

A Brief Survey of the Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East as Expressed in the *Khudra*

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Introduction

The question of the Church's Christological expression finds its roots in the question of the Lord Jesus posed to his Disciples in Caesarea of Philippi: "Who do you say that I am," Matthew 16:15. That is really at the foundation of every, and any, discussion concerning how the Church confesses the one Son, Jesus Christ. The response of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" constructs a framework for later Christological expressions of the Church. Later, one of the Lord's Post-Resurrection appearances, the apostle Thomas equally gives a highly Christological expression to the Risen Lord whom he experienced and truly handled after the resurrection—"My Lord and my God," John 20:28. In the Synoptic Gospels, the blessed Evangelists speak of Jesus 'Son of God,' 'Christ' and 'Lord' (ܡܪܝܢܐ *Marya* in Aramaic, or *Kyrios* in Greek), while the Johannine tradition is more emphatic in its expression of the Eternal Son as 'Word' (or ܡܠܬܐ *Meltha*)—Logos—the very Mind and Wisdom of God.¹ Theologians will speak of a 'Christology from Below' (identifying the Synoptic Gospels tradition) or a 'Christology from Above' (in reference to the tradition of St. John, the Beloved Disciple).

Although the Gospels express a christological faith that is complete and sufficient in its own right, the emergence in the early centuries of the Church of various heresies which denied

¹ See John 1:1; I John 1:1.

either the complete humanity of Christ (such as Docetism² of the late third century and Apollinarianism³ of the early fourth century) or the Lord's complete and true divinity (such as Arianism⁴ of the early fourth century) necessitated an expounding of the pure and simple Christological expressions of the New Testament. The influence of Hellenistic culture and the use of philosophy by the early Fathers of the Church also contributed to the development and growth of a Christological parlance and expressions that were much more complex than the Christology expressed in the New Testament texts.

The apostolic *kerygma*, therefore, is foundational for dogma—the Church's official expressions and formulas of faith; without the apostles, there can be no apostolic faith, nor can there be an Apostolic Tradition, as such. Without the living Tradition of the apostles, there can be no valid apostolic expression. This living Tradition of the apostles, in turn, is outwardly expressed and experienced by the faithful in the Church's life of worship and prayer—her *Liturgy*. For the Assyrian Church of the East, the main liturgical formulary is the *Khudra*, or 'Cycle,' which contains the offices and prayers for all Sundays of the liturgical year and the Feasts of our Lord and commemorations that are observed on Sundays.⁵

² 'Docetism,' from the Greek *dokein* (meaning, 'to appear/seem') was the heresy that arose first in the letter of Serapion of Antioch (bishop 197-203), who held that Jesus only 'seemed' to be human and that his physical body was only a phantasm.

³ Apollinaris of Laodicea (died 390) held that Christ did not have a human mind, but a human lower soul and a divine mind. Along with Eutychianism, Apollinarianism is the extreme form of monophysitism.

⁴ 'Arianism' was the heresy espoused by Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria (ca. 250-336). He held and taught that Christ as the Son of God did not always exist (eternally) with the Father, but was created, and as such distinct from the nature of the Father. Thus, for Arius the Father was greater than the Son (an idea based on John 14:28). Arius' teaching was condemned as heretical at the first ecumenical council of Nicea (325), and the condemnation was reiterated at the second ecumenical council of Constantinople I (381).

⁵ The *Khudra* was printed between the years 1960-62 in Thrissur, Kerala, South India by the Mar Narsai Press and with the express permission of the late His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII (1908-1975), Catholicos-Patriarch. This being the first Assyrian edition of this liturgical formulary, the other two liturgical books—the *Gazza* (containing the offices for feasts of our Lord and commemorations of the saints which are not based on the Sunday-cycle) and the *Kashkul* (containing the propers for the night, morning and evening offices for the ferial days, excluding all Sundays, feasts and commemorations)—were combined into one volume, and are now collectively referred to as the *Khudra*. Hereafter abbreviated as *Khudra*.

A very important and continuously viable principle expressive of the importance of the Church's liturgical nature, and indeed the very content of the liturgy, is the famous axiom "the law of prayer establishes the law of belief."⁶

The Formation of the *Khudra*

The major formularies with regard to the liturgical prayer are the *Khudra*, *Gazza* and the *Kashkol*; these have been formulated and organized at the Upper Monastery at Mosul.⁷ The *Khudra*, an Syriac term meaning 'cycle', is the principal liturgical formulary of the Church of the East. It has already been effectively studied by Anton Baumstark and William Macomber.⁸ The oldest extant copy of the *Khudra* (10th-11th century),⁹ which has come to be known as the 'Mar Eša'ya *Khudra*' (belonging to the parish at Mosul under this name), was effectively discovered by W. Macomber, who writes concerning the *Khudra*:

*[the Khudra] contains the variable chants of the choir for the divine office and the Mass for the entire cycle of the liturgical year. The compilation of the Khudra is traditionally attributed to the Catholicos Patriarch Išo'yahb III of Adiabene (648/9-658/9) and his collaborator, the monk 'Enanišo', and there is no compelling reason for doubting the attribution.*¹⁰

⁶ Stated by Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 390-455), in the eighth book of his concerning the grace of God and free will: "Let us consider the sacraments of priestly prayers, which having been handed down by the apostles are celebrated uniformly throughout the whole world and in every catholic Church so that the law of praying might establish the law of believing." See *Patrologia Latina* 51:209-210.

⁷ Cf. W. C. Van Unnik, *Nestorian Questions on the Administration of the Eucharist by Išo'yahb IV* (Haarlem 1937; reprinted Amsterdam 1970) 148.

⁸ See: A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* (Bonn 1922) 198. W. F. Macomber, "A List of the Known Manuscripts of the Chaldean Hudra" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973) 275-306; Idem., "The Oldest Known Text of the Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 32 (1966) 335-371; cf. Idem., "A History of the Chaldean Mass," *Worship* 51 (1977) 112. Cf. B. Varghese, "East Syrian Liturgy During the Sassanid Period," *Harp* 15 (2002) 216.

⁹ It seems that an even older extant *Khudra* exists in the collection of the Syriac and Soghdian Christian manuscripts found at Turfan. For my discussion this *Khudra* fragment, possibly older than the Mar Eša'ya manuscript by one century, see my forthcoming article: "From Mosul to Turfan: The *Hüdrā* in the Liturgy of the Assyrian Church of the East. A Survey of its Historical Development and its Liturgical Anomalies at Turfan." Lecture delivered at the VIII Christianity in Iraq Seminar Day, May 2011, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. My thanks to Dr. Erica Hunter for her invitation and for providing me with digital copies of the Turfan fragments.

¹⁰ W.F. Macomber, "Manuscripts of the Hudra," 120-121. For a description of the contents of the Mar Eša'ya *Khudra* see: P. Yousif, *Appunti sulla preghiera liturgica del rito caldeo (commune)* [= *Notes on the Common Liturgical Prayer of the Chaldean Rite*], (unpublished class notes at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome 1982-1983) 3.

We have already discussed the redaction of the *Khudra* initiated by Išo'yahb III, whose liturgical reforms actually began while he was yet metropolitan of Adiabene.¹¹ The fact that the recension of the *Khudra* standardized by Išo'yahb while he was already patriarch, residing at the Upper Monastery, has gained for the name of this formulary, "according to the order of the Upper Monastery of Mar Abraham and Mar Gabriel at Mosul."¹² The manuscript tradition almost always refers to this work as the "*Khudra dam-dabranootha*," i.e., the *Khudra* 'of the dispensation.'¹³ This refers to the whole liturgical year, with its different seasons and feasts in between, as celebrating the divine economy or *mdabraootha*—the economy of salvation authored by God the Father and realized in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The early history of this most-important formulary is not known. Whether some sort of 'primitive' recension of the book prior to the seventh century reforms ever existed cannot be known. The earliest witnesses to the *Khudra* outside the book itself are the *Liber Superiorum* (*Book of Governors*)¹⁴ of Thomas of Marga and the *Expositio Officiorum* of Pseudo-George of Arbel (ܩܘܪܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܬܐ).¹⁵ The author refers to the *penqīthā* made by Išo'yahb a number of times. At first glance, the title *penqīthā*, no doubt coming from the Greek *πινακίδιον* seems to refer to a lost work of Išo'yahb which describes the various reforms he effected and an explanation of the rubrics he had stipulated.¹⁶ According to Baby Varghese the *penqīthā*:

...was a commentary on the ceremonies of the eucharist, daily office and other liturgical rites. This work seems to have given a theological rational for the liturgical actions. The theological explanation given to the liturgical actions by an influential patriarch invested them with 'a sacrosanct quality to change.' This liturgical commentary, now lost, is used

¹¹ Cf. E. Tisserant, "(L'Église) nestorienne," *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 11.1 (Paris 1931) column 319.

¹² Cf. A. Baumstark, *Geschichte*, 198.

¹³ See for example manuscript Borgia Syriac 150 (fol. 1r) and Borgia Syriac 85 (fol. 1r).

¹⁴ See Earnest A. W. Budge, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Margâ A.D. 840*, volumes I-II, London 1893.

¹⁵ R. H. Connolly (editor & Latin translation), *Anonymi Auctoris Expositio Officiorum Ecclesiae Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta. Accedit Abrahae Bar Lipheh Interpretatio Officiorum*, vols. I-II. *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 64, 72 – 71, 76 = *Scriptores Syri* 25, 29 – 28, 32, Paris-Rome 1913, 1915; reprinted Louvain 1960-1961. Hereafter abbreviated as EOE I/II.

¹⁶ See J.-M. Fiey, "Išo'yaw le Grand. Vie du catholicos nestorien Išo'yaw III d'Adiabène (580-659), *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 35-36 (1969-1970) 11; P. Yousif, *Appunti sulla Messa caldea [= Notes on the Chaldean Mass]*, (unpublished class notes at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome 1982-1983) 15. Cf. BAUMSTARK, *Geschichte*, 198.

*in an anonymous commentary on the anaphora and other liturgical ceremonies probably written in the ninth century.*¹⁷

However, according to Pseudo-George of Arbel, the *penqīthā* in question seems to be none other than the *Khudra*:

*Why is it that since the beginning of the year is Tishrin II, and that there is no feast from Tishrin to Kanon I, the blessed Išo'yahb kept the Annunciation and the beginning of the penqīthā until Kanon, and did not make its beginning [to be] from Kanon? The Church celebrates four beginnings in counting the year, and every one of them has a day and month, I mean the beginning of the year and the beginning of the penqīthā, and the beginning of the books and the beginning of the governors. The beginning of the year is Tishrin I; the beginning of the penqīthā is Kanon I; the beginning of the books is the beginning of the season of the Fast of the Passion; and the beginning of the governors is the beginning of the season of Resurrection...and the second [of the beginnings] is that of the dispensation, i.e. the penqīthā...*¹⁸

Thus, according to the usage of *penqīthā* in the *Expositio*, it could refer to none other than the *Khudra* itself. Again, the author of the *Expositio* writes: "Why is it that since the [period of] Consecration of the Church is before all of the liturgies, including Baptism [Epiphany], the blessed Išo'yahb ordered the beginning of the *penqīthā* [to be] the Annunciation, and placed the baptism at Resurrection, and after all of the *Khudra*, ordered the Consecration of the Church..."¹⁹

The so-called *penqīthā* of Išo'yahb is also mentioned by 'Abdišo' of Nisibs in his *Catalogus Auctorum*. Concerning the writings of Išo'yahb he mentions that he ordered the *penqīthā d-Khudra*, or the 'volume of the *Khudra*.'²⁰ Here the understanding is clear—the *penqīthā* and the *Khudra* are one and the same volume.

It seems that in the period lasting from the christological controversies to the reforms of Išo'yahb III, the East Syrians used to refer to the *Khudra* as the *Penqīthā*, in agreement with the

¹⁷ VARGHESE, "East Syrian Liturgy," 217-218.

¹⁸ See EOE I, 25-26.

¹⁹ EOE II, 116-117.

²⁰ J.S. Assemani (editor & Latin translation), *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana de Scriptoribus Syri*, vols I-III/1-2 (Rome 1719-1728; reprinted Hildersheim/New York 1975; Piscataway, NJ 2002) vol. III/1, 139.

be mentioned by name was Mar Yahb'Alaha II (1190-1222); it is most likely that this reform of 'around 1250' mentioned by George Percy Badger is in reference to this patriarch.²⁴

A Precursory View of the Christology of the *Khudra*

The Christology of the *Khudra* is expressed, obviously, in the ecclesiastical compositions of this liturgical formulary. The very opening of the *Khudra*, which begins with the four Sundays of the Annunciation (*Subara*), in the first 'Antiphon of the Basilike' (ܕܘܨܒܪܐ ܕܕܝܘܢܝܐ), which is the main vesperal antiphon for Sundays, Feast Days and Commemorations, begins on a very high note, christologically speaking. The ecclesiastical compositions for the opening of the liturgical year recall the dispensation of God which was begun in Abraham, with whom the promises concerning the Christ began: "God the Word [who is] from the Father, did not take the form of the servant from angels but from the seed of Abraham. And He came [by means of] our humanity in His goodness, that He might save our race from error."²⁵ The first of the Old Testament readings is, in fact, very much tied to this antiphon, for all of Genesis 17 is to be read. It recalls the election of Abraham and the giving of the Covenant and its sign (between God and Abraham) to his and his children after him.

Similarly, for the Second Sunday of Annunciation, the same antiphon proclaims: "The great mystery which was hidden from centuries and generations, was revealed to us at the end of times: for, the Only Begotten who is in the bosom of his Father came and was clothed with the form of the servant in his goodness. He has recounted and revealed to us concerning the fullness of the faith of the Trinity."²⁶ This second antiphon is based on Ephesians 3:9, where St. Paul speaks of the revelation of the hidden mystery of Christ among the nations: "...and to make all see what is the economy of the mystery, which from the of the ages had been hidden by God who created all things..."

The 'Antiphon of the Basilike' for the Third Sunday of Annunciation is equally Christological and incarnational in nature. The antiphon proclaims: "He who is incomprehensible

²⁴ A. Rücker, "Das 'Obere Kloster' bei Mossul and seine Bedeutung für die Geschichte der Ostsyrischen Liturgie" *Oriens Christianus*, third series, 7 (1932) 181 note 2; cf. C. Van Unnik, *Nestorian Questions*, 149.

²⁵ *Khudra*, vol. I, 114.

²⁶ *Khudra*, vol. I, 127.

and not confined by creatures fulfilled his economy by our humanity. For, the divine nature was joined to the human nature which was assumed, while not undergoing change. The Virgin gave birth in a holy manner to Christ—the Power and Wisdom of God. This [same] One we worship while we all proclaim one Son—he who is the Savior of the world.”²⁷ This antiphon recalls the words of St. Paul in I Corinthians 1:24, “...but to those who are called, both Jews and Arameans, Christ the Power of God and the Wisdom of God.”

Finally, the season of Annunciation closes with the Fourth Sunday, which the major verspertine antiphon again recalls the message of the annunciation of the eternal Son in his humanity: “The Radiance from the Father who was revealed in our humanity was seen from the house of David, and he reigns over the house of Jacob and there is no limit to his dominion. The angel announced to Mary and gave greetings full of mercy to the Virgin, and the hope which is full of good things he announced to the Holy One, ‘Peace be to you, O Blessed among women, full of hope; peace be to you and blessed are you, O who gives birth without intercourse. For, from you shall shine the Master of the height and the depth and that is in them—glory be to him from every mouth. Glorious, O my Lord, is the day of your Annunciation.”²⁸

For the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension, the ‘Antiphon of the Basilike’ is even more expressive of the Church of the East’s understanding of ‘christology from above.’ This antiphon is based on Philippians 2:7, Romans 5:18 and ending with Galatians 1:8-9: “He who in his essence is God the Word, increased his compassion towards our crippled state and put on our image that it might be a dwelling for his Godhead. And he took it [= our image] and affixed it to the Cross and gave it up to death that by it he might give us life. And he made it to ascend and seated it in the heavens, above the principalities and powers. That in the manner of the First Adam we were made guilty, through the Second Adam we were justified—who can recount his marvelous generation! In this manner do we glorify and we believe with knowledge and give thanks in wonder, even as we have learned in truth. For, neither an angel from heaven if he were to come and persuade us and change us by his [own] Gospel,

²⁷ Khudra, vol. I, 138.

²⁸ Khudra, vol. I, 148-149.

outside of that which we were evangelized—we shall not reject his humanity nor shall we ascribe passion to his Godhead.”²⁹

The christological expressions of the *Khudra* are for the most part simple, yet theologically rich. The main focus is the duality of the natures, in keeping with the strict diaphysite christological creed of the Church of the East, and the unity of the natures of the Godhead and humanity in the one person of Sonship. The classic hymn ‘Blessed is the Compassionate One’ (ܒܠܘܕܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܝܚܐ) by Mar Babai the Great (ca. 551-628) is really the only ecclesiastical composition in the *Khudra* which expresses in a liturgical manner the Church of the East’s position concerning the duality of *Qnoma* in Christ.³⁰

A Brief Note on the Meaning of *Qnoma*

The ecclesiastical compositions of the *Khudra* very rarely make use of the term *Qnoma* in the antiphons. The duality of natures in our Lord Jesus Christ, yet stressing the unity of the natures in the one Son of God is of essential importance. ‘Qnoma’ is defined as “individual nature” or “unique nature.” In his synodical letter which deals with Christology, Patriarch Mar Isho’yahb II of Gdhala (628-646) speaks about the meaning of *Qnoma* in the Christological position of the Church of the East. He became patriarch in the very year that Mar Babai the Great died (i.e. 628), who was the celebrated author of the *Book of Union* (ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܕܡܘܨܘܢܐ).³¹ Babai the Great is the first to formally express the Church of the East’s Christological formula of two natures (*ousia*), two *qnoma* and one person of Sonship.

²⁹ *Khudra*, vol. II, 681.

³⁰ See the Syriac text in *Khudra*, vol. I, 118.

³¹ See the Syriac text in: A. Vaschalde (editor), *Babai Magni: Liber De Unione*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 79 = Scriptorum Syri 34, Louvain 1915. The English translation of this text, made by the late Cor-bishop Michael J. Birnie (†2013) with an introduction by S.P. Brock, is in preparation by the Assyrian Church’s Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Educational Development (CIRED), and is due to be published late 2013/early 2014.

Isho'yahb II presented the orthodox faith contained in his *Letter to Rabban Abraham d'Beth Madaye*,³² concerning how one ought to confess the only person of Christ, and which in the ancient codices was contained in the 'Eastern Synods' or *Synodicon Orientale*.³³ Concerning the definition of *Qnoma*, Mar Isho'yahb II writes: "And how would it be possible for the nature of the Father to be seen in his Son, if 'qnoma' were not in every place the definition of [a] nature and its demonstrator. On account of this, it was also fittingly named 'individual nature' (*ousia*), that is, a singular nature..."³⁴ Mar Isho'yahb further states that *qnoma* is the "genuine nature" which as the individuated nature is 'self-subsistent.' He concludes when speaking about the duality of natures in Christ: "...they do not constitute two Gods nor two Sons, but rather one is Christ in all things pertaining to him—one Son, one Only Begotten, one Firstborn, one Lord, one High Priest, one God—one in his being numbered with his Father, and one in his being numbered with us. This is what the union has accomplished, this is the unsearchable mystery of the economy of our Savior..."³⁵

Conclusion

At the heart of the Church's christological expression is the mystery of the Incarnation—that the Son of God became Man for our salvation. The Assyrian Church of the East ardently holds to the duality of natures in Christ—the divinity and the humanity—yet clearly expresses the unity of the natures in the singularity of the person of Christ the Son. The *communication idiomatum* is found not in the *Qnoma* but in the one person of the Son of God incarnate. The main liturgical formulary of the Church of the East, the *Khudra*, is replete with christological expressions that demonstrate the orthodoxy of her faith. I conclude with yet another antiphon, found in the night office (*lelya*) for the Fourth Saturday of the Resurrection: "We have gained great pride without limit over death by the Cross of Christ. By his resurrection from among the dead, he wiped out the judgment of death which entered upon us through his Passion. With great praise that is limitless

³² Founder of a monastery in the village of Ba Mada, near Mosul, who lived during the patriarchate of Mar Isho'yahb I of Arzon (582-595).

³³ The Syriac *Synodicon* was edited with a French translation by J.B. Chabot in 1902. However, this letter of Mar Isho'yahb II is omitted in Chabot's edition. For the Syriac text and French translation see: L. R. M. Sako (editor & French translation), *Lettre christologique du patriarche Syro-Oriental Īšō'yahb II de Gdālā (628-646). Étude, traduction et édition critique*, published doctoral dissertation, Rome 1983.

³⁴ Sako, *Lettre christologique*, 172.

³⁵ Sako, *Lettre christologique*, 187.

*we all cry out and say: 'O Only Begotten, God the Word, he who wore our mortal body, have pity upon your servants who have confessed in your Cross.'"*³⁶

³⁶ *Khudra*, vol. II, 634.