

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS OF THE HOLY FAMILY

A Champion of the Theology of *Bāla Līlā* of Child Jesus as Recounted in *Ātmānutāpam*¹

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Abstract: Paulachan Kochappilly takes a look at *Ātmānutāpam*, the poetic work of Chavara from an Indian perspective and in the light of the analysis, the writer considers Chavara a champion of the theology of the *Bāla Līlā* of Child Jesus. Kochappilly considers on the one hand, Christian theology painted as cerebral, reflective, and rational in nature. On the other hand, the theology of the Middle-Ages was overshadowed by the piety founded on the passion, suffering, and death of Jesus and disproves both of them. In the light of the poem, as an alternative, he proposes a celebrative theology which gives adequate attention to the *balakanda* of the mystery of the Incarnation, where Chavara brings together the cosmic and ecclesial celebrations. Chavara's contemplation on Jesus in the womb of Mother Mary, Jesus as He becomes the Emmanuel, Jesus at Nativity, Jesus in the Mother's Arm, Jesus and the nursing Mother and the limitless joy of Joseph is subjected to thorough study and the author proposes *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus as a way of celebrating theology.

Keywords: Holy Family, *Bāla Līlā*, Child Jesus, history, faith, mission, theology, encounter, community, poetry, testimony, plurality, tradition, salvation, infancy, narrative, *balakanda*, Incarnation, celebration, *darshan*, eastern, theologization, knowledge, nativity,

¹Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Compunction of the Soul*, in *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, vol. II, Trans. Mary Leo, Mannanam, The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1989. S. Poonoly, "Writings of Chavara," in *The Lord of Heaven and Earth. Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr Lucas Vithuvattickal*, CMI, P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly (eds.), Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 120, notes: "*Compunction of the Soul*, an epic poem in 12 parts with a total of 3923 lines, intermingled with meditations and aspirations of great devotion, related to an event that took place in the life of our Lord and His mother, as well as the poet's own life."

mystery, kingdom, heaven, Lisieux, spirituality, Mary, luminous eye, *sanskaras*, *garbhsanskar*, womb, mother, obedience, Emmanuel, migrant, mystery, mystic, *Ramayana*, Sanskrit, *bhakti*, Joseph, testament, sexuality, Ephrem, East Syriac, theology, spirituality, mysticism.

1. Introduction

Faith is human response to the revelation of God in history; it is historical, dialogical and relational. Theology is an understanding or an interpretation of the faith of a people in their given context, going beyond the boundaries of space and time. Mission is said to be the mother of theology. And depending on the context and challenges, theological reflections and investigations unfold. Encounter with God in a specific context, therefore, is the beginning of theology. Though Christian theology is fundamentally one and the same, it has different shades and emphases depending on the cultural and religious ethos of the community and the variety of contexts and challenges that people might confront in a given situation. This diversity gives rise to different trends and approaches in theology; it is never uniform, but always multiform. The four Gospels of the Bible bear testimony to the plurality of theologies, subject to the audience and their religious, social, and cultural backgrounds. Though the nucleus of theology is one and the same, that is, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, it is captured, articulated and communicated differently at different times and by people of different cultures.

Often Christian theology is painted as cerebral, reflective, and rational in nature. Unfortunately, the theology of the Middle-Ages was overshadowed by the piety founded on the passion, suffering, and death of Jesus. Though theology in the Bible is founded on everyday experience of the people of God and their encounter of God in history, there were moments of deviation from the real, historical and contextual underpinnings of the biblical tradition. At the time of the formation of the Gospels, the inspired authors were preoccupied with the immediate concerns and the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. No surprise, therefore, that we do not have long infancy narratives in the Gospels. The Gospels of Mark and John have no infancy narrative at all, whereas the Gospels of Matthew and Luke devote a little space to the infancy of Jesus. Hence, it is no surprise that most of the successive theologians down the centuries did not pay

adequate attention to the childhood – *balakanda*² – of the child Jesus on earth – the mystery of the Incarnation.

The birth of a child is the cause of family celebration; its presence and playfulness make all joyful and hopeful. No doubt the nativity of Jesus was a matter of cosmic celebration. Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family commemorates the cosmic and ecclesial celebrations through his epic poem, *Ātmānutāpam* (*Compunction of the Soul*), composed in the Malayalam language, his mother tongue.³

In this reflection, the key to the theological investigation and interpretation is *bala* (child) and *leela* (play). It is in praise and honour of the great insight Jesus gave us when he exclaimed, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants" (Luke 10:21). This is to acknowledge and appreciate the joy, beauty, and glory of theologizing in the footsteps of Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family, which to my mind, is Christian, Indian, and Eastern in character. Seeing is the centrality of this methodology. Seeing is believing. The saying of Jesus, "Come and see" may be the cornerstone of theologization. In general, devotees desire to have a *darshan* (seeing) of the divine in their life. Seen from this perspective, the simple and profound cry of Kuriakose, "I long to see" gives us enough food for our thought and senses for a heightened faith experience and a sharing of experiential knowledge. The infancy narratives of Jesus in the Gospels, though concise, give us the feel of such a theology. Saint Francis of Assisi recreated those attractive scenes of the nativity of

²*Bala Kanda* is the name of the Introductory Chapter of Ramayana, one of the two epic stories in India. The focus of the chapter is the birth and childhood of Rama. One of stanzas reads as follows: "There on seeing Rama of eyes like the lotus, he shed tears of joy and with the aid of his Guru performed the ceremonies of *Jatakarma* (birth ceremony) (I, III.37). Another stanza reads, "Then the mother fondled the children and pressed them to her breast. In this way He Who is the source of happiness to all, Who is the nature of bliss, having assumed a childlike form through Maya, made the husband and wife happy" (I, III. 58). See Valmiki, *The Adhyatma Ramayana*, Trans. Rai Bahadur Lala Baij Nath, New Delhi, Oriental Books, 1979 (second edition).

³Though Kuriakose knew different languages, his works are in the language of the people and land, and it is very important for us to develop a theology of our own. In the race for being global, often the theologians forget about the incarnational principle of being rooted in the ethos of the people. It is time that we contribute theological and philosophical reflections in the native languages of India.

Jesus through the making of a crib for the Christmas season in order to help the believers to “see” the mystery.

The instruction of Jesus, “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (Mt 11:4) helps us to understand the importance and relevance of *bāla līlā* theology. The teaching of Jesus, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Mt 19:14) gives us a clear direction for *bāla līlā* theology. In addition, the exhortation of Jesus, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Mt 18:3-5) reiterates the relevance of theologizing from the point of view of a child and taking into account its playfulness. Surely it is an urgent need of our day to save the children and the family, the pillars of any society, including that of the Church. If we could attain the sight and insight of Kuriakose in seeing and celebrating faith in the everyday events of the family, our faith in Christ and its celebration would be alive and active in our lives. One of the foundational beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8) can be seen as the heartbeat of theology. Saint Therese of Lisieux approached God as a child with open arms and a profound trust, for which today she is an acclaimed Doctor of the Church.

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family was an outstanding person of genuine spirituality as well as a man with integral humanity who was committed to the transformation of the human community, both ecclesial and social. Saint Kuriakose, ushered in vigour and vitality among the Saint Thomas Christians of India as a reformer of the human and Christian life of Kerala in the nineteenth century. His contributions in the field of literature were historical and spiritual in flavour.

What I would like to do in this brief reflection is to examine the insight and foresight of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara in his Christian spirituality imbued with Indian genius, as expressed through his epic poem, *Ātmānutāpam* (*Compunction of the Soul*). Sebastian Poonoly acknowledges the value and significance of the poetic work of Saint Kuriakose in the following commentary:

The literary value of Chavara’s poems to be true, is great, though it is not yet fully discovered or revealed. But their true value is spiritual, mystical, like those of St. John of the Cross. In a final analysis, no other poet in India, ancient or modern, has so powerfully and movingly expressed in verses, the Christian

experience of the divine as we find in the verses of Blessed Chavara.⁴

2. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus in the Womb of Mother Mary

How he stayed for nine months

In the womb of His mother I long to see

Born in her womb, to Bethlehem he came

To obey mighty Caesar, I long to see (*Ātmānutāpam* III, 11-14).

As a mystic poet, Chavara has left an indelible mark on the Churches in India for our imagination and emulation in the world of spirituality. Founded on a solid and candid theology of seeing through the luminous eye of faith and of observing the realities through the naked eyes and following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, our Master and Saviour, he penetrates into the mystery of Christ with a touch that is accessible and credible. Effortlessly Saint Kuriakose takes us on a tour to the *balakanda* (childhood) of Jesus, commencing from the womb of Mary, which goes far beyond our ordinary perceptions. But this is not far from the truth of human life, and it is in tune with the *sanskaras*, especially with the *garbhsanskar*,⁵ a sacred ritual at the time of pregnancy in Indian tradition.

Saint Kuriakose of the Holy Family pays attention to the minute details of the mystery of Jesus in the womb of his mother. This is not unknown in the biblical tradition, for we read in Luke, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb" (Lk 1:41). Pondering on the reality of Jesus in the womb of his mother is a matter of great marvel to our Saint. Therefore, he wishes to behold Mother Mary and Jesus in her womb, which he sees as a great wonder. A mother carrying her babe in the womb is always a blessing in any

⁴S. Poonoly, 2004; 122.

⁵The literal meaning of *garbhsanskar* is "educating the fetus in the womb." In Indian culture it is believed that the education of real and traditional values and parenting starts right from the time the fetus is confirmed in the womb. This is why when anyone becomes pregnant, the elders advise the mother to have positive thoughts and emotions. In the Hindu epic, Mahabharata, there was a warrior named Abhimanyu who is said to have learnt a war skill when he was in the womb of his mother. He could only learn to decode and enter the trap before his mother fell asleep. This was one of the reasons why he was later killed because he did not know how to get out of the trap. (http://www.indiaparenting.com/pregnancy/338_3778/performing-garbhsanskar-during-pregnancy.html accessed on 11 June 2016).

religious tradition; for a woman to conceive a child and give birth is considered a beautiful gift of God.

Kuriakose longs to see this beautiful blessing of the babe Jesus playing in the womb of his mother. Today, with all our sophisticated modern techniques, we can see this movement of the infant in the womb. But how many of us see a babe in the womb as a beautiful blessing of God leading us to the *darshan* of God? In addition to this sacred scene of fulfilment, Kuriakose upholds the values and significance of marriage and family life. He adopted as his additional name, the Holy Family, at the time of his consecration in the religious congregation. This name adds colour and vigour to his original vision of Christian life, which begins in the holy bond of marriage and flourishes in the family. Is not Kuriakose pointing out the significance of a mother in the formation of a child, beginning from the moment of conception? Recent psychological insights help us to appreciate the formative values of the initial stages of life, including the nine months in the womb of the mother. Kuriakose, a mystic poet, had this insight into the phenomenon of the physical formation and spiritual transformation of a child, from the moment of conceiving, as reiterating the dignity of the human person and the holy vocation of a woman to be a mother.

The wings of the mystic fly high and far to see the difficult terrain and the painful travel Jesus' mother had to undertake to arrive in Bethlehem with the baby Jesus in her womb. In spite of the hardship, the poet recognizes and respects the obedience of Jesus in the womb and of his mother in fulfilling the ordinance of Caesar. Indeed, Jesus in his teaching underlined the importance of obeying the law of the land, especially in the case of paying taxes. Asking for a coin, He directed the people to give to Caesar what was due to Caesar. Saint Kuriakose longs to know the burden of Mother Mary in carrying Jesus in order to comply with the ordinances of the Emperor. Kuriakose had imbibed this value of obedience of law throughout his life, especially when events unfolded most unexpectedly. Such a personal disposition may have helped him to confront all things with a sense of equanimity and to confess, "God's will always and everywhere." Since Kuriakose had stored up the memories of the babe in the womb and of Mother Mary, and this must have assisted him in facing his many challenges, always trusting in Providence as a child of God. Though there were many painful and shattering experiences in his life, Chavara learned the lessons of obedience and excelled in the virtue of obeying the law in letter and spirit.

3. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus as He Becomes the Emmanuel

God becoming one with man
"Emmanuel", I long to see
His parents denied a resting place
Though painful, I long to see (III, 15-18).

The childlike desire to see the mystery of the Incarnation, the truth of Emmanuel – God with us – is the foundational character of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. He unfolds the mystery in simple terms which may be understood by any person, including children. The story of Jesus is narrated in plain words – God becoming one with man – is similar to the story of the human child. Kuriakose repeats the refrain of the Word becoming flesh, God-with-us, for emphasis and to fill the mind and imagination of the devotee. Interestingly, the desire of the poet, "I long to see" attached to the great mystery, is phenomenal as far as its appreciation is concerned: the invisible becomes the visible; God becomes man. There is no intellectual abstract image in the poetry, instead, what is tangible and accessible is presented in clarity and brevity. It is, in fact, a celebration of the senses, and consequently, an immersion into the ocean of spiritual experiences.

Insightfully and brilliantly, our mystic poet takes us to the harsh realities associated with the birth of Jesus. The joy of the nativity of Jesus is mingled with the misery of the manger: a true picture of the manger, the attention of all, especially of the children.⁶ Anyone who reads and reflects on the text, will understand the poverty of the parents, Mother Mary and Joseph. Anyone who contemplates the nativity of Jesus will understand the painful experience of a migrant family seeking a shelter to give birth to their child. It seems that the poet sees through the eyes of Jesus here. Though he narrates the plight of the parents, there is no account of the misery of Jesus explicitly mentioned. Along with the baby Jesus in the womb of his mother, Saint Kuriakose paints the wretched situation of the Holy Family. Not only does he behold Jesus, Mary and Joseph in their miserable surroundings, he invites each disciple of Christ to reflect on the misery and glory mingled in the great mystery of the Incarnation. It seems that the author wants to introduce here the reality of both the cross and crown, the touchstones of the Christian world vision. Once again,

⁶A similar story is told of Krishna, regarded as the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who was born of Vasudeva and Devaki while they were in prison in Mathura, which again captures the attention of all, especially of the children.

the poet celebrates the seeable, touchable, enjoyable, experiential encounter of the Holy Family, miserable and painful as it is. Putting together contrasting scenes – spiritual and material – Kuriakose gives us a taste of the reality experienced by the Holy Family.

4. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus at Nativity

His birth without pain or stain
 In His mother, I long to see
 The infant whom she worshipped
 Without a winks' respite, I long to see (III, 23-26)

The poet is aware of the pain a mother undergoes during labour, but disregards such pain in the case Mother Mary. He casts Mother Mary differently, because she was carrying her own Lord. A close observation of and attention to Mother Mary as given in these lines might be taken as a guideline for all to heed in family life. A woman birthing a child should be honoured and held in high esteem. In this mystic poem, Kuriakose invites us to pray with him and to follow his attitudes and dispositions of the heart. With him, we are privileged to see the innocent and insightful looks of a child as she or he gazes at the mother.

The poet does not stop at the point of merely seeing Jesus along with His mother. Going beyond ordinary seeing, our mystic longs to see the joy of Mary as she worships Jesus unceasingly. Two complementary scenes are clubbed together in the person of Jesus against the backdrop of Mother Mary: in the first scene, Kuriakose wishes to behold the birth of Jesus through Mary, indeed a terrestrial reality; and in the second scene, the poet wishes to look at Mother Mary worshipping her son Jesus, a celestial phenomenon. Kuriakose longs to see Jesus on two realms: first, Jesus born of Mary, and, second, Jesus adored by Mary. This is the perfect mingling in the mind and heart of a mystic poet like Saint Kuriakose. There cannot be an iota of doubt regarding the focus of the poem, that it is Jesus Christ himself. Admitting the great role of Mother Mary, the poet has a single minded adoration of Jesus: to Jesus through Mary. Though Mary is much celebrated, the concentration is always on Jesus, her Son.

5. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus in the Mother's Arm

The son of God the angel placed
 In the mother's arm, I long to see
 The holy child gazing at His mother
 With darling eyes, I long to see (III, 27-30).

The eyes of Saint Kuriakose express his longing to see the infant Jesus, the son of God in different scenes and in various poses. Obviously the mystic poet has only one desire in his heart, that is, to behold the Child Jesus, whether He is placed by the angels in the arms of Mother Mary or whether the Holy Infant is gazing at his mother with darling eyes. Interestingly the poet switches his plot in an ever changing sequence, but his unconditional single minded contemplation, and consequently the celebration, is always the holy Child Jesus. In my opinion, this echoes a deep seated and wide spread popular religious devotion rooted in the *balakanda* of Rama recounted in *Ramayana* in the cultural scenario of India. Saint Chavara, who had the insight and initiative to start a Sanskrit school at Mannanam for the untouchables in the nineteenth century Kerala, would have had a good knowledge of and appreciation for the Sanskrit language and its literature. Composing such unparalleled and unprecedented lines on the childhood of Jesus compels me to conclude that his theology is a theology rooted in the soil of the Saint Thomas Christians of India and encompasses the literary genre of the Indian epics and the *bhakti* or devotional literature of his motherland, which was the ethos in which Kuriakose was immersed.

6. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus with Lips and Hands

The lips enkindled with a smile
 The fire of love, I long to see
 The tiny hands embracing the mother
 With longing love, I long to see (III, 31-34).

The theology of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family may be seen as faith seeking the celebration of life in Christ and giving adequate coverage to the playfulness of the Infant Jesus in the company of the Holy Family. This theology may be described as a theology of *bāla līlā*, which, although not widespread in Christianity, is not unorthodox in content and style. Against the background of the Indian and Asian spiritual and theological horizon, Saint Kuriakose has championed a theology of focusing on the joyfulness and playfulness of the Holy Child Jesus, which has often been ignored or neglected altogether by disproportionately projecting the suffering and death of Jesus. Our mystic poet, imbued with Christian revelation and faith in Jesus and moulded in the religious, spiritual, cultural, and theological ambience of his motherland, emerges as a visionary in the evangelizing mission of the Church. His emphasis on the joy of the

Christian message can make a big difference in the minds and hearts of the listeners and readers of the gospel of Christ.

Picturesquely, Saint Kuriakose captures the *bāla līlā* of Jesus in his *Ātmānutāpam*. Notice the details of the beauty of the Infant Jesus. The poet celebrates the smile of Jesus which he sees as similar to the fire of love. For the mystic poet, the smile of the Holy Child is worthy of meditation and contemplation. A smile in itself is contagious and communicative. The innocent smile of an infant can infuse new energy and enthusiasm into the life of a person. Meditating on the smile of the child Jesus can transform lives and challenge one to experience the joy of the Gospel. We owe our thanks to this insight of Saint Kuriakose who draws such a picture worthy of emulation in religious and spiritual formation. The focus of such meditation and prayer is on the Child Jesus with His simple movements of lips and hands. What is contemplated and celebrated in these lines is not cerebral, but corporeal. Though rationality and intellectual investigations are of great significance, the celebration of faith in Christ cannot be limited to mere rational, intellectual, and abstract articulations. Instead, faith is integral and total in experience and expression. Through these lines, Saint Kuriakose calls attention to the need to incorporate the celebrative and corporeal dimensions in Christian life, worship, and witness. The words of Jesus shed light on our Christian discipleship, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Mt 19:14). This can inspire us to dive deep into the mystery of Christ with the scenes of *bāla līlā*.

7. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus and the Nursing Mother

Joy exuberant, ecstatic

The infant felt, I long to see

The mother fondly feeding her child

With milk at her breast, I long to see (III, 35-38).

Loving and lovely images of the Mother and Child flow naturally in the imagination of Saint Kuriakose. Only a mystic can so brilliantly and beautifully pen such an exuberant ecstasy of the Infant with his Mother. Much more than portraying a mere natural maternal-filial joy, Saint Chavara could be addressing the mothers of today to take the time to nurture and foster such a joy in feeding their children. While modern scientific evidence supports breast feeding for the health of the mother and child, these findings are often disregarded, if not fully ignored. Today, the fast changing family culture is often eclipsed by the business culture, leaving little time for family intimacy. The

longing of our poet to have such an intimacy between the mother and child springs from his spirituality. To this day, many spiritual authors have failed to acknowledge and appreciate such a beautiful, noble and holy bond between the mother and her child in Christian literature. In forming lines like those of Kuriakose, one needs a deep spiritual bond with the Child Jesus and his Mother. Scenes such as these can take seekers to the theology, spirituality, and morality of *bāla līlā*, emerging from a foundational encounter with the Lord in everyday life.

8. *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus and Limitless Joy of Joseph

The holy awe, the mother enjoyed
 While feeding him, I long to see
 The limitless joy, Joseph felt
 While watching them both, I long to see (III, 39-42).

In another poetic stroke, Saint Kuriakose narrates the holy and joyful experience of the mother of Jesus and Joseph her spouse. It is very rare to find a poet capture such a beautiful and blessed experience as Joseph watching Mary and Jesus. Kuriakose shows his faithfulness to his chosen name in the religious congregation, namely, the Holy Family, by giving such genuine coverage to all the three members of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

In his Testament to the Families, our poet describes the family as "the image of heaven on earth." In view of making the family heaven on earth, he has outlined a code of conduct covering all in the family. Reflecting on this stanza, the reader gets a feel for his concept of the family and the components that make it a holy and heavenly one. First, he sees that the parental care is holy and noble. Kuriakose testifies that all things in a family should bring limitless joy to both parents and child. The refrain, "I long to see" discloses the purity, maturity, and intensity of the eye of the beholder. Jesus stated, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Mt 6:22-23). In his praise and worship, Kuriakose associates every event and moment to the person of Jesus, to whom he is consecrated totally and unconditionally. He shows, albeit indirectly, a positive regard for sexuality, while affirming the role of being mother and father and child in the family. This indicates his recognition of the gender differences as well as of each family member's equality in dignity.

The Eastern Fathers of the Church, in general, had a positive regard for sexuality and marriage, and in particular, Saint Ephrem held

sexuality and marriage as “holy and honourable.”⁷ In addition, Saint Ephrem reminded the virgins or celibates that “one who regrets marriage as a bitter fruit, negates his own roots,”⁸ for it was through marriage and family that the virgins or celibates themselves came into being. In his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Saint Ephrem expresses his great regard for the infancy of Jesus and the family life of Jesus:

By power from Him Mary’s womb became able

To bear the One who bears all.

From the great treasury of all creation

Mary gave to Him everything that she gave.

She gave Him milk from what He made exist.

She gave Him food from what He had created.

He gave milk to Mary as God.

In turn, He was given suck by her as human

Her arms carried Him, for He lightened His weight,

And her bosom embraced Him, for He made Himself small.⁹

Though the style, structure, and substance of Saint Ephrem’s poem is different from that of Saint Kuriakose’s, there are striking similarities on the themes pertaining to the Holy Family and the infancy of Jesus in the Holy Family. Saint Kuriakose may have been influenced by the works of Saint Ephrem as the Saint Thomas Christians were acquainted with the East Syriac literature of which Ephrem is a shining star, and he offers a window on the East Syriac theology and spirituality. This is a matter worthy of further research, which I do not wish to explore here. If Saint Ephrem is known as “the harp of the Holy Spirit,” then it may be proper to call Saint Kuriakose as “the harp of the Holy Family,” because of his outstanding contribution to the reflection on Christian family life, following in the footsteps of the Holy Family. The testimony of Kuriakose on his deathbed attests his great devotion to the Holy Family, “My pious parents in many ways impressed on me great regard for the Holy Family: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In this way I was always keeping in my heart and mind, and was honouring, the Holy Family.”¹⁰

⁷See L. Edakalathur, *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition*, Roma: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1994, 48.

⁸See Edakalathur, 49.

⁹Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity*, Trans. Kathleen E. McVey, New York, Paulist Press, 1989, 182-186.

¹⁰A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 390.

Kuriakose establishes himself squarely as a theologian poet on the family. He may be recalling his own childhood experiences as he finds a link between himself and Jesus for his devotion and dedication. He relates all the moments and events in the family to the Holy Family of Nazareth. He pays attention to the minute details of ordinary life and associates these with the life of Jesus and sees them as an occasion to sing the praises of God. Being a mystic, Kuriakose can guide others on the way to everyday mysticism – by seeing God in everything and everything in God – a way accessible and realizable to ordinary Christians. We can hear, taste, smell, and touch God in the midst of everyday ordinary engaged life. I would have you experience this for yourself by going through a couple of stanzas of the mystical poem.

Now the mother beckoned him nigh
Whom she loved as her heart
And how with reverence and fear
He came to her I long to see (III, 43-46).

How she placed her lovely babe
In his arms, I long to see
The praises he poured upon his son
As his spouse listened, I long to see (III, 47-50).

The added comfort and love they gave
To the babe asleep, I long to see
How the shepherds thronged to them
Hearing the news, I long to see (III, 51-54).

How the crowd, unceasingly offered
Praise and worship, I long to see
The lovely boy, the angels adored
In humble strain, I long to see (III, 55-58).

How the mother to the temple brought him
As enforced by law, I long to see
The holy feet, old Simeon longed to see
Ere he died, I long to see (III, 65-68).

Fearless the Lord, I long to see
Who fled to Egypt, seeking shelter
How those people long waited
To receive the boon, I long to see (III, 69-72).

The agony the parents bore
On losing their son, I long to see

And joy recovered on the third day
On find their son, I long to see (III, 77-80).

Your mother tenderly holding you
And nursing you, I would see
Your chubby cheeks the mother kissing
With joy, I long to see (III, 33-36).

The ordinary is made extraordinary through one's faith; the nearness and the presence of Jesus become a gift in the present. The eyes of Kuriakose are highly focused in his composition and through his contemplation and this helps him to fly high. With an eagle's eye, Kuriakose sees the marvels of the Child Jesus and this enables him to be like the bees, tasting the sweet honey from the flower of the childhood of Jesus. Kuriakose sees all things and persons in the holy scene, but they are all agents of making Jesus present. This imagery helps the reader to touch the Lord in his smallness. It is a theology of encountering greatness in smallness. This is precisely the teaching of Jesus, "Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me,... for the least among all of you is the greatest" (Lk 9:47-48). Interestingly, St. Ephrem praises Jesus for this process of becoming small and making us all great, "Blessed is He who became small without limit to make us great without limit."¹¹ Kuriakose too, is bathed in the beauty, joy, and glory of God in his poetic and mystic creations. In my humble opinion, Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family, being faithful to his name, coaches his readers in the contemplation on the mysteries of Christ, including that of the playfulness of the Child Jesus in the Holy Family of Mary and Joseph.

The simplicity, originality, fecundity, with which Kuriakose treats the *bāla līlā* of Jesus is truly inspiring and transforming. Everyday mysticism is available in these lines of the author. A solid spirituality is visible and tangible in his composition, for the spirituality or theology of mysticism is not abstract, but a profound experience of Emmanuel in everyday life in the Holy Family, which is "the image of heaven on earth." For Saint Kuriakose, the ordinary way to holiness is to see the Lord in every event and turn of life. Faith is a luminous eye. Seeing with the luminous eye is spirituality. Singing with all that is, is theology. Dancing with the whole body is celebration. The *bāla līlā* of Jesus as painted by Kuriakose is an experience of intimacy with the

¹¹*Hymns on the Nativity*, 21.

Lord. Saint Ephrem chants the same refrain of celebration, "Praise to You, Son of the Most High, Who put on our body."¹² The contemplation of the Child Jesus in the Holy Family is available to all, irrespective of their age and status.

9. Conclusion: *Bāla Līlā* of Jesus as a Way of Celebrating Theology

This paper has been an attempt to acknowledge and appreciate the imaginative, creative, and celebrative poetic contribution of Kuriakose to a theology of *bāla līlā* as it is narrated in the third chapter of his epic poem, *Ātmānutāpam*. The theology of *bāla līlā* is in seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching the childhood events and playfulness of Jesus, which can move our imagination and bring us closer to the Son of God. This meditation of St. Chavara on the *bāla līlā* of Jesus gives us great insight into his spirituality, and it helps us see the life of the Holy Family in ways that we may not have considered before. It can also be a reminder of our own childhood and gives us pause to think of the great mystery of God working in our lives from our earliest years. It is, above all, a loving look at the everyday life of the child Jesus.

The *bāla līlā* of Jesus as recounted by Kuriakose is a sure way to mysticism through the luminous eye of faith. Such an interpretation of the mysteries of our faith set in poetry takes us into a realm of faith, which is a simple and enjoyable experience. This liberates us from the clutches of hair splitting intellectual speculative rational investigations and philosophical argumentations on the mysteries of Christian faith. In a theology of *bāla līlā* people come to faith in Jesus Christ through celebration, which fits well with the religio-cultural ethos of India. It is an approach of theologizing compatible with the pedagogy through the various imageries in the Bible and is in tune with narrative theology. A theology of *bāla līlā* is quite close to a theology of the *bhakti* tradition. It is a theology similar to "the little way" of Saint Therese of Lisieux: a theology of play with Jesus out of love and commitment. The theology of *bāla līlā* is the reminder of the innocence of childhood, of the play of little children sporting with Jesus in his home and courtyard. *Bāla līlā* invites one to live the theological insight of Saint Ephrem, "Blessed is He Who became small without limit to make us great without limit."¹³

¹²Hymns on the Nativity, 6.

¹³Hymns on the Nativity, 21.

“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see” (Lk 10:23). At the end, Jesus might say these words to Saint Kuriakose and to all those who long to see Jesus and sport with Him. Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family has given us a foundation for a theology of *bāla līlā* through his epic poem. However, *bāla līlā* of *Ātmānutāpam* is only one of the many strands in the poem of our mystic poet. Since this aspect of theology is most neglected, I felt it important to point out this important and urgent element proper to theology. Once again I would like Saint Kuriakose to speak to us through his compelling simplicity and clarity regarding the *bāla līlā* of Jesus: and to see Him as a child in the arms of His mother, the Saviour of the world.

The art with which she made you smile

O beauty, I long to see (III, 37-38).

You seated in your mother's lap

In joy I long to see (III, 41-42).

In the arms of Mary, Queen of Mother

My Master, I long to see (III, 45-46).

An infant asleep on the earth

Helpless, I would see (III, 53-54).

The sweet smile you show your parents

Beloved Babe, I long to see (III, 61-62).

Sebastian Poonoly says of the literary contributions of Kuriakose: “The person and life of Chavara on the one hand and his writings on the other, clarify and interpret each other. To adapt what John Keats said of William Shakespeare: Chavara led a life allegory, and his writings are a commentary on it.”¹⁴ This adds further flavour and fragrance to the understanding of the theology of *bāla līlā*, for it is a mirror of the life of our mystic.

I would like to conclude this reflection with the opening verse of *Ātmānutāpam*, III, in order to indicate the all-embracing and holistic theology recounted in the of epic poem and to pay homage to his simple and profound insight of St. Kuriakose in this jubilee Year of Mercy:

The Lord of mercy, the son of God

His glorious splendour, I long to see (III, 1-2).

¹⁴Poonoly, 125.