



## Structural Division, Distribution, and Analysis of Psalms in the East Syriac Festival

*Rajeesh Mathew\**

Our daily prayers, especially the Liturgy of the Hours sanctify each moment of our daily life. We praise and reflect constantly on the loving presence of God in our day-to-day activities. Christ's daily activity was closely bound up with the synagogue prayers and His private prayers. For St. Benedict, daily praise and prayer was *opus Dei*, the work of God, where the Church on earth is joining with the praise offered to God by the heavenly persons<sup>1</sup>. The liturgy of the hours, as part of the earthly liturgy, is united with the angelic prayers; it is a continuation and an imitation of the heavenly liturgy. The East Syrians have preserved an early Christian tradition of following the liturgical hours, where the psalms served as the nucleus of the daily offices<sup>2</sup>. The striking element of this celebration is the use of many psalms in the prayers. The hymns and prayers formed with the psalm verses also show the importance of the Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours.

The East Syriac Liturgy of the Hours in nature is more monastic except for the *Ramšā* (vespers) and *Saprā* (morning service) which are rather 'cathedral' in character<sup>3</sup>. But the evening vespers with its ca-

---

\* Fr. Rajeesh Mathew is a third-cycle student for the Doctorate degree at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum

<sup>1</sup> A.M. ROGUET, *The Liturgy of the Hours: The General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*, P. COUGHLAN – P. PURDUE (trans.), Minnesota 1971, 11.

<sup>2</sup> V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Divine Praises and Liturgical Year*, OIRSI, Kottayam 2000, 31.

<sup>3</sup> J. VELLIAN, "The East Syrian Monastic Divine Office; A Study Based on MS. VAT. SYR. 88", in *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, vol 56, ed. R. EBIDE – H. TEULE, Leu-

thedral structure is preceded by a monastic psalmody that originally formed part of the Ninth Hour of prayer<sup>4</sup>. A transformation took place from the monastic style of singing or reciting the whole 150 psalms every day to the cathedral style of praying for the main hours. They followed mainly three major hours, *Ramšā* (evening prayer), *Lēlyā* (night prayer), and *Saprā* (morning prayer). In the ancient monasteries, the monastic structure of the liturgy of the hours is still preserved, but in the cathedral tradition, the practice of following other minor hours disappeared by the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>.

This article deals with the use of Psalms in the East Syriac festival *Ramšā*. The liturgical day according to East Syriac tradition begins with the evening *Ramšā*. It is a symbol of dedicating the whole day to the Lord<sup>6</sup>. In the Liturgy of the Hours, especially in vespers, psalms occupy the centre of the service and a major part of the evening prayer. In addition to the direct use of usual psalms, several hymns and songs are intercalated with the psalms or verses from the psalms<sup>7</sup>. They are inserted and used very intelligently in liturgical hours. It becomes the centre of the prayer because 47 psalms and one canticle are used or recited in the Liturgy of the Hours. Among them, 39 variable psalms are recited, and an additional 8 psalms are used in different places<sup>8</sup>. In the festival vespers 14 psalms are directly used and a few additional psalms with other prayers. Many of the East Syrian prayers and hymns disappeared over several years from the liturgical texts, but the Psalter remained one of the main parts of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Therefore, in this article, considering the psalm's importance, and its superior status in the East Syriac Vespereal prayers, we concentrate

---

ven 2004, 293-302. Egeria in her travel diary (A.D. 381-384) reports that the Cathedral offices of morning and evening prayers were popular and laymen were present along with the clergy and the monks. Even before Egeria, the monks formed divine praises and recited them in their monasteries at various hours of the day.

<sup>4</sup> A.C.J. NEROTH VAN VOGELPOEL, *The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the East Syriac Morning Service on Ordinary Days: Text, Translation, and Discussion*, Gorgias Press, USA 2018, 36.

<sup>5</sup> J. MOOLAN, "Liturgy of the Hours", in *Marthoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St. Thomas Christians*, ed. A. MEKKATTUKUNNEL, OIRSI, Kottayam 2012, 383.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. MOOLAN, "Liturgy of the Hours", OIRSI, Kottayam 2016, 168.

<sup>7</sup> B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", *Parole De L'Orient* 43 (2017), 413-438.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 422.

and limit this study to the Initial Psalmody and the Evening Psalms, used in the festival *Ramšā*. The theological, Christological, and eschatological significance of each psalm underlines the reasons for its insertion in the vespers, even though it is not explained in any of the commentaries.

### The Psalter in the East Syriac Liturgy of the Hours

In the East Syriac tradition, the individual Churches with their heritage, follow the Peshitta version of the Bible and its numbering. Hence, the psalms used in the liturgical hours are taken from this version of the Bible which is different from the Hebrew and Septuagint version, in style and enumeration<sup>9</sup>. This difference is identified in the numbering of psalms in each version. For example, Psalm 10 of the Septuagint version appears as Psalm 11 in Peshitta and Hebrew versions; Psalm 114 appears in Peshitta as Psalm 115A and in Hebrew as Psalm 116A.

According to the Peshitta Bible, psalms are grouped into units of *hūllalā* and *marmitā* for the liturgical use of the East Syriac tradition<sup>10</sup>, which is similar and corresponds to the Greek division of the Psalter *Kathismata*<sup>11</sup>. *Marmitā* is the shorter form of the division of the East Syriac Psalter, which means a prayer or an exclamation. Originally it refers to a prayer that preceded a group of psalms<sup>12</sup>. In the Psalter division, a single *marmitā* is the combination of two or three psalms. Sometimes it can be four psalms also. *Hūllalā* is the name given to the main division of the East Syriac Psalter with the collection of two or three *marmitā*. It means a shout of joy, praising a chant, hymn, or alleluia at the end of each division<sup>13</sup>. It is the collection of many psalms in large numbers. In simple words, the 150 psalms are divided into 20 *hūllalā* and each *hūllalā* is divided into two or three *marmitā* and each *marmitā* includes two or three or four single psalms.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 416.

<sup>10</sup> J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 156), Roma 1959, 29.488; B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 422.

<sup>11</sup> *Kathismata* is the name given to the Byzantine or Greek division of the Psalter. According to this division, the 150 psalms are grouped into 20 sections. See, A.J. MACLEAN, *East Syrian Daily Offices* (trans.), Rivington, London 1894, xxiii.

<sup>12</sup> J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, 491.

<sup>13</sup> J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, 491.

According to Gabriel Qatraya<sup>14</sup>, the division of psalms into *hūllalā* is the later addition and *marmitā* is the older form because he divided the Psalter only into *marmitā* concerning how much psalmody is sung at different services and they were following the innovative use of reciting only one psalm<sup>15</sup>. There are two beautiful features in the East Syriac way of reciting the psalms. First, the appropriate collect before each subdivision of the *hūllalē*, which gathers up the main thoughts of the psalms. Second, a *qanōnā* or antiphon is used for each psalm in which a clause is introduced after the first verse and at the end of the psalm<sup>16</sup>. Here *qanōnā* or antiphon is a poetic refrain attached to each psalm which is taken from the same psalm verses<sup>17</sup>.

This East Syriac division of the Psalter, apart from 20 *hūllalē*, has one more *hūllalā*. It is called *the Canticle of blessed Moses*<sup>18</sup> which includes three *marmitē* consisting of passages from the Old Testament canticles<sup>19</sup>. This *hūllalā* is used mainly in the morning prayer of matins. The reason for this addition is not explained in the commentaries or the studies of the division of the Psalter. But from their theological meaning and context, we understand that they are adequate in human praise and worship. *Marmitā 1* (*Exodus* 15,1-21; *Is* 42,10-13;45,8) is the victory song of Moses and the triumphal hymn of Isaiah; *marmitā 2* (*Deut* 32,1-21b) is the song of Moses to God, the Creator, and the Protector; and *marmitā 3* (*Deut* 32,21c-43) is the proclamation of the powerful

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Qatraya bar Lipeh was a Syriac author of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. His Commentary on the Liturgical Offices is an important source for the study of the East Syriac liturgical tradition which presents his explanation on both Qurbana and the Liturgy of the Hours. See, A.C.J. NEROTH VAN VOGELPOEL, *The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the East Syriac Morning Service*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. VELLIAN, *East Syrian Evening Services*, Kottayam 1971, 7; A.C.J. NEROTH VAN VOGELPOEL, *The Commentary of Gabriel of Qatar on the East Syriac Morning Service*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> A.J. MACLEAN, *East Syrian Daily Offices*, xvii.

<sup>17</sup> *Qanōnā* is an antiphon recited at the beginning and the end of the recitation of the Psalmody. It is the chorus of a psalm, generally poetic. Patriarch Abba I († 552) introduced the practice of reciting *qanōnā* with the psalms. See, J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, 495; S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, Dharmaram College Bangalore 1972, 13.

<sup>18</sup> They are the songs praise and thanksgiving of Moses. When he had drowned Pharaoh in the deep, he sings up to God, for He is gloriously glorified. See, J. MOOLAN, "Liturgy of the Hours", 150.

<sup>19</sup> A.J. MACLEAN, *East Syrian Daily Offices*, xxviii.

acts of God in the life of Israel<sup>20</sup>. The theological, Christological, and eschatological meaning of these hymns underlines their insertion into the Psalter.

The table below<sup>21</sup> illustrates the distribution of 21 *hūllalē* with *marmitā* or psalms.

<b>I</b> 1) 1-4 2) 5-7 3) 8-10	<b>II</b> 1) 11-14 2) 15-17 3) 18 4) 19-21	<b>III</b> 1) 22-24 2) 25-27 3) 28-30	<b>IV</b> 1) 31-32 2) 33-34 3) 35-36	<b>V</b> 1) 37 2) 38-40	<b>VI</b> 1) 41-43 2) 44-46 3) 47-49	<b>VII</b> 1) 50-52 2) 53-55 3) 56-58
<b>VIII</b> 1) 59-61 2) 62-64 3) 65-67	<b>IX</b> 1) 68 2) 69-70	<b>X</b> 1) 71-72 2) 73-74 3) 75-77	<b>XI</b> 1) 78 2) 79-81	<b>XII</b> 1) 82-84 2) 85-86 3) 87-88	<b>XIII</b> 1) 89 2) 90-92	<b>XIV</b> 1) 93-95 2) 96-98 3) 99-101
<b>XV</b> 1) 102-103 2) 104 3) 105	<b>XVI</b> 1) 106 2) 107-108 3) 109-111	<b>XVII</b> 1) 112-114 2) 115-117 3) 118a	<b>XVIII</b> 1) 118b 2) 119-124 3) 125-130	<b>XIX</b> 1) 131-134 2) 135-137 3) 138-140	<b>XX</b> 1) 141-143 2) 144-146 3) 147-150	<b>XXI</b> 1). Ex 15:1-21; Is 42:10-13; 45:8 2) Deut 32:1-21b 3) Deut 32:21c-43

Each psalm has a heading<sup>22</sup> or a title that summarizes the contents of the psalm which is the peculiarity of the East Syriac Psalter division. The headings of the psalms are often inspired by the commentaries on the Psalms by Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>23</sup>. The prayer that precedes the psalms and their headings highlight the theological and Christological meaning of the Psalms.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, Appendix II, 448-449. This table is taken from this book. *Hūllalē* is indicated with the Roman numbers and the *Marmitā* or individual psalms are given in Arabic numbers. This table follows the enumeration of the Peshitta version of the Bible. See B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 418; J. MOOLAN, "Liturgy of the Hours", 168-169.

<sup>22</sup> The psalms as they occur in the manuscripts and the printed editions of the Peshitta are either without titles or have titles that differ completely from those in the Hebrew and Greek texts. They give a shorter or a longer interpretation dependent on, for example, the circumstances under which the poet wrote the psalm or the purpose for which it was composed. See, W. BLOEMENDAAL, *The Heading of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church*, Leiden 1960, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. W. BLOEMENDAAL, *The Heading of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church*, 6.

In general, psalms are sung<sup>24</sup> at different hours especially in *Ramšā*, *Lēlyā* as well as at minor hours. They are recited in two ways; psalm sung antiphonally by two choirs or two soloists and reciting or singing a psalm accompanied by an alleluia or refrain<sup>25</sup>. If the psalm is recited with a melody, it is sung by two choirs with the alleluia at the end of the psalm and if the psalm is recited without a melody, it is done by two groups. Psalms recited without melody is known as *psitā* or simple chant which is normally followed on ferial days<sup>26</sup>. Psalms recited or sung without a response or refrain were not common in the East Syrian liturgy. The recitation of the psalms also includes an appropriate collect before each subdivision of the *hūllalā* which gathers up the main contents of the psalms. In the solemn recitation of each psalm, a clause or a *qanōnā* is sung after the first or the second verse and at the end of the psalm<sup>27</sup>. It is mainly intended to give a Christian application to the recitation of psalms.

The recitation of the psalms ends with a *Gloria Patri*. The hymn of Gloria is the symbolic presentation of the incarnation of Christ and thus all humans become the children of God. It is a sign of the economy of the Incarnation of Christ and with its angelic glorification, gets a Christological meaning<sup>28</sup>. The faithful are partaking in the angelic adoration with the hymn of Gloria, which is the earthly presentation of the heavenly adoration and veneration. Therefore, reciting *Gloria Patri* at the end of the psalms is a way of praising God with the whole universe, heaven, and earth. It is the time when the angels and the humans praise God who filled heaven and earth with His glory<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> The use of singing psalms intercalated with responses and antiphons was first introduced in Antioch. It is believed that Flavian and Diodore brought this custom to the prayers of the Church during the year 360 AD. From Antioch, it spread to the main Christian centers of the East and West. Egeria's travelogue, testimonies that Psalms with antiphons existed in Jerusalem at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. See, J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, 365; B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 423.

<sup>25</sup> Refrain is a repeated part of a psalm. A verse of the psalm is repeated as a response to each verse of the psalm. The most common name for refrain in East Syriac tradition is *qanona*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 423.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. ANTO, "Prayers of the Psalms in the East Syrian Worship", *The Harp* 24 (2011), 136.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J. CHITILAPPILLY, *Mdabbranuta: The Divine Dispensation of Our Lord in the Holy Qurbana of East Syrian Tradition*, Kottayam 1999, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. J. CHITILAPPILLY, *Mdabbranuta: The Divine Dispensation of Our Lord*, 92.

**Critiques about the East Syriac division of the Psalter:** Regarding the division of the Psalter looking into the content of the psalms some say that *Hūllalē* division of psalms is a later addition. Firstly, some of the commentators of the East Syriac Liturgy of the Hours say that this division of the Psalter is inspired by the Greek Byzantine division of the Psalter. They give some indications that the division of the Psalter into *marmitā* is older and the *hūllalē* is the later addition, following the Greek division. According to the *Expositio* of George Arbel, it seems that in his time some were reciting only one *marmitā* and others two. Abraham Bar Lipeh says clearly about two *marmitā* for ferial days and one for Sundays<sup>30</sup>. If *hūllalē* and *marmitā* were introduced at the same time, the 60 *marmitā* would have been arranged into 20 *hūllalē* and not into the 57 *marmitā*. It is clear by analyzing the present prayers followed by the *hūllalē*, Mar Aba followed the division into *marmitā*, not *hūllalē* because he arranged the prayers followed by the psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours according to the *marmitā*<sup>31</sup>. The meaning of the prayers indicates that they are arranged based on the *marmitā* division.

Secondly, during the time of George Arbel, there was also confusion regarding the contents of *hūllalē* 1 and 2. Thus two practices originated. According to the first practice, *hūllalā* 1 consisted of 5 *marmitā*, while the collection of the first 17 psalms and *hūllalā* 2 contained two *marmitā*. In the second practice, *hūllalā* 1 is composed of three *marmitā* and *hūllalā* 2 with four *marmitā*. The first practice has disappeared, and the second division is followed today.

### General Structure of East Syriac Festival *Ramšā*

The Syriac word *Ramšā* denotes the time of sunset or the evening time. The Church prayer allotted at this evening time is called *Ramšā* or Vespers or Evening service<sup>32</sup>. Its psalms, hymns, canticle, readings, and prayers give spiritual nourishment at the end of the day. This is the sanctification and consecration of the day by which each one can orientate his pains, pleasures, and peaceful repose to the glory of God with the unending chorus of angels and saints. In its nature, evening ser-

<sup>30</sup> *Expositio*, II, 151; S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 193.

<sup>31</sup> J. MATEOS, *Lēlyā – Saprā. Essai D'Interpretation des Matines Chaldeennes*, 316.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 17.

vice is communitarian by which the whole community participates. The combination of the cathedral and the monastic tradition of the Liturgy of the Hours is found today in the East Syriac tradition. The composition of the East-Syriac Divine Office is attributed to the early Syriac fathers, such as Ephrem, Jacob of Nisibis, Simeon bar Sabbae, Narsai, and Babai the Great. The norms regarding the celebration of the Cathedral or Popular office were established by Patriarch Ishoyahb III<sup>33</sup>. The fixed pattern of seven times of prayer in a day which he directed Bishops and monasteries to celebrate; and the priests in parishes with the faithful are directed to celebrate the evening and morning services only. This form of canonical hours is preserved and followed even at this time without many changes in the monasteries which is evident in the *Vatican's Syriac Manuscripts*<sup>34</sup>.

In the *Breviarium*<sup>35</sup> of the East Syriac Tradition, we find that there are separate structures for the festival and ferial *Ramšā* or vespers, even though they are not completely different. The festival *Ramšā* is used for Sundays, Feasts of our Lord, Feasts of Blessed Mary<sup>36</sup>, and the Commemoration of saints and martyrs<sup>37</sup>. Here we try to describe the general

<sup>33</sup> R. TAFT, *The Liturgy of the Hours in the Christian East: Origins, Meaning, Place in the Life of the Church*, Cochin 1987, 153. Ishoyahb III (647-657) with the help of his monks completed the reform of the Divine Office dividing the liturgical year into different weeks or periods. He organized the manuscripts of the liturgy of the hours into three groups; *Hundra* — office for Sundays and movable feasts; *Gazza* — office for immovable feast days; *Kaskol* — office for the weekdays.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. J. VELLIAN, "The East Syrian Monastic Divine Office; A Study Based on MS. VAT. SYR. 88", 293-302. Vatican Syriac Manuscript 88 was such a monastic prayer book of a type that was used in the entire East Syrian Church including in Malabar. This manuscript comprises the text of the monastic liturgy of the hours which was copied by Metropolitan Mar Joseph Sulqa at Saleste, near Goa in 1557. The composition of this office is attributed to a monk Fransa, who is from Gazarta.

<sup>35</sup> The current *Breviarium* of East Syrians is the work of Paul Bedjan, a renowned Lazarist Syriac scholar which was published in three volumes in Paris in 1887 under the title, *Breviarium Juxta Ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*. Later this work was reprinted with some corrections by J.M. Vostre in Rome in 1938 as per the direction from the Congregation for the Oriental Churches for the use of Chaldeans and Malabarians. See J. VELLIAN, "The East Syrian Monastic Divine Office; A Study Based on MS. VAT.SYR. 88", 294.

<sup>36</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 103. SC 103 gives a special hour to Blessed Mary as the first among the saints in celebrating her feasts in the annual cycle of Christ's mysteries.

<sup>37</sup> In the East Syriac tradition feasts (*Edhe*) are the important days of our Lord Jesus Christ and the days of blessed virgin Mary. Commemorations (*Dukhrane*) are the days of saints and martyrs. See, S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 21.



structure of the festival *Ramšā* which will be more helpful to understand the relevance of psalms in the East Syriac *Ramšā*.

1. Initial prayers
2. *Initial Psalmody*
3. Onita of Incense
4. Hymn Laku Mara
5. First Alleluiatic Psalm
6. *Fixed Vespereal Psalms*
7. Second Alleluiatic Psalm
8. Litany
9. Trisagion and its prayer
10. Prayer of Inclination
11. Procession and Onita
12. Third Alleluiatic Psalm
13. Lord's Prayer and Conclusion

The influence of psalms in the East Syriac *Ramšā* is evident from its very structure. It is very clear that, either in their full form or partial forms, psalms constitute a major part of the evening service. It is the most striking character of the East Syriac vespers. By their relevance and content, the *Vespereal Psalms* or *Evening Psalms* are called the heart of the *Ramšā*; and the *Initial Psalmody* and other prayers with psalms bring the rhythm of the evening prayer.

The structure of the *Ferial Ramšā* is similar to the structure of the *Ramšā* of the feast. For all the ferial days there is a permanent structure. The striking element of the ferial *Ramšā* is that it has two sets of various elements for each day of the week<sup>38</sup>. As determined in *Hudra*<sup>39</sup>, for the recitation of the office, the weeks are said as either the first week (*d-qādmāye*) or the second week (*dāhrāye*). Later this old system is changed to each weekly system which is followed now. In the initial Psalmody, two *marmitā* are said every day. According to Mar Abraham Bar Lipeh, the two *marmitā* recited in the ferial *Ramšā* signify the two

<sup>38</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> *Hudra* is one of the ancient manuscripts that present the complete text of East Syrian Divine Office for the whole year, for Sundays, feast days, and weekdays. The second manuscript is *Gazza*, a complementary volume of *Hudra* with additional pieces of Vigils. The third manuscript is *Kaskull* which contains the complete text of offices for the weekdays of the year. See, S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 6.

parts of a human, the body and soul. On feast days, only one *marmitā* is used because it is the day of the Lord, on that day we commemorate the unbreakable Will of the body and soul of our Lord<sup>40</sup>.

### Initial Psalmody in the Festival *Ramšā*

After the initial prayers of the *Ramšā*, the Initial Psalmody follows which is generally composed of two or three psalms. The Initial Psalmody is different from the Vespereal Psalms. The psalms proper to the *Ramšā* are called vesperal psalms which are permeant and sung at the centre of the evening service. The use of psalmody at the beginning of the evening liturgical hours probably can be the remanence of the ancient ninth-hour prayers or None. The practice of praying at the hour None vanished from the East traditions and the psalms used in that hour are attached to the beginning of *Ramšā*<sup>41</sup>. In the early centuries, some were reciting two *marmitā* and others only one because the grouping of psalmody was not established as it is now. Abraham Bar Lipheh explicitly says two *marmitē* are used for ferial days and one for Sundays<sup>42</sup>. The absence of a fixed structure caused the choice of each one that led to this difference. Now the accepted rule is to follow one *marmitā* for ferial days<sup>43</sup>.

Psalms or *marmitā* used in the initial Psalmody of festival *Ramšā* are different according to the occasions and the importance of the day. The theological reasons for the selection of these psalms for the festival days are not explained in any of the commentaries. There are mainly four occasions wherein the East Syriac *Ramšā* we see the use of particular psalms. We try to understand those psalms with the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Theodoret of Cyrus. They represented

<sup>40</sup> Duae marmithae, quas initio vespertini officii ferialium dierum persolvimus, respondent duabus partibus hominis, ut unaquaeque marmitha sit ei (sc. nobis-homini) loco gratiarum actionis pro unaquaque parte nostril. Dominica autem marmitham persolvimus, quia ea die una et indiscissa voluntas fit corpori et animae, non duae, sicut in hoc mundo. See, ABRAHAM BAR LIPAH, "Abrahae Bar Lipheh Qatarensis Interpretatio Officiorum", in *Anonymi Auctoris Exposition Officiorum Ecclesiae Georgio Arbelensi Vulgo Adscripta*, ed. R.H. CONNOLLY, serie II, 2., Roma 1913-1915, 151; S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 424.

<sup>42</sup> *Expositio*, I, 126.

<sup>43</sup> S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 199.

the school of Antioch, and their commentaries were translated into Syriac and played a decisive role in the East Syriac tradition. Their interpretations had a profound influence on the psalms, especially, Theodore of Mopsuestia's influence is underlined with the headings of psalms in the East Syriac tradition<sup>44</sup>.

## 1. For Sundays and Feasts

In the East Syriac tradition, there are separate psalms for Sundays and feasts. Sundays are the days of the glorified Christ remembering His passion, death, and resurrection, whereas feasts are the important days in the life of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Sundays in the period of Annunciation and Nativity have a separate set of psalms apart from other Sundays and Feasts.

### a) *Sundays of Annunciation to Epiphany; Psalms 87 and 88*

Psalm 87 is a song of Zion that refers to the foundation of the Sion Temple or the beauty of the Church of God and points to the person who is going to be born in that holy city. It refers to the heavenly city of Jerusalem with the choirs of saints and adorned with an angelic way of life. With the fine words about Jerusalem, the city of God, psalm 87 continue to profess the person of the *mother of Sion*<sup>45</sup>. "And of Zion, it shall be said, this one and that one were born in it; for the Most High himself will establish it" (v. 5). On the other hand, psalm 88 is penitential in character. When psalm 88 is recited together with psalm 87, it shows its salvific and penitential nature<sup>46</sup>. It is a prayer of a soul grievously afflicted<sup>47</sup>. "O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence. Let my prayer come before you" (vs. 1-2). It

<sup>44</sup> Cf. W. BLOEMENDAAL, *The Heading of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 102, ed. T.P. HALTON, Washington 2000, 79. Each one will call Sion as mother city and one calling Sion as mother will admit the origin of a person born in her. The way of life in this heavenly city with the one who is to come is characterized by pure and unalloyed joy and satisfaction.

<sup>46</sup> THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 77.

<sup>47</sup> THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 81. This psalm relates to the whole human race; their painful life among wicked people, calamities, death, grief, weeping and wailing widows and orphans, misfortunes and other countless problems that brings darkness in their life. Amidst these hardships and slavery, only the appearance of the Saviour will rescue them.

is a prayer to repel the multitude of troubles besetting the people when God perceives them.

These psalms are sung only in the period of Advent and Nativity and from the period of Epiphany, another set of psalms begins. Both psalms together give a clear hint to the birth of Jesus and the spiritual preparation of the faithful for this salvific event. It is a prophecy of the salvation of the nations that foretells the spiritual way of life which Jesus taught by becoming a man<sup>48</sup>. With their Christological and prophetic nature, these psalms are best suited to be sung during the Sundays and feast days of Advent and Nativity. When they are inserted into the evening prayer it gives a Christological and eschatological application to the whole *Ramšā*<sup>49</sup>. It is a prayer of expectation and hope of the people for a saviour. These Christological and eschatological elements might have been the reason for their insertion into the *Ramšā* of the Sundays of Annunciation and Nativity.

#### *b) Other Sundays and Feasts; Psalms 65, 66 and 67*

Psalms 65, 66, and 67 are used in the initial psalmody of the *Ramšā* on all Sundays and feast days of the year<sup>50</sup>, namely from the period of Epiphany to the period of Advent<sup>51</sup>. The penitential, salvific, and glorifying elements in these psalms show their role in the evening prayer. These psalms bring a sequence of ‘praise of God’. They express the idea that the vocation of the people of God is to praise God. God is worthy of being praised for His work of Creation and all nations are in-

<sup>48</sup> Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 78. It is like St. Paul’s teaching in his letter to Hebrews explains the nature of Zion; “You have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to countless angels, to a festal gathering and assembly of firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (*Heb*12, 22-23).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, “Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours”, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. P. BEDJAN – G. KHAYYATT (eds.), *Breviarium iuxta Ritus Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*, vol 1, S. Congregatio “Pro Ecclesia Orientali”, Città del Vaticano 1938, 2. For East Syrians, feasts are the days of Lord Jesus Christ and of blessed virgin Mary. Dukrane, the feast of St. Thomas comes in commemorations of saints and of martyrs. Vatican II, SC 103 gives an explanation to why Marian feasts are celebrated with the annual cycle of Christ’s mysteries. It is because she is the first among the saints with special honour. See, J. MOOLAN, “Liturgy of the Hours”, 168.

<sup>51</sup> P. BEDJAN – G. KHAYYATT (eds.), *Breviarium Vol I*, 397; S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 75.

vited to praise Him and so all nations may know the true way of salvation<sup>52</sup>. They also represent the day of our Lord. Since sabbath days are set apart for thanksgiving and praise to God from ancient times, these psalms are the best suited for use on Sundays. Salvation is possible only when all are resurrected with Christ which is commemorated on all Sundays. Praise and thanksgiving for Israel were for the creative work and their salvation, whereas for Christians. they are for being united with Christ's resurrection<sup>53</sup>.

Psalm 65 is the song of Israelites sung in Babylon as a way of entreating God; a hymn of the depressed who are longing for their return to their homeland. "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed. O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come" (vs. 1-2). This psalm expresses their faith in Him and expresses the blessings they will have in God's land. It is an offering, containing a clear prediction of Israel's knowledge of God<sup>54</sup>. Psalm 66 is an invitation to glorify the majestic power of God in which the praise of God must be sung by all nations. This is a prophecy of the present time that Christ the Lord is called Most High by everyone, by every nation<sup>55</sup>. "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing to the glory of His name; give Him glorious praise" (vs. 1-2). He is glorified for all His marvelous works, for His mercy, and for accepting the grievance of the people. Psalm 67 announces the saving manifestation and the salvation of all nations<sup>56</sup>. "May God gracious to us and bless us, and make His face to shine upon us" (v.1). The modern commentators consider this psalm as either a thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest or a prayer for a good climate. But according to Theodore of Cyrus, this psalm announces in advance the Incarnation of God the Word, because God's face made shine upon us by the Incarnation<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 427.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on the Psalms 1-81*, in, R.C. HILL (trans.), Leiden 2006, 829; THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 364.

<sup>55</sup> THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 845; THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 371.

<sup>56</sup> THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 377; THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 853.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 378. Theodore would not let the ancient history behind any psalm predominate in his commentary to the detriment of prophecies about Christ the Lord, he made no mention of interest in the cultic setting or any other situation

Psalms selected for Sundays and Feast days, speak about the Church of God. When these psalms speak of Sion Temple, it is a clear hint to the Church of Christ. Most manuscripts of the Greek version bring the idea of ‘Mother Zion’. In the New Testament when St. Paul speaks of ‘Jerusalem which is our Mother’ (*Gal 4,26*), he probably connects to the Old Testament Mother Zion to the New Testament Mother Church<sup>58</sup>. This Church is founded on Christ, glorified by Him through His passion, death, and resurrection. Therefore, the people of God must praise and glorify the Creator.

## 2. For Memorials

Memorials are the commemorations of the saints. The ancient East Syrian practice was remembering the saints only on Fridays and is continued even now. At a later period, perhaps by the Latin influence, saints from the Latin tradition are made familiar to the East Syriac tradition. Thus, other ordinary days are also included in the commemoration of saints. In the *Ramšā* of commemoration of saints, special psalms are used apart from other days.

### *a) Memorials that Come on Fridays; Psalms 85 and 86*

The psalms selected for the memorials on Fridays give the idea of God’s salvation to those who favour His will and to His people who live according to the Commandments. Heavenly life is offered to those who fear Him and live in God’s presence<sup>59</sup>. Psalm 85 reminds the people about the need for salvation, whereas Psalm 86 is a prayer for God’s assistance in achieving this salvation. Like a saint, all are invited to embrace God by glorifying Him through singing hymns and knowing the magnitude of His wonders<sup>60</sup>.

Psalm 85 prophesies that the God of all, foreshadowed salvation

---

of the composer’s time prompting the psalm beyond the historical, such as in this case, the condition of crops in the harvest. All nations in the world are invited to rejoice and celebrate and recount the favours from Him. His blessings confirm the words in action and provide those being blessed with an abundance of manifold goods. “Let peoples confess to you, O God, let all the people praise you, God. Let all the people praise you” (*Ps 67,3-5*).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, “Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours”, 429.

for all people, in the fortunes of Israel, freeing them from servitude<sup>61</sup>. It is also a prophecy of salvation offered by God to the whole world who hear the supplication of the people and bring peace to the world. "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace to His people, to His faithful, to those who turn to Him in their hearts" (v. 8). God will remove the hardships of the people of God and bring happiness to the land. Salvation comes only to those who fear Him and live in His peace. Psalm 86 is a prayer of one who trusts in God, a prayer of supplication for God's assistance<sup>62</sup>. God, by nature, is loving and showers His mercy to those who ask Him; "Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you O Lord, I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you" (vs. 4-5). It also forecasts the call and salvation of all the nations, asking for God's mercy, and embracing His loving kindness. People like to enjoy His guidance and make their journey in the way of truth. Those who perceive the providence of God will live eternally and will enjoy heavenly bliss.

*b) Memorials that Fall on other Days; Psalms 25, 26 and 27*

These psalms are the prayers of a saint who reflects upon their relationship with God, their responsibilities, and their confidence in Him. They are more applicable to the commemoration of saints because the people of God are called to live in the sanctity of God and attain the same sanctity of saints<sup>63</sup>. The singing of these psalms recalls the life of a saint which will help to form a spiritual path along with the saints.

Psalm 25 is a prayer asking for God's guidance and pardon. It is the proclamation of God's kindness towards a just and a prayer for God's

---

<sup>61</sup> THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 67. He will rescue the whole human race from devils' domination and destruction keeping people in His sanctity. "You forgave the iniquities of your people; you covered all their sins. You put an end to all your wrath, you turned to form the wrath of your anger" (*Ps* 85,1-3). Lord will exercise righteousness and will show his way, keeping to the way of virtue.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 72. Who has reverence for God holds the way of life in keeping with the Law and such life remains as the mother of happiness. Those who are having such happiness are saints whose hearts rejoice in God. "I shall confess to you, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and I shall glorify your name forever. Because great is your mercy in my regard" (*Ps* 86,12-13).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 427.

providence and protection<sup>64</sup>. “He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way” (v. 9). When one speaks of divine mercy, it is often associated with the truth, indicating that His mercy is true and never fails through any uncertainty. Psalm 26 is a prayer of a saint who asks God to test his faith and innocence. This psalm is higher in nature and prior to sin, asking God for risky trials like a person of simple and innocent life who has no experience of sin<sup>65</sup>. “Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind” (vs. 2-3). This psalm shows a saint’s sanctity, readiness to offer himself to God, and purity of heart after all tests. Whereas Psalm 27 is the proclamation of a saint’s confidence in God, asking for shelter in the temple of God where he is protected from all enemies. One who enjoys all benefits from God will not seek wealth and glory but seek contemplation of divine beauty<sup>66</sup>. When this psalm is sung in the evening prayer, people of God should also have the same enthusiasm as a saint to live in heaven with angels and saints.

As it is said in the introduction of the East Syriac Breviary, the commemorations observed among the East Syrians on Fridays are an ancient practice and are continued now. The commemorations on ‘other days’ are of later origin because the psalms selected for ‘the Friday Memorials’ are just two, whereas for ‘other days’ the psalms are distributed according to the *marmitā* division of three psalms which is a later method of division. This shows that they are the later addition, and ‘the Friday Memorial’ is the ancient practice<sup>67</sup>. There is also a practice of reciting more psalms on the feast of our Lord. For example, at the *Ramšā* of the Sunday of the Resurrection, 9 psalms are sung, psalms from 22

---

<sup>64</sup> THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 249; Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 163. Salvation is confirmed to those who fear God, to those who pray, to those who seek out his covenant and submit themselves to God. It is a request to make rejoice in living, by God’s plan; a prayer of hope that innocent people might associate and find happiness in God.

<sup>65</sup> THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 255; THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 169.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 172; THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 261. God will not allow them to lose their soul in the hands of enemies, and He will guide them by the eternal law. “I believe that I shall see the beauty of the Lord in the land of the living” (*Ps* 27,13). This expresses a saint’s urge and confidence to live with multitudes of angels in heaven.

<sup>67</sup> P. BEDJAN – G. KHAYYATT (eds.), *Breviarium*, vol. I, 8.



to 30 (*Hūllalā III*). Among St. Thomas Christians<sup>68</sup>, the initial Psalmody with one *marmitā* on Sunday/Feast/Commemoration days and two *marmitā* on weekdays have been shortened to the use of one *mazmorā* or one psalm alone for both Sundays/Feast days and weekdays. This difference is made as part of shortening the length of the celebration.

### Vesperal Psalms – a Theological Analysis

The centre or the core of the East Syriac *Ramšā* is the Evening Psalms or Vesperal Psalms. It is generally agreed among historians that the original core of the East Syriac *Ramšā* is the fixed set of psalms for the evening. These Evening Psalms are different from the Initial Psalmody. This Vesperal Psalms is also called ‘*Marya Qretak*’<sup>69</sup>. This title is derived from the incipit of the first verse of Psalm 140, “Lord I call to You; hasten to answer me”. God’s answer to the people’s cry for salvation is first given to the Blessed Virgin through an angel. Here it signifies that the cry and petitions of the new Israel will be answered, and God will respond to their prayer.

The Vesperal Psalm is a combination of psalms 140, 141, 118, and 116. In other traditions, this set of psalms in the evening service is called ‘*the Psalms of Lucernes*’<sup>70</sup>. It may be called this because it shows a clear allusion to light and lamp in Psalm 118, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my paths”<sup>71</sup>. Pseudo-George of Arbel gives a co-

<sup>68</sup> The vernacular text of Syro Malabar tradition follows the same structure of the East Syriac text of the liturgical hours. This text is a shortened Malayalam translation of East Syriac text only for the major liturgical hours like *Ramšā*, *Lēlyā*, and *Saprā*. They follow the one-week prayer setting for the whole seasonal cycle of the liturgical year. So far, no official text is approved for the usage of the minor hours. Cf. J. MOOLAN, “Liturgy of the Hours”, 259.

<sup>69</sup> The angel addressed Maria with a salutation, full of mercy and he announced to her hope, full of happiness; for from you has appeared the Lord of the heights and depths; and of everything that is in them; to Him be praise from all mouths. See, S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> The two most important rituals associated with vespers are the Lighting of the lamps or ‘Lucernarium’ and the ‘Offering of Incense’. The lighting of the lamp is considered necessary at the end of the day when the sunlight fades and the darkness spreads. This simple gesture is immediately associated with the concept of Christ as the Light and the Peace. Traditionally, when the lamp was lit at the beginning of the evening service, the celebrant lifted a lighted candle and proclaimed, ‘in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, light and peace’. To this greeting people respond “thanks be to God”. See J. MOOLAN, “Liturgy of the Hours”, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 30.

lourful meaning to this combination of four vespereal psalms. According to him, they indicate the whole economy of salvation. The first three verses of Psalm 140 reflect the cry of Adam after the fall from paradise. The expression ‘oblation of my hands’ in the psalm suggests the memory of Abel. Altogether, they bring our attention from Adam to John the Baptist, who refers to Christ as the Light<sup>72</sup>.

This practice of using the combination of psalms into one psalm is common to the West Syrian and Maronite rites. In both East and West traditions, psalms 140 and 141 are the principal psalms sung at vespers, glorifying God as the trustworthy One to rescue from the snares of the wicked<sup>73</sup>. This combination of the Evening Psalms brings a sense of deep trust in God and the obligation to offer praise to Him. It invokes deep confidence, refuge, and salvation in God, who saves His people from enemies, console and strengthen them by receiving their spiritual sacrifices. He will never give up the crying of His people and will save them from struggles and enemies. He is the Lord of all who safeguards His worshippers from the dangers of life. “I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy and executes justice for the poor. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in Your presence” (vs. 12-13). It expresses the great confidence of hope and trust in the Lord who alone can save His people from their unjust sufferings and slavery<sup>74</sup>. A great trust in God who protects them in their daily life and who separates the righteous from the wicked.

Psalm 141 is the psalm of par excellence for the evening *Ramšā*<sup>75</sup>. The vespereal feature of this psalm is clear from its first verses, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips” (v. 2). This psalm by its nature shows that it is a simple evening prayer of a faithful person who asks God to accept his petitions. Directly it points to the role of the Church as a priestly nation that offers spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God and asks their prayers to be counted as incense before God and lifting of their hands

---

<sup>72</sup> *Expositio*, I, 137-141.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. J. MOOLAN, “Liturgy of the Hours”, 19.

<sup>74</sup> J. VELLIAN, *East Syrian Evening Services*, 11.

<sup>75</sup> J. VELLIAN, *East Syrian Evening Services*, 13.

as an evening sacrifice<sup>76</sup>. It is, a prayer to safeguard from sins, sinners, and the wicked; a prayer to be spiritually united with God. Psalms 140 and 141 are the classic of the vespereal psalm; they together represent the crying of Israel to God for deliverance from the Babylonian captivity. He is the only one, upon whom they can trust and ask for help in the struggles of life<sup>77</sup>. It is a trust in Him, waiting for help, and asking for their soul's permanence in Him. This underlines the importance of the insertion of these two psalms in the daily evening service of the East Syrian Christians.

Psalm 118 shows the penitential spirit of the people, and they express the two traditional themes of the Cathedral evening psalm, light, and penance<sup>78</sup>. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (*Ps* 119,105). They are the prayers of greater consolation for those who live according to His commandments and walk through the paths of the Lord. This psalm of the evening prayer is like the people's request for a true light in their life and the expression of their willingness to live in the hands of God<sup>79</sup>.

Psalm 116 brings the idea of cosmic salvation through sanctification. It recollects the various calamities faced by Israelites who were living a life of ease, who willingly accepted the struggles, and who enjoyed the triumphal crowns. It foretells their bravery, but at the same time, it recounts the distress they faced and the intervention of God in their life<sup>80</sup>. "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: O Lord, I pray, save my life" (vs. 3-5). In the same way by singing this psalm, the new Israel reflects upon the greatness of God and requests His timely intervention.

Multiple psalms inserted into a single form marks the particularity of East Syriac evening psalms. These four psalms are selected for the

<sup>76</sup> Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 338.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. J. MOOLAN, "Liturgy of the Hours", 269.

<sup>78</sup> R. TAFT., *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today*, Minnesota 1985, 236. The penitential spirit of this psalm is expressed in psalms 118 and 119. These two psalms were one before the present division of the Psalter into *hūllalē*. Their suitability to express the two traditional themes of cathedral evening song: light and penance or forgiveness for failings.

<sup>79</sup> THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 238.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. THEODORE OF CYRUS, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 229.

evening psalms because of the glorifying, thanksgiving, and penitential nature of these psalms. The theological themes found in the Vespers Psalms are Israel's praise for God's mercy, their veneration and trust in Him, their dependence, and their confidence in Him. The people gathered in the evening after the heaviness of the day, submitting everything before God, and asking for His guidance and protection. It is giving thanks and adoration to the Father at the end of the day, reflecting upon His presence throughout the day.

At the same time, there are also critiques of this combination of the Vespers Psalms. The first critique was about the origin of the combination of psalms. For Abraham Bar Lipeh, only Psalm 140 was used for the Vespers psalm in the early time, and he underlined that it is the psalm of *par excellence* of the *Ramšā*<sup>81</sup>. Hence it is to be assumed that the combination of vespers psalms together with psalms 141, 118, and 116 are the later additions. The second critique is about Psalm 118; it is divided into two *marmitā* and each of them has been placed in two different *hūllalē*, 17 and 18<sup>82</sup>. A major part of psalm 118 comes now in psalm 119 and when we speak about psalm 118, we should consider both psalms together. It is a clear indication of the irregularity of the division of psalms.

## 1. Other Liturgical Elements in the Evening Psalms

The recitation of the evening psalms ends with a *Gloria Patri* as it is in the initial psalmody. It is the invocation of the Trinity in our prayers. In the book of Isaiah, we see that God the Father is eligible for adoration because the whole earth and heaven are full of His glory, but only the angels sing Holy to God. Whereas, in the book of Revelation, the great personalities represent the Trinitarian aspect. Together with the Trinity the whole community of faithful and the four animals represent the universe, singing together Holy to the Creator<sup>83</sup>. The same is recreated when it is recited at the end of the psalms. For Tertullian in *De Oratione*, this holy hymn in the context of singing psalms is a way of joining with the angels by praising the Almighty which is the duty of all humans to praise Him<sup>84</sup>.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 417.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, "Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours", 421.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 22.

<sup>84</sup> TERTULLIAN, *De Oratione*, 3; see, L. ARANGASSERY, *Ecclesial Dimensions of East Syr-*

After the *Gloria Patri*, the singing of the psalms ends with the *qanōnā*; an antiphon recited at the beginning and the end of the evening psalms. It is an extension of the glorification of God, which goes with the hymn, *Gloria in excelsis*<sup>85</sup>. On Sundays and ferial days, the *qanōnā* of the Evening Psalms is, “Lord, hear my words and accept my prayers” (*Ps* 140,1). The present practice is after the first versicle of the psalm, its *qanōnā* or antiphon is recited and again repeated together with the first versicle of *Ps* 140 at the end of the recitation of psalms. The old practice of repeating the *qanōnā* after each versicle of the Evening Psalm is still observed for great feasts like Nativity or Epiphany<sup>86</sup>. When repeated after each versicle, each psalm has its refrain and is repeated after every versicle of the respective psalm. For example, the following *qanōnā* is used for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord; *Ps* 140 *qanōnā*: “Glory to You, glorious is Your birth”. *Ps* 141 *qanōnā*: “Glorious are You and glorious is Your birth”. *Ps* 118 *qanōnā*: “Glorious is Your birth which gives joy to all”. *Ps* 116 *qanōnā*: “Let the people and nations praise Him”<sup>87</sup>.

## 2. The Opening and Closing Prayers of Evening Psalms

Prayer before and after the evening psalms summarizes the content of the psalms. These prayers highlight the greatness and power of psalms in the prayer service. The prayer before the Evening Psalms is as follows:

“O our Lord and our God for Your mercy and the diligent care of Your goodwill towards us, we are bound to thank, adore and glorify You at all times, Lord of all, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever — Amen”<sup>88</sup>.

This prayer at the beginning of the evening psalms invokes thanksgiving and adoration to the Almighty which is the main theme of the vesperal office<sup>89</sup>. It is a petition to accept their prayers, request for bless-

---

*ian Liturgy; an Introduction to Liturgical Ecclesiology*, Kottayam 1990, 37.

<sup>85</sup> J. CHITILAPPILLY, *Mdabbranuta: The Divine Dispensation of Our Lord*, 93.

<sup>86</sup> S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 27.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. B. VARGHESE, “Psalms in the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours”, 428.

<sup>88</sup> A.J. MACLEAN, *East Syrian Daily Offices*, 51.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 29.

ings, salvation, divine providence, and remission of sins. This prayer is intended to prepare the community to express their complete trust in God to offer praises to Him always.

The Evening Psalms conclude with the following prayer:

“O our Lord and our God mercifully hear the prayer of Your servants and receive with kindness the petitions of Your adorers and have compassion on our sinfulness in Your grace and mercy. O Physician of our bodies and good Hope of our souls, Lord of all, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever — Amen”<sup>90</sup>.

This prayer expresses the attitude of the faithful when they make petitions before God. Their gratitude and their requests are expressed through praising, adoring, lamenting, supplicating, felicitating, and thanking God<sup>91</sup>. It is a request for accepting the prayers and praises submitted in the Psalms. It is a prayer and a hope that their daily life will be blessed with the presence of God who brings good to the bodies and salvation to the souls.

## Conclusion

The liturgical use of psalms in the official prayers of the Church underlines the divine experience of singing or reciting the psalms. The East Syriac Church maintains this use of a large number of psalms in their daily liturgy and tries to maintain the monastic spirituality in the daily Christian life by taking the psalms into the mainstream of the Liturgy of the Hours. The aesthetical, theological, and literal quality of Psalms makes them an official element of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially in the evening service.

This article aimed to highlight the theological and traditional importance of the Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours. It is painful to understand that many of the East Syriac liturgical practices are in a dying stage. The Syrian Christians fly from their motherland out of political struggle, the destruction of the early documents, and the lack of major studies about its liturgical tradition are the major reasons for this loss.

<sup>90</sup> A.J. MACLEAN, *East Syrian Daily Offices*, 53.

<sup>91</sup> S. PUDICHERY, *Ramšā: An Analysis and Interpretation of the Chaldean Vespers*, 30.

Now we are at risk of losing the monastic musical harmony of psalms in the liturgical prayers due to these struggles. The vernacular text of the Syro-Malabar Rite itself underlines this fact where they avoided many psalms for shortening the length of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Psalms are excellent among all the other human prayers. They are remarkable in their theological and spiritual elements. The spiritual fragrance and the literal beauty of the Psalms strengthen the daily life of Christians. This study on the liturgical use of psalms in the East Syriac evening vespers will throw some light on preserving the East Syriac Psalter in the Liturgy of the Hours.

**Summary:** The article examines the theological and traditional role of Psalms in the East Syriac Church Festival Vespers. The recitation of the Psalms occupies a major part of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially in the Vespers. In addition, several hymns and songs are intercalated with the Psalms or verses from the Psalms. They are inserted and used very intelligently in the Liturgy of the Hours. The aesthetical, theological, and literary quality of psalms and their distribution in the Liturgy of the Hours leads us to discuss the general structure and division of the East Syriac Psalter. This article will explain how the Psalms enjoy a superior status in the East Syriac festival Vespers by explaining their theological, Christological, and eschatological significance and role.

**Key Words:** Psalms, Psalmody, East Syriac Psalter, Psalter division, East Syriac Vespers, Liturgy of the Hours, Festival Vespers.

**Sommario:** L'articolo esamina il ruolo teologico e tradizionale dei salmi nei vesperi festivi della Chiesa Siriaca Orientale. La recita dei salmi occupa maggior parte della Liturgia delle Ore, specialmente nei vesperi. Inoltre, diversi inni e canti sono intercalati con i salmi o versetti dei salmi. Sono inseriti e usati con molta intelligenza nella Liturgia delle Ore. La qualità estetica, teologica, e letterale dei salmi e la loro distribuzione nella Liturgia delle Ore ci porta a discutere la struttura generale e la divisione del Salterio Siriaco Orientale. Questo articolo mostra come i Salmi godano una posizione superiore nella Liturgia delle Ore nella tradizione Siriaca Orientale. Spiega più chiaramente il significato e il ruolo teologico, cristologico, ed escatologico dei Salmi nei vesperi festivi.

**Parole chiave:** Salmi, salmodia, salterio siriano orientale, divisione del salterio, vespro siriano orientale, liturgia delle ore, vesperi festivi.