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## ST JOSEPH IN THE EASTERN CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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### **Abstract**

All Oriental Liturgies commemorate and honour St Joseph, the husband of Mary, the Mother of God and the foster father of Jesus in Nazareth. In the Byzantine as well as in the Syriac Traditions, St Joseph is depicted as a man of Alleluia. The contours between Joseph and Herod define the difference between right and wrong praise. As such, the Akathist Hymn in the Byzantine Tradition offers St Joseph as an image of a human being restored to his divine vocation. The Syriac Fathers as well as both the East and the West Syrian Liturgy commemorates St Joseph and seeks his intercessory powers. By comparing Joseph's act of protecting with the vigilance that Cherub does in paradise, the West Syrian Church Fathers assert that Joseph is a man with divine call. It also affirms that the vocation of being a protector involves all those who protect life and others. The actualisation of the divine call manifests his priestly character, which reveals to us the basic nature of priests. Therefore, the narration of west

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Syrian Church Fathers on the life of St Joseph depicts him as a model who inspires our Christian journey standing close to Jesus.

**Keywords:** Byzantine Liturgy; Cherub of Flesh; East Syriac Liturgy; Guardian of the Hidden Mystery; Son of David; St Joseph in the Syriac Fathers; St Joseph as a Priest; West Syrian Liturgy

## Introduction

In the Year of St Joseph, it is only opportune and fitting to look into the life and role of St Joseph as depicted in the Eastern Liturgical Traditions and Syriac Fathers. However, a comprehensive review of the sources, especially concerning some of the Eastern Liturgies with regard to the materials on St Joseph is not possible for obvious reasons. There are very few works available.<sup>1</sup> Our attempt here is limited mainly to the Syriac Liturgical Traditions, both East and West, although references are made to some others too.

### 1. Eastern Liturgical Traditions and St Joseph

Among the six oriental liturgical families, St Joseph is given a very prominent position, especially in the spiritual life of the family. However, it varies from one to the other, how this memorial is expressed liturgically. We take a look at some of the traditions.

#### 1.1. Armenian Tradition

In the Armenian Church the feasts of the saints are flexible and this year Saint Joseph is venerated on October 18<sup>th</sup>. But this day is not only dedicated to St Joseph, but also the centurion Cornelius, Joseph of Arimathea, Lazarus and his sister Mary and Martha are worshiped with him. The hymns sung on this day are collectively dedicated to apostles and martyrs of Christ. Saint Joseph is not specifically mentioned<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, only Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned. An attempt to find books or articles on the topic in Armenian background were futile.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Michael Schneider, "Die Verehrung des heiligen Josef in der Ostkirche," in *Der heilige Josef: Theologie, Kunst, Volksfrömmigkeit*, hg. v. H.-O. Mühleisen u.a., Lindenberg 2008, 105-112; Ferdinand Gahbauer, "Der heilige Josef nach den Apokryphen und den Kirchenvätern," in *Der heilige Josef: Theologie, Kunst, Volksfrömmigkeit*, hg. v. H.-O. Mühleisen u.a., Lindenberg 2008; Roswitha Josefa Kaisler, "Auf den Spuren des heiligen Joseph," in *ausgewählten Traditionen der Orientalisch-Orthodoxen Kirchen*, Wien 2014 [Unpublished Diplomarbeit].

<sup>2</sup>This is based on a personal E-mail communication with Dr Husik Smbatyan, a monk belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church and did his doctoral studies at the University of Vienna together with the author.

## 1.2. Byzantine Tradition

The Byzantine tradition understands St Joseph as a prophet and is commemorated with his forebearers Jesse and David on the Sunday after Christmas. To align Joseph as a prophet together with Jesse and David is a strange choice indeed.<sup>3</sup> Much like Jesse, Joseph is no proclaimer of divine speech. In fact, he has no recorded lines at all throughout the Gospels. He is just a stump, raw material for God to work with. Joseph simply offers the line of Jesse and David to Mary, in order to fashion the fulfilment of the prophesy: that a Messiah will come forth from the line of Jesse. Like David, he embodies Israel's Law, not as a king, but as a righteous man. He could have used this law to his advantage, and could have protected his pride and the seeming betrayal through an allegedly ignoble birth. Instead, he extends his righteousness to protect Mary and the Son of God. Covering them with his own justice, he could spare them at least that shame and allow Christ to live a quiet life in Nazareth.

In the vespers for the Sunday after Christmas of the Byzantine tradition, Joseph is implicated in Prophecy: "in his advanced years, Joseph clearly saw the prophecies fulfilled."<sup>4</sup> Joseph is prophetic precisely in his ability to change his mind. He puts aside his readymade decision to divorce his wife because of the angelic pronouncement. Now that Joseph's hands are open, God may fill them with His new Spirit. The *troparion*, or central thematic hymn, of the commemoration of Joseph gives him a prophetic task. However, in this hymn, Joseph does something strange that no other prophet does. Normally prophets speak to the present about the future, but here Joseph is asked to speak about the present to the past: "Joseph, proclaim the wonders you have seen to David, the forefather of God: The Virgin has given birth; you have given glory with the shepherds and worshipped with the wise men; you have been instructed by an angel. Ask Christ our God to save our souls."<sup>5</sup> Just like the risen Lord who instructs his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Joseph is charged with this hymn to consider the history of Israel beneath the light of the advent of Christ.

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Andrew J. Summerson, "St Joseph is a Prophet in the Byzantine Tradition. What can we learn from their devotion?" <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/03/19/st-joseph-byzantine-tradition-devotion-240278>, 19 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Summerson, "St Joseph is a Prophet in the Byzantine Tradition," [https://mci.archpitt.org/liturgy/Christmas\\_3.html](https://mci.archpitt.org/liturgy/Christmas_3.html).

<sup>5</sup>Summerson, "St Joseph is a Prophet in the Byzantine Tradition."

The Old Testament Joseph is considered as a type of resurrection by the patristic interpretation. This interpretation is enshrined in the Byzantine lectionary, where the Joseph cycle is read during the last week of the Lent and is meant to parallel the liturgical celebration of the paschal mystery of the Holy Week. In the language of Scripture, a journey to Egypt foreshadows and signifies a salvific end. When Moses sees the burning bush in the land of Midian, he is told to go down to Egypt, take the Jews out of the hell they are experiencing there and bring them into the Promised Land. In the light of the paschal mystery, we are able to interpret the past anew, just as Christ teaches his disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Joseph in the Old Testament, likewise a righteous man, precedes this divine recognition, that he is sent down to Egypt in the service of salvation. Consider how he looks at the past when his brothers come grovelling before him. Once left for dead by his brothers, he now stands among the leaders of Egypt, carrying the entire land through the famine. The starving children of Israel come before him, face to face. Here, Joseph could exact vengeance rightfully. "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide food for you and your little ones." Thus, he reassured them and comforted them" (Gen 50: 20-21).

The same is true for Joseph in the New Testament. Joseph is told: "Get up, go down to Egypt," so when the coast is clear, he can get about the work of the good news. Joseph is a man of resurrection. He sees in this world the pattern that God has woven into the fabric of existence: dying and rising. We receive new life not by suffering a little bit, but by dying, if we go down to Egypt, just as Christ came down to earth and went down into Hades. If we get comfortable with this pattern, we get comfortable with life in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

In the Byzantine Tradition St Joseph is depicted as a man of Alleluia.<sup>7</sup> The famous Akathist hymn in the Byzantine liturgy, addressed to the Mother of God, is an interpretation of the infancy narratives. It is both an object of popular devotion as well as a recapitulation of the theological language about the Mother of God and the early life of Christ. St Joseph and King Herod are set up as foils in this hymn. Both men represent a form of righteousness.

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Summerson, "St Joseph is a Prophet in the Byzantine Tradition."

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Summerson, "St Joseph is a Prophet in the Byzantine Tradition."

Joseph is the keeper of the Mosaic law, whereas Herod is the embodiment of the legal code of the Roman Empire, and he functions as an icon of the law and order. Both are faced with a challenge, not only to their own codes, but to the laws of nature—a strange birth without human seed. Both conspire “secretly.”<sup>8</sup> The Greek word is ‘lathra’ λαθρα from *lanthano*, a rare adverb used only in these two instances in the synoptic gospels and only twice more in the rest of the New Testament.

The contours between Joseph and Herod define the difference between right and wrong praise. Joseph quietly resolves to remove his wife from the equation. Herod secretly brings the Magi aside, only to tell a lie: “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”<sup>9</sup> There is a difference between the two: Joseph lets himself to be taught—and changed—by new facts. He puts down his defences and protections of his self-righteousness. Instead, he turns his righteousness into a service. For Herod, this child is a threat to his claim to power. In his rage, he slaughters all boys aged 2 and under and all others even remotely similar to the king of kings.

In the hymn this comparison is made more explicit when both Joseph and Herod are offered the occasion to learn new songs: “filled with a storm of contradictory thoughts, the wise Joseph was greatly disturbed. Having seen you an unwed, All-Blameless One, he now suspected crimes against the marriage bed. Learning that your conception was without seed, he cried out, Alleluia”<sup>10</sup> Joseph learned new facts from the angel, that the conception of Mary was without human seed. Joseph lets his guard down before divine intervention; he untightens his grips around his own plan for divorce and opens his throat to cry out: “Alleluia.”

In contrast to Joseph, later in the hymn, Herod is offered the opportunity to sing. Instead, he becomes a parody of his own name, left as “the fool” (the hymn plays on the original Greek: Herode=Herod/Ierode=fool). Tormented by the threat to his power, he urges the Magi to bring him the Messiah under the pretence of wanting to offer him praise. Herod’s foolishness turns upon a

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Mt 1:19; 2:7.

<sup>9</sup>Mt 2:8.

<sup>10</sup>Akathist Hymn, Stanza 6.

fundamental lie surrounding worship, for Herod “did not know how to sing ‘alleluia’”.<sup>11</sup>

The contours between Joseph and Herod define the difference between right and wrong praise. As such, the Akathist Hymn offers Joseph as an image of a human being restored to his divine vocation. In his masterpiece, *For the Life of the World*, Alexander Schmemmann suggests that before being Homo sapiens or Homo faber, the human being is summoned by his divine vocation to be a “Homo adorans,” standing before Gd and offering back to creation everything that God has wrought through an act of thanksgiving.<sup>12</sup> Restoring this attitude makes the difference between adoration and idolatry. In this salvation consists: “Now that we have seen this strange birth, let us estrange ourselves from this world and turn our minds to heaven. Indeed, it is for this that the God Most High appeared on earth as a lowly man desiring to draw up to heaven those who cry out to him: Alleluia”<sup>13</sup> Thus perhaps in this year of St Joseph, before St Joseph the Worker, we do well to celebrate Joseph, the man of Alleluia.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.3. East Syrian Tradition

According to Dr Pauly Maniyattu,<sup>15</sup> there is no commemoration or prayers related to St Joseph in the original sources of the East Syrian Tradition.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, when we check the Syriac sources of the Assyrians there is no special day or prayers dedicated to St Joseph. The Hudra edition by Paul Bedjan (strongly influenced by the Latin Catholic background) gives a section of the liturgy of the hours as well as special texts for Holy Qurbana for the commemoration of St Joseph. In the Syriac version of Bedjan there are prayers given as *edda d'mar Yausep*, but they are not original Syriac version.<sup>17</sup> These prayers were added later since it is a Catholic edition. In this text there are special prayers for all liturgical hours of that day. Naturally it is

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<sup>11</sup>Akathist Hymn, Stanza 10.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and New York: Orthodoxy*, 1973, 120.

<sup>13</sup>Akathist Hymn, Stanza 14.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Summerson, “St Joseph is a Prophet in the Byzantine Tradition.”

<sup>15</sup>Dr Pauly Maniyattu is the Vice President, Professor of Oriental Liturgies and Co-ordinator for P G as well as Doctoral Programm at the Pontifical Oriental Institute for Religious Studies, Vadavathoor, Kottayam in India.

<sup>16</sup>This is based on our personal chat on 21 and 23 September 2021.

<sup>17</sup>Paul Bedjan, ed., *Breviarum iuxta ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*, 3 Vols., Leipzig 1886-87, vol. 2, 529-539.

continued in the days Holy Qurbana too. There are no official English or Malayalam translation available for these texts yet.

There is a section with the name St Joseph added in the recently revised Syro-Malabar Thaksa (first published in 1989).<sup>18</sup> This could probably be inspired by the Bedjan version. But it cannot be considered to be belonging to the original East Syrian Tradition.

#### 1.4. West Syrian Tradition

In the West Syrian (Malankara) Tradition although there are many references to St Joseph in the prayers of the liturgical hours, there are no specific prayers in honour of St Joseph. Most of the references are in relation to Mary the Mother of God. For example, on Sunday in the Lauds, it is said: “even when the Ancient One carries Mary, she bore Him in her womb, and went together with Joseph to register themselves to Bethlehem...”<sup>19</sup> In the Qouqlion for the honour of the saints, which always is placed after the one for the Mother of God, most often than never, St Joseph is called upon to intercede for us, especially for the families.<sup>20</sup>

In the litany hymn used for the festal procession in the Malankara Tradition the fifth stanza is dedicated to St Joseph, asking for his intercession. The narration of epithets about Joseph in this hymn goes like this: “Oh great Israelite, son of David, great sculptor (craftsman), watchman (Guardian) of the virgin, foster father of the Lord, man of good manners (just one), St Joseph blessed be your honour.”<sup>21</sup> Again in the Festal Liturgy of the Nativity of Our Lord, the hymn and prayers commemorate St Joseph in a very special way. St Joseph is addressed as Blessed, because he was honoured by God to be the ‘father’ of the Son of God.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, he is described as just and noble. Besides, Joseph in the Old Testament is presented as forerunner of St Joseph in the New Testament. Syriac Fathers like St Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, etc are the important authors in this regard.

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. സിറോ മലബാർ സഭയുടെ കുർബാന. ആഘോഷപുർവ്വമായ ക്രമവും സാധാരണ ക്രമവും [Order of the Holy Qurbana of the Syro Malabar Church: Solemn and Ordinary Form], Kakkannadu: Syro-Malabar Commission for Liturgy, 2011<sup>9</sup>, 245–253.

<sup>19</sup> മലങ്കര സുറിയാനി കത്തോലിക്കാ സഭ: പ്രാർത്ഥനകൾ, വിശുദ്ധ കുർബാനക്രമം [Malankara Syriac Catholic Church: Order of Prayers. Order of the Holy Qurbano], Trivandrum: The Synodal Commission for Liturgy, 2007, 136.

<sup>20</sup>പ്രാർത്ഥനകൾ, വിശുദ്ധ കുർബാനക്രമം, 191–192.

<sup>21</sup>പ്രാർത്ഥനകൾ, വിശുദ്ധ കുർബാനക്രമം, 260.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. മലങ്കര സുറിയാനി കത്തോലിക്കാ സഭ: പെരുന്നാളുകൾ [Malankara Syrian Catholic Church: Feasts], Trivandrum: The Synodal Commission for Liturgy, 2019, 14, 38, 39, 42, etc.

Their homilies as well as hymns have found very important place in the liturgical celebrations of the West Syrian Churches.

## 2. St Joseph in the Writings of Syriac Fathers

In the Syrian tradition, especially in the writings of Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh, the description of the life of St Joseph is elaborate and evident. Their accounts are in tune with the early narration of the apocryphal gospel of St James or the Protoevangelium. As the apocryphal gospel expanded the story of St Joseph, Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh developed the themes on the life of St Joseph through their imagination and poetic fantasy. Their narrations depicted Joseph in a dilemma whether to hide the sin of Mary or to fall under the censure of the law or whether to manifest the pregnancy and incur the risk of condemning an innocent party, who was perhaps conceived by an angel<sup>23</sup>. Their narrations are theologically insightful and they shed light on the personality of Joseph, and hence we can draw meaningful epithets about Joseph from their writings.

The Syrian Church Fathers both in the East and West, describe the role of Joseph concerning salvific events that had happened in the Old Testament. Therefore, the epithets are given to him for explaining his greater role in the salvation of humanity. 'Guardian' is one of the most important characters of Joseph that we come across in the writings of Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh. This article is an attempt to bring out the epithets on Joseph from the West Syrian literature, especially those used in the Antiochene and Malankara Liturgy, which remind us that those hidden in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation.

### 2.1. St Ephrem

Ephrem is clear on the fact that the fatherhood of St Joseph is through grace. In his Second Hymn on the Nativity, he writes: "[Worthy] too is Joseph, who by grace is called father to the true Son, Him Whose Father is glorious, Ruler of all Creation..."<sup>24</sup> It is important to note the Ephrem emphasizes that he is the father of the 'true Son' and not any unlawful one. He brings out a whole lot of complex issues and social concerns in just three lines here.

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<sup>23</sup>Cf. Titus John Cheravallil, "St Joseph in the Writings of the West Syrian Fathers," in *Bethany Shabdām* 124 (October 2021), Kottayam 51-53.

<sup>24</sup>Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II. 6, in K.E. McVey, ed., *Ephrem the Syrian*, New York, Mahwah 1989, 77.

Secondly, Joseph is considered as *the guardian and protector* of both Mary as well as the child, in spite of all the humiliations and the ordeal he had to undergo thereby. Ephrem explains the act of guarding in the sense of protecting and rescuing. Joseph is the one who rescued both Mother Mary and her child from all abuses that could have emerged in the society, if they had come to know about the birth of a child without a father. So, it was said, "Joseph rescued You (Jesus) in his arms."<sup>25</sup> In the second Hymn on the virginity, Ephrem says:

Joseph worshipped you; a crown he offered to You -  
 this troubled just [man] whom the angels reassured.<sup>26</sup>  
 So that You might increase his reward, he rescued You, in his arms.<sup>27</sup>  
 For who could convince a just man  
 to carry the hateful son of adultery  
 and to be pursued from one place to another?<sup>28</sup>

Ephrem is unable to comprehend the logic of the incarnation, and that too, as a man. It is all the more difficult when it comes to the question of the virginity of Mary, the fatherhood of St Joseph and that Jesus be born in the family of David. Ephrem asks the question,

why then was it necessary that she, a daughter of David,  
 be betrothed to Joseph<sup>29</sup> and that then Your birth  
 from her would be without man?<sup>30</sup>

Ephrem knows that "the succession of kings is written in the name of men instead of women."<sup>31</sup> However, Ephrem joins them both in the same line of David. He further argues also for a double Davidic descent<sup>32</sup> of Jesus. This is not without reasons. The juxtaposition of facts that are seemingly contradicting each other, and use of Syriac terms and its puns are very interesting to note:

<sup>25</sup>Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II. 13, 79.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Mt 1:18-21.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Mt 2:14.

<sup>28</sup>Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II 11, 78.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Mt 1:18 and its parallels.

<sup>30</sup>Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II. 12, 78.

<sup>31</sup>Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II. 12, 78.

<sup>32</sup>Syriac Tradition in general stresses the double Davidic descent of Christ, because Mary and Joseph are of the "household of David." This is due to the Syriac Gospel tradition in Diatessaron and old Syriac Gospels. Cf. Ephrem, "Hymn on Nativity," II, 13-16; Robert Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve," 374. Jacob of Serugh also, following Ephrem, holds this double Davidic descent. K.E. McVEY, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 79 (f. n. 84).

Joseph, a Son of David<sup>33</sup>, betrothed to a daughter of David,<sup>34</sup> for the child could not be registered in the name of His mother. He became, therefore Joseph's offspring without seed, and His mother's offspring without man, and by the two of them He bound Himself to their people, so that among the kings He is written, Son of David. It was not fitting that from the seed of Joseph He be born, nor without Joseph that from Mary He be conceived. He was not registered by the name of Mary, who gave birth to Him, but Joseph, who registered, did not register his own seed. Without the body of Joseph, He was united with his name; without the betrothed of Mary, He sprang forth, her Son. He was Lord to David and son.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus is, therefore, Joseph's offspring without a seed! Joseph's relationship with Jesus is brought out very poetically and symbolically in these lines. However, Ephrem is very down to earth in explaining it using the words like seed, to register, etc. The lineage of David and being heir to the family of the King is very important for Ephrem. The connection comes through Joseph. Ephrem asks:

Without a man, indeed, how can he be counted the Son of David?  
[Mary] considers her bridegroom a husband;  
also, our Lord acknowledged Himself in their lineage,  
for they call him Son of David, and He did not deny [it].<sup>36</sup>

Just like Jesus, Joseph also is justly called Son of David. The epithet Son of David, according to St Ephrem, is shared by Jesus as well as Joseph. However, it is completed and fulfilled with Jesus, just as confessed by the blind man. He goes on to explain and argue it further as to how,

Even an adopted son is called a man's son,  
although he is alien to his lineage and his people,  
but because he is pleased with him, he is an acceptable heir.  
Who then will doubt concerning the birth of the body of our Saviour  
that by this daughter of David He was conceived,  
and in the arms of the son of David He was clasped,  
and in the town of David, He was worshipped?"<sup>37</sup>

Ephrem takes the help of the evangelists who have established the lineage of Jesus very well: "so that the lineage would be well

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Mt 1:20.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Lk 1:27.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Mt 22:41-46. "Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity," II 14, 79.

<sup>36</sup>Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II. 15, 80.

<sup>37</sup>Lk 2:4, 11; Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," II. 16, 85.

explained—and of David and of Joseph, so that by the learned mouths of two witnesses—and of the blind man who called Him Son of David.”<sup>38</sup> And therefore, according to Ephrem, “There is no more numbering of generations. The line reached You and stood still, for You are the Son of David, and there is no other.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, although Ephrem calls Joseph as well as Jesus “son of David”, he still grants priority to Jesus as ‘the’ Son of David.

## 2.2. St Jacob of Serugh

Another most important Syriac author who describes the personality of Joseph is St Jacob of Serugh.<sup>40</sup> One of the most important of the Festal Homilies of Jacob of Serugh is the Homily on the Nativity of our Redeemer. Here Jacob provides a meditative reflection on the biblical episodes concerning the Nativity with special attention to the statements and behaviour patterns of the persons involved. After dealing with Zacharia and Mary the author comes to Joseph. In Jacob’s narration, Mary begs her son to reveal the truth to Joseph so that he might be sanctified to approach the Nativity with holiness and become a true witness to it<sup>41</sup>. Through this intervention, “Joseph, a son of David, become convinced of the truth as the angel demonstrated how Mary was of the household David and in truth the Immanuel dwelt in her as was foretold by Isiah; thus, he became a believing, life-long herald of the truth of Nativity.”<sup>42</sup> Joseph rejoices as he became worthy to see the Son.<sup>43</sup> Jacob, just like Ephrem, wonders about the mystery of the Nativity and expresses his human inability to comprehend this deep mystery of God becoming man. He asks: “Where will you be found, upon the chariot<sup>44</sup> or with Mary; with your Father or with Joseph in the land of Judea?”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Mk 10:46–52 and the parallels.

<sup>39</sup>Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” II. 21.

<sup>40</sup>This Syriac Father who is believed to have lived from 451 to 521 CE and was made Bishop of Batnan near Edessa. He is commemorated in the West Syrian Tradition on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November. This year happens to be the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death and the Syrian Churches had organised different programmes to honour the memory of this great poet of the Syriac Tradition. His writings re found in the liturgy in different forms like Boutho or Prose Qolo, etc.

<sup>41</sup>Jacob of Serugh, FH I, 639–690, in Thomas Kollampampil, tr. & ed., *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies*, with a forward by Sebastian Brock, 1997 Rome–Bangalore, 70–73.

<sup>42</sup>Jacob of Serugh, 37–38.

<sup>43</sup>Jacob of Serugh, 39.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. Ezek 1:26.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Mk 2:1; Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 23–24.

### 1.2.1. *Doubts of Righteous Joseph and the Ordeal of Mary, the Believing Woman*

In his First Hymn on Nativity, Jacob of Serugh describes in detail the thoughts and doubts of righteous Joseph and the ordeal of Mary the believing woman. The return of Mary to Joseph from the house of Elizabeth and his reactions are described as a very keen observer of human behaviour and the normal reactions of a husband and wife. "The King returned from the house of the servant to the house of His mother. The virgin carried the "Aged Infant"; she came towards Joseph."<sup>46</sup> And Joseph's reaction is very supernatural and beyond any normal human imagination: "Joseph, her just spouse, saw her and wonder took hold of him. He gazed upon the chaste, modest, young girl and his heart became alarmed."<sup>47</sup> As a keen observer, Jacob describes every detail of Joseph's reaction:

Her manner was chaste but her womb was full and what should he say?

Her appearance was pure but her womb was full and what should he say?

Her appearance was pure but her womb was bearing (a child) and how should he look on?

Her appearance is humble, her offspring stirs and how should he be silent?

She is glorious in her house and he is aware of her conception and what he should approve?

Regarding her dignity he had wondered seeing how much she was shining forth;

from the reality of the conception which he saw he was fearing much.<sup>48</sup>

The situation becomes more complex when one reflects on the mental disposition of Joseph seeing this embarrassing turn of events. Jacob considers *Joseph as the guardian* not only of the virgin but also of the mystery she carries in her womb. And how much patient Joseph was about the affair, the womb cried out on account of the offspring conceived that dwelt in it. The agony of Joseph seeing the helpless Mary on one side and the people who point finger at her on the other, is narrated so touchingly by Jacob:

And while he was guarding the mystery so that it might not be spoken by him,

he saw people pointing to the womb that carried the conceived (child).

And while he was seeking not to disclose the believing woman,

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<sup>46</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 555-556.

<sup>47</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 557-558.

<sup>48</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 559-564.

he saw other people who, as it were with a finger, were pointing at her. The just man felt constrained at Mary's conceiving and at her chastity: to speak out, he felt shame, but not to speak, he was unable.

The mental dilemma of Joseph in the lines "to speak out he felt shame, but not to speak, he was unable" is put very succinctly. Although Joseph has a claim, he is magnanimous and shows a just heart to listen to the woman, and thus recognises her right to be heard. He approached gently and began to speak kindly: [...] "Tell me, young girl, what has happened to you without your being aware of it?" Even when he has an upper hand and advantage, he never puts her down. Rather he calls her "honourable on all days." And he asks a lot of questions as to how it happened the she lost her virginity: "O honourable on all days, when have you lost your honour?"<sup>49</sup>

Now Mary becomes for a moment impatient (in the imagination of Jacob) and she reacts to Joseph's allegations and anxieties. What follows is a long dialogue and dispute.<sup>50</sup> She says that her pearl of virginity is not stolen and neither is she despicable. She says:

The seal of virginity stands firm and no one has damaged it.  
Seals of my maidenhood are preserved and I am assured;  
and the door of the palace of my youthfulness is shut up and I am sealed.<sup>51</sup>

But how can Joseph, a simple carpenter, accept and believe it? He is just a normal human being, a carpenter. But he is very gentle and ready to talk and discuss with her. He confesses and agrees:

until now you were true and about your chastity, I have attested better than all.

About your continence all these days I have noted  
and because in your virtue you were chaste, and I rejoiced much.  
That no unfaithfulness has touched you, again I am testifying;<sup>52</sup>

However, Joseph is true to his conscience. He is bold enough to say at her face how he feels: "But to be convinced of these that you say, I am not willing."<sup>53</sup> And he has reasons for that. He says:

It is befitting to accept deeds rather than words,

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<sup>49</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 583, 68.

<sup>50</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 589–668.

<sup>51</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 592–593.

<sup>52</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 599–603, 69.

<sup>53</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 604, 69

because that fact (of conception) stands by itself, it is not a matter for controversy.

The conception that is in your womb, behold, I am seeing indeed, and how shall I be convinced of your entreaties? I do not know. For, falsehood follows adultery and calumny is joined with theft.<sup>54</sup>

This reasonable and just man has a point. Therefore, his words are also strong and sincere. And therefore, he asks: "Should I be convinced by your words or should that conception of yours be believed by me? Shall I have regard for your utterance or for the truth that is revealed and stands firm?"<sup>55</sup> But Mary is not ready to give in. She argues vociferously. She swears with her virginity and is ready to go through any test according to the Law of Moses<sup>56</sup>. She then goes to the extend of swearing with the Son: "And if you hold me as well as those things to be false, behold, my son will testify that He is from above<sup>57</sup> and I myself am not aware of any man."<sup>58</sup> Even after all these dialogues and arguments Joseph finds it difficult to believe. The following arguments also show that Jacob is not ignorant about the process and normal course of events related to conception and procreation. Jacob of Serugh describes:

Joseph said: "Who is able to be convinced of these things?  
While a manifestation similar to this has never been seen."  
Who has seen signs of virginity and conception in the same womb;  
the breasts full and the seals of virginity preserved?  
Like guards the signs of virginity stand at the gate of the womb  
and unless they have left no conception has entered and dwelt in the  
womb.  
[Joseph] "This has altogether not been heard of with women,  
That without a man there should be an offspring for virgins.  
Where and when or with whom has it ever been achieved?  
It is hard for me to be convinced about this vision which I have heard  
from you.  
While neither Scripture nor Nature teaches this,  
how is it possible in your case for it to happen against (normal)  
custom?"<sup>59</sup>

Mary then continues to defend herself citing a good number of scriptural and natural testimonies for her virginity. And Joseph finds

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<sup>54</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 605–610.

<sup>55</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 613–614.

<sup>56</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 619–624.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Lk 1:32.

<sup>58</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 625–626.

<sup>59</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 627–638, 70.

them reasonable too. Joseph, the just man, even after hearing all these, would in no way dare to harm her. He knows clearly the choices before him. He takes a decision being fully conscious of its repercussions. He says:

There is suspicion regarding you are on account of two things.  
It is also truly right for me to flee from you.  
If your conception is from adultery, God forbid! that in future  
I should mix my purity with a body that has committed fornication with  
strangers.  
And if your offspring is from Spirit, I do not venture  
To approach the pure castle, in which the King has resided.  
I do not investigate what your conception is or from whom it is  
because even should I search it out the (same) end result would happen to  
me.  
Whether from adultery or from Sprit, it is an object of terror for me  
and why therefore should I debate many things with you?<sup>60</sup>

Jacob of Serugh says that “this thought carried the just one to leave Mary and the destitute woman became clothed in suffering concerning her separation.”<sup>61</sup> But hopeless and discouraged is she not. She naturally finds a way out.

### ***1.2.2. Mary's Supplication to the Son Regarding Joseph***

Mary has no other way than to turn to her Son. Even there she takes care not to hurt or humiliate or to alienate Joseph in any way. “With sighing utterances, she whispered to her Son gently [...] ...”<sup>62</sup> And she continues:

Reveal your action to the foster father whom you have there for you on  
earth,  
Lest he be alienated from the mystery o your nativity.  
[...] have pity on his righteousness and with your revelation  
let his heart rejoice and let him forget his suffering.  
My Son, do not hide your conception from him so that he may not perish,  
Defend your mother so that he may not be in doubt.  
[...] Regarding his righteousness I am much solicitous so that he might be  
sanctified with me.  
And because you have made me worthy as his spouse to receive you,  
make him also worthy  
So that he should approach your nativity full of holiness.

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<sup>60</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 655–666, 71–72.

<sup>61</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 667–668, 72.

<sup>62</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 667–668, 72.

Do not again abandon him to be tormented by scandal on account of your conception.

Make him reach the haven of your faith,<sup>63</sup> full of hope.

[...] Convince Joseph, and he will (then) convince on my behalf the one who is doubting.

If he will be convinced, it will be easy for him to reprove the person who falsely accuses me,

And he will proclaim the truth about your birth all days of his life.<sup>64</sup>

It is astounding to see how Mary defends Joseph and takes care not to cause any defamation or harm to Joseph because of his reaction towards her. She acknowledges his righteousness and has realized that before she suffered, Joseph suffers more on account of her. So, she asks her son to defend his mother, so that Joseph may not be in doubt. Her argument is that if Joseph is convinced about the truth regarding the conception, it would be easy for him to reprove the person who falsely accuse her.

### ***1.2.3. The Encounter between the Angel and Joseph***

The next scene is the encounter between the Angel and Joseph. Jacob writes about the feelings that Joseph go through,

[...] When the thoughts have carried Joseph that what he should do, he was immersed in sleep because he had been doubtful in [his] worry.

And while during sleep of the still night the just one rested himself,

The Son of the Virgin made a sign to the watcher and he came toward him.<sup>65</sup>

The same ambassador who had brought the good news to the womb of his mother descended to reveal the mystery to Joseph the husband of the believing woman. The herald came to manifest the truth to the one who doubted and to explain to him the revealed truth in a divine vision. In the vision of the night, the angel approached towards Joseph kindly to drive away all doubtful thoughts from him. A perturbing appearance, glorious and amazing, did he reveal and made manifest to him so that he might fearfully hear the truth from him.<sup>66</sup>

The light of flame flashed out and Joseph was shaken.

He opened his mouth and burning coals showered down from his lips.

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<sup>63</sup>Mary prays that let Joseph reach 'the faith in Christ' that saves.

<sup>64</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 675-690.

<sup>65</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 692-694.

<sup>66</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 701-704.

He stretched out his wings and the house became clothed in a cloud of fire

And he began to speak and the just one trembled on his bed.<sup>67</sup>

The angel called and said to him: "O Joseph, Son of David, do not be in doubt."<sup>68</sup> Addressing Joseph as "Son of David" the angel reveals him all the prophecies about the Incarnation<sup>69</sup>. Jacob of Serugh explains the action and the conversation of the angel in order to prove and establish that Joseph is the son of David. He says about the title used by the angel to address St Joseph: "At the beginning of his phrase he gave the crown to him, seeing that he is the son of David."<sup>70</sup> Jacob also explains what is the intention of using such a title. It was to indicate "to him that he might understand that from the house of David there would shine forth the King of whom Jacob had written."<sup>71</sup> He said at the end: "Behold, in truth, in your betrothed is Immanuel because His is the power, and its [Immanuel] explanation is, 'Our Lord is with us'"<sup>72</sup>. The angel then in a manner scolds Joseph: "Behold, God is united with man as it was proclaimed 'God is with you', as it was sung, yet you are complaining."<sup>73</sup>

#### **1.2.4. *Believing Joseph, the Herald of the Truth of Nativity***

After this revelation from the Angel, Joseph is a changed new man. This change is depicted very clearly by Jacob:

The watcher departed and Joseph was awakened and terrified,

Fearing, trembling, amazed, shaken, astonished and afraid.

He was agitated, alarmed, assured, confessing, afraid, rejoicing,

Confident, strengthened, glorifying, confessing, blessing, and adoring.<sup>74</sup>

Joseph in no way hesitate to be humble enough to accept and change his mind, although his reasons and arguments were true. This change of mind and the reactions and behaviour of Joseph afterwards are clear from the following lines: He saw the virgin, he folded his hands and prostrated before her.

Peace be with you, the mother of the King who has come to our world.

I am adoring the womb, the conveyance of the Lord of Kings.

I am believing you, young girl, who carries the Lord of the truth.

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<sup>67</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 709-712.

<sup>68</sup>Mt 1:20.

<sup>69</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 715-733.

<sup>70</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 715, 74.

<sup>71</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 716, 74.

<sup>72</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 731-732.

<sup>73</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 733-734.

<sup>74</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 735-738

Because that One who dwells in you is the Lord of the watchers, as I testify,  
And the orders of fiery ones obey Him because He is the Son of God.<sup>75</sup>

Because the Angel has cleared all doubts in him and revealed to him the truth of the Incarnation, he is convinced, overjoyed, and at the same time ready to do the penance for it:

Now that I have learned, I will not cease from His praise.  
I would become a herald of truth for Him among the calumniators.  
And because I doubted a little while concerning your conception,  
My tongue will proclaim all my life long the truth of your offspring.  
Because in suspicion I had wanted to dismiss you on account of your offspring, n  
not even by the sword would I abandon your holiness.<sup>76</sup>

Joseph explains his reasons to turn from his decision to abandon Mary and says: "Because that One who dwells in you is the Lord of the watchers, as I testify, and the orders of fiery ones obey Him because He is the Son of God."<sup>77</sup> The conversation of Joseph reaches its sublime form and expression. Then he swears over his strong determination and decision: "Behold, from today I have dismissed from my mind (the idea of) marital union, And to your purity I am submitting myself because your Son is my Lord."<sup>78</sup> This is the greatness of Joseph. After the revelation from the angel, Joseph makes up his mind, come what may, he would stick on to his decision. This submission is to the Lord, because, ultimately, for Joseph it was not an ego clash between him and Mary. Rather, a test about both their purity and fidelity. The righteous man kept to his word until his death. He respected her virginity and holiness. Jacob says:

Joseph led the believing woman and she entered with him,  
and the virgin lived with the holy man in continence.  
He was serving and adoring and honouring her and being glad before her,  
Extolling, confessing and serving her in a holy manner.  
Holding back in awe while hearing her prudently,  
His body is sanctified and his heart shining together with its thoughts.<sup>79</sup>

### ***1.2.5. Joseph the Cherub of Flesh and the Virtuous Servant***

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<sup>75</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 739-744.

<sup>76</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 751-756.

<sup>77</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 743-744.

<sup>78</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 761-762.

<sup>79</sup>One must not forget that in Syriac understanding, and especially for Jacob, heart is the seat of thinking: cf. HS III 114: 17 - 115: 4.

Now Jacob comes out with a very striking epithet for Joseph: "The carpenter became a Cherub of flesh for the Artificer of the universe, and with virtue he took up the service in great fear."<sup>80</sup> Even as the Seraphs veil themselves and sanctify praise the hidden Son, and the heaven is too small to carry His hidden nature, but the household of Joseph is enriched by Him and is held in honour because of Him.<sup>81</sup>

And when the Son is born, "confined is the cave, miserable is the manger and the mother is a virgin, Joseph trembles, praise whispers out and the Son is humble."<sup>82</sup> When the nativity is a day of joy for the Prophets, Joseph is the one who is the happiest person. According to Jacob, on this day Joseph rejoices because although he endured ignominy on account of Him, he is worthy to see Him. But 'he trembles' as written by Jacob. One cannot even imagine the feelings of Joseph at the event of the Nativity. "The Seraphs veil themselves, Joseph adores, for here is a wonder. The ranks are stretched out and men are weak; but who is capable of (understanding)?"<sup>83</sup> One sees the reason for Joseph's trembling here more clearly. The day of nativity is the day of joy for the prophets and the virgin. Jacob in his request to acclamation and praise to all those around comes also to Joseph: "On this day let Joseph, the husband of your mother, rejoice, because he endured ignominy on account of you and he is worthy to see you."<sup>84</sup>

### ***1.2.6. Joseph, the Guardian of the Hidden Mystery***

The Homily on the Nativity of our Lord by Jacob of Serugh demands our special attention, while it is from this homily that we hear many of our liturgical hymns on Christmas Eve. Apart from the hymns and narrations of the Nativity scene and the manger, our attention is demanded to the points which describe the personality of Joseph. First of all, according to Jacob, Joseph is the Guardian of the Hidden Mystery, that is Jesus.<sup>85</sup>

The act of guarding is explained in the writings of Jacob of Serugh in the context of West Syrian theological perceptions. In the West Syrian context, all the theological treaties are explained within the frame of paradise event. According to Jacob of Serugh, redemption

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<sup>80</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 769-771.

<sup>81</sup>Cf. Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 771-776, 863-864.

<sup>82</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 953-954.

<sup>83</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 863-864.

<sup>84</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 1 FH I, 1021-1022, 87.

<sup>85</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 300-321.

occurs when Adam returns to the Garden of Eden to eat from the Tree of Life. The fallen Adam cannot accomplish this on his own, for the gate to paradise is locked, and the Cherubim with a fiery revolving sword guard the way to the Tree of Life to prevent Adam from coming back. Hence, the Tree of Life descended to him to bring him back to his original inheritance. The Tree of Life symbolizes the Son of God, and Joseph in this framework, according to Jacob of Serugh, is like the cherub who guards the Tree of life in paradise (Gen 3:24). The protection Joseph gave to Mary, and her Son is depicted like the guardianship which the Cherubs do in paradise. Joseph protected the “hidden mystery” that came to the world and took the flesh of the virgin mother. So, by guarding the Son, within the womb of his mother, Joseph became “the cherub of flesh.”<sup>86</sup>

This expression has got its real meaning with reference to the salvation of mankind. Joseph’s act of guarding has a meaning beyond any human act of guarding. His act of protection is not simply to safeguard anything, instead to protect the hidden mystery, the Messiah, until its time of revelation. Joseph was given the call of acting like a heavenly being. By his deed of protecting, he participates in the life of heavenly beings, who shield eternal life. Like heavenly hosts, he was attentive to God’s voice to be guided by His will. Hence, his life teaches that protecting and caring is more than a human activity, it is a divine call and participation in the act of heavenly beings. For this reason, he is all the more a model for all those who safeguard life.

At the humiliating question about the fatherhood of Jesus and the demand to “show us the Father of the Child since you are treated wrongly because of Him and the truth calls out that you are not His father”<sup>87</sup>, Joseph is not annoyed. First of all, Joseph makes it clear what his attitude and approach is. He is also convinced of the fate of Mary will have to undergo. He has heard the request “let not the Son be dishonoured by your paternity,”<sup>88</sup> and here is this just and gentleman’s answer:

I do not approach to dishonour but to guard the destitute woman from abuse.

It is a novel matter that a babe should come into being without marital union

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<sup>86</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity of our Lord, 3 FH III, 300–301, 125.

<sup>87</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 300–301, 125.

<sup>88</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 303, 125.

and no one believes that Mary, the young girl is a virgin.  
And if I put myself far away from the child whose Father is hidden,  
Mary would die as an adulterous though she did not commit adultery.  
That is why I approached, so that I may hold back from her all gossip  
Until the child wants it and His Father would reveal His story.”<sup>89</sup>

Now Joseph reveals clearly his decision without any ambiguity  
in the following lines:

As long as he is silent the mystery is guarded from the outsiders  
And I am guarding Him as my son, the Hidden Mystery.  
Words fall silent and the priests filled with wickedness fail  
From the abuse of the child and of its mother as long as He wishes.  
But when it pleases Him to reveal himself to the world whose son He is  
that woman will remain as mine and Mary will shine in her virginity.<sup>90</sup>

In his words “that woman will remain as mine and Mary will shine  
in her virginity”, there echoes not only an extraordinary courage, but  
also a real manliness. Joseph is not just brave and courageous to take  
up this responsibility to defend Mary’s virginity, he does it out of his  
trust in God and being faithful and committed before God. He does  
not show any stinginess (miserliness) in honouring Mary’s holiness.  
His words are sincere and strong:

Behold I am approaching and am serving while being fearful  
And when it pleases Him, He will set me away without abuse.  
She was betrothed to me and now I have left behind the betrothal  
And I have become a servant to the mother who is totally holy.<sup>91</sup>

To those who seek models of spousal equality, co-operation and  
mutual respect and care, the spouses should take it from Joseph and  
his attitude to Mary. What he shows is not merely a sympathy or  
consideration for a ditched girl. There is faith, love, supernatural  
courage, trust in God, sense of social justice and what not. He even  
ignores his status a being betrothed (being equal partner) and  
becomes a servant to the mother who is totally holy. He even goes  
out of his way in defending her virginity. Mary in the same way,  
regards Joseph as a holy, noble and sincere man, being faithful to his  
conscience. She never tries to put any blame on him.

### **1.2.7. Joseph as a Priest**

Another epithet given to Joseph is that Joseph is a priest because he  
is a holy man. Joseph is revered as the ‘worthy one’ for the Mystery

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<sup>89</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 304-311, 125.

<sup>90</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 312-317.

<sup>91</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 318-321, 125.

of the Son. This truth comes out through Mary, or rather, Jacob makes Mary to tell the world that Joseph is not only a just man, but also his holiness is unparalleled. He is a priest in full holiness. We find this epithet of Joseph as a priest in the writings of Jacob of Serugh. Though the tribe of Joseph is well emphasised in the scripture as that of David (Lk 2:4) and it is not the Levite tribe of priests, Jacob attested in his writings that Joseph was like a Levite. His nativity hymn enumerates:

I will not drive out Joseph who is full of holiness  
because like a Levite, behold he serves the Lord of the sanctuary.  
Aaron, the priest was not made more resplendent than Joseph  
for, behold, in his hands he carries the Lord of sanctuary and escorts  
Him.<sup>92</sup>

The above homily gives the reason for addressing Joseph as a priest. His holiness, service at the sanctuary and carrying the Lord in his hands make him more resplendent than Aaron, the priest of the Old Testament. The imagery of a child clinging to the hand of its father, is totally changed to another perspective in the case of Joseph and Jesus. Jesus the child holding his father, just like any other child, as he tries to toddle is put in opposite comparison to Joseph holding the fingers of the child Jesus just like the Seraph who took the coal of fire (Jesus). Jacob of Serugh explains the reason for naming Joseph as a priest in relation to Christ, depicted as the coal of fire, which the seraph scarcely took hold of with the tongues of fire. The underlying reason for his priesthood is the holiness that brought him closer to the sanctuary and made him eligible to carry the Lord in his hands. The depth of Jacob of Serugh's reasoning is very much noticeable in his homily on the nativity. Joseph being close to Jesus the child and his stay beside him is considered to be a special kind of priestly service to the Lord.

That coal of fire, which Seraph scarcely took hold of with the tongues of  
fire  
behold Joseph carries with his fingers.  
As long as the infant desires, Joseph will remain beside him,  
he serves Him with holiness for he is a just man.<sup>93</sup>

The depiction of Joseph as a Levite indicates the perception of the Christian priesthood according to Jacob of Serugh in the context of the Syriac world. The emphasis given to the quality of holiness is the

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<sup>92</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 330-333, 126.

<sup>93</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 334-337, 126.

prerequisite for priests in the West Syrian tradition. The other homilies of Jacob of Serugh also emphasises on priest's holiness. In the homily on *the Descent of the Most High on Sinai, and the Mystery of the Church*, we read:

I put in you (Church) holiness, the treasure of priests.  
The prophets who reveal the secrets shall be yours,  
and the priests who give absolution over the sins shall dwell with you.<sup>94</sup>

The above narration specifies that the holiness of the priests is their treasure, and they must be saints, righteous and virtuous on account of their holiness. Jacob of Serugh depicts St Joseph as a model for priests because of the holiness that he acquired through his affinity to Jesus. People ask her to explain the reason why she defends and supports Joseph. They even suggest to let Joseph go.

Oh virgin, who became a mother through a wonder, come, point out to us,  
why Joseph, the just, is treated unjustly for you, since he does not know you (carnally)?  
Your Son is the Exalted One and His Father is hidden, and you are holy;  
For let Joseph go off so that you will not be reviled by the earthly<sup>95</sup>

But Mary's view is quite different from those who support her. The courageous Mary replies: "I am not afraid of abuse. My Son knows that I am a virgin, because no man has known me (carnally)." She has full trust in Jesus who had been revealed to her by the angel as Immanuel (God with us), and therefore she has no hesitation or doubt that Joseph is the worthiest among all around, to be with her and take care of the Holy One in her womb. She stands firm on her conviction and says:

I will not drive out Joseph who is full of holiness  
Because like a Levite, behold, he serves he serves the Lord of the Sanctuary.  
Aaron, the priest was not made more resplendent than Joseph  
For, behold, in his hands he carries the Lord of the sanctuary and escorts Him.  
The Coal of Fire, which the Seraph scarcely took hold of with the tongues of fire,  
Behold, Joseph carries with his fingers.

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<sup>94</sup>Jacob of Serugh, *The Descent of the Most High on Sinai, and the Mystery of the Church*, HS I, 10,4-6.

<sup>95</sup>Jacob of Serugh, *Nativity 3 FH III*, 324-327.

As long as the infant desires, Joseph will remain beside Him.  
He serves Him with holiness for he is just man.<sup>96</sup>

Now Mary makes also a self-declaration regarding the criticisms against Joseph. She is aware that Joseph's decision to support and defend her was not merely a magnanimity of Joseph towards her. She is convinced of Joseph's modesty and that it was a decision of his discernment. At the same time, she holds to her stand of purity. Neither is she at fault. So, she can demand a decent treatment even from Joseph towards her.

I am not ungrateful to his discernment or his modesty,  
For, the Lord wished to reveal through him the mystery of His Son before him.

For, if Joseph had not been worthy of the mystery, he would not have become the betrothed to His mother and then stayed with her.<sup>97</sup>

The same theme of the priesthood of Joseph comes again when the child is brought to the temple on the eighth day.<sup>98</sup> Jacob in his Hymn on the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple and on the Reception of Him by Simeon<sup>99</sup>, narrates the priestly role of Joseph in this event: On behalf of the Lord of all sacrifices, who with His Sender accepts sacrifices, "Joseph brought two young birds.<sup>100</sup> It is worth imagining the arrival of Joseph to the temple with offering in both his hands: on one Jesus and on the other, the two birds. "Joseph carried the young birds which he brought on account of the child. And he went up to the sanctuary to offer according to the law."<sup>101</sup>

### ***1.2.8. Syriac Eucharistic Theology***

In this context it is worth mentioning one of the basic aspects of West Syrian sacramental theology (especially the Antiochene), namely, all three factors of the sacrifice, the offeror, what is being offered, and the receiver is one and the same Christ. The oneness of the holy trinity as well as the priesthood of Jesus are symbolically as well as metaphysically established here. It comes through the mouth of Simeon in the temple when he sees Jesus being brought to the temple by Joseph and Mary. Seeing the young birds in the hands of

<sup>96</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 328–337.

<sup>97</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 338–341.

<sup>98</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Nativity 3 FH III, 318–321.

<sup>99</sup>Syriac Text in *Homiliae selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, P. Bedjan, ed., Vol. V, Paris-Leipzig 1910, 447–446 (Homily No. 165).

<sup>100</sup>Cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 12:6–8.

<sup>101</sup>Jacob of Serugh, Presentation of Our Lord FH V, 31–32.

Joseph, that were brought for the sacrifice according to the law<sup>102</sup>, the aged one says:

To whom shall I offer the sacrifice that you, the Lord of heights, have brought?

Sacrifices and libations ascend to you in the presence of the Father and how shall I receive a sacrifice from you and whom shall I offer?

For the Father does not receive anything without you.

Behold, from eternity, it is through you that He accepts all offerings<sup>103</sup>.

[....]

Then You are the recipient together with your Begetter, and therefore,

How shall I accept from you, ritual sacrifice which you offer?

If I receive it, I shall be giving (back) the same to you.

Take from your own and it is appropriate for you to accept.

You have brought the sacrifice; come, receive it together with your Begetter.

Give me what you have brought and receive from me what I am offering.

Your Father, on His own, does not receive sacrifices from anyone;

Behold, you are there with your Sender because He is with you.

Behold, I am holding two young birds that Joseph brought.

To whom should I offer if I do not offer through you to your Father?<sup>104</sup>

A great theological vision of Eucharistic and sacramental theology, which runs throughout the West Syrian liturgical texts, especially that of the Holy Thursday<sup>105</sup>. Here Jesus is seen as the one who offers, the offered, and the one who receives the sacrifice at the same time.

## Conclusion

Eastern Churches in general honour St Joseph in line with the Fathers of the Church. His role in the salvific events, especially in the Incarnation of the Lord is highlighted in the liturgy of all these churches. The Syriac Tradition highlights St Joseph as a just and righteous man but at the same he surpasses the Jewish and Mosaic law where he becomes a guardian for the virgin and the Son of God. In the west Syrian tradition, Joseph is depicted as the one who stands

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<sup>102</sup>Cf. Lk 2:22-24; Lev 12:6-7.

<sup>103</sup>Cf. Jacob of Serugh, *Homiliae selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, Vol. I, 316, 9-317, 4 [Homily "On the Pharisee and the Publican," in Paul Bedjan, ed., Paris—Leipzig 1905-1910, English Translation in *The True Vine* vol. 9 (1991), 32 (lines 353-370)].

<sup>104</sup>Jacob of Serugh, *Presentation of Our Lord FH V*, 142-146, 167-176, in Thomas Kollampampil, tr. & ed., *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies; with a forward by Sebastian Brock*, 147-149.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. മലങ്കര സുറിയാനി കത്തോലിക്കാ സഭ ഹാശാ ആഴ്ചയിലെ പ്രാർത്ഥനാക്രമം [Malankara Syrian Catholic Church: Divine Office of the Holy Week], Trivandrum: Synodal Commission for Liturgy, 2012, 292.

before God with a divine vocation to guard and protect Mary and her child. By comparing Joseph's act of protecting with the vigilance that Cherub does in paradise, the West Syrian Church Fathers assert that Joseph is a man with divine call. It also affirms that the vocation of being a protector involves all those who protect life and others. The actualisation of the divine call manifests his priestly character, which reveals to us the basic nature of priests. Therefore, the narration of west Syrian Church Fathers on the life of St Joseph depicts him as a model who inspires our Christian journey standing close to Jesus. At the same time, he is presented as a just, holy, sincere husband as well as humble servant of God who takes care of the family.