

Book Review

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

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

Let me now whet the reader’s appetite by selecting a few notable features of the work. The authorial Introduction (pp. 1-4) is precise and it 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 is a journey into the historico-theological milieu of Narsai, who could inspire and edify the East Syriac Church of Persia through his instructions, literary creations and personal witnessing. In the adverse atmosphere for the Christians, Narsai instilled courage in them and encouraged them to persevere in faith. He propagated the true theological stand of the East Syriac Church and never deviated from the Nicene Creed. His homilies were to encourage and enhance the authentic Christian life through an active and experiential liturgical life (p. 32).

In the second chapter, the concept of the Holy Spirit in the East Syriac tradition till the time of Narsai is examined and expounded. It is an exploration of the theological development of the notion of the Holy Spirit in the East Syriac Church until Narsai. The Pneumatological underpinnings in the Syriac source texts of *Odes of Solomon*, *The Syriac Didascalia* and the *Acts of Thomas*; and the teachings of the Syriac Fathers, Aphraates, Ephrem

and Theodore of Mopsuestia are investigated. Arickappallil observes that "the authors of the early Syriac writings and Syriac Church Fathers discerned and defined the personality and the mission of the Holy Spirit basing their thoughts on the Scriptures" (p. 102). The third chapter is on the theological thinking pattern and content of Narsai. The present chapter has three parts and in the first section an attempt is made to find out how Narsai systematically bases his Trinitarian notion on the Scriptures, the second section discusses the essence and nature of the Triune God, and the third part discusses Narsai's understanding of each of the Persons separately with the interrelationship of the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit and vice versa. Narsai explains the mystery of the Trinity revealed progressively right from the OT, and simultaneously with our redemption, by employing the theological language of his time. God is one in Being and nature, but three in Persons; and the Spirit proceeds from the Father as the Son is generated from the Father. The Spirit, a Person with the Father and the Son, is equal in nature and one in Essence with them (p. 135).

The following chapter brings out the pneumatological highlights of the redemptive work of Christ as delineated by Narsai. The salvific work of humanity by the Son is necessarily in and through the Holy Spirit. 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 the redemption and the Holy Spirit's role in the salvific economy of Christ are the concerns of the present chapter. The Holy Spirit has active role in the salvific economy of Christ, and the Spirit fashions a new 'figure' in the womb of Mary as the perfect image of God who is the second Adam. Anointed by the Spirit, through his death, resurrection and ascension, he defeats death, sin and the evil; and on the day of Pentecost, he perfects his mission and enables the human race to re-enter the Paradise (p. 164). The fifth chapter is on the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the Sacraments. It is a discussion on the role and involvement of the Holy Spirit in distributing the fruits of the salvific economy through the Church and its Sacraments. Holy Spirit constituted the Church for the realization of the universal salvific will of God; and as the New Israel, the Church is the locus where the saving economy of Christ is fulfilled. The Holy Spirit imparts the redemptive merits of Christ through the sacraments of the Church leading her to the eschatological fulfilment (p. 204).

The sixth and the final chapter is a synthesis of Narsai's pneumatology. Comparing Narsai's views and vision to the early Syriac sources such as *Odes of Solomon*, *Didascalia* and the *Acts of Thomas*, and the Syriac Fathers like

Aphraates, Ephrem and Theodore, his doctrine on the Holy Spirit and the place of the Spirit in Soteriology, Ecclesiology and sacramental theology, especially Baptism, Eucharist and Priesthood are presented. Narsai's views are also evaluated in the light of the Church documents and the scholarship of the modern authors. The pneumatology of Narsai as found in his writings are summarized in the General Conclusion; and to highlight some of them: Narsai's pneumatological doctrine is well based on the Scripture and Tradition, his teachings were developed in a well-balanced Trinitarian framework, his pneumatological vision is thoroughly soteriological, his ecclesiology is highly pneumatological, and the faithful appropriate the fruits of redemption through the sacraments of the Church (p. 242-242).

What makes this work impressive and appealing is the range of its treatment. It critically engages a large gamut of scholarship on the mystery of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Scripture, Tradition, Liturgy and the Early Syriac sources and Fathers to arrive at a synthesis of Narsai's Pneumatology. Arickappallil has provided a long list of Abbreviations and Sigla (p. xxviii-xxxiv), enough bibliographical guidance referring to the sources, important commentaries, and selected studies (p. 248-265). In this, a "Further Bibliography" is observed making this work quite up-to-date, but compared to the enormous studies that has come out since 1992, very minimum of such works are mentioned. An index of names, ancient sources and theological terms at the end would have been a great help. 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 diminish 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" to all the teachers and students of theology and all interested people who wish to have a taste of the patristic synthesis, and especially of Mar Narsai's Pneumatology.

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