

## BOOK REVIEW

**Isaac Arickappallil**, *Pneumatology of Mar Narsai*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2025, Pages: xvii+265. ISBN: 978-81-982119-8-9.

The book by Isaac Arickappallil CMI, *Pneumatology of Mar Narsai*, is a well-researched scientific study based on sources. Originally a doctoral dissertation defended at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, in 1992, it has now been published as a book after “the gap of a long period of ‘incubation’” (p. xxiii), as the author himself comments. In his Prologue (p. xi-xii), Thomas Aykara offers an engaging appreciation of Arickappallil’s work. The following messages highlight and reveal the theological depth of this splendid work, which brings to light Mar Narsai’s thoughts, reflections, and their spiritual richness.

Let me now whet the reader’s appetite by highlighting a few notable features of the work. The authorial Introduction (pp. 1-4) is precise and affirms, “the insights of Narsai which have a sound scriptural and liturgical basis are relevant even in our times since they echo the views on and experience of the Holy Spirit prevalent at the period of the Fathers which are conducive to an authentic Christian life based on sound theological principles and spiritual values proper to the Church” (p. 4). After the General Introduction, the book unfolds in six chapters. The first chapter explores the historico-theological milieu of Narsai, who could inspire and edify the East Syriac Church of Persia through his instructions, literary creations and personal witness. In the adverse atmosphere for Christians, Narsai instilled courage in them and encouraged perseverance in faith. He promoted the true theological stand of the East Syriac Church and never deviated from the Nicene Creed. His homilies aimed to encourage and strengthen authentic Christian life through an active and experiential liturgical practice (p. 32).

In the second chapter, the concept of the Holy Spirit in the East Syriac tradition up to the time of Narsai is examined and explained. It explores the theological development of the Holy Spirit in the East Syriac Church until Narsai. The pneumatological foundations in Syriac source texts such as the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Syriac Didascalia*,

and the *Acts of Thomas*; as well as the teachings of the Syriac Fathers – Aphraates, Ephrem, and Theodore of Mopsuestia – are investigated. Arickappallil notes that “the authors of the early Syriac writings and Syriac Church Fathers discerned and defined the personality and mission of the Holy Spirit based on the Scriptures” (p. 102). The third chapter focuses on Narsai’s theological thought patterns and content. This chapter is divided into three parts: the first explores how Narsai systematically grounds his Trinitarian understanding in the Scriptures; the second discusses the essence and nature of the Triune God; and the third examines Narsai’s understanding of each Person separately, along with the relationship between the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit, and vice versa. Narsai reveals that the mystery of the Trinity is gradually unveiled from the Old Testament and revealed alongside our redemption, employing the theological language of his time. He states that God is one in Being and nature, but three in Persons; and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, just as the Son is generated from the Father. The Spirit, as a Person with the Father and the Son, is equal in nature and one in Essence with them (p. 135).

The following chapter highlights the pneumatological aspects of Christ’s redemptive work as described by Narsai. Humanity’s salvific work by the Son necessarily occurs in and through the Holy Spirit. The chapter explores the background of the salvific act, the appearance of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit – the second Adam (p. 144) – who brings about redemption, and the Holy Spirit’s role in Christ’s salvific economy. The Holy Spirit actively participates in Christ’s salvific work, forming a new ‘figure’ in the womb of Mary as the perfect image of God – the second Adam. Anointed by the Spirit, he defeats death, sin, and evil through his death, resurrection, and ascension; and on the day of Pentecost, he completes his mission and enables humanity to re-enter Paradise (p. 164). The fifth chapter concerns the Holy Spirit in the Church and the Sacraments. It discusses the Spirit’s role in distributing the fruits of salvation through the Church and its Sacraments. The Holy Spirit established the Church to realise God’s universal salvific will; and as the New Israel, the Church serves as the place where the saving work of Christ is fulfilled. The Holy Spirit imparts the redemptive merits of Christ through the Church’s sacraments, guiding her towards eschatological fulfilment (p. 204).

The sixth and final chapter provides a synthesis of Narsai’s pneumatology. It compares Narsai’s views and visions with early

Syriac sources such as Odes of Solomon, Didascalia, and the Acts of Thomas, as well as Syriac Fathers like Aphraates, Ephrem, and Theodore. The chapter discusses his doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's role in Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and sacramental theology- particularly in Baptism, Eucharist, and Priesthood. Narsai's perspectives are also reviewed through the lens of Church documents and modern scholarly works. His pneumatology, as outlined in his writings, is summarized in the General Conclusion; notably, Narsai's pneumatological doctrine is firmly rooted in Scripture and Tradition, developed within a balanced Trinitarian framework, and characterised by a thoroughly soteriological outlook. His ecclesiology bears a strong pneumatological emphasis, and the faithful receive the benefits of redemption through the Church's sacraments (p. 242-242).

What makes this work impressive and appealing is the range of its treatment. It critically engages a wide spectrum of scholarship on the mystery of the Holy Spirit as revealed in Scripture, Tradition, Liturgy, and the Early Syriac sources and Fathers to achieve a synthesis of Narsai's Pneumatology. Arickappallil provides a comprehensive list of Abbreviations and Sigla (p. xxviii-xxxiv), along with sufficient bibliographical guidance referencing sources, key commentaries, and selected studies (p. 248-265). In this, a "Further Bibliography" is included, making this work quite up-to-date, but compared to the extensive studies that have emerged since 1992, very few such works are mentioned. An index of names, ancient sources, and theological terms at the end would have been very helpful. I notice a few minor oversights: the usage of 'East Syrian Church' instead of 'East Syriac Church', and the absence of inclusive language (p. 136, 164), font size (p. 52), which in no way diminishes the value of the work. The author deserves appreciation for providing the building blocks for in-depth research into the field of Pneumatology. This book is a fitting tribute to the empowering Spirit's ways of rendering the Church's mission marvellously effective. The author deserves our appreciation, and I heartily recommend this book as a "must-read" for all teachers and students of theology, and for anyone interested in gaining a taste of the patristic synthesis, especially Mar Narsai's Pneumatology.

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