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Mary in the Annunciation as a Type of Baptism

The exegesis of the Annunciation scene in the Syro-Orthodox tradition differs from that known to us in the Greek-Latin tradition. Certain elements are, moreover, common throughout the oriental tradition. It was influenced by many factors. One of them is the question of philology.

1. The Spirit and Power of the Most Supreme

In the Annunciation scene, Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, also the One who will be born is holy, he will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35)². In the Syriac language the word *ruḥā* means Spirit and the word *ḥailā* means Power. The first of these words is feminine and is accepted as such throughout the Syrian tradition³. The second word used is masculine and it has traditionally been referred to Christ as *the Power of the Father*. At this point, the dialogue suggests the participation of each of the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity⁴. Gabriel

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² S. Brock, *The lost Old Syriac at Luke 1:35 and the Earliest Syriac terms for Incarnation*, in: *Gospel Traditions in Second Century. Origins, Recensions, Text and Transmission*, ed W.L. Petersen, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 3, Notre Dame – London 1989, p. 117-131.

³ S.A. Harvey, *Femine imaginary for the divine: The Holy and Spirit, The Odes of Solomon and Early syriac Tradition*, “St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 37/2-3 (1993) p. 115-122.

⁴ See N. Macabasag, *Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh and Early Syriac Fathers*, Moran Etho 34, Kerala 2015, p. 185-208 (chapter IX).

speaks in the name of the Father; the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary, and the Son is incarnated, shielding Mary in the annunciation. Moreover, *ḥailā* has traditionally been referred to Christ as *the Power of the Father*⁵. It is remarkable that in the Coptic apocryphal writing from the second century⁶, the Gospel of Philip, we come upon the statement: “Some said Mary conceived with the Holy Spirit. They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did that a woman ever conceived by a woman?”⁷.

As Jacob of Sarug notes: “It was necessary for the Holy Spirit to come before the Only Begotten, for it was the Spirit, and then the Power, that dwelt in the pure Virgin”⁸. In other words, what in Latin tradition is considered one action, in the Syro-Orthodox tradition it breaks down into two acts attributed to two distinct Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Reference to the theological concept which assigns certain activities to specific Divine Persons seems important. Purification in the oriental tradition is related to the person of the Holy Spirit, and the action of the saving, including the man in the course of the economy of salvation, is normally the action of the Son. The Spirit comes upon Mary and it is to this action of the Spirit to which the liturgy refers in Baptism. Thus, a parallel can be drawn between the action of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation and His action in Baptism, where the action of the Son is preceded by the action of the Spirit who prepares the recipient of sacrament just as the Spirit prepared and purified the Blessed Virgin before the incarnation of the Son.

It seems that this understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit may be contrary to our understanding of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Before the dogmatic formulation of the category of the original sin, the Syrian authors could not refer to it in their writings; however, in their concept of time, which is not linear, such *prior* action is not precluded. The

⁵ S. Brock, *Passover, Annunciation and Epiclesis: Some Remarks on the Term Aggen in the Syriac Versions of Lk. 1:35*, “Novum Testamentum” 24/3 (1982) p. 226-229. See Ephraem Syri, *Mimra in prologum Evangelii Ioannis*, in: *S. Ephraemi Syrii Hymni et Sermones*, v. 2, ed. T. Lamy, Malines 1886, c. 515.

⁶ Found among the Gnostic texts in Nag Hammadi, it was probably written in the 2nd century, it contains Jesus’ statements and fragments of His teachings, associated with the Valentinians (NHC II 3).

⁷ *Evangelium Philippi* 17, NHC II 3, 55, 24-26, tr. *Nag Hammadi Codex II 2-7, together with XIII 2**. *Brit. Lib. Or. 4926 (I) and P. Oxy. I 654, 655*, v. 1, ed. B. Layton et al., NHS 20, Leiden 1989, p. 151.

⁸ Iacobus Sarugensis, *Mimre*, in: *S. Martyrii, qui et Sahdona, quae supersunt omnia*, ed. P. Bedjan, Paris – Leipzig 1902, p. 631. English translation: S. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, Kottayam 1998, p. 7.

common element of purification is essential. Due to the role and task entrusted to Mary, the Spirit had to prepare her for the function of the Mother of the Lord. It did not happen in an instant but was the fruit of the whole process in which Mary grew up to accept the Word and to surround Him with her motherly protection. The Holy Spirit accompanied her in this process with His presence, so that the Son could be incarnated. The two-stage approach, suggested by the biblical text to the early Syriac authors, is taken into account in the present study to explain what takes place at Baptism. It takes the grace of the Spirit to believe and confess that Jesus is Lord, and the one who accepts the Son becomes his joint heir.

2. Baptism in the oriental tradition

In the history of the development of the liturgy of baptism among Oriental Christians, the influence of Hellenization of many elements is clearly visible⁹. This applies both to the rite itself – the subsequent anointings – and its interpretation. However, we are interested in the earliest rite available in the commentaries of the Syrian Fathers of the first four centuries before the process of Hellenization.

One of the significant differences between the period prior to the Hellenization and after is the role of the anointing. Baptism takes place through oil and water. Both elements are essential¹⁰. Oils are not so much a symbol of the Holy Spirit as a sign of His action, a means by which the Paraclete manifests Himself in our midst. As Saint Ephrem writes in *Hymns on Virginity*: “This oil is the dear friend of the Holy Spirit, it serves Him, following Him like a disciple”¹¹.

A similar association also appears in the official texts (preserved in canon XVII), such as in the response of the Catholicos of the Church of

⁹ P. Bettolo, *Letteratura siriana*, in: *Patrologia*, v. 5, ed. A. di Berardino, Roma 2005, p. 415-493, the Author marks influence of Greek tradition at the beginning of Christianity's development in the area of Syriac language (p. 416, 427, 442), and he speak also of the important influence of Hellenism in the fifth century (p. 456).

¹⁰ S. Brock, *Lo Spirito Santo nella tradizione battesimale siriana*, Roma 2019, p. 80n. See M. Potoczny, *Praxis i teologia chrztu w liturgicznej tradycji syro-orientalnej*, “Łódzkie Studia Teologiczne” 26/2 (2017) p. 137; S.E. Myers, *Initiation by Anointing in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity*, “Studia Liturgica” 31 (2001) p. 152.

¹¹ Ephraem Syri, *Hymni de Virginitate* 7, 6, tr. S. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, Kottayam 1998, p. 35.

East Isho`yahb I to the inquiry of Bishop Jacob, who for this reason prohibits its use for purposes other than baptism, because, as he writes, the horn of the Oil represents the Holy Spirit¹² at work in the baptism of the believers.

Of course, this does not mean that the oil has no connotation with the person of Christ. In fact, by referring to the well-known text of Isaiah 61:1 (Peshitta), which reads, *therefore the Lord anointed me*, he connected the anointing with Christ. Hence, it is important to combine the purification that prepares the catechumen to receive the gift of sonship in the Son with the action of the Paraclete. Thus, the same pattern of the Annunciation, which we have seen above, may be drawn in the rite of baptism; for the anointing with oil of catechumens cleanses the candidate and prepares him to receive the gift of Baptism.

It must be remembered that in later times, the oriental rites include four anointings. The first of these, without going into the rite of baptism itself, is related to the catechumenate and could sometimes be replaced by the sign of the cross without the application of oil. The second, and this is what we are talking about, after the end of the catechumenate and before the consecration of water, is the one that relates to purification and which in its symbolic dimension corresponds in some oriental exegesis with the scene of the Annunciation. The other two anointings, one after the consecration of water before the rite of baptism and the other immediately after baptism, do not appear in the earlier rites and they are taken as elements of the Hellenization of the Oriental Churches¹³. In the Antiochian Rite, the oldest documents, such as the *Acts of Thomas* or the *Acts of John*, do not mention them, nor do they appear in the baptismal homilies of Saint John Chrysostom. The first testimony comes from the *Apostolic Constitutions*¹⁴ and in the strictly Syrian sources, it is confirmed in the baptismal homilies of Theodore of Mopsuestia. However, some later authors, such as Narsai and Jacob of Sarug, do not know this anointing at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries. What Latin tradition associates with Confirmation is of a secondary nature in these texts and permanently enters the rite in the 5th century and later.

¹² *Synodikon Orientale*, ed. J.B. Chabot, Paris 1902, p. 186 (text), p. 445 (latin translation).

¹³ Brock, *Lo Spirito Santo*, p. 55-58.

¹⁴ Cf. *Constitutiones Apostolorum* VIII 43-44.

3. Pre-baptism anointing

The oldest tradition knows one anointing called *rušmā*, which was performed on the head of the candidate, a sign of ownership and participation of sonship and royal priesthood. It appears in texts originating both from the Syriac Western tradition in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁵ and in the rite of Severus of Antioch, representing The Eastern Syriac Texts. It is also present in the Maronite texts.

This anointing is followed by the handing of *Our Father Prayer* over to the candidate before baptism. It is important to know that this original anointing before baptism meant preparing the candidate for baptism and granting him the gift of the Holy Spirit, who purifies and enables him to call God “Father”. Only then can baptism, which unites the believer with Christ, take place. In other words, to confess faith in Christ and believe in Him, I need the grace of the Spirit that fills me. Then Christ dwells in the believer in the manner of the Annunciation. The Spirit prepares the womb of Mary, but it is the Spirit, in the consecration of water who prepares the spiritual womb in which the incarnation of the Son takes place. One becomes, to some extent, a member of the Church not only by baptism but before that, by receiving the anointing with the oil of the catechumens¹⁶. This explains, for example, why the Code of Canon Law applies some rules to catechumens; why in tradition catechumens as martyrs are included in the martyrology¹⁷. It can be explained with the so-called Baptism of blood, but it becomes obvious if we accept, after some oriental authors, that the Church includes, to some extent, the anointing through which the Spirit purifies a person to profess the faith and prepares him to receive Christ, immersing him in the death and resurrection of Christ. As in the Annunciation at the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit purified Mary, so in the rite of Baptism, the Holy Spirit descends and cleanses the catechumen; and as in Mary’s womb the Word becomes flesh, so also in the water of Baptism the candidate becomes a real member of Christ, God’s heir.

¹⁵ Cf. Pseudo Dionysius Areopagita, *De coelesti hierarchia* II.

¹⁶ Which rite was abolished as obligatory in Poland, although it remained, for example, in Italy.

¹⁷ See *Codex Iuris Canonici* 206 which tells: “speciali ratione cum Ecclesia conecuntur catechumeni [...]”. This explain, why from council in Nicea (can. XIV) some regels was prepared for catechumen.

4. The three wombs according to Jacob of Sarug

Jacob of Sarug speaks of three turning points in the Incarnation. The first of them is the Annunciation, the second is the baptism of believers, and finally in Sheol, to which Christ descends after His death before the Resurrection to free the dead¹⁸. However, the parallel between the womb of Mary and baptism is already present in the texts of Saint Ephrem¹⁹. And although these three places are distant in time and space, they are nevertheless present in the baptismal liturgy. Their message and the gifts they bring are closely related. This can be seen in the prayer attributed to Philoxenos:

Father, open the Heavens to my prayer and send your Holy Spirit into this baptismal womb, and as the Holy Spirit descended into the womb of the Virgin and clothed me in a body taken from her, so let Him descend into this womb of the baptismal water and sanctify it and form people and beget new children out of it, and make them your children and my brothers, the dwellers and the joint heirs of the kingdom²⁰.

We see that, as in the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit purifies and prepares the water of baptism so that those who enter it may become members of Christ. As Sebastian Brock notices, we can see full symmetry in the work of redemption, which in his opinion boils down to the pattern: through Mary, God became man, through baptism man becomes God²¹. Mary gave birth to Christ, Baptism gives birth to Christians. In the Syro-Oriental rite²², we read: “just as the womb of Eve gives birth to mortal and destructible sons, so the womb [the baptismal spring] gives birth to heavenly, spiritual and immortal sons”²³.

¹⁸ Cf. Brock, *Lo Spirito Santo*, p. 241-244.

¹⁹ Ephraem Syri, *Hymni de ecclesia* 36, 2-4, tr. S. Ephrem, *Hymns about the Church*, “Eastern Churches Review” 7/2 (1975) p. 137.

²⁰ Quoted by Dionysius bar Salibi, *Commentary in evangelia* II (2), ed. B. Vaschalde, CSCO 113, syr. 60, Parisiis 1939, p. 304, v. 9-15.

²¹ Brock, *Lo Spirito Santo*, p. 244.

²² As in the later Maronite work: *Codex liturgicus Ecclesiae Universae*, v. 2, ed. G.L. Assemani, Romae 1749, p. 339-340.

²³ The rite of baptism, ascribed to Timothy II, in: S. Brock, *A New Syriac Baptismal Ordo attributed to Timothy of Alexandria*, “Le Museon” 83/2 (1970) p. 386. Timothy II (+1332) was the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East in the 14th century attributed with the authorship of the commentary: *The Arguments on the Seven*

This thought, although it comes from a later author from a different confessional circle, fits in with the analyses presented earlier²⁴. The Second Eve becomes a type of a person's transformation during baptism. More precisely, just as Mary became the place of the Incarnation of the Son and cleansed by the power of the Holy Spirit became the Mother of the Lord, so the spring of the baptismal water, cleansed by the Paraclete, becomes the place of man's birth to a new life in Christ. The New Eve gave birth to the New Adam, and the water of baptism gives birth to His brothers.

Mary in the Annunciation as a Type of Baptism

(summary)

The study shows that there is a full parallel between Mary in the Annunciation and the baptism of believers. In the Oriental interpretation, the two-stage approach observed in the Annunciation scene: the Holy Spirit who cleanses and the Son who incarnates have their counterpart in the birth of a new man – a Christian who receives the Holy Spirit through the anointing with oil, and becomes a member of Christ in the waters of baptism. So we have a Mariology which is soteriologically oriented and inseparably connected with the person of Christ. This approach, biblical and in line with tradition, seems to be particularly interesting because it allows us to see the not always emphasized dimension of our Marian devotion.

Keywords: Holy Spirit; Annunciation; baptism; liturgy; anointing

Sacraments of the Church. As M. Potoczny writes: „Timothy, speaking about the essential elements of the sacrament of baptism, mentions water, oil, a priest and priestly prayers, adding that in the absence of any of these elements, baptismal perfection does not take place (*lā meštamlē laghmār*). In turn, referring to the individual elements of the ceremony (consecration of oil and of the baptismal water), Timothy likens them successively to the male seed and the female womb. The oil is the same as the seed (*qudš mešhā paletēh d-azrā'ā gaḥri*), and the water is an analogy of the mother's womb (*ken den mayā salmāh marb'ā emhāyā*). Speaking of the consecration of water, Timothy notices that the old oil is used for it, which is passed down in tradition from generation to generation, starting with the Apostles” (tr. I. Duma, Potoczny, *Praxis i teologia*, p. 145).

²⁴ Which M. Potoczny writes about, referring to B.D. Spinks (*Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism. From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Aldershot 2015, p. 77-78), that he made a kind of synthesis of the entire oriental tradition (Potoczny, *Praxis i teologia*, p. 144).

Maryja w zwiastowaniu typem chrztu

(streszczenie)

W tradycji orientalnej pomiędzy sceną zwiastowania opisaną przez Łukasza a liturgią chrztu istnieje pełna symetria. Wynika to z jednej strony z odmiennych konotacji filologicznych w kręgu języka aramejskiego, z drugiej z innego teologicznego podejścia do samego chrztu. Temat narzucił strukturę artykułu. Wychodząc od analizy pojęcia *ruhā* i *ḥailā* w ich filologicznym syryjskim znaczeniu, omówiono działania Ducha Świętego i Słowa w zwiastowaniu i chrzcie świętym. To pozwoliło na ukazanie koncepcji oczyszczenia i włączenia do ludu Bożego nowo ochrzczonych, ukazując inny wymiar namaszczenia w czasie liturgii, jednocześnie wskazując na dalsze paralele. Ukazana została jedność dzieła odkupienia, w którym wszystkie elementy są ze sobą powiązane, a mariologia jest nierozzerwanie związana ze zbawczym dziełem Chrystusa. Opierając się na dostępnych tłumaczeniach tekstów Ojców Syryjskich i współczesnych opracowań chrztu w liturgii orientalnej, artykuł ukazuje nieznanym wymiar egzegezy sceny zwiastowania, jak i mariologii syryjskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Duch Święty; zwiastowanie; chrzest; liturgia; namaszczenie

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