

# GLOBAL HUMANITY AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM AN EASTERN VIEW

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**Abstract:** The corporate nature of human existence and endeavours is coming into evidence in the present day world order. At present the religious sense of 'corporate personality' and 'communal behaviour' patterns, seen in the Biblical history, are getting incarnated even in the secular sphere. In the Christian vision there are prominent strands evolved from the 'Greek East' and 'Latin West', both of which are indebted to a far prior set of Christian foundations based on the Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies evolved through the Old and New Testament worldviews. At present, 'Syriac Orient' is the surviving heir to the Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies. Together with the Greco-Roman thrust of Christianity, 'Syriac Orient' preserved and made flourish such Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies very prominently in the history of Christian theology and spirituality.

**Keywords:** Corporate personality, Covenantal perception, Divine pedagogy, Globalization, Sacramental understanding, Synchronic vision, Syriac Orient

## 1. Introduction

In a world of globalization and swift engagement of peoples all around, one can come across a two dimensional dynamism of engagements. One dimension is centripetal in which the different forces in play are brought into a unified centre of realization. The

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other dimension is centrifugal in which the participating forces would infuse energy and dynamism so as to guide the journey and destiny of the centripetal forces with effulgent outward growth. The corporate nature of human existence and the need of collaborative thrust in human endeavours come into evidence in the present-day world. In the face of such developments, the reality of unity in diversity and the need of integration of all discrete and plural forces in society are much prominently felt. In such a context, the religious sense of 'corporate personality' and 'communal behaviour' patterns, seen in the biblical history, get incarnated even in the secular sphere in a very concrete manner. Here the Pauline Semitic Judeo-Christian sense of the 'mystical body' (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) and communion are quite inspiring and emotive. In such a context of religious and secular developments, the Eastern/Syriac Christian spiritual, ascetical, and mystical legacies emphasize corporateness of human existence and the need of social and religious collaboration in all sectors.

In the world of Christian religious developments, there are prominent strands and normative foundations, evolved from the 'Greek East' and 'Latin West' of Christendom.<sup>1</sup> They have contributed and enriched the Christian world-vision with their own genius. But it is to be seriously noted and remembered that even the Greek East and Latin West of Christianity have their indebtedness to a far prior set of Christian foundations based on the Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies very well evolved through the Old and New Testament revelations and worldviews. 'Syriac Orient' that stands apart from the Greco-Roman thrust of Christianity has preserved and made flourish such Semitic Judeo-Christian legacies very prominently in the history of Christian

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<sup>1</sup>This division of Greek East and Latin West of Christendom is based on the division of the Roman Empire into East and West (from the time of Diocletian). It was purely out of Roman convenience and had overlooked the Persian and other Christian traditions of the Orient. Here, the phrase 'Syriac Orient' comprises the Christian traditions of the Persian (mainly Syriac) and other oriental centres of Christianity excluding the Greek East and the Latin West.

vision of salvation. According to Jean Daniélou, such a Christian heritage is seen as the very foundation of Christian theology. “In between the Incarnation and the emergence of Hellenistic theology in the works of the Apologists there is a phase of Christian thought” which is described as “*a first form of Christian theology expressed in Jewish-Semitic terms.*”<sup>2</sup> Syriac Christianity breathes deeply from such a foundational Christian world-vision as well as develops upon such biblical categories of thought and practices. It is in such a context, there emerges the evident reality and the perennial significance as well as the effective dynamism of Syriac Christian spiritual, ascetical, and mystical legacies which act as complementary elements to the views of Greek East and Latin West.

## **2. The Global Biblical Vision**

Biblical history of salvation describes the progress of humanity in realizing the promised fuller life in creation: Humanity (human nature) is the common denominator of concerns of all ages.

### **2.1. Universality of the Biblical Semitic Judeo-Christian Vision**

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God: the channel of divine-human engagements in the world is based on that ‘Image and Likeness of God’ deposited in all. While the ‘image of God’ is imprinted in humans, the ‘likeness of God’ needs to be attained by human endeavour according to the designs of God: Social, religious, and mystical endeavours which deal with body, soul/person, and spirit, are to be tuned and made mature for improving the ‘likeness of God’ in humans. The fact of human composition in body, soul/person, and spirit is a discovery of the human intelligence based on divine designs in humanity. This is theologically and salvation historically depicted by St. Paul: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

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<sup>2</sup>Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964, 7, 10.

As a sequel to this mode of human composition, the human society is also analogically composed of its own body, soul/person, and spirit. Human society also has to attain the perfection of 'divine image'. In order to govern all human societies in a globalizing world, universality of the human spirit and human values are to be esteemed, cherished, and promoted by all means.

The promises given to Abraham, Jacob, and the patriarchs were for the whole humanity: To Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Genesis 12:3); To Jacob, "... your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and by your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves" (Genesis 28:14); Deutero-Isaiah instructs those who returned from the Babylonian captivity: "Extend the dimensions of your tents and stretch the curtains of your tabernacles. Do not be constricted" (Isaiah 54:2). The needed human openness and wider ecumenical concerns are explicit in these promises and instructions.

## **2.2. Universality of the New Testament Vision**

What is highlighted in the OT is given in the NT as a developed version in the Pauline description of God's plan for the whole of humanity, as fulfilment in history, by bringing everything to Christ as the head. "God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head" (Ephesians 1:9-10). The task of carrying out this plan of God, in all its magnificence and universality, is the work of the universal Church.

The whole humanity is the object of the divine plan of salvation. The human spirit is said to be the same in all ages, religions, and cultures. It is a common factor and a uniting power of humanity in all ages. The union and relationality between human spirit and God stand as the sphere of salvific progress and

realization. Hence, rather than an objectivizing theology the need is a theology that establishes, maintains, and makes flourish the human relationality which is the basis of salvation. A theology of the pilgrim journey, aiming at justice, peace, and development oriented to the salvation of the whole person and the whole world should be envisaged and realized in spiritual life.

### **3. Syriac Christian Legacy and Christian Theology**

A good amount of Semitic Judeo-Christian writings of a distinct quality were produced and preserved by the Syriac Christians. This distinction in quality is due to several reasons. Firstly, Syriac speaking Christianity, through historical vicissitudes, became the major and faithful carrier of the Semitic, Jewish legacies of Christianity after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, which resulted in the disintegration and dispersal of the Jewish Christians and their traditions that emerged at Jerusalem. Secondly, Syriac Christianity stands rooted in the age-old traditions and cultural patrimony of the Semitic peoples through whom the Old Testament revelation had its ‘cultural incarnation’ within the social and religious legacies of the Semitic cultural categories. Thirdly, Syriac Christianity inherited and dynamically developed Semitic constants and Hebraisms that have become paradigms and normative factors for the ‘cultural incarnation’ of the Christian message in other later Christian cultures, such as, Greek, Latin, and Byzantine. The best examples are the implications of covenantal relations, sense of corporate personality, sacrificial atonement, communal (liturgical) praising and thanking for the wonderful deeds of God in history, etc.

The sense of mystery and the contemplative approach to the divine for participative realization through liturgical remembrance are central to the Hebrew vision of religious life and realization of salvation. All such perceptions, orientations, and practices have become certain normative factors of Christian way of life and paths of ascetical and mystical pursuits down through the centuries for different Christian cultures of the world. In such a context, the attempt here is to highlight the indigenous early Syriac Christian ideals, orientations, and patterns of theological,

ascetical, and mystical life-visions that have got integrated into later Christian cultures of the world.

The early Syriac Christianity is the most powerful and resourceful representative and surviving heir of the Semitic Judeo-Christian traditions. Syriac fathers/writers, by their geographical, cultural, and religious affinities as well as by the patterns of their faith horizon, stand within the millennia long Semitic Judeo-Christian thought patterns and sensibilities. Their theological reflection is based on the dynamics of the history of salvation. Their consciousness is very much composed of the sense of mystery and how it functions on the pattern of sacramental understanding of the whole creation. The key modes of early Syriac Christian theological perceptions, that are described below, are perennially valid and very enlightening for regaining the biblical and salvation historical sensibilities and perceptions with contextual applicability in Christian praxis and theologies of all times.

### **3.1. Sacramental Understanding of Creation and History**

The biblical understanding of God is based on the experiential knowledge of creation, redemption, and salvation having a complementarity of their own. It is the power of the Word of God that creates, redeems, and provides salvation in resurrection. The author of creation, redemption, and resurrection (salvation) is the same. The creator God who out of his mercy fashioned and supports the created world is basic to the Semitic understanding of divinity. The existence of this world and humanity always depend on their relationship to the creator. Hence, in the created world and in history, we find signs, symbols and designs of divine support and providence that are to be perceived by human beings. Regarding this, Ephrem (306-373) writes so convincingly:

In every place, if you look, His symbol is there,  
and when you read, you will find His types.  
For by Him were created all creatures,  
and he engraved His symbols upon His possessions.  
When he created the world,  
He gazed at it and adorned it with His images.

Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth

His symbols on His members (*Virginity* 20:12).<sup>3</sup>

God being the architect and sustainer of creation has left traces of divinity in the world. Jacob of Serugh (451-521) finds the fashioning out of nothing, sustenance, and bringing up to perfection by the divine mercy. He finds ‘creation from nothing’ and ‘the continued creation’ as two phases of the act of divine mercy (HS III 52,6,7; V 368 16-17).<sup>4</sup> It is a Trinitarian activity: “The Father made the sign, and the Son created and the Spirit perfected, and the world came up in a Trinitarian way from nothing” (HS III 13, 15-16).

‘Continued creation’ is a sequel to the primary divine act of creation (HS V 369, 2; III 52, 6-11). The divine force inhabits the creatures (HS IV 553, 20) and, hence, sustains them as the soul holds up the body (HS IV 554, 1-2; 11-14). Again, through the intellect the divine power is active in the body. Thus, divinity is immanent and transcendent with regard to the world (HS II 210, 3). On account of this mutual relationship, all created realities assume a symbolic power that signifies and proclaims the creative, sustaining, and perfecting force of the divine Word. This function and truth regarding the creative power renders everything in the world as having a sacramental role and power. Hence, this world can never be seen as evil in any way. It is the mode of using this world by human beings that generates good or evil. It is the duty of human beings to discern God’s intention of every created being and manage it to attain the goal. Hence, any misuse of the created world is against the will and intention of God. Rather what God intends is that human beings be thankful to everything that God provided in the creation. In this respect, Ephrem writes in *On Nisibis* 50, 1:

While I live I will give praise,  
and not be as if I had no existence;  
I will give praise during my lifetime,

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<sup>3</sup>K. McVey, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989, 348-349.

<sup>4</sup>HS = *Homiliae selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, vols. I-V, ed. P. Bedjan, Paris-Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1905-1910.

and will not be as someone dead among the living.  
 For the man who stands idle is doubly dead,  
 the earth that fails to produce defrauds him who tills it.<sup>5</sup>

With this outlook, according to Ephrem, anyone who fails to give praise and acknowledge his dependence on God is not having an authentic existence. Moreover, all have to approach the created world with a sense of love and respect for the divine gift. The created world, inclusive of all human beings, is at the same time a gift and a responsibility to Adam/humanity.

Ephrem explains in his *Commentary on Genesis II, 4*:

Although animals, cattle and birds came into being at the same moment that they received life, in Adam's case God honoured him in a variety of ways: first, because it is said that God 'fashioned him with His hands and He breathed a soul into him,' He also gave him authority over Paradise and what is outside Paradise; and He wrapped him in glory and gave him reason, thought and an awareness of the Majesty.<sup>6</sup>

By the special status given to Adam there was the duty of Adam to journey to the signified through the signifying so as to find the 'hidden power' (*haila kasya*). This hidden power is on account of the divinity and it can be reached only through meditation and contemplation: Ephrem speaks about how Moses in his book narrated the story of the Garden by the medium of visible things that point towards far glorious things that are lying hidden in Paradise (*On Paradise I, 1*). Ephrem confesses his method in such cases: He revered what was laying hidden and meditated on what was revealed (*On Paradise I, 2*).

The sacramental role of created beings becomes all the more explicit and fundamental regarding humanity with its 'image and likeness of God'. Based on this divine-human mutuality, Aphrahat (+345) writes regarding annunciation and redemption:

The Word set off from the height and came, 'and the Word became body and dwelt in us' (John 1:14). And when he went

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<sup>5</sup>S. P. Brock, trans., *The Luminous Eye*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992, 45.

<sup>6</sup>S. P. Brock, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1990, 200.



back to his sender, he took off what he had not brought, as the Apostle said, ‘He has raised us up and caused us to sit with him in heaven’. And when he went to his Father, he sent us his Spirit, telling us, ‘I am with you until the world comes to an end’ (*Matthew* 28:20). For Christ is seated at the right hand of his Father, and Christ dwells in human beings. He is capable of being above and below through the wisdom of his Father, and he dwells in many, while yet being one, and he overshadows all the faithful each with a portion of himself, without his being diminished (*Demonstration* VI, 10).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Aphrahat sets the specific orientations for envisaging the divine-human relationship. Developing from the ‘image and likeness of God’ in humanity, Ephrem speaks about the deeper engagement between Christ the redeemer and each Christian. It is through this engagement Adam who is prophet, priest, and king perfects himself and attains his goals (*Virginity* 19, 9;<sup>8</sup> *Nativity* 2, 2;<sup>9</sup> *Against Heresies* 24, 22<sup>10</sup>). The roles of prophet, priest, and king in Adam is a promise to be rendered perfect through Christ the Word, the source of prophecy, Christ the High priest, the crown of Priesthood, and Christ the King of kings who shepherds and governs all. Adam, who was bound to exercise all his roles, functions, and faculties in a sacramental way, had in fact exercised them in an utterly secular way and, thus, failed to attain the goals.

Secular mode of viewing and acting is a mode of viewing all matters and behaving as if the created world with all happenings in it, and the history in general, do not have any other reference beyond what is seen. The dependence of the created world and its history on divinity has to be perceived, acknowledged, and obeyed in human action in order to attain the goals set by God. The lack of sacramental outlook caused the fall of

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<sup>7</sup>K. Valavanolickal, trans., *Aphrahat: Demonstrations* I, Kottayam: Seeri, 2005, 146-148.

<sup>8</sup>McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 343.

<sup>9</sup>McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 76.

<sup>10</sup>Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Ephraem Des Syrsers, Hymnen Contra Haereses*, CSCO, Scriptorum Syri, Tomus 77, Louvain: Durbecq, 1957, 91.

Adam/humanity in its roles as prophet, priest, and king (shepherd) into narrow secular outlook that corrupts the exercise of human faculties and functions. All these social institutions, developed from the prophetic, priestly, and kingly (shepherding) functions of Adam, became corrupt and were redeemed through Christ. In order to make Adam/humanity attain the goals, Christ perfects Adam/humanity's faculties and functions. In Christ is the perfect sacramentality that became a tangible medium and means for every human being. Through Christ humanity is set on the road of sacramental way of life that attains perfection through a journey from the secular vision to the sacramental.

Our human body, environment, created world, ecological factors, etc., are to be handled in a sacramental manner than in a secular manner. All natural, scientific, commercial, and developmental management of the material world and resources should be guided by the sacramental vision. In all areas of human behaviour, sacramental vision should be a guide for all, by which human person/s should be given primacy of value than material development.

### **3.2. Covenantal Perception and Consciousness**

The underlying biblical vision of the relationship between God and the orders of his creation is a sort of engagement and participation. Creation is divine mercy's engagement with the created world, inclusive of humanity. This engagement should grow to its fulfilment in participation. The very reason of this participation is God's own design executed through the creation of humanity in the 'image and likeness of God' (*Genesis 1:26*). This design of 'image and likeness of God' in humanity engenders a specific role to humanity to play inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, human persons have to be well integrated to the divine design. The outward human role and ministry of illuminating and perfecting the divine designs function and attain fulfilment only in proportion to the inward human integration of divine designs in humanity. In other words, humanity functions as a medium and an intermediary of the execution of divine designs in the

created world. This specific divine relationship with humanity is best perceived and understood through the imagery of covenant.

The imagery of covenant is the most dynamic one that can depict the divine-human relationship in the history of salvation. In the Syriac Christian understanding, creation, incarnation, and redemption are various steps of a covenantal relationship. It is through these activities divine engagement and participation assume fulfilment. Through these mysteries, humanity is made to respond with a progressive maturity to the divine designs or calls. Hence, Syriac authors find various covenants in the history of salvation. Beyond the mere reckoning of old and new covenants, Syriac vision envisages several covenants referring to various stages of salvation history. This is in the wider understanding of the dynamics and spirit of covenantal relationships as envisaged in the Bible. Syriac Christian reflection proposes five covenants in the history of salvation (*Demonstration XI, 3; HCJ IV 115-144*):<sup>11</sup> i) Adam (*Genesis 2:17*), not to taste from the tree; ii) Noah (*Genesis 9:3*), not to eat flesh with blood; iii) Abraham (*Genesis 17:10*), the command to practise circumcision; iv) Moses (*Exodus 19ff*), the whole of Sinai Covenant; and v) Christ (New Covenant), who fulfils all other covenants. These five alliances serve as five senses of humanity and Christ comes as the light, enabling and perfecting all other senses (*HCJ IV 115-144*). The fifth alliance in Christ is the perfection and conclusion of all previous covenants. Christian life is a covenantal life with Christ that leads to fulfilment in the risen life with the Risen Lord.

The excellent dynamism of Semitic, Hebrew factor of covenant is greatly enriched by another Semitic factor of corporate personality in the aspects of covenantal relationship. By this sense and awareness of social and corporate life, attributes and functions, duties and privileges, and promises and fulfilment simultaneously affect the individual and community. The whole covenantal relationship depends upon the rate of engagement, fidelity, and steadfastness of the covenantal parties. These factors

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<sup>11</sup>HCJ = Jacques de Sarug, *Homélie contre les juifs*, M. Albert, ed., *Patrologia Orientalis* 38 (fasc. 1), Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976.

are the coefficients of the degree of divine-human participation and fruitfulness. Thus, Syriac theological reflection sets through the covenantal idea a very subjective and personal relationship that goes beyond all modes of objective, rational, and legalistic relationships. This is the reason why the God of Israel is seen as one who personally intervened in their history in a very personal and subjective manner. If ever someone attempts to objectify, rationalize, and legalize the basis of this participatory divine-human relationship, it will lose its inspiration, dignity, and dynamism because no rational and legal basis can be found out for the divine human-relationship in the Christian understanding. The only basis is divine mercy and nothing else. To the descending divine mercy, the apt response is the loving faith and compliance to the will of the merciful God.

For an individual Christian, the sacraments are channels of covenantal engagements through the Church to Christ and to the Father. Personal fidelity and steadfastness are the strongholds of this relationship. Here rationality and legality of the mind are not primary measures, but purity, faithfulness, and endurance of the heart and conscience are the measures that guide one to fruitfulness. It is on account of this that Syriac spiritual vision envisages pure prayer, pure fasting, etc., from a pure heart and conscience. In order to highlight the aspects of faithfulness and perfection, nuptial imagery of 'bridal chamber' and 'entry into the bridal chamber' of the heart are widely used. Here the deeper significance of the Syriac ascetic-monastic group of the 'Sons of the Covenant' comes to the focal point.<sup>12</sup> 'Covenanters' are those who made a special commitment together with baptism (early Christian adult baptism) by which one commits one's self to closely follow Christ, the 'Only-Begotten', the 'Undivided One' (*ihidaya*) who was not divided in the heart and in the committed life. In general, for a Christian, all moments of life are committed moments of a covenantal life. Hence, in Christian life, the coefficients of covenantal life, i.e., fidelity, commitment, and

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<sup>12</sup>See Aphrahat, *Demonstrations VI* ("On the Sons of the Covenant," K. Valavanolickal, trans., *Aphrahat, Demonstrations I*, Kottayam: Seeri, 2005, 121-160.

steadfastness are the measuring rods rather than rational legal norms that are less subjective.

All human relations and engagements at the level of human existence in social, religious, communitarian, national, and international are covenants. All contracts and agreements and their maintenance for justice, peace, and development in the world are present-day covenants for salvation. In all covenants, the covenantal parties are to be mutually faithful and enduring for the success or salvation of all. Plight of the marginalized, the poor, the women, and the vulnerable groups in the society are to be given immediate attention and remedy. All individual, social, national, and international agreements and services are to be seen primarily as channels for the promotion of human life and not as mere commercial transactions.

### 3.3. Salvific Divine Pedagogy and the Christian *Paideia*

One of the basic theological questions is the mode of reconciliation between the functioning of human free will as a God-given gift and the divine economy that is eternal and immutable. How do the volatile human free will and the immutable divine economy work together? Divine will and divine economy are from the divine mind, which is immutable and eternal. Even with all such immutability of divine plan, divinity cannot and would not enforce or impose anything on the free will of humanity. God wants to give the crown to humanity on the merits of humanity. Ephrem explains this:

For God would not grant him the crown without some effort;  
He placed two crowns for Adam, for which he was to strive,  
two trees to provide crowns if he were victorious...

The Just One did not wish to give Adam the crown quite free,  
Even though he had allowed him to enjoy Paradise without  
toil;

God knew that if Adam wanted he could win the prize...

*Paradise* 12:17-18.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Brock, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 167.

What Adam/humanity would do from the exercise of free will is a matter of Adam's free choice. But while Adam is free to choose, God cannot let Adam/humanity annihilate itself by the wrong exercise of human free will. Thus, there arose the crucial question of how divine designs for Adam and Adam's free will function towards the salvation of Adam/humanity? The only solution and mode of action is the divine pedagogy. The whole divine-human encounter in the history of salvation can be seen in the aspect of such a divine pedagogy to humanity so as to attain the promised salvation. It is the divine mercy that created Adam/humanity. The same mercy revealed itself and instructed him how to behave and act as to grow to the desired perfection. Adam had to obey the divine instructions. Yet, he had a double failure: he not only disobeyed the divine instructions but also deviated from the divinely instituted path and behaved according to the false but captivating instructions of the evil one. So, he became a 'failed one' and an 'unjust one'. For his failure, divine mercy acts out again to rectify him; but divine justice demands chastisement. Ephrem finds divine mercy and divine justice functioning as if on a balance:

The scales of Your balance are Grace and Righteousness:  
 how and when they are balanced, You alone know.  
 Though they may not seem to be balanced,  
 they are balanced all the same  
 since they are not divided against the One Lord of all.

*On Faith* 12:4<sup>14</sup>

While the divine mercy with its loving kindness supports, the divine justice chastises all. This is the mode of divine economy, which renders its pedagogy, providing its teachings to win all. Ephrem clarifies this further in *Epiphany* 10:14-15:

He, the Good One, behold, labours with these two;  
 He does not want either constrain our freedom,  
 or on the other be slack that it might go neglected.  
 For, if he had constrained it, its power might be taken off;  
 and if he let it leave, he deprives its help.

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<sup>14</sup>Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 20.

He knows that if he constrains he deprives us.  
He knows that if he slackens he destroys us.  
He knows that if he teaches us he gains us.  
He neither constrained nor slackened as the evil one.  
He taught and instructed (us) as the Good One.<sup>15</sup>

Ephrem explains the function of human free will through the imageries of ‘colour’ and ‘image-drawing’ in *On Faith* 31:5:

See his kindness! Though he could have made us fair  
by force, without toil, he has toiled in every way  
that we might become fair by our own choice,  
ourselves the artists of our own fairness:  
using the colours our own freedom had gathered.

If he himself had beautified us we had been but an image  
painted and beautified with the colours of another artist.<sup>16</sup>

According to Ephrem, what is needed is the proper choice of colours for the beautification of our image. This ‘colour’, by analogy, is the pattern of human behaviour. Human free will has to make proper choice and act accordingly. In other words, all our moral actions are the ingredients of human image building. Divine wisdom does a very crucial balancing act by which neither human free will is constrained nor that free will is let so free as to lose the divine promise of life through the second tree of Paradise, the ‘Tree of Life’ (*Genesis* 2:9). So, God gave a pedagogical situation to Adam through an exile for his repentance and return. It was a divine pedagogy for saving Adam to send him out of paradise to till the ground from which he was taken (*Genesis* 3:23) so that he might in repentance return to Paradise in the proper time. So, Ephrem writes: “God now sends him ‘to work the earth from which he had been taken’, so that he who had been harmed

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<sup>15</sup>*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Paris, 1903, 186 (Syriac 82), 183. Though the authorship of the Epiphany Hymns by Ephrem is debated, that cycle of hymns originated definitely from the Syriac theological reflection inspired by Ephrem.

<sup>16</sup>*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 154 (Syriac 73), 106; R. Murray, trans., “Theory of Symbolism,” *Parle de l’Orient* 6-7 (1975-76), 17.

by the ease in the Garden might be benefited by toil on the earth."<sup>17</sup>

Adam has to return to Paradise with repentance after having reconciled himself to the divine plan and instructions. This truth and teaching can be seen repeatedly in the salvation history. Moses who doubted the word of God was punished and was not permitted to enter the Promised Land, Paradise (*Deuteronomy* 4:21; 32:48-52). Later, at Tabor, he was made to enter into the Promised Land (*Matthew* 17:1-8). The story of Samson also teaches us on a repentant homecoming (*Judges* 14-16). Whenever he was moved by the spirit of the Lord, Samson was successful and whenever he was selfish he failed. He depicts Adam perfectly. In the New Testament, we find the return of all in captivity to their own districts at the birth of Jesus in order to write their names in the book of life (*Luke* 2:3). At the time of the arrest and trial of Jesus, we find Barabbas being liberated as a sign of Adam's liberation. The robber's entry into Paradise is a sign of the re-entry of Adam into Paradise (*Luke* 23:43). At the death of the High Priest, all who were expelled from Eden returned to their former places as it was signalled in the return of prisoners at the death of a high priest (*Numbers* 35:28). Above all, the return of the prodigal son is the symbol of Adam's return. All these are divine teachings in the history and in the scriptures. Such teaching of life (*yulpana d-hayye*) has to be personalized by all. This type of theological reflection basically functions not on the basis of rational philosophical categories but by the power of the horizon of faith that can read the inner connections and meanings of the happenings in the history of salvation. This is attainable only through meditative mystical exercises.

Instruction and guidance for the free will of humans to attain a dignified and disciplined life should be updated on a daily basis. Right use of free will has to be stressed in *diaspora* experiences on account of active migration as well as the *diaspora* experience due to the passive falling into the changed socio-cultural and other

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<sup>17</sup>Ephrem, *The Commentary on Genesis*, Section II, 35; S. P. Brock, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 224.



existential situations as the changing backgrounds. Here we may mention the age-old saying of Heraclitus: “nobody can step into the same river twice.” Even if the person does not change, the background changes every now and then. Hence, actively or passively, all are in *diaspora* and that demands right exercise of free will. A society built on justice and love, as Old Testament stands for justice and the New Testament for love, provides a holistic vision. Learning from the history and world developments is an urgent need. Climate change and ecological disasters, racial hatred and social tensions, and learning to subdue egoism and selfishness are all to be undertaken. Pruning of public behaviours that endanger human dignity, social security, social, cultural, and religious value systems remain an alarming threat. The Western Christian *paideia* based on Hellenistic dualism was not fully successful in striking a salvific balance between matter and spirit, body and soul, humanity and divinity, sacramentality and secularity, etc., or for that matter all possible polarities and opposites of human life. So, educating all people to pursue an authentic and holistic vision of the Bible and Christianity is essential. What happens in history has to be taken as the base, raw material, on which the Kingdom of God has to be built. Hence, we need to educate the peoples to generate salvific history in all ages with human development for peace and prosperity based on justice and peace.

### **3.4. Salvific Synchronic Vision for Realization**

Syriac writers have a specific mode of looking at the events and personalities of salvation history. This becomes all the more explicit from their concentration on typological biblical exegesis, insistence on the unity of revelation, unity of the scriptures and above all the perception of symbolic values of events and persons in the history of salvation. All these are in effect the result of an integrated and unified vision of the revealed mysteries, which, in effect, transcend the chronological and historical boundaries of human vision. Such a vision synchronises all times, and its horizon transcends the boundaries of time and history. This might

be called to enter into the divine milieu or to the eschatological realm by a faith vision.

The Syriac theological vision is so discerning as to set every event in the history of salvation within a coherent framework. The basis of this coherence is the sort of complementarity and the organic progression of events in the Old Testament and the New Testament with respect to the realization of the divine economy of salvation. This discerning vision understands the progressive realization of the divine plan of salvation and it enables one to find a single teaching running through Old Testament and New Testament. This is realized by an intuitive vision of the divine plan underlying in all events of the history of salvation. This vision is attained through the sacramental world-vision, typological exegesis, and symbolic theological reflection. Through a sort of symbolic abstraction from the diachronic levels of history, one can arrive at a synchronic vision of the realization of immutable divine plan of salvation through the divine pedagogy. The historical outlook provided by Syriac authors is based on the indications and suggestions that are already in the biblical texts themselves. Moreover, it provides new insights into, and interrelationships within the typological network latent in the scriptural episodes. Some examples will illustrate the profundity and originality of this type of vision.

The discerning question of Mary towards the angel during the Annunciation (*Luke* 1:34) is historically set against the background of Eve's failure to ask such questions to the serpent in Eden (*SMS* 730,8-732,4 / *FH* I 219-56).<sup>18</sup> Mary was cautious not to be deceived in contrast with Eve who was deceived by the serpent. The angel's explanation to Mary too is quite dramatic and reminiscent of the earlier failures and consequences starting from the failure of Eve, e.g., 'garment of leaves' (*SMS* 732,5-735,10. 772,11-12 / *FH* I 257-326; 1101-2). Adam and Eve who gave heed to the evil one eventually clothed themselves in leaves (*Genesis* 3:7). But Mary by

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<sup>18</sup>*SMS* = *S. Martyrii, qui et Sahdona, quae supersunt omnia*, P. Bedjan, ed., Paris Otto Harrassowitz, 1902, 614-865; *FH* = *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies*, T. Kollampampil, trans., Rome and Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997.

hearing the angel discerningly enabled Adam/humanity to exchange the ‘garment of leaves’ for the ‘garment of glory’ through the Incarnation. The angel addressing Joseph ‘Son of David’ is highly reminiscent of the promises to David, and refers to other messianic prophecies (SMS 753,21-754,1 / FH I 713-714).

The coherent vision is extended through the Nativity, Transfiguration, and Ascension. On Mount Sinai, Moses prepared the people and, then, God descended. So, Mary too prepared herself and God descended to her (SMS 740,8-11 / FH I 427-430). On parallel lines, at the time of the Lord’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor, there was the betrothal of the Church to Christ, the Bridegroom, like the one that took place at Sinai between Yahweh and Israel. On the day of the Resurrection, the appearance of Christ as ‘the Gardener’ (HS II 612,20; 614,17 / FH XIII 36,74) is reminiscent of God in the garden of Eden, who makes all reach the goal through growth by his creative power. Theological reflections “On the Ascension of our Lord” brings into full play the events on Mount Sinai, especially the climbing of Moses to the top of the hill, as a background to depict the Ascension of Jesus as the entrance of ‘the High Priest’ to the Holy of holies where the Father alone abides (SMS 828,10-829,10 / FH XVI 413-434). Thus, the history of all sacrifices and offerings of the past is brought into remembrance and is shown to be perfected as well as made effective in the single offering of Christ who carried the redeemed humanity through his ascension to the abode of the Father.

The events and realities of the history of salvation are not haphazard factors. They are interrelated realities with definite purposes behind them (SHF V 34/FH XII 34).<sup>19</sup> Since the exegesis of Jacob is more aimed at catechesis he searches the ‘reason or purpose’ (*elta*)<sup>20</sup> behind scriptural realities and events. He finds

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<sup>19</sup>SHF = Jacques de Sarug, *Six Homéliees Festales en Prose*, Frédéric Rilliet, (ed. + tr.), in *Patrologia Orientalis* 43 Turnhout, Belgique: Brepols, 1986.

<sup>20</sup>See SMS 726,9-10 + 726,19-727,1 / FH I 133-134 + 143-146; SMS 775,18 + 776,21 + 778,11 + 780.7 / FH II 15 + 37 + 69 + 109; HS V 449,18 / FH V 44; HS I 180,9 + 188,21 + 191,14 / FH VI 264 + 441 + 497; HS II

the purposes of many realities mutually dependent and elucidating one another. The divine providence, rich in discernment (*SHF V 34/FH XII 34*), is the guiding factor behind the 'divine economy' (*m-dabbranuta*, *SMS 793,5. 802,7/FH III 57, 245; SHF II 29/FH VII 29; SHF IV 1/FH XI 1*) and it provides the 'teaching of salvation' (*yulpana d-hayye*).<sup>21</sup> The underlying divine instructions<sup>22</sup> in the scriptural events and realities, governed by the divine economy, have to be understood and put into practice in order to attain salvation (*SHF III 1,2/FH IX 1,2*). From this type of dynamic functioning of scriptural realities and events Jacob draws rich networks of typologies. It is the way in which the human authors of the Scriptures themselves viewed the developments in the history of salvation.<sup>23</sup>

The Scripture that is full of divine instructions is "a sweet spring whose draught cheers him who tastes it" (*HS V 154,1-6*).<sup>24</sup> Since Scriptures are the story of the descending love of God (*SMS 794,12-15 / FH III 85-88*), it can be approached and fruitfully read only through a corresponding love towards them (*HS IV 282,9-18*).<sup>25</sup> Love is the key to the understanding of the mysteries of creation, incarnation, and redemption (*HS I 606-627*).<sup>26</sup> The divine mercy that created the world sent the Son to be offered as a sacrifice so that through his death he might liberate the prisoners

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369,9 / *FH VIII 464; SHF IV 30, 40 / FH XI 30, 40; SHF V 1, 16 / FH XII 1, 16; SHF VI 21 / FH XV 21.*

<sup>21</sup>See *SHF IV 1 / FH XI 1*.

<sup>22</sup>*yulpana* can be rendered in English as 'instruction, doctrine, learning' or 'teaching' (see Homily "On the Pharisee and the Publican," *HS I 299-319*; English trans. from *The True Vine* 9 (1991), 18-34 (esp.1, 64).

<sup>23</sup>Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, 84.

<sup>24</sup>See "A Homily on Melchizedek" (*HS V 154-180*); English trans. from *The True Vine* 2 (1989), 30-55 (esp.33, 1-6).

<sup>25</sup>See "The Second Homily on Elissaeus and on the King of Moab" (*HS IV 282-296*); *ET* from *HTM, TV 1* (1989), 51-67 (esp. 55-56, 9-18).

<sup>26</sup>See "Homily on Love" (*HS I 606-627*); French trans. E. Khalifé-Hachem, "Homélie sur l'amour," *Parle de l'Orient* [Melto], Kasilik, 1 (1970), 281-299 (esp. *HS 609, 6-611,4* = trans. lines, 55-90).

of darkness from Sheol (*HS I 610,6-9*).<sup>27</sup> The Scriptures proclaim the story of this love and they are placed in the world like ‘lamps of light’ amidst darkness (*HS IV 282,4-8*). Love for the divine teaching is the greatest virtue because only through it does one attain the virtues of justice and perfection (*HS I 610,14-17*).

The divine mercy instructs humanity according to the latter’s capacity to understand. The homily of Jacob of Serugh “On the Veil on Moses’ Face”<sup>28</sup> searches the reason for the veil Moses had to place over his face after the theophany on Mount Sinai (*Exodus 34:33-35*). Jacob finds the veil as a type of veil placed on the words of prophecy until the coming of Christ because Israelites were not mature enough to grasp the full truth of the divine teachings and, hence, the need of instructions through types and symbols in prophecy (*HS III 285,21-287,16*). As a good master, God instructs his people step by step so as to bring them to the level of maturity at which they can read the ‘great book’ (*ktaba rabba*) where one finds wisdom (*HCJ IV 145-150*).<sup>29</sup> The law was given to Moses as ‘milk’ for little children so as to bring all to the perfect teaching of Christ that serves as ‘bread’ for the grown up (*SHF II 1,2 / FH VII 1,2*). Those who can attain spiritual understanding can find great treasures of the divine ‘teaching of salvation’ (*yulpana d-hayye*) shining out from the Scriptures (*SHF IV 1 / FH XI 1*). It is the Spirit that enlightens all with the spiritual understanding of hidden things. It is the same Spirit that enlightened the righteous and the prophets of the Old Testament by enabling them to see the mystery of Christ and to bear witness to him in their own ways. It is again the same Spirit that guides the apostles. That Spirit again enlightens one to see the same teaching running through the prophets and apostles (*HS II 358,11-12 / FH VIII 231-232*). Christ is the mediator and the head of the two orders of

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<sup>27</sup>“Homily on Love” (*HS I 606-627*); *Parle de l’Orient* 1 (1970), 281-299 (esp. 286-287, 75-78).

<sup>28</sup>See Homily “On the Veil on Moses’ Face,” (*HS III 283-305*); English trans. S. P. Brock, “On the Veil of Moses”, 70-85 (= *Syriac Spirituality*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 73-89).

<sup>29</sup>*HCJ* = Jacques de Sarug, *Homélie contre les juifs*, M. Albert (ed.), in *Patrologia Orientalis* 38 (fasc. 1), Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976.

teachings, which shone out in the Old and the New Testaments, in the prophets and the apostles. Thus, through all of them a single body of teaching filled with truth shines out (*HS II 364,15-18 / FH VIII 363-366*) for the salvation of humanity.

Lack of holistic vision and instructions in several populations and cultures emerge due to selfish narrow outlooks and sectarianism. What is needed is effective socialization and religious education in a society that changes from day to day. Catechesis in religious faith with right theological and spiritual education is to be maintained, updated, and perfected for each generation for healthy praxis in life.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The sacramental understanding and awareness regarding Creation and History demand a total transformation of attitudes in human thinking and praxis. In all engagements with the world of humanity and other created beings, there should be continuous transition from the secular mind and realities to the sacramental mode of vision and action. While the whole created world and secular realities should not be hated, they should be transformed by enabling and ennobling them to attain the divinely desired goals.

Covenantal perception and consciousness in human social and religious life demand pure, faithful, discerning, and subjective relationships to God and humans in order to realize justice, peace, and development in the world. Justice, peace, and development should be given prime place in all human contracts and relationships, giving due importance to human persons than to commodities.

Salvific divine pedagogy and the Christian *paideia* for salvific modes of life demand constant learning from history and historical developments. All developments in the day-to-day life should be reviewed and learning should take place to ensure that all get positively reconciled and empowered to embrace the divine plan. Thus, the divine plan should be made incarnate in the world affairs.

Salvific synchronic vision for the social, religious, and spiritual realization brings in faith-vision on human existence and salvation from the patterns of the history of salvation. Salvific synchronic vision is the outcome of faith-vision from the learning attained through human experience and history. The power of the Word of God functioning in creation, redemption, and salvation should be accepted into individual and social life patterns and concrete activities for the fulfilment of life on earth.