

Abraham Malpan

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Introduction

In the history of the Mar Thoma Church there are many notable and influential persons that helped reform the church to what it is today. For example, Mathews Mar Athanasius, Titus I Mar Thoma, Abraham Mar Thoma, Alexander Mar Thoma, or lay persons such as K.K. Kuruvilla, C.P. Mathew and K.N. Daniel have all played a role in the reforming of the Mar Thoma Church. But there is one person that all these aforementioned persons would likely regard as the key reformer in the history of the Mar Thoma Church; the person who initiated the reformation movement that eventually formed the Mar Thoma Church: Pulakunnathu Abraham Malpan.

The story of this man, Abraham Malpan (“Malpan” is a Syriac term for professor), is a difficult one to tell. The literature available is limited. He himself did not write much, if anything at all, about himself or what he believed. If he did, these writings have not been found. Yet, despite the scarcity of information on the Malpan, he has a legacy and tradition that continues in the church to this day. However, due to the many unknowns regarding him, his story has likely been exaggerated in some parts, perhaps even fabricated in some others, yet certainly there would have to be truths found in his tradition as well.

In this paper, we will look at the story of Abraham Malpan based on the information available. His history, his personality and his role in the reformation will be examined. Lastly, and perhaps the most important thing to study of any reformer of any church tradition, his relevant beliefs will be examined. We will see there is disagreement amongst historians as to what the Malpan believed. Two of these disagreements will be examined. The author assumes a general knowledge of the history of the Mar Thoma Church from the reader and will not discuss in any detail matters outside of the person and life of Abraham Malpan.

Brief personal background

Abraham Malpan was born into the Palakunnathu family in 1796 in Maramon. Before his birth, his father had passed away.¹ Before turning three years of age, his mother passed away. His father’s elder brother, Palakunnathu Thomas Malpan, had then assumed guardianship of the young Abraham and his brother, and raised them.²

Because the practice of the church at that time was to ordain children as deacons, only after completing his primary education was Abraham ordained as deacon. He was then sent to study Syriac and the worship orders under Malpan Korah Kathanar, eventually becoming an expert in the Syriac language. After being ordained as a priest in 1815 by Mar Thoma VIII³, he soon became a professor of Syriac, a Malpan, at the Seminary in Kottayam.

The priests of that time practiced celibacy. This was a practice that was kept after the brief time under the Roman Catholic Church. However, after the protestant British arrived, who were Anglicans, they encouraged the church to end the mandate of celibacy. The then metropolitan, Punnuthra Mar Dionysius, agreed and the practice ended. Abraham Malpan was one of the first of the priests to get married. This does not indicate how much the Malpan wished to get married, however. The British Resident, Col. Munro, offered cash rewards to the first

¹ *Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan*, [cited: 4 January 2007] <http://mtcyouth.org/cs2/files/folders/37/download.aspx>

² Juhanon Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and a Brief History of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Madras: K.M. Cherian, 1968), 23.

³ *Ibid.*

priests who got married.⁴ So either the Malpan really wanted to get married, he needed the money, or a combination of the two.

His character aided the reform

The Malpan was very stubborn when it came to his convictions. No matter how extreme his actions may be, or the consequences of his actions, if he believed it to be the right thing to do, he will do it boldly and gladly. These are some of the incidents that historians describe:

- The first known incident was in regards to his ordination. There were doubts surrounding the consecration of Mar Thoma VIII and its validity. If his consecration was invalid, that would make Abraham Malpan's ordination invalid, and this was a concern for the Malpan⁵. Therefore, when a Jacobite bishop from Syria came, the Malpan got re-ordained. This obviously angered Mar Thoma VIII and he filed a complaint to the government. Abraham Malpan was then sent to prison for flouting the authority of the bishop. It is said that he gladly went to prison⁶ because he strongly believed that his ordination must come from a truly consecrated bishop, and he had serious doubts of Mar Thoma VIII's consecration.
- Another incident concerned an idol that was at his parish in Maramon. The small statue was to represent a saint, a bishop from Tigris, Yeldo Mar Baselios. Mar Baselios visited Kothamangalam and shortly after his arrival, he had died. To remember him, the people held a festival in his name and called it the Muthappan Festival.⁷ People from Maramon and other cities visited this festival to pay homage to the Muthappan. They believed that it was the Muthappan who was causing their agriculture to produce much prosperity. Maramon, being an agricultural town, also believed they were being blessed by the Muthappan. They then created a statue that represented him, and every year during the Muthappan Festival, they will parade it around and people will offer their prayers and offerings to it. Incidentally, this was also a revenue source for the Maramon parish.

Abraham Malpan used to be a strong believer in the Muthappan as well. But when he began to read and study the Bible, he felt this was a form of idolatry and he threw the statue down a well. This offended some, but the practice was thus halted in his church.

- Abraham Malpan was also a very staunch keeper of the Sabbath. He prohibited people from doing any work, aside from studying the Bible, from Saturday evening to Sunday evening. He was so strict that he threw away curry after finding out the coconuts used in the curry were taken during the Sabbath. The Malpan also excommunicated his own cousin for taking vegetables Sunday morning. He openly excommunicated him in front of the whole congregation.⁸ This not only shows his boldness and discipline, but also shows signs of a legalistic approach to Christianity and not one of grace. Whether this

⁴ Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan, op. cit.

⁵ K.K. Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines* (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1951) 14.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan, op. cit.

⁸ Ibid.

incident occurred before or after Malpan's reformation initiative is unknown to the author.

- When the missionaries and the Syrian Church parted company, and the Metropolitan prohibited anyone from dealing with the missionaries again, Abraham Malpan took it upon himself to lead the reformation and take over where the missionaries left off.⁹ He also maintained his relationship with the missionaries despite the prohibition.¹⁰
- The Malpan and eleven other priests wrote a memorial to the British Resident listing grievances against the Metropolitan and also the state of the church. In an effort to bring the church back to its roots without the foreign and superstitious elements within, they felt this was a necessary step. However, the effort was fruitless.¹¹
- Abraham Malpan performed the translated and revised liturgy for Holy Communion without the consent of the Metropolitan.¹² It was not merely an act of defiance, but he knew the Metropolitan was not in favor of reforms, so he felt this was the right thing to do. For the sake of the church, he performed it.

What we can learn about the Malpan with these incidents is not so much what he believed, but rather the character and personality of the Malpan. We see a man who was passionate, zealous, disciplined, progressively thinking and not wishing to keep the status quo if the status quo was found to be weak or wrong, not hesitant to question ecclesial authorities, and not afraid to suffer to do what he felt was right. It is this side of the Malpan's character that the author wishes to demonstrate in order to see the man behind the reformation.

Abraham Malpan was also close friends with one of the missionaries who was at the center of many of the problems that led to the separation between the missionaries and the Syrian Church. Joseph Peet was a man described to be rash, impatient with the slow progress of reforms¹³ and made hasty decisions. He was very critical of the church and pointed out errors in their practices.¹⁴ This was a departure from the previous missionaries who started the work with the Syrian Church. However, this personality fits with Abraham Malpan. It is said that Peet and the Malpan were good friends¹⁵ (despite having clashes¹⁶), he had preached at the Malpan's church in Maramon¹⁷, and he visited Malpan as he was ill before his death.¹⁸ Their close relationship can be indicative of their similar personalities and desire for reform.

⁹ Juhanon Mar Thoma, op. cit., 23.

¹⁰ C.P. Mathew and M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 70.

¹¹ Kuruvilla, op. cit., 14-15.

¹² Mathew, op. cit., 83-84.

¹³ Ibid., 63, 65.

¹⁴ Juhanon Mar Thoma, op. cit., 20.

¹⁵ *Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Mathew, op. cit., 64.

¹⁷ Philip Tovey, "Abraham Malpan and the Amended Syrian Liturgy of CMS," *Indian Church History Review* 29/1 (June 1995): 52.

¹⁸ *Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan*, op. cit.

The Syrian Church of Abraham Malpan

The Syrian Church that Abraham Malpan was raised in and was a priest in was one in certain need of reformation. Due to the influence of CMS missionaries from the Anglican church, such reformation was initiated. But before we can discuss the reformation of Abraham Malpan, we must understand what the state of the church was that made him want to reform it.

After the Coonen Cross oath that severed ties between a group of Syrian Christians and the Roman Catholics, the church managed to survive, however, they were not “alive”. There was no “spiritual vitality” or “missionary zeal” that would be marks of a living church. Juhanon Mar Thoma would say they were only Christians by name.¹⁹ Practices of the church that had the attention of the missionaries included:²⁰

- Uneducated clergy and no school for such training (the latter was addressed when the Seminary began)
- Imposed celibacy, a practice introduced by Rome and continued after the Coonen Cross oath
- No facility for reading the Bible
- Services were not conducted in Malayalam, the vernacular of the people, but rather in Syriac, a language not understood by the lay people, and weakly understood by the priests
- Having no fixed salary, priests would earn money by saying masses, including that for the dead
- Superstitious practices of non-Christians were also practiced among the Syrian Christians
- Invocation of the saints took place
- Auricular confession

This was the church that Abraham Malpan saw as a young deacon, a priest, and Malpan of the Seminary. Through the help of the missionaries, he began the movement to correct the church of these and many other ills.

Abraham Malpan’s role in the Reformation

In 1836, there was a parting of ways between the church and the missionaries. The metropolitan, Cheppat Mar Dionysius, Mar Dionysius IV, was not as favorable to the missionaries and their reformist ideas as were the prior metropolitans. This decision of ending the relationship was made at the Mavelikarra Synod where Abraham Malpan was present. It was he that related the outcome of the Synod to the missionaries.²¹ Despite the division, the Malpan kept in close relationship with the missionaries and he stayed faithful to the former metropolitans’ acceptance to reform the church as he continued to do his work at the Seminary and in his Maramon parish.

While Abraham Malpan is singled out by some as the one who began the reformation, he certainly was not alone. He had a colleague at the Seminary, Kaithayil Gheeverghese Malpan, who also wished to reform the church from within. In addition to these two, the people who inspired the need for reformation in the church were the CMS missionaries. Technically, one could argue, they are the ones who began the reformation. But after the Mavelikarra Synod

¹⁹ Juhanon Mar Thoma., op. cit., 19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tovey, op. cit., 51.

decision, the Malpan continued their work. The missionaries' relationship with Abraham Malpan was key in the reformation. While there were times the Malpan acted on his own, many of the liturgical changes he made were done with the help and influence of the missionaries. There were also the Metropolitans, Mar Dionysius I, Mar Dionysius II and Mar Dionysius III, who established the relationship with the Anglicans and missionaries, and were open to their ideas of reforming the church to be a more biblically sound church and having the Bible available in the vernacular of the people. Punnathra Mar Dionysius was the one who, in 1818, commissioned a group of priests, including Abraham Malpan, to work with the missionaries to see what can and should be reformed, and the Malpan stayed faithful to that task²² despite Mar Dionysius IV.

As a professor in the Seminary, Abraham Malpan had a critical role in the training of future priests with the new reformist principles. It was a way in which he can bring reformation from within: begin with each member of the clergy.

While the Malpan worked very closely with the missionaries in trying to reform the church from within, he also acted apart from the missionaries wishes. One such act that occurred in 1836 was what is known as the "Trumpet Call" of the reformation, an act the missionaries wanted no part of.²³ Twelve priests, including Abraham Malpan and Kaithayil Gheeverghese Malpan, wrote a memorial to the British Resident making charges against Mar Dionysius IV and listing twenty-three points concerning abhorrent church practices.²⁴ They said that these practices crept into the church and are not part of the St. Thomas tradition. The memorial went without a response.

This did not deter Abraham Malpan. He went on to revise the liturgy and began using it in the Seminary. The revised liturgy began its use in the Seminary in 1836.²⁵ His support diminished, however. Even though he had Kaithayil Gheeverghese Malpan behind him, he had no great support any more.²⁶ The Malpan took it upon himself to begin using the revised liturgy whenever he celebrated Holy Communion, including his parish in Maramon. Despite being prohibited to have dealings with the missionaries, Abraham Malpan continued his relationship, especially with Joseph Peet.

At that time, the priests of the church would be assigned to a particular parish for an indefinite period of time. While they would be under the auspices of their bishop, they essentially ran as an autonomous church. Priests could do as they pleased without having to ask permission of their bishop. This was something Abraham Malpan took advantage of as a priest of his parish in Maramon²⁷, and also was likely hoping to take advantage of with the training of future priests. In his church at Maramon, he used the revised liturgy and also would preach as to why the changes were made.²⁸ This he could do freely without the consent of the Metropolitan. In 1840, Abraham Malpan retired from the Seminary and devoted his full effort to his parish in Maramon.²⁹

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁴ Juhanon Mar Thoma, op. cit., 23

²⁵ Tovey, op. cit., 52.

²⁶ Juhanon Mar Thoma, op. cit.

²⁷ Mathew, op. cit., 83-84.

²⁸ Mathai John, "The Reformation of Abraham Malpan: An Assessment," *Indian Church History Review* 24/1 (June, 1990): 41.

²⁹ Tovey, op. cit., 52

When Dionysius IV heard of what was going on in his parish, this infuriated the Metropolitan and he excommunicated Abraham Malpan and his parish and prohibited any deacons trained under him to be ordained as priests. This was a major blow to the Malpan's desire to reform the church from within. However, he did not give up.

He needed a bishop that supported the reformation so the revised liturgies and prayers could be freely used at every parish without fear of reprimand. He sent his nephew, who was studying at a CMS school in Madras, to the Jacobite Patriarch to be trained and consecrated as Metropolitan of the Syrian Church. After being consecrated as Mathews Mar Athanasius in 1842, he felt he had to gain the favor of the church to be accepted as Metropolitan. Therefore, much to Abraham Malpan's disappointment, he did not use the revised liturgy for his first Holy Communion service. Mathews Mar Athanasius also had a battle to win over Mar Dionysius IV over who is the legitimate Metropolitan. This battle lasted for years until finally Mathews Mar Athanasius won.

However, it did not take long for yet another bishop to be consecrated as Metropolitan and even more legal battles were to take place. After this second round, Mathews Mar Athanasius' successor, Thomas Mar Athanasius, lost. The reformists, clergy and lay persons alike, lost much of their physical church infrastructure including the Seminary. But their convictions for reform gave them the desire to suffer through the initial stages as Thomas Mar Athanasius was essentially beginning a new church. However, traditionally speaking, he was continuing the same tradition but going down a different branch as the church they departed from. The Mar Thoma Church was thus formed in 1889.

Abraham Malpan did not live to see that day as he passed away at a young age in 1845, before his nephew, Mathews Mar Athanasius, won the first court case. We could speculate that the outcome was not what the Malpan would have wished for. Malpan had the opportunity to join the Anglican church after their division with the Syrian church, but he refused. He was convicted in reforming the church from within – he did not want to form a new church. Even though it can be argued that a new church was not formed, as it is part of the tradition of the Apostle Thomas dating back to 52 A.D., as a legal institution, it is new.

The Malpan's beliefs

The Malpan's beliefs are in question. Because the Eastern church is not one to write or adopt Statement of Faith documents, Articles of Faith, etc., aside from the Nicene-Constantinople Creed³⁰, Abraham Malpan did not have a need to write down what the Syrian Church *should* believe. There were those abhorrent practices which he condemned, but those were matters of decadence in the church. Issues of doctrine, however, cannot be understood so easily. This is because the Eastern church holds that their belief and theology is found in their liturgy. This is why Abraham Malpan was focused on revising the liturgy to begin reforms in the Church. But because that is the case, the problem that is presented is: What was Abraham Malpan's original revised liturgy?

In 1926, there was a potential rift occurring in the Mar Thoma Church as there was within the reformed church a reformist party and a conservative party. The latter believed that the church should be more Orthodox, that the Malpan wanted a purified Eastern church. The former believed that Malpan wanted a more progressive and continually reforming church. There were huge debates over whether or not the Mar Thoma Church should do further revisions of the liturgy.

³⁰ Mathew, op. cit., 81.

In order to prevent a schism within the young Mar Thoma Church, the conservative party desired to seek a compromise with the reformist party.³¹ From it, they agreed on what is known as the Articles of Reform. These same articles are attributed to be the beliefs of Abraham Malpan based on the study of his liturgy and book of prayers.

The Articles of Reform, or what people say were Abraham Malpan's reforms, included (in no particular order):^{32,33}

1. Prayers for the dead were removed.
2. Invocation of the saints, including the Blessed Virgin Mary, was removed.
3. In the liturgy, "Thee I am holding ... Thee, O God, I place in my mouth" was removed.
4. In the liturgy, "We offer this *bloodless sacrifice*" was changed to "We offer this prayer."
5. In the liturgy, "You cut the hard rock which was set against the tomb of our Redeemer" was replaced with "Thou art the tried and precious stone which was rejected by the builders."
6. In the liturgy, "The Qurbana is ... sacrifice of peace" removed.
7. In the liturgy, "Let this bread be made the life-giving and salvific body" replaced with "Let him (Holy Spirit) dwell upon this bread and make it to be the body of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and to life eternal, unto those who receive it."
8. A rubric to bless the incense was removed
9. The practice of dispensing the elements was done in both kinds, i.e. bread and wine separate.
10. The practice of celebrating communion when no one is present was ended.
11. The practice of auricular confession was ended.

Many historians of the Mar Thoma Church use these Articles to explain what changes Abraham Malpan made in his revised liturgy.³⁴

Mathai John, however, argues that Abraham Malpan did not believe all of these things and that the liturgies studied did not represent all of these articles. He contends that the compromise sought out by the conservative party with the reformist party included the addition of liturgical changes. After studying the sources believed to be the closest representation of Abraham Malpan's revised liturgy, Mathai John contends that according to the list given above, items 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 were wrongly attributed to Abraham Malpan and that those elements were not removed or revised in his revised liturgy. Rather, those revisions were done by the reformist party. In regards to prayers to the dead, they were not removed, but the verbiage was changed.

In order to prevent the church from schism, the compromise made was to add these additional elements of liturgical reform. Unfortunately, since then, it has been attributed to be the reforms of Abraham Malpan. Ultimately, Mathai John argues that the Malpan was not as progressive as one might think. Instead, he was more moderate.³⁵ He was wishing to "expurgate, purify, and clarify," not to "renovate or innovate."³⁶

³¹ John, op. cit., 37.

³² Ibid., 43.

³³ Juhanon Mar Thoma, op. cit., 31-32.

³⁴ John, op. cit., 53.

³⁵ Ibid., 42.

³⁶ John, op. cit., 63

Philip Tovey offers a different point of view. He argues that Abraham Malpan was more Protestant in thinking than the conservatives think he was.³⁷ The Malpan and Joseph Peet probably worked closely together to revise the liturgy.³⁸ In fact, Tovey gives the impression it is Peet that is initiating the revision and the Malpan is helping Peet. Records show that in February of 1836, Abraham Malpan was involved in the discussion of liturgical revisions and said that his views entirely coincide with that of the missionaries.³⁹ On March 14, 1836, a letter from J. Tucker, secretary of CMS Madras Committee, in response to the Mavelikarra Synod of 1836, indicated that the missionaries were requested to “prepare a suitable liturgy in Malayalam for the use of the Syrians.”⁴⁰ This indicates, if not the missionaries, if not Peet specifically, it was the Anglican church wishing to initiate the use of a revised and reformed Syrian rite. Regardless of who made the initiative, or who did most of the revisions, Abraham Malpan and Joseph Peet were partners in the reformation in the Syrian Church and the revisions of the liturgy.

There were also indications that the Malpan felt that reforms should not happen too suddenly. Change the liturgy, yes. But leave the visual there, such as the bells, elevation, etc. He did not think people would be ready for such a drastic change. This discouraged the missionaries upon hearing this from him. However, it seems that Abraham Malpan gave assent of the revisions.⁴¹ In 1872, Mathews Mar Athanasius sanctioned a much more moderate reformed liturgy. It is possible, Tovey speculates, that the Malpan was right: People were not ready for such a drastic change. Therefore, Mathews Mar Athanasius then revised the liturgy again to make it slightly closer to the original form of the rite.⁴²

This CMS amended or revised liturgy was in use at the Seminary from 1836-1838, which was during Abraham Malpan’s tenure. In 1837, Abraham Malpan introduced the revised liturgy at his parish in Maramon,⁴³ according to Tovey. It was not Malpan’s work, but the joint work of Joseph Peet and Abraham Malpan mainly.

Tovey compares this CMS amended liturgy to the Syrian liturgy and notes the following: The CMS amended liturgy shows that the method of reform was excision. Portions which were theologically unacceptable were removed. Such include relating to saints and to the dead. There were some marginal influences from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, but virtually no insertion. The ceremonial is radically reduced as there are no crossings, elevations or bells. However, vestments and the incense remained.⁴⁴

Thus, he concludes, regardless of what happened in 1926, the beliefs of Abraham Malpan, according to the CMS amended liturgy of the Syrian rite, are in agreement with the Articles of Reform. This amended liturgy, Tovey argues, was what Abraham Malpan used, agreed with, and thus, indicates what he believed: the Malpan was more protestant in his thinking.

Conclusion

Abraham Malpan is a man of mystery. Due to a lack of resources and conflicting sources, we are left mainly with what history the historians, with their own biases, would want to

³⁷ Tovey, op. cit., 38

³⁸ Ibid., 51

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 39

⁴¹ Ibid., 52.

⁴² Ibid., 54

⁴³ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 47.

say about him. He is either a schismatic or a reformer; a conservative or a radical reformist. Essentially, what Abraham Malpan has become is a symbol of what we wish to see as our reformer. Mathai John is conservative who wishes the Mar Thoma Church would be less protestant and more eastern.⁴⁵ Philip Tovey, an Anglican priest, will obviously have his own bias in his telling of Abraham Malpan. K.N. Daniel, one of the leading members of the reformist party in the 1929 Articles of Reform, has a much more progressive and evangelical Abraham Malpan in mind.

Due to Abraham Malpan's untimely death and his lack of writings, we will never truly know what the Malpan desired. But what we do know is that he was a zealous, passionate and selfless man. He lived for the reformation of the Syrian Church. He loved it by disliking it, and trying to correct it. To what degree did he want to reform it, we will never know. Yet, the Malpan's beliefs of what should be reformed need not be normative for the church. But it is his unquenchable desire to reform and be biblically sound that we can agree upon, and also look to for inspiration in the present day Mar Thoma Church.

⁴⁵ Mathai John was member of the Mar Thoma Church and studied in UTC Bangalore. He was not selected for ordination in the Mar Thoma Church so he left the church and joined the Syrian Orthodox Church where he was ordained.

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