

# **ST. CHAVARA, A FATHER OF THE EASTERN CHURCH**

## **Biblical and Theological Perspectives**

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### **1. Introduction**

The Fathers of the Church are those revered men who gave leadership in the early Church, especially in *defending, expounding* and *developing* Christian doctrines in their formative years. For the first two centuries, most of these leaders were bishops. However, later, certain eminent priests and deacons were also recognized as Fathers for their contribution to the Church. In the following pages we discuss the biblical and theological perspectives on the Father of the Church and see how, in that light, St Kuriakose Elias Chavara could be considered a Father of the Eastern Church.

### **2. The Tradition of the Fathers**

Jesus gave the twelve disciples, the Apostles, the power of *ruling, teaching* and *sanctifying* as he appointed them to continue his work on earth once he moved away from the scene. The Twelve bequeathed to their own disciples the faith, experience and the teachings that they had received from the Lord. The earliest leaders of the Church *after* the Twelve Apostles and *within* two generations of the Twelve are usually called the Apostolic Fathers since tradition describes them as having been taught by the Twelve. The significant Apostolic Fathers include Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna.

Following the period of the Apostolic Fathers come the Church Fathers who are ancient and generally influential Christian theologians, some of whom were eminent teachers. The term is used of writers or teachers of the Church not necessarily 'saints'. For instance, Origen Adamantius and Tertullian are considered Church Fathers but are not saints.

Generally, in order to recognize someone as a Father of the Church in the West, four major conditions are to be met and certain

characteristics are to be exhibited in his life and works. These are *antiquity*, meaning that he lived before the eighth century;<sup>1</sup> doctrinal *orthodoxy* in teachings; personal *sanctity*; and *approval* by the Church.

### **3. The Biblical Perspectives on the *Father***

The Church, the family of God, is among other things, a divinely ordained society and as in all societies there must be an authority whose word is final if chaos is to be avoided. The Jews, for example, had patriarchs, judges and the then kings as well as prophets to carry out this function in various ways. Ordinary human experience shows that the need for authority is primary. However, the justification for the existence of authority is neither that it works perfectly, for the authorities are human beings; nor that it never makes mistakes, but simply the rule, that in the absence an authority, there is no orderly society. This authority in most society is exercised by a father-figure.

The Bible is the written record of the reflection on the self-revelation of a God who is essentially revealed, understood and proclaimed as father.<sup>2</sup> However, the modern world has a place for a group of individuals with its own ethical norms based mainly on hedonism that inadvertently aims at establishing a world of brotherhood and sorority without a father or mother. Based on the experiences of the biblical fathers and mothers for whom family life provided the means of exercising authority in a spirit of love, and in contrast with the objectionable manner in which others with a different ethical standard, transferred these human realities to their gods, the people of the Old Testament reveal the love and authority of the living God mainly by means of the images of father and spouse.<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament abounds in these images that are attributed to God. To a great extent, the spirituality of the Old Testament was based on the relationship the people had with God whom they considered to be their creator, Father. This understanding of the creator God as the Father had a history of evolution as is seen in the following discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>The death of St. John Damascene in around 750 AD is generally regarded as the close of the age of the Fathers in the Western Church. The Oriental Churches seem to be flexible with regard to this dead-line.

<sup>2</sup>We will not consider the patriarchal baggage the terminology carries.

<sup>3</sup>We consider the fact that images are, however, only means of understanding and expressing an idea and as such, they are extremely limited.

#### 4. The Pentateuchal Patriarchs

The story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the three Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis is an interrelated story of the first three generations of people<sup>4</sup> whom God was trying to mould into an example of a nation that would bring glory to His name. The overall message of the Holy Scriptures depends on the essential features of the three Patriarchs who allowed themselves to be used by God, in order to lay a foundation to the "people of God."

##### 4.1. Important Features of Abraham

Abraham could not only hear God's voice (Gen 12:1), he could see God (12:7) and he was willing to obey (12:4) trusting that God would reward him as promised in the Covenant (12:2-3). Paul considers the Abrahamic Covenant as based totally on God's grace as he uses the expression "according to grace" (Rom 4:16). Abraham was the recipient of an unmerited grace of God (Lk 1:72-73) because God chose him to move to Canaan, a fertile land almost as if God was giving him the opportunity to establish his family in a reinstated blessing of creation in a land like the Garden of Eden.<sup>5</sup> Because he could see and hear God, Abraham was obedient and trusting.

Abraham had agricultural skills and the ability to manage his servants and he became wealthy (Gen 13:1). He was a good warrior and his wealth enabled him to have hired hands enough to defeat several hostile kings (14:13-17). His prestige had grown and he was declared "blessed" by the mysterious Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest of the "most High God" (14:18-20). Abraham became great, because he was a man to be reckoned with even in kingly affairs (14:17-18). By giving a tithe to Melchizedek, and refusing to accept gifts from the king of Sodom (14:20-23), Abraham foreshadowed and authenticated David's rule in Jerusalem (Ps 110), and later Jesus' role as High Priest and King (Heb 7).

Even though Abraham's faith sometimes wavered (as in the matter of Sarah's barrenness), he believed God's promises, and that was "counted unto him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Abraham obviously loved his favoured son Isaac (22:2), nevertheless was obedient to God

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<sup>4</sup>In this analysis, we do not go into a discussion on the actual relationship between these three patriarchs. There is a possibility that they were heroes of the past whom they employed as they reconstructed their story as a family.

<sup>5</sup>P. N. Tarazi, *The Old Testament an Introduction: Volume 1 Historical Traditions*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003, 10.

by his willingness to sacrifice even what was dearest to him (22:2-11). He set a very high standard for faith even in the Church (Heb 11:8-10), an example for the subsequent prophets and apostles to follow for centuries.

Other essential features of Abraham were that he was hospitable to strangers (18:3-8), courageous when dealing with the Lord, advocated for less faithful persons (18:23), was kind and just to the oppressed as he dealt with Hagar (20:14) and compassionate even to sinners in Sodom (18:23-32) and Abimelech (20:17). Despite family rivalry inflamed by Sarah and Hagar, both of his sons respected him so much that they came together to honour and bury their father when he died (25:9). No wonder, Abraham heads the list of the patriarchs as he became an example of a father both in faith and action.

#### **4.2. Important Features of Isaac**

Isaac is the only Patriarch who was born and died in Canaan. He never left it. His life typified Christian believers more than either his father or his sons (Rom 9:6-8). Isaac respected and obeyed his father to a fault. As a youth,<sup>6</sup> he willingly accompanied his father to Mount Moriah where he was to be sacrificed (22:3-11). It was said that while Abraham passed this test of faith, Isaac passed this test as well. Isaac remained at home while his father's servant went to find him a wife, who he first married and then loved (24:67). Unlike his father and sons, Isaac did not try to "assist" God in fathering a proper heir.<sup>7</sup> When he was 60 years old and his wife still seemed barren and he "pleaded with the Lord" (25:21) for Rebecca to conceive. In a way, his faith in the promise of the Lord seems stronger than that of Abraham, his father.

Although Isaac was wealthy (26:13) he was a peaceful man, less of a warrior than his father and did not instigate conflict like his son Jacob, using diplomacy to resolve quarrels (26:22-32). Like his father, Isaac was a man of his word. He refused to withdraw a blessing that was

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<sup>6</sup>Although the English translations use the word "boy" to describe him, the Hebrew word can mean anything from an infant to a young man of military age (see 1Chron 12:28). While the text does not give the age of the boy Isaac, we know that he was big and strong enough to carry enough firewood intended to burn a body the size of a ram (22:6), so he must have been at least a teenager and Abraham an old man of at least 113 years.

<sup>7</sup>The reference is to Hagar who gave Abraham a son and Bilhah and Zilpah who gave Jacob two sons each.

extorted out of him by Jacob and his mother by deceit (27:33). To keep peace and safety in the family, he commanded his son Jacob, to flee to the safety of his extended family in Padan Aram where he hoped Jacob would find a suitable wife (28:1-5). Isaac understood that God's promise of blessing consisted in fully sharing God's earth with the original inhabitants of Canaan, which was his homeland and he would not leave it! As a patriarch, he lived in relative peace, silence and obscurity compared to his more illustrious father and more industrious son whose story we consider below.

### 4.3. Important Features of Jacob

Jacob, the younger son of Isaac is shrewd and crafty. He is not as controlled by his impulsive passions as his brother Esau who sold his birth-right for a bowl of soup (25:32-34) and married against his parent's wishes (26:34). Jacob obviously placed a higher value on the birth-right and blessing from his father. His mother must have seen some quality in Jacob that made him a better candidate for the blessing and primogeniture.<sup>8</sup> In spite of the craftiness and conspiracy, Jacob is not a total villain. During his flight away from home, he had a vision of Heaven and angels and a repetition of the Covenant made to Abraham and Isaac (28:12-15). This put the fear of God into him (28:17). Assuming that God needed a house, he lays a foundation stone of a temple. He further promises to build it at this site of Bethel on the condition that God would keep his side of the bargain (28:18-20). Through various experiences, God taught Jacob to obey (Is 66:1-4) and follow his ancestors' ways with God.

In Haran, despite Laban's trickery, Jacob remains righteous (30:33). Jacob becomes the father of many sons (29:31 - 30:24). He is a means of blessing to Laban (30:27, 30) as per the promise to Abraham, his grandfather. He becomes wealthy despite Laban's swindling (30:25-43). Yahweh protects him from Laban's anger, transforming them into a covenant brothers (31:17-55). Upon leaving him, Jacob acknowledged the help of God (31:9-13, 42).

Back in the Promised Land, Jacob became a softer and kinder father. However, he had to pay a heavy price for his life of deceit which resulted in so much sibling rivalry (37:3-4). His heart is broken by the loss of his favoured son Joseph (37:34-35). Going into Egypt, Jacob's fortunes turned around. He had the honour of blessing the powerful

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<sup>8</sup>The conspiracy to trick Isaac was shocking by its impudence. It almost seems as if the story of Jacob is included as an example of how not to be a Patriarch.

Pharaoh (47:10) indicating that his name had become respected and great. His deathbed scene is set with an individual prophetic blessing for each of his twelve sons (Gen 49). Through various ups and downs in life, the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise of a nation takes place in Jacob, as in his children he laid the foundation for the future history of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as the *fathers* of the people of God, were pioneers in many respects. Biblically, since the Mosaic Law was still a concern of the future, God expected His people living under the Abrahamic Covenant to live righteous lives. Obedience to the Law did not earn eternal salvation under the Abrahamic Covenant (see Rom 4:1-22). Instead, their faith was demonstrated by their obedience to God (Jam 2:21-22). On this obedience, the future law would be founded.

All the three Patriarchs struggled against obstacles to the realization of God's covenantal promise, but their most essential feature was their faith in God's Covenant. The three of them are considered patriarchs for they were able to lay a foundation to the morality of a people and a tribal social structure. Above all, they believed that God was with them. The promise of blessing, of land, of increase, of God's presence, and the respect of the nations was not merely based on the Patriarch's achievements, but the grace of God.

For the reasons given above, the ancestors were revered among the people of Israel. The long line of the ancestors, according to the reconstructed history of the people of Israel, was headed by these patriarchs *par excellence*, in whom the race was founded. These ancestors were considered to be so powerful materially and spiritually that the blessings and curses from them counted. For instance, although prior to Abraham, the curse on the son of Ham included the subordination of the Canaanites to the sons of Shem. In like manner, the greatness of Israel in various levels was already present in the election and blessing of Abraham (Gen 9:20-27; 12:2). The lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the revered patriarchs of the people of Israel, were marked by the promise of innumerable descendants and a fertile country. The early history of the people of Israel was written in the intricate details of their lives, activities and sojourns, which became normative for the people. In the same way, the history of the neighboring people was written into the history of Lot and his daughters, Ishmael and Esau who were also patriarchs on their own rights, but were excluded from the promises for various reasons (Gen 19:30-38;

21:12f.; 36:1). This methodical inclusion and exclusion of individuals from the ancestral lines was also pedagogical for the people. As a theocratic society was being formed, this process taught the members what was acceptable as a norm in religion and society and what was not.

## 5. The Shifting Perspectives on the *Father*

Since there is a vital relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament based on continuity, the latter takes up the image of the father and perfects it. Standing in the Jewish tradition, Jesus takes the concept of the fatherhood of God a step further by revealing his own unique sonship. The New Testament goes ahead with the unheard of notion that this filiation of Jesus secures the paternity of God for all human beings everywhere at all times. The transference of the meaning of the *father* from the physical to the social and then to the spiritual sphere could be followed in the ensuing discussion.

### 5.1. The Fathers: the Vertical Plane

In order to have a notion of the biblical base of the *Father of the Church*, it is crucial to understand the vital functions of the father in a Hebrew family, which, as we have seen above has a critical relationship to the way God also was understood in that society. On the vertical plane,<sup>9</sup> the father was head of a line of descendants and the link with the line.

Biblically speaking, fatherhood was the only way a man could perpetuate his name. Thus the concern for male heirs was a primary element in biblical narratives (1Sam 1). By procreating, he perpetuated himself (Gen 21:12; 48:16); he contributed to the continuance of his race, assuring that the family possessions would go to his issue (15:2f.). If he died without a son, he was considered as having been punished by God (Num 3:4; 27:3f.).

In the patriarchal worldview of Israel, the father was the fulcrum of family life, and his house was the basic unit of the biblical society, in which the family was called *beth ab*, "father's house" (Gen 34:19). Since

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<sup>9</sup>When we consider the two planes – vertical and horizontal – we do not refer to the two-fold human relationship: the human and divine. Here both these planes refer to human relationship. Here, horizontal plane refers to the social connotation of the father, which is not essentially and strictly related to a family of filial relationships.

the father wielded the ultimate power in the family, the wife recognized him as the master (*ba'al*, Gen 20:3) and lord (*adon*, Gen 18:12). This honour was given to him since he was considered to be pivotal point in the family, for upon him the future of the family depended. The responsibility of the father included the education of the children – often exclusively boys (Sir 30:1-13). It was a father's central religious duty to see that his son was circumcised into the covenant (Lev 12:3) and instructed properly in the Torah (Deut 11:19). He negotiated the marriage settlements (Gen 24:2ff; 28:1f) by means of which he ensured the stability of the family.

In the Hebrew society, the father exercised absolute authority over his children. Sons were expected to refrain from any conduct that shamed their fathers (Lev 18:7-8). Disrespect of any kind, physical violence, arrogant speech, or a rebellious attitude towards the father carried severe punishment including death penalty (Exod 21:15; Lev 20:9; Deut 22:18-21). He was responsible for the freedom of the girls (Ex 21:7) who did not have as many rights as the boys and whose status within the household was often inferior and sometimes precarious (2 Sam 13). He supervised the behavior (Num 12:14) of the women who lived within the *beth ab*. They returned to his control if they were widowed without children. If their behavior shamed him, they deserved death (Gen 38:24; see also Judg 11:35-36). In short, in the Old Testament milieu, the entire life of the children (Gen 38:24; 42:37) depended on him as in him the whole family was incarnate. Above all these, he was looked upon as the assurance of the unity of the family (Gen 32:11).

Subsequently, when Israel became a tribal confederacy, each tribe attributed to its ancestor of the same name the responsibility for its place at the tribal meetings (Gen 49:4). In the various family trees that are found in various parts of the scripture marked the place of each ancestor. However, while expressing relationships other than or more complex than ties of blood (Gen 10), these genealogies systematized the paternal lineages and stressed the importance of ancestors whose actions had involved the future and the rights of their descendants. The Hebrew family tree (Gen 5:1) orders the sequence of the generations in relationship with the divine election and salvation by showing a continuity between Adam himself (creation) and the patriarchs (election).

## **5.2. The Fathers: the Horizontal Plane**

On the horizontal plane, the father who was considered to be the uncontested head of the family, by analogy began to be applied to



relationships that are beyond familial. First of all, somewhere in the evolution the people of God, the term *house* began to denote an entire clan (Zech 12:12ff.) like "the house of Joseph." Secondly, an expanded notion of *house* was seen in an important fraction of the people like "the house of David" (Ps 122:5), which included the entire kingdom of Judah. Finally, the term referred even the entire people as in the expression of "the house of Israel." In all these, the authority of the leader of these groups was conceived analogically in the image of the *father* of the family (Jer 35:18).

Outside of the tribal set up in Israel, the term *father* was equivocal. To begin with, in various monarchies, the monarch was considered as the "father" of the nation that he ruled (Is 9:5). Then, the name of *father* was applied to priests (Jg 17:10; 18:19) who in the ancient societies stood next in line to the monarch. Again, the term referred to the royal counselors (Gen 45:8; Esth 3:13f.; 8:12) on account of the sagacity and influence that they wielded. Yet again, the term was applied to the prophets of Israel (2 Kings 2:12) based on the word of God they employed in order to instruct the people. Finally, on account of their authority as educators, whose teachings affected the daily life of the people, the wise men of the society (Prov 1:8, Is 19:11) were acclaimed as *fathers*. By their influence on the horizontal plane, all these five kinds of *fathers* contributed immensely in various ways and in various capacities to prepare the people of Israel as a unique people to receive God's salvation. Most of them also made their contribution towards preparing the people to recognize God as the *Father*.

### 5.3. The Fathers: Beyond the Racial Race

In the pages above, considering paternity on both vertical and horizontal planes, we limited our discussion to the *children of Abraham*. Although the patriarchs were the fathers *par excellence* of the chosen people, yet, eventually, it was not only by reason of their physical paternity that they were considered fathers, but also because of the promises that God made to them from time to time. These promises had their implications far beyond the considerations of race. Since Abraham was the Father of Faith, what was promised to him could be attained ultimately by all who imitate his faith, irrespective of their racial roots. The stress begins to shift from an exclusive race to an inclusive holy nation which might include people of other races as well. The people of Israel were gradually, but with some difficulty, led to this belief by

means of the haggadic Book of Jonah. This teaching was perfected by Paul for the New Israel as he held that their paternity "according to the flesh" (Rom 4:1) was only the temporary condition of a spiritual and universal paternity based on the permanence and coherence of the salvific plan of a God unceasingly at work from the election of Abraham until the glorification of Jesus (Exod 3:15; Acts 3:13).

The gloss of the earlier rosy picture of a pure Israelite race of the pure blood of Abraham, had faded in the more critical prophets. Ezekiel wonders: Is not the race of Israel impure from the beginning according to the lineage of the fathers as well as the mothers? (Ezek 16:3). Moreover, the author of the Chronicles himself admits the relationship of some of his people with pagan clans (1Chron 2:18-55). Some of the prophets hint at the possibility of the proselytes joining the people of the promises (Is 56:3-8; see also 2Chron 6:32f.). Gradually, in spite of the several nationalist uprisings, the salutary paternity of Abraham and the great ancestors was actualized no longer by race but by faith and the corresponding works.

Perhaps it is because of the exposure that the Greek translators (the Jews in the Diaspora) of the Hebrew Bible received in Alexandria that instead of magnifying the chosen race, they (the translators of the LXX) suggest the idea that all the nations in the universe will one day share in the blessing of Abraham because all are blessed in him. This tendency of the universalist streams was given a great momentum in the New Testament times by John the Baptist and Jesus. John's message is clear: "From these stones, God can raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:9). Jesus clearly taught that the Kingdom of God would welcome a spiritual posterity of believers (Mt 8:11) for if there is a filiation with Abraham that is necessary for salvation, it is the imitation of the faith of the patriarch (Jn 8:33, 39f.).

#### **5.4. From Fathers to the Father**

The notion of the *father* expanded as the horizon of the understanding the people of Israel broadened. From the familial through the tribal, racial and national, the notion took a climactic connotation as it reached the universal. This happened when the fatherhood of the ancestors began to be conceived as something spiritual. The seed of this notion was already found in the scripture as it indicated with regard to Abraham whose name

meant "father of a multitude" of peoples (Gen 17:5). Moreover, the promise of Gen 12:3: "Through you will all the nations of the earth bless themselves" as mentioned already, becomes in the Greek translation: "In you will be blessed ..." (Sir 44:21; Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8).

Paul is the theologian of the broad understanding of the spiritual paternity. The idea was prepared in the Old Testament, during the exile and especially in the latter prophets. The deportations, especially, the Babylonian one was a bolt from the blue. It played havoc in the lives of the people of Israel and called their ancestral assumptions into question. They began to shift the attribute of fatherhood to a higher plane. God never appeared so clearly as the one *Father* of His people as He did in those times when the heritage of the physical ancestors (Ezek 33:24) had been appropriated by the intruders. To the stunned and disillusioned Israelite exiles, Abraham and Jacob seemed to forget their posterity (Is 63:16). In the midst of and partly as a result of this traumatic trial, a "qualitative Israel" was being formed, an Israel to which not all the sons of Abraham according to the flesh belonged. Only those who imitated his search for justice, his hope (Is 51:1ff.) and his faith belonged to this Israel. In him the metaphor is extended to include the Lord's creation of Israel as a wider people (Exod 4:22; Deut 32:6; Is 63:16; 64:7). This understanding of God as *father* became a motive for observing the law (Deut 14:1) and for seeking divine compassion and forgiveness (Ps 103:13; Jer 3:19; 31:9, 20; Hos 2:1).

## 6. The Apostles and Their Successors as Fathers

Almost as it is in the horizontal plane where the prophets and sages and counsellors and others came to be considered as fathers, in the New Testament era, the apostles and their successors also, for similar reasons, came to be considered as fathers. In the following discussion, we consider how the early church understood apostles and elders and how the title was applied to various people throughout the history of the Church.

The view of Paul regarding the structure of the Church and the role of the apostles is found in his words to the Ephesians: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Eph 2:19, 20). Towards the end of the apostolic

period, in 97 AD, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Church at Corinth in which he mentions the succession in the Church. He notes that the apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ who has done so from God. Christ was sent forth by God, and the apostles were sent forth by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God.<sup>10</sup>

Having received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of the Lord, and been established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles went forth proclaiming the Good News that the kingdom of God was at hand. Preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits of their work, having first proved them by the Spirit, to be *elders* of those who would afterwards believe.<sup>11</sup>

The apostles knew, that here would be strife in the Church on various issues. For this reason, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those ministers and gave instructions,<sup>12</sup> that after them, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. This instruction has been followed in the Church to this day.

By 97 AD, the authorities in the Church were not apostles and prophets, but elders who had been appointed according to the standards laid down by the apostles. The qualifications for apostles were that they must have seen the risen Lord and have been appointed directly by Him. The apostles provided qualifications for the elders, and these qualifications would apply to future generations.

Those who were appointed by the apostles, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ in a humble, peaceable, and valiant spirit, and have for a long time led the Church courageously and have possessed the good opinion of all, are considered heroes of the Church. Some of them, in the history of the Church, are those blessed presbyters who, having defended, taught and guided the

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<sup>10</sup><http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1010.htm>

<sup>11</sup>A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A. C. Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997, 16; First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians chapter 42.

<sup>12</sup>Paul gives instructions on the qualifications and roles of the elders (Acts 20:28-31; Tit 1:5-9; 1Tim 3:1-7) and provided for their continuation (2Tim 2:2).

Church, finished their course in a heroic manner and have obtained a title that points to their role as the Fathers of the Church.

## 7. Theological Implications

In theological perspective, which has its foundation in the scripture, a significant ancestor who was considered as the patriarch, and various men of God who were called fathers and the apostles who were who were revered as fathers, in whose line, the fathers of the Church are considered today, had certain characteristic features, which could be found in Chavara as he lived in and for the Church.

### 7.1. Mandate from God

Fatherhood in this scheme must be part of God's call to spearhead a movement and protect, cherish and promote it valiantly and to become a blessing for oneself and for as many people in the future as possible. When one considers such functions as works of God, they become channels of grace. Depending upon the blessing that God grants, the initiative would have far reaching effects beyond the wildest imagination of the one who launches it. In so doing, they enter the *Father's work* of creating, sustaining, redeeming, and consummating and cooperate with it. As studies have proved, Chavara received the divine mandate to accomplish the foundations of the religious congregations that he co-founded.

### 7.2. Correspondence to God's Purpose

God's purpose is not that human beings should become angels, or even religious, but that they should become fully human. One becomes fully human by relating to God, building both the human community and the faith community, and thus becoming a blessing the nations. Chavara's personal future was not exclusively to be a saved immortal soul in heaven *up there* but to be a fully resurrected person in a totally renewed creation in a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21), which was brought about by means of the transformation of the society of his time.

### 7.3. Virtuous Undertaking

Faith, hope, and love are the main virtues, often repeated as a triad in scripture and mentioned singly dozens of times. Practicing these theological virtues heroically and seasoning one's

life with the cardinal virtues, one lights up the paths of others. The following are some of the criteria for considering what made Chavara's work good, humane, or virtuous.<sup>13</sup>

### **7.3.1. The Criterion of Objectivity**

One is immersed heart and soul, in the project undertaken as per the mandate given to him by the Lord, until it is realized. In order to strengthen the Church by means of literacy, and publication, Chavara would leave no stone unturned until he got what he positively desired to accomplish.

### **7.3.2. The Criterion of Worth**

The *fathers* contributed to the advancement and adornment of human existence, often at a crucial turning point in the life of the Church. The innovative social and spiritual projects that Chavara launched for the uplift of the families and the communities that he founded in order to enhance the quality of life both in the society and religion proved to be of immense value at the time and ever since.

### **7.3.3. The Criterion of Humanity**

Any work that uses people as mere instruments is excluded in this scheme. Every human being is intrinsically valuable. It is because Chavara knew the real worth of humanity that he took upon himself the all-round development of human being in his society. He envisioned a society where education and other facilities did not come to a member on account of his high birth, which was usually the case. Everyone was valuable.

### **7.3.4. The Criterion of Reflectivity**

Since the *father* is in constant relationship with the divine, the internal exercise of reflection and contemplation and the expression of some of it in literature must not be excluded. Chavara's contemplative life reflected in his apostolic activities enriched his prayer life. They were mutually so complementary that one wonders how he could integrate the mysticism that he practiced and the projects that he undertook and further, could put it the experiences into black and white.

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<sup>13</sup>See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 Vols., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-1961, vol. 3, 535.

### 7.3.5. The Criterion of Universality

Since the Church is universal, the work undertaken by a leader of the Church in one part of the world has universal ecclesial implications. Although Chavara belonged to a ritual tradition, when it came to relate to the fellow humans, he went beyond the boundaries of rites. Ecclesiastically speaking, for instance, although he wrote to Rome requesting for indigenous bishops for the particular Church that he was part of, his outlook was so universal that he was generous enough to incorporate the pious practices of another particular Church in order to enliven the faith-life of the faithful.

## 8. Chavara as an Eastern Church Father

A closer look at the life of Chavara reveals that, like the fathers of old, as a pioneer in many of his undertakings, Chavara possessed most of the traits of the biblical patriarchs in one form or another. In addition to these, in the following discussion we look at how, based on his contributions that are ecclesial, spiritual and social, he can be considered a unique Father of the Eastern Church.

### 8.1. The Ecclesial Liturgical Contributions

Chavara realized that a real renewal of the Malabar Church is possible only based on the Word of God and the Liturgy. He learnt Syriac and Latin, the liturgical languages with great zeal and enthusiasm. Ordering the rubrics of the Holy Qurbana, the codification of the Canonical prayers for the clergy, introduction of several para-liturgical practices such as Eucharistic adoration, way of the cross, rosary devotion, novenas to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, etc., brought about a revival in the spiritual life of the ordinary faithful of the Malabar Church.

Chavara prepared the *Tukasa*, the 'Order of the Mass' to ensure the celebration of the Eucharist with devotion, attention and order. He prepared and got it printed in 1868.<sup>14</sup> It was a remarkable work, which was used by the Church for almost a century as the only means to bring about uniformity in the rubrics of the liturgical celebration. The compilation of the Divine Office recited by priests was another notable service of Chavara. The prayers that were currently in use were gathered from four different sources, namely, *Hudra*, *Kaskol*, *Gaza*, and

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<sup>14</sup>*Positio*, 308; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 267-268.

*Kala* and it was not easy to recite it in an orderly and uniform manner. The priests were inclined almost to ignore its use. Chavara took up the challenge of preparing a handy Divine Office.<sup>15</sup> Later, when he became the Vicar General he revised it and sent it to Rome for approval, printed it and made available for the use of the priests. Chavara was conscientious also in compiling the Divine Office for the use the sisters at Koonammavu. The Chronicle of the Convent at Koonammavu records that he compiled it in his own hand marked it with different colours of ink to make them understand the order in which it was to be recited and gave them practice accordingly.<sup>16</sup>

Since there was no special liturgical service on Holy Saturday in the Syrian rite, he translated the Holy Saturday service of the Latin liturgy into Syriac for the use in Syrian churches. In this regard he wrote to Cardinal Simeon, the head of the Propaganda Congregation in 1864: "Our churches remain closed on that day like the Jewish Synagogues. So I request you to approve it for us and send it back as early as possible."<sup>17</sup> Chavara was a man of reading and reflection. In his letter to the sisters at Koonammavu, he wrote: "The time you save after your proper work and recreation should be spent in spiritual reading. Read the books that give you knowledge and devotion, if you love reading, you will love solitude. When a soul delights in solitude Jesus Christ will come to converse with it in solitude and begin communing with it."<sup>18</sup>

## 8.2. Spiritual Writings

Some of the works of Chavara are grouped together in spiritual and literary works on account of their nature. *Atmanutapam* is a poetic work. In the work he reminisces his early life and outpours his sense of gratitude for the ineffable love and mercy of God. At the same time he laments over his own shortcomings. *Parvam/Pana (Dirge/Song of Mourning)* is Chavara's reflection on death, resurrection and eternal life. A canto for the use in a bereaved family at the demise of a loved one (*Marana Veetil Paduwanulla Pana*) notes the importance of a life focused on heavenly bliss. *The Martyrdom of Anastasia*, the first

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<sup>15</sup>Porukara, *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, 30; P. J. Podipara, *Nammude Ritu (Our Rite)*, Mannanam: St Joseph's Press, 1943, 132f.

<sup>16</sup>CSK Vol. IV, 22.

<sup>17</sup>CWC Vol. IV, 1990, 11; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 277.

<sup>18</sup>CWC Vol IV, *Letters*, 1990, 85.



Malayalam Spiritual Lyric (*Khanda-kavyam*), composed in 1861<sup>19</sup> is the story of a courageous virgin martyr of the early Church that enthused the community to remain firm in faith. In the context of the Roccas episode, it meant to encourage his people to uphold loyalty to the one Holy Catholic Church. *Dhyanasallapangal* expresses the God-experience and contemplative dimension of Chavara between 1866 and 1868.<sup>20</sup>

His most intimate feelings reveal his childlike innocence. *Chavarul is The Testament of a Loving Father*, written towards the end of his life, meant to transform the family, the domestic Church, into a heavenly abode according to the plan of the Creator. He wrote it for his own parishioners as a sign of his indebtedness and concern for them.<sup>21</sup> It gives inspiration and guidelines to families and it has a lasting relevance. *Ecologues* are pastoral dramatic plays (1855-1856),<sup>22</sup> the first of its kind in Indian Literature. These depict the Paschal Mystery in art form meant to deepen the spirituality and to impart the Gospel message in young people. Chavara was a prolific writer who wrote in the vernacular as did some of the fathers of the Church in their time. His writings were heterogeneous. Whatever may be the nature of the writing, one can notice in it a biblical, salvation historical and mystical flavour. The writings reveal the very personal and spiritual experiences, outlooks and insights of the author. All these literary works played a significant role in awakening and nurturing the spirituality of the Malabar Church.

### 8.3. Social Contributions

Chronicles that Chavara recorded throughout his life and the letters that he wrote to various individuals on various occasions are considered here. He had a very keen sense of history and ability to record with great accuracy. These pieces of literature illustrate the socio-political life of Kerala and the history of the Church of his time. These writings reflect his historical consciousness, farsightedness, honesty in recording and the sense of justice. They are a window to the

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<sup>19</sup>CWC Vol. II, *Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, 1989, 129-172; Mundadan, *Chavara*, 366-368.

<sup>20</sup>CWC Vol. III, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1990.

<sup>21</sup>Chavara, *Testament of a Loving Father*, Kakkannad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2014.

<sup>22</sup>J. Paul, *Idaya Natakangal (Ecologues: Shepherd Plays) by Chavara Kuriakose Elias*, Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2014.

great personality that Chavara was as could be deduced from the following discussion on his contributions at various levels.

### **8.3.1. Chavara as a Pioneer**

On account of the visual effect of the glowing trail that a shooting star leaves in the dark sky, it is also called a trailblazer. Analogically, the term is used for such rare personalities who, on account of their great contributions to the society, in a particular walk of life or several of them. They are also called trailblazers, for they blaze a trail for others to follow through wilderness, desert or untreaded terrains of life. Trailblazers are fast in pace and they loathe mediocrity that turns people into trailers rather than trailblazers. It is easier to be trailers of that which pulls you. It helps escape responsibility and security is guaranteed by that object that does the pulling. Chavara was such a trailblazer doing exciting work that could shape various fields of activities for decades and centuries to come.

### **8.3.2. Chavara as a Pace-Setter**

An innovator in any field of endeavour is one of the first to introduce into reality something better than ever before. This introduction, in turn, opens up new areas for others to follow suit. Such a person lives and moves in a society, which gradually begins to revolve around him because he is able to provide end-to-end solutions to the issues that he confronts in the society and helps members of the society bring their imaginations into reality. Often, an innovator is a very active consumer of and contributor to the cultural riches of a society and his novel and innovative ways reflect cultivated tastes for upscale standards.

With dogged tenacity Chavara worked in pursuit of that which he saw in the eye of his mind. Very often he was successful and sophisticated. He showed how the energy inherent in people could be put to new or better uses in order to expand opportunities for or enhance the present status of the society. Like the shooting stars, innovators are few and far between but, that part of the society that was touched by the effect of this star eventually begins to feel the change from within. However, the world is full of imitators who for the right reason look up to the innovators like Chavara, for inspiration and direction.

### **8.3.3. Chavara as a Moderniser**

A trendsetter is an early adopter, who visualizes and brings into existence, and further into use, a fashion or trend before most other people begin to think of it. Subsequently, everyone else follows him. Trends are usually long lasting and indicative of a broader cultural shift as exemplified by the broad adoption of the educational initiatives in the nineteenth century South India by Chavara, in response to the educational initiatives of the Catholic Church. Sometimes trendsetters are so unconventional that their words, deeds, and innovations are not based on the well-accepted standards of the society. Chavara, the trendsetter was so versatile that that he offered enough flexibility to suit the needs of the times. This flexibility helped him form a cushion between two generations whose merge is often uneasy and jolting. He worked and accomplished missions faster than his historical average.

### **8.3.4. Chavara as a Developer**

Pioneers start popular movements for the sake of the society. Their place is in the heart of the society. Often they do the fundamental work that will spawn future innovations and set new trends. The breakthroughs that the pioneers achieve in various fields will be taken up by tomorrow's leaders who share the vision of the pioneer. Often they take charge of the situation because they are people with high self-esteem. Since their resources from within are abundant, they exhibit motivations in high degrees. Chavara was not only a leader who brought about change, but he was also most receptive to new ideas. His vision in conceiving a movement, courage in pushing it to the limits to get it off the ground and persistence in keeping its momentum, left a trail for others in the field.

### **8.3.5. Chavara as an Originator**

Inventors are those who identify a need of the society and are bent on meeting the need by finding a solution in remarkably novel ways. They are often immersed in presenting the society with something new. The passions and creations of Chavara reflect a cultivated taste for finer things in life – more refined and more perfect than that of the past generations. What is invented by him carries a mark of his taste, because the invention is the externalization of his independence and personality. Despite the fact that he was among the emerging leaders

in a given area of taste, he continued to seek and meet challenges. Versatility is his hallmark that his life is characterized by variety.

### **8.3.6. Chavara as a Visionary**

Visionaries are those farsighted people, who, for the sake of the society, are able to gaze into the future and are able to visualise cutting-edge initiatives and solutions for the vexing issues that the members of the society are grappling with. Thanks to the experiences of engaging with the challenges he encounters, a visionary is able to engage with a wide cross section of the society where there is an opportunity to interact with raw realities of life. Chavara visualised dynamic platforms to bring together people with a similar vision, from various walks of life, to have a unity in purpose and encourage integrated action that matches the complexity of the issues that the society faces. Each section of the society was his concern that he either launched or became instrumental in launching initiatives that promoted women and the marginalised and ensured the participation of individuals and groups, men and women in the social and spiritual development and change.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was one of the luminaries that appeared in the overcast skies over India and left a well-defined trail for many a man and woman of the following generations to find paths that are answers to the burning issues of faith and morals that they faced in their locale, time, and society. The manner in which he left his mark on various areas of life, lighting up the ways for generations to come, would invite men and women not only to continue the various humanitarian projects that he undertook and the spiritual pursuits that he made, but also to be blazers of new trails in responding to the needs of the present time whose exigencies and priorities are very different from those of his times.

This Indian priest spearheaded an impressive number of initiatives, including a publishing house, several institutes, and two religious congregations - all aimed at maintaining and promoting the cultural and social present and preservation of Catholicism in the modern world. He intervened on behalf of the Church in Kerala at several turning points in her history. The interventions that he made at the arrival of an unauthorised Bishop, a request that he made for a separate bishop for the Syro Malabar Church and the liturgical practices that he implemented in the Church speak not only of leadership but also the vision that he had for the Church in Malabar. As one of the greatest scholars of his age, his educational initiatives

that addressed the challenges of the formal education system offered a viable alternative that enhanced the access to quality education for people from low-resource backgrounds.

Chavara reportedly drew his strength from the hours he had spent in contemplation each day. The secret of his intense and busy life is found in the long hours he gave to prayer. He preferred to pause before the Blessed Sacrament, to gain spiritual fortitude and return to gaining people's hearts, to bring them back to the sources of life by means of fresh pastoral initiatives. Engaging himself socially, spiritually, and intellectually in his society, Chavara became a true herald of the good times to come, a Father of the Church.

## 9. Conclusion

In the event of the canonization of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the universal Church has deigned to recognise the sanctity of his life and the orthodoxy of his faith and teachings. On this occasion, having scrutinized his life, works, and contributions to the life of the Universal and particular Churches, the society, religion, and politics we deem it highly opportune to explore the possibility of considering Chavara as an Eastern Church Father for the following reasons: to honour the saint with a deserving title at the high point of the saga of studies, prayers, and symposia on the life, activities, and writings of the saint; to let the Christian Churches in the East hear the tales of the luminary and his likes in the East that set their skies ablaze; to honour the original vision that held a particular Church together in peril; for various voices in the East to be heard when they raise them for a reason as Chavara did; to make this voice officially available to those who would like to listen to them; and to celebrate the scholarly and valuable studies and research done on the Person and contributions of Chavara, a true Father of the Church.

The present issue of the *Herald of the East* showcases the literary thoughts of Chavara. In the first three entries, we make a journey through the poetical contributions of Chavara in general, after which we concentrate on one of them - the most liked and most read *Atmanutapam*. We look at the composition from mystical, Indian theological and linguistic points of view and explore the interpretative possibilities inherent in the reservoir of meaning in the poem. We also look at the vision of Chavara regarding a religious community as gleaned from the chronicles that he kept and the letters that he wrote on various occasions to various people. In one way or another, we cover all his writings in the present issue of *HE*.

In this issue, we place on record the immense contribution that Rev. Dr Fr George Thanchan CMI, the patron of the *Herald of the East*, made towards the revival of the journal. As the CMI General Councillor for Evangelization and Pastoral Ministry, his staunch support worked as a pillar of the last four issues of *HE*. His sudden demise on 4 July, 2016 left us all stunned. We remember him fondly. We dedicate this issue of *HE* to celebrate the life that he led among us and the religious, academic, and pastoral leadership that he gave the members of his religious community and the contributions that he made to the various bodies of the Church as a Canon Lawyer with crystal-like clarity of thought, comprehension and judgement. Tailing the thought on Fr Thanchan, *HE* also places on record the inspiration that Rev. Dr Prof. Fr Saju Chackalackal CMI was to the journal. As the President of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, he inspired his colleagues to adopt *HE* and made it the fifth of the journals of DVK. Moreover, painstakingly, he went through the pages of the last four issues of the journal giving each of them an overall polish. *HE* is immensely grateful to him for his services to the journal. *HE* wishes Fr Chackalackal all the good wishes in the world, and pray for heaven's blessings on him in his new ministry of leadership as the CMI General Councillor for Evangelization and Pastoral Ministry. *HE* is happy that he is elected the General Councillor to replace late Fr Thanchan. *HE* deems it providential that, despite the responsibilities of the leadership role, he is still part of the *HE* family to continue to give his patronage to the journal.