PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE ODES OF SOLOMON, PRAYERS FROM THE 1ST AND 2ND CENTURIES

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Abstract: The Odes of Solomon, a collection of Christian prayers from a Syriac or Hebraic environment, are an extremely valuable document, able to portrait the first century theology of Christian communities around Holy Land. Dated around the end of the first century until the middle of the second century A.D., the Odes of Solomon were in the first millennium in the Canon of the Scripture, cited by the Holy Fathers, containing the most important doctrines of the Church and, above all, a beautiful poetry of devotion that is the foundation of mystical theology of the Church of Christ.

Keywords: Poetry, mystical, Odes of Solomon, theology, orthodox, doctrine, Mariology, liturgical, Incarnation, nativity

The Odes of Solomon are a collection of prayers and poetry born in a Syriac community around the end of the 1st century Anno Domini and the 2nd century. They are indeed Christian prayers and they open a completely new perspective on the Christian faith, life and community after the Ascension of Jesus Christ. They were lost for more than a thousand years and discovered in 1909 by Randall Harris in a pile of manuscripts in British Museum. They come from the north of Syria, Antioch or Edessa. But they were famous in the first Christian millennium. So the 11th Ode was found among other prayers in the "Bodmer Manuscript" from the third century A.D. in the 10th century, a scribe copies the odes in Syriac, but it is preserved until today only the fragment between ode 17 and 42,20 (British Museum Manuscript 14538)[1].

One of the most important fragment in the Odes of Solomon is the Ode 19, 6-11. This fragment was cited by several Fathers of the Church and is a mariological hymn, written in the dawn of the first century A.D., two centuries before the Council of Ephesus, that stated the worship of the Mother of God:

1. A cup of milk was offered to me, and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness.
2. The Son is the cup, and the Father is He who was milked; and the Holy Spirit is She who milked Him;
3. Because His breasts were full, and it was undesirable that His milk should be ineffectually released.
4. The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom, and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.
5. Then She gave the mixture to the generation without their knowing, and those who have received it are in the perfection of the right hand.
6. The womb of the Virgin took it, and she received conception and gave birth.
7. So the Virgin became a mother with great mercies.
8. And she labored and bore the Son but without pain, because it did not occur without purpose.
9. And she did not require a midwife, because He caused her to give life.

[1] *Odele lui Solomon, rugăciuni creştine din secolele I-II*, traducere si introducere Ioan Valentin Istrati, Editura Anastasia, 2003, p. 15.

10. She brought forth like a strong man with desire, and she bore according to the manifestation, and she acquired according to the Great Power.

11. And she loved with redemption, and guarded with kindness, and declared with grandeur Hallelujah.

12. We can notice that the odes of Solomon[2] are written in the manner of psalms, with a cadence of prayer and incantation, using the chiasm and the double expression of ideas. The author is a probably a Christian from the northern parts of Middle East. The prayers in the Church are usually dated way before their inscription into the worship of the Church, because it needs time to perceive and accept a text into a community[3]. The language is – as James Charlesworth observed – Semitic and influenced by the psalms of David and those after him. Extraordinary is indeed the power of the author to express the faith in metaphors. Even the mystery of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is seen in a metaphor of birth and life. The author writes that the faith in God is like a cup of milk offered by God to the believer: "A cup of milk was offered to me, and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness". But what follows is really great. The faithful Christian says that the Son is the Cup of this sweetness, the Father is the One that is milked and the Holy Spirit is the One that milks him. This is a metaphor of maternity, love and sharing. It can be compared with the Gospel of John, and with the mystics of the Church as Saint Simeon the Theologian or Saint Gregory of Nyssa. The prayer imagines that God the Father is like a mother that gives life to her children, through the humanity of the Son, the Cup, and through the pouring of the Holy Spirit, i.e. Pentecost, the birth of the Church. We can see that the first century author has no problem with genders[4] and sees the Creator as a Life Giver and the human persons as babies nourished with eternal grace by the two hands of the Father: Son and Spirit (as Saint Irenee of Lugdunum stated). The abundance of grace and the infinity of self giving of the Lord is seen in the verse: "Because His breasts were full, and it was undesirable that His milk should be ineffectually released". It is indeed the prove that the metaphors of the Odes of Solomon are not Gnostic, as some Fathers accused them, but a mystical collection of prayer of devotion where God is felt like a nourishing mother united with humanity through love in Jesus Christ, God and Man. It is so far away from the Gnostic theology that saw the body as a prison, the matter as evil, dualistic principles being everywhere[5]. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the moment in history when the Creator became creation without renouncing of his throne of creator, and became one with us. We can say that the entire mystical theology of the Church, the askesis as devotion and unification with Christ in spirit, the theology of "theosis" deification through grace, is present in these texts from first century.

But, what is absolutely magnificent in the history of Christian theology is the verses 13-18. Here the author of the prayers says the the womb of the Virgin took this eternal milk and se was pregnant, received conception and gave birth. So the Virgin became mother with great mercies. And she labored and bore the Son but without pain, because it did not occur without purpose. The theology of the virginity of Mary, Mother of God, respected in the Scriptures and revered in the whole Christian theology as foundation of the Incarnation of Christ, is here, in the verses of the Odes of Solomon. All the protestant theology cries for help, the evangelical denomination coming from the eternal useless reform of Luther, that affirm that Mary was a simple woman, or worse, see that the Mariology was not invented in the fourth century – as they say – a an alternative of the Goddess of life in the mysteries of antiquity and polytheism, but the real doctrine of the Church in the Scripture and in the tradition of the first century.

[2] Charlesworth, J., *The Odes of Solomon*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1973.
[33] H.J.de Jonge, *The Historical Jesus view of Himself, Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in honour of Marinus de Jonge*, Journal of the study of the New Testament, Suplement Series, Shefield, 1993, pp. 25-27.
[4] Conzelmann, H., *Primitive Christianity*, London, 1973.
[5] Achtemeyer, Paul, J., *An apocalyptic shift in early Christian tradition, Reflections on some canonical evidences*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 45, Washington 1983, pp. 231-248.

Hundreds of books in the protestant theology[6] trying to destroy the worship of Mary are demolished by these verses that show the true reverence of the Christians to the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary. The School of Tubingen that tried to rationalize the Scriptures through philosophy and reason, the radical theologians from the protestant confessions, all are receiving the prove that Mary the Virgin was asked in prayer in the first century.

These prayers of a Christian vibrant Semitic community, some of them knew the Apostles, are a indubitable prove that the theology of Christianity was not formed by Constantine the Great on the ruins of Semitic faith in Jesus, as the protestant say, but it is a continuity of faith, discovery, study, theology and prayer.

The reform imagines that the first centuries Church was bare, without mediators, without priesthood, saints, icons, the cult of the Virgin, mysteries, and the protestant church is a revival of this simple church of Jesus[7]. They believe that the fourth century of Constantine the Great was a shift and a destruction of the real Church, who borrowed the imperial principles, the philosophical Greek terms, the fast and the telluric splendor of the roman court, and became an idolater imperial wealth based structure where all entered without devotion and faith. Luther – seeing the mediator principles of the Catholic Church, threw away all the windows of the heaven and stripped the Church from its garments of grace. He imagined that all the people of God are priests, in spite of the Scriptures of the New Testament, where priests were elected by Christ and by Apostles. He threw away the icons, the worship of saints, the mysteries, the key of entering into the Kingdom, the Cross (the followers of Luther), the good deeds, the Tradition of the Church, the freedom of humanity et caetera[8].

The Odes of Solomon – written on the verge of the year 100 A.D. – comes and destroys this conception of the alteration of the true Church in the Constantine era. The Church of Christ cannot be altered by the history, the dependence of matter or the principles of evil. That is why Jesus Christ said that he will be with the Church in all days, until the end of ages.

We can see in the Ode 20 that the writer says that he is the priest of the Lord and he serves the Lord as priest. This is another prove that the sacramental priesthood of the Church existed from Christ, through the Apostles, through the bishops ordained by them, as apostolic succession and sacramental bond of grace and mysteries into the Church. The author even speaks of the anointment of priesthood (Ode 20, verse 9), as icon and continuation of the anointment of Christ by God the Father (Luke 4, 18). Indeed the name Christos (Christ) is coming from "chriso", to anoint, to ordain.

Another theological principle in the Odes of Solomon is the reality of Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God and Man. In the Ode 7, the author develops this idea in a mystical fashion, as unity, approach and love between Creator and creature, between history and eternity, between space and infinity, between human and divine[9].

"For there is a Helper for me, the Lord. He has generously shown Himself to me in His simplicity, because His kindness has diminished His dreadfulness. He became like me, that I might receive Him. In form He was considered like me, that I might put Him on. And I trembled not when I saw Him, because He was gracious to me. Like my nature He became, that I might understand Him. And like my form, that I might not turn away from Him" (Ode 7, 3-6).

In these verses we can see the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is a realization of the prophecy of the creation of man after the face of God, "imago Dei". Jesus fulfils in himself the vocation of humanity of uniting with God and the goal of the creature to become immortal,

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[6] Drijvers, H.J.W., *Solomon as Teacher, Early Syriac Didactic Poetry*, Orientala Christiana Analecta, 229, Symposium Syriacum 1984, 1987, pp. 123-134.

[7] Pricop, Mircea Cristian, pr. Dr., *The relationship between the European and Christian Identity from an Orthodox moral perspective*, in Journal of Romanian Literary Studies, 2019, pp. 592-604.
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[8] Cf. Ellis, E. E., *Profecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, New Testament Essays, Tubbingen, 1978.

[9] Cf. Batey R., *New Testament nuptial imagery*, Leiden:Brill, 1971.

through grace of the Lord. The Nativity of Christ is the real novelty of history and the most important moment in the whole universe, because the resemblance of the human with God became identity, and the eternal Logos bears with him his humanity until the end of ages. The human race is embraced by God for ever. This is the foundation of mystical devotion, of Eucharistic sharing, of ascetical battle, of the love of saints, the fact that God became man from the Virgin and saved us from the evil, sin and death. The relationship between human and God is no more a face to face, but it is interior, is a profound look onto the depths of the divine and an eternal embrace of the Creator.

The author of the Odes of Solomon speaks also of the water of grace, of the Light of the world, of the Song sung by God into the hearts of the people, of the Word the Logos, which seems that he is not stranger from the Gospel of John[10]. It is plausible that the community of the Odes, where they were sung into the Church, was founded by Apostle John or by his disciples. Let us not forget that for hundreds of years, they were canonical Scriptures, written in the Canon of the Church[11].

The Odes of Solomon are one of the greatest Christian documents of history, besides the Scriptures, and their study is in the beginning. A thorough comparative analysis of the sources of the faith will discover more astounding news on the primary Church, her faith and the development of theology in the first centuries.

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[10] Cf. Bultman R., *The Gospel of John, a Commentary*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 134-140.
[11] For a thorough examination of the Odes, cf. Charlesworth, J.H., *A critical examination of the Odes of Solomon*, Journal for the Study of Pseudoepigrapha, Suplement Series 22, Sheffield Academic Press Limited, Sheffield, 1998.