



The Spirituality of Ephrem and the Syriac Church in the 4th Century

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Abstract: The paper briefly presents Ephrem's spirituality as emblematic of the earliest Syriac Church, and at least of the fourth century. First, according to Ephrem's parenthesis in his hymns, the truth of Christian witness has to face, with strength and firmness, every testing situation, because of difficulties caused by social or political pressures. Second, it is noted that Ephrem's vision embraces East and West together, outlining alongside the features of salvation history also those of a geography of salvation. From this emerges a truly universal view of the work of Christ, the true Physician who heals the world described as a great sick body. Finally, some original Ephremian notes are presented on the inseparable solidarity that exists between soul and body, which founds the truth of the Christian hope of resurrection. The necessity, so to speak, of such a promise, which transcends all temporal and spatial order, shines through in the brothers of Bethany, where new life is anticipated, the Lord himself is welcomed and sits at the table among others.

Keywords: Ephrem; Hymns; Julian the Apostate; Christ the physician; soul and body; resurrection; Lazarus; Martha and Mary

1. *Veritatis splendor: in the furnace and the forge*

When I wanted to put the term "spirituality" ("the spirituality of the early Syriac Church") in the subtitle of my doctoral thesis on the Syriac exegesis of Daniel, I remember that André de Halleux advised against it². Mine was to be a study of exegesis, as rigorous as possible,

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² But, certainly, the sense of "spirituality" is well clear in other contexts, as that of this meeting and I therefore thank all the organizers and especially Rev. Prof. Jan Želazný for the invitation. I publish here the text prepared for the reading in the conference on *The Spirituality of Eastern Fathers of the Church*, Krakow, October 29, 2024, The Pontifical University of John Paul II. For a very useful overall introduction to the spirituality of the Syriac tradition, see first S.P. Brock, *La spiritualità nella tradizione siriana*, Roma 2006; S.P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality*, Syrian Churches Series 13, Poona 1988 (2nd rev. edition, Bangalore 2008). See also M. Nin, *Il soffio*

and I had to study the thought and theology of the Fathers, in my case especially Ephrem. Indeed, I left in the subtitle simply “the exegesis of Dan 3 in the early Syriac Church”³. When de Halleux regrettably passed away, I was able to pursue my doctorate, which was from a consortium of Italian state universities based in Bologna, again with a thesis moderator from Louvain la Neuve. Although in the meantime, for a year in Oxford, I had been guest student of Sebastian Brock, to whom I owe much, it was in fact Fr. Pierre-Maurice Bogaert, an expert on Chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel that I was dealing with, who guided me in concluding the research. He asked me to accompany the reading of the passages on the three children in the furnace according to Ephrem with that of Jacob of Serugh’s long *mēm̄rā* 36 on “Daniel and the House of Ananias”, opening up for me a broader perspective on Syriac patrology and making me discover that, for Jacob, they were “the friends of truth”⁴.

The title of the thesis, and I come to the reason for these personal memories, was then to take up the term “truth” and I cannot say when I formulated that of “truth in the furnace”. I delivered the thesis certainly in 1994. The discussion then took place in Rome in November 1995, but, in those very years, on August 6, 1993, the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, the *Veritatis splendor* of St John Paul II had come out, which made so much talk. I don’t really remember whether or not I was influenced by that encyclical in my choice of “truth”, but I don’t dislike now to suppose it so speaking here in Krakow, where I am returning for the first time since 1978⁵. In any case, and I return to the topic of my talk, the term I wanted to highlight in the title of my thesis was

dell’Oriente siriano. L’anno liturgico Siro occidentale, Città del Vaticano 2013, or, among the volumes of Patrimoine Syriaque du CERO (Centre d’Études et de Recherches Orientales), see for example the Actes du Colloque VII, *Le visage de Dieu dans le patrimoine Oriental*, Antélias – Liban 2001.

³ E. Vergani, *La verità nella fornace. L’esegesi di Dn 3 nella chiesa siriana antica*, thesis advisors: prof. A. de Halleux (†), prof. F. Bolgiani, prof. P.-M. Bogaert, Dottorato di ricerca in “Storia religiosa”, Università degli Studi di Bologna, a.a. 1994/95, p. XXXI+364.

⁴ See E. Vergani, *Gli amici della verità. L’esegesi di Dn 3 in un mēm̄rā di Giacomo di Sarug*, “Laurentianum” 61 (2020) p. 427-466.

⁵ Indeed, with a friend, Adriano Fossati, I wanted to see for myself a society of “realized socialism”. As a Christian young layman in those vivacious 1970s, I shared a Catholic youth culture that was open and always in search, so to speak. It was the Polish Workers’ August of 1980 that made us reflect and understand more and more and better the pope who came from Eastern Europe, and his teaching between “orthodoxy and liberation” (this is the formula adopted by a well-known, if somewhat controversial, Italian priest, Fr Gianni Baget Bozzo).

the Syriac *šrārā*. It derives from the root *šrr* and indicates strength and solidity. In Ephrem's texts on Daniel 3 that I was studying, it represents the firmness and strength of the Christian testimony in the face of, for example, the political pressure of a tyrannical ruler (for Ephrem, Julian the Apostate) or, at least, that is how this last scion of the Constantinian family was perceived in the fourth century, and not only by Christian communities in cities like Edessa and Nisibis.

In his desire to conquer and emulate Alexander the Great, in fact, Emperor Julian reached the Eastern Roman borders in 362 to undertake the invasion of Persia⁶. He avoided the Christian cities in the region, stopping instead at Harran to perform the worship of Sin, although he then found death at the culmination of his enterprise: struck down by “the spear of justice” (*rumḥāh d-kē[']nūtā*), according to Ephrem⁷, because he had despised the One who had turned away the spear or sword that prevented the protoplasts from returning to Paradise (Gen 3:21). His plans and paganism, the Syrian Father writes again, were gathered up as in a rake and swept away by God⁸. The other term that struck me, and which I also found, like the first, in Jacob of Serugh, is *quštā*, and it too is used to indicate a “truth”, which is difficult to connote precisely, but which can apply as “truth, faith”⁹. It corresponds not only to adherence to abstract doctrines or spiritualities, but rather to a commitment to practice values that can guide life in new ways and change behavior:

⁶ See E. Vergani, *Salus corporis. Utilizzazione e contesto dell'esegesi del sogno di Nabucodonosor (Dn 2,31) negli inni di Efreem Siro*, in: *La cattura della fine. Variazioni dell'escatologia in regime di cristianità*, ed. G. Ruggieri, Testi e ricerche di Scienze Religiose, n.s. 7, Genova 1992, p. 3-37 (especially 18-23).

⁷ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni contra Julianum* 3, 14, 1-2, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 174, Syr 78, Louvain 1957, p. 84: “Because he dishonoured him who had removed the spear of Paradise (*rumḥeh d-pardaysā*)/the spear of justice (*rumḥāh d-kē[']nūtā*) passed through his belly”, tr. J.M. Lieu, *The Emperor Julian. Panegyric and Polemic*, ed. S.N.C. Lieu, Translated Texts for Historians. Greek Series 1, Liverpool 1986, p. 120.

⁸ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni contra Julianum* 2, 11, ed. Beck, CSCO 174, Syr 78, p. 77-78: “He was the thorn bush, as it is written, which was exalted and arrogant,/which threatened to bend down cedars (Sal 80,10) and cypresses,/and wished to make great the thistles and tares (Mt 13,25)./(God) made him a broom and (he) did not succeed –/the Just One swept up with him the abomination of paganism (*d-ḥanpūtā*),/and took and hurled his paganism to a remote place”, Lieu, *The Emperor Julian*, p. 114.

⁹ M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon. A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum*, Winona Lake – Piscataway 2009, p. 1346.

O sin which raked up¹⁰ the furnace (*'attūnā*)¹¹,
 in order to destroy truth (*quštā*) therein!
 It knew not it created the crucible (*kūrā*),
 in which the beauty of truth (*šupreh d-quštā*) was to be glorified (*netqallas*).
 The fire caught its heralds and they were put to shame.
 For outside (the furnace) the followers of sin were turned into fire and ashes,
 but truth (*quštā*) triumphed in the three
 and they emerged therefrom beautiful like gold!¹²

In this first stanza of *Hymn on Fasting* 8, Ephrem alludes to a truth or authenticity that shows its steadfastness in trial. It is like gold that, forged in the fire where it has lost all its scoriae, emerges from the forge resplendent with beauty. In another (unique) *Hymn on the Church* he then resorts to the image of the tree, and in particular that of the “Branch of truth” and “of life”¹³ to which all disciples must stand firmly attached lest they be shaken away at the first breath of wind. Sorry for prolonging my memories, but this reference to “truth” in the title of the thesis was not taken for granted, because it was perhaps heard as recalling outdated times in the Church. It seemed to recall discarnate doctrinal truths, which, it is true, so often we Christians have preached without concern for living them. But I did not give up that term, and it appears in an article in which I published the chapter on Ephrem of my thesis, which is entitled, precisely, “the forge of truth”¹⁴. Ephrem, like so many authors of this “Syriac world”, expresses himself in a vivid and figurative language that is nevertheless capable of speaking to our actuality as well:

Who will not persevere
 on that Branch of Truth
 which sustains the true,
 casts away the false?

¹⁰ See Dan. 3:19 and 22.

¹¹ See Dan. 3:11.

¹² Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Ieiunio* 8, 1, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 246, Syr 106, tr. E. Beck, CSCO 247, Syr 107, Louvain 1964, p. 23; tr. C. Mathew, *Saint Ephrem's Prayer Songs on the Great Fast*, Awšar šlawoto 5, Kottayam 2019, p. 50-52 (with my little changes).

¹³ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymnus de Ecclesia* stanzas 3, 5, 10, 11, ed. Beck, CSCO 174, Syr 78, p. 67, 68, 69.

¹⁴ E. Vergani, *La fucina di verità. Storia, escatologia e parenesi ecclesiale nell'egegesi su Dn 3 di Efrem il Siro*, in: *Scritture e cristianesimi in Siria tra II e IV secolo*, ed. P. Bettiolo, “Cristianesimo nella storia” 19 (1998) p. 597-630.

Not as too heavy for its strength
 did it cast them away;
 for our sake it tested them
 in the wind
 which shakes off the shrivelled
 and ripens the true.
 Blessed be he who rejected the vineyard,
 for being a source of wild grapes!¹⁵

By using the word “spirituality” in the title of this paper, without any particular terminological concerns, I want to say at once that even today, all the more so in such troubled times, at the school of the Fathers we always hear a call to flee the mellifluous sirens that charm and enchant everywhere. That is why I have chosen, among the many themes that can illustrate Ephrem’s spiritual teaching, only a few topic that seem to me sufficient to make it clear how relevant his thought can be.

2. East and West united in praise of Christ

The richness of the Ephremian texts, as it will be understood, I hope, lies not only in their finely intertextual character or subtle use of allusions, but also in the originality of his overall worldview¹⁶. It unfolds both on the temporal sphere, which is more obvious, since it refers back to the category of “salvation history”, and on the spatial sphere, with images that suggest, I would say, a “geography of salvation”¹⁷. In fact, Ephrem, in addition to recognizing divine pedagogy by identifying the authentic value of a biblical text in the connection between OT and NT, expands his use of typology and symbolism to the witness of nature itself¹⁸. Thus not only

¹⁵ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymnus de Ecclesia* stanza 10, ed. Beck, CSCO 174, Syr 78, p. 69; tr. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Cambridge – London – New York – Melbourne 1977, p. 109.

¹⁶ On Ephrem’s allusive and intertextual “style”, see C. McCarthy, *Allusions and Illusions: St Ephrem’s Verbal Magic in the Diatessaron Commentary*, in: *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers: Letter and Spirit*, ed. T. Finan – V. Twomey, Cambridge 1995, p. 143-162.

¹⁷ See E. Vergani, *Geography of Salvation in Ephrem and in some other Syriac Fathers*, in: *Breathing with two Lungs. Complementarity of the Orient and the Occident in Theologising today*, ed. G. Ayyaneth – P. Vysanethu, Pune 2017, p. 141-153.

¹⁸ On this theme of “nature” in Ephrem see, especially, *Hymni de Virginitate* 27-30, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, Louvain 1962, p. 99-113, and, for example, my Italian

on the temporal plane the maximum extension of the offer of salvation is valid. Indeed, the Christian message that always supports, at its core, the thought of the Fathers is truly universal. Ephrem, who represents for us an “Eastern” point of observation, is aware that there is no pre-eminence of the East over the West, or vice versa. In fact, for him every region is eminent because of the gifts received from Christ. That is why he traces the trophies of faith everywhere, whether they are in the North, South, West or East. In this way, he notes that in such a picture, two Orientals shine in the West. Indeed, the play of paradoxes becomes so profound that the two regions come to be inextricably intertwined.

Peter and Paul are then for Ephrem two stars that set in the West, but actually continue to illuminate the world through their martyrdom, Christian confession and preaching. But, like the two apostles, the whole world offered and offers crowns to Christ. This is why Ephrem praises the “new flowers” of martyrs and virgins from the North, the South, from whom came the Law, which no one was able to fulfil. Indeed, the Lord fulfilled it, and in some way he exauthorized it, letting it also endure as a testimony. From the East, which gave Noah, Shem, Abraham, the blessed Magi, the star and paradise, Ephrem moves on to describe the West, where he sees arising, as mentioned, the pair of “sparkling crowns” of the two apostles. But let us listen to him directly:

Let the East, with his right hand, offer him a crown;
intertwine it with the symbols and types of the ark.
On the mountains of Qardu¹⁹ he gathered his flowers.
From there (came) Noah, Shem and also the head of the world²⁰;

translation *Le Arpe del Signore*, Testi dei Padri della Chiesa 24, Magnano 1996; also, briefly, S.P. Brock, *L'occhio luminoso. La visione spirituale di Sant'Efrem*, Roma 1999, p. 42-46, 85-88; P. Yousif, *Symbolisme christologique dans la Bible et dans la nature chez S. Éphrem de Nisibe (De Virginitate VIII-XI et les textes parallèles)*, “Parole de l'Orient” 8 (1977-1978) p. 5-66; P. Yousif, *Le symbolisme de la croix dans la nature chez Saint Éphrem de Nisibe*, in: *Symposium Syriacum 1976 célébré du 13 au 17 septembre 1976 au Centre Culturel “Les Fontaines” de Chantilly (France)*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205, Roma 1978, p. 207-227.

¹⁹ Gen. 8:4 Peshitta; “Ararat” in Hebrew text. For this concordance of Ephrem with the targum, see S.P. Brock, *Jewish Tradition in Syriac Sources*, in: S.P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity. History, Literature and Theology*, Hampshire 1992, (IV) p. 212-232 (here: 213-214).

²⁰ Adam, *rēš 'ālmā*. The same expression can be found in Ephraem Syrus, *In Genesim XXI 2*, ed. R.M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodus Commentarii*, CSCO 152, Syr 71, Louvain 1955, p. 85; tr. E.G. Mathews – J.P. Amar – K. McVey, St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works. Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on*

From there the illustrious Abraham,
the blessed Magi and the star,
and paradise is its glorious neighbour.

The West offer two resplendent crowns,
crowns whose fragrance has spread everywhere.
The West in which the pair of stars set,
the two buried apostles who unceasingly sparkle therein
rays that never set.
Behold, Simon has overtaken the sun
and the Apostle has eclipsed the moon²¹.

Midday from Paran²² offered him a crown.
Of Hebrew flowers it blossomed and bloomed.
And the terrible Law that no one could ever fulfil
is the crown of our Lord: he fulfilled it and brought it to an end,
and because (the law) had grown old, it fell silent and found rest.
It is read (still) only as a testimony,
And like a worn-out old man it takes rest.

In the North the earth, because of its hardness, did not produce shoots:
snow and ice, violent storms!
The paganism of the Greeks is depicted in the North Wind.
With new flowers, behold, it offers a crown
to that Sun of mercy that made it fruitful.
Behold, there the bones of the martyrs
and the virgin flowers that shine flourished²³.

Ephrem thus lucidly shows the grandeur of early Christian mission and evangelization, the fruits of which flourished abundantly in the fourth century. In a stanza of the *Hymns on Paradise*, he then celebrates these enterprises as the epic of the saints. Alluding to the efforts of

Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius, The Fathers of the Church 91, Washington 1994, p. 169.

²¹ On the apostles Peter and Paul, see the note by I. De Francesco, in: Efrem il Siro, *Inni pasquali: sugli azzimi, sulla crocifissione, sulla resurrezione*, Letture cristiane del primo millennio 31, Milano 2001, p. 312, n. 13.

²² From the Sinai region. See Deut. 33:2 and Hab. 3:3.

²³ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de crucifixione* 7, 7-10, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 248, Syr 108, Louvain 1964, p. 70-71; see also an Italian transl. De Francesco, in: Efrem il Siro, *Inni pasquali*, p. 311-313.

the evangelizers, to Paul's shipwrecks on journeys made in the name of the faith, Ephrem thus assures that the message "unveiled in parables" reached the heights and the depths, as well as every latitude. Indeed, the "saints" extended to every region the mystery that the "Envoy"²⁴ came to reveal. However, it should certainly be emphasized that the renewal of creation that resulted from Christ's salvific work is rooted in the course of all "salvation history", constituting a "grandiose" vision of it. According to Ephrem, ultimately, the "saints" and the "righteous" have faithfully fulfilled the task of reversing the course of violence, oppression and despair that characterizes human history. Sustaining the whole ecumene, offering a new hope of life to Adam, it was for him the eschatological witness of those who opened storehouses to satiate hungry Egypt, who suffered in fire refreshing it with dew, who, by fasting, in an unexpected way, obtained from an angel respite to the very voracity of the ferocious beasts²⁵:

The East has grown luminous with the saints,
with them the West has become brilliant,
the North is raised up by them,
from them the South has learned.
They have ascended to the firmament and opened it²⁶,
they have gone down to the sea and explored it²⁷.
The mystery that the apostle revealed,
in a parable
have they extended to all humankind,
reaching every corner²⁸;
all creation has embraced it
to draw strength from it²⁹.

A similar view that brings the whole economy of salvation even more into a spatio-temporal unity is found in the *Hymn of Nisibis* 34,

²⁴ It is not clear in these stanzas whether Christ or the Apostle, but it is rather a reference to Christ for R. Lavenant, in: Éphrem de Nisibe, *Hymnes sur le Paradis*, Sources Chrétiennes 137, Paris 1968, p. 90 n. 5.

²⁵ See Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Paradiso* 6, 20, ed. Beck, CSCO 174, Syr 78, p. 24.

²⁶ Cf. 2Cor. 12:3.

²⁷ Cf. 2Cor. 11:25.

²⁸ Cf. Rom. 16:25-26; Col. 1:25-26.

²⁹ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Paradiso* 6, 22, ed. Beck, CSCO 174, Syr 78, p. 24; tr. S. Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, Crestwood – New York 1990, p. 117.

in which Ephrem adopts the image of the physician Christ. Applying it to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of Dan 2, the world is transformed for him into the figure of a giant sick body that has been visited by great physicians, beginning with Abraham, that is, all the "righteous ones" who have acted throughout time. Abraham began the care of the sick body from the head, from Babel, while Moses began from the feet, that is, from Egypt. All the patriarchs and prophets participated in this work of healing, but no intervention was definitive until that of Christ, the Physician or Archiater. His surgical touch, which came as a result of the diagnosis made by so many physicians, is described with paradoxical imagery. Christ, in fact, bandages us by cutting a bandage from his body, a reference to the cross and the Eucharist³⁰:

However, the doctors could not (heal) the world with their medicines.
 The Physician who can do all things saw it (the world) and had mercy.
 He cut off from his body and placed (a bandage) on his wound,
 and healed our pain: with his body and his blood,
 He healed our wound. Glory to the Medicine of life
 for it was able to heal the wound of souls
 with its teaching³¹.

Always included in a dimension of universal renewal is the way Ephrem deals with the question of the relationship between the Law, nature and grace, between faith and works. The purpose of God's action has always been for him the repentance and conversion of men. Work of the one Creator, the natural world and Scripture are joint witnesses of God and,

³⁰ The association between the stone of Dan 2 and the Eucharist is evident in a stanza of the *Hymns on Virginity*: "With stones Satan tempted/the Stone that gave drink to the people (Ex 17:1-7; Num. 20:11; 1Cor. 10:4),/the Stone that was living bread (John 6:26-58),/the Stone that shattered the great image (Dan 2:34)./He set out to tempt it and feared not/since he is blind in understanding and senseless./Instead of the image You shattered Satan,/the cause of all images" (Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 14, 6, ed. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 49, tr. K. McVey, in: Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York – Mahwah 1989, p. 321-322). Among the commentaries listed in the *corpus* of Ephrem, see also *Epistola ad Corinthios prima* X: "Ideo autem Petram illam Christum appellavit, quoniam ad petrae exemplum laceratum est latus Domini nostri, indeque manarunt sanguis et aqua; sanguis quidem in propitiationem, et in potum omnium Gentium", Ephraem Syrus, *Commentarii in Epistolas D. Pauli nunc primum ex Armenio in Latinum Sermonem a Patribus Mekitharistis translati*, Venitiis 1893, p. 66.

³¹ Ephraem Syrus, *Carmina Nisibena* 34, 10, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 218, Syr 92, Lovain 1961, p. 82.

because of this, bear the traces of the providential plan, whose plot is revealed to man with the eyes of the Spirit. The former gave the source of natural law to the Gentiles, the latter delivered the Torah to the people of Israel: both prepared for the advent of the One who is to be confessed both as “the Lord of Nature” and as “the Lord of Scripture”:

Look and see how Nature and Scripture
are yoked together for the Husbandman:
Nature abhors adulterers,
practicers of magic and murderers;
Scripture abhors them too.
Once Nature and Scripture had cleaned the land,
they sowed in it new commandments,
– in the land of the heart, so that it might bear fruit:
praise for the Lord of Nature,
glory for the Lord of Scripture³².

Nature and Law have contributed to the growth of a new and spiritual harvest. The Scriptures of the two economies mutually confirm each other, and nature assists those who are disoriented in their search for the “truth” they contain³³. For Ephrem it is found in the agreement of Moses’ Harp with that of the Lord and in the confirmation offered by nature. Indeed, as it is well known, in *Hymns on Virginité* 27 and 28-30, Ephrem describes the harmony that reigns between Scripture and nature with the image of three harps in the hands of Christ³⁴. The melodies of the Son of David are “ancient and new”; He plays the “temporal harp”

³² Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni contra Haereses* 28, 11, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 169, Syr 76, Louvain 1957, tr. S. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit. Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 4, [London] 1983, p. 10.

³³ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 29, 1 ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 105: “The Word of the Most High came down and put on/a weak body with hands,/ and He took two harps/in His right and left hands./The third He set up before Himself/ to be a witness to the (other) two,/for the middle harp taught/that their Lord is playing them”; Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 30, 4, 1-4, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 110: “If what make you wander is the voice of Moses,/the voice of our Lord will gather you./But if the two voices trouble you,/nature, with which they are bound together, will testify”, tr. K. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, p. 390-391 and 395; on the symbolic structure of the cosmos and the Scriptures in Ephrem, see briefly T. Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Éphrem le Syrien*, Bibliothèque de l’Université Saint-Esprit 16, Kaslik 1988, p. 121-129.

³⁴ See especially Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 27, 1.4; 28, 1; 29, 1-9; 30, 1, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 99.100; 101; 105-108; 109.

(*kennār zabnā*) and the “true harp” (*kennār quštā*)³⁵; He alternates the silence of the one with the voices of the others³⁶, uniting “with wisdom” variety and likeness, in order to obtain the free and convinced assent of the listeners³⁷. Nothing can break their perfect and mutual accord, for they are as one and come from the One³⁸. The three harps are entrusted to the faith of the Church, which sings on them, witnesses and waits for the Lord, in the hope of being worthy.

3. Soul and body companions and brothers. Resurrection and freedom

I have presented in these few notes the “spirituality” of Ephrem, emblematic for a certain older Syriac world, emphasizing two rather general aspects. First, I have highlighted the Ephremian description of the “strength” that connoted Christian testimony in ancient times, with its model in the children of Dan 3, capable of resisting the temptations of royal foods and all kinds of flattery, and for this reason becoming in the trial as brilliant as gold; second, I have wanted to illustrate the profound feeling of universality that is present in Ephrem’s vision. His thought and thus his spirituality are characterized by the clear expression of the “catholic” dimension of the Christian faith. His small Church on the Eastern borders of the Roman Empire knows how to breathe with full lungs, how to unite the two lungs of East and West with the third of the Syriac tradition, that of the Churches

³⁵ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 29, 5, 2 ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 106.

³⁶ See Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 29, 9, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 107-108: “Who has ever seen two harps,/one silent and one endowed with speech?/ But the silence of that one, its preaching,/was not heard by rational (creatures)./For the silent one persuaded by deed,/but the one endowed with speech (persuaded) by sound./By words and by deeds both, they proclaimed the Lord of all”, tr. K. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, p. 392.

³⁷ With the harmony of the three harps he wants to convince listeners. He made the sea, whose nature is subject, obey (Mark 4:35-41; 6:45-52 par), but left men free (Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 30, 1 and 5, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 109-110). Cf. Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 30, 6, 3-4, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 111: “Whatever is contested, its contesting/teaches that it is entirely concerned with freedom”, tr. K. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, p. 396.

³⁸ See Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 27, 5; 29, 11, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 100, 108.

that went on their missionary adventure into the depths of Asia³⁹. In this last paragraph, however, I go on to sketch, again with just a few hints, an aspect that is surely characteristic of so many spiritual reflections and meditations as that of the relationship between body and soul.

It has already been noted that Ephrem makes frequent use of the image of the body in his texts. As mentioned earlier, it can serve to metaphorically represent the whole world in need of healing (so it is in the *Hymn on Nisibis* 34). In other cases Ephrem carries out a more specific reflection on the body and human nature, when, for example, he engages in anti-Marcionite polemic and intends to affirm the goodness of God's creation, of the Old Testament God so despised by Marcion. How far the originality and strength of Ephrem's argument in favor of God's one saving plan of love for man reaches can be clearly grasped in a stanza of a *Hymn on Virginity*, in which the Syrian theologian-poet alludes to the resurrection and salvation of Lazarus' created body. Commenting quickly and succinctly on this miracle performed by Jesus according to the Gospel account, Ephrem subtly points out that the episode takes on a surprising significance in remarking on the positivity of created nature. Had Lazarus' body, in fact, been imperfect to some extent, it would have been easier, even for the one to whom everything is easy (Luke 18:25 par), to perfect it before resurrecting him. But, in fact, this was not the case, and if Jesus did not change the nature of Lazarus, it means once again that creation is good. The harps of Scripture resonate in full accord with that of nature:

He played, and that third harp
 was harmonious and completed the (other) two.
 When He awakened and revived Lazarus⁴⁰,
 the former nature was not changed.
 If it were an imperfect nature,
 why did He not perfect it and (then) awaken it?
 It would have been very simple⁴¹ to perfect
 in its restoration what was corrupt and ruined⁴².

³⁹ S.P. Brock, *The Syriac Orient: a third "lung" for the Church?*, "Orientalia Christiana Periodica" 71 (2005) p. 5-20.

⁴⁰ See John 11:1-44.

⁴¹ The term of Matt 9:5 par; Mark 10:25 and Luke 16:17.

⁴² Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 29, 2, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 105-106, tr. K. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, p. 391.

The journey of man is for Ephrem a journey “from Paradise to Paradise”⁴³. In this journey “soul and body” constitute an indissoluble unity. In a *Nisibene Hymn*, in which Ephrem opposes Bardaisan ideas, this close association between soul and body is strenuously defended. The thought of this other heresiarch – Mani is the third of the triad against which the Syrian Father normally reacts – deeply saddened him. Indeed, for Ephrem the doctrine of Bardaisan denies resurrection, and in this way discredits and dishonors at once divine Grace and Justice. For if one separates the soul from the body, its companion and, as it were, brother, one robs man of all hope. Bardaisan operates as in the beginning acted the ancient serpent who caused Adam’s exit from Paradise. Those who do not understand the grace and goodness of created existence become followers of the first cunning deceiver and, moreover, continue his malevolent work. But, for Ephrem, if one simply observes the soul’s concern for the body in this life, one can understand that it cannot bear to be deprived of it. Scripture and nature honor the body, so much so that the Creator called to account those who first suppressed it, such as Cain, who had pretended to be its guardian. The murderer, then, cannot claim not to kill the soul but to free it from the body. I cannot tell how much, in this Ephreman apologetic strategy, Greek ideas spread to some extent in his world rooted in Semitic culture are disputed. In any case, for Ephrem the soul can learn and perform any honest and virtuous behavior through the senses and the members of the body. If the latter were evil or derived from sin, man could obtain no justification, while, finally, it is through the body that the righteous have always triumphed⁴⁴:

On the other hand, that reading afflicted
the soul and the body equally,
for it caused between the (two) friends
a separation that shattered hope.
It deprived the body of its vivification
and the soul of its companion.
And the harm the serpent caused
Bardaisan called it profit (...).

⁴³ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni contra Haereses* 22, 8, 1-6, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 169, Syr 76, p. 80: “Plain is the way for the simple:/it is faith (*haymānūtā*),/that has set up inns and milestones/from Paradise to Paradise./Indeed, because of Adam (there was) the departure,/and with the (good) thief the return (Luke 23:43)”.

⁴⁴ I summarized the Nisibene hymn quoted above: Ephraem Syrus, *Carmina Nisibena* 51, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 240, Syr 102, Louvain 1963, p. 70-73.

The good mercy of your Creator
 will stand, O body, against the injustice you (suffered).
 The serpent has thrown you out of Paradise;
 and also his children⁴⁵ out of the Kingdom.
 That one has deprived you of life;
 and they⁴⁶ (deprived you) of vivification.
 The serpent hastened (to bring you down) at the beginning;
 his followers at the end.

On the other hand, the soul clothed
 of the body is very solicitous toward it,
 in fear that they are separated from each other
 in this passing life.
 And how could it bear,
 at the end, to live without it?
 Indeed, love for it does not allow it
 to be without its vivification⁴⁷.

Despite this hope, Ephrem does not omit that man is unfortunately so often fragile and weak. Even Christians, individually and gathered in communities and churches, know a great number of divisions and disputes that sin nourishes. Their ability to understand is many times dulled and clouded, while they must keep their eyes bright and clear. Otherwise, God's effort to raise Christians higher and higher among the Watchers is in vain, for their bodies and hearts hasten, inexorably and invariably, to descend downward. Indeed, they allow themselves to be caged and imprisoned in a myriad of chains and laces (*paḥḥē*) from which, instead, they must have the strength to loosen themselves⁴⁸. Obviously, the Evil One finds all kinds of opportunities to throw trouble and resentment among Christians and happily enjoys seeing that they are incapable of flying in the wake of the heavenly Eagle. But in fact Christ, once and for all, has broken for all the snare that binds us. The Eagle has flown away from the hunter and left Satan mocked and covered with shame for every generation⁴⁹.

⁴⁵ That is, the children of the serpent.

⁴⁶ The children of the serpent.

⁴⁷ Ephraem Syrus, *Carmina Nisibena* 51, 4 and 8-9, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 240, Syr 102, p. 71-72.

⁴⁸ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Ecclesia* 1, 1, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 198, Syr 84, Louvain 1960, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Ecclesia* 1, 2-3, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 198, Syr 84, p. 1-2.

And yet, Ephrem is forced to note with Christian realism that even his own Church does not live in the docile following of its Lord. The cunning hunter knows mellifluous ways of ensnaring everyone in his cruel snares, which, if they are at first pleasant to hear, are very painful when it comes to tearing them off and untying them⁵⁰. The picture that emerges from Ephrem's description of the communities of Syria, between Nisibis and Edessa, is bleak: Christians do not like to listen to those who admonish them and are prey to "evil customs", to "mammon, to the thirst for glory, to covet and greed". So they are bound to these chains with no hope of breaking free from them⁵¹. Instead:

The fire loosened the bonds (*la-pkārāyhōn*)⁵²
 of the Three (young men) and they rejoiced and praised (*'awdīw*)⁵³.
 Our Lord left his fire on the earth⁵⁴,
 so that he would loosen from us the bonds (*pkārīn*)
 invisible of sin.
 We, on the other hand, weak,
 we rejoiced in chains (*b-[']assūrē*),
 and it was sweet in our mouths
 the taste of bitter flavors⁵⁵.

However, I do not intend to conclude my paper with this negative description, but to recall that many other ephremian images and reflections present exemplary models of Christian life. From his texts it is possible to draw the lesson of a strong and solid spirituality, despite being aware of the difficulties of life, even of those who set themselves ideals as great as the Christian one. For example, the ideal of fraternity shines in the hospitality received by Jesus in Bethany. For Ephrem, the model of Martha, Mary

⁵⁰ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Ecclesia* 1, 5, 2-7, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 198, Syr 84, p. 2.

⁵¹ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Ecclesia* 1, 6, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 198, Syr 84, p. 2-3.

⁵² See Dan 3:24=91.

⁵³ See the verb of Dan 3:51 also in the Aramaic text edited in K. Koch, *Deuterokanonische Zusätze zum Danielbuch. Entstehung und Textgeschichte*, v. 1: *Forschungsstand, Programm, Polyglottensynopse*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 38/1, Kevelaer – Neukirchen-Vluyn 1987, p. 70; in addition, see Dan 3:90 in the Peshitta. For "loosened", see Dan. 3:25=92.

⁵⁴ See Luke 12:49; Acts 2:38.

⁵⁵ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Ecclesia* 1, 8, 1-5, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 198, Syr 84, p. 3. Note that the terms "bitter"/"sweet" refer to the language that Ephrem used in the anti-Arian polemic. On the "chains", see Ephraem Syrus, *Carmina Nisibena* 57, 28, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 240, Syr 102, p. 87: "The fire loosed the righteous (*zaddīqē*) whom you have bound;/let a great tie (*pkārā rabbā*) be for you the flame of fire".

and Lazarus stimulates those who are “divided” (*plīgē*) to be united in one love⁵⁶, so much so that the three brothers are also represented as a crown that rises to encircle Christ’s head⁵⁷. Moreover, if Mary is described as being inebriated with Christ, sitting at his feet listening to the Word⁵⁸, Martha has the gift of freedom and *parrhesia*, *galyūt ’appē*, the open-faced speech that must characterize every Christian life. In fact, thanks to her love, Martha has the right to speak aloud at the banquet where God himself was at table with his disciples. Martha has her mouth open, unlike Eve, who took refuge in the trees to hide the greed with which she had picked the fruit. Thus the house of the two sisters of Luke 10:38-42 becomes the house of the true God with us, Emmanuel. The *Liber graduum* makes Martha the type of the “righteous (*kē[’]nē*)” and the contemplative Mary that of the “perfect” (*gmīrē*)⁵⁹. But this is another story, I think, of Christian spirituality. In Ephrem it is not a question of the just and the perfect: Martha rebukes her Lord and serves him without fear:

Blessed are you, Martha, who without fear
served⁶⁰ the One feared by all.
You nourished the Storehouse (*’awšrā*) Who freely gives
living bread to humankind⁶¹.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 26, 2, 7-8, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 94.

⁵⁷ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 35, 9, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 128-129.

⁵⁸ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 24, 7, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 86.

⁵⁹ *Liber graduum* 3, 13, ed. M. Kmosko, PS 3/1, Parisii 1926, c. 72-76, tr. R.A. Kitchen – M.F.G. Parmentier, *The Book of Steps: the Syriac Liber Graduum*, Cistercian Studies Series 196, Kalamazoo 2004, p. 33-34: “We must distinguish the greater gifts from the lesser ones, and the pledge from the full blessing. The Lord said this in connection with Miriam and Aaron – their gifts were smaller than those of Moses (Num 12:2.7). Also the seventy men who had received from the gift of Moses were inferior to him (Num 11:16). In the same way, the portion of Martha was smaller than that of Mary (Luke 10:38-42) (...) This how Mary’s portion came to be larger than Martha’s, as our Lord testified about her, “Mary has chosen the good portion” (Luke 10:42). (...) At the same time, Martha served our Lord with clothing and food, for himself and for the crowd that was with him, as she had a house and possessions, like Abraham, and she led an Upright life. But she did not go so far as to take up the Cross”. See further E. Vergani, *Tra le altre. Marta, Maria nei madraše di Efrem il Siro*, in: *Il cristianesimo e le diversità. Studi per Attilio Agnoletto*, ed. R. Cacitti – G.G. Merlo – P. Vismara, Studi di Storia del Cristianesimo e delle Chiese Cristiane 1, Milano 1999, p. 101-126.

⁶⁰ Luke 10:40.

⁶¹ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 26, 2, 1-4, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 94, p. 94, tr. K. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, p. 377.

Blessed are you, Martha, to whom love gave
 the confidence (*galyūt 'appē*) that opened your mouth⁶².
 By the fruit Eve's mouth was closed
 while she was hidden among the trees⁶³.
 Blessed is your mouth that sounded forth with love (*b-reḥmtā*)
 at the banquet (*smākā*) at which God reclined (*smīk*).
 You are greater than Sarah, who served the servants⁶⁴,
 for you (served) the Lord of all⁶⁵.

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⁶² Luke 10:40.

⁶³ Gen 3:8.

⁶⁴ Cf. Gen 18:1-6.

⁶⁵ Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Virginitate* 26, 3, ed. E. Beck, CSCO 223, Syr 95, p. 94, tr. K. McVey, Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, p. 377-378.

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