

## **Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI: Creator of a Syriac Music Genre in Malayalam**

Joseph J. Palackal, CMI  
Christian Musicological Society of India

**Abstract:** Fr. Abel Periyappuram (1920-2001), a CMI priest, who received no formal training in music during his formative years, became a pivotal figure in Kerala's cultural history and Christian music history of India. Fr. Abel's innate musicality came alive when Cardinal Joseph Parecattil (1912-1987) commissioned him to create a Malayalam version of the funeral services and the *Hudra*, the book of canonical prayers in Syriac. The commission came along with a mission to retain the Syriac melodies that were already in use among the Syro Malabar Catholics. It also meant that the translated text should be viable to the original Syriac melody. Fr. Abel relied on a liberal approach in representing the source text but took extreme care to make the target text pleasantly singable. As a result, a new genre of old Syriac melodies with Malayalam text became an integral part of the Syro Malabar Catholics' religious experience. This presentation focuses on an analytical study of Fr. Abel's music leadership in enriching the cultural confluence in Kerala and reconnecting India to the source of Christianity in West Asia.

### **A time travel to the Ernakulam of 1965.**

Let us travel back in time to Ernakulam, a bustling commercial town in Kerala, India, in 1965. That is where Fr. Abel rediscovered himself as a lyricist, poet, art-promoter, organizer, and administrator.

Fr. Abel arrived at Ernakulam after a teaching career at St. Joseph's College, Devagiri in Calicut. We shall focus our attention on only one of the many creative phases of Fr. Abel's life, starting from 1965.

Fr. Abel arrived at Ernakulam at an exciting time in the Catholic Church. The repercussions of the Second Vatican Council's first document on Sacred Liturgy reached the entire Catholic Church across the world. Kerala was no exception. Interestingly, it would seem that the Syro Malabar Church was prescient of the movement in the Roman Catholic Church. The Syro Malabar Church promulgated the vernacular version of the Syriac Qurbana in 1962. The other services continued to be in Syriac. Joseph Cardinal Parecattil (1912-1987), the head of the Syro Malabar Church, was enthusiastic in leading the efforts toward renewing the Syro Malabar Church's liturgy.

### **Joseph Cardinal Parecattil and the fate of the Syriac music of the Syro Malabar Church**

Cardinal Parecattil was well aware of Fr. Abel's poetic talents and saw in him a trusted partner in the project of modernizing the Syro Malabar liturgy. Initially, the Cardinal commissioned Fr. Abel to prepare the Malayalam version of the canonical prayers and the services for the dead. Early on, Cardinal Parecattil and Fr. Abel arrived at a crucial decision to keep the original Syriac melodies that the Syro Malabar priests had been singing for centuries. It meant that the Malayalam translation should fit into the Syriac melodies. Fr. Abel had to transfer the thought process and prosodic patterns that originated in a Semitic language to the target text that followed a Sanskrit-Dravidian language's syntax rules. In the process, the structure of the melody of the Syriac text had to be kept intact. Fr. Abel accepted the challenge.

The prophetic value of Cardinal Parecattil's decision comes to light when we examine the fate of the Gregorian chant of the Roman Catholic Church. Had the Latin Church in Kerala followed a similar path, the Gregorian chant repertory would have acquired a second life in Malayalam.

### Fr. Abel's advantages

The practice of singing Malayalam lyrics to secular melodies was very much in vogue among many Christian communities in Kerala. For example, in 1963, Dharmaram College in Bengaluru published *Dharmagīti*, a Malayalam hymnal (Dharmaram College 1963)<sup>1</sup>. This hymnal is a historical witness to the compositional practices among the Catholics. There are 133 songs in the hymnal. Most of them are set to popular melodies from Hindi and Malayalam movies. For that reason, the hymnal did not include music notation. People already knew the melody. These songs were not part of the liturgy. They were sung during paraliturgical services, prayer gatherings, and other religious occasions.

Fr. Abel grew up in the Syriac tradition of the Syro Malabar Church. More importantly, Fr. Abel received

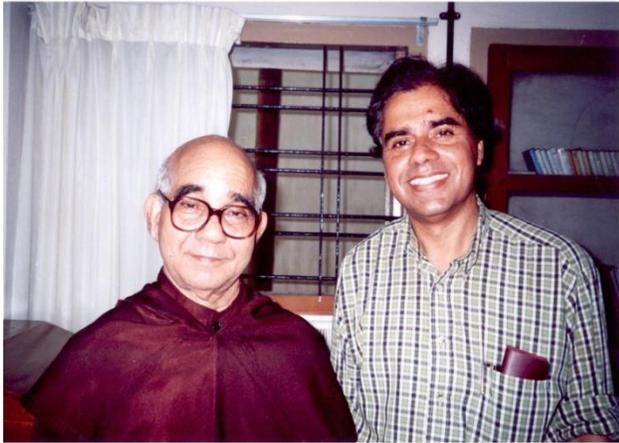


Figure 1: Joseph J. Palackal, CMI with Fr. Abel, CMI at Kalabhavan. Photo by K. S. Prasad. 23 August 2001.

seminary training in the CMI congregation. In those days, Syriac literacy was a requirement for becoming a priest. The seminarians learned to read and write the Syriac language during their formative years, and used the Syriac *Hudra* (book of the liturgy of the Hours for the entire year). Toward the final year of formation, they learned to celebrate Qurbana and other sacraments in Syriac. The CMI culture valued knowledge of the Syriac language and music. The founding fathers were Malpan-s. The Congregation was home to such scholars as Placid Podipara (1899-1985)<sup>2</sup> and Emmanuel Thelly (1925-2015)<sup>3</sup>. The CMIs owned a sense of pride in preserving the "authentic" melodies of the East-Syriac *Hudra*<sup>4</sup>.

During the formative years, Fr. Abel must have listened to many stories about great luminaries in the CMI congregation. Nevertheless, the level of knowledge and exposure to Syriac culture during the formative years was far from sufficient for the task that Fr. Abel agreed to undertake. Fortunately, help was available not far away, at St. Antony's Monastery at Aluva. Fr. Ludovic Kuniathodath, CMI (1888-1979),<sup>5</sup> a scholar and grammarian of the Syriac language, lived in retirement due to ill health. Fr. Ludovic had ample time and willingness to help Fr. Abel. There begins the story of a new music genre.

<sup>1</sup>See a review and sample pages at <http://thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/dharmagiti-hymnals-in-malayalam>. Accessed 2 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/taksa-by-fr-placid-j-podipara>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thecmsindia.org/component/content/article/48-aramaic-photo-gallery/aramaic-gallery/297-fr-emmanuel-thelly?Itemid=101>

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph J. Palackal's commentary on a letter by Fr. Amos Mechery, CMI (1904-1988) on the topic of the Syriac music culture of the CMI congregation, <http://www.thecmsindia.org/StaticFiles/docs/pdf/Fr-Amos-letter-English-translation.pdf> . Accessed 28 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://thecmsindia.org/personalities/fr-ludovic-kuniathodath-cmi>.

### The challenges

There were more challenges in front of Fr. Abel than the advantages. Unlike Malayalam, and similar to Sanskrit, the Syriac language can compress layers of ideas into a small number of phrases and verses. The Malayalam translation would require more words to achieve a literal translation.

For example, St. Thomas the Apostle used only three syllables to profess his faith in Aramaic: *Mār(y) Wālāh(y)*,<sup>6</sup> "My Lord and My God." The addition of a silent *yod* at the end of *Mār* and *ālāh* changes the meaning to "my Lord", and "my God." The Malayalam translation, however, would require ten syllables in the place of three in Syriac *En-te-kaṛ-ttā-wum- en-te-dai-wa-wum*. So, a melody of the three-syllable Syriac phrase may not fit the ten-syllable Malayalam text.

Beyond the syllabic structure, the Syriac fathers' genius is capable of creating simple phrases with multiple layers of meanings. Let us look at the famous Christological chant, *Sagdīnan Mār(y)*<sup>7</sup>

ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ  
ܕܠܐ ܩܘܠܐ ܕܠܐ ܩܘܠܐ

സഗ്ദീനൻ മാർ ലാലാഹുസാക്  
വൽനാശൂസാക് ദ് ലാപൂലാഗാ

Sagdīnan mār(y) lālā hūsāk  
Walnāšusāk d' lāpūlāgā.

We praise you, Lord, in your  
Undivided humanity and divinity  
without doubt.<sup>8</sup>

This chant consists of four phrases of four syllables each, in two verses. So there are a total of 16 syllables. The original Syriac melody is set to these 16 syllables. The text's meaning is complicated because of the polysemic nature of the phrase *d'lā pulāgā*, which could mean "without a doubt" or "without division." It is almost impossible to create a Malayalam translation of this chant into two verses to fit the Syriac text's melody.

Syriac and Malayalam have different approaches to poetic meters. Syriac poetry is syllabic; the number of syllables is the leading criterion without respect to the length of the syllable (short/long), accent, or pause. In contrast, the relative length of the syllable is a defining factor in Malayalam poetry. Besides, the grouping of syllables and pauses are also part of the metric structure.

<sup>6</sup> The system of transliteration of Syriac words in this chapter is based on a recommendation by Fr. Thomas Kalayil, CMI. Fr. Kalayil adapted the transliteration system that Brown, et al. (1997: 46) used in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, to represent the pronunciation of the Syro Malabar Catholics in Kerala.

<sup>7</sup> The text of this chant is attributed to Babai the Great (c. 551-c.628). See details in *Encyclopedia of Syriac chants of the Syro Malabar Church*. <http://www.thecmsindia.org/sagdinan-mar>. Accessed 15 February 2021. For melody and performance practice of this chant (Houston, Texas, USA), see Aramaic Project-146 <https://youtu.be/f8MXHYtiPdQ>.

<sup>8</sup> Translation, courtesy: Zacharias Thundy.

Syriac prosody is much more complex than that of Malayalam. The Syriac prosody consists of two to thirteen verses in a single stanza. For example, the melody of *Brīk hannānā dawthaibūtē* consists of couplets. Here is the Malayalam version of Fr. Abel:

ഉലകിൻ നാഥാ സിവിനയമങ്ങേ	Ulakin Nāthā sawinayamangē-
യുദയാരാധനയർപ്പിക്കുന്നു	Ykkudayārādhanayarppikkunnu. <sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the melody of *Marya kolhōn hawbay* consists of thirteen verses in one strophe.

By the way, we do not know if there is any other cultural tradition in the world that uses stanzas with thirteen verses for community singing. What is fascinating is that a stanza employs only five pitches.<sup>10</sup>

Like the raga-based classical system in India and the *Octoēchos* of the Gregorian chant and West Syriac chant, Syriac melodies follow systematic grammar and syntax. The grammar and syntax serve the aesthetic articulation of the meaning of the text. Most of the melodies of the *Hudra* have a syllabic setting, i.e., singing only one note to a syllable.<sup>11</sup> Melodies outside the realm of the *Hudra* sometimes have a combination of syllabic and melismatic settings.<sup>12</sup> Often melisma occurs as ornamentations on the ultimate or penultimate syllable of a verse or phrase. Ornamentations also serve as semantic boundary markers. In general, Syriac melodies have conjunct motion, i. e., moving from one note to the adjacent note up or down. Leaps of a perfect fourth or perfect fifth are rare. If there is one, it is mostly in the opening phrase.

In the melodic realization of the text, Syriac chants have a unique rhythmic structure that is different from the idea of *tālam* in Indian music. Rhythm in Syriac chants may be described as referential, i.e., rhythm exists only in reference to the text. Rhythm is not an independent entity with its theory as in the Indian classical traditions. Rhythm is linear, not cyclical, and therefore, does not fall in the category of *tālam*. Rhythm emanates from the movement in the utterance of the text. For that reason, rhythm also has a semantic role. The durational values of the notes also depend on the meaning units. For example, in the text's musical realization, sometimes a steady flow of rhythm may be broken to draw attention to a semantic closure.

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<sup>9</sup> The Malayalam version by Fr. Abel, (നിൻ കല്പനകൾ വീണ്ടും വീണ്ടും വായിച്ചുവയെൻ)

*Nin kalpanaka! wīnṭum wīnṭum wāyichawayen*, is available in Abel ([1974] 1996: 196-197). An audio recording of the melody is available in Fr. Abel's voice, on Aramaic Project-12 <https://youtu.be/WAgly8eVRw0> (33:19). See a transcription of the melody in staff notation, in Palackal (2005:162).

<sup>10</sup> See a transcription of this melody in Palackal (2005: 176).

<sup>11</sup> See an example of the melody of the acrostic hymn of St. Ephrem in the voice of Fr. Emmanuel Thelly, in Aramaic Project-1B <https://youtu.be/IJyBiLzqqcU>.

<sup>12</sup> Melisma refers to the practice of singing several notes to a single syllable. See an example of melisma on the final syllables (*kōn* and *hā*) of *Puqdānḵōn – Puqdānē damšihā* in Aramaic Project-132A, <https://youtu.be/U-r4iYzBQXw>.

For example:

പുലരിയിൽ നിദ്രയുണർന്നങ്ങേ      Pulariyil nidrayunarnnangē  
പാവനസന്നിധിയണയുന്നു      Pāwanasannidhiyanṇayunnu<sup>13</sup>

കർത്താവെ നിൻ കരുണയ്ക്കായ്      Karthathawe nin karuṇakkāy  
നന്ദിപറഞ്ഞു നമിക്കുന്നു      Nandiparaññu namikkunnu.<sup>14</sup>

**Pulariyil Nidrayaṇṇangē**

Text: Fr. Abel Periyappuram, CMI      Transcription: D. Sebastian  
Strophic melody: Syriac, Tuyay      Ottaplackal

*♩=52*  
Stanza 1

Pu - la - ri - yil ni - dru - yu - ṇar - nna - ngē -  
Pā - wa - na sa - nni - dhi - ya - ṇa - yu - nnu  
Kar - ttā - wē nin ka - ru - ṇa - kkāy  
Nan - di - pa - ra - ññu na - mi - kku - nnu -  
Stanza 2  
Ma - nu - ja - ku - la - ttin pā - la - ka - nē -  
Wi - na - ya - mo ṭa - nga - ye wāzh - ttu - nnu  
Kṛu - pa - yum śā - nti - ya -  
Pā - pa - ppo - ru - ti - yu - ma - ru - ḷa - ṇa - me -

See more information at the Encyclopedia of Syriac Chants at [www.TheCMSIndia.org](http://www.TheCMSIndia.org)  
<http://christianmusicalogicalsocietynriia.com/pulariyil>  
published by TheCMSIndia.org (2021)

Figure 2. The rhythm of Pulariyil Nidrayunarnnange. The pauses at the end of measures 4 and 12 coincide with the semantic flow of the text. Based on a rendering by Fr. Abel, CMI.

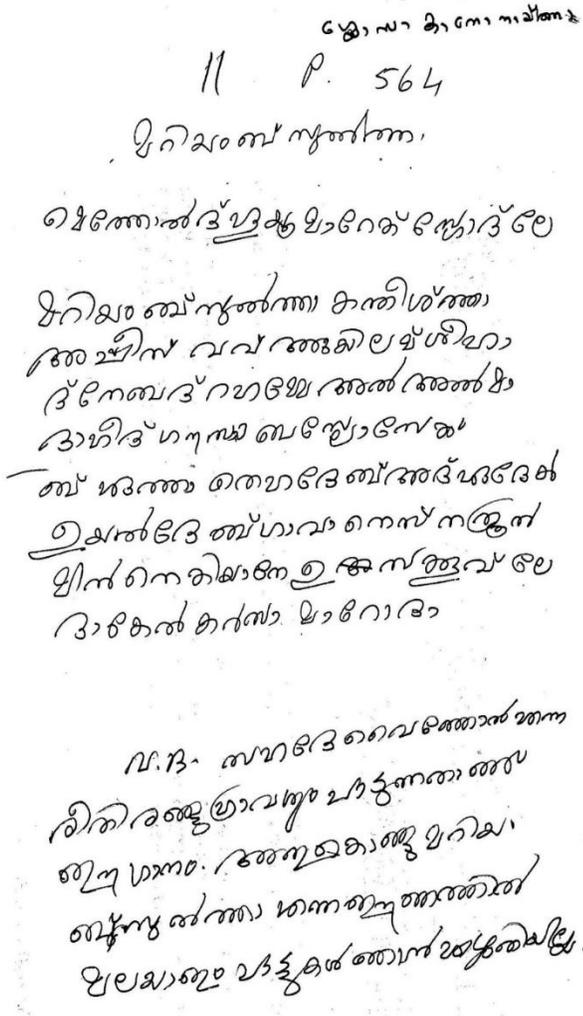
In this four-verse strophe, the fermata at the end of measures 4 and measure 12 indicate a pause. The purpose of this pause, which causes a break in the regular rhythmic flow, is to indicate the closure of a semantic unit.

<sup>13</sup> This caesura is not related to *yati* in the Malayalam poetic meter. The text itself does not call for a caesura. It happens only in the melodic realization of the text to demarcate semantic units.

<sup>14</sup> See complete text in Abel ([1974] 1996: 14).

One of the unique features of the Syriac prosody is the use of incipit. The incipit is often a verse from the Scripture, mostly from the book of Psalms. It serves as a thematic introduction to the strophe or the entire chant. More often than not, the incipit is prose and does not follow the stanza's syllabic structure. In reference to incipit, there are four kinds of chants in the Syriac repertory:

- chants that have an incipit before every stanza
- chants that have only one incipit before the opening stanza
- chants that have only one strophe but are sung twice with two different incipits
- chants that have no incipits



Incipits also have a melodic function. The musically talented leader of the group decides the pitch register of the incipit. The intoning of the incipit is in such a way that its ending pitch could lead conveniently to the beginning pitch of the strophe. In the absence of a reference pitch from a musical instrument, the first group leader<sup>15</sup> intones the incipit in view of a pitch register that is comfortable for the community.

Syriac chants existed primarily in oral tradition. A few attempts to create staff notation of model melodies did not gain popularity<sup>16</sup>. For that reason, individual variations in melodies were common occurrences.

Finally, Fr. Abel had to deal with liturgical texts. Liturgical chants are repositories of the theology of particular churches. A wrong word or phrase can make a world of difference. The writer had to be well aware of the nuances of both the source language and the target language.

Figure 3. Fr. Abel's handwriting. Text of the Syriac melody, *Maryam b'sultha*, in Malayalam script. Includes a note on the melody.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> If the chant is antiphonal (singing in which two choirs alternate), two designated leaders will intone the incipits.

<sup>16</sup> See more examples at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/manuscript-of-syriac-chants-in-staff-notation-by-fr-aiden-kulathinal> Accessed 13 February 2021.

[17] This list is a corrective to Palackal (2005: 137-138).

[18] This title is from the first incipit, *Laykā ēzal min ruhāk?* ("Where shall I go from your Spirit?").

<sup>17</sup> See more examples at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/chant-texts-in-the-handwriting-of-fr-abel-cmi>. Accessed 13 February 2021.

### The choice of Rēš Qālā

One of the characteristic features of the Syriac chant tradition is the use of Rēš Qālā ("head melody"/ model melody). *Rēš* ("head") refers to the opening strophe in a chant. The melody of the first strophe is the model for the rest of the strophes in the chant that may range from one to any number of strophes. *Rēš Qālā* is, thus, a compositional practice of creating new chant texts to an existing melodic and rhythmic pattern (see more details in Palackal 2005: 130-138).

At the outset, Fr. Abel had to make a major decision on the melodies that he would use for the Malayalam version. The *Hudra* is a treasury of Syriac melodies that survived the test of several centuries. After much deliberation, Fr. Abel decided to choose twenty-four model melodies from a plethora of melodic options contained in the Syriac chant repertory. Here is the list of model melodies that Fr. Abel employed.<sup>18</sup>

<u>Title of Malayalam text</u>	<u>Syriac title</u>
1. Pulariyil (പുലരിയിൽ)	Tūyay
2. Ulakin nāthā (ഉലകിൻ നാഥാ)	Brīk hannānā
3. Kaṇṇīrāru tarum (കണ്ണീരാരു തരം)	Sahdē brīkē
4. Narakula rakshakanām (നരകുല രക്ഷകനാം)	Eṭpan al slōṭā
5. Santatamuyarunnen (സന്തതമുയരുന്നെൻ)	Yādā hūšāwē
6. Wiṭarum pularikaḷ (വിടരം പുലരികൾ)	Sahdē waitōn
7. Ellāmariyunnu daiwam (എല്ലാമറിഞ്ഞു ദൈവം)	Īšyā daw remšē
8. Ewiṭeyoḷikkum (എവിടെയൊളിക്കും)	Laykā Ēzal <sup>19</sup>
9. Kālwarimalayil (കാൽവരിമലയിൽ)	Ēramrammāk <sup>20</sup>
10. Winayānwitanāy (വിനയാന്വിതനായ്)	Pūš Bašlāmmā
11. Gadsēmaniyil (ഗദ്സെമിനിയീൽ)	B'endān Saprā
12. Unnata wāniṭamē (ഉന്നത വാനിടമേ)	Al Madbah Qudšā (Sahdē qandišē)
13. Paramōnnatamām (പരമോന്നതമാം)	M'šihā Pārōqē
14. Amalōlbhawayām (അമലോൽഭവയാം)	Esthappānōs
15. Sāyam kālamaṭukkunnu (സായം കാലമടുക്കുന്നു)	K'tāwā Rambā
16. Paralōkattin (പരലോകത്തിൻ)	Mānāy Hādē
17. Nin kalpanakaḷ (നിൻ കല്പനകൾ)	Māryā Kolhōn Hāwbay ("Prōkumariyā")
18. Karuṇā nilyanamē (കരുണാ നിലയനമേ)	Šāmā U'lāmahmē

<sup>18</sup> This list is a corrective to Palackal (2005: 137-138).

<sup>19</sup> The title of this chant is from the first incipit, *Layka ezal min ruhak* (Where shall I go from your Spirit?)

<sup>20</sup> The title of this chant is taken from the incipit of the opening strophe, *Ēramrammāk Mār Malkā* ("I will praise you, my Lord King").

**Title of Malayalam text****Syriac title**

19. Swātantryattin (സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യത്തിൻ)	Māran Āsē
20. Anutāpikaḷe kaikkoḷwān (അനുതാപികളെ കൈക്കൊൾവാൻ)	Handā Nawšē <sup>21</sup>
21. Annoru diwasam (അന്നൊരു ദിവസം)	B'hadmin Yawmin
22. Wayalilppularum (വയലിൽപ്പുലരും)	Lā Tekarē Lāk
23. Maṛṭyanu raksha (മർത്യനുരക്ഷ)	Baslōs Kēnē
24. Jīwitabhāraṅaḷ (ജീവിതഭാരങ്ങൾ)	Bṛīku Rambūk Mārē

In a cover-letter dated 15 December 1997 for the audio recording in Aramaic Project-11, Fr. Abel hinted at his rationale for selecting model melodies.<sup>22</sup> Fr. Abel preferred melodies that are feasible for community singing. One of the criteria was relative rhythmic regularity.<sup>23</sup> Nineteen of these melodies were part of an analytical study in Palackal (2005: 130-178).

Fr. Abel masterfully managed to transfer the text, melody, and emotive effects into the new medium of Malayalam poetry. The net result was that the younger generation that did not grow up in the Syriac tradition did not know that these melodies came from another era, and they felt at home with the melodies and experienced devotion. Moreover, emotive effect of the original Syriac texts was not lost in translation so much so that the clergy who knew both languages felt at home in both versions of the text, even when there were disparities between the number of syllables and literary images. The melody served as the glue.

It may be worthwhile to remember that the Chaldean Catholic Church in the Middle East that shares the Syriac same liturgy went through a similar process. However, their task was easier than that of Fr. Abel; they transferred the text from Syriac to another Semitic language, Arabic, which happened to be their native language.

**Analytical study of a chant**

We shall analyze the Malayalam version of a chant for a cursory glance at the poetic wisdom of Fr. Abel.

**Mangiyoranti welīchattil (മങ്ങിയൊരന്തി വെളിച്ചത്തിൽ)**

This chant belongs to the category of *Mad'rāšā* (didactic chant) from the services for the dead. First, let us take a look at the Syriac text and the English translation.

<sup>21</sup> The title is from the first incipit *Handā nawšē d'awdāk* (Let it be My Delight). The chant is also known by the first verse of the initial strophe *Am kolhōn qandišaik* (With all Your Holy Men).

<sup>22</sup> See copy of the letter at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/fr-abel-s-letter-to-fr-joseph-palackal-on-syriac-chants>. Aramaic Project-11 contains an audio recording of model melodies that Fr. Abel sang. See [https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8\\_G1k](https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8_G1k). Accessed 14 February 2021.

<sup>23</sup> For an interesting and enthusiastic interaction with Fr. Abel on the topic of rhythm, see Aramaic Project-14 <https://youtu.be/W0ANNKMTJq0> (7:37). Accessed on 24 February 2021.



### Abel's version of the chant<sup>26</sup>

<p>മങ്ങിയൊരന്തി വെളിച്ചത്തിൽ ചെന്തി പോലൊരു മാലാകാ<sup>27</sup> വിണ്ണിൽ നിന്നെൻ മരണത്തിൻ സന്ദേശവുമായ് വന്നരികിൽ</p>	<p>Mangiyoranti weḷichattil Chentī pōloru mālākā Wiṇṇil ninnen maraṇattin Sandēšawumāy wannarikil</p>	<p>At the dim glow of dusk A reddish fiery angel From the skies, with death's Message came up to me.</p>
<p>കേട്ടു നടുങ്ങി മാനമിളകി പേടിവളർന്നെൻ സ്വരമിടറി മിഴിനീർ തൂകിയുണർത്തിച്ചു ഞാനൊരു നിമിഷമൊരുങ്ങട്ടെ</p>	<p>Kēṭṭu nṭungī manamiḷaki Pēṭiwaḷarṇnen swaramiṭari Mizhinīr tūkiyuṇarṭtichu Ñānoru nimishamorungatṭe</p>	<p>Hearing I shuddered, mind perturbed, Fear grew, my voice cracked Shedding tears, I said, "Let me have a moment to get ready."</p>
<p>ദൂതൻ പ്രാർത്ഥന കേട്ടില്പ്പ സമയം തെല്പും തന്നില്പ്പ മൃതിയുടെ പിടിയിലമർന്നു ഞാൻ നാഥാ നീ താൻ അവലംബം</p>	<p>Dūtan prārṭhana kēṭṭilla Samayam tellum tannilla Mṛṭiyuṭe piṭiyilamaṇnu ñān Nādhā nītānawalambam.</p>	<p>The messenger did not heed my prayer Nor did grant me any time; I am crushed in the clasp of death, O Lord, you are my only refuge.</p>

In mere twelve verses, Fr. Abel presented a musical drama of an intense emotional encounter between a man and a messenger of death. The angel descends from the skies holding a glowing torch at an ominous time of darkness. The man in tears pleads with the angel for a little more time to get ready. The angel denies the request. Despondent, the man turns to God and pleads for refuge. The tension that has been building up reaches its climax in verse eleven; here, we see the man already in the grip of death. The dreadful mood changes in the final verse when the man seeks mercy from the higher authority of God. This is a strange combination of liturgy and drama.

Fr. Abel is a master of composing liturgical drama. Looking from a third-party perspective, we feel enormous pity for the main character in the melodrama. The man is submissive and does not challenge his fate nor fight with the angel. Instead, he only asks for a few moments to prepare. In the Syriac version, the poet leaves us on the uncertain terrain; the man is in the clutches of death. The messenger does not heed the plea and is engaged in severing the soul from the body. The poet leaves us sad.

Abel is also a master of word painting. Departing from a literal translation of the text, Fr. Abel resorts to images that are not in the source text. In effect, Fr. Abel takes the Syriac text theme and creates a new poem in Malayalam. A cursory glance at the literal translation and Fr. Abel's version may highlight the differences. The Syriac text does not use the word *malaka* (angel), instead *rūhānā* (A spiritual being). The Chaldean Church of the East retained a direct translation of the word *rūhānā* as *arūpiyuruwan* (a male spiritual being). Fr. Abel substituted *rūhānā* with *Mālākā*, which Malayalam speakers are more

<sup>26</sup> See the text in Abel [1965]1986: 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Fr. Abel transliterates *mālāka* (മാലാകാ) exactly as in the Syriac text. For unknown reasons, the Malayalam speakers have modified the pronunciation as *mālākha* (മാലാഖാ). In later editions of this book as well as other publications, Fr. Abel represented the popular pronunciation.

familiar with. Also, the messenger descends like a fireball; this is not in the original text. The word *chentī* rhymes with *anthi* and provides an aesthetic diversion. The drama heightens in the second stanza, *kēṭṭunaṭungi*, *manamiḷaki*, *pēṭiwaḷarṇnen swaramiṭari*, the shudder, the churning of the mind, the abounding fear to the level of cracking of voice, and shedding of tears. These biological changes resulting from row emotions are not part of the Syriac text.

More importantly, the Syriac text ends without a resolution; in the final verse we see the angel in the act of removing the soul from the body. Fr. Abel, however, adds a new dimension to the drama. In the final verse, the lead character in the drama is seeking refuge in God's mercy. O Lord, you are the only refuge, like a terrified child running towards the comfort of its mother's lap. Fr. Abel ends with a sense of hope and a prayer. The final verse creates a sense of calm resolution. Overall, Fr. Abel's version has all the characteristics of an independent composition of high literary quality rather than a faithful translation of a source text.

What we did not ask so far is who the man who is the main character is. That man is the individual singer. See the repeated use of the first-person singular. The text is meant for community prayer, but the song is intensely personal and private. Each singer is enacting the drama. Also, the chant belongs to the category of didactic songs, *mad'rāsā*. The singer and the listener have the opportunity to learn a life lesson. At the end of the poem, the singer needs to probe into his/her inner self to see if he is ready to respond to the messenger's call of death. It calls for a constant readiness that is required of every faithful, much like the servant who keeps awake for the return of his master (Lk 12:36).

### The melody

We are still in search of the melody of the Syriac text. It will be worthwhile to know the metric structure of the melody. Because, the verses consist of pentasyllabic phrases: 2 + 3 = 5, as in B'ram- šā + b'mā-rā-wā. Fr. Abel would have had access to the melody through his literary collaborator, Fr. Ludovic Kunianthodath, CMI. Nonetheless, Fr. Abel decided to use the meter and melody of the heptasyllabic (seven syllables in verse) popular chant, *Tūyay*.

<p>Tu-yay- bad-muṭ- he-šō-kā<sup>28</sup>  Prīsā wāt al beryātā  Wadnah nuhrē(h) damšīhā  Waqnā ālmā būyānā</p>
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In contrast to the melodrama of incredulous intensity in the text, the melody is beguilingly simple. It is set to a single, strophic-melody in medium tempo. The melody consists of just four notes. It has a syllabic setting, i.e., a single note to a syllable. The conventional techniques that composers use to create drama are

conspicuously absent in the melody; there are no skips or jumps. Also, there are no ornamentations on notes. There are no neumes or melisma at the end of phrases. The only glissando in the melody occurs at the last syllable of the third verse on *tin*, connecting to the first syllable of verse four (on *sa*). Also, there are no dynamics (loud/soft); the volume stays steady on the syllables.

The melody is strophic, i. e., all the strophes have the same melody. The rhythm is logogenic, i.e., the rhythm implied in the utterance of the syllables. There is no intricate rhythmic play. The melody's movement is conjunct, i. e., moving from one note to the adjacent note.

<sup>28</sup> This chant is a *Tešbohtā* (praise) from *Saprā* (Morning prayer). See complete text in Bedjan ([1938] 2002: 35-36).

The articulation of the syllables is without accentuation. There is an even distribution of energy on the syllables. There is no emphasis on the opening syllables of verses to highlight the meaning or showcase periodization.

The entire first verse is set to a single note, i.e., the nine syllables in the first verse, *Man-gi-yo-ra-nti-we-li-cha-ttil*, are sung to the same note, which is also the tonic or the holding note of the melody.

The first instance of variation is at the opening of the second verse with a descend of a half tone. In other words, there is no drama in the melody. Characters change, mood varies, but the melody is stable.

This may be the place to make a general statement about the Syriac melodies in the *Hudra*. The role of the melody is to serve the articulation of the text. The melody has no existence outside the realm of the text. Music does not overpower the text. (This is not the case of the music of solemn Qurbana).<sup>29</sup> The simplicity and the limited range, and the melody's syllabic structure are purposeful to make the singing of a vast number of strophes by people with only a general musicality because liturgy is a participatory ritual that involves everyone present for the celebration.

### **Critical acclaims of Fr. Abel's poetic genius**

Literary critics in Kerala were eager to praise Fr. Abel's use of the Malayalam language in its pure form. For example, *Mangiyoranti welichattil* caught the attention of Prof. G. Sankarakurupp (1901-1978), an acclaimed poet laureate and literary critic in Malayalam. Prof. Sankarakurupp, a Hindu, developed a great admiration for Fr. Abel's poetic works<sup>30</sup>. What attracted Prof. Sankarakurupp was setting the scene in the opening line with that powerful image of the blazing angel against the background of the dim light of the setting sun. This image struck a chord with every Keralite of their era. Both Mr. Sankarakurupp and Fr. Abel grew up when there was no electricity or street lights in Kerala. People traveled at night holding a torch made of cloth drenched in coconut oil or dried coconut leaves. The experience was quite common to people in Kerala. Indeed, Fr. Abel surpassed the genius of a Syriac poet.

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<sup>29</sup> The solemn Qurbana in Syriac is an elaborate musical event and is subject matter for a separate study. See an example of solemn Qurbana in Syriac by Fr. Probus Perumalil, CMI (1922-2009) in Aramaic Prproject-119 <https://youtu.be/8QiIz383dss>. Accessed 27 March 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Poet Laureate, Prof. Sankarakurupp wrote a letter of appreciation of the poetic caliber of Fr. Abel, see Kunnappally (1990: 61). <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/kalabhavan-shilpavum-shilpiyum-a-memoir-edited-by-mathukutty-j-kunnappally>. Accessed 14 February 2021. See the copy of the letter at <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/g-sankarakurupp-on-fr-abel>. Accessed 14 February 2021. Prof. Sankarakurupp wrote the letter on 1 October 1965. That is the year Fr. Abel started working on the translation of the funeral services into Malayalam. As per the letter, Fr. Abel visited the poet at his home at Karikkamuri, Ernakulam, in September, and showed him the work in progress and sang some of the chants in the Syriac tunes. The purpose was to see if the eminent poet would approve the quality of the target text. Probably, Prof. Sankarakurupp felt connected with the text and thought process in Fr. Abel's work. About thirty years before (1933), the poet laureate, a Hindu, wrote a famous poem that is replete with imageries from the Catholic funeral rites in Kerala. The title of that poem, *innu nān nāḷe nī* ("Today I, Tomorrow You") is the script that used to be on the caskets used for Catholic funerals in Kerala.

Another famous literary critic in Kerala, Prof. Mathew Ulakamthara, quotes the opening stanza of *Mangiyoranti welichattil* as a prime example of Fr. Abel's literary style (see Kunnappally 1990: 72). Professor Ulakamthara is not sure if the chant has a Syriac source. The following is his scathing comment in 1969:

“ഇതിനൊരു സുറിയാനിമൂലമുണ്ടോ എന്നെന്നിരിക്കറിവില്ല.  
ഉണ്ടെങ്കിൽ മുലകവി അല്പം ലജ്ജിച്ചുകൊള്ളട്ടെ”.

“I do not know if this has a Syriac source,  
Should there be one, let the original poet be ashamed!”.

There could not be a more powerful testimony to Fr. Abel's literary talent.

### Summary

Individual stories are indispensable tools for historians to reconstruct the past. The focus of this study is on a specific area of Fr. Abel's contribution to the Syro Malabar Church and Malayalam literature. Beyond the history of Catholic liturgy, Fr. Abel's contributions are part of Kerala's cultural history. In retrospect, Cardinal Joseph Parecattil could not have entrusted creating Malayalam versions of the book of the Hours and funeral services in Syriac to a more talented person than Fr. Abel. Fr. Abel took upon himself a difficult mission to retain the ancient Syriac prosodic practices and liturgical melodies. He used the translation of a Syriac chant and transformed it into a beautiful poem in Malayalam.

In the process, Fr. Abel improved upon the source text's content and intensified the dramatic effect by infusing into it emotive images. One would not think that this is not a song of Kerala origin.

Abel's contributions also include Malayalam translations in prose of over a thousand pages of Syriac liturgical texts. That includes the translation of the Book of Psalms. This is subject matter for a separate study. Fr. Abel created a corpus of prose texts in contemporary Malayalam. In the process, Fr. Abel formulated a prayer vocabulary that flows smoothly in utterance and is endearing to the Malayalam language speakers.

Above all, Fr. Abel has bequeathed to us a set of recordings of the Syriac and Malayalam versions of the model melodies in his voice. The recordings are available on Aramaic Project-11, 12, 13, and 14.<sup>31</sup> Aramaic Project-14 includes a discussion on the nature of rhythm in Syriac chants. All these are in addition to Fr. Abel's active participation in the audio recording of the CD *Qambel Maran: Syriac Chants from South India* (Palackal 2002).<sup>32</sup> These recordings may be primary source materials for future researchers. Also, we are fortunate to have a record of the Singing voice and speech voice of a cultural icon of Kerala.

<sup>31</sup> These recordings took place at three different locations and dates. Aramaic Project-11 (Kalabhavan Studios, 5 December 1997), [https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8\\_G1k](https://youtu.be/SKFUdi8_G1k); Aramaic Project-12 (Giri's Studio, New Rochelle, New York, 22 July 1998), <https://youtu.be/WAgiy8eVRw0>; Aramaic Project-13 (Fr. Abel's office at Kalabhavan, 23 August 2001), <https://youtu.be/4S3QAPWH-PY>; Aramaic Project-14 (Joseph J. Palackal's office at St. Stanislaus Kostka Rectory, 20 September 1997), <https://youtu.be/W0ANNKMTJq0>. Accessed 2 April 2021

<sup>32</sup> Fr. Abel is the lead singer in the title chant of this CD (track 15).

## Conclusions

A CMI priest, who received no formal training in music during his formative years, became a pivotal figure in Kerala's cultural history and India's Christian music history. The consequences of the decision that Fr. Abel and Cardinal Parecattil made are far-reaching. The decision to retain the original Syriac melodies contributed to their preservation in a different cultural context. These melodies have become an essential component of the cultural fabric of India. Had they not done that, a precious repertory of East Syriac melodies would have been lost for humanity. For this reason, we may add to the discourse on India as also a country that preserves an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Fr. Abel was a mediator in the transformation and preservation of a Syriac music tradition from the Middle East and took a life of its own in Kerala. The underlying process of transformation of a melodic tradition that Fr. Abel set in motion may contain clues for researchers on the early history of the intercultural music that we now refer to as Hindustani classical music. For that reason alone, Fr. Abel's name should find a special place in the history books on music in India. Music historians have ignored the rich and varied musical traditions among the Christians in South India that came about due to continued cultural communications among countries and regions across the world. Over the centuries, these traditions have established their own unique identities and expanded Kerala and India's musical mosaic (Palackal 2019).

How Fr. Abel blended the Malayalam text with the Syriac melody was so perfect that the generation that grew up in the 1960s did not think that the melodies came from the East Syriac tradition. To them, they all sounded indigenous. Also, by adapting the characteristically simple Syriac melodies to Malayalam texts, Fr. Abel gave a model for future composers of liturgical music to emulate.

Along with their Malayalam versions, Syriac chants belong to a musical system, a *padhathi*, with its unique principles of melody, rhythm, and performance practices that require academic attention. Further studies on the contributions of Fr. Abel can only enrich the emerging field of Christian musicology of India.

Finally, this historic webinar organized by Dharmaram Vidya Kshethram may be the right forum to propose that the East and West Syriac music traditions in India should be elevated to a third system of music, besides the Karnatak and Hindustani systems. This may also be the forum to propose that Syriac music and the socio-religious systems embedded in it should find India's high school textbooks.

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