

*God's Self-Revelation as seen in the Hymns on Paradise*

**A Topical Study of St. Ephrem of Nisibis' *Hymns on Paradise***



St. Ephrem of Nisibis

Image courtesy of *St. Ephrem the Syrian Icon Gallery*

**Presented by:** Brian Ephrem Fitzgerald, Ph.D.

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## St. Ephrem of Nisibis - His Life

*Who is St. Ephrem the Syrian?* St. Ephrem is the foremost author and composer of Christian patristic literature in the Syriac language. Syriac itself is a semitic language, specifically an eastern Aramaic dialect of the Late Aramaic period (c. 200-700 AD).<sup>1</sup> *Classical Syriac*, as this dialect is often called, became the primary medium of Christian Syrian literature and is the most prolific Aramaic dialect throughout the history of the Aramaic language (ninth century BC until today).

What we know about St. Ephrem's life is relatively brief. In his own writings St. Ephrem indicates that he was born of Christian parents.<sup>2</sup> When exactly he was born is uncertain. When he died is not: the year 373, probably 9 June. He did not travel far, living in Nisibis for all but the last ten years of his life.<sup>3</sup> He served both as a deacon and catechetical teacher under several remarkable bishops, St. Jacob of Nisibis (d. 338), Babu (c. 338-350), Vologeses (c. 350-361), and Abraham c. 361-?).<sup>4</sup> A baptistery, built in St. Ephrem's lifetime (359/60), but now incorporated into the Church of St. Jacob of Nisibis, survives until this day. This structure gives us a direct link to St. Ephrem since therein he would have served as deacon.<sup>5</sup>

Since Nisibis was a town near the Persian frontier, it suffered from the vagaries of the Roman-Persian wars of the fourth century. The town survived three sieges (338, 346, and 350), but was surrendered to the Persians as a result of the Emperor Julian's disastrous campaign of 373. As stipulated in the agreement with the Persians, both Nisibis and Singara were transferred to the Persians *without their populations*.<sup>6</sup> As a result, all Nisibenes were expelled from their homes. St. Ephrem settled in Edessa,<sup>7</sup> a major Greco-Roman center in northern Mesopotamia. Here St. Ephrem spent the remaining ten years of his life. Many of his hymns and much of his prose date to this period and reflect the city's more hellenistic culture, often battling the speculative theologies of Bardaisan of Edessa, Arius, Marcion, Mani, and others prevalent in Edessa.<sup>8</sup>

The Syriac translation of Palladius' *Lausiac History*, relates an interesting episode from St. Ephrem's time in Edessa. Famine plagued the region from the summer of 372 until the barley harvest of May 373. Compassion for the starving people of Edessa moved St. Ephrem to undertake a great public service. Seeing the sufferings of the common folk and the hoarding of available grain by the rich, he rebuked the wealthy for neglecting God's compassion. He warned that by their hoarding they were corrupting their wealth and damning their souls. In self-defense the rich retorted that they could not help the starving people since nobody honest enough could be found to administer the service equitably. Ephrem asked what they thought of him. He was a man of God, of course, they acknowledged. With this St. Ephrem

<sup>1</sup>Sebastian Brock, "An Introduction to Syriac Studies," *Horizons in Semitic Studies - Articles for the Student* (ed. J. H. Eaton; Birmingham, 1980) 11-13.

<sup>2</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction," *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (trans. Sebastian Brock; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990) 9 (see *Against the Heresies* 26, last stanza, and *Hymns on Virginity*, 37:10).

<sup>3</sup>Nisibis was a town in northern Mesopotamia near the eastern border of the Roman Empire (before 373), currently Nusaybin in extreme southeastern Turkey.

<sup>4</sup>St. Jacob of Nisibis, the "Moses of Mesopotamia," was one of the 318 Fathers of the Council of Nicaea (325). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F. L. Cross; F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1985) 721.

<sup>5</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 10-11.

<sup>6</sup>Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire* (intro. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill; trans. Walter Hamilton; London: Penguin Books, 1986) 304 (Book 25, Chapter 7).

<sup>7</sup>Modern Urfa, about 100 miles west of Nisibis (Nusaybin).

<sup>8</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 11.

offered his own services and left the rich without excuse. With the financial support of the wealthier citizens he began his ministry of mercy. St. Ephrem blocked off portions of the city streets, making a hostel for the ill, starving, and dying both of Edessa and the nearby villages and countryside. St. Ephrem joyfully attended to the needs of the suffering, aided by chosen assistants. When the famine ended, the hostel was dismantled and everyone went home since the work was over. One month later he died.<sup>9</sup>

This account fits well with the sixth century *Chronicle of Edessa* which places his death on 9 June 373. The famine would therefore have run from the failure of the wheat harvest in early summer 372 until the barley harvest of May 373. St. Ephrem would thus have had one month left in this life.<sup>10</sup>

### St. Ephrem of Nisibis and Monasticism

*Was St. Ephrem a monk? No. Was St. Ephrem an ascetic? Yes. Is this nitpicking? Not at all. To understand St. Ephrem properly, one must understand his relationship with Egyptian monasticism. With Palladius' *Lausiaca History*, a long tradition of calling St. Ephrem a monk (μοναχός) begins. This is an anachronism, however, since St. Ephrem probably encountered Egyptian monasticism only late in life. St. Ephrem, in fact, belongs to an ancient Syrian tradition of asceticism. Most likely St. Ephrem was an *ikhidaya* (ܝܚܝܕܝܐ), meaning "single," "celibate," "single-minded," "simple," a follower of Christ the *Ikhidaya* (Only-Begotten). Only in the late fourth century did *ikhidaya* take on the meaning of *monachos*, or monk.*

In St. Ephrem's time, *ikhidaya* referred to a celibate consecrated to Christ. An *ikhidaya* could either be a *bthula* (ܒܬܘܠܐ), an unmarried celibate, or a *qadisha* (ܩܕܝܫܐ), a married person who renounced marital intercourse. *ikhidaye* (plural) would have been *bnay qyama*, members, literally *children of the covenant*, (ܒܢܝ ܩܝܡܐ). They would have taken oaths of consecration at their baptism (still usually in adulthood), lived in small groups in local towns and served the local church in a variety of ways. The theological basis for this would be Christ as the Bridegroom, notably in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13). The marriage feast of Matthew 25 clearly refers to the eschaton, or end of the age. The Church from very early is also described as the Bride of Christ, in the book of Revelation as the Bride (Rev. 18:23; 21:2, 9, 17). The eschaton and the Second Coming of Christ are anticipated, furthermore, in the coming of Christ in the Eucharist. The Church is the Bride of Christ, but so also are individual Christians. At the reception of the Eucharist, Christ the Bridegroom joins with the soul, the Bride, in the Bridal Chamber of the Body. The individual *ikhidaya*, as bride, is therefore willingly consecrated in life to the *Ikhidaya*, the Bridegroom. The single one, *ikhidaya*, follows after the Only-Begotten, *Ikhidaya*, as the Christian, *mshikhaya*, (ܡܫܝܚܝܐ) follows Christ, *mshikha*

(ܡܫܝܚܝܐ)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 12-15 (translation of the relevant section of the *Lausiaca History*, 13-15).

<sup>10</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 15.

<sup>11</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 25-33. Also Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem* (Rome: C. I. I. S., 1985) 107-117. Another foundation for Syrian ascetical celibacy is the theme of angels as *watchers* or *wakeful ones* in the tradition of the Book of Daniel. Hence the wise virgins of Matthew 25 in their wakefulness share in this aspect of the marriageless angelic life. Yet another basis is Adam and Eve being understood as remaining celibate while

St. Ephrem, therefore, was probably an *ikhidaya*, and not a monastic of the Egyptian tradition. Instead he followed an ancient Syrian Christian ascetical tradition wherein at baptism additional vows of consecration were taken. At this point he would become both a Christian, *mshikhaya*, and a single one, *ikhidaya*, serving Christ the Only-Begotten One, *Mshikha Ikhidaya*, and the Church. Shortly after St. Ephrem's lifetime, Egyptian monasticism would gain so much popularity and prestige as to absorb local ascetic traditions, later almost obliterating the memory of them. In St. Ephrem's lifetime, both were distinct and alive.

### **St. Ephrem of Nisibis - His Works**

Remarkable as are the parts of St. Ephrem's life which we know, St. Ephrem's greatest legacy lies in the literary works he left behind. In fact his works were already well-known by the end of the fourth century. In his *Lives of Illustrious Men* (written in 392), Jerome writes concerning St. Ephrem:

*Ephraim, deacon of the church at Edessa, composed many works in the Syriac language, and became so distinguished that his writings are repeated publicly in some churches, after the reading of the Scriptures.*

*I once read in Greek a volume by him On the Holy Spirit, which some one had translated from the Syriac, and recognized even in translation, the incisive power of lofty genius. He died in the reign of Valens. (Lives of Illustrious Men. 115)<sup>12</sup>*

St. Ephrem had a great reputation both in the Syriac and in the Greco-Latin worlds. Being such a reputable Christian author, many later works were often attributed to him. As a result, his authorship of most of the Greek and Latin works attributed to him is highly questionable. He was a very prolific writer and over four hundred of his hymns survive to this day. Many more were known to have been written which are now lost. The works which are unquestionably his fall into the following categories:<sup>13</sup>

#### Strict Prose Works:

Polemical Works

Biblical Commentaries, e.g., *Commentary on Genesis*, *Commentary on the Diatessaron*

#### Rhythmic Prose:

*Discourse on the Lord*

*Letter to Publius*

#### Metrical Homilies: memre (ܡܡܪܐ)

Six *memre* on Faith

*memra* on the Destruction of Nicomedia by earthquake (358).

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yet in Paradise, motivating the ascetic to anticipate the eschatological Paradise through celibacy on earth.

<sup>12</sup>Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; trans. Ernest Cushing Richardson; NPNF 3, Second Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 382.

<sup>13</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 33-36. Also Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 5-6.

All other *memre* attributed to St. Ephrem are of questionable authorship.

Lyric Doctrinal Hymns: *madrashē* (ܡܕܪܫܐ) - grouped into hymns cycles<sup>14</sup>

<i>On Faith</i>	87 hymns
<i>On Nisibis</i>	77 hymns
<i>Against Heresies</i>	56 hymns
<i>On Virginity</i>	52 hymns
<i>On the Church</i>	52 hymns
<i>On the Nativity</i>	28 hymns
<i>On Paradise</i>	15 hymns
<i>On Lent</i>	10 hymns
<i>On the Paschal Season</i>	3 groups with 35 hymns total

The vast majority of St. Ephrem's surviving works are *madrashē*, lyric doctrinal hymns. It is therefore worthwhile to discuss briefly his poetic form. His *memre*, or metrical homilies, are written in couplets of seven syllables (7+7). His *madrashē* were hymns written in stanza form with responses. These were meant to be sung, often antiphonally, in worship. In these hymns St. Ephrem employed over fifty different syllable patterns. In his *Hymns on Paradise* he used a single syllable pattern in his stanzas (5+5. 5+5. 5+5. 7. 5+5. 5+5.). Hymns 13 and 14 together of this cycle form an alphabetic acrostic. Since *madrashē* were meant to be sung, manuscripts passing them on often bore the title of their melody, called *qala* (ܩܠܐ), consisting of the first words of a particular *madrasha* using that stanza pattern. Rhyme was seldom employed in Syriac poetry and it is uncertain whether a regular stress pattern corresponding to the homotony of the Byzantine *kontakion* (κοντάκιον) was used.<sup>15</sup>

In St. Ephrem we find a theologian in the form of a poet or composer. This seems odd to modern minds which are more accustomed to theological ideas expressed in forms resembling philosophical definitions. The loss is ours, however. The paradoxical nature of God's revelation to man is often more aptly evoked in song than captured in explanations. *Spiritual events are often more readily experienced than defined.* This is the advantage of the spiritual poet as theologian since he concerns himself more with evoking than defining these realities. For this reason poetry is an excellent media to address the issue of *anthropomorphic language*, the use of human words, ideas and imagery to express hidden truths - an issue of which all Christians should be aware. God's condescension into human language is a major theme for St. Ephrem in his *Hymns on Paradise*. This self-emptying revelation to man will thus provide the unifying theme of our study of these hymns.

<sup>14</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 35. These hymn cycles probably date back to the fifth century. Only the smaller cycles, such as the *Hymns on Paradise* are likely to represent St. Ephrem's own arrangement.

<sup>15</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 35-39, also *The Luminous Eye* 6.

### The Garment of Words

With regard to being and knowledge there is a yawning gap between God and creation. God is infinite whereas His creation is not. God is the source of His own being whereas all else is created *ex nihilo*, i.e., out of nothing. Creation is bound by time and finitude, but God is not. Nothing in God's creation can bridge this gap, hence man's unaided search for God is fruitless. If man is either to experience or to know God, the initiative must come from God.

Out of love for mankind, God has chosen to bridge this gap, namely, *to put on names*. Stated more technically, God has condescended to reveal Himself through human language and thought. St. Ephrem expresses this notion of divine condescension with the vivid image of clothing. St. Ephrem frequently uses clothing imagery to illustrate God's interaction with mankind. God's condescension and incarnation, for example, are described as putting off glory and putting on a body.

*All these changes did the Merciful One make  
stripping off glory and putting on a body;  
for He had devised a way to reclothe Adam  
in that glory which Adam had stripped off.  
(On the Nativity. 23:13)<sup>16</sup>*

Concerning revelation, he speaks of *putting on names*. In the Incarnation, God clothes Himself in a body. In divine revelation, God clothes Himself in words. Both were acts of love, and both absolutely necessary if mankind would know God at all.

*We should realize that,  
had He not put on the names  
of such things,  
it would not have been possible for Him  
to speak with us humans.  
But by means of what belongs to us did He draw close to us:  
He clothed Himself in language,  
so that He might clothe us  
in His mode of life.  
He asked for our form and put this on,  
and then, as a father with his children,  
He spoke with our childish state.  
(On Faith. 31:2)<sup>17</sup>*

For our benefit, God put on names so that we might know God and adorn ourselves with His mode of life. But where might we find these names? God's *putting on names* refers to the Biblical images and metaphors which supply the human intellect with pointers to aspects of the hidden realities of God. If

<sup>16</sup>Cited from Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 65. For another translation see Ephrem of Nisibis, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (trans. Kathleen E. McVey; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989) 190.

<sup>17</sup>Cited from Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 46. Also translated in Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 43-44.

one would learn anything about God, Holy Scripture is the starting point.<sup>18</sup>

Due to God's initiative, humanity can know God. To know God, however, requires a proper response to that initiative. How then should we respond to God's putting on names? A profitable response requires

discernment, *purshana* (ܦܪܫܢܐ), fear, *dekhla* (ܕܟܠܐ), wonder, *tehra* (ܛܝܪܐ), and love, *khuba*

(ܚܘܒܐ).<sup>19</sup> For good reason are these qualities required. The spiritual riches, glories, and beauties revealed are so magnificent as to overwhelm human intellect and sensation. No words can adequately contain God's overabundant revelation. For example, St. Ephrem writes concerning the revelation about Paradise in Holy Scriptures:

*Scripture brought me  
to the gate of Paradise,  
and the mind, which is spiritual,  
stood in amazement and wonder as it entered,  
the intellect grew dizzy and weak  
as the senses were no longer able  
to contain its treasures --  
so magnificent they were --  
or to discern its savors  
and find any comparison for its colors,  
or take in its beauties  
so as to describe them in words.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 6:2)<sup>20</sup>*

A proper response also requires knowing one's limits. One must not pry into hidden matters, i.e., things which God has not revealed. Hence one should bind the word and proceed no further than what God reveals.<sup>21</sup> One should proceed with caution even with what is revealed since the relationship of revelation to human language is paradoxical. God's nature and eternal truths overwhelm the capacity of human language and thought. Therefore neither word nor concept can correspond directly to what God reveals. Yet how else could God reveal Himself but through human language? Thus to grasp revelation usefully, we must recognize that a condescension has taken place therein. We must neither falter at the use of created imagery to portray spiritual truths nor take these images literally.

*Do not let your intellect  
be disturbed by mere names,  
for Paradise has simply clothed itself  
in terms that are akin to you;  
it is not because it is impoverished  
that it has put on your imagery,*

<sup>18</sup>Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 45.

<sup>19</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (trans. Sebastian Brock; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990) 78, 109 (Hymns 1:2 and 6:2). Ephrem of Nisibis, *Des heiligen Ephraem der Syers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (ed. and trans. Edmund Beck; SCSO 175, Scriptorum Syri 79; Louvain, 1957) 1, 19.

<sup>20</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 109. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 18-20.

<sup>21</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 101, 132 (ch. 4:11; 8:3). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 15, 33..

*rather, your nature is far too weak  
to be able  
to attain to its greatness,  
and its beauties are much diminished  
by being depicted in the pale colors  
with which you are familiar.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 11:7)<sup>22</sup>*

Knowledge is indeed possible. The intellect can grow as it meditates with discernment, *purshana*, in the treasure house of hidden things, *bgaza dkasyatha* (ܒܓܙܐ ܕܟܥܣܝܬܐ), namely Holy Scriptures. To do this, one must pursue such study in love and doctrine, *bkhuba wyulphana* (ܒܟܗܘܒܐ ܘܝܘܠܦܢܐ). In short, this knowledge is not open to just anyone with any attitude. One's study must be a loving response to God's initiative and disciplined by the teaching of the Church. Outside the Church, spiritual knowledge remains hidden. With the keys of doctrine, the hidden truths of Scripture are unlocked, making perceptible the imperceptible God. Love and faith make it possible to receive what God reveals.<sup>23</sup>

*The keys of doctrine  
which unlock all of Scripture's books,  
have opened up before my eyes  
the book of creation,  
the treasure house of the Ark,  
the crown of the Law.  
This is a book which, above its companions,  
has in its narrative  
made the Creator perceptible  
and transmitted His actions;  
it has envisioned all His craftsmanship,  
made manifest His works of art.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 6:1)*

The greater one's spiritual stature, the more God reveals. The feeble receive small glimpses while the mature are illumined more brightly. Each according to his capacity, but all who purify their eyes receive some measure of spiritual truth. One needs both the sending of divine light and its reception by luminous eyes for hidden truths to be revealed. It is the Christian's duty and privilege to illumine his eyes with love and faith so as to receive God's light. Intellectual acumen and curiosity alone lead nowhere spiritually since God's revelation is invisible to the unaided eye. The intellect does find light and truth, but only in love, faith, discernment, and in the Church. *Only God's Son, however, can fully behold the majesty of God.* This is the basis of St. Ephrem's epistemology and underlies the rest of this study.

*The Lord of all  
is the treasure store of all things:*

<sup>22</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 156. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 47-48.

<sup>23</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 108-109, 118 (ch. 6:1, 25). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 19, 25.



*upon each according to his capacity  
He bestows a glimpse  
of the beauty of His hiddenness,  
of the splendor of His majesty.  
He is the radiance who, in His love,  
makes everyone shine  
-- the small, with flashes of light from Him,  
the perfect, with rays more intense,  
but only His child is sufficient  
for the might of His glory.*

*Accordingly as each here on earth  
purifies his eye for Him,  
so does he become more able to behold  
His incomparable glory;  
accordingly as each here on earth  
opens his ear to Him,  
so does he become more able to grasp  
His wisdom;  
accordingly as each here on earth  
prepares a receptacle for Him,  
so is he enabled to carry  
a small portion of His Riches.*

*The Lord who is beyond measure  
measures out nourishment to all,  
adapting to our eyes the sight of Himself,  
to our hearing His voice,  
His blessing to our appetite,  
His wisdom to our tongue.*

*At His gift  
blessings swarm,  
for this is always new in its savor,  
wonderfully fragrant,  
adaptable in strength,  
resplendent in its colors.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 9:25-27)<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 145-146. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 41-42.

### God's Two Witnesses: Holy Scripture and Nature

God has chosen to close the gap between Creator and creation by *putting on names*. In so doing, the Lord has provided pointers, or hints, to aspects of the hidden, but magnificent, truth of God. One finds these pointers in two repositories, *Holy Scripture* and *Nature*.

*In his book Moses  
described the creation of the material world,  
so that both Nature and Scripture  
might bear witness to the creator:  
Nature, through man's use of it,  
Scripture, through his reading of it.  
These are the witnesses  
which reach everywhere,  
they are to be found at all times,  
present at every hour,  
confuting the unbeliever  
who defames the Creator.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 5:2)<sup>25</sup>*

In the use of nature, man sees God's goodness through the merciful provision for man's livelihood. By reading Holy Scripture one learns of the truth, *shrara*, (ܫܪܪܐ), through the hints given therein. Reaching out to both readers and non-readers alike, the truth of God pervades everything. The discerning, who hone their spiritual sensibilities, can find these pointers. Those whose spiritual vision wane see nothing. God has done His part, leaving the choice with the responder, and mankind without excuse.

One method which both Holy Scripture and Nature share in revealing truth is the usage of *types* and *symbols*. Types indicate a relationship between the normal significance of a thing, e.g., *light*, and the spiritual reality to which it points, e.g., *divine illumination*. St. Ephrem uses many terms interchangeably to indicate *type* and *symbol*, e.g., *tuphsa* (ܬܘܦܫܐ), a loan word from Greek, *typos* (τύπος, English *type*), also *raza* (ܪܐܙܐ). The latter, *raza*, a word of Persian origin, is perhaps the most important term used by St. Ephrem to signify the concept of *symbol*. It is probably the word which lies behind the Apostle Paul's term, *mysterion* (μυστήριον). Both *raza* and *mysterion* signify *secret* and *mystery*. Significantly enough, in the Christian context, the plural of each, *raze* (ܪܐܙܐ) and *mysteria* (μυστήρια) refer to the *Divine Mysteries* or Holy Eucharist. This is significant since it shows that for St. Ephrem, and for the Patristic view in general, the concept *symbol* carries far greater meaning than it does in modern usage. The phrase, *a mere symbol*, or, *symbolic action*, indicates the relative poverty of the word's connotation in modern parlance. Here the emptiness of the symbol stands in sharp contrast to the reality of the thing or action indicated. In St. Ephrem's and the Patristic view, the symbol partakes somehow in the reality of the deeper truth to which it points. This reflects their sacramental conception of the world

<sup>25</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 102. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 16.

wherein time and matter are neither empty nor void, but can carry great significance and even be media of salvation. Hence for St. Ephrem, types and symbols are not empty signs but marvelous avenues to spiritual reality.<sup>26</sup> Types and symbols do not separate us from the truths to which they point but instead draw us toward them.

Types and symbols are essentially relationships between the manifest image and the hidden truth to which it points. Although the outward media of types take on additional significance through their relation to their deeper meaning, they are not necessarily aware of this relationship. Although aspects of God are revealed through types, God remains essentially hidden due to the limitations of human intelligence and creation in attaining to the infinite. Although these images are everywhere, their deeper meanings are not seen naturally. For the eye of faith, however, God is not distant.

*Lord, Your symbols are everywhere,  
yet You are hidden from everywhere.  
Though Your symbol is on high,  
yet the height does not perceive that You are;  
though Your symbol is in the depth,  
it does not comprehend who You are;  
though Your symbol is in the sea,  
You are hidden from the sea;  
though Your symbol is on dry land,  
it is not aware what You are.  
Blessed is the Hidden One shining out.  
(On Faith. 4:9)<sup>27</sup>*

From the citation above, one can see that St. Ephrem understands the spiritual nature of typology to permeate creation, albeit unseen without the insight of faith. How much more then is this the case regarding Holy Scripture? Here St. Ephrem finds countless typological relationships, and in varied directions, e.g., Old Testament types of New Testament realities, Old and New Testament types of the mysteries of Paradise, Old and New Testament types of the Holy Sacraments, Paradise as a type of the Church and vice versa, and so forth. For the spiritually aware, types and symbols infuse Holy Scripture and creation with meaning and purpose. They are not apologetical proofs for the existence of divinity, rather opportunities and enticements to divine beauty and truth. Behind these types lies the condescension of a loving God who, through them, would draw us to Himself.<sup>28</sup>

*Lord, You bent down and put on humanity's types  
So that humanity might grow through Your self-abasement.  
(On Faith. 32:9)<sup>29</sup>*

<sup>26</sup>See also Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 41-42, and *The Luminous Eye* 37-43.

<sup>27</sup>Cited from Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 39.

<sup>28</sup>See Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 37-40.

<sup>29</sup>Cited from Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 38.

### Holy Scripture as Witness

*Moses, who instructs all men  
with his celestial writings,  
He, the master of the Hebrews,  
has instructed us in his teachings  
the Law, which constitutes  
a very treasure house of revelations,  
wherein is revealed  
the tale of the Garden --  
described by things visible,  
but glorious for what lies hidden  
spoken of in few words,  
yet wondrous with its many plants.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 1:1)<sup>30</sup>*

Holy Scripture is a primary source for those who would know God. The Law, literally 'uraitha (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ) i.e., the Pentateuch, is a font of spiritual knowledge concerning Paradise. Here Holy Writ is a "treasure of revelations," *simtha dgelyane* (ܣܝܡܬܐ ܕܓܝܠܝܢܐ). This cornucopia of revelation clearly displays the dynamics typical of divine revelation, "written in things manifest, glorious in things hidden," *kthibhath bgalyatha shbhikhath bkasyatha* (ܟܬܝܒܬܐ ܒܓܠܝܬܐ ܫܒܝܚܬܐ ܒܟܝܣܝܬܐ). God reveals through what the eye sees what is glorious to the spiritual eye. Condescension to what is perceptible makes partial understanding possible. It is the hidden truth, however, which elevates.

*I stood halfway  
between awe and love  
a yearning for Paradise  
invited me to explore it,  
but awe at its majesty  
restrained me from my search.  
With wisdom, however,  
I reconciled the two;  
I revered what lay hidden  
and meditated on what was revealed.  
The aim of my search was to gain profit,  
the aim of my silence was to find succor.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 1:2)<sup>31</sup>*

<sup>30</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 77-78. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 1.

<sup>31</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 78. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 1.

Here one finds an exemplary response to God's self-revelation. In the presence of God's glorious truth, St. Ephrem stands "between love and fear," *beith dekhla lkhuba* (ܒܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܠܐ ܠܚܘܒܐ). An honest yearning for Paradise prompts the saint to further study, while a godly fear prevents undue inquisitiveness. Wisdom prevails and the intellect proceeds. St. Ephrem writes, "I revered its hidden things, I pondered its manifestations," *yeqreth lkasyatheh hemseth bgalyatheh* (ܝܥܩܪܝܬ ܠܟܝܣܝܬܐܗܗ ܗܡܫܝܬ ܒܓܠܝܬܐܗܗ ܡܬܦܬܝܠܐ ܕܗܝܘܬܐܗܗ), providing an example of how to approach what God reveals. Ponder what is revealed since this can be known. Revere what is hidden for this is the glorious truth of God.

Human intellect therefore has a proper realm for investigation. All creation lies within reach of human knowledge. But loving and fearing the unseen yet experienced God, the intellect soars as it examines what also lays within its realm, namely what God has revealed. When investigating revealed truth one examines it, not as it actually is, but as given to man to understand. Doing this, one's investigation is profitable while one's awe for the unseen God brings comfort and joy.

*Joyfully did I embark  
on the tale of Paradise --  
a tale that is short to read  
but rich to explore.  
My tongue read the story's  
outward narrative,  
while my intellect took wing  
and soared upward in awe  
as it perceived the splendor of Paradise --  
not indeed as it really is,  
but insofar as humanity  
is granted to comprehend it.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 1:3)<sup>32</sup>*

It is worth examining some of the types and symbols which St. Ephrem finds in Holy Writ. An unusual typological relationship exists between the Holy of Holies and the outer sanctuary of the Temple and the corresponding inner and outer regions of Paradise. Included in this relationship are yet others, e.g., between Adam, the King of Paradise, and Uzziah, King of Judah, the priest's censer and Adam's obedience, as well as the ephod and the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

In the separation of the outer sanctuary from the Holy of Holies, St. Ephrem sees a type of Paradise in that Paradise too, as he understands it, is separated into outer and inner regions. Access was granted to the temple's outer sanctuary as Adam initially had access to Paradise' outer region. Only the High Priest, however, had access to the Holy of Holies. Furthermore, this access required preparation, the ephod, censer, and so forth, and was granted once yearly. Adam, at first, was denied access to the inner region of Paradise so that his service in the outer sanctuary might first prove pleasing to God. As the

<sup>32</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 78. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 1-2.

<sup>33</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 95-96, 161-162, 184-185. (ch. 3:14-17; 12:4; 15:7-10). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 11-12, 50, 63-64.

ensor was necessary for the Temple priest, so also was obedience to the commandment concerning the Tree of Knowledge necessary for Adam should he be allowed to enter Paradise' inner sanctum. Unfortunately, Adam, King of Paradise, became bold and seized the fruit of the Tree out of season. Likewise, Uzziah, King of Judah, was emboldened to take the priest's censer which by right was not his.<sup>34</sup> Adam thus was stripped of glory whereas Uzziah was struck with leprosy. Both kings then, ashamed of their bodies, fled from their realms. Seeking to gain what was not theirs, they lost what was.

*In the midst of Paradise God had planted  
the Tree of Knowledge  
to separate off, above and below,  
sanctuary from Holy of Holies.  
Adam made bold to touch,  
and was smitten like Uzziah:  
the king became leprous,  
Adam was stripped.  
Being struck like Uzziah,  
he hastened to leave:  
both kings fled and hid,  
in shame of their bodies.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 3:14)<sup>35</sup>*

The priest's ephod and the Tree of Knowledge stand in a typological relationship since both provided knowledge required to ponder their respective inner regions. Both were keys to unlock the treasure of revelations; the ephod to the Holy of Holies, the Tree of Knowledge to Paradise' inner sanctuary. To the obedient, both were keys to knowledge. But anyone daring to enter the Holy of Holies against the commandment died, becoming a type of Adam, who ate prematurely, was stripped of glory and died.

*Accompanied by the knowledge  
which was hidden in the ephod,  
the priest entered the sanctuary,  
a type for Paradise,  
and he tasted of the Tree  
through the symbol of the revelation given him.  
But if anyone entered  
contrary to the commandment, they died,  
as a type of Adam who died  
for taking the fruit prematurely  
The priest put on sanctification,  
but Adam was stripped of glory.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 15:8)<sup>36</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup>II Chronicles 26.

<sup>35</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 95. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 11.

<sup>36</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 184-185. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 63-64.

The leper in the camp of the Hebrews was also a type of Adam in that both their conditions made it necessary to expel them from their respective encampments. But should the leper shed his leprosy and make supplication, the priest would cleanse him with hyssop, blood and water. Thus the leper could enter once again to his inheritance. Likewise Christ, the High Priest, saw Adam cast out from Himself. The High Priest then humbled Himself and came to Adam. He cleansed Adam with hyssop, restoring him to Paradise.<sup>37</sup> Thus we have a type of our fall and restoration to glory.

*Adam had been most pure  
in that fair Garden,  
but he became leprous and repulsive  
because the serpent has breathed on him.  
The Garden cast him out from its midst;  
all shining, it thrust him forth.  
The High Priest, the Exalted One,  
beheld him  
cast out from Himself:  
He stooped down and came to him,  
He cleansed him with hyssop,  
and led him back to Paradise.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 4:4)<sup>38</sup>*

### **Nature as Witness**

Nature is God's second witness to Himself. To draw errant man back to God, the Lord strew types and symbols throughout the created order. These pointers lie everywhere, leaving mankind ample guides and no excuses.<sup>39</sup> Such a view presupposes a sacramental view of the world. For St. Ephrem, and the Patristic tradition in general, creation and matter serve both as media of salvation and revelation. Although the created type is unaware of its spiritual counterpart, the relationship between the material and spiritual poles of a type a very real. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, St. Ephrem illustrates how the eternal order flows into this world and bridges the gap between God and creation, enriching the fallen world.

The river of Eden which watered the Garden also flows into this world, dividing into the four rivers, Pison, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates.<sup>40</sup> St. Ephrem's concern here is not geographical. Since Adam's sin, the earth fell under the curse, polluting its waters. To purify the waters fouled by the curse, the living stream of Paradise irrigates this world.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 97-99. (ch. 4:1-5). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 12-14.

<sup>38</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 98-99. (ch. 4:4). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 13.

<sup>39</sup>Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 38, 39 (*On Faith*. 32:9; 4:9). Also Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 102 (ch. 5:2). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 16.

<sup>40</sup>Genesis 2:10-14.

<sup>41</sup>St. Ephrem lived in northern Mesopotamia and knew the geography of the region well enough. A literal interpretation of the spring of Paradise dividing into the four great rivers was no more logical to him than to us. In addition, St. Ephrem saw the eschatological Paradise as of a different order than our current existence. The relationship he portrays, therefore, is meant to be a spiritual rather than a literal one. St. Ephrem identifies the four rivers as the Danube, Nile, Tigris and Euphrates respectively. See Ephrem of Nisibis. "The Commentary on Genesis," *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (trans. Sebastian Brock; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990) 201 (for Genesis 2:6).

*What need was there  
that from that land  
a river should flow forth  
and divide itself,  
except that the blessing of Paradise  
should be mingled by means of water  
as it issues forth  
to irrigate the world,  
making clean its fountains  
that had become polluted by curses  
-- just as that "sickly water"  
had been made wholesome by the salt.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 11:11)<sup>42</sup>*

Even the blessed aromas of Paradise mingle with this fallen world, giving sweetness to this bitter region and tempering the curse.

*The breath that wafts  
from some blessed corner of Paradise  
gives sweetness  
to the bitterness of this region,  
it tempers the curse  
on this earth of ours.  
That Garden is  
the life-breath  
of this diseased world  
that has been so long in sickness  
that breath proclaims that a saving remedy  
has been sent to heal our mortality.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 11:10)<sup>43</sup>*

Eternity therefore interacts with our fallen world, making knowledge of God possible through symbols strewn throughout creation. What are some of the types which St. Ephrem sees in nature? Death, for example, is a symbol, *raza* (here spelled ܠܘܐܘܪܐ) of rebirth into the eschatological Paradise.

*I was amazed at how even infants  
weep at they leave the womb --*

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<sup>42</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 157-158. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 48. See also Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 87-88 (ch. 2:8-9). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 7. For a clear reference to Holy Baptism, see Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 158 (ch. 11:12). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 49.

<sup>43</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 157. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 48. In the Upper Room the scents of Paradise found both their home and their strongest manifestation on earth. See Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 159 (ch. 11:14). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 49.



*weeping because they come out  
from darkness into light  
and from suffocation they issue forth  
into this world!  
Likewise death, too,  
is for the world  
a symbol of birth  
and yet people weep because they are being born  
out of this world, the mother of suffering,  
into the Garden of splendors.  
(Hymns on Faith. 5:14)<sup>44</sup>*

Morning also is a type for the Resurrection of the dead. This daily recurring symbol provides encouragement since once night falls, the morning is only hours away. So too Christians need neither despair nor weary in well-doing since the Resurrection is not afar off.

*In the evening the world sleeps,  
closing its eyes,  
while in the morning it arises.  
He who repays is distant  
as it were but a night's length away;  
now light dawns and He is coming.  
Weary not, my brethren,  
nor suppose  
that your struggle will last long  
or that your resurrection is far off,  
for our death is already behind us,  
and our resurrection before us.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 7:2)<sup>45</sup>*

God has therefore left witnesses to His existence and love for us, both in Holy Scripture and in nature. God has strewn both with types and symbols, providing countless hints at aspects of His hidden being. Heaven thus interacts with earth, making human knowledge of God possible through the eye of faith. There are limits to this knowledge due to the feebleness of created human intellect when encountering the divine. One must therefore not take literally the images which God uses to communicate to us since they are terrestrial while their referents are spiritual. There are no other media available, however, with which God can communicate with us. But to take such images literally, whether in nature or in Holy Writ, is to abuse them, erring through the very means with which God would enlighten us. One must not confuse the eye of faith with the eyes of empirical science or history. Although not mutually exclusive, they are not the same.

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<sup>44</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 107. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 18-19.

<sup>45</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 119. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 25-26.

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*Let not this description of it  
    be judged by one who hears it,  
for descriptions of it  
    are not at all subject to judgment,  
since, even though it may appear terrestrial  
    because of the terms used,  
it is in its reality  
    spiritual and pure.*

*Even though the name of "spirit"  
    is applied to two kinds of beings'  
yet the unclean spirit is quite separate  
    from the one that is sanctified.*

*For him who would tell of it  
    there is no other means  
but to use the names  
    of things that are visible,  
thus depicting for his hearers  
    a likeness of things that are hidden.*

*For if the Creator  
    of the Garden  
has clothed his majesty  
    in terms that we can understand  
how much more can His Garden  
    be described with our similes?*

*If someone concentrates his attention solely  
    on the metaphors used of God's majesty,  
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty  
    and thus errs  
by means of those metaphors  
    with which God clothed Himself for his benefit.  
and he is ungrateful to that Grace  
    which stooped low  
to the level of his childishness;  
    although it has nothing in common with him,  
yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness  
    in order to bring him to the likeness of itself.*

*Do not let your intellect  
    be disturbed by mere names,  
for Paradise has simply clothed itself  
    in terms that are akin to you;*

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*it is not because it is impoverished  
that it has put on your imagery;  
rather, your nature is far too weak  
to be able  
to attain to its greatness,  
and its beauties are much diminished  
by being depicted in the pale colors  
with which you are familiar.*

*For feeble eyes  
cannot gaze upon  
the dazzling sight  
of its celestial beauties;  
it has clothed its trees  
with the names of the trees we know;  
its figs are called  
by the same name as our figs,  
its leaves, which are spiritual,  
have taken on bodily form;  
they have been changed  
so that their vesture may resemble ours.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 11:4-8)<sup>46</sup>*

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<sup>46</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 155-157. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 47-48.

## **Hiddenness and Revelation**

The ontological and epistemological gap between Creator and creation, which man cannot cross, has been spanned by God through *putting on names*, i.e., revealing Himself through the use of human language and imagery. *Types* and *symbols* are primary media by which God adapts human imagery to convey deeper spiritual meanings. They are conceptual relationships between the mundane image used and the ultramundane idea behind them, thereby serving as pointers to hidden truths. God has sewn these symbols liberally throughout creation and Holy Scripture, making both witnesses for Himself. Types and symbols, therefore, are visible and tangible items which, by God's grace, convey spiritual notions far greater than themselves. Without these symbols, however, these concepts would remain hidden.

Therefore in typology one finds always a tension between two poles, *hiddenness* and *revelation*. What God reveals through human types and symbols is genuine. Yet due to human finitude, far more remains hidden than revealed. With the eye of faith, however, hidden realities can be experienced in spite of our inadequacies. Just how St. Ephrem expresses the polarity of hiddenness and revelation is now the question at hand.

St. Ephrem views the polarity of types from two perspectives. These perspectives are: **a)** the *human*, or *subjective* perspective, which focuses on the limitations of human knowledge and the corresponding partial nature of revelation; and **b)** the *objective* perspective, which begins with truth and God's being which are objectively true but experienced by humans in a hidden way. Once these two viewpoints are understood, one grasps St. Ephrem's concept of *hiddenness* and *revelation*.

### ***Hiddenness and Things Revealed --- The Subjective Perspective.***

This perspective is the one most commonly found in St. Ephrem's writings and is also the one most frequently discussed in this study so far. Here man's *experience of knowing* the transcendent is emphasized, especially its limitations and paradoxes. Due to the inadequacies of human knowledge, revelation from this perspective is always partial. Types and symbols are temporal images pointing to timeless realities which far transcend the images used to convey them. Yet to some degree truth is conveyed, as long as one doesn't deceive oneself by taking these metaphors and similes literally. To do so is to discard the pole of eternal hiddenness, causing one to construe the divine solely out of one's own limited experience leading to heresy and deception.<sup>47</sup>

The knowledge gained from types is *always partial*. With many types one receives many revelations in part. The more types, the more parts; but no sum of parts will ever amount to the whole revelation of God's hiddenness. Furthermore each person gathers his own collection of types, leaving each with his own accumulation of partial revelations. Due to the consequent incompleteness of knowledge, man's perspective is essentially subjective.<sup>48</sup>

Here hiddenness, *kasyutha* (ܟܣܘܬܗ), refers to God Who without His self-revelation would never be known. In this context, St. Ephrem uses the term, *galyatha* (ܓܠܝܬܗ), meaning "things revealed,"

<sup>47</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 156 (ch. 11:6). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 47.

<sup>48</sup>See also Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 43-44, and *The Luminous Eye* 14.

indicating the partial nature of revelation on this level. The most complete revealing of God's hiddenness is in the Incarnation. Yet even here the divinity of God retains its hiddenness.<sup>49</sup>

*Who will not give thanks to the Hidden One,  
most hidden of all,  
who came to open revelation,  
most open of all,  
for He put on a body,  
and other bodies felt Him  
-- though minds never grasped Him.  
(On Faith. 19:7)<sup>50</sup>*

One finds examples of types as "things revealed" when St. Ephrem discusses the topography of the Garden. He describes Paradise as a mountain divided into distinct regions, each with their own inhabitants. The summit is the abode for the "glory of God's presence," *shkintha* (ܫܟܝܢܬܗ). The heights are reserved for the victorious, *naçikhe* (ܢܫܝܚܝܗ), the middle region for the righteous, *zadiqe* (ܙܕܝܩܝܗ), and the lowest parts for the repentant, *tayabe* (ܬܝܒܝܗ). According to one's spiritual labors one is allowed to proceed up the Paradisiacal mountain, being halted at the level of which "he is worthy," *dshawe leh* (ܕܫܘܘܐ ܠܗ). Nobody is excluded since there are enough levels for all.<sup>51</sup>

Hence Paradise has four levels: the summit, the heights, the slopes, and the lower parts. The inhabitants of these regions are correspondingly: God, the victorious, the righteous, and the repentant. One set of "types of Paradise," here, *tuphsaw dparadisa* (ܬܘܦܫܘܘܐ ܕܦܪܕܝܝܫܐ), deals with Noah and the Ark. The animals lived in the lowest part, to the birds was allotted the middle part, while Noah, like the deity, lived in the upper deck. Mount Sinai provides yet more types. The people were below, the priests round about the mountain, Aaron midway up, Moses at the heights, while "the Glorious One," *mshabhkha* (ܡܫܒܫܚܟܗ) was at the summit. In these types Paradise, the harbor of all riches, is portrayed, whereby also the Church is portrayed.<sup>52</sup> Thus one finds here several types of Paradise which in turn is a type of the Church.

*When He made this intricate design  
He varied its beauties,  
so that some levels  
were far more glorious than others,  
To the degree that one level*

<sup>49</sup>Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 14-15.

<sup>50</sup>Cited from Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 14.

<sup>51</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 88-89 (ch. 2:10-11). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 7.

<sup>52</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 89 (ch. 2:12-13). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 8. For a concise chart correlating the corresponding types, see Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 53.

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*is higher than another,  
so too is its glory  
the more sublime.*

*In this way He allots  
the foothills to the most lowly,  
the slopes to those in between  
and the heights to the exalted.*

*When the just ascend its various levels  
they 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 God's presence.*

*Noah made the animals live  
in the lowest part of the Ark;  
in the middle part  
he lodged the birds,  
while Noah himself, like the Deity,  
resided on the upper deck.*

*On Mount Sinai it was the people  
who dwelt below,  
the priests round about it,  
and Aaron halfway up,  
while Moses was on its heights,  
and the Glorious One on the Summit.*

*A symbol of the divisions  
in that Garden of Life  
did Moses trace out in the Ark  
and on Mount Sinai too;  
he depicted for us the types of Paradise  
with all its arrangements:  
harmonious, fair and desirable  
in all things --  
in its height, its beauty,*

*its fragrance, and its different species.  
Here is the harbor of all riches,  
whereby the Church is depicted.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 2:10-14)<sup>53</sup>*

In this example, the Ark and Sinai are types of the eschatological Paradise. Even the human body, *phagra* (ܦܘܓܪܐ), soul, *naphsha* (ܢܦܫܐ), and intellectual spirit, *tar'itha* (ܛܪܝܬܐ - literally "intellect"), are types of Paradise.<sup>54</sup> In any of these types, one receives a partial revelation of the levels of Paradise. Nonetheless, all the types in the world will never depict anything but a partial manifestation of Paradisiacal glory. For a fuller experience thereof, one must await the eschaton. In the meantime, human knowledge of Paradise will be partial and thus subjective, albeit genuine.

### ***Hiddenness and Revealing --- The Objective Perspective.***

Unlike the previous viewpoint, which focuses on *man's knowing* of truth, the "objective" perspective begins with the mode of existence of truth, *shrara* (ܫܪܪܐ) or *qushta* (ܩܘܫܬܐ). The starting point is not man's experience of God, rather God's actual being, *'ithutha* (ܐܝܬܘܬܗ), which exists objectively but is experienced by man in a hidden way.<sup>55</sup> In the Eucharist, for example, one truly receives the body and blood of Christ, albeit hiddenly since to all appearances the elements still appear to be bread and wine. In the coming age, however, Christ will come openly. In both cases Christ comes objectively and is experienced in truth. Yet in this age humans experience Christ in a hidden way due to the limitations of human knowledge and sensation.

It is important to note that when St. Ephrem works from this perspective, the polarity is not between hiddenness, *kasyutha* (ܕܟܣܝܘܬܐ) and "things revealed," *galyatha* (ܕܓܠܝܘܬܐ), rather *kasyutha* (ܕܟܣܝܘܬܐ) and revealing, *galyutha* (ܕܓܠܝܘܬܐ). In this polarity, *galyutha*, refers to what is revealed, which is objective reality, but is experienced only subjectively in this life. In this context, types and symbols are not merely *galyatha*, "things revealed," but also possess a hiddenness which indicates a reality manifest fully only in the eschaton. *Here it is not the typological image which is the pointer, rather the hiddenness found in the type.*<sup>56</sup> As is the case in the relationship between *kasyutha* and *galyatha*, the hiddenness will be lifted in the eschaton. Unlike that relationship, however, what is revealed on this side is objectively real and not partial. In the relationship between *kasyutha* and *galyutha*, the human experience is partial, but not the reality itself.

<sup>53</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 88-89. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 7-8.

<sup>54</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 143-144. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 40. Here is an early

"non-hellenic" reference to divinization, *theosis* (θεωσις). "At the end," *lkharta* (ܠܚܪܬܐ), the body will be raised to the level of the soul, the soul to the level of intellectual spirit, and the spirit shall put on the likeness of God's majesty. Sebastian Brock has some interesting insights concerning St. Ephrem and *theosis*. See Sebastian Brock, "Introduction" 72-74, and *The Luminous Eye* 123-128.

<sup>55</sup>Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 15.

<sup>56</sup>Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 15, also "Introduction" 42-43.

Although less common, the reader does find instances of this "objective" perspective in the *Hymns on Paradise*. Perhaps the clearest examples of this are found when St. Ephrem addresses the relationship of Church and Paradise. God is the planter of the Garden and the builder of the Church.<sup>57</sup> Both the Garden and the Church were established as dwellings. Without effort, God planted the Garden to be the Church's dwelling. Through the effort of free will, however, the Church planted a Paradise in which God chose to dwell. God planted the Garden to delight the Church; the Church planted a Paradise to honor God. God's Paradise pleased the Church whereas the Church's Paradise pleased God.

*The effortless power,  
the arm which never tires,  
planted this Paradise,  
adorned it without effort.  
But it is the effort of free will  
that adorns the Church with all manner of fruits.  
The creator saw the Church  
and was pleased;  
He resided in that Paradise  
which she had planted for His honor,  
just as He had planted the Garden  
for her delight.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 6:10)<sup>58</sup>*

Paradise is the dwelling place of the Church while the Church is the dwelling place of God. More beautiful to God are the fruits of the righteous than the fruits of the trees. Beauty in nature extols the human mind, *re'yana* (ܪܝܢܐ). Paradise extols the intellect, *mad'a* (ܡܕܐ), as do the flowers virtuous deeds, *dubhare* (ܕܒܗܪܐ), and the Garden free will, *khirutha* (ܚܝܪܘܬܐ).<sup>59</sup> The glory of the Church even exceeds the glory of Paradise. The exploits of the victorious, *naçikhe* (ܢܥܝܩܗܐ), who adorn themselves "in the types of Paradise," *btuphsaw dparadaisa* (ܒܬܘܦܫܘܘܢܐ ܕܦܪܕܝܝܫܐ), are more worthy to be told than even the account of Paradise itself. In them, and thus in the Church, is depicted the beauty of the Garden. Let one celebrate the inheritors rather than the inheritance.<sup>60</sup>

*More fitting to be told  
than the glorious account  
of Paradise  
are the exploits of the victorious  
who adorned themselves  
with the very likeness of Paradise;*

<sup>57</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 111 (ch.6:7). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 21.

<sup>58</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 112. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 21.

<sup>59</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 113 (ch. 6:13). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 22.

<sup>60</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 113-114 (ch. 6:14). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 22.



*in them is depicted  
the beauty of the Garden.  
Let us take leave of the trees  
and tell of the victors,  
instead of the inheritance  
let us celebrate the inheritors.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 6:14).<sup>61</sup>*

The glories and blessings of Paradise are therefore found in the Church. The Church resembles Paradise since in it the fruit of the Giver of life is plucked just as the fruits of the Garden were plucked. In the Church the cluster of grapes is crushed "to be the medicine of Immortality," *dsam dkhaye* (ܕܫܡܕܟܗܝܬܐ), i.e., the Eucharist. As the river of Paradise irrigates the world through the four mighty rivers of Genesis 2:10-14, so also another spring, full of perfumes, issues forth from Paradise into the world, namely the waters of Baptism.<sup>62</sup> In the Upper Room the Apostles gathered together, "and the fragrance of Paradise," *wrikkeh dparadisa* (ܪܝܚܗܝܬܐ ܕܦܪܕܝܝܫܐ), found its home and poured out its Pentecostal blessings.<sup>63</sup>

*When the blessed Apostles  
were gathered together  
the place shook  
and the scent of Paradise  
having found its home,  
poured forth its perfumes,  
delighting the heralds  
by whom  
the guests are instructed  
and come to His banquet;  
eagerly He awaits their arrival  
for He is the Lover of mankind.  
(Hymns on Paradise. 11:14)<sup>64</sup>*

In the Church the grace of Paradise issues forth into the world. Through the Sacraments one experiences the *fullness* of Paradisiacal blessings. These are not partial but complete blessings, experienced truly but in a hidden way due to the limitations of humanity and the current age. The Church is a type of the Garden, possessing a hiddenness which points to the complete manifestation of Paradise at the eschaton. In the next age, the glories of Paradise will be more visible than in current age. Nevertheless the reality of these blessings in the Church now is just as great as at the end of the age.

<sup>61</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 113-114. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 22.

<sup>62</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 158 (ch. 11:12). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 49.

<sup>63</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 159 (ch. 11:14). Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 49.

<sup>64</sup>Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymns on Paradise* 159. Ephrem of Nisibis. *Hymnen de Paradiso* 49.

## Conclusion

God, in His love for mankind, has bridged the ontological and epistemological gap between Creator and creation by *putting on names*, or revealing Himself by using human language and imagery. *Types* and *symbols* are the means by which God adapts human imagery to convey deeper spiritual truths. They are conceptual relationships between the worldly image used and the otherworldly realities behind them, serving as pointers to hidden truths. God has strewn these symbols throughout creation and Holy Scripture, making both witnesses for Himself. Types and symbols, therefore, are visible and tangible items which, by God's grace, convey spiritual notions far greater than themselves. Without these symbols, however, these concepts would remain hidden.

Types and symbols can be understood from two complementary perspectives, the "subjective" and "objective." The "subjective" perspective begins from the viewpoint of human perception with its possibilities and limitations. Here man cannot know God without God taking the initiative in revealing Himself first. From this perspective, typology makes partial revelations of more fulsome but currently unfathomable spiritual depths which will be revealed completely at the eschaton. The "objective" perspective starts with the utter reality of God's being. Here spiritual realities are objectively real but experienced in a hidden way. This hiddenness itself, however, is a pointer to the fullness of spiritual realities which are objectively real both now and in eternity but which will be more fully manifest in eternity.

This then is the nature of God's self-revelation to man as culled from St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*. Since the topic of these hymns is Paradise, which according to St. Ephrem exists on another plane of reality, it is understandable that St. Ephrem would address the issue of anthropomorphic language<sup>65</sup> in them. He is, after all, trying to dress the spiritual nature of Paradise in the garment of human language. In content St. Ephrem stands very strongly in the Patristic tradition concerning the otherness of divinity and the limitations of human knowledge.<sup>66</sup> As keen as St. Ephrem's insight is, it is further enhanced by the poetic form with which he expresses these insights. By evoking them with poetic imagery, St. Ephrem makes the concepts of typology and divine revelation in human language much more approachable than is often the case when they are set down in definitions. Keeness of insight and the vivacity of his poetic form make Ephrem of Nisibis' *Hymns on Paradise* a valuable source for the study of Christian religious language.

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<sup>65</sup>The use of human words, forms and images to express otherworldly concepts.

<sup>66</sup>Sebastian Brock notes briefly the similarities and profundity of both Ephrem of Nisibis and Gregory of Nyssa, concerning anthropomorphic language. See Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* 119-123.

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<http://tserkovnost.org/stephrem/egallery.html>

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