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Theological Content in the Tamil Christian Poetical Works

D. RAJARIGAM

(Continued from Volume XII, Number 1)

(g) *Salvation*.—Tamil Christian poets believe in a redemptive history. They believe that God in His gracious decision has in eternity set a purpose for His creation, a goal for mankind. They read the meaning of human history as given by God and revealed through the prophets of Israel, the elected nation. They see how the promises given to them were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So when they write about salvation, they begin with the Old Testament history, the decalogue, the prophecies concerning the coming of the Saviour and the cross.

(i) *The Origin of Salvation*: John Palmer, a Tamil Christian with an English name, and Krishna Pillai trace the origin of salvation back to the conversation between God the Father and God the Son in eternity:

When Adam and Eve, who had the image of God, because of the sin they committed, lost righteousness and stood bewildered, being worthy of damnation only, the Holy Son said, 'Father, I shall be responsible; leaving heaven I shall bring salvation unto them', and decided graciously to descend to the earth.

(*Life of Christ*, p. 7:1)

When transgressions abounded, God's wrath was rendered unimaginably, and raged like wild fire. But at the same time grace abounded and tried to quench the fire of wrath. It was then that the Son came between and said, 'O Father, these human beings, attentive to the words of the deceiver, have in turn become traitors. Let me bear all the guilt and all the punishment for their sake, and by fulfilling the Ten Commandments, I will establish righteousness. I beseech Thee to forgive all humanity which is going to hell, and show favour to them on the strength of my righteousness, which I shall earn after going down to the world. This is my vow. I will shed my blood and save humanity.'

When the most Holy God-King heard this gracious utterance of His only Son, he decided to send Him to the world to fulfil His plans for salvation. The King of heaven crowned Him with wisdom and exalted Him that He might reign and crush the head of the cruel devil and save humanity.

(R.Y.,¹ Part I, p. 53: 8-12)

These poets' descriptions of the conversation between the Father and the Son in eternity remind us of Luther's hymn, *Nun freuet euch, lieben Christen g'mein*, and also of one by Paul Gerhardt, both of which are in the *Lutheran Tamil Hymnal*. In a poetic strain Luther declared:—

Then God in everlasting grace,
Did look on me so wretched,
And mercy taking judgment's place,
To me its help outstretched.
The Father's heart toward me was stirred,
To save—not with a sovereign word,
His very best it cost Him.

He said to His beloved Son,
'Tis time for mediation,
Go hence, my heart's most precious crown,
Be to the lost salvation,
Man's heavy sins take thou away,
And death, his cruel foe, do slay,
And bring him with thee rising.

In a similar vein Paul Gerhardt exulted:

This the lamb that was slain,
Is the merciful saviour mine,
The curse He willingly bore,
As ordained by Father before;
'My Son, Thou must save,
All the men that do deserve,
The punishment now and after,
My wrath is kindled and great,
Patiently bear taking on Thy pate',
So said Father mercifully.

Willingly the Son took that behest,
'Willingly will I suffer', He said,
'And to this end I submit,
And go down to the deepest pit.'
O wondrous love! thus to the damned world,
It freely flowed, to bear the curse of the wicked,
Brought down the Son beloved.

¹ *Rakshanya Yathrikum* by Krishna Pillai, Madras, C.L.S., Part I, 1927, Part II, 1931.

The two Tamil poets, John Palmer and Krishna Pillai, may well have borrowed the idea of the conversation between the Father and the Son from these hymns of Luther and Gerhardt. But there is a marked difference between the German poets and the Tamil poets. In the German hymns it is God, the Father, that takes the initiative and asks the Son to go down to the earth and save men and the Son willingly offers to bear the curse on Him. The two Tamil poets say that it was the Son who took the initiative seeing the wrath of God, the Father, to go to the world to save men. The difference in the narration of the imaginary conversation in heaven between the Father and the Son may be due to the difference in the God-idea of the poets. The Germans emphasize the love of God and attribute salvation to the spontaneous and prevenient grace of God. The Tamil poets think more of the wrath and justice of God, which need satisfaction, than of His love. Krishna Pillai appears not quite consistent in this respect, for at times he refers to the love of God, the Father, as the cause for salvation.

(ii) *The Act of Salvation—Atonement* : Krishna Pillai in the first stanza of his epic drama of salvation says, in effect: God, having created and sustained the universe, out of love for the world, sent His Son as a sacrifice, in order that mankind might obtain heavenly bliss. In this poetical language the author has given expression to the central element in the Biblical message of salvation, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life' (John 3: 16).

With regard to the mystery of the cross, it is not easy to find a systematic theological treatment in the Tamil Christian poetical works. The writers are more concerned with the fact of the cross and the passion of Christ than the theology of it. Yet we find, here and there, some hints to their interpretation of the fact of crucifixion. So, for example, in the words of Krishna Pillai:

Thou art the king of all ; Thou art God,
Why then should such an unutterable passion befall
Thee ?

Is it not the warmth of Thy real love that has caused this
to Thee, One in the Trinity ?

(R.Y., Part I, p. 142: 12)

So says Krishna Pillai regarding the cause that made Christ bear the cross. In another context he attributes this cause to our sins:

Was it Pilate that sentenced Him to death ? No.

Were they that tortured Him cruel ? No.

It was our sin that was the first cause
for all the sufferings of Jesus.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 245: 272)

In giving these two causes, namely divine love and our sins, Krishna Pillai sums up the mystery of the cross by saying that although man's sin caused the death of Christ, God willed man's redemption. It is of course that a poet like Krishna Pillai could be interested in the study of various individuals, like Pilate, or groups, like the Roman soldiers, who took active or passive part in the crucifixion. But to Krishna Pillai such a consideration of the motives of men who crucified Jesus is only to remind us that we belong to a common humanity, which takes the same attitude to Jesus at all times. There is a timelessness about the cross. It happened one day, but, in a sense, it is happening whenever men are worldly, selfish, timid, jealous. Christ evokes similar responses today. This fact that it was the sin of the world that sent Jesus to the cross is given very picturesquely in another stanza by Krishna Pillai. In substance he says :

The sinless One bore the cross on His head, and with a bounden duty to save, lifted up His eyes towards Calvary, and every atom of the cross comprised the sum total of human sins and the weight of every atom was equal to that of the burden, which one hundred crores of elephants could bear.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 249 : 308)

O Holy One ! are not the sufferings you suffered due to the limitless burden brought by the sin of this wicked One ? Are not the evils, pains and death due to the crime of the sinner ? I say : It is I that am the culprit, and it is I that should die.

(C.L.,² 51 : 4)

Krishna Pillai in his poetical way says that the burden of Jesus Christ cannot be calculated mathematically. For this burden was the sin of the world and it had not the quantitative but qualitative magnitude. In other places the Tamil poets ascribe the sufferings of Jesus Christ to divine love. Thus the truth that the cross is neither an act of remorseless fate nor simply the result of certain historical causes, but the fulfilment of God's redeeming purpose is also expressed.

In two other contexts Krishna Pillai gives other causes for the crucifixion :

Knowing that, on account of righteousness, destruction would come to humanity, Thou didst become like us and didst stand in our stead.

In order that the wicked might live, One intervenes, and in accordance with the decree of the Father, humbles Himself ; a divine Son is cut asunder by a sword, and He falls ! What sovereign justice this is !

(R.Y., Part I, p. 142 : 13, 14)

² *Christian Lyrics*, Madras, C.L.S., 1950.

Considering the wrath of God, and the sin that bound the lowly mankind, He took compassion and intervened, looked upon the deluge of suffering that was to come, and lifted up His eyes towards this world on the one hand and towards Calvary on the other.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 250:311)

Herein lies, it seems, a penal theory of the Atonement. God is the God of justice. Sin is the crime for which the divine justice demands punishment. But Christ took the punishment upon Himself. Thereby God's justice is satisfied and the sinner is set free. Thus Vedanayaga Sastriar attributes the cause of the crucifixion to God's wrath. He declares:

On account of divine wrath, O King ! Thou didst ascend on the cross, and didst give up Thy life.

What can I, a sinner, repay ?

(C.L., 57)

We cannot say with certainty that Krishna Pillai is an advocate of the penal theory only. For he also talks, like other poets, about the subjective side of redemption. He sings devotional hymns in a repentant mood, meditating upon the cross and beseeching Jesus Christ to accept him. The following is a summary of one such hymn :

I will not sing as if I were a saint ;

I do not lead a pure life.

The whole day I spend in sin and live a deceptive life.

I am counted as one who is alive today, and tomorrow deceased.

To such a fool as I, there is nothing but Thy plenteous grace that can give life.

Therefore, O God, Lord ! I surrender before Thee.

Give me refuge, saying : Fear not.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 274:2)

Vedanayaga Sastriar nowhere attempts to give an explanation of the Atonement. He is well known for his devotional hymns. In his *Jepamalai* there is a section with the title 'Meditations on the Cross'. It contains twenty-five stanzas. All of them are prayers to make a change in him. So also other lyric writers are concerned about the subjective side. They all meditate upon the passion of our Lord, enumerating all His suffering, and upon His love that suffered because of the sin of the world and to reconcile the hearts of men unto God, to draw their minds away from the will to sin and to incline them to the fullest of Himself :

O Lord ! in order to meditate upon the love manifested on the cross, and to walk in it by the strength of my faith, pour Thy love in my heart through Thy Spirit, and create in me pure love.

(*Jepamalai*, p. 171)

The idea that Jesus Christ combated and conquered the forces hostile for the establishment of His kingdom is not prominent in the Tamil Christian poetical works. Yet it is not without mention. In some lyrics Jesus is described as winning a victory over the hostile forces :

Look at the God that came from heaven to win a victory
over the might of the devil.

(C.L., 59:5)

Where art Thou going, bearing the cross ?
To kill the mighty devil ?
To win a victory over death ?
To destroy boundless sin ?

(C.L., 60:5)

(h) *The Fruit of Salvation.*—It is an accepted truth to all the Tamil Christian poets that the salvation of Jesus Christ is offered and expounded by the Church through the Word of God and His sacraments. Those who are the members of the Church appropriate the life and strength from Him who establishes a fellowship with the believers through His Word and sacraments.

Krishna Pillai uses many indigenous similes to define the nature and function of the Church. He compares it to a pond of water of eternal life in which the saints (swans) live. He means that the Church is composed of saints and that if they are outside it they will endanger their lives (R.Y., Part I, p. 34:21). Like the sun the Church sheds light to remove the darkness of the world (R.Y., Part I, p. 10:2). So Krishna Pillai sings :

The Church is established like the lamp that shines from
the mountain top, in order that the salvation of the soul might
be known to the world.

The Church will grow like the crescent moon in the ex-
perience of the soul.

The head of the Church is the Son of God ; all the ser-
vants are His body.

The holy fellowship will last for ever ; it will make
righteousness prosper.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 10:3, 4)

Vedanayaga Sastriar compares the Church to the flock of
sheep and Jesus Christ to the shepherd :

Have the sheep gone astray ?

Have they become the possession of outsiders ?

O loving Shepherd that suffered, O Jesus, seed of a
woman, search for them in the forests.

(C.L., 287:3)

With regard to the nature of the Church there are some lyrics
making reference to the corporate reality of the Church in and
through which Christ fulfils His purpose :

Jesus is the everlasting cornerstone of the Holy Church.
It is a wonderful stone of love that unites the whole Church.

It is a stone that gathers all the nations of the earth to be in fellowship of friendliness.
(C.L., 315:2)

Pastor A. Savarimuthu of Dindigul had the same conception of the Church when he sang:

O ye members of the Church, the name of Jesus is sweeter than honey; seek it yearningly and run to it.
(C.L., 125:1)

Some one at a later date has changed 'Ye members of the Church' into 'Thou, O soul'. The change may be due to the emphasis on individual religion or the individualistic idea of salvation apart from the Church.

Concerning individual appropriation of salvation, the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith is found in many lyrics and other poetical works:

O thirsty ones ! come unto the still waters.
Those who suffer in the world without money, come unto Me in faith, and take freely.
(C.L., 139:2)

By faith the righteous shall live.
Only those who have faith shall live prosperously.
We know not the way to live; we have no strength.
There is no goodness in the works of men.
God's grace alone will look upon us.
It is His great love that will wipe our debts.

(C.L., 226:2, 4)

By faith they overcame the big furnace.
By faith He closed the open mouth of the cruel lion and overcame it.

By faith He overcame the three enemies.
By faith, therefore, ye men of the world, worship Christ the King.

(R.Y., Part II, p. 80:55)

Salvation is a free gift of God and does not depend upon human efforts or good works:

Taking compassion on our souls,
Thou hast saved us giving us Thy life.
Is there anything that can be done in return ?
Until the end save me, a refugee, freely.
I have no voice, no possessions, Lord.
Besides Thee who is there that is my help and relation ?

(R.Y., Part I, p. 172:2)

About the vain attempts of those who depend on their good works for their salvation, Krishna Pillai has this to say :

Just like building a bridge of butter to cross the river of fire that comes to devour the earth, do not say that the wrath of God will be removed by merits.

Come to take out of the innocent blood of Jesus Christ and quench it.

(R.Y., Part II, p. 74:7)

The dominant note in the conception of salvation is that of the highest ethical holiness. So the prayers of the poets crave the forgiveness of sins, and seek a cleansing of the heart and a reception into fellowship through the precious blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross. These are some examples :

Holy Spirit ! come to change the wicked heart through Thy love.

(C.L., 121:1)

The name of Jesus is sweeter than the sweetness of honey.
O heart ! seek it daily and run to it.
In order to redeem the sinner, He Himself gave His life.

(C.L., 125:1, 2)

It is a precious medicine of the Holy 'Guru'.
It is a medicine for the salvation of the world.
It is a medicine made by God.
It is a medicine that cures the disease of sin of the sinners.
It is a medicine that gives purity of heart.

(C.L., 127:1-3)

O King ! Thou camest to seek me and wed me.
In order to give Thy life for the sheep,
Thou didst suffer and die on the cross.

(C.L., 57:1)

Wilt Thou not melt, O heart ?
Look there ! On the cross the holy body is crushed ;
His hands and feet are nailed.

(C.L., 59:1)

O men of the world ! come and see the lofty scene of merit ; the holy blood and water flows, the Son of God being pierced on His side ; gather together ; consider that (scene) as the broad spring of grace that takes us to heaven.

The King that took the form of wicked men and the Lord of life, through death, on the mount Calvary gives up His ghost.

Come and see this glorious scene.

(C.L., 62:2)

O sinner! come and see the river of life that cleanses sin.
This river is the river of the blood of the Lamb of God
that removes evil.

Those who were crushed and wearied by the burden of
sin, those who trembled, wept and cried aloud daily, have
bathed in this and were happy at heart.

(C.L., 135:2)

He, who sacrificed Himself and saved the world, will
save you, too. Hold fast to Him.

(C.L., 148:4)

Krishna Pillai takes the way of worship of a Hindu before
the idol, and gives a model of worship of Christians similar to
it. Yet he uses quite different elements. On the one hand the
Hindu anoints the idol with oil, milk or water, garlands it, offers
his offerings and worships it. Krishna Pillai compares the tears of
the repentant sinner before Jesus Christ to the anointing liquid,
his prayer for the garland and faith for the offering (R.Y., Part II,
p. 81:56). On the other hand, when Krishna Pillai talks of the
mode of prayer for the grace of God, he says: Those devotees in
whose hearts the fire of the Holy Spirit burns daily without being
extinguished, will hold the bow of their heart. Their heart bows
before God, as they string their bow with the long string of love.
They smear the blood of our Lord on the arrows of words of prayer
and with the shoulder-strength of devotion and faith will shoot.
This is prayer. With this arrow of prayer, speeded up by deep
breath, they will pierce the two ears of God. The pot of the excel-
lent honey of grace will it flow, and they will drink of it with joy.

(R.Y., Part I, p. 210:65, 66)

Faith, as expressed in the lyrics, is not merely acceptance of
the merits of Christ, but surrender to Christ. It is reliance upon
Him, cleaving to Him, even personal union with Him. Songs of
prayer for this faith-union are very prominent in the lyrics. For
example:

Take possession of my heart, so that I might come closer
to the cross on which Thou hast died; that I might live mak-
ing Thy will my will; that I might remain at Thy feet and
converse with Thee; that I might know as far as possible the
depth of Thy love.

(C.L., 199)

I give myself unto Thee, Jesus, even now;
I am nothing; without Thee I can do nothing.
Fill me with the Spirit, which Thou gavest unto the dis-
ciples.

(C.L., 219:1, 5)

I give myself up as a living sacrifice, O Jesus, accept me.
My Father, who hast redeemed me from darkness, from
the slavery of the sinful devil, through the price of Thy own
blood, to Thee I offer myself.

I have placed my soul and body under Thy rule.

I wait upon Thee to accept it as useful.

Be merciful unto me,

I have offered Thee my limbs as the instrument of right-
eousness.

I have offered my body as the temple of Thy Holy Spirit,

(C.L., 220)

Krishna Pillai's songs of dedication are all sung with a 'broken spirit', with a 'resignation to hell', with 'Godly fear', and in a state of *Anfechtung*. The following is one example :

My mind rolls like the rolling wheel, not being steady.

The world and Satan entangle it in the net of sin.

O That which is true ! how can I love Thee and live ?

Have mercy upon me, my Lord.

I surrender myself. Grant me refuge saying : Fear not.

(R.M., p. 57:8)

One of the figures used in the Tamil Christian poetical works to explain the relationship between Jesus Christ and the soul is the figure of marriage in which Jesus Christ is the bridegroom and the soul is the bride. This figure is first of all Biblical. In the Old Testament Israel is compared to the bride and God to the bridegroom. 'As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee' (Isa. 62:5; cf. Hos. 2:19; Isa. 54:5; Ezek. 16). In the New Testament Jesus Christ uses this figure to show the relationship between Himself and the Church. 'And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast' (Matt. 9:15; cf. John 3:29; Matt. 25:1-10). In Revelation John compares the Church to the bride and Christ to the bridegroom. 'And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Rev. 21:2). St. Paul uses this figure to explain the unity of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:23-33).

This figure was used by the Protestant hymn writers. The following are two well-known examples :

Zion hears the watchmen singing,

And all her heart with joy is springing ;

She wakes, she rises from her gloom ;

For her Lord comes down all-glorious,

The Strong in grace, in truth Victorious,

Her Star is risen, her Light is come !

Ah, come, Thou blessed Lord !
O Jesus, Son of God,
Hallelujah !
We follow till the halls we see
Where Thou hast bid us sup with Thee.

(Common Service Book with Hymnal, 5:2)

The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord ;
She is His new creation
By water and the word ;
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy Bride,
With His own Blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.

(Op. cit., 198:1)

In the Bible, and in these hymns, the Church is compared to a bride. But in the Tamil poetical works, the soul is compared to the bride. Hindu literature abounds in the usage of this figure. There it is the individual soul that is the bride and God is the bridegroom. So it is evident that the Tamil poets are influenced by the Hindu devotional writings in this respect. But Luther compares the personal relationship of the believing sinner with Christ and their mutual participation of their qualities to the union of the bride and bridegroom. He says :

The third incomparable benefit of faith is this, that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. And by this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage, nay, by far the most perfect of all marriages, it follows that all they have they have in common, the good as well as the evil, so that the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as if it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as His own . . . It shall come to pass, that sins, death and all hell are Christ's and grace, life and salvation are the soul's.

Though this figure of the bride and bridegroom is used in the Tamil Christian poetical works, it is not developed as it is in Hindu literature. Terms meaning bridegroom are often used for Jesus Christ and prayers are offered to Him to take possession of the soul.

(Concluded)