

A Syriac Poetic Eulogy for St. Gregorios of Parumala

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Photograph of St. Gregorios of Parumala
Taken for the Travancore Government - 1901



Funeral of St. Gregorios of Parumala - 1902

Dr. J.J. van Ginkel, affiliated fellow, faculty of humanities, Leiden Institute for Area Studies, the Netherlands, presented an interesting paper in the Eight World Syriac Conference held at Kottayam, India from 8th to 16th September 2014. The paper was titled as “A poetic Eulogy from Kharpat for Geevarghese Mar Gregorios (‘Parumala Thirumani’); reflections on the relations with and knowledge of Indian Syriac Church in the Middle East around 1900.” As the title indicates, it was about Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Gregorios of Niranam, Kollam & Thumpamon dioceses of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church; popularly known as ‘*Parumala Thirumani*’, the first Indian canonized Saint.

The theme of his paper was about a eulogy written by Mar Dionysius ‘Abd an-Nur Aslan, West Syriac metropolitan of Harput, Homs and Diyarbekir for *Parumala Thirumani* around the time of the latter’s demise. Before entering into the topic under discussion, here is the brief life sketch of St. Gregorios of Parumala.

St. Gregorios of Parumala was born on 15 June 1848 AD at Mulamthuruthy, Ernakulam district, Kerala, India. He received his minor order of deacon (*Korooyo*) on 26 September 1858 AD from Palakkunnath Mar Mathews Athanasios, Malankara Metropolitan and becomes a full deacon in 1864 AD by West Syrian bishop Yooyakkim Mar Coorilos. In the same year he was ordained as a priest by Palakkunnath Mar Mathews Athanasios followed by the elevation as Cor-Episcopus by Yooyakkim Mar Coorilos. On 7 April 1872, Metropolitan Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius V, (later Malankara Metropolitan) entered him into the monastic order as a *Remban*.

Patriarch Ignatius Peter III (IV) of Antioch consecrated Remban Geevarghese as Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Gregorios of Niranam on 10 December 1876 AD. Later he was entrusted with the dioceses of Kollam and Thumpamon also. On 23 November 1895 AD, the Malankara Association elected him as the Assistant Malankara Metropolitan. He entered into eternal rest on 2 November 1902 AD and entombed at Parumala Seminary, India. On 2

November 1947 AD, Catholicos Mar Baselios Geevarghese II declared him as a saint by the decision of the Holy Episcopal Synod of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

According to Dr. van Ginkel, Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan was born on 1 July 1851 AD to Ibrahim, son of Aslan, and Rihan probably at Urhoy (Edessa). In 1871 AD, he entered *Deyr ul-Zafaran* monastery (popularly known in India as *Kurkkuma Deyara*). In 1875 AD, he becomes a priest and appointed as the Patriarchal representative (*patrik vekili*) for Mar Ignatius Petrus IV (In Indian notion, Pathrose III) in Istanbul from 1880 to 1887 AD. Patriarch Mar Ignatius Abdulmesih II of Antioch consecrated him as the metropolitan of Harput on 10 November 1896 AD. Mar Dionysius was appointed as metropolitan of Amid (Diyarbakir) by Patriarch Mar Ignatius Elias III in 1917 AD. He entered into rest on 20 July 1933 AD in Diyarbakir.

Dr. Van Ginkel further explains that Mar Dionysius "was actively involved in the debate on the relationship with the Turkish government, Armenian cultural influences and the secularists in the late 19th and early 20th century. In addition he had a substantial manuscript collection and contacts with western scholars." However, Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan neither referred to as a Syriac scholar nor as a collector of manuscripts by Patriarch Ignatius Aprem I, Barsum in his famous book, *The Scattered Pearls*.

During his research about the West Syrians, especially of in and around Tur Abdin, Turkey, Dr. van Ginkel came across the copy of a manuscript that is the contention of this discussion. It is a Syriac eulogy written in dodeca syllabic meter (known in India as *Memra* of Mar Yakob) by Mar Dionysius about Mar Gregorios. It is a beautiful poetic composition as dipodies with explanatory note for every verse. It consists of 83 dipodies in West Syriac language.

Dr. van Ginkel raises three important questions about this manuscript. One: since it is only a copy, where is the original? Two: how Mar Dionysius of Tur Abdin got acquainted with Mar Gregorios of Parumala who is from distant India and enthused to write a eulogy about him? And three: it is stated in the manuscript that a commemorative service was conducted for Mar Gregorios by Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan with a photograph of the former. He wonders from where such a photograph could be obtainable to the latter?

The original manuscript of the eulogy is well preserved in Konat library at Pampakkuda, Ernakulam District, India. It is bound as a book with 40 pages and numbered as MS. Syr. KL 269. Except a preface and an endnote, the entire body text is written in West Syriac character in single hand-writing. The two notes are also in West Syriac but by a different thin hand-writing. The Introductory note, translated by Fr. Dr. Johns Abraham Konat, the present custodian of the Konat library and a noted Syriac scholar, is as follows:

"These (are the) Memras, on the departure of Saint Aboon Mar Gregorios, whose soul is at rest. It was composed by Aboon Mar Dionysius Ab dho dh'nyhro, metropolitan of Militene, Kafarzo and those who surrounded became sad. In the year of 1903 (of our Lord) it was send to Malabar in the name of Kasheesso Mathai Malpan of Konat family to print in Syriac and English. His prayers (are) with us. Amen.

Following the Memras, there were written and added its explanations at the end. Compare the number of Memras with the number of explanations (notes). Oh reader! Then you will be able to understand and (hence) illuminated (yourself).

Glory to merciful Lord"

Besides this preface, there is an endnote also. It reads as "The book of Memra (metrical homily), with (its) explanations, is on the departure of saint Aboon Mar Gregorios Geevarghese, metropolitan, (whose) soul is at rest. It was composed by Aboon Mar Dionysius Ab dho dh'nyhro, metropolitan of Militene; in the year 1903 (of our Lord).The Kafarzo and those who

surrounded became sad.” It is a colophon rather than an endnote added later while it is sent to India.

Though it was requested by the author, the translation and publication did not materialize. Further the story is never mentioned at least once anywhere while volume upon volume about Mar Gregorios of Parumala were prepared over a century. Fortuitously, this manuscript came into my attention in 2000 AD. Fr. Dr. Johns Abraham Konat, the grandson of the recipient Fr. Konat Mathen Malpan, translated the preface to Malayalam language. Upon that source, I published a small article about this eulogy in the *Malankara Sabha Magazine* brought out in that year in connection with the consecration of the new Parumala church, where Mar Gregorios of Parumala entombed. And thus for the first time the eulogy of Mar Dionysius ‘Abd an-Nur Aslan made way into public attention.

While preparing a reference book about Mar Gregorios of Parumala titled as *Parumala Smrithi* in 2002 AD for the occasion of the centenary feast of the Saint, I took initiative to get this eulogy translated into Malayalam. Upon my request, Cor-Episcopus Curian Kaniyampambil, a renowned Syriac scholar, has kindly consented to translate all the 83 dipodies in the same dodeca syllabic meter. It was published in *Parumala Smrithi* in 2002 AD itself with my introductory note. Due to time constraint, the explanatory notes in the original text were neither translated nor published then. No further attempts ever made to explore it with the exception of Dr. van Ginkel’s efforts based on a copy unaware of the existence of the original.

From the preface, it is obvious that this literature was destined to Fr. Konat Mathen Malpan, later elevated as Cor-Episcopus, who is referred to as “Kasheesso Mathai Malpan of Konat” in the eulogy. But he took no efforts either to publish or to translate it. Albeit there is no evidence, two logical reasons for this lapse or excuse we can attribute. Firstly, at the time of the arrival of this eulogy, several poetic creations about Mar Gregorios of Parumala both by celebrated as well as nameless authors were published. And beyond that a beautiful eulogy in Malayalam language composed by a blind poet, Pulathuruthel Chacko Chacko from Chingavanam, Kottayam, India, became viral by then. Perhaps the limited references about Mar Gregorios of Parumala in the said Syriac composition may lead Konat Mathen Malpan to excuse it. However he preserved it properly with his Syriac collection.

Secondly, publishing was not a profitable business to him. According to the letter of Mar Gregorios of Parumala dated 7 April 1899 AD to the Patriarch of Antioch, the people, even the priests, were reluctant to purchase books even the necessary Syriac sacramental texts published by Konat Mathen Malpan. Mar Gregorios further states that by investment in the procurement of the Syriac manuscripts and publishing them Konat Mathen Malpan incurred into deep financial crisis. In such a situation he was not in a position to take any further financial burden. Mar Dionysius ‘Abd an-Nur Aslan might have misunderstood that the wrong perception ‘Syrian’ about the Indian Christians tagged them as Syriac speaking people.

Fr. Konat Mathen Malpan and his Syriac press were well known to the West Syrians. The above mentioned letter of Mar Gregorios of Parumala indicates the demand of the Patriarch for the royalty of the books published from Pampakkuda press. In addition, Konat Mathen Malpan was collecting West Syriac manuscripts from Mesopotamia just for the sake of his affection to the Syriac language. He spend huge amount for it. Apart from the introductory note addressed to him, Konat Mathen Malpan is acknowledged in verses 37 and 38 of the eulogy regarding his scholarship in Syriac.

As a Syriac scholar, Mar Gregorios of Parumala was appointed as the translator and secretary to Patriarch Peter III during his tour in India during 1875-77 AD. His devotion and dedication along with his altruistic character attracted the Patriarch and hence, he was consecrated as a Metropolitan at age of 29 by violating the lower age limit propagated by the same Patriarch. Later the Malankara Metropolitan appointed him to do the inter-church

correspondence on behalf of him. Mar Gregorios of Parumala might have been familiar to several West Syrians through those correspondences.

In 1895 AD Mar Gregorios of Parumala did a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and conducted the holy week services there. This journey embedded an interminable reminiscence about him to whomever he acquainted during that voyage. However, there was little chance for a meeting between Mar Gregorios and Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan, who was just a priest then.

Not alone Mar Gregorios of Parumala, but his primate Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius V, Malankara Metropolitan, was also known to the author of the eulogy. His Herculean efforts to protect the Church from the protestant infiltrations are admired in verses 33 to 36 of the eulogy. It indicates that somebody was informing the developments in India frequently to Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan.

It is most likely Dr. van Ginkel's assumption about the West Syriac Metropolitan Sleeba Mar Osthathios as the connection in between India and Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan is true. Patriarch Ignatius Yakoob III in his *History of the Syrian Church in India*, states that Mar Osthathios (*Euststhius*) was a native of Kafarzo in the district of Bushairiyya of the province of Diyarbakir. He came to India as a deacon along with the West Syrian bishop Mar Simon Athanasius in 1881 AD but did not return after the demise of the latter in 1889 AD. He was in India during the demise of Mar Gregorios in 1902 AD. As a native of Kafarzo, (Kharpat or Harput), he must certainly had comparatively strong communication links with Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan, then prelate of Kafarzo. Further, verse 62 of the eulogy itself divulges the attendance of deacon Sleeba in the funeral service. He is referred to as 'one among us' by the author. Even though there is no specific evidence, Konat Mathen Malpan may used deacon Sleeba as a medium for his manuscript collection, who in turn may contact his native, Kafarzo, for the same.

Indeed deacon Sleeba informed the demise of Mar Gregorios of Parumala to Mar Ivanios Elias, then West Syrian Metropolitan of Jerusalem. It is confirmed by his condolence message addressed to deacon Sleeba dated 3 January 1903 AD. Hence, it is possible that deacon Sleeba himself was the informer to Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan. It is interesting to note that Mar Ivanios Elias too conducted a commemorative service at Jerusalem for Mar Gregorios of Parumala in the same pattern exercised by Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan. Instead of a photograph, a full set of Episcopal vestments over a chair represented the body of Mar Gregorios of Parumala at Jerusalem for that service. The Malayalam translation of the condolence message of Mar Ivanios of Jerusalem published by Fr. P. J. Abraham in 1938 AD confirms this.

In the known history, Mar Gregorios of Parumala was photographed only thrice – one around 1880 AD, another as a group photo in 1882 AD and finally in 1901 AD by order of the Travancore government – during his lifetime. It is most unlikely for Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan to get hold of one of those three. However, a photograph was taken during the funeral of Mar Gregorios that expressing his agony through his prolonged illness. Perhaps, Mar Dionysius would have received a copy of that photograph via deacon Sleeba along with his obituary note.

The explanatory notes of this eulogy must be deciphered and need extensive study in Indian perspective. That might throw light into the West Syrian understanding of the Indian Church as Dr. van Ginkel assumes. It may perhaps lead to identify the root-cause of the power struggle between the Patriarch of Antioch and the Malankara Metropolitan regarding the Malankara throne since 1876 AD.

Yet, one incoherency still exists. In the forward of the eulogy, Mar Dionysius 'Abd an-Nur Aslan referred to himself as the Metropolitan of Meletine. But Dr. van Ginkel's list of his Episcopal appointments did not cite Meletine at all. The reason for this omission must be explained. Perhaps he may be consecrated as the titular bishop of once important but ceased, Meletine, and appointed later at different dioceses.

