

THE LITURGICAL MYSTICISM OF THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA

In 1933 A. Mingana¹ published Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentaries on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacrament of Baptism and the Eucharist. It was an astonishing discovery, which enriched our knowledge of the Oriental liturgies in no small degree. Since then a great number of studies have been made of these sermons which prove the relation of the liturgy described in these catecheses to other liturgical sources and indicate at the same time its peculiarities.² What is lacking so far is a study of the religious sentiment of these sermons and of Theodore's liturgical mysticism.

If we compare, for instance, St. Ambrose's sermons to the newly baptized in *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*³ with Theodore's counterpart, we will be struck by the entirely different spiritual attitude towards the *mysterium fidei*, although the two authors are contemporaries.

Ambrose uses the figure of bride and groom in order to describe the relation of the soul to the Holy Eucharist. The soul is the *sponsa*,⁴ the *adulescentula*,⁵ the *soror*;⁶ Christ in the Eucharist is the *sponsus*,⁷ the *frater*.⁸ The Eucharistic worship is a heavenly banquet. Christ invites the soul to this banquet and receives her with a holy kiss. The Canticle of Canticles is used

¹ A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacrament of Baptism and the Eucharist* (Woodbrooke Studies, VI; Cambridge, 1933). Cf. R. Devresse, "Les instructions catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste," *Recherches de science religieuse*, XIII (1933), 425-36.

² H. Lietzmann, *Die Liturgie des Theodor von Mopsuestia* (Sitzungsberichte der Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse, XXIII; Berlin, 1933); A. Rucker, *Ritus baptismi et missae quem descripsit Theodorus episcopus Mops. in sermonibus catecheticis* (Opuscula et Textus, II; Münster i. W., 1933); J. Quasten, "Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Exorcism of the Cilicium," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXV (1942), 209-19; F. J. Reine, *The Eucharistic Doctrine and Liturgy of the Mystagogical Catecheses of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Studies in Christian Antiquity, ed. J. Quasten, II; Washington, D. C., 1942).

³ For the authenticity of *De sacramentis*, cf. J. Quasten, *Monumenta eucharistica et liturgica vetustissima* (Bonn, 1935-37), pp. 137-39; O. Faller, *Ambrosius der Verfasser von De Sacramentis* (Innsbruck, 1940); R. H. Connolly, *The De Sacramentis a Work of St. Ambrose* (Near Bath, 1942); J. H. Srawley, "The De Sacramentis a Work of St. Ambrose," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLIV (1943), 199-200.

⁴ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX, 55 (ed. Quasten, p. 135).

⁵ Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, V, 2, 9 (*ibid.*, p. 165).

⁶ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX, 57 (*ibid.*, p. 136).

⁷ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX, 56 (*ibid.*, p. 136).

⁸ Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, V, 2, 5-6 (*ibid.*, pp. 164-65).

as a frame for this reception, for this salutation between brother and sister, for this *hieros gamos*, this holy wedding.⁹

The spiritual preparation and mental attitude which Theodore demands of his listeners is entirely different. He never mentions the figure of bride and groom or of sister and brother. The Bishop seeks instead to fill his audience with fear and trembling towards the Eucharistic mystery. He uses again and again expressions like "awe-inspiring," "fearful," "with reverential fear," etc. The Eucharistic sacrifice is called on several occasions "awe-inspiring."¹⁰ The liturgy is an "awe-inspiring service,"¹¹ the Holy Eucharist an "awe-inspiring sacrament."¹² The Body of the Lord¹³ and the altar¹⁴ on which it rests are "awe-inspiring." The consecration is an "awe-inspiring event"¹⁵ to the onlookers. The same is true of Holy Communion¹⁶ and the Eucharistic Table.¹⁷ Silence, immense fear, and reverential awe are demanded on account of the greatness of the offering.¹⁸

The liturgical attitude of the people is described in the following words:

We all stand in reverential fear while we bow our heads as if unable even to look at the greatness of this service. And we make use of the words of the invisible hosts, in order to make manifest the greatness of the grace which has been so unexpectedly outpoured upon us. We do not cast away the awe from our mind, but on account of the greatness of the things that are taking place we keep it throughout the service equally, and we bow our heads both before and after we recite loudly the *Sanctus*, and make manifest this fear in a congruous way. In all this the priest also associates himself loudly with the invisible hosts, and prays and glorifies the Godhead, and is like the others in fear of the things that are taking place, as it is right that in connection with them he should not be less than the rest; on the contrary, he is to be in awe and fear more than all, as he is performing for all this service which is so awe-inspiring.¹⁹

Commenting on the vision of Isaias, Theodore says in another passage:

The Seraph did not hold the live coal with his hands but with tongs. This vision demonstrates that the faithful should be afraid to draw nigh unto the Sacrament without an intermediary, and this is the priest, who with his hands gives you the Sacrament and says: "The body of Christ," while he himself does not believe that he is worthy to hold and give such things.²⁰

⁹ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, VII, 37 (*ibid.*, p. 130); VII, 39 (*ibid.*); VII, 40-41 (*ibid.*, p. 131).

¹⁰ A. Mingana, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 95. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 103. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 87. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

In still another passage Theodore states:

The deacons offer honor and adoration to the sacred and awe-inspiring body which is lying there. In this they make manifest to all those present the greatness of the object that is lying there, and induce all the onlookers to think of it as awe-inspiring and truly sacred, and to realise that it is for this reason that they keep it from all defiling things. This they do now according to their habit in order to show that, because the body which is lying there is high, awe-inspiring, holy and truly Lord through its union with the Divine nature, it is with great fear that it must be handled, seen and kept.²¹

It would be easy to increase the number of such and similar passages. Theodore's Catecheses contain many of them, so that there cannot be any doubt about the underlying spirituality. The question is only: What is the relation of Christ and the soul which corresponds to this attitude of awe, fear, and reverence? Theodore answers this question on several occasions. Thus he asks, for example:

How can a man who is mortal, corruptible, and burdened with sin, be deemed worthy to take and receive that body which became immortal and incorruptible, which is in heaven, and at the right hand of God, and which receives honour from all as Lord and King?²²

The last of these words are significant. The relation of the soul to Christ is not that of a bride to the bridegroom, as in Ambrose's mystagogical sermons in the *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*, but that of a servant to his king. That explains the feeling of fear, awe, and trembling which Theodore demands for the approach to this sacrament. It is interesting to read his description of the reception of the Eucharistic bread:

It is with these expectations that each one of us draws nigh while looking downwards and stretching out both hands. By his looking downwards he signifies that he is offering a congruous thing to God through adoration, and giving thanks for his receiving the body of a king, who became the Lord of all through his union with the Divine nature, and who is worshipped as a Lord by the whole creation; and in the fact that both his hands are stretched out, he confesses the greatness of the gift which he is about to receive.

To receive the Sacrament which is given, a person stretches out his right hand, and under it he places the left hand. In this he shows a great fear, and since the hand that is stretched out holds a higher rank, it is the one that is extended for receiving the Body of the King; and the other hand bears and brings its sister hand, while not thinking that it is playing the rôle of a servant, as it is equal with it in honour, on account of the bread of the King, which is also borne by it.²³

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87. ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

Here the concept of the Eucharistic Lord as a King and of the soul as His servant is evident. No wonder that Theodore advises the recipient of Holy Communion:

As to you, after you have received the body, you offer adoration as a confession of the power placed in your hands, while remembering the words uttered by our Lord to His disciples after He rose from the dead, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth."²⁴

The contrast of this Oriental spirituality with the Western spirituality of St. Ambrose is so remarkable that the question arises, how far this kind of spirituality reaches. Is this a personal attitude of Theodore, or is there a similar concept to be found in other ecclesiastical writers of the East?

We notice the same religious sentiment in the homilies of Narses, the famous teacher of the School of Edessa and founder of the School of the Nestorians at Nisibis. His literary activity began about the year 437, less than a decade after Theodore's death. In his Exposition of the Mysteries Narses remarks:

The priest now offers the mystery of the redemption of our life, full of awe and covered with fear and great dread. The priest is in awe and great fear and much trembling for his own debts and the debts of all the children of the Church.²⁵

Of the celebration of the Holy Mystery Narses says:

Trembling and fear, for himself and for his people, lie upon the priest in that dread hour. In his awful character and office, an object of awe even to the seraphim, the son of dust stands in great fear as mediator. The awful King, mystically slain and buried, and the awful watchers, standing in fear in honour of their Lord.²⁶

The last sentence indicates that Narses, like Theodore, sees Christ as the awful King in the Eucharist. All those present, especially the priest as the mediator in this mystery, are full of fear and dread. Narses calls this "the frame of mind, in which the priest stands to officiate, reverent, with great fear and trembling."²⁷ But this kind of piety Narses demands not from the priest alone; the deacon as the mediator between priest and faithful takes care that this frame of mind is shared by the crowd. Immediately after the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁵ R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Texts and Studies, VIII; Cambridge, 1909), p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

opening of the *Canon Missae*—in other words, before the consecration—Narses remarks:

The herald of the Church now cries and admonishes every one to confess to the Lord, and entreat of Him with purity of heart. "Stand well," he says, "look with your minds on what is being done. Great is the mystery in which ye are ministering, O ye mortals; the dread Mysteries, lo, are being consecrated by the hands of the priest: let everyone be in fear and dread while they are being performed. . . entreat earnestly and make supplication to the God of all in this hour which is full of trembling and fear. Let no one dare to speak a word with his mouth. . . . And be ye standing in stillness and fear."²⁸

The admonition with which the priest exhorts the faithful draws again the picture of Christ the great King: "Let your minds be aloft in this hour where King Messiah is sitting on the right hand. Be not taken up with vain thoughts of earthly things: Look upon Him that is now mystically slain upon the altar."²⁹ The answer of the people twice mentions the glorious King.

Narses remarks on several occasions that even the angels look at the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice with fear and dread. When the priest summons the Holy Spirit in the Epiclesis, the deacon again addresses the faithful: "In silence and fear be ye standing, peace be with you. Let all the people be in fear at this moment in which the adorable Mysteries are being accomplished."³⁰

Before the distribution of the Holy Eucharist the deacon again admonishes the crowd: "Let us all approach with fear to the Mystery of the Body and the Blood."³¹ The people answer with a prayer which closes as follows: "May these Divine Mysteries, Lord, be to us for confidence and courage before Thy Majesty."³¹

The majesty of Christ is even behind the symbolical interpretation of the liturgical edifice which appears in Narses' Exposition of the Mysteries.

The sanctuary is a type of that Kingdom which our Lord entered and into which He will bring with Him all His friends. The adorable altar thereof is a symbol of that throne of the Great and Glorious, upon which He will be seen of watchers and men in the day of His revelation.³²

These passages may suffice to show Narses' frame of mind and his liturgical concept of Christ.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that this idea of the *mysterium tremendum* occurs only among the Nestorians. Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narses are not the only ones to emphasize it. If we limit ourselves to the Syrian liturgy of the Antioch type, it may suffice to mention St. John Chrysostom. He too calls the Eucharist "a table of holy fear,"³³ "an awe-inspiring and divine table,"³⁴ "the frightful mysteries,"³⁵ "the divine mysteries,"³⁶ "the ineffable mysteries,"³⁷ "the mysteries which demand reverence and trembling."³⁸ He calls the Eucharistic cup the "cup of holy awe,"³⁹ "the frightful and most awe-inspiring cup,"⁴⁰ "the awe-inspiring blood,"⁴¹ and "the precious blood."⁴² Accordingly the Eucharist is an "awe-inspiring and terrible sacrifice,"⁴³ "a fearful and holy sacrifice,"⁴⁴ "the most awe-inspiring sacrifice."⁴⁵ The liturgy is "a service full of holy reverence."⁴⁶

Moreover, St. John Chrysostom has the same liturgical concept of Christ the King as have Theodore and Narses. He complains in one of his homilies about the decreasing number of communicants in these words: "It is vain that we stand daily at the altar; it is vain that the Holy Sacrifice is offered daily; there is nobody to receive. . . . The King comes daily to see His guests and He speaks to everyone."⁴⁷

In another text, found between two excerpts of St. John Chrysostom, the reception of the Holy Eucharist is described as the reception of a King: "Whenever you approach to receive, do not stretch forth your hands, but make your left hand a throne for the right one . . . as if you were to receive a King. Receive the Body of the Lord with great fear."⁴⁸

³³ *Hom. de baptismo Christi* (PG, XLIX, 370).

³⁴ *Hom. in diem natalem D. N. J. Chr.* (PG, XLIX, 360).

³⁵ *Hom. 25 in Matth.* (PG, LVII, 331); *Hom. 46 in Joannem* (PG, LIX, 261); *Hom. 24 in I Cor.* (PG, LXI, 919).

³⁶ *Hom. in sanctum Pascha* (PG, LII, 769).

³⁷ *Hom. 34 in I Cor.* (PG, XLIX, 288).

³⁸ *Hom. in diem natalem D. N. J. Chr.* (PG, XLIX, 392).

³⁹ *Catech. 1 ad illuminandos* (PG, XLIX, 223).

⁴⁰ *Hom. 24 in I Cor.* (PG, XLIII, 199).

⁴¹ *Hom. 82 in Matth.* (PG, LVIII, 746).

⁴² *De sacerdotio*, III, 4 (PG, XLVIII, 642); *Hom. 16 in Hebr.* (PG, LXIII, 124).

⁴³ *Hom. 24 in I Cor.* (PG, LXI, 203).

⁴⁴ *Hom. 2 de proditione Judae* (PG, XLIX, 390).

⁴⁵ *De sacerdotio*, VI, 3 (PG, XLVIII, 681).

⁴⁶ *Ecl. de non contemn. eccl. Dei* (PG, LXIII, 626).

⁴⁷ *Hom. 3 in Eph.* (PG, LXII, 29).

⁴⁸ *Ecloga quod non indigne accedendum sit ad divina mysteria*, hom. 47 (Montfaucon, XII, 771).

In order to answer the question, how old this attitude and concept is, it must be remembered that we find a similar passage in Cyril of Jerusalem about the year 348. In his fifth Mystagogical Catechesis he states: "When you approach [to receive], do not come forth with your hands flatly stretched out, but make your left hand the throne of the right one to receive the King."⁴⁹

The similarity of these two passages from St. John Chrysostom and St. Cyril of Jerusalem is so striking that the authorship of the fifth Mystagogical Catechesis has been attributed to Chrysostom.⁵⁰ For us it is more important that Cyril of Jerusalem has not only the idea of Christ the Eucharistic King, but also that of the *mysterium tremendum*. In his exposition of the Mass in the same Catechesis, he uses the same expression for the moment of consecration as Theodore and Narses, calling it *ἐκείνην τὴν φρικωδεστάτην ὥραν*.⁵¹ He employs the same term a second time, speaking of the oblation after the consecration as of *τῆς ἁγίας καὶ φρικωδεστάτης προκειμένης θυσίας*.⁵²

These passages trace the idea of cultual dread back to the middle of the fourth century. It is therefore not surprising that another source of Syriac origin from about 380, the Apostolic Constitutions, has the same religious sentiment. In the so-called Clementine Liturgy of the eighth book the deacon admonishes the congregation: Ὅρθοι πρὸς Κύριον μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου ἐστῶτες ὤμεν προσφέρειν.⁵³

Edmund Bishop thought that this was the only passage of such a mental attitude in the liturgy of the Apostolic Constitutions, and drew the conclusion that this was an importation from a foreign liturgy and "indeed an intrusion out of place."⁵⁴ However, he was mistaken regarding the number of such passages. The idea of dread and fear towards the Eucharist occurs more than once in the Apostolic Constitutions. Thus we find in the liturgy of the eighth book the admonition that the faithful should approach Holy Communion "with awe and fear."⁵⁵ In the liturgy of the second book it is said of the deacons that "they serve the Body of the Lord with fear."⁵⁶ Even the idea of Christ the King, as we found it always connected with that of the

⁴⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech. myst.*, V, 21 (Quasten, p. 108).

⁵⁰ Cf. F. J. Dölger, "Das Segnen der Sinne mit der Eucharistie," *Antike und Christentum*, III (1932), 237.

⁵¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech. myst.*, V, 4 (Quasten, p. 99).

⁵² *Ibid.*, V, 9 (Quasten, p. 102).

⁵³ *Constitutiones apostol.*, VIII, 12, 2 (*ibid.*, p. 212).

⁵⁴ E. Bishop, in R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Const. apost.*, VIII, 13, 14 (Quasten, p. 230).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 57, 15 (*ibid.*, p. 185).

mysterium tremendum, appears in the advice given that all should take the Body of the Lord and the Precious Blood, approaching in order, in awe and in fear, as to the Body of the King.⁵⁷

In sharp contrast to all these sources, the Cappadocian Fathers do not have any vestige of such a religious sentiment regarding the Eucharist. The writings of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa never associate the idea of awe and dread with the Eucharist or the liturgy. Nor does the Egyptian liturgy of the Euchologion of Serapion from the first half of the fourth century. The prayer after the breaking of the bread speaks of the *μυστήρια τὰ παρόντα*,⁵⁸ but nowhere do we find the feeling of awe and fear attached to the Eucharistic service. Instead the *φιλανθρωπία* of God is stressed⁵⁹ and the Eucharist is called a remedy for the soul⁶⁰ and a link of unity for the Church.⁶¹

Two conclusions can be drawn from what has been said so far. First of all, if we look back, Theodore's Commentaries point to Antioch, not only in their liturgy but even in their peculiar religious sentiment and attitude. Theodore shares this feeling with the other sources of the liturgy of Antioch, with Cyril of Jerusalem, the Apostolic Constitutions, and St. John Chrysostom. If we ask why such a religious sentiment developed in Antioch, we must remember that the Arian heresy denied the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. The confutation of this heretical concept occupied the minds of the fourth century long after the Council of Nicaea. It seems that at Antioch one was not satisfied with the confession and Creed of Nicaea, but laid special stress on the divine majesty and royal power of Christ in the liturgy and prayer of the Church, in order to meet all temptations of a relapse into the Arian doctrine of a subordination of the Son. Thus a new religious sentiment developed at Antioch to have an important influence on the liturgy of the future. The Eucharist, at the beginning a simple *cena dominica* in the private homes of the Christians, takes more and more the forms of a court ceremonial, of the reception of a King. The Eastern liturgies mold even the entrance with the unconsecrated oblation into an entrance of the divine majesty of Christ. The *hymnos cherubikos*, which accompanies this royal entrance, was introduced at Byzantium at the time of Justin II (565-78). It glorifies *τὸν βασιλέα τῶν ὄλων ὑποδεξόμενοι ταῖς ἀγγελικαῖς ὁρατάς δορυφορουμένων τάξεσιν*.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 57, 21 (*ibid.*, p. 186).

⁵⁸ Serapion of Thmuis, *Euchologion*, XV, 1 (*ibid.*, p. 65)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, XV, 1; XVI, 1 (*ibid.*).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, XIII, 15 (*ibid.*, p. 63).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, XIII, 13 (*ibid.*, p. 62).

⁶² A. Baumstark, *Die Messe im Morgenland* (Kempton, 1906), p. 113.

Not the liturgy only, but the ecclesiastical edifice as well, shows the influence of this development. Not a private home, but the King's hall, the *basilica*, is now the place where this royal ceremonial is celebrated. The liturgical hall becomes more and more a royal hall with throne and baldachino, the protecting roof of the imperial throne (*κιβώριον*), and the throne chair, as it appears in the pictures of the *ἐροίμασία τοῦ θρόνου*.

The idea of the Eucharistic Lord and King led to the use of these strictly imperial *insignia*, as A. Alföldi has amply demonstrated.⁶³ Moreover, the element of fear, as we found it in Theodore's Commentaries, paves the way for the wall of pictures, the *ikonostasis*, or the curtain, which hides the altar from the eyes of the faithful in the Eastern liturgies.⁶⁴

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⁶³ A. Alföldi, *Insignien und Tracht der römischen Kaiser* (Mitteilungen des deutschen arch. Instituts, Röm. Abt. [1935], pp. 1-158). Cf. J. Quasten, in *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft*, XV (1941), 405-7.

⁶⁴ Curtains are mentioned for the first time in the year 411. Cf. E. Bishop, in R. H. Connolly, *op. cit.*, p. 91. The oldest example of the *ikonostasis* is Hagia Sophia. Cf. K. Holl, *Zur Entstehung der Bilderwand in der griechischen Kirche* (Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte, II: Der Osten; Tübingen, 1928), p. 228.