

Ephrem the Syrian

HYMNS

TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY
KATHLEEN E. McVEY

PREFACE BY
JOHN MEYENDORFF



PAULIST PRESS
NEW YORK • MAHWAH

This is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving for the incarnation. By addressing both God the Father and Christ under a series of titles, Ephrem stresses the paradoxical nature of the incarnation. His choice of imagery achieves an intricate interplay of philosophical ideas with metaphors drawn from everyday life, many of them found also in scripture. Although Ephrem occasionally refers directly to New Testament events (e.g., str. 2, 18), most of the theological imagery of this hymn is not explicitly scriptural. Early in the hymn (str. 3-7) Ephrem shows his acquaintance with philosophical notions of God. God, who by nature is unable to be grasped even by the mind, freely chose to become limited, small and accessible to us by the incarnation; God went so far as even to be bound, fettered and crucified. The unchangeable God's willingness to submit to change has revived the full dignity of our humanity.

After setting forth this theology of the incarnation, Ephrem proceeds to a series of metaphors for redemption: light breaking into darkness (str. 8-9), relief from indebtedness (str. 10), awakening from sleep (str. 19), rescue from drowning (str. 19). God is like a tree or vine giving fruit (str. 15, 17); he is a farmer, ploughman, shepherd, physician, master builder and musician (the last with strong Orphic overtones; str. 14-16, 19-20). In the incarnation God makes a tabernacle (str. 7), palace, temple, garment, armor (str. 20) in which to dwell.

To the melody "He consoled with promises"

- 1 Blessed be the Child Who today delights Bethlehem.
Blessed be the Newborn Who today made humanity young again.
Blessed be the Fruit Who bowed Himself down for our hunger.
Blessed be the Gracious One Who suddenly enriched

all of our poverty and filled our need.
Blessed be He Whose mercy inclined Him to heal our sickness.

*Refrain: My Lord, blessed be Your Child,¹⁰²
Who raised to honor our hardness of heart.*

- 2 Thanks to the Fountainhead sent for our salvation.
Thanks to the One Who violated the sabbath in its fulfillment.¹⁰³
Thanks to the One Who rebuked leprosy and it remained not.¹⁰⁴
Fever also saw Him and departed.¹⁰⁵
Thanks to the Compassionate One Who bore our pain.¹⁰⁶
Glory to Your coming that restored humankind to life.
- 3 Glory to that One Who came to us by His First-born.¹⁰⁷
Glory to that Silent One Who spoke by means of His Voice.
~~Glory to that Sublime One Who was seen by means of His Dawn.~~
Glory to the Spiritual One Who was well-pleased
that His Child should become a body so that through Him His
power might be felt
and the bodies of His kindred might live again.¹⁰⁸
- 4 Glory to that Hidden One Whose Child was revealed.
Glory to that Living One Whose Son became a mortal.
Glory to that Great One Whose Son descended and became small.
Glory to that One Power Who fashioned Him,
the Image of His greatness and Form for His hiddenness.
With the eye and the mind—with both of them we saw Him.¹⁰⁹
- 5 Glory to that Hidden One Who even to the mind

102. Jesus is addressed as child of God, *παῖς θεοῦ* in the *Didache*, 9-10, probably also of Syrian origin, and in Hippolytus' *Apos. Trad.* 7. The title may also mean servant of God, with reference to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

103. Cf. Mark 2.23-28 et par.

104. Cf. Mark 1.41f. et par.

105. Cf. Mark 1.29-31 et par.

106. Cf. Isa. 52.4f.

107. Here and throughout the verse, the utter ineffability of the Father is stressed. Although Ephrem does not use the term, this is a Logos theology; cf. Beck, *Reden*, 85f.

108. Through the incarnation of the Child of God, human beings become kindred of the Child of God, thus becoming receptive to the power of God and receiving life. The notion is, again, fundamentally of a Logos theology.

109. God the Father fashioned (*ἔσχε*) the Son as his image. For the use of this term in Ephrem, cf. Beck, *Bildtheologie*, esp. 244-51. Likewise, for Athanasius, *Ath. adv. Ar.* 3.23.5, the Son is the "perfect," express image of the Father, but the Father did not "fashion" his image, cf. *Ath. adv. Ar.* 1.13.58.

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

is utterly imperceptible to those who investigate Him.¹¹⁰

But by His grace through [His] humanity

a nature never before fathomed is [now] perceived.¹¹¹

His hands bound and fettered, His feet nailed and fastened,

by His [own] will He clothed Himself with a body for those who seized Him.¹¹²

6 Blessed is He Whom freedom crucified, when He permitted it.

Blessed is He Whom also the wood bore, when He allowed it.

Blessed is He Whom even the grave enclosed, when He set limits to Himself.

Blessed is He Whose will brought Him

to the womb and to birth and to the bosom and to growth.

Blessed is He Whose changes revived our humanity.

7 Blessed is He Who engraved our soul and adorned¹¹³ and betrothed her to Him[self].

Blessed is He Who made our body a Tabernacle for His hiddenness.¹¹⁴

Blessed is He Who with our tongue interpreted His secrets.

Let us give thanks to that Voice Whose praise on our lyre¹¹⁵

and Whose power on our kithara¹¹⁶ are sung.

110. Those who are arrogant enough to investigate God will be utterly incapable of perceiving him. Ephrem's sustained polemic against the "investigators" and the "inquirers" is directed against the Arians, who seek to understand the mysterious essence of God. The proper role of humans is to ponder the symbols God has placed in scripture and nature and the sacraments rather than trying to analyze the nature of God. Cf. de Halleux, *Mar Ephrem*, 42–45; Beck, *Theologie*, 62–80; Murray, *Symbols*, 14–20; Brock, *Luminous*, 10–36.

111. By the incarnation even the divine nature becomes accessible to human beings, but not for investigation!

112. Paradoxically, the incarnate Christ is physically helpless, but he became incarnate by his own will for those who lay hold of him—*ḥd* is to be taken in both the physical sense (the seizing of Jesus by his persecutors) and in the mental sense (those who grasp the meaning of Christ, in a positive sense).

113. As in Nat. 1.99, *ḥsm*, "engraved," suggests the image of a gemstone or seal, but *ṣbt* is here rendered "adorned" because of the bridal imagery.

114. The incarnation is like God's presence in the tabernacle.

115. The kinora (*knwr*) or lyre was associated by Greek pagans with Orpheus, by Jews with David, and by Christians with both David and Jesus; cf. P. C. Finney, "Orpheus-David: A Connection in Iconography between Greco-Roman Judaism and Early Christianity?" *JJA* 5 (1978), 6–15. Strophe 16 of this hymn clearly invokes Orphic ideas of the taming of wild animals as a metaphor for salvation.

116. Or zither (Syriac, *gytr*). Ephrem is fond of musical imagery, as are some of the Greek Patristic writers, particularly Clement of Alexandria; cf. Clem. prot. 1; cf. T. Halton, "Clement's lyre: a broken string, a new song," *The Second Century* 3 (1983), 177–99. Instrumental music in a liturgical context is, however, rejected by all Greek and Latin Christian writers who mention

HYMN 3

The peoples came together to listen to His melodies.

8 Glory to the Son of the Gracious One, rejected by the sons of the Evil One.

Glory to the Son of the Just One, crucified by the sons of the Wicked One.

Glory to the One who released us and was bound in place-of us all.

Glory to that One who pledged Himself to pay the debt.

Glory to the Beautiful One Who portrayed us in His similitudes.

Glory to that Serene One Who looked not at our blemishes.

9 Glory to that One Who begot His Light in the darkness, and [the darkness] was hidden by its vices that concealed its secrets, but [the Light] stripped off and took away from us the garment of blemishes.¹¹⁷

Glory to the Heavenly One who mingled

His salt with our mind, His milk with our souls.

His body became bread to revive our mortality.

10 Thanks be to the Rich One who paid the debt in place of us all, something He did not borrow, but He signed and became indebted for us again.

By His yoke He brought away from us the shackles that held us captive.

Glory to the Judge Who was judged,

but He had His Twelve sit down for the judgment of the tribes.

Yet He was found guilty by the ignorant, the scribes of that people.

11 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.¹¹⁸

Glory to the All-knowing Who cast Himself down,

and asks to hear and to learn what He already knew

to reveal by His questions the treasure of His benefits.

it; cf. Quasten, *Musik*; E. Ferguson, "The Active and Contemplative Lives: the Patristic Interpretation of Some Musical Terms," *SP* XVI, 15–23; James W. McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Music (Cambridge, 1987). Ephrem apparently differed from his Greek and Roman counterparts since a sixth-century source depicts him playing the lyre while a woman's choir sings; cf. McVey, *Singing*.

117. The use of imagery of clothing is common in Syriac Christian literature, but the more usual notion is that the garment of light or of glory is lost by Adam and Eve and regained through Christ; cf. Nat. 23.13, Brock, *Clothing*, and Saber, *Theologie*, 152–57.

118. God has many forms (*ḥwšw*), not by nature but by choice. He is the One, who enters into multiplicity for our sake, cf. Nat. 1.97.

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

- 12 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.
Thanks be to the One Who sent His Heir
to draw us toward Himself by Him and to make us heirs with Him.
Thanks be to that Gracious One, the cause of all our virtues.
- 13 Blessed is He Who did not reproach, for He was the Gracious One.
Blessed is He Who did not avert His gaze, for He is also the Just One.
Blessed is He Who was silent and reproached: He restored life by both.
Powerful is his silence, and reproachful.
Gentle is His strength even though He accuses,
for He reproached the False One, but He kissed the thief.
- 14 Glory to the Farmer, the Hidden One of our thought.
His seed fell on our earth and enriched our intellect.
Its harvest was a hundredfold¹¹⁹ for the storehouse of our souls.
Let us worship the One Who sat down and rested,
Who walked within the way, and He was the Way on the way¹²⁰
and the Gate¹²¹ of entry for those who enter the kingdom.
- 15 Blessed is the Shepherd Who became the sheep for our absolution.
Blessed is the Vineshoot that became the cup of our salvation.
Blessed also is the Cluster, the source of the medicine of life.
Blessed also is the Ploughman Who Himself became
the grain of wheat that was sown¹²² and the sheaf that was reaped.
He is the Master Builder Who became a tower for our refuge.¹²³
- 16 He 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 melodies.
Glory to the One Who saw that we had been pleased

119. Cf. Mark 4.20 et par.

120. Cf. John 4.6

121. Cf. John 10.7.

122. Cf. John 12.24.

123. On building images, cf. Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, esp. 49, 52–54, on the Odes of Solomon and Acts of Thomas.

HYMN 3

- to resemble the animals in our rage and greed,
and [so] He descended and became one of us that we might become
heavenly.
- 17 Glory to Him Who never needs us to thank Him.
Yet He [became] needy for He loves us, and He thirsted for He
cherishes us.
And He asks us to give to Him so that He may give us even more.
His Fruit was mingled with our human nature
to draw us out toward Him Who bent down to us.
By the Fruit of the Root He will graft us onto His Tree.¹²⁴
- 18 Let us thank Him Who was beaten and Who saved us by His
wound.
Let us thank Him Who took away the curse by His thorns.
Let us thank Him Who killed death by His dying.
Let us thank Him Who was silent and vindicated us.¹²⁵
Let us thank Him Who cried out in death that had devoured us.¹²⁶
Blessed is He Whose benefits have laid waste the enemies of God.
- 19 Let us glorify Him Who watched and put to sleep our captor.
Let us glorify the One Who went to sleep and awoke our slumber.
Glory to God the Healer of human nature.
Glory to the One Who plunged in and sank
our evil into the depth and drowned our drowner.
Let us glorify with all our mouths the Lord of all means [of
salvation].
- 20 Blessed is the Physician¹²⁷ who descended and cut painlessly
and healed the sores with a mild Medicine.
His Child was the Medicine that takes pity on sinners.
Blessed is the One Who dwelt in the womb, and in it He built

124. In the second half of the verse, “He” is God the Father rather than the Son. The image of root and fruit is part of Ephrem’s usual Trinitarian language for Father and Son; cf. Beck, *Reden*, 75–77.

125. Matt. 27.14 et par.

126. Matt. 27.50 et par.

127. Ephrem frequently characterizes Christ both as physician and as the medicine of life. The image is especially developed in CNis 26.3–7, 27.1 and CNis 34, where it is applied to Old Testament types and Christian bishops as well. Ephrem’s use is firmly rooted in Syriac tradition, cf. Murray, *Symbols*, 89–91, 199–204. Here, as in str. 17, Ephrem shifts the referent for “Him” without warning from Son to Father, so that Christ is the Physician in the first line, but the Child and the Medicine of the third line.

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

- a palace¹²⁸ in which to live, a temple¹²⁹ in which to be,
 a garment in which to be radiant, and armor by which to conquer.
- 21 Blessed is the One Whom our mouth is not sufficient to thank,
 Whose gift is too great for those gifted with speech.
 Nor are the senses sufficient to give thanks for His grace.
 for however much we thank Him, it is too little,
 and because it is of no use for us to be silent and unnerved,
 let our weaknesses return [to God] a song of thanksgiving.
- 22 Gracious One Who does not demand more than our strength,
 how much was your servant judged by principal and interest—
 he who did not give what was sufficient and withheld what he
 owed?
 Sea of glory without needs,¹³⁰
 receive in Your graciousness a drop of thanksgiving,
 for by Your gift You have moistened my tongue to praise You.

4

Although this hymn is primarily a nativity hymn celebrating the paradox of the incarnation, it also concerns the feasts of Easter and the Ascension (str. 31–32, 58–59). The primary theological and liturgical theme for the nativity is that the birthday of Christ resembles him in many ways, primarily in its compassion (str. 1–31). Ephrem develops this theme by an extended exegetical section contrasting the life-giving birthday of Christ with the death-dealing birthday of Herod as recounted by the synoptic gospels (Mark 6.21–19 *et par.*; str. 60–83). The primary theme for Easter is a paradox: the bait catches the fishermen (str. 35–47), and again, as by the wood, wine and rib we were conquered, so Christ conquers by those same means (str. 109–118), and the Lamb destroys Satan as the divine presence in the Ark destroyed the image of the Philistine god Dagon (112–118; cf. 1 Sam 5). The theme of the Ascension is both incarnational and eucharistic: Just as the infinite God was paradoxically present in the infant at the nativity, so also the unlimited God is present in the eucharistic elements (str. 84–96); just as the body of Christ was lifted up to heaven, so those who worthily receive the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist will be lifted up, spiritualized (str. 58, 97–108).

After alternating these three themes at greater length, Ephrem recapitulates them: 1) in winter when there is little light, the Light came (str. 119–20); like the barren earth, a virgin brought forth (str. 121–22); 2) the lamb born out of season tore apart the wolf (str. 123–29); 3) as the holy One dwelt bodily in Mary's womb, so he dwells spiritually in those who can perceive him (str. 130–42). Ephrem ends the hymn with a long and stirring litany of examples of the apparent powerlessness of the incarnate One with the reality of his hidden power (str. 146–213). The reality can be seen by those able to see it (str. 132–42; actually the metaphor of hearing is much more developed than seeing here); God is revealed to each according to the capacity of the creature (str. 199–202).

128. *bykl'* may be a palace or temple.

129. *nws'* from Greek ναός, temple.

130. *dl' snyq* is the equivalent of ἀνεπιδέης of the Greek apologists, cf. Clem. str. 7.13, Meth. symp. proem., Ath. gent. 28, where God is said to be sufficient to Himself.

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

who swaggered as if [he were] a lion—
the fox lay down and howled when he heard
the roar of the Lion Who came to lie down
upon his kingdom, as it is written.²²²

20 But the fox heard that the Lion was a cub
and was like a suckling, and he sharpened his teeth
so that while He was still a newborn, the fox might lie in wait
to strangle the Lion before He had grown strong
and the breadth of his mouth should destroy him.²²³

21 All of creation became mouths
and cried out above Him: the Magi cried out
with their offerings; the barren cried out
with their offspring; the star of light
cried out in the air, "Behold the King's Son!"

22 ~~The sky was opened; the water sparkled;~~
the Dove hovered over; the voice of the Father,
more weighty than thunder, said,
"This is My Beloved"²²⁴; the Watchers proclaimed Him,
the children shouted joyfully with their hosannas.

23 By these voices that proclaimed and cried out
above and below, the sleep of Sion
was not frightened away. By His colt she was startled;²²⁵
he trampled and grieved her; she started and rose up.
She killed the Watcher because He awakened her.²²⁶

24 The Watcher rose up from within the grave,
for He was sleeping while awake, and He came and found
the peoples asleep. He shouted for joy and cried out
and awakened them. The sleeping [people] thanked
the Watcher who made [them] watchers on earth.

222. Gen. 49.8–12.

223. Herod Antipas, the fox of Luke 13, son of Herod the Great, is here confused with his father, cf. Matt. 2.16–18. Jesus, the Davidic Messiah, is the Lion of Judah.

224. Mark 1.11.

225. Ephrem has shifted to the entry into Jerusalem, Mark 11.1f.

226. Sion, the female personification of the Jews, is seen by Ephrem as the killer of Christ, here understood in the language of angel-Christology as the "Watcher." On the watchers, cf. Nat. 1.61, 4.195, CJ 1.8.

This hymn begins with the infancy narrative of Luke in which the angelic praise at the nativity is followed by the homage of the shepherds to Jesus. Ephrem uses the theme of shepherds and sheep to draw out several Old Testament types for Christ: the Paschal Lamb, Moses as shepherd of the people in the wilderness, and David. Noah is also included, apparently because his name brings to Ephrem's mind Orphic themes. At the ninth strophe Ephrem universalizes the praise by adding women of various ages and states in life as well as old men. The unity of the hymn is somewhat artificially maintained by alluding again to the infancy narrative, this time from the Matthean version, the slaughter of the innocents.

The same melody

1 At the birth of the Son a great clamor
took place in Bethlehem, for Watchers descended
to give praise there;²²⁷ a great thunder
were their voices. With this voice of praise
the silent ones²²⁸ came to give praise to the Son.

Refrain: Blessed is the Babe by whom Adam and Eve grew young again.

2 Shepherds, too, came carrying
the good things of the flock: sweet milk,
fresh meat, fitting praise.
They divided [the gifts] and gave to Joseph the meat,
to Mary the milk, to the Son the praise.

227. Luke 2.13.

228. Beck suggests dumb animals, cf. Ps. Matt. 14, HdF 13.10.3. More usually *štyq* refers to inanimate objects or to people, while *ʿmlyl* refers to animals. Yet the content of the following strophes lends support to Beck's view.

- 3 They carried and offered to Him: suckling lamb
to the Paschal Lamb, the first-born to the First-born,
a sacrifice to the Sacrifice, a temporal lamb
to the True Lamb. A fitting sight
that a lamb to the Lamb should be offered.
- 4 The lamb bleated while being offered
to the First-born. He thanked the Lamb
that came to free sheep and oxen
from sacrifices, even the traditional
paschal lamb that served as a symbol of the Son.²²⁹
- 5 The shepherds approached to worship Him.
With their staffs they greeted Him,
prophesying, "Peace, O Greatest
of shepherds! The staff of Moses
acknowledges Your staff. Shepherd of the universe."
- 6 For You [are the One] Moses acknowledged—he whose
lambs became wolves and whose sheep became
like dragons and his ewes [like]
savage beasts. In the fearful wasteland
his flock became rabid and attacked him.²³⁰
- 7 You, then, the shepherds will acknowledge,
for You reconciled wolves and lambs
in the flock. You are the newborn
Who is older than Noah and younger than Noah,
Who pacified all in the ark.²³¹
- 8 For the sake of a lamb, David, Your father
killed a lion.²³² O Son of David,
You have killed the hidden wolf

229. Literally, ". . . the paschal Lamb that was handed down and served as a symbol of the Son." The traditional sacrificial animals are grateful that there is to be no more animal sacrifice after Christ, not even a Passover celebration. Cf. Nat. 18.18–19.

230. Tensions between Moses and the people of Israel in the desert become a basis for Ephrem's portrayal of the Jews as perennially faithless in relation to God and to the leaders chosen by God. On the portrayal of Moses in Syriac Christian literature, cf. R. M. Tonneau, "Moïse dans la tradition syrienne," in *Moïse l'homme de l'Alliance* (Paris, 1955), 245–65.

231. Ephrem plays on *kwl* in two different vocalizations: *kālā* meaning "all, the universe" and *kwelā* meaning "ark." Elsewhere he plays on *nwh* meaning "to rest" as well as "Noah." This pun, the Orphic theme of rest, and the more usual Jewish and Christian association of David with Orpheus perhaps explain Ephrem's mention of Noah here just before David and in the context of shepherd imagery.

232. 1 Sam. 17.34–37.

- that killed Adam, the innocent lamb
who grazed and bleated in paradise.
- 9 By that song of praise brides awoke suddenly
and chose chastity, and virgins
preserved their chastity, and even young girls
were purified. They rose early and came
in throngs to worship the Son.
- 10 The old women of the town of David came
to the daughter of David, speaking blessings:
"Blessed is our native land whose streets are made light
by the ray of Jesse! Today the throne of David
is established by You, the Son of David."
- 11 Old men cried out, "Blessed is the Babe
Who restored Adam's youth; he was displeased to see
that he grew old and wasted away, yet the serpent who killed him
shed [his skin] and recovered his youth. Blessed is the Babe
by whom Eve and Adam were restored to youth."²³³
- 12 The chaste women said, "Blessed Fruit,
bless our fruits, given to You
as first fruits." Aglow, they prophesied
about their children, who, when they were killed,
would be plucked by Him as first fruits.²³⁴
- 13 The barren women hovered over and held Him.
They caressed [Him] and said, "O Blessed Fruit [conceived]
without intercourse, bless our wombs
during intercourse.²³⁵ Have pity on our barrenness,
Miraculous Child of virginity."

233. The portrayal of Adam and Eve as children is common to several early Christian writers in the Greek and Syriac traditions, cf. Thphl. Ant. Autol. 2.25, Iren. A.H. 3.22.4, 4.38.1, and Demonstr. 12 and 14; Clem. prot. 11.111.1, Virg 12.12, and Murray, Symbols, 304–306. Ephrem uses this idea and adds the notion that in the Eucharist Christ restores their youth, cf. Graffin, Eucharistie. For a negative stress on their youth, cf. Nat. 26.8. As is often the case, Ephrem plays on the words *hw'* and *hwy'*, "Eve" and "serpent."

234. Cf. Matt. 2.16–18. The mothers of the slain innocents address Jesus. Their children are types of the resurrected faithful. They are the first fruits of the resurrection, to be plucked by Jesus immediately after his resurrection.

235. Here the temporal sense of the preposition *mn* is more appropriate than the comparative sense suggested by Beck.