

## FEED AND LEAD: PARADIGMS OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN EASTERN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Christian Leadership has always been held in high esteem and has remained a subject for consideration by others. The fundamental thrust of this leadership is that it is a worldly leadership which is thoroughly Christ-centred. We can find some paradigms of the background to the present-day Christian leadership among the ancient Syriac Church Fathers. One such Syriac scholar is Aphrahat. The 10th *talwita* 'On Shepherds' throws ample light on the paradigms of psycho-social dimensions of Christian leadership. This article attempts to introduce the excellent models of Christian leadership which emerge in the 10th *talwita*.

**Keywords:** Aphrahat, Christian Leadership, Eastern Theology, Integrity of the Heart, Shepherd

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Malayalam version of the article was already published in *Danahalaya Roopeekaranabhashyam*, Vol. 13, 2 (January-June 2018) 5-16. I hereby express my gratitude to the director for giving consent to publish it in English. However, this is a revised and updated version of the article originally published in Malayalam.

background to the present-day Christian leadership among the ancient Syriac Church Fathers.<sup>2</sup> Such a revered Syriac scholar is Aphrahat.<sup>3</sup> Living in the fourth century in today's Mosul, he wrote 23 *tahwita* (*Demonstrations*).<sup>4</sup> The 10th *tahwita* 'On Shepherds' throws ample light on the paradigms of psycho-social dimensions of Christian leadership. This article attempts to introduce the excellent models of Christian leadership which emerge in the 10th *tahwita*.

## 1. Christian Leadership and the Pastoral Identity

The biblical perspective of Christian leadership is usually denoted with the symbol of "shepherd." Aphrahat also borrows the same biblical style. However, he gives his own interpretation to the symbol of "shepherd" to portray the various facets of Christian leadership. He carries out his interpretation mainly by distinguishing the shades of the meaning of two words: Chief Shepherd and under shepherd.<sup>5</sup> He assigns the use of the phrase 'Chief Shepherd' solely for Jesus Christ, whereas the term 'under Shepherd' or 'sub shepherd' is used to denote the apostles. However, in the hierarchy of the Church's pastoral care both the above-mentioned terms signify different leaderships. The Chief Shepherd is the bishop while the under shepherds are the clergy who are devoid of the episcopal consecration.<sup>6</sup> In the ultimate evaluation, both the terms reveal something which is related to the hierarchy of Christian leadership.

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<sup>2</sup>In general terms, the Syriac theology is heir to three different traditions namely, the Ancient Near Eastern, Judaism, and the Greek world. Cfr. S.P. Brock, "Divine Titles and Epithets in Syriac Writings: Some Approaches," *Parole de l'Orient* 38 (2013) 35.

<sup>3</sup>Aphrahat represents Christianity with its Syrian pedigree. He was an important witness to an independent Syriac literary tradition, which is generally known as "Syriac Orient." The "Syriac Orient," which stands in parallel to the theological traditions of "Greek East" and "Latin West," has a Semitic Judeo-Christian legacy. The Semitic Christian heritage is the very foundation of Christian theology. It is the first form of Christian theology, which was mainly reflected in the Apologists of all theological traditions. Cfr. J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, London 1964, 7.10.

<sup>4</sup>This article follows a consistent system with regard to the reference to the *Demonstrations*. As the occasion demands, this article will use the abbreviated form *Dem.* for *Demonstration*. When this article refers to a *Demonstration*, it will state the number of the *Demonstration* and the relevant paragraph respectively (for instance, *Dem.*1:5).

<sup>5</sup>Cfr. G. Nedungatt, "The Typology of Peter in the Symbolic Theology of Aphrahat," *Orientalia Cristiana Periodica* 80 (2014) 306. The author further observes that though the Syriac language has two different words for "Chief Shepherd" and "under shepherd," they can be rendered in English only with one word "shepherd." Cfr. Nedungatt, "The Typology of Peter in the Symbolic Theology of Aphrahat," 306.

<sup>6</sup>Nedungatt, "The Typology of Peter in the Symbolic Theology of Aphrahat," 306.

This implies that Christian leadership undertakes diverse ministries with divergent aims or goals.

Aphrahat also explains the Petrine Ministry highlighting the differences between the above-mentioned two terms. He regards Peter as only one among the many under shepherds appointed by Jesus, The Chief Shepherd. This view of Aphrahat is in stark contrast to the Western theological perspectives. In the Western theological perspective, the difference between the Chief Shepherd and the sub shepherds is not that much clear. However, Aphrahat sees Peter only as a representative of the Apostolic community. In that sense, Peter remains a 'type' of the community of shepherds within the Church. By entrusting the pastoral care to Peter, the other apostles also share the same charism. This view is in contrast to the usually accepted view regarding Petrine ministry. According to the teaching of the Church, only Peter is given the authority to shepherd the sheep of Messiah. The other apostles are only the representatives of the sheep under the pastoral care of St Peter; they too are to be under the care and guidance of Peter.<sup>7</sup>

However, according to Aphrahat, the shepherding authority given to St Peter is not solely for him alone. On the contrary, by entrusting this authority to Peter, every other apostle partakes of the same responsibility in equal manner. Peter's authority is unique. But it is not in the light of the sole authority that he received; on the contrary, it is because he was entrusted with that authority as the representative (type) of the other Apostles<sup>8</sup>.

Aphrahat's unique view which we have explained above points to a crucial character of Christian leadership. He reminds us that Christian leadership is one of co-responsibility. Moreover, he teaches that the Christian leadership is firmly grounded in spirituality. Therefore, he views the leader as the head and "Life giver." Hence the leader leads from the forefront fulfilling the pastoral care and guides those entrusted to his care to "Life" by providing "Life-giving food." Feed and lead is the admonition of Aphrahat to the pastors.<sup>9</sup> In this situation, one needs to note that Aphrahat uses the term "Life" in the sense of 'salvation' itself. This, indeed, is the unique view of the East Syriac Theology.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Nedungatt, "The Typology of Peter in the Symbolic Theology of Aphrahat," 308-309.

<sup>8</sup>Nedungatt, "The Typology of Peter in the Symbolic Theology of Aphrahat," 305-309.

<sup>9</sup>Cfr. *Dem.* 10:4.

<sup>10</sup>For further details, see A.F.J. Klijn, "The Term 'Life' in Syriac Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 5 (1952) 390-397.

The East Syriac Theology, especially East Syriac Anthropology, gives much importance to the positive attitudes in its theological articulation. Therefore, East Syriac Theology uses the word "Life" in the place of "salvation." What is the reason for this substitution? This is the difference in perspective. Winkler further clarifies: "There is a crucial difference between the negative approach of being *freed from*, *rescued from*, *saved from* something and the positive approach of *bestowing life*, *causing life* as the fundamental concept, whether of redemption or asceticism."<sup>11</sup>

One of the principal witnesses of this positive approach is the Syriac NT. In this regard, it avoids the use of the Greek verbs which include the meaning of "to deliver," "to redeem," and "to save."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Syriac NT replaces them with the verbs "to give life," "to make alive," and "to cause to live."<sup>13</sup> In the light of the new approach of the Syriac gospel tradition, the term "Life" becomes a normative use with regard to the doctrine of "salvation" in the Syriac tradition. The reason for such a theological approach is the Christology reflected in the biblical theology of Syriac tradition. Eastern Christology views Jesus Christ more as the 'Life giver' than as the 'Saviour.'<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the Messiah came into the world to give back the 'Life' which was lost because of Adam's sin. Jesus Christ was incarnated in the earth to bring back the 'Light of Life' and to liberate us from the 'darkness of Death' caused by the sin of Adam. The 'Life-giving' process was completed in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. After the Resurrection and Ascension, the Messiah gave the Holy Spirit to humanity. This, indeed, ensures that one's journey to salvation is easier. Each one partakes in the Life and Salvation by safeguarding the Holy Spirit received through Baptism.<sup>15</sup>

The spiritual vision of salvation which is explained above also reflects in Aphrahat's view regarding Christian leadership. The aim of the pastoral leadership, that is, the providing of the food of Life, actually gives emphasis to his view that the noble leadership style is

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<sup>11</sup> Cfr. G. Winkler, "The Origins and Idiosyncrasies of the Earliest Form of Asceticism," in W. Skudlarek, ed., *The Continuing Quest for God*, Minnesota, 1982, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. J. Molitor, *Grundbegriffe der Jesusüberlieferung im Lichte der orientalischen Sprachgeschichte*, Düsseldorf, 1968, 15-35.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Molitor, *Grundbegriffe der Jesusüberlieferung im Lichte der orientalischen Sprachgeschichte*, 15-35.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. G. Lenzi, "The Johannine Origin of the Syriac Usage of the Term "Life" for "salvation," in Juan-Pedro Monferrer-Sala - Á. Urbán, ed., *Sacred Text: Explorations in Lexicography*, Frankfurt am Main, 2009, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. *Dem.* 6:10.



to hold the hand of the other in the path of spirituality. In the light of this affirmation, one can understand that Aphrahat underlines the fact that the individuality of the shepherd is firmly rooted in spirituality.

## 2. From the 'Sheep' to the People: Preparation for the Christian Leadership

Christian leadership by its very nature involves a manner of selection; and this selection demands a lot of voluntary preparation. A well-trained leadership is essential for efficient and effective pastoral ministry. Aphrahat explains this preparation with the Biblical background. He narrates how God prepares the specially chosen ones to lead the flock. Jacob, Joseph and Moses were all shepherds who diligently guided the sheep.<sup>16</sup> God raised these men from shepherding the sheep to shepherding the people.<sup>17</sup> Hence Christian leadership is a divinely ordained selection and preparation for pastoral ministry.

What is the need for such preparation? This preparation is needed for three purposes. The mission entrusted with the leadership should be accomplished with great care, vigilant observation and unrelenting hard work.<sup>18</sup> Any leadership strongly founded on these three qualities can clearly recognize the path of ministry entrusted to oneself. The ultimate aim of this care is unity which is the manifestation of the 'koinonia' of the whole faithful. It involves the eschatological vision of 'One Shepherd and One Flock.'<sup>19</sup> The eschatological relevance of the 'koinonia' makes the Christian leadership unique. One gets the intuition to see the flock of sheep with equality only in the light of this perspective. It is the style to embrace the flock with equanimity which include both the wise and the fool, the able and the inefficient, the good and the rotten. This pedagogical style of equality involves a broad perspective of care and concern.

Another aspect of care is the holding on to Life (Salvation). It is the joyous experience of salvation through Christ who is the door to it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Cfr. *Dem.* 10:1.

<sup>17</sup>Aphrahat writes: "But why, my beloved, did these pastors first shepherd the sheep and (only) then were chosen to feed the people? - if not so that, they should learn how a shepherd cares for his sheep, watches and toils on behalf of his sheep. Once they had learnt the practices of pastors, they were chosen for leadership." *Dem.* 10:2.

<sup>18</sup>Cfr. *Dem.* 10:1.

<sup>19</sup>Cfr. *Dem.* 10:4.

<sup>20</sup>Aphrahat states: "But the Chief of the Shepherds will make those who have tended the sheep well rejoice and inherit life and rest." *Dem.* 10:3.

In this respect, care involves some integral style of pastoral ministry. Bringing back those who have gone astray, visiting the sick and suffering, strengthening the weak, uniting the destructed, protecting the weak are different aspects of the caring ministry. The noble aim of the Christian leadership is oneness. Religious fundamentalist groups often take unfriendly stands making people to oppose and fight one another. However, the aim which the Christian leadership foreshadows is diametrically opposed to this view. Its mission is not to divide or segregate but to unite and gather the flock in one-fold. This is the quintessence of Christianity. Despite the differences of opinion, it is the spiritual ethos of seeing all as one. Intrinsically, it is the conviction formed by the perspective that we all are one in Christ.

Yet another aspect of care is to have a focused lifestyle grounded in constant vigilance. Moreover, it is the act of becoming one with Jesus Christ, the Centre. The natural outcome of becoming one with Christ is the ministry without division. This implies the liberation of the mind from all obstacles which hinder one from committed service and fidelity to the entrusted mission. For any effective leadership this centralised style is a must. It is the keeping away from things and issues which are likely to take one away from the committed life of pastoral ministry.<sup>21</sup> It is the conviction of life which makes one to turn away from all transient pleasures and firmly dedicate the mind and body to the entrusted ministry.

The total dedication in the pastoral leadership differentiates the true shepherd from the hireling. The leadership of the hired reflects the ulterior motives which manifests the ego. He is more concerned about his own matters.<sup>22</sup> But the true shepherd is selfless and takes care of the needs of the other. The best example of this is Moses in the Old Testament. His petition and prayer before God in Exodus 32:32 reveal this fact. One can find three qualities of a leader in the petition of Moses. Moses is at the same time a watchful shepherd, courageous leader and a considerate father. Accordingly, Aphrahat portrays watchfulness, courage, and mercy as the paradigms of caring leadership.

### 3. Integrity of the Heart

According to Aphrahat, integrity of the heart is an important dimension in the Christian leadership. Citing the exemplary biblical

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<sup>21</sup>Aphrahat says: "For the shepherd who cares for his sheep engages in no other work. He does not establish a vineyard, or plant gardens, or falls into the troubles of this world." *Dem* 10:4.

<sup>22</sup>Aphrahat writes: "The shepherds who did not care for the sheep, however, are the hired hands who only tend to their own needs." *Dem.* 10:3.

figures of David and Noah, he reminds us that pastors must have the integrity of the heart.

One can better understand the phrase ‘integrity of the heart’ by analysing how the Bible and East Syriac theology explains the word ‘heart.’ ‘Heart’ is not merely a human organ but it is a symbol.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, one needs to understand this symbol theologically and spiritually. In other words, one needs to understand ‘heart’ in a metaphorical way. In that sense, ‘heart’ is a state that forms the reality of the purity of thought. In the modern perspective, the term ‘heart’ denotes the central point of two kinds of existences, that is, physical and spiritual.<sup>24</sup> However, Old Testament theology gives more importance to the metaphorical sense of the term rather than the physical while using the term ‘heart’. In this sense, the Old Testament views the ‘heart’ as the centre of human intellect and all types of human thought processes.<sup>25</sup>

The Syriac Fathers expound their views of the ‘heart’ in the light of the Old Testament insights. In their view, the ‘heart’ is the very epicentre of a man’s existential nature as well as the source of Life. But Aphrahat teaches the word ‘heart’ in relation to his concept of ‘purity of the heart.’ He explains his insight most lucidly in a letter he wrote to the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The letter forms the main theme of the 14th *tahwita*. What makes this article to deal with the relevance of the theme ‘purity of the heart’ is that Aphrahat treats the same concept in the context of a fight between the leader and the flock. This persuades us to explore more about the theme of the ‘integrity of the heart’ used by Aphrahat.

One may wonder why Aphrahat mentions the ‘integrity of the heart’ in the context of the battle between Church leadership and Church members. But by going deeper into the subject one may understand that Aphrahat approaches the theme in this *tahwita* both theologically and anthropologically. According to Aphrahat, the universality of the Church becomes manifested only when one overcomes the earthly division and separation, in Jesus Christ. The conviction regarding the ‘integrity of the heart’ and the purity of the heart helps one for this overwhelming. According to Aphrahat, those who keep the conviction of the ‘integrity of the heart’ can rise to the

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<sup>23</sup>Cfr. T. Špidlík, “The Heart in Russian Spirituality,” *Orientalia Cristiana Analecta* 195 (1973) 362-363.

<sup>24</sup>Cfr. S. P. Brock, “The Prayer of the Heart in the Syriac Tradition,” *Sobornost* 4, 2 (1982) 133.

<sup>25</sup>Cfr. Špidlík, “The Heart in Russian Spirituality,” 362-363.

level of the fraternity of the heavenly hosts by letting aside all the earthly divisions. Aphrahat writes:

Who has perceived the place of knowledge? Who has understood the roots of wisdom? Who has attained the place of intelligence? ... The person whose heart's door is open will find it. He who unfolds the wings of his sense will inherit it. It dwells in the diligent man. It is planted in the heart of the wise. Its nerves are strengthened by means of its sources. A person acquires with it a hidden treasure. It causes his thought to fly to all heights. His reflections are brought down to all the depths. It forms in his heart amazing things. The eyes of his senses cross the seas. All created things are enclosed in his thought. His inclination is open to receive. He is the great temple of his maker. The King of the height enters and dwells in him, raises his mind to the height and causes his thought to fly to His sanctuary and shows it a treasury of many colors. His mind wanders about at the sight and his heart is captivated by all his senses. It shows to him what he has not known. He gazes at and examines at that place. His mind wonders at all that he sees. All the watchers make haste at His ministry and the seraphs sanctify His magnificence. They fly with their swift wings and their garments are white and adorned. They cover their faces from His brightness. They run more swiftly than the wind. The throne of the kingdom is put in there and the judge equips himself (for) the tribunal. The thrones are set right out for the righteous who shall judge the wicked on the day of judgement (Mt 19:28). When the wise sees in his mind the place whose treasures are many, then his thought is raised up and his heart conceives and gives birth to all sorts of good things. He cares for everything which has been commanded (of him).<sup>26</sup>

In the above-mentioned passage, Aphrahat describes the mystical ways of fraternity of heavenly hosts in which a (wise) person with 'integrity of the heart' experiences God and his Kingdom. This points to an important aspect of Christian leadership. A leader or a shepherd, who keeps the 'integrity of the heart' as necessary criteria, should be concerned more about the spiritual and heavenly spheres than the worldly ones. Moreover, the passage reminds us that the Christian leadership needs to be founded on spirituality and a Christian leader needs to strive for heavenly treasures than worldly profits. Today, this has turned to be the major challenge that the Church has to face.

Christian leadership is often criticized for its excessive concern with worldly affairs. Christian leadership deviates from its true mission and vision when it gives more importance to worldliness rather than spirituality. Instead, the essence of Christian leadership should be the 'integrity of heart' and the bliss of God-Man

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<sup>26</sup>Dem. 14:35.

relationship which it nurtures as well as the heavenly brotherhood it creates. Only such a person who possesses this integrity of the heart can rise above the world's division and have the social insight to treat all with equality. The source of strength and criteria for this world's leadership shall be its union with the Heavenly Kingdom. Christian leadership devoid of this union with the divine Kingdom shall remain only as a gathering of individuals who lost the 'integrity of the heart.' The 'gatherings' which have lost fraternal koinonia is always a challenge. Therefore, the 'integrity of the heart' is a relevant vision even in the modern world. More than a mere spiritual vision, the 'integrity of the heart' puts forth the subjective vision that a true leader needs to equally integrate the mental, physical and social realities. This dimension forms the genuine definition of the concept of 'integrity of the heart.'

Aphrahat uses the Syriac word *tamimuta* for 'integrity of the heart.'<sup>27</sup> The Syriac word *tamimuta* includes various meanings such as innocence, humility, integrity, and without blemish.<sup>28</sup> In a broader sense, *tamimuta* implies the mental maturity that a person needs to acquire. In the light of this understanding, 'integrity of the heart' infers the complementarity of the thoughts, words, and deeds of a person. The source of this reciprocal behaviour is the heart.<sup>29</sup> The basic attitude which is formed in the heart becomes manifested as thoughts, words, and deeds.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Aphrahat presents the 'integrity of the heart' as the basic criteria for the Christian leadership. In a wider sense, the 'integrity of the heart' involves the mental attitudes of modesty and humility of a shepherd or leader. Thus, Aphrahat presents the person who has acquired the 'integrity of the heart' as the hallmark of real Christian leadership. The Syriac theology always upholds this aspect of psycho-social vision as the speciality of the Christian leadership.

## Conclusion

The rationale for this article was to explore the psycho-social aspects of Eastern (Syriac) theology regarding Christian leadership. The Syriac heritage is very often a neglected one in the Eastern

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<sup>27</sup>Cfr. A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage*, Piscataway, NJ 2010, 237.

<sup>28</sup>Cfr. N. Koltun-Fromm, "Aphrahat and the Rabbis on Noah's Righteousness in Light of the Jewish-Christian Polemic," in J. Frishman – L.van Rompay, ed., *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, Lovanii, 1997, 69.

<sup>29</sup>Cfr. *Dem.* 9:11.

<sup>30</sup>Cfr. S.K.S. Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God: A Study of Early Syriac Theological Anthropology*, New Jersey, NJ, 2008, 147.

theological milieu. The Syriac theology is symbolical which gives prominence to the attitudes of heart rather than intellect in its theological articulation. Therefore, the vision which the Syriac theology puts forward has always been simple and relevant. One needs to evaluate the vision of Aphrahat, the pioneer among the East Syriac Fathers in the light of the just-mentioned fact.

The article has used the *tahwita* "On Shepherd" to understand Aphrahat's vision. He chiefly introduces three psycho-social paradigms of Christian leadership. The first stresses the importance of the personality of the Shepherd in distinguishing the models of leadership. Thus, the shepherd should be the 'leader' and 'giver of salvation' in the spiritual realm of Christian leadership. The thought that only a leadership firmly rooted in Christ can function as a creative leadership is relevant even today. The Christian leadership devoid of Christ often deviates from its true mission. Moreover, his thought underlines the fact that only a spiritual model of leadership grounded in Christ can lead everyone with equality. Only the paradigm of leadership which is based on the salvation of the soul can satisfy the sheep. Craving after worldly affairs shall never provide ultimate satisfaction for the people. Hence, Aphrahat's vision may help us to regain the contemporary relevance of the Christian leadership if it has been lost.

The second paradigm of the Christian leadership which we trace from the thought of Aphrahat points to the need for preparation. According to the divine economy, those who are called to shepherd the flock which have to undergo through preparation. The experience of 'caring for the sheep' enables the Old Testament leaders to select them for a great mission like shepherding of the people by Yahweh. Thus, Aphrahat reminds us that Christian leadership should attain this quality through sufficient and proper training and preparation. This, in fact, leads us to the thought that the preparation should be of immense value. Today there is no lack of preparation for Christian leadership. However, one needs to evaluate whether today's leadership is equipped to dialogue with contemporary human realities of life. Aphrahat argues that Christian leadership should focus on spiritual gains for the flock rather than nurturing personal joys of the self; the hallmark of the leadership is the focus on altruism rather than selfishness. In the light of this perspective, it is to be examined whether such an annihilation of the self is achieved during the preparation for the Christian leadership. The view of Aphrahat reminds us that there should be a preparation to acquire the paradigms of care and being one with Christ as part of the Christian leadership.

The third and most significant aspect of Christian leadership is to cultivate the 'integrity of the heart.' The leadership which has lost its authenticity may cause immorality and division. Here the 'integrity of the heart' presents before us the best paradigm of Christian leadership. The innocence of shepherds and the fidelity to the divine call help the leadership to be free of criticism and challenges. If Christian leadership is to grow to such noble heights it should be a brotherhood of shepherds with 'integrity of heart.' Life witness with commitment is more important than strategies. Constant relationship with heavenly realms is needed rather than the friendship with the worldly hierarchies of power. This shall make one's ministry of caring more noble in nature. For such a fruitful leadership, the driving force shall come from the concept of "integrity of the heart."

All three visions of Aphrahat which is mentioned above place before us the perspectives of East Syriac theology. These are the basic models of ideal Christian leadership. Creative growth of the Church is impossible if these foundations are shattered. Therefore, these three paradigms of Aphrahat regarding Christian leadership remain significant for all times.