

Pesaha Celebration of Nasranis: A Sociocultural Analysis

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Abstract

This article presents the results of research on the Pesaha tradition of Saint Thomas Christians of India (Mar Thoma Nasranis or Nasranis) in the context of its sociocultural aspects. Pesaha is a tradition observed by the Nasranis at home on Maundy Thursday. This practice is observed with piety and has been preserved even after centuries of European influence. This is a unique tradition of Saint Thomas Christians, and it is not known to be practiced by any other Christian community in India and abroad. This article contains details of the Pesaha tradition and associated rituals and practices and also provides an analysis of this tradition and compares its characteristics to that of the Jewish Passover. This article also attempts to find out the origin of this practice: (1) The recent discovery of an ancient harbor in Kerala, India, indicates the presence of Roman, Greek, and Middle Eastern communities on the Malabar Coast even before the Christian era. This might point to the presence of early Jewish settlements in Malabar. (2) From literature it is clear that early Jewish Christians, particularly Aramaic-speaking Christians, practiced several Jewish rituals including Passover up to the fourth century. (3) An ancient copper plate issued to the Nasranis by the local ruler indicates cooperation between Nasranis and the Jews of Kerala. These lead us to the conclusion that the Pesaha of Nasranis could be traced back to an ancient Syriac Christian practice or it might be the influence of early or later Jewish converts on the Malabar Coast.

1 Introduction

Mar Thoma Nasranis, St. Thomas Christians or simply Nasranis are a group of Christians in India, and they trace their Christian origins back to apostolic times. British scholars erroneously called them Syrian Christians since they follow Syriac liturgical traditions. According to *Ramban songs*, one of the folk songs of Nasranis, their ancestors were baptized by Saint Thomas the Apostle during his missionary work between AD 50 and AD 72 (Koonammakkal, 2012b). They are mainly concentrated in the Malabar Coast or Kerala, the southwest coast of India.

This article discusses one of their ascetic practices called Pesaha, held on the evening of Pesaha (the night of Maundy Thursday). The topic covered here is not entirely new. What is novel about this article is the attempt to provide discussions on Pesaha in the context of sociocultural aspects rather than a theological point of view. The article is divided into five sections. The following section describes a brief history and divisions of Nasranis. Section 3 discusses traditions associated with the Pesaha celebration. A discussion on the plausible origins is provided in Section 4. Finally, Section 4 ends with Conclusions.

2 A Concise History of Mar Thoma Nasranis

A brief discussion of Nasrani history is essential for this article. The following paragraphs of this section cover it.

According to the tradition of Mar Thoma Nasranis, St. Thomas the Apostle, landed in Kodungalloor in 50 AD (Koonammakkal, 2012b). It could be that he traveled to the Malabar Coast by a ship of Roman traders as there was active trade between the Gulf Peninsula and the Malabar Coast according to a number of authors (e.g., Tomber, 2008). As per *Ramban songs*, the traditional folk songs of Nasranis, Saint Thomas the Apostle established seven Churches in Kerala—Kodungallur, Kollam, Niranam, Nilackal (Chayal), Kokkamangalam, Kottakkayal (Paravoor), and Palayoor. Their folksongs also describe the martyrdom of St.

Thomas at Chinna Mala near Chennai in Tamil Nadu in AD 72. The events described in the folksongs are in line with the Acts of Thomas (Vadakkera, 2007), written in classical Syriac before the third century. Although the acts cannot be considered as an apocryphal work, the striking similarity of their folksongs and the text of the acts indicate the antiquity of the tradition on the Malabar Coast.

2.1 Historical Divisions

Until the aftermath of Coonan Cross oath in AD1653, the Nasranis were united under a community head called *Arkadiyakkon* (archdeacon or *jaathikku Karthayyan*)—"the head of the caste," bearing the title "Archdeacon and Gate of All India." The archdeacon held all characteristics of a king or a modern secular leader. He was normally escorted by a group of Nasrani soldiers. By sending bishops, spiritual guidance was given by the Catholicos-Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon—the Church of the East (CoE). Though there were occasions when more than one bishop from CoE was present in Malabar at the same time, there was only one Arkadiyakkon—the head of the Church—who made decisions for temporal matters of the Church. Bishops from CoE had the role of giving spiritual guidance, and they never intervened in the financial and communal matters of the Nasranis. Thus the Church in Malabar was united under the leadership of the Arkadiyakkon.

When traders from Portugal came from AD 1498 onward, there were also Roman Catholic missionaries accompanying them. Relations between Mar Thoma Nasranis and the Portuguese in the early years (until AD 1550s) of their visits were friendly since the Portuguese had to depend on the Nasranis for reasons of trade and military help. Gradually the power and influence of Portugal increased in India, and they demanded power on the churches of Mar Thoma Nasranis, thinking that they could gain control of the spice trade. The Portuguese managed to get support of the Hindu King of Kochi as well, a kingdom that had supported the Nasranis for long time. As a result, the Portuguese missionaries convened a meeting in AD 1599, which they call "Udayamperoor Sunhados" (Synod of Diamper), an invalid Synod according to Thaliath (1958). The so-called Synod declared the authority of the Portuguese Padroado over the Church of Saint Thomas Christians and appointed a Jesuit bishop of Portuguese origin to govern the Malabar Church. Thus the Portuguese colonized the Church of Malabar that has apostolic origin. Fifty years after the invalid synod, through the Coonan Cross oath, the Nasranis sought to assert the freedom their ancestors lost. They pledged that they would never accept the authority of any Jesuit or Portuguese bishop.¹ Perhaps this might be the very first organized activity against European colonialism in India. However, the events after the oath were not positive; Nasranis split into two factions and in the later centuries into many more denominations. At present they are divided into seven denominations. A pictorial representation of these divisions is given in Figure 1 below (see <http://www.nasranifoundation.org/articles/historicaldivisions.html>).

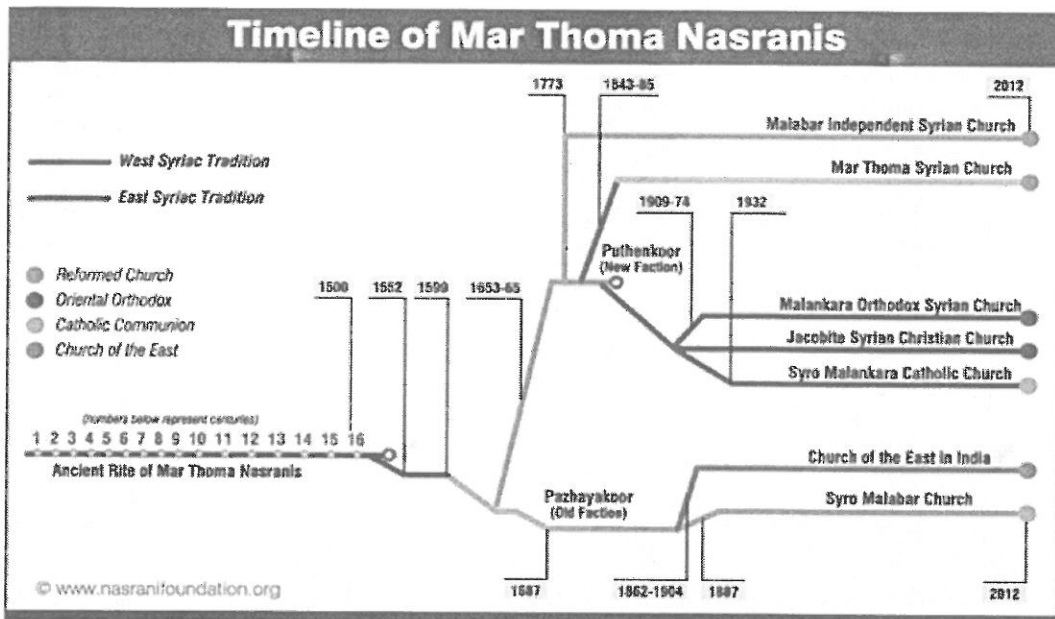


Figure 1: Timeline of Mar Thoma Nasranis

2.2 Origin of Early Converts

It is reasonable to think that the early converts on the Malabar Coast in the first century were from various ethnic groups and religions, including Judaism,² Buddhism,³ Jainism,⁴ Vedic,⁵ other tribal⁶ religions of Kerala and immigrant communities⁷ (Greeks, Romans, and Persians). Therefore the ethnic composition of Nasranis cannot be considered as a single entity. In the early centuries Aramaic was the lingua-franca of trade in Asia (Koonammakkal, 2012b). Saint Thomas was an Aramaic speaker and a Jew. Therefore it is reasonable to think that it was the Jewish colonies that existed in India from the times of King Solomon that paved the way for Saint Thomas to India (Puthiyakunnel, 1973; (Koonammakkal, 2012b). In the later centuries, by the end of third century onward or even earlier (Mingana, 1926), large groups of Christians from Persia and perhaps other Middle Eastern kingdoms started migrating to the Malabar Coast due to persecutions, political, or economical reasons. Hence, it can be said that the community has emerged through centuries of conversion of local inhabitants and the assimilation of migrations of a number of foreign communities.

Despite being a cosmopolitan community, some ascetic practices of St. Thomas Christians are still similar to those of Jews. Some of these are unique and cannot be found among other Christian communities in the world. One among them is the tradition of Pesaha, and this article focuses on this topic.

3 Pesaha Night Rituals of Nasranis and Jews

For Jews, the celebration of Passover is related to their Exodus from Egypt after 400 years of slavery under the pharaohs in Egypt. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is described in the Old Testament. (Exodus 1-15). This festival commemorates the beginning of their life as a nation. A brief mention of the Jewish Passover is needed for proceeding with this subject and is described in the following paragraphs. At least for the Eastern Christians, Passover is the most important celebration because the Last Supper was a Jewish Passover Seder.

3.1 Jewish Passover

It should be noted that there are differences in the way Jews from different nations celebrate Passover. Cultural elements from their host countries influenced their Passover practices too. For example Jews of Kochi have extra observances on their purification rituals prior to the Passover week, compared to Jews from other countries. This is perhaps due to their interaction with the caste-concerned Hindu society (Katz, 2005). Only a short description of general practices is given here.

The removal of *chametz* (leaven) is the most significant observance related to Jewish Passover and this practice is consistently seen among all Jewish communities. Chametz commemorates the fact that the Jews leaving Egypt were in a hurry and did not have time to let their flour ferment. Passover Seder customs include drinking four cups of wine and eating matza (cracker-like bread made of white plain flour and water; the bread is pricked in several places and not allowed to rise before or during baking) and the consumption of symbolic foods placed on the Passover Seder plate. While many Jewish celebrations revolve around the synagogues, the Jewish Passover is conducted in homes. It is an occasion for praise and thanksgiving. Often the celebrations go on until late at night, with the reading of the Haggadah, studying the meaning of various passages, and singing special Passover songs. It is customary to invite guests, especially strangers and the needy.

The Passover Seder plate is a special plate containing six symbolic foods used during the Passover Seder. The six items on the Seder plate are:

Maror and Chazeret: Two types of bitter herbs, symbolizing the bitterness and harshness of the slavery that the Jews endured in Ancient Egypt.

Charoset: A sweet, brown, pebbly mixture, representing the mortar used by the Jewish slaves to build the storehouses of Egypt.

Karpas: A vegetable other than bitter herbs, usually parsley but sometimes celery or cooked potato, which is dipped into salt water (Ashkenazi custom), vinegar (Sephardi custom), or charoset (older custom, still common amongst Yemenite Jews) at the beginning of the Seder.

Z'roa: A roasted shank bone, symbolizing the korban Pesach (Pesach sacrifice), which was a lamb offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and was then roasted and eaten as part of the meal on Seder night.

Beitzah: A roasted egg, symbolizing the korban chagigah (festival sacrifice) that was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and was then roasted and eaten as part of the meal on Seder night.

3.2 Pesaha of Nasranis

For Nasranis, the observance of Pesaha is the feast of Eucharist, and it falls during *Sawma Ramba* (Weeks of Great Fast) unlike the traditional date of Sacred Heart in the Latin rite (Pathikulangara, 2009). It falls on the Maundy Thursday and coincided with the Passover Seder night of Jews. It is a public holiday in Kerala state. There are no reliable records⁸ other than tradition to prove its antiquity, however the name Pesaha (originates from Syriac) itself and the characteristics of the associated rituals indicate its antiquity.

3.2.1 Passion Week and Pesaha

The Weeks of Great Fast itself is the preparation toward Qyamtha—the Great Sunday of Resurrection. Passion Week (or the last week of Great Fast) has the highest piety for Nasranis. Preparation for Pesaha starts on the Sunday of Oshana or Palm Sunday. Tender coconut leaves distributed on the Sunday of Oshana has great importance for the Pesaha celebration. On this week, the home and its surroundings are thoroughly cleaned (*adichu thuda* in Malayalam). The eldest male member has a significant role in the Pesaha celebration. Still in some families the tradition of cleaning the surroundings are done by the head of the family, as in the olden days.

3.2.2 Pesaha Meal

Depending on the region or family, new vessels are bought for making the Pesaha meal, called *pesaha appam*⁹ and a sweet drink called *aaal* (milk in Malayalam). In some families or regions, dedicated vessels are used for making Pesaha meals only. In some regions the earthen pottery used for making the Pesaha meal is destroyed after use. In some places like Kottayam, Pala, Changanassery, and so forth, and Kuttanadu region, the appam is cooked using steam whereas in places such Thodupuzha and Kothamangalam or the high-range areas, the bread is roasted on a hot plate instead of steaming.

Unlike the other traditional breads of the Nasranis, pesaha appam is the only bread that is made using urid daal (a kind of lentils white in color). The important aspect, like in the case of Jewish Passover, during its preparation is to avoid traces of any old food or fermentation. As described earlier, a new vessel or a dedicated vessel is used for cooking the meal. In addition, the batter prepared using rice flour, urid daal, garlic, local herbs, and coconut is not allowed to ferment—that is, the first loaf of bread is made immediately after the batter is prepared. Over the first loaf of bread a miniature form of a plain cross made using the tender coconut leaves (distributed on the Sunday of Oshana) is placed. The leftover batter is also cooked, but without a miniature cross. The sweet drink (ingredients are rice flour, coconut milk, jaggery—a type of unrefined sugar—and some local herbs) also is made so that any traces of fermentation is avoided. As in the case of pesaha appam, another miniature cross also is put into the vessel while cooking the Pesaha drink. This thick brown-colored drink might be comparable to the characteristics of charoset of the Jewish Passover Seder. The Pesaha meal also includes some local fresh fruits and nuts.

3.2.3 Pesaha Night

On the night of Pesaha, all family members gather together at home. If extended family members also live in the near vicinity, they gather at their ancestral home. The eldest male member or the head of the family cuts the pesaha appam. Some families cut the bread into 13 pieces, to remind them of the Last Supper of Isho M'shiha. The head of the family narrates the story of Pesaha to young family members or children during ceremony. Extracts from the book of Exodus about the Pesaha—the exodus of Israel from Egyptian slavery—are read. In some regions the reading of the Last Supper, which was a Pesaha meal—is also read. Some families still follow the tradition of singing special hymns or songs on the night of Pesaha. The head of the family serves the food, and no food other than the Pesaha meal is consumed on the night of Pesaha. The Pesaha meal is eaten without leaving even a small piece on the floor; also it is customary to stand while eating it.

If a death has occurred in the family, the pesaha appam is not made that year, but relatives or a neighbor makes two loaves of pesaha appam and gives the extra one for the grieving family. The first loaf of pesaha appam is never shared with non-Christians; however, the extra loaves are shared. Strictly speaking, the extra loaves are not necessarily unleavened as they are not cooked immediately after the batter is prepared. If there are any leftovers, it is either consumed on Passion Friday by the children during the day or in the evening by the adults—since it is a traditional fasting day of Nasranis. Any further leftovers are dried and consumed later, but never thrown away.

3.3 Similarities of Jewish Passover and Pesaha of Nasranis

The Passover of Nasranis has some similarities with the Passover celebration of the Jews as listed below.

Cleaning of the household.

Usage of thoroughly cleaned or new dishes for cooking the Pesaha meal.

Both groups make unleavened bread on the day of Passover.
 Traces of leavened food or grains are avoided.
 The sweet drink among the Nasranis may be an inculturation of charoset on the Jewish Passover Seder plate.
 The head of the family serves the food.
 Meals of both groups include bitter food. Bitter drink¹⁰ among Nasranis and maror among Jews.
 Singing of special songs or hymns.
 Alms-giving to the needy.¹¹

The Jews of Kochi had a practice of selling their old potteries during Passover and buying new ones for cooking their Passover meals (Katz & Goldberg, 1993). Nasranis in some regions still observe a similar tradition of using new potteries for cooking Pesaha meals.

4 Plausible Origin of Pesaha

The Pesaha of Nasranis might be an indication of their Jewish or Judeo-Christian roots. The author proposes four points for further discussion in this section to perhaps trace the origin of Pesaha among the Nasranis.

- Jewish past of Nasranis.
- Persian immigration and their religio-cultural relationship with the Persian Church and the East Syrian Church.
- Judeo-Nasrani interaction in the later centuries.
- An import of sixteenth-century European tradition.

4.1 The Jewish Past

One may ask whether there were Jews in Kerala when St. Thomas arrived in Kerala. It is not possible to establish the existence of Jews in Kerala based on documentary evidence. However, circumstantial evidence, particularly the trade links that Kerala had in those days, leads us to the existence of Jewish communities in Kerala. Koonammakkal (2012b) describes the trade links that existed between the Mediterranean world, Mesopotamia, Persia, and India long before Christ. According to him, these existing trade links were the basis for Solomon's commercial enterprises in the tenth century BC.

4.1.1 Indications from the Old Testament

The Old Testament mentions a number of materials that may have been exported from India to the Kingdom of Israel. We read in 3 Kings, 10:28, "And they came to Ophir and fetched from thence, gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to King Solomon." Again in 3 Kings 10:22, "For the King's navy once in three years went with the navy of Hiram by sea to Tharshish and brought from thence gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks." Scholars disagree about the location of Ophir, but commodities such as peacocks, elephants, and so forth are not found in Palestine nor are they found in neighboring countries, and it is reasonable to think that these were taken from the west/east coasts of India.

In addition, spices such as cinnamon and cassia are mentioned in Exodus 35:1-24 and were foreign to Palestine. It is reasonable to think that these were imported from the Malabar Coast or Ceylon. Indian teakwood logs have been found in the temple of the Moon at Mugheir and in the palace of Nebuchadenazzar. It is believed that Solomon's ships (Pathemaari in Malayalam) were of teakwood and believed to be built in the Malabar Coast. Blue (2009) describes that no suitable timber for building ships was available in Arabia and

hence the Arabs visited the forests of Malabar to collect teakwood or even to purchase ships built at Bepoor. Hence it could be concluded that the trade links might have started due the availability of teakwood, peacocks, pepper, sandalwood, and other spices in Malabar.

There is clear evidence that the Malabar Coast had constant trade links the Roman and Hellenic worlds for hundreds of years, between the third century BC and the fifth century AD (Tomber, 2008). After the revolutionary voyages done by Eudoxus of Cyzicus between 120 and 110 BC, the flow of traders from the Mediterranean region to the southern coasts of India by sea had dramatically increased. This increased the tempo of the trade to a greater extent and led to the formation of large foreign settlements and communities on the Indian coasts.

4.1.2 Evidences from Ancient Records

Muziris was an important harbor of the Malabar Coast until the middle of the fourteenth century. The tradition holds that St. Thomas the Apostle landed at the port of Muziris. A number of travelers describe the sea route to Muziris. The most important one is the *Periplus Maris Eurythraei* (PME), written by a Greece-Egyptian merchant in the mid-first century. In the first century BC, the Greek sailor Hippalus discovered the secret of the monsoons. These publications might have attracted even more traders to the coast.

Another document that mentions about Muziris from early centuries is called "Muziris Papyrus" (Casson, 1990; Tomber, 2008). The papyrus contains an agreement between two businessmen to do business between Alexandria and Muziris. It also contains a detailed itinerary and instructions for transporting goods to the ports between the Red Sea to Alexandria. In addition, details regarding the value of cargo and goods—namely nard (a typical Ayurvedic herb), ivory, and textiles are described. More details about this document can be found in Casson (1990). Although Muziris papyrus dates back to the second century, it testifies to the existence of a well-established trade between Muziris and other ports. As per a Peutinger table, original copy written in the fifth century (Tomber, 2008), the ancient city of Muziris had a Yavana community with a temple of Augustus for their worship.

It should be noted that Muziris was the most important port but not the only one. A number of other ports such as Kollam, Nelkynda, and Thyndis also had trade links with the ancient world. The point here is that it was plausible for St. Thomas to visit the Malabar Coast in the first century due to active trade links.

A number of texts written in India also mention Muziris. Of these, the most important ones are the Sangam poems, written between 300 BC and AD 300 by a number of poets. *Akananuru* and *Purananuru* also mention Muziris as Muchiri.

4.1.3 Archaeological Evidence

Until recently historians and archaeological researchers were not certain about the existence of such a port due to the lack of archaeological evidence. Recently, a group of researchers from the Kerala council for historical research excavated a small village called Pattanam near Kodungalloor. They believe that they have found at least a part of the ancient port of Muziris (Selvakumar et al., 2009). According to their studies, Muziris was a cosmopolitan port with inhabitants at least from the second half of the first millennium BC. A large number of shreds from anaphoras, storage jars, potteries, ornaments, etc., were found from the excavated spot. The shreds have their origins from the times of Parthian and Sassanian Persia, South Arabia (present-day Yemen), Roman Empire, Greece, and East Africa. According to them, the location of Pattanam matches the descriptions given PME. The carbon dating study conducted on a piece of canoe made of *Anjili* (*Artocarpus hirsutus*) concludes its age between 1300 BC and 100 BC, the oldest part of a ship found from India (Selvakumar et al., 2009). These indicate that Muziris was an active port even before Christ.

All these point to the fact that there were a number of flourishing trade centers in the Malabar Coast. Therefore the possibility of the existence of Jewish communities cannot be

ruled out since they were involved in trade. According to Katz and Goldberg (1993), permanent settlements were formed as a result of the ancient trade links. Among them were not just Jews but also Greeks and Romans. Therefore the author proposes that there were Jews among the early adherents of by Saint Thomas. It does not mean that other communities rejected the Good News. Malekandathil (2007) proposed that the possibility of Yavanas accepting Christianity in the first century could not be ruled out. The fact that the seven churches established by St. Thomas are close to early Jewish settlements supports this view.¹² Therefore, the view that there were Jews in the first century when Saint Thomas established his Church in the Malabar Coast cannot be rejected. If this hypothesis is true, it is reasonable to believe that the Pesaha tradition of early converts were continued by the later generations and preserved until today. This point has more validity as the Pesaha is not the only tradition that Nasranis share with the Jews. See the appendix below (Section 6) for more details.

4.2 Interaction with Persian Christians

The relationship between the Nasranis and the Church in Persia starts through Saint Thomas the Apostle. The Church in Persia proper (Church in the Fars province headquartered at Rewardashir) also originated from the same saint. Contents of the Acts of Thomas might have been transmitted to Persia or vice-versa through Aramaic-speaking traders. This explains the similarities between Rambaan songs and the Acts of Thomas. Mingana (1926) states that whenever there is a reference to the Malabar church, the Persian church is also mentioned. He writes: "Any attempt to speak of early Christianity in India as different from the East Syrian church, is in our judgement, bound to fail."

Some scholars and leaders of Nasrani churches believe that the migration of Persian Christians and the dependence of Nasranis on the Persian church started from AD 345 onward under the leadership of Thomas of Cana.¹³ Mingana (1926) writes that this is far from the truth, but he agrees that the migrations might reached their peak during AD 345 due to the persecution by Sapor II. Evidence speaks that the migrations might have started much earlier. According to him, two shores in the Persian Gulf—Basra and Qatar—had well-established bishopric sees by AD 225 and these ports were flourishing trade centers at that time. The first recorded migration of Christians from West Asia to the Malabar Coast happened around AD 300 with the leadership of Bishop Dawood of Basra according to Chronicles of Seert. According to Tomber (2008) the Sassanian Empire (AD 224 to 651) gained dominance in the spice trade from the Romans after the third century. Perhaps this might be the reason why we see clear evidence for migration from Persia to the Malabar Coast around that time. From this point onward a number of Christians started migrating to the Malabar Coast. As Mingana (1926) pointed out, persecutions by the Sassanian King Sapor II might have attracted even more Christians from Persia to Malabar. These early migrant Christians from Persia carried Syriac traditions with them.

Christians of the Aramaic-speaking world, particularly those in Persia, in the early centuries followed a number of Jewish customs. Rouwhorst (1997) reports on the Jewish customs present among the Christians of the early centuries. They include architecture of worship houses, the liturgical readings from the Torah and the Prophets, the Eucharistic Prayer, traces of the Jewish Sabbath, Passover, and so forth. He adds that this was particularly more evident among the Christians who used Syriac in the later centuries. Since the Church in Malabar had connections with Christians of Persia as early as the third century, it is possible that the Jewish customs prevalent among them were passed over to them through the migrants. According to Rouwhorst, the Jewish customs of Christians of Persia has vanished after the fourth century.

Since the migration of Christians started from the third century onward, it is possible that the Jewish customs of West Asian Christians were also passed to Malabar Christians through immigrants. This hypothesis is supported by the testimony of Cosmas Indicopleustes, an Alexandrian Greek traveler and East-Syrian monk. He writes about the

presence of East-Syrian Christians in Malabar and nearby regions. He also mentions about a bishop consecrated in Persia residing in Kalliana. Kalliana could be either Kollam (Quilon in Kerala) or Kalyan (Mumbai). In a letter written in the eighth century, the East Syrian Patriarch Timothy I encouraged intermarriages between Persian Christians and Indian Christians. Therefore this hypothesis also cannot be rejected easily.

4.3 Judeo-Nasrani Interaction in Malabar

It is already established that a number of Jewish migrations took place through the famous port of Muziris or present day Kodungallur. Remnants of a number of early Jewish colonies can be found even today near the vicinity of Kodungallur. The Christianity of Malabar was centered in or near these ancient Jewish colonies.

There was a cordial relation between the Nasranis and the Jews of Malabar until the European colonialists came on the scene. There are signatures in Hebrew in one of copper plates issued to the Nasranis in about the ninth century (Narayanan, 2002). There were joint trade activities by the Jews and Nasranis of Malabar. *Anjuvannam* and *Manigramam* of Kollam are generally considered Jewish and Christian merchant guilds respectively (Malekandathil, 2010). These indicate that when the Christians and the Jews were fighting each other in Europe, in the Malabar Coast the situation was just the opposite. Due to these interactions, there might have emerged a community resulting from the marriages between the Nasranis and the Jews. It is also possible that a number of Jews accepted Christianity in the later centuries and mingled with the Christians of Malabar through marriage relations. When some Jewish people were accepted into the community of Nasranis, they might have continued practicing Jewish customs as part of their lives. Of these, Pesaha—along with many others—might have spread into the entire community and remained until modern times.

4.4 An Imported European Tradition

One should not rule out the possibility of popularizing a form of Maundy Thursday celebration from Europe among the Malabar Christians during the times of European colonizers. Knapp (2007) established that a number of hymns and prayers present in the Latin mass have roots in early Jewish prayers. According to him, European or Roman Christianity had a number of Jewish practices prior to the fifteenth century. Therefore one cannot rule out the possibility of such a tradition among Malabar Christians, imported from Europe in the sixteenth century through the so-called missionaries that came along with the colonizers and invaders. The Latin—particularly the Portuguese—missionaries were very enthusiastic about forcing Latin practices on St. Thomas Christians; interestingly some practices are not even seen among the Latin Christians (for example singing of “Puthen Paana” on the Passiona [Passion] Friday). By the time of Parambil Chandy Methran, perhaps even earlier than the invalid Synod of Diamper, the missionaries succeeded in replacing the native vestments of St. Thomas Christians with the vestments of the Latin Church. Therefore, it is possible that even the practice of Pesaha could be an inculturation of a Latin tradition that was prevalent in Europe in the later centuries of the Middle Ages.

From a survey conducted among various Christian communities in Kerala, it was found that Latin Catholic communities that live without interaction to Nasrani denominations do not follow the tradition of Pesaha. In addition, the Latin Catholic communities in the Konkan Coast (Mangalore, Goa, etc.) do not have the tradition of Pesaha. If this tradition was an import from Europe, it could have also been found among the Latin Catholic communities of India. Further, any Christian communities in European countries such as Portugal, Spain, Germany, Italy, and so forth, do not have the tradition of making unleavened bread on Maundy Thursday. The invalid Synod of Diamper describes nothing about the observance of Pesaha of the Nasranis. If such a practice was imposed at the time

of the so-called synod, this might have been present in the decree. Due to these reasons the author rejects this hypothesis that the Pesaha tradition was an import from Europe after the sixteenth century.

5 Conclusions

Pesaha is a unique ascetic practice of the Nasranis held at their homes. We see that there is a striking similarity between the Pesaha of Nasranis and the Passover of Jews. According to Rouwhorst (1997), "rituals are characterized by certain stability; usually they are not invented all of a sudden and at least their basic structures are not so easily changed." The practice of making unleavened bread on the evening of Pesaha might be one such basic practice and have its origins from the Jewish Passover. Therefore the possibility of the Pesaha tradition coming from the Jewish Passover cannot be rejected easily.

As a matter of fact, the possible origins described earlier in this article are related to each other to a great extent. Therefore the author proposes to find an answer by combining the valid plausibilities mentioned above. The origin of Pesaha could be traced back to one of the following or a combination of both.

It might be the influence of early or later Jewish adherents in the Malabar Coast or an ancient Syriac Christian practice transmitted through the Christian migrants from Persia.

The Pesaha of the Nasranis has its origins from early Jewish converts—the question is only about the geographic location of those converts—whether it is Malabar or Persia. There is no doubt that the Pesaha is the remnant of one of the early apostolic traditions, which somehow survived in the Malabar Coast due to the lack of frequent contacts or interaction with other parts of the Christendom.

6 Appendix: Other Cultural Similarities that Point toward the Jewish Heritage of Nasranis

6.1 Naming Conventions

Koonammakkal (2012b) describes the naming convention of Nasranis: "The eldest boy is named after paternal grandfather; the eldest girl receives the name of paternal grandmother; the second boy and girl get the names of maternal grandfather and maternal grandmother respectively. Thus four names were always inherited in the family with great pride and joy. One could choose the name of the fifth child, though the choice was often that of an uncle, aunt, parent, etc. Thus we can say that most of the names among St. Thomas Christians are inherited from generation to generation. Even in modern times they rarely break this naming tradition. Often pet names are developed from baptismal names, but need not necessarily." These rules are similar to that of Sephardic Jews as indicated by Katz (2005). According to the decree of the so-called Synod of Diamper, the names of Nasranis were chosen from the Old Testament only. The synod proposed to accept New Testament names as well.

6.2 Musical Characteristics in the Liturgy

Eminent musicologist Ross (1979) studied the musical characteristics of liturgical music that is used by the Nasranis.¹⁴ He studied various aspects such as chant accentuation, mode, rhythmic and melodic motives, and organum. According to the study, chant accentuation system of the Nasranis is similar to the Palestinian dot system of Jews. The mode among the music of Nasranis is similar to Arabic *maqamat*, a system prevalent in the Middle East at the beginning of the Common Era.

In music theory, augmentation is the lengthening or widening of rhythms, melodies, intervals, and chords. An augmented second is a major second raised a half step (or a semitone or half a tone). Thus, if two notes are an augmented second apart, there are three semitones (one and a half tones) separating them. It is a frequently used interval in Arabic maqamat and Indian raga. It is interesting that the augmented second is not seen in the liturgical music of Nasranis. This is also true for liturgical music of Cochini Jews. The solo recitation of the precentor (one who helps facilitate worship) is the melodic motives used in responsorial (an anthem consisting of short verses sung or spoken by the officiant and responses sung or spoken by the choir, especially after the lesson in a church service) and antiphonal song (a hymn or psalm performed by two groups of singers chanting alternate sections). The units of chant melody derive from initial melody, the recitation tone and cadential motives. These characteristics, together with some others, are similar to some Hebrew cantillation and prayer motives.

Music rhythm of the Nasranis is logogenic; the melody has little or no tonal syntax independent from that of the words. Their solo chant is in the flowing, free rhythmic, nonmetrical manner termed "punctuation style." The Orthodox Jewish tradition does not allow decorated music. Orthodox rabbis wanted chanting words only. So the author believes that the music of the Nasranis still have this characteristics of Orthodox Jewish music.

Organum in their music occurs in congregational singing of responses, antiphons or hymn tunes. This is seen among three isolated groups of Jews: Yemenite Jews, Cochini Jews, and Hebrew Samaritans.

It is probable that a number of melodies that were once part of the common repertory of the Nasrani churches in the Middle East and India are now extant only in Kerala.

6.3 Church-Centered Life and Synagogue-Centered Life

Ross (1979) and Katz (2005) mention that the Nasranis and Cochini Jews are two communities grown in parallel in the Malabar Coast. Ross mentions that the life style of Cochini Jews was synagogue centered. The Nasranis also have a similar lifestyle centered in their churches. It is well known that every Nasrani church irrespective of the denominations have committee meeting after Qurbana (mass).

6.4 Kiss of Peace

There is a custom called *kaimuthu* among the Nasranis at the conclusion of a forty-day mourning period after someone dies. This is similar to the "kiss of peace" (*kaikkasthoori*), a custom that is seen in some Nasrani churches at the conclusion of Qurbana, which is passed from bishop to priest to worshipper. The kiss of peace is a sign of respect and friendship and has its roots in the Jewish Temple worship (Ross, 1979).

6.5 Restrictions in Mixing Milk and Milk Products with Meat or Fish

Nasranis do not mix milk and milk products with meat. This is particularly true during festival occasions such as weddings. The origin of *kachiya moru* (cooked buttermilk) might have its origin from this custom. It is a tradition among a number of vegetarian communities to use curd or buttermilk during parties. However, it may also be noted the Ayurveda also puts such restrictions for mixing milk and meat products.

6.6 Presentation of Babies in the Church after Their Birth

Decrees of the Synod of Diamper describe that Nasranis followed the exact tradition of Jews while presenting their children in the church after their birth. Like Jews, Nasranis used to present their male children on the 40th day and female children on the 80th day after their

birth. The synod instructed Nasranis to abolish this practice because Jews also followed the same tradition.

6.7 Origin of Palappam and Kallappam

Palappam and kallappam represent the cultural identity of Nasrani food. According to Marks (2010), palappam originated in the southern tip of south India (Kerala) and is the traditional food of the Jews of Kochi. This is an indication that some food habits might have continued by the Jewish converts even after they have accepted Christianity or assimilated into the Nasrani community.

6.8 Indication from the Decrees of the Invalid Synod of Diamper

A number of action points imposed on the Nasranis by the so-called Synod of Diamper indicate that many of their customs and lifestyle were similar to that of Jews. Discussing them here is beyond the scope of this article, but some are mentioned below. Decree 15 of the Action VIII commanded the Nasranis to avoid of practice of abstaining from eating meat on Saturdays to be free from the pain of mortal sin. Further, decree 16 of the same action asks to abolish the practice of observing the beginning and end of the day in the typical Jewish fashion, that is, changing the practice of counting day from "evening to evening" to "midnight to midnight" (Geddes, 1694). These indicate that the Portuguese were aware of the presence of at least some Nasranis who followed the same laws of the Jews.

6.9 Other Practices

Koonammakkal (2012b) reports a number of other similarities such as the traditions of funeral practices (ceremonial bath of the dead body, mourning for seven days, etc.), and purification practices of mother and child after childbirth. During the wedding ceremony of Nasranis, the bride stands on the right side of the bridegroom and a bridal veil (*manthrakodi*) is used. This might also have originated from Jewish customs.

Notes

¹ This is a topic of debate as factions of Nasranis create their own versions of history for justifying their allies or obedience with the external churches. Syro-Malabarians claim that it was against the Jesuits only and portray that their church was always in communion with the Church of Rome through the East Syrian Church. Churches derived from the *Puthenkoor* faction (new party) holds the view that the oath was against the Church of Rome and thus the Roman pontiff. This topic is beyond the scope of this article, and the author leaves it for the discretion of the reader.

² Since there are indications of trade links between South India and Israel from the time of King Solomon, the possibilities for the existence of Jewish communities in Kerala cannot be ruled out. See Section 4.1 for a detailed discussion.

³ Menon (1967) discusses that Buddhism was the primary or one of the major religions of Kerala in the first century. After the Kalinga war of Emperor Ashoka the Great (260-218 BC), the Buddhist religion has spread within and beyond the kingdom of Ashoka. Kerala is mentioned in one of the edicts of Ashoka as the Kingdom of "Kerobotra." Therefore it is reasonable to believe that the missionaries of Ashoka might have propagated Buddhism in Kerala, and we could assume that there were people who followed Buddhism in Kerala in the first century. The traditions of Hindu communities in the present in Kerala attributes a lot to the old Buddhist traditions, which were prevalent before the Arianization of Kerala

(circa between the fifth to ninth centuries). An example is the cult of Ayyappa in Sabarimala, which is believed to have been a Buddhist temple.

⁴ Jainism also as in the case of Buddhism had deep roots in Kerala in the early centuries. The Koodal Manikyam temple is considered as one of the several Jain temples converted later into Hindu temple (Menon, 1967).

⁵ Vedic religion here refers to the religion of the Brahmins. There is a tradition among Nasranis that St. Thomas converted Nampoothiris near the pool in Palayoor while they were conducting sun-worshipping rituals. According to Narayanan (2002) and many other scholars, the migration of Nampoothiris to Kerala happened by the sixth century or later. Considering this, the author proposes that it might not be the ancestors of current the Nampoothiris community who accepted Christianity in the first century, but some other community who worshiped the sun, and their importance was not significant like the present-day Brahmins. It could be the traders from Persia, who in fact followed Zoroastrianism or another branch of a sun-worshipping religion. The word Nampoothiri might have been added at a later time. Further Malekandathil (2007) is of the opinion that there were microcommunities of Brahmins who conducted religious rituals for kings. Based on this, the author proposes that a number of Vedic religions or some forms of sun-worshipping communities were present in Kerala in the first century, which later might have called themselves Nampoothiris.

⁶ In the first century, the caste system was not established in Kerala. Considering this, there is no reason to rule out the possibility of St. Thomas converting people from the tribal religions of Kerala.

⁷ Existence of Yavanas can be found from Sangam literature. The word "Yavana" refers to Greeks or Romans. The traditional belief is that St. Thomas arrived in the ancient port of Muziris. The existence of Yavana communities in Muziris can be proved with the help of archaeological evidence. Since a number of ancient Christian centers of Nasranis were located near Kodungallur (Muziris), it is not logical to think that St. Thomas excluded some communities during his missionary work. Further Malekandathil (2007) proposes that the possibility of Yavanas accepting Christianity in the first century could not be ruled out.

⁸ The invalid Synod of Diamper does not mention anything about the Pesaha celebration. This is probably due to its private nature. The Latin missionaries or the Portuguese might not have had any information about the Pesaha since it was always celebrated at home. Fearing the Inquisition chambers of the Portuguese, Nasranis might have celebrated the Pesaha in secrecy. The Portuguese introduced several action points in the Synod to erase the practices that are similar to that of Jews (see Section 6.9 for further details).

⁹ The word "appam" probably derived from Syriac verb *apya* (*apo* in West Syriac). Interestingly, all traditional breads used by the Nasranis end with the word appam (kallappam, paalappam, achappam, cheppappam, neyyappam, unniyappam, etc.), whereas the most popular traditional food of South India is called dosa, iddaly, upma, puttu, etc.

¹⁰ The Pesaha meal of Nasranis does not include a bitter drink, but on the Passion Friday at the Church, drinking of bitter juice is still observed.

¹¹ Passion week is a week of alms-giving for Nasranis; needy people are helped with food or money depending on the requirement.

¹² Many scholars pointed out similar words in Tamil and Hebrew (for peacocks, apes, ivory, etc.) and they argued that Ophir even might have located in South India. Mundadan (2007) has recently criticized the parallel existence of these words and thus the possibility of Jewish settlements in the Malabar Coast in the first century. He opposed the hypothesis with the help of the Jerome Biblical Commentary. The author thinks that this topic needs further study by a linguistic expert with the help of authentic references written in Hebrew or Aramaic.

¹³ The arrival date of Thomas of Cana in AD 345 is questionable. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this topic here. Refer to the works of Kurmankan (1944), Thomas (2008), and Appassery (2006) for more details.

¹⁴ The music used in the Syro-Malabar Church.

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