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**“He Whom the Seraphic Angels Are Afraid to Gaze at”:
A Syriac Eucharistic Hymn
Shared by the East and West Traditions**

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The Syriac liturgical tradition is by far the most diverse amongst the three most ancient liturgical traditions (the other two being the Greek and Latin). In fact, it is the only ancient tradition that crosses the boundaries of the various Christological schools: Chalcedonian, represented today by the Chaldean, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Syro-Malabar, and Melkite Churches; pre-Chalcedonian, represented by the Syrian Orthodox and Malankara Orthodox Churches; and pre-Ephesian, represented by The Assyrian Church of the East. This diversity is indeed a credit to the Syriac liturgical tradition which witnessed its own share of inner conflicts.

Linguistically, and later ecclesiastically, the Syriac liturgical tradition consists of two distinct rites: an Eastern one covering more or less East of the Euphrates, which today constitutes the traditions of the Assyrian Church of the East and that of the Chaldean Church, and a Western one which covers today the traditions of the Syrian Orthodox and Catholic Churches, as well as the Maronite Church. Both rites have corresponding Churches in India as well. The difference between these two rites is not merely a linguistic one. In fact, the entire fabric of the East and West Syriac rites is different. While a member of the Assyrian Church of the East will find no difficulty following the liturgy of the Chaldean Church and a member of the Syrian Orthodox church will find no difficulty following the liturgy of the Maronite or Syrian Catholic churches, the same cannot be said across the Eastern and Western rites. There are, however, a few liturgical texts that are shared between East and West. The poem discussed in this paper is one such example.

Typically shared poems are archaic, and may predate the Christological divisions of the fifth century. These, understandably, were inherited by both rites from a common source. An example of such poems is a *madrasha* by Saint Ephrem, published by Sebastian Brock.¹ These shared poems tend to find their way into the *Khudra* or the *Phanqitho*, both books being the yearly liturgical cycles of the Eastern and Western rites, respectively. At times, one finds intriguing cases of poems that are theologically sensitive, but still managed to move from one tradition to the other, even in cases when their theology disagrees with the receptive tradition.

In which direction did each of these poem travel is a hard question to answer, but always intrigues the scholar. If one can find phraseology that is particular to one rite, one can sometimes discern which rite was the originator. In the cases of ‘neutral’ texts, as is the case of our poem, it is rather difficult to determine this,

¹ *Parole de l’Orient* 15 (1988/9).

although in our case, there is but one phrase, which we will come to later, that might shed some light on the originating rite.

What is striking about our poem is its common usage today. As it is commonly recited during the Holy Qurbana liturgy, the faithful of both traditions recognize it, and if ‘marketed’ wisely can be instrumental in ecumenical activities.

The Text

The poem is a verse homily composed in the Mar Narsai (or Mar Jacob in the West tradition) meter; that is, each line consists of 16 syllables, divided into four 4-syllable parts. In its current form, the poem consists of thirteen stanzas in the Eastern version, with three additional stanzas in the Western version. The first 10 stanzas are common to both versions. The three additional stanzas of the Western version are as follows:

1. An extra stanza after stanza 10 (numbered 10* below).
2. The 13th stanza of the Eastern version is expanded into two stanzas in the Western version (numbered 13¹ and 13²).
3. An additional final stanza at the end (numbered 14).

The following text is taken from Daniel Benjamin’s edition of *ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ*², in the case of the eastern version, and *ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ*³, in the case of the Western version.

1	ܐܘܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܘܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ :
2	ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ :
3	ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ :
4	ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ : ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ :

² Daniel Benjamin, *ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ* ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ. Mall Graphic Publishing, Chicago, 1996.

³ Jerusalem, 1959

5	<p> $\text{ܘܗܝܠ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ $\text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} : \text{ܘܗܝܠܝܢ ܘܗܝܠܝܢ} :$ </p>	<p> 9 10 * 10 11 12 13 213 14 </p>
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Text Variants

There are minor variants between the Eastern and Western version. These are indicated below under each stanza number. For each entry, the Eastern version is given, then a closed square bracket, ‘]’, then the Western version.

- 1. دَكَّيْهِ [دَكَّيْهِ]
- 7. تَوَّص [تَوَّص]
- 8. يِيهِ يَكْتِي [يِيهِ عَبْدِي]
- 11. مَكْبَد [مَكْبَد]
- 12. هُجِنْمِي [هُجِنْمِي]

Additionally, stanza 13¹ reads in the Western version:

13¹ ١٤ ١٥ ١٦ ١٧ ١٨ ١٩ ٢٠ ٢١ ٢٢ ٢٣ ٢٤ ٢٥ ٢٦ ٢٧ ٢٨ ٢٩ ٣٠ ٣١ ٣٢ ٣٣ ٣٤ ٣٥ ٣٦ ٣٧ ٣٨ ٣٩ ٤٠ ٤١ ٤٢ ٤٣ ٤٤ ٤٥ ٤٦ ٤٧ ٤٨ ٤٩ ٥٠ ٥١ ٥٢ ٥٣ ٥٤ ٥٥ ٥٦ ٥٧ ٥٨ ٥٩ ٦٠ ٦١ ٦٢ ٦٣ ٦٤ ٦٥ ٦٦ ٦٧ ٦٨ ٦٩ ٧٠ ٧١ ٧٢ ٧٣ ٧٤ ٧٥ ٧٦ ٧٧ ٧٨ ٧٩ ٨٠ ٨١ ٨٢ ٨٣ ٨٤ ٨٥ ٨٦ ٨٧ ٨٨ ٨٩ ٩٠ ٩١ ٩٢ ٩٣ ٩٤ ٩٥ ٩٦ ٩٧ ٩٨ ٩٩ ١٠٠

Translation

1. He Whom the Seraphic Angels are afraid to gaze at
I have seen him (made manifest) in bread and wine on the altar.
2. Those clothed in lightning, if they see him, are inflamed,
And the face of the worthless earth, when receiving Him, becomes unveiled.
3. The Mysteries of the Son are fire among the heavenly beings;
Isaiah bears witness with us to have seen them.
4. These mysteries which are in the womb of the Godhead,
Are on the altar being distributed to the children of Adam.
5. The altar is fixed like the chariot of the cherubim,
Surrounded by the multitudes of the heavenly hosts.
6. On the altar is laid the Body of the Son of God,
And the children of Adam are carrying him with their hands.
7. And instead of the man who is wearing silk, the priest stands
Distributing alms and pearls to the needy.
8. If there exists envy among the watchful (angels),
The cherubim are close to envying human beings.

9. Where Zion fixed a cross to crucify the Son,
There, grew up the tree that gave birth to the Lamb.
10. Where the nails were fixed on the hands of the Son,
There too, the bonds of Isaac were offered.
- 10*. Welcome O priest who carries the mysteries of his Lord,
And by his right hand, he distributes Life to people.
11. Welcome O priest who carries a pure censer,
And with its fragrance sweetens the whole world.
12. Welcome O priest whom the Holy Spirit raised up,
And with his tongue he carries the keys of the House of God.
- 13¹. Welcome O priest who binds people in the deep,
And the Lord in the highest he binds them, Halleluiah.
- 13². Welcome O priest who unbinds people on earth,
And the Lord in the highest unbinds them, Kyerie-Eleison.
14. Praise be to the Lord, His mercies upon you, and forgiveness for me;
And let there by commemoration to Mar Jacob, the *Malpana*.

Commentary

The numbers below refer the stanza numbers.⁴

1. **ܕܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܢܝܐ** literally means fiery beings and is an epithet of the Seraphim, one of the nine ranks of angles.
2. **ܕܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܢܝܐ** ‘those clothed in lightning’ is a reference to spiritual beings (see Ezekiel 1:13); **ܕܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܢܝܐ** ‘worthless earth/dust’ is a reference to Gen 3:19, ‘for dust you are, and to dust you return.’)
3. A reference to Isaiah 6:1-8.
4. **ܕܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܢܝܐ** ‘Womb of the Godhead’ is a reference to John 1:18 in the Peshitta version, **ܕܝܢܝܐ ܕܝܢܝܐ** ‘the One God who is in the womb of his father’.

⁴ I Would like to extend my thanks to Dr. Sebastian P. Brock who provides hints to some of the Biblical references.

6. **ܡܘܨܒܐ** ‘carrying’ is a Syriac verb that is difficult to translate. The verb embodies a number of semantically related notions, ‘to put in motion’, ‘to move something’, ‘to lift up something’. In fact, there is a liturgical Order of *Zuyōho*, during which the celebrant lifts and moves the object on which *Zuyōho* is performed, usually a cross (but water on Epiphany, Palms on Palm Sunday, etc.). Hence, we refer to the *Zuyōho* of the Cross, or the *Zuyōho* of the Palms.⁵

7. **ܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܝܒܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ** ‘the man who is wearing silk’ is a reference to the Old Testament priesthood whose garments are discussed in Exodus 28; **ܚܕܝܢܐ** ‘pearls’ is a metaphor for Eucharistic particles.

9. **ܐܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ** ‘the tree that gave birth to the Lamb’ is a reference to Genesis 22:13, **ܐܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ**: ‘a ram held by a branch’. Amongst early Syriac writers, such as Saint Ephrem (his commentary on this verse), alterations to the phrase are introduced: the ram becomes a lamb, and the branch becomes a tree. More interestingly, amongst West Syriac writers of the fifth and sixth century, the ram/lamb is no longer held (**ܐܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ**) by the branch/tree, but the tree gives birth (**ܐܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ**) to the Lamb, an analogy for Mary’s virgin birth of Christ. East Syriac writers do not adopt this typology.⁶

10. **ܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ** ‘the bonds of Isaac’ is a reference to Genesis 22:9.

14. **ܡܘܨܒܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ** ‘St. Jacob the Doctor’ must be a reference to Mar Jacob of Sarug, to whom later scribes may have wanted to attribute the poem.

Conclusion

This brief paper presented a Syriac poem that is actively been used by both the Eastern and Western rites. Its text is theologically neutral which makes it very hard to determine if the text predates the East-West split, or originated in one tradition and moved to the other. There is one phrase, however, that may shed some light on the originating tradition, though

⁵ See <http://sor.cua.edu/Feast/Zuyoxo.html> for an audio chanting of *Zuyōho* according to the West Syriac rite.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion on this subject, see Brock ‘Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac’, *Le Muséon XCIV* (1986), pp. 61-129; reprinted in Brock’s *From Ephrem to Romanos* (1999).

very inconclusively. In stanza 9, the phrase **ܕܒܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܝܪܝܢܐ** ‘the tree that gave birth to the Lamb’ has been discussed in some detail, and it was indicated that its phraseology is more common amongst West Syriac writers. This makes it unlikely that the text traveled from East to West.

Whether the homily predates the split or traveled from West to East, it seems that the East version is more archaic. In fact, two pieces of evidence indicate so. The first is the expansion of stanza 13 into two stanzas in the Western version; such expansions usually take place at a later date (omissions by scribes are usually more mechanical where entire stanzas are omitted). The second is the attribution to Mar Jacob of Sarug in the last stanza which must be of a later date.

Regardless of its origin or which version preserves the original text, the homily described here has a great potential of being used today to bridge the gap between East and West in ecumenical activities that are much lacking.