



East Syriac Liturgical Poetry of the St Thomas Christians

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The uniqueness of early Syriac literature is its poetry. It is in the liturgical tradition that Syriac poetry has found its finest expression. Since the St Thomas Christians of Malabar followed the East Syriac liturgy from time immemorial, the early history of their liturgical poetry and music goes hand in hand with the liturgical heritage of the Church of the East. The article develops this argument in two parts: the first part expounds the development of liturgical poetry in the East Syriac tradition from a historical perspective and the second part analyses the chanting system from a liturgical and musical perspective. The state of affairs of the liturgical music after the 17th century following the Latin contact and the development of Christian folk art forms are not part of our discussion. The basic liturgical text of reference is the *Hudrā*, with its Catholic (HB) and non-Catholic editions (HD).¹ The present Syro-Malabar 'breviary' (an abbreviated form of *Hudrā* for the daily Liturgy of Hours) is also used as a primary source.²

Part One: History of East Syriac Liturgical Poetry

1.1 Early Liturgical Poetry

Syriac poetic form is based on syllable count, and not length. We have no trace of evidence that the early Syriac poetry in *Odes of Solomon* and in *Acts of Thomas* were used in liturgy. The *Odes of Solomon* is not syllabic, but is described as a *zmirtā*, 'song'. The interpolation of 'h(alleluiah)' at the middle as well as the end of each *Ode* in the later manuscripts indicates that they were adapted, in the manner of Psalms, to the liturgical chant. The two poems in the *Acts of Thomas* are in six-syllable metre which is rarely used later on. Another appended hymn, though not part of original *Acts* is the "Song of Praise of Thomas the Apostle". It contains some phraseologies that have close parallels with the most ancient sections of the earliest surviving Anaphora, attributed to Addai and Mari.³

Among the early liturgical composers of the East Syriac tradition, three names need special mention: first and foremost comes Mar Ephrem, the poet par excellence of Syriac Orient and then two bishops, Mar Simeon and Mar Marutha.

¹ Catholic edition of *Hudrā* prepared by Paul Bedjan (HB = *Breviarium juxta Ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*, I-III, Rome 1886-87) and the non-Catholic edition by Mar Thomas Darmo (HD = *Ktābā da-Qdām wad-Bātar wad-Hudrā wad-Kaškōl wad-Gazā w-Qālā d-'Udrānē 'am Ktābā d-Mazmorē*, I-III, Trichur 1960-62).

² The official text now in use (*Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Yamaparathanakal*) was published in 27-12-1986 with the permission of Syro-Malabar Bishops Conference and with the provisional approval of the Holy See.

³ The phrases like 'you put on our humanity' (ܠܒܢܐ ܕܢܚܢܐ) and 'you resurrected our dead state' (ܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܢܚܢܐ) are found in Post-Sanctus of Addai Mari. S. Brock, "Some Early Witnesses to the East Syriac Liturgical Tradition", JAAS 18:1 (2004) 9-45, 9 note 3.



1.1.2 Catholicos Mar Simeon bar Sabbae

According to the *Book of Tower*, the first ‘Summa’ of East Syriac theology, written by the Arabic historian Mari ibn Sulayman (mid-twelfth century), it was Catholicos Mar Simeon bar Sabbae, Metropolitan of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (329-344),⁴ who introduced two choirs with alternate chanting of psalms, *hullālē* and anthems (*ʿoniyātā*) in the Persian Church.⁵ The *Book of Tower* cites two anthems that Simeon used before his martyrdom that occurred on the Good Friday of 344. They are the anthem of the Mysteries (*Rāzē*) sung on the Passover Thursday (HB II:356) and on the New Sunday, first Sunday after Easter (HB II:450).⁶ These anthems are currently sung in the Syro-Malabar liturgy on the very same days. The anthem of *lākumārā*, the primitive fixed introit of *Ramšā* and *Rāzē*, is also attributed to Mar Simeon. This anthem is one of the earliest Christological hymns ever used in liturgy, and is composed in the form of *madrāšā*, a teaching song. It is a quatrain with a simple syllabic pattern (4+4+4+4) and it reads as follows.

<i>La-ku ma-ra dkol maw-di-nan</i>	To you, O Lord of all, we acknowledge/confess,
<i>olak l-šo msi-ha mšab-hi-nan</i>	To you, O Jesus Christ, we praise;
<i>da-tu mnah-ma-na dpa-gra-in</i>	you are the Quickener (جسّك) of our bodies,
<i>wa-tu pa-ro-qa dnap-ša-tan</i>	and you are the Saviour (فدك) of our souls.

Though nothing of Mar Simeon’s renovations or compositions are historically verifiable, the ecclesiastical tradition consider him progenitor of East Syriac liturgical poetry.

1.1.2 Mar Marutha of Maipherqat

The second liturgical composer is Mar Marutha, bishop of Maipherqat/Martyropolis (end of 4th to the beginning of 5th century), to whom *Hudrā* ascribes most of the “martyrs’ anthems” (HD II:420*).

“Anthems of martyrs: written by Marutha of Maipherqat: this Bishop was member in the ecumenical Synod of Nicea. When he was traveling in the countries of East and West, he saw the massacres of the holy martyrs of the Church of God in both places, (thus) he composed these voices of the martyrs to be sung in the churches at the morning and evening (services). Afterwards, other skilful teachers of the church added a few other anthems, which are appropriate to the whole community for the memorial of the holy martyrs, for the consolation of the faithful, for the instruction of the disciples, and for the glory of the Name

⁴ One of the earliest dated Christian literary manuscript in any language (Add. Ms 12,150 in the British Library), completed at Edessa in November 411, witnesses the martyrdom of Catholicos Mar Simeon, Metropolitan of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (329-344). S. BROCK, “Syriac Culture 337-425”, *The Cambridge Ancient History XIII: The Late Empire AD 337-425*, I. E. S. Edwards (ed.), Cambridge 1998², 718 note 22.

⁵ *Maris, Amri et Slibae de patriarchis nestorianorum commentaria I*, H. Gismondi (ed.), Rome 1897, 15-16.

⁶ Two other hymns are also attributed to him in certain Mss: *ʿonitā d-subāʿā* of I Tue of Fast (HB II:77-78) and *tešbohtā* of Ferial Weeks of Fast, found in the *Book of After and Before*. According to J. Mateos the use of this *tešbohtā* in the Weeks of Ferials of Lent itself indicates its antiquity, though not its authorship. Cf. J. MATEOS, *Lelya-Sapra: Les offices chaldéennes de la nuit et du matin*, OCA 156 (1972), 189-91.



of the Mighty Lord of Hosts, whom they praise and bless forever and ever, Amen.” (HD II:420*)

Bishop Marutha's service as the Roman ambassador for the peace negotiations between the two empires won him to obtain relief for the persecuted Church in Persia. He is known to have gathered quantities of martyrs' relics, which he transferred to his city his bishopric, consequently named as Martyropolis. In addition, he is said to have written accounts of the martyrs' passions. All these were enough reasons to accredit to him various Martyrs' anthems of the East Syriac liturgy. These anthems were often sung after the evening and morning (*Ramšā* and *Ṣaprā*) daily services like an additional stationary liturgy appended to the Cathedral service. For instance, the final hymn of the present Syro-Malabar (=SM) Morning service, called *b-madnāhay Ṣaprā* ("As morning dawns") is originally a series of popular anthems sung during the procession towards the martyrion in honour of martyrs.

1.2 Liturgical Poetry of Ephrem⁷

The poet *par excellence* in the Syriac world is Ephrem, the 'harp of the Holy Spirit'. His poetical writings can be divided into two categories: *memrē* (isosyllabic couplets for narrative and didactic verse) and *madrāšē* (stanziac verse). The former can employ small number of different metres: the most usual being 7+7 syllables is designated as the metre of Ephrem. Many of the liturgical pieces in this metre are falsely attributed to Ephrem. Amongst those which are likely to be genuine is the long narrative *memrā* concerning Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites (*Sermons* II:1) used in both East (HB I:438-66) and West Syriac liturgical tradition for the Fast of Nineveh.

Madrāšē, 'teaching songs', by contrast, can employ a very large number of different syllabic patterns, though any single poem will employ the same pattern throughout all its stanzas. Within a single stanza there will be metrical breaks (caesuras) between the various segments, usually corresponding to slight breaks in the sense. These segments are built up of smaller units consisting of two to five syllables.

Whereas *memrē* were evidently recited, *madrāšē* were sung, either by a soloist, with the refrain (*'onitā*) sung by a choir, or by two choirs in alternating verses with the refrain sung by both; they were to be chanted to the accompaniment of the lyre (*kennarā*), on the model of David the Psalmist. According to Jacob of Serug, Ephrem employed women's choirs. Since the melody title (*qālā*) employs the opening words of a well-known *madrāšā*, it also serves as an indicator of the particular syllabic metre that is being used. For these, just under 100 different *qālē* or melody titles, are recorded in the manuscript tradition. *Qālā* in a liturgical context can often refer to a whole stanzaic poem, and later on it can also mean musical

⁷ S. BROCK, "Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac", *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (eds.), Oxford 2008, 657-71; ID., "Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition" 362-72, 513-515; ID., "Some Early Witnesses to the East Syriac Liturgical Tradition", *JAAS* 18:1 (2004), 9-45; S. BROCK, "Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition", *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, F. Young, L. Ayres, A. Louth (eds.), Cambridge 2004, 362-72, 513-515.



tone. The 400 or so *madrāšē* by Ephrem that survive employ some 45 different syllabic meters. The use of rhyme was not a regular feature in early Syriac poetry. The use of rhyme as a regular feature is found from about the ninth century onwards, this was evidently introduced under the influence of Arabic poetry.

The context of Ephrem's *memrē* and *madrāšē* was often the divine liturgy. Specifically, as St. Jerome says of these compositions, "in some churches his writings were publicly recited after the reading of the Scriptures".⁸ The *Vita Siriaca* states that *madrāšē* were sung at dusk and dawn in the Church, before the liturgy.⁹ This means that the proximate occasion of these compositions was the reading of a set of passages from the Scripture chosen for the relevance to the liturgical celebration of the day or the season. The titles of the collections of *madrāšē* reflect their liturgical character. Complete texts of Ephrem's *madrāšē* are preserved almost exclusively only in the 6-7th century manuscripts. Later, for liturgical purpose many of Ephrem's *madrāšē* were excerpted, broken up, added to, and even completely reconstituted in (liturgical) manuscripts. Moreover, since the texts were sung alternatively by two choirs, manuscripts were sometimes written in pairs, each one giving only the verses sung by one of the two choirs. A good example of this is provided by a beautiful Epiphany poem, probably of the sixth century, whose full form of 26 stanzas is only to be found in a single 12th cent. Ms, whereas all that is left of the poem in the printed edition is the five stanzas (HB III:411; HD III:586).¹⁰

The printed editions provide only a small proportion of what is to be found in the liturgical manuscripts. For example, the West Syrian Fenqitho incorporates a large number of *madrāšē*, mostly attributed to Ephrem, whereas the *Hudrā* has a much more limited selection, and these are always just restricted to three stanzas. The Liturgical pieces found commonly in West Syriac and Maronite traditions can normally confirm the antiquity of the texts.¹¹ The shared texts would normally imply that they are likely to antedate the ecclesiastical divisions. Here is a list of excerpts from Ephrem's *madrāšē* in the *Hudrā* so far identified as genuine.¹²

II Sun Annunciation	HB I:69; HD I:130	= Nativity, 5:1-3.
IV Sun Annunciation	HB I:88; HD I:152	= Nativity, 23:1-3.
VI Sun Epiphany	HB I:242; HD I:476	= Epiphany, 6:1-3.
Comm. of Mary	HB I:365; HD I:596	= Nativity, 11:1-3.
II Sun Fast	HB II:116; HD II:189	~ Fast, 1:6, 4:1.
VI Sun Fast	HB II:277; HD II:381	= Church, 6:1-5,7. ¹³

⁸ *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men*, Thomas P. Halton (tr.), Washington DC 1999, 149.

⁹ DE FRANCESCO, *Inni sul Paradiso*, 196 note 15.

¹⁰ S. BROCK, "An Anonymous Hymn for Epiphany", PdO 15 (1988-89), 170.

¹¹ For details: BROCK, "Early Witnesses", 9-45.

¹² BROCK, "Early Witnesses" 44. References are to E. Beck's editions in CSCO.

¹³ The inclusion of the *madrāšē* on the Church, 6:5 is fortunate, since this is badly damaged in Beck's manuscript B, and so thanks to *Hudrā*, we are able now to read it in its complete form. S. BROCK, "The Transmission of Ephrem's *madrāshe* in the Syriac Liturgical Tradition", SP 33 (1997), 501, Appendix 5.



VII Mon Fast	HB II:334; HD II:456	= Virginité, 8:1-3.
VII Tue Fast	HB II:339; HD II:463	= Unleavened Bread, 3:1-4, 6-7.
VII Wed Fast	HB II:345; HD II:469	= Unleavened Bread, 5:1-6.
Passover	not in HB; HD II:477	= Crucifixion, 2:1-3.

S. Brock notes that a *madrāšā* found in East Syriac *Ḥudrā* (Passover: HB II:351; HD II:476-7) gives the impression of preserving genuine Ephremic material, but had been lost or is absent in available manuscripts.¹⁴ Among the many liturgical poetry attributed to Ephrem, some *tešbāhtā* common with the Maronite tradition may be dated very old. For example, *Receive, O our Lord, the supplication of us all* in *Lelyā* of Thursdays (HB I-III:44; HD I-III:54).¹⁵

The ferial morning hymn recited in SM Week-day *Ṣaprā* ("To you be glory, our God"), according to ms tradition is attributed to Ephrem (HD I:63). Though this hymn has no uniform syllabic pattern, in general follows the classical meter of Ephrem (7+7). In the same way, the Sunday morning "hymn of light" recited in SM Sunday *Ṣaprā* ("Jesus our Lord the Messiah") is an acrostic poem attributed to Ephrem. Each stanza of this hymn is composed in 7+7 7+7 meter. The acrostic spells the name of Jesus Christ, consisting of ten Syriac alphabets (ܚܝܫܘܥܡܫܝܚܝܘܥܝܫܘܥܝܫܘܥܝܫܘܥ), where the sequence *yod + alaph* points to the antiquity of the East Syriac convention of placing a supralinear *alaph* over the initial *yod* where this serves as a vowel.¹⁶ The post-communion hymn of "Sundays and Memorials" sung in SM Eucharistic liturgy, is attributed to Ephrem. This hymn is written in 4+4 4+4 syllables. We quote the first four lines of this ancient hymn.

<i>Ma-ran Ish-o mal-ka sgi-da</i>	Our Lord Jesus King that is worshipped
<i>da-zka bha-she Imaw-ta thru-na</i>	who conquered by his Passion death the tyrant.
<i>Bra da-la-ha desh-taw-di lan</i>	O Son of God, who has promised to us
<i>Ha-ye had-the bmal-kut raw-ma</i>	New Life in the Kingdom on high

S. Brock further gives a short list of common *madrāšē* that are generally attributed to Ephrem, as found in East Syriac *Ḥudrā*, but these will certainly date from slightly later.¹⁷ This would normally imply that they are likely to antedate the ecclesiastical divisions of the fifth and sixth centuries, thus confirming the antiquity of such texts.

I Sun Annunciation	HB I:58; HD I:118
Passover	HB II:351 stanzas 2-3; HD II:476
Passion Fri	HB II:368; HD II:501
Passion Sat	HB II:384; HD II:522
Easter	HB III:411; HD III:586
II Tue Resurrect.	HB III:421 stanza 1; HD III:597
II Fri Resurrect.	HB III:433 stanza 3; HD III:612-3

¹⁴ BROCK, "Transmission of Ephrem's *madrashe*", 502.

¹⁵ BROCK, "Early Witnesses", 22-38.

¹⁶ An additional superlinear alaph (Ⲡ) is added after the first alphet. This is the practice of later East Syriac mss. The latest reprint of *Ḥudrā* (2002) edited by P. Yousif has added this provision.

¹⁷ BROCK, "Early Witnesses", 44-45.



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