

## TEXT 2

### On Human Language about God (*Fid.* 31)

This *madrasha* is of particular importance for the light it sheds on Ephrem's understanding of how the biblical text is to be understood, for it sets out to describe how God speaks to humanity through the biblical text, allowing himself, as it were, to become incarnated into human language. The starting point is the dilemma: how can human beings speak about the Godhead, seeing that the human mind is not capable of crossing the ontological gap (or "chasm," as Ephrem often calls it) which exists between Creation and its Creator? This might suggest that a holy silence is all that is possible. Ephrem, however, has a solution to the problem: God, stirred by love for his creation, has himself crossed this gap and entered the created world, allowing himself to be described in human terms and in human language in the Bible. Thus, before becoming incarnate in the human body, he first became incarnate in human language, or, in Ephrem's own homely metaphor of clothing, "God put on names," or metaphors, in the Old Testament, just as subsequently he "put on a body" at the incarnation. Of great importance for Ephrem in all this is the fact that God is not forcing himself on humanity; rather, he is deliberately encouraging the use of his gift to humanity of free will (stanza 5). Ephrem then goes on, with a delightful sense of humor, to compare God's action, in teaching humanity about himself, to that of a man teaching a parrot how to talk, using a mirror to deceive the parrot into thinking that it is a fellow parrot talking to it.

Humanity, on its part, must not abuse this divine condescension by taking literally these "names" or metaphors with which God has clothed himself; to understand these terms literally would be a total

misunderstanding of biblical language. The very fact that the biblical text moves from one metaphor for God to another should be a sufficient warning against any such misconception. Thus, instead of fixing one's mind on the literal meaning of the metaphors, one should allow these metaphors to act as pointers upwards, as it were, towards the hiddenness of God, whose true nature cannot be described by, let alone contained in, human language.

As usual, Ephrem employs many subtle verbal allusions to a variety of different biblical passages; amongst these it is interesting to find the "sapphire brick," which is a reference to Exod 24:10, a passage which gave rise to a great deal of mystical speculation among both Christian and Jewish writers.

An excellent study of Ephrem's approach to reading the biblical text is provided by Griffith 1997.

#### *Meter*

The *qala* is given as *bayya*<sup>2(w)</sup> *b-mulkane*, the opening words of *Par.* 7. This is the widely used *pardaisa* meter, for which see on Text 1 [pp. 2–3].

#### *Text*

The cycle *On Faith* is preserved in four sixth-century manuscripts: British Library Add. 12176 (Beck's A), Vatican Syr. 111 (dated 522; Beck's B), Vatican Syr. 113 (Beck's C), and British Library Add. 14571 (dated 519; Beck's D). The opening of the present *madrasha* is lost in C (which begins at stanza 9), and the whole poem is absent from D.









10. تَلَعَّه وُحَا وَرَاخَ أَوْوَدِ احْتَهُؤَلَا  
 هَلَّا هَفَّ رَنْتِ أَرِحْنَه كَلَّوَحْمَلَا  
 وَهَدْنَا وَسَكَمَا هِه هُحْنَا حَمَلَا وَهَدْنَا  
 أَمَلَا هِه وَحْنَحْنَاهُ لَأ هَفَم  
 أُولَا كَلَحْتَهُؤَلَاهُ نَبَدِ فَوَعْنَه كَه  
 هَرَاخَ لَسْحَنَه كَه حَمَلَا هِه حَمَلَا كَمَلَا

11. وَتَلَفَّ رُحَا لَأْوَلَا هِه هِه هَلَا هِه هَلَا  
 حَبَّ كَه أَقَا حَسَّوَدَه وَخَتَبَّوَه هِه سَهْؤَلَا حَه  
 وَلَا وَبَ تَعَلَّوَعَه هِتَهْدَا وَوَعْنَه هِه  
 مَه وَهَه كَبَحْتَه هَتَا وَتَلَفَّ  
 وَكَه كَلَا كَه وَهَعْلَا هِه كَبَ لَأ بَعْمَ مَحْنَه  
 وَرَبَّؤَلَا وَبُئَعْلَا بَعْمَ كَه حَمَه تَكْفَه هِه

10. Let us wonder at how, when He became small,  
 He made our own small state great.  
 Had He not reverted and become great,  
 He would have made our opinion of Him small,  
 imagining Him to be weak—and by thus imagining,  
 our conception [of God] would be diminished.  
 He is an Essence whose greatness we are not capable of grasping—  
 no, not even in His smallness.  
 He grew great—when we had gone astray;  
 He grew small—when we had grown feeble.  
 In every way did He labor over us.
11. He wished to teach us two things: that He became [flesh],  
 yet He did not come into being.  
 In His love He made for Himself a countenance,  
 so that His servants might behold Him;  
 but, lest we be harmed by imagining He was really like this,  
 He moved from one likeness to another, to teach us  
 that He has no likeness. And though He did not depart  
 from the form of humanity, yet by His changes<sup>5</sup> He did depart.

John 1:14

5. changes: For a discussion of this term in Ephrem, see McVey 1988.