

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA: ANTIQUITY IN HIS ECCLESIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract: Benny Thettayil, in the present article, explores and emphasizes one of the characteristic features of the Fathers of the Church, i.e., 'antiquity' in the life and contributions of Chavara. He explains the role of Chavara in the ecclesial formative period by becoming an exponent of pastoral awakening and ecclesial revitalization when it needed a spiritual revival. Chavara's zeal for the Church made him a strong defender of the Church for he knew its apostolic faith, traditions and history. He was convinced of the apostolicity of the Syro-Malabar Church and was proud of the antiquity of its faith and tradition, and as a patriarchal figure he defended the Church and protected it from possible divisions and disputes. Expounding the outstanding contributions of Chavara in spiritual, educational, ecclesial and literary realms, Thettayil in his article urges the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church to declare Chavara a Father of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Keywords: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Mysticism, *Dhyanasallapangal*, *abba* experience, Fathers of the Church, *Chavarul*, *The Testament of a Loving Father*, Church *sui iuris*, antiquity, ecclesiastical writers, sanctity, *Eclogues*, Father of the Syro-Malabar Church.

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1. Introduction

Fathers and mothers are remembered by their children. Great fathers and mothers are remembered by generations of children. Some of these fathers and mothers are made immortal in the memory for what left for the posterity to hold and to cherish in perpetuity. They influence lives beyond their geographical and temporal horizon. The main concern of this study on the life and activities of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a patriarch and a faithful and Spirit-filled son of the Malabar Church is to see how, in various ways, his life, activities, teachings and writings have left a mark in the history of the Church. Our focus in this exploration is these various aspects of his life seen from the perspective of antiquity as he/she has been part of the beginnings.

2. Chavara in the Ecclesial Formative Period

Living in the 19th century, Chavara awakened not only his time, but also the 20th century and left a legacy for the 21st century. Throughout his life, he laboured zealously for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the Church. Since all his apostolic services had the endorsement of his mystical experience, they still remain relevant to the Church and the society.¹

2.1. Pathfinder of Indian Christian Mysticism

The history of the universal Church records that only those men and women who led a life encircled by the Divine Spirit could make remarkable and lasting contributions to the Church in its formative years. Standing in a great line of Christian mystics, Chavara had a unique vision of God and humankind. *Dhyanasallapangal* enshrines his God-experience and contemplative dimension. He wrote of this experience: "My heart however, tells me to call you by no other name than my Father."² The joy he experienced from this *abba* experience enabled him to spend long uninterrupted hours in the divine presence of the Eucharist.³ His works were natural expressions and extensions of his intimate God-experience and lived mysticism. Mystical experience is

¹ The well-known Kerala historian, Sreethara Menon, "Kalathinumunpe Nadanna Naōdhāna Nāyakan", (*A Renaissance Leader Come before Time*), in *Chavarayachan*, 2004, 16-20, regrets that he did not make an elaborate study of Chavara's person and contribution. He writes that the life and achievements of Fr Chavara cannot be restricted to the Catholic Church. They are relevant to all communities and to all times. It can be said that Chavara was a great personality born before the times.

² CWC, *Colloquies*, 5.

³ *Positio*: 541.

the mark of a person who is close to God in sanctity. It is noteworthy that all the Fathers of the Church in both East and West were men of God although not all of them were mystics.

2.2. Pastoral Awakening

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who was a diocesan priest, made extraordinary achievements for the Church by means of his dynamic activities. In the formative years of the Church in Malabar, he dedicated his life for the faith formation of the people of God. He fostered their faith, protected it and brought about a spiritual revival among the people. Some of the areas that he brought about the reformation were the formation of the laity and the new converts, foundation of religious communities for men and women, liturgical reforms, schools for public education for all strata of the society,⁴ development of print media⁵ and charity home⁶ for the destitute. A zealous pastor, he focused on the building up of the Church as well as the social, cultural and economic development of the society based on the Gospel values.⁷

2.3. Formation and Renewal of the Clergy

Chavara lived at a time when the native Church was animated by a group of clergy who were ill-prepared for the ministry. He knew that “an uneducated priest was not only inefficient to do anything worthwhile in his pastoral work, but may be even detrimental to the salvation of souls.”⁸ He taught that if the clergy were empowered in formation, they would contribute immensely towards the spiritual uplift of the people of God.⁹ Hence, the monastery at Mannanam had a seminary attached to it in 1833,¹⁰ and the monasteries at Vazhakulam

⁴ Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mumbai: St Pauls, 2014, 239-248; 249-250; M. Mundadan, *History and Beyond*, Aluva: 1997, 169.

⁵ A.M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 346-354.

⁶ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 161.

⁷ The letter that Archbishop Baccinelli wrote to Rome recommending the consecration of Chavara as the bishop co-adjutor bears attests to the pastoral zeal of Chavara that made the Archbishop to propose him as his successor. See Mundadan, *Chavara*, 229.

⁸ L. Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Monastery, 2003, 6; *Ciriaco Elia Chavara*, Roma: Postulator, 1974, 10.

⁹ J. Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the Co-founder of CMI Congregation*, Kottayam: Deepika, 2012, 38.

¹⁰ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 68-76.

(1866) and Elthuruth (1869) followed suit.¹¹ Special retreats were preached for them, spiritual books and other literature were made available to them.¹² In various ways, he reformed the ecclesiastical education according to the need of the hour.¹³ The alumni of these seminaries were with Chavara later to confront the divisive challenges the Church faced from various quarters. Along with his confreres, Chavara stepped in to fill the vacuum that was created in the Malabar Church by the absence of effective native leadership.

2.4. Foundation of Indigenous Religious Congregations

Chavara belonged to a Church that was in a comma. The leadership of the European missionaries maintained it but without any vigour. He had often lamented the slumber and the barren state of the Church in India, which despite its antiquity and apostolic connections, had not produced even a single saint, whereas lands that received faith much later have produced them in great numbers.¹⁴ This state of slumber had descended on the Church "owing to the want of a religious house."¹⁵ In order to level this void, together with two of his mentors, who had had shared his vision,¹⁶ he paved the way for the foundation of no less than three religious congregations – two for women and one for men.

Despite the several references to the existence of Christian monastic life in India and among St Thomas Christians, Chavara and his companions had no extant monastic or religious models to build on; they had to begin from the scratch. They laid the foundation for the first religious house for men at Mannanam in 1831.¹⁷ The Primitive Rule of the Carmelite Order was given to them in 1855, and they became

¹¹ V. Plathotam, *Vannya Divyasree Chavara Kuriakose Elisachan*, Mannanam: Publisher Unavailable, 1936, 87.

¹² Mundadan, *Chavara*, 343-345.

¹³ Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision*, 38-39.

¹⁴ CWC, Vol. III: *Adhyatmika Kruthikal* (Spiritual Works), Ernakulam (and Mannanam): 1981 (Malayalam), 173f.; English trans. by Jose Chittilappilly, Ernakulam: 1990, 146.

¹⁵ Vol. III: *Adhyatmika Kruthikal* (Spiritual Works), Ernakulam (and Mannanam): 1981, 1; English trans. Jose Chittilappilly, Ernakulam: 1990, 1.

¹⁶ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 109, would note that "these two were the first to have the inspiration and start work on the foundation."

¹⁷ Mundadan, *History and Beyond*, 157ff; *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I (revised edition), Bangalore: 2001, 187ff; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 158-161, 67.

"Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel."¹⁸ Chavara animated them as their Prior until his death in 1871.¹⁹

The Malabar Church was lopsided. With no religious life for women, and none of them in ecclesial leadership, the Church was almost chauvinistic. In order to remedy this situation, Chavara also facilitated a similar arrangement for women.²⁰ This initiative was made at a time when they were largely denied the basic rights to education, property and proper clothing, a role in decision making in the family, in the Church and society.²¹ A few attempts at such a venture in the past, including the attempts of Archbishop Baccinelli, the reigning European prelate over the whole Church of Kerala seems to have failed.²² Chavara and Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD, an Italian missionary set out for such a venture.²³ They built a temporary bamboo shack²⁴ and "received some women who were prepared to live this kind of life and accommodated them in a temporary house"²⁵ in February 1866. Eventually, a permanent house was built for them.²⁶ The first convent for native religious women came into existence.

2.5. Ecclesial Revitalization

A lethargic church with little life was reinvigorated by Chavara. He brought about a renewal of the Malabar Church based on the Word of God and the Liturgy. He learnt Syriac and Latin, the liturgical languages of the time and organized the rubrics of the Mass, codified the Divine

¹⁸ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 102, n. 44, 103.

¹⁹ CSK (*Chavara Sampoorana Kruthikal*), Vol. I, 57, 77-78.

²⁰ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 281, indicates the possibility that the request that was placed before Arch Bishop Baccinelli included a vision for religious life both for men and women.

²¹ CKC, Vol. I, 84-85; Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 145-146; J. Pathrapankal, "An Iconoclast in His own Right", in J. Mannarathara, ed., *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2015, 241.

²² Mundadan, *Chavara*, 283, 289-290, 343.

²³ Positio, 558; P. Koyipallil, *A Short Biography of Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family: The First Prior General of Our Congregation*: (Malayalam manuscript AMSJ), 1929, 57.

²⁴ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 67; Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision*, 66-73.

²⁵ Porukara, *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, 39.

²⁶ CKC, Vol. III: *Adhyatmika Kruthikal* (Spiritual Works), Ernakulam (and Mannanam): 1981, 138; English trans. Jose Chittilappilly, Ernakulam: 1990, 115f.

Office for the clergy²⁷ and the nuns,²⁸ introduced several paraliturgical practices such as Eucharistic adoration,²⁹ Passion week liturgy,³⁰ way of the cross, rosary devotion, novenas to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph and effected a revival in the spiritual life of the faithful of the Malabar Church. In addition to these, he prepared the 'Order of the Mass' and got it printed in 1868³¹ to ensure uniformity in the celebration of the Eucharist with devotion and order.³² This remarkable work was used by the Church for almost a century.

2.6. Educational Revitalization

There was an irrational fear in the ecclesiastical authorities about English education that was introduced by the European Protestant missionaries in the 19th century.³³ The fear prevented Catholics from getting educated and it was disadvantageous to the Catholics. Opening the door of literacy before his people in his own alternative way,³⁴ he opened a Sanskrit school in 1846. He offered education to the commoners and the deprived classes like the untouchables through the parishes in his jurisdiction.³⁵ Owing to the resistance in an area where the upper and

²⁷ Porukara, *Stapaka Pithākanmar*, 30; P.J. Podipara, *Nammude Ritu* (Our Rite), Mannanam: St Joseph's Press, 1943, 132f.; Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision*, 57.

²⁸ CSK Vol. IV, 22.

²⁹ *Positio*: 282ff; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 278.

³⁰ See CWC Vol. IV, 1990, 11; 1982, pp. 22f.; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 277.

³¹ *Positio*: 308; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 267-268.

³² Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision*, 56.

³³ V. N. Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol 2, Trivandrum: Asian Educational Service, 1989, 474; *LMS Report, The Report of the Directors to the Members of the Missionary Society*, London: 1823, 70; K.S. Mathew, "Introduction," in *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, K.S. Mathew and T. K. Sebastian (eds.), Tellichery: Institute for Research in Social Science and Humanities, 2009, 1-29, 9.

³⁴ J. Kanjiramattam, *The Pastoral vision*, 83.

³⁵ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 257. Mundadan also refers to the controversy regarding the origin of the idea and the circular enjoining the parish priests to establish a school adjacent to the churches. K.C. Chacko, *Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam: The Vice Postulator, 1959, 72. See also Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 29; V. Parappuram, *The Chronicles of the Monastery at Koonammavu*, ASJM, Mannanam: 1474; V. Plathottam, *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Veera Santhanam*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1939, 137; T. Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 250.

lower classes could not be brought together,³⁶ he established a school at Arpukara, solely for the Dalits in 1865.³⁷ Not only did he make education affordable to them,³⁸ and in some cases free of charge, but also provided the mid-day meal as an incentive.³⁹ As a follow up, he made print media and literary facilities accessible to the people.⁴⁰

All these accomplishments made by Chavara and his companions were initiatives that awakened a church that is still reaping the benefits of his vision. The lasting effects of the many reforms that he brought about are still felt in the Church. The far-reaching results of his innovative moves would place him in the formative period of the Church in Malabar. He was at the head of the renaissance and reformation that was happening to the Malabar Church at the time.

3. Chavara the Patriarchal Figure

Chavara was convinced of the Apostolicity of the Church in general and that of the Malabar Church in particular. He wrote: "This Malabar which had received the faith from St. Thomas, the Apostle" confesses the "true faith from ancient times... We, the Nazarenes, are Christians of ancient origin..."⁴¹ His zeal to keep the Church away from Roccas and to protect it from the possible division, come from his conviction of the apostolicity of the Church. He took this stance at a time when he could have become the leader of the dissidents, which would have brought him laurels that the missionaries found him unworthy of. His decision made him an avid defender of the Church. He was very proud of the antiquity of his faith and tradition.

3.1. Local Ecclesial Leadership

Although the Malabar Church was an apostolic Church, at the time of Chavara, it was devoid of native leadership. The European missionaries

³⁶ Mundadan, A. M. *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 256; V. Plathottam, *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, 37. See Mundadan, *Chavara*, 256; *Alochanapusthakam* (Book of Consultation in the Monastery at Mannanam), 1864-1871, ASJM, Mannanam, 94-95, 26-27, 159.

³⁷ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 257; J. Paul, *Idaya Natakangal, (Eclogues – Shepherd Plays) by Chavara Kuriakose Elias*, Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2014. 133.

³⁸ H. Wingram, *A Commentary on Malabar Laws and Customs*, Madras: Higginbotham, 1900, 100.

³⁹ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 259.

⁴⁰ Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision*, 86-87. See also Mundadan, *Chavara*, 353

⁴¹ CWC Vol. IV, Letters, 1990, 14.

had neither found a local leader nor did they want to hand the leadership down to any native hands. The dissent that developed within the Church in the aftermath of the arrival of Roccas forced the missionaries to find a solution in Chavara. After the appointment of Chavara as the Vicar General, the efforts for a native bishop gathered momentum. Enumerating the benefits of a native ecclesial leadership, for the sake of the stability of the Church, he appealed to the Holy See to make provisions to appoint native bishops in the Malabar Church:

We are Mar Thoma Christians who have received our faith from St. Thomas. For the past many years we had no Bishop of our own. But those who have received their faith in very recent times have a Bishop of their own. Provoked by such envious thoughts when they (believers) get an opportunity they will go to Babel, saying 'Let us resort to Babel for... a Bishop of our own rite. Hence, Your Eminence, I am placing before you a suggestion ... It is good to have two Bishops here: one for the Latin Church, and the other for the Syrian Church.⁴²

Such an appeal did not produce any immediate positive effect. On the contrary, a few of his confreres were chastised as they demanded a for local leadership in the Church. However, eventually, such efforts bore fruit. Ironically, though posthumously, Chavara himself was sought after to be appointed the first native Bishop of the Malabar Church.

3.2. Vicar General for the Malabar Church

In 1861, Chavara was appointed the Vicar General of the Malabar Church. As the Prior of his religious community at Mannanam, he was already giving leadership to the faithful. He had great human qualities; he was prudent, polite but stern,⁴³ and there was no leader in Malabar more fit to lead the Church than Chavara "for the spiritual progress of the faithful and to fight the schism more effectively."⁴⁴ The reason Baccinelli gave for the appointment of Chavara as the Vicar General is: "On account of the difficulties... in the administration of the churches under our jurisdiction, and on account of our advanced age... ill health, and above all, since I do not find the desired spiritual fruits either among the priests or among the laity... hereby I nominate you vicar general... of the Syro-Malabar Church under our jurisdiction."⁴⁵ On the personal

⁴² CWC Vol. IV, Letters, 1990, 14.

⁴³ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 148ff; 206; 224-229; 155.

⁴⁴ Kanjiramattam, *Pastoral Vision*, 96.

⁴⁵ *Positio*: 216; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 206.

credentials of Chavara, Baccinelli writes: “I am convinced that you have the fortitude, ability and the virtue necessary to carry out this office.”⁴⁶

3.3. For the Unity and Growth of the Church

The European Vicars Apostolic neither had he linguistic ability to understand and converse with the natives nor the time to learn the culture. Dissatisfied with the European leadership, some members of the Malabar Church turned back to Chaldea for a bishop.⁴⁷ In response, the Chaldean Patriarch Audo sent Thomas Roccas, a Chaldean bishop, as a visitor. The Church in Malabar, assuming that he was sent with authority, gave him a warm welcome. However, when Roccas was asked produce his authorization, he failed to do so. But, by the time, 86 out of the 154 parishes completely and 30 partially followed him⁴⁸ and he began to exercise his episcopal powers as if he had jurisdiction over Malabar Church.

In the ensuing sticky situation of prolonged raucous between the majority who followed Roccas and the minority who did not, Chavara was appointed the Vicar General. His timely intervention saved the Church from a division. Subsequently, taking his contributions into consideration, Archbishop Baccinelli proposed to nominate him the co-adjutor bishop.⁴⁹ What is worthy of consideration here is that at the time, in the plausible event of appointing a bishop of Malabar origin, there would be nobody found worthy of nomination except Chavara.

Placid Podipara would surmise the outcome of the appointment and the activities of Chavara for the growth of the Church in Malabar:

⁴⁶ Mundadan, *Chavara*, 206.

⁴⁷ Before the arrival of the missionaries, the Malabar Church was given spiritual leadership by the bishops from Chaldea, whereas the temporal leadership remained with the Archdeacon who was a native priest.

⁴⁸ CWC Vol. I, *Chronicles*, 1990, 148-176.

⁴⁹ The Archbishop would also mention his minor reservation about his own proposal which is practical in nature. In comparison with the European Bishops, Chavara would neither have the education nor the episcopal niceties. This is also to be read in conjunction with *Positio*: 264; 265-269, where the objections made by Marcelline Berardi and Leopold Beccaro against the proposal are enumerated. Also see Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the St Thomas Christians in 1896: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, for reasons why Chavara was found an unworthy candidate by the subsequent missionaries.

... at this time, the whole of the Syrian Church was divided, by the Vicar General, into four districts, each being entrusted to one of the Fathers of the Congregation. These Fathers were known, so to say, as the “plenipotentiaries” or “deputies” of the Vicar Apostolic, each in his district. They had special charge over the clergy and the laity; they supervised school work, conducted catechetical institutions, settled naughty disputes and quarrels and transacted other works of importance. Thus, the members of the congregation, directed by Fr Cyriac Elias (Chavara), visited, from the beginning, all the Churches of Malabar, preached retreats and missions, corrected abuses, and even discharged parochial work, when the peculiar circumstances of a parish required it.⁵⁰

4. Teachings of Chavara and the Fathers

One of the reasons we study the Fathers of the Church is to have a familiarity with their life, which makes us acquainted with Christian doctrine as it developed in the early centuries. By studying their writings in the context of their lives and the times in which they lived, we learn the history of the Church in its formative years and the various challenges it confronted. Not only were the Fathers some of the greatest minds in the history of the Church, for the most part, they were also saints, and immense spiritual value is derived from their writings.

Through their writings, the Fathers speak to us with considerable authority on matters of Christian life and doctrine. St John Henry Newman writes eloquently on the significance of the teachings of the Fathers in the second of the Four Lectures on The Patristical Idea of Antichrist: “When they speak of doctrines, they speak of them as being universally held. They are witnesses to the fact of those doctrines having been received, not here or there, but everywhere. We receive those doctrines, which they teach, not merely because they teach them, but because they bear witness that all Christians everywhere held them. As honest informants, they are an authority too.”⁵¹

Similarly, Newman, in his Advent Sermon I on the Times of Antichrist speaks of the obligation of the believers to listen to the Fathers:

⁵⁰ P. Podipara (ed.), *The Carmelite Congregation of Malabar 1831-1931*, Mannanam, 1932, 58-59; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 312, 313.

⁵¹ J.H. Newman, “Four Lectures on The Patristical Idea of Antichrist” in www.newmanreader.org/works/arguments/antichrist/lecture1.html; accessed on 18.12.2019.

Doubtless, no man has any right to impose his own deductions upon another, in matters of faith. There is an obvious obligation, indeed, upon the ignorant to submit to those who are better informed; and there is a fitness in the young submitting implicitly for a time to the teaching of their elders; but, beyond this, one man's opinion is not better than another's. But this is not the state of the case as regards the primitive Fathers. They do not speak of their *own private* opinion, but in matter of fact it is held, and has ever been held, by all the Churches, down to our times, without interruption, ever since the Apostles.⁵²

Most of the Church Fathers have made immense literary contributions for which they are known today.

5. Chavara in the Light of the Fathers

The Fathers of the Church have been a vital source of wisdom and inspiration for countless saints, popes, peasants, converts and believers throughout the history of the Church. They have expressed their thoughts on a wide variety of spiritual, religious, historical and even secular themes. In the light of what we have seen above, in the following discussion, we make an attempt to see how Chavara fits into the great tapestry of the patristic galaxy.

5.1. *Didache and the Testament of a Loving Father*

The Didache is a brief anonymous early Christian treatise, dated back to the first century. The text, parts of which constitute the oldest extant written catechism, has three main sections dealing with Christian ethics, rituals such as baptism and Eucharist, and Church organization.⁵³ The opening chapters describe the virtuous way of life and the wicked way of death. Among other contents of the Didache, the Lord's Prayer is included in full. In a similar way, *Chavarul, The Testament of a Loving Father*, written towards the end of Chavara's life, became central to Christian life at the time. In order to transform Christian families, into a heavenly abode according to the plan of the Creator, practical teachings were explicitly formulated in order to assist early disciplinary formation in the family.

The multi-genre character of the *Chavarul* accounts for the multiple levels of interpretation that it produces. Approaching a fairly old text

⁵² J.H. Newman, "Advent Sermon I on the Times of Antichrist" in <http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/tract83.html>; accessed on 18.12.2019.

⁵³ O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2010, 46-104.

like *Chavarul* through the lens of the biblical Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus enables us to hear the multiple voices encoded in them for the sake of the family and the formation of children.⁵⁴ The stories and anecdotes that are found in the *Chavarul* point to the many ideological and religious imaginations of Chavara that have produced them for the society and the Church.

5.2. Ecclesiastical History and the Chronicles

The importance of the early ecclesiastical writers was well understood even by their contemporaries. Eusebius, in his fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*, lists all the Christian writers and writings of which he knows, including quotations, many of the sources of which are no longer extant. In many cases, we only know of these writings from the work of Eusebius. Similarly, much of the contemporary historical details regarding the Church and society in Malabar are derived from the Chronicles that Chavara and his confreres kept.

5.3. Theology and Poetry

Saint Ephrem the Syrian was a gifted and prolific poet of the fourth century. He also is a saint and Doctor of the Church who eloquently defended Christian Orthodoxy during a great upheaval. As a deacon, Ephrem taught through insightful hymns and poems for which he is famous. At Edessa, a city filled with Arians, Marcionites, Manicheans and Gnostics, he excelled in defending Orthodox, Nicene Christianity in the face of a myriad of adversaries. Hymns became one of his most effective weapons against heresy. He was a master of music and is still known as the “harp of the Holy Spirit.” Ephrem’s favourite subject in the hymns was the Blessed Virgin Mary. Like many other Early Church Fathers, he knew that a proper understanding of Mary and her role was inseparable from a proper understanding of Christ’s humanity and divinity, his relationship with the Father, and the nature of our redemption in him. Like Ephrem, Chavara engaged with contemporary religions and philosophies. He often used terms borrowed from the Indian literature to explain and illustrate Christian ideas.⁵⁵ Both Ephrem

⁵⁴ Chavara, *Testament of a Loving Father*, Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2014. See also George Kaniarakath, “St. Kuriakos Chavara, a Teacher of Family Theology: A Reading in the Light of Ben Sira”, *Herald of the East* 13, 2 (July-December 2017), 165-182, who makes a comparative study of *Chavarul* and Ecclesiasticus.

⁵⁵ Jojo Parecattil, *Tattvamasikkoru Chavarabhashyam*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017.

and Chavara use the terminology of vision to describe the way in which Christ dwelt in Mary, filling her with beauty, transforming her for a great purpose.⁵⁶

5.4. Literary and Linguistic Considerations

Jerome, in addition to the biblical projects, was concerned to catalogue the existing Christian literature, in order to show the non-believers that the Christian intellectual tradition was far from negligible. Jerome included some secular and Jewish writers such as Philo, Josephus and Seneca in his list and introduced what was good in them to Christianity. In a similar way, some of the genres of literature was introduced to the society and the Church by Chavara. For instance, though, semi-spiritual, with its implicit articulations, the *Eclogues* are pastoral dramatic plays (1855-1856),⁵⁷ that were altogether a new introduction to the literary society in his context. It was the first of its kind in Indian literature.

The primitive language of the patristic literature was Koine Greek. The Greek Fathers and ecclesiastical writers of the 4th and 5th centuries were outstanding representatives of Atticism, which is a form of elegant Greek. Basil and John Chrysostom were admired by Libanius, the great Sophist for their style and content of writing. Greek was gradually supplanted in the East by the national languages, especially Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian. Ephrem the Syrian wrote his hymn and the bulk of other materials in Syriac. This ancient language came to Malabar Church through the Chaldean Church and was still in use at the time of Chavara. Most of the correspondence that he had, especially with Rome, was in Syriac, the ecclesiastical language of St Thomas Christians of Malabar at the time.

6. Conclusion

The insightful teachings and services of Chavara enabled the Malabar Church not only to keep up her own apostolic faith and traditions, but also to renew her life in accordance with the signs of the times. In these testing times, when the Malabar Church is in need of another renewal, an overview of his life profile is very pertinent since the saint was a strong pillar who spearheaded the formative period of the Malabar Church in the 19th century, a crucial time in her quest to regain her

⁵⁶ Cf. Ephrem, *Hymns on the Church* – 112; Chavara, *Kanakenam*.

⁵⁷ J. Paul, *Idaya Natakangal (Eclogues – Shepherd Plays) by Chavara Kuriakose Elias*, Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2014.

identity and autonomy, while keeping intact the unity of the Universal Church.

Syro-Malabar Church is a Church *sui Iuris* with a synodal structure and it has many powers that it can exercise canonically because it has autonomy, for which Chavara and his confreres worked. Since the Syro-Malabar community does not have an officially declared Church Father,⁵⁸ and there is no other contender in the community who deserves this title, and as the Syro-Malabar Church Synod has the power to do it, the Synod ought to declare Chavara *a Father of the Syro-Malabar Church*.

⁵⁸ In this context, St Thomas the Apostle who brought to the Church in Kerala the gift of faith deserves our consideration. There are opinions raised that St Thomas is *the* Father of the Syro Malabar Church. However, we need also to consider the fact that there is no Apostle called Father of the Church because the Apostles cannot be relegated to such a rank. Even Paul who claims that in Christ Jesus he became the father of the Corinthian church through the gospel (1 Cor 4:15), is never referred to as the Father of the Church.