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## **THE NEW TESTAMENT SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ECCLESIAL TERM DEACON**

**Devamitra Neelanakvil<sup>♦</sup>**

*Ujjain, India*

The NT is the first and fundamental source concerning the origin of the diaconate. Though disputed by a group of exegetes, the event found in Acts 6 is traditionally considered to be the historical origin of the NT office of the diaconate. Later in 1 Timothy 3 there is a presentation of the qualities of the Deacons. Apart from these two texts, the NT usage of the word 'Deacon' or 'servant' (*msemsana*, *diakonos*) in different contexts is also important, as it shed light to the NT meaning of the diaconate.

### **1. Meaning and Etymology of *Msemsana* and *Diakonos***

The important term of our concern found in the NT and later in general ecclesiastical terminology is 'servant' or 'deacon' (*msemsana*, *diakonos*). This section is dedicated to narrate the meaning of this key term in the Syriac and Greek NT.

#### **1.1. *Msemsana***

The root form of the word *msemsana* is *sames* which means to serve or to minister to. The word in its secular sense can also have the meaning of someone who performs a service, though it is not all that common. This term is mostly used in the ecclesiastical circle.<sup>1</sup> But the word *abda* is very common in the secular sense of 'slave' (just like

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<sup>♦</sup>**Dr Devamitra Neelanakvil** is a Syro-Malabar Catholic priest working in the *Ad Gentes* mission of Ujjain. He holds a Licentiate in Theology from Saint Anselm (Rome) and Doctorate in Oriental Sciences from Pontifical Oriental Institute (Rome). He is a member of the Synodal committee for Liturgy and is the secretary of the committee for the preparation of the liturgical texts in Hindi. Email: vdevamitra@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>*A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 308.

Greek *dulos*). The Syriac verb *abd* means 'to do', rather than 'to serve,' hence the translated as well as the attributed meaning would have been 'a worker' or 'a doer.' The NT and ecclesiastical sense of 'slave' is probably due to the influence, from the OT or the Hebrew '*ebed*, (servant/slave), and '*abad*, ' to serve.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2. Diakonos

The Greek term *diakonos* represents one who renders dignified service. One of the extra-biblical uses of the term *diakonos* is found in the Greek mystery religions, where a certain service was rendered to the divinity as a cult. The ancient Greeks considered this service as received from above. These deacons of Greek religion were also messengers of the deity apart from the service they rendered to the people as a cult. The official messengers of a noble family or of the citizens were also called deacons in the ancient Greece.<sup>3</sup> In the ancient Greek society a deacon can be also a person who is involved in socio-political field. Thus divine and political dimensions are seen in the Greek concept of pre-Christian diaconate. Hence, it was in a certain sense an honour and recognition than a free service coming from freewill. Being a divine-political service in the society, the ancient Greek concept of diaconate lacked the possibility of serving the poor and strangers which did not foster honour and recognition in the society.<sup>4</sup> The term *dulos*, however, represents one who serves under a task master under pressure, or simply a slave. This term was not much in use in ancient Greece.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The NT Usage

In the NT the word 'servant' or 'Deacon' (*msemsana*, *diakonos*) is used in different shades of meaning in different contexts. At times the Greek terms change according to the context.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>A *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 397.

<sup>3</sup>*Thesaurus Graecae Linguae ab H. Stephanus Constructus et Aliis, III*, Graz: Akademische Druck-Und Verlagsanstalt, 1954, 1186-1187; M. Pavone, *La Preghiera di Ordinazione del Diacono nel Rito Romano e nel Rito Bizantino-Greco*, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, 101.

<sup>4</sup>Pavone, *La Preghiera di Ordinazione del Diacono*, 102.

<sup>5</sup>Pavone, *La Preghiera di Ordinazione del Diacono*, 110-111.

<sup>6</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. II*, G. Kittel, ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, 81-93.

## 2.1. Mentality of Jesus the Servant: Model of Christian Service

One of the NT occurrences of the word *msemsana* or *diakonos* in the Gospels is when Jesus teaches His disciples about humble service. This teaching takes place in two different contexts, namely, on the occasion of the request of the sons of Zebedee and at the last supper.

Matthew 20:20ff. and Mark 10:35ff. are the request of the mother of Zebedee's sons,<sup>7</sup> asking Jesus to grant her two sons to sit one at the right and the other at the left of Jesus in His kingdom (Mt 20:21). At the end of the dialogue, the other Apostles were indignant as Jesus told them that they (Zebedee's sons) will indeed drink His cup but the choice of sitting at the right and the left of Jesus belongs to those whom have been prepared by the Father (Mt 20:23). The word 'servant' (*msemsana* or *diakonos*) is used in Matthew 20:26 and Mark 10:43, within the answer or the teaching Jesus gave in this context, saying that they (Apostles/disciples) must not have the mentality of the gentiles who search for burdening others and wish to exercise authority over people, but to become servants if they want to be great and a slave if they want to be first. In Matthew 20:27 the word 'slave' (*abda* or *dulos*) is also used. The word *msemsana* or *diakonos* is translated as servant, while *abda* or *dulos* is translated as slave. Then Jesus presents Himself as the example of service and explains His service as to give His own life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28). In Matthew 23:11 Jesus once again repeats the same teaching and says, whoever wants to be great shall be 'a servant' (*msemsana* or *diakonos*). This He does while speaking about the superficiality of the Pharisees and Scribes.

A similar teaching is found in Luke 22:26. The immediate context of this text is completely different, but the message is similar. The context in Luke is the last supper where Jesus breaks the bread and blesses the chalice, explaining this gesture in relation with the kingdom of God (Lk 22:16-18). Here the dispute among the Apostles was about who is greatest among them (Lk 22:24). Answering them Jesus used similar expression as in Matthew 20:26; 23:11 and Mark 10:43, 'like a servant' or 'as one who serves' (*ayk msemsana* or *hos ho diakonon*). Here too Jesus presents Himself as the example of service and servants.

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<sup>7</sup>In the Gospel according to Mark the sons of Zebedee, John and James, themselves make this request: Mark 10: 35ff.

With these four synoptic texts Jesus teaches that neither the mentality of gentile authorities nor the same of the Jewish authorities must be the model for Christians, but it must be the mentality of Jesus who gave His life as ransom for many by humbling Himself for the service of the humanity. So here the servants are those who do service as Jesus Himself. Though it is not applied to any particular ecclesiastical Order or ministry, it applies to the mentality and purpose of all Christian service.

## 2.2. Servants of Inner Court

In Mark 14:54 there is an occurrence of this term. The context of this text is the trial of Jesus in the house of high priest, where Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest warming himself along with the guards or servants. In Syriac NT the word used for servants is *msemsana* instead of Greek *heperetes*. Here this word neither applies to an ordained ministry nor to the table servants or paid servants, but simply to the guards or servants of the inner court.

## 2.3. Servants at the Wedding Banquet

In John 2:9, in the context of the wedding feast at Cana the word *msemsana* or *diakonos* is used. In this text *msemsane* or *diakonoi* are the servants who waited at the banquet table and those who filled the jars with water. This meaning is closer to the immediate original secular meaning of the ecclesiastical use of the idea of diaconate found in Acts 6.

## 2.4. Civil Authority: Ministers of God

In Romans 13 Paul teaches about the need of having submission to the authorities. While speaking about persons in authority in verse 4 he says that they are ministers or servants of God (*msemsana d alaha* or *theou diakonos*). Though the term 'servant' is used here, it does not mean that Paul intends to consider civil authority as an Order but a ministry or service that comes from God Himself. Here Paul connects the Christian view of authority found in the Gospels, that is, the spirit of humble ministerial service after the example of Jesus<sup>8</sup> to every lawful civil authority. This he teaches in a context where the vast majority of the civil authorities were gentiles or Jews.

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<sup>8</sup>This view of Paul can be seen in Philippians 2: 5-11.

## 2.5. Ministers of 'Cult of Proclaiming the Word'

In the entire NT, Romans 15:16 deserves particular attention as it is the only passage where the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel is presented in terms of priesthood and sacrifice. Here Paul says that the grace he received from God was to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the ministry of sacrifice or the priestly duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God. The expression used in Greek NT is *leitourgon kristou iesou* while the Syriac NT expression is *msemsana l iso masiha*. Though the term *leitourgos* is a clear expression of service or ministry in a priestly milieu, the Syriac term *msemsana* includes what is intended by *leitourgos* and *diakonos* in Greek. Here we can conclude that Jesus appoints Paul as His *msemsana* or *diakonos*, that is, His minister, here in the context the minister of Gospel. Here too the expression simply means service or ministry, not any hierarchical Order. Still this expression shows the gradual development of the concept of ministry in cultic terminology.

## 2.6. Ministers of the Word

There are several texts where this term is used as minister of the Word. This usage is found mostly in a Pauline milieu. In Acts 26:16 this word is used in the context of the trial of Paul before Agrippa (Acts 25:23-26:32). Here Paul explains his past life to Agrippa and narrates the story of his conversion. He uses the word *msemsana* in Syriac NT instead of *heperetes* in Greek when he says that Jesus appointed him a servant and witness of what he had seen and what he would see in the future. Taking the Syriac term into consideration, one can justly conclude that Jesus appointed Paul as a *msemsana*. Here it does not mean Jesus appointed him or ordained him a Deacon, but simply that Jesus appointed Paul to be His minister and witness in the general NT sense of ministry and witness.

While explaining the ministry of the Apostles and that of missionary companions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1 he uses the expression *msemsana d masiha* or *heperetas kristou*. In 1 Corinthians 3:5 the word *msemsana* or *diakonos* stands for a minister or simply a servant of God. Here in the context of the text the word is only an expression that Paul and Apollo are equally ministers or servants of the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 3:6 Paul gives justification or explanation for his competence as minister of Christ and uses the expression 'ministers of the NT' (*msemsa d ditqa hadta* or *diakonos nous kaines diatekes*). Later in 2 Corinthians 6:4 the word 'servants' is used again.

The context of this verse is the trials endured by Paul and his companions during their missionary endeavours. He makes a big list of such trails. Here this word is applied to Paul himself and also to his missionary companions. The exact usage found in this text is 'servants of God' (*msemsane d alaha* or *teou diakonoi*).

In Colossians 1:7 Paul greets his fellow-servant Epapharas and calls him 'faithful minister of Christ' (*msemsana mahaymana d masiha* or *pistos diakonos tou kristou*). The same expression is found in Ephesians 6:21 and in Colossians 4:7 while speaking about Tychicus and in Philippians 2:25 while speaking about Epaphroditus. In 1 Timothy 4:6 while giving instructions to Timothy Paul says that by following his instructions Timothy will be 'a good minister of Christ Jesus' (*msemsana taba d iso masiha* or *kalos diakonos kristou iesou*). A similar expression is found in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 where Paul introduces Timothy as 'servant of God' (*msemsana d alaha* or *sunergon tou teou*). Here the Greek expression is different: 'fellow worker of God.'

In 2 Corinthians 11:15 the word *msemsana* in Syriac and *diakonos* in Greek appears twice, once as servants of Satan and the other as servants of righteousness. Paul uses this word in a context where he explains his position as an Apostle who never burdened the community where he preached the Gospel. Here this word is directly applied to the false Apostles, calling them as servants of Satan in the mask of servants of righteousness. Here the indirect application is to his own apostolic ministry. In verse 23 Paul continues to boast about his merit as an Apostle and says that if the other Apostles or the false Apostles are 'servants of Christ' (*msemsane di masiha* or *diakonoi kristou*) he is more than they are. So in both instances, the same term is used to explain the apostolic ministry and not to indicate a distinct diaconal Order. This Pauline usage is supported by Luke 1:2 where he calls all ministers who were eye-witnesses as 'ministers of the Word' (*msemsana d melta* or *heperetai tou logou*).

## 2.7. Jesus the Servant

In Galatians 2:11-21 Paul confronts Peter regarding the evangelization of the gentiles. Paul argues that justification in Christ which presupposes that all who are justified were sinners does not mean that Christ promotes sin. The expression here is 'servant of sin' (*msemsana d hatitha* or *amartias diakonos*) which means one who promotes or serves the growth of sin. Though it is an indirect attribute to Jesus Christ, it intends to say that Jesus is not the

promoter or minister of sin. Once again in Hebrews 8:2 Jesus is referred as *msemsana* or *diakonos*. Here Jesus is 'the minister of the sanctuary' (*msemsa d beyt qudisa* or *leitourgios tes skhens*). This expression is found in one of the rare contexts in which Jesus is called 'priest' in the NT. The word *leitourgios* used in Greek parallel text is a better expression of a cultic or liturgical minister as already found in Romans 15:16. However the Syriac *msemsana* includes what is intended by *leitourgios* in Greek. Though it does not intend to say that Jesus was a Deacon, it is closer to the concept of diaconate as a liturgical ministry. From this expression one can trace the source of diaconal ministry in the person of Jesus Christ.

## 2.8. Acts 6:1-6

Acts 6:1-6, according to some exegetes, is the introduction to chapters 6, 7 and 8 which form a bridge between the Acts of Peter and Acts of Paul. This is made possible through the appointment and ministry of 'the Seven' especially that of Stephen and Philip. The author before introducing Paul the Apostle of the gentiles presents the problems of the primitive Church due to the expansion of it among the Greek-Jews. As an effective response to the prevailed situation the Apostles shared their responsibilities with men elected by the Christian community. This unit of three chapters ends with the expansion of the Church among the Samaritans. Though liturgico-patristic traditions consider this text to be the narration of the origin of the diaconate,<sup>9</sup> the word 'Deacon' is not found in this text. It is also noteworthy that 'the Seven' are elected and ordained to serve at the table and to look after the needs of the widows, but later Stephen started preaching and Philip started to baptise. So this text always was a matter of discussion among the scholars of whom many do not consider 'the Seven' as Deacons of the NT.<sup>10</sup> Adhering to the liturgico-patristic traditions which use the term 'the stephanite seven' several times, I tend to hold the traditional view that this is one of the basic texts concerning the diaconate in the NT and the term Deacon comes from the implied verb used in this passage.

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<sup>9</sup>In the following sections this concept will be clarified; hence I do not make an anticipation here.

<sup>10</sup>H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 44. Some others like Strauch consider this as concerning the NT diaconate.

### 2.9. 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Beyond doubt 1 Timothy 3:8-13 is concerning the diaconate. This text found at the centre of this letter which insists that Timothy combat the heresy and organise the community, comes immediately after the instructions concerning the Presbyters (Episcopus).<sup>11</sup> The instructions concerning the Presbyters (Episcopus) is applicable in a certain sense also concerning the Deacons, as it is connected with the word 'similarly.' In this letter there are also instructions concerning men, women and widows.

As a whole this text does not give everything about the diaconate ministry in the Church. It gives practically the expected qualities of a Deacon. The qualities mentioned in this section are not anything particular or exceptional exclusively meant for the Deacons; rather they are simply socio-human in character and are expected from all Christians, even from the non-Christians.<sup>12</sup> The author insists on those qualities as he wanted men of quality as the ministers in a community disturbed with heresy. Later these qualities become the basis for many ecclesiastical authors to speak about the qualities of the Deacons. The ministry of the Deacons is to hold the Mystery of faith in a pure conscience. Though this is a very subtle expression it contains everything in the Pauline language. As in the case of Presbyters (Episcopus) the author prefers married men who must know how to look after their children and family, as one who do not know how to look after their own family would not be able to look after the Church of God.

### 3. A Theological Conclusion

This analysis demonstrated that *msemsana* is equal to many Greek terms. On the one hand this fact indicates the poverty of the Syriac vocabulary; on the other hand it shows the richness of this term as it represents many beautiful and rich ideas. In short, in the Syriac NT the word *msemsana* is used to denote the basic Christian attitude of service after the example of Christ the servant. Then this term is used to denote the companions of Paul, Paul himself, the table servants in the secular sense and finally this term is applied to Jesus Himself.

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<sup>11</sup>In the Syriac NT the term Episcopus is not used, instead the presbyter is used.

<sup>12</sup>L. Oberlinner, *Le Lettere Pastorali, Commentario Teologico del Nuovo Testamento*, Brescia: Paideia, 1999, 224.



Though none of these NT meanings directly represent the office of Deacon in the NT, each NT meaning of this term is relevant one way or other to the ministry of diaconate. 'Jesus the Deacon' is the source and model of all service in the Church including the diaconate as they are to have the mentality of Christian service as proposed by the Gospel, a humble service in spirit of sacrificial love.

As Paul and his companions the Deacons are servants of God and His Christ, who shares the ministerial charisma of the Church. The Deacons are also ministers of Christian cult. They are part of the celebration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ in the Baptism and in the Eucharist. They continue in their life through charity the celebration of the Paschal ministry in 'the liturgy'. They are servants at the Eucharistic table and the table of charity. They are also servants of the Word. So when someone is called *msemsana*, in the light of Syriac NT meaning of this term, he represents a reality which has a deep NT significance. He is truly an icon of Jesus the servant, who reminds a multiform reality of Christian service found in the NT.