

# SYRIAC SPIRITUAL, ASCETICAL AND MYSTICAL LEGACY

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## **1. Introduction**

In a world of globalization and swift engagement of peoples all around, one can come across a two dimensional dynamism of engagements. One dimension is centripetal in which the different forces in play are brought into a unified centre of realization. The other dimension being centrifugal in which the participating forces would infuse energy and dynamism so as to guide the journey and destiny of the centripetal force with effulgent growth. The corporate nature of human existence and the need of collaborative thrust in human endeavours are all the more coming into evidence in the present-day world. In the face of such developments the reality of unity in diversity and the need of integration of all discrete forces in society are much prominently seen. In such a context the religious sense of ‘corporate personality’ and ‘communal behaviour’ patterns, seen in the Biblical history, are getting incarnated in the secular sphere in a very concrete manner in our days. Here the Pauline Semitic Judeo-Christian sense of the ‘mystical body’ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) and communion are quite inspiring and emotive. In such a context of religious and secular developments this article is narrating the Syriac Christian spiritual, ascetical and mystical legacies that emphasize corporateness.

In the world of Christian religious development there are prominent strands and normative foundations, evolved from the Greek East and Latin West of Christendom.<sup>1</sup> They have contributed and enriched the Christian

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<sup>1</sup>This division of Greek East and Latin West of Christendom was based on the division of the Roman Empire into East and West (from the time of Diocletian). Later the distinction of the Christian traditions of the Greco-Roman empire into East and West based on Greek and Latin cultures became quasi normative. Such a division was purely out of Roman convenience and had overlooked the Persian and other Christian traditions of the Orient. Here in this article the Syriac Orient comprises the

world-vision with their own genius. But it is to be remembered that even the Greek East and Latin West of Christianity have their indebtedness to a far prior set of foundations based on the Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies well evolved through the Old and New Testament world-views. Syriac Orient that stands apart from the Greco-Roman thrust of Christianity has preserved and made flourish such Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies very prominently in the history of Christian vision of salvation. According to Jean Daniélou such a Christian heritage is seen as the foundation of Christian theology “in between the Incarnation and the emergence of Hellenistic theology” which is described by him as “*a first form of Christian theology expressed in Jewish-Semitic terms.*”<sup>2</sup> Syriac Christianity breathes heavily from such a Christian world-vision. It is in such a context this article is bringing into evidence the perennial significance and dynamism of the Syriac Christian spiritual, ascetical and mystical legacies which are acting as complementary to the views of Greek East and Latin West.

## **2. Syriac Christian Legacy**

Syriac is a dialect of the Aramaic language which the Lord Jesus spoke. A large Syriac speaking population became Christian in the early centuries of Christianity. They belonged to the Semitic culture and social groupings of the population of Mesopotamia. In fact they had their social and religious moorings in the Semitic social and religious categories evident and vibrant in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian message of salvation. They were heirs to the Semitic Judeo-Christian legacy in a congenital manner. Thus they belonged to the world from which the Christian scriptures themselves evolved. A good amount of Semitic Judeo-Christian writings of a distinct quality were produced and preserved by this group of Syriac Christians. This distinction in quality is due to several reasons. Initially Syriac speaking Christianity, through historical vicissitudes, became the major and faithful carrier of the Semitic, Jewish legacies of Christianity after the fall of Jerusalem which resulted in the disintegration and dispersal of the Jewish Christians and their traditions that emerged at Jerusalem. Secondly Syriac Christianity stands rooted in the age long tradition and culture of the Semitic peoples through whom the Old

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Christian traditions of the Persian (mainly Syriac) and other oriental centres of Christianity excluding the Greek East of the Roman Empire.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964, 7, 10.

Testament revelation had its cultural incarnation within the social and religious legacies of the Semitic cultural categories. Thirdly Syriac Christianity inherited and dynamically developed certain Semitic constants and Hebraisms that have become paradigms and normative factors for the cultural incarnation of Christian message in other later cultures. The best examples are the implications of covenantal relations, sense of corporate personality, sacrificial atonement, etc. The sense of mystery and the contemplative approach to the divine for participative realization are central to the Hebrew vision of religious life and realization of salvation. All such perceptions have become certain normative factors of Christian way of life and paths of ascetical and mystical pursuits down through the centuries for different cultures of the world. The attempt in this article is to highlight the indigenous early Syriac Christian ideals, orientations and patterns of ascetical and mystical life that have got integrated into later Christian cultures.

### **3. Early Syriac Christianity and Ascetical Patterns**

The earliest Syriac ascetical and mystical views had much Gnostic and heterodox sectarian influences. This could be seen in the writings of Tatian who guided encratite groups, Bardaisan and others. In the second level of teachings and literature of the Syriac Christianity some shades of the encratite views which look down upon the world of matter and human body can be traced in the early Syriac views in *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Acts of Judas Thomas* and *Odes of Solomon*, Tatian's *Diatessaron*, etc. A further third level development could be seen in the set of teachings and literature coming down from Aphrahat the Persian Sage, Ephrem the Syrian, the *Book of Steps*, etc. It was through such a third generation of literature much of the purified Syriac teachings and views on ascetical and mystical life can be traced. Those developed and purified teachings can be perhaps termed as the third form of 'Jewish Christianity', 'a type of *Christian thought expressing itself in forms borrowed from Judaism*' as explained by Jean Daniélou.<sup>3</sup> From fourth or fifth century, Syriac ascetical and mystical views and practices have been much influenced by the Hellenistic views and systems, especially through the Evagrian influences. The goal of this article is, however, set focus on the mystical views and dynamics indigenous to the Syriac Christianity, precisely as it stands before the fourth or fifth century Hellenistic influences.

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<sup>3</sup>Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 9.

### 3.1. Ascetical and Mystical Patterns in Syriac Christianity

The monks of Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia were the pioneers of ascetical and mystical life of the Syriac orient. Among them there were solitary and communitarian modes of life. The earliest patterns of Syriac ascetical life aimed at the mystical realization can be gleaned from early Syriac writings like *Acts of Thomas*, *Odes of Solomon*, etc. The ascetical orientations were based on the biblical inspirations, especially that of the New Testament. The imitation of Christ, sacramental growth by the power of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, baptismal realization of the promises, etc. were the dominant ideals in the Syriac tradition. All such potential engagements were made real and tangible through individual practices and liturgical observances in community as well.

There were organized ascetical groups also in the early Syriac Christianity such as the ‘Sons of the Covenant.’ Later from 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries Syriac ascetical and mystical traditions were influenced by Egyptian monasticism and Hellenistic ideals and modes of sanctification. This process became very evident through the influence of Evagrius of Pontus (intellectual mysticism) based on the Origenist influences. But the important factor to be noted is that Syriac Christianity was keeping its own indigenous and discrete elements of ascetical ideals together with the assimilated Hellenistic thrusts. A sort of complementary interaction could be seen through the Syriac authors of later centuries. Here mention should be made of John the Solitary, Philoxenus of Mabbug, Martyrius (Sahdona), Simon Taibutheh, Isaac of Nineveh, and others. Even with Hellenistic influences these writers maintained the Syriac thrusts on baptismal spirituality, inner purity of heart and conscience, prayer as interior offering (of Eucharist), attainment of spiritual joy with hidden mysteries in *theoria*, etc.

In fact Syriac orient is the cradle of a special phenomenon called ‘Syriac Proto-monasticism’<sup>4</sup> which is very well articulated in the life of the ‘Covenanters’ (*bnay qyama*).<sup>5</sup> This mode of life and such groups were in

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<sup>4</sup>See S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992, 131ff.

<sup>5</sup>The literal meaning of the Syriac Christian nomenclature *bnay qyama* is ‘sons of the covenant,’ referring to the solemn covenantal vow taken by the baptized (at the time of adult baptism) in view of leading an ascetical and mystical life with special focus on radical following of Christ in imitation of Christ, the ‘only-begotten,’ ‘single one,’ ‘unmarried one,’ ‘undivided one,’ etc. This mode of life was in existence in

existence even earlier to the classical Egyptian monasticism and due to that it is called ‘Proto-monasticism.’ Aphrahat (+345?), the well known Syriac teacher and writer from Persia (the Persian Sage), deemed it opportune to write a detailed demonstration on the orientations and life patterns of the ‘Covenanters’ by the year 336 AD. The sixth demonstration of Aphrahat, ‘*On Covenanters*,’ portrays the ideals, orientations, life patterns and spiritual goals of this Syriac proto-monastic ‘Sons of the Covenants.’ Among the early Syriac speaking Christianity there were different modes of ascetical and mystical practices. A sense of mystery and the quest for imitation of the life of Christ and participation with him in the mode of ‘putting on Christ’ were the guiding sentiments and goals. It was in view of this virginity, celibate life and abstinence were highly esteemed as practices of ascetics among the Syrians. This ‘putting on of Christ’ has come out in the Syriac ideal of *ihidaya* (single one, undivided one, only-begotten, etc.) of the early Syriac Christianity.

### **3.2. *Bnay Qyama*: The Syriac ‘Proto-Monastic Group’**

Early Syriac Christianity is very much noted for its ascetic styles and practices. The most prominent factor is the phenomenon of *bnay qyama* (sons of the covenant), an ascetical pattern of life evolved indigenously in the Syriac Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Membership and practice of this mode of life is open to all who desire for it. They have to take up this mode of life initiated by a vow made at the time of their baptism (bear in mind that in the early Christianity adult baptism was the normal order). By the vow they dedicate themselves to lead a life without marriage in the model of Christ for effectively imitating him. There were male and female members who made such vows and conducted themselves in the style of *bnay qyama*. They consisted of two categories, *bthule* (virgins) and *qaddishe* (married people) who sanctify themselves by abstaining from marital relationship for the kingdom of God. The *bthule* have to follow Christ in their unmarried state. This is attached to the ideal of ‘angelic life’ inspired by Luke 20:35-36, where marriageless life is equated to the heavenly ‘angelic life,’ a biblical motif that inspired many and has been reflected in many writings.

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Syria and Mesopotamia even before the emergence of the classical monastical life in Egypt and hence, the name ‘proto-monasticism.’

<sup>6</sup>The earliest and most dependable description on this group is provided by the early Syriac writer Aphrahat (c. +345) in his *Demonstration VI*, “On the Sons of the Covenant.”

A central biblical ideal that inspired the *bnay qyama* is explained by their ideal of *ihidaya*, a word that cannot be conclusively translated into any other language. This term *ihidaya* indicates a solitary, hermit, monk, in usual English rendering. *Ihidaya* is used with reference to Christ (John 1:14; 3:16) where the Greek word is *monogenes* that is translated in English as ‘Only-Begotten.’ No single English word is totally apt to carry the full meaning of the Syriac concept of *ihidaya*, and hence different words are employed. Some of them are: Unique One (Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38), Single, singular, unique (in the sense of celibate), Single-minded (in relation to God), Unified, integrated, undivided (opposed to divided state of the heart and mind) as a follower of Christ.

Jewish Targums describe Adam as an *ihidaya* (undivided one) before the fall. It is because he was undivided in his heart. The disobedience of the first Adam was due to giving heed to the serpent and dividing his heart by accommodating the inspirations of the ‘evil one’ in his heart. In the biblical vision Christ, the Second Adam, retained his heart undivided even at the face of severe temptations and sufferings so as to rectify and redeem the first Adam (humanity) to perfection. So Christ is called the *Ihidaya* by Christians. Christians are to imitate Christ the *Ihidaya*. All followers of Christ are thus called *ihidaye* (the plural usage of the term). Aphrahat finds Christ the *Ihidaya* from the bosom of the Father giving joy to all *ihidaye* (*Dem*<sup>7</sup> VI,6). Ephrem calls the newly baptized as ‘putting on the *ihidaya*’ (= Christ, *Epiph*<sup>8</sup> 8:16). Hence technically in the early Syriac Christian understanding an *ihidaya* was someone who had opted for himself/herself some form of consecrated life which involved the single-minded following of Christ. The one opting for a life of *bnay qyama* need not be from among the virgins or celibates. Even a married can become a *bnay qyama* by abstaining from sexual relations to become a *qaddisha* (holy) in the name of the Kingdom of God. *Bnay qyama* members of the Syriac Christianity, in contrast to the later Egyptian and other forms of ascetics, were living and serving in their community rather than going away to deserts or mountains.

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<sup>7</sup>*Dem* = Demonstrations of Aphrahat, *Patrologia Syriaca*, Vol. 1, Paris: Brepols, 1894.

<sup>8</sup>*Epiph* = Hymns on Epiphany, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania), Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (CSCO)*, edited in four series: Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Aethiopic, by J. B. Chabot and others, Paris 1903-, 186/187 (syri. 82/83), Louvain, 1959.

## 4. Mystical Perspectives of Indigenous Syriac Christianity

Some of the indigenous Syriac thrusts on ascetical perspectives and imageries of mystical realization are the matter of concern in this section.

### 4.1. Imprinting of the Trinity and the Mystical Realization

Ephrem’s vision effectively clarifies the constitution of human person as a Trinitarian reflection of unity extended to human body, soul and spirit. Human being is a symbol of the Trinity (see *HFid*<sup>9</sup> 42:9-10; 80:1-2; *CH*<sup>10</sup> 52:1; *Virg*<sup>11</sup> 32:6; 1 Corinthians 3:3; 2:14, 15). Ephrem’s insightfulness finds human life as a continuation of the Trinitarian act in creation. The three names of the Trinity are imprinted in human persons in creation and in the re-creation of Baptism. Perfection would evolve in a Trinitarian way through the baptismal life. St. Ephrem is quite evident by declaring that it is in the three names of the Trinity Christian baptism stands; it is in the three sacraments of initiation the Christian faith achieves perfection; it is in the three names of the Trinity Christ advised his disciples to take refuge. When Christian faith opens to the Father the fatherhood is revealed, with the Son it will be united with his being, and with the Holy Spirit faith will be purified and sealed in sanctification (see *HFid* 13:2,5). As a result when the spirit undergoes agony, it is a way of engravement by the Father; when the soul undergoes pain, it is getting mingled with the Son, and when the body is burnt with witnessing it takes communion with the Holy Spirit (*HFid* 18:4-5; see a;sp *HFid* 13:2-3). *Odes of Solomon* speaks of a Trinitarian seal that is on the letter written by the finger of God, a form of the command of God, full of the thought and will of God so as to rule forever and ever (*Odes*<sup>12</sup> 23:5-22).

Ephrem discerns the victory over the three temptations of Christ as three crowns offered to humans for their body, soul and spirit (Luke 4:1-13; *Virg* 32:6). Similarly, there are nourishments and healings to the human person offered through wheat (bread), grapes (wine) and Olive (oil of anointing) to the body, soul and the spirit respectively (*Virg* 37:3) in all ascetics and mystics. The unity of these components will be manifested in

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<sup>9</sup>*HFid* = Hymns on Faith, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, CSCO, 154/155 (syri 73/74). Louvain, 1955.

<sup>10</sup>*CH* = Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen Contra Haereses*, CSCO, 169/170 (syri. 76/77). Louvain, 1957.

<sup>11</sup>*Virg* = Hymns on Virginitate, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate*, CSCO, 223/224 (syri 94/95), Louvain, 1962.

<sup>12</sup>*Odes* = *Odes of Solomon*, James Hamilton Charlesworth (tr.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.

the resurrection. The soul and the spirit will be resurrected together with the body which is the harp of the other two (*CH* 52:13; *HPar*<sup>13</sup> 8:7-11).

The initial human disobedience and the resulted expulsion from Paradise practically effected a wound in the body, a grave ulcer (*suhna rabba*) in the soul and a stain in the spirit (*HFid* 5:19). Human misuse of free will and the resulting moral evil are the causes for the imbalances in the created world. Natural and moral order becomes disturbed. Social and ecological harmony began to be lost in anarchy and humanity stands loosing peace and hope (*CH* 28:9).<sup>14</sup> Rectification of all these deformities for re-entry into Paradise is the story of salvation. Body has to put on the beauty of the soul and the soul has to put on the beauty of the spirit and the spirit will then put on the likeness of God's majesty (see *HPar* 9:19-20). The divine-human engagement is to take place in the right progression, in a discerning manner:

Far more glorious than the body is the soul,  
and more glorious still than the soul is the spirit,  
but more hidden than the spirit is the Godhead.  
At the end the body will put on the beauty of the soul,  
the soul will put on that of the spirit,  
while the spirit shall put on the very likeness of God's majesty  
(*HPar* 9:20).<sup>15</sup>

Ephrem teaches about the imprinting of the divine image in the whole person inclusive of the body (*Virg* 2:15). Body is the habitation of the soul. Holy Spirit is also lodges in the body (*CNis*<sup>16</sup> 47:9). A well unified and balanced anthropology with true positive values are taught by Ephrem (*CNis* 47:5; 49:9; 50:7; 69:8, 12; 73:5). The dignity of the human person and the sacred tuning to the body as the image and likeness of God are stressed. In baptism the body is made a temple by the 'Carpenter of Life' (*Virg* 1:2). When one person sweeps his own person in the name of Christ there will be the indwelling of Christ and God dwells in Christ and

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<sup>13</sup>*HPar* = Hymns on Paradise, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, CSCO, 174/175 (syri 78/79), Louvain, 1957.

<sup>14</sup>See S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (1985), 137.

<sup>15</sup>S. P. Brock, tr., *Hymns on Paradise*, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990, 143.

<sup>16</sup>*CNis* = Nisibian Hymns, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena. I*, CSCO, 218/219 (syri 92/93), and II, CSCO, 240/241 (syri 102/103), Louvain, 1961 and 1963.

the man becomes one of the three (*Dem* IV, 11,12). Baptismal faith and the liturgical confession and praises are the dynamic powers of engagement with the Trinity in the Christian life. According to the Semitic belief a name signifies the reality that is named. Name represents the person and when the name is mentioned the personal presence is celebrated and relationship is established. Baptism generates a ‘new man’ in the Trinity.<sup>17</sup> Ascetical life and mystical union are the flowering and flourishing of the baptismal life.

#### 4.2. Christocentric Mystical Vision

The goals of Syriac ascetical and mystical life are symbolically expressed by the early Syriac authors themselves in the imagery of the entry into the ‘bridal chamber of the heart’ and the union with the bridegroom, Christ. Ephrem’s vision is clear from his Armenian Hymns:

How wonderful is this abundance  
that the Lord should reside in us continually,  
for He has left the heaven and descended:  
let us make holy for Him the bridal chamber of our heart.<sup>18</sup>

*(Armenian Hymns 47:46-47)*

Entry into the ‘rest’ with Christ by the Spirit is a great ideal of union and realization in the Odes of Solomon (*Odes* 11:12; 20:8; 25:12; 26:3,12; 28:3; 30:2; 35:6; 36:1; 38:4). This ‘rest’ is same as the primordial condition of man in paradise before the fall. This rest is near the ‘living fountain of the Lord’ (*Odes* 30:1-3). *The Hymn of the Pearl/Soul* in *The Acts of Judas Thomas* presents the figure of Christ with whom Apostle Thomas grows up and inherits the Kingdom. The ‘brother of Judas Thomas’ (*AJT*<sup>19</sup> 108,15) and in Egypt the fair youth who associated with him (*AJT* 109,25) all depict Christ with whom Ap. Thomas would inherit the Kingdom. What is applicable in Ap. Thomas is equally applicable to every Christian.

The ascetics have to fight diligently against the evil one and his cunning ways. Becoming children of light against all forms of darkness is the power to do the combat (*Dem. VI*, 2) and hence ascetics are called ‘athletes’ (*Dem. VI*, 6). All those who have become ‘Sons/Daughters of the Covenant,’ have in fact taken up ‘the yoke of Christ’ on themselves and they have to preserve that yoke in their personal purity. From the

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<sup>17</sup>A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962, 135.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in S. P. Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 128.

<sup>19</sup>*AJT* = *The Acts of Thomas*, A. F. J. Klijn (Tr.), Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962.

beginning onwards Eve and her type of people who behaved without discernment and integration were the means used by the adversary to trap the ‘athletes of Christ,’ the ascetics who follow Christ, the *Ihidaya* (the Single One, Only-begotten) in the order of a *bnay qyama* (sons of the covenant).<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Eve Aphrahat demonstrates the model of Blessed Virgin Mary who behaved with discernment and integration in life. The needed pattern of Christian perfection advocated by Aphrahat on all channels of spiritual progress, such as, that of *ihidaye* (solitaries), *bnay qyama* (son of the covenant), *qaddise* (holy ones), is an integrated life of Gospel values and goals. Aphrahat advises:

Above all else, it is appropriate that the man upon whom the yoke (of Christ) is laid should have a sound (firm) faith, in accordance with what I wrote to you in the first letter; he should be assiduous in fasting and in prayer, he should be fervent in the love of Christ, he should be humble, composed and alert; his speech should be gentle and kind, he should be sincere minded with everyone, he should speak (carefully) weighing his words, he should make a fence (barrier) for his mouth against any harmful words... (*Dem. VI, 8*).<sup>21</sup>

Those who have taken up the ‘yoke of Christ’ have to take on the likeness of Christ, the Saviour. Christ revealed himself by the medium of his greatest humility, because humility is the actual state of the created humanity and every human being has to remain in humility to be true to oneself and to be just to others. This is a great lesson to all ascetics for remaining humble in the true following of Christ the Saviour. From the human side what can be done is to adorn oneself as a ‘temple for Christ’ to reside in. Christ himself has made it possible for him to reside in human beings (John 1:14).

In the divine plan humanity has received the animated body with a living soul from the first Adam and with Christ, the Second Adam, the life giving Spirit as well. As all have put on the image of the earthly Adam all have the provision to put on the image of the heavenly Adam, Christ (1 Corinthians 15: 44-49). Through the promised Spirit all have to put on Christ. Anyone who grieves the Spirit of Christ will be devoid of the Spirit and remains only with the animated soul which has no glory in the

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<sup>20</sup>See S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, Chapter VIII, Syriac Proto-monasticism for detailed explanations on technical terms.

<sup>21</sup>K. Valavanolickal, tr. *Aphrahat: Demonstrations I*, Kottayam: SEERI, 2005, 143.

resurrection, but remains naked without glory (*Dem* VI, 18). The life of virginity in imitation of Christ is a means to attain the Spirit of Christ.

The assumed body of Adam served as armour for Christ in combat and victory for providing a reward and crown for Adam. Adam, being deficient of discernment and falling as a victim to the deceiving adversary, plucked prematurely the fruit that would give sweetness only in due season, but would prove bitter out of season. In fact Adam lost what he had desired and found what he dreaded (*HPar* 12:3,5). But Christ came putting on the same armour and conquered the evil one. Ephrem writes: “He put on his armour and conquered and was crowned” (*Epiph* 10:11).<sup>22</sup> In this respect Adam-Christ complementarity is set in the context of combat as a model for all ascetics:

There came another Athlete, this time not to be beaten;  
He put on the same armour in which Adam had been vanquished.  
When the adversary beheld the armour of conquered Adam,  
he rejoiced, not perceiving that he was being taken by surprise;  
He who was within the armour would have terrified him,  
but His exterior gave him courage.

The evil one came to conquer, but he was conquered and could not hold his ground. (*HPar* 12:6)<sup>23</sup>

It is the fallen body of Adam that Christ has put on in his Incarnation (*SdDN*<sup>24</sup> 9). Ephrem states that the Omniscient One, even though he had foreseen the fall of Adam, created him to make him victorious at the end (*CNis* 69:2). God’s plan was to give the fruits of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life as two crowns by merit through a contest. The imageries of Christ as Athlete, Commander, Medicine of Life, etc., explain very well the fight of Christ on behalf of Adam as well as the healing of sick Adam who is typified in the healing of the Leper (Leviticus 13:46; 14:1–9; *HPar* 4:3). All ascetics have thus hope in imitation of Christ the Athlete.

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<sup>22</sup>CSCO 186 (syri 82), p. 182; Johnston, E. tr. “Fifteen Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (NPNF)*, ed. by P. Schaff and others, New York 1886-1900, Vols. 28 (Reprints, Michigan 1991), Vol. XIII, 281.

<sup>23</sup>CSCO 174 (syri 57), p. 51; Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 162.

<sup>24</sup>*SdDN* = Sermon on Our Lord, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro*, CSCO, 270/271 (syri 116/117), Louvain, 1966.

*Liber Graduum* brings out the contrasting pictures of Adam's sin and the Son's becoming.<sup>25</sup> Doing exactly the opposite of what Adam did out of his pride, Christ assumed the form of the created Adam and fulfilled the demands of the state of humility and obedience as a true servant in place of Adam and so brought about reconciliation. The author of the *Liber Graduum* gives an exegesis of Philippians 2:6-7 elaborating the complementarity seen in the salvific becoming of Christ in assuming the form of a servant (= Adam; *LG*<sup>26</sup> XXI.11).<sup>27</sup>

St. Ephrem finds power and treasures hidden in Christ, the Giver of all, and on his salvific road all receive from his treasures and become saved (*Azym*<sup>28</sup> 16:34). In the conception of Ephrem it is a renewal of Adam that takes place: "It is yours, O Blessed One, to repeat your mercy once more: let your hand shape Adam anew, let your fingers refashion him" (*CNis* 69:6).<sup>29</sup> This renewal of Adam is the very reason for the Incarnation and Resurrection. Through Christ all ascetics have the renewal and realization. Christ crucified on the cross and pierced by the lance is seen by Aphrahat (*Dem* XXIII), Ephrem (*EC*<sup>30</sup> 21,11; *CNis* 43:3; *HNat*<sup>31</sup> 3:15; *Crucif*<sup>32</sup> 3:9; *Virg* 31:13; *HPar* 6:7-8) and Cyrillona<sup>33</sup> as the Tree of Life

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<sup>25</sup>See A. Kowalski, *Perfezione e Giustizia di Adamo*, Roma: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 232, pp. 138–141.

<sup>26</sup>*LG* = *Liber Graduum*, M. Komosko, (ed.), *Patrologia Syriaca*, Vol. III, Paris, 1926.

<sup>27</sup>See *Patrologia Syriaca*, Vol. III, 616–617; cf. ET, Kitchen & Parmentier, *The Book of Steps*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004, 242–43; For a detailed analysis of Adam-Christ contrast in sin and the complementarity in salvation in the aspects of arrogance-humility and disobedience-obedience, see Kowalski, *Perfezione e Giustizia di Adamo*, 138.

<sup>28</sup>*Azym* = Hymns on Unleavened Bread, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Paschahymnen (De Azymis, De Crucifixione, De Resurrectione)*, CSCO, 248/249 (syri 108/109), Louvain, 1964.

<sup>29</sup>CSCO 240 (syri 102), p. 111.

<sup>30</sup>*EC* = Commentary on Diatessaron, Leloir, L., ed. *Saint Ephrem, Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant*, CSCO, 145 (arm 137), Louvain, 1953/1954; Text syriaque (Chester Beatty manuscript 709), ed. L. Leloir. Dublin, 1963.

<sup>31</sup>*HNat* = Hymns on Nativity, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, CSCO 186/187 (syri 82/83), Louvain, 1959.

<sup>32</sup>*Crucif* = Hymns on Crucifixion, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Paschahymnen (De Azymis, De Crucifixione, De Resurrectione)*, CSCO 248/249 (syri. 108/109), Louvain, 1964.

<sup>33</sup>See R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 121-24.

bearing its fruit. The symbolism of the ‘fruit of the tree’ extends to vine, olive and wheat as the source of life in the Church and in Christ through the sacraments. Basically this imagery presents the sacramental and salvific efficacy of the incarnate body of Christ.

### **4.3. Pneumatological Mystical Vision**

*The Acts of Judas Thomas* presents that the aim of Christians is to become temples of the Holy Spirit: “Be physician for their bodies, and give life to their souls, and make them holy shrines and temples, and may the Holy Spirit dwell in them” (*AJT* 156). Aphrahat uses several expressions, ‘temple of God’ (*Dem* I,3; XVII,7; XXIII,47), ‘temple of the Spirit’ (*Dem* XIV,38), ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ (*Dem* XII,8), ‘dwelling place of the Spirit of the Messiah’ (*Dem* I,3,5; XXIII,47) for indicating the indwelling of the divinity in the baptized. Aphrahat finds that wherever the Messiah dwells the God of Messiah also dwells and the Spirit of the Messiah also will be there (*Dem* IV,11). When the Spirit of Messiah dwells in a Christian he should honour the Spirit of Messiah in him by keeping the body, the temple of the Spirit pure and free of all filth and should not grieve the Spirit by corrupting the person. One need not only be free from sin but should adorn the self by virtues (*Dem* VI,1,14). In the history of salvation one can see several instances of grieving of the Spirit and the departure of the Spirit (*Dem* VI,14; XI,7; XVIII,2). Those who grieve the Spirit are going back to the state of the ‘old man’ which is a deprivation of the resurrection life.

At baptism the ‘animated spirit’ in a Christian will receive the ‘heavenly Spirit’ which needs to be honoured and preserved. Then at the death of a person the honoured ‘heavenly Spirit’ will be the advocate for that person before God and at the final resurrection the same Spirit will call out for reunion to the body in which it lived on earth (*Dem* VIII, 23; VI, 14). Thus the baptismal Spirit is directly related to the eschatological union. There is a profound transformation of a terrestrial human being into a celestial being. In that process death will be swallowed up in life and the body will be swallowed up in the Spirit (*Dem* VI, 6,14). This is a flying up to meet the King by the power of the Spirit (*Dem* VI,6, 10; XXII,4). There will be communion of the human with the divine King and Messiah will thank all who kept his Spirit in honour. On the whole the Spirit of the Messiah stands as a person and relates with all persons as the Son did. Here too a sort of Trinitarian union takes place in a beatific manner.

‘Overshadowing of the Spirit’ in Syriac vision starts from the natural symbol of the mother bird hovering over the eggs and over the brood of young ones. In the Syriac tradition Holy Spirit (*ruha d-qdasa*) is feminine gender and highlights the ‘mother-figure’ of the ascetics and mystics. This is typical of divine providence and protection effected through the power of the Spirit. This divine overshadowing began in creation over the waters (Genesis 1:2). The Lord was following the chosen people on their way to the Promised Land in the form of fire and cloud (Exodus 14:19-20) in another overshadowing. During the annunciation the angel told Mary, “Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35), yet another mode of overshadowing in the history of salvation. What happened in creation, in Israel and in Mary is repeated in the Christian life through all sacraments, in sacramentals, prayer and all spiritual and charitable practices. It is by the divine overshadowing through the Holy Spirit that the life and activities of a Christian become sanctified and perfected. Clothing with the Spirit is the spiritual realization in the *Odes of Solomon* and in Aphrahat. In Ephrem it becomes all the more integrated.

You put on our visible body; let us put on your hidden power.  
 Our body became Your garment; Your Spirit became our robe.  
 Blessed is He who was adorned and adorned us!<sup>34</sup>

Breath of life of the Spirit is the life-giving power of the Father and the Son send out for the divinization of humans. This Spirit is clothed as in an enveloping manner that begins in Baptism.

## 5. Purification, Enlightenment and Vision

The indigenous Syriac vision on ascetical life and mystical union is based more on the mode of internal awakening and sacramental dedication of the Christians and ascetics on the mysteries of revelation. This starts with Baptismal faith and life. This mode of vision stands distinct from the Hellenistic modes of starting with external ascetical practices aiming at illumination and vision.

### 5.1. The Ideal of ‘Angelic Life’

The ideal of ‘angelic life’ was popular in Syriac proto-monasticism and later in the ascetic and monastic circles. This had its roots in the Jewish groups, especially, with the influential view of the Book of Daniel, where the angels are described as ‘ire’, ‘wakers,’ ‘wakeful ones’ or ‘watchers’

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<sup>34</sup>K. E. McVey, tr. *Ephrem the Syrian*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989, 185.

and as *qaddishin*, ‘holy ones.’ The ideal of ‘wakefulness’ readily associates itself to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 (Matthew 25:13). Another implied importance of ‘angelic life’ is its ‘marriageless life’ with reference to Luke 20:34-36, where the angelic life is described as that of the children of God and as children of resurrection.

Ephrem calls Christ, ‘the Wakeful One’: “For Christ himself is the Wakeful One who has come to make us wakers on earth” (*HNat* 21:4). Ephrem’s spiritual vision finds Adam as the introducer of the sleep of death in sin, and Christ is the Wakeful One who came down to wake us up from being submerged in sin (*HNat* 1:61-62). At baptism Christians put on the Wakeful One in the waters (*Epiph* 4:8), and become potentially ‘wakers.’ Those who have arrived to baptism go on to the Eucharist where all are recreated as angelic beings by means of Fire and Spirit (*HFid* 10:9). Eucharist is called the food of the angels.

For all Christians, especially, for all ascetics who are progressing in imitating Christ, ‘wakefulness’ is the needed virtue to meet the Bridegroom at any hour. They should have ready oil in their lamps. The oil here means the practice of Gospel values that transforms the self and makes one eligible to meet Christ the Bridegroom. One has to be a ‘diligent worker’ avoiding all manners of a ‘hired labourer.’ The journey to meet Christ the Bridegroom is a life of doing the word of God so as to translate the will of God in life (*Dem* VI, 1).

## 5.2. Faith Vision of the Luminous Eye

The right way to reach God is through discernment (*purshana*). It originates from the proper attitudes of love, openness and faith. Only this attitude can reciprocate God’s love and condescension experienced in his self manifestation. The proper awareness of the fact of God’s loving kindness that made him bend down to the level of human understanding gives rise to wonder which enhances faith. This faith is a necessary element for the life of the Soul (*HFid* 80:1; 65:10-11). Faith is the inner eye that can see even hidden things (*HEcc*<sup>35</sup> 23:3). This seeing will generate wonder accompanied by love and prayer.

You are entirely a source of amazement,  
 from whatever side we may seek you:  
 You are close at hand, yet distant  
 who shall reach you ?...

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<sup>35</sup>*HEcc* = Hymns on the Church, Beck, E., ed. *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen De Ecclesia*, CSCO, 198/199 (syri 84/85), Louvain, 1960.

But faith gets there,  
and so does love with prayer (*HFid* 4:11).

As the physical eye functions by means of light, the inner eye of mind (*HEcc* 53:12) or the Soul (*HEcc* 5:18) functions by means of faith. Ephrem compares Eve and Mary as contrasting images of the inner eye. Eve is the 'darkened eye' of humanity and Mary is the 'bright eye' because Mary had the proven faith (*HEcc* 37). This inner eye should be *shaphya* (clear, pure, limpid, lucid, luminous) as in the case of Mary.

Blessed is the person who has acquired a luminous eye  
with which he will see how much the angels stand in awe of You, Lord,  
and how audacious is man (*HFid* 3:5).

In explaining the desired luminosity Ephrem makes lavish usage of the mirror-imagery. He speaks of the self (awareness) as a mirror that has to be kept pure without getting darkened by any spot or dirt (*CNis* 16:1-4). Prayer is a mirror through which one can see Christ and his divine beauties. This mirror of prayer can be made ugly by satan. Scriptures, again, is a mirror which is ever polished and capable of reflecting divine realities. This is possible only if the eye of the beholder is clear and luminous.

The Scriptures are placed there like a mirror:  
he whose eye is luminous beholds there the image of reality.

(*HFid* 67:8)

Faith is the key to the Kingdom of God. It should be the first offering to God and then only one can progress in the knowledge of God (*HFid* 16:6-7). This faith has to be nourished for its growth through praise, which starts with vocal praise and as it gets purified becomes similar to the silent praise of the angelic beings (*HFid* 4:1). The more the praise, the more the 'luminous eye' of faith beholds the symbols, types and metaphors depicting the divine reality in the Nature and the Scripture. As one gets into the vision of the inner eye of faith, this faith-vision travels horizontally through the events, institutions and personages of the salvation history extending that vision to the fulfilment of all in the *eschaton*. In a vertical level it travels through the analogies of divine manifestations to the divine reality itself.

### 5.3. The 'Robe of Glory'

The image of 'putting on and putting off clothing' is widely used by the early Syriac Christian authors, especially Ephrem, in order to depict various stages in the history of salvation, such as, the states of Adam

before and after the Fall, the redemptive Incarnation, the salvific mysteries in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection of all.<sup>36</sup> The narrative regarding the first parents finding themselves naked and the sewing of the clothes of fig leaves in Genesis 3:7, and that of Lord God making garments of skin to clothe Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:21, stand as the inspiring verses for this imagery. Genesis 3:21 speaks of ‘garments of skin’ but early Syriac Christianity acquired much from a Jewish background of *Haggadah* and *Targum* including traditions concerning the theological expression of ‘robe of glory,’ which was understood to refer to the state of Adam before the fall.<sup>37</sup>

In the Syriac tradition the metaphor of ‘clothing’ is well developed in a consistent way and explains the entire salvation history from the Fall to the redemption in Christ leading to salvation.<sup>38</sup> *Odes of Solomon* 20:7 speaks of the need of being clothed in the grace of the Lord for entering into Paradise. This clothing is called ‘clothing of light’ (*Odes* 11:11; 21:3). According to Aphrahat the glory that Christ brought is far greater and more astounding than what Adam had been deprived of (*Dem XXIII* 51).

Jacob of Serugh in his *Festal Homilies* stresses Christ’s bringing down of the ‘robe of glory’ to the fallen Adam and offering the same to the baptized through the baptismal waters. Ephrem already has a well developed synthesis of the theological views behind the expression of putting on of ‘the robe of glory.’ S. P. Brock explains the salvation-historical import of this clothing metaphor as consisting of four stages. They are Adam before the fall with the ‘robe of glory/light,’ after the fall without the ‘robe of glory,’ Divinity ‘putting on’ a body in the Incarnation to re-clothe mankind in the ‘robe of glory’ and Christ’s setting the ‘robe of glory’ in the baptismal waters for the Christians to regain the ‘robe of glory.’<sup>39</sup> In union with Christ through the sacramental indwelling of the Holy Spirit Christians can make the ascetical and mystical journey to perfection. *HNat* 23:13 is a fair synthesis of Ephrem in this regard:

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<sup>36</sup>For a detailed exposition of Ephrem’s employment of this imagery, see Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 85–97.

<sup>37</sup>See S. P. Brock, “Some Aspects of Greek Words in Syriac,” in *Syriac Perspectives*, No. IV, 98–104; “Clothing Metaphors,” in Schmidt, M., ed. *Typus, Symbole, Allegorie bei den Ostlichen Vatern und ihren Parallelen in Mittelalter*, 11–38, Eichstatter Beitrage, 4. 1982, 14; Kowalski, “Rivestiti di gloria,” 41–60; Kowalski, *Perfezione e Giustizia di Adamo*, 89 (n. 158).

<sup>38</sup>See Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 11.

<sup>39</sup>See Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 11–13.

All these changes did the Merciful One make,  
 stripping off glory and putting on a body;  
 for He had devised the way to reclothe Adam  
 in that glory which Adam had stripped off.  
 Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes,  
 corresponding to Adam's leaves,  
 Christ put on clothes, instead of Adam's skins;  
 He was baptized for Adam's sin,  
 His body was embalmed for Adam's death,  
 He rose and raised up Adam in his glory.  
 Blessed is who descended, put Adam on and ascended! (*HNat* 23:13)<sup>40</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The mystery of the incarnation and the bearing of the fallen body of Adam by Christ for the purification, sanctification and glorification of the person of Adam by the risen Lord is the foundation of the Syriac spirituality and mystical vision. Quite often the Syriac vision is starting from the biblical episodes and patterns and thus everywhere one finds a biblical mooring. Scriptural episodes and salvation historical incidents are the inspiring factors of Syriac spirituality and mysticism. Syriac mystical vision is guided by the biblical anthropology where the divine human relationship based on image and likeness is stressed. The imprinting of the Trinity in the human person connects all stages of salvation history from creation through Incarnation and the sacramental life until *eschaton*. Purity of the heart and pure prayer, fasting and the luminous eye are required for the insight into the divine realm. The illuminated heart will have the vision of divinity: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God' (Matthew 5:8).

Incarnation is putting on Adam by the Son in order to make him re-enter into Paradise. In Baptism one is putting on Christ, which makes one re-enter Paradise. This re-entry is entry into the eschatological Paradise in which humanity is enabled to pluck the fruits of the Tree of Life, practically through the Eucharistic table. Baptism as re-entry into Paradise enables Adam to get back his 'robe of glory' with which he was adorned and glorified in Paradise before it was taken away from him at his disobedience. All these are made really accessible for the baptized in the Church and Church is the new Paradise.

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<sup>40</sup>CSCO 186 (syri. 82), p. 120; tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 85; see also "Clothing Metaphors," 13.