

BOOK REVIEWS

Emmanuel Kaniyampampil, *The Spirit of Life: A Study of the Holy Spirit in the Early Syriac Tradition*, Vadavathoor, Kottayam: OIRSI Publications (No.268), 2003, pp.XVI + 351, Rs. 200 (\$ 20.00).

This book is a doctoral dissertation defended at the Catholic University of Paris under the direction of Professor Dr. Pierre Yousif, who has written a foreword to the study. In this foreword Prof. Yousif describes this work as "a very invaluable contribution in the field of Syor-Chaldaic Patrology" (p. vii).

This study is concerned with the understanding of the Holy Spirit in the very early years of Christianity (1st c. - the middle of the 4th c.). Kaniyamaprapil limits his study to the literature that emanated from the earliest Syriac-speaking Christian communities, where faith in the spirit was very rich and alive. Thus the field of his research is the Early Syriac tradition. The author has studied the very early literatures, such as the *Odes of Solomon* (abbreviation *Odes*) the *Acts of Thomas* (abbrev. *Acts*) and the writings of Aphrahat. We do not know why the author has taken the *Odes* and the *Acts*, both of which belong to the Apocrypha of course he is free to choose his primary sources. Unfortunately the author has not included the works of Ephrem of Nisibis, who is almost a contemporary with Aphrahat, as one of his main sources.

In his Introduction the author rightly points out the difference in the thought pattern between the Greek and the Semitic traditions. While the Western mind is guided by the logical and systematizatiional preoccupations, the Eastern thought embraces a mystical and symbolic perspective. Indeed the Oriental outlook displays the biblical especially the Hebrew mentality. Thus "the theology of the Holy Spirit in the early Syriac tradition has the advantage of bringing us closer to the roots of biblical revelation" (p. 4).

After defining the objective of the study the author delineates its method and procedure. He wants to examine the theology of the Holy Spirit in its entirety "through a deeper and critical analysis of the sources" (p. 6). The author divides the study into seven chapters, each of which enunciates a pneumatological theme.

Chapter I is devoted to assess the relevance and significance of the sources for an evaluation of the Eastern theology of the Spirit. The author argues for the Syriac origin of the *Odes*. It uses 15 times the Syriac term *Ruha* for the Spirit. The poet speaks about the function of the Holy Spirit in a believer. Kaniyampampil finds that the Syriac version of *Acts* has 19 references to the Spirit. The Persian sage Aphrahat is regarded as the first Father of the Syrian Church. His works are known as *Demonstrations*, which expose in an orderly way the Christian faith. The author identifies 125 uses of *Ruha* in Aphrahat. At the end of chapter I the author adds a note on the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Syriac.

In Chapter II the author tries to find out the biblical roots of the early Syriac pneumatology. This chapter provides an in-depth study of the theme in *Odes*, *Acts* and Aphrahat. Kaniyampampil deals with three OT topics: the Spirit of God hovers over the primordial waters, the Spirit of God and the original date of Adam, and the revealing and guiding function of the Spirit of God. In the NT the author studies the roles of *Ruha* in the virginal conception, at the baptism of Jesus, the *Ruhadmihiha*, and the inseparable action of the Spirit and the Messiah in the divine salvific mission. In the light of these discussions the author tries to give articulation to an early Syriac pneumatological Christology, although it was only in its nascent stage.

Chapter III is titled "The Prebaptismal Anointing and its Pneumatological Significance." The author is well aware of the importance of such enquiry into the early Syriac Rites for the study of the theology of the Holy Spirit. The pre-baptismal anointing was the first Rite of Christian initiation in the early Syriac tradition. The

Acts provides five reports of Christian initiation: the baptisms of Kings Gundaphorus (chs. 25-27), of a woman (ch. 49), of Mygdonia (chs. 120-121), of General Sifur (chs. 131-132), and of Vizan (chs. 157-158). Kaniyamparampil admits that in Aphrahat we have only indications of the Rites of initiation. Two expressions, "the giving of the sign," and "the signing of the mystery of life" seem to point to the prebaptismal anointing. The author also refers to the prebaptismal anointing in the Syriac *Didascalia*. Next he looks into the meaning of the prebaptismal anointing and its implications. According to him, the *Acts* considers the Rite of anointing as a channel for the reception of the Spirit. He holds that the prebaptismal anointing in the early Syriac tradition "occupied a place of precedence or priority over the Rite of baptism in water" (p. 105). This has a pneumatological significance. The coming of the Spirit inaugurates a person's Christian life. "The Spirit generates the necessary faith in the Messiah and opens the way for a new convert to enter into relationship with the Messiah (p. 113). This assertion has rich theological significance, which, however, calls for a more in-depth study.

"The Holy Spirit in the Mysteries of Baptism and the Eucharist" is the theme of chapter IV. First the author exposes the active function and reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism. The *Odes* speaks about the circumcision of the heart in the Holy Spirit. It also uses the expressions "a covering of the Spirit" and "putting on the role of light." Aphrahat has the phrase, "put on the Holy Spirit and be born anew." Three actions are attributed to the Spirit: to open the heavens, to descend from heaven, and to hover over the baptismal water. As a baptized person puts on the Holy Spirit, he begins to live a life in the Holy Spirit, which is oriented towards the resurrected life.

The newly baptized person immediately partakes in the Eucharist. *Acts* speaks of the Eucharistic epiclesis in ch. 50. After studying its syriac and Greek versions (pp. 140-153) The author concludes that

there exists a close link between the Spirit and the Eucharist, and this corresponds with the early Syriac understanding of the Eucharist. In my opinion this is an understatement. The author would have used more vibrant language to express this mystical and most sublime phenomenon of the Eucharistic Epiclesis.

In the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat there is no direct and explicit presentation on the Spirit's presence in the Eucharistic body of Jesus. Aphrahat only makes some implicit references, especially in 12:8. There he emphasizes the reception of the life (salvation) as an important effect of the Eucharist.

The author titles chapter V "The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life." Early Syriac theology envisages the whole Christian life as an ever-guiding and dynamic presence of the Holy spirit. The *Odes* presents the Christian life as a Spirit-filled life. It speaks of the joy of being in the Spirit of the Lord. The poet uses imagery to express this pneumatic bliss. The Spirit is compared in 28:1-2 to a mother-bird, whose closeness brings joy to her nestlings. This celestial joy induces one to sing the praises of the Lord. Verses 6:1-2 puts it very beautifully:

"As the wind moves through the par
And the strings speak,
So the Spirit of the Lord speaks through my members
And I speak through his love."

Further, it makes one rest in the Spirit and near to the Lord (36:1-2). Kaniyamparampil interprets this rest as "as inter-penetration of a believer by the presence of the Spirit who raises or elevates him up to heaven while on earth itself" (p. 167). But he does not explain further the meaning of inter-penetration. Of course the poet of the *Odes* was gifted with a mystical intuition into the phenomenon of human-divine union. I would have appreciated if the author could articulate this mystical reality in poetical and experiential terms.

Aphrahat in his *Demonstrations* says that the Lord has sowed on the earth of human body the seed, that is his Spirit. It is the duty of Christians to produce the fruits of the Spirit. The Risen Lord imparts his Spirit upon Christians, and they are transformed into the Temple of the Spirit of the Messiah. They have become the abode of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Hence they are obliged not to grieve the Spirit, but honor the Spirit by their day to day life. According to Aphrahat the Spirit may depart from a person if he grieves the Spirit. Aphrahat holds the opinion that one can through prayer regain the Spirit who has departed from the sinful soul. According to him the Spirit who dwells in a Christian will at his death return to the Lord, and will become the advocate of the righteous ones. Aphrahat gives certain functions to the Spirit at the resurrection. The Spirit will open the tomb, raise up the body and clothe it in glory. The human being will be transformed into a spiritual being. The risen one will fly to meet the King by the power of the spirit.

In Chapter VI, the author makes certain reflections on the symbols of the Holy Spirit. As Oriental theology widely uses symbols, this topic is very relevant for a study of the Holy Spirit in the early Syriac tradition. Biblical symbols and images form the core of Eastern theology. The author has selected four topics for his investigation: the Holy Spirit as feminine, as living water, as salt, and as clothing. In his study of the Holy Spirit as feminine, the author focuses his attention on the grammatical feminine feature of the Syriac term *Ruha*, the Spirit's action of hovering both in Bible and in early Syriac literature, the motherhood of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit as mother of Christians. As a conclusion the author draws some theological implications of the maternal imagery of the Holy Spirit. He correctly observes that the syriac writers were not emphasizing the "feminity of the Spirit, but rather the feminine-maternal function of the Spirit towards Christians" (p. 222).

The author of *Odes* makes elaborate exposition of the theme of the Holy Spirit as the living water. It is said in 11:5-8 that he drinks the living water of immortality. In 6:8-18 he develops the symbolism of the living water. In 30:1-7 he exclusively concentrates on the symbolism of the living water. The author examines all these texts in the light of the biblical symbolism of water and concludes that the living water in *Odes* seems to denote the symbol of the Spirit (pp. 235-236).

On the theme "The Holy Spirit as salt," Kaniyamparampil exposes its rich symbolism in Aphrahat in the light of biblical and patristic traditions. He finds out that the Spirit functions as "an antidote against a Christian's moral corruption that makes him a slave of the evil one. As salt prevents material corruption, the Spirit is said to hinder spiritual corruption . . . Spirit . . . preserves and gives the taste of divine life to the Christians" (pp. 247-248).

Both *Odes* and Aphrahat speaks of clothing with the Spirit. According to *Odes* "The Holy Spirit is the best garment that a believer can put on to cover up the nakedness of sin" (p.253). For Aphrahat "It is through the Spirit's clothing that a Christian will achieve the final glory of resurrection" (p. 254). The author thus concludes his study of the theme: "Being clothed with the Spirit indicates the reality that a person totally belongs to God and that reveals also the activity of the Spirit as salvific and divine" (p. 255).

The author has devoted the final chapter to the study of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity. He wants to find out how the early Syriac theology expresses concretely its faith in the Spirit together with the Father and the Son. He examines the early Trinitarian expressions and the place of the Spirit in the Syriac tradition. In the light of his study Kaniyamparampil observes that the three divine names appear in the *Odes*, *Acts* and the Aphrahat. However, they do not use the title "Trinity." The Spirit is praised and glorified together with the Father and the Son. The three divine names are presented in their soteriological and doxological dimensions. Thus the early Syriac theology looks at the Trinity in relation to humankind.

The book ends with a general conclusion of eight pages. Kaniyampampil clearly pinpoints that the early Syriac pneumatology focuses on the human-oriented salvific actions of the Holy Spirit. It gives us “a keen awareness of the inevitable creative action and the all-embracing presence of this Spirit of God” (p. 311). Eastern pneumatology is fully biblical and mystical. Intuitive and experiential dimensions are its traits. Hence it is embedded in liturgy. The Holy Spirit is actively present in the mysteries. The Syriac tradition envisages Christian life as a life in the Holy Spirit. The early Syriac theology depicts the Holy Spirit as the divine life of the regenerated Christian. “The Trinitarian doxology sums up the Christian response to God’s life-giving activity to human beings in and through His Messiah and His Spirit” (p. 317). Indeed, as the author aptly concludes, “It is in and through the work of the Spirit that the believer experiences salvation in Christ” (p. 317).

Kaniyampampil has done a meticulous study on the theme of the Holy Spirit in the early Syriac tradition. The bibliography is almost exhaustive. The author makes use of not only the texts of *Acts*, *Odes* and *Aphrahat*, but also the works of Ephrem and other patristic authorities as well as modern authors. Throughout the study he strives to keep a balanced position, avoiding exaggerations. The thematic index given will help the students of the Spirit of Life to delve into the richness of Syriac theology. The study of Kaniyampampil has made this reviewer a lover especially of the *Odes*. To sum up, academics will esteem Kaniyampampil’s work as a basic introductory study on the theme of the Holy Spirit in the early Syriac tradition. I hope that the author will bless us by undertaking more elaborate and profound studies on *Odes*, *Acts* and *Aphrahat*.

“A cup of milk was offered to me,

And I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord’s kindness.” (*Odes* 19:1).

Paul Kalluveetil, CMI