Abstract

This paper is a study of certain notions of ‘Divine Mercy’ in the West Syriac liturgical tradition in the light of Word of God and liturgical prayers. The author tries to explore the theme of ‘Mercy’ (rahme) in the liturgical prayers in West Syriac liturgical tradition using certain technical phrases coined with the word rahme. Some of the phrases are “Door of Mercy” (tar’o drahme), “Dew of Mercy” (talā drahme), “Sea of Mercy” (yamā drahme) and “Wings of Mercy” (kenfe drahme).

Keywords: Rahme (Mercy), Trisagion, Door of Mercy, Dew of Mercy, Sea of Mercy, Wings of Mercy.

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi studium niektórych pojęć związanych z Bożym Miłosierdziem w liturgicznej tradycji zachodniosyryjskiej w świetle Słowa Bożego i modlitw liturgicznych. Autor stara się zgłębić temat milosierdzia (rahme) w modlitwach liturgicznych w rzeczywistej tradycji, używając pewnych fraz technicznych osadzonych w terminie rahme. Cho-
dzi m.in. o takie zwroty, jak: „brama miłosierdzia” (tar’o drahme), „rosa miłosierdzia” (talā drahme), „morze miłosierdzia” (yamā drahme) i „skrzydła miłosierdzia” (kenfe drahme).

Słowa kluczowe: Rahme (miłosierdzie), Trishagion, brama miłosierdzia, rosa miłosierdzia, skrzydła miłosierdzia.

The quintessence of the Holy Gospel is mercy. The Church is called and commissioned to announce this ‘beating heart of Gospel.’ To contemplate the mystery of ‘Divine Mercy’, Holy Father Pope Francis proclaimed an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy from 08 December 2015 to 20 November 2016 as a special time for the Church; this Extraordinary Holy Year was itself a gift of grace, “a time when the witness of believers might grow stronger and more effective.” (Misericordiae Vultus, 3). The Jubilee Year was intended to proclaim the mercy which the humanity experience in and through the person of Jesus Christ, the Evangelion. Pope says, “In order to be capable of mercy therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves listen to the Word of God... In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God’s mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle” (Misericordiae Vultus, 13). This vignette is an attempt to retrace the certain notions of ‘Divine Mercy’ in the West Syriac liturgical tradition in the light of Word of God.

1. Mercy in the Old Testament

The concept of mercy in the Old Testament has got a long and rich history. The experience of Divine Mercy made Israelites the ‘People of God.’ Israel was a people of covenant, and they specially experienced the ‘Mercy of God.’ Through the covenant, God entered into a familial relationship with the people of Israel. God was faithful to the covenant promises and people in turn are requested to be faithful to covenant promises. But the Israelites many a times they broke their covenant with Yahweh because of their sins and worship of foreign gods. Whenever they became infidel and went astray, they were awakened to the awareness to ‘appeal for mercy’ by the prophets (John Paul II, Dives in Misericordia, 4). Thus, we can

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see that the judges and prophets became instruments in the hands of Yahweh to announce “Divine Mercy.”

The two technical terms used in the Old Testament to designate ‘Divine Mercy’ are _hesed_ and _rahāmîm_.

The term _hesed_ indicates a profound attitude of “goodness” and can be understood only in the context of covenant that Yahweh established with Israel. From God’s part the covenant was a gift and grace for Israel. In the Old Testament we can see the noun _hesed_ very frequently and it occurs approximately 250 times and is used in singular. The exact English translation is difficult but some of the Bible versions use the terms “kindness” or “loving kindness.” Modern scholars _see_ _hesed_ as a gift rather than as a right. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) has employed four categories of meaning for _hesed_:

I. “Kindness” in reference to a particular act of one person towards another.
II. “Deal loyally” in reference to the continuing behavior of one person to another.
III. “Steadfast love” or “love” in reference to God’s consistent behavior toward individuals or Israel as a whole.
IV. “Love”, “devotion”, “faithfulness”, in reference to Israel or individuals in relation to Yahweh.²

When _hesed_ is established between two individuals, they are faithful to each other by the virtue of an internal commitment, this occurs because of fidelity. When Israel broke the covenant, the juridical commitment ceased to oblige, but here _hesed_ revealed its deeper love. This made them go on hoping and trusting _hesed_ since God of covenant is really “responsible for his love.” _Hesed_ thus highlights the marks of fidelity to the self and ‘responsibility for one’s love.’

The second term which serves to define mercy in the Old Testament is _rahāmîm_ and its nuance is entirely different from _hesed_. _Rahāmîm_ denotes the love of a mother, and this is completely gratuitous and not merited. The term has got a wide range of feelings of goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding. Isaiah attributes these features to Yahweh. We read: “Can a woman forget her nursing child of her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” (Is. 49:15). Despite human infidelity, Yahweh will have compassion towards his people. “I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely” (Hos. 14:5).

The Old Testament affirms that mercy was a basic characteristic of God. Israel’s earliest understanding of Yahweh was that of “A God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation…” (Exo. 34:6, 7). The theological significance of the term rahme can be understood only in reference to the covenantal relationship of Yahweh with the people of Israel. The mercy of God is integrally related to His steadfast love (hesed). The Psalmist says, “Our God is merciful” (Ps. 116:5; Prov. 12:10). The Psalms frequently relate God’s mercy and steadfast love. It is because of God’s mercy that the sinners are able to appeal to Him in hope. Daniel appealed to God on the ground of His great mercy.3 “We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies” (Dan. 9:18).

1.1. Etymological Observations

The term “merciful” (רחום) raḥûm is from the same root as a noun that means womb. Thus it conveys God’s motherly compassion (Pss. 25:6; 40:11; 51:1; 69:16; 79:8; 106:45; 111:4). The word gracious hanûn is regularly paired with “merciful” and another form of the root indicates that God’s grace is the basis for appeals to God for help. (Pss. 4:1; 6:2). The words “faithfulness” and “steadfast love” (hesed) are paired frequently in the Psalms as in Exodus 34:6. “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness…” (Ps. 25:10).

The Hebrew word employed for mercy is raham. The Hebrew word for “mercy” or “compassion” is derived from the root rhm which means “womb,” and its original meaning was brotherly or motherly feeling, i.e., the feeling of those born from the same womb or the love of a mother for her child.4 The noun rahmo in Syriac refers to “womb.” Thus the term raham has got some implication in relation to the “womb love” the love of mother towards her child. We read “But the woman whose son was alive said to the king – because compassion for her son burned within her” (1 Kgs 3:26). From this etymological notion we can understand Yahweh’s mercy in term of a kind of familial love.

The term ἐλεος (eleos) designate to the Hebrew term hesed (kindness) which is conduct demanded by God to person to person. Ἐλεος (eleos) means mercy, compassion.

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1.2. Instruments of Divine Mercy in the Old Testament

Whenever the Israelites became infidel and went astray, they were awakened to ‘appeal for mercy’ by the prophets. In the sacred scripture we see that the prophets and others constantly recommended the people to implore mercy from the Merciful One (mrahmōno). In this regard the Old Testament give us examples. The important events and texts include the beginning of the history of Judges (Jud. 3:7-9), the prayer of Solomon at the inauguration of Temple (1 Kgs. 8:22-53), the prophetic work of Micah (Mic. 7:18-20), the assurances given by Isaiah (Is. 1:18; 51:4-16), the cry of Jews in exile (Bar. 2:11–3:8) and the renewal of covenant after the return from exile (Neh. 9).5

In one of the prayers, we see that God out of his Mercy sends his chosen ones to cure the humanity. We recite:

The mercy (mrahmonûto) of God which is spread over the creation sends to every man a remedy according his disease; for the grievous disease of the Egyptians it sent Joseph; for the greed of the house of Ahab, Elijah the prophet; for the great city of Nineveh it sent Jonah the preacher; and when he saw that the world had rebelled against the yoke of repentance, he sent his only Son and redeemed by his cross.6

«ܐܠܟܢܒܐ ܥܣܩܐ ܕܡܨܪܡܪܚܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ. ܕܦܪܝܣܐ ܥܠ ܒܪܝܬܐ. ܠܟܐܢܝܫ ܐܢܟ ܟܐܒܗ ܐܣܝܘܬܐ ܫܕܪܬ ܘܡܢ. ܘܠܝܥܢܘܬܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܐܚܒ ܠܠܝܐ ܢܒܝܐ. ܘܠܟܪܟܐ ܪܒܐ ܕܢܝܢܘܬܐ ܠܝܘܢܢ ܟܪܘܙܐ ܫܕܪܬ ܗܘܬ ܠܝܘܣܦ ܫǳܪܬ ܬܐܒܝܠ. ܡܢ ܢܝܪܐ ܕܬܝܒܘܬܐ. ܫǳܪ ܠܝܚܝܕܗ ܘܒܨܠܝܒܗ ܦܪܩܗ ܕܡܪܕܬ ܕܚܙܬ»

2. Notion of Divine Mercy in West Syriac Tradition

In the West Syriac tradition the words employed for mercy are ṭܝܒܘܬܐ (taibûto),חܢܢܐ (hnôno) and rahme, מܪܚܡܢܘܬܐ (mrahmonûto). But the frequently used words in liturgy are rahme and hnôno. Into Malayalam the words are translated as karuna and daya respectively. In response to all the introductory prayers we say; “And upon us the weak and sinful ones may mercy and compassion (rahme wah-nôno) be shed in both worlds forever. Amin.”

«ܘܠܡܥܠܡ ܥܠܡܝܢ. ܐܡܝܢ܀ ܛܝܐ ܪܚܡܐ ܘܚܢܢܐ ܢܫܬܦܥܘܢ ܒܬܪ̈ܝܗܘܢ ܥܠܡ ܝܠܐ ܘܚܘܥܠܝܢ ܡܚ»

5 John Paul II, Dives in Misericordia, 4.
2.1. Rahme

The noun rahme derives from the root *ṛḥm* which means “to love, delight in, desire.” The ‘pael’ form of *ṛḥm* is *ṛḥm* and which is taken as the root of word rahme. The noun has got the meanings ‘tenderness, mercy, compassion, affection, favour.’ The verb is usually used with the proposition ‘al. The word is normally used in plural form. Then the word has the meaning “to have mercy upon, feel pity to” etc. The terms such as *mrḥmônô* (merciful one), *mlē rahme* (full of mercy), *mrḥmônôit* (mercifully) are derived from the same root. In the Old Testament we can see many references for this. But it would be a mistake to define God’s mercy simply in terms of familial love. Like his faithfulness, his steadfast love, his righteousness, his judgments (Hos. 2:19), God’s mercy refers to his continual regard for the covenant established with his chosen people, Israel.

2.2. Hnôno

The noun hnôno has got the meaning ‘pity, mercy, compassion, favour, grace.’ It is derived from the root *hn* which means ‘to have pity or compassion, to pity, to be gracious.’ According to Saint Jacob of Serugh “Divine Mercy” is the source of divine economy of creation, redemption and salvation. The divine mercy (*hnôno*) is the part of the divine essence. As God is hidden, his mercy is also hidden.

3. Liturgical usage & some prayers of Mercy

I think the Syriac liturgical tradition (both East & West Syriac traditions) very much upholds the theme of “Divine Mercy.” In the West Syriac liturgical tradition one may see the persistent usage of the term rahme especially in its liturgical prayers and Divine Liturgy (*Qurbôno Qadišô*). It is often unobserved that the very beginning of the *Qaumo* prayer starts with begging mercy (rahme) and compassion (*hnôno*). But this essential and key terminological expressions are left out in Malayalam translation.

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3.1. Some Petitions for Mercy

The West Syriac liturgical prayers are replete with begging God’s Mercy. Here I would like to mention the importance of some of familiar prayers extant in our liturgy.

a. Trisagion

We are very much acquainted with the trisagion, the prayer which is recited in most of our prayers and in the Divine Liturgy. Trisagion is the central prayer of the qaumo prayer. “Holy art Thou, Almighty. Holy art Thou, Immortal. Crucified for us, have mercy upon us”

(Qādeeshat Āloho. qādeeshat ḥaylthono. qādeeshat lo mōyūtho. deṣṭlebt ḥlofayn ethraḥam’alayn).

Trisagion or ‘Thrice Holy’ recalls the vision of Prophet Isaiah of the Lord’s throne and the proclamation of the six-winged seraphim (Isaiah 6:1-3). Its liturgical use dates to the apostolic church. In the West Syriac tradition, the Trisagion is addressed only to our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Mor Severus Mooshé Bar Kepho (c. 813–903), bishop of Mosul, comments that it was handed down from Ignatius the Fiery, the third Patriarch of Antioch.

Both Bar Kepho and Mor Dionysius Bar Ṣalibi († 1171), bishop of Amid (Diyarbakir, Turkey), record the mystical tradition that when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus brought down the body of Christ from the cross, they witnessed three angelic choirs singing the first three verses of the Thrice Holy. In response to the singing of the angels, they cried out; “He Who was crucified for us have mercy upon us” (deṣṭlebt ḥlofayn ethraḥam’alayn). Mor Dionysius Bar Ṣalibi also cites Patriarch Mor Severus of Antioch’s last cathedral homily which suggests that the last verse may have been added after the excommunication of Nestorius and that perhaps Patriarch Peter the Fuller (d. 488) introduced it into the singing of the Trisagion.

b. Mōran ethraḥam’alayn / Qurie eleison (Gr.)

is perfectly a Biblical prayer. This is the prayer of two blind men who followed Jesus. They cried loudly and said; “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” (Mat. 9: 27). The blind men did not make request to regain their eyesight,
but they implored for mercy and cried ‘have mercy upon us.’ This was the same prayer which the blind Bartimaeus son of Timaeus made when Jesus was leaving Jericho (Mk. 10:47). The prayer of the tax-collector who came to the temple to pray is also “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). Later these prayers were combined together as the so called “Jesus Prayer.” Qurie eleison, the Greek form of this prayer which is used extensively in our liturgy invites us to beg for mercy of God. In all our litanies and the intercessions (Tûb den) during Divine Liturgy the response is not ‘Lord hear our prayers’ but Qurie eleison, ‘Lord, have mercy on us’ – an entreaty for mercy. Faithful of West Syriac Churches during the Great Lenten season genuflects 40 times reciting this biblical prayer.

c. Psalm 51 (ܡܙܡܘܪܐ ܕܚܡܫܝܢ ܘܚܕ)

The crux of West Syriac liturgical prayers is repentance and imploring mercy. In order to articulate these two themes among the faithful, the holy Fathers of Syriac Churches incorporated the Psalm 51 – the Psalm of repentance in our prayers. All our liturgical prayers begins with the recital of Psalm 51. This Psalm – a classical prayer of repentance that prepares the faithful to beg for mercy and compassion from the Almighty.

In the Eucharistic Liturgy of the West Syriac Church we may find many prayers where the mercy of God the Father is implored. In the Sedro prayer of the preparatory service of the Divine Liturgy we see;

1) “O peaceful, kind and humble God, the lover of mankind, who is please by mercy (rahme) rather than sacrifice, and who loves a contrite heart more than whole burnt offerings…”

2) “If you weigh how much my debts and how much Your Mercy (rahme), Your compassion is heavier than the mountains that are weighed by You.”


After having discussions on some prayers pleading God’s Mercy, now we can see a number of technical phrases coined with the word rahme in the West Syriac liturgical tradition. Some of the phrases are “Door of Mercy” (tar’o d rahme), “Dew of Mercy” (tālo drahme), “Sea of Mercy” (yāmo drahme) and “Wings of Mercy” (kenfe drahme). The phrases such as “Door of Mercy” (tar’o drahme) and “Sea of Mercy” (yāmo drahme) are directly attributed to Jesus Christ. Here I would like to make some terminological clarifications of these technical usages.

3.2. “Door of Mercy” (�ܢܓܐ ܒܬܰܪܥܳܐ ܕܪܰܚܡ)

In many prayers we can see that “open to us the door of your mercy.” In the concluding prayer of evening prayers we recite the familiar prayer:

moran eešu mšîho.... Here the ‘mercy’ of God is compared to a house. The Aramaic term referring to door is ṭra. This can mean ‘gate or door.’ In ancient times the city gate was the seat of administration where the king pronounces his judgment. One of the Hebrew term referring to ‘gate’ is שָׁאָר sha’ar. This may refer to the city gate. Depending upon the size of the city, the city had many gates, but one main gate consists of inner and outer gate. The city gate has got special significance in the life of Israel. The social, administrative, and business interactions took place at the city gate. It is also the place where the kings as well as the elders sat to administer justice. The original meaning of word deleth is ‘door.’ The deleth primarily offers protection from dangers and also from disturbances. The opening of one’s door to a stranger indicates hospitality (Job 31:32).

In the liturgical texts we frequently see the expression “Door of Mercy (ta’ro drahme). Syriac Fathers very meticulously explained this expression of “Door of Mercy” in connection with repentance and absolution of sins. According to the Fathers absolution for sins is received from the “Door of Mercy.” Sinners are now and then told to knock at this ‘door’ and obtain ‘mercy.’ We recite: “Behold, I knock

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at the door of your mercy, that I may receive forgiveness; for the evil one by his craft has kept me from the path of life…”16 (Ramšo on Tuesday).

As far as the Syriac Churches are concerned, the phrase ‘Door of Mercy’ is very familiar one. The monumental inscriptions written in Syriac (or Garshuni) on the top of doors/gates to shed light to this fact. The gates of the churches at north and south and main gate has got the inscriptions:

«ܐ܀ ܡܢ ܡܪܐ ܕܡܠܐ ܪܚܡ ܐܥܘܠ ܚܛܝܐ ܒܥܝ ܪܚܡ ܘܠܓܘ ܡܢܗ ܐܝܬ ܪܚܡ ܗܢܘ ܬܪܥܐ ܕܡܠܐ ܪܚܡ»

a. “This door is the door of mercy, inside which there is mercy. O sinner, Go in and ask mercy from the Lord who is full of Mercy.”
b. “Your door is the door of mercy, Jesus full of mercy. The one who enters (it) carries sins but one who leaves it carries mercy. But if he carries sins does not shed tears, he would not find mercy and forgiveness of sins.”

The first part of the inscription derives from the bo’utho attributed to Balai:

«ܠܘܒܟܐ ܒܶܐ ܘܢܳܦܶܩ ܫܩܺܝܠ ܪܚ ܡܶܐ ܕܥܳܐܶܠ ܛܥܺܝܢ ܚܰܘ ܡܶܐ ܝܶܫܽܘܥ ܡܠܶܰܐ ܪܰܚ ܬܰܪܥܳܟ ܬܰܪܰܥ ܪܰܚ»

“Your Door is door of mercy, Jesus full of mercy; he who enters burdened with sins, goes out loaded with grace”18 (Bo’utho of Balai, Lilyo on Monday, III qaumo).

3.3. “Dew of Mercy” (ܡܶܐ ܛܰܐܠܳ ܕܪܰܚ)

In the prayers we may see the phrase “Dew of Mercy” (tālo drahme). In the prayer of absolution (hûsôyo) we read: “O Lord, grant rest to their souls, spirits and bodies and sprinkle the dew of your mercy (rus tālo drahme) and compassion on their bones…”19

«ܐܢܘ ܡܶܐ ܘܕܰܚܢܳܢܳܐ ܥܰܠ ܓܰܪܡ ܗܽܘܢ. ܘܪܽܘܣ ܛܰܐܠܳ ܕܪܰܚ ܚܳܬܗܽܘܢ ܘܦܰܓܪܰܝ ܫܳܬܗܽܘܢ ܘܪܽܘ ܐܰܢܝܺܚ ܡܳܪܝܳܐ ܐܠܰܳܗܳܐ ܠܢܰܦ»

In one of the liturgical petitions written by Môr Balai we see the phrase (ܡܶܐ ܕܒܽܘܣ) (dew of gladness). He writes, “Sprinkle, Lord, the dew of gladness on the faces of our fathers and brothers, who have rested in your hope.”

«ܠܘܒܟܐ ܠܰܡܶܐ ܕܒܽܘܣ»

(Common *b ’outo* of *mor* Balai recited during the Noon Prayer)\(^{20}\).

The word *tal* is found in the West and South Semitic languages. It has got the meaning “dew” or “light rain.” The root *tll* means “be moist,” “moisten,” “cause dew to fall,” etc. in Palestine it is only the dew which provides a certain amount of moisture for plants during the long, dry summer. The summer dew is necessary for life as the winter rain. Dew comes from heaven and it usually falls on night (Nu. 11:9; Jgs. 6:36-40) and vanishes quickly in the morning.

According to the Old Testament understanding, the Jews believed that dew is a gift of Yahweh. In the Ugaritic religion they believed dew as the gift of Ba’al. Yahweh is the giver of fertility and without dew there is no fertility; i.e., dew is linked indissolubly with creation, with fertility and God’s blessings.\(^{21}\) In figurative language of the Old Testament, dew has got two different usages namely; i) it serve as meteorological phenomenon, ii) as a metaphor to express Yahweh’s blessings. In the former sense the imagery is negative, while in the latter it is positive. Prophet Hosea makes frequent use of dew in his imagery both positively and negatively. He describes the covenant love of is similar to ‘dew.’ “Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early” (Hos. 6:4). “Therefore they shall be like the morning mist or like the dew that goes away early” (Hos. 13:3). Hosea again says if the people will return to him, Yahweh will be a dew to Israel. “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily…” (Hos. 16:4, 5).

Dew is considered as a phenomenon which provides refreshment in the burning heat. “A mist quickly heals all things; the falling dew gives refreshment from the heat” (Sir. 43:22). In the book of Daniel we see that when Azariah and his companions were put into fire, the angel of Lord came down and drove the fiery flame out of the furnace as though a moist wind were whistling through it (Cf. Dan: 3:49). The present prayer, the dew refers to something that provide refreshment. In the prayer we recite, “Be to me a haven and by you I shall be delivered from the pit of fire; let not the flames attack me and burn my limbs; with that dew of furnace of Hananiah and his companions sprinkle my face and have mercy upon me.”\(^{22}\)

Prophet Isaiah speaks about the resurrection of the dead. He says, “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will gave birth to those long dead” (Is.


26:19). This verse try to explain that Yahweh by his miracle working dew brings the long dead ones to life. He brings to life those who are sleeping in the shades of the underworld. From the above discussions we can see that the ‘dew of mercy’ of Lord enlivens and refreshes the dead ones.

3.4. “Sea of Mercy” (شَكْرُ كَيْلَام)

The Syriac word stands for sea is yāmo. Sea can be considered as a place where one can wash his/her debts. Sea stands for the broadness. In one of the hymns attributed to sun in ancient Mesopotamia we see, “Your divinity is like distant heavens, awesome as the broad sea.” The sea plays a crucial role in the narratives describing the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. In the narrative of ‘Song of the Sea’ (Ex. 15:1-18), sea appears as an instrument in the hands of Yahweh.23

We can see that Saint Ephrem24 the Syrian clearly asserts that Christ is the ‘Sea of Mercy.’ In his liturgical supplication we see that; “You are the Sea of Mercy and our inequity is a drop of mud; one drop cannot disturb a great sea.”25

Saint Jacob of Serugh26 calls Jesus Christ, “the Sea.” He depicts Christ as Sea out of the conviction that Christ is the source, meaning, efficacy and the final goal of all salvific symbols of both Nature and the Scripture.27 He calls Jesus, “the Great Sea” (yāmo rābo) in his homily ‘on the Resurrection of our Lord’ we read: “O Great Sea, pour out into me the homily of your kindness (rahme)”28 (Homily on the Resurrection of Our Lord, 3).


24 St. Ephrem the Syrian (Mor Ephrem Suryōyo) who is known as the ‘Harp of the Holy Spirit’ (kēnōro drūho qādīšo) was a native of Nisibis (today’s Nusaybin) in Turkey. He was born c. 306, probably of Christian parents. He spent most of his life in Nisibis where he was ordained a deacon before 338. Famous for both learning and holiness he died in 373. St. Ephrem is called as ‘the prince of monks.’ He remained a deacon, a servant in his liturgical ministry of the Church throughout his life.


26 Jacob of Serugh (450–521) the finest Syriac poet after Saint Ephrem the Syrian († 373), was born in Kurtam (now known as ‘Kurtak’), a town near Mesopotamia around 451 AD.


In one of the qōle we see the penitent is gazing to Christ, the Sea of mercies. We recite: “On the sea of your mercies I gaze, God, the only Son, because my offences are many and my faults have gained strength…”29

(Soutoro on Monday). In contrast to Jesus, the ‘Sea of Mercy’ the faithful’s sin is compared to ‘sea.’ We recite the prayer: “I sink in the multitude of sins as in a sea…”30 (Sapro on Thursday, eniono).

3.5. “Wings of Mercy” (ܚܳܐܪ ܐ ܕܪܰܚ)

The Syriac term referring to wing is kenfo. The word is used metaphorically in the sense of ‘covering, overshadowing, protection.’31 Most of the references of wings are figuratively used to denote God. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is twice described in terms of God bearing the people upon eagle’s wing. In Exodus 19:4 we read, “You have seen that what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself.” God’s sheltering under his wings is often compared as a hen does her chicks. “May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:12).

In Psalms we can see statement in which God’s steadfast love is related to the statement of an intent to seek shelter under wings. “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Ps. 36:7). ‘To take refuge in the shadow of God’s wing’ and ‘to abide in the shadow of the Almighty’ (Ps. 91:1) refers to assurance of God’s protection. In Malachi 3:20, we read “But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings.” The winged sun-disk was a common conception in the ancient near east world and was used as a manifestation of deity’s protection.32 “Sun of Righteousness” is considered as a prediction of Christ. He alone is the true manifestation of God’s benevolence and he comes to heal those who cast away their pride through fear of God. Thus we can see that wings offer deliverance and security.

The Hebrew term ‘kānāp’ refers to the corners of typical rectangular biblical garment. The Israelites are to wear bluish-white tassels on the four corners of their outer garment. “Speak to the Israelites and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner” (Num. 15:38). The interpretation of these fringes are to remind Israel about Yahweh’s commandments. “You have fringe so that, when you see it you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them” (Num. 15:39). From this we can also infer that ‘wings of mercy’ kenfe drahme can also mean ‘the garment of mercy.’ In the evening prayers on Tuesday, we beseech: “Protect us, Lord beneath the wings of your mercy from all harm that we may not be mocked by Satan and that the evil one may not deride us; we are your image and likeness, protect us, Lord of all, by night and by day”\(^{33}\) (Ramšo on Tuesday, II qōlo of repentance).

3.6. God – the one ‘Full of Mercy’ (.Meshânutha)

God – the one ‘Full of Mercy’ is a dominant theme running in all our prayers. In the common b’outo of Mor Balai at ninth hour we recite “Renew, Full of Mercy (mle rahme), your creatures by the resurrection.”\(^{34}\)

« ܢܳܠܰܫܰܘܒܩܳܢ ܚܰܝܒ, ܕܝܳܕܥܰܝܢܰܢ ܡܳܪܝ ܕܰܚܛܰܝܰܢܰܢ. ܒܬܰܪܥܳܐ ܕܪܰܚ ܡܶܐ. ܥܢܺܝ ܠܰܚܰܛܰܝ ܐܠܰܳܗܰܢ ܣܰܓܺܝ ܪܰܚ ܐ. ܡܶܢ ܒܶܝܬ ܓܰܙܳܟ ܥܬܰܝܪܳܐ ܫܽܘܒܩܳܢ ܚܰܘܒ ܕܐܪܰܚ ܘܕܩܳܪܶܝܰܢ ܠܳܟ. ܕܝܳܕܥܰܝܰܢ ܡܳܪܰܝ ܕܰܚܰܛܰܝܰܢܰܢ. ܐܰܣܪܰܪܰܚ ܐܕܩܰܪܶܝܰܢ ܠܳܟ. ܐܰܣܪܰܪܰܚ ܐܰܬܳܐ ܢܳܩܫܰܝܰܢ. ܐܰ ܕܩܳܪܶܝܰܢ ܠܳܟ. ܕܝܳܕܥܰܝܰܢ ܡܳܪܰܝ ܕܰܚܰܛܰܰܢܰܢ. ܒܬܰܪܥܳܐ ܕܪܰܚ ܡܶܐ. ܒܪܺܝܬܳܟ ܒܢܽܘܚܳܡܳܐ. ܠܥܰܒܕ ܚܰܕܰܬ ܡܠܶ ܪܰܚ ܩܟܕܰܫܒܘ ܥܰܠ ܣܰܒܪܳܟ܀»

In some prayers we see God the one “Rich in Mercy.” “Our God, rich in mercy, answer sinners, who call upon you, because we know, Lord, that we have sinned; we knock at the door of mercy, bring forth pardon of offences for us from your rich treasure-house.”\(^{35}\)

« ܕܠܰܢ ܫܽܘܒܩܳܢ ܚܰܘܒ ܩܟܕܰܫܒܘ ܥܰܠ ܣܰܒܪܳܟ ܒܪܺܝܬܳܟ ܒܢܽܘܚܳܡܳܐ. ܠܥܰܒܕ ܚܰﺩܬ ܡܠܐܶ ܪܰܚ ܐ. ܡܶܢ ܒܶܝܬ ܓܰܙܳܟ ܥܬܰܝܪܳܐ ܫܽܘܒܩܳܢ ܚܰܘܒ ܕܐܪܰܚ ܘܕܩܳܪܶܝܰܢ ܠܳܟ. ܕܝܳܕܥܰܝܰܢ ܡܳܪܰܝ ܕܰܚܰܛܰܝܰܢܰܢ. ܐܰܣܪܰܡ ܐܕܩܰܪܶܝܰܢ ܐ. ܕܩܰܪܶܝܰܢ ܠܳܟ. ܕܩܰܪܶܝܰܢ ܡܳܪܰܝ ܕܰܚܰܛܰܰܢܰܢ. ܒܬܰܪܥܳܐ ܕܪܰܚ ܡܶܐ. ܒܪܺܝܬܳܟ ܒܸܢܽܘܗܰܫܸܡܸܐ ܠܥܰܒܕ ܚܰܕܬ ܡܠܶ ܪܰܚ»

(Sapro on Thursday, II qōlo of repentance).


\(^{34}\) Awsâr Slâwoto. 2006. The Book of Common Prayer, 175.

3.7. Jesus – the Treasure House of Mercy (ܡܳܪܰܢ ܝܶܫܽܘܥ ܡܫܺܝܚܳܐ ܒܶܝܬ ܓܰܓܳܐ ܕܪܰܚܡ)

Christ the Lord of all, is called as the treasure house of mercy. In one of Sedro of Qurbono we pray that “Our Lord Jesus Christ, enrich us from your treasure house full of mercy and compassion.”

This prayer has its roots on epistle of Saint Paul to Corinthians: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). The treasury (bet gâzo) is the one which never fails. And Christ is the rich one who never grow poor. Christ is the manifest source of divine mercy that is abundant and inexhaustible. In our prayers it is very evident: “At your door, Lord, I knock, and from your treasure-house I beg mercy; I am a sinner for years have departed from your way; grant me to confess my sins and be free from them and live in your grace.”

(Sapro on Thursday, I qôlo of repentance).

Conclusion

In this article I was making a humble effort to explain the nuance of some of prayers in West Syriac tradition which expound the theme on ‘Divine Mercy.’ Through the prayers we fix our gaze on our God. God too fixes his gaze upon us during prayers. Pope Francis says: “From all eternity man will always be under the merciful gaze of the Father” (Misericordiae Vultus, 13). Through our prayers let us fix our gaze on God the Father and beg ‘mercy’ and ‘compassion’ (rahme wahnôno) from the Merciful Lord (moryo mrahmôno)

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