

## **St. Ephraem the Syrian, a Spiritual Teacher for Today**

(By Sidney Griffith, Catholic University of America. Posted on this Home Page with author's permission. NB: pardon any errors since this is a scanned text)

### I

To the east of Byzantium in the fourth century, the era in which the faith of Nicea came to its classical expression and the life of the church took on its familiar liturgical forms, Ephraem the Syrian (c.306-373) was undoubtedly the thinker whose ideas would have the most powerful influence on later generations. He wrote in Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic language, which carried with it a family relationship to the Jewish world in which Christianity first appeared in the synagogue communities of Mesopotamia and Syria/Palestine. It was this language which eventually carried the Christian faith across the trade routes of Central Asia, eastward into China and southward into India. But in Ephraem's day, Syriac-speaking people living where he lived, in the cities of Nisibis and Edessa, on the Roman Empire's frontier with Persia, were also intellectually and politically very much attuned to the Greek-speaking culture of Asia Minor, and of the major ecclesiastical centers in Antioch and Constantinople. Ephraem himself was the major literary promotor of Roman imperial ideology in the region; in ecclesiology he followed the line of Eusebius of Caesarea Mantima (c.260-c.340); in theology he adhered to the teaching of the council of Nicea, strenuously combating what he perceived to be the inquisitive rationalism of

those he called ‘Arians’ and ‘Aetians’; in the east he was the relentless opponent of the teachings of Marcion, Bar Daysan, and Mani.<sup>1</sup>

Ephraem served the church in Nisibis for most of his life, beginning in the time of his patron, Bishop Jacob of Nisibis (d. 338), one of the signatories to the decisions of the council of Nicea.<sup>2</sup> He left Nisibis as a refugee in the year 363, when the city was handed over to the Persians as part of the price of peace after the death of the emperor Julian on 26 June 363, while on campaign against the Persians deep in Mesopotamia. Ephraem, along with many other refugees from Nisibis, then took up residence in Edessa, where he served the local bishop until his death on 9 June 373. All his life Ephraem was a bishop’s man, possibly a deacon, definitely a teacher (*malpānā*) and commentator on the scriptures, an apologist/polemicist and a liturgical poet.<sup>3</sup> One modern scholar has written enthusiastically that Ephraem was “the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>On these matters see Sidney H. Griffith, “Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire,” in Thomas Halton & Joseph P. Williman (eds), Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), pp. 22-52; *idem*, “Ephraem the Syrian’s Hymns ‘Against Julian’: Meditations on History and Imperial Power,” Vigiliae Christianae 41(1987), pp. 238-266; *idem*, “Faith Seeking Understanding’ in the Thought of St. Ephraem the Syrian,” in George C. Berthold (ed.), Faith Seeking Understanding: Learning and the Catholic Tradition. Selected Papers from the Symposium and Convocation Celebrating the Saint Anselm College Centennial (Manchester, N.H.: Saint Anselm College Press, 1991), Pp. 35-55; *idem*, “Setting Right the Church of Syria: Saint Ephraem’s Hymns against Heresies,” to appear in a forthcoming Festschrift for Robert A. Markus. See also Peter Bruns, “Arms Hellenizans?. Ephrem der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit,” Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte 101 (1990), pp. 21-57; Paul S. Russel, St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians (Kottayam, Kerala; St. Epikrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>See Paulus Peeters, ‘La Légende de saint Jacques de Nisibe,’ Analecta Bollandiana 38 (1920), pp. 285-373; P. Kruger, “Jakob von Nisibis in syrischer und armenischer Überlieferung,” KG Muséon 81 (1968), pp. 161-179; David Bundy, “Jacob of Nisibis as a Model for the Episcopacy,” Le Muséon 104 (1991), pp. 235-249.

<sup>3</sup>On the life of Ephraem see Edward C. Mathews, Jr., ‘The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian, the Deacon of Edessa,’ Diakonia 22 (1988-1989), pp. 15-42; Sidney H. Griffith, “Images of Ephraem: the Syrian Holy Man and his Church,” Traditio (1989-1990), pp. 7-33. <sup>4</sup>Robert Murray, “Ephrem Syrus,” in the Catholic Dictionary of Theology (vol. II; London, 1967), pp.

220-223. Murray reaffirmed this opinion in his landmark book, Robert J. Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom; a Study in Early Syriac Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 31.

After his death, Ephraem gained a wide reputation as a holy man, not only in his own Syriac-speaking community but throughout the Byzantine world, and later in the medieval west and Russia. Many Greek-speaking admirers, particularly in the monastic communities of late antique and early medieval times, both translated his spiritual counsels and themselves composed treatises in Greek in his name.<sup>5</sup> In this guise Ephraem has often been listed among the fathers of monasticism and icons of him often portray him in a monk's garb. Even the standard *Vita* of Ephraem in Syriac reflects this development.<sup>6</sup> But Ephraem was never in fact a recluse or a hermit, or even a monk in any conventional sense of the term.<sup>7</sup> He was all his life long a busy pastoral minister, whose main business was the composition of 'teaching songs' (*madrāshê*) in Syriac, often to be presented at the divine liturgy. This was the portrait that Ephraem himself penned in the final stanzas of one of his memorable 'teaching songs' at the end of his *Hymns against Heresies*. He wrote prayerfully,

O Lord, may the works of your pastoral minister (*callānâ*) not be  
discounted.

I will not, then have troubled your sheep,

but as far as I was able,

I will have kept the wolves away from them,

and I will have built, as far as I was able,

<sup>5</sup>The long list of them, with further bibliography, can be found in M. Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (vol. II; Turnhout: Brepols, 1974), pp. 366-468. A reprinting of the Greek works, together with a translation into modern Greek, is available in Konstantinou C. Phrantzolas (ed. & trans), *Osiou Ephraim tou Surou Erga* (6 vols. to date; Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis 'To Periboli tes Panagias', 1988-). See also the Web site of Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, "Saint

Ephrem the Syrian; Ascetical and Other Writings Extant Only in Greek,”

<http://www.orthodox.org.uk/Ephr-Int.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>See Joseph P. Amar, “Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and Greek Bias in the Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 58 (1992), pp. 123-156.

<sup>7</sup>On the relevant terminology in Syriac see Sidney H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: the Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in Vincent L. Wimbush & Richard Valantasis (eds.) *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 220-245.

enclosures of ‘teaching songs’ (*madrāshê*) for the lambs of your flock.

I will have made a disciple

of the simple and unlearned man.

And I will have made him hold

onto the pastoral ministers’ (*callānê*) staff,

the healers’ medicine,

and the disputants’ arsenal.<sup>8</sup>

In an encyclical letter issued on 5 October 1920, Pope Benedict XV proclaimed St. Ephraem the Syrian a Doctor of the Universal Church.<sup>9</sup> This title may be seen as a culmination in Rome of a new fame in the twentieth century for St. Ephraem. It was due to efforts exerted already for some two centuries by a number of scholars in the west to bring out modern editions of Ephraem’s works. One thinks initially of the publication in the eighteenth century of the six-volume Roman edition of the works attributed to Ephraem in Greek, Syriac, and Latin.<sup>10</sup> While the Greek and Latin texts had long been known in the west, the publication of Ephraem’s works in Syriac brought the first glimpse of the poet’s true genius to western Christians. They are largely the work of Etienne Awad Assemani (1709-1782) and Pierre Mobarak, S.J. (1660-1742), Maronite scholars who worked in close association with J. S. Assemani (1687-1768) and others in the Maronite

College in Rome and the Vatican Library.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Edmund Beck, Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen contra Haereses (GSCO, vols. 169 & 170; Louvain: Secretariat dii CorpusSCO, 1957), vol. 169, LVI:10&11, pp. 211-212.

<sup>9</sup>See Benedict XV, "Principi Apostolorum Petro," Acta Apostolicae Sedis 12 (1920), pp. 457-453.

<sup>10</sup>See J. S. Assemani (ed.) Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia quae exstant Graece~Synace, Latine (6 vols.; Rome, 1732-1746).

<sup>11</sup>See Pierre Raphael, Le role du College Maronite Romain dans l'orientalisme aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Beyrouth Université Saint Joseph, 1950), esp. pp. 123-136, 137-139, 145-148.

## II

Although Ephraem wrote biblical commentary, prose refutations of the teachings of those whose views he regarded as false, prose meditations, dialogue poems and metrical homilies (*mêmrê*), there can be no doubt that his preferred genre was the ‘teaching song’ (*madrâshâ*).<sup>12</sup> Translators have often called these songs ‘hymns’, but since they are not primarily songs of praise, the term is not really apt.<sup>13</sup> Rather, they are ‘teaching songs’, as Andrew Palmer has happily styled them; they were to be chanted to the accompaniment of the lyre (*kennarâ*), on the model of David, the Psalmist.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps their closest analogues are the Hebrew *Piyyûtm*, synagogue songs which enjoyed great popularity in Palestine from the eighth century on, and which feature biblical themes and literary devices very similar to those regularly used by Ephraem.<sup>15</sup> They are also comparable to the Byzantine

<sup>12</sup>See the convenient presentation of the titles of Ephraem’s Syriac works by genre, their editions, and notice of the available translations into English in Sebastian P. Brock, “A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations of the Works of Ephrem,” *The H!~p 3* (1990), pp. 7-29. See also Joseph Melki, “S. Ephrem le Syrien, un bilan de l’édit!on critique,” *Parole de l’Orient 11* (1983), pp. 3-88.

<sup>13</sup>See Michael Lattke, “Sind Ephraems Madrâ~ë Hymnen?” *Oriens Christianus 73* (1989), pp. 38-43. See also K. E. McVey, “Were the Earliest *MadrâJë* Songs or Recitations?” in G.J. Reinink & A.C. Klugkist (eds), *After Bardaisan; Studies on Continuity and Change in Synac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han I. W. Dnjvers* (Orientalia Lovaruensia Analecta, 89; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), pp. 185-199.

ThSee Andrew Palmer, “A Lyre without a Voice, the Poetics and the Politics of Ephrem the Syrian,” *ARAM 5* (1993), Pp. 371-399. For more on Ephraem’s poetics, see also Andrew Palmer, “The Merchant of Nisibis; Saint Ephrem and his Faithful Quest for Union in Numbers,” in J. Den Boeft & A. Hilhorst (eds.), *Early Christian Poetry; a Collection of Essays* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 167-233; *idem*, “Words, Silences, and the Silent Word: Acrostics and Empty Columns in Saint Ephraem’s *Hymns on Faith*,” *Parole de l’Orient 20* (1995), pp. 129-200; *idem*, “St Ephrem of Syria’s Hymn on Faith 7: an Ode on his Own Name,” *Sch~rnost 17* (1995), pp. 28-40.

<sup>15</sup>See J. Schirmann, “Hebrew Liturgical Poetry and Christian Hymnology,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review n.s.*, 44 (1953-1954), Pp. 123-161; J. Yahalom, “*Piyyut* as Poetry,” in L. I. Levine (ed.), *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 123-134; W. Jac. Bekkum, “Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (*Piyyut*) of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries,” in J. Den Boeft & A. Hilhorst (eds.), *Early Christian Poetry; a Collection of Essays* (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 22; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 297-308.



*Kontakion*. In fact, a good case can be made for the suggestion that the most famous composer of *Kontakia*, Romanos the Melode (d. after 555), who was a native of Emesa in Syria, was actively influenced by Ephraem's compositions.<sup>16</sup>

Ephraem composed his 'teaching songs' (*madrāshê*) for the liturgy. St. Jerome says that in some churches they were recited after the scripture lessons in the divine liturgy.<sup>17</sup> And they have had a place in the liturgy of the hours in the Syriac-speaking churches from the earliest periods for which textual witnesses remain.<sup>18</sup> In his lifetime, Ephraem himself reportedly spent time and energy rehearsing the groups who would perform the 'teaching songs' in church. What is more, according to one early witness, he insisted that women take their rightful place in the church's choirs. For this reason Jacob of Sarug (d. 521) called Ephraem the "second Moses for women."<sup>19</sup> What he meant was that because of their role in the public performance of Ephraem's 'teaching songs', women effectively became teachers in the churches. Jacob of Sarug made the point explicitly. Rhetorically addressing Ephraem, he said,

Your teaching opened the closed mouth of the daughters of E~e, and  
now the congregations of the glorious [church] resound with  
their voices.

<sup>16</sup>See J. Grosdidier de Matons, Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse a Byzance (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); William L. Petersen, "The Dependence of Romanos the Melodist upon the Synac Ephrem; its Importance for the Origin of the Kontakion," Vigiliae Christianae 39 (1985), pp. 171-187; *idem*, The Diatessaron and Ephrem Syrus as Sources of Romanos the Melodist (CSCO, vol. 475; Louvain, Peeters, 1985); *idem*, "The Dependence of Romanos~ the Melodist upon the Syriac Ephraem," in E. A. Livingstone. (ed.), Studia Patristica (vol. SVIII, 4; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications & Leuven: Peeters, 1990), pp. 274-281; S. P. Brock, "From Ephrem to Romanos," in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), Studia Patristica (vol. XX; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), pp. 139-151.

<sup>17</sup>See. E. C. Richardson, Hieronymus, Liber de Viris Inlustribus (Leipzig, 1896), p. 51.

<sup>18</sup>See Robert Taft, The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West; the Origins of the Divine Office and its Meaning for Today (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1986), pp. 225-247.

<sup>19</sup>Joseph P. Amar, "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug; Critical

Edition of the Syriac Text, Translation and Introduction," Patrologia Orientalis (tome, 47, fasc. 1, no. 209; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), # 48, p. 37.

It is a new sight that women would proclaim the Gospel, and now be called teachers in the churches.<sup>20</sup>

The point not to be missed here is that the ‘teaching songs’, which the women teachers were reciting, were the effective instruments of catechesis in the Syriac-speaking congregations. And this catechesis consisted in poetic meditations on the symbols and types which GOD distributed in nature and scripture to lead people across the chasm separating creatures from their Creator. For Ephraem’s theology is not propositional but typological and symbolic. The symbols and types are not esoteric but commonplace. While they come from both nature and the scriptures, it is the Bible that provides the horizon for their interpretation. And within the Bible, the Gospel is the exegetical focal point; all the figures ultimately point to Christ. For Ephraem, the symbols and types are so many verbal icons, and his thought is really not so much theology as it is a sacramental iconology. Indeed, the image of the image maker is one of Ephraem’s favorite figures of speech to refer to the ways in which God has communicated with people in the Bible.<sup>21</sup> In this way Ephraem’s thought is Semitic rather than Hellenic, flowing almost directly from the discourse of the scriptures rather than commenting on them.<sup>22</sup>

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In the divine revelation, what one most often finds, according to

Ephraem, even in the names and titles of God, are manifest symbols, which he

<sup>20</sup>Amar, “A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem,” ## 40-44, pp. 34-35.

<sup>21</sup>See Sidney H. Griffith, ‘The Image of the Image Maker in the Poetry of St. Ephraem the Syrian,’ in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica* (vol. XXV; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), pp. 258-269.

<sup>22</sup>See Sidney H. Griffith, ‘Faith Adoring the Mystery’: Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian (The Pere Marquette Lecture in Theology, 1997; Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997).

most often calls *râzê* (sing. *râzai* in Syriac, which in turn, by God's grace, disclose to the human mind those aspects of the hidden reality or truth which are within the range of the capacities of human intelligence. Ephraem and other Syriac writers use this word *râzâ* more in the sense of a 'mystery-symbol', which is not so much mysterious in its function as it is indicative, disclosing to human minds according to their capacities what is hidden from human knowledge in its essence, such as the being of God and the course of the economy of salvation. While *râzâ* is often synonymous with 'type' in Ephraem's works, his use of the term goes well beyond what one normally thinks of as the typological sense of the scriptures, i.e., words, actions, facts, and narratives in the Old Testament that foreshadow their models in the New Testament. For Ephraem, biblical typologies are indeed *râzê*, but so are many things in nature, and also in the apostolic kerygma and the life of the church, like sacraments. For him, the *râzê* all point to the incarnate Christ, who is "the Lord of the *râzê*, who fulfills all *râzê* in his crucifixion."<sup>23</sup> So they may point forward from Nature and Scripture to Christ, who in turn reveals his Father to the eye of faith, or they point from the church's life and liturgy back to Christ, who in turn reveals to, the faithful believer the events of the eschaton, the ultimate fulfillment of all creation in the economy of salvation. They may be biblical characters and their actions, facts about nature or scripture, concrete objects heard, seen or used in scripture or liturgy, or narratives almost cinematically imagined and poetically presented from Bible or life. They take their significance from the role they play in highlighting Christ for the believer, or even embodying him for the eyes of faith. Within this kaleidoscope of images a coherent figure of church and faith emerges,

<sup>23</sup>Edmund Beck, Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschahymnen; (de azymis, de Crucifixione, de Resurrectione) (CSCO, vols. 248 & 249; Louvain: Peeters, 1964), *de Azymis*, 111:1, 'unita.

sufficient to ground a solid sense of Christian identity, which comes to view most resolutely in liturgy and song.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

Ephraem entered the Trinitarian controversies of his day pointing to the names of God one finds in the Scriptures. He did not engage in debate about the definitions and the implications of the several Greek philosophical and/or logical terms which his Greek-speaking contemporaries were using to clarify the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Rather, he went straightaway to the Syriac text of the Scriptures. In the *Homilies on Faith* he said:

Sufficient for our infirmity

is the truth (*shrārâ*) that has come in

revelation.

Acknowledge that there is the Father and the Son,

in truth (*bashrârâ*) as in the names (*bashmâhê*).

The root of the name is the thing itself (*qnoma*),

to it names are attached.

For who would give a name

to something which itself (*qnomeh*) did not

exist?<sup>25</sup>

Again, in another place in the *Homilies*, Ephraem wrote:

You have heard, Father, Son, and Spirit;

<sup>24</sup>The most comprehensive discussion of Ephraem's thought in this regard is Taruos Bou Mansour, La Pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le Syrien (Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 16; Kaslik, Lebanon: L'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988).

<sup>25</sup>Edmund Beck, Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones de Fide (~SCO, vols. 212 & 213; Louvain: Peeters, 1961), II, 587-588.

in the names get the things themselves (*qnome*).<sup>26</sup>

Passages such as these draw one's attention to two considerations which were crucial for Ephraem. First are the names of the persons of the Trinity and their verification in Scripture, and second are the "things themselves" to which the names inevitably point according to Ephraem.

In evidence of the names 'Father', 'Son', and 'Spirit', as proper names of God, Ephraem customarily points to such widely quoted Gospel Passages as the baptism formula, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19); Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," with Jesus' reply, "No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father" (Mt. 16:16-17); Jesus' transfiguration, with the divine testimony, "This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests" (Mt. 17:5), which confirms the report at Jesus' own baptism, "He saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and hover over him. With that, a voice from the heavens said, This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him'." (Mt. 3:16-17)

Ephraem relates these New Testament names for God to the names of God one finds in the Old Testament. His method is clear in what he has to say in *Hymn on the Faith XLIV*:

His names will instruct you,

how and whom you should call Him.

One teaches you He is the 'Eternal One,'

another that He is the 'Creator'.

One shows you He is the 'Good One',

another informs you He is the 'Just One'.

He is also named and called

<sup>26</sup>Beck, Sermones de Fide, IV, 45-46.



Father.

The scriptures are the test;

why does the fool gainsay it?

Try by His own test,

His names and His distinctions.<sup>27</sup>

St. Ephraem has much to say about the names of God one, finds in the Scriptures. He distinguishes between what he describes as true names and borrowed names. The latter say nothing essential about God, according to Ephraem, but they are God's way of communicating with human beings. For example, when the Scriptures speak of God's 'ears' or 'eyes', Ephraem says:

The ears He ascribes by name to Himself

are to teach us He hears us.

The eyes He attributes by name to Himself

are to inform us He sees us.

He takes on the names of these things

for the sake of our weakness.<sup>28</sup>

It is a different matter with the names St. Ephraem considers to be 'real', or proper names, as one might say. They bespeak reality. St. Ephraem says,

The root of the name is the thing itself (*qnoma*),

to it names are attached.

For who would give a name

to something which itself (*qnôneh*) does not

exist?<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Edmund Beck, Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide (~SCO, vols. 154 & 155; Louvain: Peeters, 1955), XLIV:1.

<sup>28</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, XXXI:1.

<sup>29</sup>Beck, Sermones de Fide, II, 587-588.

The Syriac equivalent for the English noun ‘self’ is *qnômâ*. As in English, the noun is used in conjunction with the personal pronoun in Syriac to serve as a reflexive pronoun. And in this way one might say that the noun *qnômâ*/self means an independently existing, individual reality: the technical equivalent for all practical purposes of the Greek term *hypostasis*, as the Cappadocian fathers were using it to designate one of the persons of the Trinity.<sup>30</sup>

What attracted Syriac writers such as St. Ephraem to the term *qnômâ* as a fitting word to express what westerners would call the ‘persons’ or the *hypostaseis* of the Trinity is surely its appearance in the Peshitta and in the Syriac *Diatessaron* to render the reflexive pronoun *heauto* in a Gospel passage such as John 5:26, “For just as the Father has life in himself, so has he granted the Son also to have life in himself.” In fact, Ephraem commented on this verse in its Syriac *Diatessaron* version, relying on the appearance of *qnôma* for *heauto* in both of its instances here to allow him to interpret the passage to refer to the *qnômâ* of the Father, and the *qnômâ* of the Son, virtually in the Greek sense of two divine *hypostaseis*.<sup>31</sup> Nothing could express St. Ephraem’s thought better than to show that the whole Trinitarian formula is literally in the Scriptures in Syriac, one God in three *qnômê*, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And since even the word *qnômâ* is in the Gospel in association with the names of the Father and the Son, Ephraem can say:

If you acknowledge their names,

<sup>30</sup>See G. L. Prestige, God in Patristic Thought (2nd ed.; London, 1952), pp. 157-178. See also A. De Halleux, “Hypostase et personne dans la formation du dogme trinitaire,” Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique 79 (1984), pp. 313-369; 625-670.

<sup>31</sup>See L. Leloir, Saint Ephrem. commentaire de l’évangile concordant, texte syriaque (manuscrit Chester Beatty 709) (Dublin, 1963), pp. 106-109; *idem*, Ephrem de Nisibe, commentaire de l’évangile concordant ou Diatessaron (Sources Chrétiennes, 121; Paris, 1966), pp. 236-237. A later Christian Arab writer, whose native language was Syriac, made the same point arguing with Muslims in the ninth century. See M. Hayek (ed.), Ammar al-Basri, apologie et controverses (Beyrouth, 1977), pp. 52 & 163.



but you do not acknowledge their *qnômê*, You are a worshiper  
in name,

but in fact you are an infidel.<sup>32</sup>

A longer passage in the *Sermones de Fide* puts the matter in the context of Ephraem's concern to commend faith in the scriptures and to discourage what he regarded as impious intellectual inquiry. He said,

The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

are perceived in their names.

You should not muse over their *qnômê*;

meditate on their names.

i~ you pry into the *qnômâ* you will perish;

but if you believe in the name you will life.

Let the name of the Father be the boundary for you;

do not cross it to pry into his nature.

Let the name of the Son be a wall for you;

do not climb over it to pry into his generation.

Let the name of the Spirit be a fence for you;

do not enter within to investigate him.

Let the names be boundaries for you;

confine your questions to the names.

You have heard the names and the truth;

turn your attention to the commandments.

Believe that the Father is the first;

affirm that the Son is the second.

That the Holy Spirit is

<sup>32</sup>Beck, Sermones de Fide, IV, 49-52.

the third do not doubt.<sup>33</sup>

The word *qnômâ* did become a technical term for Syriac theological writers, who used it almost as an equivalent for the Greek term *hypostasis*.<sup>34</sup> It seems clear that writers such as St. Ephraem intended to teach in Syriac the same Trinitarian doctrine that Sts. Basil and Gregory Nazianzenus taught in a logically and philosophically correct Greek idiom. There is every reason to think that St. Ephraem was knowledgeably *au courant* with theological developments in Cappadocia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Roman empire. But it would be a mistake to think that St. Ephraem wanted simply to reflect Greek doctrinal language in Syriac. Rather, Syriac-speaking Christians had their own genres of religious discourse. Like the Latin speakers at the other end of the empire, they also had the Bible in their own language. And they sought to express their understanding of the faith of the church of Nicea in literary forms most congenial to Syriac.

## V

St. Ephraem meditated on the doctrine of the Trinity, not in Greek logical or philosophical terms, but in terms of the *râzê*, the ‘mystic symbols’ or *mysteria* that, according to Ephraem, God distributed for the purpose in nature and the scriptures. Regarding the relations between Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, Ephraem’s favorite *râzê* involved the relations between the

<sup>33</sup>Beck, *Sermones de Fide*, IV:129-144; 173-176.

<sup>34</sup>The term *qnômâ* has a wider range of meaning than does the term *hypostasis*. In this connection see the remarks of Sebastian Brock, ‘The ‘Nestorian’ Church: a Lamentable Misnomer,’ *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78 (1996), p. 28:

“When the Church of the East uses *qnoma* in connection with ‘nature’ it usually speaks of the ‘two natures and their *qnomas*’, where *qnoma* means something like ‘individual manifestation’: a *qnorna* is an individual instance or example of a *kyana* (which is understood as always abstract), but this individual manifestation is not necessarily a self-existent instance of a *kyana*. Thus, when the Church of the East speaks of two *qnome* in the incarnate Christ, this does not have the same

sense as two *hypostaseis*, where *hypostasis* does have the sense of self-existence.”



sun/the fire, its light and its warmth.<sup>35</sup> While this imagery is also found in the works of other writers, such as Justin, Athenagoras, Tertullian, Athanasius, Cyril, Basil, Gregory Nazianzenus, and Gregory of Nyssa, for them it serves mainly an illustrative function; their principal preoccupations were with the denotations and connotations of the non-biblical, philosophical and logical terminology being used in their time to explicate the biblical teachings in Greek. For Ephraem, who was more sceptical of abstract, philosophical terms, meditation on the images provided by nature and the scriptures afforded one a multifaceted entree into the inner life of God as he imagined it to be mirrored in images and types, names and symbols.

Ephraem's doctrine on the Holy Spirit, like his Christology, shies away from abstract, intellectual inquiry. He wrote:

You hear about the spirit, that she is the Holy Spirit;

entitle her by the name they call her.

You hear her name; acknowledge her name;

that you pry into her nature is not allowed.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, Ephraem had not so much to say about the Holy Spirit in the context of his defense of the faith of Nicea; for him it was principally a matter of controversy with the 'Arians', and therefore the generation of the Son and its implications were the main subjects of discussion.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless he did dearly affirm the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, and this in no uncertain terms.<sup>38</sup> The scriptural setting of the baptism of Christ is the scene he most

<sup>35</sup>See Edmund Beck, Ephrams Trinitätslehre im Bud von Sonne/Feuer, Licht und Warme (CSCO, vol. 425; Lovanii: Peeters).

<sup>36</sup>Beck, Sermones de Fide, P1:41-44.

<sup>37</sup>See Edmund Beck, Die Theologie des hi. Ephraem in semen Hymnen über den Glauben (Studia Anselmiana, 21; Vatican City, 1949); *idem*, Ephraems Reden Über den Glauben; ihr theologischer Lehrgehalt und ihr geschichtlichen Rahmen (Studia Anselmiana, 33; Rome, 1953). See also Peter Bruns, "Anus hellenizans? ..Ephraem der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit," Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte 101 (1990/1991), pp. 21-57.

<sup>38</sup>See Beck, Die Theologie des hi. Ephraem pp. 81-88.

often evokes for this affirmation.<sup>39</sup> For example, there is the following stanza in *Hymn on the Faith* LI, in which Ephraem addresses Christ. He says,

It was the threefold mysteries (*râzê thllthayê*)

that baptized your humanity:

the Father by means of his voice,

and the Son by means of his power,

and the Holy Spirit by means of his hovering (*râhapâ*). Glory be to  
your hovering!<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting to note that Ephraem uses the word ‘hovering’ to refer not only to the activity of the Holy Spirit, but to that of the three divine persons at the baptism of Christ, In the very next verse he says,

Who could falsify

the threefold names

whose hovering first

ministered at the Jordan.<sup>41</sup>

In another hymn the same imagery appears again in a clear affirmation of the equal divinity of the divine persons. Ephraem says,

The names of the Father,

and of the Son, and of the Spirit,

are equal and concordant

at the hovering

of the baptism.

And just as they are equal

<sup>39</sup>In the whole Syrian tradition, the scene of the baptism of Christ and the baptism of Christians is rich in the theology of the Holy Spirit. See S. P. Brock, Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition (J. Vellian, ed., The Syrian Churches Series, 9; Poona: Anita Printers, 1979).

<sup>40</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, LI:7.

<sup>41</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, LI:8.

at the hovering of the baptism,

so also are they equal

in being concordant too.<sup>42</sup>

In Ephraem's parlance, 'hovering', the characteristic activity of God's spirit in the scriptures (Gen. 1:2) has become the image of the triune God's activity at Christ's baptism.

*Hymn on the Faith LXXIV* is one of Ephraem's more extended considerations of the Holy Spirit, using the image of the warmth of the sun/fire, in an elaboration of his favorite set of Trinitarian symbols. He begins by addressing the sun:

Who could empower me

to look and gaze at you,

O luminous one, you in whom are crowded

the mystic symbols of your Lord?

Response: Blessed be your progenitor!

Who could search into

his warmth,  
which, while widely distributed,  
is undivided,  
like the Holy Spirit?

The strength of his

<sup>42</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, LXXVIII:20 & 22.

warmth rests upon everything;

all of it with all,

all of it with each.

Divided neither

from the ray of light

in which it is instilled,

nor from the sun in which it is imbued.

And while it is spread

over creatures,

each one receives

the strength of its heat

as it can.

In it the naked one

is warmed;

it clothes him

like Adam,

who was completely exposed.

It is pleasant

to all who are sent/bare,

sending them

suited for all tasks,



The Spirit clothed (3fs) the apostles too,

and sent (3fs) them

to the four corners

for [their] tasks.

In the warmth

everything ripens,

just as in the Spirit

everyone is hallowed; a type manifest,

In it the cold

that is within the body is overpowered,

as is moral defilement by the Holy Spirit.

In it even the fingers

are loosened

that the frost had paralyzed, like the souls

the Evil One paralyzed.

In it the calves of Nisan (spring) leap for joy,

like the disciples do

in the Holy Spirit who dwells (3fs) within them.

In the warmth too

the harness of winter

is cut away,

by means of which it held back the fruits and blossoms.

In the Holy Spirit

the harness of the Evil One is cut away

by means of which he held back all [spiritual] benefits.

The warmth

awakens the womb

of the silent earth,

as the Holy Spirit

does the holy church.

How can one go off,

a single weakling,

how can he investigate

the greatest treasure

that is indefinable?

And how can he go off to measure himself

with whatever exists

in the four corners,

even things too little for him?

Heat loosens

the hated muzzle,

the very cold,

the silent frost

that is on the lips.

And the mouth tells forth, the tongue too,

just like the tongues of fire that settled

over the disciples.

The Holy Spirit,

in her warmth,

by means of the tongues [of fire], drove away (3fs) the silence

from the disciples.

The hateful silence,

the cold too,

was too terrified,

as if by the winter, to speak.

For the People,

the model of winter,

the type of the frost,

were gloom

for the disciples.

The Holy Spirit,

by means of the tongues of fire that came down,

released the strong grip of the cold.

And drove out (3fs) the fear from the disciples.

So the silence fled

from the tongues

by means of the tongues.

Satan succumbed

like the winter.

And the angry People, were utterly gloomy,

on the model of February.



And the sparrows of heaven spoke there,

in a new voice,

to whom were contemptible

both the hawk and the winter.

These things the warmth

brought about,

and these things the Holy Spirit

has accomplished too.

Who else could do it? 43

## VI

Ephraem highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Son of God become incarnate and in the sacraments. For him, the bread and the wine of the Eucharist become the body and blood of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit, just as it was by the Spirit that Christ was in the womb of Mary, and in the water of Baptism. Addressing Christ, Ephraem wrote,

See, Fire and Spirit were in the womb of her who bore you, see, Fire  
and Spirit were in the river in which you were baptized. Fire and  
Spirit are in our baptismal font;

in the Bread and Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup>

The association of fire with the Holy Spirit as a powerful symbol of divine  
presence in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and even in

<sup>43</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, LXXIV. See the extended discussion of this hymn in Beck, Ephräms  
Trittätslehre, pp. 99-116.

<sup>44</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide. X:17.

Mary's conception of the Word God, is widespread in Syriac liturgical texts.<sup>45</sup> It owes its prominence to the eastern Christians' observance of the role of fire and fire imagery in numerous passages in the Old Testament which describe the signs of God's acceptance of sacrifices from his faithful servants, and thereby for Syrian Christians also signifying the action of the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup> Ephraem himself makes the point explicitly in what he says about fire in one of the *Hymns on Faith*. He says,

The mystery symbol (*râzâ*) of the Spirit is in it (i.e., in fire), and the  
type of the Holy Spirit,

who is blended with water,

so it yields forgiveness,

and is kneaded into bread,

so it becomes the *Qürbanâ*.<sup>47</sup>

Even the priest's role in praying the *epiclesis* in the Syrian liturgy is reported by the poet Balai (d. after 432) in fire imagery. He says of the officiant at the holy *Qurbanâ* on the occasion of the consecration of a church,

The priest stands, he kindles the fire, he takes bread, but gives forth  
the Body; he receives wine, but distributes the Blood.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, fire imagery figures in a number of other expressions not infrequently used in reference to the Eucharist in Syriac texts. For example,

particles of the Eucharistic bread are often called ‘embers’ or burning coals’

<sup>45</sup>On the relationship between the symbols of fire and spirit that bespeak the Holy Spirit and the fire and spirit that constitute the nature of the angels, see Beck, Die Theologie des hl. Ephraem, pp. 88-92.

<sup>46</sup>See S.P. Brock, “Fine from Heaven: from Abel’s Sacrifice to the Eucharist; a Theme in Syriac Christianity,” in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), Studia Patristica (vol. XXV; Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993).

<sup>47</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fidee XL:10.

<sup>48</sup>J. J. Overbeck, S. Ephraemi Syri. Rabulae, Balaei aliorumque Opera Selecta (Oxford, 1865), p. 252,

*(gmârathd)*, usually with at least an implicit reference to the passage in Isaiah 6:6-7, where the prophet speaks of the Seraph who touched his mouth with a burning coal from the altar of the temple. Ephraem makes this connection the the following stanzas:

The Seraph could not touch the fire's coal with his fingers, the coal only just touched Isaiah's mouth:

the Seraph did not hold it, Isaiah did not consume it, but our Lord has allowed us to do both!

To the angels who are spiritual Abraham brought food for the body and they ate. The new miracle is that our mighty Lord has given to bodily man Fire and Spirit to eat and to drink.<sup>49</sup>

One could go on in this vein, citing many more passages from the works of St. Ephraem. But enough has been said to highlight the role of the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation as the Syrian poet follows the images and symbols the scriptures provide. While the idiom is different from that employed in other churches with more abstract theological concerns, the faith expressed in Ephraem's Syriac hymns and homilies is the familiar one of the church of the Rome.

## VII

While St. Ephraem was a master theologian, he was also a spiritual father, psychologically astute, whose counsels were widely esteemed. What he commends

to the spiritually starved is nothing less than the prayerful

<sup>49</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide., X:10-11.

practice of *lectio divina*, allied with an appropriate sense of intellectual humility. In one stanza of the *Hymns on Faith* he gives this advice:

Let us not allow ourselves to go astray

and to study our God.

Let us take the measure of our mind,

and gauge the range of our thinking.

Let us know how small our knowledge is,

too contemptible to scrutinize the Knower of All. 50

According to St. Ephraem, there is a deep chasm (*pehtâ*) between God and his creatures, which human knowledge cannot bridge, but which love crosses.<sup>5-t</sup> God, for his part, as a function of His love for us, has provided for us, in human language, the symbols and types, the names and metaphors, culminating in the Incarnate Son, by which we may cross over to Him. Ep[hraem makes this point dearly in a prayer he addresses to Jesus as the final strophe in an acrostic *madrâshâ* which ends with the middle letter of the Syriac alphabet, *yodh*, which is also the first letter of the name 'Jesus' (*Yeshz2c*). He says,

O Jesus, glorious name, hidden bridge which carries one over from death to life, I have come to a stop with you; I finish with your letter *yodh*. Be a bridge for my words to cross over to your truth. Make your love a bridge for your servant.

<sup>50</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, XV:3.

<sup>51</sup>See Beck, Hymnen de Fide, LXIX:11-12.



By means of you I shall cross over to your Father. I will cross over and say, 'Blessed is the One who has made his might tender in his offspring.'<sup>52</sup>

The scriptures too are a bridge over the chasm that separates man from God, and in one of his *Hymns on Paradise*, as he describes his reading of the book of Genesis, Ephraem provides the perfect paradigm for the contemplative Christian at prayer, Bible in hand. He says,

I read the opening of this book

and was filled with joy,

for its verses and lines

spread out their arms to welcome me;

the first rushed out and kissed me,

and led me on to its companion;

and when I reached that verse

wherein is written

the story of Paradise,

it lifted me up and transported me

from the bosom of the book

to the very bosom of Paradise.

The eye and the mind

traveled over the lines

as over a bridge, and entered together

the story of Paradise.

The eye as it read

transported the mind;

in return the mind, too,

<sup>52</sup>Beck, Hymnen de Fide, VI:17.

gave the eye rest from its reading,

for when the book had been read

the eye had rest

but the mind was engaged.

Both the bridge and the gate

of Paradise

did I find in this book.

I crossed over and entered;

my eye remained outside

but my mind entered within.

I began to wander

among things indescribable.

This is a luminous height,

clear, lofty and fair:

Scripture named it Eden,

the summit of all blessings.<sup>53</sup>

St. Ephraem also had moral advice for the spiritual seekers. In his own day these were in all probability to be found among the so-called ‘Sons and Daughters of the Covenant’, the ancestors of the monks and nuns of the Syriacspeaking world. Ephraem addressed them in passages such as the following one from his second *mêmrâ* “On Reproof.” He wrote:

Let us be builders of our own minds

into temples suitable for God.

If the Lord dwells in your house,

<sup>53</sup>E. Beck, Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen De Paradis und Contra Tulianum (CSCO, vols. 174 & 175; Louvain: Peetens, 1957), V:2-5. The English translation is from Sebastian Brock, Saint Ephrem the Syrian; Hymns on Paradise (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), pp. 102-104.

honor will come to your door. How much your 'honor' will increase

if God dwells within you.

Be a sanctuary for him, even a priest,

and serve him within your temple. Just as for your sake he became

High priest, sacrifice, and libation; you, for his sake, become

temple, priest, and sacrificial offering. Since your mind will become a temple,

do not leave any filth in it;

do not leave in God's house

anything hateful to God.

Let us be adorned as God's house

with what is attractive to God. if anger is there,

lewdness abides there too;

if rage is there,

fumes will rise up from there.

Expel grudges from there,

and jealousy, whose reek is abhorrent. Bring in and install love there,

as a censer full of fragrant incense. Gather up and take the dung out,

odious liaisons and bad habits. Strew good fellowship around it,

like blossoms and flowers.