This paper that I present before you today is a brief summary of my doctoral dissertation that I have defended at the Catholic Institute of Paris in June 2002. Here I am happy to share with you some of the fruits of my study of the early Syriac sources with a view to bring out the early Syriac theology of the Holy Spirit.

When one turns into the early Syriac period in search of a theology of the Holy Spirit, the primary difficulty that is met with is the lack of any proper treatise on the Holy Spirit. What then are the early sources that are at our disposal? How did the early Syriac tradition live and express a very essential aspect of Christian Trinitarian faith, namely the faith in the Holy Spirit?
1. The Early Syriac Sources

Going back to the early Syriac period we can find three important works, namely the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat which originate respectively from the beginning of 2\textsuperscript{nd} century, the first half of 3\textsuperscript{rd} century and the first half of 4\textsuperscript{th} century. Hence they cover rather completely the early period of Syriac Christian literature.

Through a close examination of all these three early works extant in Syriac language we have observed that they are very rich in their use of the various biblical terms for the Holy Spirit, like ḫanīš (the Spirit); ḫanīš or ḫanīš moš (the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Holiness); ḫanīš (the Holy Spirit), the typical feminine form and the masculine form ḫanīš (the Holy Spirit). Besides these, there occurs several times the term “the Spirit” in relation to God, or the Lord, or the Messiah. Accordingly, we see the use of various expressions like, ḫanīš or ḫanīš (the Spirit of God); ḫanīš (the Spirit of the Lord) which is seen only in the Odes and finally ḫanīš (the Spirit of the Messiah) which is typically a New Testament expression for the Spirit and is found only in Aphrahat.

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1 This is the simple term and is the same everywhere. Cf. Lk 2, 27; 4, 1; Jn 1, 32; 2 Cor 3, 6; Eph 3, 5.
2 Cf. *Old Syriac and Peshitta* Mt 1, 18; Lk 1, 35 (*Old Syriac* is not extant); Jn 14, 26; Eph 1, 13.
3 It is not found in the *Old Syriac* or in the *Peshitta* Gospels. But in the *Peshitta* Rom 1, 4 we have a similar form, but another grammatical variant, ḫanīš.
4 For the *Old Syriac*, see Mk 13, 11; Lk 2, 25. In the *Peshitta* it is found only in Eph 4, 30 (ḵanīš = the Holy Spirit of God) and in 1 Thess 4, 8 (ḵanīš = His Holy Spirit. ‘His’ refers to God).
5 It is found in *Peshitta* Ps 51, 11. But in the original *Peshitta* text a feminine adjective was used in Ps 51, 13: ḵanīš; and it is still preserved in the oldest manuscripts. For example, see the Psalms printed in the *Peshitta* New Testament: *Sûryanice Incil ve Mezmurlar*, United Bible Societies, Stuttgart, 1986, p. 43. Also, in Aphrahat’s citation of Ps 51, 13 in *Dem. 6, 16* (l/300) we see the feminine form ḵanīš.
6 See for example Mt 3, 16; 12, 28; 1 Cor 2, 11.
7 Cf. Rom 8, 9; 1 Pet 1, 11.
Furthermore, these early works reveal in one way or other the important activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. We shall now explain some of the prominent themes related to the Holy Spirit that are presented in the above-mentioned early Syriac sources.

2. The Spirit of the Messiah and the Believers

According to the deeper understanding of the early Syriac tradition, a Christian believer is one who is led by the Spirit of the Messiah. The reason behind this thought can be traced back to a correct perception that the early Syriac tradition had held of the person of Jesus, the Messiah. That means, Jesus the Messiah is the only one who came with the fullness of the Spirit of God.

This is clearly explained by Aphrahat. For him, it is evident that the fullness of the Spirit of God resides only in the Messiah. Before Jesus, the Prophets received the Spirit. But each prophet received only according to what he was able to bear. Jesus the Messiah is then the only one who possesses the Spirit of the Father without any limit and he is the one to whom the Father has entrusted everything without any exception.

To bring this idea into the fore Aphrahat makes recourse to Jn 3, 34b where one reads that “he [God] gives the Spirit without measure.” In fact, to the reader it is not clear who the recipient of this action of God giving the Spirit without measure. But in the understanding of Aphrahat it is Jesus who received the Spirit from His father without measure. This we read in Aphrahat as follows:

> And the Messiah received the Spirit not by measure, but his Father loved him and delivered all into his hands, and gave him authority over all His treasure. For John said: The Father did not give the Spirit by measure to His Son (ใ zend), but He loved him and gave all into his hands [Jn
And also our Lord said: All things have been delivered unto me by my Father [Mt 11, 27].

In the theological understanding of Aphrahat, from the moment of the coming of the Spirit in fullness upon the Messiah, the Spirit received a new title, that is, the Spirit of the Messiah. The Spirit and the Messiah are inseparably related to each other and they work together for the salvation of the human beings. Through this vision which is thoroughly biblical, we think, Aphrahat rightly points toward a pneumatological Christology which is very fundamental in understanding the person of the Messiah. Moreover, if the Messiah is filled with the Spirit, the followers of the Messiah also are called to be filled with the Spirit of the Messiah. This is what, as we see next, prompted the early Syriac writers to provide a right place to the Spirit in the re-living of the Mysteries of the Messiah.

3. The Holy Spirit and the Celebration of the Holy Mysteries

In the beginning of Christianity it is the celebration of the faith that preceded the doctrinal formulation of that same faith content. A liturgical celebration was indeed the place where the faith of the community is demonstrated. Therefore, in search of the theology of the Holy Spirit one has to see what role is given to the Holy Spirit in the celebration of the mysteries or the sacraments.

3.1. Prebaptismal Anointing and the Reception of the Holy Spirit

One particularity of the early Syriac Christian initiation rite was the giving of an anointing with oil which was technically called by the liturgical scholars as a

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8 Dem. 6, 12 (I/288).
“prebaptismal anointing.” One clear example of this rite of anointing before baptism is seen in the *Acts of Thomas*. Through a litany-like prayer of invocation, the Holy Spirit is invited to come and dwell in the oil of anointing. By analysing closely the wordings of this primitive Epiclesis we have seen that the prayers addressed to the Holy Spirit were meant to make the Spirit present in the oil of anointing which was applied over the whole body of the new convert, the candidate for baptism.

Thus we see that the rite of prebaptismal anointing underscored the truth that it is the Spirit of the Messiah who strengthened a believer and led him or her to profess the faith in the Messiah. Indeed, according to the early Syriac tradition represented by the *Acts of Thomas* it is the coming of the Spirit that inaugurated a believer’s Christian life. We think that this is very much similar to the experience the Apostle Peter and his companions who came out of their timidity and preached boldly their faith in the Risen Jesus only after they have received the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost as one reads in the Acts of the Apostles. It reminds us again of the words of St. Paul in 1 Cor 12, 3: *no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.*

3.2. The Holy Spirit and Baptism

Another strong emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit is given in the context of baptism. In the *Odes of Solomon*, exactly speaking, in Ode 11, 1-2 there is a very interesting mention about the Holy Spirit which we think can legitimately be interpreted as an allusion to Christian baptism. It reads as follows:

1. My heart was pruned and its flower appeared,
   Then the grace sprang up in it,
   And it produced fruits for the Lord.
2. For the Most High circumcised me by His Holy Spirit (κοπήν τοῦ Θεοῦ),

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Then He uncovered my inward being (كلمة) towards Him, And filled me with His Love.\textsuperscript{10}

In the old covenant, the circumcision remained as a sign of the total belongingness of the people of God to Yahweh. Similarly in the new covenant, it is the baptism that makes a believer to belong totally to the Messiah. And in this process of becoming fully of the Lord Messiah, the Odist notes well that it is the baptism that functions as a new ‘circumcision’ and that takes place in the Holy Spirit. Hence in the mystical and spiritual vision of the Odist, the role of the Holy Spirit is very decisive in making a believer to belong completely to the Messiah.

The early Syriac tradition was indeed, very much conscious of the role that the Holy Spirit plays in the mystery of baptism. This can be explained from the 6\textsuperscript{th} Demonstration of Aphrahat. Aphrahat speaks there elaborately and repeatedly of the reception of the Holy Spirit at baptism. He writes:

\begin{quote}
For from baptism we receive the Spirit of the Messiah (جنات المخلص).\textsuperscript{11} In that hour in which the priests invoke (بنوي) the Spirit, She opens (نور) the heavens and descends (سفسف) and hovers over (سكسك) the waters. And those who are baptised put Her on.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Through these words Aphrahat specifies that the baptised truly receives the Holy Spirit from baptism. By putting on the Holy Spirit the baptised person is reborn.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, the principal emphasis of Aphrahat’s baptismal theology is placed on the baptismal rebirth in the Holy Spirit which is the positive effect of baptism.


\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Acts 1, 5.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Dem}. 6, 14 (I/292-293).

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. \textit{Dem}. 6, 14 (I/293).
3.3. The Holy Spirit and Eucharist

What role did the early Syriac Christianity attribute to the Holy Spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist? A close analysis of an archaic form of a eucharistic epiclesis in the Acts of Thomas reveals that the invocation to the Spirit constituted an essential element and was a key moment in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thanks to the work of the Spirit, the communicants of the Body and Blood of the Messiah are said to enjoy life, rest and joy (Cf. Acts of Thomas, ch.158).

In the Demonstrations of Aphrahat one does not find any clear mention about the action of the Spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist. However, allusions about the reception of the Spirit through the eucharistic communion is not absent. In this connection it is noteworthy that the Syriac tradition has attached much importance to the action of the Spirit in the Eucharist and thereby the Eucharist itself is conceived as an effective means to receive the Spirit. To understand this idea further it is enough to read the lines of St. Ephrem who writes in his Hymns on Faith 10, 8 as follows:

   In your Bread there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed,
   in your Wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk:
   The Spirit is in your Bread, the Fire in your Wine -
   a manifest wonder, that our lips have received.\(^{14}\)

Thus, we see that, for the early Syriac tradition, the celebration of the three mysteries or the sacraments of Christian initiation remained as the locus theologicus, the place par

excellence, for expressing and teaching the believers about their faith in the Holy Spirit. A keen awareness of the functional and personal presence of the Spirit in these mysteries made the very celebration of them a living and life-giving reality to the participants. Through the participation in the mysteries, the channels for receiving the Holy Spirit, a Christian believer is invited to become the temple of the Spirit which in turn is a true Christian vision as explained by St. Paul in his letters. In short, we find, in a general way, that the joy of Christian life is believed by the early Syriac tradition as an effect of the presence of the Spirit of the Messiah.

4. The Holy Spirit and the Resurrection

The Holy Spirit who takes possession of a believer does not remain inactive. The believer should take active notice of this indwelling Spirit and bear fruits worthy of the Spirit. When the Spirit of the Messiah dwells in a Christian, his interior, spiritual life must be embellished by bearing spiritual fruits, says, for example, Aphrahat. If one aims at living a fruitful spiritual life there arises the need for honouring the Spirit. According to the understanding of Aphrahat, this honour due to the Spirit includes a particular duty of not grieving the Spirit. In the words of St. Paul Aphrahat puts it as follows:

Let us prepare our temples for the Spirit of the Messiah, and let us not grieve her (πνεύμα) that she may not depart from us. Remember the warning (to you) of the Apostle: Grieve not the Holy Spirit (σάλευτε το πνεύμα) in whom (τῷ) you have been sealed for the day of redemption [Eph 4, 30].

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15 Dem. 6, 14 (1/292).
And the final result of honouring and not grieving the Spirit, according to Aphrahat, is that the Spirit will come to transform that person into the heavenly glory at the moment of resurrection. Aphrahat explains it:

Whosoever honours the Spirit, and it is guarded in him in purity, in that day the Holy Spirit shall protect him, and he shall become altogether of the Spirit, and shall not be found naked, as the Apostle said: And when we shall have clothed ourselves, may we not be found naked [2 Cor 5, 3].

Aphrahat emphasises here the idea that the whole human being will be transformed by Holy Spirit into a spiritual being. Indeed, it is the Spirit of the Messiah that becomes the glory of the human beings. A person in his totality will be in the Spirit and of the Spirit. The earthly reality of the human being is taken up or assumed into the heavenly reality of the Spirit and thereby he becomes a spiritual being, united with the Holy Spirit. For Aphrahat, this is the final ‘divinisation’ or ‘spiritualisation’ of the human being, that is, his pneumatic state. In fact, this glorious state of a person is the same as that which the Messiah has already attained for humankind, namely the Risen Lord filled with the Spirit. Here it is also interesting to notice that Aphrahat’s thought on the total transformation of a human being into the Holy Spirit is in agreement with the Odist’s idea of being lifted up to heaven in the Spirit of the Lord.

Thus we see that Aphrahat’s vision of an eschatological intervention of the Spirit in the life of a Christian believer is something very important. It shows how Aphrahat understood correctly the Pauline teaching on the Spirit as an agent of resurrection and has developed the same idea in a considerable way.

16 Dem. 6, 18 (I/308).
17 Cf. Ode 36, 1.
5. The Symbols of the Holy Spirit

Finally, one important area where we find substantial reflections on the Holy Spirit in the Early Syriac literature is the use of Symbols. In fact, what interested the early authors was the symbols that underscore the life-giving activity of the Spirit. Certainly, a predominant biblical symbol of the Spirit like water is well exploited. At the same time, it is to be noted that the Spirit as fire is not at all seen during this very early period of Syriac Christianity.

Here is it is also important to mention the great interest that was shown during this very early period of Syriac Christianity to speak of the Spirit in terms of feminine gender. In all the three sources, the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat we have found instances where the Holy Spirit is construed as feminine in gender.

First of all, a very vivid maternal imagery of the Spirit is presented by the Odist in Ode 28, 1-2:

1. As the wings of doves over their nestlings,
   And the mouths of their nestlings towards their mouths,
   So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.

2. My heart continually refreshes itself and leaps for joy,
   Like the babe who leaps for joy in his mother’s womb.\(^\text{19}\)

These lines explain meaningfully the motherly protection that the Spirit extends to believers whereby they experience joy and confidence in their Lord Messiah. The Holy Spirit protects the believers and their life is lived under the direction and help of the Spirit who acts like a mother toward her little ones.

In Aphrahat also, as we have seen above, the baptismal activity of the Spirit is compared to a mother giving birth to her children. The presence of the Spirit at the baptismal water makes the baptismal font to symbolise “a spiritual womb,” whereby Christians are reborn as the children of God; here the Spirit functions like a mother at this new birth of baptism.

Now, what was the motive behind this feminine characterisation of the Holy Spirit? In the theological vision of the early Syriac authors, the Holy Spirit represented by a feminine-maternal imagery communicated to the believers the idea that the Spirit is the fecundity of God Himself, the generating and life-giving force both of the Father and the Son, opened up to all Christian believers in order to achieve their divinisation.

**Conclusion**

Concluding these brief reflections, I would like to underline the fact that it is in the process of living and re-living the mysteries of the Messiah, namely in the liturgical actions, that the early Syriac tradition has formulated, articulated and handed down faith in the Holy Spirit, an important aspect of Christian Trinitarian confession. This recognition invites us today to find out ways and means to re-emphasise the role of the Spirit in the celebration of the mysteries and thereby to make the believers experience that the reality of being saved by the Messiah involves an active life in the Spirit of the Messiah, the Holy Spirit. And, the most fitting title of the Holy Spirit in the early Syriac tradition is “the Spirit of Life” because as envisioned by this tradition right from
the beginning, it is inevitably through the action of the Spirit that the divine life, brought by the Messiah, is imparted to all the believers who confess their faith in the Messiah.

As expressed and lived by the early Syriac tradition, examined through the sources of our study, we arrived at the conclusion that, for this tradition, it is in and only through the activity of the Holy Spirit that a Christian believer is near to God and enters into a full experience of the new relationship between God and man established by the redemptive work of the Messiah. By placing the Spirit at the centre of the salvific experience of a Christian believer the early Syriac tradition proved indeed that the Spirit is divine.
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