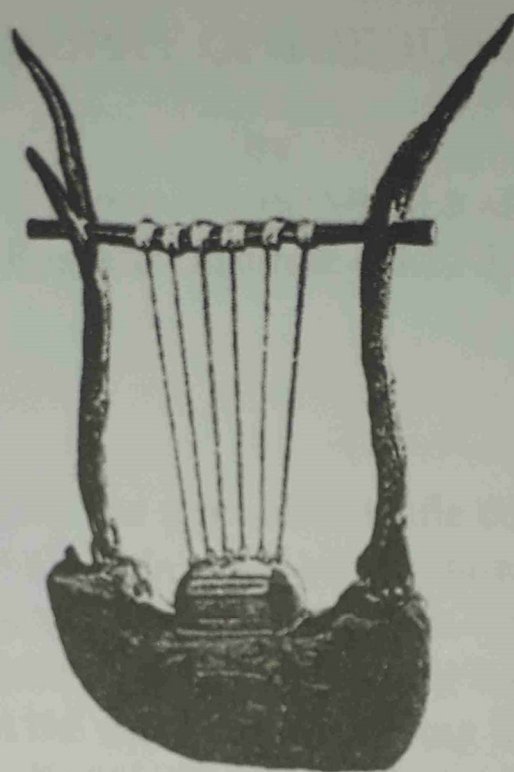


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Thomas KOONAMMAKKAL , <i>Ephrem's philosophy of theological language</i>	153
Sidney H. GRIFFITH , <i>Saint Ephraem's adversaries: Readings in Hymns against Heresies; Madrāshê xxii-xxiv</i>	177
François CASSINGENA-TRÉVEDY , <i>La pneumatologie des Hymnes Sur la Foi</i>	197
Dominique GONNET et René LAVENANT , « <i>Sentir le Paradis</i> » <i>d'après les Hymnes Sur le Paradis d'Éphrem de Nisibê († 373)</i>	239



EPHREM'S PHILOSOPHY OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Early Christian writers had a problem while confronting Greek philosophy: how far is it acceptable? In other words, how to reconcile the Gospel message with the Hellenistic background? There were two radically different approaches. Justin the martyr stood for making Greek philosophy to serve Christian propaganda, at the same time admitting the positive worth of Hellenistic wisdom. But his disciple Tatian the Syrian had a different view. Unlike his master, Tatian took a confrontational attitude towards Greek wisdom, though the Greek philosophical influence on his thought cannot be overlooked. These authors were only two second century representatives of a trend that was gradually emerging. Two later contemporaries followed suit: Clement of Alexandria in his fight against Gnosticism stood as the champion of Christian Hellenistic synthesis, while Tertullian of Carthage openly hated Greek philosophy though the Stoic colour of his mind remained. Justin and Tatian came from the Semitic Orient influenced by Hellenism and both were well-educated in Greek thought. Clement was born and brought up in the cradle of Greek philosophy. But how did Tertullian the Latin scholar and lawyer, come to hate Greek wisdom after his conversion to Christianity? Like Tatian the Syrian he too was following an apologetic tactic while adopting such a view. Whenever Greek philosophy happened to support their theological views these early Christian apologists had no scruples in making ample use of what they openly discarded.

Ephrem, the fourth century poet-theologian, seems to have followed the approach of Tatian in this matter. His cultural and theological background was more or less the same that of Tatian. About Ephrem's education we know almost nothing except that he was educated in Christian faith under Jacob of Nisibis. It seems that Ephrem was "an unschooled" (*hediota* in his



own words!) scholar who lacked classical education of his days. He was not at all ignorant of Greek philosophical ideas because he grew up in a world very much penetrated with Hellenistic language and culture. After the invasion of Alexander the Great, Greek culture and ideas spread rapidly across Mesopotamia and Persia to the then North West India. It is no wonder that even without a Greek classical education a Syrian can have had access to the Hellenistic world and philosophy. The cultural background of Ephrem in Nisibis and his later contact with bilingual Christians of Edessa cannot be overlooked while explaining the influence of Greek philosophical ideas in his theological speculations. As a zealous Christian apologist Ephrem took an apparently anti-philosophical attitude against heretics who were well-versed in Hellenistic philosophy; but this was only an apologetic tool against his theological adversaries whom he wanted to defeat by all means. Many scholars have pointed out the problem of Greek philosophical concepts in Ephrem's theology¹ though it is not a finished chapter. Here what we attempt to do is slightly different, that is to say, to point out Ephrem as a religious philosopher in his own right. His philosophy of theological language is our concern. Ephrem's theological polemics with the Neo-Arian issue bring out some of his views in this respect.

EPHREM'S PROBLEM WITH METHODOLOGY

According to Ephrem the Arians went wrong in their doctrines because they were applying a wrong methodology - *'uqqaba* and *bṣata* - in their theologizing: *'aqeb* means to take by the heel, to hold back, to follow closely, to trace or seek out;² it is to track down the prey like a hunter. *Bṣā* is to search into or out, trace out, inquire into, investigate³. *B'ā* is another term explaining more or less the same idea⁴. What Ephrem criticizes is not any balanced or reasonable search into theological issues. In his terminology the Arians are *baṣoyē* (scrutinizers), *darōšē* (disputers), *saprē* (scholars) and *saklē* (fools) who go astray through their wrong and presumptuous approach of tracking down, prying into the divine realities, forgetting the ontological chasm⁵. Ephrem sees them as 'learned fools' (*saprē saklē*)⁶. But the *parōšē*

1) U. POSSEKEL, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (CSCO 580 Subsidia 102, Louvain, 1999).

2) J. PAYNE SMITH, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, p. 424.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 51.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 50.

5) See HdF 1:9, 13:1, 15:7-8, 16:11, 17:3, 23:2-3, 35:3, 39:1, 51:7, 53:1ff, 60:4, 77:1ff, etc.; E. BECK, *Die Theologie des Ephrem*, p. 62-80; *idem*, *Ephraems Reden über den Glauben: Ihr*

do not have such a dilemma as is faced by disputers; they keep in mind the ultimate difference between Creator and created throughout their search. Thus, in theologizing, Ephrem set forth a philosophical rationale of his own, contrasting it with that of the Arians.

EPHREM'S THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

It is rather surprising that Dom Edmund Beck, one of the greatest authorities on Ephrem qualified him as an "agnostic"⁷. Bundy has repeated this view about Ephrem⁸. Whether an agnostic will ever recognize Ephrem as such is an interesting question. Perhaps Beck's opinion need not be taken literally? No doubt that it is Ephrem's emphasis on the ontological chasm that earned him this modern title. A God who is beyond human language, but reveals himself in human language and symbols, is the problem before Ephrem the poet-theologian. Created sign-posts (*nīšē*) are established throughout our Nature⁹. They are meant for rational human beings endowed with the faculty of speech and language. The Creator dwelt in the vast wombs of all creation¹⁰. Rationality, language and freedom prompt humanity to read the language of revelation in the created universe. Through these nearby indications we can safely search and reach That Far Away One (*haw raḥiqa*). A far-away God comes near and still after coming near He remains far away! Nearness and far-away-ness both apply to Him! It is a unique dilemma that constantly haunted and fascinated the mind of Ephrem the poet-theologian. A nearness that is far-away-ness and a far-away-ness that is nearness! Such paradoxical language is natural to his system of thought which defies systematization. The Book of Nature is pregnant with revelatory symbols proclaiming the incarnation of God in human language. The same process of divine revelation is intensified in the Book of Scripture until the climax of incarnation takes place in Jesus Christ. The tension precipitat-

theologischer Lehrgehalt und ihrer geschichtlicher Rahmen (Studia Anselmiana 33, Rome, 1953), pp. 111-116. See my "Ephrem's Imagery of Chasm", in R. LAVENANT, ed., *Symposium Syriacum VII* (OCA 256, Roma, 1998), pp. 175-183.

6) HdF 53:7.

7) E. BECK, *Die Theologie des hl. Ephraem in seinen Hymnen über den Glauben* (Studia Anselmiana 21, Città del Vaticano, 1949), p. 25; *Idem, Ephräms des Syrers Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre* (CSCO 419/Subs. 58; 1980), pp. 95-96, 116-147; *Idem, Ephräms Trinitätslehre im Bild von Sonne/Feuer, Licht und Wärme* (CSCO 425/Subs. 62; 1981), pp. 25.120.

8) D. BUNDY, "Language and the knowledge of God in Ephrem Syrus", *PBR* 5:2 (1986), p. 100.

9) HdF 1:4.

10) HdN 21:6f.



ed in the language about a revealing God who is at the same time a revealed God and a hidden God, is a favourite theme for Ephrem. In other early Christian writers it is the problem of transcendence and immanence of the self-same God. As usual Ephrem explains this in the language of imagery and paradox.

You don't reach the things revealed;
How can you grasp the Hidden One? (...)
But why should we weary ourselves to narrate
The creatures which are incomprehensible?
For see, at the scrutiny of things revealed
They become like things hidden.
And if revealed things are also hidden,
Indeed how much more hidden, the things hidden!
And if the things hidden are hidden,
How much more hidden the Hidden One in His hiddenness!¹¹

The divine self-revelation is a unique and dynamic mode of communication to all who seek God with discernment. The very language of revelation is radically different from our ordinary speech about the created realm. Theological language is itself sacramental, iconic or symbolic. Corporeal, spatial, temporal categories are ruled out on the one hand. But they get employed on a radically different level. Ordinary human categories of thought undergo a process of sacramentalization. God communicates without enslaving Himself to the means of our communication, though He uses our means for our benefit. Revelation is a help given to our created intellect to direct its steps towards God with wonder and awe.

Glory to that One Who never before could be measured by us;
Our heart is too small for Him and our intellect too weak.
He dazzles our smallness by the wealth of His forms.
Let us worship the One Who enlightened our intellect by His teaching
And prepared in our hearing a path for His words.
Let us thank the One Who gave to taste His Fruit on our tree.
Glory to the Farmer, the Hidden One of our thought.
His seed fell on our earth and enriched our intellect.
Blessed is He Who Himself constructed the senses of our minds
So that we might sing on our lyre something that the mouth
Of the bird is unable to sing in its melodies¹².

11) SdF II:355f, 429-436. See my "Divine Names and Theological Language in Ephrem", *Studia Patristica* 25 (Leuven, 1993), pp. 318-323.

12) HdN 3:11-12,14,16 in K.E.McVEY, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York, 1989).



He is the Being for whose greatness we are incompetent;
 Not even for His smallness;
 He became great, we go astray.
 He became small, we become helpless.
 With all (means) He wearied Himself with us.
 He wanted to teach us two things,
 That He became and He did not become.
 In His love, He made for Himself appearances
 Of His servants that they may look at Him.
 But that we should not damage ourselves and think that 'He is thus',
 He changed from image to image to teach us,
 That He has no image.
 And though He did not depart from human picture
 He left it through His changes¹³.
 His form cannot be searched out,
 That it should be depicted in our mind.
 He hears without ears;
 He speaks without mouth;
 He works without hands,
 And He sees without eyes¹⁴.
 He depicted the hidden upon the revealed,
 To show the invisible
 By means of the visible.
 Also He imprinted His symbols on the trees
 To explain the incomprehensible
 Through the comprehensible¹⁵.
 If the creatures depend on Him
 How can they be far away from Him?
 Far away His nearness,
 Near, His far-away-ness!
 He is far away, though very near!
 Who can describe Him?¹⁶
 He is far away and near,
 Also, hidden in His revelation!¹⁷
 Be far away and near!
 Blessed is He, who is near while being far away!¹⁸
 Though far away, He is very near to us

pp. 85f.

13) HdF 31:10-11; cf. HdN 13:9, 25:15, etc.

14) C.Nis. 3:2.

15) HdF 76:11-12.

16) SdF II:709-714.

17) HdV 36:9.3.

18) C.Nis. 21:13.5.



Through His union of love¹⁹.
 However much, Lord I would feel You,
 It is still not You Yourself I touch,
 For my mind can touch nothing of Your hiddenness:
 It is just a visible, illumined image
 That I see in the symbol of You;
 For all investigation into Your being is hidden²⁰.

In all the above cited texts we observe Ephrem's idea of a dynamic and paradoxical tension related to the ontological chasm. Elsewhere he deals with this tension in great detail as hiddenness and revelation²¹. Divine epiphany goes hand in hand with divine hiddenness. They neither stand apart nor exclude each other. Divine manifestation is divine hiddenness and *vice versa*. While being revealed God is hidden; while being hidden God is revealed. Divine revelation and divine hiddenness penetrate each other and one can speak of this in terms of *perichoresis*. Hence there is always scope for speaking about God in human terms. This we are able to do, not on our own insufficient resources, but based on a prudent observation and intelligent interpretation of divinely erected sign-posts all around us in Nature. There is always something that lies behind and beyond these sign-posts. Our God-talk will never cease as we are unable to interpret these symbols in an exhaustive manner. This human inability is an indication that we are only creatures of the Creator. In itself it is not a drawback; instead it is our starting point towards God and God-talk.

Inability of intellectual investigation in hunting down God like a prey of the human mind actually shows the real difference between a non-existing god created by our imagination and the real God who exists and reveals Himself to us. Incarnation of God in human language is a divine initiative and it is not at all the achievement or invention of human imagination. God is everywhere and nowhere at the same time²² - a statement that baffles the human intellect left without the perspective of revelation. It is utterly futile and foolish to attempt to track down and thereby presume to put the Limitless within limits, to see the Unseen, to define the Indefinable God whether

19) *C.Nis.* 50:6.2.

20) *C.Nis* 50:13 in S. BROCK, *The Harp of the Spirit: 18 Poems of St. Ephrem* (London, 1983), p. 58.

21) G. NOUJAIM, "Anthropologie et Économie de Salut chez saint Éphrem autour des notions *Ghalyata, Kasyata et Kasya*", in *Parole de l'Orient* 9 (1979/80), pp. 313-315.

22) Cf. HdF 4:7-9.

incarnate or not. The ontological chasm is not the natural consequence of our corporeality; instead, it is first and foremost a limitation and boundary arising from the very nature of our createdness - a condition we share even with angels. The angels too are at a loss if and when they try to grasp what is beyond the chasm or the grasp of every created reality.

We cannot form even a picture of God as He is in our heart²³. Such an emphasis on the significance of the ontological chasm might be the reason why Beck called Ephrem "an agnostic" as we saw above. Such a title cannot be given to Ephrem when we understand Ephrem on his own terms. The inability of creatures to track down the Creator is no failure or drawback in Ephrem's view about our knowledge of God, seeing that the intellect is not meant for such a task on its own resources. The intellectual stretch of the creature is shorter than the Divine range and there is a non-connection. The remoteness or distance is the chasm that ultimately distinguishes the Creator and creatures. The near is far away and remains a wonder from every angle of our search. The stretch of our intellectual enquiry falls short and fails to reach the distance; but faith, love and prayer combined can arrive at the divine realm²⁴.

When Ephrem criticizes intellectual scrutiny of God, it is only arrogant rationalism he rules out because such an approach blinds or shortens the reach of the eye of our thought²⁵, and hence his warning: "Let us not blind the eye of our thought through scrutiny"²⁶. God cannot be depicted as He is, even in our thought, much less in our language. "...not even its type can be depicted in (our) thought"²⁷. But for Ephrem this does not eliminate valid theologizing. The ineffable God can be and should be depicted through *demwan* - images and illustrations. *Dmūtā* - image, likeness, icon - serves as an inexhaustible fountain. "And as my mouth overflows and as he who has sucked the sweetness of Paradise, I will depict it in all images (*kol demwan*)"²⁸. What we depict are only examples or pictures of a reality which can be looked at from endless angles. They are gateways to divine reality as they communicate in terms of divine revelation. The images we draw in our 'heart' (intellect included), serve as an adorable icon (*yūqnā*) of God, as we are told in HdF 4:10. Here *dmūtā* and *yūqnā* mean much the same as what

23) HdF 4:10.9.

24) HdF 4:11.

25) HdF 5:18, HdN 22:22 (eyes of the soul); HdP 1:4, HdF 53:12 (eyes of the mind).

26) CSCO 154 Syr 73, p. 65.

27) HdP 3:1.

28) HdP 1:9.

we mean by 'sacrament'²⁹.

Thus, theologizing is a valid and useful process in Ephrem's view. In fact he goes on 'describing' endlessly because 'defining' is forgetting the ontological chasm. He gets lost in this process of drawing many pictures, and bursts into highly pictorial and eloquent rhetoric that characterizes the breakdown of all restrictive barriers of ordinary words and their usual meaning in order to create a sound theological language of his own. Fixedness of word - meaning just disappears along with the concern about making 'definitions'. Once words - insufficient as they are - lose their static nature, they are used as pigments by an artist. Colours are used one after another to describe rather than to define; but this is a process without an end when somebody can say 'This is the final picture of God'. Insufficiency of words does not, and need not, bring the process to a halt. There is a divine pedagogy to guide us in our God-talk. But always our words and our language about God remain incomplete. That is why after every description Ephrem feels the continual incompleteness of the picture he is drawing. For him Sun and ray are two examples or icons (*demwata*). The great might of the Sun with its intensity of heat and light remain beyond the gaze of the eye. But the moderate ray of the Sun is not harmful to the eyes. The Sun represents the Father whereas the ray stands for the Incarnate Son³⁰. This typically Alexandrian view we find in Ephrem is rather interesting. Or was it a common tradition that both Alexandrians and Syrians inherited independently? Let us listen to Ephrem describing the Incarnate Son:

In the ray that is from Him, there tempered itself
 His wonderful vehemence.
 Not that He actually became weak;
 For us He became sweet, for He abated Himself for us;
 We have compared Him to a ray,
 Even though this is not His likeness;
 For, there is nothing
 With which to depict Him exactly.
 In examples He is depicted,
 That according to our ability we may learn about Him
 Through His blessed (means of) help³¹.

29) See E. BECK, "Zur Terminologie von Ephräms Bildtheologie", in M. SCHMIDT et al., *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter*, (EB 4, Regensburg, 1982), pp. 279ff.

30) Cf. HdF 6:2-3.

31) 'udranawhy brike. See E. BECK, "Die Eucharistie bei Ephräm", OC 38 (1954), pp.



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