

The East Syrian Liturgical Tradition

Historical Background:

There are three Churches whose rites may be considered to represent the East Syrian liturgical tradition: The (Assyrian) Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Syro-Malabar (Catholic) Church. The first is often referred to as the Nestorian Church, but the term is pejorative and should be avoided. Until the last century the Assyrian Church of the East was simply known as the Church of the East.

All of the Churches are heirs to the Christian community with roots in Edessa. While the Christian community in Antioch used Greek as its literary language, those in Edessa used Syriac, the local dialect of Aramaic. The geo-political position of Edessa outside the borders of the Roman Empire led to an independent development of East Syrian Christianity, which was unconcerned with the Christological concerns of the fourth century, although the Council of Nicaea was eventually officially accepted in 410. When Emperor Zeno expelled Nestorians from the Roman Empire, the theological school in Edessa was transferred to Nisibis in 489, putting it within the sphere of control of the largely Zoroastrian Persian Empire. Except for occasional outbreaks at times when the Sasanians were at war with the Roman Empire, the Christians under the Persian Empire generally did not suffer persecution. In the course of the fourth century, the bishopric of Seleucia-Ctesiphon came to be recognized first as 'catholicos' then later as 'patriarch' of the Church of the East.

The advent of Islam and the collapse of both the Roman and Persian Empires cemented the cessation of ties between the Church of the East and the Byzantine Church. In 766, the patriarchate was moved to the new capital of Baghdad. Initially, the position of the Church of the East was strengthened under the Arabs, with missionary efforts extending east along the trade routes as far as India and China. Moreover, Christian and Arab scholars began to translate Syriac texts into Arabic, facilitating the transmission of many texts from the Hellenistic world. The Crusades and the adoption of Islam by the Mongol khans destroyed this receptive relationship between Christians and their Arab rulers.

The patriarchate of the Church of the East was made hereditary in the fifteenth century, which resulted in the refusal of many Assyrian bishops to accept a particularly inept patriarch in 1552. In response, the bishops elected Sulaqa and he was sent to Rome to seek union with the Roman Catholic Church, which was effected in early 1553 by his proclamation as Patriarch of the Chaldeans. This established the two separate patriarchal lines which were in bitter conflict for many years. In 1830, the Catholic patriarchate was moved to Baghdad, and renamed the Patriarch of Babylon. The First World War was a disastrous period for the Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholics, with large-scale massacres and forced flight. From this point forward emigration has become a major factor in the life of all Middle Eastern churches.¹ Events in the last century resulted in a schism within the Church of the East, with one hereditary patriarch having been exiled to the United States and a rival patriarch in Iran. This has been resolved, although the patriarch continues to live in the United States.

The Syro-Malabar Church remained in communion with the Church of the East until their encounter with the Portuguese in 1498. The Portuguese refused to accept the legitimate authority of the Indian hierarchy and at a synod held in Diamper in 1599, the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa imposed a large number of Latinizations. The dissent with such changes caused a break in relations with Rome in 1653, which were largely restored by 1662. In response to the malcontent of many Indians with this situation, a bishop was sent from the Syrian Patriarch to head those who did not wish to concede so much by entering into union with Rome. The followers of this bishop are known now as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and do not use the East Syrian Liturgy, but rather the West Syrian Liturgy of Antioch. Three Vicariates Apostolic were created by the Pope in 1896 for those in union with Rome and the Syro-Malabar Catholic hierarchy was finally restored in 1923. There has been a great deal of effort directed towards liturgical renewal within the Syro-Malabar Rite in the last fifty years.

¹ Beggiani, 469.

Features of the East Syrian Liturgical Tradition:

Books:

Taksa dRaze (contains three *Qurbana* or anaphoras and ‘The Rites’)

- **Addai and Mari** (original Syriac composition; late 3rd century; original composition has no Institution Narrative; used from Holy Saturday until Advent, masses of the dead, memorials of saints, ordinary days, and all low masses).
- **Nestorius** (indigenization of Byzantine anaphoras of St Basil and St John Chrysostom; 6th century; attributed to Mar Abbas; used on five occasions: Epiphany, John the Baptist, Greek Doctors, Wednesday of the Supplication of Nineveh, and Holy Thursday).
- **Theodore** (based on Nestorius, Addai and Mari, and the *Catechetical Homilies* of Theodore of Mopsuestia; 6th century; attributed to Mar Thomas; used from the first Sunday of Advent to the Feast of Hosannas or Palm Sunday).
- *Takhsa d'amadha* (baptismal rites).
- *Taksa dSyamda* (ordination rite).
- *Burakha* (marriage rite).
- *Taksa dHussaya* (penance rite).
- *Ktaba dkurrasta 'annide* (funeral rites).

Taksa dKahne (ritual).

Hudra (texts proper to specific festivals).

Qiryana (lectionary)

Shlika (epistolary)

Iwangaliyana (Evangelary)

Turgama (hymns sung before NT lessons)

Abukhalima (collectary)

Šamašuta (texts for deacons).

Gaza (variable hymns and collects).

Dawida (psalter).

Qdam wa-dbatar (“before and after”, Divine Office).

Kaskul (chants).

Ba'utha dNinwayi (prayers attributed to St. Ephrem, used on the Fast of the Ninevites).

Structure of the Eastern Syrian Anaphora:

Preface
Sanctus/Benedictus
Post Sanctus
Institution Narrative
Anamnesis (Commemoration)
Intercessions
Epiclesis (Invocation)
Doxology

Calendar:

The year is divided into periods of about seven weeks each, called *Shawu'i*.

Annunciation-Nativity (7 weeks)
Epiphany (7 weeks, variable)
Great Lent (7 weeks)
Resurrection (7 weeks)
Apostles (7 weeks)
Summer (7 weeks)
Elijah and the Cross (7 weeks)
Moses (4 or fewer weeks)
Dedication of the Church (4 weeks)

Characteristics of the Liturgical Tradition:

Išo'yab (650/651-658) was a liturgical reformer who gave the present East Syrian Liturgy its form. The baptismal rite, reformed as a rite for infants, still echoes the older order of anointing—baptism—communion, with no post-baptismal anointing. The marriage rite is particularly rich in imagery, preserving many Semitic customs including the construction and blessing of the bridal chamber. The rite of penance predates 420, is modeled on the Liturgy of the Word, and is still used by the Assyrian Church of the East as a general confession before the reception of communion. It has been replaced by the Roman rite for confession by the Chaldeans. Different funeral rites are provided for clergy and laity. Only in the case of clerics does the body enter the church (*Kathnita*); for laity the Jewish sequence of preparing the body, procession to the grave, and burial is retained (*Anidha*).

Only Vespers (Ramša) and Morning Service (Sapra) are mandatory for Chaldeans, while some monastic communities also recite the night service (Leyla). Scripture reading is not

included in the daily office, except at Easter, a trait considered further evidence of the antiquity of the East Syrian Office. The daily office contains hymns attributed to Ephrem, his contemporary Jacob, bishop of Nisibis, Catholicos Simeoon bar Sabba'e, Marutha of Maiperqat, Narsai, and Babai the Great, the latter having explicit Nestorian phraseology. Vespers once contained the lighting of the evening lamp, as attested by Gabriel Qatraya (c.615), but this fell into desuetude.

The following differences of the Syro-Malabar from the Chaldean may be observed:

- a) The preparatory prayers before Mass, washing of the hands before the fraction, comminution (except the prayer and the proclamation of the deacon), and the distribution of blessed bread are omitted.
- b) Communion is under the species of bread only, except for the celebrant.
- c) Priests vest at the beginning of the liturgy, immediately after washing his hands.
- d) The creed is recited directly after the Gospel, and therefore before the dismissal of the catechumens.
- e) All the prayers and ceremonies from the *kushápa* before the short intercession to the first prayer of the fraction have been inserted before the institution narrative. The second prayer at the fraction is said immediately before the first part of the narration, and the first strophe of the hymn at the fraction follows it. The remaining part of this hymn is sung by the deacon after the formula which is recited at the fraction. Then the fraction is made.
- f) The elevation is not made at the words, "The holy thing to the holies is fitting in perfection," but with the prayer of introduction to the Lord's prayer, *more romano*. Two other elevations are made as in the Roman rite, after each part of the institution narrative.
- g) The laying of the hand of the deacon upon the chalice before the communion of the celebrant takes place, but in an abbreviated and altered rite.
- h) The purification of the sacred vessels is carried out immediately after the paten has been replaced on the altar.
- i) Some formulas have been taken from the Roman missal, such as those at the communion, both of the celebrant and the faithful.
- j) The whole institution narrative is found in the anaphora, and much of the wording is very similar to that in the Roman Mass.²

² King, 480-1.

Bibliography:

First note the excellent *Classified Bibliography on the East Syrian Liturgy* compiled by Pierre Yousif in 1990. Because of the availability of this work, I have omitted all but a few seminal works on the East Syrian Liturgical Tradition, as this would merely duplicate the work of Yousif. It should be noted that anyone intending to study the East Syrian Liturgy should begin with Yousif's work. In addition to the copy owned by the Notre Dame Library, you may purchase the book for \$20 from Eastern Christian Publications ().

Yousif, Pierre. *A Classified Bibliography on the East Syrian Liturgy*. Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1990.
BX 157 .Z99 Y68 1990

Beggiani, Seely. "Syrian Christianity" in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* / edited by Ken Parry, David Melling, Dmitri Brady, Sidney Griffith & John Healey. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. Pp. 467 – 472.

Ref. BX 100.7 .B54 1999

This is an excellent and recent introductory article on the history and ecclesial structure of Syrian Christianity, both Eastern and Western.

Chalassery, Joseph. *The Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation in the East Syrian Tradition*. Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1995.

BX 157 .C53 1995

This recent book is published by the Mar Thoma Yogam, a group of scholars mostly Syro-Malabar, but also of the Chaldean Catholic streak, at the Pontifical Oriental Institute who dedicate their study to East Syrian Liturgical Studies. This work, like most of those published by Mar Thoma Yogam, was a doctoral dissertation.

Edakalathur, Louis. *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition*. Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1994.

BX 4714.163 .E335 1994

Another publication of the Mar Thoma Yogam, this book focuses on the theology of marriage and the use of the marriage rite, particularly in the Syro-Malabar tradition. Of particular interest is the conclusion he draws of the rite of marriage as what might call a catechetical text on the marriage of Church and Christ. Edakalathur also examines the problematic aspects of this rite, which does not do justice to the modern understanding accorded to women.

Eglise catholique chaldéenne. *Missel Chaldéen: l'ordre des mystères avec les trios anaphores selon le rite de la sainte église de l'orient*. Paris: Service Concordia, 1982.

BX 4714.365 .M5 1982

This missal, originally published in 1901 by Dominicans in Mosul, Iraq, is the standard text for the celebration of the Chaldean Liturgy. The book includes the Syriac text, as well as a French translation, with notes about the celebration of the rite, the location of Chaldeans in the Middle East and other supplementary material, showing its use as a study text.

Kannookadan, Pauly. *The East Syrian Lectionary: An Historico-Liturgical Study*, a doctoral dissertation. Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1991.

BX 177 .L4 .K3 1991

Also published by the Mar Thoma Yogam, this dissertation analyzes the lectionary of the Chaldean Church and Assyrian Church of the East, especially in light of the calendar and way in which the lections form a thematic base for the *Shawu'i*.

King, Archdale A. "Chaldean Rite" and "Syro-Malabar Rite" in *The Rites of Eastern Christendom*, vol. 2. Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1948. Pp. 251-520.

BX 4710 .K58 v.2

This is an old text, but hugely valuable nonetheless. I do not know what profession King espoused, but he liked liturgy. I have used King as a resource for non-Roman Liturgical rites, ranging from the East Syrian to the Rite of Nidaros (Norway). While King does not have one text on the East Syrian Liturgy as a whole, the two lengthy chapters on the Chaldean and Syro-Malabar Rites give an excellent and detailed examination of the East Syrian Liturgy easily accessible in English.

Maniyattu, Pauly. *Heaven on Earth: The Theology of Liturgical Spacetime in the East Syrian Qurbana*. Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1995.

BX 157 .M365 1995

I could not get my hands on this text, but it is the most recent work published by Mar Thoma Yogam and is owned by the Notre Dame Library. The *Qurbana*, recall, is the Syriac name given to the "Hallowing" or Anaphora.

Spinks, Bryan D. *Addai and Mari, The Anaphora of the Apostles: A Text for Students* with Introduction, Translation and Commentary. Grove Liturgical Studies, 24. Bramcote, Nottinghamshire: Grove Books, 1980.

BX 5141 .A1 G76 no. 24

Everyone's favorite Anaphora is Addai and Mari. It preserves ancient forms, it challenges our assumptions about Eucharistic Prayer, and it has some beautiful language. And although William Macomber discovered and edited the oldest known manuscript of Addai and Mari, Spinks uses less idiosyncratic sources and presents in a brief, but insightful form useful to students of East Syrian Liturgy.

Spinks, Bryan D. *Mar Nestorius and Mar Theodore the Interpreter: The Forgotten Eucharistic Prayers of East Syria* with Introduction, Translation and Commentary. The Alcuin Club and the Group for Renewal of Worship, 45. Cambridge: Grove Books 1999.

BX 177 .S656 1999

Almost because Addai and Mari is so popular to study, the two other *Qurbana* used in the East Syrian Liturgical Tradition, are not widely studied. In another concise but insightful book, Spinks presents a translation of the two Anaphoras, as well as commentary on their use, history and theological implications.

Spinks, Bryan D. "Syrian Liturgy" in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* / edited by Ken Parry, David Melling, Dmitri Brady, Sidney Griffith & John Healey. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. Pp. 472-476.

Ref. BX 100.7 .B54 1999

The final citation from Spinks, Professor of Liturgical Studies at Yale University, is in an excellent dictionary and examines the three traditions of Syrian Liturgy: East, West, and the eclectic Maronite Rite. Except for the historical background, this article is a primary source of information in this presentation.