



By means of this short article, I want to introduce my intended PhD-research project. The focal point of this study will be a comparison of the baptismal rites of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai of Nisibis. After a short introduction of both figures, I shall explain in a general way the method and relevance of this project.

A Critical Comparison of the Baptismal Rites of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai of Nisibis

Theodore (350-428)¹

Already during his life, Theodore, the lifelong friend of John Chrysostom and later bishop of Mopsuestia, was widely revered as one of the prominent biblical theologians of his time. After his death however, history wrote two different narratives. In the West arose a growing opposition to Theodore's teachings culminating in his posthumous condemnation at the fifth ecumenical council at Constantinople in 553. In the Syriac speaking East however, Theodore's popularity even increased after his death. During his life, most of his writings were already translated into Syriac.

1. For some information about Theodore's life, oeuvre, reception, and influence on the Church of the East, see Peter Bruns, *Theodor von Mopsuestia: Katechetische Homilien* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1995), 1-21 and Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia, The Early Church Fathers* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-16.

This phenomenon prevented Theodore's writings from total destruction. Responsible for this major translatory project was the school of Edessa. The first head of this school we know by name, Qiore, replaced the texts of Ephraem by those of Theodore as normative. Following synods headed by Išō'yahb in 585 and Sabrišo^c in 596 confirmed Theodore's teachings as canon. So, Theodore had a profound influence on the teachings of the Church of the East (pejoratively called the 'Nestorian' Church), an influence that persists until today.

Narsai (ca. 399-503)²

Narsai was a prominent figure in the East Syriac Church. He studied at the school of Edessa (today's Urfa) and later directed the same institute for some years before he was more or less forced to flee to Nisibis (today's Nusaybin), because of anti-Nestorian sentiments. In Nisibis, he started a new school. This school is hailed as the first theological university ever which fame even reached Rome, with students from as far as India. According to tradition, at the zenith of its success the school educated more than 1,000 students at the same time.

2 An extensive treatment of Narsai's life and work, with special emphasis to his directorship in Nisibis, is found in Arthur Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 266, subsidia, tomus 26 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965), 57-121.

I have already stressed the influence of Theodore on the Church of the East in general. This development did not bypass Narsai. To the contrary, he rather contributed to the propagation of it. Narsai is acclaimed as a devoted first-generation disciple of Theodore of Mopsuestia and a zealous propagator of Theodore's teachings. He even dedicated a homily to the specific defence of the teachings of the three doctors Nestorius, Theodore and Diodore.³

A comparative approach

Both Theodore and Narsai have left us important writings that inform us about the baptismal rites of West and East Syria. I am speaking of the *baptismal homilies 1-3* of Theodore and the *liturgical homilies 22 and 21* (in this order) of Narsai.⁴

3 See F. Martin, "Homélie de Narsès sur les trois docteurs nestoriens," *Journal Asiatique* 13 (1899): 446-492 (Text); 15 (1900): 469-525.

4 English translations (with Syriac text) of Theodore's and Narsai's homilies are provided by respectively Alphonse Mingana, *The Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer, Baptism and the Eucharist*, Woodbroke Studies VI (Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1933), and Dom R.H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai: Translated into English with an Introduction; With an Appendix by Edmund Bishop* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909). Already Connolly, *Liturgical homilies*, xlvi-xlvi, rightly observed and plainly argued that, based on internal grounds, homily 22 must be placed before 21.

Both are transmitted to us in Syriac (although Theodore's homilies were originally written in Greek). Usually, the two are identified as quite similar. Given the fact that both theologians shared a common Syriac tradition and given the aforementioned influence of Theodore on the Eastern Church in general and Narsai in particular, this may not surprise us. The question is however, *how profound* Narsai's rite has been influenced by Theodore's.

According to some scholars, this influence reaches rather far. Leonel L. Mitchell e.g. states rather boldly that Narsai's liturgical homilies

*"... follow so closely the account of Theodore of Mopsuestia that they might be described as poetic renditions of Theodore's text. The Similarity is so great both in the structure of the rites described and in the details of their interpretation that the lack of a post-baptismal consignation in Narsai itself suggests that there was none in Theodore's original text."*⁵

If Narsai, as a major representative of East Syrian tradition, is really that profoundly influenced by Theodore, this has far reaching consequences for our understanding of continuity and discontinuity within the Eastern baptismal tradition.

However, if we want to get a clear view of the possible influence of Theodore on Narsai,

5 Leonel L. Mitchell, "Four Fathers on Baptism: St. John Chrysostom, St. Ephraem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Narsai," in: *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites*, The Syrian Churches Series, vol. 6, ed. J. Vellian (Kottayam/Kerala, India: C.M.S. Press, 1973), 53.

we first have to submit both rites to a thoroughgoing comparative study and this will be the aim of my research. Such a study should not only focus on similarities, but the more on differences between both rites. Indeed, discrepancies often yield much more understanding to a comparative study than similitudes. Moreover, this investigation should be performed on different levels of comparison like the structure of the rite, the subrites, and the baptismal narrative(s), the latter of which informs us about function and meaning.⁶

Next, the categorized similarities and differences have to be examined in order to answer questions like "Which agree-ments may be attributed to a common tradition or dependency on a common source?" and "What may be explained as a particular contribution of Theodore or Narsai?"

A study like this not only adds to our understanding of Theodore's and Narsai's baptismal rites specifically, but also to our general comprehension of the fourth and fifth century Syrian rites and the Eastern one in particular. At the same time it enables us, by means of a

6 Juliette Day, *The Baptismal Liturgy of Jerusalem: Fourth- and Fifth-Century Evidence from Palestine, Syria and Egypt* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), explains the interconnectedness of structure and narrative as follows: "The narrative of the whole rite can be revealed by the primary structure: the sequence of liturgical units indicating which rituals are climactic, which are preliminary and which are not truly initiatory. This structure of the rite is affected by the dominant biblical typology upon which the rite relies, and in turn this typology may affect the sequence and performance of secondary structural units and their perceived role in the initiatory process." (p.6)

diachronic approach, to position both rites within the wider Syrian baptismal tradition, increasing our insight into the process of continuity and discontinuity.⁷

Relevance for RCEC

Thus far, it may be plain that my research project has relevance for Syrian liturgical studies. But what is the relevance for RCEC? I hope to clarify this in the following.

Although every christian 'knows' that christianity has its roots in the Middle-East, most common believers and scholars alike suffer from collective amnesia concerning the prominent role of the Orient within the christian landscape of the early centuries.

Most handbooks of church history are mainly concerned with christianity as it developed within the boundaries of the Roman empire and gave rise to the catholic West and the orthodox East, Rome and Constantinople. Discussions of Oriental christianity are often restricted to marginal paragraphs, mostly concerned with 'heretical movements' like monophysitism and nestorianism.

7 The fruitfulness of this approach is already revealed by my research thus far (paper forthcoming). A close comparison of the subrite both Theodore and Narsai call a 'Lawsuit' (*dina*) shows important differences concerning the position of the rite within the whole, the actual performance and the function and meaning of it. This demonstrates that Narsai is not exclusively dependent on Theodore.

However, such an approach does no justice to the historical data. Syrian christianity as it flourished in Antioch, Edessa and Nisibis was at least as influential as it's Roman and Byzantine brothers. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that even between 640 and 740, no fewer than six popes derived from Syria.

Furthermore, christian expansion did not stop at the Roman border. Via Antioch and Edessa, Syrian missionaries headed East along the old Silk Road. It is quite possible that, as tradition contends, by the end of the first or the beginning of the second century there were christian communities from the Euphrate to India. This becomes even the more likely if we realize that the distance from Jerusalem to Teheran (<1,000 miles) is less than the distance of Jerusalem to Rome (1,400 miles). As the result of missionary outreach to Afghanistan and China, the Church of the East achieved the greatest geographical scope of any church until the Middle Ages. Even around the year 1000, Asia had 17 to 20 million Christians; 'christian' Europe about 25-30 million.⁸

However, not only because of numbers and expansion, but the Syrian tradition is the more relevant for its deep roots. In fact, it is the only surviving representative of a semitic Syro-Aramaic *Urkirche*. By means of this lingual-conceptual vehicle, Syrian tradition was able to treasure specific ideas not, or

only marginally, preserved in other traditions. An interesting example of this concerns the 'robe of glory'.

According to Syriac tradition the baptizand takes up from the baptismal waters the robe of glory that Christ had recovered and deposited in the Jordan. This clothing image presupposes and preserves the Jewish tradition that Adam lost his robe of glory at the fall. Once we are aware of this kind of symbolism, we realize that the New Testament is not unfamiliar with it (cf. Luk. 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10; Rev. 3:5).

Another characteristic of Syrian baptismal tradition is the focus on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan as the archetype of christian baptism. The importance of the baptism of Jesus in Syrian tradition is already testified by Ignatius of Antioch who mentions it twice within a quasi-credal formulation (*Eph.* 18:2; *Smyrn.* 1:1). This just illustrates that Syriac tradition stands for a branch of christianity that may inform, enrich, and even correct our understanding of the early church.

The mission of RCEC is to "research emerging Christianity ...". Although there is much more to say, I hope to have made clear that a serious investigation of "emerging Christianity" is impossible without giving due attention to the Syriac tradition. May my own research project contribute to our understanding of it.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2008), 70.