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THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ANALOGY LANGUAGE
IN THE TEACHING OF SYRIAC FATHERS
AND ITS IMPACT ON THEOLOGY OF TODAY

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Abstract: Like any other science, theology has a specific language, which should express and clarify its essentials. Because most of the subjects of theological research are immeasurable, scientific language has to operate using images and theoretical terms. Of course, there are many methodologies of theological discourse. Among them one can find the methodology developed by Church Fathers especially those belonging to both West and East Syriac Traditions. Since their mentality was close to the Semitic roots, they started to use in the theological treatises a very specific kind of explanation which could be well understood by the people of Middle East. It was a language of analogy. Thanks to the use of tangible images the Fathers invented a direct language which enabled them to explain truths that could not be clarified using ordinary language. In this paper we try to explain the importance of analogy in theological debate. The explanation will be supported by some examples taken from the writings of the prominent Syriac Fathers regarding the baptismal analogies and the typology “Mary – Eve”, seen as an example of the theological explanation of the divine truth. In the final part of this study, we attempt to outline the accommodation of analogical language to contemporary theological discussion and liturgical practice.

Key words: theology, analogy, Syriac Fathers, Baptism, typology, Syriac Churches.

1. Introduction

Theological knowledge, the knowledge of God Himself, is always very difficult not only to be understood but also to be fully explained. Therefore, since the very beginning of the Christian era, the Church Fathers and other theologians tried to identify and adopt an appropriate tool which could be used for this human-divine research. Over the passage of time a new theological language was elaborated which used a special kind of analogy and parallelism to explain the important moments and events of the history of salvation.

It is obvious that the Church Fathers belonging to the both Eastern and Western Syriac rites played a prominent role in this development (see more: Potoczny 2014). Their writings are rich in analogies which made the deep theology more accessible to human thought. Of course, the language of analogy was not limited only to the Christian Orient – we have many examples of its use also in the Western tradition. But the oriental kind of thinking presents a more genuine way of theological expression which is still valid today.

In this paper we want to focus our attention on some examples of the analogical language of some prominent Syriac writers. The study will be structured in the following parts: analogy as a linguistic tool of theological expression; baptismal analogies in selected works of Fathers; the typology “Mary – Eve”, as an example of the theological explanation of the divine truth. In the final part of this study, we will try to draw an outline of the accommodation of analogical language to contemporary theological discussion and liturgical practice.

2. Analogy as a Theological Expression

The Oriental Fathers, especially those belonging to the both West and East Syriac tradition, used in their writings a very specific theological language which made theology itself more approachable for all Christians. Among those writers four – Aphrahat, Ephrem the Syrian, Narsai and Jacob of Serough – deserve special attention. The tool commonly used by them was the language of analogy, which from that time was more and more present in the theological discourses of the Christian East, and unfortunately less and less used in western theology.

To better understand the importance of such a language, it seems necessary to explain what constitutes the analogy in the theological context. A prominent researcher, Michał Sadowski († 2019) in his work dedicated to the Trinitarian analogies, has explained the issue as follows: “Analogy (...) uses symbolic expressions, well-known to the addressees, to

bring the inaccessible reality of God closer to their cognitive capabilities. Symbolic language has an important role in the Judaeo-Christian milieu. It is faith that tells us that nature is God's creation and, in some ways, bears His mark. In addition, we may notice that in the New Testament some common symbols, such as: blood, bread, wine, and the shepherd, receive a new (...) significance. (...) Hence, in this sense we may say that the primitive conscience is symbolical from the outset. In the Christian perspective the roots of this imagery are found in the Bible. God revealed Himself to people in a comprehensible way and under the name that was given to Him. We may, therefore distinguish, on one hand, the official titles used in public worship and, on the other, the names, in personal devotion." (Sadowski 2019, 9-10)

Of course, in this quotation Sadowski speaks about analogy in the context of the mystery of Triune God. But it seems that this "tool" can be applied also to other theological and liturgical issues, because it is the analogy which makes a link between the ineffable divine reality and the tangible reality we all live in.

At this point another question arises: is the theological language of analogy limited only to the discourse which concerns God Himself or can it be applied also to the key people and important events from the History of Salvation? How should we understand the "symbolic expressions, well-known to the addressees" from Sadowski's definition?

Regarding the mystery of God Himself and His existence we usually use the imagery taken from the world of things which surround us. But this doesn't mean that in some cases we cannot compare people, things that are created or symbols by putting them forward as types and anti-types of certain realities. This juxtaposition opens a way to analogical language: by ascribing certain attributes or by describing them with very vivid images, we can understand the real impact which they have on us or on the whole history of salvation. In other words, we can say that the analogy makes some theological realities more "ours" in the context where it is used. It is a kind of linguistic accommodation, which makes theology understood by people worldwide.

To justify this approach, we can shortly refer to the knowledge of God. In the western tradition all students of Sacred Theology know very well the *Quinque viæ* (English "Five Ways") i. e. the five logical arguments regarding the existence of God summarized by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (Aquinas 1923, 12-13). And, of course, even in pastoral work one can use the argument from "motion", from causation, from contingency, from degree and from final cause or ends. But one can worry that it could be listened to with only half an ear, and that after the explanation none of the ordinary listeners would have any idea what was going on.

But instead of that well-ordered logical arguments one can use the language of analogy of Saint Ephrem, who spoke about the "luminous eye"

which God gave us as a kind of sixth sense. It is the inner eye of faith which is capable of perceiving the types and symbols of God hidden in both the Scriptures and in the natural world around us. This sixth sense works with the help of faith, just as the physical eye works with the help of light. And the reason why sometimes we cannot discern God around us is that this spiritual eye is darkened by the presence of sin which provokes a kind of a spiritual cataract (Brock 2005, 44).

Which one these two approaches are easier to accept: that of Saint Thomas or that of Saint Ephrem? The answer reveals itself very easily and it helps to understand better why the Oriental Fathers preferred the language of analogy to that of speculation.

3. Baptismal analogies in selected works of Syriac Fathers

The Mystery of Baptism was very well elaborated by most of the Syriac Fathers. In their writings we find prominent theological treatises explaining the meaning and significance of the first sacrament of the Church. Those writings abound in baptismal analogies which see types of Baptism in many images of the Old and New Testament. Moreover, the symbolic nature of this sacrament is apparent also in some of the Judaic religious customs. In the following part of this study two examples of those analogies will be discussed. This subject has been deeply studied by Sebastian P. Brock, who published several works concerning baptismal theology and symbols in Syriac Fathers. In our study we will refer to the most important of these works (Brock 2008).

3.1. Baptismal analogy of circumcision

In the Old Testament, after the Babylonian captivity, circumcision was seen as the visible sign of the Covenant between God and the Chosen People. We can say that it was a kind of ID Card of any Israelite male: the lack of this important sign was an obvious confirmation that the person did not belong to Israel [cf. Gen 34,13-16] (Potoczny 2019, 39). Therefore, one cannot be surprised that this custom influenced the Christian rites of initiation. The starting point of such an interpretation we find in St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, where he writes about "a circumcision (περιετμήθητε) not performed by human hands (ἀχειροποιήτω)" and made by Christ Himself (ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ) [cf. Col 2,11-12].

Among the Syriac Fathers the baptismal symbolism of circumcision was widely interpreted. One of the early writers, Aphrahat the Persian Sage († 345), in his treaty *Demonstration on Circumcision* speaks about the circumcision of the heart (ܥܠܡܐ ܕܠܝܒܐ) (Aphrahat 1894, 501). He

juxtaposes the Old Testament circumcision of the flesh to the baptismal spiritual circumcision (Potoczny 2019, 42).

For St. Ephrem the Syrian († 373) the circumcision is seen as a type of the baptismal anointing. In his hymn *On Epiphany* Ephrem writes: “He separated out the Jewish nation from the gentile nations/ by the former mark (ܡܬܥܬܝܢܐ) of circumcision (ܡܬܥܬܝܢܐ),/ with the mark of anointing (ܡܬܥܬܝܢܐ)/ he separated out the nation from the nation” (Ephrem 1985, 147; Brock 2008, 117).

Analysing the above-mentioned verse, we can notice an interesting algorithm, containing the continuity of the history of salvation. The bodily circumcision makes a visible sign which distinguishes the chosen nation from the gentiles. In turn, the baptismal anointing is a characteristic of the nations who followed the light of Christ. It is important to note that for Ephrem there is an essential difference between the significance of the first and the second circumcision: the spiritual gifts which a person receives during the baptismal “circumcision” last forever; the Judaic ones are only temporal (Ferguson 2009, 499-501; Potoczny 2019, 43).

Another prominent Syriac writer Narsai († 502), also sees in the baptismal anointing – similarly to Aphrahat and Ephrem – analogy of spiritual circumcision. In this case the anointing is described by using analogy of iron (knife). In both the Judaic and Christian tradition, the initiation rites are related to this tool. There is only one difference: in the former case the iron was physical, in the latter – spiritual: “The priest holds the iron of the oil (ܡܬܥܬܝܢܐ) on the tip of his finger/ and marks the body and the senses of the soul with its sharpness; / the mortal priest sharpens the oil with the word of his mouth (*epiclesis*), /sharpening it like iron to cut away iniquity” (Narsai 1905, 365).

3.2. Baptismal analogy of the “robe of glory”

Among the most popular baptismal analogies in the writings of Syriac Fathers one can find the analogy of “robe of glory”. It is, of course, a direct appeal to the biblical narration from the Book of Genesis. According to some Jewish interpreters the “garment of glory” or “garment of light” was the first and “natural” clothing of Adam and Eve after their creation. They were stripped of this spiritual garment right at the fall [cf. Gen 3] (Brock 2008, 62).

To explain the connection between Christian baptism and the whole history of salvation the Fathers used exactly the image of clothing taken from everyday life. Since the fall of the first parents “creation waits in eager expectation” [Rm 8,19] for the restoration of that former state, because until now nature has to be in an abnormal situation (Paprocki 2014).

According to the Fathers it was Jesus Christ himself who allowed humanity to restore the original grace by immersing into the water of the Jordan river the lost “robe of glory” (Brock 1991, 202). Jacob of Serough is

very direct in this interpretation. In one of his homilies we read as follows: “Christ came to the baptism, he went down and placed in the baptismal water the robe of glory (ܠܒܫܐ ܕܟܠܝܐ), so that the robe which Adam had lost might be there for him” (Sarugensis 1907, 593).

The same Jacob of Serough also explains that the new “robe of glory” is made of “light and spirit” (Sarugensis 1905, 208). Sebastian Brock notices that this spiritual; clothing makes the wearers brighter than light (Brock 1978, 336; Potoczny 2019, 72). It is easy to feel how analogy in a very simple way explains the way baptismal grace works in every newly baptized person.

With this image of the “robe of glory” immersed into the water there is another interesting statement of the Fathers regarding its consecration. In the teaching of the Syriac Fathers the first consecration took place exactly during Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan. Descending into the water He sanctified all baptismal waters and united them into one font. This consecration happens in liturgical time. Technically we can say that – according to the Fathers – from the very moment of Jesus’ baptism the water contains sacramental potential. The *epiclesis* spoken during the celebration of the mystery in the Church is like a moment of activation of the grace already hidden in the element (Potoczny 2019, 72). In 15th *Hymn on Virginity* Ephrem writes: “Blessed are you, little Jordan River,/ into which the Flowing Sea descended and was baptized./[...]/ Blessed are your torrents, cleansed by His descent./ For the Holy One, Who condescended to bath in you,/ Descended to open by His baptism/ The baptism for the pardoning of souls” (Ephraem 1962, 31; Ephrem 1989, 326).

4. Typology “Mary – Eve”: the analogy of eyes of the world

One of the most famous patterns, of types and anti-types, developed by Church Fathers concerns Adam and Jesus. Obviously, the teaching refers to St. Paul and to his famous passage taken from the Epistle to the Romans: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned - for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (...) For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (...) For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” [Rm 5, 12-14.17.19].

According to Paul, disobedient Adam and obedient Christ are two dimensions which determine the history of both old and new humanity (Ernst 2011, 9). Adam represents humanity subjected to the consequences of original sin; Christ brought the gift of renewal to humanity's fallen state (Müller 2013, 178-180). In the 2nd century the counterpart of this typology was introduced: to the parallel Adam – Christ, writers added Eve and Mary (Brock-Kiraz 2006, 62). The first to speak about this typology was probably Justin, who – in his *Dialogue with Trypho* – focused on the disobedience of the first Eve, as we read: “and that He [Son of God] became man by the Virgin, so that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin” (Justinus 1857, 709).

In the Bible Eve is called mother of the living [cf. Gen 3,20], but very early the Church Fathers explained that we have to understand this name in regard to the transmission of physical life. In fact, through Eve's disobedience and sin, her descendants inherited not true life but death. Luigi Gambero says that it was for this very reason that the Christian authors started to see in Eve – the mother of the living, a prophetic type of a new Eve – the Mother in a truer and fuller sense (Gambero 1999, 46). Already here we should add that this parallel Eve – Mary, similar to the parallel Adam – Jesus, “has a properly soteriological content and demonstrates that the primary concern of the earliest theological reflection about Mary was focused less on her person than on her role in relation to Christ” (Ibid). In this perspective the history of salvation can be described and understood as a process of healing: through Jesus Christ – born by the New Mother of the Living – humanity, imprisoned in geographical space and historical time, can be restored to its primordial state, deep in sacred time (Brock 1989, 32).

When we look at the two attitudes – that of Eve and Mary, we can easily see that the attitude of the first mother was imperfect, sinful and selfish. In the sinful act of Eve, the motive was a desire to become like God. By disobeying God's commandment Eve let herself be guided by the serpent [cf. Gen 3,13]. In the case of Mary, her approach was totally different: her attitude was not selfish but that of sharing. In the humble dialogue with Gabriel, we notice that Mary doesn't seek her own convenience but takes a responsible decision and entrusts herself to God's will [cf. Lk 1,26-38] (Puthuparampil 2012, 245-246).

As noted by Luigi Gambero, the one who fully developed the Eve – Mary comparison was St. Ephrem himself. Analysing his works, we can easily discover that to make this parallel clearer he used – of course – the language of analogy. In his writings, with reference to the parallel, we encounter relative concepts such as light and darkness, death and life, the triumph of good over evil, etc (Gambero 1999, 116). But the most characteristic and genuine seems to be the one contained in the hymn *De Ecclesia* 37, where we read as follows: “Illumine with Your teaching the

voice of the speaker/ and the ear of the hearer: like the pupils of the eye/ let the ears be illumined, for the voice provides their rays of light./ *Ref.* Praises to You, o Light!/ It is through the eye that the body, with its members,/ is light in its different parts, is fair in all its conduct,/ is adorned in all its senses, is glorious in its various limbs./ It is clear that Mary is the land that receives the source of light (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ);/ through her it has illumined the whole world, with its inhabitants,/ which had grown dark through Eve (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ), the source of all misfortunes./ [Mary and Eve] in their symbols resemble a body, one of whose eyes/ is blind and darkened (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ), while the other is/ clear and bright (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ), providing light for the whole./ The world, you see, has two eyes fixed in it (ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ):/ Eve was its left eye, blind (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ),/ while the right eye, illumined, is Mary (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ)./ Through the eye that was darkened (ܠܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ) the whole world was darkened,/ and people groped and thought that every stone/ they stumbled upon was a god, calling falsehood truth./ But when it was illumined by the other eye (ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ ܡܢܐ) and the heavenly Light/ that resided in its midst, humanity became reconciled once again,/ realizing that the discovery they had made was destroying their life" (Ephrem 1960, 92-93; Brock-Kiraz 2007, 65-67).

The key-analogy used by St. Ephrem has been taken from the bodily experience of every human being. In this analogy Eve and Mary are like two eyes of a body, i. e. of the world. The left eye, which symbolizes the first Eve, is blind and through her disobedience and sin it is unable to discern the beauty of salvation. Humanity, which in the order of nature descends from its sinful mother, had its eyes closed to the light. By using this analogy Ephrem explained how the blindness of the first Eve caused the failures of her children. Seeing nothing but darkness people could only grope, and groping they believed that salvation could be provided by false realities. Therefore, in the History of Salvation, Eve's children needed someone who could help them to clear and heal their useless eye: they needed Mary with all her qualities. It was only through the obedience of New Eve – the Mother of Jesus Christ Himself, that the world restored its sight and became able to discern true reality. This clear and sinless eye of the world radiates splendour on all men, who in this way will retrieve their lost unity (Gambero 1999, 116).

5. Analogy language for the contemporary theology: notes for conclusion

The analysis of the aforementioned examples of the liturgical and theological analogies found in the writings of Syriac Fathers clarifies the

specific language used in their works. Mostly, it was more vivid than speculative, as for example that of Greeks. For Syriac Fathers a word had to play more prominent role than a simple communicative aid: it had to draw and paint a real image of truth.

Sometimes we try to find a proper way to explain some difficult theological issues. There are scholars who think that theological treatises or even pastoral issues have to be linguistically complicated. Our papers and books and even the sermons and homilies of ordinary priests are overpacked with abstract terms borrowed from the ancient writings of the Doctors of the Church. We still create dozens of new meaningless words and try to make our discourses more scientific, and we believe that this is the only way to understand God and His essentials. It seems that for many theologians only difficult language is proper for theological research and makes the studies serious. Perhaps this is because we think that since God is unapproachable our language should be likewise. And in doing that we don't notice that these thoughts are simply incomprehensible for contemporary man. Church leaders promote new movements which in the West are commonly known as the "new evangelization". With respect to that, it must be underlined that we often forget an important truth: to update theology to our times it would sometimes be enough to open the treasure of our history – the treasure of the Fathers and their kind of thinking. We all are heirs of the old evangelization which seems to be the appropriate solution to reach the people of our times: it consists of the use of direct language which in human words makes God's reality clearer and more palatable. Listening to the Syriac Fathers we can not only see how God's logic worked from the very moment of creation through the whole history of salvation, but we should learn how to present theological ideas to the people of our times.

Therefore, the theology of today should not be afraid of the language of analogy or parallelism, borrowing the images taken from the works of the Fathers or even from the world we live in. Without this reference contemporary theology is in danger of distancing itself not only from people, but from its own essence. It can still be "protect", of course, but more as a historical relic than as a real human-divine science with its eschatological goal.

The heritage of the Fathers gives us thousands of analogies appropriate to explain dogmatic truths and liturgical issues – one has only discovered them by using such tools as the old and forgotten series of their works. The same heritage teaches that God is really simple – and every complication comes from the human side.

Obviously, the use of analogical language and different images must be done with special care. But the examples of the Syriac Fathers show that it is worth going in that direction. Even today, intangible theological truths have to be explained more by tangible things than the abstractions. The world around us consists of plenty of images which can be easily use

in theology today. Some are the same as those in the Fathers' times – others are different, specific to our world.

In the first group one can find the above mentioned in this paper, and – of course – many others. In the latter, we can name for example the phenomenon of virtual reality, which is so common among the people of today. We can also use images taken from the technology we use in our daily life. If, for example, we want to explain why patience is an essential element of our prayer and why we cannot understand it, we can use an image taken even from our kitchen: since we want to have everything instantly, we could easily be called the “microwave generation”, forgetting that God doesn't work according to our plans – He wants us to have not just “fast food”, He always wants the best for us. Is this image too ordinary? Perhaps. But it makes the truth more understandable than meaningless theoretical terms.

In conclusion we want to underline that the theological language which serves to describe the divine reality must not always be comprehensible for everyone: sometimes it has to serve itself by abstractive terms. But if theology has to impact on contemporary world, the use of clear images seems to be necessary. Today's people, especially the young generation, is attached to the screens of smart devices and they communicate easier by using images, emoticons and other simple commands. Why, then, theology shouldn't go towards those expectations? It seems that we need to come back to the old school of Church Fathers and learn from them how to speak about God: analogical language can help theology to be more up to date and the whole Christianity to be attractive... even in the 21st century.

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