

Anointing of the Sick in the East Syriac Fathers Perspective

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Introduction

It is commonly believed that the anointing of the sick, which is received by a sick believer, should only be given on his deathbed. As if it were the anointing of death and not the anointing of healing. But the truth is completely different. Christ only wanted to heal the sick during the days of his earthly ministry, and he wanted the church to continue on this path through the apostles. We start from the Holy Bible and end with a detailed historical presentation of the use of the anointing of the sick in the Church of the East.

The biblical Dimension

There are two main sources on the anointing of the sick in the New Testament.

- The first source is in the Gospel of Mark (6:13): “And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them”. This text shows that the apostles' special ministry in healing the sick through anointing was an extension of Christ's own ministry, even though Jesus was still in his earthly message.
- The second source is the apostolic commandment of James (5:14-15): "If any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the

prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he has committed sins, it shall be forgiven him."

We understand from this scriptural text that the anointing oil does not only grant physical healing to the infected, but also brings forgiveness of sin to believers who trust in the power of the Lord by faith through the sacrament of priesthood. Through our traditional Biblical journey, we find the substance of the sacrament, namely the laying on of hands in the sense of blessing on the one hand, and the anointing with oil on the other hand.

The Anointing of the Sick in the Fathers of the Church of the East

It is well known that all church ceremonies must be performed in the church, with the exception of the anointing of the sick. This apostolical practice is undoubtedly part of the liturgical, theological and biblical heritage of the Church of the East. Although the Anointing of the Sick isn't considered one of the seven sacraments in the Church of the East, however, Patriarch Mar Timothy II (14th. Century) counts it in his treatise on the sacraments because it owns the character of conveying the grace of God to the patient, whether physically or spiritually. Moreover, this Anointing should be administered by the ecclesiastical Priesthood handed down by the apostles, which is liturgically performed through the anointing with holy oil that becomes a means through which God works in bringing about healing to human. Besides Mar Timothy II, only Mar Aphrahat calls the anointing a Mystery: "the fruit of the glorious olive tree, which contains the sign of the mystery of life, by which Christians, priests, kings and prophets are perfected. You anoint the sick and by His

hidden mystery restore the repentant. Here we are talking about the mystery of anointing in baptism and the anointing of the sick and the repentant".¹

The life of Mar Abba the Catholicos tells how he blessed oil during his contagious illness. This was then used to anoint the patient who was thus healed. Mar Abba also sent blessed oil to a possessed woman. She anointed herself and the devil left her.²

In one of the canons of the Council of the year 554 we read: If a believer who is afflicted with a disease is guided by pagan practices such as magic and incantations, he must be given a means of healing: the sick person is given the oil of prayer blessed by the priests, blessed water, fasting, prayer and constant vigil until the satanic ways are dispelled from his mind..³ The Chronicle of Seert records how Saint Mar Abda prayed over a sick pagan and anointed him with the oil of blessing.⁴

In the questions concerning baptism, there is talk of the holy oil of grace, given to those in need of grace. The oil of anointing is used exclusively for baptism.⁵ . Shortly afterwards it is said that the oil of the holy grace is given to the sick.⁶ In this text it is about oil and not about Khnana. This is coming clear through the following question: And the oil which the priest sanctified and anointed the baptized with and poured into the horn of grace, with which he sealed the oil he sanctified. What is the answer: the anointing oil or the oil

¹ Aphrahat, Demonstrations, J. Parisot, in Patr. Syr. I, 9, 4-8.

² O. Braun, Ausgewählte Akten persischer Märtyrer mit einem Anhang: Ostsyrisches Mönchtum, Kempten-München 1915, 207.

³ يوسف حبي، مجامع كنيسة المشرق، 310

⁴ The Chronicle of Seert, Patrologia Orientalis, XIII, 588.

⁵ Questions about the Baptism, Vat. Syr. 150. F. 55 r.

⁶ Ibid, f. 55 v - 56 r.

of grace? The answer: Such a mixture is not permissible.⁷ The writer Alsemani quotes a text from the Church Fathers about the anointing of the sick, where it is described as the priest's duty to lay hands on the sick until they are healed. This is a clear reference to oil.⁸

It is worth noting that the Indian Bishop Joseph, who has referred to this subject several times before, explained that the people of Malabar were not accustomed to performing the rite of last anointment, but were limited to blessing bodies instead.⁹ The writer Mansi, based on the Council of Diamber, also asserts that the people of Malabar did not know the rite of the anointing of the sick.¹⁰ William of Rubruck also testifies that the anointing of the sick was not used by the Fathers of the Church of the East in Mongolia. They had the oil of blessing, which William himself used for the last anointing of a dying man, because he did not have oil for the sick. It has been proven that the oil of blessing was used in some limited cases of the sick.¹¹ However, this anointing was not called a "sacrament" in the first centuries of the history of the Church of the East, nor was it attributed to divine designation.

According to the rite of the Church of the East, the priest recites the prayer over the oil with which he anoints the sick, he says: " O, True Physician whose

⁷ Ibid, f. 54 v – 55 r.

⁸ Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Rome 1725, III, 2, 276.

⁹ Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, , III, 2, 271.

¹⁰ J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collection*. T. 35 Diamperitana Synodus in Malabaria, 1272.

¹¹ Van Den Wyngaert, *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol. I, Quaracchi – Firenze 1929, 284. The Erküt use a ceremony called anointing the dying. The priest anoints the entire body of the sick person with juice from the fruit of the Sophora from Japan. Since we have no other evidence for the existence of anointing of the sick among the Mongols, it seems very unlikely to assume that anointing of the sick is a surviving practice here. See: A. Mostaert, *Les Erküt descendants des chrétiens médiévaux chez les Mongols ordors*. In: *Bulletin of the Cath. University of Peking*, 1934, 13.

¹¹ Joseph Kelaita, *the liturgy of the church of the east*, 195.

word is full of every well-being, every aid and every healing, you O my Lord do make your grace to dwell in this Oil, that it may be a helper and healer of all our illnesses and pains, a cooler of our afflictions, a reliever of our vexations a healer of our pains, a purifier of our sores, a destroyer of our fever. May it be found suitable for every healing and every aid in the wholeness which you have prepared for us by it. "¹²

KHNANA - (ܟܢܢܐ)

Besides the oil used to anoint the sick, there was another method of healing in the ancient East Syriac tradition, which is the Khnana (ܟܢܢܐ), which contains soil collected from the tombs of martyrs, where blood was shed for the name of Christ and is considered holy ground and it coincides to be the same location where the Church of the East was centered and where the Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Shimon bar Sabbae and his comrades were martyred for the sake of their faith in Christ during the times of a Persian king who worshiped the sun. In the end of the Persian persecution of the Church of the East in the late fourth century, it was collected from the tombs of the saints by faithful believers and mixed with olive oil to be used as a healing blessing. However, at present, Khnana is only used in marriage rituals in the Church of the East.¹³

Khnana (ܟܢܢܐ) was certainly considered a kind of substitute for the anointing of the sick. It had already been mentioned several times in the chronicle of Seert. Saint Mar Abda gave a khnana to pagan sick people and healed them.¹⁴

¹² Joseph Kelaita, the liturgy of the church of the east, 195.

¹³ The Rite of marriage of the church of the east, Baghdad 1995, 20.

¹⁴ The Chronicle of Seert, Patrologia Orientalis, XIII, 588.

Elsewhere it is mentioned how a khnana is used as a kind of good luck charm. The man who was treated by the governor was advised by the monk Shemon to carry a khnana with him when he goes to the governor.¹⁵ The holy Rabban Khoudahwi gave sick people Khnana to drink and they were cured.¹⁶ Also, it is not permissible to use Khnana as jewelry or ornament on the forehead of children.¹⁷

It is worth mentioning that Mar Jacob of Edessa (640-5708) answered a question regarding the healing of the sick through Khnana. The Question: “is it right for a priest to give Hagarenes (Muslims) or pagans who are possessed by evil spirit some blessings from the holy ones or, holy water mixed with the dust of relics, that is (Khnana - **كهنانة**), and spread them on so that they might be healed? The Answer: By all means, no one should hinder anything like this. Rather, it should be given to them for whatever sickness it might be. For I need not to say that while you should give them some of the blessings, it is God who gives them health. Clearly it is right for you to give this to them without hinderance.”¹⁸ In the biography of Saint Michael the Companion of the Angels (who lived in the late fourth century AD),¹⁹ it is mentioned that the ruler of one of the villages whose inhabitants were Magi, was suffering from the possession of an evil spirit, and suffered greatly because of it. But after he gave him the holy blessing that included soil taken from the graves of the martyrs, mixed with oil from the hand of the saint from “Khnana”, he was healed. This soil was a blessing and a medicine for

¹⁵ Ibid, 449.

¹⁶ Ibid, 593.

¹⁷ Ibid, 596.

¹⁸ Michael Philip Penn, When Christians first met Muslims, California 2015, 169-170.

¹⁹ Khudra, II, 391.

the sick believers, spiritually and physically.²⁰ The biography also mentions Saint Mar Yarith, the monk who was one of Mar Eugene's disciples, who healed a Magian who was suffering from a terminal illness after he believed in Christ as his savior. He prayed over him and gave him soil from "Khnana" mixed with water, and he was healed at the same moment. the writer Fosti recounts the ritual of making a khnana,²¹

In addition, the writer Voste relates the ritual of making a khnana, whereby soil should be taken from the place where the martyrs were crowned. This soil is placed in a container with oil and water. You should then make threads from the mixture and let them dry on a piece of linen cloth. At last, one should take the soil of the grace of St. Thomas from the grave of St. Thomas and sprinkle it in the sign of a cross in the vessel in which the threads were placed. It is said: "This soil is anointed and sanctified by the grace of the Apostle St. Thomas for the health and healing of body and soul in the name of the Father, etc."²² According to the Alsemani writer, khnana with water is given to the children to drink.²³

As for the liturgical aspect, there are many ritual texts in the Book of Khudra that indicate that "khnana" as earth was used for physical and spiritual healing. However, we will cite one text as follows: "They were crowned with the sword, they were cooked by fire, they were thrown before wild beasts, they were drowned in the seas. The oppressors were not satisfied with this, but after their death, they crushed and ground their bones and threw their dust

²⁰ Addai Sher, History of the most famous Eastern Martyrs, Vol. II, Mosel- 1906, 105.

²¹ شهداء المشرق ، 273.

²² I. M. Voste, pontificate according to the rite of the Church of the Eastern Syrians, that is, of the Chaldeans. IV, Vatikan 1937-1938, 399. Assemani, Bibliotheca Orientalis, III, 277.

²³ Assemani, Bibliotheca Orientalis, III, 2, 279.

into the seas. The sons of darkness hoped that their master would not be able to revive them. They mocked the sword and despised the fire with the power they received from their Lord. From their dust, a khnana was made to drive away evil spirits and tyrants. Christ strengthens the martyrs with their struggle and preserves our assembly with their prayers."²⁴

Conclusion

The Church shares the sick people their suffering, so the priest prays with the sick person's family for him so that he may receive healing for his body and soul through anointing with oil and obtain divine grace for him. In the anointing of the sick we find deep meanings that completely surpass the meaning that most Christians imagine of the richness of salvation and suffering dedication to God. Through this anointing, God offers His salvation and His covenant, in return to the believer, and based on God's gift to the believer, he responds to God and accepts salvation and enters into His sonship with the incarnate Son for our salvation. The fruits of the anointing of the sick nourish the entire being of man, since the mystery of anointing stands on two basic poles: physical and psychological health and together they provide a spiritual life through the forgiveness of sins.

²⁴ Khudra, Vol.I, 29.