CHAPTER THREE
THE SYRIAN LITURGY WITH REFERENCE TO THE BEMA

RECONSTRUCTING THE SYRIAN LITURGY

The rituals of the early Church remain largely shrouded in mystery due to our lack of evidence, textual or otherwise, on the subject. Therefore liturgiologists are naturally wary of advancing complex theories on how the earliest Christian rituals were enacted. Details about the liturgy have to be extrapolated from a small number of early texts that mention the liturgy in passing. Almost all of the earliest texts fall into the category of Church Orders, texts that collected practical rules for the Christian community to live by. Three of these works were mentioned in the previous chapter as they have been considered as early textual evidence for the presence of the bema. However it is important to reiterate that all church ritual is unclear in the early centuries. It has always been assumed that the Eucharist was the central focus of Christian worship from the beginning but our first clear textual evidence for a eucharistic prayer is from Justin in the mid-second century, from his writings the liturgy appears to have contained the following elements:

1. Readings and sermon (displaced by baptism in the first account). The Lector reads from the OT and from the Gospels for as long as time permits and the President delivers a homily.
2. Common Prayer, which would no doubt have included prayer for the emperor and secular authorities, is recited standing. The Kiss of Peace, regarded as a seal of prayer, follows.
3. Bread and cup are brought to the President. The cup contains wine mixed with water; in the first account a further cup is mentioned containing water only, probably a peculiarity of the baptismal Eucharist.
4. Eucharistic prayer and Amen.
5. Distribution of the Eucharist by deacons to those present and to those absent.
6. Collection.

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1 See pp. 78 ff.
In his discussion of Justin’s texts Noakes suggests that the prayer sections of the liturgy would have followed the form of Jewish benedictions and that the first and second elements of the Eucharist as described by Justin would probably have been based on elements of synagogue worship.³

The textual sources, like the archaeological evidence, become more plentiful from the third and fourth centuries and in the third century the document known as The Apostolic Tradition traditionally ascribed to Hippolytus, a schismatic Roman bishop, entered circulation. This text contained one of the earliest complete eucharistic prayers⁴ but the anaphora that we have now largely dates from the mid-fourth century rather than its original third century form.⁵ Within this wider spectrum of all early Christian liturgical literature, from the third century onwards a distinct body of Syrian literature can be discerned. As mentioned above several texts within the category of Church Orders have been considered in the preceding chapter. These texts are particularly pertinent given the fact that many of the writings within this genre are now thought to have originated from Syria:

The Didascalia (or, to give it its full title, The Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Holy Apostles and Disciples of our Saviour) is generally thought to have originated in Syria in the first half of the third century. Its original language was probably Greek, but it survives in full only in Syriac ...

... The Apostolic Constitutions is also probably of Syrian origin, dating from the second half of the fourth century. The original Greek text is extant.

... The Testamentum Domini is another elaboration of the Apostolic Tradition roughly contemporary with the Apostolic Constitutions. Its original language is thought to have been Greek, but it survives only in translations in Syriac and other languages. Its place of origin is probably Syria.⁶

This early emergence of Christian literature in Syria is also found in other areas that can be related to the liturgy. For example the apocryphal Acts of Judas Thomas describes the Eucharist in the following terms:

49. And he laid his hands upon them and blessed them saying, ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus be upon you for ever!’ And they said, ‘Amen.’

And the woman begged him and said, ‘Apostle of the Most High, give me the seal, that that foe may not come back to me again.’ And her made her come near to him, laid his hands on her, and sealed her in the name of the

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³ K.W. NOAKES, “From the Apostolic Fathers to Irenaeus”, p. 212.