

JPJRS 9/2 ISSN 0972-3331, Jul 2006 129-148

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4284897

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4284897>

Funeral Rites of Syro-Malabar Church: A Liturgico-theological Analysis

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Abstract: The author studies funeral rites of the Syro-Malabar Church are noted for their liturgical and theological significance. In this study the author concentrates on the liturgy and theology of the funeral rites in the East Syrian tradition and see how far the East Syrian tradition is preserved in the Malabar liturgy.

He shows that the East Syrian liturgy of funeral is indeed a treasure house containing the Christian theology of death and the eschatological character of Christian life. These prayers and hymns of the liturgy are presented as earnest appeals to the believing community to respond in ardent faith. The large variety of hymns and prayers for various categories expresses the great concern of the Church towards each and every member. The prayers, hymns and gestures of the liturgy invite the assembly as a whole and the bereaved of the departed one in particular to lead a life worthy of the sacred journey of the believers to the heavenly home. Thus the funeral becomes an opportunity of catechesis. In this manner, the Syro-Malabar text of the funeral is already keeping the fundamental liturgical and theological thrust of the East Syrian tradition.

Keywords: Assyrian Traditions, Chaldean traditions, East Syrian tradition, Ephrem, St., funeral rites, Syro-Malabar Church, theology of death.

The funeral rites of the Syro-Malabar Church are noted for their liturgical and theological elegance. The present liturgical texts of the funeral in the Malabar Church are founded on the funeral service in the East Syrian tradition. However, considerable changes are seen in the Syriac texts and the Malayalam texts of the Syro-Malabar tradition.¹ A comparative study with the liturgical texts of the

Chaldean Catholics and the Assyrian Church of the East will help us to identify the changes made in the Malabar texts. In this study we shall concentrate on the liturgy and theology of the funeral rites in the East Syrian tradition and see how far the East Syrian tradition is preserved in the Malabar liturgy.

I. Ancient East Syrian Tradition of Christian Funeral

From ancient times onwards Christian funeral was a liturgical celebration in the East Syrian tradition. Narsai (399-502) mentions the role of a priest in the funeral. "Without a priest the defunct also is not interred; nor do they let him down into his grave without the priest".² *Liber Patrum* considers the burial of the dead as an important duty pertaining to the office of the priest.³

The biography of Mar Aba (540-552) speaks of the solemn burial of the body of a saint with great honour, in the presence of different groups of clergy.⁴ The Synod of Mar Aba (544) denies a Christian burial to those who were living in unlawful marital relations without repentance. "None of the religious or faithful laymen shall be allowed to accompany them (on the day) of their death or to accompany their biers in the service, or to enshroud them on the day of their departure, either openly or in secret, but as they separated themselves in their affairs from the exalted practice of Christianity and were stained with unlawful marriage like the beasts, without discrimination, so also in their death they should be separated and alienated from any fellowship with the faithful. Let them be given the burial of an ass like the beasts they resembled in their customs."⁵

Canon 18 of the Synod of Mar Giwargis (674) deals with the burial of the departed and those who mourn without order. "Departed Christians shall be buried in a Christian manner and not as the pagans, for it is the pagan custom to prepare the departed for burial with choice and costly raiment, and to make much lamentation for them with faintheartedness and despair as a token of unbelievers. Therefore, we have determined, with the decree of the "Word of our Lord", that Christians are not allowed to bury their departed with silks and costly raiment, but they shall be enshrouded in believing hope with simple vestures which are not very costly. Also, those lamentations which crazed women make in the place of mourning

must come to an end, as well as the great expenses for those women who gather at the place of mourning. Whoever transgresses against these things shall be under the anathema of the “Word of God”. The limit of accompanying of women with the bier shall be as far as the place in which consolation is spoken. Beyond this place they shall not be permitted to go.”⁶ Canon 19 grants some freedom with regard to the choice of the garments: “Concerning the canon which was established concerning the simplicity of garments for the burial of the departed: because there was a little resistance by some, we have committed freedom of administration to the bishop of the diocese, that according as he sees and understands is expedient he may arrange for and allow the vestments of burial. However, no costly or very choice vestments shall be allowed for internment.”⁷

While referring to the rite of burial, Synod of Mar Giwargis in 674 speaks about the participation of women who once separate themselves to the title of virginity and the chaste garb of standing: “They may sing hymns following the biers of the departed on the day of burial, as also they may sing hymns on the day of vigil for days designated as memorials of the departed. However, they are not allowed to go to the graveyard in order to sing hymns there.”⁸

There are documents referring to the details of the liturgical practices in connection with funeral. For example, Ishoyahb IV speaks about the two distinct traditions of reciting and not reciting the Lord’s Prayer during the funeral liturgy.⁹ Timothy II too gives reasons for not reciting the Lord’s Prayer. According to him, the Lord’s Prayer is not recited for the departed one because the dead man does not require some of the favours asked for in the Lord’s Prayer. He does not require any more daily bread. He does not require to be delivered from the evil one. What he requires is to inherit eternal happiness, joining the Just.¹⁰

Ishoyahb IV speaks about the different practices of reciting the *mawtwa* of the Evening-service over the dead. Some priests simply recite two prayers without the *huttama* (final blessing called sealing) and signing of the assembly and the dead man whereas some priests recite the sealing prayer (*huttama*) and sign the dead man and the assembly.¹¹

II. Funeral Rites in the Chaldean and Assyrian Traditions

The Chaldean Church, the Syro-Malabar Church and the Assyrian Church of the East make use of the same liturgical rite for the funeral, however with occasional alterations. For the burial of the priests all these Churches make use of a common text without substantial changes.¹² The service book of the burial of the dead was printed with a variety of titles basing also on the variations in manuscripts.¹³ According to W.F. Macomber, there is a remarkable uniformity in the manuscript tradition from the oldest, of the twelfth century, to those of the nineteenth, and this is faithfully expressed, with but minor variations, in the recent edition of the Assyrian Church.¹⁴ There are separate services for patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops, priests, deacons, laymen, women and children. Macomber identifies the following as the important elements of the East Syrian liturgy of burial.

Washing the body and clothing it in white garments

Vigil office of Prayer: Three Cathismatas (three mawtwe); Each cathismata consists of: Psalmody, Sacerdotal prayers and Hymns

Scriptural Lessons

Funeral Procession with processional chants

Rites at the Grave

The acclamation of the Deacon

Sacerdotal prayer

The lowering of the body during a chanted homily

Casting a bit of the earth into the grave with prayer

Final chant

Two prayers

Final blessing

We shall examine the most important of these elements, especially those which are common to all the three versions of the East Syrian liturgical tradition.

1. Washing the body: Washing of the body is seen already in the New Testament, at the death of Tabitha. It emphasized the reverence with which the bodies of Christians should be treated.¹⁵ In the East Syrian tradition there are rules regarding the washing of the bodies. In the case of monks, nuns, bishops, metropolitans and catholici, only the heads, hands and feet are to be washed; but in the case of secular priests and the laity, the whole bodies are to be washed. The body of the patriarch must be washed by bishops. A layman's body is washed by "grey beards" of noted gravity and goodness; a woman's body by aged women of honour and reverence."¹⁶ The liturgical text requires also the clothing of the body in white garments.¹⁷

2. Vigil Office of Prayer: Vigil prayer is already reported by St. Gregory of Nyssa at the funeral of his sister St. Macrina in the 4th century. The vigil office in the East Syrian tradition consists of three *cathismata* (three *mawtwe*, roughly the equivalent of Latin nocturns) of psalmody and hymns, plus readings from Scripture. Psalmody of each cathisma consists of only two appropriate sections of Psalms with a single, brief, invariable antiphon: "O Quickner of the dead, glory to thy name." The hymns are of two kinds: one is a meditative chant that expresses in a series of rhythmic strophes, each introduced by a suitable psalm versicle, the theology of death and resurrection; the other is a more popular form of lamentation, two or three stanzas sung slowly and mournfully by a cantor with a refrain for the chorus, that frequently expresses the human tragedy of death and gives an outlet to the pent-up grief of the bereaved.¹⁸ Many of the hymns are dialogues between the departed and the company of those who are already in sheol, or between the departed and the congregation of mourners. There are different anthems appointed for patriarchs, bishops, monks, virgins, priests, teachers, deacons, old men, for "all men", for rich men, murdered men, drowned men, strangers, bridegrooms, young men betrothed, an only son, young men, lads, women, young women, brides, and children.¹⁹

The funeral rite is specifically didactic and the didactic feature appears more specifically in the doctrinal hymns called *madrasa* which are seen in several places of the rite. The number of these hymns varies from manuscript to manuscript and from printed edition

to printed edition.²⁰ An anonymous Author finds significant symbolic meaning in the singing of *madrasa* by women. Sometimes women sing the *madrasa* while all are seated. Singing by women signifies death because through women death entered the world. Sitting signifies death whereas standing represents resurrection.²¹

Psalms have a very important place in the East Syrian funeral liturgy. The Anonymous Author (9th /10th cent.) interprets the recital of Psalm (Ps 40.1ff) as referring to those just people who lived in the Old Testament times. Those who conducted themselves well in the Old Testament deserve the happiness of heaven, just as those in New Testament.²²

There are brief sacerdotal prayers interspersed among the psalms and hymns. Their theme is almost uniquely the glorification of God. These prayers express the desire to glorify God at all times, especially in the face of death.²³ Such prayers point to the East Syrian concern for presenting the funeral liturgy as one of the important occasions for praising and thanking God.

The commentators think that the acclamations and *karo-zutha* of the deacon in the funeral liturgy are quite relevant. According to Timothy II, the deacon's acclamation, "Let us pray, peace be with us" means, let the dead person be made worthy to join the departed ones in sanctity.²⁴ In the *karo-zutha* the deacon prays that the dead person may be joined to all the saints departed from the beginning of time.²⁵

3. Scriptural Lessons

There is a large variety of scriptural lessons in the East Syrian funeral liturgy. In the case of lay faithful the scriptural lessons are from the Old Testament. This peculiarity is perhaps due to the fact that the service takes place in the home, for deceased laymen are taken not to the church, but directly to the cemetery. There are different lessons for men, women and children, most of these teach the resurrection in one way or another, e.g., Hezekiah's thanksgiving after his miraculous recovery from the mortal illness and the raising of the dry bones in the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezek 37.4-10).

A.J. Maclean and W.H. Browne speak of the prescription of the Synod regarding the lessons from prophets to be read over all laymen

*and lay brothers and sisters. For the deacons and the deaconesses the Apostle is to be read and for priests and higher dignitaries, the Gospel. But ordinarily the lessons are read in the house. They differ for the different people. Thus for baptized children the story of Bathsheba's child is read (2 Sam 12. 15-24) and of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17.17ff); for women the death of Sarah (Gen 22.1-8, 19) and of Tabitha (Acts 9.36 ff.).*²⁶

The anonymous Author observes that for lay people there are readings from the Law and Prophets, because they are in the world. The reading of the books of the Law refers to nature. The reading of prophets refers to the laws suitable to nature. Lay people are engaged with the laws of nature, and are carrying them out according to nature. For the deacons epistles are read. For priests and those above priests Gospels are read. However, the anonymous Author himself points to the contemporary practice of reading gospel for the deacons and the religious.²⁷ Why there are readings at all in the service of the dead? Because the readings show that they led their lives according to the Scriptures. From these Scriptures they drew help for eternal life. According to the anonymous Author, the readings, sitting down, standing up and the *karozutha* of the deacon together symbolize the crucifixion, petition of the thief, and the death and resurrection of the Lord.²⁸

4. Funeral Procession

The funeral procession was an ancient usage christianized by the Church. It is mentioned by St. Gregory of Nyssa and other fourth century authors.²⁹ The funeral procession is a powerful rite revealing the theology of death. The anonymous Author speaks about the nature of the funeral possession: "Christians are carried to the tomb, not with grief and lamentations as in the case of pagans who have no hope, but with songs of joy as if to a banquet."³⁰ In Urmi there is much in common between marriage processions and funerals. At both the drums beat, and the sad horn sounds; perhaps the same instrument as is referred to in the account of the weeping at the death of Jairus' daughter. Great branches of trees are carried, adorned with handkerchiefs and apples.³¹

The main difference between the funerals of laymen and ecclesiastics is that only the latter are brought to the church. "The principal reason, however, why laymen are not brought to the church before burial is the conception of the funeral rite as a leave-taking of this world and a journeying forth to the true life of the future world. Accordingly, the ecclesiastic, whose whole life was dedicated to the service of the Church, is brought to the church to which he was attached and there he takes his leave, and again on coming out of the village in which he lived. The layman on the contrary, whose life was spent in the world, bids farewell to it on going out of his home or on leaving his village."³²

The core of the East Syrian funeral liturgy that gives meaning to the whole is the funeral procession, which is a sensible representation of the journey of the Christian from this world to Paradise. The ancient tradition was to recite Psalms during the procession. Later a series of eleven processional chants substituted the recitation of Psalms. These chants are also found in the Jacobite funeral collection of 823 AD and are attributed there to St. Ephrem. These chants express the idea in various ways that the deceased is not going to the corruption of the tomb, but to the glory and joy of the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is presented as the guarantee for this belief.³³

The first processional chant expresses the deceased's farewell to this world. "Fare thee well, O temporal dwelling, that cannot save them who possess thee; for I go to see the place of light where the Just who have laboured have their dwelling." The last chant at the cemetery expresses the imminence of resurrection. "Our Lord is coming and is raising the dead; and bringing hope to all the deceased." After three strophes the people pick up the bier and proceed to the grave. The deceased is carried such a way that it seems that he himself leads the procession."³⁴ The singing of all the chants was not always feasible, and hence there might have been attempts at reducing the number of chants. In the eighteenth century Chaldean manuscripts we notice the practice of anticipating most of the processional chants in the home of the deceased except for the first and the last which were related to specific positions and functions. The Assyrians anticipate all the chants in the house except

the first chant which is chanted as they leave the house of the deceased. The Catholics in the cities usually transfer the vigil office to the church and abandon most of the processional chants altogether.

The anonymous Author tries to find meaning for every minute element related to the service of burial. The sitting and standing postures are of symbolic significance, representing death and resurrection. The two choirs accompanying the bier have symbolic meaning. They represent the two Testaments. The first choir is far from the bier because it signifies the Old Testament, that is seeing the life of the Lord from far. The second choir near the bier represents the New Testament. It starts singing, because the dead person was involved in the law of New Testament.³⁵

5. Rites at the Grave

The ceremonies at the grave are dominated by the hope of a glorious resurrection. Such a hope is evident in the acclamation of the deacon: "God, who...has taken him in the true faith, may bring him to the goal of all the just; and when he resuscitates and raises up all who sleep in the dust and allo's a good end to all who have been pious and just, he may call him and set him at his right hand, inscribe him in the Book of Life, include him in the number of the Elect, and join him to the multitudes of them that glorify himself..."³⁶

The face of the dead person is placed at the tomb facing the East. It is expressing the expectation of the coming of the Saviour who would appear from the East and raise our bodies and save our souls from the East.³⁷

There was the practice of the priest standing turning towards the head of the departed one, signing him from feet to head and from left to right and throws dust on him in the form of cross.³⁸ Badger mentions the practice of the priest taking soil in his right hand and putting it in the sign of cross, invoking the Trinity.³⁹ While throwing the dust, today the priest says the following prayer: "May God the Lord of all, who gave the commandment concerning thee, 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return', himself call thee and set thee at his right hand resplendent in the glory of the resurrection; and may the Holy Mysteries that thou hast received plead thy cause and win thee pardon at he judgment seat, Amen."⁴⁰

Emmanuel Bar Shahhare mentions the anointing of the deceased ones before putting the body into the tomb. He compares this anointing with the anointing of the candidate for baptism before the immersion into the tomb of the baptismal font.⁴¹ This tradition is not seen any more in the East Syrian tradition.

The final chant echoes in various ways the hope and prayer for a glorious resurrection. The following two collects emphasise the same thought. The same theme reappears in the final blessing of the grave and the bystanders. Thus the theme of resurrection penetrates the entire funeral rite.⁴²

Maclean and Browne mention the rite of consolation. At the end of the burial the near relatives stand on one side, and all present give them their condolences or “heal their head”. Each of the bystanders passes by touching the hands of the bereaved relatives, and saying, “May your head be pleasant”.⁴³

In many places there is the custom of washing after the defilement of touching-only metaphorically- a dead body. On leaving the grave, all go down to a stream nearby; and after a considerable number of prayers, the water is blessed with the sign of the cross, and all wash their face and hands.⁴⁴

6. Commemoration of Dead

The East Syrian tradition attaches great importance to the commemoration of the dead. The anonymous Author explains the relevance of the commemoration of the dead. Because the bread and wine our Lord gave in propitiation of the living and the dead. “Whoever eats my body...shall not die.”⁴⁵ *The Order of the Service of the Dead (Aneeda Susrusha kramam)* of the Assyrian Church of the East gives reasons for making the commemoration of the dead on the third, seventh, fifteenth or thirtieth day after death.⁴⁶ The liturgical text of the Assyrians contains special office for the commemoration on the third day. According to the anonymous Author, the commemoration of the dead on the third day has a special symbolic significance. Number three is of great significance in the Old and New Testaments. When we celebrate the commemoration on the third day we imitate the resurrection.⁴⁷ In the Syro-Malabar

Church there is the practice of commemorating the dead on the 7th, 8th, 9th, 13th or 41st day.

Memorials of departed friends and of the saints may be made on any day, whether Sunday or not, even if there are several memorials together, except only on the festivals of our Lord: Christmas, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, the Passover (Maundy Thursday), Easter Day, Ascension Day, Pentecost and the Holy Cross Day; and also on the two festivals of the apostles (the Seventy, and the Twelve, the seventh Friday and Sunday after Pentecost) and the “Hallowing of the Church”, the last but three Sunday before Advent.⁴⁸

III. Burial Service of the Priests

The service for the priests is quite different from that of the lay faithful. According to the Anonymous Author, the ecclesiastics are taken to the church because they are attached to the church. Lay people are not taken to the church because they are attached to the world, not to the church.⁴⁹

In the burial service of the priests, the first part is at the place where the dead body is kept. This first station has one or two *mawtwe* (called “of washing”). After that there is a procession towards the church. In the earlier tradition only ecclesiastics were taken to the church. The second part is celebrated at the church.

The bier of priests is put in the centre of the nave, and only that of a patriarch may be brought into the sanctuary as far as the lamp. It is carried by bishops and priests. According to some, the bier of a metropolitan may be brought into the sanctuary, but not so far as that of the patriarch. All members of the threefold episcopate are to be buried in their ecclesiastical vestments.⁵⁰

For the burial of the priest there are around three to ten *mawtwe* in the church. There is also the celebration of the Holy Qurbana with procession inside the church at the end of communion. When the hymn “Abide in Peace” is intoned, the procession shall stop and the bier is borne only when the response is chanted. The first verse of the hymn is to be sung at the step of the chancel, the second at the door of the bema where the priest received ordination, the third at the north side of the nave, the fourth at the south side of the nave, and the fifth at the main entrances of the church. If the deceased be

a priest, he shall be carried by the priests and if he is a deacon he shall be carried by deacons.⁵¹ In the Syro-Malabar tradition for this ceremony priests carry the coffin and make it touch the edge of the altar, the two side doors and the main door when the hymn *Edta Poosle* is sung. The third part of the service is the funeral procession with *Qale d Urha* (chants for the way). The last chant is called chant of approaching. The final station is the cemetery and there the burial takes place.⁵²

According to the ancient East Syrian tradition, in the church itself no one may be buried, except the martyrs, whose bones are to be “put in the churches to help those in need”. But bishops may be buried in the summer chapel attached to the church, and monks may be buried in the special cemetery inside the monastery.⁵³ However, Timothy II speaks about the burial of priests in the church. According to him, the priests may be buried in the church in front of the haykla, before the sanctuary. The body of the priest may be placed in front of the sanctuary. The body of the one belonging to monastic order is put close to the sanctuary near the door of the sanctuary.⁵⁴

IV. Particular Characteristics of Malabar Tradition

The first Malabar ritual of the East Syrian funeral service was edited and published by Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara in 1882.⁵⁵ The same book had later editions in 1921, 1945 and 1954. The Office of the Dead was published from Mannanam in 1921 and the Thumsa was published from Puthenpally in 1929. The Bishops Conference of the Syro-Malabar hierarchy decided to publish the book of the office of the burial of priests editing and making short the 1921 text of Mannanam and the 1929 text of Puthenpally. The revised text was published in 1947. This revised edition was reprinted in 1949, 1953 and 1960.⁵⁶ The Malayalam text of the rites of funeral was edited and published by Fr. Abel CMI. There are Malayalam texts for the burial of lay people, children, priests, bishops, and religious.

1. Structure of the Rite of Funeral of Lay Faithful in the Malayalam Version⁵⁷ and Common Elements in the Mannanam Syriac text of 1960.

1. Blessing of water, Blessing of joss-stick; Sprinkling of Holy water on the corpse [not in Mannanam 1960]

2. Sign of the Cross; Glory to God; Lord's Prayer; [Mannanam has *Puqdarkon* too. p.3]
3. Slotha (Sacerdotal prayer)
4. Ps 103 [Mannanam has instead Ps 88 with the title *Surraya d Qdam*]
5. Slotha [Mannanam has a parallel prayer having same idea. pp.7-8]
6. Ps 39
7. Slotha
8. Onitha: *nripanam mishiha karttave* [Mannanam p.8: *Onitha d kahne u gawre*]
9. Apostle (1 Thess 4.3-18, or Rom 8.10ff or 1 Cor 15.19ff)
10. Ps 88 [It is the abbreviated form of *Surraya d Qdam* in Mannanam p.5]
11. Gospel (Jn 5.24ff or Jn 11.17-45; Mt 25. 31ff; Jn 14.1ff; Mt 25.1ff)
12. Karozutha [Mannanam, pp.57-59]
13. Creed
14. Madrasa (separate for men and women): *Maranam varumorunal orkkuka marttya nee* [Mannanam p.52.]; *Annorudivasam besaniyayil* [Mannanam p.42.]
15. Coronation: Words of deacon and celebrant
16. Farewell Song: *Vidavangunnen* [Mannanam p.19. *Poosh bashlama*]
17. Procession; Processional hymn: *drushyadrushyangal sakalam theerthone*
18. Rite in the church: (Qurbana optional)
19. Hymn: *Anayunneesho mrutaramakhilrkkum* [Mannanam p.55]
20. Deacon's acclamation; Deacon's karozutha with people's response 'Amen' [Mannanam p.57]
21. Slothas [Mannanam p.59]
22. Deacon: Farewell to the church

23. Procession to cemetery; Processional anthem: *vayalilppularum pulkkodipole*
24. Priest's prayer and people's response
25. Blessing the tomb: sprinkling holy water on the dead body and the tomb; incensing the dead body and the tomb.
26. Celebrant casting earth (frankincense) on the dead body; all people cast earth (frankincense) in to the tomb. [Mannanam p.61]
27. Body is placed in the tomb
28. Hymn: *mahimayodlantima vidhi nalil*
29. Two slothas
30. Madrasa (separate for men and women) *nathanananjidum antima nalil; mishiha karttavin dasi vidhi nalil* [Mannanam pp.52-53]
31. Psalm: for men Ps 51; for women Ps 41
32. Two slothas
33. Huttama
34. All depart after venerating the cross.

The Malabar liturgy of the funeral is basically East Syrian, however with lot of adaptations. The liturgy as a whole is appealing because of its hymns, prayers and gestures. It seems that there was no special concern to maintain fidelity to the structure and theology of the original East Syrian texts. Only some of the theologically rich hymns are taken into Malayalam. Many of the hymns are abbreviated. There are new prayers composed in Malayalam. The Malayalam texts have a substantial change at the final part of the sacerdotal prayers. Mannanam text and all East Syrian texts have the expression "Lord of our death and our life" (*mara d mawthan wad-hayyayn*): Christ is qualified as the one who permits death and one who gives life.⁵⁸ The expression 'life' here does not mean the earthly life prior to death. It is the eternal life after death. Christ is the Lord of death and life after death. The Malayalam version of Fr. Abel has ignored this theological import of the expression and gives always the alternative expression 'Lord of life and death'.

There are new rites like the blessing and sprinkling of holy water at the beginning. The attractive rite of coronation is not seen in the

Chaldean and Assyrian tradition. It seems to be appearing for first time in the Malayalam text. It very well agrees with the dominant theological theme of the celebration, namely resurrection. The solemn covering of the face of the deceased by the eldest son is typically an Indian element. It reminds us of the right of the eldest son in the Hindu tradition to do the last rite for his father or mother. Throwing frankincense instead of soil is not a better alternative. The East Syrian insistence on using earth is meaningful.

Unlike in the East Syrian tradition, the bodies of all faithful are brought to the church, except of those who are not given an ecclesiastical burial. The Assyrians in Kerala do not bring the body of the lay persons inside the church. Instead they put it near the church. In Iraq the Assyrians bring the bodies of all faithful inside the church. Sometimes the funeral liturgy begins in the church only. In the ancient practice of Thomas Christians the dead were buried around the church building. There was the blessing of the tomb. Vicar Apostolic Prenter Gast (1821-1827) ordered that all cemeteries be fenced with walls. That was the origin of today's cemeteries. The prayer for blessing the cemetery was translated into Syriac from Latin. An area of the cemetery was kept without blessing, in view of those who do not get an ecclesiastical burial.⁵⁹

With regard to the celebration of the last rites there has been a steady influence on the Thomas Christians from the part of the Hindu brethren. The following practices like washing the body; not preparing food in the house of the deceased; the manner of keeping the body in the house of the deceased; the immediate relatives of the departed one keeping abstinence for a fixed period; the post-burial rites of commemoration like *adiyantaram*, *pulakuli*, *chattham* (anniversary); blessing the house of the deceased along with the *adiyantaram* celebration; the members in the house of the deceased abstaining from making the "pesaha bread" on the Pesaha (Passover) Thursday reflect Hindu influence.

V. East Syrian Theology of Death

The East Syrian liturgy of the funeral with its highly appealing prayers and gestures proclaims the East Syrian theology of death. The whole liturgy is a celebration of our participation in the death

and resurrection of the Lord. The anonymous Author makes this theological truth manifest when he says that we bury the dead with the hope of resurrection. Since we connect our death and its celebration with the death of Christ, we maintain rightly the hope of his glorious resurrection.⁶⁰ The prayers, hymns, diaconal acclamations and actions like processions enable the faithful to understand the meaning of death as a participation in Christ's death. The directive given in the liturgical text before the beginning of the liturgy of the funeral sets the tone of the entire East Syrian funeral liturgy. "And they clothe him in white garments as on the day of his wedding."⁶¹ For a Christian, death is the passage from this world of suffering and sin to the true life of sinlessness and incorruptibility in the resurrection."⁶²

On the occasion of death, one of the most important turning points of human life, the liturgy makes the maximum effort to comfort the community especially through the faith of the Church. The prayers and hymns make the assembly convinced of the terrible reality of death. The liturgy is not an escapism from the truth of death. The prayers, hymns and gestures prepare the sorrowful ones to accept the reality of death as the will of God. Some of the hymns sung slowly and mournfully express the human tragedy of death and give an outlet to the pent-up grief of the bereaved.⁶³ Only after enabling the bereaved to face the sad reality of death, Church's liturgy does invite them to the joy of resurrection.

As in the case of any other liturgical celebration in the East Syrian tradition the whole celebration is thoroughly communitarian. It is indeed an affair of the community. The departed one is going away from a community; he is bidding farewell to that community; he is trying to help that community through his words (there are many hymns through which the departed one is addressing the community) to grow in its faith. Some of the processional hymns serve as a dialogue between the departed one and the faithful, comforting and encouraging each other. Very strong hope of resurrection is expressed in these hymns.

The intimate relation existing between the departed one and the community finds expression in the detailed rites of prayers and actions. The procession to the cemetery from the house and the

village or from the church celebrates the departed one's journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem. The community is fully conscious of this glorious journey of the departed one toward his heavenly home. The departed ones are on their way to their kingdom. While nearing the cemetery the bier is held in such a way that symbolically the dead person is leading the procession to his tomb, the entry point to heaven.⁶⁴ The whole celebration is a solemn bidding of farewell in joy. We bury our dead with joy. The anonymous Author gives the reason for his joy. "Because of death they are liberated from all sufferings connected with the body. Now they can have a peaceful sleep without any suffering and will rise later and will be worthy of happiness. Therefore, it is right that we accompany them with songs of joy. We do not suffer because of their death."⁶⁵

The deacon's *karoza* says that through his life of faith he is brought to the place of the living. He will be placed on the right side. He will be numbered among the elect. He will be among those who praise and please God.⁶⁶ The *karozas* of the deacons and the prayers of the priests and bishops teach us that it is indeed a blessing to die in Christ.⁶⁷

The general resurrection of the Last Day towards which the deceased has departed is the primary theme reflected in the prayers, hymns and acclamations of the funeral service. The relation of the expected resurrection of the departed one to Christ's cross and his resurrection is clearly and repeatedly presented in the prayers. However, the liturgy of the funeral gives little attention to the condition of the soul between death and resurrection. Even though the lesson of death, the vanity of this world and the sobering thought of judgment figure in the prayers, they do not submerge the dominant note of Christian hope and joy.⁶⁸

Timothy II points out the relevance of the prayers for the dead. The prayers for the dead are to praise and thank God for the sake of the sanctity which the dead person had attained.⁶⁹ The departed one himself is indeed a great reason for praising and thanking God. The liturgical assembly join the departed one in praising and thanking God. These prayers are of immense help for the departed. Our prayers would be of help to those who were weak in this life. These prayers would cleanse them of the stains caused by their worldly deeds.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The East Syrian funeral liturgy is indeed a treasure house containing the Christian theology of death and the eschatological character of Christian life. There is a vast collection of hymns and prayers suiting the burial of various categories of people. These prayers and hymns are presented as earnest appeals to the believing community to respond in ardent faith. The large variety of hymns and prayers for various categories expresses the great concern of the Church for each and every member. The prayers, hymns and gestures of the liturgy invite the assembly as a whole and the bereaved relatives of the departed one in particular to lead a life worthy of the sacred journey of the believers to the heavenly home. Thus the funeral becomes a wonderful opportunity of for catechesis. The very title of some hymns as *madrasa* verifies this point. The Malabar text of the funeral is already keeping the fundamental liturgical and theological thrust of the East Syrian tradition. However, it has not fully preserved the liturgical and theological richness of the East Syrian funeral liturgy.

Notes

1. The Syriac printed texts are *Ktaba d'Kurastad'annide bnay 'alma*, Trichur 1954; *Taksa d'annide ak ayada d'ediha qaddistha d'suryaye Madnahaye d'hennon Kaldaye*, Mossul 1907.
2. "Homily (XVII): An Exposition of the Mysteries", in *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, R.H. Connolly, trans., Text and Studies VIII, Cambridge 1909, 21.
3. Liber Patrum, J.M.Vosté, ed. & trans., Fonti, serie II, fasc. XVI: Caldei-Diritto antico III, Vaticano 1940, 30.
4. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten* etc, p.219, Cf. p.274 cited in Wilhelm De Vries, *Sakramententheologie bei den Nestorianern*, Roma 1947, 251.
5. J.B. Chabot, ed. & trans., *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil des synodes nestoriens*, Paris 1902. English Translation, M.J. Birnie, *The Eastern Synods, Draft Copy*, 1991, 54. See also p. 67, Canon 16.
6. Birnie, *The Eastern Synods*, 181.
7. Canon 19. Birnie, *The Eastern Synods*, 181.
8. Birnie, *The Eastern Synods*, 178.
9. W.C. Van Unnik, ed. & trans., *Nestorian Questions on the Administration of the Eucharist* by Išō'yahb IV: A Contribution to the History of the Eucharist in the Eastern Church, Haarlem 1937, Questions 115-116. pp.183-184.

10. Timothy II, *The Causes of the Seven Mysteries of the Church*, Malayalam text in T. Mannoorampampil, Pitakkanmarude koodashabhashyangal (Mal.), Kottayam 1992, 184.
11. Van Unnik, Nestorian Questions, 184-185.
12. The English translation of the funeral rite for the priests is given in G.P. Badger, *The Nestorians and Their Rituals II*, London 1852, 282-321.
13. Bm Add. 14706 (13th cent.), Bm Add. 17260 (12th/13th cent.) and Vat. Syr. 61 (13th cent.) are some of the important early manuscripts.
14. William Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy of the Chaldean Church", *Concilium*, Vol, 2.4 (1968) 19.
15. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 19.
16. A.J. Maclean & W.H. Browne, *The Catholicos of the East and His People: An Account of the Religious and Secular Life and Opinions of the Eastern Syrian Christians of Kurdistan and Northern Persia* (known also as Nestorians), London 1892, 281-282.
17. Ktaba d-kurrasta d'annide bnay 'alma, Trichur 1954, p.2. ET: Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 19.
18. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 20.
19. Maclean & Browne, *The Catholicos of the East*, 284-285.
20. J.Vellian, "Burial of Priests in the East Syrian Rites", Paper presented at the International Liturgical Congress at Santa Clara University, 2001, 3.
21. Anonymi auctoris expositio officiorum ecclesiae Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta. Accedit Abrahae Bar Lipheh interpretatio officiorum, vol.II, R.H. Connolly, ed. & trans., CSCO, series secunda, syri 92, Roma 1915 (Expositio II), 126-127.
22. Expositio II, 136.
23. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 20.
24. Timothy II, *Causes of the Seven Mysteries*, 178.
25. Timothy II, *Causes of the Seven Mysteries*, 178.
26. Maclean & Browne, *The Catholicos of the East*, 282.
27. Expositio II, 129-130.
28. Expositio II, 129-131.
29. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 19.
30. Expositio II, pp.123-125. ET Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 19.
31. Maclean & Browne, *The Catholicos of the East*, 283.
32. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 20.
33. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 20.
34. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 20-21.
35. Expositio II, 133.
36. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 21.
37. Timothy II, *Causes of the Seven Mysteries*, 185.

38. Vat. Syr. 150, f.65 r-v. De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 252.
39. Badger, Nestorians and their Rituals II, p.314.
40. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 21.
41. Memre über die Taufe, Vat.Syr. 182, f.270 r. De Vries, Sakramententheologie, 251
42. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 21-22.
43. Maclean & Browne, The Catholicos of the East, 283.
44. Maclean & Browne, The Catholicos of the East, 284.
45. Expositio II, 139.
46. The Order of the Service of the Dead (Aneeda Susrusha kramam), (Mal.), Trichur 1980, 226-230.
47. Expositio II, 138-139.
48. Maclean & Browne, The Catholicos of the East, 288.
49. Expositio II, 127.
50. Maclean & Browne, The Catholicos of the East , 284.
51. Badger, The Nestorians and Their Rituals II, 303-304.
52. Vellian, "Burial of Priests in the East Syrian Rites", 4.
53. Maclean & Browne, The Catholicos of the East, 282-283.
54. Timothy II, Causes of the Seven Mysteries , 177.
55. Ktaba d'tesmesta dahlap annide, Mannanam 1882.
56. Thumsa d-teshmeshta d-annide, Mannanam 1960.
57. The Malayalam translation of the Syriac text with some new prayers and hymns was made by Fr. Abel C.M.I. There have been various editions with slight modifications. For the present study we make use of the text published in 2002. Marichavarkku vendiyulla thirukkarmmangal (Mal)(Sacred Rites for the Dead), Abel C.M.I., Kottayam 2002.
58. Expositio II, 136.
59. T. Mannoorampampil, Aradhanakramangal, (Mal.), Kottayam, p.106.
60. Expositio II, 123.
61. Ktaba d-kurrasta d'annide bnay 'alma, Trichur 1954, 2. ET: Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 19.
62. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 19.
63. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 20.
64. Order of the Service for the Dead, Trichur 1980, 62.
65. Expositio II, 125.
66. Expositio II, 135.
67. Timothy II, Causes of the Seven Mysteries, 178.
68. Macomber, "The Funeral Liturgy", 22.
69. Timothy II, Causes of the Seven Mysteries, 177-178.
70. Timothy II, Causes of the Seven Mysteries, 179.