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Sagdīnan mār

(A Christological hymn by Mar Babai the Great, ca. 551-628)

Sagdīnan mār lālāhūsākh
Walnāšūākh d'lāpūlāga

Translation (Courtesy: Zach Thundy)

We worship you, O Lord, [without doubt] in your divinity.
And your humanity [which are indivisible].

This is a unique hymn from the East Syriac tradition that correctly proclaims the mystery of Incarnation. This is the 18th strophe from the hymn, “Brīk hannānā” (“blessed is the merciful one”) from the night prayers for Sundays in Advent and Christmas. Because of the theological significance of the text, the breviary prescribes this couplet be sung three times. At some point in the history, definitely before the seventeenth century, the St. Thomas Christians started treating this couplet as a separate hymn. The performance context varied from the beginning of Qurbana on the major feasts of the Lord to the conclusion of festal processions. The usual performance practice is to sing the same text and melody three times in three ascending pitch registers.

The earliest reference to the hymn is in the acrostic hymn in Syriac, written by a Catholic St. Thomas Christian priest, Fr. Chandi Kadavil, popularly known as “Alexander the Indian” (1588- c. 1673). Fr. Kadavil wrote the acrostic hymn according to meter and melody of “Sagdīnan mār.” It means that the hymn was already popular among the St. Thomas Christians at the dawn of the seventeenth century (i. e., before the Coonan Cross Oath (1653) and the ensuing divisions in the community.

The text is highly Christological and deserves further study. This may very well be the earliest known East Syriac hymn on the subject of hypostatic union and Incarnation. It is, in effect, a paraphrasing of the exuberant acclamation of St. Thomas, the Apostle of India: “Mār walāh,” “My Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28). In those two words, the Apostle acknowledged the humanity and divinity of Christ. In the course of history, the manner of the coexistence of the humanity and divinity in the person of Christ became a topic for heated discussions that shook the foundation of the Christian religion. There is a play on the shades of meaning of the final phrase “lā pūlāga.” It can mean “without doubt,” or “without division.” The alternate meanings appear in the brackets in the translation given above. The hymn resolves the long-standing Christological controversies (Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon). The special significance the East Syriac Churches in India gave to this hymn is an indication that these Churches were not subject to those controversies. The hymn is a perfect example of the interface of music, poetry, pedagogy, dogma, theology, liturgy, and catechesis.

Glossary (courtesy: Zacharias Thundyil) Sagdīnan mār (sagdīn + an) = we adore; mār = my Lord; lālāhūsākh (l' + alāhūsā + akh) = your divinity; walnāšūākh (w' + al + nāšūsā + akh) = and your humanity; d'lāpūlāga (d' + lā + pūlāga) = that which [is] without division/ without doubt. See more information at “sagdina mar” *Encyclopedia of Syriac Chants* at www.TheCMSIndia.org