

HUMILITY According to Syriac Culture

"He who recognizes his impotence reaches the heights of humility."

Mor Ishok of Nineveh (613-700)

In Akkadian, if 'makāku' derives from <magāgu, it means to 'widen', 'spread', 'grow', 'continue', 'stretch out'.

If 'Makaḥu' is accepted as the continuation of the word <magahū, it reflects the meanings of 'siege', 'surround', 'enfold', 'enclose' and 'protection'. In Akkadian, the consonant 'k' can take the form of near vowels q, g, k, ḥ and sometimes even h.

Similarly, in its daughter language Syriac, six letters appear in the "strengthened" form (qûṣoyo) as BeGaDKePaT, and in the "softened" form (rûkoḳo) as 'BeĠaDḴePaS /VeĠaZḤeFaTH'.

For this reason, it is etimologically plausible that it's related to the root words 'makû', 'māku(m)', and their plural form 'makiûte', meaning 'needy, poor, destitute, deprived'; as well as the words 'makû(m)/mākum' and the sense of 'deficiency, lack, poverty, shortage, deprivation'.

This is because the words 'makû(m)' and 'makûtu' express a state of being deprived of something and/or an absence, lack of one thing within another. Its more mystical meanings can be found in Tanakh verses and in the passages of the New Testament.

How conspicuous that in Isaiah 58:5, the usages derived from the ternary letter pairs of the verb 'mak' in the phrases 'saqo° w°-qeṭmo° mo°(y)ek leh' (**שָׁקוּ וְיִשְׁמְרוּ מִלֵּב**) and (**وَيُخָبِرُوا**) signify 'to restrain one's desires' and 'to yield'.

In fact, if we translate the phrase in Psalm 44:25 (**وَسَجَدْنَا لِلْأَرْضِ**) 'meṭûl d°-mekaṭ °al °afro nafṣan' as 'for we stooped low to the ground and our bodies fell prostrate', the allegorical expression 'to stoop to the ground, prostrate oneself, grovel' seems to imply humility, modesty, meekness rather than deprivation.

Without diving too deep into etymology, I would like to conclude this introduction and segue into the main topic by bringing up one final word in the context of the relations of Akkadian and

Syriac. The Akkadian word 'mah' ending in 'he' and the Syriac word 'm^hhîlo', with the middle letter 'heth', share the same meaning: weak, powerless, sick.

Notwithstanding that there are countless exemplary Syriac words, which is essentially a continuation of Akkadian, I wish to discuss in my writing the word which derives from "mak" and means **"humility"** or the act of lowering or prostrating oneself from a height, and is emphasized in Syriac with the concept "mûkoḵo (ܡܘܟܘܚܐ) , makîḵûto (ܡܚܝܚܘܬܐ)"...

This concept is one of the most abundantly used and frequently expressed high-level social concepts in Syriac literature.

As we explained earlier, the word's etymological root lies in the remote history of ancient Beth Nahrain (Mesopotamia).

As one can see, traditions make sense when they are sequential.

In the same way, Makîḵûto (ܡܚܝܚܘܬܐ) also is a continuation of the Akkadian 'maku', 'makiu', 'makutu':

With its multi-layered anti arrogance, pride, conceit, condescension, haughtiness, braggadocio, and contempt meanings.

The universe of the conceptualized word does not contain the negative state caused un/consciously by these attitudes during flights of historical etymology.

This is an inner spiritual frequency that reflects the energy/meanings of spiritual capital.

At the same time, this state has the means to discipline the soul/ego, with its higher moral values.

"Just as darkness brings forth light, 'humility' reveals the lights of heaven inside a person."

"Every concept, every word..."

The tongue has its own spirit too, similar to the human spirit. The spirit of the words/concepts in a language forms the roots of our world of meaning/culture. **"Every concept, every word grants access to culture."**

To quote a social thinker for emphasis, **"Those who learn a word and fail to grasp its meaning, fail to understand both the word and the meaning."**

As one can see, Syriac, an ancient language, has deep historical roots against a backdrop of social concepts and has accumulated a cultural richness that finds meaning through life.

At times, said meaning/s are mute and veiled to us because that cultural richness is not understood. When this is the case, it makes it harder to perceive and understand the meaning of the concept/word.

In other words, it becomes possible to comprehend the full meaning of a conceptualized word in Syriac culture by understanding the historical odyssey of the words/concepts in the language.

Just as the nutritious nucleus of a walnut can only be reached by breaking the shell, one must dive deep into the profundity that lies in the background of words/concepts in this language to make sense of a language and culture as ancient as Syriac.

As long as we are able to acknowledge the true meaning and respective profundity of words/concepts, we get the opportunity to keep our cognitive/spiritual facilities intact and strong.

Being Detached From the "Ego"

Understanding/explaining what humility is in Syriac culture is a research subject in itself. This topic, which requires inner strength and spiritual capital, has been scientifically researched.

Despite that, it is rather difficult to define the subjective concept of "humility", because many different definitions exist.

"If man, being created from dirt, fails to match dirt in humility, he forfeits his nature/humanity." This is the best quote on humility, in its general sense, to keep in mind.

In Syriac sources, we encounter ways of coming up with definitions unique to humility. Firstly, it is the sine qua non of greatness. It is also a call to the flexibility, fluidness, and sophistication of life.

It means to be detached from the "ego", to break free of its control, and to value the soul over vanity. Decency and manners are its mark.

For the concept to find Lebensraum in daily life, the person must first grow aware of his/her own flaws and shortcomings; and they must act with this awareness.

Which is why Mor Ishok of Nineneveh (613-700) says, **"He who recognizes his impotence reaches the heights of humility."** This prolific writer has treated humility to such extent that he elaborates and explains it in a way which does not run counter to modern-day views.

Conscious awareness and Merciful awareness

In Syriac sources, "**humility**" is described as a polite and courteous life perspective that is necessary in all spheres and areas of life.

It is the greatest of human virtues and most cherished of moral tenets.

And, it harbors a sincere meaning which is necessary for the preservation and development of a person's individuality, just as much as it harbors conscious awareness and merciful awareness.

In the world of humility, a fettered soul cannot flourish. And a soul that will not flourish cannot be unfettered, because without a flourishing self, a person cannot exist as themselves and experience fullness.

A person can only discover life's meaning and purpose by tending to the soul and self-actualizing. They find happiness because that soul is creative. That soul is productive. It likes to share. It is a soul that comes to life through humility. It achieves union with God!

The literary productions of Syriac literature offer vast knowledge on the subject of humility. According to these works, "**Humility is a pure idea that is closely linked to divine values. And a humble person is one who, despite knowing evil and being freely capable of committing it, does not do so.**

"Silencing 'Me' So That 'You' Are Heard"

Since Christ and his teaching are in the foreground in Syriac works, humility is described as a state of independence from the self/ego.

It is synonymous with having inner light. It is constantly emphasized as the foundation of good things, adorned with virtues and wisdom.

If one would wish for warmth to ward off the chills that ail the spirit, they must certainly arrange comfortable accommodations for humility at the depths of their heart/spirit. Because wisdom and virtue are the constant companions of humility.

As is evident from these descriptions, humility is a true form of discernment and awakening that develops with self-love. At the same time, it is a balancing force between the 'personality' and spirit.

Silencing 'Me' So That 'You' Are Heard, is a way of keeping 'Me' in check. It is the withdrawal of the soul/ego into its own shell. It means that it knows its place.

It means that it respects itself, others, and all existence. It means a person putting their ego in its place. It means that it does not champion the ego.

Being humble does not mean that we depreciate ourselves, but that we appreciate others. It means getting our ego out of the way and embracing all existence.

It means seeing all people and even creatures as one's equals without condescension, arrogance, boasting, and discrimination based on ethnic background, class/status, and identity.

It means hearing that incomparable divine whisper which engulfs the universe, and drawing back one's ego into the depths, the core, the self within the self.

A humble spirit has been steeped in kindness and mercy. Thus, there can be no exploitation/abuse where there's humility, and humility cannot exist and grow where there's exploitation/abuse.

Humility is so in tune with the human spirit that it merges with every single atom of life.

It strives to aid all existence through the spirit of empathy. It takes inspiration from life, from other people, from the entire universe and tries to inspire others as much as it can.

According to Syriac literature, knowing oneself leads one to humility. Therefore, Saint Anthony (251-356) says that, **"To know God, you must first know thyself"**.

The key to humility, which is the synergic expression of the positive forces inside people, is self-knowledge. Mor Aphrem of Nusaybin (306-373) supports and emphasizes the vital importance of this approach when he says, **"To reap the fruits of good works, you must always maintain a humble attitude."**

While conducting an in-depth study on the subject, Persian Sage Aphrahat, who is considered among the first and prominent writers of Syriac culture, states that, **"Humility is the abode of justice. It is the source of all good."** Mor Ishok of Nineveh (613-700) puts it differently: **"Humility is a godly garment. (...) Humility is a power that cannot be communicated through language or won by human strength."**

In parallel with this, one of the brilliant stars of Syriac culture, Mor Ishok of Antioch (d. 491) thus expressed in poetic language the dangers of haughtiness/vanity:

"Two CLOUDS left in the field by a farmer begin an argument over which of them is stronger than the other. The pouring rain dissolves and wipes out both, effectively putting an end to the argument. This is analogous to a person who patronizes his/her equals. Just

as said person believes that they've come out on top, they're swept up by death and imprisoned in the grave."

The understanding that, "**He who humbly serves humanity is closest to God**" predominates Syriac culture.

However, it is sometimes more appropriate to be on guard against exploitation/abuse in the face of our disappointments.

Since Saint Mor Aphrem (303-373), a model of humility, personally experienced false practices and mistaken appraisals of humility in places/people where a cash cow mentality had gained foothold, he gave this momentous warning: "**enhu detmakaht haşbuḳ d^a-lo havro: if you behave humbly, they deem you vulgar."**

In this sense, acting in a way that shuts out exploitation/abuse and avoiding harm or harmful things is actually an act of love. It is the love we feel toward ourselves.

The Key Itself

As you can see, humility is essential to the truth of life and the center of the universe. If the meanings of humility, which flows from divine values, become meaningless and ineffective, everything in human life will gradually lose meaning as well.

Humility is the very key inside us that unlocks doors between people and opens up the world. With this key, people who know/understand themselves can unlock the doors beyond which splendors lie. Those who lock themselves away and are strangers to themselves cannot possibly know/understand others. Experts in the field (sociologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists) verify this truth as well.

It is not at all easy to understand and make sense of life without understanding oneself and others. As a person gets to know him/herself, they grow aware of their inner light.

When they are able to illuminate the paths of others as well as their own, they come to possess the magical keys of humility.

Statuses of "greatness/supremacy/grandeur" attainable to humans show variance in proportion to the humility and arrogance of a person.

The reason being that arrogance and humility are inversely proportional. As the ratio of humility within a person increases, the ratio of arrogance diminishes. As the ratio of arrogance increases, the ratio of humility diminishes.

Smugness, on the other hand, is the first step towards arrogance and haughtiness. Such people stand aloof from learning and development.

In other words, they cannot be in possession of humility or its magical keys.

Parallel to this, science explains that humility influences the human brain structure and all psychological processes that are bound to its functionality. Modern writers who conceive sociological ideas poignantly explain this in its various aspects.

Foreseeing the necessity of humility for growth and development, German thinker Gerhard Uhlenbruck writes that, "**Smugness prevents learning, and learning prevents smugness.**"

Wolfgang Van Goethe (1749-1832) too, relays the idea that, "**He who does not think highly of himself, is in fact greater than he thinks.**"

Another idea that duly describes humility is by French thinker Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1900-1944) and goes along the lines of, "**Humility does not require degrading oneself, but opening up. It is the key to change. Only then can one give and receive!**"

According to English writer John Ruskin (1819-1900), an influential sociologist, "**Not only is a humble person courageous, but at the same time highly aware, consistent, and wise. The first test of a truly great man is his humility. By humility I don't mean doubt of his powers or hesitation in speaking his opinion, but merely an understanding of the relationship of what he can say and what he can do.**"

This shows that where there is humility, moral tenets are more developed. Wisdom, diligence, altruism, sincerity, sobriety, self-denial, virtue, consistency, honesty, and sharing become inescapable.

As you see, on the one hand there are bad habits, traditional patterns, and mental/spiritual infections that complicate and poison life...

And on the other we have the illuminating wisdom of humility, a life-facilitating method of breaking free from said patterns and mental/spiritual infections...an antibody and antidote, as it were, against the poisonous constraints inside people!...

So, as a humble person proceeds on his/her way in the illuminating wisdom of humility, they must always remember the words, **"The full ear of grain droops; the empty one is upright."**

If anyone can contribute anything to a fellow traveler whom they encounter on the path of life, they hold on to the belief that permanent peace is within their reach. For a humble person, this is what true success in life entails, because they are conscious of the fact that unenthusiastic giving and insincere conduct are a spiritual illness, and that the day they quit contributing to themselves and to others is the day they begin to die.

The more we value humility, a factor in all of life's transitions, and the more we reproduce/uplift it with our noble actions, positive situations will increase correspondingly. This, in turn, will contribute positively to human interaction and social peace.

Hence, in emphasis of sincere humility as the revelation of love and decency, Jesus Christ says, **"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant..."** (Matthew 20:26)

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