

Francis X. Clooney, *Saint Joseph in South India. Poetry, Mission and Theology in Constanzo Gioseffo Beschi's Tēmpāvaṇi*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library vol. XXXIX (Vienna: Institut für Indologie und Religionsforschung, 2022), pp. 194, ISBN 978-3-900271-48-0.

It is significant that the book appears on the heels of the “Year of St Joseph” (2021) which marks the 150th anniversary of the Church’s declaration of Saint Joseph as the Patron of the Universal Church. It is a serious research work on Tēmpāvaṇi, a Tamil Christian devotional poetry written by Joseph Beschi (1680–1747) who was an Italian polymath, a linguist, and one of the greatest missionaries in India.

The preface of the book clarifies the goal and objective of the book. Undoubtedly, ‘it is a constructive theological appreciation of Tēmpāvaṇi as disclosive of Beschi’s Jesuit vision of the true inculturation of the Christian story in Tamil culture, the ways in which the Christian story uplifts and fulfils the culture, and the concomitant virtues of foreign and native Christians who are invited to live to the examples of Saint Joseph’. (p.7).

The book has six chapters with respective subchapters. Additionally, there are three appendices and ample references to primary sources, translations, and secondary sources. The verses the author has selected for study are given in transliterated forms.

In the introduction, the author highlights both the convergence and the difference in the practice of inculturation between Joseph Beschi and Roberto De Nobili, another Italian missionary to India.

The author presents the book as Beschi’s literary and theological project, reimagining how the Gospel is to be presented weighing on rational, moral, literary, and religious foundations that are most congenial to and deeply rooted in Tamil methods of knowing and understanding.

The author explores Beschi’s work, *Veṭiyaroluḷkkaṁ* and explains clearly what the missionaries working among the Tamils are expected to teach and practice. The deep Tamil culture and language that Beschi imbibed is reflected in Tēmpāvaṇi, his poetic work.

Beschi draws inspiration from various traditions and customs like Tamil epic tradition, the Spanish mystical tradition and Beschi’s own Jesuit contemplative style. In describing the epic (*Perumkāppiyam*) genre, Beschi indirectly cites examples from popular epics, *Cīvakacitāmaṇi*, *Rāmāyaṇam*, *Bharata*, *Nālaṭi*, and his own Tēmpāvaṇi.

Beschi was also inspired by Mary of Agreda’s the *Mystical City*. The central role of her work is Mother Mary, while in Beschi’s epic, the major character is

Joseph. However, Beschi's work is not the result of any direct vision but a poetic work of imagination.

Beschi turns St Joseph into a potent model of single-minded meditation for Jesuits and all men of Christianity. Indeed, in his key portrayal of Joseph as a preacher in the Chapters 27–29, Mary does not appear at all.

After a brief explanation of Ignatian spirituality, Clooney demonstrates that as a Jesuit, Beschi was schooled in a Bible-plus manner of reading and acting in holy imagination which have helped him work out his epic in the Tamil linguistic and cultural context of South India.

Joseph in Egypt is the heart of Tēmpāvaṇi in which Beschi presents the mission of Joseph in three chapters 27–29. Chapter 27 reveals a priest troubled with a wrong idea. Chapter 28 portrays a warrior troubled by lust. And Chapter 29 describes an angry young man who intends to harm Joseph. Conversion takes place after a dialogue with each of them.

The author says that Tēmpāvaṇi is an intense theology of God's work in human cultures, a more practical theology than any speculative scholastic theology. Beschi's practical theology is implicit throughout his poetic work. I could verify this point personally in my research in other writings of Beschi, on Mother Mary such as Tirukkāvalūr kalampakam, Veṅkalipā, Mātā mālai, and Aṇṇai aḷuṅkal antāti.

The book under review can be an eye opener for every Tamil Catholic to take Joseph as a role model for his or her mission and witness of Christian life. Tamils can learn from the character of St. Joseph to be virtuous, wise, and obedient to God's will. The three chapters of Tēmpāvaṇi. are retold again in our times by the living Beschi, Fr. Francis X Clooney S.J.

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