

Jesus Christ as Medicine of Life. A St. Ephrem Christological perspective

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*Blessed be the shepherd, who became
the lamb our atonement!
Blessed be the Vineshoot, which became
the chalice for our salvation!
Blessed also be the Grape,
the source of the Medicine of Life!
Blessed also be the Farmer, who became
the wheat which was sown
and the sheaf which was harvested!
(Hymn on Nativity 3:15)*

In the ancient civilized societies, health and diseases were allied with deities and hence, often magic and medicine went together. The Indian Vedic Text ‘Atharva Veda’ contains prayers against diseases. In China, health and disease are integrated into the philosophy of the Tao and the two polar principles, the *yin* and the *yang*. In ancient Egypt, people believed that pain and sickness are caused by the gods and goddesses.

But today ‘Health and Healing’ are under the purview of a new deity, Global Market Economy. New inventions and innovations to health care have moderately tainted the relationship of medicine to medical ethics. The Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) on the products and processes of the medical world ended up in a new ‘Medi-Ethics’ – “Profiteering from the sick! As a student of Praxis Theology, cannot close my eyes towards the ongoing tyranny in the healing scenario. In this very context where the health concerns are at its zenith, St. Ephrem’s healing imagery “Jesus as Medicine of Life” (a Christological perspective) has not only theological implications, but also ethical implications in today’s Christendom.

St. Ephrem the Syrian, a celebrated poet-theologian and musician of the 4th century, portrayed Jesus as the ‘Medicine of Life’ in the context of salvation (The other terms that are harmonized by Ephrem for Jesus Christ in the healing context are Paradise’s fragrance and Tree of Life). In Paradise, Adam and Eve enjoyed good health. Ephrem considers their life in Paradise to be a ‘companion of well-being’. To put it in nut shell, Adam and Eve were created rich in health. According to Ephrem, both Adam and Eve were created in an intermediate state, neither mortal nor immortal. However, through their freewill they were permitted to decide.

When they had sinned against God, they came underneath the vicinity of curse and pains. In Ephrem’s analysis, there are two agents that cause sin and sickness – external and internal. The external is Evil one (satan) and the internal is one’s freewill. To be precise, sin is the consequence of the influence of the Evil One and the misuse of freewill. In the beginning, sin persuaded human history through disobedience, eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The fruit was offered by the serpent to Eve and then to Adam and thereby the serpent led the inhabitants of Paradise to sin. Thus, the poisonous advice of the Evil One instigated the Fall of Adam and Eve. Later sin continues in many different ways – desire, greed etc.

Ephrem compares freewill with the honorableness of God. Freewill enables human beings to decide between good and evil. By the freewill, Adam and Eve plucked the fruit which contains the 'poison of death'. Thus, the transgression of the divine commandment and the eating of the fruit were the first wrong decision of freewill. So Ephrem is on the view that freewill is a spring of all visible and invisible diseases.

Ephrem portrays Jesus as the Medicine of life in the light of incarnation. Ephrem continues, "He is the healer of everything who came down from heaven as the 'medicine of life' to heal humanity from its state of sickness". With his 'Good News, Compassion and Caring' Jesus granted perfect healing and restoration to humanity. Jesus' passion, Cross, His garment, His word and hand contributed to the healing. Jesus, the 'Medicine of life' and the 'Physician', has been sent to fulfill what wants in humanity for restoration.

The food offered by the Evil One poisoned the life of Adam and Eve in the Paradise. At the last supper, Jesus offered himself in the form of bread and wine as against the poison offered by the Evil One. Thus, bread and wine (his Body and Blood) became the medicine of life. Jesus' healing ministry has not ceased with him, but continues with his disciples, saints, martyrs and the sacraments of the Church through the priestly ministry. We became the part of Jesus' healing process through the Church's Sacraments – by the water and oil of Baptism and Eucharistic bread and wine, Holy Qurbano. For Ephrem, healing of world is considered to be a second creation. So Jesus Christ, the son of God, came down from heaven as the 'Medicine of life' to heal not only humanity, but also creation as a whole.

Today our world is diseased heavily. The zeal of 'exploring new opportunities and discovering new horizons' has diseased not only the human nature but also the nature of the world. We too are consuming the poisonous food by our own freewill. In these days our wants and greed lay red carpet to more destruction. When Adam and Eve were poisoned by the Evil one, they were expelled from the richness of health. The unseen fluctuations in every corner of inhabited earth are impact of our poisoned nature and thereby we too are loosing the richness of health. It's high time to post a second thought to our deficiencies that which leads to devastations. The medicine offered by Jesus Christ against the poisoned food was his own Body and Blood. When we take part in the Holy Qurbano, we are accepting communion with him, since his Body and Blood became the ingredients of our own very life. The Holy Week which proclaims the passion of Christ towards the redemption of the humanity and the inhabited world may lead us to that realization "**I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly**" (John 10:10). Let us adore that Lamb, Jesus Christ who slaughtered for the medicine of life.