

‘FAITH ADORING
THE MYSTERY’:*

READING THE BIBLE WITH
ST. EPHRAEM THE SYRIAN

Of all the writers of the Syriac-speaking churches in the patristic period, it is undoubtedly Ephraem, the deacon of Nisibis and Edessa, whose name is the most immediately recognized today among those who treasure the thought of the teachers of the east in the formative centuries of Christian thought. His lifetime spanned the first three quarters of the fourth century, arguably one of the most significant periods in the formulation of the classic statements of orthodox doctrine. What is more, well within the patristic period itself Ephraem's reputation as a holy man, poet, and theologian of note was widely proclaimed, well beyond the borders of his native Syria and the territories where Syriac was spoken. Within fifty years of his death, Palladius included a notice of Ephraem among the ascetic saints whose memory he celebrated in the *Lausiac History*.¹ Sozomen the historian celebrated Ephraem's memory as a popular ecclesiastical writer. He said of Ephraem's works, "They were translated into Greek during his life, ...

and yet they preserve much of their original force and power, so that his works are not less admired when read in Greek than when read in Syriac."² Even Saint Jerome claimed to recognize Ephraem's theological genius in a Greek translation he read of a book by Ephraem on the Holy Spirit.³ Later, in Byzantium, so important a monastic figure as Theodore Studites held up the example of Ephraem for the inspiration of his monks.⁴ But surely the most striking testimony to the Syrian saint's popularity in patristic and medieval times is the fact that in the *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, the number of pages it takes to list the works in Greek attributed to Ephraem is second only to the number of pages devoted to listing the works of John Chrysostom!⁵

One notices immediately, however, that these testimonies to Ephraem's great popularity all refer to works in Greek. And in spite of the fact that Sozomen testifies that Ephraem's works were translated into Greek during the Syrian's lifetime, one of the effects of the modern recovery of his genuine works in Syriac is that scholars have come to recognize that for the most part there is only a small relationship between the writers whom we may for convenience call 'Ephraem Graecus' and 'Ephraem Syrus.'⁶ What is more, in the biographical tradition, an examination of the Greek and Syriac sources reveals two very different *personae*, which, for convenience, one might style the 'icon of Ephraem Byzantinus' and the 'portrait of Ephraem Syrus.'⁷ They depict saints of very different character. The fact of the matter is that with the modern publication of the genuine Syriac works of Ephraem it becomes clear that for centuries

in the Graeco-Latin world, admirers had created an image of the Syrian holy man that suited their own ideas about the ancient paragons of monastic sanctity, but that they had little or no notion of the real Ephraem and his works.⁸ It is one of the credits of modern scholarship to have recovered a view of Ephraem that seems to correspond to the facts. All his life he was never a monk, but he was a bishop's man, a 'single' person in God's service,⁹ a minister in the local churches of Nisibis and Edessa, a deacon who was also a teacher, a poet, who was also one of the most insightful exegetes of the Bible in the fourth century.

II

Ephraem's works in Syriac first came to the attention of readers in the west in a substantial way with the publication in the seventeenth century of the six-volume Roman edition of works attributed to him in Greek, Syriac, and Latin; the Syriac works, with Latin translations, are included in volumes IV to VI. They are largely the work of Étienne 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.¹⁰ While later scholars have sometimes been scathing in their comments about the quality of the edition, the fact remains that for all practical purposes it offered the first glimpse of the genuine works of Ephraem the Syrian to Europeans who had hitherto known only the works of Ephraem

Graecus and their numerous translations and adaptations in other languages.

In subsequent years, beginning in the nineteenth century, and reaching well into the twentieth century, scholars in England, Belgium, and other parts of Europe, making use of the numerous manuscripts recently acquired in the west, made major strides in publishing the rest of the Syriac works attributed to Ephraem.¹¹ By the 1920's his theological reputation in Rome had grown to the point that Pope Benedict XV proclaimed St. Ephraem a doctor of the Universal Church, in an encyclical letter issued on 5 October 1920.¹² But already it was becoming clear that the first publications of Ephraem's Syriac works left much to be desired in terms of the quality of the editions of the texts; many of them were not based on the best available manuscripts, and the work of many of the editors did not satisfy the requirements of truly critical editions. To remedy this situation, Dom Edmund Beck, O.S.B. (1902-1991) began in 1955, and continued for the next quarter century, to publish critical editions and German translations of the genuine, Syriac works of Ephraem in the Louvain series *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*.¹³ The hallmark of Beck's method was the choice of the best, earliest manuscripts to serve as the base manuscripts for his editions, and the practice of displaying the texts on the page in a way that highlights the literary form of each piece. While Beck has not been alone in the task of editing and publishing Ephraem's works in the twentieth century, the sheer volume of his output in this enterprise makes his name almost synonymous

with the production as it were of the 'complete works' of Ephraem Syrus.

The publication of the Syriac works of Ephraem has been accompanied by a crescendo in the number of studies devoted to them, and to his life and thought more generally.¹⁴ The effect of all this attention has been gradually to bring Ephraem into the mainstream of modern patristic scholarship, although one can even now consult the index of too many studies of early Christian thought in areas on which he wrote extensively and still not find a mention of his name.¹⁵ It is also interesting to observe the changes in the scholarly estimation of Ephraem's writing in the English-speaking world of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Early on in the English-speaking world, F. C. Burkitt wrote that "Ephraim is extraordinarily prolix, he repeats himself again and again, and for all the immense mass of material there seems very little to take hold of. His style is as allusive and unnatural as if the thought was really deep and subtle, and yet when the thought is unraveled, it is generally commonplace. . . . Judged by any canons that we apply to religious literature, it is poor stuff."¹⁷ More recently, J. B. Segal echoed the same sentiment. While admitting that Ephraem was a master of Syriac style, Segal went on to say that "his work, it must be confessed, shows little profundity or originality of thought, and his metaphors are laboured. His poems are turgid, humourless, and repetitive."¹⁸ But in stark contrast to these negative judgments, Robert Murray has described Ephraem "as the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante."¹⁹

And now, as if in testimony to Murray's judgment, the composer/singer, John Tavener, has set several of Ephraem's stanzas in English translation to music and has issued a CD featuring them in performance.²⁰ Generally, it seems, the closer one studies Ephraem's works, and the more familiar the reader is with the text of the Bible, the more prepared one is to concede the genius not only of his language, but of his exegetical insights.

III

In the Syriac tradition, Ephraem is remembered as a teacher, and as an interpreter of the scriptures. Jacob of Sarug (c. 451-521), a Syriac writer whose literary reputation is second only to that of Ephraem himself, wrote a verse homily on "the holy man, Mar Ephraem, the teacher (*malpānā*)," in which he presents Ephraem as a skilled preacher and composer of doctrinal hymns carefully wrought to commend right teaching and to refute error. Jacob celebrates Ephraem as:

A marvelous rhetor, who surpassed the Greeks in declamation;
 who could include a thousand subjects in a single speech.
 A divine citharist; he set his phrases to verse, to make joyful
 sound in mighty wonder.²¹

In the seventh century Pseudo-Barḥabbā (d. before 650), the historian of the schools of Edessa and Nisibis, echoed Jacob of Serugh's celebration of Ephraem's pedagogical talents when he accorded him the anachronistic title of 'Interpreter'

(*mpashshqānā*). In seventh century usage this title would identify him as the local church's chief biblical exegete, and the master of his city's school of religious education.²² In fact, Pseudo-Barḥabbā says that Jacob of Nisibis (d. 337/8) put Ephraem into a position in Nisibis comparable to that which bishop Alexander of Alexandria gave the young deacon Athanasius in his own city after the council of Nicea. And Pseudo-Barḥabbā goes on to say that in later years in the Church of the East, before the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428) had been translated into Syriac, the current 'Interpreter' at the school of Nisibis was still passing on "the traditions of Mar Ephraem."²³ Clearly Pseudo-Barḥabbā was claiming a patristic authority for Ephraem in the Syriac-speaking community comparable to that of Athanasius in the Byzantine church.

It is customary to reckon the year 306 as the year of Ephraem's birth. When he reached his majority, he came into the service of bishop Jacob of Nisibis (c. 308-338), and he remained in the episcopal service of Nisibis through the tenure of the next three bishops, Babū (d. 346), Vologeses (d. 361), and Abraham (d. 363). Ephraem's diocesan service, therefore, lasted some forty years until the day in the reign of bishop Abraham, in the year 363, when he and other refugees left Nisibis on the occasion of her surrender to the Persians as part of the agreement Emperor Jovian (363-364) made after his predecessor Julian had met his death deep in Persian territory.²⁴ After the surrender of Nisibis, and his flight from the city westward, Ephraem came eventually to Edessa; there he entered the service of bishop Barses

(361-371), whom the Arianizing Emperor Valens (364-378) translated to the lesser see of Ḥarrān in 371.²⁵ Two years later — on 9 June 373, according to the *Chronicle of Edessa*—Ephraem died.²⁶

Ephraem's lengthy bibliography of hymns, homilies, and biblical commentary testifies to the pastoral work he actually did in the service of his bishops. He was a teacher, a preacher, a biblical exegete, a theologian-poet whose discourse was Aramaic to the core. In his own idiom he commended to his flock what one now recognizes to be the orthodox faith of Nicaea, along with an unswerving loyalty to the Roman Empire.²⁷ His style of religious discourse was not academic; it was deeply contemplative, based on a close reading of the scriptures, with an eye to the telling mystic symbol (*rāzā*) or 'type' in terms of which God chose to make revelations to the church. In the context of the fourth century, in the 'Church of the Empire,' Ephraem's style of thought was archaic in the etymological sense of the word - it issued from the well-spring of what, in the monastic west, one would call *lectio divina*. The result was a colloquy with the Word of God, the mode of religious discourse that is prior to academic theology.

Everything we know about Ephraem's career in Nisibis and in Edessa, most of it from his own pen, suggests that he participated wholeheartedly in the pastoral work of the bishops whom he served. In his *Hymns against Heresies* he spoke of himself as a 'herdsman' (*allānā*), who by his writing helped tend the flock. In the last hymn of the collection he offered this prayer:

O Lord, may the works of your herdsman (*allānā*)
not be defrauded;
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 capable,
Enclosures of hymns (*madrāshē*)
for the lambs of your flock.²⁸

In all probability Ephraem lived within a "fold of herdsman" (*dayrā d'allānē*), as he himself called them, who worked together with the chief shepherd (*rā'yā*) of the local Christians, and who, he said "had rejoiced to see the succession of their ranks"²⁹ in the service of Bishop Abraham of Nisibis. This *dayrā* would not have been a 'monastery', in our sense of the word, and as the Syriac term itself would later be interpreted.³⁰ But there is every reason nevertheless to believe that Ephraem lived among his fellow 'herdsman' as a single person (*ihīdāyā*) in God's service, a member of the so-called 'sons of the covenant' (*bnay qyāmā*), and perhaps as a deacon, as the later tradition would insist.³¹ Jacob of Sarug, in his homily on Ephraem, 'the Teacher', characterized him as "a godly Philosopher in his actions, who as he was acting would also be teaching whoever would listen to him."³²

Ephraem's works in Syriac are almost all metrical compositions, or *Kunstprosa*, that is to say poetry, in some sense of the word. It is true that he wrote some works in more straightforward prose as well, such as his commentaries on Genesis, Exodus and the Diatessaron,³³ along with the collection of polemical texts which generally go under the title given

them by the editor of many of them, the so-called *Prose Refutations*.³⁴ But there is no doubt that his particular genius comes to full flower in the poetic *mêmrê* and *madrāshê* that he penned, or the 'homilies' and 'hymns' as they are conventionally called in the west.³⁵ Here we meet the quintessential Ephraem, who expressed his thoughts in measured lines of verse, usually in isosyllabic cola, which, in the *madrāshê*, are arranged in stanzas, after each one of which a response (*'unîrâ*) is usually repeated.³⁶

It seems that Ephraem's hymns and homilies had a liturgical setting;³⁷ St. Jerome says that in some churches they were recited after the scripture lessons in the divine liturgy.³⁸ The recitation was chanted to the accompaniment of the lyre (*kennārâ*), on the model of David, the Psalmist.³⁹ Indeed Ephraem's Syriac poetry does bear a close, formal resemblance to the prosody of the Hebrew Psalter, although the closest literary analogue to the Syriac *madrāshê* in other religious literatures is probably to be found in the Hebrew *Piyyûtîm*, synagogue hymns which enjoyed great popularity in Palestine from the eighth century on. While these compositions are from a later time and a different people, they do provide a useful point of comparison. Two of the earliest writers of them, Yannai and Qallir, employ literary devices very similar to those regularly used by Ephraem, and like him, they most often take their themes from the Bible.⁴⁰ Similarly, Ephraem's poetry is in many ways not unlike that of the Byzantine *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.⁴¹ All of these works, Syriac, Hebrew and Greek, found their natural setting in liturgical circumstances, a fact that underlines the dramatic character of their presentation. As for Ephraem's compositions in particular, it is not unlikely that in them he was developing a style of hymnody already at home in Syriac writing before his time, the earlier examples of which have not survived due to later considerations of orthodoxy, and the overwhelming fame of Ephraem's own works.⁴²

Ephraem's *mêmrê* and *madrāshê*, which were 'occasional pieces', in the sense that he wrote them for specific occasions, be they liturgical or didactic, were gathered into collections by theme, and also by melody, by his disciples and by later users and transmitters of his compositions.⁴³ There is ample evidence that in certain instances his work was even expanded by others, the better to serve some more immediate liturgical or memorial purpose.⁴⁴ And sometimes verses and whole stanzas were rearranged to suit new situations.⁴⁵ Some followers and imitators, now unknown by name, also wrote entire compositions in Ephraem's name and included them among his genuine works; others corrected or brought up to date earlier, more surely genuine pieces.⁴⁶ All this activity is testimony not only to Ephraem's popularity and authority in the Syriac-speaking churches, but also to the essentially public-service character of much of his writing. He did not write primarily tracts for scholars or meditation pieces for monks, or even literary homilies intended for circu-

lation among the theological trend-setters. His texts were used for the most part by busy churchmen like himself, who had liturgies to celebrate or catechetical classes to teach. They often had no compunction about adapting his compositions to their own pressing purposes, or even about borrowing the authority of his name to commend a certain point of view in compositions of their own.

While it remains uncertain just how much Ephraem himself was involved in the collection of his works, it is clear that by the sixth century, the date of the earliest and best manuscripts, the compilations were essentially in the form in which we know them today. The evidence for the production of comprehensive volumes of Ephraem's hymns is found in remarks which occur in a number of manuscripts which transmit his works. But the principal document which has given scholars an insight into the final form taken by these volumes is Sinai Syriac MS 10, a text which in the judgment of André De Halleux may have its own roots as far back as the sixth century. From this source, which is meant to be a register of the forty-five melodies used in the whole collection of Ephraem's hymns, one learns of nine volumes of the author's collected *madrāshê*.⁴⁷

One learns from Jacob of Sarug's homily on Ephraem, 'the Teacher', how important the correct performance of his *madrāshê* was for the busy deacon of Nisibis and Edessa. He reportedly spent time and energy rehearsing the groups who would perform them in church. And what is more, according to Jacob, he insisted that women take their rightful place in the church's choirs. On this subject, Jacob

spoke of Ephraem as "a second Moses for women,"⁴⁸ and he addressed Ephraem as follows:

In you, even our sisters were encouraged to sing [God's] praises, although it was not permissible for women to speak in church.⁴⁹

Your teaching opened the closed mouth of the daughters of Eve, and now the congregations of the glorious [church] resound with their voices.⁵⁰

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

The aim of your teaching is the wholly new world, where, in the kingdom, men and women are equal.

Your work put the two sexes together as two lyres, and you made men and women at once equal to sing [God's] praises.⁵¹

IV

The fact that so much of Ephraem's writing had a pastoral setting, a good portion of it even being produced as choral responses to the scripture lessons in the liturgy,⁵² reminds one of the centrality of the Bible in all of his work. He was no less an exegete in his hymns and homilies than he was in the professedly biblical commentaries that have come down to us under his name. In fact, to hear Ephraem himself talk, his exegesis is to be found primarily in the hymns and homilies. At the beginning of his *Commentary on Genesis* he wrote:

I had not wanted to write a commentary on the first book of Creation, lest we should now repeat what we had set down in the metrical homilies and hymns. Nevertheless,

compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things of which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns.⁵³

The old *Editio Romana* of the works of Ephraem contains commentaries attributed to him on most of the books of the Old Testament *Peshitta*, and the searches of subsequent scholars have uncovered even more texts purporting to contain such commentaries.⁵⁴ While much scholarly work remains to be done on these often fascinating compositions, it seems clear enough that few of them can be authentic. In fact, only the commentaries on Genesis and Exodus are generally considered by modern scholars as likely to be in large part genuine works of Ephraem.⁵⁵ Their authenticity is perceived in their general congruity with ideas found expressed in the genuine hymns and homilies.⁵⁶

As in the case of the hymns and homilies, so in regard to the more straightforward biblical commentaries, it is clear that later texts have been attributed to Ephraem because of the popularity and authority of his name. And just as in the instance of the hymns and homilies the new attributions were made in a tradition of on-going liturgical requirements, so in the case of the commentaries it is not unlikely that a certain school tradition was the setting for the attribution of commentaries on the books of the Old Testament *Peshitta* to Ephraem. This likelihood is increased when one takes notice of the polemical character of much of the exegesis, even in the commentaries on Genesis and Exodus.⁵⁷ For this is the most likely milieu for the transmission of

Ephraem's *Prose Refutations* as well, the texts in which the adversaries of record in the Syriac-speaking communities are refuted, principally Marcion, Bar Daiṣān, and Mani.⁵⁸

Another dimension of Ephraem's Old Testament commentary which most modern scholars seldom fail to mention is the Jewish connection. It is not only the fact that the Syriac versions he and his continuators and imitators used have the Hebrew Bible rather than the Septuagint behind them, but that many aspects of the interpretation have their closest analogues in the Jewish exegetical tradition rather than in other Christian traditions.⁵⁹ This is a dimension of Ephraem's thought which is perceptible not only in the straightforward commentaries, but in the hymns and homilies as well.⁶⁰ It reminds the modern reader of Ephraem's work that in the Christian world of the Semitic languages there was a certain continuity of thought and imagination with the Jewish world about the interpretation of the biblical narratives that one does not always find in Greek and Latin commentaries.⁶¹

Ephraem is also credited with commentaries on most of the New Testament books. There are works on the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline epistles, which survive only in Armenian translations,⁶² and which have not been much studied, along with his well known and often quoted commentary on Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Although the text survives in only a single manuscript in the original Syriac,⁶³ and in two manuscripts in Armenian translation,⁶⁴ Dom Louis Leloir pronounced it to be "the most important of Ephrem's exegetical works."⁶⁵ But in a series

of a half dozen articles, in which he subjects portions of the commentary to an intense literary scrutiny, based on comparisons with passages in the surely genuine hymns and homilies, Dom Edmund Beck came to the conclusion that "Ephraem was not the author of the commentary. On the other hand, the many and large connections with Ephraem's hymns and homilies allow the supposition that the work originates from his school."⁶⁶

Once again one encounters the situation in which Ephraem's work has been taken over into a tradition which then augments and expands it, all the while relying on the popularity and authority of the deacon of Nisibis and Edessa to commend it to successive generations of readers and users. As for Ephraem's own attitude to the scriptures and their interpretation, there is a passage in the commentary on the *Diatessaron* which, even if it may not have come from his pen, is nevertheless an apt expression of his point of view. The text says,

Many are the perspectives of his word, just as many are the perspectives of those who study it. [God] has fashioned his word with many beautiful forms, so that each one who studies it may consider what he likes. He has hidden in his word all kinds of treasures so that each one of us, wherever we meditate, may be enriched by it. His utterance is a tree of life, which offers you blessed fruit from every side. It is like that rock which burst forth in the desert, becoming spiritual drink to everyone from all places. [They ate] spiritual food and drank spiritual drink. (1 Cor. 10:3-4)

Therefore, whoever encounters one of its riches must not think that that alone which he has found is all that is

in it, but [rather] that it is this alone that he is capable of finding from the many things in it. Enriched by it, let him not think that he has impoverished it. But rather let him give thanks for its greatness, he that is unequal to it. Rejoice that you have been satiated, and do not be upset that it is richer than you. . . . Give thanks for what you have taken away, and do not murmur over what remains and is in excess. That which you have taken and gone away with is your portion and that which is left over is also your heritage.⁶⁷

V

Ephraem shares with his audience the sense of awe with which he is filled as he approaches the book of Genesis in the composition of his *Hymns on Paradise*. In several stanzas he provides a concise statement of his customary posture in regard to the Bible. He says,

In his book Moses
described the creation of the natural world,
so that both Nature and Scripture
might bear witness to the Creator:
Nature, through man's use of it,
Scripture, through his reading of it.
These are the witnesses
which reach everywhere,
they are to be found at all times,
present at every hour,
confuting the unbeliever
who defames the Creator.

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,
 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
 amid things not described.
 This is a luminous height,
 clear, lofty and fair:
 Scripture named it Eden,
 the summit of all blessings.⁶⁸

These few stanzas elegantly portray Ephraem in the posture of what in the west we would call *lectio divina*, and they include the mention of ideas which he took for granted whenever he opened his Bible.⁶⁹ If we are to read the scriptures along with him we must examine these ideas in some more detail. They are basically three: both Nature and Scripture bear witness to the Creator; the verses of scripture provide a bridge to Paradise; beyond the written or proclaimed words of the Bible, the attentive mind gains access to the luminous heights, the summit of all blessings.

A - Nature and Scripture

Ephraem voices the idea that Nature and Scripture are the twin sources of revelation at several places in his writings. In a *madrāshā* in which he had been reviewing some ways in which Nature reveals its Creator he says,

Look and see how Nature and Scripture
 are yoked together for the Husbandman:
 Nature abhors adulterers,
 practicers of magic and murderers;
 Scripture abhors them too.

Once Nature and Scripture had cleaned the land
 – they sowed in it new commandments
 in the land of the heart, so that it might bear fruit,
 praise for the Lord of Nature
 glory for the Lord of Scripture.⁷⁰

In another passage Ephraem likens Nature and the two testaments of Scripture to three lyres, to the

accompaniment of which the Word of God sings; the lyre of Nature then testifies that it is the Saviour himself who sings to the lyre of Moses and the lyre of the Gospel. Ephraem says,

The Word of the Most High came down
and clothed himself in
a weak body with two hands.⁷¹
He took up and balanced two lyres,
one in his right hand and one in his left.
A third he put in front of him,
to be a witness for the other two;
for it was the middle lyre corroborating
that their Lord was singing to their accompaniment.⁷²

For Ephraem the Bible is the rule of faith which even Nature confirms. As he says, "Faith in the scriptures is the second soul."⁷³ And he means the integral scriptures, the Old and New Testaments together—the Christian Bible, which has Christ as its focal point. He says,

In the Torah Moses trod
the Way of the 'mystic symbols'⁷⁴ before that People
who used to wander every which way.
But our Lord, in his testaments,
definitively established the path of Truth
for the Peoples who came to the Way of Life.⁷⁵
All the 'mystic symbols' thus travelled
on that Way which Moses trod
and were brought to fulfillment in the Way of the Son.
Let our mind then become
cleared land for that Way.
Instead of on the ground, my brothers,
let us, on souls, tread the Way of Life.⁷⁶

For Ephraem, only the integral scriptures can be the measure of truth. He says in the *Hymns against Heresies*,

Like the body of the alphabet,
which is complete in its members,
neither subtracting a letter,
nor adding another one,
so is the Truth which is written
in the Holy Gospel,
in the letters of the alphabet,
he perfect measure which does not accept
less or more.⁷⁷

According to Ephraem, in the Bible's verses, with their types and images, and their fulfillment in Christ, he finds that Christ himself is the bridge and the gate to Paradise. That is because the prophets and the apostles, that is to say the Bible, are the milestones and the inns respectively,⁷⁸ on the Way of Life, and they all lead to Christ who alone reveals his Father. According to Ephraem, as Sebastian Brock has put it, "what is 'hidden' in the symbols of Nature and of Scripture is revealed in Christ at the Incarnation."⁷⁹

B - The Bridge over the Chasm

For Ephraem, the Scriptures, and Christ himself, are a bridge which God's love provides over the ontological chasm that separates created beings from their Creator. He speaks of this chasm primarily in the *Hymns on Faith*, where his adversaries are the Arians, or perhaps more precisely the 'Homoeans.'⁸⁰

He says,

Let us not allow ourselves to go astray
and to study our God.

Let us take the measure of our mind,
and gauge our thinking.

And as for our knowledge, let us know how small it is, and
too contemptible to scrutinize the Knower of all.

Tell me, how will you have pictured in your mind that
birth,⁸¹ so far removed from the range of your inquiry?
Do you think there is just a short gap in the interval
between you and searching it out?

Seal your mouth with silence; let your tongue not act rashly.
Know yourself, a creature made, son of one so fashioned,
that there is a great chasm (*pehṭā*) without bottom
between you and the Son, at the edge of scrutiny.⁸²

In another passage from the same collection of
madrāshê Ephraem makes the point more simply.
He says,

As for 'Deity,'
what man (*'abdā*)

can search it out?

There is a chasm (*pehṭā*) between him
and the Creator.

As for 'Deity,'

it is not far removed
from its chattels (*genyānê*);
there is love between it
and the creatures.⁸³

These passages are sufficient to record Ephraem's
sense of the chasm between the creature and the
Creator. One notices that it is explicitly a chasm in
knowledge and not in love.⁸⁴ Thomas Koonammakal
sums up Ephraem's thought in these words:

The far-awayness and great closeness of God, is a much
repeated theme in Ephraem. . . . Nature and Scripture are
two treasuries of the self-revealing God who put on
human language for our sake. These treasuries are full of
types, symbols and metaphors. But the key to open these
and interpret the mysteries, is the Incarnate Son.⁸⁵

It is in this sense that for Ephraem the lines of
the scriptures form a bridge over the ontological
chasm, bringing the human mind not only into
Paradise, but, by way of the incarnate Son of God, to
the Godhead itself. For just as in the Son, God
clothed himself in flesh, in the scriptures, one might
say, God clothed himself in human words. Ephraem
put it this way:

Let us give thanks to God who clothed Himself in the
names of the body's various parts:
Scripture refers to His 'ears,' to teach us that He listens
to us;

it speaks of His 'eyes,' to show that He sees us.

It was just the names of such things that He put on,
and, although in His true Being there is not wrath or
regret,

yet He put on these names too because of our weakness.

We should realize that, had He not put on the names
of such things, it would not have been possible for Him

to speak with us humans. By means of what belongs
to us did He draw close to us:
He clothed Himself in our language, so that He might
clothe us
in His mode of life.⁸⁶

The incarnate Word of God is then himself the ultimate bridge to the Father. Ephraem makes this point clearly in a prayer he addresses to Jesus as the final strophe in an acrostic *madrāshê* which ends with the middle letter of the Syriac alphabet, *yodh*, the first letter of the name 'Jesus' (*Yeshû*). 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.
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.'⁸⁷

C - The Mind Enters Within

According to Ephraem, when one reads the scriptures the eye remains outside, but the mind enters within and wanders among things indescribable. That is because it is by means of the mind (*tar'îtâ*) that one encounters the majesty of God. In the *Prose Refutations* Ephraem says,

Moses testifies that while it was granted to him to do everything like God, at last he abandoned everything and prayed to see the Lord of all. For if the creatures of the Creator are so pleasant to look upon, how much more pleasant is their Creator to look upon; but because we have not any eye which is able to look upon his splendour, a mind (*tar'îtâ*) was given us which is able to contemplate his beauty.⁸⁸

In one of the *Hymns on Paradise* Ephraem further specifies his view of the mind's role in the human encounter with God. He says,

Far more glorious than the body
is the soul,
and more glorious still than the soul
is the mind,
but more hidden than the mind
is the Godhead.
At the end
the body will put on
the beauty of the soul,
the soul will put on that of the mind,
while the mind shall put on
the very likeness of God's majesty.⁸⁹

The mind puts on the very likeness of God's majesty because in Nature and in Scripture the eye's perusal brings to the mind's eye the types and images, indeed the very reality of God incarnate, to whom all images and types point, in seeing whom one sees the Father. As Ephraem says in another *madrāshâ*, speaking of God the Father in relation to the Son incarnate:

Glory be to that Powerful One
 who painted for himself
 a portrait for his majesty
 and an image for his invisibility.
 In the eye and in the mind,
 in both of them, we have seen Him.⁹⁰

Here is not the place to enter into a discussion of Ephraem's psychology and theory of knowledge.⁹¹ Suffice it now to say only that for him the mind (*tar'îttâ* or *re'yânâ*) can be likened to a mirror (*mahzîttâ*) in which one sees the types and symbols from Nature and Scripture, which themselves in turn function like a mirror in which one sees the hidden things of God. Therefore, Ephraem says, the scriptures too are like a mirror which God has set up for the mind's eye, in which one might see the triune God.⁹² He says,

The scriptures are set up
 like a mirror;
 one whose eye is clear
 sees there
 the image of the truth.

Set up there
 is the image of the Father;
 depicted there
 is the image of the Son,
 and of the Holy Spirit.⁹³

VI

According to Ephraem, what one finds in Nature and Scripture are the types and symbols, along with the names and titles, in terms of which the

invisible God reveals himself to the eyes and minds of persons of good faith, and which prepare them to recognize the incarnate Word of God in Jesus of Nazareth. In one stanza from his *Hymns on Virginity* Ephraem says the following about the incarnate Son and his symbols and types:

In every place, if you look, his symbol is there,
 and wherever you read, you will find his types.
 For in him all creatures were created
 and he traced his symbols on his property.
 When he was creating the world,
 he looked to adorn it with icons of himself.
 The springs of his symbols were opened up to run down and
 pour forth his symbols into his members.⁹⁴

In another *madrâshâ* Ephraem speaks similarly of the symbols and types of God's Son and Messiah to be found in the scriptures. He says, in allusion to the Arianism which he combats:

Those doctrines are put to shame
 which have alienated the Son.
 See, the Law carries
 all the likenesses of him.
 See, the Prophets, like deacons,
 carry
 the icons of the Messiah.
 Nature and the scriptures
 together carry
 the symbols of his humanity
 and of his divinity.⁹⁵

It is in the scriptures too that God teaches human beings the names and titles which reveal

what they can know of God himself. Ephraem says,

His names will instruct you,
 how and what 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
 'Father.'
 The scriptures are the crucible;
 why does the fool gainsay it?
 Contemplate in his crucibles,
 his names and his distinctions.
 For he has names,
 perfect and exact;
 he also has names
 metaphorical and transient...
 Have a care for his names,
 perfect and holy,
 for if you deny one
 they will all fly away.
 They are tied to one another
 and they carry all,
 like the pillars
 of the world.⁹⁶

These symbols and types, names and titles, which for Ephraem are the very contents of the scriptures, are also the idiom of his own religious discourse. They are the basic elements of the narratives of the patriarchs and prophets read through the lens of the Gospel and the person of the incarnate Word, the names of God and of his creatures revealed and interpreted according to their obvious

senses in the text. In turn they become the paradigms for the Christian's own understanding of God and the world, the terms of one's theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation, of Christology, sacramentology, ecclesiology, anthropology and eschatology.⁹⁷ Ephraem read the scriptures in terms of these symbols, types, names and titles, and they in turn became the terms of his own thought. For this reason some scholars have used the expression "symbolic theology" to characterize Ephraem's approach to religious discourse, and they often contrast it to Greek or Latin modes of thought, not to mention modern systematic theology.⁹⁸ Consequently, the better to understand Ephraem's reading of the Bible, one must for a moment look more closely at how he thinks about the symbols and types, the names and titles,⁹⁹ which he himself so deftly employs in his own writings.

First of all, it is important to make the point that while one will surely find many examples of 'typological' exegesis in Ephraem's works, of the sort that scholars regularly associate with the so-called 'Antiochene' school of biblical interpretation and its exercise of *theoria*,¹⁰⁰ the role of symbols, types, names and titles in his thought goes well beyond this limited range of applicability. For him they are the very idiom of human thought in general, and of what we call 'theology' in particular. One may say that for Ephraem, on both the natural and the supernatural planes, "that which one knows is a series of images and words which are stored in the mind. One does not possess the reality itself."¹⁰¹

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 most often calls *râzê* (sing. *râzâ*) in Syriac, which in turn, by God's grace, disclose to the human mind those aspects of the hidden reality or truth (*shrârâ, qushîâ*) which are within the range of the capacities of human intelligence. To pry further than this into the essence of God, is to fall into the chasm that separates the creature from the Creator, and to wander in error. Religious thought or 'theology' then rightfully consists in the contemplation of the *râzê*, the mystic symbols in which God reveals the truth about himself and the world to human beings.

The term *râzâ* came to Syriac via ancient Persian and old Aramaic, where it basically meant 'secret', and in this sense it appears in the book of Daniel (e.g., Dan. 2:18). Ephraem and other Syriac writers use the word more in the sense of a 'mystic 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' (*typos, tupsâ*) 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."¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

The image of the image maker is one of Ephraem's favorite figures of speech,¹⁰⁴ and he uses it to advantage in two stanzas of the *Hymns on Virginity* to give a good summary of the functioning of the *râzê* in his thought. In these stanzas, Ephraem addresses himself to Christ, "the painter of his own *râzê*,"¹⁰⁵ as he calls him in another place. He says,

Scattered *râzê* you have gathered up
 from the Torah for your comeliness.
 You have published the models (*tapenkê*)
 which are in your Gospel,
 along with the prodigies and signs of nature.
 You have mixed them together as the paints for
 your portrait; you have looked at yourself,
 and painted your own portrait.
 Here is the painter, who in himself has painted
 his Father's portrait;
 two portrayed, the one in the other.
 The prophets, the kings, and the priests,
 who were creatures, all of them painted
 your portrait, but they themselves bore no resemblance.
 Created beings are not capable;
 you alone are capable of painting the portrait.
 They indeed drew the lines of your portrait;

you in your coming brought it to completion.
The lines then disappeared due to the strength of the paints,
the most brilliant of all colors.¹⁰⁶

VII

Given the ever suggestive intricacy of his rich imagination, it seems somehow rash to lay down laws for Ephraem's biblical exegesis.¹⁰⁷ He himself insists on the multiple possibilities of every scripture passage. At one point in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* he says,

If there were [only] one meaning for the words [of Scripture], the first interpreter would find it, and all other listeners would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding. But every word of our Lord has its own image, and each image has many members, and each member possesses its own species and form. Each person hears in accordance with his capacity, and it is interpreted in accordance with what has been given to him.¹⁰⁸

We find Ephraem's own exegesis basically in two forms; somewhat sparingly in the straightforward commentaries on several biblical books: Genesis, Exodus, and the text of the *Diatessaron*; and much more abundantly in the numerous *mêmre* and *madrāshê* on particular theological or liturgical themes. Nowhere does he discuss principles of exegesis as such; everywhere his methods are clear and evident; he begins with the literal meaning of the text, and then he looks for the spiritual sense encoded in the symbols and types, the names and titles which have the incarnate son of God as their con-

stant point of reference. In this way the integral, Christian Bible is the constant measure of his thought, supplying the very idiom of his religious discourse.

In his commentaries on Genesis and Exodus Ephraem does not discuss each verse. Rather, he concentrates on the passages of greatest importance, such as the creation narratives, where there is much at issue for his polemics against adversaries like the Marcionites, the followers of Bar Daisān and Mani. He seems to be in a hurry, as if the commentaries are meant to serve only some immediate, academic purpose. At the end of his discussion of passages in Genesis, for example, when he comes to the account of Jacob's blessings for his sons (Gen. 49: 2-27), and after he has set out what according to him the text literally means, he says:

Now that we have spoken of the literal meaning (*su rāna īt*) of the blessings of Jacob, let us go back and speak of their spiritual meaning (*rāhāna īt*) as well. We did not fittingly speak of their literal meaning nor will we write of their spiritual meaning as we ought, for we spoke too sparingly of their literal meaning and we will write of their spiritual meaning much too briefly.¹⁰⁹

Not only is Ephraem's feeling of haste evident in this paragraph, but what he says allows one to see that he expressly recognizes two senses of the scriptural text, the literal sense and the spiritual sense. In the sequel it is evident that for him the spiritual sense consists in whatever there is in the terms of the blessings that one might take to refer to the ultimate economy of salvation in Christ and in the church, the types and symbols of what is yet to come in the

unfolding of the history of salvation. In other passages he indicates the spiritual sense almost *en passant*. For example, in his comment on Gen. 22:13, a verse at the end of the account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in which his version of the text reads, "Then Abraham saw a ram in a tree, took it, and offered it upon the altar in the place of his son," Ephraem says,

The mountain spit out the tree and the tree the ram, so that in the ram that hung in the tree and had become the sacrifice in the place of Abraham's son, there might be depicted the day of Him who was to hang upon the wood like a ram and was to taste death for the sake of the whole world.¹¹⁰

The commentary on the *Diatessaron* is a more leisurely work for Ephraem. Although he does not cover the whole text, he takes his time in commenting not only on the literal meaning of the words in the verses he discusses, but he also frequently enlarges on a theme which the text suggests, often in the process recalling the types and symbols from Old Testament narratives which find their point of reference in the Gospel. For example, in his reflections on the account of the crucifixion of Christ he does not fail to recall the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and the significance of the ram caught in the branches of the tree.¹¹¹ In fact, the *leitmotiv* of his commentary is the idea that the church, which was previously hidden in mysteries, is now openly proclaiming God's true revelation. At the beginning of the *Commentary* he says,

Although the Church was hidden, the mysteries were proclaiming it, while it remained itself silent. But then, when the Church itself became manifest, it began to interpret the mysteries, its erstwhile interpreters, which are silent [from now on] because of this revelation [of the church].¹¹²

The 'mysteries' of which he speaks are the *râzê* of the Old Testament now fully revealed in the New Testament and in the life of the church. If Ephraem stopped here, one could say, as many have, that his exegesis is an exercise in Antiochene *theoria* and leave it at that. But in his *mêmre* and *madrâshê*, as we have seen, the *râzê* from Nature and Scripture, incorporating the symbols and types, the names and titles which God has revealed, carry the human mind by way of faith into the very depths of the mystery that is the Incarnation of the Son of God. So for Ephraem reading the Bible is really a *lectio divina* that carries the contemplative eye of the mind well beyond the limits of knowledge and leads it to the brink of faith and prayer. He says himself, in the *Homilies on Faith*:

If you just say God's name,
there is no investigation underway.
Between God and man,
faith is what is required.
If you put faith in Him, you honor Him;
if you investigate Him, you belittle Him.
Between man and God then,
there is to be but faith and prayer.¹¹³

In two stanzas of a hymn in the collection of his *Hymns on Faith* Ephraem makes clear his ideas about the role of this virtue in the mystical union of a human being with God. It is by means of faith that one is configured into the image of the Godhead, which is of course, in Ephraem's thought, the incarnate son of God. Ephraem says,

The body then,
 this mortal one,
 depends on the soul,
 and the soul depends
 on faith.
 But faith in turn
 depends on
 the Godhead,
 since from the Father
 there proceeds, in his Son,
 the Truth which enlivens
 all in the Spirit.

Then, in this reality [of faith],
 mankind can
 bind himself
 to the heavenly ones.
 In the soul he lives,
 and by means of the body,
 he sees and hears.
 In faith,
 love and wisdom,
 he is united (*metmazag*) with
 the Godhead,
 and is configured into its image.¹¹⁴

The person of faith is united with the Godhead in being configured into the image of the Godhead, the incarnate Son, God's only one (*ihidāyā*), in whom he has been invested at Baptism.¹¹⁵ Him he recognizes in the mysteries (*rāzē*) of Nature, Scripture and Church which all enter into his mind through eye and ear, there by name and title to depict the incarnate Son in whom he meets the Father, and through whom he receives the Spirit.

The Bible for Ephraem is then primarily a treasury of the symbols and types, the names and titles, which the incarnate Son has put on concretely for the purpose of leading all human beings to himself. It is for this reason that one says that in reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian, one engages not so much in theology, in the Augustinian sense of *fides quaerens intellectum*, but in a contemplative *lectio divina* which is more like *fides adorans mysterium*. Its idiom is not primarily expository prose but a poetry akin to that of the Psalms which is more likely than not to induce silence in response to the awesome wonder.

Notes

¹ I owe this phrase to Robert Murray, S.J., *Symbols in Church and Kingdom; a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 89, where he characterizes Ephraem's theology as, "Not *fides quaerens intellectum* but *fides adorans mysterium!*"

¹ See C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (2 vols., Texts and Studies, 6; Cambridge, 1898 & 1904), vol. II, pp. 126-27.