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BUKHRA

THEOLOGICAL & LITURGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIRST BORN IN SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

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BIOGRAPHY



Endowed with an insatiable thirst for knowledge and a prodigious memory, Joseph Thekkedath Puthenkudy (Rocky) stepped into the Syriac wonderland as a young boy with little awareness of what was in store for him. Joseph's maternal grandmother, a Jacobite, followed the Antiochene liturgy (in West Syriac) of the Malankara Catholic Church. She took her grandson on Sundays to celebrate the liturgy in the Malankara Catholic church in the neighborhood. The haunting Syriac melodies of the Malankara liturgy nestled in the child's brain. The fledgling interest in Syriac chants eventually led to an attraction toward the Syriac language. Joseph's paternal church, the Syro Malabar Church, had already relinquished its Syriac connection in the process of modernization. As a teenager, he used to think that only the Jacobites and the Malankarites were Syriac Christians. Joseph's realization that he, too, was a Syriac Christian changed his self-awareness and the course of his life.

Meanwhile, one day, Joseph happened to find a collection of old Syriac books that the sacristan of his local Syro Malabar parish had thrown away in the garbage box. Joseph asked the vicar, Fr. Joseph Kozhikkadan, permission to take those books home. The vicar readily granted permission, and the interaction between the two led to a life-long friendship and admiration. One church's garbage became a young man's treasure. The Syriac genie burst out of the bottle. Joseph's life would change forever, like in a picturesque novel. Possession of that treasure prompted him to learn to read and write the Syriac language and immerse himself in the study of the Syriac heritage in India. Joseph never turned back. Even when the Syro Malabar Church walked away from its Syriac heritage, Joseph kept walking into it.

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Joseph Thekkedath Puthenkudy

The term *Bukhra* (ܒܘܟܪܐ) in Syriac Christianity holds deep theological and liturgical significance. Etymologically, it stems from the common Semitic root *B-K-R*, found in Hebrew (*bekhor*) and Arabic (*bikr*), signifying "firstborn," "first offspring," or "the first of a kind." In theological terms, however, *bukhra* goes beyond simple birth order to denote consecration, election, and offering. According to Payne Smith (1903), it was not only a biological designation but also a status of spiritual importance, often associated with ritual sanctity. The firstborn, in biblical theology, belonged to God and was to be either sacrificed or redeemed (Exodus 13:2). Thus, *bukhra* functions as a loaded term encapsulating divine priority, priestly consecration, and redemptive anticipation.

The concept of *bukhra* appears as early as Genesis 4:4 in the Syriac Peshitta, where Abel offers "the firstlings of his flock" (*min bukareh d'naneh*), indicating an early recognition of the primacy of the firstborn in sacrificial practice. Though the word itself is not used extensively in Genesis in its nominal form, the theology of firstfruits is foundational. God's demand for the firstborn of humans and animals throughout Exodus and Leviticus (Exodus 22:29–30) places *bukhra* at the center of Israelite liturgical consciousness. The firstborn thus represents both what is most excellent and what is owed to God. This theological insight reaches its culmination in the person of Christ, who is called "the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15) and "the firstborn from the dead" (Revelation 1:5), embedding *bukhra* into Christological doctrine.

Early Syriac theology, especially in the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem the Syrian, took the concept of *bukhra* and deepened it theologically. For Aphrahat, Christ is the *Bukhra d'Alaha*—the Firstborn of God—who fulfills all typologies of the Old Testament firstborn by sanctifying creation through His Incarnation and Resurrection (Demonstrations 8). Ephrem the Syrian, in his hymns on the Nativity, describes Christ as the one who opened the womb and sanctified all births by being born as the *bukhra* (Brock, 1982).

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