

The Holy Oil in the Syriac tradition

The Syriac term for Oil (*meshHa*)¹ and the Trinity:

oil (symbolizing the Spirit): *meshHa*
Christ, the 'Anointed': *mshiHa*
The Father, the 'Anointer': *mashoHa*

Thus a triangular relationship (as in Rublev's famous icon):

mashoHa (Father)
mshiHa (Son) *meshHa* (Spirit)

Main liturgical uses of (olive) oil: Baptism; anointing of sick; consecration of a church/altar.
Baptismal anointings: originally there was only one, pre-baptismal, anointing, known as the *rushma*, or 'mark', a term taken from the Syriac OT (Exodus 12:23 and Ezekiel 9:4). In the course of time a second pre-baptismal anointing was added, and then (after c.400) a post-baptismal one. For the post-baptismal anointing a scented oil is used; by c.500 this had come to be called '*myron*' in the West Syriac rites (Syrian Orthodox and Maronite). The *myron* is already very prominent in the works attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, which date from c.500. *Myron* originally this consisted of olive oil and balsamon, but at some time in the Middle Ages a very elaborate confection came to be used, involving many ingredients, and its sanctification was reserved to the Patriarch (earlier this was done by bishops). Besides being used for the post-baptismal anointing, *myron* is also poured on the baptismal water in the course of the long prayer of sanctification of the water.

The three baptismal anointings:

- (a) before sanctification of the water; forehead.
- (b) between the sanctification of the water and the water baptism; the whole body.
- (c) immediately after the water baptism; the organs of sense.

(The baptismal rite culminates with the Eucharist; there is no separate Confirmation, as has developed in the Western rites).

Prayers over the oil were originally to be found within all the Syriac rites; these have subsequently been lost in the Syrian Orthodox rite, but are preserved in the Maronite and East Syriac rites. Three very archaic prayers over oil have been preserved, two in the Acts of Thomas (3rd/4th cent.?), and the third in a Legend about the Magi preserved in an 8th-cent. Chronicle. In the third prayer, and in the excerpt below from one of St Ephrem's Hymns, the word *ruHa*, 'spirit', in 'Holy Spirit' is still treated grammatically as feminine, whereas in later texts *ruHa*, when referring to the Holy Spirit, is regularly treated as a masculine; to bring out this feature the translation of St Ephrem below uses 'she' etc.

Three archaic prayers over the baptismal oil

1. Acts of Thomas, section 121:

Holy oil for anointing has been given to us
and the Hidden Mystery of the Cross which has appeared in it,

¹ H here represents 'ch' as in 'loch'/'

You are the stretcher-out of bent limbs,
You, our Lord Jesus Christ, are Life, health and forgiveness of sins,
May Your power come and reside on this oil
and may Your holiness dwell in it.

2. Acts of Thomas, section 157:

O Fair Fruit that has been worthy to become fervent with the Word of holiness (holy Word).
so that human beings can put You on and overcome in you their enemies
when they have been purified of their former actions;
Yes, Lord, come and reside on this oil as You resided on the Wood (of the Cross). and Your
crucifiers could not endure Your word;
may Your Gift come, which You breathed over Your enemies and they retreated backwards and fell
on their faces [Jn 18:6],
and may You reside on this oil, over which we make mention of Your name.

3. Legend of the Magi, Zuqnin Chronicle, ed. Chabot, I, p.88.

We praise You, O Mystery of Life/Salvation, who has been given to us in the oil by grace for
anointing,
to You be praise, Hidden Mystery that has been given to us in the oil by grace for anointing,
to You be praise, Hidden Mystery that has been given to us in the oil for Life/Salvation and for
forgiveness.

By it (the oil) He illumines us and chases away from us darkness and error,
and in its Mystery, again, athletes in the contest overcome their enemies.

To You be praise, Mystery of the oil, who were worthy to have participation with Christ,
and with it the victorious are crowned in the contest.

You are twinned with the Spirit

and it (the oil) too floats over the water like its mate (fem.), the Holy Spirit,
the mingler of the soul with the mind,
and the renewer of the body in the rebirth to Life/Salvation.

Come (fem.), Companion of the Firstborn,

come (fem.), Renewer of human beings in her giving birth to eternal life,

reside in these believers, who are the beloved of our Lord Jesus Christ,

and purify and sanctify them from all the scars of their bodies;

and may they become for You (fem.) temples for Your dwelling,

and a resting (place) for the perfect Son of Mercy;

and may You sanctify them in rebirth to Life/Salvation completely.

(And he baptized them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

(Translations of the East Syriac, Maronite and Melkite prayers over baptismal oil can be
found in *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, pp.115-6)

St Ephrem (d.373) on the symbolism of oil

Hymns on Virginity, no. 7, stanzas 5 and 6 (ET of the whole in S. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: 18
Poems of St Ephrem*), and in K. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*):

An image of the Kingdom is painted with visible colours,
and with oil that all can see is the hidden portrait of our hidden King portrayed
on those who have been signed: on them baptism/the font,

that is in travail with them in its womb, depicts the new portrait,
to replace the image of the former Adam, who was corrupted,
it gives birth to them with triple pangs,
accompanied by the three glorious Names, of Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Oil is the dear friend of the Holy Spirit, it serves Her,
following Her like a disciple. With it She signed priests and anointed kings;
for with the oil the Holy Spirit imprints Her mark on Her sheep.
Like a signet ring whose impression is left on wax,
so the hidden Seal of the Spirit is imprinted by oil on the bodies
of those who are anointed in baptism; thus they are marked in the baptismal Mystery.

Symbolism of the baptismal oil as expressed in the rites and their commentaries

The *rushma* is primarily understood as a mark of identity, indicating an entry into a new state or relationship; above all, it authorizes the newly baptized to call God 'Father' (and thus to use the 'Our Father'), and to become sisters and brothers of Christ. Some early texts and prayers connect the pre-baptismal anointing with Ex. 19:6 and I Pet. 2:9; in the latter the Syriac NT reads 'you are a chosen race that serves as priest to the Kingdom'.

Frequent images used in connection with this new status include:

- entry into the flock of Christ;
 - grafting on to the True Olive (Rom. 11:17);
 - imprinting with a mark of ownership;
 - providing a seal of ownership;
 - healing and cleansing (e.g. of the disfigured 'image of God');
 - protection against the powers of evil;
 - armour in the contest with Satan (or, in connection with the second pre-baptismal anointing, to make the body slippery in the wrestling match with Satan): the sequence baptism - contest is based on the Temptation of Christ following his Baptism.
- the *rushma* is sometimes seen as replacing circumcision under the Old Covenant (and so the oil can be described as 'cutting').

The early Syriac baptismal tradition laid more emphasis on the Johannine view of the font as effecting rebirth than on the Pauline understanding of baptism as a death and resurrection. The introduction of the post-baptismal anointing was perhaps due to shift in emphasis, away from the Johannine view in favour of the Pauline. Once the water baptism was primarily understood as a death and burial, it became necessary to transfer many of the positive associations of the *rushma* to the post-baptismal anointing. The use of the term *myron* for the post-baptismal oil provided a new link with Song of Songs 1:3, and the imagery of fragrance. Other new themes that came in with the post-baptismal anointing include those of 'perfecting', 'union' (Eph. 4:3), and sharing in Christ's Body (as new 'members' or 'limbs' (Eph. 3:6).

For further reading

S.P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (1979; 2nd edn Gorgias Press, 2008), 20-21, 49-50, 114-33. (Appendix 2: 'The Holy Spirit as feminine in early Syriac literature').

- , The priesthood of the baptised: some Syriac perspectives, *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 9:2 1987, 14-22; reprinted in *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (revised edn, Bangalore, 2008), chapter 9.
- , Anointing in the Syriac tradition, in M. Dudley and G. Rowell, *The Oil of Gladness* (1993), 92-100.
- An archaic Syriac prayer over baptismal oil, in *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006), 3-12.
- B. Varghese, *Les onctions baptismales dans la tradition syrienne* (1989).
- G. Winkler, *Die armenische Initiationsrituale* (1982). (Index, s.v. Öhl; the early Armenian baptismal rite has many similarities with the Syriac).
- , The history of the Syriac pre-baptismal anointing in the light of the earliest Armenian sources, in *Symposium Syriacum 1976* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205; 1978), 317-24.
- , The original meaning of the pre-baptismal anointing and its implications, *Worship* 52 (1978), 24-45.

For wider themes

S.A. Harvey, *Scenting Salvation. Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (2006).
 E.C. Quinn, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life* (1962). [This legend, however, is only found in the West, despite its origins in the East].