

# **CHURCH THE BRIDE AND CHRIST THE BRIDEGROOM**

**Naiju Jose Kalambukattu, CMI<sup>♦</sup>**

*Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome*

## **Abstract**

The nature and significance of the Church, and her relation with Christ have been expounded through various images and models. The East Syriac Fathers explicate the profound relation and intimate union between the Church and Christ by the image of the bride and bridegroom. As a pledge of His love for the bride and as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, Christ has hallowed and adorned her with His body and blood as spiritual food and drink. The Church the bride born from the side of Christ the bridegroom has the same mission of Christ in the world. How genuine is she in imbibing and interiorizing the vision and accomplishing and achieving the mission of her Groom — is the query.

**Keywords:** Bridegroom and Bride, Bride-Price, East Syriac Tradition, Heavenly Banquet, Heavenly Bridal Chamber, Mystery of Christ, Symbolism of Marriage, Type and Anti-type

## **1. Introduction**

There have always been attempts to delineate the nature and identity of the Church through various images and models. These models, as Hahnenberg points out, “emerge, have influence, and then fade or are subsumed into new models or perspectives.”<sup>1</sup> The

---

<sup>♦</sup>**Fr Naiju Kalambukattu** is a doctoral student at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome. He holds an LTh from DVK, Bangalore and a post-graduate degree in English from Garhwal University. He has taught Liturgy in Samanvaya Theological College, Bhopal. His publications include *Apostolic Roots of Syro-Malabar Liturgy*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2011, and articles and book reviews in *Asian Horizons*, *Christian Orient*, *Ephrem's Theological Journal*, *Journal of St. Thomas Christians*, *Journal of Dharma*, *In Christo*, *Sangam Darshan*, and in edited works. Email: kalambukattunaiju@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>E.P. Hahnenberg, “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005) 5.

Second/New Testament offers multiple images of the Christian community, as a flock, a field, a temple, a holy priesthood, God's people, the bride and body of Christ, etc. In line with the scriptural understanding, the East Syriac tradition makes use of many types, symbols and metaphors to express different shades of meaning and significance of the Church.<sup>2</sup> The East Syriac Fathers describe the Church as the people of God,<sup>3</sup> the body of Christ,<sup>4</sup> the great Christian community instituted by Christ in place of the synagogue, the re-found paradise, the holy and immaculate spouse of Christ,<sup>5</sup> a pilgrim, way and voyage, bride and mother, true vineyard and flock of Christ.<sup>6</sup> *Liber Graduum* describes the Church as a nurse and a

---

<sup>2</sup>The Syriac tradition understands the Church as 'the Church of the Nations,' 'the body of Christ,' 'Church as Rock,' Church of Truth, etc. S.J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1983, 79-87. The early Syriac Fathers, while theologizing, do not give formal treatments in clear propositions, but they try to express the theme in symbolic and figurative ways. They express the theology in hortatory or lyrical passages through typological comparisons and symbolic titles. R.J. Murray, "The Rock and the House on the Rock: A Chapter in the Ecclesiological Symbolism of Aphraates and Ephrem," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 30, 2 (1964) 315-316.

<sup>3</sup>Aphrahat states, "The people (Israel) has been stripped of favour (or grace) and from Jesus the blessing has flowed to the peoples" (*Demonstrations* 23.47). Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, Parisot, ed., in R. Graffin, ed., *Patrologia Syriaca*, Tomus Secundus, Parisiis: Firmin-Didotet Socii, 1907, 92; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, London-New York: T&T Clark International, 2004, 58. Ephrem also comments, "In thy seed (which is Christ) all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed." Ephrem, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, R.M. Tonneau, ed., CSCO 152, Syr. 71, Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955, 84; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 45.

<sup>4</sup>Aphrahat says, "For we are the Body of Christ and members of his members. Whoever hates one of Christ's members will be cut off from the whole Body" (*Dem* 2.88). Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, Parisot, ed., in R. Graffin, ed., *Patrologia Syriaca*, Tomus Primus, Parisiis 1894, 88; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 87. Referring to the unity of the Church in Ephrem, Murray expounds, "the Unity of the Mystical Body is founded on our natural human solidarity." R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 88. Theodore of Mopsuestia develops the theme of the mystical body of Christ and says, "Indeed all of us are one body of Christ our Lord (1 Cor 12:27) and all of us are members one of another (Eph 4:25), and the priest only fills the role of a member that is higher than the other members of the body, such as the eye or the tongue." Theodore further clarifies, "All of us ought to be one body of Christ our Lord, to possess towards one another the harmony which is found between the members of one body." Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, in A. Mingana, ed. & trans., WS, VI, Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1933, 228, 230.

<sup>5</sup>G. Saber, *La Théologie Baptismale de Saint Ephrem: Essai de Théologie Historique*, Kaslik: Bibliothèque de l'université Saint-Esprit, 1974, 51.

<sup>6</sup>J. Naduvilezhnam, "Ecclesiological Perspectives of St. Ephrem of Nisibis," *Christian Orient* 22, 1 (March 2001) 3-9.

mother.<sup>7</sup> Based on the East Syriac liturgical tradition, Yousif presents Church as bride, mother who communicates life, guide to salvation, and community of worshippers.<sup>8</sup>

Though each type, image, metaphor or model provides new views and insights into the reality of the Church, none of them expresses completely what the Church is. Each type conveys something about the Church and therefore an attempt to integrate all the various insights offered by this plurality of images offers a synthetic vision of the Church.<sup>9</sup> The profound and intimate relationship between Christ and the Church is conveyed through the symbols of marriage. This article is an attempt to understand and unravel the intimate and indissoluble relation between Christ and the Church as expressed in the image of the Church as the bride of Christ, the bridegroom.

## 2. Christ and Church: Bridegroom and Bride

The term bride of Christ expresses the relation between Christ and the Church more profoundly. The Second/New Testament presents Christ as the bridegroom (Mt 9:15) and his coming as a wedding feast (Mt 22:10; 25:1-13). The bridegroom, a common title of Christ, is derived from Jn 3:29 and the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-13).<sup>10</sup> John the Baptist also identified Christ as the bridegroom (Jn 3:29). The right preparation for the wedding feast is the faithful obedience to the bridegroom (Rev 19:7-9).

The ascetics of primitive Syriac tradition proclaimed their passionate love and devotion to Christ in the favourite title, bridegroom.<sup>11</sup> As Murray states "Syriac Christianity shows a uniquely luxuriant proliferation of names and epithets applied to Christ."<sup>12</sup> St. Paul,

---

<sup>7</sup>"The blessed nurse, which every day bears and brings up fair wards and sends them to that great Church on high... Now this Church, with its altar and baptism, bears mankind like children; they suck (her) milk, till they are weaned" (*Liber Graduum* 12.2). M. Kmosko, ed., trans., *Liber Graduum*, in R. Graffin, ed., *Patrologia Syriaca* III, Parisii: Firmin-Didotet Socii, 1926, 288-292; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 142.

<sup>8</sup>P. Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality: Liturgical Ecclesial and Theological Dimensions," in A. Thottakara, ed., *East Syrian Spirituality*, Rome-Bangalore, Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies & Dharmaram Publications, 1990, 32-36.

<sup>9</sup>E.P. Hahnenberg, "The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology," 4.

<sup>10</sup>S.P. Brock, "The Bridal Chamber of Light: A Distinctive Feature of the Syriac Liturgical Tradition," *The Harp* 18 (2005) 181; "Divine Titles and Epithets in Syriac Writings: Some Approaches," *Parole de l'Orient* 38 (2013) 43.

<sup>11</sup>R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 132.

<sup>12</sup>R. Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6-7 (1975-1976) 10.

referring to matrimonial life, writes, "This is great mystery, I speak in reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:32). The Lord takes the Church as his wife, hands himself over to her, purifies her so as to make her holy and without blemish (Eph 5:25-27). During the liturgical season of the Dedication of the Church in the Syro-Malabar tradition, the community constantly prays for the protection of the Church, the bride of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

The Church is the mother, daughter and bride.<sup>14</sup> The images of the Church as mother, daughter and bride have basis on the nuptial imagery and the symbol of marriage between Yahweh and his people in the First/Old Testament. The Israel turned to be unfaithful and adulterous, and cheated her bridegroom and God. But the Church is the real and the chosen bride who saves her children and thus becomes the mother of all the faithful. She continues and fulfils the salvific works of her bridegroom through the celebration of the *Raze* or the sacraments. Christ loved the Church (Eph 5:25) and offered Himself for her (Eph 5:27) and thus He manifested the love and unity, which are to be fostered in the Church.

The bridegroom adorns the bride with celestial and spiritual beauty. While explaining the intimate relationship between Christ and the faithful, the author of the *Odes of Solomon*, hires the nuptial imagery (*Odes 3, 7*).<sup>15</sup> The *Acts of Judas Thomas* employs the nuptial imagery to speak of the union of Christ with the Church. It describes the magnificent beauty of the Church, the bride, "My Church is the daughter of light; the splendor of kings is of hers. Charming and winsome is her aspect, fair and adorned with every good work. Her garments are like flowers, whose smell is fragrant and pleasant."<sup>16</sup> The *Didascalia* uses the nuptial imagery of the adorned bride to speak of the crowned Church.<sup>17</sup> It expresses the grandeur of her beauty. Ephrem also recounts the beauty of the Church, "The Church reveals her comeliness, in the open her beauty is praised; there is no blemish in her that she must hide and no fault that she must veil. For her

---

<sup>13</sup>S.M.B.C., *Yamaparathanakal*, Changanacherry: S.M.B.C. Committee for Divine Office, 1986, 560.

<sup>14</sup>*Yamaparathanakal*, 560.

<sup>15</sup>J.H. Charlesworth, ed., & trans., *The Odes of Solomon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, 19, 35.

<sup>16</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, sec. rev. edn., Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003, 28; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 133.

<sup>17</sup>While exhorting the people *Didascalia* says, "You are... the great Church, the bride adorned for the Lord God." A. Vööbus, *Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, CSCO 402, Scr. Syr. Tom. 176, Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1979, 99.

teaching is open as the light; blessed be he who has illumined her with his truth.”<sup>18</sup> Ephrem sings the glories of the Church the bride, “Blessed are you, bride and crowned one to who came the Bridegroom whom Zion hated.”<sup>19</sup> The crowning<sup>20</sup> evokes and echoes the parallel of the Church as bride. Theodore of Mopsuestia regarded the conjugal communion as the symbol of a supernatural mystery, the union of Christ with the Church.<sup>21</sup> Narsai emphasizes the exigency of the presence of a priest for the celebration of the mystery of the marriage.<sup>22</sup> For the Anonymous Author, the marriage of Christ and the Church is the authentic and original one, and of a man and a woman is its image.<sup>23</sup>

The life giving Spirit dwells in the Church and makes her holy. Expounding and citing Gueranger’s teachings, Cuthbert Johnson says that the Church, through the action of the Holy Spirit, is the bride of Christ.<sup>24</sup> The mystery of Christ and his Church revolves around the symbolism of marriage between Christ the bridegroom and the Church his bride. The concept of the Church as bride in the East Syriac tradition is very dynamic and it has a close relation to the sacraments of initiation and marriage.<sup>25</sup> Christ entrusted the

---

<sup>18</sup>Ephrem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen contra Haereses*, E. Beck, ed., CSCO 169, 170, Syr. 76, 77, Louvain: Le Durbecq, 1957, 87/84; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 142.

<sup>19</sup>Ephrem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnende Virginitate*, E. Beck, ed., CSCO 223, 224, Scr. Syr. Tom., 94, 95, Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1962, 64/60-61; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 140.

<sup>20</sup>The Crowning signifies the mystical approach in marriage, the special grace of the Holy Spirit received by the couple, the glory and honour with which God crowns His people, participation in the kingship of Christ, the bride and groom becoming the “king and queen” of their own “kingdom,” holy priesthood, martyrdom and victory over death. J. Kannanthanam, “‘Kulala’ (Crowning) in the East Syrian Tradition,” *The Harp* 23 (2008) 281-290. See for the crowning ceremony in Byzantine rite, D. Gelsi, “Punti di riflessione sull’ufficio Bizantino per la ‘Incoronazione’ degli Sposi,” in G. Farnedi, ed., *La celebrazione Cristiana del Matrimonio: Simboli e Testi*, Roma: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1986, 292-296.

<sup>21</sup>Theodore Of Mopsuestia, *In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, I, H.B. Swete, ed., Cambridge: University Press, 1880, 183-187.

<sup>22</sup>Narsai, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, R.H. Connolly, trans., *Texts and Studies* 8, Eugene, Oregon: Wipt and Stock Publishers, 2004, 1909, 21.

<sup>23</sup>*Anonymi Auctoris Exposition Officiorum Ecclesiae Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta, II, accredit Abrahae Bar Lipheh interpretatio officiorum*, R.H. Connolly, ed., & trans., CSCO 72-76, Scr. Syr. Tom. 92, Parisiis: Gabalda, 1915, 156.

<sup>24</sup>C. Johnson, *Prosper Gueranger (1805-1875) A Liturgical Theologian: An Introduction to His Liturgical Writings and Work*, Roma: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1984, 381.

<sup>25</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ: A Historical, Analytical and Theological Study of the Season of the Consecration of the Church in the East Syrian Tradition towards a*

incorruptible signs, i.e., the Raze or the sacraments to her.<sup>26</sup> According to Haering, "The sacraments are Christ's wedding gift to His Bride, the Church. In the liturgy the Church experiences that she is the beloved Bride of Christ and her entire concern is to repay adoringly her Lord's love."<sup>27</sup> As the Church is betrothed to Christ, the Christian soul is betrothed to Christ in baptism.<sup>28</sup> In the East Syriac tradition the mystery of marriage is the symbol of Christ's love for the Church.<sup>29</sup> As Beggiani suggests, the Church as the bride of Christ becomes the type of the sacrament of Christian marriage.<sup>30</sup> Arangassery states, "Through the nuptial benediction by the priest, the couples are made to symbolize the great Mystery of the union of Christ and the Church."<sup>31</sup> For Yousif, "Marriage is not merely a marital relationship between husband and wife, but a realization of the link, spousal and everlasting, between Christ and the Church. It is not that Christ and the Church are the symbols of the Christian marriage but on the contrary, marriage between Christians is an image of Christ and the Church."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the one who is

---

*Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation), Rome: Pontificio Athenaeum Anselmianum, 1987, 286. According to Spidlik the many oriental customs of engagement and marriage are played upon the theme of the Church as the spouse of Christ. T. Spidlik, "Some Aspects of Syrian Spirituality," in C. Payngot, ed., *Homage to Mar Cariattil: Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist*, Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1987, 69.

<sup>26</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 212; L. Arangassery, "Sacramentality (Razanayuta) of the Church in the East Syriac Tradition," *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 13, 1 (March 2009) 21.

<sup>27</sup>B. Haering, "Liturgical Piety and Christian Perfection," *Worship* 34, 9 (October 1960) 531.

<sup>28</sup>P. Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality," 76. Baptism is incorporation in Christ and an assurance of the participation in the Kingdom. Cf. G. Saber, *La Théologie Baptismale de Saint Ephrem*, 157.

<sup>29</sup>P. Maniyattu, "Inculturation of the East Syrian Liturgy of Marriage by the St. Thomas Christians in India," in S.H. Teeples - B. Groen - S. Alexopoulos, ed., *Studies on the Liturgies of the Christian East*, Leuven-Paris-Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013, 173.

<sup>30</sup>S.J. Beggiani, "The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 555.

<sup>31</sup>L. Arangassery, "Sacramentality (Razanayuta) of the Church in the East Syriac tradition," 27. Cf. also P. Verghese, "Relation between Baptism, 'Confirmation' and the Eucharist in the Syrian Orthodox Church," *Studia Liturgica* 4, 2 (1965) 82-83.

<sup>32</sup>P. Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality," 37-38. Yousif presents that the ideal marriage is that of Christ and the Church and the Christian marriage acquires its importance from the union of Christ and the Church. Therefore, the rite emphasizes the union of spouses, after the model of Christ and the Church. P. Yousif, "La celebrazione du mariage dans le rite Chaldeen," in G. Farnedi, ed., *La celebrazione Cristiana del Matrimonio: Simboli e Testi*, Roma: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1986, 257-258. See for the details of Syro-Malabar marriage, C. Payngot,

betrothed to Christ in baptism is called also to witness to the union of Christ in the marriage.

The reflections of Jacob of Serugh on Ephesians chapter 5 express a clear and comprehensive articulation of type and antitype, and foreshadowing and reality. Jacob of Serugh sees in every marriage of man and woman, a reflection of the mystery of the wedding of the Church to Christ. However, this mystery was not unveiled until the crucifixion and the subsequent teaching of St Paul. Jacob of Serugh in his *Homily on the Veil of Moses* explains:

The hidden Father betrothed a bride to his only-begotten having instructed her through prophecy in a symbolic way.

In his love he built a great palace for the bride of light and depicted the bridegroom in various ways in her royal home.

Moses entered in and, like a skilled artist, delineated the bridegroom and the bride, and then covered the great picture with a veil.

He put in his writings that 'a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, so that the two of them might be one completely'...

He covered up his words by various means, hiding them from outsiders.

And so he painted a picture inside the chamber of the royal bridegroom; he called them 'man and woman', although he knew the truth, that the one was Christ and the other the Church, both being veiled...

After the wedding feast [that is, the redemptive mysteries] Paul entered in and beheld the veil lying there; he seized and removed it from the fair couple ... and began to show what the covered picture was: in those called man and wife in the prophetic writings I recognize Christ and his Church, the two being one.<sup>33</sup>

The Syro-Malabar *Qurbana* has the image of the Church as the bride of Christ in the *slotha* before the *Laku Mara*, "crowned like a spouse and full of every help and blessing."<sup>34</sup> The *slotha* before the *Laku Mara* on Sundays and feast days says,

When the sweet fragrance of your love, O Lord, our God, breathes over us and our souls are enlightened with the knowledge of your truth, may we

---

"The Syro-Malabar Marriage," in G. Farnedi, ed., *La celebrazione Cristiana del Matrimonio: Simboli e Testi*, 261-282.

<sup>33</sup>Cited in S.P. Brock, "Jacob of Serugh on the Veil of Moses," *Sobornost* 3, 1 (1981) 74-75.

<sup>34</sup>S.M.B.C., *The Syro-Malabar Qurbana: The Order of Raza*, Trivandrum: San Jose Press, 1989, 11; *Taksa d'Raze: Ordo Mysteriorum cum Prima Sanctificatione Id est sanctificatione Beatorum Apostolorum Mar (Domini) Addai et Mar (Domini) Mari Praeceptorum Orientis iuxta Usus Ecclesiae Syrorum Orientalium Malabaribus*, Editio Typica, Rome, 2003, 16; S. Athappilly, *Theology in India. Essays on Christ, Church and Eucharist*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2005, 113.

be found worthy to receive from heaven the manifestation of your beloved Son, and to thank you and praise you unceasingly in your church, crowned like a spouse and full of every help and blessing, for you are the Lord and Creator of all, for ever.<sup>35</sup>

The *slotha* before *Laku Mara* on *Dukrana* and ferial days also retains Church as the bride, "For every help and grace that you have given us, for which we can never repay you enough, may we thank you and glorify you unceasingly in your church, crowned like a spouse and full of all help and blessing, for you are the Lord and creator of all, for ever."<sup>36</sup> The Church as a bride is adorned with the crown, vestments and ornaments, and is united to the heavenly spouse and Lord; and this union and love are the cause and source of her infinite and unending joy.<sup>37</sup> The understanding of Christ as the bridegroom and Church as the bride is again reflected in the prayer of the celebrant just before receiving the sacred blood from the chalice, "For the guests at your banquet, heavenly bridegroom, you have prepared the chalice of your precious Blood."<sup>38</sup>

### 3. Birth of the Bride on the Cross

The evangelist reports that there came forth blood and water from the side of Jesus on the Cross (Jn 19:34). This single verse that delineates the piercing of Christ's side on the Cross serves as the centre point for the rich and elaborate web of typological exegesis in early Syriac poetry.<sup>39</sup> The blood and water, the symbols of the Eucharist and baptism, issued from His side.<sup>40</sup> The blood and water from the side of Christ represent the mysteries of initiation by which the members are incorporated and nourished in the Church.<sup>41</sup> Brock points out Jacob of Serugh's description of the baptismal water that issues from the side of Christ in terms of a 'fountain', a 'well', or

---

<sup>35</sup>*The Order of Raze*, 11; *Taksa d'Raze*, 16; P. Kalluveetil, *Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Qurbana: Bible Darsanangal*, Kakkanad: Liturgical Research Centre Publications, 2004, 29.

<sup>36</sup>*The Order of Raze*, 11; *Taksa d'Raze*, 17.

<sup>37</sup>P. Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality," 33.

<sup>38</sup>*The Order of Raze*, 54; *Taksa d'Raze*, 49.

<sup>39</sup>S.P. Brock, "'The Wedding Feast of Blood on Golgotha' an Unusual Aspect of John 19:34 in Syriac Tradition," *The Harp* 6, 2 (November 1993) 121.

<sup>40</sup>Brock holds that the issuing of blood and water from the side of Christ looks forward to the mysteries of the Church, the Eucharist and Baptism. S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992, 80-81. The reversed order, 'water and blood' is more suitable for the sequence 'Baptism and Eucharist'. S.P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (1978), 330.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. S.J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 79.



'rivers', in particular the river of paradise dividing into four and made available to the four corners of the world.<sup>42</sup>

The Church comes into being from the side of Christ and then reaches out to the world.<sup>43</sup> As Eve was formed from the side of Adam, Christ, from His side, formed the Church.<sup>44</sup> Beggiani describes, "The Cross is the site of the birth of the Church as the Bride of Christ. The reality of the Church in turn becomes the type of the sacrament of Christian marriage."<sup>45</sup> According to Brock, it is Jacob of Serugh who developed the bridal imagery in a vivid and dramatic way.<sup>46</sup> Jacob of Saroug compares the birth of the Church to that of Eve. He asserts:

The Bride-groom's side has been pierced, and from it the Bride has come forth, fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve. For from the beginning God knew and depicted Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his only-begotten; He slept on the cross as Adam had slept his deep sleep, his side was pierced and from it there came forth the Daughter of light — water and blood as the image of divine children to be heirs to the Father who love his Only-begotten. The stillness of the sleep of death fell upon him on the cross and from him came forth the Mother who gives birth to all spiritual beings.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. Betrothal

God the Father, from eternity, chose the Church as the bride to Christ, his beloved Son. At the manifestation, during the baptism at river Jordan, Christ betrothed the Church as his bride. The baptism of Christ is the betrothal of Christ and the Church.<sup>48</sup> Through his washing in the baptismal waters he purified and washed her filth and sinfulness away, freed from the slavery of Satan<sup>49</sup> and gave her the pledge of new life. Through the Holy Spirit and by the anointing of the oil he made her sweet and fragrant. Christ, after having purified

---

<sup>42</sup>S.P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," 330.

<sup>43</sup>E.J. Kilmartin, "When is Marriage a Sacrament?" *Theological Studies* 34, 2 (1973) 278.

<sup>44</sup>John Chrysostom, "A Newly Found Easter Homily by St. John Chrysostom," *Worship* 34, 5 (April 1960) 244-245; S.P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," 332.

<sup>45</sup>S.J. Beggiani, "The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology," 555.

<sup>46</sup>S.P. Brock, "Divine Titles and Epithets in Syriac Writings: Some Approaches," *Parole de l'Orient* 38 (2013) 43.

<sup>47</sup>Cited in S.P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7, 6 (1978) 463-465.

<sup>48</sup>S.P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," 328.

<sup>49</sup>P. Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality," 32.

and sanctified the Church, adorned her with every glory, splendour and beauty, and betrothed her to himself in Jordan.<sup>50</sup> Hence the Church is invited to participate in the beauty of Christ. The mystery of baptism is the betrothal of the soul to Christ.<sup>51</sup> Brock observes that for the Syriac authors

the twin fountain heads of Christian baptism are provided by Christ's own baptism and his pierced side on the cross: these two salvific events, separate in historical time, come together as a single unit in sacred time. Furthermore, when speaking in universal terms, it is the Church who is the Bride whose betrothal takes place at Christ's baptism and crucifixion, while at each Christian baptism it is the individual member of the Church who in turn becomes Christ's particular 'bride'.<sup>52</sup>

Moolan, while describing the powers of the Eucharist says that just as the blood and water from the side of Christ the Groom purified the Church, His bride, so the Eucharistic body and blood make the baptized ones the perfect bride to the Groom healing her from all the scars of sin.<sup>53</sup>

The marriages of the old dispensation were types of the marriage of Christ with the Church.<sup>54</sup> Ephrem points out that the First/Old Testament types like the marriages of Eleazer (Issac) with Rebecca, Jacob with Rachel and Moses with Zipporah are fulfilled in Christ. Ephrem says, "All these were types of our Lord who espoused his Church at his baptism in the Jordan."<sup>55</sup> For the Syriac writers, the Church is the bride of Christ betrothed at the Jordan.<sup>56</sup> "The baptism of Christ in the Jordan is the betrothal of the Church."<sup>57</sup> According to Brock, "At Christ's baptism John the Baptist is described as having betrothed the Church as the Bride of Christ. Thus at Christ's baptism a Bridal Chamber is prepared for the Church."<sup>58</sup> The liturgical tradition speaks from the first moment of the betrothal of the Church

---

<sup>50</sup>J. Vellian, "The Church as Bride in the East Syrian Liturgy," *Studia Liturgica* 2, 1 (1978) 61; *Yamaparathanakal*, 525; J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 328.

<sup>51</sup>S.P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," 466.

<sup>52</sup>S.P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," 466.

<sup>53</sup>J. Moolan, "Structure and Theology of East Syrian Baptism," *Malabar Theological Review* 9, 2 (2014) 112.

<sup>54</sup>S.J. Beggiani, "The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology," 557.

<sup>55</sup>Ephrem, *Commentaire de L'Evangile Concordant Version Armenienne*, L. Leloir, ed. & trans., CSCO 137/145, Scr. Armeniaci 1/2, Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1953-54, 45; R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 135.

<sup>56</sup>S.J. Beggiani, "The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology," 555.

<sup>57</sup>S.J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 82.

<sup>58</sup>S.P. Brock, "The Bridal Chamber of Light," 186.

to her Bridegroom, which takes place at the river Jordan during the baptism of Jesus,<sup>59</sup> to the last moment of the ceremony of marriage, the marriage-banquet and the living together of the couple, together with the children born of the Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

## 5. Wedding

Christ, the true bridegroom made the Church his partner by his death on the Cross. As Beggiani testifies, although for the Syriac writers, the Church is the bride of Christ betrothed at the Jordan, she is wedded to him on the Cross.<sup>61</sup> Beggiani captures, "The baptism in the Jordan reaches its climax with the salvific death of Christ on the cross. From the side of Christ comes blood and water which effect the birth of the Church, and also her wedding to her heavenly groom."<sup>62</sup>

The prayer of blessing of the *tali/minnu* in the Syro-Malabar celebration of the marriage proclaims that the Lord in and through the crucifixion received the Church as His bride.<sup>63</sup> The liturgical texts express this relational dimension in several formulas. The East Syriac liturgical seasons of Epiphany and the Dedication of the Church illustrate the concept of the wedding of Christ with the Church.<sup>64</sup> The hymns and prayers of the season of the Dedication of the Church explicate the final glorification of the Church and her meeting with Christ, the Bridegroom in the heavenly bridal chamber. Analyzing the liturgical prayer of the hours, Theckanath observes in them the stress on the fact that the Church is the bride of Christ and through his salvific mysteries he has purified her and made her holy.<sup>65</sup> The celebration of the mystery of matrimony throws light on the wedding of Christ and the Church.<sup>66</sup> The salvific actions of Christ become the type and divinizing principle of Christian sacramental marriage.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Yamaparthanaka, 558.

<sup>60</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 255.

<sup>61</sup>S.J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 56; "The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology," 555.

<sup>62</sup>S.J. BEGGIANI, *Early Syriac Theology*, 82.

<sup>63</sup>Commission for Liturgy, *Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Qookashaka*, Kakkanaad: Commission for Liturgy, 2005, 178.

<sup>64</sup>H. Engberding, "Die Kirche als Braut in der ostsyrischen Liturgie," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 3, 1-2 (1937) 5-48.

<sup>65</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 267.

<sup>66</sup>H. Engberding, "Die Kirche als Braut in der ostsyrischen Liturgie," 5-48.

<sup>67</sup>S.J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 56; "The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology," 557.

## 6. Bride-Price

According to the liturgical tradition Christ the bridegroom had to pay for his bride. The bride-price<sup>68</sup> which Christ paid is his life, his own body and blood.<sup>69</sup> He did this payment out of his loving kindness. On the Cross, “her dowry is written in the blood which flowed from his side. The blood and water, symbols of baptism and the Eucharist, make humans children of the Father and part of the saved assembly.”<sup>70</sup> The Lord paid the wealth of his blood flowing from His heart as the price for the Church (1 Cor 6:20).<sup>71</sup> The marriage document is written in the blood, which signifies the indissolubility of the marriage; and the blood is both the bride-price and the bridal present.<sup>72</sup> Paying the dowry of his body and precious blood, Christ bought the Church back from the yoke of error and from servitude of demons.<sup>73</sup> Jacob of Serugh describes the suffering of Christ as a dowry for the Church.<sup>74</sup> The *karozutha* on the Sunday *Ielya* of the season of the Dedication of the Church invites to thank the Lord who obtained the Church with his own blood (Acts 20:28); and prays for the peace in the Church and the grace to stand at the right hand along with the Just at the second coming of Christ.<sup>75</sup>

## 7. Bridal Chamber

Christ leads the Church to the bridal chamber, which is spiritual, heavenly and eternal.<sup>76</sup> The bridal chamber is the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>77</sup> He takes her to this eternal bliss at his second coming, but she is given the Eucharistic celebration as an anticipated

---

<sup>68</sup>The term *pernitha* in Syriac (*pherne* in Greek) does not have the meaning of “dowry,” but it corresponds to “bride-price” and the “bridal present” from the bridegroom, i.e., “price paid to the father of the bride.” J.P. Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus*, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1998, 462. As Brock explains, in the Syro-Roman Law Book the distinction between *pherne* (what the woman brings), and *dorea* (what the man brings) is rigidly kept; and in the later East Syriac legal texts, *pernitha* (*pherne*) is often used in the sense of *dorea*. S.P. Brock, “‘The Wedding Feast of Blood on Golgotha,’” 126, footnote 15.

<sup>69</sup>*Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Qookashakal*, 174; P. Yousif, “An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality,” 32. The liturgy of the consecration of the holy Myron emphasizes the relation of Christ and the Church as bridegroom and bride. Commission for Liturgy, *Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Pontifical Kramam*, Kakkanad: Commission for Liturgy, 2007, 161.

<sup>70</sup>S.J. Beggiani, “The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology,” 555.

<sup>71</sup>*Yamapararthanakal*, 559.

<sup>72</sup>S.P. Brock, “‘The Wedding Feast of Blood on Golgotha,’” 126.

<sup>73</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 287.

<sup>74</sup>S.J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 82-83.

<sup>75</sup>*Yamapararthanakal*, 528.

<sup>76</sup>*Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Qookashakal*, 174

<sup>77</sup>P. Yousif, “An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality,” 33.

experience of the heavenly Jerusalem here on earth.<sup>78</sup> *Acts of Judas Thomas* calls the Church as the “daughter of the Light,”<sup>79</sup> and sings the glories of the Church, “My church is the daughter of light; the splendor of kings is hers. Charming and winsome is her aspect, Fair and adorned with every good work.”<sup>80</sup> Klijn comments that in the Syriac version the daughter of light has been identified with the Church.<sup>81</sup> The hymn describes the outward appearance of the daughter of light, and those who enter the bridal chamber do not attend a wedding but enjoy the heavenly bliss. Splendour belongs to the heavenly world.

In the Syriac version, the bridal chamber is identified as baptistry.<sup>82</sup> The *Acts of Judas Thomas* sings, “Her bridal chamber is lighted up, And full of sweet odour of salvation.”<sup>83</sup> It further illustrates the glory of the bridegroom in the kingdom,

Her groomsman surround her, all whom she has invited and her pure bridesmaids (go) before her uttering praise. The living are in attendance upon her, And they look to their Bridegroom who shall come And they shall shine with his glory, And shall be with Him in the kingdom Which never passes away.<sup>84</sup>

The celebration of the season of the Dedication of the Church is the foretaste of the wedding-feast arranged by the heavenly bridegroom for his bride in the bridal chamber. It is the foreshadowing of the final glorification of the Church, the bride, along with her bridegroom.<sup>85</sup> Therefore the Church has to be vigilant like the wise virgins (Mt 25:4, 10) who kept their lamps prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. The Church as a field has to be cultivated and kept free from the tares of error; and her mission is to unite each individual believer to Christ; not just a union of simple membership but a real incorporation into Christ, the bridegroom.

## 8. Wedding Banquet

The ascetics of the primitive Syriac tradition looked forward to union with Christ, the bridegroom in the eschatological wedding-feast and in the heavenly bridal chamber.<sup>86</sup> The season of the

<sup>78</sup>J. Vellian, “The Church as Bride in the East Syrian Liturgy,” 62.

<sup>79</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 28.

<sup>80</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 28.

<sup>81</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 38.

<sup>82</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 39.

<sup>83</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 29.

<sup>84</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 29.

<sup>85</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 323.

<sup>86</sup>R. Murray, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom*, 132.

Dedication of the Church alludes to the guests who partake in the wedding banquet. The guests are the priests, prophets, apostles, martyrs, angels and the people. Every invited guest has to come with the wedding garment, the baptismal grace.<sup>87</sup> The bride brings the bridal gown made by the Holy Spirit, i.e., the baptismal grace preserved intact.

The Eucharist is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet. For Ephrem, Christ's own wedding feast is the Eucharist, where the bride is both the Church and the individual soul.<sup>88</sup> As a token of his love for the bride and as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, Christ, through his passion and death, has sanctified and made her holy and given his body and blood as spiritual food and drink. He has adorned and beautified his bride so that she may be worthy partner for him.<sup>89</sup> Kilmartin affirms, "The Eucharistic meal is a very potent manifestation of the reality of the fulfilled kingdom; for the whole community shares in the anticipated banquet of the kingdom with the Lord in the Spirit unto the glory of the Father."<sup>90</sup> In the Syro-Malabar *Qurbana*, the liturgical assembly responds to the call of the deacon to "Glorify the living God" saying, "Glory to Him in His Church, and His mercy and compassion be upon us in all moments and times."<sup>91</sup> Here the community affirms that the Church is of the Lord, and it is duty bound to praise Him unceasingly. The Church fulfils this duty during the Holy *Qurbana*, the anticipated banquet; and as God is praised, the members of the Church receive His mercy and compassion.<sup>92</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

The East Syriac Fathers made various attempts to expound the relation between the Church and Christ through different images, types, metaphors, etc. These attempts highlight one or other aspect of the intimacy between Christ and the Church. The intimate and indissoluble union of the Church and Christ is well expressed and explained in the image of the Church as bride of Christ, the

---

<sup>87</sup>J. Vellian, "The Church as Bride in the East Syrian Liturgy," 63; *Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Pontifical Kramam*, 161.

<sup>88</sup>Ephrem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* (HFid 14.1-5), E. Beck, ed., CSCO 154, 155, Scr. Syr. Tom., 73, 74, Louvain: L. Dubecq, 1955, 61-61/46-47.

<sup>89</sup>J. Theckanath, *The Church Bride of Christ*, 286.

<sup>90</sup>E.J. Kilmartin, *The Particular Liturgy of the Individual Church: The Theological Basis and Practical Consequences*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1987, 111.

<sup>91</sup>*The Order of Raze*, 53; *Taksa d'Raze*, 48.

<sup>92</sup>P. Kalluveetil, *Syro-Malabar Sabhayude Qurbana*, 233-234.

bridegroom. In the liturgical celebrations, the Church as bride of Christ makes its own self-offering to the Father; and the believing community encounters the Lord who draws them into union with Himself. The Church, the bride is always dependent on Christ and she cooperates with Him in her own up-building. In other words, the Church relies on Christ for her life and activity as the body is joined to its head. Due to this unity with Christ, she can be called a "comprehensive sacrament."<sup>93</sup>

The Church comes into being from the side of Christ, the bridegroom and reaches out to the world. Therefore, Church as the continuation of Christ and the safe and secure way to the Father (Jn 14:6; Mk 16:16), has the same mission (Mt 28:18-20) of Christ in the World. The Church, firmly rooted in profound faith and an intense personal experience of Christ may fulfil her mission. She may imbibe and interiorize the vision of Christ the bridegroom that she may be authentic in mission. To phrase differently, the bride born from the heart of the bridegroom may continue to exist in His heart and learn from Him. It necessitates a constant immersion in His love and delight in Him through the liturgical celebrations and an unceasing pondering in the heart the sacred Scriptures with faith and love. It enables the bride to go and meet the bridegroom with confidence (Mt 25:1-13). The self-giving love and the intimate union between Christ and the Church is the sublime ideal and model of the Christian spouses of the day. They shall witness the redeeming love of the Lord, and become the icons of the same in their day-to-day life. The ideal and model of the Church and Christ for the spouses shall become also the means to witness their union and love.

---

<sup>93</sup>E.J. Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1988, 105.