

ܒܘܚܪܐ

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.





BUKHRA

THEOLOGICAL & LITURGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF

THE FIRST BORN IN SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

Joseph Thekkedath Puthenkudy

The term *Bukhra* (ܒܫܬܪܐ) 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).



Theologically, this role of Christ as *bukhra* is twofold: He is eternally begotten of the Father (pre-existent Sonship) and temporally born of the Virgin Mary (Incarnational firstborn), thereby bridging heaven and earth. As the firstborn from the dead, He inaugurates the resurrection of humanity (1 Corinthians 15:20–23), making the Church the assembly of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:23).

In contemporary Aramaic dialects, especially among the Chaldeans and Assyrians, *bukhra* remains understood, though its use has declined in colloquial and pastoral settings. Among Arabic-speaking Christians, the word has often been rendered into *al-bikr* (البكر) or *al-awwal* (الأول), which, while linguistically accurate, lack the fullness of the Syriac theological undertones (Butrus, 2010). The term *al-bikr* emphasizes chronological primacy but does not carry the sacrificial, liturgical, and Christological implications that *bukhra* does. The diminishing usage of *bukhra* in Arabic Christian theology reflects the broader erosion of native Syriac terminology and the subsequent loss of nuanced theological thought embedded in those terms.

Within the East Syriac liturgical tradition, including the Chaldean and Syro-Malabar Churches, *bukhra* features prominently in the Eucharistic texts and festal hymns. The ancient Anaphora of Addai and Mari, for instance, contains references to Christ as the *Bukhra d'Alaha*, emphasizing His sacrificial and eschatological roles. In the Syro-Malabar Church, the pre-1962 Syriac *Thaksa* preserved the term faithfully. However, post-1962 vernacular liturgical reforms often translated *bukhra* as *aadya jaathan* (ആദ്യജാതൻ, firstborn) or *eka jaathan* (ഏകജാതൻ, only begotten) in Malayalam. While these are semantic equivalents (*thathbhavam*), they do not always carry the ontological or liturgical resonance of the original term. Vadakkekara (2007) notes that such translations may have been necessary for intelligibility but inevitably reduced the theological depth of the original Syriac.

The question arises whether terms like *bukhra* can be reintroduced into vernacular worship. From a theological perspective, the answer is a resounding yes. Language in liturgy is not merely a medium but a vessel of revelation. Recovering Syriac terms such as *bukhra* can reconnect the faithful with the depth and richness of their liturgical heritage. In the Syro-Malabar context, integrating terms like *bukhra* into liturgical poetry, catechetical programs, or even musical compositions could foster both continuity and catechesis. Such restoration should not be seen as a return to archaism but as a renewal of theological memory. As the postconciliar Church reclaims her Eastern identity, preserving key theological terms becomes essential for spiritual and ecclesial identity.

Among the Chaldeans, particularly in Iraq and diaspora communities, *bukhra* continues to be used in liturgical Aramaic (Sureth) and survives in hymns and anaphoras. However,



in Arabic-language liturgies or catechism, the term is often replaced by *al-bikr* or *al-maseeh al-awwal* (the first Messiah). Toma (2016) observes that some liturgical translations in Iraq are attempting to preserve Syriac terms through transliteration, especially for terms with deep theological significance such as *Qurbana* and *Bukhra*. This transliteration effort demonstrates a commitment to maintaining theological accuracy and spiritual depth even in Arabic contexts. The Chaldean example offers a model that the Syro-Malabar Church could follow in its bilingual or trilingual liturgical settings.

In conclusion, *bukhra* is a word of profound theological resonance, bridging Scripture, liturgy, and ecclesiology. It speaks of Christ's eternal Sonship, His Incarnate mission, His Resurrection, and the Church's vocation as the first fruits of redemption. While linguistic transitions and vernacular reforms have obscured this term in some modern contexts, its revival offers rich possibilities. Recovering *bukhra* as a theological and liturgical category would reinforce the East Syriac Church's identity and provide future generations with a deeper connection to their apostolic and patristic roots. In doing so, the Church does not merely restore a word, but reclaims a mystery.

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