

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 11, No. 3, September 2017
Pages: 595-601

New Scholars

FROM ADAM TO MAN: A STUDY ON THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SONSHIP IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS OF APHRAHAT, THE PERSIAN SAGE

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Year: 2017

Introduction

The present study is an attempt to trace the sonship anthropology of Aphrahat in the *Demonstrations*, especially focusing on *Demonstration 17:7*. Aphrahat represents Christianity with its Syrian pedigree. He was born in the Persian Empire. It is believed that he lived in the fourth century. From his own writings, we assume that he was born of pagan parents and later became a Christian by conversion. The name 'Aphrahat' – which is the Syriac version of the Persian *Farhad* – always appears with the title 'Persian Sage.' The only extant work of Aphrahat is known as the *Demonstrations (taḥwiyātā)*,¹ and it was written in Syriac between 337 and 345 A.D.

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¹Cfr. I. Parisot, ed., *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes*, Patrologia Syriaca I, vii.

(*Demonstration* 22:25; *Demonstration* 15:50).² The *Demonstrations*, which are also known as *Homilies* or *Expositions*, are arranged according to the letters of the Syriac alphabet (*Dem.* 23:69). There is no recorded history concerning the personal details of Aphrahat. However, his twenty-three *Demonstrations* are witness to a great theologian of a particular tradition.

Relevance of the Study

Theological anthropology as a science has always made its attempt to explain the mystery of man in a unique way. It depicts man in relation to God. The Christian apologists, especially the Fathers of the Church in the early centuries, enjoy an undeniable originality in this matter. They have approached the mystery of man with a viewpoint that focuses on Christ as its starting point. In this regard, their exposition of human person lays foundation for theological anthropology which has perennial relevance. However, the theological anthropology after the Second Vatican Council highlights a paradigm shift. The teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* dwells on the mystery of man in the light of the incarnate Word (GS, 22). The Christological anthropology of GS builds a correlation between the mystery of man and the mystery of Incarnation.³ The Adam-Christ complementarity that features the theological anthropology of GS later develops into a Christological anthropology. One of the fundamental presuppositions of Christological anthropology is the human perfection attained in Christ. Although this human perfection is a transcendental reality, man can implicitly seek, desire, and hope for this perfection. The human attempt for perfection is also called "hominization." In this regard, in Christological anthropology, the purpose of the divine economy of human salvation is "hominization" with an orientation to "deification." In other words, "hominization" becomes the penultimate of "deification."⁴

The relevance of this study may be weighed on account of the above-mentioned paradigm shift in the theology of man. The present study tries to show how Aphrahat – a representative of the Syriac theological tradition – interprets the mystery of man through Adam-Christ complementarity. Therefore, the significance of this study is twofold. Firstly, this study brings into light the unique reflections of

²Hereafter, *Demonstration* will be referred to as *Dem.*

³Cfr. J. Xavier, "Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes* and Fundamental Theology," *Gregorianum* 91.1 (2010) 130-131.

⁴Cfr. International Theological Commission, *Theology, Christology, Anthropology*, D: 1, 2, M. Sharkey, ed., *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents 1969-1985*, San Francisco, 1989, 207-223.

Aphrahat regarding the mystery of man. His unique vision of man consists in the key concept, “son of God.” Therefore, the study may encourage one to understand how a Syriac theologian symbolically interprets the mystery of man by way of using the biblical figure of Adam.⁵ Secondly, the relevance of this study is related to the general concern of theology. Theology as a science tries to study God as its formal object. However, the science about God can be meaningful only if it is and remains the concern for man. Therefore, from the subjective point of view, theology is that science that deals with the divine-human engagement. This study shows how Aphrahat takes this task seriously through his anthropology of sonship, which may serve as a paradigm for theology, especially for theology of man.

Summary of the Study

The study, apart from a general introduction and conclusion, consists of six chapters.

The **first chapter** serves as an introduction in order to situate Aphrahat in the theological milieu with regard to his life and thought. To carry out that purpose, the chapter deals with three contexts: life, work, and theology of Aphrahat. The first context deals with the personal life and identity of Aphrahat. The history of the life and person of Aphrahat remains a mystery. However, his work owns a credible history since Aphrahat speaks of the date of its composition within the *Demonstrations*. Moreover, the *Demonstrations* enjoy a rich manuscript tradition. The three existing manuscripts and the two editions of them enable one to have an authentic study on Aphrahat. The literary context of Aphrahat includes the literary sources and patterns that he uses for the *Demonstrations*. The Syriac version of the Scriptures with its exegetical styles and other literary patterns constitute the literary context of Aphrahat. The theological context of Aphrahat includes the linguistic, religious, and political situations of his time. Among them, the Jewish-Christian religious background is significant. In this regard, his writings attain an apologetic character which further affirms his relevance in theology.

The **second chapter** takes a different cue. While the first chapter places Aphrahat in the theological realm with regard to his apologetical thought, the second chapter locates Aphrahat in the theological world with special reference to his anthropology. In this regard, the chapter deals with three kinds of anthropologies which

⁵Aphrahat belongs to a particular school of thought, which uses symbolism as its method. The symbolic method of Syriac tradition is based on the key notion of *rāzā* (mystery). Cfr. J. P. Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 28.

seem to have a considerable relationship with the anthropology of Aphrahat. These anthropologies include philosophical, Gnostic, and mythical anthropologies. The main intention to introduce these different kinds of anthropologies is to show how the vision of man is formed in them and how they considerably correspond or differ from the biblical and patristic anthropologies. The theological anthropology of Aphrahat focuses on the biblical figure of Adam which acquires a symbolic interpretation in *Demonstration 17:7*. Therefore, this study considers the anthropology of Aphrahat as 'symbolic anthropology,' and *Demonstration 17:7* as the fundamental locus of his symbolic interpretation.

The next chapters, i. e. third, fourth, and the fifth, explore the theological anthropology of Aphrahat in detail. The exploration in these chapters is carried out under the familiar categories of theological anthropology such as origin, nature, and destiny of man. For the development of each category, this study divides *Demonstration 17:7* into three parts. Moreover, each part serves as the point of departure for the subsequent explanation in the respective chapters.

The **third chapter** deals with the origin of man viewed by Aphrahat. Aphrahat explains the origin of man through the interpretation of Adam. The Genesis account of creation becomes the basis of his interpretation. His anthropological pedagogy focuses on the concept that man is originated as "son of God." One of the apparent features of his nuanced interpretation is that he does not give further details concerning the usual biblical understanding of "Adam is in the image of God." This is due to the context of his argument in *Demonstration 17*. In his response to Jewish criticisms, Aphrahat tries to prove that Christ is both God and Son of God. Though Aphrahat's attempt is to make a Christological defense, his argument takes an anthropological turn. He brings forth the biblical figure of Adam in order to prove the divine sonship of Christ. His anthropological intention is related to the cultural background, especially the Mesopotamian religious tradition of his time. In Mesopotamia, there was a belief that man is created to serve the gods. Aphrahat changes this Mesopotamian cultural view of man as "servant of God" with his Christian reading.

The **fourth chapter** explains how Aphrahat views the nature of man in the *Demonstrations*. The unique interpretation of the term "nature" (*kyānā*) with its clear distinction from other theological traditions highlights the vision of Aphrahat concerning the nature of man. Aphrahat views two stages of creation of man in *Demonstration*

17:7. They include “forming” and the “breathing of God from His Spirit.” According to Aphrahat, they are not simple divine activities in the creation of man. Rather, they are divine interventions that enable man to assume his nature. Aphrahat upholds that the concept of “forming” is the reception of the image of God by Adam. However, according to Aphrahat, the real image of God is Christ. Therefore, Christ becomes the heavenly prototype of the “earthly Adam” (humanity). Moreover, Aphrahat includes another divine activity to denote the process by which “earthly Adam” receives the image of the heavenly prototype. The divine activity is the “breathing of God from His Spirit.” The divine activity of the bestowal of the Spirit enables man to hold the image of God in two ways: supernatural and natural. The supernatural way implies the “elevated nature” of man and the natural way constitutes the body-soul aspect of man (*Dem.* 9:6; *Dem.* 9:14). While the “elevated nature” implies the paradisiacal state of man, the “living soul” implies the natural, earthly way of living the “elevated nature” (*Dem.* 14:22).

The **fifth chapter** deals with the destiny of man viewed by Aphrahat. Aphrahat views human destiny mainly in terms of divine economy of human salvation, which he explains through the notion of “indwelling.” At the time of creation, man is originally endowed with the Spirit of God, which defines his human identity. The human identity is the subsequent result of human intellectual faculty by which man acknowledges God and thereby attains the divine “indwelling” in him. Nevertheless, the sin of Adam frustrates this original potential of man to become the “temple for God, his Creator.” Consequently, Adam loses his human identity, the Spirit of life, and Paradise. Therefore, according to Aphrahat, the destiny of man is to regain these original benefits of Adam. Aphrahat highlights both divine initiative and human response with regard to the attempt of man to regain his destiny. The divine initiative includes the incarnation, baptism, and the resurrection of Jesus. In the incarnation, Christ leaves his “heavenly nature” and descends into “earthly nature” (*Dem.* 6:10). Aphrahat views the Incarnation of Christ in terms of the Syriac imagery of “put on body” (*Dem.* 22:4; *Dem.* 23:20). According to Aphrahat, Christ is not the ‘redeemer’ but the “Life-Giver” (*Dem.* 6:9). However, in Aphrahat’s anthropological framework, the human response also plays a key role with regard to one’s attainment of destiny and salvation. Aphrahat portrays this teaching through the notion of “grieving the Spirit.” The concept points to man’s obligation to keep the Spirit in purity, which one has received at the time of baptism.

The **sixth chapter** is the final outcome of this dissertation. The chapter is a critical evaluation of the theological anthropology of Aphrahat. It is done mainly by focusing on three dimensions. They include assimilation, evaluation, and contemporary relevance. The overview of the "sonship anthropology" of Aphrahat, which this study has dealt with, shows a clear paradigm shift from the philosophical, Gnostic, and mythical anthropologies. The central difference is that the point of departure for the anthropology of Aphrahat is *theos* rather than *anthropos*. Moreover, Aphrahat views man in terms of the divine-human relationship. The ultimate aim of this divine-human engagement is the dynamism of unity or "oneness"/"singleness." However, this dynamism of "oneness"/"singleness" is not only an otherworldly reality but also an ongoing process that involves both the divine initiative and the human response. This dynamics of divine-human relationship is the result of man's identity as "son of God" by way of his creation. In the light of this understanding, this study views the anthropology of Aphrahat as "sonship anthropology" which functions under the dynamics of "son and one." The "sonship anthropology" with its "son and one" dynamism is not a traditional anthropology. It has its later reflections in the teachings of the Church and modern authors as well. Moreover, it is relevant in some areas of human life as well especially in terms of morality and theology. From the point of view of morality, the "son and one" anthropology provides an ethical paradigm regarding the source of the origin of the notion of human dignity. The "son and one" anthropology shows a relational dimension of human dignity that has its later development in the teachings of the Church (GS, 19), and in the anthropologies of Rahner and Ratzinger. The "son and one" anthropology gains its relevance for (fundamental) theology based on the Christocentric anthropology initiated with the Second Vatican Council, especially in its teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* 22 and 41. The post-conciliar interpretative developments of these documents gave way to different kinds of anthropological models. A common feature that is reflected in all these models is "To follow Christ the perfect human is to become more human oneself." The "son and one" anthropology also presupposes a growth into perfection of one's humanity (humanness) merited after the "indwelling" of Christ in a person. In this regard, one may view the "son and one" anthropology of Aphrahat as the continuous attempt of a person to perfect his humanity (humanness) by making sure the "indwelling" of Christ in him as a constant reality accompanied by a life of faith in *praxis*. Therefore, the "son and one" anthropology is not *informative* but *performative*.

In summary, sonship anthropology of Aphrahat is the divine pedagogy of human salvation with divine initiative and human response. While the divine initiative is marked by the gift of the Spirit of God, the human response involves the responsible life of faith and morals. The responsibility of faith implies the acknowledgement of God as Creator and the moral responsibility entails 'not grieving' the Spirit of God. The final aim of both these dimensions is to safeguard the "indwelling" of Christ in man (oneness) as a constant reality. While the first dimension helps one to preserve the human identity, the second dimension facilitates the eternal salvation. In any case, the dynamism of "son and one" characterizes the reality of human life with its natural and supernatural dimensions. In other words, in terms of the post-conciliar understanding, one may qualify the "sonship anthropology" of Aphrahat as "hominization" with a potential for "divinization" that further denotes the future relevance of it as an anthropological model.

Conclusion

We live in a globalized world where new 'theologies' emerge every day. As a result, the 'God-talk' in the modern world becomes all the more challenging. Theology needs to be reasonable in a world of human longing for knowledge. Therefore, the study of Aphrahat's theological anthropology, which is imbued with symbolic insights, may have perennial value in the midst of these challenges of theology. In this regard, this study would like to point out some of the possible areas of further research. For instance, one can continue the research by taking into consideration "son and one" as an anthropological model and its subsequent application for different theological and non-theological disciplines. Christological anthropology, ecology, and Jewish-Christian dialogue may constitute some of the areas of attention. This study hopes for future investigations on Aphrahat's anthropology. The conclusions of this study are based on the sonship anthropology of Aphrahat in *Demonstration* 17:7. Here we are reminded of the words of Aphrahat himself: "Everyone speaks thus to the audience, according to what he understands. I have written these things even if some of the words do not correspond with other speakers, but I say thus, that those wise men have spoken well, but it seemed to me (good) to speak in this way" (*Dem.* 22:26).