SUMMARY

The baptismal homilies 1-3 of Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) as well as the liturgical homilies 21 and 22 of Narsai of Nisibis (d. ca. 503) provide us with valuable insight into the dramatic rites by which baptismal candidates were initiated during the fourth and fifth centuries in West and East Syria. In current scholarship, it is generally accepted, not only that the two rites are similar, but also that Narsai is heavily dependent on Theodore. There is no doubt that Theodore influenced East Syrian Christianity in general and Narsai in particular. Nevertheless, the specific relation between Narsai’s and Theodore’s baptismal rites has not previously been the subject of thorough investigation. The present study aims to fill this ‘research gap’.

The actual comparison occurs on two levels: ritual and mystagogy. Concerning the former, the following must be noted. Firstly, since Narsai’s homilies were primarily composed for delivery to the assembly, possibly even to the newly baptised, it is likely that they reflect the real rite and are not merely a literary construct (as some have proposed). Secondly, rites are usually conservative and tend to resist change (Aidan Kavanagh). Thirdly, it may be highly questioned whether Narsai – not occupying a high ecclesiastical office – was in the position to make (serious) alterations to an existent baptismal rite. The tradition is completely silent on this. The first reform of the rite we know of happened under Isōyahb III (7th century), and there are no indications whatsoever that Narsai was involved in such a radical project as the reformation of the baptismal liturgy. For these reasons, the current study takes it as an assumption – tested and confirmed accordingly – that direct influence of Theodore on Narsai is limited to the interpretation of the rituals. The research question is then: In comparison with other influences on Narsai of Nisibis, is the influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia regarding a) the baptismal rite and b) its mystagogy distinctive enough that one may claim Narsai is (primarily) dependent on Theodore?

Concerning methodology, this study faces several challenges. To begin with, our comparison between the rites of Theodore and Narsai can succeed only if we assume that the one extant manuscript of Theodore’s catechetical homilies is the same as, or at least sufficiently similar to, the manuscript that Narsai used. Since the Syriac translation is usually considered
a fifth-century product of the school of Edessa, and may even be the product of Ibas (Hibā; d. 457), bishop of Edessa, this assumption seems justified.

Furthermore, following the lead of current scholarship that the early Christian baptismal practice was more diverse than was previously thought, it is the conviction of the present study that a critical comparison has to give due weight to both similarities and differences. This whole endeavour is guided by the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Paul Bradshaw), i.e. the awareness that the sources are not ‘raw factual data’ that merely record everything that was said or done, but rather that genre, context, and the author’s intentions must be reckoned with.

A major methodological challenge concerns the means of establishing influence. Since Theodore and Narsai share a common (Syrian) heritage, similarity is not necessarily the result of direct influence. Therefore, the rule of thumb we follow is that exclusive dependence of Narsai on Theodore can be established only when the resemblance concerns a characteristic feature of Theodore’s rite or mystagogy, whose presence in Narsai cannot be satisfactorily explained by an appeal to an earlier (common) tradition and/or by Narsai’s use of a specific source to which he, concerning this specific point, stands generally closer than to Theodore. The necessary contextual framework for the comparison of Theodore and Narsai is constructed by a discussion of relevant baptismal writings from Syria and its vicinity, which are, the Didascalia, the Acts of Thomas, Aphrahat’s Demonstrations, Ephrem the Syrian, the Apostolic Constitutions, John Chrysostom’s Baptismal Instructions, Cyril of Jerusalem’s Procatechesis and Baptismal Catecheses, the Jerusalem Mystagogical Catecheses, Egeria’s Itinerarium, the Testamentum Domini, the Syriac Acts of John, AR (a fifth-century anonymous commentary), and the Barberini Euchologion. However, one must note that the surviving literature is probably only a fraction of what must have been existent at the time (Sebastian Brock), and, moreover, Church traditions are not always in the first place transmitted in writing. Therefore, a careful extrapolation from the known to the unknown, a ‘reading between the lines’, may sometimes be necessary in order to avoid hasty conclusions. It goes without saying that absolute certainty is not attainable here.

In order to answer the research question fruitfully, guided by the established methodological criteria, this study is structured as follows. The seven chapters are distributed over three parts: 1) Preliminary Issues: Terminology and Structure (Chapters 1-2); 2) Rituals Preceding the Sacrament (Chapters 3-5); and 3) Rituals of the Sacrament (Chapters 6-7). The
aim of the first chapter is to pin down a terminology which corresponds to our sources. This bottom-up approach is necessary since there is no clear consensus among scholars regarding the meaning and range of key-terms like ‘baptism’, ‘baptismal rite’, and ‘initiation’. Important findings are that Theodore and Narsai agree that ‘baptism’ concerns the immersion part and not a larger cluster of rituals. They also concur that the Eucharist is excluded from the whole process of initiation. Theodore’s ‘baptismal rite’ – a ritualisation of baptism – starts with the enrolment and Narsai’s with the *apotaxis*. Chapter 2 demonstrates that the basic structure of both rites is not the common trio of pre-baptismal rituals/baptism/post-baptismal rituals, but a twofold pattern consisting of the rituals preceding the sacrament (राजां राजेः) and the rituals of the sacrament. The latter begins with the signing on the forehead. The first two chapters equip us with the necessary tools of a sound terminology and a structural grid which enables us to approach the rites in a profitable way.

Chapter 2 also shows that the specific pattern of the rites is different. Theodore has the structure: enrolment-exorcism-Creed and Lord’s Prayer-penitential prayer-apotaxis/syntaxis-signing on the forehead-rising and *orarium*-whole body anointing-consecration of the water-baptism-vesting with white garment-signing. But Narsai has the pattern: *apotaxis*-‘exorcism’-syntaxis-enrolment-consecration of the oil-signing on the forehead-consecration of the water-baptism. After baptism, the initiand is embraced and kissed, and vested with the baptismal garment. Theodore’s rite is clearly more developed, and in particular the absence in Narsai of a full body anointing and a post-baptismal signing/anointing shows that his rite has the more archaic Syrian pattern, which turns out to be a variant of that of the anonymous East Syrian *AR*. Interestingly, Narsai seems to be the first witness to the pattern *apotaxis*-‘exorcism’-syntaxis.

The actual discussion and comparison of the rituals takes place in the chapters of Part 2 and 3 and follow the sequence of Theodore’s rite. Chapter 3 concerns the enrolment, the accompanying examination and the role of the sponsor. Since Theodore’s enrolment is positioned at the beginning of the rite, and takes place several days before baptism, it still functions as a registration for baptism. In Narsai, however, the enrolment is put into the middle of the rite and, therefore, does not have its original administrative function anymore, but has become a symbolic act. Another consequence of its different position is that in Theodore the enrolment can be portrayed as a process, something that Narsai’s pattern would not allow for.
The locus of the enrolment also affects the role of the sponsor as father-guide. Theodore’s sponsor guides his pupil from the enrolment until the orarium, while Narsai’s sponsor can fulfil this responsibility only after initiation. Lastly, it may be noted that citizenship and filial adoption, two ideas so prominent in Theodore, are lacking in Narsai.

The deliverance from evil dominion is discussed in Chapter 4. Both rites have an ‘exorcism’, which is portrayed as a courtroom scene. Although the idea of a lawsuit has a broader attestation – as witnessed by AR – the shared combination of features not found in other sources of Syria and its vicinity, i.e. the explicit mention of the silence of the candidate and his fear for the Devil, and the use of the terms ‘advocate’ (ܐܢܓܪܐ) and ‘lawsuit’ (ܐܡܐ), may indicate that Narsai drew primarily on Theodore here. Yet, the rituals are far from identical. Not only do they differ in position and structure (and by consequence, in function), but as well in performance, bodily position, minister, and exorcistic nature. Narsai shows also some resemblance with AR, although there are no traces of simple imitation.

Chapter 5 discusses the apotaxis and syntaxis. Since Narsai identifies ‘Satan’s angels’ (of the apotaxis) in the same way as Theodore, i.e. with the symbolic number of seven heretics, we may be quite sure that he was familiar with and used Theodore’s catechetical homilies. Yet, by replacing Marcion with Eutyches, Narsai adapted the list to his own context and target group. Moreover, the performance of the rituals in Theodore and Narsai shows important differences. Narsai’s apotaxis/syntaxis is interrupted by the Lawsuit (‘exorcism’), while Theodore’s ritual is preceded by the penitential prayer. It is of special interest that Theodore’s apotaxis requires a previous deliverance from Satan, while Narsai’s ritual – where the apotaxis precedes the ‘exorcism’ – does not have any such prerequisite. Concerning the bodily movements, Narsai’s baptizand probably stands during the renunciation and kneels to make the profession, possibly combining the kneeling with a turning from West to East. Theodore’s candidate, however, is in a praying posture, and since he is also kneeling during the whole ritual, a turning from West to East is highly unlikely here. The formulas agree only on the impersonal form and the common terms ‘his angels’ and ‘his service’, which may be attributed to a shared heritage.

The signing on the forehead is the topic of Chapter 6. Both the position and the function of this ritual are different in Theodore and Narsai. The nature of Theodore’s signing is paradoxical: it begins the sacrament – indicated by the bishop’s apparel – but concludes the
preceding ritual unit (prayer-apotaxis/syntaxis), combined with the following rising and orarium. Neither this paradoxical nature, nor the visual indicators of the bishop's attire and the orarium are present in Narsai. Also the bodily position differs: Theodore's candidate is kneeling, while Narsai's initiate is standing during the ritual. A possible influence of Theodore on Narsai concerns the exclusive use of ܪܘܼܫܡܵܐ/sfragi,j for the signing of the forehead, the soldier image, and maybe the distribution of the rituals over both liturgical homilies. An influence of Theodore on the broader East Syrian tradition may be traceable in the use of the passive Trinitarian formula. Most striking, however, is the absence of the Holy Spirit in Theodore as compared to the importance of the Trinity's Agent in Narsai. Especially the close relation of anointing to baptism, and of both to the Spirit, means that Narsai is generally closer to the Acts of Thomas, Ephrem, and the Acts of John, than to Theodore. Not less remarkable is the absence in Narsai of Theodore’s important concept of παρφηνία.

The final Chapter 7 is dedicated to the core ritual of baptism. The high level of agreement between the two writers concerning the performance of the immersions may safely be attributed to a common tradition. The same is true for the main baptismal images used, the dying/rising with Christ (Rom. 6) and rebirth (John 3). Narsai's independence from Theodore is demonstrated by his heavier focus on re-creation, his more developed Rom. 6-mystagogy of the ritual itself, his use of (Old Testament) images which are absent from Theodore (but shared with the Syriac Acts of John and AR), his omission of any mystagogy on undressing/nakedness or on the benefit of filial adoption – both so prominent in Theodore – and his interest in the cleansing effect of baptism. Nonetheless, besides Narsai’s general concurrence with Theodore’s sacramental eschatology, it is especially the similar discussion of the bishop’s garb that betrays an influence of the West Syrian on the East Syrian mystagogue.

Particularly interesting is Narsai’s application of the birth image and the concept of forgiveness of sins. Although he uses ‘birth’ once in exactly the same way as Theodore – referring to the second birth at the resurrection and generally agreeing here with the ‘two ages’ framework – he normally speaks in a more traditional way of a spiritual birth happening directly at baptism. Concerning ‘sin’, Narsai agrees with Theodore’s view on original mortality, but unlike Theodore (who never connects sin with baptism), and right at the heart of his discussion of baptism, Narsai reflects the traditional idea of baptismal forgiveness of
sins. These examples illustrate the competition of different forces and that the voice of traditional baptismal elements may get a higher register than Theodore.

In summing up the results of the present study, we may conclude that there are no good reasons for claiming that Narsai’s baptismal rite and mystagogy are (primarily) dependent on Theodore of Mopsuestia. The rites are simply too different and the similarities are better ascribed to a common tradition. This confirms our previously expressed doubt whether Narsai was in a position to make alterations to an existent rite and our assumption that Narsai’s homilies reflect an actual liturgy of a particular fifth-century East Syrian community. There is no indication whatsoever that Narsai’s homilies are merely a literary construct that projects Theodore’s rite onto that of his own church. And although Narsai’s mystagogy demonstrates that he read and used Theodore’s catechetical homilies, it is anything but a simple copy of them. Drawing on a rich spectrum of traditional symbolism, including that found in Theodore, the East Syrian poet (in the line of Ephrem) creatively produces the artwork he desires. In doing so, he remains within traditional liturgical boundaries, even if that creates some tension with the mystagogy of his esteemed teacher.