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 10; THEODORE, *Commentary on the Eucharist*, 94–95; G. QATRAYA, *Commentary on the Liturgy*, 60; BAR LIPHA, *Interpretatio Officiorum*, 163; ABDISO, *Ordoludiciorum*, 98; TIMOTHY II, *On the Mysteries*, 64. For Timothy II, the reading of the Diptychs by two deacons is a sign of the living and the dead.

please the Lord- there, as men who have been shaken of death and have become companions of spiritual beings.²²

Another element in the Anaphoral part with eschatological symbolism is the hymn of Hosanna. By singing this hymn, the community foretastes the experience of Parousia of the Lord. The hymn visualizes the divine economy, initiated in the Old Testament, realized in the New Testament, will be fulfilled in the future.²³ During this hymn, heaven and earth join together to praise the Creator of the Universe. The Anonymous Author writes:

Now heaven and earth are one church; and heaven is not heaven and earth is not earth; because time and material place are taken away; for heaven is the heaven of the earth and earth is the earth of heaven.²⁴

Through this hymn of Hosanna, the earthly and heavenly communities become one unit to render glory to the adorable and glorious name.²⁵

The Epiclesis of the Qurbana is also filled with eschatological allusions. The celebrant invokes the Holy Spirit “for the pardon the debts, remission of sins and the great hope of the resurrection from the dead and new life in the kingdom of heaven”.²⁶ According to Prof. C. Giraudo, the epiclesis of the Addai and Mar Mari is “an epiclesis for the transformation of the oblation and the eschatological transformation of the participants”.²⁷

1.3. The liturgy of the Holy Communion

The rite of the Holy Communion (Taksad’masvad’Raze) is the apex of the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. In the priestly prayer during the time of the penitential litany, the celebrant thanks God for destroying the powers of Satan and death

²² ECS II, 44/43; J. CHITILAPPILLY, *Mdabbranutha*, Kottayam, 1999, 173.

²³ J. CHITILAPPILLY, *Mdabbranutha*, 191; Cfr. R. TAFT, *Interpolation of the Sanctus into the Anaphora*, OCP 57 Roma, 1991, 281–308.

²⁴ Ps. NARSAI, *Liturgical Homilies XVII*, 11.

²⁵ ECS II, 53/51.

²⁶ J. CHITILAPPILLY, *Mdabbranutha*, 191; Cfr. R. TAFT, *Interpolation of the Sanctus into the Anaphora*, OCP 57 Roma, 1991, 281–308.

²⁷ ECS II, 58/55.

Make the lips which have praised you within the sanctuary worthy to sing your glory.
 Let not the ears which have heard the sound of your praises hear the voice of terror.
 Let the eyes which have beheld your great mercy also behold the blessed hope which
 is from you. Dispose the tongues which have cried ‘holy’, for the speaking of truth.
 Make the feet which have walked in the churches walk in the region of light. Renew
 the bodies which have eaten your living Body unto new life.³⁴

The Huttama of the days of commemoration of the dead prays: “Even so O Lord, accept in your grace the sacrifice of your servants and make him (her or them) worthy, to enter the bridal chamber of your kingdom with all the just who pleased you [ܘܬܘܚܕܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܘܫܘܥ ܠܘܬܝܥܝܐ ܕܘܕܡܝܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܘܥܐ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܝܗ ܘܠܟܠܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܘܫܘܥܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܘܫܘܥܝܢܝܐ].”³⁵

Conclusion

We have been analyzing the eschatological vision contained in the different sections of the East Syrian Qurbana. The commemoration of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ are the most important moments in the Eucharistic celebration. The resurrection of Christ is the pledge and guarantee of our own resurrection (Rom 8:11). In the liturgy of the Word, we can see many prayers and hymns with clear eschatological reflections on heaven, death, resurrection, purgatory (*Beth Purkana*), parousia and final judgment. If the ‘sitting on the ground’ symbolizes death, then according to the liturgical commentators, the ‘standing’ during the Qurbana typifies the mystery of resurrection.³⁶ The anaphoral part of the Qurbana carries eschatological views especially in its *G’hantnas*, Sanctus and Epiclesis. There are many prayers in this section, where the community asks God to forgive the sins of the living and the dead. The Liturgy of the holy Communion presents the ultimate eschatological fulfillment of the faithful and the Church in terms of the Eucharistic Communion. The transformed bread and wine is the symbolic anticipation of the total transformation of “already taken place” but “not yet realized”. Christ is not only the crucified and risen one, but also the one who is to come. Participating in the Eucharistic celebration actively, let us pray to Jesus Christ “Come O, Lord” (*Maranatha*, Rev 22:20).

³⁴ *The Order of Raza*, 57.

³⁵ *The Order of Raza*, 54; *Taksad’Raze of the Syro-Malabar Church in Syriac*, 15.

³⁶ E. THELLEY, *Lexicon*, 377. See also P. YOUSIF, *L’Eucharistie chez Saint Ephrem*, 337–340.

Abstract

Eschatological hope is inherent in the East Syrian Qurbana through which the Church contemplates and foretastes the second coming of Christ in glory (parousia). The main thrust of this paper is to find out the eschatological allusions seen in the prayers, hymns and rubrics of the different sections of the East Syrian Qurbana. In the liturgy of the Word, we can see many prayers and hymns with clear eschatological reflections on heaven, death, resurrection, purgatory (*Beth Purkana*), parousia and final judgment. The anaphoral part of the Qurbana carries eschatological views especially in its *G'hanthas*, Sanctus and Epiclesis. The Liturgy of the Holy Communion presents the ultimate eschatological fulfillment of the faithful and the Church in terms of the Eucharistic Communion.

Keywords: East-Syriac Liturgy, Eucharist, Eschatology, Qurbana.

Wizja eschatologiczna w syro-orientalnej Qurbana

Abstrakt

Nadzieja eschatologiczna zakorzeniona jest w syro-orientalnej liturgii eucharystycznej (*Qurbana*), przez którą Kościół kontempluje i przepowiada drugie przyjście Chrystusa w chwale (*parousia*). Głównym wątkiem niniejszego artykułu są różne sekcje tejże liturgii. I tak kolejno: w liturgii słowa spotykamy wiele modlitw i hymnów z wyraźnymi eschatologicznymi wzmiankami dotyczącymi nieba, śmierci, zmartwychwstania, czyśćca (*BethPurkana*), paruzji i sądu ostatecznego. Część anaforyczna Qurbany zawiera myśli eschatologiczne głównie w modlitwach zwanych *ghanta* oraz w *Sanctus* i w epiklezie. Z kolei Komunia św. stanowi dla wiernych ostateczne eschatologiczne spełnienie wiernych.

Słowa kluczowe: liturgia syro-orientalna, Eucharystia, eschatologia, Qurbana.

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