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Signature Charles Stang
Charles Stang (May 4, 2022 15:17 EDT)

Typed name: Prof. Charles Stang

Signature Jon D. Levenson

Typed name: Prof. Jon D. Levenson

Signature Kevin J. Madigan

Typed name: Prof. Kevin J. Madigan

Signature Ute Possekel, 5 May 2022

Typed name: Dr. Ute Possekel

Date: May 3, 2022

The Place of the King Wherein He Dwelt:

Reading Ephrem's Mariology in its Contexts

A dissertation presented
By

Michael Ennis

To

The Faculty of Harvard Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Theology

In the Subject of

History of Christianity

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2022

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Dissertation Advisor: Professor Charles M. Stang Michael Ennis

The Place of the King Wherein He Dwelt: Reading Ephrem's Mariology in its Contexts

Abstract

This dissertation examines a fundamental paradox in Christianity. How can the omnipotent, omnipresent God be said to be present within Mary, mother of Jesus Christ? I pose this question of the poetry of Ephrem the Syrian. I further argue that Ephrem's rich theological symbolism, because it is embedded in a fourth-century Roman Syrian context, is best understood by examining contemporary literature, both within Syrian Christianity and from other contemporary religious traditions.

I divide the dissertation into two parts. Part One, on Ephrem himself, begins with a chapter in which I review recent important literature on Ephrem's symbolism, consider Ephrem as a poet, and then perform a sample reading of one of his poems to illustrate his theological method. This chapter closes by articulating principles which should guide a systematic study of Ephrem's theology.

Chapter Two then performs such a reading on Ephrem's Mariology, tracing a range of symbols that the Syrian uses to depict the mother of God, and sketching their implications. I draw chiefly on the *madrashe* or Hymns on the Nativity, a rich collection of songs which are largely given in Mary's own voice. Among the symbols I find Ephrem using for Mary include the Virgin, the Prophet, and the Temple. I argue that these three symbols make particularly useful examples for comparative study.

Part Two then consists of three chapters looking beyond Ephrem to his world. In Chapter Three, I situate Ephrem within earlier Syrian Christianity. Studying these authors, I note the

prominent theme of the chaste Christian becoming the Temple of God and suggest that some of Ephrem's theological symbolism makes more sense when considered in this tradition.

Chapters Four and Five turn respectively to the Greek authors of late antique Roman Syria and the early rabbinic authors. Here too, although the connections are more distant, I find that various elements of Ephrem's symbolic theology make the most sense when considered alongside the way that other traditions use the same images.

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FOR MRS. PATRICIA PINNEY (1951–2022),
WITHOUT WHOM I WOULD NOT BE HERE,
AND
FOR REBECCA,
WITHOUT WHOM I WOULDN'T WANT TO.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

"Each of us is all the sums he has not counted," Thomas Wolfe says. "Subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas… Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years."[1]

It would be a reckoning indeed to pay my debts dating back to the Minoan Protopalatial; but at the least, acknowledgements for the present work must begin with Helen Sternberg, my maternal grandmother, who read to me from the Iliad when I was young, and taught me to love ancient things and words. I recall these stories only dimly, at the peripheries of my memory—Helen died when I was three—but what she planted has borne fruit for more than thirty years now, and—who can say?—may well for another four, or forty, thousand.

My close family has been no less formative. My father David, though an engineer and physicist rather than a humanist, taught me how to think about everything in the world: take it apart and see how it's built. He's a natural teacher, and I can only assume that what meager gifts I've got in that regard are an inheritance from him. My mother Martha, when I was *in utero*, wished only for "a child who liked books." The Great Librarian who circulates the Universe heard and nodded with a wry smile; Mom has helped nurture that liking ever since. I cannot count how many ancient dictionaries she's bought me. My sister Elizabeth, a talented artist but also a careful thinker and meticulous scholar, has shown me all her life how well creativity can fuse with intellectual rigor to produce beautiful and interesting work. I owe them all debts that cannot be repaid.

With the exception of a one year Dean's Dissertation Fellowship—for which I thank Harvard Divinity School—this project was entirely researched and written while teaching. I thank all the Harvard faculty who gave me opportunities to grow as an educator (and keep a roof over my head) by serving as a teaching fellow: besides Professors Stang and Madigan (*vide infra*), these include Professors Shaye Cohen, Gregory Nagy, Maya Jasanoff, and Stephanie Paulsell, as well as Drs. Courtney Lamberth and Ivy Livingston.

Bylines obscure that dissertations always have *many* authors. Countless colleagues shared their thoughts, refined my research with their careful questions, and checked drafts for errors. I cannot hope to mention everyone who inspired me in some way, but I want to offer special thanks to Julia Hintlian, Jordan and Sarah Parro, Henry Stoll, Bennett Tansey, and Jonelle Weier. Portions of arguments that went into this dissertation were read before at the NAPS, AAR/SBL, and PMR conferences in 2020–2021; I thank those audiences for their thoughtful feedback.

Over and above all other classmates, friends, and former teachers, however, I must thank two in particular. The first is Dr. Jesse Mirotznik. Jesse and I met on the first day of a summer Hebrew class nearly ten years ago. (He long ago surpassed me in *Hebraica veritas,* and any errors that I've made in that language in the following pages are in spite of his generous corrections.) From lunch at the Kebab Factory on that first day down to the very end of the dissertation, we've read together in three or four languages; commiserated through rough patches in our research and writing; disputed over dinners at Cambridge Common; and, in an important sense, grown up together as scholars. He is the kind of guy who notices a semicolon you accidentally left italic in your footnotes. He is the most indispensable kind of colleague, and a great friend.

Second, as this project neared completion, I learned of the death of Patricia Pinney. Mrs. Pinney headed Discovery Place, the gifted-and-talented program at Hall Memorial School in Willington, Connecticut, when I was a student there 1994–2000. Seldom in the history of pedagogy

[1] Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 3.

has “enrichment education” so completely transcended metaphor. From MathCounts to History Day to Shakespeare, Mrs. Pinney broadened, deepened and refined my education in every facet of the curriculum. My life is better, my education richer for having known her, especially at the age I did. She set my mind roving when I was 8 or 9, and wherever it has wandered since, I’m still using the maps she gave me. This dissertation is partially dedicated to her memory.

I am, of course, profoundly grateful to my committee. It was Ute Possekel who first taught me Syriac with characteristic attentiveness, precision, and patience. She has also been an encouraging mentor in all those times I have met with her after initially learning to distinguish my *rūkkāḵā* from my *qūššāyā*. I cannot hope to rival her command of the language in the pages below, but I sincerely hope that I have, at least, made her proud. It goes without saying any errors I have made in the Syriac reflect the deficiencies of the student and not the teacher.

Let quibbling Oxford lexicographers insist all they like that “magnanimous” entered English with the Elizabethans; those of us who have studied under him know that, whatever the niceties of chronology, the word was coined to describe the eminent Jon D. Levenson. His wit and his broad learning are justly legendary not only at Harvard but in the field at large (even in the streets of benighted New Haven have I heard them proclaimed). More than this, he has been a font of personal and professional advice throughout my graduate studies. Justly may he say to me, בדרך חכמה הרתיך הדרכתיך במעגלי־ישר.

Kevin Madigan’s goodwill and generosity—with his time, words of encouragement, and with a seemingly limitless supply of teaching jobs—have sustained me, often in a quite literal sense, throughout the past decade. I have worked alongside him as a teaching fellow more than all other faculty *combined* and, in the process, I learned more than I can say about how to be a patient, thoughtful, and interesting instructor, and a gracious and good man. His has also been a calming presence at various moments of high tension in this process; I have never spent an hour with him without coming away refreshed, reassured, and revived to write another day.

Charles Stang, lastly, has been an exceptional *Doktorvater:* patient and understanding when he needed to be, exacting when I needed him to be, judicious with comments, wise and witty in conversation, a zealous professional advocate, and always prudent in recommendations when it came to the dissertation—or anything else. When I first met him ten years ago, I had only the dimmest idea of *patristics*; I know my views of nearly every facet of ancient Christianity are tinted by lenses he has furnished me. Even where we differ, I disagree *with* him within frameworks taken *from* him. I came to him having a handful of languages and a few notions about history, but he has taught me everything else: how to read, how to write, how to think, and how to teach.

Finally: it is customary to end acknowledgements with one’s spouse, and make a statement approximating, “I couldn’t have done it without them.” This is certainly true of my wife Rebecca; the other half of the dedication is hers. More than half these pages were drafted in the long lockdown of March 2020 to August 2021, when Harvard was entirely remote and it was just the two of us and the cat, huddled decameronically against the pandemic in an impossibly small one bedroom apartment in Allston. She made the time a foretaste of heaven. From meals to kind words to patient indulgence of countless domesticities overlooked, especially in the last few months of this project, she has also supported me in every way a spouse can. As a professional librarian, she also assisted more than once in the procurement of some source without which this argument would be incomplete. But even apart from all those practical means of support, there is a more fundamental reason I could not have written it without her: after nearly seven years together, so completely are we intertwined that I no longer think there is a meaningful *I* without *her*.

A Note on Abbreviations and Citations

Citations in this dissertation are made in accordance with the *SBL Handbook of Style, Second Edition (*Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), itself designed as a "supplement" to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Abbreviations generally follow the extensive listings and rules given in that volume, pages 117–260. Journal and series titles not listed in that volume will, for the sake of clarity, be left unabbreviated.

However, while that volume gives an extensive list of standard abbreviations for Greek, Latin, and Hebrew writings, it does not provide a similar list for the fourth-century Syriac authors—nor, oddly, for a handful of fourth-century non-Christian Greeks like Iamblichus and Libanius. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, the following abbreviations will be adopted for works cited in this dissertation and not mentioned in the SBL Handbook. (Following a general and laudable convention of the citations of ancient authors in that volume, titles are abbreviated from their Latin equivalents, whose English translation I provide in the third column.) The Ephrem abbreviations are derived from Kathleen McVey's *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 49.

Aphrahat		
Demonstr.	*Demonstrationes*	Demonstrations
Ephrem		
Azym.	*Hymni de Azymis*	*Madrashe* on the Unleavened Bread
CNis.	*Carmina Nisibena*	*Madrashe* on Nisibis
HdF.	*Hymni de Fide*	*Madrashe* on the Faith
HdP.	*Hymni de Paradiso*	*Madrashe* on Paradise
Nat.	*Hymni de Nativitate*	*Madrashe* on the Nativity
Virg.	*Hymni de Virginitate*	*Madrashe* on Virginity
Iamblichus		
De Myst.	*De Mysteriis*	On the Mysteries
De Vita Pyth.	*De Vita Pythagorica*	On the Pythagorean Way of Life
Libanius		
Orat.	*Orationes*	Orations

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INTRODUCTION

This project begins with a desire to understand a paradox in early Christian thought. How is it that they could conceive of God, who created the heavens and earth, for whom, indeed, heaven is a throne and the earth a footstool,[1] as being meaningfully and distinctively present in particular persons, places, or things? This paradox animated some of the great doctrinal controversies of the patristic period, and the attempt to answer it in the case of Jesus Christ himself produced some of the most rigorous philosophical theology of Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Cyril of Alexandria.[2] But philosophy is not the only way to resolve this problem. Another is the *symbol*: the use of figurative language to express something which, in literal terms, is inexpressible. This dissertation is a study of some of those symbols. I will begin with a focus on Mary, one of the most potent Christian theological symbols of the presence of God to, and within, humanity. More specifically, I investigate the Marian images of the preeminent symbolic theologian of late antiquity, and one situated in a rich multireligious context: Ephrem the Syrian.

I pose the question, how does Ephrem think about the presence of God within Mary? What theological symbols does he use to portray her, and how are those symbols elaborated, developed, and interrelated? The project thus begins as an Ephrem-centered one, aimed at illustrating his poetic symbolism and coming to grips with some of its theological significance. But I am also interested in understanding Ephrem's thought within the interreligious, polyglot world in which

[1] Isaiah 66:1, quoted in the New Testament at Acts 7:49.

[2] For the history of this problem in Christology in particular, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, Rev. ed., trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1975); R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: the Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1988). See especially Brian Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), whose study (although he acknowledges it as "incomplete" [ix] and it omits Syriac material) nonetheless helpfully rereads the texts of the Greek Christological controversies while avoiding some of the more systematizing features of Grillmeier's approach, which was framed by "Western scholastic dogma, Protestant and Catholic, rather than the early Christian sources themselves" (8).

he was embedded.[3] We know from Ephrem's own writings that he thought *about* (to take two examples) Greeks and Jews; modern scholarly work, as we shall see, has also established that he was influenced *by* Greek and Jewish thought. To what extent, therefore, might considering Ephrem in the context of other late antique religious literatures help us better understand him? Might such a study, in turn, reveal that Ephrem's religious symbols participate in a much broader, multicultural and multireligious reflection on my initial paradox in late antique Syria? I aim to answer these questions in the pages ahead.

Mary and Ephrem

That Mary holds a prominent place in Christian theology does not require defending. As one recent handbook on the subject puts it, "[t]o understand the cult of the Virgin Mary is to understand the Christian religion."[4] Although specific doctrinal expressions and devotional emphases centering on her vary across time, place, and confessions, her significance as a human being with a unique relationship to Christ is a constant.[5] She has been the object of prayers, copious literature, and a wide range of religious art across centuries, continents, and churches.

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[3] On that world in general, see the work of Han J.W. Drijvers, including *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden: Brill, 1980); *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (London: Variorum, 1984); *History and Religion in Late Antique Syria* (London: Variorum, 1994) and *Bardaisan of Edessa*, Rev. ed. (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012). For more recent studies see those collected in Fergus Millar, *Empire, Church and Society in the Late Roman Near East: Greeks, Jews, Syrians and Saracens (Collected Studies, 2004–2014)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015). Chapters 4 and 5 will more specifically discuss Ephrem's connection to Greek "pagan" and Rabbinic Jewish material.

[4] Sarah Jane Boss, "Editor's Introduction" in Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: the Complete Resource* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

[5] To comment on the immensity of a bibliography in a footnote is, of course, a venerable *locus communis dissertationum* (and moreover a topos to which I will return in the pages that follow), but if ever such a comment were warranted it is in the case of the Virgin Mary. The articles in Boss, ed., *Mary the Complete Resource* and Chris Maunder, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and especially their respective bibliographies, will between them furnish the reader with a copious and representative view of the available scholarship. Here I will only cite a handful of historical studies which give standard accounts of the importance of Mary, and the development of Marian doctrines, especially in the first millennium: these include Fr. Luigi Gambrero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); Hilda Graef and Thomas A. Thompson, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*,

There are many reasons why Mary became a figure of religious and devotional importance: her status as a mother, her virginity, her submission to God's will. But one of the most important reasons is that God was, in a unique way, present within her. Ancient Christians believed this a biological reality, because the infant Christ took shape within her womb. As the articulation of Jesus's divinity developed in Christianity's early centuries, the place of Mary grew apace. Eventually, she too became the site of debate in the Christological controversy: was she or was she not the Theotokos, the God-bearer? For most ancient Christian communities, that question was settled in the affirmative in 431, and Marian devotion continued to evolve.[6] But always, it was her relationship with her son, and her son's presence within her, that helped to justify and articulate her own elevation.

This project, then, will study God's presence in Mary. But why Ephrem the Syrian?

In any discussion of Syriac Christian literature Ephrem is, of course, unavoidable; the centrality of the "harp of the Spirit" to that entire tradition has been often remarked upon.[7] Beyond

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Rev. ed. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2009); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Brian K Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven: Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, *Image and Typology in the Patristic Period* (New York: New City Press, 2012); and Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[6] On the political and theological issues at stake in the "Theotokos controversy" of the 420s CE, see John McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood: St. Vladmir's Seminary Press, 2004). For a broader history of the title Theotokos, see Sarah Jane Boss, "The Title Theotokos" in Boss, ed., *Mary: the Complete Resource*, 50–55. On the development of Mariology in general, see the works cited in the preceding note. For a history specifically of Marian *devotional* practice and literature in antiquity, see Stephen Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

[7] According to one prominent translator, "Ephrem the Syrian [is] the foremost writer in the Syriac tradition […] Ephrem's importance for the history of Syriac literature and for the history of Christianity in the Syriac-speaking world is immense […] The literary and hymnic forms that he used, some of which he may have invented, became the standard forms of all subsequent Syriac literature and hymnography." Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3. As a recent article calls to our attention, however, Ephrem's position in the Syriac tradition was not entirely unproblematic; later doctrinal controversy and definitions made some of his language strike later Syrian readers as, at the very least, requiring explanation to vouchsafe its orthodoxy. See Aaron Michael Butts, "Manuscript Transmission as Reception History: The Case of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373)," *JECS* 25 (2017): 281–306, especially 292–298 on Ephrem through a "post-Chalcedonian lens."

his own linguistic context, ancient evidence attests that he acquired a readership in the Grecophone and Latinate west quite early.[8] But there is a good reason, beyond his general significance, for making Ephrem the center of a study on ancient Mariology. The Mother of God appears[9] frequently in his poems and other writings: she is the central human figure in his cycle of *madrashe* on the Nativity, appears in several *memre*[10] of probable authenticity, and is often mentioned throughout his other works. A Roman pontiff, one of Ephrem's translators, and a noted modern scholar of Marian devotion all join in acknowledging the unusually rich and variegated language that Ephrem brings to his discussions of Mary.[11] J.M. Bover's succinct judgment, "hardly any among the ancient fathers of the Church may be called the 'Marian Doctor' with greater right than Ephrem,"[12] may be taken as representative of the chorus.

While scholars have long acknowledged the place of Mary in Ephrem's poems, much of the earliest work on his Marian thought suffers from two distinct yet related methodological

[8] Jerome recounts (*De viris illustribus* 115) that he had read Ephrem in translation less than twenty years after the latter's death. For this and on the broader question of the influence of Ephrem the Syrian, see Andrew Palmer, "The Influence of Ephrem the Syrian" *Hugoye* 2 (1999): 83–109. Note also Jane Stevenson, "Ephraim the Syrian in Anglo-Saxon England," *Hugoye* 1 (1998): 253–272, who traces Ephrem's influence in late antiquity all the way to the other end of the Christian world.

[9] Not, however, under the title "Mother of God", which is not applied to Mary in the authentic Ephrem according to Edmund Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften Ephräms," *Oriens Christianus* 40 (1956): 22–39.

[10] Henceforth, throughout the body of this text I will continue to use the terms "hymn" and "sermon" respectively for these two genres. The terms are not ideal and the reader should take them as conventional rather than substantive labels. Continuous use of the transliterated Syriac or of cumbersome, if more accurate, translations would quickly become repetitious; the custom in English scholarship has been to number the madrashe as hymns (as, for instance, Hymn 6 on the Nativity) and it has seemed wisest to cite and to discuss the texts using the same terminology.

[11] "haec Spiritus Sancti cithara numquam suaviores reddit sonos, quam cum propositum est Mariae concinere laudes," (Benedict XV, "Principi Apostolorum," *Acta Apostolicae Sedes* 1920: 457–471, here 463). "The wealth of his typology for Mary sets Ephrem's effort apart," (McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 32). "Perhaps no one embraces Mary's Divine Maternity with as much fervor and eloquence as Ephrem the Syrian" (Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith*, 167).

[12] "vix ullus inter antiquissimos Ecclesiae Patres potiore iure quam S. Ephraem 'Marianus Doctor' potest appellari," J. M. Bover, "S. Ephraem, Doctoris Syri, testimonia de universali B. Mariae V. mediatione," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 4 (1927): 161–179, here 161.

problems, one particular to Mariology and the other affecting interpretation of his work in general. In the narrow case, much Marian Ephrem scholarship has read the fourth-century Syrian in medieval, and post-medieval, Western theological terms.[13] In the broader sense, many older studies of Ephrem's theology have not grappled fully with the role of the symbolic in his theology, construing it as an incidental feature of his *style* rather than a critical structure of his *thought*. Although authors of more recent generations have brought more sophisticated hermeneutics to Ephrem's Mariology, as with other aspects of his theology, nevertheless plenty of work remains in constructing a full account of Ephrem's symbolic Marian thought.

Finally, Ephrem's situation in a fourth-century Syrian context, where multiple religions, cultures, and linguistic traditions overlapped and interacted, makes his work a particularly valuable object of study for a comparative project. After Part 1 of this dissertation, in which I examine Ephrem's rich web of Marian images, I will in Part 2 aim to place him in context, considering Christian, "pagan" and Jewish material that employs similar language. This comparative work will not only sharpen our understanding of Ephrem's symbols; it will also help to demonstrate the ways that different religious traditions in fourth-century Syria borrowed from one another, challenged one another, and mutually developed those parts of their heritages that they held in common.

In the rest of this introduction, I briefly summarize historic trends in the first scholarship on Ephrem's Mariology, demonstrate why the more systematic accounts remain unsatisfactory on some points, consider a few more recent studies that offer more promising avenues, and conclude by laying out the plan which the rest of this dissertation will follow.

[13] This is not a problem exclusive to Ephrem scholarship by any means. Shoemaker, for instance, notes the effect of contemporary dogmatic interests (Catholic and Protestant alike) in deforming the history of patristic Marian piety in general in *Mary in Early Christian Faith*, 1–15.

Previous Scholarship on Ephrem's Mariology

As mentioned above, on the evidence of Jerome, Ephrem's literature had entered the Greek and Roman worlds within a generation of his death. The scholarly assessment of Ephrem's thought, however, did not begin in earnest until the nineteenth century, with the advent of the modern discipline of Syriac studies and the publication of primary Syriac texts.[14] It is one of those accidents out of which the history of ideas is constructed that this period coincided with what has been termed the "Marian Century," an epoch stretching from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries and characterized in Roman Catholic circles by a heightened attention to Mary that compassed both doctrine and devotion. To the Marian Century belong both the most famous Marian apparitions (save only Guadeloupe)[15] and also two infallible definitions of Marian dogma which serve roughly as its bookends: the Immaculate Conception, promulgated by Pius IX in 1854, and the Assumption, defined by Pius XII in 1950. These propositions had long been debated, both within the Catholic sphere and in Protestant reaction to Catholic Mariology, and they occasioned no little controversy in the wake of their definition.[16]

[14] For the history of Syriac studies in general, see Sebastian Brock, "The Development of Syriac Studies," in Kevin Cathcart, ed., *The Edward Hincks Bicentenary Lectures* (Dublin: Dept. of Near Eastern Languages, University College Dublin, 1994), 94–113.

[15] These appearances include the "Miraculous Medal" apparition (1830), La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), Knock (1879), and Fatima (1917), among other less well-known events. For an overview of the role of Marian apparitions in Catholic theology general and in their nineteenth- and twentieth-century context in particular, see Graef, *Mary: A History*, 343–361 and, more recently, Chris Maunder, "Apparitions of Mary" in Boss, ed., *Mary: the Complete Resource*, 424–457.

[16] See e.g., Graef, *Mary: A History*, 339–343 and 394–397.

Patristic authors of all kinds were, naturally, invoked as prooftexts on one side and the other of the doctrinal debates.[17] But it is peculiar to the authors of the Syrian tradition that the *first* modern theological engagement with their writings in the original languages coincided with this era. In the Catholic academy, Ephrem in particular also became an object of special study after 1920, when Pope Benedict XV declared him a doctor of the universal Church.[18] We should not then be surprised to discover that the earliest stratum of scholarship on Ephrem's Mariology is redolent of the Marian Century—whether it seeks to affirm Marian devotions with appeals to Ephrem's teaching on the intercession of the Virgin, or whether it strains to hear the faintest notes of the Immaculate Conception in the melodies of the "harp of the spirit."

A cursory review of some of the articles on Ephrem's Mariology across roughly the first half of the twentieth century will give some sense of the major thrust of these investigations. One of the earliest analyses following Benedict XV's declaration is an article by Martin Jugie, on the patristic evidence for the Assumption. At the beginning of the roughly five pages that he spends on Ephrem, he notes that his works "a été jusqu'ici fort peu étudiée." He blames this reality on the state of the critical editions, a point to which we will return in a moment. His own study focuses on the dogma of the Assumption, as he discerns it, in Ephrem. Characteristic is this interpretation:

> Here is, first of all, an explicit assertion that Mary died: "The Virgin gave birth, and she preserved her virginity intact. She bent down and gave birth, and behold, she was still a virgin. Rising, she nursed him, and she remained a virgin. *She died*, and the seal of her virginity was not at all broken.[19]

[17] For an example of the sort of scholarship produced by the Marian Century see e.g. Edward Dennis O'Connor, ed., *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, History and Significance* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958).

[18] Benedict XV, "Principi Apostolorum."

[19] "Voici tout d'abord une affirmation explicite que Marie est morte: « La Vierge l'enfanta, et elle garda intacte sa virginité. Elle s'inclina et l'enfanta, et la voilà encore vierge. Se levant, elle l'allaita, et elle demeure vierge. *Elle mourut*, et le sceau de sa virginité ne fut point rompu." Martin Jugie, "La mort et l'Assomption de la Sainte Vierge dans la tradition des cinq premiers siècles," *Echos d'Orient* 25 (1926): 5–20, here 15–16. Emphasis in the original.

Ephrem's emphasis here is clearly not the question of Mary's mortal fate but rather her inviolate chastity; her death is mentioned mainly—perhaps only—to emphasize that her virginity was lifelong. Language of "the unbroken seal" is, as we shall see, a key Ephremic Marian concept; but Jugie fixes on the single word that indicates that Mary died (rather than being assumed without dying) and discards the rest. The remainder of his article is of a similar character.

The question of Ephrem's teaching on the Immaculate Conception is likewise the topic of several articles. They need not detain us here long; their methods are overall similar to Jugie. Ortiz de Urbina, for instance, while showing a little more sensitivity than Jugie to Ephrem's poetic style and rhetorical antitheses, still sifts through Ephrem's text looking for a handful of words that he can parse as Ephrem's teaching on Mary's sinlessness or purification; the other articles are similar, as is the slightly longer German dissertation by Ludwig Hammersberger.[20] The problem, of course, is not the sifting; it is the antiquarian's lot to build his castle out of painstakingly collected pebbles. The problem is that the questions the authors ask of their evidence are all supplied by the contentious issues of the Marian Century, rather than by Ephrem's own interests, theological foci, and contexts.

Apart from their line of inquiry, however, these articles and other early scholarship on Ephrem suffered from another, and graver, methodological defect. They were based on faulty *texts*.

[20] Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, "Vale el testimonio de san Efren en favor de la Inmaculada?" *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 28 (1954): 417–22 and Ludwig Hammersberger, *Die Mariologie der ephremischen Schriften: eine dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1938). See also J.M. Fernandez, "San Efren, primer cantor de la Inmaculada Concepcion," *Humanidades* 10 (1958): 243–64 and F.S. Muller, "Die unbefleckte Empfangnis Marias in der syrischen und armenischen Überlieferung," *Scholastik* 9 (1934): 161–220, esp. 161–73 on Ephrem. Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, "La Vergine Maria nella Teologia di S. Efrem," in Ortiz de Urbina, ed. *Symposium Syriacum 1972*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 197 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium, 1974), 65–104, while at some remove from the "Marian Century," may still be grouped with these articles, and taken as a last instance of this older model of theological reading of Ephrem before the work of Murray, Brock and others, starting in the 1970s, brought the symbol to the center of the study of Ephrem (see chapter 1).

The editions of Assemani, Overbeck, and Lamy[21] on which these articles grounded their arguments interspersed poems of dubious authenticity which had circulated under Ephrem's name in late antiquity with those texts genuinely composed by Ephrem. Some of the authors in question even acknowledge the problem; Bover, in his Latin article on the question of Marian intercession in Ephrem, concedes that "the majority of those in the great edition of Assemani-Mobarek can be considered authentic, *although not all*."[22] His subsequent methodological reasoning, however, is representative: he cites as many testimonies out of "Ephrem" as he can, so that, even if some prove inauthentic, enough will remain to make "the mind of the holy doctor utterly certain."[23] Moreover, even *inauthentic* texts serve his purpose; since they circulated in antiquity under Ephrem's name, even if they were not written by him they nonetheless attest to the existence of a "school" that had a coherent set of teachings on Mary's intercession.[24]

For Bover, and for all the authors under discussion so far, note that this methodology would, in fact, be mostly satisfactory. Because their aim was *not* the historical study of a particular thinker in his own context but rather the history (and thereby, defense) of a contemporary proposition by appeal to ancient evidence, any "Ephremic" text would suffice, so long as it were sufficiently old and circulated in contexts whose orthodoxy could be assumed. When "Ephrem" could not be confidently asserted, the "school of Ephrem" could be constructed, to serve much the

[21] For a short overview and valuation of the various editions of Ephrem, see Sebastian Brock, *"*A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations of the Works of St. Ephrem,*" The Harp* 3 (1990): 7–29, and also Brock, "The Changing Faces of St. Ephrem as Read in the West," in John Behr, Andrew Louth and Dmitri Conoms, eds., *Abba: the Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West: A Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 65–80.

[22] "quae vero in magna editione Assemani-Mobarek, pleraque quidem, *non tarnen omnia* authentica haberi possunt." Bover, "S. Ephraem," 161, emphasis mine.

[23] "sancti Doctoris mentem indubiam prorsus efficiant" Bover, "S. Ephraem," 162.

[24] Ibid.

same purpose. It is readily apparent, however, that the same arguments cannot be mustered if our goal is a description of the thought of the fourth-century Ephrem himself.

This latter goal was first attempted on secure textual grounds by Beck, himself the editor of Ephrem's authentic corpus, in an article in *Oriens Christianus*. He begins by discussing the problem of defective sources in previous Mariological studies of Ephrem and identifies certain theological ideas which can, he believes, definitively diagnose non-Ephremic authorship.[25] The legitimate texts for inquiry established, he introduces his discussion of Ephrem's Mariology with a historical question: did Ephrem have a Syriac equivalent for the term "Mother of God" (Theotokos) in his vocabulary? (The answer is no, although his range of Marian titles comes close.)[26] From here, Beck moves to a discussion of Mary's sinlessness, and attempts to articulate Ephrem's theory, or lack of a theory, of the Immaculate Conception.[27] Even when, in the rest of the article, he retreats from a discussion of specific points of defined Marian doctrine to a discussion of Ephrem's symbolism for Mary, the attempt is still being made to "translate" Ephrem's poetry into modern dogmatic categories. Beck's contributions are invaluable, and the field of Ephrem studies his immensely in his debt. His work here represents a significant step forward from his predecessors, insofar as he is no longer merely mining Ephrem's corpus for prooftexts without regard to constructing an authentic picture of his subject's thought. It remains, however, oddly teleological. Ephrem is probed to determine whether his poetry contains the seeds

[25] His criteria mandate, for example, the exclusion of all texts that evince a strong dyophysite Christology, or that emphasize Mary's *virginitas in partu*. Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 22. He also notes that he excludes all texts in Greek.

[26] Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 23–25.

[27] Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 25–28.

of later doctrinal developments, whether it be the Ephesian acclamation "Theotokos" or the Pian definition "immaculata."

This scholarship is old, and more recent writers have approached Ephrem with better techniques which we will discuss below. But it has seemed worth reminding ourselves of this early work because this teleological framework for evaluating Ephrem's Mariology remains a danger facing any attempt to build a "systematic" account of Ephrem's theology. Indeed, it still periodically reappears in more recent publications. It can perhaps be understood in Luigi Gambrero's *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* because, although scholarly, the work has a Catholic devotional commitment.[28] But the recent and non-confessional work of Brian K Reynolds, if anything, makes this framework even more explicit. His *Gateway to Heaven*, although an excellent and thorough treatment of patristic Mariology, titles each chapter according to various Marian dogmas, and then evaluates how ancient and medieval writers—Ephrem among them—fit into these categories. For instance, on the question of the Assumption, he writes that Ephrem

> …provides what may be one of the first references to the glorification of Mary's body in one of his hymns on the Nativity… [t]hough the precise meaning of these lines is ambiguous, and cannot be taken as a reference to Mary's bodily Assumption, what is clearly established here is the principle of con-carnality, in which the glory of Christ's flesh is shared with his Mother.[29]

Recognizing that this passage cannot be taken as an unambiguous testimony to the Assumption is a step forward, but the analysis is still framed by modern questions, leading to the Syrian theologoumenon of the "garment of glory" being transformed into a "clearly established… principle of con-carnality."

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[28] Gambrero, *Mary and the Fathers*, 108–119.

[29] Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven*, 297–298; see references also passim, e.g. 58–59, 250–251. Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries* simply omits Ephrem altogether; Rubin's treatment (*Mother of God*, 37–39), although brief, is perhaps a little better, focused as it is on symbols rather than doctrine, but it does not engage in a deep way with Ephrem's theological ideas.

These approaches advance valid inquiries, and all the books and articles just cited have thoughtful and interesting things to say about Ephrem. But posing the question, "what is Ephrem's teaching on the Assumption or the Theotokos?" yields answers that are mainly about the Assumption or the Theotokos, not Ephrem. The category of thought and the dogmatic expression were alien to him, the words Latin and Greek that he would likely have but dimly understood. A proper approach to Ephrem's Mariology must, to appropriate a phrase, Ἐφραίμ ἐξ Ἐφραίμ σαφηνίζειν (or better, ܐܦܪܝܡ ܡܢ ܐܦܪܝܡ ܢܦܫܪ): interpret Ephrem from Ephrem.

Of course, some more recent scholars have offered more nuanced readings of Ephrem's Mariology. These discussions tend to take inspiration from Murray, Brock, et al. (see Chapter 1 below) and accordingly center Ephrem's symbols (Ark, Temple, New Eve) for Mary. None of these are full-scale systematic studies, but we will have recourse to them in Chapter 2 where appropriate.[30] Before turning to an outline of the dissertation, however, it is appropriate here to mention three particular writers of the 21st century whose methods illustrate this more sensitive approach.

Kathleen McVey has examined Ephrem's use of feminine imagery for the divine. Her method is to survey the various ways that Ephrem uses language of wombs, birth, weaving (a feminine-coded activity, she argues) and similar metaphors; just as interestingly, she assesses the way that these different images mingle in Ephrem's writing. The article is primarily about the divine, but in several places she touches on Christ's presence in Mary. In the context of that discussion, she makes an important note about Ephrem's portrayal of Mary's agency:

> At first glance, Ephrem's understanding of Mary as virtually a holy place in which the power of God dwells truly yet freely and without confinement, seems to reduce her to a

[30] See e.g., Graef, *Mary: A History*, 57–62; Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975), 144–150 for characteristic examples; other texts will be mentioned in the appropriate place in Chapter 2.

> status less than personhood. Her antitypes from Hebrew Scripture in this case are objects rather than human beings, and certainly he is clear that the imago dei resides in human beings alone. But it is evident that Ephrem has also mined the Jewish Scripture for every imaginable female human antitype for Mary. For him the characterization of Mary as the dwelling place of the Deity on earth is the highest title possible for any human being.[31]

This ambiguity, between passages where Ephrem seems to think of Mary as a dwelling-place, and others where he attributes moral agency to her, is one I will illustrate in chapter 2.[32]

Susan Ashbrook Harvey, meanwhile, writes on Ephrem's attribution to Mary of a prophetic voice, one with an interesting dynamic of gender (the songs are written by a man, attributed to Mary, and sung by a choir of women). By putting his performances into both their social and ritual contexts, she awakens us to the fact that we must consider Ephrem as a historical figure, and that the most fruitful avenue for interpretation is one that is aware of his fourth-century world:

> Ephrem could grant Mary a voice by following the model from Luke's Gospel. There, Mary not only speaks when she questions the archangel Gabriel (Luke 1:43), but sings to her cousin Elizabeth a song of prophecy and wonder (Luke 1:46–55), echoing the one sung many generations before by Hannah, mother of the first prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 2:1–10). Ephrem grants Mary a prophetic voice, one that declares God's intention in the presence of God's people. [33]

In this short passage, Harvey ties together several important themes in Ephrem: the way that he integrates Mary into a Hebrew Bible type, and constructs a voice for her building on the symbol of the prophetess. Elsewhere, she further elaborates on the way that his poems, *considered in their context*, take on new shades of meaning:

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[31] Kathleen McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian's Use of Feminine Metaphors to Describe the Divine," *ZAC* 5 (2001): 261–288; this quotation from 286–287; for other treatment of Mary within the article see especially 266–270.

[32] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian* 30–34 also contains an interesting discussion of a few Marian images prevalent in the Hymns on the Nativity.

[33] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "On Mary's Voice: Gendered Words in Syriac Marian Tradition," in Dale Martin and Patricia Cox Miller, eds., *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 63–86, this quote 67, see especially 64–72 on Ephrem. Cf. also Harvey, *Song and Memory: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition.* Père Marquette Lecture in Theology (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 45–60.

> When Mary's voice sings out for Christ to vindicate her blackened reputation, the women's choirs who sing these hymns become themselves the objects of his divine advocacy and protection. This elision of time and location, between biblical past and contemporary congregation, allows Ephrem to trumpet the valuation of consecrated virginity in the midst of a social order which, in the mid-fourth century, was genuinely struggling to accommodate its consequences.[34]

Ephrem's poetry takes on its greatest significance when we consider text, context, and the symbolic imaginary he inhabited in the fourth century.

Lastly, the recent dissertation of Michelle Weedman, on the symbolic overlap between fertility imagery and ascetic imagery in Ephrem, offers a fruitful example of a systematic and comparative project, assessing Ephrem's Mariology through his symbols. Arguing that "[i]dentifying whatever "system" arises out of Ephrem's thought […] will require both a broad synthetic approach and a particular examination of the symbolism of a specific collection,"[35] she proceeds to an analysis of Ephrem's Mary as a "fertile virgin" by an analysis of some symbols he uses in the Hymns on the Nativity (as, for instance, the Second Eve). Moreover, she employs another method from which I take inspiration for my own project: she considers some of Ephrem's symbols in Syrian Christian, Jewish, and Jewish-Christian contexts. Of the particular impact of this study on the symbol of Mary as "Second Eve," she says:

> reading Ephrem through that tradition helps illuminate precisely what Ephrem was trying to accomplish in his Mariology: a typology in which Mary stands in contrast to the portrayal of Eve in the earlier tradition.[36]

[34] Harvey, "On Mary's Voice," 71.

[35] Michelle Weedman, "Mary's Fertility as the Model of the Ascetical Life in Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns of the Nativity," (PhD diss, Marquette, 2014), 7.

[36] Weedman, "Mary's Fertility," 37.

In other words, and applied more broadly, Ephrem's theological position was elaborated within an interreligious context, and studying him within that context helps us to grasp what he is doing more precisely.

What these three scholars share is an approach that does not view Ephrem through the lens of exogenous theological categories of the medieval and post-medieval West, but rather attempts to situate him in his own late antique social, theological and interreligious contexts. It is a version of this project which this dissertation aims to advance.

The Plan of This Dissertation

I will proceed in two parts, divided into five chapters. Part One, "Ephrem," offers two chapters on Ephrem himself, and argues that a proper understanding of his Mariology must forego modern theological categories and begin from within his work. Part Two, "Contexts" moves us beyond Ephrem, to embed him and his various Marian symbols into three traditions which shared with him a wider literary and religious world. I will argue that once we understand Ephrem's Marian symbols on their own terms, we can gain greater understanding not only of Ephrem (bringing to light his subtleties, understanding his aims, highlighting points of contrast, or showing implicit connections) but also of an ancient intellectual landscape, by considering him in the world in which he wrote.

Chapter 1, "Reading Ephrem as Theology and Poetry," both offers a reading of some of the major moments in scholarship on Ephrem's symbolism and demonstrates how insights drawn from that work can make us more careful readers of Ephrem's sometimes repetitious, sometimes obscure poetry. After working through an example taken from his famous hymns on the Pearl, I

conclude with a few philosophical reflections drawn from Gadamer and Ricoeur and articulate the method which I proceed to follow in the remainder of the dissertation.

In chapter 2, "Symbols of Mary in the Thought of Ephrem the Syrian," I turn to articulating Ephrem's Mariology. Rather than trying to situate him in the history of dogma, I interpret Ephrem from Ephrem. I engage in close reading of numerous passages from the Hymns on the Nativity, illustrated where appropriate with images from other parts of his poetic corpus. I lay out the major images that Ephrem associates with Mary and attempt to show what these symbols may have *meant* for Ephrem.

Part Two then considers Ephrem's wider world. In chapter 3, "Mary and Symbols of Divine Presence in Early Syrian Christianity," I place Ephrem in his nearest context: earlier Syriac (and Syrian) Christian texts. By a twofold examination of first, how *Mary* is portrayed, and second, how some of Ephrem's Marian *symbols* are portrayed, in the works of Aphrahat, the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Protoevangelium of James*, I show that the question of "divine presence" within humanity was an active one in the earliest Syrian theology, and also that Ephrem's Mariology fits within this same discourse.

The last two chapters leave Christian texts behind altogether. Chapter 4, "Ephrem's Symbols in the Context of Grecophone Syria," concerns four non-Christian authors writing in Greek and loosely associated with Roman Syria: Lucian of Samosata, Libanius, Iamblichus, and Heliodorus. I study the deployment of several important Ephremian symbols for Mary (temple, prophet, virgin) in their works, and show that even though we cannot know the precise channels by which "Greek thought" and Ephrem's symbolic world communicated, and even if the connections sometimes seem remote, nonetheless we understand his system with a little more clarity if we consider "pagan" literary evidence.

Chapter 5, "Ephrem's Symbols in the Context of Early Rabbinic Literature," turns to early Rabbinic Judaism, and uses a similar method to chapter 4. I consider rabbinic depictions of several Ephremic symbols, but also discuss a distinctively rabbinic symbol: the Shekinah or divine "presence." I again argue that the rabbinic texts meaningfully inflect our reading of Ephrem, not only by situating him relative to certain rabbinic debates, but also by showing how his mind and the minds of the Rabbis approach the problem of divine presence with a similar set of concerns.

I want to end this introduction with two caveats. The first is that Part Two of this dissertation is, per necessity, selective. Not only might I have chosen other authors or questions *within* each comparative field that I examine; there are also many other traditions of the Roman east with which I might have compared Ephrem's Mariology: there are interesting parallels between him and the texts usually called gnostic; there is plausible overlap with Manichaeanism. It would undoubtedly be a worthwhile project to compare Ephrem's fourth-century Aramaic with the deeper layers of Semitic myth uncovered by the historical study of the Hebrew Bible and comparison with ancient cognate literature. Above all, useful work remains to be done on Ephrem's Mariology in the context of Greek and Latin Christian writers. All these projects I put aside for another day (or someone else's dissertation). As a writer and thinker most at home in the world of late antiquity and the literary traditions of Syriac, Rabbinic Judaism, and (post)classical Greek, I have selected traditions that I know how to interpret.

The final caveat also concerns evidence. There are many kinds of sources that one could draw on to paint a comparative portrait of, for example, the meaning of the symbol of the "temple" in late antiquity: archaeology, epigraphy, and art history are merely the beginning of the list. In this project, however, I examine mostly literary evidence. Aside from my own training as a philologist, there are defensible reasons for this selection. Ephrem himself is an artist working in

the medium of words, and his symbols are mediated to us through literature; it seems therefore a valid project to take other literary mediations of the symbolic as the central point of comparison. But, as with any selective body of evidence, certain things are lost, and I do not claim to give the full picture of either Ephrem's late antique world or of his thought—only some very interesting facets of them.

PART ONE: EPHREM

CHAPTER ONE: READING EPHREM AS THEOLOGY AND POETRY

Walk today into any Roman Catholic church in the world, from St. Peter's, Rome to St. Peter's, Cambridge. Search long enough, and eventually you will find a special case or receptacle. (At the Vatican, it'll be a baroque Bernini affair in bronze, gold, and lapis lazuli; in the local parish it is often wooden, though good solid wood, thick enough to keep out the elements, decorated with some gilded accents.) Sometimes you will find it in the church's sanctuary, and sometimes off in a side chapel. Wherever you come across it, you will see people kneel as they pass. The case is locked and the contents are usually inaccessible to laity-off-the-street, but if you were to be standing by during a Mass just before communion, and you looked inside when the priest or server opened it, you would see nothing but little round wafers of nearly flavorless bread, resting in a precious metal dish or vessel.

Catholics see something else.[1] The bread is Christ's body. The case they call a tabernacle.[2]

The name "tabernacle" connects these modern, often somewhat humble, boxes with the awesome *tabernaculum* (Hebrew משכן) which the Israelites constructed during their forty years in the desert in the book of Exodus. In that ancient wandering, we are told, God's cloud came to rest upon the tabernacle by day and his fire by night.[3] The General Instruction of the Roman Missal similarly maintains that "in accordance with traditional custom, near the tabernacle a special lamp,

[1] Or are taught to see; in practice declining faith in the Real Presence is a well-documented feature of modern Catholicism. See "Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (updated November 5, 2019) https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/.

[2] A full history of Catholic tabernacles has not, to my knowledge, been completed. The nearest such account, albeit slightly dated and not including post-Vatican II practices, is Archdale King, *Eucharistic Reservation in the Western Church* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1965).

[3] Exodus 40:38.

fueled by oil or wax, should be kept alight to indicate and honor the presence of Christ,"[4] and, according to older and now-abrogated norms, it was to be covered by a *canopeum*, a liturgical mantle.[5] The connection is important; in the Israelite story, the tabernacle precedes the Temples as the place where God dwells in the midst of his people. The modern tabernacle thus analogously affirms the constant presence of Christ to his Church *sub specie panis.*[6]

Because, in the Catholic view, the actual sacramental body of Jesus Christ reposes within the tabernacle, it is often assimilated not just to the structure in Exodus but also to a New Testament figure who also, in a still more physical way, contained the body of Christ within her: the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Frequently this connection is merely homiletical;[7] at other times, however, it has been made into an architectural reality—for instance, by building the tabernacle into a Marian statue.[8] And sometimes, this connection between Mary, the Body of Christ, and Exodus theophany extends further still: a little more than a decade ago, at a parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago, Fr. Anthony Buś commissioned an artist to produce a monstrance which portrayed Mary

[4] Catholic Church, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 316.

[5] William Cavanaugh, *Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1927), 58–59.

[6] The tabernacle is not ancient; it seems to have arisen in the medieval period as Eucharistic piety grew, and to have been codified in the Counter-Reformation to affirm the doctrine of transubstantiation in defiance of Protestant dissent (King, *Eucharistic Reserv*ation, 132–34, 171–205). Since the Second Vatican Council, the question of the *placement* of the tabernacle is a matter of debate. Reformers, wishing to *theologically* recenter the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration (rather than the continual presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements), have insisted on *spatially* de-centering the tabernacle; see Michael McCallon, "Lay and Professional Views on Tabernacle Location in Catholic Parishes," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29 (2000): 717–746 for common views and their rationale.

[7] A search of youtube.com conducted on March 4, 2022 obtained at least a dozen Catholic homilies with titles such as "Mary, the First Tabernacle" or "Mary was the Perfect Tabernacle of our Lord." I can personally recall having heard at least four such homilies from four different priests in the last decade.

[8] See for instance those pictured in Lucas Viar, "Virgo Sacrario – The Marian Tabernacle of the Cathedral of Palma de Mallorca," Liturgical Arts Journal (updated December 20, 2020) https://www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2020/12/virgo-sacrario-marian-tabernacle-of.html.

atop the Ark of the Covenant, seated between the cherubim, the Eucharistic host embedded in her heart.[9]

This last extension is in one sense no more than another logical step in the connection between Mary and the tabernacle (in the Exodus account, when the Israelites make camp the Ark is placed within the tabernacle).[10] But it grows in significance when we consider the practices of another religion. For if, after leaving the church, your walk took you next to the local synagogue, and you asked someone there to show you the *aron*—the Ark—you would be pointed to a cabinet, likely of wood. Near it would be a lamp that is kept always burning, and the cabinet would be veiled. If you happened to be there when it was open and the curtain drawn aside, you would notice people stood until it was closed. Inside, you would see a Torah scroll.[11]

Ark and Torah, Mary and Host. Pause and observe the mental operations here. The physical object is what we encounter first. But by a process of association which derives its power from the words we use *about* that object, and then from a series of religious stories in which those words are embedded, the object deepens in meaning, at least for those who share the religious community's commitments, and becomes a locus of something holy. Next, note that some surface parallels are shared between the two contexts: the holy cabinet called by an Exodus name; the sacred object within; the ever-burning lamp and the veil; rules of posture with respect to the cabinet, all connoting the presence of holiness—or even God—within.

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[9] See "Our Lady of the Sign, Ark of Mercy," St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish, accessed March 4, 2022, https://ststanschurch.org/iconic-monstrance. Like the tabernacle, a monstrance holds the consecrated Eucharist, but whereas the tabernacle keeps a quantity of hosts for distribution to the faithful, a monstrance is designed to *display* the host for Eucharistic adoration, prayer, and spiritual reflection. One might argue that the monstrance is therefore even more appropriately associated with the Exodus Ark than the (ecclesial) tabernacle is. See King, *Eucharistic Reservation,* 136–141, 215.

[10] Exodus 40:21.

[11] On the ark in the synagogue, see Macy Nulman, "The Relationship between the *Aron Hakodesh* and the Prayer Service," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 22 (1999): 1–18.

This is the essence of *symbolic* thinking about the divine presence: the complicated interrelationship of observed physical realities, imputed linguistic signifiers and meaning-bearing religious stories, operating both within and across religious traditions, to designate a quality, one we might call "holiness" or "divinity," as residing within a certain place or a certain thing. It is Ephrem's use of this symbolic mode I will explore in this chapter.

Our introductory review of literature, in addition to showing that the richness of Ephrem's Marian thought has long been recognized, also argued that many earlier studies were unsatisfactory in their methods. These Mariological readings were, as we said, shaped by a specific historical moment in magisterial Roman Catholicism. They are, however, only part of a broader trend in earlier generations of scholarship. Because they did not take the symbolic mode of thinking as a serious vehicle for theology, Ephrem's interpreters viewed his poetry as nothing more than an idiosyncratic veil thrown over implicit propositional claims—the natural and proper form of theology. As a result, when these authors approached Ephrem, and the Syriac tradition in general, they viewed their work as that of clearing away superfluous poetic and figurative embellishments in the texts, reading *through* their distinctively Syrian idiom, and recovering the propositional theology of fourth century Syria; these could then be incorporated into their proper place in a general *Dogmengeschichte*.[12] The inevitable result of such reading was to disadvantage the Syriac theologians as thinkers, and even as writers. In one particularly unflattering and oft-cited appraisal, Ephrem "shows little profundity or originality of thought, and his metaphors are laboured. His poems are turgid, humourless, and repetitive."[13]

[12] Murray gives, as an example, a late nineteenth century dissertation which "horrifies us today by unabashedly wringing a whole list of post-Tridentine controversial theses" out of Aphrahat. (Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom,* 2); cf. Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 7–21.

[13] J.B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 89. This quote, representative of a tradition of scholarship critical of Ephrem *qua* poet, was challenged by Murray who goes to the other extreme,

This flawed appraisal of Ephrem derives from a misunderstanding of his method. Concisely, we may call this error a failure to appreciate Ephrem as a symbolic theologian. That is, these readers construed him as a thinker whose theology consisted of rational, propositional statements, but who for reasons of either artistry or idiosyncrasy concealed his doctrine in obscure symbolism and repetitious poetry.[14] Other readers might acknowledge that Ephrem's own thought (such as it is) operates at the level of symbol and poem; but surely, *proper* theology consists in propositions, and thus Ephrem, like all theologians, can be reduced to his logical arguments and evaluated on these grounds.[15] The interpreter's job, in this view, is that of a smelter, melting down Ephrem's verses, extracting the metal of doctrine and leaving behind the primitive word-pictures as dross. Exposed to such theological metallurgy, Ephrem can only seem like fool's-gold.

The poet himself, however, would have rejected the very basis of such reading; for Ephrem, such rational reductivism was one of the fundamental errors of the Arians![16]

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asserting that Ephrem is "the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only *theologian-poet* to rank beside Dante" (Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom,* 31, italics in original). The Segal quote has since become, in its way, a locus classicus in modern scholarship on Ephrem, held up as summarizing the older prejudice against which the whole field must contend. One may find it cited e.g. in Sebastian Brock, "The poetic artistry of Saint Ephrem: an analysis of HAzym 3," *Parole de l'Orient* 6 (1975): 21–28 (here 21); Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2008), 12; and den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 3. It may be worth noting, however, that Segal continues, "But Ephraim's writings reflect his courage, his sincerity, his unswerving zeal for the faith and his sympathy for the poor," and that his overall valuation is not quite so negative as the one quote suggests. A far more negative opinion is the older one of Francis Burkitt, who surmises that fourth-century Edessa's approval of Ephrem shows "a lamentable standard of public taste," that his poetry lacks "merit either of simplicity or of subtlety" and 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 unravelled it is generally commonplace. (Francis Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity: St. Margaret's Lectures, 1904, on the Syriac-Speaking Church* [New York: Dutton, 1904], 96–99.) Hardly an ambiguous assessment!

[14] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 18–19.

[15] "We tend to think of theology as the preserve of academics, a rather cerebral affair at the best of times," as Sebastian Brock begins his seminal, "The Poet as Theologian," *Sobornost* 7 (1977): 243–50.Tanios Bou Mansour *La pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le syrien* (Kaslik: Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 538 and den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 17–18 agree in construing this as the main methodological shortcoming in, for instance, Beck.

[16] This point is first made by Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6 (1975): 1–20, esp. 14–20; a more recent treatment of the same theme can be found in Jeffrey Wickes, *Bible*

A better approach has been built by recent generations of Ephrem scholars. Central to this method are two corrections to earlier misreadings. First, these scholars contend that Ephrem's symbolism is not peripheral to his theology—rather than a decorative feature of his style, it is the structuring principle of his thought. The would-be interpreter of Ephrem must therefore engage with these symbols directly, rather than attempt to read "past" or "through" them in search of some propositional foundation. Second, Ephrem should be read *as poetry*, rather than (as it were) dull prose with odd line-breaks. The techniques of his poetry (assonance, puns, wordplay, acrostics, parallelism and counterpoint, among others)[17] are demonstrative, meaning-bearing elements of his writing, not mere ornaments. A proper reading of Ephrem must center both of these insights.

In this chapter, I will delineate some key ideas in this scholarship and elaborate just such a better method for reading Ephrem's symbolic poetry, so that we may then better read his Mariology. I will first define the key term "symbol", and then review some contemporary scholars who, beginning in the 1970s, developed the theory of Ephrem's symbolic theology and his poetic art. To illustrate and concretize these insights, I will next turn to some passages from the Hymns on the Pearl[18] and read them with his symbolic method in view. I conclude my treatment of Ephrem's symbolism by considering the theoretical implications posed for interpreting "symbolic theology" by the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and especially Ricoeur, two theorists of

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and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Ephrem's Hymns on Faith (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 24–39.

[17] On Ephrem's poetic style see Sebastian Brock, "The poetic artistry of Saint Ephrem;" Andrew Palmer, "Words, Silences, and the Silent Word: Acrostics and Empty Columns in Saint Ephrem's Hymns on Faith," *Parole de l'Orient* 20 (1995): 129–200; and especially A. S. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic poetry (c. 100 B.C.E.-c.600 C.E.): Selected Jewish, Christian and Samaritan Poems* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997) 101–170 and 217–249, to which we return below. Analogous study of the forms of classical Hebrew poetry, in e.g. Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, Rev. ed. (London, T&T Clark, 2005), is also helpful, although one ought not to conflate the two.

[18] The Hymns on the Pearl are a distinct series in the Hymns on Faith (*HdF* 81–85), marked by having a common melody and a common theme, focusing on the symbol of the pearl and its religious dimensions.

the symbol whose usefulness for understanding Ephrem has often been noted, and end with some synthetic remarks on my method for the remainder of the dissertation.

Defining the Symbol

The word "symbol" and its derivatives will appear rather frequently in the following pages. In the interest of terminological clarity, therefore, I begin by defining the word. The sense in which I will use "symbol" throughout this chapter—and indeed, the rest of the dissertation—is one articulated by Paul Ricoeur, who in one place says that a symbol is:

> any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative, and which can be apprehended only through the first.[19]

In its literary guises, it thus refers to a specific kind of linguistic signifier: one with an apparent "surface" meaning on the one hand, and another meaning, not immediately apparent but accessible by a hermeneutic extension of the first meaning.

We should add that under this definition, the link between the literal and the figurative meanings in a symbol is neither the product of an interpreter's conscious intellectual activity, nor of an artist's fancy. Rather, for Ricoeur, the symbol is "the movement of the primary meaning which makes us participate in the latent meaning, and thus assimilates us to that which is symbolized without our being able to master the similitude intellectually."[20] Two things are worth noting here. First, although the symbol is susceptible to and enriched by a philosophical or intellectual analysis, it arises in the first place by some prior apprehension. Second, it has an

[19] Paul Ricoeur, "*Existence and Hermeneutics,*" trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in Don Ihde, ed., *Paul Ricoeur, the Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press: 1969), 3–23, here 13. The selection is not made randomly; as we shall see, writers on Ephrem's symbolic method have appealed to Ricoeur as early as the 1970s.

[20] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 16.

anagogic character: the symbol does not just conceal a latent meaning, but rather "makes us participate" in that latent meaning, even if we cannot assimilate it logically.

We can locate the symbol with more precision by distinguishing it from other closely related terms. The symbol is a species of the genus *sign*, the category which contains all things which signify or point to other things. What sets symbols apart is not only their "double meaning" (i.e., the linguistic "signifier" in a symbol points to two referents). They are also distinct because the connection between their two meanings, literal and figurative, is apprehended not purely as a matter of convention. Rather, the interpreter moves from the literal to the figurative sense of the symbol by a process of *natural analogy*.[21]

We can also distinguish symbols from allegory, another form of language in which literal and nonliteral meanings inhabit the same language. First of all, for the classical allegory, the connection between the non-literal and the literal meaning is a matter of arbitrary artistic choice on the part of the writer (if a work is being *written* as allegorical) or the inventive genius of the reader (if a text is being interpreted allegorically.)[22] Allegory also differs from the symbol in that the former usually has only one non-literal meaning, a specific message that the author is thought to have hidden under the surface of the words. There is some sense, therefore, that once the "true meaning" of an allegory has been discerned, the literal meaning, its concealed delivery having

[21] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 36–37.

[22] We should inject a sharp note of caution here; this heuristic construction of "allegory" is meant to refer to a specific phenomenon, as described and analyzed in works such as Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), who defines allegorical composition as "essentially a grammatical or rhetorical technique" whereby a hidden reality is referred to under an arbitrary guise (4); his study concerns mainly the medieval usage of this technique. Note that this is a specific definition of allegory, and that many other things that go under this label would not used in this sense. See e.g. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode,* Rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). In particular, Origen and other "Alexandrian" patristic exegetes, often said to interpret "allegorically," have far more complex methods of reading, and certainly do not construe their readings as bounded, arbitrary interpretations! See, e.g. Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

been its only purpose, can be discarded like wrapping paper, its power spent.[23] The symbol, by contrast, cannot be so readily thrown aside, not only because the link between the literal and the figurative meaning is non-arbitrary, but because of the sheer fecundity of the symbolic expression; in Ricoeur's view (and Ephrem's),[24] the symbol is a literally inexhaustible source of meanings.[25]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this dissertation, the symbol is distinct from the *image.* Kees den Biesen notes in his book on Ephrem that

> modern scholars […] tend to reduce the notion of "symbol" to a simple "image." Ephrem's symbolism is often evocative and compelling, but its expressiveness represents much more than a writer's ability to paint words.

The symbol is rather "one of the principal forms in which reality presents itself to human understanding."[26] This is an important methodological caution for any study that seeks to engage with Ephrem. Because I am engaged in a historical and literary project rather than a constructive theology, in order to compare Ephrem with other authors in the pages ahead, I will often operate at the surface of the images that he employs. This level is the one that is most open to the sorts of method (philology, close reading and so forth) that my project requires. However, we must always be aware that the symbols are pointing to something more, something deeper in the ground of reality: in Ephrem's case, the presence of God in Mary, and through Mary, in all humanity. Although necessarily working a great deal at the image-surface of the symbolic, I will attempt to remind us periodically to look beyond.

[23] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* 16.

[24] See below, in our discussion of Ephrem's Hymns on the Pearl.

[26] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 36n99.

A Historical Note on Symbolism

The definition of the symbol we outlined above is one that is shaped by a thoroughly modern set of discourses, emerging from semiotics and especially from Ricoeur. But it is worth taking a moment to note that the symbol is also an *ancient* concept. Although our theorists systematize and adapt "the symbolic" to the categories in which we (post-)moderns operate, they are not importing a category that is wholly exogenous to the ancient context. We will see that Ephrem has a robust theory of "the symbol" as a category. Nor, as a small but important body of modern scholarship has shown, is Ephrem idiosyncratic within antiquity.[27]

Peter Struck frames his book *Birth of the Symbol* as the history, or perhaps better the genealogy, of "an idea, or perhaps it is better called a hope or a desire:" that, beneath the pleasant exterior of poetic texts and the "mundane stuff of everyday speech" out of which the poets construct their verse, "their language might be more than just words."[28] His book highlights a dispute within ancient literary criticism in response to this desire. One theory emerges from Aristotle, who valued what Struck terms a "poetics of clarity [whereby] decoding poetic language is not an occasion for diving into the mystified soup of an always receding reality; it is rather an exercise in understanding how language produces effects on audiences."[29] The model for understanding poetic language is thus the same as the model for understanding forensic rhetoric. Although metaphors which clearly convey their meaning through conventional non-literal forms

[27] Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) is the primary text I consider here, but see also Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986) and James Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

[28] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 1. The emphasis on readerly *desire* to transcend text is one of the things that I most like about Struck's initial framing. The process of natural analogy by which the mind is led from visible to hidden meanings in the symbol is activated, at least in part, by a human instinct: *there must be something more here!*

[29] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol,* 63.

are permissible, even the hallmark of good style, language that is "composed entirely […] from metaphors is an enigma (αἴνιγμα)," that is to say puzzling, defective, and unclear speech.[30] This is, in Struck's view, the dominant literary critical tradition that emerges from antiquity.[31]

Over against this tradition is another, however. It began with the desire to solve problems in the verse of Homer and Hesiod, and owes its evolution to Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy. This is the tradition of allegory and the symbol, or σύμβολον. The word σύμβολον begins in the realm of contract; it specifies an object which is broken and divided between two parties to an agreement, to acknowledge what is shared by them.[32] As it develops, however, the symbol becomes key to understanding how hidden meanings can be encoded within poetic language.

Struck's book traces this evolution across a wide variety of sources in Hellenistic and late antique Greek thought. All of his arguments need not detain us here, but two specific moments in the ancient evolution are important. One occurs near the beginning of the history, in the early Stoic period. Struck discusses Chrysippus (3rd century BCE), whom he identifies as the "earliest evidence of someone calling a literary construction a 'symbol.'"[33] Chrysippus reads the poetry of Hesiod as referring, in symbolic terms, to elements of Stoic psychology. Struck notes that in so doing, he does not imagine himself to be "foisting an idea onto the text that did not belong," and

[30] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1458a26, quoted and analyzed in Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* 64–66.

[31] Struck, *Birth of a Symbol*, 7.

[32] Struck, *Birth of a Symbol*, 78–81, who catalogues the various uses of a symbol in this earliest sense as an "authenticating device" as including "a hospitality token," a "marker of legal rights," a "receipt in a business transaction," the sign of a political treaty, a "diplomatic credential" or even a "calling-card." He summarizes: "the symbol is put to use as a proof of something. It authenticates."

[33] Struck, *Birth of a Symbol*, 119.

that properly read, the poetry was not about mythic stories but "such heady aspects of reality as human reason and the divine itself."[34]

This leads Struck to a careful exegesis of often fragmentary Stoic philosophical texts, in order to understand how Chrysippus might have construed Hesiod in such a way. His answer comes not only from Stoic linguistic theory, but also Stoic metaphysics. In the Stoic imaginary, in Struck's reconstruction, words possess a "'natural' ambiguity"[35] because they are all designations which apply to Stoic *pneuma*, the divine organizing principle and structuring substance that makes up reality. Since this divine principle is the basis of all things, all *words*, in so far as they label things, are really labeling divinity:

> The word "egg," for example, is really a sort of shorthand for the pneuma insofar as it has formed a clump of matter into something with the common characteristic "egg." […] all things can be *named* only as manifestations of the divine. [we can best understand Stoic] investigations of divine names precisely within the context of the ontology of universalist materialism and its linguistic implications…[36]

On this basis, it is possible to read a story that on its face seems to be discussing a Homeric myth, and find in it instead a philosophical treatise. In this articulation of early Stoicism, we see a way of grounding the "double meaning" of a linguistic symbol in real—even material—terms.

For the later Neoplatonists, meanwhile, the linguistic symbol, embedded in poetry, is not just a defensible mode of reading ancient texts; it is a privileged method of revealing divine truth. Struck's example here is Proclus (fifth century CE), one of the great systematizers of the Neoplatonic tradition. Proclus, in his view, articulates a theory of poetry and language that is very similar to how our theorists will conceive Ephrem:

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[34] Struck, *Birth of a Symbol,* 122.

[35] Struck, *Birth of a Symbol,* 138.

[36] Struck, *Birth of a Symbol,* 137. Emphasis in the original.

> Proclus proposes that the literary symbol does not resemble its referent, but rather carries a direct and ineffable ontological link to it. […] in shaping the raw material of language into "symbols," the inspired poet does not imitate his subject but invokes its real presence.[37]

The poet, moreover, "unites the immaterial and material orders… and render[s] invisible entities into visible form." The poets, to quote Proclus, "fabricated images of the divine in the medium of language, expressing the transcendent power of the models by those things most opposite to them and furthest removed from them."[38] In Struck's reconstruction, Proclus is the fount for the "grander views that one sees articulated in Boccaccio, Dante, or in some of the Romantics, in which poetry is held out as a vehicle for transporting the soul to higher planes."[39] The mechanism for that transport is precisely the symbol, which through the beauty of the poetry leads the soul to knowledge of things which cannot be otherwise communicated.

There are many other interesting arguments made in Struck, and in the other scholars who deal with the question of late antique theories of symbolism. Certain elements in this tradition suggest connections to Ephrem, although the lines of transmission are of course impossible to trace. This summary is intended, however, only to show that when scholars use a sophisticated idea of the "symbol" to analyze Ephrem, and imagine him *consciously* working in the mode of symbolic poetry, they are describing an authentically ancient practice.

Scholarship on Ephrem's Symbolism

Let us turn now from ancient comparanda to Ephrem himself. How are we to understand *his* practice of symbolism? The modern explication of Ephrem's symbolic worldview was not the

[37] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol,* 241.

[38] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 243, quoting Proclus, *Commentary on the Republic*, 1.77.13–27.

[39] Struck, *Birth of the Symbol,* 248.

work of a single scholar. Rather, starting in the 1970s, several writers, each with their own terms, began to realize that conventional propositional and analytic approaches to Christian theology had not, and could not, adequately account for Ephrem as a thinker. Georges Saber and de Halleux may be credited with initiating this process of reconsideration and elaborating the role of the Ephremian symbol—both in the same issue of *Parole de l'Orient* in the early 1970s![40] Since those groundbreaking articles, a gradual reworking of Ephrem's thought has proceeded steadily. A full account of each moment in this scholarly reevaluation may be found in den Biesen.[41] Here, I will simply discuss four authors whose works are formative for my examination of Ephrem's symbolism: Robert Murray, Sebastian Brock, Tanios Bou Mansour, and Kees den Biesen.

Fr. Robert Murray, SJ produced one of the earliest, and still most influential, accounts of Ephrem's symbolism. Throughout the 1970s, in articles and a monograph,[42] Murray sets as his goal an examination of "the fundamental principles of Ephrem's theological language."[43] These principles, he argues, rest on Ephrem's theory of the structure not of the Bible, but rather the cosmos. Murray notes that when Ephrem reads scripture, the forms of correspondence that he tends to draw between the Old Testament and its fulfillment in Christ "stand in the main stream of ante-Nicene typology."[44] Indeed, in assessing some of Ephrem's reading, Murray is entirely comfortable classifying his approach as basically Antiochene.[45]

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[40] Georges Saber, "La typologie sacrementaire et baptismale de saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 73–91; André de Halleux, "Mar Éphrem théologien," *Parole de l'Orient 4* (1973): 35–54.

[41] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 7–46.

[42] Alongside the monograph (Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom)* to which we have referred, these are Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6 (1975): 1–20, and Murray, "'Der Dichter als Exeget: der hl. Ephram und die heutige Exegese," *Zeitschrift fiir Katholische Theologie* 100 (1978): 484–94.

[43] Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 4.

[44] Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 4.

[45] Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 31. By "Antiochene," Murray refers to a school of "literalist" exegesis which has been associated with the city of Antioch and figures like Theodore of Mopsuestia, and opposed to a school

Ephrem, then, is distinctive not in his reading of the Bible, but in his reading of everything *outside* the Bible. Murray gives wood as an illustration: the trees and pieces of wood encountered in the Bible are symbols of the Cross not because they are in the Bible, but because a properly trained Christian will see all wood in the universe as a symbol of the Cross. Ephrem's theory of symbolism thus derives from his scriptural hermeneutics—or rather precisely the reverse, for to Ephrem, "the Bible contains… symbols of Christ because the whole world does."[46]

This symbolic relation, whereby mundane reality points beyond itself to Christ, is not a mere poetic fancy, nor is it merely a matter of teaching by analogy. To Ephrem, the signifying power of the cosmos owes to the intent of the God who created it: "for in him all creatures were created / and he marked all his possessions with his symbols / when he created the world."[47] The structure of cosmic symbolism underwrites Ephrem seeing various elements in the world around him, and in salvation history, not as separate realities or distinct temporal moments, but an always interconnecting and overlapping network. The relation between these various phenomena, Murray asserts, is "symbolic," but this symbolism does not rest on literary convention; rather it is "ontologically grounded in God's universal plan."[48]

In several places throughout his work on Ephrem, Murray resorts to diagrams to illustrate his principle. To illustrate his claim that Ephrem's symbolic theory of reality demands a special method of seeing, he draws a circle, centered upon the "Auge des Glaubens." This eye of faith is

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of more "allegorical" exegesis associated with the city of Alexandria and figures like Origen. The distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis has been rethought in recent decades; see e.g. Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); cf. Margaret Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) for a rethinking which highlights the equally Pauline origins of the two supposed "schools."

[46] Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 5.

[47] Ephrem, *Virg.* 20:12, cited and translated by Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 5.

[48] "ontologisch aber ist sie im allgemeinen Plan Gottes begründet," Murray, "Der Dichter als Exeget," 489.

surrounded by various phenomena: the life of Christ; the sacramental acts of the Church, the salvation-historical narrative of the Old Testament, and the end times. These are presented in a circle not because Ephrem has a cyclical theory of time[49] but because the Eye encounters all of them at once together, both in the temporal life of the believer, and also in a detached and eternal moment of *theoria.* In this contemplative vision, all these moments which historical analysis might consider discrete are revealed to be related, and the mode of their relations is symbolism.[50]

This theory of symbolic vision is further developed in the work of another scholar: namely, Sebastian Brock. Brock made several important contributions to the early study of symbolism in Ephrem, including several articles that appeared around the time that Murray was doing his most important work. Brock, for instance, called attention to the way that Ephrem's symbolism is grounded in a theory of the divine presence: "the immanence of the holy in this world involves Ephrem in recognizing connections between everything; everything is of significance and has the potential of being a pointer to Christ."[51] Brock also contributes to our understanding of the way that Ephrem's symbolic theology is "intimately tied up with Ephrem's conception of the nature of *time.*"[52]

But among Brock's best contributions to the theory of Ephrem's symbolism is the book *The Luminous Eye.* Brock takes his title from several references in Ephrem to the ܥܝܢܐ ܢܘܗܪܐ or "luminous eye," a special form of symbolic sight, the attainment of which is something that he exhorts for the faithful. (Note that one of the main figures that Ephrem associates with the luminous

[49] "nicht um einen zyklischen Zeitbegriff anzudeuten," Murray, "Der Dichter als Exeget," 489

[50] The diagram and its exegesis found in Murray, "Der Dichter als Exeget," 489.

[51] Brock, "The Poet as Theologian," 244.

[52] Brock, "The Poet as Theologian," 245–49.

eye is Mary herself, whose clear and clarifying vision is contrasted with the sight of Eve, which has been darkened by her sin.)[53] Brock's depiction of the luminous eye's perception is substantially similar to Murray:

> What sort of things does this 'luminous eye' behold? It is an infinitely exciting world, where the symbols, types and analogies latent in both Nature and the Scriptural text gradually become more and more perceptible.[54]

Brock's distinctive contribution here is the *prerequisites and the effects* of this special vision. Because of their intricate structure—their yoking together of a visible or "literal" referent with a deeper, symbolic and divine one—symbols are not immediately accessible to everyone. For Ephrem, *faith* is the initial precondition without which the symbolic interpretation of reality is impossible. God is, by his nature, hidden from human understanding, and only by first having faith in his existence can the eye, becoming luminous, perceive those symbols which God created in order to reveal things about himself to humanity.[55] Moreover, the believing eye must also *love* God, responding in kind to the act of self-disclosing love that motivates God's symbolic self-disclosure to creation.[56]

This symbolic vision, grounded in faith, also has an ascetical component. Brock borrows Ephrem's analogy to a mirror, which can also be termed "luminous" (ܥܝܢܐ), but which must be polished in order to maintain that quality. Just so, a Christian must "polish" his eye by removing impurities which would obstruct his vision. These include sins,[57] but also fixations on the external

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[53] Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem,* Rev. ed. (Kalamazoo: Cisctercian Publications, 1992), 71–73. *The Luminous Eye* first appeared in 1984, and so I place it here in my account of the history, but note that I cite the revised edition.

[54] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 80.

[55] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 29.

[56] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 67.

[57] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 76–77.

facet of symbols. The vision of the eye requires an active choice, neither to pry into the mysteries of symbols through a misplaced rationalism (the error of the "investigators", or Neo-Arian heretics) nor to believe the kinds of misconceptions about God which afflict those (for Ephrem, Jews and pagans) who cannot see beyond surface meanings.[58] Only by careful ascetical "maintenance" and cultivating the skill of discernment can humans perceive symbols correctly, and thus come to know God in the way that he has disclosed himself to us.

The luminous eye is also transformative. The one who beholds the symbolic structure of creation is not merely acquiring information. Rather, he is being changed by the process, and should have certain affective responses to it. Moving from an initial position of faith and love, he is awakened to wonder, which is the correct and natural response to God. Wonder in turn strengthens and nourishes faith. The *analogical* language of creation will guide the believer *anagogically* to praise, first vocal but eventually silent and contemplative, the mode of the angels.[59] Coming to see the symbolism of the created order thus integrates us *into* that order, allowing us to take our place in the cosmic symphony of praise.

In Murray and Brock, therefore, we see important systematic accounts of how Ephrem construes creation as symbolic, and how his ideal Christian subject is supposed to interpret and respond to this symbolic order. Two further studies – Tanios Bou Mansour's *La pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le Syrian* (1988) and Kees den Biesen's *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (2006) have further systematized this theory of Ephrem's symbolism.

[58] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 68–69.

[59] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 78–79.

The apposition of Ephrem to Ricoeur had already been made by Murray.[60] But it remained for Bou Mansour to give the first full account of the hermeneutic dimensions of Ephrem's symbolism. For Bou Mansour, even if Ephrem did not consciously, in Murray's phrase, "anticipat[e], by sixteen centuries… the basic philosophical position of Paul Ricoeur,"[61] nevertheless the way that he invokes symbols throughout his poetry shows a deep sympathy with Ricoeur's theories, and certain elements of Ephrem's thought can only be appreciated if one proceeds by treating symbols as something richer than simple allegories.[62]

Bou Mansour begins by giving a thorough account of Ephrem's operative theory of the symbol, including a philological analysis of different Syriac words for "symbol" and "type" in the authentic works. Against the conclusion of Beck[63] who saw Ephrem's vocabulary of "symbolism" as a catalogue of synonyms, Bou Mansour, while not denying that there is occasional significant overlap between terms (especially in poetic parallelism), nonetheless finds rich and subtle distinctions.[64] Without reiterating all his terminological findings at length, one important example will suffice here. Bou Mansour argues that the two words *raza* and *tupsa* (loanwords respectively from Persian and Greek), treated synonymously as "symbol" or "type" by Beck, in fact exhibit subtly different shades of meaning in Ephrem. Although not always strictly differentiated (there are indeed passages where Ephrem uses them in parallel synonymously), there are notable patterns in their usage. *Tupsa* is more likely to be used of *scriptural* symbols while *raza* is more likely to be applied to natural symbols; more significantly, for Ephrem a *tupsa* tends to indicate a structure

[60] In Murray, "Der Dichter als Exeget," 485 and Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 3.

[61] Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 3.

[62] Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 11–12.

[63] In, e.g., Edmund Beck, "Symbolum-Mysterium bei Aphraat und Ephräm," *Oriens Christianus* 42 (1958): 19–40.

[64] Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 23–120.

of signification in which the figurative or "antitypical" meaning is more closely and univocally bound to the literal signifier. The *raza* meanwhile is a more complex symbol, capable of containing a plurality of meanings but, because subtler, requiring a more diligent hermeneutic eye to discern.[65] (The pearl, discussed below, is a *raza par excellence.*)

From there, Bou Mansour proceeds to symbolic accounts of several facets of Ephrem's thought: Christology, ecclesiology, and so forth. Throughout these chapters, his argument is that Ephrem's complex symbols give rise to a multitude of readings, rather than propositional theological statements of the kind that earlier scholarship had mistakenly been deriving from him. In fact, Ephrem's symbolic style specifically *rejects the possibility* of a logical analysis of the claims of theology; as we have remarked above, Ephrem associates this style with the impieties of the "investigators" and the logic-chopping of the Eunomian Neo-Arians.[66]

In his conclusion, Bou Mansour returns to Ephrem's symbolic method as such. Against previous scholars like Beck, who lamented precisely this absence of a clear "logic" or consistency in Ephrem,[67] Bou Mansour argues that a "system" of the kind that Beck wants to find is entirely outside of the domain of the symbol. This is because symbols, by nature, cannot be univocal. They must be polysemous, and indeed, because the deeper signification of symbols is sequestered beneath the surface at a level accessible *only* by acts of interpretation, their meaning cannot ever

[65] "…dans le terme tûpsâ, le «modèle» ou l'antitype est plus explicite que dans le cas râzâ... Le modèle y est présent d'une façon plus reconnaissable qu'il ne l'est dans râzâ… râzâ constitue un faisceau de significations latentes qui, renvoyant au symbolisé en le suggérant par des touches fort subtiles, nécessitent un travail herméneutique vigilant." Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 34–35.

[66] Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 72–74. Cf. Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 28–31.

[67] Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 538n6 gives a list of citations, to which we may add Beck, *Mariologie* 37; on the following pages 538–39 he even notices some remarks of Murray and Brock which seem to him to misjudge the point of Ephrem's polysemous symbolism.

be grasped in its entirety.[68] Ephrem's symbolic language is a fount, not a basin, giving rise to an infinite supply of meanings rather than containing a bounded reserve of doctrines.

Kees den Biesen's *Simple and Bold* owes much to Bou Mansour; his own work can be read as a continuation of the project in *La pensée symbolique*.[69] Den Biesen builds on Bou Mansour in important ways, however. First, he offers a clear, thorough, and critical account of the scholarship on Ephrem's symbolism.[70] Reviewing the literature, he finds that even many of the scholars who first posited the symbol as central to Ephrem's theological worldview nonetheless, when they attempt an account of Ephrem's thought, fell into what he calls a "descriptive-analytical" method (Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* offering a paramount example). Such a method entails "collect[ing], order[ing], and compar[ing]" all the images Ephrem uses for a particular subject and deriving from this gathered data a conceptual account of Ephrem's theology. Although den Biesen praises such a method as an advancement over its predecessors, nonetheless it risks flattening the contours of his symbols in reducing them to the conceptual.[71]

Den Biesen's second, and most important, contribution is his one significant departure from Bou Mansour: he insists on reading text. In den Biesen's view, although Bou Mansour's insight on Ephrem's thought is indispensable and underappreciated, nevertheless he errs in that he:

> moves almost exclusively on the plane of theological reflection, and hardly ever deals with [Ephrem's texts] *as* texts, that is, with their audience, textual strategies, structures, and

[68] Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 537–40.

[69] Citations of Bou Mansour run throughout den Biesen, *Simple and Bold.* At 51 he says that he "admiringly adheres" to Bou Mansour's position, at 319 he frames his project as grounding Bou Mansour's insights in text.. Den Biesen also notes (33) that Bou Mansour's work is "almost completely absent" from more recent scholarship. We can now add that the last fifteen years have not significantly changed this judgment, and that den Biesen's work itself, although often cited, is seldom substantively engaged. This project, as a work of history and comparative theological language rather than constructive theology, can only slightly rectify this, but the possibilities explored by Bou Mansour and den Biesen, despite the latter's occasional overstatement (see below) deserve further engagement.

[70] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 7–46.

[71] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 31–33.

> rhetorical links to other texts. [Ephrem's various symbolic structures] are more than abstract characteristics comprehended by philosophical or theological reflection. They are first and foremost elements of a cognitive process that is being shaped and played out in the construction of spoken or written language…[72]

Den Biesen thus recalls for us that Ephrem is not merely a symbolic *thinker*, but a symbolic *writer*, and thus to study him is to study a body of written works *as written works*, with all the tools involved in such a study.

He shows the fruits of such a study with a very clear and thorough exposition of a productive tension in Ephrem's thinking: the polarity between word and silence. For Ephrem, the human mind experiences these impulses as "successive moments in time" as "agnostic silence is overcome by a word which gratefully acknowledges God's mercy, but then this word is prevented from reaching out too far by a wise silence."[73] In den Biesen's view, this is the major generative force in Ephrem's poetry. In experiencing God's merciful self-disclosure, the poet is moved to speak about Him—but pious fear of overboldness properly constrains the modes and extent of this speech. Ephrem "vigorously asserts God's ineffability, but also defends the necessity and possibility of talking about God."[74]

This seeming paradox is resolved by Christ himself, who shows through his self-disclosure to humanity the proper way to find balance between the two poles:

> Only Christ can teach us how to speak and how to keep silent, how to avoid one-sidedness and how to discover the relationships which weave contradictory aspects of reality into a meaningful whole… Christ himself is the master-poet, the poet par excellence who is the ultimate reason for, and creator of, analogical language.[75]

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[72] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 51.

[73] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 201–202.

[74] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 104.

[75] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 203–204.

If Christ is the master-poet, then to write theological poetry is a form of *imitatio Christi*—or even, *imitatio factoris*. This is another of den Biesen's significant contributions. As their titles respectively show, in passing from Bou Mansour to den Biesen we have moved from *la pensée symbolique* to the *art* of symbolic thought. Ephrem does not merely recognize that symbols are part of the divine plan or the structuring principle of creation; they are fundamental to his way of thinking and writing about God. Ephrem's theological language, like the languages in which God discloses himself (Biblical and natural), *must* operate on the level of symbol. In order to read Ephrem, then, we must approach him the same way that he would have us approach scripture and creation: alert for the polysemous and Christocentric symbols lying beneath everything.

Den Biesen *also* voices hope that Ephrem might become the model for a constructive project, one that rescues Christianity from the overly rational mode which, in his view, dominates western theological discourse. In a final section titled "Symbolic Thought Now," he laments that the "creative spirit" of Christianity has been lost, and that "mystagogy" has become "catechesis." He concludes hopefully, suggesting that a new scholarly appreciation for Ephrem, aimed at "redefining theology" rather than merely "reconstructing history," might, by reintroducing the "beauty of human art and culture", be an important part of a project of rescuing Christianity from "literalisms, dogmatisms, moralisms, ritualisms and excessive institutionalizations."[76]

[76] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 330–33. It is on these grounds that den Biesen's otherwise very good and important book may be criticized somewhat. In order to exalt Ephrem as a uniquely important voice, he repeatedly contrasts the Syrian's way of thinking and writing with a somewhat vaguely defined "Western" alternative, to which every sort of negative quality is ascribed: aridity, sterility, rigidity, fundamentalism, etc. The monster he seems to have in view is a particular form of nineteenth– and twentieth–century manualist neo-Thomism; though he's not quite tilting at windmills, the poor dragon he's hunting withdrew long ago; provided one avoids the darker corners of Youtube, a handful of schismatic bishops, and a half-dozen retrograde blogs, it is no danger any longer. Moreover den Biesen does not, in my view, reckon sufficiently with the fact that Ephrem is himself a dogmatic and institutional Christian, one who (as we shall see in e.g. Chapter 5) wants to draw sharp boundaries around his community. That his dogma is expressed in symbols rather than propositions does not make it any less dogmatic.

This seems entirely too arduous a task to expect of the Syriacists—too much, perhaps, even for the great Ephrem himself. But it is hoped that the preceding review of some major strands in Ephrem studies over the past fifty years has exhibited *why* a scholar disgusted with the current state of Christianity as he perceives it[77] might look to Ephrem to repristinate the Church. His symbolic way of thinking and writing does represent a distinct—and distinctly powerful—way of thinking and speaking about the central Christian mysteries.

Scholarship on Ephrem's Poetry

To the examination of Ephrem as a symbolist, we should add a few remarks considering him as, in den Biesen's phrase, "an artist with words"[78]—that is, a poet. The two are not entirely separable; it is because he prefers figurative language to logical statements that poetry is Ephrem's natural medium. Poetry enables him to express the ambiguous and polysemous power of his symbols. Considering Ephrem as a poet is, however, important in its own right, as it validates treating him as a sophisticated writer, and interpreting his complex, sometimes obscure style as the product of deliberate intelligence. I already mentioned how den Biesen's work considers Ephrem as a poet: to him, the Syrian reveals the truth in a transformative way through his art rather than through logical arguments or prosaic statements of doctrine.[79] To his account we can add the work of three other scholars who have examined the mechanisms of Ephrem's poetry: Phil Botha, Alphons Rodrigues Pereira, and Jeffrey Wickes.

[77] "a meaningless, intolerant and ugly system that ultimately redeems no-one," den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 333.

[78] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* title of conclusion (322–33).

[79] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 333.

Since the late 1980s, Phil Botha has released a stream of articles which offer sustained rhetorical and literary study of Ephrem.[80] The arguments that he makes on individual poems are less germane here; what is more important is that his method, by examining individual stanzas of the Hymns, has shown the ways in which Ephrem is not a "turgid, humorless, and repetitious" poet, but a careful and persuasive rhetorician, one who falls back on a few rhetorical structures with regularity. Botha particularly casts light on Ephrem's use of antithesis and paradox as verbal structures and argumentative strategies through which Ephrem convinces his audience.

To Botha, Ephrem writes poetry "not primarily for aesthetical purposes, but for argument."[81] In view of Pereira's work (below), we might nuance this position slightly; Ephrem is an aesthetically gifted writer; but the broader point, that Ephrem arranges his words chiefly to communicate rather than merely to entertain, is well-taken. His rhetoric does not take the form of syllogistic logical arguments, however, but rather structures built out of symbols. His favorite structure, as Botha argues, is the well-constructed antithesis, which he often articulates and rearticulates over the span of several stanzas, setting up polarities whose rhetorical aim is to help the listener position correct belief against imagined (and excoriated) opposites.[82]

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[80] To cite just a few of these studies which are formative on my reading of Ephrem as a sophisticated verbal artist: Phil Botha, "Antithesis and Argument in the Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 44 (1988): 581–595; "Polarity: The Theology of Anti-Judaism in Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on Easter," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 46 (1990): 36–46; "The Structure and Function of Paradox in the Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian," *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 68 (1990–1991): 50–62; "The Rhetoric Function of Polarity in One of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on the Church", *Journal for Semitics* 3 (1991): 188–201; "The Poet as Preacher: St. Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn De Virginitate XXXI as a Coherent, Aesthetic, and Persuasive Poetic Discourse," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 19 (2008): 44–72.

[81] Botha, "Antithesis and Argument," 585.

[82] Botha, "Antithesis and Argument," 585–592. We may note that Botha concentrates in many of his articles on the function of Ephrem's rhetoric in uniting, and articulating the boundaries of, his ecclesial community. (cf. Botha, "Polarity: The Theology of Anti-Judaism," 45: through Ephrem's rhetoric, "diverse elements of Christianity could be rallied under the common cause of protection against the dangers of Judaism;'" Botha, "The Rhetoric Function of Polarity," 201: "This polarity urges alteration of conduct and views.")

One particular structure that Botha brings to our attention is worth highlighting because it implicitly involves Ephrem's symbolic method. Botha calls these "double antitheses" which "occurs in the construction 'A stands over against B as C stands over against D'. For example […]: Leavened bread stands over against the Passover as stale food stands over against inner renewal."[83] For Botha, this sort of parallel antithesis creates an "associative connection" which persuades the reader that, if he accepts the opposition of A and B, the opposition of C and D must naturally follow. Such antitheses have a persuasive rhetorical force, but they also show Ephrem's symbolic thinking in action.

Botha thinks about Ephrem as a rhetorician, not as a theologian; although he is aware of, and discusses, Ephrem's use of "arguments from analogy,"[84] he analyzes these as methods of persuading an audience, rather than staking deep theological claims. Nevertheless, read *alongside* the symbolic thinkers discussed above, the net effect of Botha's scholarship is to remind us that Ephrem is a skilled craftsman with words. "Arguments," as Botha says, "need not always be rational."[85] While there is usually not a syllogistic substructure in the hymns of Ephrem, this should not mislead us into thinking his verses thoughtless.

Of a different kind, but no less conducive to understanding Ephrem as a poet, is Alphons Rodrigues Pereira's *Studies in Aramaic Poetry*. He offers, alongside other Aramaic corpora, a literary analysis of the Hymns on the Pearl (*HdF* 81–85) and a sequence of other hymns from the Carmina Nisibena.[86] Although his excellent book is aimed at characterizing a tradition, rather than

[83] Botha, "Antithesis and Argument," 592.

[84] Botha, "The Rhetoric Function of Polarity," 198–200.

[85] Botha, "Antithesis and Argument," 594.

[86] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 101–170 and 217–249.

Ephrem individually, and lacks any lengthy cumulative statement of Ephrem as an artist, Pereira's line-by-line reading is meticulous, and under his eye Ephrem is revealed to be a sophisticated poet. He asserts that Ephrem owes his reputation "to the lyric tone of many of the hymns, and to the rich and varied imagery of his poetry which is couched in his very personal symbolic language."[87] This general summation is proved by an analysis of individual verses.

In nearly every stanza he examines, Pereira finds Ephrem structuring his language deliberately, with a range of poetic devices. Pereira's atomistic style makes summary difficult; a few quotes across his lengthy treatment of more than a hundred pages will, however, suffice to prove this point:

> Ephrem shows great virtuosity in word and sound. Sound effects are, e.g. onomatopoeias, alliterations, rhyme, assonances. As in Biblical Hebrew, rhyme is the weakest point because of the tendency to use suffices as rhyming morphemes. However, genuine attempts to rhyme have also been observed.[88]

> Here we note a number of wordplays and assonances. *mawtā - memtum; negbe – ga(n)bārā - da-nbag.* The latter series is a play on the letters *nun*, *gamal*, *beth*, which are permutated in three anagrams. It does not seem to matter that in *ga(n)bārā* the *nun* is not pronounced. This raises the question whether stylistic devices like these are based on the written or on the spoken language.[89]

> Alliteration underlines the significance of the expression māḥḥe mitē and a few other variants. A high frequency of assonance and dominant sound is found in the letters mem, sin, lamed, and a few other consonants. It mainly serves to turn the attention of the reader to an important notion or term, or to increase the effect of another stylistic device as a parallelism or chiasmus.[90]

The last quote calls our attention to the fact that Ephrem's poetic structures are not limited to the sound effects of words, but also structures at the level of thought, as, for instance:

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[87] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 217.

[88] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 244.

[89] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 110.

[90] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 164.

> Parallelism, typical in biblical poetry, is practically nonexistent in these lines. Chiasmus, however, is frequent. Its application is narrowly linked to Ephrem's tendency to think in contradictions and antitheses. […] Chiasmi or chiastic constructions are present on any level. Sometimes they are restricted to the parts of one line, sometimes they extend over two lines, whether or not by enjambment, and sometimes chiastic relations can be observed between sequences in different strophes.[91]

Pereira's careful study resists summary. But reading even a few pages of it—or even just the quotes sampled above—suffices to show that Ephrem is not an artless poetaster, as some earlier readers condemned him. When he is read in Syriac, with an attentive eye and an attentive ear, he is shown to be a master of his craft, building exceedingly intricate structures on the level of the word, the line, the strophe and the poem, to complement his equal intricate structures of symbolic thought. Moreover, by placing Ephrem's hymns in the context of other late antique Aramaic verse-forms, Pereira lets us see Ephrem in a new guise: not as only father of a Christian Syriac poetic tradition, but as inheritor of a multicultural, multireligious tradition of Aramaic literature.[92]

Jeffrey Wickes, meanwhile, calls our attention to another facet of Ephrem's poetic style: it is a language built out of Biblical material. In Wickes' view, the "the Bible is already wrapped up in Ephrem's own poetic world. The world of the Bible and the world of his poetry are already intermingled."[93] Studying the Hymns on Faith in particular, Wickes notes how Ephrem conceives himself as a "lyre" (or "harp") and consciously models himself on King David, thereby likening his own hymns to the Biblical psalms, both revealing things about the hidden God through knowable realities.[94]

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[91] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 113.

[92] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 249–64.

[93] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 62.

[94] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 71–73.

This last identification is an important one, because it says something about Ephrem's view of both Biblical language and, consequently, his own. In Wickes reading, Ephrem—originating from an anti-Arian desire to avoid subordinationist language for Christ—construes certain Biblical language about God as "borrowed." This means that the text uses terms which are "ill-suited to God if taken literally, but which, if understood correctly, function pedagogically." Among the examples of this kind of language Ephrem locates, for instance, the language attributing various body parts to God.[95]

This in turn sets a certain kind of limit on Biblical language; it "comprises a series of metaphors, through which God has humbled himself… [and which] metaphorically represent a God who always means more than any reader could comprehend." But this same theory of Biblical language also implicates something about Ephrem's own language. If the Bible is structured in such a way as to move the reader rhetorically towards an understanding of God that transcends the ability of words to express, then Ephrem's project becomes one of "mimicking the divine arrangement present in the Bible… to reassemble these words to convey further meanings."[96] In effect, the Bible becomes not only a sourcebook for Ephrem's hymns, but also a model for how to go about shaping them for audiences.

It should go without saying, of course, that Ephrem nonetheless holds the language of the Bible, even those parts which are "borrowed," as "true" and a source of "hermeneutic stability."[97] But their truth, even as the preferred names by which God discloses himself to humanity in scripture, is not absolute, and their disclosure is not complete. "Rather, its nouns and narratives

[95] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 56.

[96] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 57.

[97] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 59.

are metaphoric representations of something that is essentially beyond the reader's power to grasp—beyond even the language's ability to communicate."[98] This view of the Bible's poetics not only grounds a theory of the limitations of language; it also justifies Ephrem's own poetic project, using the language of scripture and reconfiguring it in order to further the project of making the perfection of God known by imperfect means.

The work of Botha, Pereira, and Wickes harmonizes nicely with that of Brock, Murray, Bou Mansour and den Biesen. In our review of the theorists of Ephrem's theological method, we have seen that Ephrem is a sophisticated thinker, with a fully developed idea of the limitations of language but also of the tremendous symbolic power of words. Reviewing those who studied his poetics, we found that he was also a tremendously sophisticated writer, with an elaborate practical gift for rhetorical communication. The two of these insights, taken together, license a project like the one that I will pursue in the remainder of these pages, construing Ephrem as not only a poet, but a *poet-theologian.*

Symbolism in Action: The Hymns on the Pearl

I have so far, in this dissertation, spoken a great deal about the theory of figurative language; I have spoken about phonic effects and parallel structures; and I have used the word "symbol" and its derivatives over a hundred times. The reader may be forgiven if things begin to feel abstract. But having now gone through the theory of and background to Ephrem's symbolism and the techniques of his poetry in some detail, let us observe it in practice.

[98] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 61.

As an illustrative example of Ephrem's symbolic method, we turn to the Hymns on the Pearl, hymns 81 through 85 of the Hymns on Faith.[99] The richness of the pearl as a symbol has already been noted by several authors discussed above,[100] and I will not attempt to catalogue the symbolic connections which he draws from the pearl exhaustively. Rather, I want to concentrate on the Hymns on the Pearl because they are an excellent demonstration of Ephrem's *methods* in deploying theological symbols. We will confine most of our remarks to a close reading of the majority of first Hymn on the Pearl (Hymn 81 on Faith), although once this is complete we will look at a few additional verses from the rest of the cycle.

First, let us note that the pearl (Greek μαργαρίτης, Syriac ܡܪܓܢܝܬܐ) is a Biblical image found in Jesus's parables, albeit not one that is particularly developed in scripture. The text of the parable on the pearl is, in the Peshitta rendering:

> ܡܪܓܢܝܬܐ ܕܫܦܝܪ ܐܝܬ ܠܗ ܠܡܪܟܒܬܐ ܕܡܒܥܐ ܫܦܝܪ̈ܐ ܘܟܕ ܡܫܟܚ ܚܕ ܡܪܓܢܝܬܐ ܝܩܪܐ ܗܘ ❊ ܐܙܠ ܘܙܒܢ ܟܠ ܕܐܝܬ ܠܗ ܘܩܢܐ ܐܢܘܢ ❊
> Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a man, a merchant, who seeks good pearls; and when he finds one precious pearl, he goes and sells all that he has, and buys it.[101]

There are a handful of even briefer Biblical citations of pearls,[102] but one is easily justified in concluding that, compared with more elaborate or frequently repeated parable figures, the pearl is not a particularly central Biblical symbol.[103] Aside, perhaps, from the pearl's value (worth, indeed,

[99] A general overview of the Hymns on the Pearl can be found in Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 217–20.

[100] Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," 8; Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 91–93.

[101] Matthew 13:45–46.

[102] The injunction not to "cast pearls before swine" (Matt 7:6) and the statement that the gates of the New Jerusalem are "twelve pearls" (Rev 21:21) are the most germane here, as suggesting the "pearl" might be a figurative symbol relating to Christian mystery; the other citations in the New Testament (1 Ti 2:9, Rev 17:4, Rev 18:12,16) focus instead on the pearl as a signifier of luxury, construed pejoratively.

[103] Of course, the brevity of the scriptural texts on a particular subject is never a reliable indicator of the depth of meaning that the tradition will derive from it, and Ephrem is hardly alone in finding inspiration from the image of the

everything else that the man has), there is little to suggest just how much Ephrem will do with it. But then, as Wickes reminds us, Ephrem's work is a reconfiguration of Biblical language, not a recapitulation of it.

Ephrem begins with a statement of the wealth of symbols he finds in the pearl:

> One day, I took up
> A pearl, my brothers. I saw in it symbols (ܪܘܙܐ),
> Things of the Kingdom, images and types (ܪܫܡܐ ܘܕܡܘܬܐ < εἰκών, τύπος)
> Of that Greatness. It became a fountain
> And I drink from it symbols (ܪܘܙܐ) of the Son.[104]

We can note a few things already. First, the symbols which Ephrem beholds in the pearl are "things (literally, sons) of the Kingdom" (ܒܢܝ ܡܠܟܘܬܐ), "images and types of that Greatness" and "symbols of the Son." In other words, this stanza emphasizes by a triple repetition that the Pearl stands in a direct symbolic relation to the mysteries of God, whether kingdom, greatness, or the Son. Second, although the pearl is singular, Ephrem perceives in it a multitude of symbols, images, and types. It is a fountain—that is, a limitless source of reflections on God.

Ephrem continues with a description of the act of examining and reflecting on the pearl. He "placed it… in the palm of [his] hand to observe it" and finds that "on one side, it had a face; on every side, it offered examination of the Son." With this deft juxtaposition Ephrem here distinguishes between the pearl's one surface reality ("face" ܦܐܪ) and the range of figurative meanings that can be drawn from it when considered from all its various "sides." As he will go on to demonstrate, this single pearl can be made to connect with the reality of Christ in a multitude of

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pearl. Origen in Book 10 of his Commentary on Matthew dedicates several chapters to the pearl (7–10), considering both its natural history and also its status as a type of Christ. Beyond the realm of commentary, the image of the pearl has been a powerful literary one throughout Christian history, from the Syriac *Hymn of the Pearl* (see Chapter 3), to the Middle English allegorical poem *Pearl*, to the Mormon standard, *The Pearl of Great Price.* For the history of interpretation of this pericope in particular, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary,* vol 2, trans. by James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 276–280.

[104] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.1. The translation of this poem is from Wickes, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith.*

ways. And this is fortunate, too, because symbols like this are the only way, in Ephrem's view, to approach the Son who is inaccessible in himself "because he is entirely light."[105]

In the next few stanzas, Ephrem begins to demonstrate some of the symbolic connections that one can draw from the pearl:

> In its simplicity, I saw the Simple one,
> Who is not moved. In its purity [I saw]
> A great mystery (ܪܙܐ): the body of our Lord,
> Unsullied. In its lack of division,
> I saw the truth that is undivided.
>
> It was Mary that I saw there—
> Her pure conception. It became the Church,
> And the Son was inside it. [It took on] the likeness of a cloud,
> That one which carried him, and a heavenly mystery (ܪܙܐ ܥܠܝܐ),
> That shone forth its fair splendor.[106]

Observe first that the one object in Ephrem's hand, considered from its many "sides," can reveal a wide variety of figural meanings. It is the Simple One (God considered with respect to his transcendent unity) and the pure "body of the [incarnate] Lord"; it is also Mary, the Church, the cloud in which Christ was raised up at the Ascension, and the Truth itself, all in a short space. The eye of faith reveals not only that the natural symbol of the pearl has some connection to the divine mysteries of the Church, but that it is connected to *all* the mysteries of the Church, because each of these truths is interrelated with the others.[107]

Discerning these symbolic meanings begins, it seems, with a verbal parallel. Because the pearl possesses simplicity (ܪܥܝܦܘܬܐ) it is a symbol of the Simple One (ܪܥܝܦܐ); similarly, its connection with the pure body of the Lord and the undivided Truth are found by meditation on its

[105] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.2.

[106] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.3–4

[107] Cf. the *Auge des Glaubens* at Murray, "Der Dichter als Exeget," 489.

own purity and indivisibility.[108] In the next stanza, however, the links between the symbol and its figural meanings becomes more complex. We begin with the likeness to Mary, because the purity of the pearl again puts Ephrem in mind of her "pure conception" (ܚܕܝܬ ܥܘܠܕܢܐ). From here, however, the chain of connections no longer attaches directly to the pearl; rather the following symbols depend upon the image of the pearl as Mary and, *because* the pearl is Mary, bearing the Son within her, Ephrem leaps to the Church, which likewise contains the Son, and the image of the bright cloud which carried him;[109] only at the end does he return to the physical object of the pearl, because of the connection between the luminescent cloud and the "fair splendor" of the pearl. This sort of associative move is characteristic of Ephrem's symbolic logic; he carries along from one image to the next as symbols connect in his vision, without pausing in every instance to make the connections explicit. [110]

As Ephrem continues along, the sheer volume of symbolic references evoked by the pearl overwhelms him: it contains signs of Christ's "triumphs… crownings… aids… profits… secrets… revelations" and becomes "larger to me than an Ark, so that I roamed around inside it." It becomes paradoxical, containing "rational types without tongues" and "a silent lyre" which sings without a

[108] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 222 also points out that the skillful structure of this stanza: the first and third parallel qualities ("simplicity" and "indivisibility") are structured by uses of the same root (ܥܦܝܟ / ܥܦܝܟܘܬܐ and ܚܕܘܬܐ / ܚܕܝܕ); the middle pair, meanwhile, expresses the likeness of purity by synonyms that are *not* from the same root (ܠܐ ܚܝ / ܕܟܝܬܘܬܐ).

[109] Wickes, *Hymns on Faith,* 378n5 makes this out to be an allusion to the Ascension, and this is the interpretation that seems likeliest to me. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 222, however, construes it as an allusion to Daniel 7 and the coming of the Son of Man, and quotes Beck (without specific attribution) as a reference to the cloud in Exodus 13.

[110] Murray gives a charming account of the "particularly complicated" symbolism of the piercing of Christ's side in Ephrem: "Christ is the second Adam, from whose side is born the second Eve, the Church; yet through that opening we enter paradise, to come again to the Tree of Life, which is sometimes the Cross but also sometimes Christ himself." (*Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 126). If one tries to draw a clear schematic map of relations like these, one will struggle; it is better to follow Ephrem down the winding path of his associative logic.

voice.[111] The pearl, in other words, not only connects with every moment of Christ's life and the life of the Church; it not only exceeds the size of the Ark; it reaches the cusp of ineffability.

With Ephrem on the verge of leaving behind that which can be described in language, his ecstatic vision is abruptly cut short:

> A trumpet sounded, and thunder whispered:
> "Do not be rash! Abandon hidden things,
> Take up what is revealed!" I saw in a clear sky
> Other rain—a fountain, from which my ears,
> As from a cloud, were filled with interpretations.[112]

The symbols, in other words, may tempt the mind of the contemplator to move beyond "what is revealed" into "the hidden things"[113] but this is a temptation that must be avoided; to want to probe beyond the limits of human intelligence, beyond those things which have been (symbolically) "revealed" to humanity is a species of "rashness." But after this thunderstorm-warning comes a rain of interpretations, freely given, so it seems, by the same voice which demands that Ephrem not probe too far.[114]

The next stanza mediates on the divine source of symbolism and interpretation:

> Like that manna, which alone
> Filled the People in place of meals,
> It filled me with its tastes—
> The pearl—in place of Books
> And their readings and interpretations.[115]

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[111] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.5–6.

[112] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.7.

[113] On the tension ܪܙܐ / ܦܫܛܐ see den Biesen, *Simple and Bold* 187–200.

[114] Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 223 also points out that this sudden rain is the culmination of a sequence of nine uses of forms of the verb ܚܙܐ "to behold," and that this is the last thing that Ephrem "beholds" in the poem.

[115] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.8.

God's *gift* of symbolic interpretations is made explicit by invoking the Biblical image of the manna which sustained the Israelites in the desert. It's worth pausing over this a moment: Ephrem does not see the symbols that he discusses throughout this work as being mere acts of poetic fancy on his own part, nor a set of particularly inventive similes. Rather, they are explicitly given by God because they were created, from the outset, as sustenance for inquiring minds. The relationship between the symbol and its figurative referent is *ontological*, not merely literary.

This image of manna, however, also contains an implicit sense of limitation, a reiteration of the danger of seeking too much knowledge about God or trying to exhaust the symbol. The manna which fed Israel, after all, was accompanied by rules governing its collection. Those who took excess, out of stubbornness or a failure to trust God, found that it was useless, for "it bred worms and became foul."[116] As he stresses God's loving provision for the faithful mind, then, Ephrem also reminds the reader not to take more than he needs.

The end of this stanza, meanwhile, elevates the symbolic understanding which can be gained by meditating on the "tastes" of the pearl over books and their interpretations. Here, it is improbable that Ephrem has the text of scriptures in mind (after all he is himself the author of several "interpretations" of *these* books). Rather, in view of the preceding warnings, he likely intends the investigative "books" of the heretics.

After Ephrem steps back from investigating that which is "hidden," the last few stanzas of the hymn consist of a speech by the Pearl itself, who addresses Ephrem and further explains the riches—and dangers—inherent in her symbolism.

> She responded and said to me—the child of the sea—
> "I am infinite. As for that sea
> From which I ascended, it is a great treasury
> Of the symbols which are in my bosom. Inquire into the sea,

[116] Ex 16:20b (NRSV).

But do not examine the Lord of the Sea."[117]

The limitlessness of the pearl, and the distinction between the "sea" (which may be investigated) and the "Lord of the Sea" (who may not be) are now familiar. But pause for a moment over the complex notions of interiority in these lines. The pearl, on the one hand, ascended *from* the sea; on the other hand, the sea is a treasury of symbols that are *within* the pearl. If we try to diagram this rationally, the relation of container to contained will break apart. But if we attend to it attuned to the Ephrem's symbolic art, it becomes a little clearer: the pearl is infinitely symbolic in itself, but it is also just one part of an elaborate web of natural symbols (the sea), which all contain mysteries themselves. And because the ultimate referent of all symbols is the same (Christ), it is indeed true that the sea contains the same mysteries as the pearl which came from it.

The remainder of the pearl's monologue to Ephrem continues the nautical imagery. The pearl mocks "divers" who seek after the pearl to seek the "depth of divinity" and retreat in fear,[118] and compares the mystery of the Son with waves: those who resist are shattered, but those who are pliant and yield to the current are preserved.[119] Moreover, the pearl recalls the Egyptians, who were drowned in the sea by God's power even though they did not investigate his mysteries.[120] In the final stanzas, the pearl calls to mind the "fish of the sea," who quake at the sight of God's

[117] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.10.

[118] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.11 Wickes, *Hymns on Faith,* 379n9 sees in this a pun on the newly baptized (the word for "divers" is the same).

[119] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.12.

[120] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.13. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry,* 224–25) and Wickes, *Hymns on Faith,* 379n16 both, in my view correctly, interpret the logic here as being of the "how much more" sort: if the Egyptians, who had not tried to probe the mysteries of the "Lord of the Sea" were nonetheless destroyed by it, how much more will those impious ones who dive into it willingly in pursuit of impossible knowledge?

power, and marveled at what God did to Jonah. They display the proper reverence for God, unlike those who rashly dive into mysteries too deep for them to swim in.[121]

The pearl itself retreats somewhat in these final lines, although the reference to the fish and to Jonah as "neighbors" keeps it in view. But as so often with Ephrem, the associative logic of his web of symbols has led him from the pearl to other images of the sea: a diver, the wave smashing a boat, the Exodus parting of the red, the great fish that swallowed Jonah. Note that he freely mingles scriptural and natural images. As Murray and Brock were among the first to note, these are not separate domains for Ephrem, but instead two parts of an overall master-web of symbols, created by God and having him at their center.[122]

Note also that these later symbols (the diver, the wave, etc.) no longer symbolize in quite the same way that the earlier symbolic relations did. There, it was a simple matter of a shared quality: because pure, the pearl can signify purity. At one more level of complexity, because pure, the pearl can signify other pure things (Mary). Here, the connection is still more complex, requiring the readers to immerse themselves imaginatively in the literal situation of each symbolic context, and from there to intuit the appropriate figurative relation. The basic structure of signification is the same as in the earlier examples—"likeness" between the literal and figurative—but these more complex relations require a greater intellectual effort to perceive those likenesses.

The first Hymn on the Pearl thus illustrates some of the most important themes in Ephrem's thought: symbols are a gracious gift of God, who nonetheless limits how far they may be interpreted and investigated. Symbols may freely float back and forth amongst one another, guided by a logic of poetry, imagery, and association. Beneath each singular surface, the pious mind can

[121] Ephrem, *HdF* 81.14–16.

[122] Brock, "The Poet as Theologian," 244; Murray, "Theory of Symbolism," 5.

find an infinite fountain of meanings. And the chief line of perception by which the mind moves from the literal to the symbolic meaning of an image is by notions of "likeness," whether it be a simple shared quality or a more complex network of shared relations.

A few more important elements of Ephrem's symbolic thought are revealed by a few citations of the subsequent Hymns on the Pearl. One recurring theme in the Hymns on the Pearl is the way that the pearl, like Christ himself, is beautified and rendered fit for human use by being pierced and hung up:

> The beauty of the Son is depicted in your beauty:
> He clothed himself with suffering, {to the point that} nails passed through him.
> A prick passed through you: they pierced you,
> Just as [they pierced] his hands. Because he suffered, he reigned,
> Just as in your suffering, your beauty increases.[123]

The allusion in this stanza is to the pearl being pierced in order to be set in a woman's earring. For Ephrem, a symbolic connection exists between that act of piercing jewelry and the piercing of Christ's hands in the Crucifixion. Elsewhere, he considers the pearl as it appears to divers, to merchants, and to kings who set it in their crowns.[124] The point to be gleaned from these examples is that Ephrem's understanding of the symbol of the pearl extends from its qualities considered in itself to its various uses in human culture. This perhaps seems too obvious to belabor, but it raises an important methodological point that will guide much of this dissertation. If we did not know (because we have the same practice) that in Ephrem's day, pearls and other jewels were pierced in order to hang them on earlobes and set them in crowns, then some of his language about the pearl, and some sense of what the pearl "means," would be lost to us. In order for a symbol to be comprehensible for a modern reader, in other words, the various cultural contexts and applications

[123] Ephrem, *HdF* 82.12; cf 82.2,11, 83.9–11, 84.15.

[124] Examples too numerous to cite individually are found throughout the Hymns on the Pearl, but Ephrem, *HdF* 84.3 gives in quick succession the relation of a diver, a merchant, and a king to the pearl.

of that symbol in Ephrem's fourth-century milieu must be known. The symbol cannot be reduced to that sociohistorical and contextual information, but it remains an important key to fuller understanding. My project in part two of the present work will be of an analogous kind, albeit confined to religious texts: by learning how various cultures interpreted some of Ephrem's symbols, we will learn a little more about Ephrem's own understanding.

A related point can be made regarding a few places in the hymns where Ephrem describes the "birth" of the pearl. Ephrem says, "Your mother is the virgin of the sea. Without his marrying her, she fell into his bosom. Without his knowing her, you were conceived at its side."[125] In another place, "According to the story, two wombs bore you: an unbound nature descended from on high, while a fixed body ascended from the sea."[126] The Christological allusions in both of these discussions of the pearl are readily apparent, because Ephrem arranges his poems to make them so; but a modern reader may be slightly at a loss if he is unaware that these verses allude to two different theories held by Ephrem's contemporaries about the origin of pearls.[127] Here, once again, some understanding of the state of scientific knowledge in the fourth century is necessary if the modern reader is not to be blind to Ephrem's symbolic intent.

We can conclude this case study with one more point which emerges in the Hymns on the Pearl. Although a single line, nevertheless it offers a concise summary of one of the most important facets of Ephrem's understanding of symbols. Addressing the reader, the poet says, "In the

[125] Ephrem, *HdF* 82.2.

[126] Ephrem, *HdF* 84.14.

[127] Wickes, *Hymns on Faith,* 381n4, summarizes R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price, Pearls and Pearl-Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discoveries* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 1–16: "[T]here were three ancient theories for how pearls were made: first, that pearls were drops of rain that crystallized within the oyster; second, that they resulted from lightning striking the oyster; third, that oysters conceived the pearl virginally. Ephrem suggests the third option here, but at 84:14 suggests the second option."

temporal pearl we see that which is eternal."[128] In other words, despite all Ephrem's frequent warnings against trying to investigate into "hidden" things, the symbol—a temporal, perceptible object—remains a privileged method of obtaining "vision" of a higher, eternal reality.

Thinking about Symbols in Ephrem and Beyond: Gadamer and Ricoeur

Thus far, we have consulted patristic scholars and looked to the poet's own texts themselves, to build our picture of what "symbolism" means for Ephrem. But there are also two twentieth-century theorists, chiefly working in the domain of philosophical hermeneutics, whose names are often mentioned in the scholarship in connection with Ephrem's theory of the symbol: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. [129] It is worth spending a little time thinking through the implications of both these theorists for a proper reading of Ephrem—and, more importantly for this dissertation, for a proper reading of other contemporary figures. For Gadamer, these insights come chiefly from his *Truth and Method;* Ricoeur, perhaps the more important thinker for an appreciation of Ephrem, had many useful things to say about symbolism from the publication of *Symbolism of Evil* in the 1960s straight through until the end of his career.

Gadamer is raised in the literature on Ephrem as a guardrail against bad exegesis, and this may be his most important contribution to our study.[130] A historical and comparative analysis, like the one that we are about to undertake in the pages ahead, is often at risk of forgetting its own situatedness, or its "horizon," as he terms it. The historian of ideas may be tempted to believe that he can, through a careful enough study, fuse his horizon with that of the ancient author under his

[128] Ephrem, *HdF* 83.14.

[129] The significance of these two thinkers for an understanding of Ephrem has been noted by both den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 8, and Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 3.

[130] See e.g. Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 3.

investigation, and thus arrive at a perfect, and perfectly objective, account of that figure's worldview. Gadamer injects a note of caution here: we are always looking at our evidence from our own situatedness, and our horizon is not "closed"; the world that we are observing moves along with us.[131] The scholars of the early twentieth century who probed Ephrem and found in him an early proponent of the Immaculate Conception were modern scholars who brought their own contemporary prejudices to the text; they did not discover the Objective Ephrem. Neither has Murray, nor Brock, nor den Biesen. Neither shall we.[132]

Gadamer's application to our own project thus consists mainly of a general philosophical guardrail, valuable for establishing the limits of our study. Ricoeur's interventions contribute similarly to the philosophic background, but also add something to our method. Without wading into every element of his sustained half-century discourse on the symbolic, we can draw out a few points that are of particular interest.[133]

Ricoeur frames his approach to a philosophical understanding of religion with a wager:

> I wager that I shall have a better understanding of man and of the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings if I follow the *indication* of symbolic thought. That wager then becomes the task of *verifying* my wager and saturating it, so to speak, with intelligibility. In return, the task transforms my wager: in betting *on* the significance of the symbolic world, I bet at the same time *that* my wager will be restored to me in power of reflection, in the element of coherent discourse.[134]

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[131] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 313–18.

[132] For Gadamer on the challenge of historical interpretation, in general, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 180–386. See also Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hemeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 133–212, who explains this rather lucidly where Gadamer himself is often byzantine, and sometimes even Varangian.

[133] Aside from Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* and the essays collected in *Conflict of Interpretations,* I have also profited from the study of two books by Dan Stiver: *Ricoeur and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) and *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

[134] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 355.

That is, Ricoeur strikes out in the hope that religious language carries a meaning, and that it is susceptible of an intellectual analysis, and that it conveys certain valuable and true things that cannot be expressed in any other way. This is framed as a "wager" because, Ricoeur concedes, there is a chance that the whole edifice of the symbol is built on nothing but fancy, and that no "logic" of any kind undergirds the texts. But, nonetheless, he wagers; and this wager in turn gives him the task of verifying it for himself, of *making* the symbolic intelligible.

I am embarking on a project of philology and history, not philosophy in quite the way Ricoeur conceived it. Nevertheless, a skeptical reader may perhaps find it helpful to think of himself as adopting a similar "wager" in approaching Ephrem. Certainly, the sound literary judgment of the nineteenth-century Anglophone world tended to disparage his writing, and certain theological tendencies sketched by den Biesen have tended to make scholars regard him as a shallow thinker. More recent rhetoric which treats him as a uniquely gifted and great poet perhaps cannot overcome the nagging sense that he *is* a bit dull, a bit repetitious. But if we make a wager of a kind on his work—that his poems *do* have value, that there is an intelligence underneath the surface of his lines, we may well be rewarded by deeper understanding.

Ricoeur, his chips down and his wager made, plunges into the domain of the symbolic. Symbols, in his view, do not start as consciously created artistic representations. Rather, (taking an anthropological view) he sees them as being projected onto the cosmos by humanity in its first attempt to understand the order of the world. These "cosmic" symbols occupy the deepest layer of our consciousness: the human mind perceives that physical objects and qualities encountered in the world are, simultaneously, representative of something else, presences which cannot be grasped or seen, but can nonetheless be felt. The example of the primordial symbol of *defilement* as a symbol for evil is a principal example of this. The experience of physical defilement leads by

a natural extension to the experience, and the confession in language, of a *non-physical* defilement, distinct from and yet intrinsically linked to and signified by the physical. [135]

From these primordial and "cosmic" symbols, however, additional layers of symbol emerge as civilization and religion complexify; Ricoeur traces the way in which "sin" and "guilt" emerge as symbols of evil as the conception of the deity and of society developed.[136] But in addition to developing along with the evolution of a social structure, the symbol also develops in terms of what Ricoeur calls its "expressivity," moving from the cosmic, to that which is experienced internally (as "psychic" or "oneiric," depending on whether Ricoeur is thinking with Freud in the particular moment)[137] to the *poetic.* In this last stage, the symbol, although still an ontologically real relation and not a mere artistic artifact, consists in words wielded by the poet, and shows us "expressivity in its nascent state."[138] But although the symbol has, in this state, moved from the subconscious hierophanic situation where it began, these poetic symbols retain the same structure as the earlier sort. The symbols wielded by a poet like Ephrem signify in the same manner as those earlier cosmic imaginings: something which cannot be touched is made to feel present by the invocation of something tangible.

So much for Ricoeur's theory of the symbolic. It consists of a series of conjectures, yes, but they are nonetheless conjectures that are useful to think with, when it comes to Ephrem. We are not interested here in a grand archaeology on the scale that Ricoeur attempted with the

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[135] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 35: "In truth, defilement was never literally a stain; impurity was never literally filthiness, dirtiness… The representation of defilement dwells in the half-light of a quasiphysical infection that points towards a quasi-moral unworthiness."

[136] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 50: "The category that dominates the notion of sin is the category of 'before' God." 101: "the first direction in which the consciousness of guilt moves is, then, that of our *ethico-juridical* experience." (Italics in original.)

[137] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 348.

[138] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 14.

symbolism of evil. Nevertheless, in his reflection on symbols as ideas which emerge in the cosmic and eventually progress to the poetic, I think we discern a process that may be usefully thought about in Ephrem.

At the level of *method*, meanwhile, Ricoeur makes several helpful distinctions which should guide our treatment. One of the most significant is his division between the symbol and the myth. In Ricoeur's treatment, myths are symbols which have become embedded in narrative contexts, in order to offer explanations of phenomena.[139] The myths themselves are interesting objects and worthy of study; Ricoeur spends more than half of *Symbolism of Evil* treating a succession of four myths about the origin of evil.[140] But the myths are secondary; the symbols precede them and give rise to them.[141]

This will have some application to our study of Ephrem over the course of the next few chapters. As we will see, Ephrem's treatment of time and narrative are idiosyncratic. His poems operate on a kind of liturgical time, in which the narratives of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ are compressed. Quite in contrast to some of the other texts in the Syrian tradition that we will examine, Mary's own life, too, is compressed in this fashion. In the moment of the hymns, she is always simultaneously the virgin being visited by Gabriel, the mother in the manger being visited by magi, and the mother seeing her son die on the cross. These somewhat confusing moments become more readily intelligible if we bear in mind that Ephrem is interested in the *symbols* of Christ and Mary far more than he is interested in the *mythic story* of Christ and Mary.

[139] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 161–74.

[140] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 175–345.

[141] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 348.

Still more importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, Ricoeur's position that the symbols themselves are prior to the myths will inform my approach in the second half, when I turn to texts outside of Ephrem himself. These narratives, speeches, philosophical treatises, and legal debates each have their own mythic or narrative context, but they contain invocations of some of the same symbols that Ephrem uses, elaborated and qualified and described each according to their religious background. Operating on ground secured by Ricoeur, I will subordinate the narratives (or myths) of these texts to the symbols themselves, to facilitate a comparative understanding.

Another very important intervention that Ricoeur makes is his admonishment not to attempt to harmonize or rationalize the collection of symbols, nor to attempt to create some kind of "hierarchy" to structure them. Symbols do not occupy any kind of rational schema.

> The world of symbols is not a tranquil and reconciled world; every symbol is iconoclastic in comparison with some other symbol, just as every symbol, left to itself, tends to thicken, to become solidified in an idolatry.[142]

We have already seen that in Ephrem the pearl slips from a symbol of Christ, to a symbol of God, to a symbol of Mary, to a symbol of the Church; here Ricoeur prepares us for another, perhaps more troubling, inconsistency. When we come to Ephrem's symbols of Mary, sometimes he treats her as lowly and humble, and sometimes as glorious. Sometimes she is an agent, cultivating virtue, and sometimes he treats her as a passive receptacle, nearly as a dressing-room where Christ puts on the flesh. These symbols are, in Ricoeur's word, "iconoclastic" toward one another; they cannot be reconciled into one rational picture, no matter how we try. We must rather accept these inconsistencies as a natural, and even welcome, part of Ephrem's symbolic worldview. Equally, we must avoid picking any one symbol, even one that Ephrem himself seems to "favor," and letting it "thicken" into an "idolatry." To do this would be to recreate the mistake of Augustine of Hippo

[142] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 354.

(in Ricoeur's view), flattening the myths and symbols of the Fall into a distorted "rational" conception of original sin.

Ricoeur also guides us, by his own method in *Symbolism of Evil* and in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, as to how we may nevertheless attempt a rational and philosophical account of symbolic language. The symbol, after all, in his famous mantra, *gives rise to thought.*[143] We should engage with the full range of various symbols' meanings: considering them historically; investigating how different persons expressed the same symbolic ideas; teasing out internal implications and connections which tie one symbol to another. The symbol cries out to be interpreted, and we should freely give in to the call.

What Ricoeur wishes for us to avoid is regarding our interpretations as, in the etymological sense, *definitive*. Even if we are cautious, and avoid turning our interpretations into "conceptual" doctrines, we can never have the last word on a symbol. Like Ephrem's fountain, Ricoeur's symbol is an endless source, supercharged with meaning. The greatest mistake would be to treat it as though it were an allegory: the inner meaning discovered, the crude exterior casually discarded. We do not escape from symbols. Rather, Ricoeur's final move is what he calls "the second naiveté:" not a turn away from the image of the symbol, but a turn *to* it, no longer with the naïve primordial consciousness which first conceived it, but with a deepened understanding, still centering the image rather than our thoughts about the image.[144] Ricoeur is engaged in a philosophical project, not a historical one, but there is something in this move that we may appropriate for our work: at the end of the project, we will not have decoded or translated the

[143] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 347.

[144] Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil,* 351–56.

statement, “Ephrem’s poetry speaks of Mary as a temple.” Rather, we will be able to return *to* the same poems and the same images, with a greater appreciation of their symbolic weight.

Reading Ephrem as a Symbolic Theologian

The remainder of this dissertation first proposes to elaborate and then to contextualize Ephrem’s Marian symbolism. But before I turn to that work in the next chapter, it seems worthwhile to pause and gather the most important threads of our preceding discussion, and lay out a set of specific strategies that must characterize a sound “reading method” for Ephrem.

Ephrem’s writings are *symbolic poetry*. The adjective *symbolic* connotes that every statement of Ephrem’s presents a surface reality which contains deeper levels towards which it gestures. Ephrem is symbolic, not allegorical, in the sense that we have defined allegory; we should not expect to draw neat diagrams or charts of equivalencies between his “surface” signs and their “spiritual” referents, because he moves quickly between one use of a symbol and another, without stopping to explain his leaps. Nonetheless, a close and systematic reading can disclose certain repeating patterns of his symbolic imagination. We must be alert to implications and allusions. And we must also keep in mind the cautions raised by Gadamer and Ricoeur, and applied to Ephrem by Bou Mansour and den Biesen: above all, that the symbol is by its very nature polysemous and cannot be concretized into a single explicit meaning.

The noun *poetry*, meanwhile, reminds us that symbols are mediated to us linguistically, and that the structure of the words, no less than their content, can contribute to meaning. This includes line-level effects like repetition, assonance, chiasm, and wordplay; it also includes the structures which characterize Semitic verse in general and Ephrem in particular: the parallelism and contrapuntal antithesis that Botha has called our attention to. These structures create meaning

by clarifying the connection between elements in Ephrem's symbolic universe, by suggesting patterns, by hinting at things that are not expressed overtly, and by refining the symbols that are expressed through opposition and antithesis.[145]

From this, we can derive a few canons of interpretation. First, as much as practical limits make it possible, texts should be analyzed in their contexts, using continuous excerpts, ideally whole poems but at the least complete sentences. We should resist the temptation to "mine" the hymns for individual words and pretend to derive Ephrem's teaching from such extractions.[146] Ephrem embeds his symbols in specific contexts, structures, antitheses, and sound patterns, and their meaning is enriched by their surroundings. The temptation to assemble prooftexts by extracting small pieces, reading them through our own frameworks, and synthesizing them into "Ephrem's thought," however natural, can only lead us to reproduce some of the shortcomings of previous scholarship. Of course, practical considerations will limit the application of this principle. This is an analytical dissertation and not a line-by-line commentary, and I cannot treat every line of every poem. But in order to respect Ephrem's integrity and complexity as an artist, I center my study in the next chapter around the analysis of several lengthy excerpts of poems. When other texts are brought in it is in order to cast light on images, not to extract "doctrines," and I always proceed with an awareness that our poet embeds his words in *contexts* and interpret accordingly.

Relatedly, Ephrem must be thought to be a sophisticated writer in command of his medium. If he is repetitious, we must not fall into private aesthetic judgments and dismiss him as artless. Instead, we must ask, why is he repeating himself? What rhetorical structures might he be building through repetition? Moreover, we must think of Ephrem as a master of his language down to the

[145] On this last point, see Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique,* 536–37.

[146] See the example of Martin Jugie, cited in the introduction.

level of the individual word, capable of creating and reinforcing his meaning through puns and wordplay, assonance, and a full range of phonic poetic devices.

Thirdly, as we have observed throughout this chapter, Ephrem's main way of thinking about theological truth is through symbols. It is therefore to the symbols that we must turn if we want to understand what he thinks about Mary. The core of our method must therefore consist in reading poems where Mary is specially discussed, and trying to discern what symbolic patterns predominate when Ephrem talks about the Mother of God. Some of these may be obvious and explicit (as, for instance, when he directly refers to her as the Ark of the Covenant or a sacred virgin.) But we must also be aware of other symbolic patterns, no less central to his conception of Mary, which are alluded to more obliquely, as with his recurring pattern of talking about her as a prophetess, or the way that she is frequently connected with light. It is only with the symbols themselves in view that we can begin to think about their signification: how does Ephrem draw the connections between the literal referents of these images and their deeper, figurative meaning?

Fourth, as emerged in our discussion of the cultural contexts surrounding the pearl and was further developed in some of the remarks touching on Ricoeur, one of the chief methods that we can use to enrich our understanding of Ephrem's various symbols will be a comparative historical reading. After elucidating the major symbols that Ephrem uses in discussing Mary in chapter 2, I will turn to Ephrem's broader contexts in the late antiquity, focusing on those which surrounded him in fourth-century Syria. We need not think about these contexts as Ephrem's *deliberate* sources (although in a few cases, we will indeed be able to hypothesize that he is making specific allusions). Rather, by looking at the contemporary discourses of other Syrian Christians, of "pagan" Greeks, and early rabbinic Jews, we can sketch a world of late antique symbols and their resonances, and embed Ephrem within that larger world.

I conclude with a note of caution, again built on Gadamer and Ricoeur's contributions. In performing a historical analysis of the symbols used by Ephrem, we must avoid any temptation to think that we have thereby exhausted them, or nailed down what, *exactly*, Ephrem meant. We must especially avoid the mistake of a previous generation of scholars on Ephrem's Mariology, attempting to boil his poetry down into "objective" accounts of his position on such questions as the Immaculate Conception or Mary's *virginitas in partu.* This is to flatten Ephrem's symbols, and to ignore their limitless capacity for interpretation.

A project like mine is therefore limited by its methods. I will seek to enrich our understanding of what Ephrem *might* have intended by his use of a particular image, or what his poems *might* have meant for readers who encountered them in late antiquity. But we cannot step outside of Ephrem's symbolic world view, at least not without wrenching his thought into shapes it was never meant to have. The final result of this dissertation will not be a comprehensive account of Ephrem's doctrine of Mary's sinlessness, or his concept of Christ's divine indwelling. Nor will I provide a final and definitive account of the "meaning" of any one of Ephrem's symbols in its interreligious, multicultural context. We end instead where we began, with the symbols themselves. This is not quite Ricoeur's second naiveté: we do not return to the symbols in order to find existential meaning in our lives, because at root this is a historical project and not a philosophical one. But it is *analogous* to that return. Instead of a final concrete answer, we end up (such is the wager) with a deeper understanding, and perhaps even an appreciation.

CHAPTER TWO: SYMBOLS OF MARY IN THE THOUGHT OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

In the previous chapter, we outlined the history of the study of Ephrem's symbolism, examined his worldview, and proposed a method for reading his texts as symbolic poetry in a historical context. This investigation highlighted that for Ephrem, "symbolism" is not merely an ornamental feature of his writing, but a structuring principle of the universe. He writes symbolically because, in his view, God created the cosmos symbolically, to point to his incomprehensible self by means of comprehensible creation. The ultimate referent of Ephrem's symbolic structures, then, is God.

But if it is true that the ultimate end of Ephrem's symbolism is knowledge of God through intermediate means, it remains nonetheless the case that these intermediary symbols are worthy study in their own right: for Ephrem, because they reveal something about the proper interrelationships of scripture, sacrament, believer, Church and Christ; and for the modern scholar, because their study elucidates not only the particulars of Ephrem's theology, but also his position as a Christian in the multireligious milieu of fourth-century Syria.

Ephrem's depictions of Mary offer one avenue for such a study, and the one I undertake in this chapter. I will confine my investigation to some of Ephrem's most frequently invoked symbolic discourses about the Mother of God, especially those that relate to God's presence with(in) her. I will not attempt an exhaustive description; indeed, by the terms of symbolic theology that we developed above, the idea of an "exhaustive" doctrine of Mary in Ephrem would not be possible. Ephrem's language will always escape a clean reduction to a list of doctrinal principles. What these symbols share is an attempt to conceptualize the particular relationship that Mary enjoyed with her son: simultaneously a child within her and yet the one who sustained her; the one whom her mind could not grasp and yet the one whom she held within her arms. This relationship stands at the heart of Ephrem's symbolic treatment of Mary, and even in passages

where Christ is not explicitly named, we can often detect him lurking beneath the surface of Ephrem's thought. This study will remain fixed on Mary herself—the human locus where divine and creation met—but will ultimately say something about both God and humanity as well.

I mentioned before that this study would not be exhaustive; it would be impossible to explore every symbol that Ephrem uses to describe Mary in its full implication. But I wish to flag at the outset one specific, and important, symbolic system which this dissertation will touch on only lightly and in passing: this is the frequent depiction of Mary as the New Eve. The symbol is interesting, sometimes touching on the question of Christ's presence within Mary. However, at other times its function seems merely typological. In any event, Mary-as-Eve has already received extensive treatment in the scholarship, and I refer the reader to that work.[1]

The Hymns on the Nativity

References to Mary can be found throughout Ephrem's work.[2] However, the richest vein of continuous and variegated language about her is to be found in the cycle called the Hymns on the Nativity.[3] Because I center my discussion of Ephrem's Marian symbolism on this collection, some discussion of their origin and structure will be helpful by way of introduction.

The cycle of Hymns on the Nativity consists of twenty-eight poems, affirmed by Beck as being of undoubted authenticity, but having a somewhat confusing compositional history. The

[1] See the early study in Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 144–150; for a much more extensive study see Markus Hoffman, *Maria, die Neue Eva: Geschichtlicher Ursprung einer Typologie mit theologischem Potential* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2011), especially 364–401 on Ephrem.

[2] Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 23.

[3] The texts edited in Lamy's collection as the *Hymni de Maria* are generally agreed not to be authentic Ephrem (Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 23). The centrality of the Hymns on the Nativity to any treatment of authentic Ephremic Mariology has been remarked by numerous authors; see Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 23, Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 46–47, McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 32–33, Weedman, "Mary's Fertility," 9–11.

"core" of the cycle is a set of sixteen hymns composed for the liturgies of the Feast of the Nativity. Although not originally constructed as a cycle, contemporary scholarly consensus holds that they were, after their individual composition, collected by Ephrem himself, and called by him the *nuṣratha* or "lullabies," that is, songs sung to the infant Christ. Apart from the shared liturgical setting of the Nativity, this core is also distinguished by the fact that they share the same melody and the same meter.[4] Around this cycle of *nuṣratha*, however, twelve additional hymns have accumulated in the manuscripts. Though they neither center the feast of the nativity, nor share a meter, they overlap thematically with the original collection. Four of these, on Christ's messianic identity, are placed before the *nuṣratha* in the manuscripts, and eight focused on the paradox of the incarnation follow them (so that the *nuṣratha* are numbered five to twenty in Beck's edition). The whole cycle, except the last, is of certain authenticity, and even this exception is likely constructed from Ephremic stanzas, although he may not have written the hymn as we have it.[5]

Mary is referred to in passing allusions in the twelve added hymns, but she is above all the central figure of the *nuṣratha*, Indeed, she is often[6] portrayed as the singer of a part or the whole of the text of these lullabies, and it is through her voice that the reader (or hearer) of the hymns encounters the mystery of Christ. It should be noted, however, that the Mary of Ephrem's hymns

[4] Blake Hartung, "The Authorship and Dating of Ephrem's Syriac Corpus: A Reassessment," *ZAC* 22 (2018): 296–321, has argued for a reconsideration of the integrity of Ephrem's various hymn cycles in general; he correctly notes that the way they are grouped under titles like "On Virginity" or "On Faith" may erroneously give the impression that they represent coherent "treatises" (302); moreover, the evidence for Ephrem's original gathering of them into these cycles is scant. He proposes instead that they be considered under the rubric of "meter-melody" units as a sign of a set of texts which may be organically linked together; the *nusratha* are cited as a prime example (319).

[5] The still authoritative discussion of the authenticity of hymns can be found in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania),* CSCO 186 (Leuven: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1959), v–ix. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian,* 29 confirms the general judgment that even "Hymn 28" contains genuine Ephrem. For the history of the collection in general, see A. de Halleux, "La transmission des Hymnes d'Ephrem d'apres les ms. Sinai Syr. 10, f. 165v–178r.," *OCA* 197 (1974): 21–63 and for the internal structure and thematic coherence of the different components see the especially thorough treatment in Weedman, "Mary's Fertility," 9–19.

[6] Ephrem, *Nat.* 5.19–24, 6, 9.4–16, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 19 are explicitly framed as the words of Mary; in several of the others (e.g., 12, 13) the attribution of Mary as speaker is less certain but remains a plausible reading of the text.

does not speak as a historical character interacting with her son at a particular moment in time (as do the Marys of some other Syriac poetry)[7]; nor does she engage in a dramatic dialogue with any other character (except implicitly and one-sidedly with her Son). Rather, her poetic voice contains not only the historical moment of the birth of her child, but simultaneously the whole narrative of his life and death. It also contains the whole liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, and the whole history of the world from Adam and Eve, through the ancient matriarchs of Israel, to the eschaton. She speaks to Christ, to herself, and to the Church. Susan Ashbrook Harvey characterizes this position as "at once within and outside of time."[8] I agree, and would call her temporal mode more specifically "liturgical time,"[9] or even "symbolic time." It is not that Mary stands *outside* of the temporal order of events, and thus can see disconnected moments at the same time, but rather that, in her vision and in her speech, all time is collapsed into a single moment, *hic et nunc*, and all events participate in the same system of meaning. Her position in the manger, admiring her Son and marveling alike at his presence and at the worship of the magi before her, is *the same moment* as the liturgical service in which choirs of women assume her voice before the congregation;[10] both are also the same as the choirs of angels praising Christ on high. This is Ephrem's entire symbolic worldview, put into Mary's mouth.

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[7] See, for instance, the rich tradition of sogyatha dialogue poems involving Mary's encounters with Joseph, with angels, and with her son; a representative selection in English is collected in Sebastian Brock, *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010).

[8] Harvey, "On Mary's Voice," 64.

[9] Brock, "The Poet as Theologian," 245–247. In formulating it this way Brock takes inspiration (as do I) from Mircea Eliade's discussions of "sacred time." See for instance Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion,* trans. William Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1987), 68–115.

[10] See Harvey, "On Mary's Voice." Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 38 notes that the Hymns on Nativity "consistently indicate their use in a service for the nativity, and are replete with allusions to scriptural lections." He therefore does not include them in his general project of reconsidering the context of Ephrem's hymns.

Precisely because Mary is not only the subject, but also the speaker of many of these hymns, we will begin our investigation of Mary's relationship to Christ with an examination of her powerful, prophetic voice. By what means can she address a Son who cannot be confined to language? How do you speak that which cannot be spoken?

Mary, Prophecy, and the Power (and Danger) of Speech

The "original cycle" of hymns on the Nativity is distinguished by a common meter and melody. This melody is named at the beginning of Hymn 5 (the first of the series) as ܡܢܘ ܕܢܐܡܪ ܠܡܫܒܚܠܗ "Who is fit to speak?"[11] This question runs through much of Ephrem, highlighting a tension between word and silence when facing the mystery of the Incarnation.[12] The pious mouth feels called to utter words of praise to God, but, given the unutterable mysteries at the heart of Christianity (the Incarnation in particular), any such attempt feels inadequate, even audacious.

Hymn 6 on the Nativity dramatizes the melody's fundamental question by putting it in the mouth of Mary and particularizing it. How can *she*, the mother of Christ, be fit to speak in that essential parental act of naming her son?

> My mouth does not know how to call you.
> I tremble, O Son of Life. that I should dare
> Call on you as "Son of Joseph,"
> Because you are not his seed. But I shrink from renouncing
> The name of him who betrothed me
>
> While you are the son of One, I will call you now
> The "Son of Many," for unfit for you
> Are a multitude of names. You are "Son of God"

[11] In the manuscripts it is only named here, at the head of Hymn 5; all subsequent hymns in the cycle are headed with some phrase indicating, "the same tune." Beck's edition gives ܕܝ ܡܠܝ as the melody notation for the subsequent hymns; his apparatus provides the alternative readings of the other manuscripts, which vary sometimes by providing the number (ܕܝ ܡܠܝ ܗܕܐ etc.) and sometimes with other phrases of the same meaning; see e.g. Beck, *Ephraem Hymnen de Nativitate*, 50 for some of the alternatives.

[12] den Biesen, *Simple and Bold,* 103–206.

And also Human [lit. "son of man"], and also "Son of Joseph"
And also "son of David" and "Lord of Mary."[13]

The first line confesses Mary's uncertainty. Despite her parental relationship to the newborn child, she is at a loss, precisely because her child's parentage is complex. Note the specific cause of difficulty: elsewhere in Ephrem the stupefying marvel is that God could dwell within and be born from Mary, while here it is the question of the child's *paternity*. Mary's initial awed silence, however, is *immediately* broken. With her very next words she finds a name to call the child: "Son of Life." The impulse to silence is not permitted to eventuate in actual silence.

Even once this name is uttered, however, doubt remains. "Son of Life" cannot exhaust Christ's nomenclature. Mary immediately turns to consider Christ's relationship to her husband. She "trembles" to call him the Son of Joseph, because Joseph has no biological relationship to the child; but she is equally afraid to renounce her spouse. Two facets of this thought demand our attention. First, Mary's hesitation between applying and denying a name demonstrates a central tension in Ephrem's theory of names: no name can be applied to God in a wholly appropriate way, because God cannot be bound by the terms which define, and therefore limit, names.[14] Christ is not of the seed of Joseph. On the other hand, the faithful mind detects a great many names that she feels can be applied to God, even if not literally. The second facet clarifies and helps resolve the first: Mary does not argue herself into the position that "Son of Joseph" is the correct name because, in some spiritual sense, Christ is of Joseph's seed (she might well). Rather, Mary's objection is of a completely different character, namely that she does not want to renounce the name of her husband. This sets up a key Ephremic point. Names, as linguistic symbols, are

[13] Ephrem, *Nat.* 6.1–2. Translations from the Hymns on Nativity are my own, although I have consulted McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*

[14] For Ephrem's theory of divine names and its connection to the broader tradition, see Jeffrey Wickes, "Mapping the Literary Landscape of Ephrem's Theology of Divine Names," *Dumbarton Oakes Papers* 69 (2015): 1–14.

polysemous. Their surface meaning can communicate multiple connotations; therefore, their hidden or deeper meanings can be likewise variegated. When Mary makes a plea for calling Christ the "Son of Joseph" she reveals that the term "Son" can carry a variety of symbolic implications.[15] She is, in effect, teaching symbolic theology.

It is not surprising, then, that following her initial reticence to address her son, the second stanza sees her pouring forth a proliferation of names. (ܕܐ, "son of," appears six times in the five lines of this stanza, giving an example of the way that phonic effects help structure Ephrem's thought.) While acknowledging Christ is the "Son of One," she also wishes to call him the "Son of Many." After this comes a list of "son" names of doubtless scriptural warrant: son of God, a "son of man",[16] son of David. The disputed name "son of Joseph" is added to the list, verifying that it, too, is an appropriate symbol of Christ. Most interestingly, however, when it comes to Christ's relationship with Mary herself, the language shifts, and he is called not "son of Mary" but "Lord of Mary" (ܡܪܝܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ).[17] This unexpected shift in the language only serves to accentuate the main point of the stanza: "sonship" can symbolize many different relations and realities. By withholding it in the one place where it would seem most literally and biologically appropriate Ephrem-through-Mary demonstrates how much the symbolized meanings exceed the limits of the symbol. The unspeakable relation remains unspoken.

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[15] The question of Christ's "sonship" with respect to Joseph, and the various ways in which that word is both appropriate and necessary to define their relationship, is a major topic of discussion at Ephrem, *Nat*. 2.12–16.

[16] Or "human being" – the Syriac compound ܒܪ ܐܢܫ is usually to be translated in this way and ought to be here, although the closeness of this compound to the Christological title, "son of Man" is tantalizing, and may even be a deliberately suggestive allusion.

[17] As one might expect, some of the manuscripts do indeed supply ܒܪ ܡܪܝ here, and Beck himself indicates that he approves of this reading (Beck, *Ephraem Hymnen de Nativitate*, 51). However, I think the version given is both theologically interesting and defensible on other grounds. Besides the simple principle *lectio difficilior praeferenda est,* we may further note that the repetitious "mar mar" assonance of ܡܪ ܡܪܝ has the look of the kind of deliberate effect that Ephrem elsewhere employs.

The sudden interruption of a paradox (what infant is "lord" over its parent?) in place of the expected "son" also highlights one of the central themes of Ephrem's Mariology. Mary's maternity is paradoxical because, although she participates in the normal behaviors of motherhood, she is not "in control" of her situation; instead, everything that she does—even the things which a normal mother does to sustain the life of her helpless child—are instead done with Christ's control remaining sovereign.[18]

Ephrem's placement of all of this in Mary's mouth may seem, in the first place, a simple matter of choosing an appropriate actor for a dramatic setting. But as we have observed, Ephrem's Mary is not really constrained to a historical moment. Instead, her speech which began in doubt and silence ends in polyphony. In other places throughout the Hymns on the Nativity, we again and again see him attributing a particularly powerful voice to Mary, whose special relationship with her divine son allows her to say things which would be audacious in the mouths of others. In some places, the point is made by a rhetorical question, whose main thrust is to emphasize Christ's unusual parentage and the paradox of a lowly human giving birth to the son of God, as:

> Who will lullaby the son in her womb in the same way as Mary?
> Who would dare to name her son
> The son of the Maker and Son of the Creator?
> Who [else] is there who has called
> Her son, "Son of the Highest"[19]

In other places, however, this same theme is more than rhetorical: Mary asserts that her voice is a spiritual gift of a particular kind. She asks, "apart from the spirit, who will sing to you?

[18] We will return to this motif below, but may briefly cite Ephrem, *Nat.* 5.24, 11.5, 15.1 among others.

[19] Ephrem, *Nat.* 8.17. Note the repetition, again, of the word "son" here. cf. also Ephrem, *Nat.* 9.1 "Who dares to speak to her son as though in prayer?"

Behold, *a new tongue of prophecy* is bubbling up in me."[20] This prophetic note is elsewhere given a more precise expression:

> … I will open my mouth,
> And you, fill my mouth. I am your earth,
> And you are the husbandman: Sow your voice in me,
> [You who] sow himself in the womb of his mother.[21]

Here the connection between two modes of Christ's presence in Mary are drawn together explicitly. Just as Christ sowed himself in Mary at the incarnation, so too Mary's special gift of speech, whereby she is able to call upon Christ and name him properly, is the result of Christ's implanting himself in her again. The inspiration of her mouth, alluded to above, is analogous to the incarnation. It also has a biblical parallel; in Jeremiah 1:9, God tells the prophet that he "has put My words in your mouth (נתתי דברי בפיך)." The mode of inspiration which Mary asks for, in order to be able to praise her son adequately, is *prophetic.*

The connection with biblical prophets is reinforced in another place, where Ephrem evokes Isaiah: "if [Mary] held you, the coal of mercies kept her bosom."[22] As Kathleen McVey points out in her translation, the "coal of mercies" is an allusion to Isaiah 6:6–7, where Isaiah's lips are purified by a coal; this suggests "that Mary's role is a prophetic one."[23] The image is slightly more complex than this *in situ*, as we shall see in a moment, but the association of a scriptural mode of purification that was applied to a prophet is highly suggestive.

From these passages, we can make our first note of a general character concerning Mary's relationship to Christ in Ephrem: Christ's presence in Mary occupies multiple modes beyond the

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[20] Ephrem, *Nat.* 16.8.

[21] Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.1 cf. also Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.4–6.

[22] Ephrem, *Nat.* 11.5.

[23] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 132n289.

simple fact of his presence in her womb. He inspires her and enables her to praise him and name him adequately. He makes her into his prophetess.[24]

Let us return now to Hymn 6 on the Nativity. After the initial kaleidoscope of names, Ephrem now begins to discuss words and voices in a different mode:

> Who gave to the one without a mouth
> [to be] Lord of Mouths? In your pure conception,
> Evil ones have slandered me. Holy One,
> Protect your mother! Display powers,
> That they may know whence is your birth.
>
> For your sake, behold I am hated,
> All-Merciful! Look, I am pursued
> Because I conceived and I bore the one Refuge
> For humanity. Let Adam rejoice,
> That you are the Key of this Paradise.

The abrupt transition from the initial scene to Mary's slander at the hands of evil ones is bridged by the common theme of *speech.*[25] Here, language is used not in praise of Christ *by* Mary, but by evil ones *against* Mary. The slanderers who revile Mary on account of the Incarnation are a recurring trope in the Hymns on the Nativity; often, they are taken to be the Jews, skeptical about Mary's claim to virginal conception.[26] This is definitely present here, but given the previous focus on voices and on speech in a prophetic mode, I think we may also see a hint of Mary's identification with the prophets even in the way that she is spoken against. After all, Christ himself mentions that the prophets were "persecuted" in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:12) and the same

[24] On Mary as a prophetess in its social context in Ephrem's fourth century, see Harvey, "On Mary's Voice," 64–72.

[25] The transition may strike us as a non sequitur, but the connection was evidently meaningful for Ephrem. A similar jump from discussing Mary's potent speech to discussing the ways that she is slandered is found at Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.6–7.

[26] See Kathleen McVey, "The Anti-Judaic Polemic of Ephrem Syrus' Hymns on the Nativity," in Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins, and Thomas H. Tobin eds., *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins Presented to J. Strugnell on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday,* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), 229–240, and also the more extensive discussion of this point in Chapter 5.

verbal root ܪܕܦ is used both in the Peshitta version of that passage and in this hymn.[27] Because, then, Mary both *bore* the child and *speaks out prophetically* about the child, she is persecuted.

The fifth stanza of Hymn 6 develops this same theme:

> See, the sea rages against your bearer,
> As though against Jonah! See, Herod!
> The furious wave seeks to drown
> "The Lord of the Seas" (ܡܪܝ ܝܡܐ). Where will I escape?
> You, teach me, Lord of his Mother![28]

This stanza is wonderful for the way that it simultaneously displays several of Ephrem's poetic gifts. First, a natural metaphor is summoned up, and then, in a characteristic move, Ephrem pulls together several biblical narratives in order to dramatize the moment. The slanderers who accuse Mary are like a raging sea. The oceanic image allows Ephrem to bring in Jonah, the prophet most famous for a notorious nautical incident. It is a wonderful moment of natural and biblical images intermingling, but it is also an opportunity for Ephrem to associate Mary and her persecution explicitly with the troubles suffered by another prophet.[29]

Then, the Matthaean pericope of Herod's pursuit of Jesus and his family, and the slaughter of the innocents, is also invoked: Herod is a great wave who is attempting to drown "the Lord of the Sea." That last phrase seems, on a surface level, to apply to Christ, but it conceals a pun: "māre

[27] Cf. also Ephrem's discussion of the persecution of prophets under Jezebel, expressed in violence "by the sword" in Ephrem, *Virg.* 28.9.

[28] Ephrem, *Nat.* 6.5.

[29] Ephrem's evaluation of the figure of Jonah is complex. He is the major subject of Hymns on the Virginity 42–50. The prophet to the gentiles is sometimes figured as a type of Christ (like Christ, Jonah had a double birth, both from his mother and a "birth" from the fish). Elsewhere, however, "for Ephrem Jonah has two sides: while he is often portrayed as a negative example because of his actions, as the one who brought salvation to the Ninevites he is also a symbol of Christ's activity." See Erić Boško, "Prophet Jonah and the Ninevites in the Madrashe on Virginity by Ephrem the Syrian," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 37 (2020): 53–72 (here, 72).

yammē" sounds quite close to "Maryam," containing therein another Ephremic ambiguity; in the biblical pericope, it is Christ that Herod pursues, while in the hymn, his mother is the target.[30]

The elision of distinction between Christ and his mother is something that Ephrem elsewhere explores, especially in relation to the theme of voices, speech, and names. From the fact that Mary is uniquely able to speak about her unspeakable son, Ephrem will say that there is something ineffable about her, too:

> Lord, no one knows how to call
> Your mother. One will call her "virgin"—
> Her child stands. And "spouse"—
> No one knew her. And if your mother
> Is incomprehensible, who is fit [to comprehend] you?[31]

Here the insufficiency of names is transferred from Christ, as it was at the beginning of Hymn 6, to Mary herself. Note that the logic is the same as we found in Mary's discourse on Christ's sonship: there are names which we might want to call Mary, but by the limits of their definitions, they seem not to apply. The gap between the desire to invoke the names (Ephrem does call Mary both "virgin" and "spouse")[32] and the sense that they are inappropriate must be filled by an appeal to symbolism.

Elsewhere, *bad* speech about Mary, like bad speech about her Son, is also noted and condemned by Ephrem. He cautions, "Let mouths fear to blaspheme [Mary], lest they be shut… Do not be like the daughter of Saul, whose genealogy is completed."[33] This evil speech against

[30] Ephrem, *Virg.* 21.3 also makes Mary the target of Herod's rage.

[31] Ephrem, *Nat.* 11.1.

[32] In fact, he does so in the very next stanzas, 11.2–3.

[33] Ephrem, *Nat.* 14.10. For the charming last line, cf. the wonderful Roman euphemism, "vixit."

Christ's mother may be compared with the misguided "investigations" carried out by heretics. In a very different context, Ephrem directly connects this question to the problem of misused speech:

> Lord, silence us! For if your revelation
> Has caused the wise to wander, because they could not comprehend
> Your birth from Mary, while the scribes, with controversy, have split your birth…
> If they could not understand
> Your humanity—a human [birth]—who could comprehend
> Your divine birth? Praises to your begetter.[34]

Here again we see a parallel between Christ and his mother being formed by Ephrem. Whereas before Mary is ineffable because Christ is ineffable, here Mary is misspoken about because Christ, too, is misspoken about.[35] This thought is the same as the one we saw expressed in stanza four of Hymn 6, where Mary makes it explicit that the scorn and hatred that she receives is on Christ's account. In one of those antitheses which Ephrem deploys to sharpen his point, Mary is *pursued* because she has born the *refuge* (or "place of asylum) for humanity; those who should be seeking respite in *him* are instead chasing after *her*. The line which commands "Adam" to rejoice here reads almost as though she is instructing him: unlike the slanderers, who pause over Mary's conception, she wills that Adam respond with appropriate speech—that of praise.

Before we conclude our study of Hymn 6, there is one more dimension of Mary the prophetess that Ephrem discusses elsewhere in the corpus. Although in the passages that we have been speaking about so far he emphasizes the power of her *voice*, and Christ's own role in providing it, elsewhere Ephrem uses a different, musical metaphor. Mary is instead portrayed as a

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[34] Ephrem, *HdF* 51.4, from the translation in Wickes, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith.* On the problem of heretical investigations in general, see Wickes, *Bible and Poetry*, 24–42.

[35] It is noteworthy, but not surprising given Ephrem's theology of speech, that in neither our passage nor in this selection from the Hymns on Faith are the mis-speakers corrected with more speech. Talk about God, for Ephrem, is fundamentally about praise, not argument. Instead, the "wandering wise" are to be silenced, and the ones slandering Mary are given not arguments, but "powers" (ܚܝܠܐ) to shut them up.

musical instrument: "Blessed is the infant who made his mother the harp of his hymns!"[36] The image of a harp being played by God connects Mary to several other 'inspired' figures. First, it relates her to King David, the inspired singer of the psalms;[37] however, it also connects her to the prophets, who elsewhere in the Hymns on the Nativity are also said to have a "harp."[38]

Moreover, the process of speaking prophetically about Christ is taxing; at one point, Mary asks her Son the divine musician to lay down his instrument and let her cease:

> Withhold your gift from your harp
> So it can rest a while. You taught me
> Everything that I said; may you now teach me
> How to be quiet. You have worn me out,
> Now may you let me rest. Glory to the Father![39]

Mary has been worn out by singing about Christ and needs rest. Note, in this stanza, that the singer emphasizes that the words she has been speaking are ones that Christ has taught her; note too, that silence is not the mere absence of words here, but rather something that Christ must *teach* her; silence is a theologically freighted state for Ephrem.

Returning once more to Hymn 6, with which we began, the sixth stanza is the last to feature Mary explicitly:

> I will flee with you, so that I will acquire in you
> Life everywhere. The pit, with you,
> Is not the pit, for in you one rises
> Into Heaven. The grave with you

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[36] Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.4. On the history of the image of the harp or lyre (the word is the same [ܚܢܐ] in Syriac; I prefer "harp" but much of the literature uses "lyre"), see Andrew Palmer, "'A Lyre Without a Voice': The Poetics and the Politics of Ephrem the Syrian," *ARAM* 5 (1993): 371–99.

[37] David is associated with the harp at e.g. Ephrem, *Nat.* 25.8. See also Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 71–74. Wickes notes (72) that the use of the harp/lyre not only allows Ephrem to identify with David, but also lets him claim a combination of divine inspiration and human frailty that matches his broader theological project. I agree and argue that the same pertains to Mary-as-harp here.

[38] Ephrem, *Nat.* 2.2. Cf. also Ephrem, *HdF* 22.1, which speaks of the two harps of "the prophets and the apostles."

[39] Ephrem, *Nat.* 19.19.

Is not the grave, because you are the resurrection.[40]

Mary here announces that she is fleeing *with* Christ (in addition to *on account* of Christ). The emphasis here is less on Mary's particular relationship with Christ than it is on his transformative power: he can turn a pit into the ascension into heaven, and the grave into the resurrection. And yet, it is Mary who is the one to proclaim this fact, centering again her powerful voice.

The remainder of the hymn moves away from the Marian imagery with which it begins and need not detain us long. But it is worth noting briefly how the hymn which starts with Mary's proliferation of names for Christ continues. Ephrem enumerates a host of other characters, and describes their responses to the incarnation: John the Baptist, Simeon, Anna, the Magi, the barren woman, and Zachariah are all united in the act of recognizing Christ and speaking to him—in symbols, in lullabies, in praises, and in blessings.[41] Let us note too that several of them are prophets: Anna and John the Baptist are explicitly called so in scripture.[42] The theme of Mary as a prophet is thus subtly reinforced by the company she keeps.

A climactic moment near the end of the hymn shows the effects of Mary's prophetic gift:

> The whole creation became mouths
> And cried out over him. The Magi cried out
> By their offerings, the barren women cried out
> With their children, the star of light
> Cried out in the air, "see, the Son of the King!"[43]

[40] Ephrem, *Nat.* 6.6.

[41] Symbols are mentioned in Nat. 6.7, lullabies in 6.12 and 6.14. praises in 6.16–17.

[42] Anna, mentioned in 6.13–14, is called a prophetess at Luke 2:36; John the Baptist, mentioned at 6:9–11 and 18, is called a prophet at Matthew 11:9–11; elsewhere Ephrem mentions him as "great among the prophets" (ܪܒ ܒܢܒܝܐ) at Ephrem, *Virg.* 15.2.

[43] Ephrem, *Nat.* 6.21.

The poem which started with Mary's mouth uncertain how to address her infant child ends with all creation becoming mouths to sing his praises.[44] Mary, the prophetess, has taught the cosmos to call him "the Son."

Reciprocity and Paradoxical Motherhood

One recurring theme in Ephrem's treatment of Mary is the way that her maternity is distinct precisely because it is complex, paradoxical and reciprocal. In an ordinary parent-child relationship, the child—especially when an infant—is utterly dependent on the mother. But Christ, as we have already seen, is the "Lord of Mary." She cannot be to him as a normal mother is to her child; if ever he is dependent on her, it is because he willed it to be so. This reversal of fortunes, whereby Christ makes himself dependent on one who is dependent on him, enables Mary to become the site of a broader kenotic moment.[45] This discourse does complex things with Mary's agency: on the one hand, all of her normal maternal activities are only undertaken because Christ wills them; on the other hand, nevertheless, she *does* do them, and as a result, she becomes a site of power. This paradox is covered in several of the hymns, but perhaps most completely in Hymn on the Nativity 11.

We have already seen the first stanza above in our discussion of Mary's derivative ineffability. The next stanza introduce the paradox of Mary's existence:

> For she is your mother on her own
> And your sister with everyone. She was mother to you,
> She was sister to you. She is, again, your betrothed
> With the Virgins. In everything,
> See how you adorned her, glory of your mother.

[44] We can observe a similar pattern happening, although on a less cosmic scale, in Ephrem, *Nat.* 8.16–19.

[45] On Ephrem's view of Mary as a mother, see McVey, "Ephrem The Syrian's Use of Female Metaphors," 280–84.

For she was betrothed in the way according to nature
Until you came, and she conceived
In a way not in nature after you came,
O Holy One, and she was a virgin
While she gave birth to you in a holy fashion (ܒܬܩܕܫܐ).[46]

Mary got through you all the tell-tale signs
Of matrons, conception was within her
Without union, milk in her bosom
That was not customary; the dry land
You have suddenly made into a font of milk.[47]

The first part of the second stanza introduces the problem: although Mary is mother to Christ, she is not *merely* mother to Christ; indeed, she bears relations of sisterhood and betrothed as well. Yet Ephrem is careful to note that not all of these can be considered in the same way. One, sisterhood, she has in common with all, and it symbolizes the unity that she possesses with him by dint of his incarnation as a human being. One, betrothal, she has in common only with those who safeguard their chastity. The "marriage" of virgins to Christ being a well-established topos in Ephrem, as well shall see. And one relation, that of maternity, belongs to her alone. Ephrem's repetition ("she was mother to you, she was sister to you") serves here to re-emphasize the point that these are distinct roles.

But because Mary holds all of these roles simultaneously, her maternity cannot be in the ordinary fashion. The next stanza emphasizes the particular transformative role of Christ on Mary by the repetition of the words "nature" and "you came." Before Christ came to Mary, she had a natural existence. The moment of his advent and conception, however, removed her from the order of nature. This is symbolized in the last line, where she gives birth while still a virgin. This virgin

[46] McVey construes ܩܕܫ roots as "chaste" in general throughout her translation of the Hymns on Nativity (see McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian* 67n25 for her rationale). Although I think this captures a real sense of the word as it applies to moral theology, I think the connection with holiness is important to maintain, especially in order to highlight certain comparative elements in the coming chapters.

[47] Ephrem, *Nat.* 11.2–4.

birth gives rise to still more effects that are "in a way not in nature": although Mary acquires all of the "customary signs" which characterize motherhood, Ephrem insists that she acquired them *because of Christ.* The infant in her womb caused her "dry land" to become a land flowing with milk. This last symbol is a potent one. The coming of Christ bestows fertility and in a sense renews a world that has thirsted for him.[48]

While Mary does perform all the normal functions of a mother to her infant son (feeding, giving a drink, embracing), Ephrem interjects that all of these actions were not done to satisfy an unavoidable need on Christ's part, as would be the case "in nature," but because Christ himself willed it to be so:

> If she bore you, your great mountain [bulk]
> Lessened its weight. If she nourished you,
> Then it was on account of your hunger. If she gave you milk,
> Then you willed to be thirsty. And if she held you,
> The coal of mercies kept her bosom.[49]

Here, the emphasis seems to be on preserving Christ's sovereign power; elsewhere in Ephrem the paradox of Mary giving existence and sustenance to the one who created and sustains her is more explicitly fronted:

> Through a power from him, the womb of Mary became able
> To bear the one who bears everything
> From the treasure-house of the whole creation
> Mary gave to him all that she gave.
> She gave him milk from what he brought into being.
> She gave him food from what he created.
> As God, he gave milk to Mary
> And again, she suckled him as a human.[50]

[48] Cf. e.g. the song of the barren woman at Ephrem, *Nat.* 6.16, and see below on Mary as microcosm.

[49] Ephrem, *Nat.* 11.4–5.

[50] Ephrem, *Nat.* 4.182–185.

Here again we see Ephrem's emphasis on Christ's sovereignty (it is "through power from him" that Mary's womb is able to endure his divine presence within her), but it is paired with another motif; Christ himself has created the very resources with which Mary sustains and nourishes her child. Indeed, Christ has himself, as God, given Mary milk. This is the heart of what I've termed the "reciprocal" maternity of Mary: she sustains the one who sustains her, and indeed, the whole universe.

The last line of stanza five, with its evocative use of the "coal of mercies" from Isaiah 6, we have seen before. McVey has commented that it injects an interesting prophetic note into this poem. But I suspect that an even broader kind of "purity" than the prophetic purification of lips is meant here. Quite apart from any question of Christ's sovereign power, his presence within Mary poses a purity question: how can the absolute holiness of Christ dwell in, and draw nourishment from, a human being? But just as Isaiah is made fit by the purification of his lips, so too Christ purifies Mary and makes her a holy habitation for himself.

The theme of Christ's willing himself to feel hunger, thirst and other human needs brings to mind the kenotic hymn of Philippians 2, and this motivates the close of the hymn. (We will consider two of the remaining three stanzas.)

> Your mother is a marvel (ܪܝܡܐ); the Lord entered her
> And he became a servant. He entered speaking
> And was silenced within her. He entered her thundering,
> And his voice became silent. He entered the shepherd of all,
> And became a lamb in her, and came out bleating.
>
> Your mother's womb overturned the orders.
> The founder of all entered as a rich one
> He came out poor. He entered her as the exalted one
> He came out humble. He entered her as the shining one
> And he put on a contemptible color and came out.[51]

[51] Ephrem, *Nat.* 11.6–7.

In this extraordinary passage, the fact of Christ willing himself to have human needs from his mother is conjoined with the whole miracle of his willing humbling of himself. The needs of his body are not forgotten (they are included in the 8th stanza, which I omit), but they are transcended. Christ surrenders his majesty, his power of speech and all his celestial riches, and puts on[52] a drab color and emerges the womb as a humbled human being. Perhaps most striking in this passage, Christ exchanges one of his Christological titles (the Good Shepherd) for another (the lamb) and begins the long journey to his death.

All of this is interesting, but what is most remarkable about this passage is the implications which Ephrem draws out of this kenotic moment for Mary. His symbolic, associative logic turns Mary's womb into a "wonder" as the site of all of these transformations. Even more striking, he asserts here that Mary's womb "overturns the orders." That is, it has a direct, instrumental role in bringing about Christ's willing self-abasement. A rigorous propositional analysis might disagree: Mary's womb is merely the site, not the cause, of Christ's kenosis. Christ empties himself of his own accord. But then, for Ephrem, Christ is hungry at Mary's breast of his own accord too, and yet it is still Mary doing the feeding. Mary's womb has its power through the will of her Son, yes; but it has power nonetheless.

This sudden shift in the theme of Hymn 11 suggests a surprising dimension of Mary's reciprocal maternity. One might have thought that, since Mary's son isn't *truly* dependent on her, and only needs her motherly functions because of an act of his own will, that her motherhood isn't "real," but rather a kind of counterfeit or play-acted maternity, a species of Mariological Docetism. Ephrem turns his argument in the opposite direction. Rather than minimize Mary's maternal

[52] ܠܒܫ is a standard Ephremic word for Christ's assumption of humanity; it's interesting here that what he puts on is not "humanity" or "flesh" but an unfashionable hue! The kenotic implications override the incarnational in this passage.

actions, he gives her womb a functional role in Christ's kenotic activity. Mary's womb not only bears the unbearable Son of God in virginity and holiness; it "overturns the orders"—even in the divinity.

The Lowly Exalted: Humility and Poverty

A related theme is to be found in a subsequent hymn. Mary's womb is powerful because it is the site where Christ puts aside his greatness and emerges as a lowly infant. Something of the opposite transformation, on the other hand, is to be found in Mary herself through Christ's operation on her. Taking his cue, perhaps, from the *exaltavit humiles* of Mary's song in response to Gabriel,[53] Ephrem makes much of the fact that just as Mary's womb has permitted Christ to transform from mighty to humble, so too he has raised up a poor and lowly girl to be his mother, and made her the envy of the rich and powerful by his attention.

The text of Hymn 15 is put in Mary's mouth. The beginning, which we have already seen above, is an invocation of Christ: "I will open my mouth, and you, fill my mouth" so that she may sing his praise.[54]

> Marveling at me are all the chaste ones
> The daughters of the Hebrews, and the virgins,
> The daughters of the princes. It is in you that
> The daughter of the poor is envied, and it is in you that
> The daughter of the lowly is enviable. Who gave me you?[55]

[53] Luke 1:52; the Peshitta text of this verse is ܕܚܙܝܢ ܒܪܝܫ̈ܐ ܕܫܦ̈ܠܐ ܒ ܕܡܬܠ̈ܐ ܫܦ̈ܠ.

[54] Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.1.

[55] Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.2.

In the previous hymn we examined, we found that Mary was a ܡܬܬܡܗ, a marvel.[56] In that instance the psychological content of the marvel was subordinated to the kenotic function of Christ which evoked it. Here, however, it is the mental response of various women which is fronted. Mary says that the daughters of the Hebrews, virgins, and the daughters of the princes are ܡܬܬܡܗ̈, "marveling" at her. Moreover, this marvel is given a negative psychological valence when we learn that they are *envious* of her. The structure of the verse gives some of the reason; each of the lines except for the first begins with an invocation of the word for "daughter," first twice in the construct plural (ܒܢܬ) identifying those who marvel at Mary, and then twice in the construct singular (ܒܪܬ), establishing some of the salient contrasting elements of Mary's identity in opposition to those who envy her.[57] The repetition serves both to remind us that we are in a feminine space, and also to establish an important pattern of one-against-many. Mary has been chosen, Christ has been given to *her* (singular) with the result that the others marvel and envy.

Note, too, a significant fact about the women in this passage: they are *all chaste.* This is a theological datum for Mary, but Ephrem goes out of his way to emphasize that both the daughters of the Hebrews and also the daughters of the princes are chaste and virginal. The distinguishing fact between Mary and the women who envy her is thus not reducible to a kind of praise or reward for Mary's chastity (that strand of thought does exist elsewhere in Ephrem) as compared with "sinful women." Instead, the stanza highlights two other polarities which Ephrem is eager to construct. The first is the contrast between Jews and Christians; the second is the polarity between rich and poor. Christ rejects the wombs "of the Hebrews" as, in Ephrem's estimation, the Hebrews

[56] Ephrem, *Nat.* 11.6.

[57] The repetition of the construct "daughter" here may also evoke for us the repetition of the construct "son" with which our investigation of Ephrem's Mariology began, see Ephrem, *Nat.* 6.1–2.

are going to reject him (Mary's identity here as herself a "daughter of Hebrews" is elided).[58] He also rejects the daughters of the powerful, and instead comes to Mary. Mary's abjection is emphasized here, as she is the daughter of both the lowly and the poor (ܡܟܝܟܬܐ and ܡܣܟܢܬܐ) in contrast with the daughters of the princes (ܒܢܬ̈ܐ). It is precisely this polarity which is about to be complicated by the action of Christ. Mary's final question in stanza 2 anticipates the transition: despite the fact that she is the lowly one, nonetheless and against expectation, it is she that received the gift of Christ within her.

> "Son of Wealthy One, that hated the womb
> Of the wealthy ones, what is it that led you
> To the poor? Joseph is in want
> And I am needy. Your merchants packed up
> And carried gold to the house of the poor."
>
> She [Mary] saw the magi. Many were her songs
> At their gifts. "See, the ones worshipping you
> Surround me, and also your gifts
> Encircle me. Blessed is the infant
> Who made his mother the harp of his hymns."[59]

This stanza starts with a paradox: although Christ is himself the Son of the "Wealthy One" (ܥܬܝܪܐ, masculine singular), when it comes to his sonship as a human Person, he avoids the womb of the wealthy ones (ܥܬܝܪ̈ܬܐ feminine plural). His birth from a woman is not like his generation from the Father, and so he shuns the daughters of the princes, and comes again to Mary. The spiritual wealth possessed by his father does not assimilate to earthly riches, but is better suited to the poverty of Mary. The pointed question ("what led you?") rhetorically heightens this paradox.

[58] Elsewhere, let us note, he will play up Mary's identification with the matriarchs of Israel, as for instance at Nat. 9.7ff.

[59] Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.3–4.

Moreover, he comes to Joseph as well: although as we have seen previously, Joseph's role as a "parent" to Christ is an ambivalent one in the Hymns on the Nativity, when it comes to emphasizing the poverty of Christ, his human paternal role is reintroduced. Nor is this the only place where this happens; at another point in the Hymns on the Nativity, Ephrem gives voice to Joseph himself: "I did not know that there was within her womb a great treasure that would enrich my poverty all of a sudden."[60] Although it is above all to Mary's womb that Christ comes as to the biology of his incarnation, it is "a house of the poor ones" (plural) that he is drawn to when he shuns the womb of the wealthy.

At this point the Incarnation literally reverses Mary's fortune. Ephrem integrates the story of the visitation of the Magi into his account of Mary's elevation from lowliness, transforming or expanding the significance of the biblical story. The gifts of gold and other treasures which the Gospel makes tokens of reverence to the newborn King are here situated rather with respect to Mary, as the magi visit "the house of the poor ones." The gifts are placed around her and encircle her. Rather than occupying the "house of the poor ones" she is now surrounded by gold. But it is important to note that, naturally enough, this enrichment is not absolute, but relative to her relationship to Christ; she is surrounded by rich gifts, but they are *his* gifts, and she participates in wealth because the Son of the Wealthy One has chosen her for the Incarnation.

This theme, of Christ preferring Mary over the wealthy despite her poverty, recurs elsewhere in the Hymns. Thus we hear, for instance, that Christ's "greatness bent down and manifested from the poor" even while the "the noble-born women" and "the luxurious ladies" waited in expectation that Christ might be born from them.[61] In another passage, Mary imagines

[60] Ephrem, *Nat.* 5.17.

[61] Ephrem, *Nat.* 8.20.

herself as having become "a vessel" to receive the "great sea" of Christ; the psalms of David and the words of the Prophets act as boats, which enter into her and unload "great riches" into her.[62] Interestingly, here it is not the Incarnation itself which brings the riches; instead, they are textually transferred to her through the writings of David and the Prophets. This verbal mediation of wealth is also found at the end of Hymn 15: David's psalms (specifically, Ps 72:15), are read as promising that Christ would receive gold from Sheba. The prophetic utterance finds fulfillment when in fact the magi come and pile gold and myrrh before the infant Christ.[63]

Let us pause and note that the last line-and-a-half of stanza four neatly draws together all three of the themes we have discussed already. First, we observe the inverted or reciprocal maternal relationship which Mary and her son possess when Mary praises her infant for "making his Mother into a harp." Second, we note that the fact that Mary has become a harp is suggestive of Mary's inspired voice: she is the instrument, but the tunes which she is playing belong to her son. Third, the whole section is embedded in the context of Christ exalting Mary in her humility. This concatenation of images is fundamental to Ephrem's symbolic method: although when we analyze it discursively we isolate individual pieces to consider their implications, as Ephrem composes they all flow freely together, because they are all different reflections of the same great reality.

Mary's Symbolic Virginity

Living in a time of increasing emphasis on asceticism and sexual renunciation in Christianity,[64] Ephrem has a great deal to say about virginity in general throughout his works, and it will not be

[62] Ephrem, *Nat.* 9.4.

[63] Ephrem, *Nat.* 15.9.

[64] Both Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity,* Rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) are still classic studies on the development of sexual asceticism in

possible to exhaust the theme here.[65] We will confine our remarks to Mary's virginity, and especially the way that virginity relates to the indwelling of her Son.[66]

Before beginning that examination, it may be well to take one example of the real spiritual power that Ephrem attributes to virginity. At the end of Hymn 14 on the Nativity, Ephrem considers the careers of three great prophets in the history of Israel: Elijah, Elisha, and Moses. In each case, Ephrem takes the biblical story of the prophet's great deeds on behalf of Israel, and, by interjecting a sometimes-strained emphasis on the man's sexual restraint, argues that their spiritual powers derived from their chastity. The logic of these connections takes the form of a kind of pun. Therefore, because Elijah *restrained* the desires in his body, he could *restrain* the rain from the idolaters, and because he mastered the *fire* of sexual desire within himself he called down *fire* upon the altar at his command.[67] Even more amusingly, because Moses *split* himself from his wife, he is able to *split* the sea.[68] Virginity and chastity, then, are not merely biological facts or ascetic practices for Ephrem. They have a kind of spiritual power that connects them to the cosmos itself.

late antique Christianity. Both, however, are notable for their lack of interest in Syrian material; Ephrem gets a sentence in Elm, and only about three pages in Brown. Weedman, "Mary's Fertility," 29 calls this a "significant lacunae [sic] in scholarship on women's role in fourth-century asceticism," and it remains so a decade after she wrote. For a somewhat dated but still useful account of Syrian asceticism in general (including, but not limited to, sexual renunciation), see Arthur Vööbus, History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East, 3 vols, CSCO 184, 197, 500 (Leuven: Peeters, 1958–88), esp. vol 2.

[65] It is worth noting, however, that the collection commonly known as the "Hymns on Virginity" are misnamed; although virginity is the subject of one sub-cycle within the corpus, it is not an organic unity. Hartung, "The Authorship and Dating," 318.

[66] On virginity in Ephrem in particular, see Weedman, "Mary's Fertility" and Mathew Paikkatt, "Virginity, the Celestial Life: A Study on Virginity in the Genuine Works of Mar Aprem of Nisibis," *Christian Orient* 13 (1992): 164–85.

[67] Ephrem, *Nat.* 14.16–17; the allusions are respectively to the drought in 1 Kings 17 and the contest with the priests of Ba'al on Mt Carmel in 1 Kings 18.

[68] Ephrem, *Nat.* 14.19.

Turning now to Mary, one of the first things that we should note is that the refrain of her conceiving as a virgin (or chaste, or "pure") is constant in the Hymns on the Nativity. Ephrem invokes it often even in contexts that are directly concerned with some other point.[69] It is sometimes paired with an emphasis that because it was virginal, Mary's conception was "not of nature" (ܠܐ ܕܛܒܥܐ and similar variants)[70] or "new." At times, however, he expatiates on the fact of Mary's virginity at greater length.

Ephrem lays a special emphasis on the physicality of her virginity (the Syriac is ܒܬܘܠܬܐ, in the plural.)[71] The fact that she remains a *physical* virgin[72] while Christ is within her womb[73] serves several distinct functions for him.

> Infant in the womb, the seal of virginity
> Exists, the womb is to you
> The palace of the king and also the veil.
> Virginities inside, Virginities outside,
> A baby within: a great contradiction![74]

Mary's status here as a physical virgin has several effects. In the last line, Ephrem exclaims one of its main functions: it makes Mary's conception the more paradoxical and contrary to nature that a child was conceived in her state. But the previous lines suggest a higher, and more

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[69] See e.g. Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.85,130; 6.3; 8.16; 11.3; 14.2; 15.5–6; 19.8; 21.16–17.

[70] So for instance Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.3; 21.18.

[71] Cf. Deut. 22:13–21. The implication is that virginity is characterized by an intact hymen. As we shall see in Chapter 5, below, the rabbinic sources complicate this position in their legal arguments, but the Deuteronomistic passage remains the authority which all parties must interpret. I translate the word as Virginities, with a capital, to distinguish it.

[72] I take the term "physical virginity" from Micha'el Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity: Testing Virgins and Making Men in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxforud University Press, 2018), who uses it throughout.

[73] The question of whether Ephrem depicts Mary as retaining *virginitas in partu* is a disputed one. Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften," 23, makes this motif a diagnostic criterion for identifying pseudo-Ephremic material. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian* 132n287, on the other hand, cites examples where the authentic Ephrem seems to suggest it.

[74] Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.2.

theological, reading. The "seal" suggests royalty, which leads Ephrem to the image of the palace which is off-limits to the common crowd. The association of virginity with not only the "palace of a king" but also a "veil," suggests moreover that rather than the home of a human monarch, we may be talking about a temple, the palace of God*:* the physical virginity of Mary serves as the "temple veil."[75]

Two stanzas later, Ephrem goes on to assert that "women have their physical virginity on your account, in order to prove that your conception was holy."[76] That is to say, from the very moment of creation, the biological structure of womankind was always intended to permit Mary to prove that she conceived chastely. In much the same way that every tree in creation points to the cross of Christ, physical virginity is itself a natural symbol, oriented towards Christ's mother and preparing the way for the Incarnation. This is not, for Ephrem, a merely literary conceit or homiletical point; rather, the "Virginities" are significant on a cosmic scale.

The purpose of this section is to discuss Mary's virginity, not Ephrem's view of virginity in general; but because her sealed womb is not *merely* a miraculous incarnational event but also a practice, it is something which can be aspired to by other women, and this is another aspect of Mary's virginity introduced in Hymn 12. Many of the statements about Mary's virginity are applied also to those who deliberately emulate her. This even goes so far as Christ's presence in Mary; although he does not literally occupy their wombs as he did Mary's, "within the seal [of virginity] you dwell also now within the chaste women […] the seal calls out, 'Our King is

[75] The Syriac word used here for "palace" (ܗܝܟܠ) can also be translated as "temple." Because it is identified as a ܗܝܟܠ ܕܡܠܟܐ, the "palace/temple *of the king,*" I translate it as "palace," but the symbolic association with the temple is clear; see below. The word I translate "veil" here is ܦܪܟܬܐ ܕܗܝܟܠ, which Ephrem elsewhere associates with the Jerusalem temple (cf. Ephrem, *Nat.* 5.11).

[76] Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.4.

there!'"[77] The mode of dwelling is slightly different in the two cases ("within the chaste, you dwell within a sign")[78] but virginity offers a mode for connection between the life of Mary and the lives of individual Christians; it is thus one of the key ways in which Mary is a symbol of the Church.[79]

Mary's physical seal of virginity has another important function for Ephrem: it allows the sealed womb of the Incarnation and the sealed tomb of the Resurrection to stand in a tight symbolic relationship. The two defining moments of salvation history thus refer to one another and share certain important characteristics. First, both the conception in the womb and the escape from Sheol are "against nature" because of the way that they were sealed; Ephrem notes that "the pure one was in the [womb] and the living one was in the grave" in defiance of nature[80] Second, both are the objects of slander by nonbelievers—on the one hand that Christ's conception was human, on the other hand that his resurrection was mere grave-robbing. But in both cases, the slanders are proved to be false because the presence of an unbroken seal (physical virginity and the stone over the tomb) refutes those who would deny Christ's miraculous birth and resurrection.[81]

In the comparisons in Hymn 10 on the Nativity, the tomb and the womb are complimentary. Elsewhere, however, Ephrem distinguishes between the sealed womb and the sealed tomb:

> The womb of Sheol conceived him and it burst open
> How did the womb of Mary sustain him?
> In his voice, he broke the stone on the grave
> How did Mary's bosom sustain him?[82]

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[77] Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.5.

[78] Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.6.

[79] It takes us afield of our subject here, but it is worth noting that while in the specific case of Mary, Ephrem is an absolutist in the way that he affirms her perpetual, and physical, virginity, in the case of chaste women generally, he is less insistent on the "seal" of physical virginity. He even acknowledges that acts of sexual violence, to which a woman does not consent, do not spoil her chastity; see e.g. Ephrem, *Virg*. 1.9.

[80] Ephrem, *Nat*. 10.8 and 6, respectively.

[81] Ephrem, *Nat*. 10.9–10.

[82] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.190–91.

Mary's womb is here made even more potent by its *contrast* with the sealed tomb. At the moment of his resurrection, Jesus' voice broke open the stone on the grave and the tomb proved unable to hold him. Mary, however, carried him in her virgin womb for nine months, the seal remaining unbroken. We can have no doubt that Ephrem would add: because Christ willed it to be so. Nevertheless, as with the earlier statement about Mary's womb overturning the orders, here her womb is discussed as though it were a site of tremendous power, containing a divinity which not even death could hold.

The various senses of physical virginity are not the only symbolic resonances which Mary's chastity has for Ephrem. Another very potent image draws on the language of agriculture and fertility.[83] Mary is, as we have already seen, "the earth, and [Christ is] the husbandman." Her virginity is, contrary to nature, the site of a bounteous yield. Yet perhaps surprisingly, the primary polarity in which Ephrem embeds Mary's miraculous fertility is not mother/virgin, but *mother/barren woman*—as though Ephrem has assimilated Mary the young virgin to Old Testament figures like Sarah or Hannah, whose longstanding marital childlessness is finally resolved by God's intervention. So, for instance, the "seed of harvest" has come forth from Mary miraculously "as though from a stone."[84] In another place, Mary's fruitfulness is compared not to maidens, but to barren women: "He deprived the matron's womb, he fructified the virgin womb" because of the faithlessness of the Jews.[85]

[83] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian,* 145n347, does not hesitate to use the language of "fertility religion" to describe this facet of Ephrem's speech.

[84] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.85.

[85] Ephrem, *Nat*. 21.17. Weedman "Mary's Fertility," 111–79 treats the ascetic chastity / fertility of Mary in the Hymns on Nativity extensively, and discusses the way that it serves as a model for female ascetics.

Up until this point, the discussion of Mary's virginity has focused on the biological fact, but not on the moral quality of her chastity. This seems to be the main mode in which Ephrem talks about her virginity, overall, in the Hymns on the Nativity. In a few places, however, Ephrem acknowledges that Mary's chaste conduct is the result of a conscious choice. If the "animals in the Ark" were chaste, says Ephrem, "how much more would Mary, in whom Emmanuel dwelt, reject marriage? […] Your will [that is, *Mary's*] magnified you and sanctified you… you [were virginal] by your will."[86] Mary's willing practice is contrasted with the conduct of the animals on Noah's Ark, whose chastity was by force. In the fact of the Incarnation and in the power of her sealed womb, Mary's agency was limited to assenting reception. Here, however, it seems that she has a praiseworthy moral role in preserving her virginity.

Within Hymn 28, the agency assigned to Mary is complicated by a stanza in which Ephrem seems to say that Christ purified her of the root causes of sexual desire:

> Worldly conception gives rise to carnal desire
> The lust of the body, which is in the members;
> Your pure conception wipes clean and removes
> The lust of desire from your members.
> He poured forth holiness and purity, and filled you
> In streams of holiness, and purified you,
> So that one who saw you would say, "What goodness!
> That glorious one!"[87]

[86] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.1. Note of course that the 28th Hymn on the Natvity is the one in the collection whose authenticity is doubted by some scholars; the broad consensus, however, is that it is Ephrem, and I discuss it as though it were.

[87] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.6. The word I have translated as "members" is ambiguous; it may mean "limbs" but also may connote sexual organs; I follow McVey on this word, as I think "members" preserves just a hint of this ambiguity.

If Christ "purifies" Mary, removing lust from her by her "pure conception,"[88] then the extent to which her own will is involved in remaining chaste becomes slightly more complicated: if the desire is not there, is Mary's decision not to act on desire really an act of her own will?

Elsewhere, however, Ephrem gives less ambiguous agency to Mary:

> Mary, who conceived him, hated sexual union
> The soul will not commit adultery, if he dwells in it.
> When Mary perceived him, she left her betrothed
> Behold, he dwells in the chaste ones, if they perceive him.[89]

Here, Mary's moral choices are pronounced. She hated (meaning, perhaps, rejected) sex, and as soon as she became aware of Christ, she left her betrothed. Her affective response in the first couplet, and the fact that, in the second, her embrace of celibacy is occasioned by her acquiring knowledge, both suggest that she is making deliberate moral choices in avoiding sexual congress and marriage. Because of these choices, in this same pair of couplets Mary is able to be a moral exemplar for other women: by avoiding adultery. committing to chastity, and "perceiving" Christ, they too can merit that he will "dwell" in them.[90]

Before leaving the symbol of virginity, there's one more element of it that is worth mentioning: it is a source of glory for Mary. As we just saw in Hymn 28, Christ purifies her of her desires in order that someone who sees her will praise her, calling her both "good" (ܛܒܐ) and "glorious" (ܡܫܒܚܐ). The next stanza puts this glory in still more dramatic terms:

> The conception is glorious; he sealed himself,
> As though with a seal upon your mind.

[88] At the risk of committing precisely the sort of errors I cautioned against in the introduction to this dissertation, I do think it is interesting to consider whether "your [=Mary's] pure conception" refers to Mary's conception (of Christ) or Mary's conception (in her mother's womb).

[89] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.131–32.

[90] Weedman, "Mary's Fertility," 103, commenting on these verses: "The Marian material gives Ephrem an effective image to describe how ascetics should open themselves to Christ, namely, by imitating Mary's openness in perceiving and so allowing Christ to enter."

And when he was born, indeed he was [still] within you
Such that his brightness was looking out from your members
And on all your grace, his love was spread out
And on all of you, he was anointed
You made a garment for him, and his glory stretched out over all your senses.[91]

Elsewhere in the hymn, it speaks of Christ "adorning" Mary,[92] but here the effect of that adornment seems to be a share of divine glory. Because of the way that Christ "sealed himself" within Mary, his glory spreads out over all of her senses, overwhelming her, but it also "looks out from all her members"—and this even after she has given birth! The seal of virginity imprints a permanent glorification on Mary's body. It is one that, as the previous stanza noted, even passers-by may comment upon.

Mary as the Eucharist

The preceding analysis has wrestled in several places with the question of agency in Ephrem's portrayal of Marian symbols. Whether as a sealed virgin in whom Christ dwells; or as a prophetess, by turns keeping silence and speaking out the mysteries of Christ as he directs her; or even in her role as mother who nurses the one who nurses creation, Mary's agency is complex. She is powerful, but she has a kind of derivative power. Yet all of these symbols have something in common: they construe Mary as a human symbol.

But there is another important symbolic domain which we must consider in Ephrem's depiction of Mary. The fact that Christ is said to "dwell" in Mary leads Ephrem to draw on a number of different symbolic categories of "receptacle" of the divine. In these discourses, Mary's human agency and participation recede altogether (aside, that is, from assertions of her fitness,

[91] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.7.

[92] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.1.

which may have a moral character), and the emphasis is instead on her reception, and the paradox of God's presence in a material, human vessel.

One natural Christian parallel to the notion of God's "dwelling" is the Eucharistic sacrifice. As one might expect of a theological author whose mind is structured by the symbol, Ephrem treats the Eucharist at some length, and has a rich variety of symbols for this central Christian sacrament: medicine of life, fire, fruit of immortality.[93] As Mary is the one through whom Christ comes into the world as a human being, so too she is occasionally portrayed as furnishing the Eucharist:

> The Church gave us the living bread instead of the unleavened bread Egypt gave.
> Mary gave us the bread of rest instead of the bread of fatigue that Eve gave.[94]

Elsewhere, her role as the "soil" from which the Christ's "seed" sprouted yields a similar image. "From the womb of the virgin, like from a rock, came forth the seed from which the harvest comes… the one true ear gave heavenly bread without end."[95] As Mary is the ground from which Christ's material human body took shape, so she is, in a sense, the source of his material sacramental body.

But because the Eucharist is also a place where Christ's divinity came to dwell, sometimes Mary herself is symbolically tied more directly to the sacrament, as in Hymn 16 on the Nativity.

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[93] See, for instance, the famous stanza in the Hymns on Faith:

> In your bread is hidden the Spirit which cannot be eaten.
> In your wine dwells the fire that cannot be drunk.
> Spirit in your bread, fire in your wine:
> It is a distinct wonder that our lips have received! (*HdF* 10.8, trans. Wickes, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith.*).

For a thorough discussion of Ephrem's poetic theology of Eucharist, see Sidney Griffith, "Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine: The Eucharist as Living Medicine in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 225–246, and the lengthier study in Elena Narinskaya, *Poetic Hymns of Saint Ephrem the Syrian: A Study in the Religious Use of Poetry in Fourth-Century Christianity* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013).

[94] Ephrem, *Azym*. 6.6–7. Note here that the parallelism is cemented by the notion of Mary as the "New Eve."

[95] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.85,87. The omitted verse introduces the finite grain collected by Joseph the patriarch, to contrast it with the infinite heavenly bread of Christ.

This hymn begins with a meditation on the curious permanence of Christ's presence in Mary. Although she "gave birth to You openly, your secret power was not lost to me: you are inside me and outside me." This parallel between a visible body and an invisible power immediately leads Ephrem, through Mary, to meditate on the Eucharist:

> Was it to me alone, in two images
> That your beauty was [apparent]? Let bread depict you
> As well as the mind. Dwell in the bread
> And in its eaters. In what is hidden and what is revealed
> Let your church behold you, just as the one who bore you.[96]

Here Mary makes the parallel direct. Just as she herself contained Christ both in a manifest way and in hidden way, so too the people should receive him in two ways: in their minds, and also as bread. But if the mental presence is the "hidden" one, analogous to the "secret power" that Mary retained even after giving birth to Jesus, then the "revealed" presence in the Eucharist must be analogous to the revealed presence of the Incarnate Christ. In other words, Christ's sacramental presence in the Eucharist is analogous here to his biological presence in Mary.

This Eucharistic identity is cemented by a further connection, for Ephrem in the next several stanzas demonstrates a keen awareness that the Eucharist is "mocked" by unbelievers, who even though they could see Christ's physical body, cannot see his spiritual body in the Eucharist; only the holy ones can see, and they rejoice in the sight[97] This directly parallels several passages which we observed above, in which Ephrem devotes an equivalent attention to the way that Mary herself was mocked for her supernatural maternity. It is the nature of vessels of Christ that they be reviled by the world, even as they are honored by the faithful.

[96] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.4.

[97] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.5–6.

One more connection unites the Eucharist and Mary in this hymn: the presence of Christ in each has a restorative function, correcting the hereditary defects of humanity by grace. The Eucharist is praised by Ephrem as offering Christ's "image portrayed with the blood of grapes on the bread […] blessed is he who destroyed graven images with his true image."[98] The idolatrous practices of the pagans, which locate divinity in physical objects, are obliterated when Christ instead offers the true image of God in Eucharistic guise. Meanwhile, Mary herself restores the Davidic lineage, which had been corrupted by Amnon's rape of Tamar:[99] "Virginity fell, and perished from the house of both [= the House of David.]" Mary, on the other hand, preserved the "pearl" of virginity, and "placed in your treasurehouse, it has not perished, for you have put it on." Thus, the chosen lineage of David, corrupted by an ancestral sin, is restored by Mary through Christ's activity. Mary's connection to the symbol of the Eucharist, then, is not merely a locative one. She is also "eucharistic" because she—like the bread and wine— is a material vessel through which Christ's grace is mediated to humankind.

Mary as the Ark and the Temple

Alongside these passages which tie Mary to the sacramental activity of the Christian Church in the present, Ephrem also typologically connects Mary to Old Testament symbols of God's dwelling place. The Temple is the most obvious of these, and indeed we have already observed how the physical virginity of Mary transforms her womb into something like the Temple, the seal of the womb taking the place of the Temple veil which obscured access to the innermost Holy of Holies,

[98] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.7.

[99] 2 Sam 13.

wherein dwelt God. But the Temple is not the only dwelling place of God: the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle too, are live symbols for the Syriac tradition.

Among the most explicit of these references is found in the close of the same Hymn 16 on the Nativity which, as we just saw, begins with a Eucharistic parallel. Here, a concatenation of images vividly reconstructs the priestly service before the Ark of the Covenant. Having spent several stanzas discussing the role of virginity and again posing the rhetorical question of how Mary should address Christ, Ephrem pivots to discuss consecrated virgins:

> May all the Virginities of your brides
> Be sustained by you. They are purple
> And no one shall approach them
> Except the king. Virginity
> Is like a vestment for you, our High Priest.[100]

Much of this is unsurprising; that the chastity of the consecrated virgins is sacred and to be guarded as though it were the Temple shrine is a motif that we have already examined. Likewise, the comparison of Christ to both king and priest has already been made in some of the passages on Mary's virginity discussed above. But a surprising shift occurs in the last line, when virginity is taken to be a vestment, rather than the veil of the Holy of Holies. Christ is here not the God within the shrine, but the ministering priest, performing the rites![101]

The next few stanzas can be summarized briefly: they construct an opposition between Tamar, who in Genesis 38 does not preserve her chastity, and Mary, who does. Yet after reiterating Mary's chastity, *Joseph*'s abstinence is mentioned as well: because he perceives Mary's chaste conception, he avoids sexual intercourse with her. This sudden introduction of Joseph and his own

[100] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.13.

[101] This seems to be one way in which Ephrem distinguishes the virginity of the ascetic women from the virginity of Mary herself. At Ephrem, *Nat*. 17.5, Ephrem again repeats that the chaste woman is "the King's palace for you as the king's son, and the Holy of Holies for you as the High Priest." It seems that Christ appears as God (in the Temple schematic) to Mary only, and to others as the officiating sacrificer. (cf. Hebrews 4:14ff).

pious cooperation in preserving Mary's chastity sets up a stanza in which the symbol of religious service at a holy site is made clear.

> Woman ministers before a man
> Because he is her head. Joseph got himself up
> To minister before his lord
> Who was in Mary. The priest ministers
> Before the Ark because of your holiness.[102]

This stanza is structured by repetition of several sound patterns, mostly of the root ܫܡܫ and the preposition ܒܬܪܝܗ, becoming even more pronounced in the alliterative final phrase, ܩܕܡ ܟܗܢ ܒܥܕܢܗ ܕܠܗ ܕܒܗ ܟܐܢ in which nearly every word begins with *qoph* or *kaph*. The effect is first to set up a typically Ephremic reversal of expectations (normally, in the domestic setting envisaged by Ephrem, a woman ministers to a man, but in this case, Joseph ministers to Mary, because his Lord is within her), and then to provide the symbolic image which contains the key to the moment: for Joseph, in preserving her chastity and attending to her in her holy pregnancy, is behaving like a priest (notably here, as a ܟܗܢ or Aaronic priest)[103] before the Ark (Mary). The polysemous verb ܫܡܫ, which can mean both "to wait upon" in a mundane way but also "to serve a priestly function", facilitates the transition between the two modes of discourse.

Mary thus becomes, alongside Joseph the priest, the object of cultic veneration because of the holiness of the son within her, in much the same way that the Ark was venerated because God himself was enthroned upon it. Mary is the place where God and humanity meet and is the proper

[102] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.16.

[103] McVey *Ephrem the Syrian,* 151n367, calls attention to this fact in her translation. Notably, in the previous passage about Jesus' priesthood, he instead uses ܟܗܢܐ, a different word unrelated to the Aaronic/Levitical religious complex and instead coming out of the Peshitta of Hebrews 5.

object of ritual.[104] There is at least one other place where Mary is clearly depicted as a ritual site, even if the words "temple" and "ark" are missing. It comes in an account of the magi coming to Mary and bringing their treasures to her. We discussed it above in the context of Christ "enriching" Mary's poverty, but the stanza seems to have another, cultic dimension as well:

> She [Mary] saw the magi. Many were her songs
> At their gifts. "See, the ones worshipping you
> Surround me, and also your gifts
> Encircle me. Blessed is the infant
> Who made his mother the harp of his hymns."[105]

There are several verbal cues that in this moment, Mary is being imagined as the center of a religious ritual. The "gifts" (gold and myrrh) are called ܩܘܪܒܢܐ, which is to say, offerings in a religious sense; elsewhere he expressly uses this term to refer to offerings given in the Temple or before the Ark.[106] Moreover, the magi are described as "worshipping" (ܣܓܕ) Christ as they surround Mary. Finally, even the last line, which construes Mary as a harp, can be seen as contributing to the cultic dimension of the moment: the harp (ܟܢܪܐ) was associated with David, and in several places in the Hebrew Bible the cognate word (כנור) is affiliated with the Ark or the altar of God.[107] Even the word used for "hymn" here (ܙܡܪ) is the same word that Ephrem uses to name the tunes for his own *madrashe*, suggesting a quasi-liturgical setting. Taken together, these verbal cues suggest that Mary is a cult site because of the infant God who sits upon her lap.

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[104] It remains an open question to what extent this reveals any *actually practiced* cultic veneration of Mary in Ephrem's milieu. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith*, 167, says that "[Ephrem's] writings somewhat surprisingly give no indication of any veneration or cult of the Virgin," although he does not elaborate.

[105] Ephrem, *Nat*. 15.4.

[106] Cf. Ephrem, *Nat*. 25.13, *HdF* 8.12.

[107] E.g., 2 Sam. 6:5, Psalm 43:4.

Let us return to hymn 16 and Joseph's attendance on Mary, the Ark. We have just seen Joseph ministering before her in a priestly function. The last stanza of the hymn further complicates the picture, however, by shifting suddenly from the Ark of the Covenant to the tablets of the law which, according to the biblical account, had been placed within it:

> Moses carried the tablets of stone
> Which his Lord had written. And Joseph attended
> The pure tablet in whom dwelt
> The son of the creator. The tablets were dissolved
> Because the earth was full of your doctrine.[108]

We have left behind the Ark, and Mary is now the tablet carrying the son of the creator. This new tablet (singular) is contrasted with the old tablets (plural). The primary action of the two scenes is the same. Moses and Joseph each care for their tablet(s) because they contain something precious, the fruit of a divine-human encounter. The last line-and-a-half, however, disrupts the parallelism, by asserting the superiority of the new tablet over the old ones. The latter dissolve (or "are abandoned") because something new has replaced the law: the doctrine of Christ. Mary, the *new* tablet in a *new Ark*, has a new kind of salvation with which to fill the world.

Hymn 16 is the most extended meditation on the image of Mary as the Ark or a temple in Ephrem. However, we can identify at least five other places where the theme is expressed directly, albeit more briefly. Two of them identify her as a "palace" or temple (ܗܝܟܠܐ), one calls her the Ark (ܬܒܘܬܐ), and two associate her with a third term we have not yet discussed: the tabernacle, or portable tent which the Torah construes as a precursor to the Temple (ܡܫܟܢܐ).

The first ܗܝܟܠܐ passage is another that we have seen before, this time in the discussion on virginity: "infant in the womb, the seal of virginity / exists, the womb is to you / the palace of the

[108] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.17.

king and also the veil."[109] Here, Mary is imagined as a temple because her Virginities serve as the curtain which separated the Holy of Holies from the profane world outside.[110] The second passage emphasizes Christ's role in *building* that temple for himself within Mary:

> Blessed is he who dwelt within the womb, and in it he built
> A temple (ܗܝܟܠܐ) to dwell in, a shrine (ܩܘܕܫܐ) to be in.
> The robe to dress in, and weapons with which to conquer.[111]

The initial image, of Christ dwelling within Mary, extends naturally to a discussion of his various activities within the womb: some of them include building a dwelling for himself. The ܗܝܟܠܐ here is paired with the word ܩܘܕܫܐ, a loanword from Greek (ναός) that reinforces the sense that Christ is building a sacred house in which to dwell within Mary's chaste womb.

The one other passage that calls Mary "the Ark" is interesting because of the tremendous power that it attributes to her:

> From the rib there appeared a hidden power
> that shattered Satan, just like Dagon
> For in that Ark, there was a hidden book within
> That cried out and announced the Conqueror[112]

In order to clarify the meaning of these verses, it is helpful to note that the "rib," in context, refers to Mary in her guise as the second Eve. So Mary, too, is a rib, but she is also an Ark, and as such, she unleashes a holy power. The reference to Dagon is an allusion to a story about the original Ark of the Covenant: when the Philistines captured it, they put it in their temple of Dagon, but the Ark overpowered the false god, and smashed his idol.[113] Mary too, drawing on a secret power, destroys

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[109] Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.2a. See above for the identification of this "palace" with the Temple.

[110] The notion that Mary serves as a temple for Christ because of her virginity leads Ephrem elsewhere to suggest that other women, too, can become temples by exercising purity; see Ephrem, *Virg*. 1.2.

[111] Ephrem, *Nat*. 3.20b.

[112] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.112–113.

[113] 1 Sam. 5.

Satan. Although we might have thought that the mode of divine presence signified by temples was purely receptive, it turns out that even here, Mary is imbued with power by Christ's presence.

The tabernacle passages, taken not from the Hymns on Nativity but from the Hymns on Virginity, share a curious feature: in both cases, Ephrem is more explicit than he elsewhere is in the temple imagery in acknowledging a *symbolic* link between the historical edifice of Exodus with Mary, the "new" tabernacle. In both places, he uses the phrase "tabernacle of time" or (McVey's translation) "temporal tabernacle" (ܡܫܟܢ ܙܒܢܐ) to refer to the ancient structure. Mary's womb, meanwhile, is the "symbol" of the tabernacle (ܡܫܟܢܐ ܕܪܡܙܐ). In the longer of these two passages, Ephrem reiterates themes evident to us from elsewhere: as God dwelt within the Temple in Jerusalem, so too did he dwell in the "tabernacle" of Mary, *and he dwells also in virgins.* His homiletical point is that the same honor which the Israelites afforded to the Temple, and which the church affords to Mary, should also be afforded to virgins of Ephrem's own day: they should not "dishonor God" within his temples.[114]

The shorter passage, meanwhile, reminds us that Ephrem was not thinking only about "temples" in a general way when he takes Mary as their symbol. He has the sacred architecture of biblical Israel clearly in view. In a hymn whose main purpose is to extol oil as a source of light, Ephrem comments on the candlestick which was present in the ancient tabernacle:

> Oil, moreover, served to shine in the temporal tabernacle.
> In its menorah (ܡܢܘܪܬܐ) of seven branches, [oil's] stream served seven torches
> In a symbol of its Lord, from whom seven lights, of seven spirits, sprung forth.
> The menorah of seven branches bore the brightness of seven lights
> So that in them, the temporal tabernacle would be lit; Mary bore the Luminary
> Of the seven holy Lights that cast light for us on the whole Creation.[115]

[114] Ephrem, *Virg*. 25.10–11.

[115] Ephrem, *Virg*. 5.3.

Mary here is not the tabernacle itself, but the menorah *within* the tabernacle. Just as that temporal menorah gave forth radiance within the original, temporal tabernacle, Mary is portrayed giving birth to the light which sustains the heavens (the luminaries, as McVey notes, must be the seven planets of ancient cosmological theory.)[116]

In an article on the early theology of the tabernacle furniture, Gary Anderson notes that Mary becomes the site of the tabernacle in later patristic theology more broadly. He argues, working from Latin and Greek sources, that it is after the settling of Christological terminology in the fifth-century "Nestorian controversy [that] we see the rejection of the Temple metaphor as a means of understanding the incarnation… and the transferal of this metaphor to the person of the Virgin Mary."[117] I do not think he is wrong to say that the later equation of the Tabernacle with Mary owes something to the rejection of it as a symbol for Christ himself. However, as Ephrem shows, the symbol was live, in Syria at least, even half a century before Ephesus.

The Paradox of Space

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, one of the discourses about holy receptacles expresses amazement or wonder at the fact that an infinity is bounded by a finitude. Often this is expressed by a polarity, of the general form, "How can God, who is too great to be contained by the universe, be contained by X?"

It can hardly surprise us that such a paradox would inspire Ephrem's pen. In fact, we find it several places throughout the hymns. In one place, Ephrem writes:

The bosom of Mary astonishes me, that it was sufficient for you and enclosed you

[116] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 282n67.

[117] Gary A. Anderson, "Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," in Ruth Clements and Daniel Schwartz, eds., *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 165–94, here 191.

> Too small was all of creation, that it should hide your greatness
> Earth and heaven are too narrow to be in the form of a bosom
> To hide your divinity. Too small for you the bosom of the earth,
> But Mary's bosom suffices. He dwelt in a bosom, and healed through a bosom.[118]

This is one classic expression of the paradox of space. Although the whole world is not large enough to contain Christ's greatness, he is nonetheless able to make himself appear, dwell, and operate in one small area. He is "enclosed" in Mary even though earth and heaven is not enough to hold and conceal him. Indeed, *because* he is held by the womb of Mary, it becomes a site of special reverence, for "the womb that held him, if it held all of him, is equal to the wonderful womb, greater than that of his birth; but how was the small womb of Mary sufficient for him?"[119] Here, Mary's womb is literally divinized, assimilated to the divine womb of the Father which gave Christ his first, spiritual birth.[120] But nonetheless, the paradox remains: how can the infinite Christ fit in such a small space?

Other paradoxical elements of this "spatial" problem arise elsewhere in the hymns. In one place, Mary sings her wonder that she is to give birth to the "One Many, the Small Great, who is present in me in full but present also in the world in full."[121] That is to say, his presence in Mary is complete, yet his presence in the world is undiminished. This is an irreconcilable paradox, and one that Ephrem returns to again and again. In Hymn 16 on the Nativity, Mary claims that she does not envy her son for "being both with me and with everyone."[122] She further complicates the

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[118] Ephrem, *Nat*. 23.11.

[119] Ephrem, *Nat*. 21.8.

[120] On the use of womb imagery to refer to Christ's divine parentage, see McVey, "Ephrem The Syrian's Use of Female Metaphors,"262–67. McVey also notes elements of the paradox of space in this article, but she calls it the "theme of containment" (267–70).

[121] Ephrem, *Nat*. 5.19.

[122] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.1.

picture by reminding us that she speaks from a position of liturgical time. She is simultaneously carrying Christ within her womb and yet has also given birth to him.

> While you dwelt in me, your glory dwelt
> Both inside and outside of me. When I gave you birth
> Openly, your secret power
> Did not leave me. You are [still] inside me
> And outside me, Marveller of his Mother![123]

Christ's mode of presence here is hard to fathom. While he was within Mary (i.e., during the time of her pregnancy) his glory was both within and without. Yet once she gave birth some secret power of his remained within her. Perhaps this presence is akin to the special presence which Ephrem says that Christ has in all consecrated virgins.

These spatial problems of Christ's presence in Mary are posed as paradoxes, and we should resist the temptation to try to resolve them into a logical doctrine. We can, however, observe that it is a paradox which Ephrem also associates with the Temple, Mt. Sinai, and other biblical sites of theophany:

> When God descended upon Mt. Sinai, it was by his power that the mountain could bear him.
> The mountain melted away before him, but the power of its creator sustained it...
> For, in order that whoever seeks him might not wander, he dwelt in the Temple, even though he is everywhere.[124]

Just as with Mary, the revelation to Moses at Sinai and God's presence in the Jerusalem Temple are forms of divine presence within finite materiality that should not be possible, but which nonetheless occurred.

These lines, from the Hymns on Unleavened Bread, also get us some of the way toward understanding how Ephrem might conceive of this operation. Note that his impossible presence at

[123] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.2.

[124]Ephrem, *Azym*. 15.1–2 and 7.

the mountain is made possible because "the power of its creator sustained it." Indeed, Ephrem continues, "only through the power of the creator are the created things able to serve."[125] That is to say, it is God's manifest will and power that enables him to be present in material places contrary to natural possibility. The same is elsewhere said in the same collection with respect to his birth: "he willed and was held by the womb of Mary."[126] In the Hymns on Nativity, meanwhile, this same point is emphasized with a light verbal pun: the power of the Son is a "free power" (ܫܠܝܛܐ ܚܪܬܐ) but nonetheless the "power dwelt" (ܚܪܬ ܫܠܝܛܐ) in the womb, while maintaining its sovereignty.[127]

The line about the Temple above also suggests another important component of these paradoxical appearances: they are not only manifestations of divine will, but also of divine care. God appeared in the Temple so that those who earnestly sought him could have an encounter and "would not wander." When in another hymn he says, "He dwelt [in Mary's womb] because of his compassion, but because his nature is great, he was in no way limited,"[128] we observe that Christ's presence in Mary, too, is being spoken of as a kind of solicitude. Without wanting to reduce this expression to something like modalism or differing conceptual accounts of presence, we can simply note that here it seems that his presence in Mary and the Temple owes something to the attribute of God's mercy and his care for humanity, while his presence everywhere has something to do with his natural power.

[125] Ephrem, *Azym*. 15.3.

[126] Ephrem, *Azym*. 16.4.

[127] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.173–74.

[128] Ephrem, *Nat*. 21.8.

Water Imagery and Mary

So far we have catalogued a number of concrete symbols with which Mary is associated: prophecy, a complex motherhood, poverty, virginity, Eucharist, Ark, Temple, tabernacle. Before we conclude, however, there are a handful of other images which recur in Ephrem's treatment of Mary which merit briefer treatment. Right now, we will not attempt to theologize them; but they lay groundwork for future chapters, as studying the Greek writers and the Rabbis will illustrate the way in which these seemingly disconnected themes actually have interesting points of connection with some of the other symbols discussed above.

The first thing to note is that Ephrem in several places associates water imagery with Mary. It is a happy coincidence of language that in two of the great liturgical languages of Christianity the name of Christ's mother lends itself to a pun with a word for "sea."[129] Ephrem makes use of this pun most directly, as we saw at the beginning of this investigation, in Hymn 6 on the Nativity, when he notes that Herod wishes to "drown the Lord of the Seas" (ܡܚܬܐ ܡܝܐ [=ܡܪܝܡ]).[130] But even apart from this verbal play, water imagery is used in association with Mary a significant number of times throughout the hymns. Unlike the image in Hymn 6, where sea appears as something dangerous, even deadly, in other places it is a sign of fertility, wealth, and restoration.

In one place, Mary herself becomes the "great sea" (ܝܡܐ ܪܒܐ ܗܝ), restoring fertility to the entire world by the lifegiving water.[131] In another, in the Hymns on the Pearl, Ephrem seems to conceive of her as the "virgin of the sea" (ܒܬܘܠܬܐ ܕܝܡܐ) in which the "pearl" of Christ was born.[132]

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[129] In Latin, *Maria* / *mare*, in Syriac, ܡܪܝܡ / ܝܡܐ. Greek, alas, is excluded from this partnership; it must content itself with having Pindar and Aeschylus.

[130] Ephrem, *Nat*. 6.5.

[131] Ephrem, *Nat*. 18.13. See discussion below.

[132] Ephrem, *HdF*. 82.2.

Yet in other places, it is Christ, not Mary, who becomes the water, and Mary is either the receptacle for him or the source from which his water is transmitted to the world. So, for instance, in Hymn 9, Mary invokes Christ as the "great sea" (ܝܡܐ ܪܒܐ) and says that she has become the "vessel" (ܡܥܪܒܐ). The governing image here is one of the receipt of treasure (to Mary, wealth is being imported on "ships" from the psalms and the prophets), but the naval metaphor is significant.[133] Similarly receptive is the depiction in Hymn 26, in which Ephrem discusses "the birth of the Son—the second one."[134] Ephrem sings,

> The one who divided waters from waters
> Divided himself from the Watchers, and he came down to mankind
> And, in place of the waters that he ordered gathered,
> He broke open a spring of life, and gave a drink.[135]

Ephrem here reconfigures the story of the creation of the world in Genesis 1, where God divides the waters above and under the earth. Christ is instead breaking open those divisions and letting a stream of "life" emerge to nourish the world. Mary is not mentioned explicitly, but is implied in the mention of the "second birth." She is the font, the source from which this lifegiving water comes into the world.

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[133] Ephrem, *Nat*. 9.4.

[134] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian,* 207n583, interprets this as "The birth of the Son, the Second [after the Father]. I don't agree with her reasoning that this is the most natural interpretation of the verse, despite its susceptibility to Arian interpretation; that Ephrem would call Christ "the Second" seems unthinkable to me. Moreover, the second part of the stanza makes it clear that he is talking about Christ's descent into the world and birth from Mary, and so I think the most natural interpretation of the words, ܢܫܒܚ ܚܕܬܗ ܕܒܪܗ ܘܩܠܗ ܕܩܕܡܝܐ is "Let us praise the second birth of the Son and Voice of the First."

[135] Ephrem, *Nat*. 26.5b.

Light Imagery and Mary

In the tabernacle image in Hymn 5 on Virginity, we saw that Mary was portrayed as the seven-branched menorah, giving birth to the great Luminary (Christ) who supplies the cosmic lights in the heavens. This is one of the most vivid images of Mary's luminescence in Ephrem, but far from the only one. Christ is sometimes characterized as "light" (ܢܗܝܪܐ) within her,[136] and at other times portrayed as "shining" within or out from her (ܙܗܪ).[137]

Many of these "light" passages simply use the image of luminescence or shining as a signifier of revelation. The tabernacle passage considered above, however, does suggest one thread that unites several of the "light" passages: the association of the light within Mary's womb with *astronomical* light. The same thread is picked up in Hymn 27 on the Nativity, where it notes that Christ was the "luminous one whom Mary bore" (ܕܝܠܕܬ ܡܪܝܡ ܢܗܝܪܐ) because his conception was "in the light's victory" (ܒܢܗܝܪܐ ܐܬܚܕ).[138] This perhaps obscure line is given its significance as the poem unfolds. Ephrem includes it as one of several ways to explain the significance of the fact that Mary conceived Christ in the spring month of Nisan, when light is beginning to return to the world after the darkness of winter. It concludes on a note of cosmological significance:

> Nisan depicts your conception when it cries out,
> "Behold, the Light is enclosed in the womb!"
> In Kanun, the pair of Lights goes out:
> You from the womb, and the sun with you, from the midst of darkness.[139]

[136] E.g., Ephrem, *Nat*. 1.6, 27.1, 27.22.

[137] E.g. Ephrem, *Nat*. 2.12, 8.20. The verb ܙܗܪ carries a variety of senses, including simply to "appear;" it is also the source of the Syriac name for the feat of Epiphany (ܬܐܘܣ). At root, however, it is a verb with luminescent implications, and it is clear that the verb retains this sense for Ephrem, as he uses derivations from it to characterize the various "lights" that shine from the tabernacle menorah at *Virg*. 5.3.

[138] Ephrem, *Nat*. 27.1.

[139] Ephrem, *Nat*. 27.22.

Here, as in the menorah passage, the emphasis on the cosmic light which is enclosed within Mary seems to imply that in the act of giving birth to Christ, she in effect reenacts that work. In another place, however, Ephrem seems to say that the cosmic light has a more didactic purpose: by giving birth to the source of true divine light, Mary has proved that those who worship the created light of the sun and moon are foolish.[140]

Mary as Microcosm

Mary's powerful voice, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, condenses time into a single moment: she speaks simultaneously to the Matriarchs of Israel, to the Church, and to her son (in the womb, on her lap, in heaven). In a few places in Ephrem, Mary is likewise represented as collapsing *geography* within herself as well, and becoming a microcosm, the whole world in miniature. This is expressed in one of two ways: first, by conflating Christ's presence within Mary with his presence in everything; second, by implying that *her* fertility has a fertilizing effect on the entire world (and therefore, what happens to and through her has cosmic consequences).

Mary is sometimes treated as a microcosm as a logical consequence of the presence of Christ within her, as for instance in Hymn 4 on the Nativity: "as [Christ] dwelt in the womb of his Mother, all creation dwelt in his womb."[141] Mary contains Christ, who contains the universe. Similarly, later in the same hymn, some of the "reciprocal" language that we have discussed before can be seen to be operating in this microcosmic light. When Ephrem talks about the sustaining power of the prenatal Christ over the universe, he sometimes writes about it in a particular sense: Mary is supporting the God who supports her individually. "As God, he gave milk to Mary; and

[140] Ephrem, *Nat*. 26.7.

[141] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.154.

in turn she suckled him as a human."[142] Other times, however, this particular relationship gives way to a general description of the whole of creation, as, "he suckled Mary's milk, and all of creation suckles his milk."[143] It seems plausible that this slippage is not merely poetic variation on Ephrem's part, but rather, because Mary is the particular dwelling place of the Incarnate Christ, to support her is also to support the whole world.

The fertilization motif is expressed obliquely in a hymn we have already seen, where Mary claims that Christ has "made the dry land, suddenly, into a font of milk" by taking residence within Mary's womb .[144] Again, I do not think it correct to say this is merely a poetic effect; rather, Mary in her barrenness is being assimilated to the dry and infertile world. When she becomes pregnant, the whole world is fructified. This same theme is stated more directly in Hymn 18 on the Nativity. This hymn, structured as thirty "years" of praise, includes two stanzas which directly connect Mary's fertilization with the fertility of the earth itself.

> In the eighth year,
> let creation give praise, whose fruits drink
> from her springs. She worshiped when she saw
> the Son in the bosom, and the Pure One drinking
> Pure milk. Blessed is his will!
>
> In the ninth year, let the earth give praise
> For when her barren womb was wetted,
> It gave birth. The dry earth
> saw Mary, that the fruit gave forth
> a great sea. To him be praise![145]

[142] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.185.

[143] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.149.

[144] Ephrem, *Nat*. 11.4.

[145] Ephrem, Nat 18.12–13.

In a chorus in which the angels, the sun and heavens, and all the elements of creation are called upon to give praise to Christ, the address to creation and the earth stands out because of its connection to Mary's womb. When creation observes that Christ has come to dwell in Mary, it gives praise because his presence has a revitalizing effect not only his mother alone but on the entire world, because she has become the fount of a great sea, restoring the thirsty earth.

Looking Ahead

We have now devoted a fair amount of attention to a variety of facets of Ephrem's Mariology, as it concerns the special relation which joins Mother and Son. In the process, we have illustrated a complex web of overlapping symbols for Mary, ranging from those which construe her as a human being (prophetess, mother), those that construe her as a vessel of some kind (Eucharist, Temple) and those that associate certain acts, qualities, or problems with her (the microcosm, the association with light or the sea.)

Before we turn to comparative evidence in the next chapter, it's worth pausing and making a few general observations about Ephrem's method here. The first may have become apparent to the reader from the way that stanzas recurred across multiple sections of my investigation: although for the convenience of analysis I have pulled some of his symbols apart and treated them as separate units, Ephrem's own process does not seem to operate in discrete categories; rather Mary is simultaneously a prophetess, a mother, a virgin, a sea and a temple. This is because (as I argued in chapter 1), all of Ephrem's variegated symbols are trying to capture a single theological reality, one that transcends the capacity of language to capture it: the paradox of the presence of God within a human being.

Second, Ephrem is not completely systematic with his symbolism. In one place, he will think of Christ as the Great Sea, or of Christ's incarnation as coming to dwell in the "tabernacle" of his own flesh. At other times, he will think of Mary herself as the sea, bestowing water to creation, and treat her as either the tabernacle, or the menorah *within* the tabernacle. If one attempts to nail Ephrem down and systematize his images, one misses the point. These images are *polysemous*, and a single symbol can compass multiple referents.

We have also noted that the notion of Mary's *agency* is a tension that runs throughout Ephrem's thought. Mary is often portrayed as a powerful figure with spiritual gifts: her voice is uniquely qualified to name her son; her preservation of her chastity brings glory to her; her womb is a site which overturns the order of creation. She exemplifies certain virtues associated with asceticism (chastity, poverty, humility), and in her maternal relation to her son, she is genuinely treated as a mother, giving sustenance to the God who sustains the universe.

On the other hand, even within those discourses which treated Mary as a human agent, there is a countervailing tendency which emphasizes her receptivity. The prophetic Mary does not speak on her own. She opens her mouth and Christ sows his voice in her, and when she wishes to stop singing, she entreats him to let her rest. Mary's maternity is not like the maternity of other women, because Christ himself wills to become thirsty for her milk. Even Mary's virginity is complex: though some passages seem to emphasize her active participation in preserving it, many others treat her as "sealed," and even suppose that her ability to willingly maintain her purity is the result of a divine gift. In these places, her purity is almost more of a ritual character. It is not incidental that Ephrem in several places connects Mary as a virgin to Mary as a temple.

I do not suggest that we try to resolve this tension. It is a highly productive paradox in Ephrem, and seems important to his view of the divine presence, both in Mary and in other human

beings. One can conform oneself to divinity; in the act of doing so, one becomes powerful. But the power that one acquires (by becoming a prophet, by preserving one's virginity, by inviting God to dwell within) remains a power dependent on the activity of God.

In the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I will turn to three bodies of religious and cultural literature contemporary to Ephrem: the Syrian Christian communities of late antiquity, the "pagan" Greek-speaking writers, and the rabbinic Jewish writers of the tannaitic and amoraic periods. Except the first, none of these groups has an account of Mary, of course. But through the work of the present chapter, I have shown that Ephrem's Mariology crystalizes around a series of symbols which *do* have cognates in different cultural traditions. I will focus on three of them in particular, as having broad application and being important in Ephrem's depiction of Mary: the prophet, the virgin, and the temple or house of God(s).

Each of these terms should be briefly defined, to frame the scope of my investigation. These definitions are offered heuristically and are aimed at capturing evidence relevant to our study of Mary and the divine presence. They should be worn lightly. By *prophet*, I will mean a person who is uniquely in communication with a god, thereby receiving divine knowledge, and especially divine speech, by direct access to a divinity. The knowledge so acquired may pertain, as it always seems to in Ephrem's Marian hymns, to the nature of divinity in itself. Alternatively, it may pertain to future events. The distinguishing factor that will mark knowledge as "prophetic" pertains not to its content but its source; it must be a divine communication.

By *virgin* I will refer to two different aspects: the physical and the moral. Physical virginity refers to those discourses which consider virginity as a biological category, relating specifically to women: purely and simply, it is possession of an intact hymen. Moral virginity, meanwhile, refers instead to a deliberately selected way of life that eschews sexual intercourse for religious reasons.

It is possible for someone to adopt the life of moral virginity after having previously engaged in sexual activity, although with a few exceptions (mainly Moses in Aphrahat and the rabbinic tradition) the virgins which we are considering will be lifelong practitioners.

By *temple* I mean a material entity which is considered to be the physical residence of a deity. Oftentimes, this will be an edifice, as the word naturally connotes in English. But the heuristic definition that I adopt extends it in two directions. First, it allows for other objects, besides buildings, to be captured under the term. Two will be relevant at various points in the chapters ahead: first, the divine cultic statues which are centered in Greek temples, and second, the Ark of the Covenant. Second, it also allows for the symbolic extension (self-evidently relevant from our reading of Ephrem) which treats *people* as able to become temples, by having God come and dwell within them. All of these I will consider under the single heading of "temple."

Ephrem does not treat these figures as radically distinct, slipping easily from one to another in his hymns. We will see that some other authors have a similar flexibility. But by adopting these heuristic categories, we can give some clarity to our analysis and our presentation of the material ahead. In turn, by contextualizing Ephrem's thought, and showing that some of the categories in which he thought were shared by others, it becomes possible to deepen our understanding, not only of Ephrem, but of the religious world in which he found himself in the late antique Roman east.

PART TWO: CONTEXTS

CHAPTER THREE: MARY AND SYMBOLS OF DIVINE PRESENCE IN EARLY SYRIAN CHRISTIANITY

A common shorthand for conspiracy theory in modern film is the "yarn map." A character stands in a dingy, poorly lit room, and gazes at a wall with seemingly random newspaper clippings, photographs, pages torn from books, and other records. Here and there, words are circled or underlined, and semi-coherent hypotheses are scrawled. Overlaying the whole, a vast web of yarn connects disparate elements of the collage, implying connections (real or, more often, imagined) between various persons, places and events. The implication of such scenes is always that, in straining to uncover the truth, the character has reached the line between sanity and madness—or indeed, crossed over.[1]

The study of the earliest Syrian Christians compels one to embrace yarn-map thinking. Our sources are few, their content often fragmentary, their connections difficult to reconstruct. Often even such basic facts as author, provenance, date, and original language rest on conjecture. Under such circumstances, the scholar must use all the available evidence lightly, must not place too much weight on any one datum, and must speak of probabilities rather than certainties. In what follows, therefore, my aim is not to prove the dependence of Ephrem's Mariological language on any specific prior source; such a proof far exceeds the capacity of the available evidence. Instead, it will be the aim of this chapter—and indeed, of all the following chapters—to explore prior and contemporary discourses using the same symbolic categories as Ephrem, and show how his Marian symbols take on added significance when considered within these contexts.

[1] See, for instance, the BBC adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1979) or Russell Crowe's portrayal of the mathematician John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001).

This chapter, which considers the Syrian Christian tradition surrounding Ephrem, will address two distinct questions. First, how do they discuss (if, indeed, they *do* discuss) Mary, the mother of God? Second, even if they show little interest in Mary herself, how do they employ some of the same symbols of divine presence that we have previously seen Ephrem use with reference to Mary? In the subsequent chapters, discussing "pagan" and Jewish materials, the former question will obviously recede, and we will focus entirely on symbolic parallels.

One terminological note ought to precede our investigation. In this chapter, I discuss four texts associated with third- and fourth-century *Syrian* Christianity. The adjective is chosen deliberately. Only one of the texts considered here (Aphrahat) is certain to have been originally in Syriac; two others (the *Odes of Solomon* and *Acts of Thomas*) are thought, with varying degrees of scholarly consensus, to be *likely* Syriac in origin.[2] The last, the *Protoevangelium* (or "Infancy Gospel") *of James* is certainly a Greek composition. These texts are united, then, not by linguistic origin but by a regional association with the Christians of upper Mesopotamia, and by the fact that, whatever their language of composition, each text entered Syriac quite early. That they shared a common cultural milieu with Ephrem, at least common enough that the symbolic language of each text might reasonably be taken to overlap, is, therefore, an operating assumption of this chapter.

Properly, too, the noun "Christianity" should be qualified. Determining the nature of the religious tradition(s) informing complicated, anonymous, and insecure dated texts like the *Odes of Solomon* or the *Hymn of the Pearl*[3] is notoriously difficult. Any claim for a direct and continuous relation to Ephrem can only be held together with much yarn. In discussing the themes and

[2] As will be discussed below, the *Acts* is *nearly* unanimously agreed to be Syriac in contemporary scholarship; the original language of the *Odes* is somewhat more contested.

[3] The *Hymn of the Pearl* is the name given to a song embedded within the *Acts of Thomas* in some manuscripts. It is, however, nearly universally agreed to be an originally independent composition. See the section below.

language that unite these texts to Ephrem, therefore, we are not discussing a conscious theological tradition or school. Rather, we are attempting to understand the broad Syriac Christian context in which Ephrem's Mariology took shape.[4]

The Protoevangelium of James

The *Protoevangelium of James*, which gives the life of Mary from before her conception through the birth of her son, is something of the odd text out in the collection under review in this chapter. Unlike all of the other works here considered, it is not held by any mainstream scholar to be an originally Syriac composition. Although it entered Syriac at a relatively early date, and was regularly circulating as one part of a collection known as the *Syriac Book of Mary* by the fifth century CE[5]—scarcely a century after Ephrem's death, in other words—it is universally thought to be an originally Greek composition. The scholarly consensus, advanced and defended by de Strycker sixty years ago, makes the *Protoevangelium* a unitary work of the late second century;[6] it can in any event be dated securely, on manuscript evidence alone, to the 3rd century at the latest.[7]

[4] On Christian identity in early Syria, the various studies of Han Drijvers (*East of Antioch, Cults and Beliefs at Edessa,* etc.) previously cited are still profoundly valuable.

[5] On the question of the Syriac circulation of lives of Mary, see Charles Naffah, "Les 'histoires' syriaques de la Vierge: traditions apocryphes anciennes et récentes," *Apocrypha* 20 (2009): 137–188.

[6] Emile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protevangile de Jacques* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1961).

[7] This on the basis of Papyrus Bodmer V, which has a nearly complete text and is datable to the late third / early fouth century. P.A. van Sempvoort, "The Protevangelium Jacobi, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date." in F.L. Cross, ed., *Studia Evangelica III: Papers Presented to the Second International Congress on New Testament Studies Held at Christ Church, Oxford* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964), 410–426 gives the most precise estimate out of modern attempts to date the text, fixing it in the range 178 to 204 CE, on the basis of patristic citations and a theory of the text's Marian-apologetic character. An up-to-date review of the scholarship on the question is given by Lily Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 31–40. George Zervos, *The Protoevangelium of James: Greek Text, English Translation, Critical Introduction,* vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), more complexly, theorizes that the text is not a unitary composition, but rather contains at least three redactional layers, spanning the late first to late second centuries.

No less than the date, the provenance of the text has been the subject of considerable debate.[8] A wide variety of locations have been suggested, from Egypt (the favored conclusion of De Strycker)[9] to Rome (Zervos concludes that the final redaction of the text was done there, perhaps in the circle or "school" of Justin Martyr).[10] One steady stream of scholarly voices, however, has argued instead for Syrian origins, on a range of bases including geography, the gospel-harmonizing principle at work in the construction of the text, and thematic concerns. The recent study of Lily Vuong typifies this last view, considering the text's focus on questions of purity to be suggestive of a Syrian Christian milieu.[11] I find this stream of scholarship broadly convincing, and will accordingly talk about the *Protoevangelium* as though it is a Syrian Christian text of the late second or early 3rd century. It should be carefully noted, however, that my argument does not *hinge* on this identification. Even if the text were originally composed somewhere far removed from Ephrem's Syrian context, nonetheless it circulated quickly and widely, and became popular in Syrian Christian circles; it is therefore a legitimate source for deepening our understanding of the symbolic dimensions of Ephrem.[12]

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[8] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 40–59 offers a thorough review of the provenance question.

[9] De Strycker, *La form la plus ancienne,* 419–21.

[10] Zervos, *The Protoevangelium of James,* 147; in the same place he says "[o]ne could even speculate that Justin himself may have been the redactor of the *ProtJac*."

[11] Arguments from geography are summarized in H.R. Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary,* trans. G.E. van Baaren-Pape (Assen: Royal VanGorcum, 1965), 20–22. On the gospel-harmonizing tendency in the *Protoevangelium* see Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Protevangelium Iacobi: a Case of Gospel Harmonization," *Studia Patristica* 65 (2013): 165–174. Vuong's thorough analysis of thematic dimensions which suggest a Syrian origin, in my view the most convincing argument, may be found in *Gender and Purity*. 193–239.

[12] Lily Vuong's book *Gender and Purity* and H.R. Smid's *Protoevangelium Jacobi* are two of the most significant influences on my reading of the *Protoevangelium*; additional studies which I have consulted include Timothy J. Horner, "Jewish Aspects of the *Protoevangelium* of James," *JECS* 12 (2004): 313–35; and Eric Vanden Eykel, *"But Their Faces Were All Looking Up:" Author and Reader in the Protoevangelium of James* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

I wish to call attention to and illustrate one important idea pervading the whole biography: Mary's *holiness.*[13] Over the course of the narrative, Mary transforms from a holy sacrifice, offered to the Temple on behalf of thankful parents, into a Temple minister, dwelling within the holy place, and finally into a new holy dwelling-place *herself*, when she receives Christ within her. We must carefully stipulate, however, that holiness is, in this text, not a *moral* quality. Mary's virtue—aside from her chastity and submission to God's will at the annunciation—are not the point. Instead, it is a *ritual* holiness that the text has in view: an absence of defilement, and a state of being set apart from the profane world, that gives Mary a kind of supernatural power.[14] I argue that several passages in the text also invite us to consider that Mary is being presented to us as a new Ark of the Covenant.

The *Protoevangelium* begins with a problem. Joachim and Anna, although a wealthy young couple, are forbidden from making an offering on the "Great Day of the Lord" (this may be Yom Kippur, the text is ambiguous)[15] because they are a childless couple. Right from the start therefore, their situation is presented as a problem of fitness for the sacred: they are cut off from Temple ritual because they are not properly disposed to participate. Joachim's response to this problem, to go out into the wilderness and fast, makes sense only in this context. We might think that a man wanting children would more profitably visit his wife; but if the problem is understood as one of holiness, then Joachim's decision to purify himself makes more sense.[16]

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[13] Vuong prefers the language of "purity" in her analysis, because her argument hinges on comparative engagement with elements of Jewish law and other contemporary discourses. I select "holiness" because I wish to compass an idea which combines the element of the set-apart and undefiled contained in"purity" with an element of spiritual power or even danger, as indicated in several places throughout the text.

[14] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 60–70.

[15] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 75–76 assesses this possibility.

[16] Prot. Jas. 2.

An angel comes to Anna and announces that she will bear a child; in gratitude, Anna declares: "as the Lord lives, if I should bear either a male or a female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it will serve him all the days of its life."[17] Before she is even *conceived*, therefore, Mary is set apart and dedicated to God. After Mary's birth, Anna makes good on this promise by special preparation: at six months old, when she first walks, Anna promises her, "you shall walk no more upon the earth until I bring you into the Temple of the Lord." Instead, Anna prepares her daughter a separate room (*ἁγίασμα*, a "holy-place") within the home, and keeps her there three years. In this sequestration, everything impure is kept from her and she is served only by the "undefiled daughters of the Hebrews."[18] In Vuong's view, Mary is envisioned as a Temple gift (the word δῶρον is used at e.g. 3.1, 7.1, etc.);[19] it is thus important for her to remain apart in a state of ritual purity, having no contact with the contaminant matter of the secular world. This sequestration charges her with holiness, and makes her an acceptable offering.

When she is brought, aged three, to the Temple, Mary is blessed by the priest. Her next act—indeed, due to the terseness of the text, one of the few things that we hear about Mary doing in the Temple—is to dance before the altar, having been filled with God's grace. This is a curious action; the narrator offers no comment except that the "whole house of Israel loved her."[20] But it puts the reader in mind of the story of David, who as an act of worship, dances before the Ark of

[17] Prot. Jas. 3.1: Ζῇ Κύριος ὁ Θεός· ἐὰν γεννήσω εἴτε ἄρσενα εἴτε θήλειαν, προσάξω αὐτὸ δῶρον αὐτὼ Κυρίῳ τῷ Θεῷ μου, καὶ ἔσται λειτουργῶν αὐτῷ πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς αὐτοῦ. Translations from the *Protoevangelium* are my own.

[18] Prot. Jas. 6: ἡ μήτηρ αὐτῆς λέγουσα· Ζῇ Κύριος ὁ Θεός μου· οὐ μὴ περιπατήσῃς ἐν τῇ γῇ ταύτῃ ἕως σε ἀπάξω ἐν τῷ ναῷ Κυρίου. Καὶ ἐποίησεν ἁγίασμα ἐν τῷ κοιτῶνι αὐτῆς, καὶ κοινὸν καὶ ἀκάθαρτον οὐκ εἴα διέρχεσθαι δι' αὐτῆς. Καὶ ἐκάλεσε τὰς θυγατέρας τῶν Ἑβραίων τὰς ἀμιάντους καὶ διεπλάνων αὐτήν.

[19] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 99–103.

[20] Prot. Jas. 7.3: Καὶ ἐκάθισεν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ τρίτου βαθμοῦ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου, καὶ ἔβαλλε Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς χάριν ἐπ' αὐτήν, καὶ κατεχόρευε τοῖς ποσὶν αὐτῆς. καὶ ἠγάπησεν αὐτὴν πᾶς ὁ Ἰσραήλ.

the Covenant while wearing a priestly garment.[21] Mary's act in this moment, therefore, is not that of a sacrifice, but of a ministering priest, performing a ritual act in the context of the altar.

After this initial act of worship, Mary lives for nine years in the Temple. Her stay there is unusual. She "was fed like a dove and took food from the hand of an angel."[22] Still more shockingly, we later learn something a little more specific about her period in the Temple: that she spent this time in the Holy of Holies![23] The historical improbability of such a fact need not detain us. It seems however that this extraordinary upbringing further concretizes her status as a holy site; for the Holy of Holies was the place, within the Solomonic Temple, that the Ark of the Covenant dwelt. In the second Temple, of course, that Ark was no longer there.[24] But by putting Mary in its place, and giving her a life apart in which she is ministered to directly by angels, the author seems to insert her into the same place as the Ark in the sacred geography of the Temple.

Eventually Mary is compelled to leave (the priests are concerned that, as a woman on the cusp of menarche, she may soon herself introduce ritual pollution into the holy place).[25] Joseph is selected to take Mary into his care. Even as she leaves the Temple, however, Mary retains her

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[21] 2 Sam 6:14–15. Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi,* 62 also notes a close parallel between the statement that Israel loved Mary (καὶ ἠγάπησεν αὐτὴν πᾶς ὁ Ἰσραήλ) with a statement made of David in the LXX of 1 Samuel 18:16 (πᾶς Ισραηλ καὶ Ιουδας ἠγάπα τὸν Δαυιδ), while Vanden Eyken, *But Their Faces,* 85–98, situates this dance in a wide variety of Biblical and classical contexts.

[22] Prot. Jas. 8.1. Ἦν δὲ Μαρία ἐν ναῷ Κυρίου ὡσεὶ περιστερὰ νεμομένη καὶ ἐλάμβανε τροφὴν ἐκ χειρὸς ἀγγέλου. Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 102–103 notes that the language of being fed like a dove assimilates Mary once again to the role of temple sacrifice, as doves were one of the few birds considered ritually pure for sacrificial purposes. The "food of angels" is more obscure; Vuong 103 emphasizes that whatever its particulars it represents a "special eating ritual" and thus designates Mary as a holy person; even the fundamental acts constitutive of human life are, for Mary, marked by holiness and contact with the divine. Vanden Eyken, *But Their Faces,* 82–85 reviews various contexts for "miraculous feedings" in antiquity, including examples from Greek literature as well as the Bible; in particular, he draws our attention to the parallels between this passage and the manna in the desert.

[23] Prot. Jas. 13.2: ἡ ἀνατραφεῖσα εἰς τὰ ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων καὶ λαβοῦσα τροφὴν ξκ χειρὸς ἀγγέλου.

[24] Vanden Eyken, *But Their Faces,* 69n11 makes this point.

[25] Prot. Jas. 8.2. Τί οὖν αὐτὴν ποιήσωμεν, μήπως μιάνῃ τὸ ἁγίασμα Κυρίου τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν; The second-temple thought-system governing ritual impurity relating to menstruation is reviewed by Vuong, *Gender and Purity*, 107–46.

holiness; in a sense, the new Ark of the Covenant is leaving the Temple. A first hint of this comes when Joseph, after he expresses reluctance to accept Mary, is scolded by the priest, who reminds him of punishments of Dathan, Abiram, and Korah.[26] Why these three men? They were rebellious, and perhaps nothing more than a general call to obedience is intended. But their fault, according to the Biblical story, lay also in an arrogant failure to perceive holiness properly and to perform sacrifice correctly.[27] In this light, perhaps the priest's accusation carries an undertone that Joseph is not only rebelling against authority; he has also failed to recognize the special holiness that is vested in Mary.[28]

We need not go through the rest of the text in detail, but a few specific moments further illustrate Mary's holiness, and specifically, her depiction as a vessel for God. At the outset of this investigation, I mentioned that the quality of holiness is characterized not only by purity and being set apart, but also by a kind of supernatural power. This power is demonstrated visually during the time of Christ's birth. In a cryptic speech made by Joseph, he tells us that at the moment when Mary gave birth to Jesus, all of creation paused for a moment. The stars in their courses, animals at their meals, and the birds in flight—all stopped.[29] Meanwhile, when Joseph and the midwife

[26] Prot. Jas. 9.2. Ἰωσήφ, φοβήθητι Κύριον τὸν Θεόν σου, καὶ μνήσθητι ὅσα ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς Δαθὰν καὶ Ἀβιρὼν καὶ Κορέ, πῶς ἐδιχιάσθη ἡ γῆ καὶ κατεπόθησαν ἅπαντες

[27] Cf. Num 16:3: "They assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (NRSV).

[28] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 140: "the text likens the possibility of Joseph's rejection of Mary to the offering of an impure sacrifice." Horner, "Jewish Aspects of the Protoevangelium," 326–327 notes the oddness of this passage (it's ambiguous whether Joseph is being given Mary as a wife or not); Vanden Eykel *But Their Faces,* 80 notes moreover that this passage makes Joseph the only person in the entire text to have a negative reaction to Mary.

[29]Prot. Jas. 18. This curious passage was studied extensively in Francois Bovon, "The Suspension of Time in Chapter 18 of Protevangelium Jacobi," in Birger Pearson, ed., *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester (*Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 393–405; he compares it with a wide variety of ancient texts, but generally concludes that the scene implies an eschatological moment. For my part, I think of the scene in Joshua 10:12–14, when the sun stands still for Joshua; in any event, a moment of divine intervention is implied.

approach the cave wherein Mary has given birth, they observe that "a bright cloud overshadowed the cave."[30] This draws on a motif from Exodus, for a cloud was the special mark signifying God's presence in the Ark or tabernacle.[31] Here the cloud rests over Mary, the new Ark.

The holy Ark, however, entails not only glory but danger. This is vividly demonstrated in the episode of Salome. Salome encounters the midwife, who tells her about the glorious birth of Christ from a virgin. Salome, however, is unimpressed, and says, "if I do not insert my finger (ἐὰν μὴ βάλω τὸν δάκτυλόν μου) and test her condition, I will not believe that a virgin has given birth."[32] Salome touches Mary; but her hand immediately feels as though it is burning and falling away from her; she admits her error, confesses that Christ is Lord, and is healed by touching him.[33]

On one level, this is a story about faith, parallel to the story about Doubting Thomas in John 20, at the other end of the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection. Salome fails to accept the incredible truth of the birth of the Lord, is punished for her doubts, and is restored to faith by Christ's mercy.[34]

On another level, the story is a narrative testimony to the fact that Mary a virgin. She is not only a virgin in the sense that she has practiced chastity. That was affirmed earlier, in a curious test whereby Mary and Joseph are made to drink the waters of the "ordeal," in order to prove that

[30] Prot. Jas. 19.2.

[31] Cf Ex 40:35, Lev 16:13, Num 10:34.

[32] *Prot. Jas.* 19.3. Jennifer Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 117 points out some interesting and important differences between this passage and the language of the Doubting Thomas episode of John 20, to which it is a close verbal parallel: while Jesus invites touching, Mary's body in fact resists touching, and is dangerous. We may also observe that the text of John never actually states that Thomas does in fact accept Christ's offer to touch; Salome does touch Mary, with dangerous results.

[33] Prot. Jas. 20.

[34] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 188 and Vanden Eyken, *But Their Faces,* 146–48, Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge* 117 all note the parallel with Doubting Thomas, and construe Salome's error here as being disbelief. I agree that this is present in the story, but it seems to me that contact between the sacred Mary and a profane Salome is part of the problem in this passage.

Joseph had not had sexual relations with her.[35] Rather, the *Protoevangelium* affirms that, even *after* giving birth, Mary remains a *physical* virgin, in the sense that we defined it in the last chapter.[36]

On yet a third level, the story of Salome is a story about the dangerous power of holiness, especially in its collision with the profane. For if we think of Mary as the Ark, then we should recall the fate of David's companion Uzzah, who has the misfortune to touch the Ark improperly during a ritual procession. Uzzah is not so impudent as Salome; his offense is a well-intentioned desire to stabilize the Ark on a rickety cart. Nonetheless, he is struck dead for the offense.[37] The Ark, as the site of God's residence in the midst of his people, cannot be touched by profane hands. Mary, as a vessel set apart before she was ever conceived. is similarly resistant to impure contact.[38]

I suspect that the last two points are related. Mary's virginity, considered here not primarily as a moral quality or a biographical fact about her (that she has not had sexual relations), but rather as a physical quality, is of a piece with the fact that she only played with the chaste daughters of the Hebrews when she was a child, and that she spent nearly a decade living in the Holy of Holies being fed by angels. It marks her as set apart, as holy, as the Ark of God.

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[35] Prot. Jas. 16.

[36] See also Micha'el Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity: Testing Virgins and Making Men in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 91–99. In his review of the literature, he observes a discordant note running through the literature: Salome is punished for her "lack of faith,"which seems to elevate belief over the physical criterion of virginity (and, after all, the text never says that Salome discovers Mary to be physically a virgin). However, I agree with Rosenberg's conclusion that "We should not, though, misconstrue this ambivalence regarding physical virginity for an actual rejection of the idea, or of its importance."

[37] 2 Sam 6 3–7.

[38] I have not, so far, found any authors who make this connection between Salome and Uzzah. The parallel is of course imperfect (Salome survives), but given the repeated characterization of Mary as holy, and the identification of her as the ark which, although not explicit, is nonetheless clearly implicit in several passages in the Prot. Jas., it seems to me a natural reading of the episode.

In the *Protoevangelium*, then, we observe Mary go through a progression that, at every point, emphasizes her holiness. We see her behaving by stages in three different modes: first, she is portrayed as a perfect Temple sacrifice, resolving her parents' ritual impurity and being preserved in holiness so that she may be given as a gift to God. Once in the Temple, she behaves as a kind of Temple minister, dancing before the altar, and seems to take on the role of the Ark by her dwelling in the Holy of Holies. And when she is made to leave the Temple—paradoxically, over fears of her *impurity*—she takes over the role of "temple" or "ark" herself, a pure vessel of holiness, with occasionally dangerous effects, through which Christ enters the world.

The point of this manifest holiness, and the sometimes elaborate care that the text takes to emphasize it, is to demonstrate Mary's fitness as the chosen vessel by which God became incarnate. Holiness, Vuong reminds us, is a state which assimilates the holy person or thing to God, himself the font of all holiness.[39] In order to enter into contact with the divine properly, no blemish or ritual impurity can be accepted. Thus, as the human person who will experience the very most intimate contact with God, her holiness and ritual purity are of the highest concern.

But the language of "vessels" invites us to note too that Mary's *agency* in all of this is somewhat limited in the *Protoevangelium*. She is set apart before her conception by her mother's vow, and from her infancy she is prepared to be a gift. Throughout the text, she speaks little, is largely acted upon rather than acting, and we get very little depiction of her moral behavior; her holiness, and even her virginity, are considered instead as ritual qualities. She thus remains, in this text, a vessel or a receptacle. Her expansion into a fully realized human being, at once receiving Christ but also proclaiming him, awaits the later development Ephrem will give her.

[39] Vuong, *Gender and Purity,* 63.

The Odes of Solomon

The *Protoevangelium* is the odd text out of our set. The *Odes of Solomon* (hereafter, *Odes*) are merely odd.[40] First hinted at in a Coptic manuscript of the *Pistis Sophia* discovered in the eighteenth century, they were restored nearly in full by J. Rendel Harris with the discovery of the Syriac manuscript H at the beginning of the 20th. They are now attested in four witnesses: aside from the nearly complete H, there is one incomplete witness each found in Syriac, Coptic, and Greek.[41]

A collection of 42 poems, of which 41 are extant,[42] the *Odes* pose a number of challenging scholarly questions concerning their origin. Neither their date, nor their original language, nor indeed the precise religious character of the *Odes* is easy to determine. For the first, the manuscript evidence provides a firm terminus ante quem of the end of the third century, but ranges from the end of the first to the middle of the third centuries have been entertained in the scholarship.[43] For the second, both Greek and Syriac have been suggested.[44] As to the religious tradition, interpreters have noted both Christian and Jewish elements in the texts; citations from the *Odes* in the *Pistis*

[40] Sebastian Brock, review of *The Odes of Solomon, Edited with Translation and Notes,* by J. H. Charlesworth, *JBL* 93 (1974): 623–5, commences, "the Odes of Solomon are one of the most beautiful and, at the same time, most puzzling products of early Christianity."

[41] The story of the scholarly rediscovery of the *Odes*, and an account of our rather slim textual evidence, is recounted in James Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solmon: the Syriac Texts, Edited with Translation and Notes* (Chico: Scholar's Press, 1977), 1–14. The same evidence has been revised and expanded upon by Michael Lattke, *The Odes of Solomon: a Commentary,* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 1–4.

[42] *Ode* 2 is absent from our otherwise complete witness H, and is not quoted by any of the other texts. Its existence is postulated in order to reconcile numbering disparities between the Coptic and Syriac witnesses. See Charlesworth, *Odes of Solomon* 2.

[43] See Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 4–10, who defends a date in the first quarter of the second century but provides a full range of the arguments.

[44] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 10 also notes the proposed Hebrew retrojection of Hubert Grimme, but judges it a "failure." His treatment of the major interpretive problems instanced by the language question (10–11, and throughout) is quite good; he concludes that a Greek original is likely, although this goes against the broader scholarly trend.

Sophia and various trends within the language itself, meanwhile, have suggested to scholars that it has, at the very least, a "Gnostic tinge" to it.[45]

All of these questions are interesting in their own right, and careful deliberation on them is important for the religious history of the second and third centuries CE. Fortunately, they need not detain us here. The *Odes* can be invoked with reasonable certainty as a source for some of Ephrem's theological symbolism because Ephrem himself quotes, alters, and responds to them.[46] Thus, whatever their *original* language or religious setting, we can at least be confident that they were circulating in Ephrem's fourth-century Syriac milieu, and we may interpret them accordingly.

Before we proceed to investigate the Marian and symbolic material in the *Odes*, it is interesting to note that all three of the partial collections of the *Odes* have "Marian" connections. In the Coptic *Pistis Sophia*, one of the *Odes* is quoted by Mary to interpret one of the songs sung by the titular Sophia;[47] this is part of a pattern in which the *Odes* are invoked by various figures as hermeneutic keys unlocking the challenges posed by Sophia's cryptic songs. Somewhat more distantly, in the Syriac manuscript N, some Marian materials by Severus of Antioch are included as part of the codex's general interest in refuting the heresies of the Julianists and others with

[45] The phrase is again Lattke's; his review of the stakes of the question (*Odes of Solomon,* 12–14) is to be recommended. Less convincing is the schema in James Charlesworth, *The Earliest Christian Hymnbook: The Odes of Solomon* (Cambridge: James Clark and Co., 2011), xviii–xix, where he divides up the individual *Odes* into categories such as "Christian," "Jewish," "Gnostic," "Christian [very Jewish]," "Christian [heavily Jewish]" and "Christian [not Gnostic]". On the problems associated with the category of "gnostic" in general, see the classic study, Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[46] See James Rendel Harris and Alphonse Mingana, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon, Re-edited for the Governors of the John Rylands Library* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), 17–25; and Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 6. Han J.W. Drijvers, "The 19th Ode of Solomon: Its Interpretation and Place in Syrian Christianity," *JTS* 31 (1980): 337–55, especially 353–355, also argues for some theological connections between Ephrem and the *Odes.*

[47] *Pistis Sophia* 59. Elsewhere "Mary" in the *Pistis Sophia* is generally Mary Magdalene; but in chapter 59 she is explicitly referred to as the Jesus' mother. See Carl Schmidt, ed., *Pistis Sophia,* trans. Violet MacDermot, Nag Hammadi Studies 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

incorrect understandings of Christ's nature.[48] Most interestingly, the Greek witness, Bodmer Papyrus XI, is part of the *same* fragmentary papyrus codex as Bodmer Papyrus V, whose discovery afforded one of the earliest witnesses to the *Protoevangelium*.[49] These connections may well be coincidental, but they are suggestive that at least for some subset of ancient readers, the *Odes of Solomon* had *some* kind of relation to Mary, however difficult it may be to trace the particulars.

Whatever these connections, however, Mary (or at least, a virgin) is mentioned only once with relative certainty in the *Odes*: she seems to discussed in *Ode* 19. Mary is not named, but in the second half of the Ode the allusion is unmistakable. The symbolism of the Ode is complex, however, and a proper interpretation of "Mary's" role requires quoting and analyzing the whole:

> A cup of milk was offered to me, and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness.
> The Son is the cup, and the Father is he who was milked; and the Holy Spirit is She who milked Him;
> Because his breasts were full, and it was undesirable that his milk should be ineffectually released.
> The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom, and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.
> Then She gave the mixture to the generation (="world", ܥܠܡܐ) without their knowing, and those who have received [it] are in the perfection of the right hand.[50]

The curious opening line suggests some kind of Eucharistic language, and even raises the faint possibility of a ritual context. This has, however, been thoroughly rejected by the scholarship.[51] Even if it is not sacramental, however, it seems to me that we must reject the assertion that "it should be treated merely as an image" or as a grotesque.[52] It is, rather, a *symbol.* Milk (ܚܠܒܐ)

[48] William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838,* vol. 2 (London: British Library, 1871), 1003–1008.

[49] Charlesworth, *Odes of Solomon,* 9.

[50] Odes Sol. 19.1–5. The translation and citation of verses are from Charlesworth, *Odes of Solomon*.

[51] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 270.

[52] Adolf Harnack, *Über das gnostische Buch Pistis Sophia. Brod und Wasser. Die eucharistischen Elemente bei Justin. Zwei Untersuchungen.* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1891), 49n: "sondern es handelt sich lediglich um ein Bild," cited approvingly by Lattke, *Odes of Solomon* 270.

appears several times throughout the *Odes*. It is always a symbol of God's gracious and loving provision for humanity.[53] In context, if it is not sacramental, it nonetheless affirms that the Son is the "milk" which is provided by the Father for the sake of human sustenance (out of his kindness, ܒܛܝܒܘܬܗ). This idea would be not at all strange to Ephrem, who has Mary remark upon the paradox that "as God, [Christ] gave milk to Mary, and again, she suckled him as a human."[54]

Much of the rest of this passage simply establishes the Odist's vision of the Trinity: the Son is the product of the Father, and the Spirit is the agent whereby the generative power of the Father is unleashed, so that it is not vain (ܠܐ ܒܛܠܐ ܗܘܬ). Although Drijvers sees these verses as full of "grotesque images which were such a hindrance for an intelligible interpretation,"[55] the logic is mainly clear. The spirit "opens her bosom,"[56] to mix the milk of the Father, and to transfer it secretly to the world, so that those who have received it "are in the perfection of the right hand."[57]

The passage of the milk to the world leads the Odist into his discussion of the Virgin, for she is the vessel by which the spiritual milk of the Father became available to mankind:

> The womb of the Virgin took [it], and she received conception and gave birth.
> So the Virgin became a mother with great mercies.

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[53] cf *Ode Sol.* 8.10; 35.5; 40.1. At 8.14, God's provision of milk is explicitly linked to his creative power ("I fashioned their members, and my own breasts I prepared for them, that they might drink my holy milk and live by it").

[54] Ephrem, *Nat*. 4.185.

[55] Drijvers, "The 19th Ode of Solomon," 341.

[56] The language is admittedly slightly odd here; Drijvers "The 19th Ode of Solomon," 341 suggests a kind of spiritual generation of the Son as offspring of the Spirit and the Father, prior to his human generation from the Virgin. This seems unnecessary; the Spirit's bosom (or womb) is here not purely receptive, but donative: mixing the milk of the Father's breasts, the milk is passed *through* the bosom of the Spirit into the world. The image falls apart if we try to map it according to the standards of biology, but the individual symbolic elements work. Alternatively, we might simplify matters by emending ܒܛܢܗ to ܒܛܢ, so that the Spirit opens not "her womb" but "his(=the Father's) womb." Lattke 273 and a number of other editors (listed by Charlesworth 83) take this latter approach, although Charlesworth demures, on the grounds that both Syriac manuscripts preserve the problematic feminine.

[57] The image of the right hand, which is Biblical (cf. Psalm 110:1, Luke 22:69, etc) is also frequent in the *Odes*. See, for example 14.4, 25.2,9, 38.21. Moreover, 8.18, where God says, "upon my right hand I have set my elect ones" is especially worthy of note as it follows shortly after the symbol of milk at 8:14.

> And she labored and bore the Son but without pain, because it did not occur without purpose.
> And she did not require a midwife, because he caused her to give life.[58]

The virgin[59] receives (and note that her role seems to be more purely receptive than the Spirit's) the spiritual milk which flows from the Father's breasts and the Spirit's bosom, and conceives a son. The short line "the Virgin became a mother" (ܪܒܬܐ ܗܘܬ ܐܡܐ) encapsulates a central paradox neatly, in a line we can imagine Ephrem writing. Although ordinarily (in accordance with Genesis 3:16, if the *Odist* has that text in mind) the birth of a child is painful, the Virgin's childbearing is without pain—a second paradox, to compound her virginal maternity. The explanatory note that this was because "the birth did not occur without purpose" is rendered slightly obscure by Charlesworth's translation, but is in fact parallel with the Father's milk not being released "ineffectually" in the first part. (The Syriac words used,ܒܛܠܐ ܠܐ, are the same in each case.)[60] The harmony of purpose is emphasized: because the virgin is participating in the same not-ineffectual action that God, in his kindness, is undertaking for humanity, her action is (by the operation of his kindness and mercy) without pain. Perhaps here we see an inchoate version of Ephrem's idea of the "double birth" of Christ from the womb (or bosom) of the Father and the womb of Mary; perhaps too the statement that it is "without pain" recalls the image of Mary as a second Eve, undoing her ancestral curse.

[58] Odes Sol. 19.6–9.

[59] We will refrain for the moment from calling her Mary, as the text does not; any reader in Ephrem's context, however, would have immediately made this association.

[60] Drijvers, "The 19th Ode of Solomon," 346 interprets this as being an expression of God's plan: "Mary bore a son without suffering pain, because it did not happen without purpose, but was a constituent phase of God's oeconomia." This is entirely plausible, but seems to me unnecessary to import the robust theological idea of the divine economy into this text.

Ode 19 closes with several verses in praise of the Virgin, which are difficult to interpret.[61]

> Like a man, she bore by will (ܒܨܒܝܢܘ), and she bore by the manifestation, and she acquired by much power.
> And she loved by salvation, and kept by kindness, and she revealed by greatness.[62]

As general praise of the Virgin, they are striking, especially for a text as early as the *Odes.* But how, exactly, are we to discover theological claims in these statements?

The first statement, that she brought forth "like man" (ܐܝܟ ܓܒܪܐ) resists interpretation. Drijvers' suggestion that it is a reference to John 1:13 and the "will of man" seems unlikely,[63] and Lattke's interpretation, where he splits these words and attaches them to the previous line (thus, "he caused her to give life like a man," suggesting the mode of God's assistance to the Virgin) only changes the referent, and does not solve the difficulty.[64] It is possible that it indicates simply that the Virgin overcame her putative feminine frailty in the act of giving birth, especially without pain, or some other statement of her virtue and power. In any event, it is interesting to note that a gender-reversal initiated in divinity is here mirrored in humanity, for just as the Father produces milk, so the mother gives birth like a man.

For the following phrases, I follow Lattke in interpreting them as references to attributes of God, rather than the Virgin's own qualities. Thus, she gave birth by (God's) will, and bore by (or in) the (divine) manifestation, and she acquired by (his) great power. These statements amplify Mary's status, of course, but they do so secondarily, as a result of God's operation through her.

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[61] Harris and Mingana, *Odes and Psalms of Solomon,* 306; Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 280–81; Drijvers "The 19th Ode of Solomon ," 348–50, while they all attempt with varying degrees of granularity to interpret the passage, also make the point that it is exegetically difficult.

[62] Odes Sol. 19.10–11. I depart from Charlesworth's translation here and offer my own, as I believe he obscures some of the text.

[63] Drijvers, "The 19th Ode of Solomon," 349.

[64] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 280.

Note that the "manifestation" (or "demonstration"), somewhat difficult to interpret,[65] might be a cryptic allusion to some kind of divine agent (the Spirit?); it may, however, also be linked to the last phrase in the Ode, that she "revealed by greatness." Taken together, these two lines suggest that the birth is a kind of theophany, a showing forth of God's will and his power. Although the interpretation is made difficult by the obscurity of the language, it is clear at least that the last few lines of this extraordinary Ode valorize a virgin, and give her an exalted place in God's plan.

This exhausts the (anonymously) Marian content of the *Odes*. But the *Odes*, as a poetic work with a distinctly hymnic character, turn out to have a fairly consistent symbology of the divinely inspired voice. And although this *Odes* do not imagine Mary in this role, nor do they frame this divine inspiration in terms of "prophecy," nevertheless Ephrem will use some similar language when he imagines Mary as the prophetic singer of the *Hymns on Nativity.*

Adequately expressing God's glory seems, to the Odist, an impossible task. ("Who can write the Odes of the Lord, or who can read them?"[66]) It is impossible precisely because God's majesty is so vast and his glory fills the entirety of the cosmos:

> For from the East and unto the West is his praise; also from the South and unto the North is his thanksgiving. even from the crest of the summits and unto their extremity is his perfection.[67]

Although the Odist asserts that love drives him on, and compels him to continue singing ("I will pour out praise to the Lord, because I am his own. And I will recite his holy Ode, because my heart is with Him"), the end result of the human mind's attempt to grasp God's glory is a holy silence,

[65] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 282.

[66] Odes Sol. 26.8.

[67] Odes Sol. 26.5–7.

as one perceives the majesty of God in awe. ("For it suffices to perceive and be satisfied, for the Odists stand in serenity."[68])

But nonetheless, a tension remains: for all that the "Odist stands in serenity," he still continues to sing, and at great length. How is this to be resolved? In the same manner in which Ephrem has Mary "open [her] mouth, and the Lord fills [her] mouth,"[69] so too the Odist: "I will open my mouth, and his Spirit will speak through me the glory of the Lord and his beauty."[70] Although the singer retains his identity as the instrument through whom God's praise is sung, it is the Spirit who provides the message, using the same (let us remember, scriptural) metaphor as we see in Ephrem. The Odist likes this metaphor of God directing or inspiring the mouth of the faithful to sing, and puts it through several different permutations. In one place, "He caused my heart to overflow, and it was found in my mouth, and it sprang forth unto my lips."[71] In another, he notes that it is not possible to demand this prophetic gift: "Who can press upon the Most High, so that he would recite from his mouth?"[72] The implied answer is no-one. Prophetic/musical inspiration is not something which the singer can demand; it is a gift from the Most High, and the Most High retains the initiative.

Moreover, just as we saw that in a few places, Mary changes from a vocalist into an instrument when she describes her own prophetic gifts (Christ "made his mother the harp of his melodies"[73]), so too the Odist: "As the wind glides through the harp [*cithara*] and the strings speak,

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[68] Odes Sol. 26 1–2, 12.

[69] Ephrem, *Nat*. 15.1.

[70] Odes Sol. 16.5.

[71] Odes Sol. 21.8.

[72] Odes Sol. 26.10.

[73] Ephrem, *Nat*. 15.4.

so the Spirit of the Lord speaks through my members, and I speak through his love."[74] To participate in the singing of the *Odes* is to have one's body literally vibrate with God.

Musical analogies come most naturally to a singer of *Odes*, but it is not the only one that gets employed alongside the image of the mouth. Sometimes, the image is of sustenance, as in "He has filled me with words of truth, that I may proclaim Him. And like the flowing of waters, truth flows from my mouth, and my lips declare his fruits,"[75] or "His love has nourished my heart, and his fruits he poured unto my lips."[76] The purpose of these metaphors is to reinforce that the words which God puts into the mouth of the Odist are not mere ornament; rather, the act of praising God brings sustenance, and, indeed, freedom and immortal life:

> The Lord has directed my mouth by his Word, and has opened my heart by his Light.
> And he has caused to dwell in me his immortal life, and permitted me to proclaim the fruit of his peace.
> To convert the lives of those who desire to come to him, and to lead those who are captive into freedom.[77]

This last image brings us to one final point of comparison between the imagery of the *Odes* and the symbols of Ephrem: the place of divine light. We saw in Ephrem that Mary was, in many places, *luminescent* because of the presence of Christ within her. The *Odes* exhibit signs of a similar image, by showing light as a frequent accompaniment of divinity. In this passage, his "heart is opened" by the light as an accompaniment to God directing speech. Another passage joins the same two ideas:

> He has filled me with words of truth that I may proclaim him.
> And like the flowing of waters, truth flows from my mouth, and my lips declare his fruits.
> And he has caused his knowledge to abound in me, because the mouth of the Lord is the

[74] Odes Sol. 6.1–2. Note however that the word for "cithara" here (ܨܒܠܬܐ) is different than the one in Ephrem.

[75] Odes Sol. 12.1–2.

[76] Odes Sol. 16.2.

[77] Odes Sol. 10.1–3.

true Word, and the entrance of his Light.[78]

We see here again the agency of the Lord in filling the mouth with words, and again it is accompanied by light—although here, the light is located not in the heart of the speaker, but in the mouth of the Lord; the association of the Lord's presence in the mouth of the believer with illumination remains nevertheless suggestive.[79]

Other imagery of divine light within the believer is less directly connected to the act of singing. As an example, in Ode 32, it is instead a property of the blessed: "to the blessed ones, joy is from their heart, and light from him who dwells in them."[80] There are several other examples of this kind of luminous presence,[81] to say nothing of other passages which, rather than locating the light within the believer, instead pledge to walk in the light rather than the darkness.[82]

Let us briefly review. Our investigation of the one citation of the symbol of the Virgin Mother in the *Odes of Solomon* revealed that several important themes found in Ephrem (the paradox of a virgin conceiving and giving birth, the reception of divine milk) were also to be found in the *Odes*. Moreover, turning from Mary herself to one of the major modes in which Ephrem talks about Mary, we noted that the *Odes* has a similar ecstatic view of the act of divine praise-singing: it is an act that arises out of man's desire to praise his creator, but it is not actually possible for anyone to do so unless God himself give him the words—whether as singer or as instrument. God retains the initiative in this divine encounter. Interestingly, in several instances this divine

[78] Odes Sol. 12.1–3.

[79] Lattke, *Odes of Solomon,* 177 resolves this line, which is somewhat tricky, by suggesting that "mouth of the Lord" is metonymy for the "word of the Lord," which would suggest a reading along the lines, "the word of the Lord [which I am speaking] is the true Word, and the entrance of his light," which is an attractive possibility.

[80] Odes Sol. 32.1.

[81] E.g. Odes Sol. 11.11, 15.2, 25.7.

[82] This seems a different motif than the light *within* Mary that I traced in the last chapter; see e.g., Odes Sol. 21.3.

directing of the mouth is also attached to an image of illumination, and light in general remains a powerful image in the *Odes* to signify the presence of God within the believer.

The Acts of Thomas

The *Acts of Thomas* (hereafter, the *Acts*) is a picaresque of the apostle Judas Thomas who is sent against his will to bring the Gospel to India; along the way he encounters numerous setbacks, chiefly from husbands and fathers upset by his preaching of celibacy. It survives in both Greek and Syriac witnesses. According to a standard scholarly account, the text was originally written in Syriac; however, the Greek version that we have is to be regarded as closer to the original, the extant Syriac versions having been submitted to revisions to remove or soften "heterodox" material.[83] (This situation is, however, reversed in the particular case of the *Hymn of the Pearl*, where our extant Syriac is believed to have priority; the *Hymn* is not present in most manuscripts of the *Acts* and is generally construed as an originally independent composition.)[84] Scholarly consensus dates the text to the early 3rd century, and favors an origin near Edessa both on linguistic

[83] The arguments for a Syriac original for the *Acts* date back to Theodor Nöldeke's review of Wright's edition, "'W. Wright, Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries. 2 vols (London, 1871)'", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen* 25 (1871): 670–79, where he grounds his argument in the metrical patterns of the *Hymn of the Pearl.* F.C. Burkitt, "The Original Language of the Acts of Judas Thomas," *JTS* 1 (1900): 280–90 advanced a new line of argument, based on "Syriacisms" within the extant Greek text. See e.g. A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. 2nd Rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 8–15, Harold Attridge, *The Acts of Thomas,* (Salem, Or.: Polebridge Press, 2010) 1–4 and esp. Attridge, "The Original Language of the Acts of Thomas," in Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins, and Thomas H. Tobin, eds., *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins, Presented to J. Strugnell on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990) 241–50. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta "A Syriac Original for the Acts of Thomas? The Hypothesis of Syriac Priority Revisited" in Ilaria Ramelli and Judith Perkins, eds., *Early Christian and Jewish Narrative The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 105–134 gives a full, albeit hostile, survey of the history of this school of interpretation. His own reconstruction favors Greek as the original language of the text.

[84] See the detailed commentary and bibliography in Klijn, *Acts of Thomas,* 181–195.

grounds and because of the special prominence given to the Apostle Thomas in that city.[85] It thus shares both linguistic and geographic connections with Ephrem.[86]

Mary is noteworthy in the *Acts* chiefly by her absence. Her name is mentioned only once in the text, in an oration Thomas gives in his final imprisonment, shortly before his execution. In the course of a creedal summary of Christ's identity, he notes:

> [Christ] is exalted above every greatness, the only begotten son of the depth
> *He is called the son of the virgin Mary*, and was known as son of Joseph the carpenter.
> He is the one whose smallness <we have beheld> with our bodily eyes, and whose greatness we have received in faith—indeed, we have seen it in deeds.[87]

This text is among the most self-consciously "Biblical" in the *Acts*: shortly after giving this creedal statement, Thomas recites a version of the Lord's Prayer closely modeled on Matthew 6:9–13.[88] The specific context thus invites Mary's presence, despite her otherwise noteworthy absence.

Aside from the stated fact of her virginity, this brief mention is noteworthy for one other reason: there is a small but significant textual difference between the Greek and the Syriac of this passage. The Greek text of the italicized portion, which Attridge translates, has καὶ ἐκλήθη υἱὸς Μαρίας παρθένου, "And he was called the son of Mary the Virgin." The Syriac, meanwhile, has

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[85] Klijn, *Acts of Thomas,* 15. More recently, Susan Myers, *Spirit Epicleses in the Acts of Thomas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 34–55 argues for a Nisibean redactor of the final text, taking place in approximately the third quarter of the third century, perhaps in direct response to Manicheanism. Once again, Lanzillotta, "A Syriac Original?" argues against the broad scholarly consensus and in favor of a 2nd century original fully immersed in the Mediterranean context of the other apocryphal acts.

[86] There may be a more direct connection; Klijn, *Acts of Thomas* notes resonances with Ephrem throughout his commentary. However, exact proof is elusive.

[87] Acts Thom. 143.5–7. Emphasis mine. All citations from the *Acts*, unless otherwise noted, come from Attridge, *Acts of Thomas*, and are cited according to his chapter and verse system. Attridge works from the Greek, while noting Syriac variants. The bracketed phrase here, "<we have beheld>", he supplies from the Syriac.

[88] Acts Thom. 144.1–4; Attridge, *Acts of Thomas,* 109n notes that the Greek has only four small linguistic variations that distinguish it from the text of the standard critical edition.

ܘܐܬܓܠܝ ܡܢ ܡܪܝܡ ܒܬܘܠܬܐ, "and he manifested from Mary the Virgin."[89] Although it is difficult to say whether this Syriac represents the original text, if it is at least ancient, then it imports a distinct theological idea not present in the Greek text. Rather than merely providing a biographical datum about Christ (Mary was his parent), it instead highlights an idea about Mary: Christ *manifested* from her. Mary is thus not merely a mother, in this reading, but a site of theophanic revelation. The idea is not further developed here, and its expression is quite brief. But it nonetheless hints at the existence of a symbolic idea whose Ephremic development we have treated earlier.

Aside from this passage, Mary is neither named nor referred to throughout the *Acts.* On the one hand, this is perhaps not surprising. The *Acts* is an account of evangelization, not a gospel, and its subject is not the life of Christ but the miraculous deeds of Thomas as he propagates the faith. Christ's relationship to Mary is thus not of paramount importance here. On the other hand, her omission is at least somewhat noteworthy, for two reasons. First, in the very beginning of the text, when Jesus sells Thomas to the merchant Chaban, he gives his identity as Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter. Although this may be no more than the author's verisimilitudinous use of conventional patronymics, nonetheless it is notable that Jesus's more theologically interesting parent is omitted in favor of his human father.

Second, the *Acts* is eager to place a theological emphasis on the paradox of Christ's simultaneous humanity and divinity. So for instance, invoking healing over a woman who had been possessed by a demon, Thomas calls on

> Jesus, a man slain, dead, buried
> Jesus, God of God, Savior, who brings the dead to life and heals the sick
> Jesus, who is in need as if <the one to be saved>
> And who saves as one who has no need
> Who catches the fish for breakfast and for dinner

[89] Syriac according to William Wright, ed. *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1871), 312.

> Who fills everyone with a little bread
> Jesus, who rests from the weariness of travel as a human
> and who walks over the waves as God.[90]

Elsewhere, he talks about "Jesus, who [has] taken on human form and come to be human and appeared to all of us"[91] and sings a hymn of praise which includes the line, "Glory be to your strength, which became weak on our account; glory be to your divinity, which appeared on our account in the likeness of humankind."[92] In one place he even exhorts faith in "Christ, who was born that those who have been born might live through his life. He was raised as a child, so that perfect manhood might be manifest through his manhood."[93] However, even when discussing Christ's incarnation and childhood, as in these later examples, the author does not take the seemingly natural step of mentioning the human mother who vouchsafes his humanity, or his double-birth from God and Mary. Her role in Christ's being "raised as a child" is omitted.

I tentatively offer two possible explanations for this curious silence. First: one of the distinct features of the theology of *Acts* is that Judas Thomas is, as his name implies, the "twin" of Christ. The exact nature of this twinship is difficult to pin down and resists a naturalistic explanation; as Charles Stang has pointed out, it cannot be that the two *look* identical (at least not all the time). For example, the merchant to whom Jesus sells Thomas does not remark on the oddity of a man selling his identical twin![94] Twinship, Stang argues, is more a complex matrix of spiritual kinship and willing membership in a particular *genos*; Judas Thomas' fraternal identity with Christ in this life anticipates Christ's spiritual relation (as kinsman or as bridegroom to bride) with Judas's

[90] Acts Thom. 47.5–8; the bracketed material is supplied by Attridge in order to complete the logic of the thought.

[91] Acts Thom. 72.3.

[92] Acts Thom. 80.7.

[93] Acts Thom. 79.4–5.

[94] Charles Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 125.

"double" in another world—and while the biological relation here is unique to Thomas, the spiritual relation there is one which all believers will one day have.[95] The text's frequent identification of Christ as "firstborn of many brothers and sisters"[96] underscores this point, as do the afterlife stories told by the young man and the young woman resurrected from the dead by Thomas.[97]

This spiritual kinship coincides, however, with a biological-looking twinship between Judas and Jesus sometimes manifests throughout the text. When Christ appears to a young couple on their wedding night to preach chastity, they confuse him for Thomas because he looks identical to the apostle; Christ reassures them that he is not Thomas, but "his brother."[98] Elsewhere, a serpent whom Thomas confronts in India acknowledges him as "the twin of Christ,"[99] as does a talking ass who confronts him in the street.[100] These fraternal relations narratively underwrite the deeper spiritual kinship which Thomas shares with Christ.

However, they would also pose a problem if the text were to elaborate Christ's human parentage. The ambiguities of the fraternal relation would be lost, and it would have to be systematized. It would either have made Judas into Jesus's fully human half-brother—and thus compromised Mary's virginity, a singularly unattractive possibility in a text which eagerly preaches total sexual renunciation even for the married—or it would have to account for the way in which a fully human Thomas is the full sibling of the divine Christ, equally miraculously born

[95] Stang, *Our Divine Double,* 129–34.

[96] Acts Thom. 60.1.

[97] Acts Thom. 34 and 57, respectively.

[98] Acts Thom. 11.4–5.

[99] Acts Thom. 30.7; this reference is omitted in the Syriac, perhaps as part of its orthodox revision.

[100] Acts Thom. 39.2.

of a virgin mother, and thus destroy Christ's distinctiveness. Indeed, the text is at pains to separate Thomas and Christ in this respect at the end, when Thomas proclaims, "I am not Jesus but a servant of Jesus; I am not Christ, but one who ministers before him. I am not a son of God, but I pray to be considered worthy by God." [101] Perhaps then, Mary's omission is a simple matter of narratival and theological simplification.

Another reason may lie in the religious background of the *Acts.* Although it is obviously a Christian text of some sort—deeply invested from its very outset in the evangelical mission[102] and containing several scenes which are recognizably Christian sacramental scenes[103]—it has a complex and multifaceted religious identity, further complicated by a redactional history now impossible to reconstruct with precision.[104] For although Mary is scarcely present in the *Acts*, that is not to say that "mothers" are not; they are simply not identifiably human.

The first invocation of a divine mother comes at the end of the "Hymn of the Bride," when Thomas sings, "they have given praise and glory… to the Father ever truthful, and the Mother ever wise."[105] That the referent for this maternal language is not Mary becomes clear as the text goes on; at another point, praying to Jesus, Judas says, "We praise and hymn you, your unseen Father,

[101] Acts Thom. 160.1–2.

[102] See especially Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent, "Apostolic Memories: Religious Differentiation and the Construction of Orthodoxy in Syriac Missionary Literature" (PhD diss, Brown University 2009), esp. 41–71 on the way that the *Acts* "created a narrative template for future Syriac missionary legends" (43).

[103] On the liturgical scenes in the *Acts* see the recent work of Jiphy Mekkattukulam, *Le don du sceau dans les Actes syriaques et grecs de Judas Thomas: le plus antique témoignage sur l'initiation chrétienne: onction, baptême, eucharistie* (Paris: Geuthner, 2019) which gives exhaustive attention to the historical evidence on offer in the text. So also Reinhold Messner, "Zur Eucharistie in den Thomasakten. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der eucharistischen Epiklese," in Hans-Jürgen Feulner, Elena Velkovska and Robert F. Taft, eds. *Crossroad of Cultures: Studies in Liturgy and Patristics in Honor of Gabriele Winkler* (Rome: Pontificio istituto orientale, 2000), 493–513.

[104] The most comprehensive recent treatment of the redactional history of the *Acts* is Myers, *Spirit Epicleses,* 57–107.

[105] Acts Thom. 6.10.

and your Holy Spirit, and the Mother of all creation."[106] The referent is then a divine figure, who is placed alongside Jesus and the Father, and seems to be paired with the Holy Spirit. This latter identification is further cemented by the three scenes in which Thomas invokes "the Mother" in clearly liturgical, sacramental contexts.[107] Here, it seems clear that the maternal divine figure being invoked is the Holy Spirit, being called upon to render the liturgical act efficacious.[108]

It is this mother in which the text takes far greater interest. Indeed, this mother may be the one which underlies genetic link of Thomas's twinship, for at one point the Spirit is invoked as "the sacred dove which gives birth to twin nestlings."[109] Although the "original" meaning of this text is unclear, in the final form of the *Acts* it cannot but call to mind the twinship of Jesus and Thomas, the twins.[110] Drijvers posits that here we see the remnant of an early, non-Nicene trinity, in which the Holy Spirit is mother to both Christ and the New Man.[111] This same trinitarian relations also inflects the last reference to the Mother in the Hymn of the Pearl, in which the Father and Mother and the Brother, in a letter, exhort the sleeper to come back and "with your brother, our viceroy, you shall be together in our realm."[112]

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[106] Acts Thom. 39.17.

[107] Acts Thom. 27.6–10, 50.2–6, 133.4.

[108] Susan Myers has made several recent studies of these scenes of feminine Spirit invocation. See *Spirit Epicleses,* 181–220, and Myers, "The Spirit as Mother in Early Syriac Speaking Christianity" in Stephen Ahearne-Kroll, Paul Holloway and James Kelhoffer, eds., *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 427–62, esp. 442–55 on the *Acts.*

[109] Acts Thom. 50.4.

[110] Myers, *Spirit Epicleses,* 194–97.

[111] Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Acts of Thomas," in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 2: Writings Relating to the Apostles Apocalypses and Related Subjects,* Rev. ed., trans. ed. R. McL. Wilson. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 322–411, here 333–34.

[112] Acts Thom. 110.41–48. Stang's reading of the *Hymn* (*Our Divine Double,* 135–43) notes that there is a "proliferation of divine doubles" in the hymn, but they are ultimately reducible to the one twin, Jesus.

The significant role of the Spirit as a maternal figure in the *Acts*, and any potentially alternative trinitarian theology that might undergird it, would leave very little role for serious consideration of Christ's human maternity. It is thus possible that Mary's omission from the *Acts* derives from a religious milieu in which less attention was paid to Christ's human parentage, in contrast with his divine maternity through the Spirit. The sole appearance of Mary in chapter 143 would then be explained as an "orthodox" insertion from an originally unrelated source.[113]

We may note in passing, however, one facet of this divine mother in *Acts* which is correlated, in Ephrem's writing, to his human parent. In one of the liturgical invocations, Thomas calls on the Mother as one who "understands the mysteries of the chosen one… you who make manifest what is secret and render visible what is hidden."[114] The agency of this language does not match Ephrem's vision of Mary; he explicitly has her disclaim perfect understanding of Christ's mysteries, and it is Christ rather than Mary who is the cause of the hidden one's becoming manifest. Nonetheless, it seems noteworthy this symbol of Mary's special relationship with her son is shared in some sense with the divine Mother in *Acts*.

Mary herself, then, plays a very small role in the *Acts*; even the other "mother-figure" of the spirit is invoked primarily liturgically. The text does, however, elaborate one symbolic image we have seen in Ephrem's Marian language—that of the temple of God. On examination, the *Acts* turns out to be quite concerned with the proper construction and maintenance of these temples.

[113] Indeed, Myers, *Spirit Epicleses,* 82, in her long chapter on the redactional history, specifically singles out chapter 143: "[it] does nothing to further the story, has little if anything to do with the apostle's current situation, and was probably inserted at this point."

[114] Acts Thom. 50.3–4.

Thomas's evangelical mission begins when Christ sells him to an Indian merchant, Chaban. In order to entice the buyer, Christ offers Thomas as "a carpenter"—a useful trade![115] Chaban's interest is piqued, and once Thomas is aboard ship, he inquires what kinds of things the man is able to build. "With wood I make plows, yokes, scales, ships, ships' oars, masts and wheels. With stone I make monuments, shrines, and royal residences," Thomas replies. "We have need of such a craftsman," is Chaban's judgment.[116] At the surface level, this is a practical conversation: a merchant having purchased a new craftsman wishes to learn the particulars of his investment, and is pleased with the result. But as the narrative progresses, we learn that Thomas is indeed on a mission to build temples, not of stone but of souls.[117]

The first time we encounter the language of spiritual temples, it comes not from Judas, but from Jesus, who borrows Judas's likeness to address a newly married couple. In his speech, he exhorts them to remember the teaching of Judas, and that if they "abandon this sordid intercourse, you'll become holy temples, pure, freed from afflictions and pains, both hidden and visible."[118] Here the dominant note of the *Acts*' temple discourse is invoked for the first time: a person becomes a purified "holy temple" specifically when he or she[119] abstains from sexual intercourse.

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[115] Acts Thom. 2.

[116] Acts Thom. 3.5–8.

[117] There is a linguistic distinction which should be drawn here. In the Greek *Acts*, the term used both in this passage concerning stone temples and in the passages about spiritual temples is consistently "ναός," providing an exact verbal continuity between the two contexts. In the Syriac, however, Thomas asserts that he builds ܗܝܟܠܐ out of stone, but chastity turns the soul into a ܡܕܫܐ (< Gk. ναός). Although the direct verbal parallel is thuse omitted from the Syriac, nonetheless the broader semantic connection between this passage and the later spiritual ones remains.

[118] Acts Thom. 12.3 As Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 115 notes, the rest of this chapter is rather odd: "Judah Thomas switches rationales in mid-sentence and descends into a diatribe against earthly marriage and childbearing. For the downside of indulging in "filthy intercourse" is the heavy burden of childbearing and rearing."

[119] The pairing is important; the *Acts of Thomas* is emphatically concerned with sexual abstinence of both men and women.

This is of a piece with the broader "encratite" project of the *Acts*; asceticism and renunciation, especially sexual, is one of the major moral themes of the whole text.[120] But this motif, where virginity in particular is linked with becoming the dwelling-place of God, connects the symbolic imagery of the *Acts* with that of Ephrem.

The motif is further developed and reinforced as we go on. In an interesting speech before the Indians, Thomas adapts the Beatitudes:

> Blessed are the spirits of the chaste saints! They have received the perfect heavenly crown from the heavenly sphere assigned to them.
> Blessed are the bodies of the chaste saints! They have been deemed worthy to become temples of God, so that Christ might dwell in them.[121]

Note here a development of the language of chaste temples: it is *Christ* who will dwell in those who, by abstinence, cultivate a sacral site within themselves. The agency here is also slightly complicated; while in the first passage Christ exhorts the couple to become temples by giving up intercourse by their own free will, here it seems that "becoming temples" is a result of being "deemed worthy"—it is a transformative process invited by chastity, but the agency remains with Christ, who *chooses* to dwell in them. The question of agency is further complicated in another place, near his martyrdom, where Thomas prays that Christ "be the physician of their bodies and souls. Make them your holy temples, and let your holy spirit dwell in them."[122] Here it seems as

[120] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 124 observes: "The reader of the Acts is left with a very strong impression that Christian faith and sexual renunciation are fundamentally related, if not one and the same thing. The author reinforces this notion by aligning celibacy with holiness."

[121] Acts Thom. 94:5–6. I have changed Attridge's intentionally defamiliarizing, "Congratulations to…" to the more conventional "Blessed are." The construction is identical to the scriptural beatitudes of Matthew 5, with forms of "μακάριος."

[122] Acts Thom. 156.14.

though the action by which a someone becomes a temple rests entirely with Christ: he first purifies a person, and then they become his dwelling-place.[123]

A temple of the indwelling Christ, Thomas asserts, has special power. In exchange for allowing Christ to rest in them, Christ gives them rest amid their troubles.[124] "The wicked, base, and evil ones"—as we shall shortly see, both humans and spirits are meant— do not harm him; instead they flee, and even the devil himself does not see him, for the "light that you have set up" blinds him.[125] The Greek of this last expression reinforces the temple language, as the verb form for "you set up" used here, ἀνιδρύσειας, is a religious one, used of cult statues.[126] The pure temples that *Acts* imagines are thus not passive receptacles, but sites of divine power.

There is also a certain reciprocity in the indwelling of Christ in the chaste. For while he dwells in them, they also dwell in a holy place. Thus, Thomas says:

> Holy chastity is the temple of Christ, and the person who dwells in it receives it as a habitation. Self-denial is the resting place of God. For forty days and nights he fasted, tasting no food. The person who observes this will dwell in it as on a mountain, and meekness is his boast.[127]

The practice of chaste self-denial thus initiates a mutual indwelling, by which one becomes a resting-place or temple for God; at the same time, however, the chaste one becomes a "dweller" within virtue, occupying a position like the inhabitant of a temple or on a holy mountain. In either case, by the practice of virtue they find themselves in positions of theophany. (Note also that in

[123] This complicated relationship of agency between the believer and Christ has been pointed out by Mark DelCogliano, "Aphrahat on the Modes of Christ's Indwelling," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 74 (2008): 181–193, here 185–86.

[124] Acts Thom. 156.13.

[125] Acts Thom.148.

[126] Thus LSJ, which sites Cassios Dio 37.34 as the sole example of the usage; in that context, the referent is a statue of Jupiter set up on the Capitoline Hill.

[127] Acts Thom.86.4–8.

this passage, uniquely among the "temple discourses" of the *Acts*, the idea of a sacred dwelling-place of God is yoked to a virtue other than chastity: fasting.)

One final note: Charles Stang, in his evaluation of the theology of the text, observes:

> [a] cluster of ideas of household, kinship, race, and kind runs throughout the Acts. There are three households, or more often races or kinds: (1) the genos of evil spirits or demons; (2) the genos of humans; and of course (3) God's own genos (or oikos). Humans have both their own proper genos, humankind, and also a genos with which they can freely affiliate, the demonic or the divine. The persistent struggle in these Acts, then, is to rescue humans from a demonic affiliation, to which sex and procreation commit them, and to welcome them instead into the divine household.[128]

This language of kinship or race does indeed run throughout the whole text. But I also argue that, in the context of the temple/divine dwelling-place theology of the text, the same idea is also expressed in terms of the capacity to become two kinds of dwelling-place. A human can, as we have been tracking, become a kind of divine dwelling-place or temple through the exercise of chastity. But they can also become the dwelling-place of a demon, as is vividly demonstrated when Thomas confronts a demon who had been possessing a woman. As part of a longer diatribe, in which he contrasts Christ's activity with Satan's, the demon declares:

> As <Christ> constructs vessels for you that are worthy for you to inhabit, so <my father> seeks out vessels for me, through which I might perform his activities. As <Christ> nourishes and provides for his subjects, so he prepares torments and punishments for me, along with those in whom I dwell… As you by your prayer and good deeds find refreshment in your spiritual chants, so I, too, find refreshment in murder, adultery, and the sacrifices performed with wine on the altars.[129]

The agency here is somewhat odd. It does not seem that people can decide to become temples of Christ or the dwelling-place of demons. Rather, the choice is made for them. But as with the *genos* of Christ and the *genos* of spirits, so too the dwelling places. Humans will either be worthy vessels,

[128] Stang, *Our Divine Double,* 132.

[129] Acts Thom. 76.7–8,10.

or vessels sought out by Satan so that demonic activities can be performed. This miserable latter state is not beyond all hope, however, as Christ himself, through Thomas, drives the demon out of the afflicted woman, and commands it "to go no longer into human habitations, but get out, away with you, and dwell far from where humans live."[130] Thus, one of Thomas's apostolic missions is a kind of divine remodeling, "converting" the dwelling-places of demons into temples of God.

In sum, the final form of the *Acts* has only one explicit mention of the Virgin Mary, in which, in the extant Syriac only, we can detect a faint verbal echo of her as a theophanic site. Aside from this, she is omitted. The reason is difficult to recover, although I have suggested that it might be either because an emphasis on her maternity would complicate the *Acts'*s theology of twinship, or because the *Acts* articulates an alternative Trinitarian theology in which the Holy Spirit assumes the "maternal" role. Despite the omission of explicit Mariological material, however, the *Acts* nonetheless has a robust and richly expressed theology of chaste human beings as the temples in which Christ dwells. We will return to this in the conclusion of the chapter.

Aphrahat, the "Persian Sage"

The *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat are the nearest securely datable contemporary Syriac literature to Ephrem. Conveniently, Aphrahat himself provides dates for the composition of various parts of the work.[131] On the basis of these statements, the range of the whole can be placed between 336 and 345 CE—within Ephrem's lifetime, in other words, although by an older contemporary. The identity of the author, a Persian writing outside of the sphere of the Roman Empire, is somewhat

[130] Acts Thom. 77.1.

[131] See e.g. Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 22.25, 23.69.

more difficult to establish with certainty,[132] although from the texts themselves it is clear that he held, or at least claimed, a position of spiritual and exegetical authority, and that he was attached to a Christian community with a distinct ascetical practice. Aside from an exposition (in the first few *Demonstrations*) of basic Christian principles of faith and love, the chief projects of the Demonstrations seem to be a defense of a Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and exhortations concerning virtue, especially the ascetical virtues which characterize the ascetical community to which he is attached, the "sons of the covenant."[133]

Mary appears more often in Aphrahat than she does in either the *Odes of Solomon* or the *Acts of Thomas.* She is mentioned by name in ten chapters, spread throughout the whole collection of the *Demonstrations.* In none of these passages, however, does Aphrahat articulate a particularly robust theology of Mary, in comparison with the more elaborate accounts of Ephrem or even the *Protoevangelium.* Indeed, his mention of her is often perfunctory: she is either included in a list to elaborate genealogy,[134] or her motherhood is mentioned merely as an otiose way of describing the time of Christ's incarnation,[135] or she is invoked as one scriptural example of an exhorted virtue in a lengthy treatment of such examples.[136] In a few of the remaining citations, however, we can detect hints of a theological idea, and a constellation of symbols, touching on Mary.

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[132] See Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010) 4–10 for a treatment of the possibilities.

[133] On the particular ascetical communities and practices with which Aphrahat was affiliated, see Sidney Griffith, "Ascetism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 326–51, Shafiq AbouZayd, *Ihidayutha: A Study of the Life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient, from Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D.* (Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1993), and Stephanie Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God: A Study of Early Syriac Theological Anthropology* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014) 73–103.

[134] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 23.21.

[135] This seems to me to be the thrust of *Demonstr.* 6.10 and 21.10.

[136] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 3.14 seems in my reading to be of this kind. Although Aphrahat offers a novel interpretation of Mary as one who was engaging in fasting at the time of the Annunciation, no great amount of theological weight is

One of the main Marian ideas that occurs in Aphrahat is that she is an exemplar of humility. He mentions her in two places as an illustration of the great importance, and great reward, of this virtue. In both of these places, Mary, because she is lowly and humble, found favor with God. In *Demonstration* 9, Aphrahat draws on the Magnificat:

> The humble are children of the Most High and brothers of Christ […] On account of her humility, Mary received him, for when Gabriel brought the news to the blessed Mary he spoke as follows to her: "Peace be to you, blessed among women." […] The beloved child was conceived within Mary. She glorified and magnified the Lord: "He has delighted in the humility of his servant, but has taken no pleasure in those who are proud and important. The Most High lifts up all those who are humble."[137]

The same basic Mariological claim is found in another passage in *Demonstration* 14. Here, though, Aphrahat classifies Mary as a prophet:

> "Prophecy and judgement were accomplished by women at certain times, since this pleased the one who elevates the humble. Miriam was a prophet; Hannah was a prophet; […] Mary was a prophet and the mother of the Great Prophet."[138]

Note that Mary's prophetic identity is not given as a mere pneumatological fact; rather, Aphrahat is using this list to illustrate a moral claim. "Prophecy and judgement" are awarded by God to women *because he wishes to elevate the humble.* This is part of a longer discourse on God's special care for the lowly:

> In each generation, [… the Creator] brought honour to those of little importance and treated the proud with contempt. He raised up the humble and humbled those of high standing. […] He elevated Seth, the younger one, over Cain, the firstborn, and Noah over Adam, as the father of a second world. He elevated Isaac over Ishmael; Jacob over Esau…[139]

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placed on this interpretation, and indeed Aphrahat seems much more interested in other scriptural figures, especially Daniel.

[137] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 9.5. Translations of Aphrahat from Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat.*

[138] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 14.33.

[139] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 14.33.

That is to say, Mary and the other women were granted prophetic gifts specifically to lift up a group (women) who are otherwise characterized by meekness, and to reverse a natural hierarchy (gender) by the exercise of grace. Mary's inclusion among the female prophets thus completes and perfects a project which has been God's intention all along: elevating the lowly over the great.

At this point, Aphrahat leaves off discussing the Mother of God herself. It is his most significant treatment of Mary, and yet it does not amount to much. But this passage which starts with Mary leads him in interesting directions: the themes of divine knowledge[140] and the temple. He next gives a lengthy account of an ecstatic vision, culminating in a discussion of the limits of the senses and the intellect:[141]

> Great are the works of God; deep and wondrous are his thoughts. He suspended the sky without pillars, and made firm the earth without supports. He gathered the waters together into pools…[A further account of creation, generally following the order of Genesis 1, follows.] The arms of intelligence are stretched out, and the wings of thought are extended; the senses of the mind explore, and the eyes of the conscience gaze intently. The openings of the sense of hearing fly to perceive and to understand the inquiry. But even all of these together do not comprehend.[142]

God's creation of the entire universe is laid out in grand terms. Alongside the statement of divine activity, however, there is a sharp reminder that merely human mental and sensible exertions do not suffice for knowledge. The intelligence, thought and mind (ܡܕܒܪܢܘܬܐ, ܡܗܪܗܪܬܐ, ܠܒܐ), the eyes, and the ears fail to grasp the works of God. (We may note that they are portrayed as straining and flying *upwards*, in an unsuccessful attempt to ascend to God under their own power.)

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[140] This vision is not explicitly framed as "prophetic" by Aphrahat. The figure whom he will eventually introduce is rather the ܚܟܝܡ, the wise man. But given that (a) it closely follows his catalogue of the female prophets discussed above, and (b) the subject matter pertains to things which cannot be comprehended by ordinary rational knowledge, it seems to fall within the domain of the "prophetic" as I defined it at the end of Chapter 2.

[141] For this vision in the context of other theophanic visions in Aphrahat, see also Jarkins, *Aprahat and the Temple of God*, 154–56 and passim.

[142] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 14.34.

If these combined powers do not suffice, what does?

> Who perceives the place of knowledge? Who comprehends the foundation of wisdom? Who discerns the place of understanding? [… it cannot be bought, and it is very desirable] It lives in those who are diligent, and is planted in the midst of the heart of the one who is wise. The ligaments of [his heart] are set firmly in their sources, and in it he possesses hidden treasure. His thought flies to every height, and his reflection goes down to every depth.[143]

It is the *diligent* and *wise* man who acquires the special knowledge of divine things. J. Payne Smith notes that the word used for "diligent" here (ܟܫܝܪܐ) is one that pertains specifically to ascetics; we may therefore safely assume that Aphrahat has the sons of the covenant in mind (and moreover, as we shall see in a minute, that celibates in particular are included among the "diligent.")

The result of the wise ascetic attaining to this knowledge is that God comes to dwell in him: "he is the great temple of his Creator, and the High King enters and lives in him, carries his mind to the heights, and his thought flies to his sanctuary; he shows him all kinds of treasure."[144] This is the crux of the matter for Aphrahat, and for our comparison with Ephrem. One might think that, as Aphrahat mentions "diligence" and "wisdom," he construes some kind of human effort or intelligence as having enabled this man to attain the division of divine things. But Aphrahat makes the actual chain of causality clear: the High King "enters and lives in him" (ܘܥܐܠ ܫܪܐ ܒܗ ܡܠܟ ܪܘܡܐ) and transforms him into a "great temple" (ܗܝܟܠܐ ܪܒܐ). It is this act of divine initiative and indwelling which is the ground of the diligent wise man's mental elevation, not any superior effort of his own.

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[143] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 14.35.

[144] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 14.35. On the interiority of this Temple and the theme of "inner temples" in Aphrahat in general, see Jarkins, *Aphrahat and the Temple of God,* 103–10.

The rest of this extraordinary passage is a meditation on the experience of being a temple of God, one of the most vivid I've encountered in Syriac literature. We need not comment on every moment in it, but a few parts do seem worthy of citation. When the wise ascetic becomes a temple:

> His intellect is absorbed with vision, and his heart is captivated by all its senses. [The King] shows him that which he did not know. […] all the watchers pursue [the King's] service and the seraphim sanctify [The King's] glory, flying on their swift wings with white and beautiful garments. They hide their faces from his brightness, and their course is more swift than the wind. There the throne of the kingdom is set up…[145]

The temple and the divine worship envisioned here is not just a dramatization of the liturgies and setting of the earthly temple. Rather, it is a vision of the *celestial* temple service. God is enthroned within the wise man, and the angelic seraphim surround him, proclaiming the King's glory. Aphrahat seems to be making an allusion here to another famous vision of God in the Temple, that of the prophet in Isaiah 6.[146] Like the biblical prophet, Aphrahat's wise man sees the King enthroned; he sees seraphim surrounding and serving the King,[147] simultaneously praising God's glory (ܩܕܫ here is the Syriac verb for the liturgical chanting of "holy, holy, holy") and holiness (and covering their own faces.) The prophetic character of the wise ascetic's vision is thus given a scriptural confirmation.[148] The interesting fact, and the one that distinguishes this passage from

[145] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 14.35.

[146] Isaiah 6:1–3, NRSV: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'"

[147] "pursue his service" is ambiguous in the Syriac; Jarkins, *Aphrahat and the Temple of God,* 145 and again 154, noting the parallels with Isaiah argues that it is the sage himself who is being served by the angels. The Isaiah parallel, however, seems dispositive to me, and I side with Lehto, who translates it as "[the King's] service." It makes more sense of the rest of the passage (the throne, hiding faces from His brightness, etc) if we construe a more direct parallel with Isaiah 6.

[148] Jarkins, *Aphrahat and the Temple of God,* 174 argues that this passage may be more appropriately classified as "apocalyptic" than "prophetic," and embeds this passage in a much wider discussion of apocalyptic literature in Christian and Jewish late antiquity. As a matter of genre distinction I find her argument persuasive, but the language of prophesy introduced by the Marian passage discussed above, together with this citation of Isaiah (which Jarkins also notes) invites us at least to hypothesize that the wise man is being envisioned prophetically. Moreover, at least in

Isaiah, is that Aphrahat portrays his wise ascetic as seeing this temple liturgy taking place not in the heavens, nor in the Jerusalem Temple, but *within a temple which is himself*. The wise ascetic by receiving God within him, becomes a prophet and a temple at the same time.

One more excerpt from this vision will suffice to illustrate life as a temple for Aphrahat:

> When the wise man sees in his mind the place of his many treasures, then his thought is elevated, and his heart conceives and gives birth to all good things, and he meditates on all that has been commanded. […] In the night, the darkness is illuminated, and he sends his thoughts to all places. […] There is no limit to the mind of the One who is contained and who lives inside of him. O place where the King lives and is served! Who can count his treasures in you?[149]

This wonderful passage illustrates several features of the ascetic's experience of having God dwell within him. First, the experience is one of *fertility.* The heart "conceives and gives birth" (ܚܒܠ ܘܝܠܕ). Second, he experiences a kind of light in the middle of the darkness. Third, note the paradox of space: although the mind of One is without limit, nevertheless, it lives *inside* the wise ascetic. They are expressed briefly here, but all of these are, of course, images that we have seen associated with Mary in Ephrem.

This passage is not the only one in which Aphrahat meditates on the experience of the human as a temple, but it is the richest and most eloquent, and also the one most proximate to a discussion of Mary.[150] But templehood is not the only Ephremic theme that we can find expressed in Aphrahat. He also has a great deal to say about celibacy.

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this passage, Aphrahat seems at times to be describing a *permanent* state of the ascetic, not a momentary vision; this seems (in my view) to accord more with the prophetic than the apocalyptic.

[149] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 14.35.

[150] For other passages on the human as a temple, see Jarkins, *Aphrahat and the Temple of God.* Mark DelCogliano, "Aphrahat on the Modes of Christ's Indwelling," traces four different "modes" of indwelling in Aphrahat. According to him, faith, baptism, and prayer in Christ's names are methods of indwelling that are dependent upon purity, while "knowledge of God" is a fourth mode, independent, in DelCogliano's view, of purity. (193) Although I agree that language of purity, in particular, does not seem to occur in more prophetic "knowledge of God" passages like this one, nevertheless *holiness* does, and so I would nuance the notion that this mode is in all senses "independent" of purity concerns.

Aphrahat is zealous in endorsing virginity, for men as well as for women.[151] Throughout the Demonstrations, he offers periodic exhortations on the subject. Demonstration 6, addressed to the ascetic "sons of the covenant," is a particularly rich example. Here, Aphrahat argues vigorously that male and female celibates should not live together;[152] and exhorts them that virginity is "the heavenly portion" and "Christ lives in those who live that way."[153] In Koltun-Fromm's analysis, the "sixth demonstration reveals a theology of salvation that is also intimately connected with sexual renunciation;" it may even be the only way to preserve the sanctity of baptism.[154]

But one of his most sustained arguments in favor of sexual purity comes in Demonstration 18, when, writing against Jewish opponents of celibacy, he connects sexual purity with a divine theophany and the salvation history of Israel. Here, Aphrahat's method is exegetical and argumentative. The Jewish interlocutors (real or imagined), against whom he is warning his readers, advance various scriptural proofs against the practice of permanent celibacy:

> When God created Adam, he blessed him and spoke to him as follows: "Increase and multiply; produce offspring and fill the earth." And in a similar way, he said to Noah, "Multiply on the earth and produce offspring in it."[155]

Aphrahat cannot, of course, argue against the words of scripture. But he does call the reader's attention to the fact that things don't turn out so well for the descendants of Adam: they become

[151] It remains, however, the case that "Aphrahat seems to have little interest in female asceticism beyond the influence it may have on male asceticism." Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat,* 35. Cf. Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 136: The fact that "all women, even celibate women, pose a terrible threat to celibate men, exposes Aphrahat's true audience: the men." See *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 129–73 for an extensive discussion of sexual purity in Aphrahat.

[152] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 6.4.

[153] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 6.19. The relationship between virginity and Christ's indwelling is here emphasized, though not so dramatically as in the previous passage.

[154] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 137. She notes, however, that this may not be an absolute statement of his belief, but rather a move designed to help rhetorically construct a Christian elite among the Sons of the Covenant.

[155] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 18.1.

corrupt and are destroyed almost entirely in the flood. The descendants of Noah, likewise, eventually forget God and become idol-worshippers. God ends up choosing the one righteous man, Abraham, over the collection of sinful descendants of Noah. Again, Aphrahat can't quite *say* that an injunction against having children is scriptural. But he does prove, at least, that God loves a righteous few more than a wicked many.[156] But in his next interpretive move, Aphrahat makes the claim that celibacy is not merely a Christian practice superadded to the Jewish Law; it is, in fact, the cause of the law being given in the first place:

> Israel was not able to receive the holy speech and the living words that the Holy One spoke with Moses on the mountain until he sanctified the people for three days. […] Moses spoke plainly to them in the following way: "You must not approach [any] woman." Then, on the third day, when they had been sanctified for three days, the Holy One revealed himself in a fierce storm, a great glory, a powerful voice, rolling thunder, a mighty trumpet, continuous brightness, and brilliant flashes of lightning.[157]

Here, Aphrahat draws on Exodus 19:15, where Moses instructs the Israelites to forgo sexual relations before the Sinaitic theophany. It is *because of ancient Israelites' commitment to chastity* (however temporary) that God speaks to them; the chaste nation becomes the site of a dramatic theophany, one which shakes the earth and fills the skies.[158] And what is true of Israel is even more true of Moses: they were only fit for a brief interview at a distance unless they had embraced celibacy, so, "how could the man Moses, prophet and bright eye of the whole people (who stood the whole time before God and spoke with him face to face), have had conjugal relations?" Because

[156] Aprahat, *Demonstr.* 18.2–3. (The fact that some of these righteous, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were not themselves celibates, does not give him pause.)

[157] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 18.4.

[158] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 154–157 traces Aphrahat's interpretive moves here, integrating them into her larger project, which explores the way that purity, holiness, and sexual absintence are developed exegetically in Christianity and Judaism. For the rabbinic interpretation of the same passage, see chapter 5.

Moses was not just a one-time conversation partner with God, but his constant intimate, lifelong celibacy was appropriate for him.[159]

Aphrahat's next move takes this point out of the scriptural narrative into the present-day community around him. If the Israelites at Sinai were favored by God because of only three days of celibacy, what kind of blessings might a whole life of renunciation have?

> And if God spoke with the Israelites, who were sanctified for only three days, how much more excellent and attractive are those who sanctify […themselves] and stand before God all their days? Should God not love them even more, and his Spirit dwell in them?[160]

Here Aphrahat introduces a new idea into his discourse: that virginity is a particular way of cultivating God's love, and receiving his presence within one. He develops this idea further as he multiplies examples from the Hebrew Bible, showing that "virginity is excellent and cherished before God." The Aaronic priests, for example, were prohibited from marrying any but virgins.[161] This he takes to be a sign that virgins were particularly beloved of God. (He passes in silence over the fact that these virgins, in marrying Aaronic priests, tended to cease thereby to be virgins.)

Aphrahat spends the next several sections outlining various other Hebrew Bible figures whom he contends were celibate. Thus,

> Moses cherished holiness, and he was cherished by the Holy One, who showed him his glory. Joshua son of Nun loved virginity and lived in the tabernacle, the place where the Holy One was served. Elijah excelled in virginity and lived in the desert, on mountains, and in caves. The Holy One brought him to the place of the holy ones.[162]

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[159] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 18.5. As we will discuss in a little more detail in Chapter 5, Aphrahat is drawing on an extrabiblical tradition (albeit one grounded in scriptural prooftexts) that Moses was, after Sinai, celibate for the rest of his life; this fact is something that his Jewish interlocutors, broadly speaking, would have accepted.

[160] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 18.5.

[161] Aphrahat, *Demonst.* 18.6. The eminently learned Prof. Jon Levenson reminds me that Aphrahat is not quite Biblically correct here; only the *High Priest*, and not every member of Aaronic priesthood, is required to marry a virgin.

[162] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 18.7.

As the list continues, it will eventually include Elisha and Jeremiah as well. Aphrahat invokes various prooftexts to prove that these men did not have wives. Clearly, for Aphrahat, the prophetic office is one that belongs particularly to the celibate, as do holy spaces (Sinai, the tabernacle).

The point is also reinforced by contrast with those who do *not* maintain their celibacy:

> The earth was not unclean when it was virginal, but after rain fell on it, it produced thistles. In his virginity, Adam was cherished and good, but after he fathered Eve, he went astray and transgressed the commandment. […] Samson was pleasing [to God], but he destroyed his nazirite status through his lust. David was attractive in his youth, but through his desire for Bathsheba he transgressed the Law…[163]

The cosmic symbolism of the first image is arresting; so too is the fact that Adam's fall is indexed not to his sexual relationship *with* Eve, but to the moment that he *fathered* Eve from his rib, in Genesis 2. But the cumulative effect of this list of negative examples, especially when paired alongside the first list, is to demonstrate that virginity is holy, and, because holy, it is distinctly *pleasing* to God.

Thus, again and again Aphrahat argues against his Jewish interlocutors, virginity is not an unclean state. It is, in fact, a holy one. Moreover, as his examples demonstrate, it has a tight symbolic relationship with theophany, the prophetic office, and intimacy with God.

To briefly summarize: Aphrahat makes more explicit mention of Mary than either the Odist or the author of the *Acts of Thomas*. Although many of these mentions are brief and without explicit "Mariological" content, a few of them do contain the seeds of theological ideas, touching mainly on the idea that Mary was exalted because of her humility, that she provided the biological link by which Christ saved humanity, and, in one place, that she became a prophetess. Moving beyond the limited treatment of Mary herself, however, Aphrahat has a robust theology of the indwelling of God: it allows the wise ascetic to overcome, in part, the utter incomprehensibility of God. He also

[163] Aphrahat, *Demonstr.* 18.9.

develops the symbol of the celibate as a person who is both distinctly pleasing to God, and also distinctly fit for theophanic vision. These visions integrate, as we will now argue, with some of the images we have observed in the other Syrian Christian writers, and paint a picture of the context for Ephrem's Marian images.

Conclusion: Ephrem and the Syrian Tradition

Having stretched out my yarn, I now pause to point at my map. Over the course of this investigation, we have shown that Mary (or at least, "the Virgin") appears in many Syrian Christian texts prior to Ephrem. Although some of these appearances are quite brief, nonetheless each one of them offers more than a mere biographical fact. Enclosed within each, even if inchoate, are theological ideas that Ephrem will later espouse. These certainly include Aphrahat's claim that Mary was exalted as a prophetess because of her humility, the *Odes of Solomon's* notion that her maternity involved, paradoxically, receiving the milk of God, and the *Protoevangelium's* vision of Mary as characterized by a kind of absolute holiness that parallels the Temple and the Ark. More tentatively, there is the *Acts of Thomas's* Syriac version, which *might* be treating Mary as a theophanic site in her one brief mention in that text.

Let us note, however, that none of these texts, with the partial exception of the *Protoevangelium*, treats Mary with anything like the same amount of theological weight that Ephrem does. In the *Odes* she is not named, in Aphrahat she gets only a handful of mostly undeveloped citations, and in the *Acts* there is but a single mention, and that having all the appearance of a later orthodox interpolation. The *Protoevangelium* is a more complicated case. Mary is, in one respect, accorded an extremely lofty position. The text treats her reverently; everyone (except, in one place, her spouse) loves her; her birth is announced by angels; the birth

of her Son brings creation momentarily to a halt. No reader can doubt that Mary is the center of the story. And yet, she is entirely passive, doing little and speaking less. This can, of course, be read as an expression of her humility; but the text does not seem at pains to emphasize this point. Ephrem's Mary, with all of her complex theological symbols and especially her profound, theological voice, can find no parallel in this earlier tradition. The exalted status which Ephrem gives to her seems to be a development of his own, rather than something that he inherits from a tradition.

At the same time, we have also seen that several of the theological symbols that *characterize* Ephrem's distinctive presentation of Mary appeared in the earlier literature, detached from the Mother of God. We can here mention two. The first is the theme of prophetic speech and divine knowledge. We first saw this expressed in the *Odes of Solomon*, where we noted several expressions which Ephrem himself will later employ. Most significant of these are the image of the prophet as having words put into his mouth by God. In these common images, as we saw in Ephrem, the agency of the prophet as *source* of the words that he says is complicated. Although he remains the one actually speaking, the things that are said are attributed to another, divine, origin. This theme is rendered even more explicit by those verses which treat the prophet not as a singer, but as a musical instrument, played by the divine hand (or the divine wind). We also saw that illumination was a frequent symbol of divine presence in the *Odes*, both in passages where it accompanied God's inspiration of the singer's voice and in other passages where the light resided within the heart.

Although not expressed in a musical mode, the same theme of prophetic or divine knowledge as something unattainable by human effort and requiring divine initiative also recurred in Aphrahat. There, we saw that even though it is the "wise ascetic" who attains to knowledge of

divine mysteries–and even if, as it seems to be the case in the Moses episode, a lifetime of chastity is required–the acquisition of that knowledge cannot be attributed to the ascetic's own efforts. The mind and the senses, however much they strain to obtain it, will fail in their reach. It is only when God himself both lifts the ascetic up and *dwells within him* that he is able to obtain the prophetic vision of Isaiah 6, and come to possess knowledge of the mysteries of God.

Ephrem's own discussions of Mary as a prophetess are more in line with that of the *Odes*, perhaps because of their common genre of musical religious poetry. However, what he shares with *both* authors is an ambivalence about the prophet's own agency in speaking divine truths. Put against the backdrop of Aphrahat and the *Odes*, we can perhaps better understand this as not *merely* a product of Ephrem's theology of God's hiddenness and the insufficiency of language to describe him. Rather, it now stands revealed as something inherent to the image of the prophet in Syrian Christianity as such: one who comes to know about God because God raises him up and makes him his instrument.[164]

Beyond even the prophet, however, it is the image of the human being (properly sanctified) as a temple that recurred again and again in these pages. From its appearance in the *Protoevangelium*, where the emphasis was on a kind of ritual holiness or purity, closely associated with Mary, but also still connected with the cultic signification of the Jerusalem Temple, the same notion then appeared as the fruit of the encratitic sexual renunciation of the *Acts of Thomas*, and as a precondition of the ecstatic vision of the wise man whom Aphrahat describes. Clearly, the symbol of the human Temple has been revealed as a powerful and common figural image within

[164] As we noted in our discussion of Mary's prophetic character, this is a notion with scriptural warrant as well, see Jeremiah 1:9.

Syriac Christianity for the mode of God's presence among human beings, and I do not think we are wrong to place Ephrem in this same tradition.[165]

But we can be a bit more specific in our analysis of this shared image than that they all think of human beings as having the capacity to become temples. This temple symbol has a few specific qualities which seem to be held in common across the whole tradition studied in this chapter. First, the human temple has a general association with holiness. In the way that Mary was dedicated from before her conception in the *Protoevangelium*, raised in seclusion, grew up in the Holy of Holies, and remained a holy site even after she gave birth, we saw the contours of holiness as a powerful and dangerous supernatural separateness. Holiness as a quality of temples is a little less developed in the *Acts* and Aphrahat, but it is at least verbally attested. In the *Acts* people are exhorted at several places to become "holy temples;"[166] and in Aphrahat's image of the human temple, the angels are chanting "holy, holy, holy" to the enthroned God within.[167]

Second, this holiness is also accompanied by virginity, considered either under its moral or its physical aspect. This is most clear in the *Protoevangelium* and the *Acts.* In the *Protoevangelium*, Mary's virginity makes her a site of dangerous power, as is proved in the Salome episode. Because her body is still physically intact even after she gave birth, she is dangerous for the profane hand to touch. The *Acts*, meanwhile, seems to make the moral act of abstaining from sexual intercourse one of the most important methods by which a human being can render himself fit for templehood. In Aphrahat, the connection is less clear in the theophanic vision of the "wise

[165] I have focused on these four authors, but we should note that "human temple" theologies are attested in other Syrian Christian authors as well; Jarkins, *Aphrahat and the Temple of God,* 130–37, mentions several others on either side of Aphrahat chronologically, including Pseudo-Macarius and Philoxenus of Mabbug.

[166] Cf. Acts Thom.12.3, 156.14.

[167] Aphrahat Demonstr. 14.35.

ascetic" in his inner temple, but his discussion of virginity in Demonstration 18, and particularly his claims that it permits the indwelling of the Spirit and that virginity permitted Joshua to live in the Tabernacle, suggest a connection between holy space and the practice of virginity.

Lastly, however, even though templehood is given a moral connection with virginity, as with the image of the prophet, in the image of the temple the *agency* of the divine indwelling remains with God, not the human ascetic. Mary's whole life, in the *Protoevangelium*, is one that is dictated by angelic decrees and laws of purity. She willingly and humbly acquiesces, but she does not direct her own hieraticization. In both Aphrahat and the *Acts*, meanwhile, although ascetical dimensions of the would-be human temple are mentioned, the agency of the God who comes to dwell in the ascetic remains paramount. A Christian can prepare a place for God and conform himself to God's expectations, but this is all.

The result of this investigation has been, in my view, twofold. First, it shows that, even if Ephrem's dynamic and prophetic Mary does not have ready parallels in the prior Syriac literature, in her particular images she is not completely *sui generis.* Ephrem was working in a linguistic and cultural tradition that had previously enunciated several of his main theological symbols. Even though points of direct contact are harder to trace, Ephrem's ideas are part of a broader religious tradition in the Syrian Christian tradition, and he exploits existing connections between the symbols of virgin, temple, and prophet to create a complex picture of human holiness.

Second, throughout the tradition we can observe slips between the three diagnostic images that I highlighted at the end of the last chapter (virgin, prophet, temple.) In the *Protoevangelium* and the *Acts of Thomas* alike, virginity and holiness are attributes which are fundamental to the human temple; Aphrahat, meanwhile, both makes the human-as-temple the locus of a prophetic revelation *and* makes perpetual celibacy a requirement for Moses's lifelong divine

communications. The different symbols that we have traced here can usefully be separated for the sake of analysis, but in the last resort they are not necessarily *distinct.* For Ephrem, at least, they should be thought of as different ways of expressing the single mystery of God's presence within humanity. I believe we see elements of the same thought in his predecessors.

CHAPTER FOUR: EPHREM'S SYMBOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF GRECOPHONE SYRIA

The previous chapter placed the main images which constitute Ephrem's Marian symbolism within a broader tradition of early Syrian Christianity. Both by examining prior Mariologies and by seeing some of Ephrem's Marian images elaborated in other Syriac contexts, I argued that our understanding of Ephrem's symbolic theology is enriched when we consider the religious traditions most closely affiliated with him.

It is the aim of this and the next chapter to show that widening the investigation can further illuminate Ephrem's symbols. This should not surprise us. While one strain of prior scholarship liked to speak about the early Syriac tradition as a purely "Semitic" Christianity,[1] and it is easy to be fooled by the vehemence of his anti-Jewish rhetoric,[2] even if Ephrem was himself a Syriac-speaking, even monoglot,[3] Christian, he was embedded, both at Nisibis and at Edessa, in a diverse, multireligious and polyglot society.[4] In this chapter, I will assess literary and philosophical Greek "pagan"[5] texts of late antique Syria; in the next chapter, I turn to tannaitic and amoraic Jewish sources.

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[1] F.C. Burkitt, lamenting the entrance of Greek thought into a Syriac tradition had previously been as pristine and uncorrupted by speculation as nineteenth century Anglicanism, says: "With the Syrians, as with us, the philosophy of the Greeks was an alien mode of thought, and a Faith which expresses itself in a foreign or an outworn philosophy tends to become fundamentally artificial." Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity,* 88. When it comes to Ephrem, however, this copious despiser of our poet seems to suppose that a bit of Grecian clarity might have helped:: "S. Ephraim shows us that the official expression of the belief of the Church needed co-ordination and precision." (ibid., 108).

[2] See the next chapter.

[3] Wickes, *Bible and Poetry,* 12–13, speculates that "Ephrem—as an educated and prolific author, as well as the deacon for a bishop in a prominent Mesopotamian town—would have known at least some Greek language" but, while maintaining that Ephrem was embedded in a "Greco-Syriac" context, concedes that the "evidence suggests that Ephrem did not know Greek in any substantial way."

[4] On the cultural background of the late antique Roman East, see Fergus Millar, *Religion, Language, and Community in the Roman Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and also Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially 437–488. On Ephrem's audience, see Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School."

[5] On the history, and the problem, of the label "pagan" when describing ancient non-Christian religions, see e.g**.** Peter Brown, "Pagan" in G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 625. The word will be used throughout this chapter without

Unlike the preceding chapter, however, where the possibility that Ephrem perhaps knew versions of some texts lingered in the margins of the argument, in these last two chapters I mostly refrain from such claims altogether. It is highly unlikely Ephrem read Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* or that he was in regular conversation with the amoraim whose arguments constituted the Talmud. Instead, I lean still more on a methodological claim of this dissertation: because we argue that symbols are fundamental units of meaning, and that Ephrem was embedded in a multicultural and multireligious context that used similar symbolic images, even in the absence of direct dependence, the contours of Ephrem's literary symbols become clearer when we consider their use in wider late antique literatures. There is a specific reason for this: as I showed in interpreting the first Hymn on the Pearl, we better understand Ephrem's symbolic connections emerges when we know something about the qualities and stories generally attributed to his symbols in the fourth century. By reading what someone else—even a non-Christian—has to say about, for instance, temples, some of the things that Ephrem says about Mary-as-temple come into sharper focus—and the world he inhabits, too, becomes clearer alongside him.

Accordingly, in the following two chapters, I consider a select body of (implicitly or explicitly) religious literature containing some of the same symbols that we observed in chapter 2. As I mentioned in the conclusion to that chapter, the images I have found most useful to think about interreligiously are temples, prophets, and virgins, and so I will use these to structure my investigation. I will not attempt a complete account of these symbols in pagan and Jewish literature, as the scale of that project would surpass not only a dissertation, but a life's-work.

scare-quotes to indicate authors who were neither Christians nor Jews, as all other more accurate terms one can devise become cumbersome when repeated. The intent is neither to present Greek non-Christian religion as a monolith nor to be pejorative.

Rather, I select certain authors and texts whose depiction of these symbols strikes me as particularly interesting, or representative of the thought-world of pagan and Jewish antiquity.

Ephrem's Relationship with Greek Literature

This chapter, then, examines the depiction of temples, prophets, and virgins in Greek literature. Though I do not assert Ephrem read the sources discussed in this chapter directly, nevertheless as we turn to this material, it is worth taking a moment to briefly assess the *status quaestionis* on Ephrem's familiarity with Greek philosophical concepts, literature, and ideas in general. As noted above, the traditional view held that he had negligible contact with Greek; not only was he unaware of Second Sophistic *belles lettres* and the niceties of Neoplatonism, but even in his Christianity he was uncontaminated by Hellenism.

This stereotype does point at certain truths: Ephrem has a distinctive style and writes in a distinctively Syriac and poetic idiom. Moreover, when Ephrem talks about "the Greeks" directly, his mode is usually one of condemnation, constructing them as a rhetorical other against whom his own audience should define itself.[6] However, as an important strand of scholarship over the last few decades has indicated, this narrative obscures as much as it reveals. Ephrem may have railed against "the Greeks" in his writings, but his worldview was not untouched by Hellenic thought.

Among the first[7] to nuance our view of Ephrem's contact with Greek was Sebastian Brock. On the one hand, Brock maintained that Ephrem's theological method, mode of expression, and worldview represented "an *essentially Semitic* form of Christianity, quite different in many

[6] As a famous stanza has it, "Blessed is the one who has not tasted the bitterness of the wisdom of the Greeks." *HdF* 2.24, Wickes translation. For a discussion of Ephrem's rejection of "Greek", see Thomas Koonammakkal, "St. Ephrem and 'Greek Wisdom,'" Symposium Syriacum 6 (1994): 169–76.

[7] The still standard account of the twentieth-century evolution on this question is Ute Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 1–8.

respects from the Christianity of the Greek and Latin speaking world of the Mediterranean littoral"[8] and elsewhere that "the freedom of this kind of theology from Greek modes of thought is striking… Ephrem [has an] un-Greek—and so, un-European—approach."[9] On the other hand, in *The Luminous Eye* he will speak of Ephrem's "points of contact (not of course direct)" with the Cappadocians.[10] For Brock, Ephrem remains both unhellenized but also a Christian in communication, however circuitous, with the broader Christian world.

Ute Possekel, in her *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in Ephrem the Syrian*, advanced a serious revision in our understanding of Ephrem's Hellenic context. She argues:

> Ephrem shares in Greek culture to a larger extent than has previously been acknowledged. The existence of similar concepts in Ephrem's works and a Greek philosophical source does not necessarily indicate a literary dependency, but it testifies to the Hellenization of Ephrem's intellectual context.[11]

Her argument shifts the focus from questions of specific literary dependencies (very hard to prove, in Ephrem's case, given how many open questions there are about his biography) to a broader historical question about culture and intellectual ambiance. She reminds us, for instance, that the first Christian inscription in Mesopotamia is in Nisibis, and *in Greek.*[12] Even if we can't know who read what, we can recognize that, for instance, various Syriac literature is plainly indebted to

[8] Sebastian Brock, "An Introduction to Syriac Studies" in J.H. Eaton, ed., *Horizons in Semitic Studies: Articles for the Student* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1980), 4–5 (emphasis mine).

[9] Brock, "Poet as Theologian," 243–44.

[10] Brock, *Luminous Eye,* 146. Possekel, *Evidence of Greek,* 7 calls this an "unresolved tension" in Brock's work (at least at that stage of his career).

[11] Possekel, *Evidence of Greek,* 11.

[12] Possekel, *Evidence of Greek,* 19.

Greek models.[13] In short, "Greekness" is deeper in the earth of Mesopotamia than a naïve fantasy of pristine "unhellenized" Christianity would allow.

The core of Possekel's argument then shifts to, as the title indicates, evidence for Greek philosophical *concepts* in Syriac. The choice of terms is important, as again the argument is not about direct dependence on specific sources, but rather the appearance of concepts, ways of thinking and perceiving reality. These are more nebulous to trace in terms of direct dependence, but still susceptible of literary analysis. Time and again, Ephrem is shown to have incorporated philosophical frameworks that must have arisen from Greek sources; moreover, when he uses these sources he does not usually mark them as "Greek," showing that they had been thoroughly nativized.[14]

Possekel's work makes clear that "Greek" ideas cannot be dismissed as irrelevant for a discussion of Ephrem purely because they are coded as "Greek." Her work focuses on philosophical concepts, but the legitimacy of exploring other kinds of concepts—such as religious symbols—in exploring Ephrem's thought seems a reasonable extension of her thesis. Before proceeding to an investigation, however, I mention two other current studies which inform my views.

Yifat Monnickendam has, in a recent article, studied Ephrem's exegetical dependence on Greek Christian sources in his Prose Commentary on Genesis. The result of her findings are limited in scope because she investigates only two problem passages. Nevertheless they suggest that while Ephrem was aware of movements and ideas even in contemporary Christian theological literature, he did not read Greek (or did not read Greek well) and, when he adapted Greek sources for his

[13] Possekel, *Evidence of Greek,* 29.

[14] Possekel, *Evidence of Greek* 230–35.

own commentary he occasionally failed to assimilate them properly. Although she is tentative in her conclusions, Monnickendam claims that "Ephrem's adaptations also reveal the linguistic gap between him and contemporary Greek Christian theologians, and the deep influence of his Syrian and Eastern background."[15]

Jeffrey Wickes, meanwhile, in an article on the context of Ephrem's songs, reminds us that a great deal is still unknown about the composition of the communities for which Ephrem performed and wrote. Although a liturgical context may be presumed for some of the poems (including the Hymns on the Nativity which form the backbone of my Mariological study),[16] some—especially the Hymns on Faith—may have been written for quasi-scholastic study circles. He notes of Ephrem's circle that, on the basis of the dense and complex texts which Ephrem produced for them, "the ideals of their life were ascetic, but their asceticism was carried out in especially literary ways."[17] Now, literary does not imply "Greek," as Ephrem's own literary Syriac attests. However, if we reconceive Ephrem as someone who directed at least part of his literary output at a circle of educated, literary men and women, it becomes easier to hypothesize routes for Greek ideas to reach him, even at second or third hand.

Ephrem, then, was not a careful reader of his Greek contemporaries, as Monnickendam shows. But neither did he exist within a hermetically sealed Syriac monoculture. Although plenty of questions remain about the exact extent of Greek influence on Ephrem and the specific modes of transmission by which Greek ideas reached him, I will take the possibility of reading

[15] Yifat Monnickendam, "How Greek is Ephrem's Syriac? Ephrem's Commentary on Genesis as a Case Study," *JECS* 23 (2015): 213–244; quote 243.

[16] Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 38.

[17] Wickes, "Between Liturgy and School," 45.

contemporary Greek materials broadly, for their *symbols* rather than for their specific statements and arguments, as open.

Rationale for the Greek Sources

As I mentioned, to give a full account of even *one* of our Ephremian symbols across all Greek literature would require a project larger than this dissertation; to confine this study within a single chapter, we must be selective. Accordingly, in the pages that follow I will look at four writers: the satirist Lucian; the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus, Libanius the orator; and Heliodorus, author of the novel *Aethiopica.*

I have not chosen these four authors randomly: in addition to covering a wide range of genres between them and having interesting passages which touch on our chosen symbols, they have certain common traits which commend their grouping. First, they are writers of late antiquity, from the late second century to near the end of the fourth. They therefore cover a similar timespan to the Syrian Christian sources discussed in the previous chapter. They are also all non-Christian[18] writers whose work touches on religious themes: Lucian, in his mock-Ionic anthropology of the Atargatis cult; Iamblichus, in his attempt to give a Neoplatonic philosophical ground to theurgic ritual; Libanius, in his desperate defense of pagan temples against Christian vandals; and Heliodorus, in the mysteriously spiritual dimensions of his novel.

Most interestingly for the purpose of this chapter, each of these authors was native to Hellenized Roman Syria: Heliodorus was born at Emesa, Libanius at Antioch, Iamblichus at Chalcis-on-Belus, and Lucian at Samosata.[19] We ought not to rest too much on this geographical

[18] As will be discussed below, the tradition that Heliodorus became a Christian bishop is unlikely to be accurate.

[19] On Heliodorus see *Aeth.* 10.41 where he identifies himself as an ἀνὴρ Φοῖνιξ Ἐμισηνός, τῶν ἀφ' Ἡλίου γένος; the last statement is often taken to be a claim to a hereditary Emesene priesthood, see Timothy Whitmarsh, "Class" in

coincidence; late antique Syria was a large and ethnically, linguistically, religiously and politically complex place,[20] and I cannot claim with confidence that these authors shared any particularly close cultural matrix with Ephrem on the basis of this geographical overlap. Even the question of a "Greek Syrian" identity is complicated, meaning that we cannot be certain that these authors occupy a meaningful subgroup of late antique Greek literature.[21]

However, the fact remains that they were all authors who lived and (in some instances)[22] wrote in the Roman East. Moreover they each identified with the region, to greater or lesser extents, in their writings. In their religious texts they also invoked, sometimes at considerable length, some of the same symbols that we have seen Ephrem deploy in his depiction of Mary. If we posit that Ephrem's literary symbolism takes on more precise shape in comparison with contemporary Greek materials, and if we must be selective in our investigation of Greek material out of practical considerations, then seeking out authors who share a loose geographical affiliation with Ephrem seems a defensible criterion for selection.

Timothy Whitmarsh, ed. *Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 72. Libanius at *Orat.* 1.2–3 not only claims Antioch as his birthplace but is at pains to insist that his family is native to the region at least as far back as his great-grandfather. Iamblichus's place of birth rests on the authority of Eunapius, who lived less than a century after him (*Lives of the Philosophers* 5.1 identifies πατρὶς δὲ ἦν αὐτῷ Χαλκίς). Lucian claims Samosata as his native city at *How to Write History* 24.

[20] See above, note 3.

[21] Heliodorus, for instance, in the passage just cited, identifies as a Φοῖνιξ. Libanius, at *Orat.* 1.3, seems to be deflecting rumors that his family is not natively Antiochene at all, but rather Italian transplants; Lucian variously terms himself an Ἀσσύριος (e.g. *Syr. d.* 1) and a Σύρος (*Bis acc.* 25). On the complexity of ethnic identification among Greek Syrians and Lucian in particular, see Nathanael Andrade, "Assyrians, Syrians and the Greek Language in the late Hellenistic and Roman Imperial Periods," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73 (2014): 299–317 and Andrade, *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[22] The place where Heliodorus composed the *Aethiopica* cannot be determined from the work, although J.R. Morgan has recently advanced an intriguing "Emesan" reading of the novel, see "The Emesan Connection: Philostratus and Heliodorus," in Kristoffel Demoen and Danny Praet, eds., *Theios Sophistès: Essays on Flavius Philostratus' Vita Apollonii* (Leuven: Brill, 2009), 263–281. Lucian wrote later in life after he had left Samosata behind. Iamblichus and Libanius, however, wrote in Syria, at Apamea and Antioch, respectively.

Two final methodological notes: first, my goal in the pages that follow is not to construct a full account of these authors. The reader is referred to the footnoted sources for more complete treatments of each writer's life and worldview. The aim here is rather to analyze the Greek portrayal of certain symbols seen in Ephrem's Mariology, to show the way that these symbols are developed in roughly contemporaneous pagan sources, and to put Ephrem's depictions into relief by comparison. Second: for the sake of organizational clarity, each author has been associated with one symbol in particular which I find especially clearly or interestingly articulated in his writing. I introduce each author and his relevant works in his own section (pairing the two authors whose symbol is temples). I then discuss the one symbol that the author's work is especially suited to illustrate. Having elaborated the Greek depiction of the symbol, I conclude each section by synthesizing my findings and returning to Ephrem for comparison.

Temples I: Lucian of Samosata, *On the Syrian Goddess*

Lucian, the earliest of our authors, was born at Samosata around the year 125. His native language may well have been a dialect of Aramaic, although this is disputed.[23] A handful of seemingly autobiographical remarks throughout his works furnish most of what we know about his life. According to these statements, he was born into a family of statue-makers but rejected the craft and sought out a Greek education.[24] Having trained as a rhetorician and earned fame and fortune as a speaker, he retired from the practice of rhetoric around the age of forty to write satires and

[23] At *Bis acc.* 27, if we take "the Syrian" as an autobiographical insert, Lucian says that as a youth he was "still barbaric in language" (βάρβαρον ἔτι τὴν φωνὴν), Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World AD 50–250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 298–308 gives a lengthy treatment of Lucian's Semitic background and concludes that his first language may have been Syriac; Millar, *Roman Near East,* 454–456 is less certain that we can conclude anything about his first language from our sources.

[24] Lucian, *Gall.*

comic dialogues, possibly at Athens.[25] However, more recent scholarship has challenged the practice of taking Lucian's autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical statements at face value, and we ought not put too much emphasis on any one claim he makes.[26] In the end, all we possess with certainty is the personality that appears to us from the page.[27]

Lucian is a satirist and a cynic. Accordingly, when it comes to religious subjects, most of his works are either dialogues which mock the stories of the Homeric gods or biting send-ups of various contemporary false prophets, charlatan philosophers, and anyone else whom he deemed insufficiently honest.[28] One work stands out among Lucian's religious writings, however: the treatise *On the Syrian Goddess.* This book is a first-person anthropological and historical account of the temple, mythology, and ritual practices of the cult of Atargatis[29] in the city of Hierapolis (modern Manbij), about one hundred miles southwest of Edessa. The text is written, unlike Lucian's typical elegant and Atticizing koine, in pseudo-Ionic dialect. More precisely, it is a remarkably competent, and funny, imitation of the dialect and style of Herodotus of

[25] Lucian, *Bis acc.* 27–32. For a characteristic account of Lucian's life as drawn from his works, see Lionel Casson, *Selected Satires of Lucian, Edited and Translated* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1962), xii–xiv.

[26] See for instance Daniel Richter, "Lucian of Samosata" in Daniel Richter and William Johnson, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the Second Sophistic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 327–44, especially 327–328 where he criticizes the excesses of "biographical criticism" in the study of Lucian.

[27] Lucian's bibliography is large, but some of the most important works that have shaped my reading of him include Swain, *Hellenism and Empire,* 298–329; Andrade, *Syrian Identity,* 261–313; Christopher Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Timothy Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire: The Politics of Imitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 247–294.

[28] For the former category, see for instance his *Dialogues of the Gods* and *Dialogues of the Sea Gods;* for examples of his vituperation of contemporary charlatans see his satires of Alexander the "false prophet" and his contemptuous treatment of Peregrinus the philosopher and one-time Christian. Cf. Jones *Culture and Society,* 33–45, 117–148.

[29] Lucian himself calls the goddess worshipped in the temple "Assyrian Hera" but the association with Atargatis is firmly established; see Jane Lightfoot, *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess, Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1–38. On Atargatis-worship at Edessa, see Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa,* 76–121, especially 79, where Drijvers notes that Ephrem knew of some features of the cult.

Halicarnassus.[30] Because of the strange dialect, but even more because of its surface earnestness and seeming want of satire, it has sometimes been doubted whether Lucian is in fact the author; the broad scholarly consensus holds that he is, but the question remains open.[31]

Lucian's story makes for diverting reading: it is full of fabulous myths, lengthy historical anecdotes, and salacious accounts of autocastration. I wish to focus instead, however, on the temples described in *On the Syrian Goddess.* When he describes the temples in general, and the temple of Atargatis in particular, what kind of language does he use? What properties does he attribute to the temples? This will give us some idea of what value the symbol of "temple" occupied in Lucian's cultural world.

The first thing that we learn about temples in Lucian is that they are old. This is not only true of the temple at Hierapolis, but is a refrain found throughout all the temples he describes. The idea of building temples to the gods in the first place is attributed to one of the most ancient of peoples, the Egyptians, who first learned of the names of gods and first established shrines—although Lucian is keen to insist that a short time later the knowledge was passed to the Syrians, who afterward become the main object of his discourse.[32] The association with an ancient nation initiates a theme which will then recur throughout his discussion of temples.[33]

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[30] For a magisterial treatment of the practice of writing in mock-Ionic in general and the language of Lucian's treatise in particular, see Lightfoot, *Syrian Goddess,* 91–158.

31 The conclusions of e.g. Swain *Hellenism and Empire*, 304–305 and the lengthy discussion in Lightfoot, *Syrian Goddess* 184–208 come down in favor of Lucianic authorship. For a modern dissenting voice, however, see Marie-Françoise Baslez, "L'Auteur du De Dea Syria et les realites religieuses de Hierapolis" in Alain Billault, ed., *Lucien de Samosate* (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1994), 171–76. Even allowing Lucian's authorship, of course, the accuracy of his depiction remains open to question; in her extensive commentary, however, Lightfoot, *Syrian Goddess,* 209–221 weighs the issues and concludes "DDS remains a priceless source for the religious history of imperial Syria." (221).

[32] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 2.

[33] On the antiquity of various temples in Lucian, see Lucian, *Syr. d.* 3, 5, 9, 12–13, 28.

Chapter 12 of *On the Syrian Goddess* attributes the foundation of the Hierapolis temple, in particular, to the aftermath of a primordial flood. According to Lucian,

> Many people say that Deucalion the Scyth established this temple, the Deucalion in whose lifetime the great flood came about… [Lucian tells how a great flood occurred, and Deucalion and his family alone were saved]… and a story is told by the inhabitants of Hierapolis about what happened next, greatly worthy of wonder: in their country, a great chasm opened, and it received all of the water into itself. Deucalion, then, since this had happened, built altars and a shrine sacred to Hera upon the chasm. Now, I have also seen the chasm: it is under the shrine, and very small. If perhaps it used to be bigger and later became what it is now, I do not know; but what I saw was small.[34]

In token of this primordial event, Lucian records that annually, a large number of people from all over Syria carry water from the sea and pour it out in the temple, so that the chasm receives it. The Hierapolis temple is thus symbolically associated with the recession of the waters, and this symbolic association is reinforced by a ritual reenactment.[35] In addition to establishing a connection between the temple and the flood, this association with an ancient catastrophe and a re-creation of the world again serves to reinforce the antiquity of the temple.

The affiliation of the temple with water is reinforced by his description of a lake which is situated *near* the temple, filled with sacred fish. This lake, according to Lucian, is of a very great depth; he professes not to have tested it, but reports that locals say it's more than 200 ὄργυιαι—just a little shy of Lake Superior. This lake also features an altar in its middle, not floating but rather resting (as Lucian supposes) on a very tall column.[36]

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[34] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 12–13. Unless otherwise noted, all Greek translations in this chapter are my own, taken from the editions listed in the bibliography.

[35] Lightfoot, *Syrian Goddess,* 339–342 is fascinating on the connections between this Deucalion myth and the Biblical flood story, suggesting a complex web of relations between Lucian, the LXX, Near Eastern legend and midrash. This little narrative on its own furnishes an excellent illustration of one of the key points of this dissertation, that the web of religious symbolism in the Roman Near East is best understood by comparative multicultural and multilinguistic study.

[36] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 45–46.

Lucian gives the flood myth as the majority view of the foundation of the Hierapolis temple. But he tells another story as well. Some say that the present temple (which he distinguishes from the original foundation) was built by Stratonice, queen of Assyria, after she had a dream: "Hera ordered her to build a temple in Hierapolis, and if she did not obey, she threatened many great evils." Stratonice at first does not heed, and thereupon she falls into a grave sickness; when she repents and agrees to build the temple, she immediately recovers.[37] The temple is thus a product not of human initiative, but of a divine will; the goddess *wants* it to be built and performs supernatural punishments when it is not accomplished. Lucian leaves the reader uncertain which foundation myth is most worthy of credence. By mentioning both, however, he not only proves himself an excellent imitator of Herodotus but also connects both sets of ideas (seal on the flood, divine command) with the symbol of the temple in his text.

Moving past the question of how temples came about in antiquity, however, what sorts of traits does Lucian associate with the Hierapolis temple itself? I want to suggest that there are three qualities that emerge from Lucian. First, the temple is associated with brilliant wealth, beautiful scents, and other sensory experiences. Second, the temple is a *symbolic center* of the world. Third, the temple is associated with secrets and restrictions.

The first sensory experience of temples mentioned in *On the Syrian Goddess* savors of the strange rather than the dazzling. Lucian asserts that in the temple vicinity, "oftentimes shouts arise in the shrine when the temple is locked, and many have heard them." These uncanny shouts, mentioned alongside a catalogue of strange occurrences (sweating images, statues that give

[37] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 19.

oracles), help establish the temple as a site of supernatural phenomena and holiness (the shouts come about *even though the door is locked*, implying that no human produced them).[38]

As he turns to describe the sensory experience of one entering the temple, however, the sense of otherworldliness moves from the uncanny to the dazzling. Befitting Lucian's Herodotean model, he describes the approach to the temple and the review of its statues in a travelogue style. Beginning in chapter 30 of the treatise, he verbally leads the reader through the experience of entering the temple:

> The temple faces the rising sun... even the temple's front hall offers a great wonder to the visitor as he ascends, and it is furnished with golden doors. Within the temple, it shines from abundant gold, and the ceiling is completely golden. Moreover it gives off an ambrosial scent, of the sort they say there is in Arabia. Even as you are still ascending from far-off it gives off an extremely good smell; and when you depart again, it does not leave you, but your clothes retain the smell a long time, and you will remember it always.[39]

The temple offers a feast for the senses. The first experience that he describes is a dazzling array of brilliant gold which moves the viewer to "wonder" (θωῦμα in his mock-Herodotean dialect; the root appears seven times in the treatise). It is paired with an unforgettable smell.[40] The scent is not mentioned again, but the abundance of gold does recur a few more times throughout his description of the temple: at chapter 31, Lucian mentions two different divine images that are made entirely of gold; chapter 33 describes a curious statue, called the σημήιον, which is also wrought in gold and crowned by a golden pigeon.[41]

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[38] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 10.

[39] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 30.

[40] Perhaps interestingly, Lucian leaves the origin of this scent unclear. He never mentions incense-sacrifice in his description of the cult. Lightfoot, *Syrian Goddess*, 432–433 notes however that some of our other evidence of the Atargatis cult attests incense-offerings.

[41] Lightfoot, *Syrian Goddess,* 211 takes the σημήιον as the "prize exhibit" confirming the general veracity of Lucian's text as recording an authentic temple-visit; see also ibid. 540–547.

At other places, the emphasis is not on shining gold, but rather on treasure: in chapter 10 he notes that the temple is filled with treasures from all over the world, and that it is the main source of riches for the locals; he describes a wealth of animals at chapter 41, and bronzes at chapter 49. But the pinnacle of the temple's wealth is found in his description of the statue of Hera in chapter 32:

> [In addition to being made of gold,] on her outside, she is dressed with more gold, and very exceedingly costly stones, of which some are white, some are sea-colored, some wine-colored, and some fire-colored; moreover there are Sardinian onyxes and many hyacinths and emeralds, which Egyptians and Indians and Ethiopians and Medians and Armenians and Babylonians bring. But the most remarkable thing, I will tell you: she wears a stone on her head called the *lychnis*, taking its name from its power: great light shines from it at night, by which the whole temple is lit up as though by lamps.[42]

The statue here is adorned with exotic gems, depicted as originating across Lucian's world, from the western Mediterranean to India. We will return to another facet of this geographical catalogue in a moment, but one thing that Lucian is certainly doing in this description is emphasizing the sheer value of the treasures contained within the temple and adorning its statues. Aside from being expensive (the stones are described as λίθοι κάρτα πολυτελέες, their cost being doubly reinforced by the adverb κάρτα and the prefix πολυ-), they are exotic.

One more dimension of this treasure motif is shared by these two passages: the emphasis on *light.* The sheer abundance of the gold when one first enters the forecourt causes the temple to shine (ἀπολάμπεται). Lest we take this as an exaggeration, in the next passage, among the catalogue of gems on the statue Lucian mentions the λυχνὶς, whose etymology he derives from the way that through its power, the temple is lit as though by lamps (λύχνοισι). This light is given a supernatural quality: the gem does not merely sparkle but "shines with a great light" (σέλας πολλὸν

[42] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 32.

ἀπολάμπεται); moreover, it is more active in night than in the day. One of the things that characterizes the sensory experience of the temple for Lucian, then, is luminescence.

Alongside this account of the sensual experience the temple offers, we have also seen a hint of another feature: the temple-as-microcosm, here demythologized into the (geographic) center-of-the-world. As we noted in the description of the goddess statue, the gems came from across the known world, from Sardinia in the west to India in the east and compassing in between notable great powers of antiquity (Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylonia). Besides merely being a symbol of the wealth of the temple, this catalogue emphasizes that the temple is a *geographic center*, in which the scattered nations of the world have come together, if only to contribute a few stones.

This motif is repeated several times in *On the Syrian Goddess.* He notes that "much wealth comes to [the inhabitants of Hierapolis] from Arabia and Phoenicia and Babylonia; and some from Cappadocia, of which the Cilicians bring some and the Assyrians others."[43] Here again the two motifs are blended. On the one hand, the temple is both wealthy and a source of wealth for those who dwell near it; on the other hand, it is wealth that travels from all sorts of peripheries (although here less far-flung) to a single center. In another place, describing a rite which commemorates the temple as the site where the flood abated, he claims that "everyone in Syria and Arabia, and many people from beyond the Euphrates, go to the sea and they all bring water" to the temple, where they perform the ritual.[44]

On a surface level, Lucian uses these scenes to reinforce the significance and wealth of the temple: it is an important place, so important that people come from far away to bring treasure, and to perform religious rituals. But I would argue that the *way* this importance is expressed

[43] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 10.

[44] Lucian, *Syr. d.* 13.

suggests an underlying religious idea: that the temple is the "center" of a world, towards which various nations around the periphery are oriented; meanwhile, as we have already seen, those who live in the temple vicinity, near the "center," experience the presence of the gods and holiness-by-proximity.

The last motif that Lucian invokes in his descriptions of temples is their affiliation with both secrets and restrictions: things to which either epistemic access, or access in general, is denied. Examples of the former include, for instance, a note that the temple contains all sorts of treasures (both vestments and also precious metals) which are hidden within it "in secret" (although, paradoxically, Lucian claims to have seen them.) I also argue that the mysterious voices which manifest in the temple in that same chapter are of the same sort. They are not witnessed by anyone, because the temple is at that point locked and no one has access to it. The presence of the god is heard, but cannot be seen.

Slightly different but related are those places where Lucian describes rules restricting certain kinds of access to the temple. So, for instance, the great inner shrine, in which the jewel-encrusted and light-emitting goddess is seated, is not actually accessible to everyone. Although anyone can enter the outer shrine, the inner chamber is accessible "to the priests alone, and not even all the priests, but those who are especially close to the gods, and to whom the service of the temple is a duty." Similarly, Lucian notes that the *galli*, those who ritually castrate themselves, are not to be admitted to the temple at all, nor are those who participate in the burial of a gallus, nor anyone who has seen a corpse. There are layers of holiness within the temple, with access restricted to each.

Lucian has a good deal more to say in the *On the Syrian Goddess*, concerning strange rituals, the origins of various practices, and his own relationship, as a Greek Syrian, with the cult

of Atargatis. But the temple, considered as itself, possesses the qualities we have enumerated here. Let's now turn to another witness, one much closer to Ephrem in time.

Temples II: Libanius of Antioch, *Orations*

As Lucian was the earliest, Libanius was, depending on the dating of Heliodorus, probably the latest of our authors. An orator, professor of rhetoric, and voluminous letter-writer, his career spans the second half of the fourth century. He taught at Constantinople and Antioch, corresponded with emperors Christian and apostate, and was the rhetoric teacher of none other than John Chrysostom.[45] Compared to the witty Lucian or the elegant Heliodorus—or even his own golden-mouthed pupil—Libanius's style is sometimes difficult to love;[46] but in recent generations a growing bibliography has turned to Libanius himself, and tried to determine something about his own worldview.[47]

For our purposes, Libanius and his religious views are important because he was a pagan who wrote about traditional Greek practice, raising protests to the emperor Theodosius I against the destruction of temples by Christians. In this protest, he gives a very clear account of the symbolic value that temples held in the "pagan" Greek imaginary at the close of the fourth century

[45] For the biography of Libanius see Rafaella Cribiore, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13–41.

[46] Edward Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Chapter 24) dismissed his writings as "for the most part… the vain and idle compositions of an orator who cultivated the science of words—the production of a recluse student." Perhaps still more damning, however, Libanius was the sort of man who would write an oration "against those who call me tiresome." (*Oration* 2)

[47] Among the studies which I have consulted with particular profit on Libanius, I would cite Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Rafaella Cribiore, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch*; Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist: Rhetoric, Reality and Religion in the Fourth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); and the essays collected in Lieve van Hoof, ed., *Libanius: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). In the last, see especially Peter Van Nuffelen, "Not the Last Pagan: Libanius between Elite Rhetoric and Religion" (293–314).

(and therefore, shortly after the death of Ephrem). I will first briefly consider his general religious views and then turn to his specific theory of temples as expressed in a few of his orations and declamations.

Libanius, as mentioned above, was a pagan. He was also a supporter of Julian. An older framework which viewed the fourth century through the lens of a "clash of civilizations" between the new religion and the old thus assigned Libanius to the latter side of this epochal battle.[48] Admittedly, Libanius lends himself to this sort of interpretation by some of the stark rhetoric he uses against his Christian monastic opponents.[49] Because, however, a coherent "program" of religious thought akin to Julian's (or, for that matter, Iamblichus's) is impossible to detect in his writings, he has often been taken as a representative of the weakness, sterility, and merely bookish quality of late antique Greco-Roman paganism in its final generations.[50]

More recent scholarship has nuanced this view. Isabella Sandwell, for example, sees Libanius as allowing that there were times when flexibility in religious allegiance was necessary.[51] Because he was a masterful rhetorician, "we do not see Libanius' true religious feelings expressed consistently in his writings and […] we should not expect to."[52] Rafaella Cribiore, meanwhile, has

[48] Cf. the essays collected in Arnaldo Momigliano, ed., *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), which Van Nuffelen calls "a classic statement" of the clash thesis at "Not the Last Pagan," 293n1.

[49] See for example Libanius Orat. 30.8–12. Commenting on this passage, Jan Stenger notes that Libanius here seems to portray the Christians as absolute enemies of both the natural and social order: "Dementsprechend zeichnet Libanios das Bild eines Christentums, dessen Vertreter sich gegen die natürliche wie die politische Ordnung vergehen." Jan Stenger, *Hellenische Identität in der Spätantike: Pagane Autoren und ihr Unbehagen an der eigenen Zeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 386.

[50] Sandwell, *Religious Identity,* 22.

[51] "[Libanius] allowed people a more flexible approach to religious interaction in which they could play down their religious allegiance in certain circumstances in order to ease relations with others and then emphasize it again when it was useful or necessary to do so." Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity,* 8.

[52] Sandwell, *Religious Identity,* 27.

coined the term "gray pagan" to describe Libanius,[53] meaning that he occupied a gray area, rejecting Christianity while maintaining relationships with individual Christians, a proponent of traditional religion but not a radical partisan of Julian. Peter Van Nuffelen, meanwhile, suggests that the question of his actual belief on religious questions can only be considered alongside his rhetorical pose and social reality. We aren't reading correctly if we try to find Libanius's "creed" or the depths of his religious sentiment. Instead we must be aware of his social rank, and his political convictions on the role of religion in public life.[54]

For my purposes, any of these latter positions is serviceable.[55] Whether Libanius is flexibly mastering the etiquette of discussing religious identity, or a "gray pagan" whose religious views reflect the lukewarm position of his society, or a self-confident advocate for his social class, deploying conventional rhetoric to argue for a variety of different religious positions, in all events when he reaches for religious imagery he will be relying on convention. His personal conviction, or lack thereof, is independent of the usefulness of his rhetoric for understanding the symbol of the temple. To that symbol I now turn.

The most substantial of Libanius's writings on religious themes is Oration 30, sometimes called the oration *Pro Templis*. The date of the speech remains the subject of debate, but the situation which leads Libanius to write is the destruction of a temple in the Syrian countryside, and a general increase in attacks on temples by bands of Christian zealots.[56] Libanius wants the

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[53] "There are nuances in his religious allegiance; he did not follow a straight path during his long life." Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist,* 173.

[54] "Far from being indifferent in religious matters, then, Libanius was rather self-confident, writing, as he did, from a position of social power. As such, religion was not a private matter: it surfaces most prominently in Libanius' orations when public salvation is at stake." Van Nuffelen, "Not the Last Pagan" 296.

[55] For a much wider account of the history of the question of Libanius' religious views, see Sandwell *Religious Identity* 20–23.

[56] The dating hinges on a few facts. It is definitively after 381 CE, because Flavianus, mentioned (*Orat* 30.15) as bishop of Antioch, assumed office in that year; it must also date before 391 CE, because Libanius expresses a hope

emperor to put a stop to these attacks. He portrays the Christians as dangerous and lawless; reminds Theodosius of his own religious law; he even concludes by threatening that the pagans will use violence if necessary to defend their temples from Christian violence.[57]

But alongside arguments of a practical or a legal character, Libanius also speaks about temples themselves at several points. His language is terser than Lucian's whimsical travelogue; we have to pull symbolic associations out of individual phrases. But nonetheless, the language that he uses reveals something about what temples meant for him and for his intended audience. One note we can inject at the beginning of this consideration comes from Cribiore: the speech itself tells us that when Libanius is speaking, temples are no longer in their pristine glory. He is speaking as an antiquarian, drawing on "collective memory"[58] for his argument. We might reframe her terms and say that he is evoking the *symbol* of the temple.

Near the start of the speech, Libanius gives his version of the history of human religion:

> Those who first appeared on earth, O King, taking possession of the high places and sheltering in caverns and huts, straightaway conceived a notion of the gods and came to know how great was their goodwill towards humanity; they built the sorts of temples that were appropriate to the earliest generations, and made images for themselves… [after they began to dwell in the foothills and plains] in each of their cities, after the walls the beginning of the rest of the body were the shrines and temples, for they believed that from such [divine] governors, too, they would have the greatest protection.[59]

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that the Egyptian Serapeum will not suffer the fate of the Syrian temple (*Orat* 30.44); in 391, however, it was indeed destroyed. Still the most authoritative and extensive article on the dating question is Paul Petit, "Sur la date du 'Pro Templis' de Libanius," *Byzantion* 21 (1951): 285–310, who settles on 386 as the most likely year. The identity of the temple destroyed is also a difficult question; I am overall persuaded by Christopher Jones, "Three Temples in Libanius and the Theodosian Code," *CQ* 63 (2013): 860–865, who argues, against a widespread supposition that the temple was in Edessa, that it may well have been the famous Temple of the Moon at Harran, 30 miles further south.

[57] For depictions of the Christians as dangerous and lawless, see *Orat.* 30.15–24; for invocation of Theodosius own law-codes relating to sacrifice, 8–9; for the threat of reciprocal violence see 55.

[58] Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist,* 224: "The beginning of the speech shows that Libanius did not have a personal memory of the past grandeur of the temples but rather had to rely on collective memory. During his lifetime the temples, at least in cities, had become poor and deprived of honor."

[59] Libanius *Orat*. 30.4.

Observe a few different facets of this brief *Religionsgeschichte.* First, temples arose, alongside humanity, in the mountains and high places of the world. It was only after a certain amount of civilizational development that they became edifices of the lowlands. Second, they arose very early; as soon as they had sheltered themselves against the elements in rude and temporary dwellings, early humanity built "temples" of the sort that were appropriate to their primitive state. Third, temples emerged in response to human knowledge of gods, and in particular, because they recognize that gods are propitious to humanity. As the last line of this passage alludes, they provide a kind of "defense" to humanity akin to city walls. Temples are thus ways of concentrating and evoking divine εὔνοια for the sake of human flourishing and protection.[60]

As Libanius continues, he notes that temples of this protective sort can be found across the whole Roman empire—even in Constantinople!—and that, in fact, it was the divinities venerated in these temples who afforded the Romans victory in their first imperial conquests.[61] The situation has, however, declined in recent generations: the Constantinian dynasty changed religious law, and now Christians run amok, violating even the few remaining protections that Theodosius has granted the old edifices.[62] The wave of Christians across the countryside is akin to a natural disaster or a flood, as they rip through the countryside like torrents and destroy the countryside by their destruction of temples.[63]

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[61] This theme is repeated later in the speech in a direct polemic against the Christians. If they say that the world would be better off without temples, then let them consider *which* gods, worshipped in *which* temples, led the Romans to victory; all great battles throughout history have been because of the favor of the gods, worshipped in temples. Libanius *Orat.* 30.31–32.

[62] Libanius *Orat.* 30.5.

[63] Libanius *Orat.* 30.9. The passage is fainly suggests a reversal of Lucian's cosmic flood myth, as given above.

This last phrase leads to Libanius's next meditation on the position of temples in human society. When a temple is destroyed, says Libanius, the country on which it is found is "blinded and murdered." This is because temples are "the soul of the countryside, the beginning of their foundation." The temples are the site of "as many hopes as the farmers have for spouses, children, cattle, and the sewing and planting," and a rural village which has lost its temple has lost the "will" of the farmers.[64] After this striking passage, Libanius goes on to discuss economic consequences of temple destruction: reduced agricultural output, lower imperial revenues, predation of the peasants, and so forth. But we should not let these practical concerns Libanius distract us from the powerful religious dimension of the initial image. The temples are the eyes, the soul, and the source of hope for the agricultural class. Their continued existence is directly tied to the fertility not only of the land, but also of the livestock and the people themselves. Even if practical realists are thinking in terms of revenue, they recognize that *other* people invest temples with a supernatural agency to bestow life and livelihood.

Turning from the temple's role supporting the modest farmers of the countryside to look at temples in the cities, Libanius finds grounds to defend them here too. They are beautiful, "second only to the beauty of the royal palaces."[65] They are also repositories of exquisite artwork in the form of divine statues. Libanius laments the loss of one Asclepius that rioting Christians have taken and destroyed.[66] Moreover, he appeals to Theodosius, they are *royal* property; not only do they contain rich treasures, but they also maintain the health and safety of his realm. Libanius gently chides the emperor for being so foolish as to allow his own treasury to be diminished; he is

[64] Libanius, *Orat.* 30.9–10.

[65] Libanius, *Orat.* 30.42: μετά γε τὰ κάλλη τῶν βασιλείων κεφάλαιον.

[66] Libanius, *Orat.* 30.22–23.

like a "one who throws his coinpurse into the sea… or a helmsmen who cuts the cable which is necessary for sailing."[67] The two similes Libanius lands on each draw out facets of the connection between the Emperor and temples: they are, on the one hand, receptacles which contain great treasures that it would be a tremendous loss to lose, and on the other hand they assist, to borrow a metaphor, in steering the ship of state. Royalty, wealth, beauty and control all correlate.

One more passage from the *Pro Templis* deserves our attention. This is the description of the great, though unnamed, temple whose destruction occasioned the speech in the first place:

> There lies on the Persian border a shrine that had no equal… it was so great, formed of such great stones, that it covered as much of the earth as did the city. It was sufficient for the dwellers in the city in the terrors of war that, if enemies took the city, they would not be able to take the temple as well, because the power of its walls exceeded any siege weapon. And if they went on the roof, they could see the greater part of the enemy country… But this temple… leaving aside the ineffable parts of its ceiling and how many statues of iron were hidden within it in darkness, is gone and lost.[68]

Once again, Libanius's description of the temple dwells on practical realities rather than religious dimensions, but still, the qualities which he associates with the temple merit a moment's reflection. First, it has a massive size, equivalent, as he claims, to the city itself. Second, again, it has the protective quality he noted above. Indeed, here it is magnified even greater, because the temple is *superior* to city walls in the protection it can offer. Next, it is associated with seeing. Libanius's evocation of the sight bestowed by the temple begins with a practical dimension: one can climb on the roof to get a better view. But in his description of the *extent* of the sight (it is possible to "see the greater part of the enemy country"), Libanius moves from a practical description of actual realities to a symbolic register: it is not *literally* possible to see nearly all of Persia from the rooftop, but rather this vision is part of the *symbol* of the temple (compare earlier,

[67] Libanius, *Orat.* 30.43.

[68] Libanius, *Orat.* 30.44–45.

when he said that the countryside was blinded when the temples were lost). As with the economic considerations mentioned in the case of the farmers and the rural temples, two different registers are operating at the same time in this passage.

Finally, the temple was also the repository of a number of things about which Libanius declines to speak: they were hidden (κέκρυπτο) in its shadows. He will name statues, but not describe them; the mysteries of the ceiling he will only describe as ἀπόρρητα, unspeakable. In other parts of the same speech, as we have seen, he is happy not only to mention, but also elaborately to describe, the beautiful artwork that temples contain and to lament their loss. Here, however, he evokes the still-resonant image of the temple as containing restricted mysteries, accessible, perhaps, to the eyes, but not to be spoken of.

As I indicated at the outset, finding a robust symbolism of temples requires reading Libanius carefully; he mentions most of these only once, and passes quickly from religious to other dimensions of his argument. Nevertheless, our study has uncovered a few interesting features of Libanius' symbolism of temples. Let us now combine these with Lucian, and compare with Ephrem.

Ephrem, Lucian and Libanius

Let us pull together some of the different themes that we saw emerge in Lucian and Libanius in their depictions of the symbol of the temple. Temples are, under both accounts, ancient; Lucian attributes them to the early Egyptians, while Libanius makes them nearly coeval with humanity. There are various accounts between them as to how temples first came to be built. Libanius makes it a human response to a perception that the gods care for humanity; Lucian tells one story about a temple which is likewise founded seemingly by human response to a divine intervention

(Deucalion, who builds his temple over the site where the antediluvian floodwaters receded). He knows of another story, however, in which the goddess Hera herself, appearing in a vision, commands that the temple be built. Lucian, as just mentioned, is aware of a story that connects his temple with an ancient flood; Libanius makes no such claim, but in his image of the Christian vandals tearing through the countryside "in torrents" (ὥσπερ χείμαρροι) destroying temples, we may see the faintest verbal echo of the idea.

Aside from their antiquity and the connection with the flood, temples are also closely associated with wealth and secrecy by both authors. The wealth of the temples consists, for both authors, in their fabulous statues; Lucian describes gem-encrusted goddesses, while Libanius lingers over the beauty of a smashed Asclepius; the secrecy lies in either things that each man refuses to describe, or, in Lucian's case, his description of various places with restrictions on who is permitted to enter.

Finally, both, I would argue, have visions of the temple as a geographic center of the world or microcosm. Libanius speaks a bit more directly about this when he describes the temple as the "soul" of the countryside; we might also see the faintest hint of it in his description of the way that, from the top of the (now-destroyed) temple in 30.44, one could see almost all of Persia. For Lucian, this idea is expressed in the multiple accounts of people coming from distant lands to bring offerings, perform rites, and deposit treasures.

Aside from these common qualities, we can also note that Lucian mentions specifically the presence of a supernatural light in the temple of Atargatis; Libanius, meanwhile, introduces the notion of royalty in connection with the temples (they are imperial property), the relationship to sight (when temples are destroyed, the countryside is blinded; from the top of the temple one can

see nearly all of Persia) and also fertility (the temple, as the "soul" of the countryside, is the locus of the farmers' hope for vegetable, animal, and human fertility).[69]

Both Greek authors therefore explicitly connect a variety of motifs with the image of a temple, the house of a divinity. Many of those same motifs are ones that we have seen in Ephrem as well, but as loose and seemingly independent descriptors connected with Mary (light, water, microcosmic fertility). When Ephrem says "the dry earth saw Mary, that the fruit gave forth a great sea,"[70] we noted the image of fertility and the hint of a microcosm; we might even have connected this image of agricultural fertility with other kinds of fertility that are found in the hymns, as, for instance, "He deprived the matron's womb, he fructified the virgin womb."[71]

But if we adopt the hypothesis that Ephrem, when he uses language like this, participates in the same symbolic system as Lucian and Libanius when it comes to the implications of the word "temple," then we might be able to understand the verse, "the dry earth saw Mary, that the fruit gave forth a great sea," as also having temple imagery dimly in the subtext: the waters coming

[69] The reader may have raised a mental objection in the preceding account of temple symbolism. Out of the fact that Lucian says that one particular temple was associated with a flood, how can we say that the idea that the flood is part of a broader symbol of the temple in Lucian? I have for the most part decided not to elaborate on ancient near eastern myth as a source for Ephrem, as it would distract a great deal from my main subjects, but it is worth pointing out that a significant body of modern scholarly literature, drawing on archaeological, paleographic, literary and other evidence, has long established that there were several common features to ancient near eastern temple ideology. Most of the ideas that I have sketched in this section —wealth and fertility, royalty, secrets, the flood myth, the microcosm—are manifested in various parts of that ancient ideology. See e.g. Michael Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013); Victor A. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamia and Northwest Semitic Writings* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1992), and the range of essays in L. Michael Morales, *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting Toward a Temple-Centered Theology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014). We should be careful not to homogenize too much, of course, but the combination of the verbal statements (sometimes in both authors) with the ancient data seems to me adequate grounds for a reasonable speculation. In the case of Lucian and the flood, the connection is further by the careful work of Lightfoot, *On the Syrian Goddess,* 347–48.

[70] Ephrem, *Nat*. 18.13.

[71] Ephrem, *Nat*. 21.17.

forth from Mary bring fertility to the land, just as Libanius's farmers place all their hope in the local shrine.

The usefulness of this exegetical tool is better illustrated in a stanza from Hymn 28 on the Nativity:

> Light appeared on your habitations,
> And to marriage it gave no space
> For there were no workers of ruin
> In the midst of your (f) dwelling-place, which is full of glory
> Shadows of luxury and desire
> Were dispersed by the beams of the Savior
> Spiritual one!(f) you have become a spiritual one (m)
> Because you bore spiritually.[72]

The overall sense of this stanza is clear without any need for outside glosses. But again, assuming for the sake of argument that a broader understanding of temple symbolism is appropriate here, we can begin to see that the "dwelling-place" here, even though it is not explicitly framed as such, may be conceived of as a temple. Besides the emphasis on spiritual beings, we also see two of the elements we discovered above: the repeated image of light and scattered shadows, as well as the fact that certain persons and things were not permitted to enter (marriage, workers of ruin).

Now, it is not necessary to go so far as to say that in this passage, Ephrem *means* that Mary is a temple, and he is simply withholding the word for some reason. Rather, what I argue is that Ephrem, when he writes as a poet (and as a sophisticated poet) fills his words with implications, some of which may be deliberate and some of which may be not. A broader knowledge of the backgrounds in which he writes can help us catch some of those implications which we might otherwise miss. So too in this case: by approaching Ephrem with full knowledge of these temple-

[72] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.4.

associations in Libanius and Lucian, we can fill out our picture of Ephrem's symbolism, finding connections that may have been implicit for him even they are not for us.

Let us note one thing before moving on. Because the material that Lucian and Libanius are using in describing the symbol of the temple derives here *not* merely from "Greek" antecedents, but from a broad near eastern system of temple ideology which Libanius and Lucian have, so to speak, "Hellenized" it is not necessary in this case to posit any kind of direct Greek-to-Syriac transmission to understand Ephrem's thought as participating in the same system. Rather, we can hypothesize that Ephrem, Lucian, and Libanius are all co-heirs to a system that, originating in older languages and older cultures, has since passed alike to Greek and to Syriac literature.

Prophecies and Divine Speech: Iamblichus of Chalcis, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*

Iamblichus was one of the most important philosophers of the Neoplatonic tradition in the late third and early fourth centuries. Born around 240 CE, he was a member of the second philosophical "generation" of writers after Plotinus, generally held to be the founder of Neoplatonism; he was a younger contemporary of Porphyry, the editor of Plotinus's works and author of his biography. He is said to have been Porphyry's student, and he does seem to have studied with him, but the precise details of this relationship are difficult to reconstruct. Porphyry himself had come from Tyre in Phoenicia, but studied under Plotinus in Rome and established himself there. Iamblichus, meanwhile, after receiving his philosophical education, returned to Syria and taught at Apamea.[73] Although the biographical details of Porphyry and Iamblichus's relationship, as just mentioned, are hard to reconstruct, the literary evidence does permit us to surmise that it was a contentious

[73] Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 5 is the standard ancient biography of Iamblichus. For a modern overview of his life and career, see John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell, *Iamblichus: On the Pythagorean Way of Life: Text, Translation, Notes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 17–24.

one. Iamblichus's extant writings are filled with argumentative statements against his former teacher, while some of Porphyry's own writings are likely broadsides against his student.[74] Personal factors may well have played a role in this dispute, but the real tensions between student and teacher seems to have come down to a set of philosophical differences between them. Most significant for our project here were two disagreements: over theurgy and over the soul.

Theurgy is, in Iamblichus's terms, the performance of rituals in order to elicit divinities' help with the "purification, release, and salvation of the soul;" it is concerned with "the best of all things for the soul."[75] It refers to practices which, if we were to accept an outmoded and rigid distinction between "philosophy" and "religion," would be classified in the latter category; some might even call them "magical." Denigrating them in this fashion, a modern critic would in fact be following in the footsteps of Porphyry. Certain theurgical rites he seems to have abhorred, thinking that they attempted to manipulate the gods;[76] others he considered a useful propaedeutic; none of it, however, did he regard as philosophical properly.[77] For Iamblichus, however, theurgy was, in an important sense, central to the philosophical project.

This disagreement over theurgy derives from a more fundamental disagreement over the human soul. For Porphyry, as for Plotinus his teacher before him,[78] the soul of the individual human had not entirely descended from the world of the gods. There remained a spark of the higher

[74] Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus, r*ev.ed.(Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014).

[75] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 10.8.

[76] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul,* 94.

[77] Aaron Johnson, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre: The Limits of Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 102–45.

[78] For Plotinus see Damian Caluori, *Plotinus on the Soul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 134–79.

intellectual world within every individual, connecting him to divinity. In consequence, although the philosopher did of course remain in his body on a day-to-day basis, it was possible, by a practice of largely mental asceticism, to elevate the soul's consciousness to the level of higher realms, and obtain a kind of unity with divinity.[79]

Iamblichus rejected this notion of the undescended soul. He was certain that the human soul had fully descended into embodiment, and that it could not by its own effort transcend the material world and encounter divinity. In order to manage such transcendence, Iamblichus says, the assistance of a god was required. All that an embodied soul could do on his own was to prepare himself for such assistance: this is the work of theurgy.[80]

Iamblichus's philosophical system is elaborate and complex, built out of a combination of traditional religious practices and exegesis of the prior canon. We will not attempt to engage with the whole of it here. But Iamblichus's great masterpiece, *On the Mysteries*,[81] does have a significant amount to say about prophecy, and this material makes an interesting point of comparison with Ephrem.[82] *On the Mysteries* is Iamblichus's reply to Porphyry (enacted through

[79] "Employing the formula of his master Plotinus, Porphyry advised the philosopher to forgo all ritual activities in order to return 'alone, through himself, to God alone;' while the philosopher should understand the enchantments of nature and the cults tied ot its demons, he should have nothing to do with them. 'In every respect,' Porphyry says, '*the philosopher is the savior of himself.* "' Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul,* 15, quoting Porphyry, *De Abst.* 2, italics in original.

[80] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul,* 67–77.

[81] *On the Mysteries* is the title by which the work is generally now known. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul,* 7–8 reminds us, however, that this was not the name under which it was originally published, which was rather, "The Reply of the Master Abammon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo." *On the Mysteries* has the virtue of being punchier, but it obscures the fact that this book is not some sort of grimoire, but "the correspondence between two of the most learned Platonists of the later third century" (8).

[82] Book 3 of *On the Mysteries* is, "[a]mong the Neoplatonists, the most extensive, surviving discussion of the nature of divine inspiration and possession, the process of consulting oracles, the nature and operation of oracles and, in a wider sense, the phenomenon of divination." Crystal Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 215.

several layers of pseudonym) over a whole host of questions pertaining to the areas of philosophy[83] where they disagree: namely, theurgy and other questions relating to the relationships between the human soul and other beings. Book 3 of the text is dedicated to replies about divination.

Iamblichus's account is rich with variety on different practices; he distinguishes wakeful from dream visions, he discusses famous prophets from antiquity, and of course he integrates the whole question into his philosophical system. But I want to ask a specific, multipart question of the material: What are the roles of the prophet and deity in the prophetic exchange? What happens at the moment of prophetic inspiration? What is the content of prophecy?

Before getting to that set of questions, however, there is a preliminary distinction to be made. Iamblichus distinguishes between true, divine prophecy (which is experienced as a kind of divine possession) and various forms of human activity which might be casually classed under the same title (haruspicy, astrology, etc.) We may, following Crystal Addey, term these two categories "inspired" and "inductive," respectively.[84] At the very beginning of book 3, Iamblichus chides Porphyry for construing prophecy as a natural human activity (and effectively reducing it to the inductive). Prophecy (or foreknowledge, πρωγνώσις) is:

> not one of the things coming into existence, and it does not even behave like a natural change, neither is it like an artefact invented for use in daily life, nor is it, generally speaking, a human achievement at all (οὐδ' ὅλως ἀνθρωπικὸν ἐστι τὸ ἔργον). But it is a thing divine (θεῖον), supernatural (ὑπερφυὲς), sent from heaven above (ἄνωθέν τε ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ); both unbegotten and eternal (ἀγέννητόν τὲ καὶ ἀίδιον), it takes priority by its own nature (αὐτοφυῶς προηγεῖται).[85]

[83] Rather than import some other category, I will continue to refer to the whole of Iamblichus' system as "philosophy" throughout this section.

[84] Addey, *Divination and Theurgy,* 41.

[85] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.1. I take my translations of Iamblichus in this chapter from Emma Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershell, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries, Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

Later in the same chapter he adds that it is "accomplished by divine acts and signs and consists of divine visions and scientific insights. All else is subordinate, instrumental to the gift of foreknowledge sent down by the gods (τῇ ἐκ θεῶν καταπεμπομένῃ τῆς προγνώσεως δόσει)."

Prophecy, then, is a form of divine possession or inspiration,[86] an activity in which the gods confer knowledge on humanity; it has no human source. It must be distinguished from various human divinatory arts which consist "largely of guessing and supposition."[87] This latter kind is not *entirely* disparaged; it is connected with divine signs, which the gods have sown into nature and which "reveal through symbols the purpose of the gods, even giving advance notice of the future."[88] But it is not the *true* type of prophecy, which is the direct interaction between a god and a human being. What does that look like?

On the human side, Iamblichus characterizes the experience of prophecy as one of absolute receptivity:

> I want to make clear the characteristic signs of those who are truly possessed by the gods. For if they have subjected their entire life as a vehicle or instrument to the gods who inspire them (ὡς ὄχημα ἢ ὄργανον τοῖς ἐπιπνέουσι θεοῖς), either they exchange their human life for the divine, or they direct their own life towards the god; they neither act according to sensation, nor are they awake in the manner of those who have their senses aroused; neither do they themselves apprehend the future, nor are they moved like those who act according to purpose.[89]

In this extreme case, the recipient of divine inspiration has effectively surrendered their own identity to the deity. They have become a "vehicle" (ὄχημα) for the divinity,[90] and they no longer

[86] Addey, *Divination and Thuergy,* 216–217.

[87] Iamblichus, *De. Myst.* 3.15.

[88] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.15: Συμβολικῶς δὲ τὴν γνώμην τοῦ θεοῦ ἐμφαίνουσι, καὶ τὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος προδήλωσιν.

[89] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.4.

[90] This tracks interestingly with Iamblichus's theory, deriving from Plato, of the "vehicle" of the human soul, which is a mediating agent for him between our human life and our (theurgically activated) capacity for divine life. In the prophetic encounter, meanwhile, the human agent becomes the "vehicle" for the god to interact with the material

participate in normal human experience; as Iamblichus goes on to say, one sign of such genuine possession is that an immunity to fire and pain.[91] In a true prophetic experience, moreover, the soul's submission to the divine agent which inspires it must be absolute; "when the soul takes the initiative, or is disturbed during the divination, or the body interrupts and perverts the divine harmony, the divinations become turbulent and false."[92]

Iamblichus does not generate his account of prophecy entirely from first principles. He is responding not only to an order of questions and objections provided by Porphyry, but also to a range of actually observed prophetic phenomena in his ancient and contemporary worlds. As such, he must account for the various physical, ritual practices observed in traditional oracles like Delphi. To take one example, the oracle at Colophon gives out prophecies after drinking a special water, and therefore, to the uninformed "it seems that some prophetic spirit passes through the water; but this is not correct." The water "only bestows the receptivity and purification of the luminous spirit in us." This ritual process, which might otherwise look like a magical act that either inspires directly or compels the god to inspire, is thus reframed as helping to make the oracle "receptive" to the divine influence; as Iamblichus points out, after all, the taking of the water is only the central part of a much larger ascetical regime (fasting, withdrawal from society), similarly aimed at cultivating receptivity.[93]

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world. On Iamblichus' theory of the ὄχημα in general, see John Finnamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

[91] Addey, *Divination and Theurgy,* 219 notes however: "According to Iamblichus, it is not the case that the recipient has no consciousness at all, though: the central point is that the inspired individual is not conscious of anything else *except the gods*." (Emphasis in original).

[92] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.8.

[93] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.11. It is this emphasis on the function of these rituals as purificatory / aimed at cultivating receptivity which distinguishes them from the magicians which he castigates in 3.13.

Iamblichus is thus very careful throughout his analysis of genuine prophecy (as against those purely human arts which *guess* at future events based on observed phenomena) to limit the sphere of human agency. It is reframed, not obliterated: the human prophet, like any theurgist, can and should cultivate their receptivity to divine influence.[94] But "the human race is feeble and puny, it sees but a little ahead, and is endowed with a congenital futility," and the only way that it can overcome its inherent deficiency is "if it participate so far as possible in some portion of the divine light."[95]

The deity who participates in the act of prophetic inspiration is, as Iamblichus emphasizes, entirely free. This is important, as it is this freedom which underwrites the validity of the foreknowledge in the first place:

> For such a power, if inseparable from the nature of places and of bodies subject to it, or preceded by a motion limited by number, cannot know beforehand things everywhere and always in the same manner. But if separate and free from places and times measured by number (since it is superior to things happening in time and held in place) it is equally present with beings wherever they are, and is always at the same time present with those growing in time, and embraces in one the truth of all existing things because of its own separate and superior essence.[96]

In other words, the divinity is not attached or confined *by nature* to a body or any particularity (including temporal particularity). It is therefore able, first, to have knowledge that transcends the limitations of human knowledge, and second, to communicate that knowledge freely to those who have cultivated receptivity to it.

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[94] Nor is this achieved purely through ritual means: "While Iamblichus makes it clear that the divine agency is hierarchically superior (as the ultimate and primary cause), human agency is marked by a subtle (yet crucial) blend of humbleness or openness and activity: receptivity has to be developed through assimilation to the divine in ethical, ritual and intellectual spheres." Addey, *Divination and Theurgy* 229; see her broader discussions 26–28 and 226–29.

[95] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.18.

[96] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.12.

Despite its transcendent quality, unattached to any particularity, nevertheless the deity is accessible to those who would receive it. Iamblichus gives the reason in one place, where he objects to Porphyry characterizing divination as gods "serving" mortals:

> you don't properly understand what you call "service" when applying this word to the overwhelming power of the gods, and their superabundant goodness, and their all-encompassing responsibility, their care and patronage. Moreover, you ignore the manner of their activity, that this is neither drawn down nor turned toward us, but, being transcendent, it guides and gives itself to its participants.[97]

Although exceeding human nature on an unfathomable scale ("the human being is shameful, and is as nothing, and a toy, compared with the divine"),[98] the gods possess a superabundant goodness, and in their love for humans, act as "patrons" and "give themselves" to humans.

What happens when one of these patron deities interacts with a sufficiently receptive human being? We have already noted that the prophet loses awareness of her surroundings and becomes insensible of pain. Iamblichus mentions several other possible manifestations:

> The characteristics of those inspired are also of many kinds: the movement both of the body and some of its parts, its total repose, harmonious positions and dances, tuneful utterances, or the opposites of these; and the body is either seen to be lifted up, or distended, borne aloft in the air, or the opposites of these appear to happen to it.[99]

This diversity in manifestation he attributes to diversity on both sides of the prophetic relationship: for there are on the one hand a variety of gods who inspire, and, on the other hand, there are a variety of levels of inspiration that a human being can receive. At other times, divine possession takes the form of a kind of glossolalic madness: the possessed ones "send forth words, but not with the understanding of the speakers; on the contrary, it is said that they utter them with a "frenzied mouth." Iamblichus, though he hedges, also considers this to be an especially high form of oracle:

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[97] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.17.

[98] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.19.

[99] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.5.

"divine possession is brought to perfection by such causes, speaking generally and without precision."[100]

Yet as Crystal Addey has noted the most common form of prophetic manifestation by far is illumination.[101] Sometimes it manifests as a light which entirely overpowers regular vision: "a light shines brightly and peacefully, [and] not only is the sight of the eye possessed, but closed up after previously being quite open."[102] Sometimes it is an ineffable fire, sometimes it flashes like lightning, sometimes it chases away darkness.[103] Ultimately, however it manifests this light is of heavenly origins:

> [T]he greatest light has a sacred brightness which, either shining from above in the aether, or from the air, or moon or sun, or any other heavenly sphere, appears apart from all these things to be such a mode of divination that is autonomous, primordial, and worthy of the gods.[104]

Once properly illuminated, what does the oracle see? Iamblichus started book 3 by responding to a question by Porphyry about "what happens in foreknowledge of the future (ἐν τῇ τοῦ μέλλοντος προγνώσει)."[105] Certain of his arguments throughout have also seemed to have a logical connection to prophecy about future events, as for instance his remark that gods can offer prophecy because they are not attached to particular times. But other elements of his system, and some of his own statements, also suggest that he's not really interested in an oracle who can simply

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[100] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.8.

[101] Addey, *Divination and Theurgy,* 222: "*divine illumination is the idiom through which Iamblichus iterates the gods' immanence.*" (Emphasis in original.)

[102] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.2.

[103] Ineffable fire: Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.6; lightning: 3.11. Chasing away darkness: 3.13, 3.31.

[104] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.14.

[105] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.1.

predict tomorrow's weather. After all, why is the divine madness which produces incomprehensible speech the perfection of divine possession?

Iamblichus shows his hand at the end of his discourse.

> With both [infallible truth in oracles and perfect virtue in the soul], ascent to the intelligible fire is granted to theurgists, a process which indeed must be proposed as the goal of all foreknowledge and of every theurgic operation.[106]

Though he started this book talking about prophetic foreknowledge, that's not actually what Iamblichus thinks that a prophet or oracle is supposed to gain through their communion with the divine. It's a byproduct, like their invincibility to pain or their incidental levitations. Access to the fire of divinity, and knowledge about the gods that is otherwise inaccessible to the fully descended and embodied soul, is the true goal of the prophetic operation.

To sum up, for Iamblichus, prophets must cultivate themselves, morally and ritually. She must make herself a fitting receptacle for the divine beings. The divine beings, although free and unattached to particularities, condescend to give themselves to such a receptive prophet. When they come to her, she works with them, cooperating in their revelation of divine knowledge losing herself (to an extent) in them, and she gains knowledge of divine truth.

This is not surprising in Iamblichus, of course; it's of a piece with his entire system. But it is worth dwelling on the fact that in presenting oracles this way, he is reframing and redirecting the (accusatory) question put to him by Porphyry, asserting that what Porphyry sees as a vulgar magical practice is actually a privileged method of accessing divinity. He is *also*, of course, reinterpreting prophetic oracles as they were actually practiced in antiquity. In a sense, he is reinterpreting the *symbol* of the oracle in his own, theurgic, way.

[106] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.31.

I suggest that there is interesting structural overlap between Iamblichus's account of the prophetic operation and Ephrem's understanding of Mary's prophetic role, despite the fact that the two operate in different religious and linguistic contexts. Both believe very strongly in divine initiative in the prophetic experience; Mary not only doesn't speak without Christ putting words in her mouth; she also doesn't *stop* speaking without asking his permission.[107] Both subordinate prophetic discussion of future events to prophetic knowledge of divine truth. Both seem to believe that certain elements of that truth are unutterable (in Ephrem's case, this eventuates in silence; in Iamblichus this privileges divine glossolalia and, elsewhere in his corpus, the use of "barbarian" and nonsensical names in the invocation of deities).[108]

I do not suggest here that Ephrem has read Iamblichus; as with all the authors in this chapter no direct lines of connection between the two can be drawn, and the points of connection can just as easily be explained by common background traditions as by anything like direct transmission. But I do suggest that in thinking *with* Iamblichus, we can see some of the contours of the symbol of the oracle or prophet in Ephrem's milieu, and that can help shape our reading of Ephrem. I propose, tentatively, three things that Iamblichus helps us see better in Ephrem:

First, just as Lucian and Libanius help us coordinate disparate symbols that are not immediately apparent as a single unit in Ephrem (so that a combination of water and fertility imagery suddenly becomes intelligible as a hint, however implicit, of the presence of the temple), so too Iamblichus helps coordinate the image of light with prophecy. So, for instance, in Hymn 6 on the Nativity (which we discussed above as a paradigmatic example of Mary's prophetic gift in

[107] Ephrem *Nat.* 15.1, 19.19.

[108] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 7.4–5.

Ephrem), the Marian section (in which she ponders what to call Christ, and she with him for refuge from Herod) is followed immediately by a discussion of the "star of light (ܟܘܟܒܐ ܕܢܗܝܪܐ):"

> The star of light that was not in its nature
> Shown forth suddenly; smaller than the sun
> And greater than the sun; smaller than it
> In its revealed light; greater than it
> In its hidden power, because of the symbol.[109]

There are all sorts of reasons for the connection between the Marian passage and this following one; the nativity scene, the tension between revealed and hidden things, the contrast between nature and the supernatural. But read with attention to the prophetic dimensions of light which Iamblichus makes us aware of, another facet—subtle, perhaps, but still, I would argue, present in Ephrem's associative logic—comes into view.

Second, Iamblichus helps us understand that prophecy, no less than the temple, can help to frame what I have called the "paradox of space." In Ephrem himself, the paradox of space is usually invoked in situations relating to Christ's bodily confinement within Mary's womb; as we shall see in the next chapter, in Jewish materials it is likewise usually expressed in spatial terms relating to the Ark or the temple. But Iamblichus makes us see that the connection of a divinity to a particular person in a prophetic relationship, no less than their residence in a particular edifice or vessel, is a problem that requires (symbolic or philosophical) explanation.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Iamblichus helps us to see better *receptivity as activity.* We noted in chapter 2, and again in chapter 3, a tension in a number of our sources between a view of Mary (or the Christian ascetic) as an active participant, cultivating virtue, performing good works, and becoming powerful, and a view of her as purely a receptacle in whom God comes and works. But Iamblichus is distinctly good at articulating the work that the oracle

[109] Ephrem, *Nat*. 6.7.

does to prepare for the reception of the god as activity, and even in the cooperation involved in simply receiving a divinity into ones' self, "they direct their own life towards the god."[110]

Virginity: Heliodorus of Emesa, the *Aethiopica*

We know almost nothing about Heliodorus himself, aside from the brief colophon already cited and a likely spurious account in an ecclesiastical historian, which will be mentioned below. We can therefore proceed straight to the text. Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* is the most sophisticated[111] of the late antique Greek romance novels.[112] Writing probably in the second half of the fourth century CE,[113] Heliodorus composed a story that is, at its core, a convoluted and adventurous love plot just like the other canonical Greek novels. The female protagonist Charikleia is an Ethiopian who, for supernatural reasons, was born white. Hidden by her mother, she is conveyed to Egypt and thence

[110] Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 3.4.

[111] Superlatives of this kind abound in the literature. To take only one example, J.R. Morgan, introducing his translation, calls it "a work on an altogether grander scale than any other extant Greek novel, a work whose structure and execution express an ambition to be considered at the highest level." See J.R. Morgan, "Heliodorus: An Ethiopian Story (Introduction and Translation)," in B.P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008), 349.

[112] The literature on the Greek novel is immense. Studies from which I have profited, and to which I refer for more extensive bibliography, include the standard introductory work, Tomas Häag, *The Novel in Antiquity (*Berkley: University of California Press, 1983), especially 54–72 on Heliodorus and 154–165 on connections between the novel and Christian hagiography. Also of interest are the essays collected in J.R. Morgan and R. Stoneman, eds., *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context* (London: Routledge, 1994), and in Gareth Schmeling, ed., *The Novel in the Ancient World,* Rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003). In the latter, see especially: Ewen Bowie, "The Ancient Readers of the Greek Novels" (87–106) and Roger Beck, "Mystery Religions, Aretalogy and the Ancient Novel" (131–150).

[113] The question of Heliodorus's date is complicated; arguments are made for third- as well as fourth-century authorship. These debates hinge on a few points, most of which need not detain us. The most interesting, for an Ephrem dissertation, is the siege of Syene in *Aethiopica* 9, which may or may not be dependent on the description of the 351 CE siege of Nisibis given by Julian the Apostate (*Oration* 1) and, fortuitously enough, Ephrem (*Nisibene Hymns* 2). For one thorough modern accounts in favor of the fourth-century, see G.W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994), 149–160. The opposing case is made in C.S. Lightfoot's discussion of the siege, "Facts and Fiction: The Third Siege of Nisibis (A.D. 350)," *Historia* 37 (1988): 105–125; at 117–119, he deems it more likely that Julian based his account on Heliodorus than the reverse. The question has been endlessly debated and will not be settled here; on balance, I side with those scholars who place Heliodorus later, but my argument does not hinge on it.

to Delphi, where she becomes a priestess of Artemis. She meets a man, Theagenes; they fall in love as soon as they are introduced to one another. Owing to a series of misfortunes, their happy union is delayed; they are attacked by pirates and then by bandits, suffer multiple cases of mistaken identity, wander across the known world, and seek the meaning of mysterious prophecies. At the end, they return unrecognized to Ethiopia, where, just as Charikleia is about to be sacrificed by her own father, her identity is revealed, the lovers are united in marriage and they assume royal priesthoods together.

The novel is, however, elevated beyond its sometimes-preposterous plot by several factors. First, it is unfolded in an extraordinarily intricate way, beginning with a striking image *in media res* and layering its narration with multiple stories-within-stories, riddles, and paradoxes whose solution only becomes apparent after the reader presses on.[114] Second, it is wittily and self-consciously intertextual, alluding widely to other literature (especially tragedy and Homer.) Lastly, and most relevant for us, it is shot through with a profound sense of religious mystery. It is "a very religious, or rather religiose, text."[115] Modern scholarship has rightly rejected the theses of Kerényi and Merkelbach, who both rather fancifully claimed that the Aethiopica was either structured by mystery-cult myth (Kerényi) or was in fact an esoteric text detailing the rites of initiation into a mystery cult (Merkelbach).[116] The fact remains, however, that the plot abounds with elements

[114] On the narrative artistry, and intricacy, of the *Aethiopica* see Martin Winkler, "The Cinematic Nature of the Opening Scene of Heliodoros' Aithiopika," *Ancient Narrative* 1 (2002): 161–183.

[115] Morgan, "Heliodorus," 350. He means the correction to suggest that the religious dimension is a thin patina: "I cannot find any consistency in the attribution of events to nonhuman agencies and am inclined to think the whole divine apparatus a literary device."

[116] Both Karl Kerényi, *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung: Ein Versuch mit Nachbetrachtungen,* Rev. ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962) and Reinhold Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike: Eine Untersuchung zur Religion* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1962) in fact advance their respective claims about *all* of the Greek novels. For an explanation and refutation of Kerényi and Merkelbach, see Beck, "Mystery Religions," 94–98.

drawn from mystery cult and religious rite. The two lovers meet at a religious festival in book 3, there are occasional asides about the nature of divine visions or cultic practices,[117] and multiple characters are priests and religious figures (not only Charikleia, but also her parents Hydaspes and Persinna, her adopted father Charikles, the gymnosophist Sisimithras, and most importantly, Kalasiris the Egyptian). It is lastly not insignificant that the central prophecy which foretells the protagonists fate speaks not of marriage but of λευκὸν ἐπὶ κροτάφων στέμμα μελαινομένων, "a white priestly garland upon a black forehead."[118] The resolution of their plot does include their marriage alongside their priestly investment, but even then the narrator alludes cryptically to τῶν ἐπὶ τῷ γάμῳ μυστικωτέρων.[119]

One more facet of this religiosity deserves mention: it is a *pagan* religiosity. No explicit mention of Christianity is to be detected in the text and, although the gods are often referred to generically as οἱ κρείττονες, they are also frequently given names like Apollo and Isis. Oddly, our earliest witness to the life of Heliodorus, Socrates Scholasticus, claims that he later became a bishop in Thessaly, and that he was the author of a custom in that region where ordained clerics who had relations with their prior wives would be removed from the clergy.[120] Although the emphasis on sexual continence that this account attributes to Heliodorus may sound plausible at first glance, it is generally rejected as spurious by the scholarship, and I find it unlikely.[121]

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[117] See e.g. Heliodorus *Aeth.* 3.12–14, 7.11, and 9.9–10.

[118] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 2.35.

[119] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 10.41. It is possible this is a discreet and euphemistic reference to intercourse, but given the general tenor of Heliodorus, some religious meaning seems more likely.

[120] Socrates Scholasticus 5.22: γενόμενος κληρικὸς [ἐν Θεσσαλίᾳ], ἣν νόμῳ γαμήσας πρὶν κληρικὸς γένηται, μετὰ τὸ κληρικὸς γενέσθαι συγκαθευδήσας αὐτῇ ἀποκήρυκτος γίνεται… τοῦ μὲν ἐν Θεσσαλίᾳ ἔθους ἀρχηγὸς Ἡλιόδωρος, Τρίκκης τῆς ἐκεῖ γενόμενος, οὗ λέγεται πονήματα ἐρωτικὰ βιβλία, ἃ νέος ὢν συνέταξε, καὶ ’Αἰθιοπικὰ’ προσηγόρευσε.

[121] Bowersock, *Fiction as History,* 149 injects a cautionary note, and gently suggests that this rejection has been done "perhaps a little too hastily and indignantly."

Writing in either the late third or the fourth century, however, Heliodorus was composing in a world shaped in the part by the developing sexual mores of Christianity or analogous developments in Neoplatonic ethics.[122] Moreover, he was writing a romance. In this genre of Greek novel, a high premium is placed on (especially female) virginity, and a significant amount of the drama derives from threats explicit and implicit to that virginity, suggests that the theme would be important in Heliodorus's romance. Even so, readers may be surprised to discover just how high, and how religious, a view of virginity this novel takes. Let us now turn to an investigation of virginity in Heliodorus, and again pose our questions: what kind of properties does he associate with virginity? How does he develop the symbol of the virgin in his plot and characterization?

Throughout the story, Heliodorus places a high value sexual continence. Like a good romantic heroine, Charikleia defends her own virginity religiously until she can finally be lawfully wed. To take a characteristic example, in the first book Theagenes and Charikleia are captured by Egyptian bandits. Thyamis, the semi-honorable leader of the crew, develops a passionate desire for the beautiful woman and, after experiencing a prophetic dream which he interprets as divine permission,[123] seeks to make her his bride. Charikleia plays along (for the sake of Theagenes' and her own safety) but begs a temporary reprieve until she can go to "a town, or somewhere where

[122] Timothy Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 111–112, and again at 154 stresses that sexual continence (as opposed to abstinence) was not an exclusively Christian virtue in the social context of the novel.

[123] The passage of the dream and its interpretation (Heliodorus *Aeth.* 1.18–19) is one of several very funny instances of Heliodorus playing with misunderstood prophecy. The goddess Isis tells Thyamis in the dream that he will "have and not have" the woman (ἔχων οὐχ ἕξεις) and that he will "kill her and she will not be killed" (φονεύσεις τὴν ξένην· ἡ δὲ οὐ φονευθήσεται). Thyamis resolves this by saying that he will "have" her as a wife and "not have" her as a virgin (γυναῖκα καὶ οὐκέτι παρθένον) and that the killing that does not kill refers to the wound of defloration, because "in this way his desire furnished the exegesis" (οὕτως αὐτῷ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας ἐξηγουμένης). That Thyamis can contort the words of a divine utterance to conform with his own desires *without* the aid of a postgraduate divinity degree is one of those supernatural occurrences which abound in the *Aethiopica*.

there is an altar or shrine of Apollo, where I can lay aside my priesthood and its symbols."[124] Besides Charikleia's insistence on chastity, let us also note here the conjunction of virginity with religion. There is something cynical in her using the excuse of her priestly office as a stalling tactic against a marriage she does not want, but the argument works because the premise that the virginity of priestesses is sacrosanct is shared by the audience of (semi-honorable) Egyptian bandits. (Charikleia moreover is no hypocrite, and is just as firm and religious in holding off sexual union with the man whom she *does* desire until all of the lawful rites can be performed.[125])

As mentioned, these sorts of defenses of the heroine's virginity are conventional, and similar scenes could be found in the other Greek novels. What makes Heliodorus interesting is the heightened religious symbolism with which he continues to invest his protagonists' virginity. Indeed, before she meets Theagenes, Charikleia, is introduced[126] by her adoptive father Charikles, a Delphic priest, as a woman who "renounces marriage for herself and lives her entire life in virginity." But as he goes on, it becomes clear that this is more than a lifestyle choice for his adopted daughter. Indeed, she has quite literally taken virginity as her goddess:

> She holds forth at length, and divinizes Virginity, rendering it akin to the immortals, and naming it as Undefiled, Inviolate, and Imperishable, but she curses Eros and Aphrodite and all of the nuptial feasts.[127]

[124] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 1.22: εἰς ἄστυ με πρότερον ἐλθοῦσαν, ἢ ἔνθα βωμὸς ἢ ναὸς Ἀπόλλωνι νενόμισται, τὴν ἱερωσύνην καὶ τὰ ταύτης ἀποθέσθαι σύμβολα. The use of σύμβολα here is a happy coincidence, into which we ought not read too much.

[125] See, for instance, Heliodorus *Aeth.* 4.18–19, where she makes him swear an elaborate religious oath not to violate her chastity.

[126] Because of the novel's intricate narrative structure, when she is first introduced to the *reader*, she is already chastely in love with Theagenes; the "introduction" cited here comes when Kalasiris restarts the story from its beginning in book two.

[127] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 2.33.

It seems to me that we should take this declaration nearly literally. When Charikleia "names" her new goddess with various epithets, it is reminiscent of other passages where gods are 'named' by titles.[128] She is enrolled as a priestess of Artemis, but she is a devotee of Virginity.

Charikles mentions this fact about Charikleia in a conversation with Kalasiris, an Egyptian priest visiting the Delphic shrine, because he presumes Kalasiris to be a powerful magician (a presumption Kalasiris is happy to humor). He wants to enlist the visitor's sorcery to counteract the power of this goddess and make his adopted daughter fall in love with his nephew, so that he can have grandchildren through her. She will not do this on her own, so he wants Kalasiris to "set in motion some Egyptian craft or charm on her, and persuade her by words or works to remember her nature."[129] In other words, her devotion to her goddess is causing her to act in a supernatural way (the absolute renunciation of love), and so her father wants supernatural help to change her mind.

Later, of course, Charikleia meets the handsome Theagenes, and without the need for any supplemental Egyptian sorcery she falls desperately in love (though not, of course, with the man her father had wanted her to marry). But instead of joy, this desire brings her first a painful sickness and a feeling of deep shame. She confesses her problem to Kalasiris in language that reads like religious guilt over an act of blasphemy:

> As much as the disease, which is now in full force, pains me, still more it pains me not to have overcome it at the start, but rather to have yielded to a passion which I had, before *him*, always been without, and which by its very mention outrages the holiest name of Virginity.[130]

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[128] See especially Heliodorus *Aeth.* 9.22, where the Nile is ὀνομαζόμενον and given a variety of titles.

[129] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 2.33.

[130] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 4.10: Ὡς ἐμέ γε λυπεῖ μὲν καὶ ἡ νόσος ἀκμάζουσα, πλέον δὲ τὸ μὴ κρατῆσαι τῆς νόσου τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀλλ' ἡττηθῆναι πάθους ἀπειρημένου μὲν ἐμοὶ τὸν πρὸ τούτου πάντα χρόνον λυμαινομένου δὲ καὶ μέχρις ἀκοῆς τὸ παρθενίας ὄνομα σεμνότατον. I take "πρὸ τούτου" to mean "before this man," rather than "before this time," but there is an ambiguity here.

At this point Charikleia has not yielded to Theagenes physically—she never does in the novel—but her mental experience of passion feels like a betrayal of her goddess.

Charikleia does not remain much longer a worshipper of Virginity; the novel could not go on if she did. With Kalasiris's (nonmagical) persuasion and assistance, she pledges her love to Theagenes, they flee Delphi, and set off on a series of romantic adventures that end in Ethiopia with their happy marriage.

But if after falling in love, Charikleia no longer quite divinizes Virginity, throughout the *Aethiopica* it seems that Virginity divinizes Charikleia. When we are first introduced to her in the novel's striking opening scene, she seems to the awestruck bandits (and through their eyes, to the readers) like a vision of the goddess Artemis.[131]

> A girl sat on the rocks, an impossible beauty, convincing the viewers that she might even be a goddess, still redolent of a noble mind despite her pain at her circumstances. Her head was crowned with laurel, a quiver clung to her shoulder, and she rested her left arm on her bow, the hand hanging heedlessly. She rested the bend of her other arm on her right thigh, her face in her hands and her head nodding downward… Some said she was some goddess, whether Artemis or the local Isis.[132]

The effect is magnified when she spies the bandits looking at her, and leaps down from her rock: she seemed "greater and more divine as she stood up, and her weapons were rattling at the sudden motion."[133] The last phrase is an oblique evocation of Iliad 1, where it is applied to Apollo.[134]

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[131] The depiction of the heroines of the Greek novels as goddesses is a commonplace; see Robert Cioffi, "Seeing Gods: Epiphany and Narrative in the Greek Novels," *Ancient Narrative* 11 (2014): 1–42.

[132] Heliodorus, *Aeth.* 1.2.

[133] Ibid., μεῖζον γάρ τι καὶ θειότερον αὐτοῖς ὀρθωθεῖσα ἔδοξε, τῶν μὲν βελῶν τῇ ἀθρόᾳ **κινήσει κλαγξάντων**. For a summary of the divine figure of Artemis, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion,* trans. John Raffan, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 149–152.

[134] Homer, *Il.* 1.46–47: **ἔκλαγξαν** δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ὀϊστοὶ ἐπ᾽ ὤμων χωομένοιο, / αὐτοῦ **κινηθέντος**. See Cioffi, "Seeing Gods," 17n54.

Scenes like this one recur throughout the novel. When Kalasiris describes Charikleia's first appearance at the religious festival where she meets Theagenes, she is portrayed coming out of the shrine to Artemis in a chariot, and wearing an intricate golden girdle as though herself an avatar of the goddess.[135] Later, she appears to pirates who have kidnapped her as a vision of Artemis, wearing a laurel crown and dressed in a golden gown which is her sacred Delphic robe and sitting in a room which has been made up to look like the colonnade of a temple.[136]

Heroines whose appearances offer divine epiphanies, as mentioned in a preceding note, are frequent in the novels. Robert Cioffi argues that in interpreting them we must recognize the "epiphany as part of a wider cultural and religious system" and that "they are deeply engaged with ancient religious experience… without suggesting that they themselves are sacred texts."[137] I propose that one way we can do that in the case of Charikleia is by paying attention to the element of divinized virginity present in her epiphanic passages.

Two of the epiphanic passages involving Charikleia include elements which explicitly connect the experience of her as divine with the fact of her virginity. First and foremost, she is always identified, explicitly, with Artemis, a goddess who is emblematic of virginity. In the passage from *Aethiopica* 1, when the bandits find her sitting on the rock, the very beginning of the epiphany is the word *κόρη*. We translated it above as "girl," but it also, more precisely, means "maiden," and in fact is often used as a divine title for another virgin goddess, Persephone.[138] The

[135] Heliodorus, *Aeth.* 3.4; the scene is again given an explicit Homeric tag, with an invocation of the formulaic line Ἦμος δ' ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος ἠώς (Iliad 24.788, etc.) and an allusion to Odyssey 11.613–14 implicit in the design of the girdle (noted in the translation by Morgan, "Helidorus," page 412n85).

[136] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 5.31.

[137] Cioffi, "Seeing Gods," 2–3. The last point is in opposition to the Kerényi/Merkelbach theses.

[138] In fact, at Heliodorus *Aeth.* 8.11, Theagenes comically misinterprets a prophecy which says that he will go to Ethiopia with a κόρη to mean that he will go to the land of the dead and be with Persephone.

very first word that introduces Charikleia to us, therefore, identifies her as a virgin of ambiguously divine status.

In the religious procession of book 3, meanwhile, aside from her explicit identification as Artemis emerging from her shrine, the sign of Charikleia's virginity lies, I would argue, in Heliodorus's rather elaborate description of her hair: it is "neither entirely plaited nor loose," but rather some of it hangs long down her back and other parts of it are bound tightly with laurel.[139] This is in keeping with the sometimes rather elaborate rules of appropriate female hair-styling for religious rituals. By having her hair neither too loose (indicative of unchastity) nor having it entirely bound up or braided (often ritually inappropriate), Charikleia is presenting herself at once in likeness to a goddess and a divinized virgin.[140]

In these instances, therefore, the viewers are not merely experiencing Charikleia as a goddess, but as a *virgin* goddess. Charikleia is divinized, in the eyes of her beholders, by her sexual purity. In all cases, this divinized appearance has a transfixing effect on those who view it, even if, like the bandits in book 1, they do not speak her language and cannot communicate with her; they instantly intuit that she is a divine virgin. This nonverbal power of virginity is also mentioned by Thyamis, the bandit leader, who mentions that he *knows* that Charikleia's soul is "good and chaste" because the modesty of her look "even compels her viewers towards reverence."[141] Though she is beautiful, the force of Charikleia's supernatural virginity imposes a religious awe (and respect) on even bandit hearts.

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[139] Heliodorus *Aeth* 3.4.

[140] On the symbolism and rules governing hair styles at Greek religious shrines, see Aynur-Michele-Sara Karatas, "Greek Cults and Their Sacred Laws on Dress-code: The Laws of Greek Sanctuaries for Hairstyles, Jewelry, Make-up, Belts,and Shoes," *CW* 113 (2020): 147–170 (especially 150–153 on hair).

[141] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 1.20.

Aside from its power almost literally to divinize Charikleia's appearance, and induce awe in the beholders, we should briefly note a few more properties of virginity in the *Aethiopica.* First, although the most dramatic manifestations of virginity's power pertain to Charikleia, it is not an entirely gendered virtue; her chaste lover Theagenes, although he occasionally grumbles, is equally a master of self-control; in a situation of temptation he is "*easily* able to keep chaste" for "though he was defeated by love, he had become greater than pleasure."[142] A religious commitment to virginity in the *Aethiopica*, unlike the other novels, enables even men to preserve their continence.[143]

Virginity also affords supernatural protection of a physical kind. In one of the most dramatic scenes of the entire novel, Charikleia is sentenced to death by immolation on a pyre by Arsake, a wicked queen who wants to eliminate her and have Theagenes for herself. When she steps into the flames, however, she is unburnt, and she emerges from this trial unscathed. The text tells us that this preservation is due to a magical jewel which she possesses, the *pantarbe*, which is specifically fireproof, but several factors invite us to suppose that her virginity, too, plays a role in her preservation. First, the narrator mentions that on the day she was sentenced to die she specifically wore the *pantarbe* not around her neck, as usual, but "under her clothes and below her womb" (τῆς ἐσθῆτος ἐντὸς καὶ ὑπὸ γαστέρα), suggesting by its placement that the jewel itself is symbolic of her purity.[144] Second, in a prayer before she steps into the pyre she specifically

[142] σωφρονεῖν *ῥᾳδίως* ἠνείχετο ἔρωτος μὲν ἐλάττων ἡδονῆς δὲ κρείττων γινόμενος. There may be a subtle allusion to divinity here, as οἱ κρείττονες is a standard Heliodoran term for the gods.

[143] I say "religious commitment" because the scene in question comes after Charikleia makes Theagenes swear an oath in 4.18–19. On Theagenes' continence compared with the protagonists of other novels see Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity,* 145–152.

[144] It is perhaps worth noting here that the jewel was given to her by her mother when she abandoned her as an infant; the letter which accompanied the jewel contained two commands: "honor chastity" (τιμῶσα σωφροσύνην) and keep the *pantarbe,* Heliodorus *Aeth.* 4.8.

contrasts her own innocence with that of the adulteress (μοιχᾰλίς) Arsake, who is seeking to steal her beloved. Third, when the fire fails to burn her, the witnesses instead behold her as though she were "a newlywed in a fiery bridal chamber" (ἐν πυρίνῳ θαλάμῳ νυμφευομένην). A newlywed alone in her bridal chamber is still a virginal figure, albeit one charged with expectation.[145] Lastly, the incident of Charikleia's being saved from the fire is echoed by a scene in book 10, where, in order to find virgins to be offered as human sacrifices, captives are made to walk across a specially wrought golden grill. Those who are impure are burned, but those who are virgins walk across it unscathed. (Theagenes is among those who pass this test, leading to a final crisis where he is almost sacrificed by his would-be in-laws.)[146] Taken together, this evidence suggests that Charikleia's virginity is implicated in her miraculous protection from fire.

Finally, let us note that for all its stupendous powers, virginity is *not* a permanent state for the protagonists of the *Aethiopica*. It remains a romance novel, and however chaste the lovers are, the plot propels them towards marriage. Beyond the conventions of the genre, however, Heliodorus also overlays the transition from virginity to matrimony with a religious dimension. In the novel's final denouement, Charikleia and Theagenes are enrolled in priesthoods of the Sun and Moon in Ethiopia. In contrast to Charikleia's former virginal priesthood dedicated to Artemis, however, by Ethiopian religious law these priesthoods are accessible only to those who have spouses.[147] In the end, therefore, after all their trials of virginity, Theagenes and Charikleia are married and assume the priesthoods at the same time.[148] Thus, for all that she reverences virginity and derives power

[145] Everything in this paragraph up to this point is from Heliodorus *Aeth.* 8.9.

[146] Heliodorus *Aeth.*10.8.

[147] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 10.21.

[148] Heliodorus *Aeth.* 10.41.

from it, at the end it proves just one stage in Charikleia's religious initiation, one which must eventually be left behind for the next stage.[149] In Burkert's phrase about virginity in other contexts in ancient Greek religion, "the tension seeks discharge."[150]

I briefly summarize our findings: first, whether or not he is responding to Christian moral sentiments, Heliodorus depicts characters who raise virginity to the level of a divinity, far beyond what any of the other ancient novelists do, suggesting that it is a symbol with religious import. More than this, however, he also characterizes virginity as something which bestows power on the protagonist who practices it. It elevates her appearance to that of a goddess, commanding both awe and respect from those who view her. Commitment to it allows its devotees easily to overcome their baser passions. Virginity also protects the protagonists from the dangers of fire: being pure, they cannot be harmed by it. Lastly and importantly, however, virginity is a temporary state in Heliodorus: a high virtue in its season, but one which is teleologically oriented towards marriage and another, higher stage.

I should say that I do not think we can find anything like a direct, or even an indirect, connection between Heliodorus and Ephrem's symbolic system for Mary. It would be ludicrous to assert that Ephrem read the *Aethiopica*, or that, even if the novelist did know some Christian traditions, Heliodorus was aware of Ephrem in particular. Moreover, Heliodorus is writing a self-consciously fantastic novel, and in his portrayal of virginity, as I have said, he is idiosyncratic even within the genre. Unlike the temple theologies of Lucian and Libanius, and the vision of prophecy

[149] For a treatment of the novel as reflecting "stages of initiation" without the full panoply of mystery cult introduced by Kerényi and Merkelbach, see Timothy Whitmarsh, "The Writes of Passage: Cultural Initiation in Heliodorus' Aethiopica," in Richard Miles, ed., *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 16–40.

[150] Burkert, *Greek Religion,* 98.

expressed in Iamblichus, where points of (indirect) contact seem plausible, in the case of Heliodorus and Ephrem we do seem to be dealing with two conversations happening in parallel. But I think that they may be read *interestingly* in parallel.

It is, as I say, unlikely in the extreme that these two authors interacted directly. Nor do I think we can learn much about Ephrem's theory of virginity by considering Heliodorus. But we *might* be able to learn something about Heliodorus by considering Ephrem's theory of virginity. Let us assume some Greek-speaker in Ephrem's Edessa—not Ephrem himself, certainly but perhaps a member of his church, or even a member of his literary study circle—picked up Heliodorus and read him. Aside from recognizing the siege of Nisibis in the story of Syene in book 9, what would such a reader have made of him?[151]

Let us note the one fact that the two do have in common. Heliodorus and Ephrem both divinize virginity, and virgins. For Heliodorus, this is nearly literal: Charikleia makes Virginity her goddess before she meets Theagenes, and becomes assimilated to the goddess Artemis in her various theophanic appearances. Ephrem cannot speak in those terms, of course, but in his treatment of Mary as the temple, and in his description of the way that divine glory adorned her because of her chastity,[152] there is something like the Christian analogue happening. (Other connections, like the fact that virginity in both Heliodorus and Ephrem gives certain figures power over fire,[153] are interesting but read like coincidences.)

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[151] Katherine Krauss, "Heliodorus' Aethiopica: A New Patristic Context," *Ancient Narrative* 18 (2021): 1–23 suggests several interesting points of comparison between patristic doctrine of the fourth and fifth centuries and elements of the *Aethiopica,* suggesting a two-way line of transmission: Heliodorus knows *something* about Christianity; *some* Christians knew the Aethiopica. I take inspiration from her article. Her passage on sexuality (5–8) focuses, however, on Heliodorus's connections with the Christian ethics of regular married laity, not more ascetical sexual ideologies as the one espoused by Ephrem.

[152] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.6–7.

[153] Cf. Elijah in Ephrem, *Nat*. 14.16–17; Charikleia in Heliodorus, Aeth. 8.9.

I tentatively propose that my hypothetical reader might have construed the *Aethiopica* as a subtle romantic, and comedic, subversion of ascetic Christian sexual ethics. Heliodorus is not a bawd; he, like all the writers in his genre, values conventional sexual morality. He even seems to place a high value on virginity—in its season. But his portrayal of Charikleia's initial commitment to virginity is shot through with a gentle humor, as evidenced by the way that she goes from a permanent devotee of her novel goddess to madly lovesick in an instant, as soon as she meets a handsome man; even the oaths that she makes Theagenes swear to defend her virginity, although respected by the characters, are given mildly ironic commentary by the narrator. Moreover, in the way that the text concedes all the claims that the Christian reader would make about the excellence of virginity and the near-divinity of virgins, but *also* confers that same exalted state on chaste lovers-who-intend-to-wed; and in the way that he subordinates his highly religious view of virginity to an even higher religious view of marriage in the novel's final act, I think we might see Heliodorus taking a position in a debate within Christian circles. Ephrem says marriage is good but celibacy is better.[154] Heliodorus—not in direct response, but perhaps as a romantic and comedic intervention into the same conversation—says exactly the reverse.

Some Conclusions

We began this chapter with a discussion of the ways that Ephrem received Greek material: piecemeal, in a mediated fashion, with direct lines of influence difficult to trace. I believe that this chapter has sustained and illustrated that general judgment. In the previous chapter, even though it was difficult to be certain of direct connections, nevertheless it was quite clear that Ephrem's Mariology fit into a specific set of discourses that were current in Syrian Christianity in the second

[154] Ephrem, *Nat*. 28.3.

to fourth centuries. Reading this set of texts, by contrast, the connections are more elusive, and any conclusions that we draw are provisional. I would argue this fact is, in itself, a piece of evidence—not that Ephrem is somehow "pristinely Semitic," of course, but rather that the (roughly) *contemporary* literature of educated Grecophone Syrians did not directly permeate his literary consciousness.

Nevertheless, even if we must proceed on somewhat speculative ground, each of the authors that we studied in this chapter helped refine our understanding of Ephrem and his place in late antique Syria in different, specific ways. Reading the accounts of sacred spaces in Lucian and Libanius against Ephrem, and especially with one eye toward the background evidence that modern scholarship has recovered for the ancient Near East, one *feels* that they are all participating in the same system: the bodies of water, the sources of radiance, the hints of microcosmic implication. Even if we cannot prove it directly, there are enough hints that suggest we see here manifestations of the same ancient ideology different idioms: for Ephrem, as symbolic poetry; for Lucian and Libanius, as historicized narratives.

In the act of studying these different connections, we learn two different things. First, we learn something about the longevity of elements of ancient near eastern temple ideologies. Whether through direct inheritance, re-creation, or (as seems likeliest for Ephrem) inheritance through the language of the Bible, the idea of, for instance, the temple as a source of agricultural fertility can still be found in the fourth century CE as it was there in the fourteenth BCE. Second, we learn something about Ephrem: having the various elements of ancient temple ideology brought to the surface gives us a hermeneutic tool to fill in gaps in the web of symbols Ephrem wove around Mary. Reading Lucian and Libanius, we see how things that to *us* do not directly connect may well have, consciously or unconsciously, for Ephrem.

Though Iamblichus and Ephrem, meanwhile, were diametrically opposed to one another religiously, nevertheless their accounts of the limits of the human intellect and the divine initiative that is required for the prophet to receive knowledge have a similar savor, too. Ephrem seems to ignore some of the outward signs that Iamblichus attributes to prophetic vision, and he of course, as a Christian, wants to allow for a more intimate form of connection with divinity than Iamblichus would allow. Nevertheless, even though Iamblichus embeds his account within a philosophical system inherited from Plato and a set of traditional religious practices of largely Greek origin, and Ephrem seems to derive his theology of prophecy from Biblical materials, hints of the same image of the prophet or diviner as the (G/g)od-inspired speaker, possessed by a divinity and only partially in control of his (or her) words, manifest in each. Across these two authors, then, we see the possibility of a theological idea—the firm limits of human knowledge and agency—to cross religious borders. As before, however, it's difficult to determine the direction of the shared characteristics.

Heliodorus is the most frustrating case of all: he has so exalted, so divine an account of the symbol of the *Virgin* that it *must* connect, in some way, to the Christian account provided by someone like Ephrem. As I said, we cannot learn much about Ephrem from studying Heliodorus, but it just might be possible that by studying Ephrem, and the Syriac traditions of that valorized virginity in which we was embedded, we can better understand Heliodorus. Is it, as I tentatively suggest, a subtle comedic and romantic argument with Christian sexual ethics? Or have I just fallen under Kalasiris's spell?

CHAPTER FIVE: EPHREM'S SYMBOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY RABBINIC LITERATURE

This chapter will continue the project of the previous one, placing Ephrem and his Marian symbolism in another roughly contemporary religious context. Turning from the pagan Greeks, we end now with the early rabbinic Jews, authors of the Mishnah, Talmud, and the earliest strata of midrash. As with the Greeks, the rabbinic authors can help us to situate Ephrem's Mariological symbols within a broader context. Although I will not argue that Ephrem was deeply conversant with rabbinic thought, nor that he composed his symbolic Mariological poems in direct dependence on or refutation of Jewish interlocutors, I will suggest a few places where I think there are interesting points of contact between Ephrem and Jewish thought.

This chapter will have a different structure from the previous two. The early rabbinic sources do not, in general, emphasize individual authors. Rather, the organizing principle of this literature is anthological: multiple voices on the same point, placed side by side and often differing without a resolution. Countless rabbis are named in our sources; arguments, midrashim, rationales, and even schools are attributed to individual thinkers; nevertheless, by its arrangement the literature emphasizes not individuals, but the body of the tradition. This structure argues against a source-by-source approach; it also introduces a complexity not found in the previous chapters. While it was possible to give a somewhat comprehensive account of, for instance, the images Lucian associated with temples, no such account can be given about the rabbinic material. This is because rabbinic literature, broadly, records discussions, not individual authorities.[1]

[1] On the anthological principle, Catherine Hezser notes that "rabbinic literature must be seen as a collective rather than an authorial literature, transmitting a wide variety of partly divergent and contradictory views and teachings rather than providing a linear systematic outline of a particular individual's point of view." ("Classical Rabbinic Literature" in Martin Goodman, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115–40, here 116.) On the methodological problems involved in the study of rabbinic literature, see H.L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash,* trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 45–55. Strack and Stemberger are also recommended for their discussion of the sources and their dating.

Quite apart from the anthological and dialogic style, however, the issue of the dating of our sources adds another methodological problem to the study of rabbinic literature. Some otherwise good and useful earlier scholarship, as for instance Joshua Abelson's *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature*, too often conflates more than a millennium of different texts across the Jewish world, as though the Mishnah, the Mekhilta and Maimonides could be said to express identical ideas.[2] In a historical study like mine, which aims to produce a portrait of the fourth century rather than a grand edifice of Rabbinic Thought, such a synthesizing approach would be inappropriate. Lengthy discussions of dating would take us far from the purpose of this chapter, and thus, in the interest of painting a coherent picture, I will confine myself to texts which are generally agreed to be of an early date (taking the Babylonian Talmud as my *terminus ante quem.*) These include, besides the Talmud, several early midrashic collections like the *Mekhilta*, *Genesis Rabbah*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, *Lamentations Rabbah*, and the *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*.[3]

Instead of proceeding with a systematic account of a particular author or source, I will organize our discussion by symbol. I will not report *the* rabbinic position on, for instance, the prophets; such a sweeping generalization would, in the majority of cases, be meaningless. Rather, I will examine some rabbinic passages that discuss the images of prophet, virgin, and Temple that we have been examining, and show how they intersect meaningfully with Ephrem's symbols. In my discussion of the Temple, in lieu of recapitulating some of the findings of Chapter 4, I introduce

[2] Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1912). See Julie Hilton Danan, "The Divine Voice in Scripture: Ruah Ha-Kodesh in Rabbinic Literature," (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2009), 22–28, who reviews the book thoroughly and notes some of its weaknesses. It remains vital, however, at least for its collection of passages, and influential on my reading of both prophecy and the Shekinah in rabbinic literature.

[3] For dating of these texts, the reader is referred again to the relevant sections in Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*. Unlike nearly all the Syrian Christian and pagan Greek materials of the preceding chapters, not all these texts can be securely said to antedate Ephrem; they are, however, all *close* to Ephrem in date, and given their redactional character, it is not inappropriate to assume that many of their ideas were circulating in his lifetime.

one image distinctive to Jewish sources, the *Shekinah*, and suggesting that this figure, although it does not appear in Ephrem's *Mariology*,[4] has important symbolic connections to it.

Ephrem's Relationship with Judaism

Before turning to the symbols, however, as with the last chapter, it seems worthwhile to begin this study with a brief account of recent literature on Ephrem's relationship to, and influences from, rabbinic Judaism. Ephrem's main rhetorical mode when he discusses Jews, as with Greeks, is vituperation. He is also at pains to draw a contrast (unflattering to Jews) between "the People" (as he often calls them) and the Christians.[5] Typical of his hostile language are the following, all taken from the Hymns on Faith:

> Our Lord is set between God
> And humans. The prophets are
> Like his heralds. The Just One rejoices
> Like his child. This word has conquered
> Jews and deniers![6]

> The Jews recite the names of God,
> But find no life in the multitude of titles.
> Since they have rejected one name, they are rejected by many names.
> The names which that People stripped off and cast away,
> Into them the peoples are baptized. And who would remove
> The names that have forged a chasm between us and the People?[7]

> Your [= the pearl's, but also Christ's] mother is the virgin of the sea.
> Without his marrying her, she fell into his bosom.
> Without his knowing her, you were conceived at its side.
> *Without their knowing it*, *Jewish women*

[4] It is, however, an Ephremian concept, and expressed in cognate language; see below.

[5] On this last point, see Phil Botha, "Polarity: The Theology of anti-Judaism in Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on Easter," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 46 (1990): 36–46.

[6] Ephrem, *HdF* 86.20. These translations from Wickes, *Hymns on Faith.*

[7] Ephrem, *HdF* 44.4.

are accused by your image, *when they hang you up*.[8]

Ephrem does a few things in these texts. First, he proclaims that the Word (Christ) has "conquered" the Jews (alongside the deniers, which here means non-orthodox Christians; see the discussion of Shepardson below). Ephrem seems to mean that they have been superseded and rejected. This same theme is picked up and advanced in the second quotation; even though the Jews continue to practice their religion (that is, they "recite the names of God"), their religious practices have no salvific effect. Because they reject the one name (presumably, Christ), they are rejected *by* all of the divine names. That is to say, they no longer enjoy a special relationship with God.[9] Versions of this theme recur frequently throughout his hymns;[10] Ephrem, perhaps unsurprisingly for a late antique Christian, thus betrays a strong supersessionist streak.[11]

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[8] Ephrem, *HdF* 82.2. I have altered Wickes' translation of the last two lines (marked in italics). He has, "without realizing it, Jewish women slay your image when they hang you up," but the object prefix ܠ on ܡܫܬܥܝܢ suggests that the Jewish women must be the object, and "image" (ܨܠܡܐ) the subject, of this sentence.

[9] Wickes, *Hymns on Faith,* 241n9 calls our attention to the fact that Ephrem here does not muster an argument, but seems instead to simply presume that his audience would agree with him that a sharp dividing line between Jewish and Christian identity is desirable ("who would remove the names that have forged a chasm between us and the People [=the Jews]?"). Whether this represents the actual view of Ephrem's congregation or simply what Ephrem *wishes* that his congregation thought is open to debate (again, see the following discussion of Shepardson).

[10] *Pace* Elena Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 42, who claims "Ephrem's understanding of the Christian religion could be seen as a fulfillment of Judaism, as Judaism receiving its true meaning through Christ… there could not be any denigration of [Judaism] as something dead and gone." (Similar claims recur throughout the book). But the claim that the Christian religion is the fulfillment of Judaism is not only perfectly compatible with supersessionism, it is one of supersessionism's main theological claims! Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 122, cited by Narinskaya as agreeing with her on this point, does not argue that Ephrem has *no* replacement theology; he makes the more defensible statement that Ephrem has no replacement theology "associated with Christ's baptism (*as opposed to the Entry into Jerusalem* [italics mine])." Narinskaya's otherwise excellent book has a tendency to argue too implausibly for Ephrem's "pro-Judaic tendencies" (43).

[11] See e.g., in the Hymns on the Nativity alone, Nat 1.18, 6.23, 9.3, 10.1, 16.17, 21.17–18. On the late antique Christian relationship to the Jews in general, see of course the massively influential Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*, trans. H. McKeating (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); but see also the equally important critique of Miriam Taylor, *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity: A Critique of the Scholarly Consensus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), which argues that Christian anti-Judaism in late antiquity must be considered as a theological and symbolic strategy, rather than a social one. The more recent study of Adam Gregerman, *Building on the Ruins of the Temple: Apologetics and Polemics in Early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), in addition to offering a contextualized study of the

Secondly, and more distinctively, Ephrem argues that Jews, without their knowledge and in spite of themselves, continue to participate in the Christian symbolic world. This emerges in the third quotation, which comes from the second of the Hymns on the Pearl. Here, Ephrem addresses the pearl (whom he has identified in the preceding stanza as Christ). The first part of the stanza, concerning ancient theories about the generation of pearls, has already been discussed in Chapter 1. But the final lines turn the discussion from natural history to interreligious polemic. Ephrem claims that, in the act of adorning themselves with pearl earrings, Jewish women are reenacting the Crucifixion (the logic goes: pearl = Christ, pierced and hung pearl on an earring = Christ crucified). The charge of deicide lurks in the background, of course, but I believe that for Ephrem the point is equally about Jewish ignorance. In much the same way that Paul claims that the Jews read the Torah with a veil over their hearts, Ephrem here claims that even in seemingly mundane acts, there is a Christological dimension of which the Jews are ignorant.[12]

Rhetoric like this, however, must be carefully contextualized. Not, indeed, to excuse it or to pretend that the hostility one encounters on the page is not there; however well-intentioned such efforts of re-reading might be, they entail interpretations more fanciful than even the most tendentious medieval exegesis.[13] Instead, we must contextualize Ephrem's anti-Jewish statements

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phenomenon of Christian supersessionist claims in the context of the destruction of the Temple, presents a robust bibliography.

[12] This motif recurs elsewhere in Ephrem. One further example may be found at *HdF* 18.8: in the previous stanza, Ephrem notes various cruciform images that are intrinsic to the act of sailing. Ephrem then remarks, "And if the ship belongs to a Jew, he is unwittingly rebuked by the action, for, in his ship, with his hands, he extends and stretches out the shape of the cross." (The word for "rebuke" is the same here as in *HdF* 82). Cf. also *HdF* 17:11.

[13] On the "dark side" of Ephrem's anti-Judaism, see Karl-Heinz Kuhlmann, "The Harp out of Tune: the anti-Judaism/ anti-Semitism of St. Ephrem," *The Harp* 17 (2004): 177–83. He cites the same passage that I have from *HdF* 82, and notes that the reference to the Jews seems "thrown in" and that Ephrem had an "incessant need to bring in anti-Jewish themes" even in contexts where they were not required (180). Kuhlmann may be overcorrecting when he reads these remarks, and Ephrem's anti-Jewish statements in general, as indicative of a deep-seated and *personal* animus. They seem to me to be rather conventional (which is not to say unharmful). Nevertheless, Kuhlmann is an important corrective to arguments from contextualization and claims about rhetorical strategy which, if taken too far, can begin to look like excuses rather than explanations.

because, by determining at whom they were aimed and what their intention was, we also become better able to read *past* them, to see the many ways Ephrem (and his Syriac Christian world) were actually deeply connected with rabbinic Jewish interpretation and thought.

The project of contextualizing itself need not detain us long here. The most important work of the past fifteen years in this field is that of Christine Shepardson. She argues that Ephrem's anti-Jewish language is aimed at reducing the complex religious landscape of the fourth century into a set of simple categories (Christians, Jews, heretics). Ephrem's own texts attest to the fact that, whatever his own theological belief in sharp boundaries between Christianity and Judaism, the evidence shows that in practice, even if most people in Ephrem's community *did* affiliate exclusively with either the Church or the synagogue, there remained a significant minority who participated in both.[14] Against this tendency, Ephrem's Jeremiads have a specific purpose: making Judaism seem unattractive and even dangerous, and making "judaizing Christianity" untenable.[15]

Moreover, Shepardson's investigation of Ephrem's rhetoric reveals that Ephrem does not have only the Jews themselves in view when he castigates "the Jews." Instead, he seems to conflate Jews and "Arian" Christians into a single category, borrowing the language used to criticize one to criticize the other.[16] The common ground which they share is their failure to recognize Jesus' divinity: in Ephrem's line of argument, a subordinationist theology is tantamount to denial of Christ altogether:

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[14] Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2008), 41–46.

[15] Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy,* 47–62 has an overview of his rhetorical strategies.

[16] "Ephrem uses anti-Jewish language to warn his Christian audience away from both 'real' Jewish festivals and also from Heteroousian [that is, heterodox] Chsitians, whom he sometimes paints in the negative images of New Testament Jews." Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy,* 150.

> Ephrem's anti-Jewish language argues against Jews and Judaizers, *and also against Christian opponents* whom Ephrem claims equally challenge Nicene orthodoxy by resembling the Jews […] in their theological subordination of the Son.[17]

Shepardson's book is rich with implications for Ephrem, especially in his relationship to western theologians like Athanasius and Roman Nicene orthodoxy in general.[18] But for our purposes here it especially serves to remind us that his anti-Jewish statements, while remaining more than pure rhetoric, were aimed at specific theological goals; his condemnations of Jewish unbelief and exhortations against Jewish practice should not mislead us into thinking he inhabited a world of unmixed Christianity. Ephrem's social world, and his theological worldview, were deeply affected by Judaism.[19]

One important recent work on Ephrem's debts to Jewish thought is Elena Narinskaya's *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage.* The book should be approached with a critical eye; it is tendentious in the introduction and conclusion, where Narinskaya argues that Ephrem had *no* anti-Jewish agenda and was, in fact, "organically adapting the exegetical tradition of the Jewish sages, and in that sense he could be seen as an heir to the Jewish tradition of biblical exegesis"[20] (as though there were no such thing as an ungrateful heir). But for all that, the bulk of her monograph offer a very important set of illustrations of Ephrem's dependence on Jewish exegesis, especially in his *Commentary on Exodus.* Both in terms of his general methods and also in his interpretation of passages and characters, Ephrem is revealed as having key points in common with Jewish thought.

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[17] Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy,* 68.

[18] Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy,* 106–56.

[19] Indeed, one strain of scholarship long maintained that early Syrian Christianity evolved from a kind of "Jewish-Christianity" of Jerusalemite origin in the first place; Shepardson *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy,* 39–40n67–68 discuss the extensive bibliography on this question.

[20] Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish Sage,'* 295.

Whether Ephrem would have acknowledged that thought as "Jewish" is not, necessarily, proven, but the common thread is more than adequately illustrated.[21]

Another very important, and very precise, study of the relationship between Ephrem and Jewish thought is Yifat Monnickendam's *Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity.* As the title suggests, she compares Ephrem with Judaism not on matters of theology or scriptural exegesis, but on legal questions. Taking as her object the laws relating to marriage, betrothal, and divorce, Monnickendam compares Ephrem's expressed positions with Roman, Christian, and halakhic law codes. She finds not only that Ephrem is influenced by Jewish ideas on marriage law, but that on both linguistic and legal grounds, he can be more precisely connected to sectarian Palestinian Jewish customs that were already obsolete by the fourth century. This suggests, Monnickendam argues, that though Ephrem was not in active dialogue with Jews of his own day, he had *inherited* certain legal ideas from Jewish traditions.[22] Whether or not Ephrem was in active conversation with Jews of his day, the influence of Jewish thought on his worldview is inarguable.[23]

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[21] The question of whether Ephrem knew that the traditions he was citing were Jewish is very important to Narinskaya's project. His non-hostile and deliberate interaction with Jewish traditions is one of the main ways that she wishes to prove him innocent of anti-Judaism. Reviewing the book, one author points out the methodological flaw here: "Jewish traditions may appear in Ephrem's writings without the author ever knowing that a particular interpretation was, at its root, Jewish." (Craig Morison, review of *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions* by Elena Narinskaya, *JTS* 62 (2011): 748–751, here 750.) Note, however, that for the purposes of *my* argument, whether Ephrem's debts and connections to Jewish thought are recognized or unknown matters less.

[22] Yifat Monnickendam, *Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity*: *Betrothal, Marriage, and Infidelity in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); the argument is summarized 202–208. Monnickendam outlines her method as "positioning Ephrem in relation to specific Jews, Jewish sources, and traditions, rather than to Judaism in general" (15). My own project here does not follow this same rigor—I lack the requisite background in the relevant legal texts. Accordingly, I reiterate again that I am not attempting to prove definite dependence on any one particular source or tradition, but rather place Ephrem within a broadly constructed world of late antique symbols.

[23] These two studies represent some of the most recent work on the question; other important works on the relationship between Jewish thought and Ephrem (or the Syriac tradition in general) include Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity,* Sebastian Brock, "Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources," *JJS* 30 (1979): 212–32; Brock, "A Palestinian Targum feature in Syriac," *JJS* 46 (1995): 271–82; Han J.W. Drijvers, "Jews and Christians at Edessa," *JJS* 36 (1985): 88–102; and Lucas Van Rompay, "The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation" in

We may summarize the current state of the question thus: Ephrem, of course, was consistently and often aggressively anti-Jewish in his rhetoric, leaning on traditional Christian notions of Judaism as having been superseded by Christianity and the Jews themselves as failing to recognize Christian truth out of ignorance. His stark rhetorical division between Christians and Jews, however, must be considered alongside evidence that the on-the-ground realities of his congregations were messier. He was attempting to enforce a sharp distinction between different religious groups, and especially between everyone who was not a Nicene Christian and his own flock. This does not mean that Ephrem was "pro-Jewish." It does mean, however, that whatever his condemnations of Jewish error, nevertheless in his own thought, whether on scriptural exegesis or legal questions, he had numerous points of contact with Jewish sources.[24] I therefore turn now to consider Jewish engagement with some of Ephrem's symbols, to consider how these depictions might shape our understanding of Ephrem's Marian theology.

Prophets and Prophecy

It is a commonplace that rabbinic Judaism mistrusts prophecy, and tends to confine or relegate it to a past spiritual age, in the process appropriating the former authority of prophecy to themselves or discounting it altogether. "When the Temple was destroyed, prophecy departed from the prophets and was given to the Rabbis," and "when the Temple was destroyed, prophecy departed

Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Interpretation. Volume 1: From the Beginning to the Middle Ages* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 612–41.

[24] It's a speculative point, and so I confine it to a note, but I have often wondered these past few years, , as I read Ephrem's symbolic and associative style of theological verse on the one hand, where one image from scripture or nature slides effortlessly into another and another, and the associative style of rabbinic midrashim on the other, where verses are gathered from all parts of the Bible juxtaposed, whether we may see some parallels not in terms of a shared set of texts, but rather in a "mode of thinking" that characterizes a joint tradition. On the midrashic style, I'm particularly indebted to James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 131–155.

from the prophets, and was given to fools and children" are statements that sit right next to each other in the Talmud.[25] Elsewhere, the Rabbis set various dates for the cessation of prophecy: whether at the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, or after the destruction of the Solomonic Temple, all of them in the distant past.[26] The actual view is of course slightly more complex than this; nearly all of the Talmudic quotations just cited are immediately qualified by arguments or stories suggesting that the prophetic spirit, or at least something like it, still survives. The power of a great rabbi's statement is argued to be quasi-prophetic in its ability to be attributed to Moses at Sinai; citations are made of both fools and children who accurately predict future events; even if prophecy departed after the death of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, nonetheless a story is told in which a divine voice (בת קול) acknowledges R. Hillel as worthy of receiving the prophetic gift, if only he had lived in a worthy generation.

These complexities notwithstanding, let us grant that the Rabbis do seem largely to confine *actual* prophecy to the past, and treat the charismatic and extralegal authority which prophetic office entailed with skepticism.[27] In their construction of Biblical prophecy, however, we can nonetheless discern a few common features which recur in various sources.

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[25] b. B. Bat. 12a and 12b, respectively. Translations from Hebrew and Aramaic sources in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted, although in the case of Jewish Aramaic sources in general and the Talmud in particular, they are done in careful consultation with the Steinsaltz translation, and I also thank the peerless Dr. Jesse Mirotznik for his careful eye on them.

[26] b. Sanh. 11a (the Holy Spirit withdrew after the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, cf. t. Soṭah 13:4); b. Yoma 21b (the Holy Spirit was among the five things which were present in Solomon's Temple but not in the Second). On the identification of "the Holy Spirit" with the gift of prophecy, see discussion below.

[27] See e.g. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "'We Pay No Heed to Heavenly Voices': The 'End of Prophecy' and the Formation of the Canon," in Linda Elder, David Barr, and Elizabeth Malbon, eds., *Biblical and Humane: A Festschrift for John F. Priest* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 19–32. Cf. Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Types of Authority in Formative Christianity and Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 73–99 on the complexity of the question. Whether statements about the cessation of prophecy can be taken as an agreed rabbinic dogma has been questioned by John R. Levison, "Did the Spirit Withdraw from Israel? An Evaluation of the Earliest Jewish Data," *NTS* 43 (1997): 35–57.

The foremost fact of prophecy for the rabbinic authors is that it is a product of the רוח הקודש (hereafter in this section, ruaḥ haqodeš).[28] In the examples from the Talmud already cited, it does not say "prophecy ceased" or "there were no more prophets," but rather "the ruaḥ haqodeš departed from Israel (נסתלקה רוח הקודש מישראל)" after the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and that the ruaḥ haqodeš was one of the "things which differed between the First and Second Temples (דברים שהיו בין מקדש ראשון למקדש שני)." This circumlocution suffices to signify prophecy because the combination of the ruaḥ haqodeš with prophetic knowledge is consistently drawn throughout rabbinic sources.

A paradigmatic example of this association may be found in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael. The midrashic interpreters note an apparent difficulty in the text of Ex 15:20, "Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in hand (ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את־התף בידה):" where does the Bible mention Miriam giving a prophecy?[29] On the surface level, it does not. In order to resolve the difficulty, the Rabbis offer a narrative expansion:[30] back in Exodus 2, it was Miriam who told her father that he would sire a son who would redeem Israel out of Egypt. The proof for this narrative expansion comes by saying that when Moses is perforce abandoned by his mother in the river (Ex 2:3), his sister "stood far off, to know what would be done to him. (ותתצב אחתו מרחק לדעה מה־יעשה לו)." The logic of the story does not seem to *require* expansion; one

[28] "The first function of Ruah ha-Kodesh in rabbinic texts, and the one most directly related to the term's biblical roots, is its connection to prophecy." Danan, "The Divine Voice," 102. On some late Second Temple antecedents to rabbinic notions of the ruaḥ haqodeš see John Levison, *The Spirit in First Century Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

[29] Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a "Jewish" Sage,* 212–13 calls to our attention that Ephrem, in his Exodus commentary poses this same question, but concludes that it is merely an honorific title.

[30] On the study of rabbinic narrative expansion, see James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 247–270.

might simply say that a young girl was concerned about her baby brother. But armed with the knowledge that Miriam is later called a prophet, the Rabbis interpret:

> **"**Standing" means nothing other than Ruaḥ hakodesh, as it is said, "I saw the Lord standing at the altar" (Amos 9:1), and it says, "The Lord came and he stood" (1 Sam. 3:10), and it says "Call Joshua and stand" (Num 31:19). *"From far off:"* "from far off" never means anything but Ruaḥ hakodesh, as it says, "The Lord appeared to me from far off" (Jer. 31:2). "*To know:*" "knowing" means nothing other than ruaḥ haqodeš, as it says, "for the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord" (Isa. 11:9), and it says "and the earth will fill with knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). "*To know what would be done to him*:" "doing" means nothing other than ruaḥ haqodeš, as it is said, "The Lord God will not do anything, etc" (Amos 3:7).[31]

As Danan points out, the Rabbis use nearly every word in the verse to emphasize that Miriam is a prophet, and they do so by implying the presence of the ruaḥ haqodeš alongside her, and mustering prooftexts from largely prophetic books.[32]

Examples of the ruaḥ haqodeš as the source or signal of prophecy are multiplied throughout the early rabbinic corpus.[33] It is not necessary to review them all here, but there are two more interesting expressions of this ruaḥ-inflected theory of prophecy worth noting. First, we have seen the Rabbis apply the ruaḥ haqodeš to canonical prophets (Haggai et al.) and also to a figure who is called a prophetess biblically but whose prophetic utterances are not provided by the biblical text (Miriam). But rabbinic midrash will also attribute the ruaḥ haqodeš to figures who are in no way associated with prophecy by the plain text of scripture. For example, in the post-Noahic

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[31] Mek. Shirata 10.

[32] Danan, "The Divine Voice," 171. Danan also points out that this story has a long afterlife in other rabbinic collections. She notes that in the specific case of the Bavli, the midrash is not only expanded to include the three words of the verse that are *not* commented on in the Mekhilta (אחתו, מה, לו) but also that the ruaḥ haqode š is replaced with the Shekinah (172).

[33] Danan, "The Divine Voice," 102–31 gives an extensive treatment of the language connecting the ruaḥ haqodeš with prophecy. Equally extensive and insightful, if a little less academically rigorous, is Abelson, *Immanence of God* 238–67. Danan, against a harmonizing tendency in Abelson, cautions us not to expect a full systematics; the Rabbis are sometimes inconsistent as to whether the ruaḥ haqodeš is required for prophecy, whether it always connotes prophecy, etc. The Rabbis "clearly refer to Ruah ha-Kodesh in connection with prophecy, but in a general way, rather than drawing up a formal hierarchy of prophetic modalities" (107).

genealogy in Genesis 10, the figure of Eber names his son "Peleg, because in his days the earth was split (פלג כי בימיו נפלגה הארץ)"[34] Commenting on this, R. Simeon b. Gamaliel notes, "Early men, because they used the Ruaḥ hakodesh, based their names on events; but we who do not use the Ruaḥ hakodesh, base our names on our fathers."[35] That is, the operation of the ruaḥ haqodeš explains the phenomenon of parents naming children based on events which would happen in their lifetimes (but had, obviously, not yet happened at the moment of their birth). Note that this text also implies that in ancient times, even relatively unimportant figures like Eber were attended by the Ruaḥ hakodesh.

The second point about the ruaḥ haqodeš I have found only once in midrash prior to the seventh century, but in the context of Ephrem's language about Mary as a prophet, it seems worthy of mention. In Deuteronomy God says, "I will raise a prophet like you for them, from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he will say everything that I command him."[36] Commenting on this verse, the Sifre says, "know from this that the ruaḥ haqodeš is given into the mouth of the prophets."[37] In other words, in a manner analogous to Ephrem's account of Mary's inspired speech, where Christ "sows himself" in her mouth as he does in her womb,[38] the Sifre, glossing Deuteronomy, says that the ruaḥ haqodeš is put into the mouths of prophets to enable them to speak about the future.

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[34] Gen. 10:25.

[35] Gen.Rab. 37.7.

[36] Deut. 18:18. Danan, "The Divine Voice," 103–104 calls our attention to this midrash and points out that this circumlocution for prophetic inspiration appears elsewhere in the Bible, giving for instance Jeremiah 1:9 and Numbers 23 (verses 5, 12 and 16).

[37] Sifre Deuteronomy 176.

[38] Ephrem, *Nat* 15.1.

Aside from its close association with the Ruaḥ hakodesh, prophecy in rabbinic literature has a few other qualities worth noting here. First, the midrashic sources have a complex view of prophecy outside of Israel. In general, they acknowledge its existence, perhaps due to the examples of various non-Jewish figures whom the Bible itself treats as prophets.[39] They are, however, also eager to place sharp limitations on gentile prophecy, either confining it to a particular period or subordinating it in quality to Israelite prophecy. So, for instance, in Leviticus Rabbah, we find,

> R. Isaac said, "until the time that the tabernacle was established, there was prophecy found in the nations of the world. But from the time that the tabernacle was established, it left them, as it is written, "I held onto it and would not let it go" (Song 3:4).[40]

The limitation of prophecy is thus occasioned by the building of the Tabernacle after the theophany at Sinai and the establishment of God's special relationship with Israel.[41]

Elsewhere, that theme of special relationship is expressed not as a *terminus ante quem*, but as a distinctly different quality of prophecy enjoyed by non-Jews vs. Jews. In Genesis Rabbah, commenting on Abimelech's dream in Genesis 20, R. Jose b. Bibah notes that although the other nations have their prophets, God reveals himself to them only at night (that is, the time when people are taking leave of each other, implying an incomplete or rushed communication). R. Hanina adds that God speaks to foreign prophets in "half-speech" (בחצי דבור) while to Israel he

[39] For instance, Balaam in Numbers 22–24. Although the Bible never calls him a נביא, nevertheless the fact that God puts his word in his mouth suggests a genuine prophetic utterance, whatever his complicated reception in the rabbinic literature. For an extensive discussion of Balaam traditions, see Jonathan Robker, *Balaam in Text and Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

[40] Lev. Rab. 1.12.

[41] Cf. the tradition, recorded at e.g. Mek. Bahodesh 5, that God first offered the Torah to various nations who rejected it, before giving it to Israel. Immediately preceding this interpretation, at the moment that Israel receives it, the people of the nations come to Balaam in terror, and he explains to them what has happened.

speaks "in complete speech, in the language of affection, in holy language" (בדבור שלם בלשון חבה בלשון קדשה). Ultimately, this is expressed in a pair of rabbinic proverbs, called *meshalim:*[42]

> R. Hanina b. Pappa said, "It is like a king, who is in his reception-hall with a friend, there being a veil between them. Whenever he wishes to speak to his friend, he folds the veil and speaks with him; but when he speaks to the prophets of the nations of the world, he does not remove it, but rather speaks to them from behind the veil." And our Rabbis said, "It is like a king who has both a wife and a concubine; when he goes to the wife, he goes out in the open, but when he goes to the concubine he goes in secret."[43]

There are two things to note in this set of interpretations. First, although the question of the accuracy or completeness of the prophecies uttered is raised in the texts (the half-speech to the nations vs. the complete speech to Israel), it is not the *main* difference in the prophetic experience between the nations and Israel. Instead, both the "language of affection and holy language" and the two *meshalim* imply that the most important difference is qualitative, not quantitative. When God speaks to Israelite prophets, he removes the veil which separates him from his subjects, because he is talking with a friend. Israel thus enjoys an unmediated intimacy in its prophetic encounters, which the prophets of the nations do not.

Second, the *mashal* attributed to the Rabbis adds another dimension to the prophetic relationship. God not only speaks to the Israelite prophet as a friend; he does so openly, like a king visiting his lawful wife, while in his visits to his concubines he uses stealth. The prophetic experience of Israel is thus in view of all, and as the context seems to suggest, meant to honor the prophet by public attention. The prophecy bestowed on the nations, by contrast, in addition to being veiled and consisting of obscure half-sayings, is also done in secret; perhaps *information* is conveyed in such visitations, but there is no honor.

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[42] On the function of such king-*meshalim* in midrash in general, see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. 63–101.

[43] Gen. Rab. 52.5. Note that a nearly identical set of interpretations, attributed to the same rabbis, is given at Gen. Rab. 74.7, in response to Laban's dream in Gen 31.

Another text that, although not explicitly aimed at the distinction between Israelite and non-Israelite prophecy, also deals with the historical periodization, merits a brief discussion. In the Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai,[44] there is a curious passage in which it is argued that, although before the sanctification of the Land, all places were suitable for prophecy (כשרות לדבור), but after Israel was sanctified, "there was no divine speech given to prophets except next to water" (לא היה דבור על הנביאים בכל מקום אלא על המים). The midrash then cites several prophetic passages, proving that in each case they took place next to a river or the sea. (There is also a brief argument, difficult to reconstruct, as to whether this water requirement pertained even *before* the sanctification of Israel). I can find no other parallels for this claim, and hesitate to build an argument on it, but it is tantalizing, given the way that Ephrem symbolically connects prophecy and the sea in several places in his Nativity hymns.[45]

One final quality of prophetic language is worth mentioning as it, too, shows an interesting overlap with Ephrem. It is mentioned in a petiḥta recorded in Genesis Rabbah:

> R. Judan said, "Great is the power of the prophets! For they liken the form to the creator, as it says, 'And I heard the voice of man in the midst of the Ulai' (Daniel 8:16). R. Judah the son of R. Simon said, "We have other verses that make this more evident, as it says, "And upon the image of the throne there was the image like the appearance of a man on it, over and above." (Ezekiel 1:26)[46]

Here, the two rabbis both notice something about prophetic language relating to God: it is full of anthropomorphisms. Daniel hears the voice of a "man" who turns out to be God speaking to him;

[44] Mek. R. Shim., Tractate Pisḥa. The Mekhilta of R. Shimon should, perhaps, be used with a little more caution than some of the other texts in this chapter, in view of the fact that it is a reconstructed text of uncertain date; however, the general scholarly consensus places it in the amoraic period. According to W. David Nelson, *The Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon b. Yoḥai, Translated into English, with Critical Introduction and Annotation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), xi. Moreover, the midrash I cite here has parallels in the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael (Tractate Pisḥa 1), although the association with water is less clear in that more famous Mekhilta.

[45] Cf. Ephrem, *Nat*. 6.5, 9.4.

[46] Gen. Rab. 27.1.

Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly throne, although it is qualified by the words דמות and מראה, still seems to portray God as though there were a heavenly throne in the sky. These depictions are not thought inappropriate or blasphemous, however. Rather, this audacity is evidence, for R. Judan, of the prophets' "great power."

The purpose of this prophetic language is to cultivate a special kind of hearing. David Stern calls our attention to the "one place that the Rabbis discuss the 'function' of anthropomorphism", in the Mekhilta. Here, too, the Rabbis are engaged in the interpretation of primarily prophetic passages; in each case, the objection to some figurative language used for God is raised, but the answer is given, "we give him names from his creations (מכנין אותו מבריותיו), in order to appease the ear in accordance with what it is able to hear (לשכך את האוזן מה שהיא יכולה לשמוע)." Stern translates differently, coming from a potentially more interesting textual variant where the prophetic words *break* (שבר) the ear rather than appeasing it; "'breaking' the ear 'in' to a certain way of hearing, … 'opening' its capacities for understanding."[47] The power of prophetic speech, therefore, allows the listeners to understand things that would normally be beyond their capacity—whether by force or by appeasement.

We have now sketched a handful of the most prominent rabbinic motifs relating to the prophets. Considered against the backdrop of these rabbinic associations, several features of Ephrem's depiction of *Mary* as a prophet are thrown into sharp relief. We can dispense quickly with the two weakest of them: Mary's juxtaposition of prophetic images with aquatic images looks, as I said, tantalizing in light of the one midrash from the Mekhilta of R. Shimon where watery locations are designated as the only valid sites of prophecy. Yet our evidence is too slight to do

[47] Mek. Bahodesh 4. See David Stern, "Imitatio Hominis: Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992): 151–74, here 153.

anything other than point to the juxtaposition here. Similarly, the midrash which mentions the special power of the prophets in discussing the creator in terms of the created, although it interestingly overlaps both with Ephrem's overall theory of symbolism and Biblical language, and with Mary's particular discussion of, e.g., the language of "Sonship,"[48] is tersely expressed. The connection of *prophetic* language, in particular, to figurative language is interesting in this connection, but again, our evidence is slight.

Far better established is the connection, by now familiar to us from both earlier Syrian sources and also Iamblichus, between prophecy and a divine presence within the prophetic speaker. When Ephrem has Mary say that a "new tongue of prophecy" is within her thanks to the operation of the spirit,[49] she is staking a novel claim about her son, and may even be (most likely unconsciously) contradicting a rabbinic idea of prophecy as belonging to the historical past, but the language is expressed in the same terms as her rabbinic counterparts. The more direct passage, in which she begs Christ, "I will open my mouth, and you, fill my mouth… sow your voice in me, [You who] sow himself in the womb of his mother,"[50] changes the specific divine "mechanism" by which prophetic inspiration is to be accomplished (Christ as opposed to the Ruaḥ hakodesh), but is structurally familiar from the midrashim: God puts words into the mouths of the prophets, and they speak what they have been told. The Rabbis remind us that this image is Biblical and also serve to recall for us the way that the Biblical language is reinterpreted, in both traditions, to support specific divine modalities.

[48] Ephrem, *Nat*. 6.1–2.

[49] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.8.

[50] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.1.

Where Ephrem intersects most meaningfully with the rabbinic material is in their discussions of the qualitative difference between Israelite and non-Israelite prophecy. Ephrem himself rejects (as he would have to) the notion that prophetic revelation to the Jews enjoys a permanent superiority to the prophetic revelation to the gentiles; in one place in the Hymns on the Nativity, he says,

> The star! As it says in scripture, the nations saw it from afar
> So that the People, nearby, would be put to shame; Ah! the People, instructed and proud,
> Who by the nations have been taught again, how and where they saw
> That rising star of which Balaam spoke. A foreigner predicted it,
> And it was foreigners who saw it; Blessed is he who arouses jealousy in his own family![51]

That is, to Ephrem the rabbinic claim about the superiority of Israelite prophecy has been proven false by the events of the Incarnation. The allusion to Balaam refers to Num 24:17. McVey, commenting on this passage, says, "as Balaam was brought from a distance to put to shame the king of Moab and his people, the Magi were brought from afar to put to shame King Herod and his people."[52] This seems to me a plausible reading of the passage, but given what we have seen, I think it is equally possible that Ephrem here is using Balaam not for his relationship to Moab, but for his relationship to Israel: as a non-Israelite prophet who, by the appearance of the star to the Magi, has proven that gentile prophecy is efficacious.

Although he rejects the notion that Israelite prophecy is always privileged, nevertheless the affective qualities brought to the fore in the midrashic *meshalim* bring into relief, in a way in which prior sources have not, the idea of prophecy as establishing a kind of *intimacy* between the prophet and God. The Rabbis in the *meshalim* maintain that the prophetic interaction evinces a feeling of love when God speaks to Israel, unlike what the nations experience. There is an expression of

[51] Ephrem, *Nat*. 24.20.

[52] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian,* 197n542.

completion, honor, and affection between God and prophet, like that of a king who allows his love for his friend to override ceremony. In the rabbinic portrait of the king who condescends to pull aside the veil and the Ephremic depiction of a mother, pondering how to sing a lullaby to a God who has condescended to become an infant (and her Son), we see mirror images of each other. The mighty God, far above his created subjects by nature, nonetheless condescends to approach them in a manner of equality (for the rabbinic *mashal*) or even dependence (in Ephrem). In the image of God who comes to his wife, Israel, in the plain light of day, while he visits the nations in their concubinage only furtively by night, we can see a mirror image of the expression of Mary, amazed that God has visited her, and put to shame the daughters of the Hebrews.[53]

Virginity I: The Permanent Celibate

It is not *prima facie* obvious that a search for the symbol of the holy, consecrated virgin in rabbinic literature *must* end in disappointment. The rabbis do have a sense that sex is a potentially dangerous force, one that is not compatible with certain kinds of holy things, and one that needs control. Levitical law, after all, spends a significant amount of time not only proscribing certain acts altogether, but also regulating those acts which are licit.[54] Rabbinic texts likewise aim to prescribe approved forms and expressions of sex.[55] In the case of Moses in particular, the Rabbis are even able to countenance the idea that a state of permanent abstinence might have been necessary. There are, in rabbinic literature, accounts of a *tanna* who remained celibate out of his dedication to study

[53] Ephrem, *Nat*. 15.2.

[54] On the Biblical construct of sexual purity, see Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 36–52. On sexuality in the Leviticus Holiness Code in general, see the wide-ranging discussion in Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*,*3* vols, Yale Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991–2001), 1514–93.

[55] Various examples could be mustered from e.g. Tractate Niddah.

and his love of Torah.[56] Moreover, modern scholarship has recovered sectarian forms of late Second Temple Judaism which did, to varying degrees, promote celibacy for part or all of their communities.[57]

I mention all these things because the fact that these roads were *not* taken, and that rabbinic Judaism went on to promote married life as an ideal, should not be taken for granted. We should not assume that theirs was a default, "unmarked" position and Christianity's emphasis on sexual asceticism and renunciation was the marked, divergent choice.[58] Both communities, collectively, made choices, elevated certain voices within their traditions, suppressed or ignored others, and constructed an orthodoxy out of these selections.[59] It remains the case, however, that rabbinic orthodoxy did a remarkably thorough job in its construction on this point. Almost no evidence of celibate life as charged with divine presence remains in tannaitic or amoraic literature. We have to look at a few scattered fragments of rabbinic stories and interpretations to find anything to compare with Ephrem's symbol of the virgin.

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[56] The account of Moses's celibacy and the *tanna* Simeon ben Azzai are discussed below; I am grateful to the inimitable and illimitable Dr. Jesse Mirotznik for bringing the latter figure to my attention.

[57] On asceticism in Second Temple Judaism see Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 53–73 and also Steven D. Fraade, "Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroads, 1986–87), 253–88.

[58] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 11–12 makes the important point, against, e.g., Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), that elements out of which one could construct and "ascetical" view towards sexuality can be found *within* the Hebrew Bible itself, especially in Levitical language about holiness and purity. Even if an alternative procreative view is the predominant one, and the one that rabbinic Judaism ultimately advances, Christian ascetics did not need to import celibacy wholesale from external sources, either Greco-Roman or New Testament.

[59] One of the central arguments of Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness* is that community formation was one of the main goals, and hermeneutic reconfiguration of scripture one of the main methods, of this project for both Christian and Jewish communities. For a paradigmatic example of the hermeneutic dimension of this process, see Gary A. Anderson, "Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden? Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden," *HTR* 82 (1989): 121–148.

Simeon ben Azzai, the *tanna* who never married, has the making of one such case. In the Talmud, his lifelong celibacy is the subject of ridicule, but he is allowed an impassioned rejoinder:

> They said to Ben Azzai [who had just preached the virtues of procreation]: "there are those who both teach properly and fulfill properly, and those who fulfill properly but do not teach properly. But you teach properly, while you do not fulfill properly!" Ben Azzai said to them, "What should I do? My soul clings to Torah with desire; it is possible for the world to endure through others."[60]

Ben Azzai is not held up for others to emulate (the logic of his rejoinder, in fact, depends on others not following him in celibacy!), nor is his zeal for Torah presented as something that *ontologically* requires him to be celibate; it is rather framed as a practical concern (because he wishes to spend so much time with Torah, he does not have time for family life), albeit one charged with a sense of desire for divine things.[61] Although he comes out of the passage tolerated, the accusation of his interlocutors does hang in the air: ben Azzai does not fulfill a commandment.

A few remarks elsewhere in the Talmud comment on the results of his devoted study; he is one of four rabbis to behold the "garden" (פרדס) (the precise meaning of this is obscure; it refers to a vision of Paradise or a higher, mystical understanding of Torah). The visit, however, proves fatal for him. He thus seems to be negatively portrayed here, however much his death is softened by the prooftext, "the death of his holy ones is precious in the eyes of the Lord." It may well be, as Marvin Sweeney has argued, that he is being used as a foil here for R. Akiva, the one rabbi who

[60] b.Yev. 63b. (Cf. Gen. Rab. 34.14, where the reproof is attributed to R. Eleazar.)

[61] On this episode, see Daniel Boyarin, "Internal Opposition in Talmudic Literature: The Case of the Married Monk" *Representations* 36 (1991): 87–113; at 87 he points out that the verb translated "cling with desire" has erotic connotations.

leaves the experience of the "garden" unscathed, precisely because ben Azzai's celibacy is regarded as a halakhic failure.[62]

The other major story attached to ben Azzai is perhaps a little more promising: according to Leviticus Rabbah:

> Ben Azzai would sit and teach, and fire would glow around him. They said to him, "Perhaps you are engaged in teaching on the text which concerns the Chariot?" And he said to them, "No, rather I am stringing together words of Torah to words of the Prophets, and words of the Prophets to words of the Writings, and the words of Torah are happy, as they were on the day they were given at Sinai; and when they were first given they were given in fire, as it says, "And the mountain burned with fire" (Deuteronomy 4:11)[63]

Here we have some promising images: the fire glowing all around Ben Azzai, the evocation in the final line of the revelation on the mountaintop at Sinai, in the midst of fire and cloud. But unfortunately, the text makes nothing here of the fact that Ben Azzai is a celibate; it is rather his *practice* (as Boyarin points out, the very practice of midrash) which brings about fiery illumination.[64] Ben Azzai's own way of life is not mentioned, and cannot really be seen lurking behind the story.

Ben Azzai, then, although he is a celibate associated with two different stories involving deep, quasi-theophanic experiences, does not seem to offer a promising connection to Ephrem's symbol of the virgin as a holy site. His mention of the revelation at Sinai, however, turns our attention to one other place in rabbinic literature that might offer useful comparanda: Moses.

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[62] Marvin Sweeney, "Pardes Revisited Once Again: A Reassessment of the Rabbinic Legend Concerning the Four Who Entered Pardes," *Shofar* 22 (2004): 43–56. The passage is found at b. Hag.14b, but Sweeney notes parallels from the Tosefta and the Yerushalmi, as well as other later sources (43).

[63] Lev. Rab. 16.4 (and cf. the later Song. Rab. 1:10). One sometimes sees "מחריז" translated as "stringing together like pearls" which, given the potent symbol of the pearl in Ephrem, would be a charming parallel, albeit one perhaps difficult to interpret. Alas, this is an over-translation, and the word itself refers only to the activity of connection.

[64] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 110.

As has been amply demonstrated by Naomi Koltun-Fromm, Moses' celibacy was the site of repeated midrashic expansion as rabbinic literature developed. The tradition that Moses had separated from his wife and become celibate (nowhere in the Bible) was "widespread in both Jewish and Christian literature," and evolved (like many rabbinic exegeses) out of a complex set of solutions to problems in individual verses.[65] (The particular process by which the tradition of Moses' divorce enters rabbinic thought is not critical to our discussion here.)

The midrashim, like Aphrahat, take the position that Moses became permanently celibate after the theophany at Sinai. To cite one version[66] of the rabbinic interpretation:

> [Moses] separated from his wife; what was his exegetical reasoning? He said, "If [to] Israel, to whom the Shekinah did not speak for more than an hour, and it appointed for them a time, the Torah says, "do not approach a woman," then I, who am designated to speak [with the Shekinah] at any moment, and there is not a fixed time for me, how much more so [must I not approach a woman?]" And his opinion agreed with the opinion of the divinity, for it is said, "Go and say to them, 'Return to your tents;' and you, stay here with me."[67]

There are some interesting surface parallels between this passage and Mary, as I mentioned in the discussion of the same passage in Aphrahat. If we extract the symbol from the broader system of rabbinic thought and consider it on its own, we have a permanent celibate, set apart and required to permanently abstain from sexual relations, because he could at any time be visited by God. This

[65] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 179. She suggests (179–88) that the midrash grew from the cryptic verse in Exodus 18:2, where Jethro comes to meet Moses after he left Egypt, bringing Moses' wife with him—implying a prior separation not mentioned in the text—and the beginning of Numbers 12, where Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses concerning his wife. She points to both Philo and (as discussed in Chapter 3) Aphrahat.

[66] As with many rabbinic interpretations, the anthological style of the genre of rabbinic literature allowed this interpretive unit to move around throughout rabbinic literature rather freely. Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 175–209 discusses the full history of this interpretive unit. On the migratory powers of midrashic exegetical units in general, see Kugel, *In Potiphar's House.*

[67] b. Yev. 62a.

notion that holiness and sexuality are incompatible, that one can be intimate with God or intimate with a human but not both, accords with Ephrem's Mary.

But below this surface level, the rabbinic Moses—unlike the very similar passage in Aphrahat—does not pair quite as well. In Aphrahat, as we observed, the celibacy of Moses, like the celibacy of a Christian, is thought to make him into a holy vessel, and especially dear to God; this is why it is paired with the desirable virginity of the wives of Aaronic priests, and other figures like Joshua are adduced to buttress a claim that Moses establishes a tradition. Moses' practice of celibacy in the rabbinic case, however, has more of a practical character and distinct to himself. In much the same way as a doctor who is on call cannot go away for a weekend vacation, a man who expects to speak with God directly must refrain from certain activities which would prevent him from doing his work. Moses, because he must be in *continuous* expectation of divine contact, must keep himself in a state of purity, in the same way that a hypothetical doctor who was forever on call could never hit the beach at Hyannis. But Moses is not *ontologically* changed by this commitment, nor is it the *cause* of God's special regard for him; it's rather an *effect*. Neither is it a model for the rest of Israel; theirs was a one-time communication. As Koltun-Fromm puts it, "[t]he audience with God is special […] but the act of purification for that audience in and of itself is not transformative… the act of sexual restraint in and of itself did not change them; rather the act of receiving the Torah did."[68]

From the preceding, it appears that the figure of the "consecrated" (better, simply "lifelong")[69] celibate in rabbinic literature has only minimal value for a comparison with Ephrem's

[68] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness,* 205.

[69] The difference in vocabulary meaning to suggest that in the rabbinic cases, continuous celibacy is the result of a practical concern (whether dedication to Torah study or a specific case of holiness required in order to be "on call" with God), rather than a belief in the intrinsic value of celibacy *as such*.

Mary. Although the figure of Ben Azzai is associated with several incidents redolent of theophany, his celibacy is either irrelevant to these events, or may have a negative impact on them. The rabbinic discussion of Moses's celibacy has a little more in common with Mary: it is occasioned by his close contact with God, is concerned with questions of holiness, and suggests that a permanent association with God *might* entail a need for permanent sexual abstinence. The connections, though interesting, are however somewhat loose; Moses is not permanently changed by his required act of celibacy, in anything like the way that Ephrem claims Mary and other consecrated Christian virgins are.

There is, however, another facet of virginity in rabbinic thought which has much closer—indeed, direct—connections to Ephrem's symbolism. If the virgin is not a symbol of holiness or special divine presence, nevertheless the status of virgins remains a judicial question, and one to which the Torah, and the Rabbis, devoted some attention; we can see Ephrem's symbolism of Mary's virginity take shape within the context of their deliberations.

Virginity II: Physical Virginity

Deuteronomy 22:13–21 establishes a procedure for adjudicating, after the fact, the question of a woman's premarital virginity. If a man marries a woman, consummates the marriage with her, and then "hates her (ושנאה)," and begins to speak ill of her, saying that she was not a virgin when the marriage took place, then the girl's father has recourse to a legal procedure to contradict the groom and protect his daughter's reputation and his own honor:

> The father of the young woman and her mother shall then submit the young woman's *bᵊtulim* to the elders of the city at the gate. The father of the young woman shall say to the elders: "I gave my daughter in marriage to this man but he dislikes her; now he has made

> up charges against her, saying, 'I did not find your daughter's *bᵊtulim*.' But here is my daughter's *bᵊtulim*." Then they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town.[70]

If this proof is made successfully, then the man who slandered his new wife is punished, fined, and barred from ever divorcing her. (The last clause may give moderns pause, but is intended to give the woman economic protection.) If, however, the bride's father cannot produce the *bᵊtulim*, then she is put to death for her sexual transgression. It's a situation of extreme stakes; emotions are running high, life and death are on the line.

But what, exactly, are the "*bᵊtulim*," and what, exactly, is going on here?

The word *bᵊtulim* is clearly related to *bᵊtulah* (בתולה), meaning "virgin." It has the appearance of a masculine plural. Fully half of the ten biblical uses of the word are found within Deut 22:14–20; the others are a single instance in Levitcus, two in Judges, and two in Ezekiel, all clearly pertaining to women's sexuality, but none are dispositive as regards the precise meaning. The LXX takes it as παρθένια, the Vulgate as *virginitas*, both abstract nouns meaning "virginity." The King James version, noting from the context that a physical object is implied, accordingly construes *bᵊtulim* as "tokens of virginity," and most translations follow suit. (The NRSV, which I modified above, uses the slightly less archaic "evidence of virginity.") As the procedure is usually construed, what the father produces is a garment or cloth (שמלה) which has blood on it. The presumption underlying the test is that, if the accused bride was a virgin at the time of the marital consummation, then the sexual act would break her hymen, and she would have bled.[71] The *bᵊtulim*

[70] Deut. 22:15–17; I have modified the NRSV to preserve the ambiguity of bətulim.

[71] The English translator of Gesenius's lexicon, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, modestly confines this definition to Latin: "*stragulae inter primae noctis amplexus hymenis scissi sanguine inquinatae.*" Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures,* Trans. Samuel Tregelles, fifth printing (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1893), 149.

are thus a "proof of virginity" in the form of a bloody textile. If no such evidence can be produced, then the woman may be presumed not to have been a virgin, and punished with death.

Although an apologist might note that the passage is framed as giving an accused woman a method of proving her innocence, nevertheless Deuteronomy 22:13–21 is a difficult text for modern sensibilities, not only because of its treatment of women but because of the strangeness of the procedure. Although virginity was a highly prized quality in ancient patriarchal cultures, and various tests for the presence of virginity were devised cross-culturally, no parallel for the Deuteronomy test can be found.[72] The unique nature of the test, the brutality of its possible final outcome, and the contradiction with other Biblical passages, have led many modern scholars to question whether the test was ever intended to be put into practice.[73]

Moderns who are uncomfortable with the test prescribed by this law have ancient antecedents: the Rabbis and other ancient Jews themselves. From an early period, we can find different groups of Jewish readers reinterpreting the Deuteronomic text in order to blunt this strange, and potentially lethal, test.[74] In this, the Rabbis employed various tactics. They might, for instance, reinterpret the world "*bᵊtulim*" to mean "witnesses concerning virginity."[75] The cloth, too, might be transformed from an actual physical object, put forth for the elders to see, into a more conventional judicial format:

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[72] Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity,* 21–30.

[73] Avi Shveka and Avraham Faust, "Premarital Sex in Biblical Law: a Cross-Cultural Perspective," *VT* 70 (2020): 316–39 review various modern scholarly arguments of this kind (318–27), although their own argument favors the view that the law was actually intended to be enforced in the original social context in which it was written.

[74] Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity,* 44–54, for instance, traces reinterpretations of the Deuteronomic test within the Dead Sea Scrolls.

[75] Cf. Sifre Deuteronomy 235–236. In this they are aided, as I would argue, by what they might plausibly construe as the surface irregularity of the Biblical word *bətulim*, which looks like it is a masculine plural noun. The slip from "*bətulim*" to "witnesses that she is a *bətulah*" is a characteristic rabbinic interpretive move. On surface irregularities as the generative power behind midrashic interpretation, see Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash."

> *And they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the city:* [this means] they shall make the matter as clear as a cloth. This is one of the matters that R. Ishmael used to interpret as a *mashal*...[76]

Taken together, these reworkings transform a ritual into a court case, adjudicated by different bodies of witnesses and having a standard of evidence. Michael Rosenberg argues, however, that while late antique legal reinterpretations like this transformed the *adjudication of claims* about virginity, nonetheless, the fundamental *idea* of virginity constructed by the Deuteronomic text—remained the dominant one for rabbinic Jews.[77] Virginity was characterized by a biographical fact (the woman had never had sexual intercourse with a man) which was united with a biological fact (the woman's hymen was intact); whether or not the latter was *actually* proved by a judicial presentation of bloodied textiles or not, it remained the theoretical basis for a woman's identity in marriage cases.

This doubly constructed (biographical and biological) idea of virginity is, however, not without difficulty, as the rabbis were aware. They expressed some of their difficulties through the construction of a category which they called the *mukkat 'etz* (מכת עץ). The phrase means "a woman who has been struck with wood;" in rabbinic texts it is the term for a woman who has damaged her hymen in a non-sexual injury (whether by wood or some other source), and consequently would not, in the ritual laid out in Deuteronomy, bleed on her wedding night. This raised, of course, a legal question. Was she to be considered a virgin, or not?

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[76] Sifre Deuteronomy 237.

[77] "As [late antique Jews] departed from the literal instructions of Deuteronomy 22, [they] nonetheless remained faithful to the Deuteronomic paradigm of female virginity as something to be tested through a woman's anatomy. This anatomical model of female virginity was surely the dominant one among Jews in late antiquity." Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity,* 79.

There is a great deal of discussion of the *mukkat 'etz* in halakhic literature.[78] It is usually expressed in questions concerning the *ketubbah*, the rabbinic marriage contract, whereby a man must put aside a certain amount of money to support his wife in the event of a divorce. According to the law, virginity is a desired, and therefore privileged, quality in a woman: a virgin's *ketubah* is worth 200 *zuzzim*, while the non-virgin's *ketubah* is worth only 100 *zuzzim.* But this raises a legal question with practical consequences: what is the criterion according to which "virginity" is adjudicated? Does the *mukkat 'etz* count as a virgin, or not?[79] There is significant discussion in legal texts, of course, but the main point is succinctly illustrated in Genesis Rabbah, in the interpretation of a curious phrase that is used to describe Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, in Genesis 24:16:

> *The woman was very beautiful*, *a virgin*, *and no man had known her*: We learn, "the *mukat etz* has a ketubah worth 200 [*zuzzim*]" according to the word of R. Meir; but that the sages say, "the *mukat etz* has a ketubah worth 100 [*zuzzim*]." R. Hanina, in the name of R. Eliezar [said,] "the reasoning behind the opinion of R. Meir was [the verse] *and no man had known her.* Therefore, if she had been injured by wood, she would still be a virgin. The reason behind [the opinion of the] sages was [the word] *virgin:* therefore if she had been injured by wood, she would not be a virgin.[80]

As with so many midrash, the cause for comment here is a strange phrase in the Biblical text. If Rebecca is a "virgin," then what is the point of mentioning that "no man had known her?" The modern reader might object that this is simply a bit of emphatic pleonasm. But the Rabbis do not, in general, read scripture that way. If the text says "a virgin, and no man had known her," it must be trying to teach something by the repetition.

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[78] See, for instance, the tannaitic laws of m. Ket. 1, cf. the Talmudic discussion in b. Ket. 11a ff.

[79] The *mukkat 'etz* is not the only ambiguous category; others included widows who had been married but not consummated their marriages, or converts, who could not be presumed to have had their "sexual status […] continuously monitored and controlled by the Jewish community." Rosenberg, *Signs of Virginity,* 103.

[80] Gen. Rab. 60.5.

R. Meir, taking the phrase to mean, "a virgin *because no man had known her*," concludes that sexual experience is the decisive criterion for making a virgin. Therefore, "virginity" is separable from the physical sense, and a *mukat etz* who has not had sexual relations is a virgin, and entitled to a virgin's *ketubah*; the physical quality does not matter. The sages, on the other hand, interpret the verse as implying that "virgin" and "no man had known her" describe *different* qualities. "Virginity" can be construed as being the sort of woman who would bleed according to the test established in Deuteronomy 22; whether a woman has been with a man is a separate question, irrelevant to the status of virginity.[81] We have here, then, a debate within rabbinic Judaism about what constitutes virginity: is it about a woman's biography, or her biology?

It is in the context of this argument that I wish to reintroduce Ephrem and his meditations on physical virginity. We noted in chapter 2 that although Ephrem does in various places think about the moral qualities of Mary's virginity, he is, for the most part, interested in asserting it as physical fact. To take one example, in Hymn 12 on the nativity, he not only insists that Mary possessed physical virginity, but also gives it symbolic significance:

> Infant in the womb, the seal of virginity
> Exists, the womb is to you
> The palace of the king and also the veil.
> Virginities inside, Virginities outside,
> A baby within: a great contradiction![82]

The word I translate here as "Virginities" is ܒܬܘܠܝܬ, cognate with Hebrew *bᵊtulim.* Let us note that here these are not witnesses, nor a physical object that proves Mary is a virgin. It is her biological

[81] On this midrash, see Rosenberg, *Testing Virgins*, 70–72, and also Jane L. Kanarek, *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 67–105.

[82] Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.2.

virginity, her hymen, itself. And Ephrem takes it not only as a legal category, but as a theological fact: Mary's ܚܬܡ "seals" her and makes her womb into the palace of the king.

Elsewhere, physical virginity not only makes one a temple, it adorns the High Priest:

> May all the Virginities of your brides
> Be sustained by you. They are purple
> And no one shall approach them
> Except the king. Virginity
> Is like a vestment for you, our High Priest.[83]

The tokens are given a royal quality ("they are purple") here. More than this, as McVey notes, the word I translate "vestment" is the same word, in Syriac, as the one used for the "cloth" in the Deuteronomic test.[84] Rather than being reinterpreted as establishing a standard of evidence by a figure of speech, as R. Ishmael does in the Sifre, Ephrem here recontextualizes the cloth which proves a woman to be a physical virgin, and makes it into a cultic object.

Ephrem, then, picks a side in the debate between R. Meir and the Rabbis (although of course he probably does not know there is an intra-Jewish debate on this question). Not only does he refrain from separating Mary's status as a virgin from a physical quality, but he doubles down, transforming her physical virginity (and alongside hers, the physical virginity of all the chaste ones who emulate her) from a legal into a theological object that is closely associated with the Temple cult: by remaining a physical virgin, a woman can become a dwelling-place for God, and their bodies become, for him, as his priestly vestments.

It is worth pausing a moment to ask why Ephrem does this. A simple answer, and one that probably contains some truth, grounds it in his symbolic worldview. Physical objects signify

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[83] Ephrem, *Nat*. 16.13. Let us note in passing here that Ephrem uses two different words in this stanza, ܚܬܝܡ and ܒܬܘܠܝܘ (which I translate "tokens of virginity" and "virginity," respectively). He has the abstract noun in his vocabulary and uses it; therefore, when he discusses "tokens of virginity" I think it right to take him as discussing a physical fact.

[84] McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian,* 151n366.

spiritual realities; but the physical symbol, to bear meaning, must have a real existence.[85] But another, sharper answer might bear less on Ephrem's symbolic worldview and more on his social reality. Alongside his high-theological view of physical virginity, Ephrem more than once juxtaposes an account of how Mary is being "slandered" by various people who deny that she is a virgin, on the basis of her pregnancy.[86] Sometimes the identity of these slanderers is left vague, but in Hymn 14 on the Nativity, Ephrem gets a little more specific about them:

> The unclean People, when they were fornicating
> And envious, God saw
> How much they slandered [one another], and he was merciful
> To women, and on their account
> He increased his plans among the slanderers.
>
> So that, if her spouse hated her
> There would be a writing to release her, and if he was envious of her,
> The waters would test her, and if he slandered her,
> He [= the father] gave forth the cloth. All slander
> Was put to shame by Mary because she was sealed.
>
> Earlier, Moses had spread out
> How much they were slanderers, because while the cloths
> Of virgins are possessed by their parents,
> They still accuse women, and they kill them
> How much more did they slander the mother of the Son!
>
> In the water tests and in the cloths
> He was expounding to them, so that when there came to them
> The Lord of Conceptions, and they slandered the womb
> Within which he dwelt, pure Virginities
> Pertaining to her conception would persuade them.[87]

Ephrem here notes something about the Deuteronomic passage on the *bᵊtulim.* Although we might construe it as primarily a test that centers on a woman and her virginity, the passage begins *not*

[85] It is in this light that we might consider Ephrem's assertion that womankind's physical virginity was created in the first place; see Ephrem Nat. 12.4.

[86] See e.g. Ephrem, *Nat*. 12.9–10, 15.7–8.

[87] Ephrem, *Nat*. 14.11–14.

with an account of sexual indiscretion, but with a husband who hates his wife and accuses her. The first punishment the Deuteronomic law prescribes is not the penalty for a woman who has been found unchaste, but the penalty for a man who is found to have slandered his wife untruthfully. Ephrem, then, reconstructs the Deuteronomic law (alongside other Torah laws governing unchaste women) as being primarily about refuting slander, not revealing unchastity. Nor is framing the passage as one that is about slander rather than one that is about sex unique to Ephrem; in the Sifre, the same R. Ishmael who interprets the cloth as a figure of speech also says: "Come and see what hate brings along with it: it gives rise to slander."[88]

Ephrem goes a step further, however, in making the text about *Jewish* slander in particular. In his reading of the law, it was given by Moses because the unclean People were engaged in habitual fornication, jealousy, and slander. In order to impose order on this primordial mess, and especially because God wanted to protect the rights of women, "he increased his plans among the slanderers," having Moses issue various laws to protect the reputations of the accused. Stanza 14 takes this interpretation even further, and Ephrem argues that the whole purpose of the law in Deuteronomy 22 is to give a proof of Mary's virginity at the time of the Incarnation. But, in a typical argument, Ephrem claims that Jews have not understood or obeyed the laws as they were properly intended, because even today they slander Mary.

How to historicize Ephrem's presentation of "Jewish slanderers" is not exactly clear. It *may* mean that he is dimly aware of specific Jewish polemics against Mary's virginity.[89] More likely, however, his real target is other Christians of unorthodox views, as Shepardson argues in

[88] Sifre Deuteronomy 236.

[89] For some recent scholarship on these polemics, including possible overlaps with Syriac Mariology in general and Ephrem in particular, see Michael Rosenberg, "Sexual Serpents and Perpetual Virginity: Marian Rejectionism in the Babylonian Talmud," *JQR* 106 (2016): 465–93 and Rosenberg, "Penetrating words: a Babylonian Rabbinic Response to Syriac Mariology," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 67 (2016): 121–134.

her discussion of other facets of Ephrem's polemic. What *is* clear, however, is that when Ephrem complains about people slandering Mary by claiming that she is not a virgin, he is calling on the language and structure of Deuteronomy 22 itself. Ephrem's firm insistence on the real fact of Mary's biological virginity, and on the supreme importance that it has as a symbol of the presence of God within her, may approximate the speech of the father in the Deuteronomic case itself: against those who deny that Mary is a virgin, he cries out, "Here are Mary's *bᵊtulim*! Here's how important they are!"

The Temple, the Ark and the *Shekinah*

Like the place of Mary in Christian theology, the importance of the Temple in the rabbinic imaginary does not seem to require a lengthy defense. The Rabbis' appropriation of the Temple and its cult—or rather, the *symbol* of the Temple and its cult—was, in the argument of one recent scholar, the entire basis of rabbinic authority.[90] Its destruction was a colossal loss that reverberates throughout their literature.[91] It would be impossible to overstate its significance.

Nor can we hope to exhaust here the wide range of meanings that the Temple and its various rituals had within the rabbinic imagination. Several of the symbolic ideas that we traced in the last chapter, in our discussion of the temples in Lucian and Libanius, recur in Rabbinic conceptions of the Temple: that it was a microcosm that fertilized the world, that it was associated with an ancient flood, etc. It might be profitable to go through all of these in detail, but our conclusion would be,

[90] "Because the rabbis claimed a role in the realm of ritual law and ritual practice, the Temple—which had always been a central place of Judaean worship and ritual—was a highly appropriate virtual site of memory. But it was not only because the Temple was related to their central preoccupation that the rabbis devoted so much attention to it […] In constructing their own version of the Temple, the rabbis could claim for themselves the Temple's authority and legitimacy in the domain of ritual—against the competing claims of other groups." Naftali Cohen, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 120.

[91] See Shaye J.D. Cohen, "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 18–39.

in general, the same as in the last chapter: that the Rabbis, like Lucian and like Ephrem, drew upon a complex web of images that lay in the background of Near Eastern temple myths.[92] Instead, I wish to focus on how the Rabbis developed a *distinctive* theological symbol for the presence of God within the Temple (and with Israel more broadly). To do this, we must turn to the Shekinah.[93]

The Shekinah has developed quite a bit over its long history. In the medieval mystical imagination of the Kabbalah, it became a feminine figure, imagined at times almost as

> a female hypostasis positioned between God and Israel, bride of God, mother of the soul, perhaps even bride or lover of the adventurous Kabbalist who dared identify with Moses, alone among men designated as "husband of the Matron."[94]

—in which guise, let us note, it shares certain striking parallels with medieval Catholic devotional thought about Mary. Modern feminist projects in Judaism have also attempted to construe it as a distinctive feminine expression of the divine.[95] In origin, however, the Shekinah is somewhat humbler, and only grammatically feminine.[96] It originates as an abstract noun, שכינה, from the Hebrew root שכנ, meaning "to dwell." (It is thus closely related to the word משכן, meaning "tabernacle.")

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[92] There is a rich literature on the mythic dimensions of the Rabbinic Temple. See, for instance, Naomi Koltun-Fromm, "Imagining The Temple In Rabbinic Stone: The Evolution Of The ʾEven Shetiyah," *AJS Review* 43 (2019): 355–77; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 112–31; also purchase Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 78–99.

[93] See Abelson, *Immanence of God* 77–149 and Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs.* Trans. Israel Abrahams. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 37–65 for detailed, if dated, treatments of the relevant sources.

[94] Arthur Green, "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context," *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 1–52, here 26.

[95] See, e.g., Leah Novick, *On the Wings of Shekhinah: Rediscovering Judaism's Divine Feminine* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2008).

[96] Green, "Shekinah, the Virgin Mary," 17n72 points out that in one place where the Shekinah is personified in Lamentations Rabbah, it is likened to a human *king*, not a queen.

The noun is not a Biblical term, although the verb from the same root is used often in the Hebrew Bible to express God's "dwelling" in the midst of the people (to take one example, **ושכנתי** בתוך בני ישראל והייתי להם לאלהים "I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God.").[97] The Shekinah itself is first introduced in the targumim, the Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible. From these beginnings, however, it eventually grows into a rabbinic theological symbol, one with a whole set of attributes we may uncover, attributes which assimilate it to Ephrem's Mariology.

Before discussing the most relevant characteristics of the Shekinah as it manifests in early midrash and the Talmud, however, it is worth reflecting just a moment longer on the exegetical process whereby the concept entered rabbinic literature. As I mentioned above, the Shekinah first appears in the targumim.[98] The translators who composed these Aramaic documents seem to do several distinct things by interpolating the Shekinah in their translations. In the first place, they sometimes soften phrases that might otherwise look like anthropomorphism (for example, Exodus 33:14: "And my *panim* (face or presence) will go, and I will give you rest," is rendered by Targum Onkelos as "And my Shekinah will go, and I will give you rest"). At other times, they resolve the paradox with which I began this dissertation: how can the God who is everywhere be said to be in a particular place? He is not, says the targum. The *Shekinah* is. Thus the verse which I quoted above, Exodus 29:45, is rendered in Targum Onkelos, as "I will *cause my Shekinah to dwell* (ואשרי שכנתי) among the Israelites, and I will be their God." The precise ontological status of the Shekinah

[97] Ex. 29:45, NRSV.

[98] For an overview of the various Targumim, see Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible: Contents and Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 1–42.

in the targumim seems to me impossible to recover;[99] however, its *function* is clear. The Shekinah preserves the nearness of something divine while shielding God from being bounded.

Let us note, however, that as they developed a term for the presence of God that, verbally at any rate, insulated God himself from spatial presence, the targumic translators (and their rabbinic successors) were in fact continuing a project that one can find within the Torah itself. As Benjamin Sommer has carefully argued, there are tensions within and between Biblical books as to the body of God: does he have one? What does it look like? Is it located in a particular place?[100] In the JE document(s)[101] the answer seems to be both affirmative and fluid (meaning that God can appear in multiple places, in material objects, etc.)[102] In the P source, God has a single body, that of the *kabod* or glory, a luminous presence concealed within a cloud, and after the Sinaitic theophany he dwells only in the Tabernacle. In the D source, God's body is in heaven only, and what he places in the world is his *shem*, his name; "[s]o insistently do Deuteronomic traditions maintain that God is not on earth that it becomes clear that for them the *shem* is only a sign of divine presence, not a manifestation of God Himself."[103]

This ancient dispute is mediated to the later tradition in the form of different kinds of language *about* God and his location, from the JE, "The *Lord appeared* to Abraham by the oaks

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[99] Abelson, *The Immanence of God,* 80 refers to a certain Targumic passage as a "clear personification" of the Shekinah and further that it is "often the case in the Talmud and Midrashim" that it is an "independent entity." Urbach, *The Sages* 41–45 demures. I do not think the evidence is sufficient to adjudicate.

[100] Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) begins his book by saying, "The God of the Hebrew Bible has a body" (1). He frames it this starkly because he believes it important, but as he himself shows through his analysis, of course, the question of the body of God is a *disputed* question throughout the various sources which compose the Hebrew Bible. Does God have a *body?* Does God have *a* body?

[101] Sommer, *The Bodies of God,* ix–x declines to take a firm stand on the compositional identity of J and E.

[102] Sommer, *The Bodies of God,* 38–57.

[103] Sommer, *The Bodies of God,* 58–79; quote from 62.

of Mamre;"[104] to the P, "The *glory of the Lord settled* on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days;"[105] to the D, "At the place that the Lord your God will *choose as a dwelling for his name*, only there shall you offer the passover…"[106] The Rabbis and the translators of the Targum, of course, were not aware of the Documentary Hypothesis. But nonetheless, it is interesting that in their effort to devise new ways of talking about God's presence, they were exegetically participating in a tradition born in the language of the Bible itself.[107]

Let us turn now to the attributes of the early rabbinic Shekinah. Let us remember, as we do, however, that in enumerating these qualities we should not think that we are articulating a coherent "doctrine" of the Shekinah; as we said at the outset, this does not exist in rabbinic literature. Rather, we are observing a series of discussions.

The Shekinah is particularly associated with God's presence in the Temple (and before that, with the Tabernacle and Ark). This ability of God to affiliate with a geographical space is sometimes presented as surprising. For instance, the Pesikta de Rav Kahana cites the verse (Exodus 25:8) in which God tells Moses, "And let them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם) as an example of one of three occasions when Moses was shocked at a divine commandment:

> Moses replied before the Holy One, Blessed be He, "Ruler of the Worlds! It is written, 'Behold, Heaven, and the Heaven of Heavens, are not enough for you,' (1 Kings 8:27) but you say, 'Let them make me a sanctuary?!'" And the Holy One, Blessed be He, said, "It is not as you imagine. Twenty boards for the south, and twenty boards for the north, and eight boards for the west, and I will come down and squeeze my Shekinah in your midst, and "I will meet with you there."[108]

[104] Gen. 18:1, NRSV.

[105] Ex. 24:15, NRSV.

[106] Deut 16:6a, NRSV.

[107] Sommer, *The Bodies of God,* 126–129.

[108] Pesikta de Rav Kahana, 6.

This midrash encapsulates what I called above the "the paradox of space," and what Urbach calls the "confinement of the Shekinah."[109] Moses is shocked at the prospect of God's dwelling anywhere on earth, since even the heavens themselves cannot contain him. God reassures him that despite his supracosmic proportions, he will accommodate himself to the size of the Tabernacle. The prooftext which Moses reaches for to argue against the project, meanwhile, is drawn from King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, and thus it subtly connects the Shekinah not just to the Tabernacle in the wilderness, but also to that later dwelling-place.

Elsewhere, the Rabbis instead emphasize that God's arrival in the Tabernacle is the completion, or the reenactment, of the creation. One interpreter notices the strange wording of Genesis 1:5:[110]

> R. Samuel bar Ammi said, from the beginning of the creation of the world, the Holy One, Blessed be He, desired to make a partnership with those of the world below… [it is surprising that the days are counted, "one, second, third"]. When did the Holy One, Blessed be He, solve this problem? At the building of the Tabernacle, because it says, "And the offerer made his offering on the **first** day" (Numbers 7:12)—this is the first day of the creation! […That day was "first" in many respects:] the first for the making of creation, the first for the kings, the first for the princes, the first for the priests, the first for the Shekinah (as it says, "Let them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them)."[111]

The resolution to the verbal problem in Genesis is found in the fact that the sacrifice in Numbers 7, when the Tabernacle is dedicated for the first time, are said to take place on the "first day," hence supplying the missing ordinal from Genesis 1. Here, again, the Shekinah is presented as coming down and taking its place in the Tabernacle after its construction, but now this construction

[109] Urbach, *The Sages,* 50. It is worth noting that even the presence of the Shekinah within the Tabernacle is a disputed point in early rabbinic discourse. R. Jose taught that the Shekinah never descended. *b*. Suk. 5a.

[110] The text famously says, "there was evening and there was morning, one day" rather than "the first day," despite the fact that the rest of the creation account gives the days with ordinal numbers.

[111] Gen. Rab. 3.9.

and God's making his presence known in the camp of the Israelites are presented as recapitulating creation, solving a verbal problem that goes all the way back to the first day—or rather, day one.

The Shekinah is also within the Ark; in a famous ocean metaphor in Midrash Tanḥuma the paradox of God's presence in such a material vessel is given an eloquent symbolic explanation:

> Was it not already said, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jeremiah 23:24). R. Joshua of Siknin said, in the name of R. Levi, "It is a *mashal* to a cavern that is located on the shore of the sea. The sea rushes forth, and it fills the whole cavern, and the sea is not diminished. Similarly, the Holy One, Blessed be He; though it is written "The glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34), still "His glory is above heaven and earth." (Psalm 148:13). And do not say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, squeezed his Shekinah [only] into the Tabernacle; but he also squeezed his Shekinah into the Ark which Bezalel made, for it is said, "Below, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of the whole Earth." (Joshua 3:11).[112]

Once again the midrash is aimed at an exegetical question. How can scripture affirm *both* that God is in the Tabernacle, and yet that his glorious presence is everywhere? In order to solve this problem, R. Levi introduces the image of the cavern: a hollow which is able to be filled completely by the ocean. The ocean, of course, is not depleted by the act of filling the cave; it remains vast, omnipresent, unknowable. But think of the experience of being in that cavern when the ocean rushes in: suddenly, the water is all around you, roaring and pervading the entirety of your senses. The experience of "the ocean" would be *particularly* concentrated here. Even so the Ark and the presence of God.

There are many other texts that show that the Shekinah is particularly associated with the Jerusalem Temple and the other holy appurtenances of ancient Israel.[113] By far the most dramatic, and affecting, of these depictions, however, come from *Lamentations Rabbah*, when the Rabbis recall the glorious past in a mournful key:

[112] Midrash Tanḥuma, Vayakhel 7.

[113] See e.g. Gen. Rab. 97, Mek. de Rabbi-Ishmael, Shirata 3, b. Ber. 63b, b. Zev.116b, Lam. Rab. (passim).

> "These things I will remember, and I will pour out my soul, etc." (Psalm 42:5). On whose account did the sons of Korah speak this verse? Over none but the congregation of Israel! For the Congregation of Israel said to the Holy One, Blessed be He: "Lord of the World, [… in former times,] the Sanctuary stood, and you descended from the Heavens on high in its midst, and you made your Shekinah to dwell upon me, and the nations of the world praised me…" [but now the Temple is destroyed,] and hence they sing, "These things I will remember, etc."[114]

This depiction, and the others in Lamentations Rabbah, would give the impression that the destruction of the Temple caused the permanent removal of the Shekinah (the logic of the previous passage has the Congregation lamenting that *formerly*, when the Temple stood, the Presence rested on Israel, but *now*, with the Temple destroyed, this situation no longer obtains). The broader insistence on associating the Shekinah with Temple, tabernacle, and Ark, would also seem to imply that *before* these things were built, the Shekinah was not present. However, although the association of the Shekinah remains closely affiliated with the Temple and the Tabernacle, many other midrashim make it clear that the Shekinah was also present with patriarchs in the days before the Tabernacle, and will also still rest on Jews in the present.[115]

Thus, for instance, Genesis Rabbah speaks of the Shekinah "uniting" with Jacob and with Judah.[116] It depicts the relationship between Abraham and the Shekinah as particularly intimate: Abraham "sits while the Shekinah stands,"[117] and another passage imagines Abraham having a conversation with the Shekinah when some angels come to call:

> It is taught, "The one who is departing from his associate, whether he is the greater or the lesser party, must request permission [to leave] from the other. Where do we learn this?

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[114] Lam. Rab. Proems 24.

[115] Let us remind ourselves that in this tentative working-out of language to describe God's presence and to set various limits on its modalities, the Rabbis recapitulate the process of the scriptural authors themselves, as discussed above. Various modern authors, of course, including both Abelson and Urbach, attempt to organize this presence in various ways, implying a coherent system which resolves these seeming contradictions and implies a coherent view of the Shekinah. Some of them are more persuasive than others; Urbach, *The Sages,* 37–59 is to be recommended.

[116] Gen. Rab. 69.2 and 95.1, respectively.

[117] Gen. Rab. 48.1.

> From Abraham. Once, Abraham was speaking with the Holy One, Blessed be He, and the ministering angels came to talk to him. Abraham said to them, "Let me first take depart from the Shekinah, which is greater than you, and then I will speak with you." As soon as he had said what was required to the Shekinah, he said to him, "Lord of the Worlds, I need to speak to the angels." And [God] said to him, "Let me depart then in peace." And thus it is written, "And God went up from Abraham" (Gen. 17:22).[118]

The elision between "God" and "the Shekinah" here is interesting, but still more interesting is the fact that this narrative expansion portrays Abraham as having a private conversation with the Divine Presence almost casually, and the Presence asking permission to depart from him. The midrash here is careful not to assert equality between the two: its introductory frame notes that this is a story about "the greater and the lesser." However, their close association is presented *as though* they were equals, or at least near enough in rank to extend conversational courtesies to one another.

Outside of the patriarchal period, the Shekinah is said even now to be present with Jews engaged in certain activities. Famously, the Bavli asks,

> How do we know that when there are ten praying, the Shekinah is with them? Because it says, "God stands in the gathering of God" (Psalm 82:1). And how do we know that when three judges sit in court, the Shekinah is with them? Because it says, "In the midst of God he Judges" (ibid.). And how do we know that when two sit and busy themselves with Torah, the Shekinah is with them? Because it says, "Then, the God-fearers spoke, each man to this neighbor, and the Lord took note" (Malachi 3:16).[119]

This passage is grounded in exegetical statements (the first two seem to aim at smoothing over a potentially polytheistic-sounding verse in Psalms) but rhetorically, the structure narrows down the presence of the Shekinah among present Jews enacting their Judaism to smaller and smaller groups, until even just two engaged in the act of Torah study manage to partake in the same kind of presence as their ancient ancestors did in the Tabernacle.

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[118] Gen. Rab. 47.6.

[119] b.Ber. 6a

This connection, between awesome ancient theophanies and contemporary practice, finds license in another midrash from Tanḥuma:

> See how the Ark was beloved, because the whole Tabernacle was not made except on account of the Ark; in which the Shekinah was. And all the signs that were done for Israel were done on account of the Ark, in which the Shekinah was. [A list of various scriptural miracles attributed to the Ark follows.] See, then how many signs were done on account of the Ark. Why? Because the Shekinah *and the Torah* were within it. And in every place the Torah is, the Shekinah is there with it, as it says, "Then the God-fearers spoke, each man to his neighbor, and the Lord took note and heard" (Malachi 3:16).[120]

After recounting the various miracles which the Ark performed, the author of this midrash then subtly connects those ancient myths the practice of its own time. The Shekinah, yes, was in the Ark; but so were Moses' tablets. Therefore it is not the Ark, as a particular wooden box, that attracted the Shekinah's presence, but rather the Torah; and the Torah, of course, persists into the present day.

The last midrash reminds us, however, that the sort of intimacy and immediacy which we have here observed should strike us as surprising. The Shekinah and the Ark in which it dwells were capable of great and powerful miracles. Elsewhere, the Shekinah accompanies a truly awesome theophany:

> When the Holy One, Blessed be He, stood and said: "I am the Lord your God," (Exodus 20:2), the earth shook, as it is said: "Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled" (Judges 5:4). And it says: "The mountains quaked before the Lord." (Judges 5:5). And it also says: "The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty," (Psalm 29:4) and so forth up to: "And in his Temple all say, 'Glory!'" (Psalm 29:9). It went so far that their houses were filled with the radiance of the Shekinah.[121]

The moment is, of course, the giving of the Torah in Exodus 20; "I am the Lord your God" initiates the decalogue. The scene is majestic: the earth shakes, the intertexts are cosmic verses from the

[120] Midrash Tanḥuma, Vayakhel 7.

[121] Mek. de-Rabbi Ishmael, Baḥodesh 5.

song of Deborah. A Temple vision not unlike Isaiah 6 unfolds in front of the people. Alongside this, the Shekinah suddenly fills their homes. This experience also has a hint of menace to it: earthquakes are dangerous, after all, and as the midrash goes on to relate, the disturbance is so great that the other nations of the world are alarmed, supposing that the end of the world is at hand.

This side of the Shekinah seems to conflict with the other. On the one hand, it is a powerful theophanic presence, manifesting as overwhelming radiance, and the natural accompaniment to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. On the other hand, it converses with Abraham in an intimate way and is present to ordinary Jews in their ordinary religious tasks.

The way through this paradox is the gracious accommodation of the Shekinah, and its love for Israel. In some places we see the Shekinah's presence with Israel described almost as a kind of condescension, a stooping-down to honor mortals who are, in some way, worthy of divine esteem. So for instance, the Mekhilta says that, because of Joseph's observance of the Torah, God causes the Shekinah itself to accompany his coffin out of Egypt, to do him honor.[122] Elsewhere, this same idea receives still more poignant expression when the Shekinah accompanies Israel into exile:

> R. Akiva says, "If it were not written in the Scripture, it would be impossible to say! Israel says to the Divine, "You have, so to speak, liberated *yourself."* And so you find that in every place that Israel is exiled, the Shekinah, as it were, is exiled with them. They were exiled in Egypt, and the Shekinah was with them, as it says, "I exiled myself into the house of your fathers, when they were in Egypt" (1 Sam. 2:27). They were exiled in Babylon, and the Shekinah was with them, as it says, "On your account, I was sent to Bablyon" (Isaiah 43:14) [descriptions of further exiles continue.] And when they return, the Shekinah will, so to speak, return with them, as it says, "The Lord your God will return with your captivity.[123]

Some of the scriptural exegesis in this passage is tendentious, but the theological point is clear: the Shekinah, out of love, allows itself to go with the Israelites into every exile that they face (as the

[122] Mek. de-Rabbi Ishmael, Beshallaḥ 1.

[123] Mek. de-Rabbi Ishmael, Pisḥa 14.

full passage makes clear, this includes not only Biblical exiles but also the current diaspora in the Roman period). This is not an appropriate thing to say, the repeated "so to speak" and R. Akiva's initial exclamation show that it cannot possibly be true. And yet it is written, and it *is* true.[124]

The Shekinah will, as I said at the outset of this excursus, evolve into a kind of doctrine in the medieval period, and even a *mystical entity*, as Arthur Green describes. But here, in the early rabbinic midrashim, it does not seem to me yet to have reached anything like a separable divinized being. It appears to me rather as an exegetical *symbol*. Like Ephrem's symbols, the reality which is apprehended on the surface level—the geographical presence of the Presence in Israel's past, in the Ark, the Tabernacle, and the Temple, points at a truth which cannot quite be comprehended intellectually: the divine presence of God with the Jews in the present day.

Ephrem and the Shekinah

As my invocation of the symbolic in the last paragraph doubtless suggests, I argue that there is a connection between the rabbinic discourse surrounding the Shekinah and Ephrem the Syrian's Mary. To be clear, this is not a *direct* connection; Ephrem did not read the midrashim and did not shape his Mariology in response to rabbinic teaching. He could not even if he wanted to: the rabbinic texts on the *Shekinah* that I quoted in the last section developed in a wide variety of specific historical contexts, and did not constitute a coherent body of teaching in the fourth century. Some of them likely postdate Ephrem altogether. Moreover, they are addressed to specific exegetical and theological concerns in Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. Ephrem is far removed from these contexts.

[124] On this motif in general, see Norman Cohen, "Shekhinta Ba-Galuta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution," *JSJ* 13 (1982): 147–59.

And yet, the distance is not *absolute.* In two places Ephrem himself speaks about the Shekinah (or, as his Syriac has it, the *shekinta:* ܫܟܝܢܬܐ).[125]

> When the just ascend [Paradise's] various levels to receive their inheritance,
> With justice he raises up each one to the degree that accords with his labors.
> Each is stopped at the level whereof he is worthy,
> There being sufficient levels in Paradise for everyone.
> The lowest parts for the repentant, the middle for the righteous,
> The heights for those victorious, while the summit is reserved for the *shekinta*.[126]

> But when he cried out, the wind greatly magnified his cry against the Temple.
> When she heard that he lowered his head and cried out, she tore the curtain as though terrified.
> Creation wrapped itself in mourning cloaks and shrouded itself with darkness because of the death of the Son of the Lord
> The *shekinta* of the Temple, as if it were her garment, tore the curtain [in mourning] because of her beloved.[127]

These two passages are all that we can base Ephrem's own theology of the *Shekinta* on, but they do at least give us a few things to think about. First, Ephrem places it in the highest point of Paradise, beyond the reach even of the victorious. Second, however, it was present in the Temple, and at the moment of the crucifixion, Ephrem portrays the *Shekinta* as being the one to tear apart the Temple veil (c.f. Matt. 27:51).[128]

Let us remember, too, that the rabbinic Shekinah did not appear exclusively in midrash, but rather was well-represented in the targumim, the Aramaic translations of the Bible. Ephrem,

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[125] These citations are given by Dominique Cerbelaud, "Aspects de la Shekinah chez les auters Chrétiens syriens," *Le Muséon* 123 (2010): 91–125. I have been unable as yet to locate additional passages.

[126] Ephrem, *HdP*. 2.11. Translation by Brock; I have modified his "God's Presence" for clarity.

[127] Ephrem, *Azym*. 13.18–21. Translation by Walters; I have modified his "glorious presence" for clarity.

[128] It is a speculative point, but there is something striking in the way that the *shekinta* here is personified as grieving within the temple at a moment of catastrophic loss; it puts one in mind of the famous proem 25 of Lamentations Rabbah, where the Shekinah is pictured as mourning over the destruction of the Temple: "when the Shekinah went out from the Temple, it returned and hugged and kissed the walls and the pillars, and it wept and said, "Oh, the peace of the Temple! Oh the peace of my palace!"

too, read an Aramaic translation of the Bible: the Peshitta.[129] Sure enough, the *shekinta* appears in the Old Testament of the Peshitta a number of times, mainly in the Book of Chronicles.[130] As Cerbelaud argues, this puts the Syriac Christian *shekinta* in a privileged position over the rabbinic Shekinah in at least one respect: the word is found in the only, and authoritative, Bible that the Syrian Christians read (unlike the Rabbis, who had in parallel a privileged Hebrew text which did not have the word and an authoritative, but secondarily authoritative, Aramaic text which did).[131]

Ephrem does not explicitly link the *shekinta* with Mary. He does, however, speak about Christ "dwelling" in Mary a great deal—more than two dozen times in the Hymns on the Nativity alone. In these instances he does not use the Syriac word ܫܟܢ; although that verb still has an entry in the lexica, the far more common term for the expression is the verb ܥܢܐ, and this is the word that Ephrem uses again and again to describe Christ's presence in Mary. Although there is a conceptual link between Mary and the *shekinta*, therefore, there is not a direct verbal link.

But if we leave beyond direct verbal connections, and consider the way that the symbol of the Shekinah is employed in early rabbinic literature, I think we can at least observe that the two—the Rabbis, attempting to wrestle with God's particular presence in Israel, and Ephrem, attempting to wrestle with God's particular presence in Mary—nonetheless think, at least, in parallel grooves. There are at least two points of commonality, one relating to the authors' imagined past and one relating to their present.

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[129] The question of the relationship of the targum and the Peshitta is a vexed one; see the articles collected in Paul Flesher, ed. *Targum Studies, Volume 2: Targum and Peshitta* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

[130] Cerbelaud, "Aspects de la Shekinah," 92–97. He makes the further point that it is oddly absent from the New Testament.

[131] Cerbelaud, "Aspects de la Shekinah," 124.

First, the rabbinic discussions of the Shekinah express, as Ephrem does with regard to Mary, a fascination with the paradox of space. When God tells Moses to make him a shrine, the rabbinic passage has Moses gravely alarmed, considering that even all of Heaven is not enough to hold the Almighty. Ephrem, similarly, notes that "Earth and heaven are too narrow to be in the form of a bosom to hide your divinity," and yet, the womb of Mary suffices! Mary's invocation of Christ as a "Great Sea" and herself as a harbor, in Nat 9.4, does not derive from R. Levi's image of the cavern and the ocean, but it at least expresses the same idea. This paradox is overcome, however, by divine condescension. God wills to let his Shekinah go into slavery and exile with Israel out of his abundant love for his people; Christ the shepherd of all enters Mary, and becomes a lamb, and comes out bleating.[132]

The second, and perhaps still more interesting, way that rabbinic Shekinah discourse and Ephrem's Mariology show signs of parallel development is the way that both use the Biblical story of God's ancient presence to affirm the importance of practices in the present. They accomplish this by a kind of exegesis, locating some point within the scriptural story from which they can build a bridge to their own communities. The ancient patriarchs and kings of Israel beheld the Shekinah in the Ark, the Tabernacle, and the Temple; but after all, say the Rabbis, the whole reason that the Shekinah dwelt in the Ark, and did wonders from it, is because the Ark contained the Torah. Therefore, says the Bavli, even when two people today study Torah, they sit in the same Presence that once spoke to Moses on Sinai amid fire and smoke. The God whom heaven and earth could not contain—nor even death—dwelt within the small womb of Mary. But he dwelt within her womb *because it was sealed.* So too, in the sealed wombs of chaste virgins in his own day. Ephrem claims, Christ can come to dwell.

[132] Ephrem, *Nat*. 11.6.

To repeat, I do not argue that Ephrem's Mariological texts owe any direct dependence on the body of rabbinic thought about the Shekinah. Nor do I claim even that his Mariology is directly influenced by his own, inchoate thought about the *shekinta.* Rather, I argue that Ephrem's symbology about Mary and the rabbinic symbol of the Shekinah develop out of need to express parallel sets of theological convictions: that God, who cannot be contained by space, nevertheless is present with particular people, in particular times, in particular ways.

Summary

As with the last chapter, I have ended on a note of speculation. It is impossible to recover concretely the connections between the Rabbinic symbol of the Shekinah and Ephrem's description of Christ's indwelling within Mary. Such concrete connections may not, in fact, exist. But the parallels between their modes of thinking, and even some of their language, seem to me to strongly suggest that here we find, if nothing else, parallel developments, evolving out of a shared response to a scriptural problem and, even beyond this, an *existential* problem. This last point is of course most difficult to prove, but I find it highly suggestive.

Prior to this speculation, however, I did trace two more concrete points of connection between Ephrem and the rabbinic authors, and it is worth briefly recapitulating them. First, we found that the Rabbis, whatever their ambivalence about the continuing existence of prophetic gifts in the present, had a robust understanding of prophecy in antiquity: it was accompanied by the presence of the Ruaḥ hakodesh, and sometimes even involved the Lord putting the Ruaḥ within the mouth of the prophet. Moreover, although prophecy was not exclusive to Israel, it was in the clarity of his prophetic communication with Israel that God honored and showed his love for them.

Ephrem, as we saw, expressed Mary's prophetic gift in some of the same language, while polemically disputing the unique claims of Israelite prophecy.

Looking at rabbinic legal arguments about virginity in the context of Deuteronomy 22, meanwhile, helped us to better understand why, when Ephrem discusses Mary's virginity, he places so much emphasis on her *physical* virginity. In doing so, he is wading (perhaps unawares) into an active legal dispute on how virginity is determined. By choosing to emphasize Mary's physical virginity, he not only refutes a certain kind of "slander" against the Virgin. He also classifies her as a virgin in the strictest sense of Jewish law, and then subordinates the entirety of that law to his symbolic theology. The only reason that Deuteronomy 22 was ever uttered, so he claims, was so that Mary could be proved to be holy.

CONCLUSION

I began this dissertation with a theological paradox. How could Christians in antiquity speak of God as being present in one place and yet present everywhere? This study has not resolved that problem; one does not resolve paradoxes, one thinks with them. But through my examination first of Ephrem's language about Mary, and then the various authors of Ephrem's Syrian Christian context, and finally the authors of his further contexts in pagan Greek and rabbinic Jewish literature, I have explored the ways in which ancient religious minds conceptualized parts of the problem. Centering Mary gave me a set of symbols to work with, symbols that I found interesting resonances for across a wide variety of authors.

This has been a diffuse project, and so I think it's appropriate at the end to offer a summary of some of the most important points that have been uncovered.

First, Ephrem's theology of Mary is expressed in a variety of symbols: she is a paradoxical mother, a prophetess, a temple of God, a consecrated virgin. She is bathed in light, she is out at sea. We also noticed, however, that these various symbols tended to slide easily from one to another, and that the nice divisions that we made in order to analyze and think through Ephrem's symbolic system tended to collapse in the face of the actual poetry. This comes down in part to Ephrem's style as a poet—possibly to something about poetry in general—but it is also, as one strand of scholarship has shown and as I argued in chapter 1, because Ephrem's symbols are not discrete images pointing at separate truths. They are rather more like a constellation: all that one sees, if one looks abstractly, is various points of independent light. But if one lets the mind wander across the various points, and lets the mind fill in connections between them, and tries to take them in all at once, all of a sudden, a picture in the heavens emerges.

Moving to the comparanda, chapter 3 illustrated that early Syrian Christianity, taken as whole, was actively engaged in discourse about the human being becoming a temple, and working out what that meant. From the *Protoevangelium*, in which it was a singular status for which Mary herself was prepared before she was even conceived, we saw it evolve in the *Acts of Thomas* into a way of life, one that could be preached, and one that was set up against a dangerous opposite: the temple of Christ versus the temple of the demons. In Aphrahat, the way of life whereby sexual renunciates became temples was given a new foundation, as the Persian sage built an exegetical defense for celibacy against Jewish interlocutors.

Embedding Ephrem into this world not only helped us to grasp that his theology of Mary as the temple (and consequently, other virgins as temples) did not emerge in a vacuum. It also helped us coordinate various pieces of his symbolic system. In both the *Acts of Thomas* and Aphrahat, the human temple of God was explicitly indexed to a life of chastity; in Aphrahat, the experience of *being* a human temple was connected too with the prophetic vision of the wise ascetic. Thus, various stars in Ephrem's Marian constellation shone a little brighter, and we understood the way that they connected to one another.

Chapters 4 and 5 took us a little further from Ephrem's closest context, and our conclusions became a little more tentative. A few of them are very well-grounded. Perhaps the firmest is Ephrem's account of Mary's physical virginity in conversation with the Rabbinic material. The basic contours of Ephrem's thought here are clear purely from his own work. Mary's virginity establishes her womb as sealed space, which at different places operates symbolically as the veil of the Temple or the seal on Christ's tomb. But Ephrem's symbol of Mary's physical virginity becomes more significant when it is noted that, at nearly the same time and not too far away, the Rabbis were engaged in a vigorous debate over who, exactly, counted as a virgin. Understood

against that backdrop, Ephrem's interpretation of Deuteronomy 22, which is simultaneously literalist and also typological, became more sensible. His concomitant attack on Jewish slander, even if we could not place it in a direct conversation, nonetheless took on new social implications.

A somewhat coherent picture of prophecy also emerged across all of the traditions that we studied. From Iamblichus to the rabbis to the *Odes of Solomon*, although they differed in some particulars, all the authors we looked at had certain things in common with Ephrem: the prophet is not in control of his own words; he does not choose prophecy, but rather a divinity comes to him. In many cases, this divinity literally puts the words, or the spirit, in the mouth of the prophet. Viewed in this light, Ephrem's portrayal of Mary's prophetic speech about Christ—prophetic speech that often takes the form of symbolic theology—can be more clearly understood.

In a more speculative mode, my reading of the *Aethiopica* in the context of the high-theological Syrian virginity discourse proposes a way of thinking about the interactions between Christians and Christian critics in the fourth-century east. More work needs to be done to buttress this sort of reading in evidence taken from other literary, and non-literary sources, but I find the solution tempting. Meanwhile, my reading of Ephrem in response to the rabbinic Shekinah illustrates, as I hope, the way that even in the absence of a direct borrowing between two religious groups, mutual reflection in the face of a similar paradox and a similar textual heritage could help induce two religious traditions to grow in parallel on the trellis.

All three of the symbols that we set out to investigate at the end of the second chapter were thus enriched by our consideration of Ephrem's context. But alongside enriching our understanding of Ephrem, I have helped to paint a vivid picture of two larger facets of late antique thought. First, it has illustrated the various ways that images and clusters of ideas could transform, migrate, and evolve across religious, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries in the peripheries of the

Roman world in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Motifs that we saw in one place recurred again in another over and over again. I used Ephrem as the center of my project, because he is particularly rich in material and particular self-aware in his use of symbols. But over the course of reading these sources, it becomes clear that an interesting project might just as easily have centered, say, Iamblichus, and traced his symbols on the theory of prophecy across different traditions instead.

Second, this dissertation has illustrated that quite apart from shared images, the various religious traditions of late antiquity—but especially Judaism and Christianity—were both contending with the same religious paradoxes. How can human agency and desire for God's presence square with God's omnipotence? How can the God who is everywhere be said to be *especially* here? How could the Lord whom death itself could not restrain be confined within the womb? How can he for whom the Heaven of Heavens was not enough space speak to Moses in a little tent in the desert?

This is, of course, a paradox. It cannot be understood in words. But, as Ephrem knew, and as R. Levi knew, it might be grasped by symbols.

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