




Pahlavi Text and Imagery Context of the “Persian Cross” in South-India: Part II

Shilanand Hemraj

Linguist and epigraphic-palaeographic researcher,
(Allahabad University), Bangalore

(Continued from the earlier issue of AJRS)

B - Inculturated exegesis of the imagery setting

(1) Shape of the Cross: [see stylized presentation (a)]
The Holy Cross has short, almost equilateral arms with four flowery ends. It is a blossoming cross, celebrating joyous victory over death. It is a source of blessing, not very dissimilar from an ancient blissful symbol, called “svastikaḥ” (or in early Christian usage “crux gammata”, composed of four Greek capitals of the letter gamma Γ as ). In Delitzsch’s Hebrew New Testament the word for “cross” is “š^elâbh”, related to Arabic, and adopted in many languages, for instance in Urdu/Hindi as “salīb”. Another term in Indian languages is “sûlī”, although the Sanskrit “śûlâ” originally means a stake for cruel impalement. In the ancient Vedic “puruṣa-medhaḥ” (human sacrifice) the victim was tied to a wooden post, called “yûpaḥ”. Not finding a proper equivalent for cross, Sanskrit translators have used general words for pillar

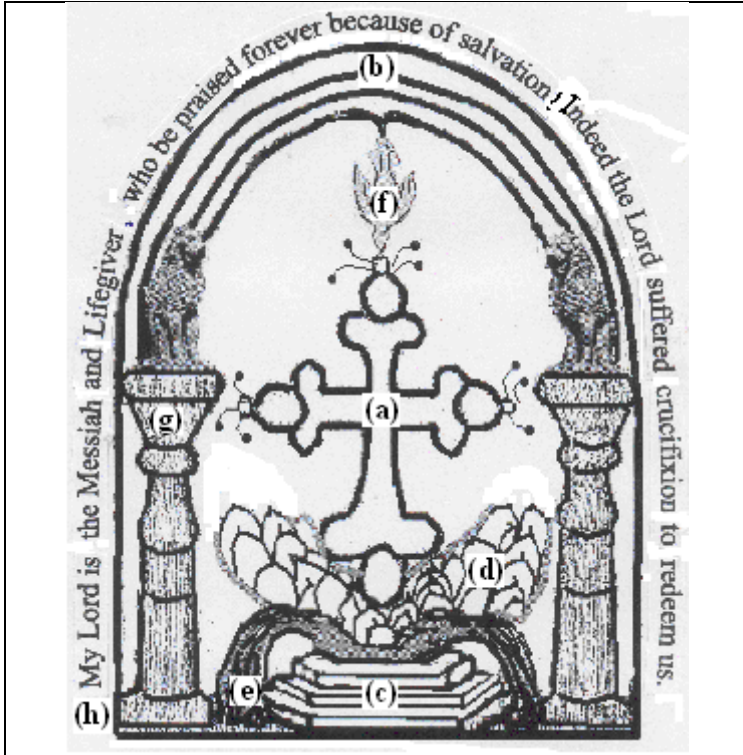
like “sthûṇâ, stambhaḥ”, or they created the neologist term “krûsaḥ”. It could be designated more easily as “taruḥ”, a tree – which is the very related term “dâru”, used in the Persian language of the inscription. But sacrificial death on a live tree is a contradiction; it cannot be the end. A budding tree-cross symbolizes “the tree of life” (Rev 22:2). The sacred tree is a primordial object of veneration in our common human heritage. Just to mention the wishful “kalpa”-tree in heaven which fulfils all desires, the “bodhi”-tree of enlightenment and the undecaying “akṣaya”-tree which withstands the onslaught of the cosmic deluge. Hence, in many a country of Asia, the rich symbolism of the cross with flowery design cannot be considered to be a foreign import.

(2) Floral protrusions: To specify this kind of cross as “blossomed”, one could use the Sanskrit term “su-puṣṭita” (well-flowered) or, with powerful connotation, “su-dalita” (the root “dal-” having two opposite meanings: to crush or to bloom). As a matter of fact, many are not only socially stigmatized as “dalita-s”, marginalized and outcaste, but oppressed and depressed in several ways, yearning for liberation. The liberative cross instills a radical existential dignity of all humans as being “su-dalita” and urges for its concrete realization. The cross is also called “Nasrani Cross”, and by coincidence, the term “Nasrani” (for Christian) expresses the blossoming of new life in the Messiah, because it refers to the prophetic text of Isaiah 11:1, which has been applied to the Messiah, coming forth from the roots of Jesse as a (royal, Davidic) “new shoot” – “nêṣer” in Hebrew, translated “branch” in English, but “anthos”, that is “flower” in the Greek Septuagint and “flos” in the

Latin Vulgate. Therefore, the Hebrew translator of the Greek New Testament opted for spelling the name of Jesus the Nazarean as “Yêšûa’ han-Nâṣ^erî” (written with ṣâdhê), relying thereby on a possible interpretation of Nazareth as a flower-city (“Puṣpa-nagaram” in Sanskrit) rather than a Nazarite city (“naz^erî”, written with zayin, meaning consecrated, separated by vow, see Numbers 6:1-21). Hence, the reference to Christians as “Nâṣ^erîm” in Acts 24:5 would give them the nomination and responsibility of being a “su-dalita” people, according to another text of Isaiah: “Your people shall all be righteous. They are the shoot (nêṣer) that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified” (60:21). Their ensign is the “sudalita” cross, lifted up for the benefit of all nations (62:10), spreading the fragrance of divine benevolence. The appellation “sudalita” makes them all equally fellow-pilgrims on the Noble Path, advancing together in mutual service and love.

Stylized presentation of the symbols carved on the Persian Cross at St Thomas Mount, Chennai with running English translation of the inscription

- (a) Flowery Cross
- (b) Arch with three layers
- (c) Pedestal with three steps
- (d) Lotus-like flower
- (e) Flow of water
- (f) Descending dove
- (g) Twin pillars with lion capital
- (h) Proposed translation



(3) Empty cross: Also typical for this early cross is the absence of any figure of the Crucified Nazarean. This implies a double truth: he is fully human, as proven by his inhuman death on the cross; but he is also uniquely human, because his sacrificial surrender unto death is believed to have turned into life, as indicated by the empty tomb. It underscores the true humanity of Jesus, albeit through transformation, resurrection – while the mystery of his personhood is to be acknowledged (see below). According to the Pahlavi inscription, the Lord endured real suffering on the tree; but it was for life-giving redemption. In him, the first Adam died to sin, but

the new Adam rose to life. There is hope and expectation for our broken humanity. According to the Puruṣa-sūkta of Ṛigveda, the Primeval Man was sacrificed for the sake of creating a universe of harmonious differentiations, with an idealized human complementarity of social functions represented by “mouth, arms, thighs and feet” (10:90:12). But in reality humanity fragmented into disunity, injustice and a rigid oppressive caste-system. Through the sacrifice of the uniquely Human, the Lord “Su-mukun-dah” (good-salvation-giver, which is the Sanskrit equivalent of his name Yêṣûa’), the wall of division was pulled down and the curtain of separation torn apart: a new humanity of unity and dignity was created, into which the firstfruits, the first “su-dalita” followers of the risen “Su-Guru” (good-Master) were initiated. A few centuries later, the symbol of the flowering cross emerged in the East. The so-called “Persian Cross” was designed, hewn and inscribed even before the spread of Islam. Does the emptiness of this cross, without any human representation, suggests a “replacement”, if we may use an expression of the Holy Quran, Surat 4:157-8 ? It is quite meaningful to say that God could not have allowed the prophet Messiah to be cursed on the tree and to be annihilated, and therefore the Almighty had him “replaced” and lifted him up to heavenly life! But, according to Nazarene interpretation, it was in the same person that the old Man was put to death and “replaced” by the new Man of righteousness.

The foundation of our faith is first to accept Jesus as a fully human being and never to diminish his humanity. Yet, the empty cross leads to silence, so that a deep mystery might be revealed. By not presenting a crucifix with a realistic portrayal of the Messiah suffering on the Cross, the accusation is precluded that

he is being worshipped as “a god”. There is no idol. He is not the “avatâra” of some pre-existing divine being, neither is he divinized on the cross. If one were to use the term “person” univocally, without proper knowledge, and say that the second divine “Person”, the eternal “Son of God” descended in our midst and underwent crucifixion, then the concrete “person” suffering before our eyes would not be the truly human Jesus of Nazareth. There would be only an appearance, an apparent human being, the result of “lîlâ”, a divine play of love. In fact, the New Testament does not use the term “Son of God” apart from its application to the human Jesus, and never in the sense of a pre-incarnational, eternal, uncreated “Son of God”, and certainly not as a distinct autonomous divine “Person”. Due to misunderstanding the Cross has been a cause of religious divide, whereas Christian faith has always upheld absolute monotheism, “one Godhead, one might, one majesty, one power, one glory, one Lordship, one kingdom, one will and truth” (Tome of pope Damasus, after the Council of Constantinople, 382 – we have to restrict ourselves to an early dogmatic expression, which predates the lower sixth century limit of the inscription). The silent empty Thomas-Cross needs further clarification, because some have cast doubt about the orthodoxy of its imagery, especially whether the descending dove would not suggest adoptionism.

(4) The explanatory text: The most likely meaning (as justified above) of the Pahlavi inscription surrounding the cross [see stylized presentation (h)] maintains that the Messiah is the Giver of life, the Bringer of salvation – which could not be proclaimed about any human being as such, though innocent, dying in utter wretchedness.

The inscription begins with the title “My Lord”, echoing the exclamation of the doubting Thomas, when identifying the Crucified one: “My Lord and my God!” (Jo 20:28). The believing Thomas does not make Jesus into another Lord-God. It is his response to the unexpected manifestation of God’s closeness in the very apparition of the Master, whose wounds he was invited to touch. This surrender of faith was uttered supposedly by a Jewish disciple and recorded by a Jewish evangelist, both remaining strict monotheists. God’s truthfulness and loving mercy were fully recognized in the human Master, as being totally united with God. But no second divinity is constituted by the mystery that a created, human person is fully united to God, being totally assumed by God. The disciple Thomas acknowledged that one, and only one divine Lordship was revealed to him in the resurrected Master, marked with the scars of his suffering out of love. The empty cross declares blessed those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. So also the community is invited to realize and experience that the life-giving God is manifested in the concretely human Messiah, who is identified with the dual messianic title of “Son of Man” as the universally human representative and “Son of God” because of his unique, loving and obedient relationship to God, as his (motherly) Father, the Parent of all fellow-humans. All of us are called finally to share in this relationship of oneness with God, as “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pe 1:4), through growing faithfulness to the voice of the Spirit in our hearts and through increasing love for one another. The mystery is that the “Word” of God, without division, without otherness, without alteration, spoke in creation, events and prophetic utterances and finally the perfect human was assumed by God as his total self-expression from the

very moment of his conception and birth, throughout his hidden Nazareth life, more forcefully in his baptism and ministry, and most explicitly as suffering and exalted Servant in his death and resurrection. As it is testified in the inscription, for all this the Lord “is ever to be praised” and all this he underwent “in order to redeem us”.

Hence, true “darśanam” (contemplation) of this Cross is directed to the human as mystery of manifested divine Love. In an attitude of “Suguru-bhakti” (devotion to the Good Master) the controversy about which of the two natures, human or divine, prevails becomes irrelevant. The Nestorian, Monophysite and Latin christologies of double nature, single nature and joined nature are silenced before the Cross. They are like the subtle “vâda-s” or theories of Indian religious philosophy – whether there is “dvaita” dualism (of Absolute Self and relative self), “advaita” monism (only one Reality) or composite “dvaitâdvaita” relationship. The supplementary artistic imagery, carved in relief around the cross, is intended to help a better understanding of the mystery.

(5) The pedestal beneath consists of three steps or layers [see stylized presentation (c)]. They remind us of the steps leading gradually from Solomon’s temple court to the inner sanctuary. They represent the whole created world in ascending order: matter, life and mind; like the three “guṇa-s” or essential qualities of inert “tamas”, dynamic “rajas” and spiritual “sattvam”; they cover all regions of earthly “bhûr”, airy “bhuvā” and atmospheric “svah”, leading from unreal to real, from dark to light and from death to immortality. When a Vedic “vedikâ”

or altar is prepared, bricks are arranged in layers, symbolizing cosmic elements and spheres, numbered according to the type of sacrifice. Here, the cross is planted on top, as it was on Calvary hill. The created humanity of Jesus summarizes, draws and lifts up the whole of universal creation (Eph 1:10). We share in his humanity and are called to love one another as he loved us, with all our strength, with all our heart and with all our mind!

(6) The arch above [see (b)] has also threefold layers; but they are enclosed in a central parenthesis as one. They represent the heavenly realm, the eternal, uncreated, divine. It reflects faith in the undivided Unity of Trinity, not unlike the Indian concept of Absolute oneness of Brahman, as mono-syllabic AUM (A-U-M) and fulness of “Sat-Cit-Ânanda” (Being-Self-Bliss). The arch overshadows the Cross, because without division or alteration the perfectly human Jesus was to be God’s fullest Self-Wording of love. The unspeakable mystery of the living God could be expressed in mystic language as a perennial “inner” breathing, where “Sat”, the Source of its own Being, exhales Self “Cit” as its own eternal Word (Śabdaḥ), and inhales Self again in eternal blissful “Âtmânanda” while returning to never decreasing fullness, from fullness to fullness (pūrṇam). God is pure Love and his immutable selfgiving is revealed so to speak in the once-for-all process of “outer” breathing, where exhalation is the self-expression of “Sat” until it reaches the final point of creation, the perfect Human, being assumed by the divine Word. The inhalation is then the re-creation from essential creaturely limitedness towards the plenitude of spiritual fulfilment; yet, in reality, due to the option of our freedom for sinful enslavement, it is a redemptive recreation of all humanity by the sanctifying

Spirit towards final self-realization in sharing the life of God! The turning point from exhalation to inhalation consists of three main stages in the life of Jesus, who is the perfect-human-united-to-the-divine: first, the conception leading to nativity; secondly, baptism as inauguration of the Messianic ministry and thirdly, the passover from crucifixion to resurrection. Each time the Holy Spirit is powerfully present, as shown in the following three representations engraved below and above the cross.

(7) Figurative flowering: The base is adorned with an opened lotus-like flower.[(d)] Certainly, a white lotus evokes purity, even when floating on the surface of a muddy pool; and among other meanings it symbolizes the enlightenment of Lord Buddha; it is also pictured as the lotus-seat (padmâsana) of goddess Lakṣmî and it is chosen as the national flower of Mother India. But, in relation to the mystery of the Crucified One, the lotus suggests the beginning of the great turning point from creation to recreation, when the humble virgin of Nazareth accepted that she may conceive through the Holy Spirit, so that instantly the “union without confusion of the perfect humanity with the perfect divinity” may be realized (Formula of Union, after the Council of Ephesus, 433). Her child was named “The Lord saves” (Su-Mukunda) and “God with us” (Sahadeva). The Word of God, speaking in many ways, finally came to total self-expression in an individual historical person; but it does not mean that, in the same sense of “person”, it was an autonomous Divine “Person” before (a second God!).

(8) The flow of water: The same Spirit was seen descending “like a dove” on the Son of Man, who after being immersed in the river was confirmed through the heavenly voice to be the appointed, anointed Messiah at the start of his public ministry. Thus, at the base of the cross, on both sides of the lotus, water seems to be flowing like a river [see (e)]. Symbols have multiple meanings. In India, specially at the “tri-veṅī sangam” or triple confluence of holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna and invisible Sarasvati, a cleansing bath in the sacred water gives an experience of rebirth to the pilgrims. Water flows like a life-giving river from the new Temple (Ez 47). Both, living water and life-blood came forth from the pierced heart of the crucified Messiah. They represent baptismal cleansing and eucharistic revivification. Thus, the Cross is a “sacramental” sign. We are invited to believe and drink from the living water, which flows from the pierced side of the new Adam (Jo 7:38).

(9) Descent of a bird: Anyone commenting on the Cross will tell that a dove is seen descending on its summit [see (f)] and that it means the power of the Holy Spirit, bestowed on and by the Crucified Lord. Thus, he is declared “Mṛtyum-jayaḥ” (Conqueror of death), because in fulfilment of his great sacrifice of loving obedience, in name of all humanity, he gave up the Spirit (Jo 19:30) and being accepted by the heavenly Father, the risen Lord breathed on the disciples (20:22) and bequeathed his “Prāṇātmā” to the community at Pentecost. But nowhere in new-testamental context is the similitude of a “dove” mentioned any longer. However, in Indian sacrificial context, such a symbol is prominent. The “su-parṇaḥ” (well-winged) flying bird is imagined to bring the offering to the Supreme Lord and to bring back the blessing of “amṛtam” (nectar) to the sacrificer. Likewise, in eastern

liturgy at the Holy Qurban, the Holy Spirit is invoked to descend and consecrate our offering in memory of the once-for-all sacrifice of our Lord. From excavations at Kauśâmbî, near Allahabad, it appears that in the ancient “puruṣa-medhaḥ” (human sacrifice) the whole sacrificial area was delineated as a huge swift-flying bird of prey, called “śyenaḥ”. More interesting is the symbolic use of the bird “suparnaḥ” in Ṛgveda 1:35:7 for the beneficiary rays of the Sun : “The well-winged bird (suparnaḥ) has verily enlightened the atmospheric regions, as divine spirit (asuraḥ) of deep inspiration (literally, profound vibration) and good guidance”. The Holy Spirit is such all-pervading and penetrating inner voice for all humankind, which is being recreated and guided to reach its ultimate destiny in God.

(10) Twin pillars with lion capital: Two identical pillars have been carved, at the left and right side of the cross, with capitals surmounted by single lions facing each other [see (g)]. Immediately we think of the lion-capital on pillars, erected by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka. The pillar at Sarnath, with four lions seated back-to-back, has been accepted as India’s state emblem. A single lion capital, found for instance at Vaisali (Bihar), is less common. Such pillars in isolated position represent imperial power; but, since they also carry aloft a “dharma-cakra” (Wheel of the Law), they are meant to propagate righteous behaviour through the revolving discipline of the noble truths. In 1 Tim 3:15 the Church of the living God is called “the pillar and bulwark of the Truth”. However, when two pillars with a lion capital, or occasionally with an elephant capital, flank the entry to a shrine or temple, they serve as protectors and guardians. Sometimes mythic sphinxes and winged lions are sculptured

for the purpose. Two guardian cherubim were placed face-to-face at the two extremes of the ark of the covenant; overshadowing the mercy seat with their protective wings. They stand in attendance because of the Holy-Holy-Holy Presence. Here, the pillars support the three-layered arch of the Divine mystery of Oneness. But the person enthroned on the cross does not need protection; he himself is the royal Messiah. The mighty lion evokes victory, as in Rev 5:5: “See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has conquered”. Those who stand near the cross are the disciples, the royal priestly people. Their leaders are the pillars of the Church (Gal 2:9), especially the two martyred witnesses mentioned in Revelation, ch 11. If the apostle Thomas, meaning the Twin (“yamalaḥ” in Sanskrit – hence his Indian name as teacher “Yamal-âcârya” or apostle “Yamala-dûta”) was really martyred on St Thomas Mount near the “bleeding cross” of his Master, the twin pillars could be taken to mean that his witness deserves to be doubly reliable – since only “the testimony of two” is considered valid (Jo 8:17) and Thomas the Twin had wanted “to die with him” (11:16).

Our findings on the Pahlavi Text and our propositions on the Imagery Context of the blossomed “su-dalita” Cross should encourage the followers of “Śrî-Sumukunda”, as well as all “Suguru-bhakta” devotees and seekers, to obtain a blessed “darśanam” (contemplation) at such place of pilgrimage, wherever the Cross is venerated. What was legendary before, has become legible. Since the inscription is now relatively certain, a replica of the Cross could be displayed with a plain vernacular translation and a clearer depiction of the symbols and their possible meanings. Thanks be to God for having entrusted to the Indian community such a wondrous sign of universal salvation. Our gratitude to all those who have preserved for us this precious rock of faith, embedded in the soil of Indian

culture. Its message and symbolization may find reverberations in the “soul” of Asia at large!

Basic Bibliography

- Anthony Samy, S.J. *A Saga of Faith: St Thomas the Apostle of India*, Chennai, 2004
- Boyce, Mary. *A Word-List of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian*, *Acta Iranica* 9-a, Leiden, 1977
- Caturvedi, Sarada. *Concise Ancient Persian Grammar* (in Hindi), Varanasi, 1984
- Samuel, N. C. e.a. *Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum*, ass: *Dictionary of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (downloaded)
- Daniels, Peter T. & William Bright. *The World's Writing Systems*, Oxford Univ.Pr, 1996
- D'Souza, Herman. *In the Steps of St Thomas*, Mylapore, 2012
- Duchesne-Guillemin, J. *Religion of Ancient Iran*, Bombay, 1973 (Fr 1962)
- Gignoux, Philippe. “The Pahlavi Inscription on Mount Thomas Cross”, in Zivny Zevit e.a., *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots. Biblical, Epigraphic and Semitic Studies in Honour of Jonas C.Greenfield*, 1995, pp 411-416 (re-works the translation of G.Gropp, but continues the trend of finding the pious dedicator's name by reading: “May Lord Christ have mercy upon Sabr-Išo [=Jesus is my hope], son of Cahar-boxt ‘the mighty’ [a Mazdean name!] ...” Hence, quite disappointing for ‘solving the riddle’)
- Gorvala, R. “The Pahlavi inscription on the Kadmatham Cross”, *Indo-Iranica* 9, 1965
- Hambye, S. R. e.a.: Special issue of the *Clergy Monthly*, Nov 1952 at the occasion of the 19th centenary of the arrival of St Thomas in India.
- Hemraj, Shilanand. *Zend-Avesta: Holy Gathas* (in Hindi), Lucknow, 2014
- Henning, W. *A List of Middle-Persian and Parthian Words* (downloaded)

- Mangatt, George. "The Thomas Christians and the Persian Church", *Vidyajyoti*, Sept 1988
- Morano, Enrico. *My Kingdom is not of this World: Revisiting the great Parthian Crucifixion Hymn* (downloaded)
- Rahi, Isvarcandra. *History of the Art of Writing* (in Hindi), 2 vols, Lucknow 1983
- Sharma, G.R. *The Excavation at Kausambi*, Allahabad Univ., 1960
- Shrivastava, A.L. *Indian Art Symbols* (in Hindi), Allahabad, 1985
- Tresmontant, C. *Hebrew Prophetism* (in French) - On the Christology of Père Déodat, Paris 1982
- Kollaparambil, Jacob. "The Persian Crosses in India are Christian, not Manichaeism", in *Christian Orient*, vol. 15, 1994, pp 26-35.
- Pathikulangara, Varghese. *Mar Thomma Margam*, Kottayam, 1989
- Widengren, G. *Mani and Manichaeism*, W.Nicolson, London, 1965
- Wikipedia: main article on Syrian Malabar Nasrani and Knanaya
- www.nasrani.net and other sites on Pahlavi script and texts