

ASIAN SYRIAC BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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In this article Professor Thomas Kollampampil, CMI rediscovers the Asian Syriac biblical interpretation as a foundational element of the Asian Christian heritage. The Syriac approach to the scriptures is relational and integrative. In this tradition, according to the author, the basic salvation historical message has to be attained by the 'eye of faith' of the believer through the symbols and types. Dr Kollampampil argues that a skilful biblical interpreter can bring out enlightenment to any period of the history by bringing out the symbolic spiritual sense of the scriptures through the 'eye of faith.' Asian hermeneutics, therefore, has to focus on the inner spiritual truths which are perennial and applicable to any stage of the history of salvation.

Introduction

The specific contributions of the Syriac Christian approach to the Word of God in the Asian context need to be highlighted as a complementary factor and as an elucidation of some rediscovered approaches to the biblical exegesis and hermeneutical reflections. The Syriac approach to the scriptures is a mode of imbibing the salvific inspiration and the message of Christian scriptures from the same cultural milieu and categories from where the Christian scriptures themselves took shape. Syriac Christianity is rooted in as well as issued out of the Semitic Judeo-Christian foundational spheres of Christian religiosity. The Semitic, Judaic, social, religious and cultic spheres have providentially served as an initial channel of divine revelation and provided some foundational factors of the Christian message of salvation. Such a message of salvation is fully Asian as Christianity itself is issued out of the Asian soil.¹ At present it is mainly in the Asian Syriac Christianity that the foundational Semitic and Jewish elements of Christianity survive and flourish as a much needed complementary element to the Hellenic and Latin forms of Christianity. Hence, in this article

attention is given to elucidate the patterns of biblical interpretation advocated by the early Syriac Christianity that was least Hellenized and thus reflecting genuine Asian and Syriac views.

In the world of global transformation all foundational elements of Asian Christianity have to be set as the common denominator. Only then a healthy and integral Christian transformation for development would result in. This factor becomes all the more pertinent in the needed evolution of Christianity anchored in the Asian milieu. There is a close affinity between the Asian pedagogical mode of describing divine realities through stories, parables and symbols² and the Syriac Christian metaphorical and symbolic modes of theological and spiritual teachings that are thoroughly biblical. Thus the Asian Syriac Christian contributions are to be acknowledged and accepted as ingredients of any genuine form of Asian Christian biblical and theological reflection.

I. SYRIAC CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE SCRIPTURES

The orientations and the approach to the scriptures by the Syriac Christian tradition became highly pronounced in the writings of St. Ephrem (306-373 AD) the Syrian. Unlike the mode of analysis and abstraction, triggered by rational categories, quite often seen in several modes of biblical interpretations, the Syriac approach to the scriptures is relational and integrative. It is out of that sense every form of divine revelation is seen as a divine invitation to humanity looking for a corresponding response to participate in the divine mysteries. Hence, this mode has to be qualified as a sacramental way, aiming at a participative and experiential mode of knowing the scriptural revelations and truths.

By the middle of the 7th century Syriac Christianity possessed two versions of Old Testament and seven versions of the New Testament in translations. No other Christian tradition had such an achievement at such an early date as an enhancement to teaching and preaching the scriptures. In addition to such number of translations, Syriac Christians had a good collection of allied

biblical literature such as verse and prose homilies, dramatic dialogue poems, narrative poems, and verse and prose expositions for effective preaching.³ All such allied literature depend on the salvation historical episodes, yet explaining many aspects of the scriptures on which the canonical texts remain silent.

Syriac imaginative expositions enlighten the believer's understanding of the message of the scriptures. One such example is an anonymous author's exposition of the behaviour of Sarah in the context of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22.⁴ The biblical episode is silent about Sarah. But the author brings in Sarah too as a model of profound faith as that of Abraham by retelling the story in which Sarah was tested for her faith. In the context of Abraham's return from mount Moriah, he enters the house far ahead of Isaac and reports to Sarah that Isaac had been sacrificed as the Lord wanted. Then Sarah replied praising Abraham who did exactly as God wished, even by sacrificing her only child. Then Abraham says that Isaac did not even cry when he was bound or when the knife was above his throat, but remembered her. Then she praised her brave child. Immediately Isaac walked into the scene, safe and sound, and Sarah praised God and the divine providence all the more. It is to be noted that such episodes were not reconstructions of history but hermeneutical techniques that are faithful to the message of the episode on the one hand and on the other bringing out the undescribed sectors of biblical episodes more eloquent and shining with salvation historical messages in consonance with the underlying biblical message. Thus Sarah is presented as a woman of deep faith exactly like Abraham. It amounts to placing the biblical women characters on equal footing with men.

1. Symbolic Sacramental Vision on the Scriptures and the History of Salvation

The symbolic and sacramental vision of Ephrem the Syrian on the scriptural revelation and the history of salvation, as interpreted by R. Murray,⁵ consists of horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal axis is that of time and historicity from creation to eschatological

kingdom, which is the realm of biblical types and typological developments. The history of salvation as depicted in the Old and New Testaments serves as the broader frame work through which the self revelation of divinity is addressed to humanity through scriptural types and symbols. One of the best examples is seen in Adam's putting on the 'robe of glory' and the losing of it.

The image of 'putting on and putting off clothing' is widely used by the early Syriac Christian authors, especially Ephrem, in order to depict various stages in the history of salvation, such as, the state of Adam before and after the fall, the redemptive Incarnation, the salvific mysteries in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection of all.⁶ The narrative regarding the first parents finding themselves naked and the sewing of the clothes of fig leaves in Gen 3:7, and that of the Lord God making garments of skin to clothe Adam and Eve in Gen 3:21, stand as the inspiring verses for this imagery. Gen 3:21 speaks of 'garments of skin' but early Syriac Christianity acquired much from a Jewish background of *Haggadah* and *Targum* including traditions concerning the theological expression of 'robe of glory,' which was understood to refer to the state of Adam before the fall.⁷

In the Syriac tradition the metaphor of 'clothing' is well developed in a consistent way and explains the entire salvation history from the fall to the redemption in Christ leading to salvation.⁸ *Odes of Solomon* 20:7 speaks of the need of being clothed in the grace of the Lord for entering into Paradise. This clothing is also called 'clothing of light' (*Odes* 11:11; 21:3). Aphrahat speaks of the glory that Christ brought as something far greater and more astounding than what Adam had been deprived of (*Dem* XXIII 51). Ephrem has a well developed synthesis of the theological views behind the theological expression of the putting on of 'the robe of glory,' S. P. Brock explains the salvation-historical import of this clothing metaphor as consisting of four stages. They are Adam before the fall with the 'robe of glory/light', after the fall without the 'robe of glory,' Divinity 'putting on' a body in the Incarnation to reclothe mankind

in the 'robe of glory' and Christ's setting the 'robe of glory' in the baptismal waters for the Christians to regain the 'robe of glory,'⁹ *Hymns on Nativity*, 23:13 is suggested as a fair synthesis of Ephrem in this regard:

All these changes did the Merciful One make,
stripping off glory and putting on a body;
for He had devised the way to reclothe Adam
in that glory which Adam had stripped off.
Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes,
corresponding to Adam's leaves,
Christ put on clothes, instead of Adam's skins;
He was baptized for Adam's sin,
His body was embalmed for Adam's death,
He rose and raised up Adam in his glory.
Blessed is he who descended, put Adam on and ascended !
(*Hymns on Nativity* 23:13).¹⁰

The vertical axis is the ontological axis between God above and the creatures below, which is the realm of natural symbols and the whole created world in its totality. The fundamental relation between God and the orders of his creatures is the source of the symbolic and sacramental powers of the created world. All creatures reflect the hidden creative power and they render glory to God according to their nature (*HS II* 138,10-11).

According to Ephrem the natural world (*kyana*) and the scriptures (*ktaba*) are two witnesses to God and his activities. They are the two channels of divine self revelation. These two sources, in effect, did the preparation for the culminating divine self-revelation in the incarnate mystery of the Son. In fact God prepared all peoples, the Jewish people through the Torah (the scriptural law) and the gentile peoples through the nature (natural law) for the new covenant. Once Nature and Scriptures had cleansed the land, the new commandments have been given in the new covenant (cf. *Against Heresies*, 28:11) in Christ. The two Testaments are considered the two harps in the right and left hands of the Son, the Redeemer. Together with them God has the third harp, the nature, as a middle

one, bearing witness to the other two manifesting that God is playing with all the three harps as the Lord of the universe (*Hymns on Virginity* 29:1).

2. Unity of Revelation and the Unity of the History of Salvation

Prophecy (OT) and apostolic preaching (NT) form a continuum. Even the present day preaching in the Church is part of the apostolic preaching. This in other words means the unity and organic relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Even though they are at two stages, they proclaim the same message and teaching.¹¹ Through biblical symbolism Jacob of Serugh explains how one drinks from the four rivers of Eden in the Old Testament and in fact the same four rivers are found in the Evangelists in the New Testament:

Behold, you are hearing from the old rivers,
the four [rivers] which issued from the blessed fountain of Eden (*Gen* 2:10)
And again in the New the apostles are like the rivers,
the four [Apostles] who went out to the four regions and you drink them.¹²

Christ is the impelling force behind the Scriptures and he is the author of both orders, the Law and the Gospel (*HS* II 363,14-18/*FH* VIII 341-44) as well as the mediator of both (*HS* II 362,7-365,2/*FH* VIII 313-372). Syriac tradition teaches the unity of the two Testaments through various images. The following are a few of them: Christ is the focal point of the Scriptures. He is the body and the two covenants are his hands (*HS* II 362,11-12/*FH* VIII 317-318). The two Testaments are like two links of a chain that interlock so perfectly (*HS* II 364,1-18/*FH* VIII 349-366). Again they are like a house which has a floor (foundation), namely, the Old Testament, and a roof which is the New Testament (*HS* III 319,20-321,4). The intertestamental unity is further clarified through the analogy of body and soul, in which the Scriptures form a single body and Christ is the soul of that body (*HS* III 243,18-244,8; *Ep* XXIII 196-197). This leads to the Christocentric vision. These images establish the intimate union (chain) of the Testaments, the inner realization of the history of salvation (House with a floor and a roof) and the over all

Christocentric vision (Christ the soul of the body of Scriptures). The unity of the two Testaments is demonstrated at Tabor (*HS II 357, 10-359, 13/FH VIII 209-254*) and at the Paschal event (*HS II 482,19-484,8*). In both salvific events the union of the central figures and the unanimous salvific message of both Testaments are made manifest. The basic reason is the fact that the same Spirit inspires and fills the Scriptures as a whole. Hence, they all give the same salvific teaching.

3. The Horizons of Revelation and Levels of Scriptural Interpretations

In the sacramental vision a reflective and meditative person can find divine traces in both the created world and in human history as both are governed by the divinity. It amounts to the fact of divine significations inlaid in the elements of the created natural world (*kyana*) and in the human history which is salvation oriented from the beginning. The salvation oriented mode of history can be seen described in the books of the scriptures (*ktaba*) of Old and New Testaments. For Ephrem they are the two witnesses of God:

In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world, so that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator: Nature, through man's use of it, Scripture, through his reading of it. These are the witnesses which reach everywhere, they are to be found at all times, present at every hour, confuting the unbeliever who defames the Creator
(*Hymns on Paradise 5:2*).¹³

Thus the natural world and the biblical narratives function as symbols signifying some underlying realities. In the Syriac vision the signifying elements of the created nature, like a pearl, the Olive tree and its oil, etc., are natural symbols. The signifying symbols of the salvation historical scriptural world are called historical types of progression in the history of salvation. Hence, in the Syriac understanding, both natural symbols and the biblical symbols or types are channels of divine significations alluding to the presiding and governing role of divinity in the world and in the history of

humanity. Thus the divinity is revealing and relating with humanity through the symbols of the created world and the historical types of the scriptures of Old and New Testaments as if playing with three harps (cf. *Hymns on Virginity* 29:1). Biblical interpretation, according to Ephrem is in one sense playing with these harps. The types and symbols of Torah are prototypes of Gospels which work together with the signs and powers of the nature to draw the pictures of the divinity and divine economy (cf. *Hymns on Virginity* 28). There are correct and false playing of these harps. According to Ephrem, while the heretics play these harps falsely, the Church plays properly:

Blessed are you, O Church, whose congregation
sings with three glorious harps.
Your finger plucks the harp of Moses
and the (harp) of our Saviour and the (harp) of nature.
Your faith plays the three (harps), for three names baptized you.
You were not able to be baptized in one name nor to play on one harp.¹⁴
(*Hymns on Virginity* 27:4)

The sacramental vision enlightens the symbols and types of the scriptures and vice versa. With such enlightenment on the scriptures one can find two levels of meaning. What are historically happening and externally visible are on account of the human response to the divine plan of salvation as revealed to the people of God. Each human being or any community of people would respond to the divine plan with their free will. Hence, corresponding to every historical happening there is an inner play of human free will in the light of divine call. Thus corresponding to the external historical events there is an inner salvation historical progression taking place.

A typical example of such a mode of biblical exegesis to trace the inner salvific meaning can be seen in Ephrem's treatment of the mystery of the paschal lamb in the Old Testament through his hymns on the unleavened bread, especially the third one.¹⁵ The salvation historical progression found by Ephrem is from the Passover lamb of the OT to the True Lamb offered on Golgotha and

then further to the Living Lamb in the risen Lord. It is in the 'living Lamb,' in the risen Lord, all the earlier historical and ritual observations find their fuller meaning. Thus corresponding to the external historical progression an inner salvation historical progression can be seen by the inner 'eye of faith' working in a believer. It is based on such salvation historical objectivity Ephrem and other Syriac Fathers maintain the inner level spiritual exegesis of the scriptures.

Ephrem and others distinguish the scriptural levels of meaning as historical and spiritual, external and inner, expressional and inspirational, etc. These levels of meanings of the Word of God can be compared to the two levels of existence of the incarnate Word in the human and divine natures of Christ. What is needed in a believer as well as in an interpreter is the proper journey from the outer historical level to the inner spiritual level of meaning, just as each believer needs to pass through the humanity of Christ to the divinity of Christ. Only those who found the divinity of Christ through the humanity of Christ and believed in him were saved. The inner spiritual level is governed by the salvation historical objectivity of spiritual truths. In the level of spiritual truth there can be seen so many salvation historical events deeply interconnected.

4. Syriac Vision of Plurality in Biblical Interpretation

The firm conviction of the Syriac understanding is that the symbols of nature and the types of the scriptures are only feeble pointers to the highly magnificent reality of the divinity and divine functioning for human salvation. Since divinity is so magnificent, for even a small measure of divine revelation, that is necessary for human salvation, a good number of symbols and types are needed. Moreover, the available symbols and types are again channels for humanity's progressive understanding of the divinity even in later developmental stages of human history. Thus as Sebastian Brock would put it, the same symbols and types of the scriptures would work in different contexts and at different levels for the effective divine revelation to humanity:

Types and symbols are a means of expressing relationships and connections, of instilling meaning into everything. They operate in several different ways, between the Old Testament and the New, between this world and the heavenly, between the New Testament and the Sacraments, between the Sacraments and the *eschaton*. In every case they 'reveal' something of what is otherwise 'hidden.'¹⁶

This affirmation of the dynamic functioning of the symbols and types in the history of salvation testifies to the polysemy and polyvalence of the symbols and types in their revealing power. In the historical context or in the narrative set up, the symbols and types of the scriptures are bound to certain geographical and historical boundaries. But in the aspect of the salvation historical truths they carry, symbols and types have wider horizons presenting polysemic implications and polyvalent connotations. A clear example would be the symbol of the veil on the face of Moses (Ex 34:33-35) and the stammering Moses (Ex 4:10-16) in the interpretation of Jacob of Serugh (451-521 AD).¹⁷ The type of veiled Moses signifies the veiled nature of prophecy in Moses¹⁸ and in the Old Testament until the time of Christ. The type of stammering Moses signifies the unclear state of prophecy that was not fully explained or made clear until the time of Christ (*HS* III 297, 5-16).¹⁹ We may wonder why Moses had to wear a veil after his theophany on mount Sinai? It was because the people of Israel were not mature enough to understand the full revelation of the OT which was reflected in the brightness on the face of Moses. That brightness of Moses was unbearable and unpalatable to the old Israel and hence Moses had to wear a veil. The stammering of Moses also signifies the same because the words of prophecy had not been fully understood until the Word became flesh. The truths are the same in both events, but they are two types, the veiled and the stammering Moses. A single word of Moses can set a bunch of meanings.²⁰ Even the staff of Moses (Ex 4:17) contains a bunch of symbols as it worked wonders in the OT history of salvation.²¹ The relationality, integration and creativity are well projected in the

way how the Syriac interpretation fits in the veiled and stammering Moses to the salvation historical truths of history.

The diverse ways of divine revelation admit and recognize the diverse ways of interpretations. Revelation takes recourse to diverse ways because the divine reality is highly profound and the divine nature is infinite which cannot be comprehensively explained by any number of finite symbols or types. So Ephrem teaches regarding divine revelation and interpretation: "Single is Your nature, but many are the ways of interpreting it" (*Hymns on Faith* 10:3).²² Ephrem affirms that scriptures have exterior and interior meanings as Christ has exterior humanity and the interior divinity. Only the one with faith can go from the exterior humanity of Christ to the interior divinity. Those who did not believe in Jesus simply found only his exterior human existence without knowing or experiencing his divinity. The same is true with regard to the words of the scriptures also. Only with faith one can go from the exterior sense of the scriptures to the interior truth.²³ It is the power of the 'inner eye of faith' that is decisive here. The more powerful 'eye of faith' can find more vividly and profoundly. No individual can fully understand the immense and diverse levels of the inner truth. The divine spiritual senses of the scriptures are so diverse as to provide each seeker/interpreter according to the acquired capacity of the 'eye of faith'. So Ephrem writes:

If there only existed a single sense for the words of scripture, then the first commentator who came along would discover it, and other hearers would experience neither the labour of searching, nor the joy of finding. Rather, each word of our Lord has its own form, and each form has its own members, and each member has its own character. Each individual understands according to his capacity and interprets as it is granted him (*Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7:22).²⁴

In the perception of the scriptural truths there are objective and subjective levels of understanding. Hence, there can be progressive understanding in the literal meaning of the texts. So also depending on one's faith-vision and spiritual progress there are several levels

of understanding. The author of *The Book of Steps*²⁵ convincingly explains this factor. There are several levels for the spiritual journey (LG IX, 13-14), and accordingly there are different commandments and scriptural teachings. The instructions of Jesus are for different kinds of people at different levels. If one does not understand the levels of applications and observances needed at different stages of spiritual life the teachings of Jesus may seem contradictory (LG XI). Scriptures are not addressed only to one type of people (LG XI, 1). There are commandments that are of 'milk and vegetables' which are minor and are for 'children and the sick' in spiritual life. There are commandments which are major, that of 'solid food', meant for the grown ups. There is the commandment, 'Do not associate with the immoral people' (1Cor 5:9). Again the same scripture instructs, 'Be all things with all people' (1Cor 9:22). If the 'infants' and 'sick' in faith associate with the immoral people, they will be negatively affected and perish. Whereas the grown up ones in faith, if they become all things with all people, including immoral people, instead of themselves perishing, they would gain the immoral and sick ones. Thus in the teachings of our Lord and the scriptures themselves we have to distinguish different levels of truth regarding spiritual life and growth (LG XI, 1-3). Hence, while reading the scriptures and understanding the teachings of the Lord each one has to distinguish his level and discern the commandments.

The aspect of plurality in scriptural interpretations and truths are explained by Ephrem quite figuratively. At the level of historical truths and literal interpretation of scriptures there may be only one correct interpretation. But at the level of inner, spiritual meaning of the scriptures several levels of meanings and interpretations can be simultaneously correct and valid. Hence, Ephrem writes:

The facets of His word are more numerous than the faces of those who learn from it. God depicted His word with many beauties, so that each of those who learn from it can examine that aspect of it which he likes. And God has hidden within His word all sorts of treasures, so that each of us can be enriched by it from whatever

aspect he meditates on. For God's word is the Tree of Life which proffers to you on all sides blessed fruits; it is like the Rock which was struck in the wilderness, which became a spiritual drink for everyone on all sides: 'They ate the food of the Spirit and they drank the draft of the Spirit' (*Commentary on Diatessaron* 1:18).²⁶

In the vision of Ephrem, the reader of the scriptures, believers and interpreters are all like thirsty people drinking from the fountain. Each one drinks according to the thirst one has. The thirst of each one would be different from the other and the drinking and the quenching of thirst and satisfaction of different people from the same fountain (scriptures) would also be different. According to Jacob of Serugh scriptures are an inexhaustible mine. They are unguarded treasures open to anyone who approaches with love and reads them, and can carry away as much as he can. Yet the treasures in them remain inexhaustible (*HS* III 414-415).²⁷ 'The divine Scriptures are a mount of gold, dig O needy one, and behold you enrich from their treasures' (*HS* III 454,16-17). Such is the diversity of approach to the scriptures and the learning from them in the Syriac tradition.

5. Symbolic Power and Spiritual Meanings of the Scriptural Texts

Scriptural texts are based on the salvation historical events and the interpretations are given to them by the human authors themselves by the power of the inspiration. In such a dynamics the scriptural texts on the one hand describe the meanings of the salvation historical events and the events on the other hand point to the true meaning and powers of the written texts. For example many of the Old Testament episodes of sacrifices such as the sacrificial death of Abel, self-offering of Isaac and many other types of Old Testament sacrifices have their textual interpretations. Those textual interpretations and narratives assume new meanings and reinterpretations in the New Testament context of events. Jesus himself provided such reinterpretations and added fuller meaning to different OT narratives and events. The best illustrations are the teachings of Jesus referring to the episode of the serpent of bronze

in Numbers 21:9 and the teaching given by Jesus to the disciples traveling to Emmaus (Lk 24:25-27), etc.

Jesus said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14,15). The bronze serpent raised up in the wilderness by Moses in itself had no power to heal those bitten by the poisonous serpents. What actually cured them was their obedience to the instructions given to them by Moses. Ultimately the proper obedience to the proper instructions saved the people from the poisonous snakes. A snake had bitten the old Adam in the course of his disobedience. Later, perils and failures have befallen the people when and where they disobeyed the Lord. The Saviour came as the Second Adam who was totally obedient to his Father. Those who looked up and believed in him who was 'lifted up' and was crucified were saved. In the old Israel Moses 'lifted up' the saving banner and those who obeyed and believed became saved. So also in the new Israel, Jesus, the sacrament of salvation, was 'lifted up' and all those who believe in him will be saved. The basic truth is that faith and obedience to the commandments or to the word of God saves all. The same truth is summarily taught by Jesus to the disciples traveling to Emmaus. Jesus rebuked them, "And he said to them, 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:25-27). These two examples are ample enough to indicate the rich inter-testamental connections that Jesus himself in first person interpreted. They are not accidental connections, but real salvation historical interconnections based on the inner truths of salvation history.

Every salvation historical event is either an individual or a communitarian response to the divine call to salvation. As human nature has common factors in every age and culture there emerges commonality in the human responses to the divine call in different

ages and cultures. Divine call in itself is constant and enduring in its nature and function. Hence, all divine human encounters in the Old and New Testaments assume similarity, symbolic congruence and patterns of interconnected significances. Take the case of Jesus' reference to the bronze serpent of the wilderness and the slowness in the perceptive capacity of the disciples traveling to Emmaus. The inner truths of both events are repeatedly seen when Christians succeed or fail to believe in the crucified Jesus as the old Israel succeeded or failed in the wilderness in front of the bronze serpent of Moses. It is the same when Christians travel with their Lord and Saviour in faith, but fall short of accepting the full path of the cross, leading to the power of resurrection, as was the case with the disciples to Emmaus. Thus in all ages we find recurring patterns of divine-human interaction on the road of salvation. These patterns are symptomatic and symbolic expressions in the history of salvation. Such symptomatic and symbolic patterns open up to humanity the symbolic power and spiritual patterns/meanings of the scriptural events and texts.

In the present day world we would be able to trace human behaviours very akin to those people around the bronze serpent and those of the disciples traveling to Emmaus. It is because of such inner (spiritual) affinities of human behaviour in all ages the biblical texts provide re-readings and re-interpretations. In such contexts biblical texts and events function quite symbolically in dynamic ways to explain the content and meanings of Christian behaviour. In the present day world of global transformation human behaviours similar to that of unbelieving old Israel and the disciples traveling to Emmaus can be traced. Hence, the available Word of God and biblical texts stand assumed with symbolic power and meanings for providing current exegetical and hermeneutical insights. It is in the light of such dynamism the modern exegetical admittance of the 're-readings' and new interpretations on old texts are affirmed.²⁸ The so described 'symbolic power and meanings' of the biblical texts are called the spiritual truths behind the scriptures

that are useful for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, etc. (cf Tim 3:16) in every age.

6. Purpose Seeking and Purpose Gaining Interpretation

There is a deeper correspondence and consonance between the handling of symbols and types by the early Syriac authors and the modern philosophical assertions on the meaning and functions of symbols. The main factor is the convergence among the philosophers and hermeneutists regarding the inherent relationship between the signifying and the signified in a symbol as has already been conceived by the early Syriac Christian writers. According to Syriac writers a symbol is something that signifies and makes present what it signifies.²⁹ Hence, there is an inherent integral relationship between the signifying and the signified. P. Ricoeur defines a symbol:

I define 'Symbol' as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition to, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.³⁰

Ricoeur finds a rudimentary natural relation between the signifying and the signified.³¹ He calls this relation analogical in view of a clear explanation and considers this analogical bond so real as part of the natural order.³² Hence, according to him the second sense in a symbol is unexplainable without the first one:

By living in the first meaning I am drawn by it beyond itself: the symbolic meaning is constituted in and through the literal meaning, which brings about the analogy by giving the analogue. Unlike a comparison that we look at from the outside, symbol is the very movement of the primary meaning that makes us share in the latent meaning and thereby assimilates us to the symbolized, without our being able intellectually to dominate the similarity. This is the sense in which symbol "gives"; it gives because it is a primary intentionality that gives the second meaning.³³

But the Syriac writers go even beyond all philosophical levels and explain the reason for this sort of relationship in the symbols as the

fruits of God's own creative activity by which God infused certain divine factors in his creation. Those divine factors are discernible through symbols of Nature and the Scriptures. This belief is the basis of the sacramental world-vision of the early Syriac tradition. Faith is the medium for the functioning of this world-vision and it enables one to understand the creative power and the purpose of the divinity who is fully active in the Nature and in history for the salvation of all.

The sacramental world-vision essentially reflects the power of the hidden and the revealed nature of the divinity who manifests himself in creation, redemption and salvation. Hence, the whole history of salvation is seen as a merciful divine initiative that needs proper response and recognition from the part of humanity. Inspired scriptures, especially through prophets and apostles, describe the various phases of this divine-human encounter that is in reality the history of divine invitations and human responses to the same. This type of divine-human encounter assumes its fullest extent in the incarnate Son. All such encounters of the Old Testament are steps of divine pedagogy through divine revelations so as to provide necessary understanding of the divine realities for the salvation. That divine pedagogy follows a progressive path through the Law, the OT types and symbols and finally the actualization and fruits through Christ, the incarnate Word.

Following the pedagogical aspect of the history of salvation the interpreter has to understand the divine teachings in the Scriptures. Hence, the goal of scriptural exegesis is to learn the divine purpose underlying the various events and episodes of the Scriptures. Often they prefigure as types/symbols or mysteries of the salvific acts of God to be actualized in Christ. All types and mysteries of the OT and for that matter, all saving acts of Christ, the incarnate Son, have external and internal aspects. They are mysteries (*raze*) of the history of salvation. All scriptural episodes pertaining to such events have thus an actualized sense (*sû'rāna'it*) and a spiritual sense (*rûhāna'it*). Therefore, Syriac exegesis gives proper

importance to both the literal and the spiritual levels in their own respects because they have proper functions for the realization of the divine pedagogy and the goal. What is actualized in Christ has to be recognized with the 'discerning eye of the soul' and has to be accepted through faith so as to effect transformation in the life of Christians. It is through such discerning understanding and interpretations the purpose of divine pedagogy and salvation could be attained.

7. *Sensus Plenior* and the Christocentric Biblical Vision

The divine economy of salvation is made concrete in the economy of the Son. It is made tangible to humanity through the scriptures. Hence, the duty of the interpreter is to see with the 'eye of faith' to recognize and understand the salvific road of the eternal Son in Christ. It is through him alone one can attain the *sensus plenior* of the revealed truths. Christ is the source, meaning, efficacy and the final goal of all salvific symbols of both nature and scripture. He is the 'Lord of symbols' and 'Sea of symbols'. The whole of the Old Testament with its symbols of the kings, priests and prophets, was pouring into Christ, the 'Sea of symbols'. Hence, Ephrem writes:

Therefore, the sea is Christ who is able to receive
 the sources and springs and rivers and streams
 that flow forth from within scripture (*On Virginit*y 9:12).
 For it is Christ who perfects its symbols by his Cross,
 its types by his body, its adornments by his beauty,
 and all of it by all of him ! (*On Virginit*y 9:15).³⁴

The Scriptures are replete with the figure of the Son of God and the righteous men of the Old Testament have portrayed him:

Thy great image is borne by the books of prophecy,
 which carry Thee in solemn procession,
 for the world to see how fair Thou art.
 From generation to generation
 Thy type hath peered out like a luminary,
 and gladdened with its rising whoever saw Thee and marvelled.
 With the allegories and dark sayings in the Scriptures,
 the Just in sundry places portrayed Thee through their revelations.

In their own times and generations they reverently bore Thee up,
 and one handed Thee to the next, to become illustrious in Thee.
 The righteous Noah³⁵ received Thee from Seth,³⁶ the goodly man,
 and in the succession of the world he placed Thee with Abraham.
 Isaac received Thee and raised up a likeness of Thee on Golgotha,³⁷
 and Jacob stole Thine image and fled to the land of Aram.³⁸
 Thou didst ordain Thy testimony in Joseph,
 who shone among the Egyptians,
 and Moses saw Thee on Mount Sinai with Thy Begetter.
 Aaron depicted Thee with the blood of sacrifices and oblations,
 and he sprinkled the entire path of Thy great slaughter with blood.
 Jesus bar-Nun, apparelled in Thy comely name,
 barred the day at will, and suffered it not to move forward.
 Gideon prefigured Thee with the dew that he brought down
 when he prayed,³⁹
 and in Thee the conqueror conquered the camp of the Midianites.
 Jephthah found out the path
 of Thy sufferings by the slaying of his daughter,⁴⁰
 and sprinkled it with virgin's blood on Thine account (HS V 331,3-332,8).⁴¹

All prophecies spoke of our Lord and the soul of the whole body of
 Scriptures is Christ:

All who prophesied spoke about our Lord through concealed things,
 for were it not he, the revealed matters of the truths are void.
 The Scriptures are like members [of the body]
 to him and he is the soul to them
 for they are impelled by him
 to speak about him abundantly (HS III 244,5-8).⁴²

The biblical interpretation of the story of Samson in the Syriac
 tradition, as explained by Jacob of Serugh, is an excellent example
 to explain the breadth and depth of *sensus plenior* of the biblical
 types and mysteries. Samson prefigured our Lord in his action and
 set the riddle he put to the Philistines which was only explained
 fully in Christ who killed death and provided life-giving food:

From the eater came out food while being incorrupt
 and the sweet honey from the bitter as it is written.
 The riddle of Samson, the son of Hebrews (Judg 14:14)
 was explained by Him

because bitter is death and sweet honey is Christ to him who tastes Him.
 And death is the real eater who ate the generations
 but our Lord became the food to peoples
 and He satisfied them (HS II 599,9-14).

Samson tore up and killed a lion. Later he found in the carcass of the lion a sweet honey comb from which he ate as well as made his parents eat. It was from this event Samson coined a riddle, "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (Judg 14:14). He put this riddle to the Philistines to solve which they could not. Of course, Samson had a riddle and an answer. Yet the *sensus plenior* of that riddle came out only in Christ who revealed the fuller sense of the action of Samson who was only a type of the saving action of Christ. As Samson killed the eater lion and found sweet honey, Christ killed the eater death in his own death and offered the nourishing bread of the Eucharist to all. So also as Samson subdued the lion 'the strong one', Christ subdued Satan, the 'strong one' and provided the sweetness of the kingdom of God in his risen body and in his mystical body, the Church, instead of Sheol which is sour. In fact neither the riddle setter Samson himself nor anyone who explained that old riddle in the OT had not understood the fuller sense. Only in Christ and through Christ alone the *sensus plenior* came out for the salvific fuller revelation of the Old Testament type of Samson. Based on this the current understanding on the *sensus plenior* of scriptural interpretation can be better understood. We have the descriptions of the present scholarship on *sensus plenior*:

The fuller sense is defined as a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author. Its existence in the biblical text comes to be known when one studies the text in the light of other biblical texts which utilize it or in its relationship with the internal development of revelation. ... In a word, one may think of the "fuller sense" as another way of indicating the spiritual sense of a biblical text in the case where the spiritual sense is distinct from the literal sense. It has its foundation in the fact that the Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors in the choice of

expressions in such a way that the latter will express a truth the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive.⁴³

Syriac interpretation naturally focuses on the Christocentric vision where Christ unifies and perfects the whole of salvation history, already actualized, yet in progress.⁴⁴

II. THE ROLE OF THE BELIEVER AND THE INTERPRETER

With its Semitic roots and patterns the early Syriac Christianity remained a natural heir and a historically surviving carrier of the Hebrew thought patterns and expressions which are the common patrimony of the lived experiences of the people of Israel. As a surviving heir to that tradition and orientations, the Syriac approach to the biblical narratives and thought patterns have a unique Asiatic thrust for experiential understanding. The biblical interpretations of the early Syriac Christianity have developed more out of the lived experiences of the believing community, rather than as brain children of individual authors as in some Hellenic and Latin traditions. In the Semitic-Hebraic legacy of the two testaments, knowledge and wisdom are experiential fruits of lived out habitudes rather than speculative findings. For the believing community of Syriac Christianity, the experience of the divine and the resulting divine-human relationships are based on the scriptural deposit of divine-human encounters in the history of salvation. Regarding this communal and communitarian nature of biblical and theological patrimony of the Syriac Christianity Aphrahat writes:

“... whatever is written in these chapters was written neither according to the thinking of one man, nor for the persuasion of one reader; but according to the thinking of all the Church, and for the persuasion of all the faithful” (*Dem XXII 26*).

As it is attested by Aphrahat, the scriptural texts and even the interpretations on them assume a communitarian prerogative and patrimony rather than individual insights. It is all because no scriptural texts are independent of the people of God. Thus the scripture as well as the intended interpretations of the scriptures

have deeper roots and guiding prerogatives in the wider horizons of the faith tradition and the believing community of the time. The interpreter has to be sufficiently anchored in the horizon of the inspired author and that of the faith tradition of the believing community.

1. Entering into to Horizon of Faith and Tradition

If the scriptural interpretation needs to be purpose-gaining, it has to take roots from the horizon in which the scriptures themselves were formed for imparting the needed teaching of salvation. Scriptural texts, as they project the manner of divine-human interactions in the history of salvation, are embedded in the underlying general pattern of divine-human relationships in the whole of salvation history. A best net-work of such a pattern is seen in the underlying relationship between the behaviour of Adam as a disobedient and a thief-like human being, as he tried in a wrong manner to steal divine powers. Such Adamic behaviour is reflected in the OT figure of Samson (Judg 13-16), the NT figure of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-31), Barabbas in the prison (Mt 27:15-26 *et par.*) and the good thief at the side of the cross at Golgotha (Lk 23:39-43 *et par.*). In Adam, Samson and the prodigal son the underlying truth and message are the same as they all show disobedience and selfish ways of behaviour. The penitential conversion in Samson, in the prodigal son, the liberation of Barabbas and the rewarding promise to the good thief, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise' (Lk 23:43), reflect the salvific fruits of the mystery of Christ for saving Adam (humanity) present in Samson, prodigal son, Barabbas and the thief on the cross. With regard to the other types of human behaviours in the scriptures by other scriptural personages, corresponding networks and patterns can be traced and seen. Human behavioural mode in the history of salvation repeats itself as major aspects of human nature are the same in all ages.

In this mode of scrutinizing the scriptural texts, the episodes of Adam, Samson, the prodigal son, Barabbas, the good thief, are all

figures of Adam and are assuming a sort of symbolic and paradigmatic nature. Externally, in the literal and historical set up, they are diverse, but in the content and message of salvation through Christ they all proclaim the same message and truth. Such congruences and patterns can be traced in our times and all times by a believing and reflective Christian. This is to affirm that there are certain horizons and patterns of human response to divine revelation for salvation in all the stages of salvation history, including that of ours. An interpreter has to be aware of such networks and be eager to trace and find out such horizons of salvation history and faith.

The dimensions of the Christian tradition and the faith of the individual dynamically serve the interpreter who should lovingly search divine truths. The awareness regarding the horizon of the texts and that of their readers play a central role in understanding the symbolic and paradigmatic meanings of the scriptural episodes. The revealing nature of symbols becomes meaningful and tangible to the seeker only in a horizon of values enlightened by faith and tradition. One gets access to the domain of symbols only through such a horizon. P. Ricoeur emphasizes the dynamic role of such a horizon:

If exegesis raised a hermeneutic problem, that is, a problem of interpretation, it is because every reading of a text always takes place within a community, a tradition, or a living current of thought, all of which display presuppositions and exigencies regardless of how closely a reading may be tied to the *quid*, to "that in view of which" the text was written.⁴⁵

The horizon of the inspired author and the text, namely the tradition in which they stand and the values they transmit and the vision out of which the texts emerge, should correspond to the horizon of values and tradition in which the interpreter and the Christian stand. As far as this correspondence grows thus far the understanding of the scriptural texts also progress. In the integration of such a horizon of faith and tradition the 'inner eye' of

the individual and that of the community become active with discernment. Here the attitude of the individuals and that of the believing community assume importance. In such a context the interpreter should enter into the total horizon so as to holistically approach the scriptural episodes.

2. Reception of the Power of Symbols and the Function of the Scriptures

In the history of divine revelation the experience of divine realities is through externally perceived signs which amount to symbols that work mysteriously in the level of human consciousness so as to elicit more than what they can describe and define in words. Symbols are replete with meanings that are evoked at the level of consciousness rather than conceptual truths defined in dogmatic terms. They carry a multiplicity of associations that cannot be sorted out by the intellect and reasoning, but are strongly and subtly interrelated and functionally active at the subconscious level in a subjective manner.

Biblical symbols and types activate the inner subjective levels. There, it is the inner eye that works by the illumination of faith inspired by the Spirit. The Word of God is the light for the inner eye. As far as this eye is pure and limpid it can assume that much light from the Word. It functions by seeing the invisible in the visible, and understanding the hidden reality through the revealed. Only through this eye a transformed vision is possible.

The communication through symbols is a particular sort that invites one to inhabit in a particular context of memories, understanding, anxieties and preoccupations or in other words in one's own horizon of faith. Rather than yielding to the analytical capacity of the intellect, a symbol makes the individual to surrender to the inner power of the symbol that enables one's own unintegrated memories, understanding, emotions, experiences and anxieties to get integrated themselves into a wider horizon of meaningful associations and interconnections, which are powerful enough to

provide profound self-integration and a unified vision of life. Thus symbolic communication is an engaged participation rather than a detached observation.⁴⁶ A best example would be the power of the Paschal Lamb in Christ fulfilling all the Old Testament Paschal awareness and experiences.

The dynamics of symbolic vision are powerful enough to indicate aspects of divine-human relationships. The observations of A. Dulles are significant.⁴⁷ Firstly, symbols provide participatory knowledge going beyond speculative aspects. Since this participation is a dynamic process it is not a finished project in symbolic vision. It is capable of accommodating new findings and experiences. In this respect the note of Nathan Mitchel sheds much light:

A symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory, but an environment to be inhabited. ... every symbol deals with a new discovery and every symbol is an open-ended action, not a closed-off object. By engaging in symbols, by inhabiting their environment, people discover new horizons for life, new values and motivation.⁴⁸

Thus a heuristic mode of cognition is prominent in symbolic vision. Secondly, symbols have a transforming power effecting a sort of healing and integration. Thirdly, symbols have the power to release hidden energies in association with the new vision and to arouse the will to definitive behaviour patterns. Fourthly, symbols bring in higher levels of awareness that are normally not accessible to dialectical thought process. It is in this connection Tillich expounds, "Symbol opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us. ... and also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality."⁴⁹

In the sacramental vision of Ephrem, and the same that is followed by early Syriac writers, the fundamental role of symbol originates not from any mere existential outlook on the phenomenon of nature and human experience but primarily through a theological vision that affirms the inhabitation of the divinity in humanity that is

created in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God. On account of this 'image' and 'likeness' in humanity, it can recognize the divine power within itself and in other creatures.⁵⁰ Symbols guide the subject into a participatory-knowledge and through it to the higher levels of transformation by leading to healing and integration. This process engenders new powers of action with higher levels of awareness that lead to the evoking of new levels of consciousness.

The revealing power of the symbol enhances the inner eye, especially those of the discerning, to see more clearly and with a wider spectrum the various colours of the salvific activity of Christ (*SHF III 26/FH IX 26*) which is the source and power of all symbols. Ultimately Christ himself is the true interpreter of all symbols. The illumination by Christ is so perfect that there is no shade around him. He sheds his light backwards and forwards on his way. In the past the prophets saw his light and now by the light of him the ongoing apostolic activity proclaims him on the road of salvation.

III. SALVIFIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE SCRIPTURES

Divinity has revealed only whatever is necessary for human salvation in the history of salvation. Love is the intermediary between revelation and understanding (*HS III 284,14-15*).⁵¹ It is the initiative of God that provides revelation to humanity according to the level of human capacity to understand divine realities. Hence, humanity has to be aware of several facts: What is made visible of the invisible or what is made approachable from the unapproachable in a symbolic and typological manner do not fully explain the divine realities. What is revealed stands as a guide to still higher and unrevealed aspects of the divine realm.⁵² In response to this self-revealing divine mercy the proper attitude should be love and acceptance in faith on account of the fact that mystery remains mystery at all levels. Towards whatever is graciously revealed and made tangible to humanity one has to be thankful and accept the invitation to relate oneself to the revealing mystery of salvation.

1. The Orientation of Symbolic Vision to the Salvific Vision

Mysteries of the scriptures teach and lead humanity to the salvific vision. Knowledge of symbols is an intermediary sense that makes us knead ourselves with the clear Christological orientations. This in turn leads us to deeper salvific truths in the person of Christ, the Leaven that transforms all. Divinity clothes itself in images to bring himself down to humanity. In Christ is the perfection of this bringing down. In him is the perfect presence of divinity and humanity, the perfect resemblance of man to God by effecting the union of our human nature to his own in view of saving the mortal nature. In him is the curing, enriching, elevation and glorification of human nature by the beauty and the power of attraction of his image.

Knowledge of the symbols is an unveiling of the symbols providing the road to the person and the activities of Christ, the sign and sacrament of salvation. As one reaches the person and activities of Christ, perfection and fullness are found in him. The inner power of the types and symbols leads to Christ and his activities which open the road to the mystery of the Son, the author of salvation. Symbols and types bind together various aspects of the cognitive knowledge of Christ. This knowledge of symbols leads to the way of the Son who guides all on his way by providing the salvific vision which can distinguish between shadow and the reality, between intermediaries and the goal, and above all the relation between opposites. Only through the mystery of Christ one can bridge the opposing experiences of death and resurrection, suffering and success, total spending up for gathering up glory, etc. Thus the knowledge of symbols enables one to travel a long way between opposite poles and the diversities of experiences through the recognition of the mysteries of Christ, the haven of peace (*HS II* 364,9-10) and the harbour of salvific vision. Symbols and types evoke deeper levels of consciousness where the cognition of realities stand beyond the faculties of the intellect and reasoning power. Only faith and its horizon of illumination can integrate such

new levels of consciousness.

2. Salvific Pilgrim Journey and the Power of the Word in Tradition

For Ephrem the historical happening is only a starting point for the interpretation. The literal meaning of the scriptures is only a pale colour adapted for the human nature to catch up with the truth. Literal meaning is an inter phase to connect humanity to the 'hidden meaning.'⁵³ Ephrem locates the biblical truths outside time and space, at a higher sphere where to one has to make a spiritual journey for the realization. In fact the primordial, intermediary and the eschatological realities are connected together by exegetical insights and hermeneutical applications. It is the road of salvation, a journey for spiritual realization.

Biblical interpretation and hermeneutics fall in between the mysteries of revelation and the salvific faith leading to the works of faith which is the state of a living faith. The goal of biblical interpretation is not a mere academic or mental exercise. Interpretation should produce fruits of understanding of the mysteries of salvation. There is a journey from the ontological and gnoseological levels to the soteriological path of understanding.⁵⁴ This in other words means from the literal written word one has to reach the speaking word and again form it to the living word. In other words inspiring Word should guide the people in a journey to the inspiring living tradition. Such a journey took place in the case of Zacchaeus, Samaritan woman at the Jacob's well, the centurion at the foot of the cross and Peter the head of the apostles. In fact all Christian traditions are the embodiments of the living word.

Revelation cannot be fully expressed in the written texts. It is impossible to write down all the Lord had done (Jn 21:25). Hence, "... a vibrant tradition is indispensable to make scripture come alive and maintain its relevance"⁵⁵ As it is in the written scriptures the Spirit is active in the Christian tradition also. Tradition is the living reality for which the written scriptures serve as inspirations. Regarding Christianity, far above the Jewish eschatological hope of

salvation, the eschatological kingdom and hope are already in this world through Christ. This reality of the Kingdom on earth is getting incarnated through the tradition. In fact Christian tradition, by its constant vivacity by the working of the Spirit, makes the community understand and assimilate the scriptures and the working of the Spirit for salvation most effectively. It is in this light *Dei Verbum* instructs, 'Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is committed to the Church' (No. 10). Hence, the inspiring and guiding power of the Christian living tradition has to be cultivated and maintained.

3. Salvific Communion through the Word of God in Christian Tradition

In the OT there are symbols and types that were in a way looking on to Christ for their fullness. After the Christ-event there are symbols and types demonstrating Christ in the life patterns and views of Christians. In fact the demonstration of Christ to the world is done by the witnessing life of Christians which again is seen in concrete in the actual living traditions of Christians. Thus religious practices, theological reflections, scriptural exegesis and interpretation, spiritual exercises, ascetical life, mystical contemplation, etc., are always exercised in an environment of the faith horizon concretized in particular Christian traditions. All these dynamics are governed by the scriptural interpretations and renewal of the tradition.

In a faith horizon any activity is not a mere subjective unilateral factor but a mutuality. Divine inspiration and providence call upon the human subjective consciousness to enter into engagement. Hence, in the case of biblical interpretation far above the objective analysis and search, a more subjective and heuristic experiential understanding and growth are aimed at. Any activity concerned with religious faith and reflection are not mere academic or objective search but more of a subjective and heuristic experiential learning and personal growth. Scriptures are not for mere informative gifts. They are more of inspirational and transformative

revelations of God that need proper responses from humanity. Mere informative exegesis does not bring us to the goal of the scriptures. Interpretation should inspire transformation and only then the divine inspiration will attain full round of blooming from the Spirit.

Symbols and types of the scriptures are not mere explanations of something but the manifestation of the motivation, action and the direction of movements towards a realization and perfection. Symbols, myths and types can relate themselves with the conscious and unconscious levels of human person. So they are powerful enough to bring the whole personality of a believer into a pattern of personal integration. In other words, symbols and types can integrate the perceived and unperceived, visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious, realized and unrealized elements of human existence. Such fresh integration levels will enable one to generate new levels of consciousness regarding oneself and the world around. Every age needs such fresh integration based on developed levels of consciousness. It is to such levels of integration and communion the Word of God invites humanity. Through the words and deeds of the manifest Son every believer has to get related to the hidden Son. Scriptural exegesis and interpretation should lead to such a relationship with the Son so that one can become an adopted child and a coheir with the Son of God who revealed himself and extended the hand of relationship for all to be saved and be children of God.

Conclusion

Asian Syriac biblical interpretation is one of the constituent elements of Asian Christianity. The Syriac approach to the scriptures is relational and integrative. The divine invitation in divine revelation and human response to the same in the context of salvation are depicted in the scriptures. There is a deeper relationship between God and the orders of his creatures and the divinity is behind the revelation. Hence, only by a sacramental mode of vision in the context of faith can the scriptures be

salvifically understood. In the created nature and in the human history the divine hand is invisibly working. So scriptures have to be approached for a participative experiential understanding of the divine plan. Ephrem the champion of Syriac biblical interpretation holds that the scriptural word has exterior and interior or literal and spiritual senses as the incarnate Word has exterior humanity and interior divinity. As the believer has to travel from the humanity of Christ to the divinity of Christ, in the biblical understanding a pilgrim journey from the literal and historical sense of the word to that of the spiritual and salvation historical sense has to be made. This journey is possible only if the reader and interpreter of the scriptures enter into the horizon of the scriptural truths and the underlying spiritual message of the history of salvation.

The basic salvation historical message has to be attained by the 'eye of faith' of the believer through the biblical symbols and types. All the types and symbols of the scriptures would finally be seen assuming fuller meaning in the mystery of Christ, the second Adam and the unifier of the whole history of salvation. Such a unified vision in Christ will be a synchronic vision of the whole history of salvation. The inspiration of the Spirit is powerful in the sacred authors of the scriptures and the present readers as well as in the interpreter simultaneously. Thus in every interpretation an interplay of the faith horizon of the text and that of the believer and the interpreter takes place. It is in such a situation the believer is enlightened by the interpreter in understanding the salvific message and truth of the scriptures. The scriptural symbols and types by their symbolic and typological networks provide enlightenments to the present day pattern of human behaviour. It is because the general patterns of human nature in the biblical history and in any other period of the history of salvation are same. Therefore a skilful biblical interpreter can bring out enlightenment to any period of the history by bringing out the symbolic spiritual sense of the scriptures through the 'eye of faith'. As Jesus himself

describes, a qualified interpreter is like a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven functioning as a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (cf. Mt 13:52). The literal historical truths of the scriptures may function in a static frame work, but the inner spiritual truths are perennial and applicable to any stage of the history of salvation. Thus the scriptures should be searched with a purpose-seeking quest for the gaining of salvation for all. This search becomes fruitful only through the 'eye of faith' traveling through the faith horizon of the living tradition.

Notes

Abbreviations: *Dem* = Demonstrations of Aphrahat; *FH* = T. KOLLAMPARAMPIL, *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies*, Rome & Bangalore 1997; *Ep* = *Iacobus Sarugensis, Epistulae quot quot supersunt*, Paris 1937, (CSCO 110, Louvain 1965), (ed.) G. OLINDER; *HS* = *Homiliae selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, Vols. I- V, (ed.) P. BEDJAN, Paris-Leipzig 1905-1910; *HTM* = The Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, USA; *LG* = *Liber Graduum*; *SHF* = *Jacques de Sarug, Six Homélie Festales en Prose*, PO 43 (ed.) Frédéric RILLIET, Turnhout/Belgique 1986; *SMS* = *S. Martyrii, qui et Sahdona, quae supersunt omnia*, (ed.) P. BEDJAN, Paris 1902; *TV* = *The True Vine*, Roslindale, USA.

¹*Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 1

²*Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 20

³Cf. S.P. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, (SEERI) 68-76.

⁴Cf. S.P. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 73.

⁵Cf. R. Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism", *Parole de l'Orient* 6-7 (1975-76), 7.

⁶For a detailed exposition of Ephrem's employment of this imagery, see S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 85-97.

⁷Cf. S. P. Brock, "Some Aspects of Greek Words in Syriac" in *Syriac Perspectives*, No. IV, 98-104; "Clothing Metaphors", 14; A. Kowalski, "Rivestiti di gloria", 41-60; A. Kowalski, *Perfezione e Giustizia di Adamo*, 89 (n. 158).

⁸Cf. S. P. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors", in M. Schmidt (ed.), *Typus, Symbole, Allegorie bei den Ostlichen Vatern und ihren Parallelen in Mittelalter*, Eichstatter Beitrage 4, 1982, 11.

⁹Cf. S. P. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors," 11-13.

¹⁰CSCO 186 (syri 82), 120; tr. S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 85; see also "Clothing Metaphors", 13.

- ¹¹Cf. Jacob of Serugh, *HS* II 357,10-365,2/*FH* VIII 209-372; 469,8-470,14; III 15-16; 653,1-12; IV 580,5-22; IV 803-817 {*esp.* 810,19-811,2; 814,13-22}; V 607,3-22.
- ¹²Cf. Jacob of Serugh, *HS* III 653,9-12.
- ¹³Tr. S.P. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 102-3.
- ¹⁴Tr. Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 383.
- ¹⁵Cf. Tr. by S.P. Brock, *Parole de L'Orient* 6/7(1975/6), 25,26.
- ¹⁶S.P. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 42.
- ¹⁷Cf. T. Kollampampil, *Salvation in Christ according to Jacob of Serugh*, 63.
- ¹⁸Cf. *HS* III, 287, 1-12; tr. S.P. Brock, 'On the Veil of Moses' (ls. 69-80), *Studies in Syriac Spirituality*, p. 73-80.
- ¹⁹Cf. *HS* III 297, 5-16.
- ²⁰Cf. *HS* IV 16, 15; 88, 3-12.
- ²¹Cf. *HS* II 366, 13,14/*FH* VIII, 403,4.
- ²²Tr. S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (1992), 57.
- ²³Cf. S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (1992), 46,47.
- ²⁴Tr. S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (1992), 49.
- ²⁵A late fourth century Syriac writing on steps of spiritual growth known in its Latin title *Liber Graduum*.
- ²⁶Tr. S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (1992), 50.
- ²⁷Cf. Homily "On the Kingdom of Heaven is Like unto Leaven", ET from HTM, TV 3 (1989), 48.
- ²⁸Pontifical biblical commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, (Rome 1993), 86,87.
- ²⁹Cf. S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 27.
- ³⁰P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 12.
- ³¹P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 314.
- ³²P. RICOEUR, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 290; He clarifies further, "Analogy is a non conclusive reasoning that proceeds through a fourth propositional term."
- ³³P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 290; cf. also "Penser", 64; "Epistémologie", 161.
- ³⁴Tr. Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 303.
- ³⁵Cf. Gen 6:9.
- ³⁶Cf. Gen 5:3.
- ³⁷According to a tradition in the book, *The Cave of Treasures*, the place where Jesus was crucified was the place where Isaac also was bound down for sacrifice.
- ³⁸Cf. Gen 25:29-34; 27:1-45.
- ³⁹Cf. Judg 6:36-40.

⁴⁰Cf. Judg 11:30-40.

⁴¹tr. from HTM, TV 3.3 (1992), pp. 51-52; cf. HS I 49; II 30; IV 322.

⁴²Cf. also *Ep XXIII* 196-197.

⁴³Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible*, 83, 84; See also J. A. Fitzmyer, *Interpretation of the Bible*, 130-131.

⁴⁴Cf. T. Kollamparampil, *Salvation in Christ according to Jacob of Serugh*, 82-5.

⁴⁵P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 3.

⁴⁶Cf. A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 133.

⁴⁷Cf. A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 136ff.

⁴⁸N. Mitchell, "Symbols are Actions, Not Objects", *Living Worship* 13/2 (1977), 1-2.

⁴⁹P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 42.

⁵⁰Cf. T. Bou Mansour, *La Pensee Symbolique de saint Éphrem*, 19.

⁵¹Tr. S. P. Brock, "On the Veil of Moses", 72 (Is. 19,20).

⁵²Cf. Jacob of Serugh, *SMS* 758,6-7/*FH* I 803-804; *HS* I 454,15-16/*FH* X 201-202.

⁵³Cf. Lucas Van Rompey, 'The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation', in M. Saebø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, The History of its Interpretation*, Vol. I, (Göttingen 1996), 624-626).

⁵⁴Cf. T. Bou Mansour, *La Pensee Symbolique de saint Éphrem*, 25.

⁵⁵The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 28.