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THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIPLE GRADATED CHURCH A Theological Analysis of the *Kṯāṯā D- Massqāṯā (Book of Steps)* with Particular Reference to the Writings of Aphrahat and John the Solitary

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1. Introduction

The 'Church of God,' being a divine mystery, is beyond any human comprehension. However, several persons have tried to describe her nature in different languages and multiple styles, using definitions, descriptions, images, types, allegories, etc. The present study is based on such an attempt of an anonymous person, the author of the *Book of Steps (Kṯāṯā d-Massqāṯā)* from the late 4th or beginning of the 5th cent. AD of Syriac milieu. The *Kṯāṯā d-Massqāṯā (KM)* is a collection of thirty

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homilies (*mēm̄rē*) and a preface (*mamlā*) of the Syriac editor who compiled these 30 *mēm̄rē*. This anonymous work is well known by the title given to its Latin translation *Liber Graduum* (LGr). The attention of this dissertation falls on the anonymous author's teaching on the "triple gradation" regarding the Church. For him the Church exists on three levels *viz.*, the 'visible Church,' the 'Church of the heart' and the 'heavenly Church.'

The contextualization of a text from an anonymous author who is from the Syriac Orient and whose identity and period of life are still in dispute is not easy. Hence, the works of some other ancient Syriac writers are also analyzed giving particular emphasis to Aphrahat († c. 345),¹ who is believed to have lived just before the author of the KM and John the Solitary (c. 5th cent.), the immediate follower² to see whether the KM is unique in its views on the triple gradated Church or simply follows a traditional line of thought.

2. Sources

The present study is based mainly on the sole critical edition of the KM by Michael Kmosko,³ published in 1926 as the third volume of *Patrologia Syriaca*. For the *Expositions* of Aphrahat, we mainly use the critical edition of Parisot⁴ and consult the edition of Wright.⁵ From a large number of monastic works attributed to John the Solitary this study focuses mainly on the discourse, *On the Soul* edited by S. Dederling.⁶ In addition to these three authors' works, writings of some of their contemporary writers as well as certain liturgical texts of Syriac Churches are also used to deepen this research. The studies

¹Aphrahat was born in the Persian Empire (the exact place is not known) between AD 270 and 285 and died after 345. The sole work of Aphrahat is entitled *Expositions* or *Demonstrations* (*Taḥvyātā*) and was written in Syriac in between 337 and 345 AD.

²In the MSS various works are attributed to this person whose identity is still a riddle for scholars. However, the texts were written in Syriac and probably in the mid 5th cent., and before the Chalcedon council (451 AD) as there is no reference to Christological controversy in the writings, cf. *John the Solitary on the Soul*, tr. M.T. Hansbury, TeCLA 32, Piscataway, NJ 2013, ix.

³Cf. M. Kmosko, ed. - tr., *Liber Graduum*, *Patrologia Syriaca*, III, Parisiis 1926.

⁴For Syriac text with Latin trans. of first 22 *Expositions*, cf. I. Parisot, ed., *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, *Patrologia Syriaca*, I, Parisiis 1894; and for the Syriac text with Latin trans. of 23rd *Exposition*, cf. I. Parisot, ed., *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstratio XXIII de Acino*, *Patrologia Syriaca*, II, Parisiis 1907, 1-489.

⁵W. Wright, ed., *The Homilies of Aphraates, the Persian Sage, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries in the British Museum*, Edinburgh 1869.

⁶S. Dederling, ed., *Johannes Von Lykopolis. Ein Dialog über die Seele und die Affekte des Menschen*, Leipzig - Uppsala - Hagg, 1936.

made on the *KM*, the books and articles related to our subject are consulted as necessary.

3. Methodology

In this research, we follow an analytical-synthetical method. However, to some extent, it is descriptive too. While choosing the methodology we have to respect the characteristics of the Syriac milieu, which is the cradle of our subject matter. Hence, in order to be attuned to the author's style of thought as well as to his historic and cultural context, we have done occasionally a philological analysis of the text and have tried to understand and synthesize the nuances of his expressions.

4. Content and Structure

Apart from a 'General Introduction' and a 'General Conclusion,' this study consists of 4 Chapters, an Appendix which includes a brief study on 'The Pauline Exegesis in the *Ktābī d-Massqātā'*, 'Transliteration Table,' list of 'Abbreviations,' a detailed 'Bibliography' and different 'Indices.'

5. Typography and Mode of Citation

This study has followed the typographical instructions provided by the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome⁷ with slight modifications. However, for the passages from the editions of the early Christian writings in their original language the suggested instructions are not much applicable. Therefore, we have made our own model for those ancient sources and its mode of citation is given in the 'General Introduction.'

6. Limits

For this study, we have used the published critical editions of the authors concerned. Even though the catalogues are consulted, this research has never done a serious analysis of the manuscripts. Since the writings of Aphrahat, the anonymous author of the *KM* and John the Solitary consist of multiple arguments and themes, we were forced to limit our focus only on those themes directly related to the topic of this study, the "triple gradated Church." From the huge corpus of John the Solitary, we have mainly analyzed the discourse *On the Soul*. The search for the similar thoughts in his other works is done only nominally. We analyzed the *KM* to have its vision on the

⁷Cf. R. Meynet - J. Oniszczyk, *Norme tipografiche per la composizione dei testi con il computer*, Roma, 2011⁹.

visible Church and left space for its actualization, for fear that our dissertation would become too vast.

7. Originality and Relevance

While speaking about the originality of the present study, we can claim its uniqueness in the field of previous scholarship. It is true that the *mēmre* XII and XXVIII of the *KM*, those depict the Church in its triple gradated format are translated and briefly treated by some authors like R. Murray⁸ and R. Roux.⁹ However, as far as I know, a detailed study that we made with particular reference to Aphrahat and John the Solitary is a pioneer attempt. The relevance and originality of this study may not formulate new theories of ecclesiology; rather, it hopes to explain the pedagogical style of ancient 'spiritual fathers' in doing theology in the context of ordinary life situations.

8. Development of the Theme

From the detailed study that we have done on this huge and complex work, it is possible to say that the *KM* took several years for its formation and hence it reflects fluctuations and change in its attitudes. Hence, we have to accept the fact that the *KM* offers the possibility of different modes of readings.

The first chapter is a general study on the *KM*. A *Status Quaestionis* is provided. In addition to that, it includes a study of the historical and theological background of the anonymous author and the addressed community. We have briefly mentioned the manuscripts of the *KM* so far discovered and have tried to find out its channels of transmission. A brief study of the biblical canon used by our author has helped us to understand his exegetical mind. The Messalian connection is also treated briefly and certain proofs for its non-Messalian character are brought out. In short, in the first chapter we have made an attempt to recreate the 'cradle' of the *KM* community to achieve the right skill to interpret this ancient literary piece.

The second chapter has analyzed the whole work to see whether in addition to the 'Church' the author presents any other reality in

⁸Cf. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, London-New York 1974, 2004², 262-276.

⁹ Cf. R. Roux, "Note sull' ecclesiologia del Liber Graduum," in E. Vergani - S. Chialà, ed., *Le Chiese sire tra IV e VI secolo: dibattito dottrinale e ricerca spirituale. Atti del 2^o Incontro sull'Oriente Cristiano di tradizione siriana*, Milano 2003, 53-72.

'gradation,' more specifically in 'triple gradation.' It is found that the author and the *KM* community were guided by different dualistic tendencies of their time and were influenced by an asceticism guided by virginity. As an impact of this, it seems that the *KM* holds bipartite groupings like "Perfect and Upright," "major commandments and minor commandments," "solid food and milk and vegetables," etc. Then why the author holds a triple gradation while speaking about the Church? From a close reading of the whole text of the *KM*, we have realized that the author is not holding any strict dualistic ideas, but he speaks about several grades. It is true that bipartite groupings are projected evidently. However along with them the author describes a third state in each category, *viz.*, a state 'beyond perfection,' a state 'beyond any laws,' a state in which we can 'eat our Lord,' etc. The third state is presented as an eschatological fulfilment that can be anticipated right now. We have kept all these gradated realities in a frame and could see that his vision on triple gradated Church never stands alone but follows the same pattern that goes in parallel with other triple gradated realities. From the analysis of this common pattern, we have seen that they are spiritual divisions rather than social. Towards receiving more support for our argument that they are not hierarchical divisions, we have extended this study to see whether the *KM*'s protagonists the "Perfect" and the "Upright" are appearing in any other contemporary movements. The systems of Manicheans, Marcionites, and proto-monastic groups are analyzed to see whether there existed any similar groupings to make sure that they are not social divisions. Our study has proved that the author shares many thoughts with the above-mentioned movements but never identifies his protagonists the "Perfect" and the "Upright" with any of them.

The *KM* depicts the state of "Perfection" using sharp ascetical requirements like renunciation of 'marriage,' 'possessions,' and 'work.' Hence it seems that there exists an unbridgeable chasm between the "Perfect" and the "Upright." Our study could bring out the symbolism behind these expressions and hence it presents the borderline between the Perfection and the Uprightness as one that can be crossed. The efforts taken by a person to achieve the state of Perfection is described as a war. Hence, the protagonist of the *KM* is a "person" who is a 'warrior' fighting in the field to achieve this state of Perfection.

The third chapter is a study focused on this 'warrior.' For that we analyzed the *KM* in an anthropological point of view. Even though

the author speaks about three elements in man [body, soul and inbreathing] he never intended them as three separate components in man. For him the “body” alone or “soul” alone cannot constitute a person. It is notable that in chapter three, the “perfection (*gmīrūtā*)” receives a new definition as the “integrity of a person,” *i.e.* an agreement between one’s “inner man” and “outer man.” In an integral or perfect man the “visibility / revealed” meets the “invisibility / hidden.” The capacity of one’s body to be visible, as well as its capability to encounter this visible creation, is contrasted with the capacity of one’s soul to be invisible to the physical eyes and its power to perceive the hidden invisible realities. In this context, the concept of *rāzā* is introduced. A person using his bodily capacities can have the power to see the visible symbols (*rāzē*) found in this world. However, to see the hidden power in them he needs “purity of the heart,” or “robe of glory” or “luminous eyes” or “mirror of the heart.” All these ascetical expressions are imageries used to describe the nature of the ‘war’ being waged in a person to achieve the state of the “Perfection.”

Chapter three also includes the analysis of the writings of Aphrahat and John the Solitary to see whether they also share any tripartite schemes. Aphrahat presents the baptized person as a tripartite being, but we could not see any defined tripartite spiritual systems in him. However, in the writings of John the Solitary, especially in his dialogue *On the Soul* there is a well-developed tripartite system. Solitary calls them three Orders (ܐܟܫܐ), or three ways of life. As the basis of this tripartite scheme, John the Solitary follows Pauline expressions from the first Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:3), (1 Cor 2:14), and (1 Cor 2:15). He used the abstract nouns that derived from their Syriac equivalents, *viz.*, “*pagrānūā*” (on the level of the body), “*napšānūā*” (on the level of soul)” and “*rūhānūā*” (on the level of Spirit)” for developing his tripartite scheme.

While comparing the *KM* with the writings of John the Solitary, giving particular emphasis to his dialogue *On the Soul* we can claim a growth in insight while moving from one author to the other. In the *KM*, the tripartite spiritual system was almost in a crude form and was on a path of evolution. In John the Solitary, it became a well-defined clear system and it was taken by many of his successors and became a major current from the 6th century onwards among Syriac Christian spiritual writers.

The fourth chapter, focuses on the central theme of this dissertation. The three main concepts of the title of the dissertation, *i.e.* “mystery,” “Church” and “triple gradation” are studied here. The Syriac equivalent of mystery is “*rāzā*”. The usage of this term and its synonyms in the *KM* are analyzed in detail and the analysis ended in a conclusion that every *rāzā* holds a triple gradated experience and this triple gradated experience is subjective and goes with the experience of a tripartite person.

The next concept under our analysis was “Church,” the “*ēdtā*”. An etymological as well as a philological study was made on the term. We can say that for the author “*ēdtā*” is a “*rāzā*” and hence holds a triple gradation. The term “*ēdtā*” in the *KM* is a multi-faceted term and it contains several significances like, “abode of God,” “assembly of faithful,” “sacred building for worship,” etc. In addition to these significances we have one more meaning which is the most emphasized significance of the “*ēdtā*” in the *KM*; *i.e.* the “Perfect” as an abode of the Lord and hence a “church.” This thought can be a Pauline exegesis and a detailed study is made on the nature of Pauline influences in this field.

Mainly in *Mēm̄rā* XII, the author presents the Church at three levels. This excellent discourse describes the personal spiritual life in terms of the Church. The “Church of heaven” - the “truth” of God, is present in its image in the visible Church. Hence the visible Church is the “*rāzā*” of the true Church in heaven. We cannot see any detailed narration about the heavenly Church in the *KM*, may be for the purpose of affirming its hiddenness. However, the narration of the visible ministry is there in detail. The “visible Church,” the person as a church who is the venue of the “Church of the heart” and the “heavenly Church” are depicted following a similar style. There exists similarity in their characteristics, especially in their architectural structure and liturgy.

Even though the author presents the Church in three grades and says that there exists a difference in glory and distinct duty, he confirms the fact that the same Spirit is working in all the three. So we can infer that these three grades are the subjective perception of the mystery of the Church by individuals at different spiritual levels. At the end of this chapter an attempt is made to find whether the idea of “triple gradated Church” exists in other writers. It is found that Ephrem, Pseudo-Macarius, Balai and John the Solitary share similar thoughts.

9. Conclusion

Even though the title of this dissertation is “The Mystery of the Triple Gradated Church,” the study that we made is not purely an ecclesiological study. There is a reason for that. The author of the *KM* never tries to present the “Church” in a systematic or dogmatic way. While speaking about the triple gradated Church, his focus was not on the “Church” as an institution or as a community, but on the person who lives ‘in the Church’ and as a ‘church’ with filial rights. Thus this dissertation tries to prove the thesis that “the triple gradated Church in the *KM* never refers to three hierarchical groups, but to the spiritual maturity of a tripartite person in experiencing and comprehending the mystery of the one Church.” Hence, the thirty *mēm̄rē* of the anonymous author of the *KM*, deserve a careful listening from the children of the Church of any generation and its message has a perennial value. The possibilities are opened for further studies to bring out the golden thread that unites this 4th / 5th cent. work and its author to the present Church. This study welcomes future scholars to work for the reception of the *KM*’s message in the present ecclesiological context.