

“SPIRIT IN THE BREAD; FIRE IN THE WINE”: THE EUCHARIST AS “LIVING MEDICINE” IN THE THOUGHT OF EPHRAEM THE SYRIAN

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To the east of Byzantium in the fourth century, the era in which the faith of Nicea came to its classical expression and the life of the church took on its familiar liturgical forms, Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306–373) was undoubtedly the thinker whose ideas would have the most powerful influence on later generations. He wrote in Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic language, which carried with it a family relationship to the Jewish world in which Christianity first appeared in the synagogue communities of Mesopotamia and Syria/Palestine. It was this language which eventually carried the Christian faith across the trade routes of Central Asia, eastward into China and southward into India. But in Ephraem’s day, Syriac-speaking people living where he lived, in the cities of Nisibis and Edessa, on the Roman Empire’s frontier with Persia, were also intellectually and politically very much attuned to the Greek-speaking culture of Asia Minor, and of the major ecclesiastical centers in Antioch and Constantinople. Ephraem himself was the major literary promoter of Roman imperial ideology in the region; in ecclesiology he followed the line of Eusebius of Caesarea Maritima (c. 260–c. 340); in theology he adhered to the teaching of the council of Nicea, strenuously combating what he perceived to be the inquisitive rationalism of those he called “Arians” and “Aetians”; in the east he was the relentless opponent of the teachings of Marcion, Bar Dayṣān, and Mani.¹

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Ephraem served the church in Nisibis for most of his life, beginning in the time of his patron, Bishop Jacob of Nisibis (d. 338), one of the signatories to the decisions of the council of Nicea.² He left Nisibis as a refugee in the year 363, when the city was handed over to the Persians as part of the price of peace after the death of the emperor Julian on 26 June 363, while on campaign against the Persians deep in Mesopotamia. Ephraem, along with many other refugees from Nisibis, then took up residence in Edessa, where he served the local bishop until his death on 9 June 373. All his life Ephraem was a bishop's man, possibly a deacon, definitely a teacher (*malpānâ*) and commentator on the scriptures, an apologist/polemicist and a liturgical poet.³ One modern scholar has written enthusiastically that Ephraem was "the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante".⁴

After his death, Ephraem gained a wide reputation as a holy man, not only in his own Syriac-speaking community but throughout the Byzantine world, and later in the medieval west and Russia. Many Greek-speaking admirers, particularly in the monastic communities of late antique and early medieval times, both translated his spiritual counsels and themselves composed treatises in Greek in his name.⁵ In this guise Ephraem has often been listed among the fathers of monasticism and icons of him often portray him in a monk's garb. Even the standard *Vita* of Ephraem in Syriac reflects this development.⁶ But Ephraem was never in fact a recluse or a hermit, or even a monk in any conventional sense of the term.⁷ He was all his life long a busy pastoral minister, whose main business was the composition of "teaching songs" (*madrāshê*) in Syriac, often to be presented at the divine liturgy. This was the portrait that Ephraem himself penned in the final stanzas of one of his memorable "teaching songs" at the end of his *Hymns against Heresies*. He wrote prayerfully,

O Lord, may the works of your pastoral minister (*‘allānâ*) not be discounted.

I will not then have troubled your sheep,
but as far as I was able,

I will have kept the wolves away from them,
and I will have built, as far as I was able,
enclosures of "teaching songs" (*madrāshê*)
for the lambs of your flock.

I will have made a disciple
of the simple and unlearned man.
And I will have made him hold
onto the pastoral ministers' (*‘allānê*) staff,
the healers' medicine,
and the disputants' arsenal.⁸

II

Although Ephraem wrote biblical commentary, prose refutations of the teachings of those whose views he regarded as false, prose meditations, dialogue poems and metrical homilies (*mêmrê*), there can be no doubt that his preferred genre was the "teaching song" (*madrâshâ*).⁹ Translators have often called these songs "hymns", but since they are not primarily songs of praise, the term is not really apt.¹⁰ Rather, they are "teaching songs", as Andrew Palmer has happily styled them; they were to be chanted to the accompaniment of the lyre (*kennârâ*), on the model of David, the Psalmist.¹¹ Perhaps their closest analogues are the Hebrew *Piyyûtîm*, synagogue songs which enjoyed great popularity in Palestine from the eighth century on, and which feature biblical themes and literary devices very similar to those regularly used by Ephraem.¹² They are also comparable to the Byzantine *Kontakion*. In fact, a good case can be made for the suggestion that the most famous composer of *Kontakia*, Romanos the Melode (d. after 555), who was a native of Emesa in Syria, was actively influenced by Ephraem's compositions.¹³

Ephraem composed his "teaching songs" (*madrâshê*) for the liturgy. St. Jerome says that in some churches they were recited after the scripture lessons in the divine liturgy.¹⁴ And they have had a place in the liturgy of the hours in the Syriac-speaking churches from the earliest periods for which textual witnesses remain.¹⁵ In his lifetime, Ephraem himself reportedly spent time and energy rehearsing the groups who would perform the "teaching songs" in church. What is more, according to one early witness, he insisted that women take their rightful place in the church's choirs. For this reason Jacob of Sarug (d. 521) called Ephraem the "second Moses for women".¹⁶ What he meant was that because of their role in the public performance of Ephraem's "teaching songs", women effectively became teachers in the churches. Jacob of Sarug made the point explicitly. Rhetorically addressing Ephraem, he said,

Your teaching opened the closed mouth of the daughters of Eve, and now the congregations of the glorious [church] resound with their voices.

It is a new sight that women would proclaim the Gospel, and now be called teachers in the churches.¹⁷

The point not to be missed here is that the "teaching songs", which the women teachers were reciting, were the effective instruments of catechesis in the Syriac-speaking congregations. And this catechesis consisted in poetic meditations on the symbols and types which God distributed in nature and scripture to lead people across the chasm separating creatures from their Creator. For Ephraem's theology is not propositional but typological and symbolic. The symbols and types are not esoteric but commonplace. While they come from both nature and the scriptures, it is the Bible that provides

the horizon for their interpretation. And within the Bible, the Gospel is the exegetical focal point; all the figures ultimately point to Christ. For Ephraem, the symbols and types are so many verbal icons, and his thought is really not so much theology as it is a sacramental iconology. Indeed, the image of the image maker is one of Ephraem's favorite figures of speech to refer to the ways in which God has communicated with people in the Bible.¹⁸ In this way Ephraem's thought is Semitic rather than Hellenic, flowing almost directly from the discourse of the scriptures rather than commenting on them.¹⁹

III

In the divine revelation, what one most often finds, according to Ephraem, even in the names and titles of God, are manifest symbols, which he most often calls *râzê* (sing. *râzâ*) in Syriac, which in turn, by God's grace, disclose to the human mind those aspects of the hidden reality or truth which are within the range of the capacities of human intelligence. Ephraem and other Syriac writers use the word *râzâ* more in the sense of a "mystery-symbol", which is not so much mysterious in its function as it is indicative, disclosing to human minds according to their capacities what is hidden from human knowledge in its essence, such as the being of God and the course of the economy of salvation. While *râzâ* is often synonymous with "type" in Ephraem's works, his use of the term goes well beyond what one normally thinks of as the typological sense of the scriptures, i.e., words, actions, facts, and narratives in the Old Testament that foreshadow their models in the New Testament. For Ephraem, biblical typologies are indeed *râzê*, but so are many things in nature, and also in the apostolic kerygma and the life of the church, like sacraments. For him, the *râzê* all point to the incarnate Christ, who is "the Lord of the *râzê*, who fulfills all *râzê* in his crucifixion".²⁰ So they may point forward from nature and scripture to Christ, who in turn reveals his Father to the eye of faith, or they point from the church's life and liturgy back to Christ, who in turn reveals to the faithful believer the events of the eschaton, the ultimate fulfillment of all creation in the economy of salvation. They may be biblical characters and their actions, facts about nature or scripture, concrete objects heard, seen or used in scripture or liturgy, or narratives almost cinematically imagined and poetically presented from Bible or life. They take their significance from the role they play in highlighting Christ for the believer, or even embodying him for the eyes of faith. Within this kaleidoscope of images a coherent figure of church and faith emerges, sufficient to ground a solid sense of Christian identity, which comes to view most resolutely in liturgy and song.²¹ The Eucharist is in many ways the ideal place from which to observe this uniquely Syriac program in action, as it is presented in the inimitable works of Ephraem the Syrian.

IV

Ephraem never used the Greek word "Eucharist". But he had much to say about the Body and the Blood of the Lord in the bread and wine of the church's daily sacrificial offering to God. Ephraem himself may have even composed an *Anaphora* that was in use in the Church of the East as late as the eleventh century, but if so, only traces of it have survived.²² For his thoughts on the Body and Blood of the Lord, and their place in the life of the church, one must survey the wide range of his "teaching songs", searching for the verses in which he instructs the faith of the Christians in attendance at the sacred mysteries.

Qûrbânâ is the Syriac word Ephraem and his contemporaries used for the liturgical action westerners call the Eucharist. It has the sense of "sacrificial offering", and as it occurs in the "teaching songs" it refers both to the sacrificial offering associated with the Jewish Passover, and to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, commemorated at the Last Supper, and in its sacramental representation in the daily liturgies of the churches. Since Ephraem was in constant controversy with the Jews of his milieu, whose religious services many Christians frequented, especially at Passover time,²³ one sees best how he uses this term (*qûrbânâ*) in the "teaching songs" associated with the liturgy of Maundy Thursday, where he speaks in a polemical tone to those likely to frequent the synagogue at *Pesahî*. He says,

My brothers, do not eat,
along with the medicine of life,
the unleavened bread of the People,
as it were, the medicine of death.

For Christ's blood
is mingled, spilt,
in the unleavened bread of the People,²⁴
and in our Eucharist (*qûrbânân*).

Whoever takes it in the Eucharist (*bqûrbânâ*)
takes the medicine of life.

Whoever eats it with the People,
takes the medicine of death.²⁵

In Ephraem's world Christians offered the holy *qûrbânâ* not only at Eastertime, and not only on Sundays and major feastdays, but every day. This is the clear implication of a stanza in one of Ephraem's "teaching songs" *On Paradise*. He says,

The assembly of the saints
is on the type of Paradise.
In it the fruit of the Enlivener of All
is plucked each day.
In it, my brothers, are squeezed
the grapes of the Enlivener of All.²⁶

Ephraem not infrequently refers to the daily *qûrbânâ* as “the breaking of the bread and the cup of salvation”,²⁷ often speaking as well of our Lord’s “breaking his own body”,²⁸ at the Passover supper, in an obvious evocation of the close connection in his mind between Calvary and the Last Supper. Ephraem put it this way in one of the “teaching songs”. He says of our Lord at the Last Supper,

He broke the bread with his own hands
in token of the sacrifice of his body.
He mixed the cup with his own hands,
in token of the sacrifice of his blood.
He offered up himself in sacrifice,
the priest of our atonement.²⁹

For Ephraem, as Edmund Beck has well said, “the Last Supper and its table is the first church and the first altar, and thus the representative of all churches and all altars”.³⁰ Therefore, in his “teaching songs” Ephraem often calls attention to the prefigurations of the Eucharist in the New Testament, and the numerous types and symbols of it in the narratives of the Old Testament.³¹ In his estimation, they all find their ultimate focus in the Last Supper and in its consummation on the cross, when blood and water flowed from the pierced side of Christ (John 19:34), representing the sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism respectively, and thereby inaugurating the era of the church. Ephraem’s thought on this subject is particularly rich in symbolism, involving a typological connection between the Cherubim’s sword that guarded the way to the tree of life in paradise after Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:24), and the lance which opened Christ’s side on the tree of the cross, thus providing a new entry to glory for the new Adam’s progeny. Robert Murray, who has studied this motif in detail, provides the following brief summary:

Ephrem’s symbolic interpretation of the piercing of Christ’s side is particularly complicated. Christ is the second Adam, from whose side is born the second Eve, the Church; yet through that opening we enter paradise, to come again to the Tree of Life, which is sometimes the Cross but also sometimes Christ himself.³²

V

According to Ephraem, it is in the reception of the Body and the Blood of the Lord that Christians are united to Christ in his church. He says,

In a novel way, his body is kneaded into our bodies.
Even his pure blood is poured into our arteries.
His voice is in our ears, his appearance in our eyes.
By reason of his compassion, all of him is kneaded into all of us.

And since he loved his church very much,
he did not give her the Manna of her rival—
he became himself the living bread for her to eat.³³

And so it is for Ephraem that the sacrament of the Eucharist, as Tanios Bou Mansour has well put it, "is not reduced to a simple system of reference, but it is the medium of a presence, which is first of all that of the body of Christ".³⁴ The sacramental body of Christ is continuous with the historical body of Christ, as Ephraem conceives of it. For him, the bread and the wine become the Body and Blood of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit, just as it was by the Spirit that Christ was in the womb of Mary, and in the water of Baptism. Addressing Christ, Ephraem wrote,

See, Fire and Spirit were in the womb of her who bore you,
see, Fire and Spirit were in the river in which you were baptized.
Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font;
in the Bread and Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit.³⁵

By invocation, Fire and Spirit are for Ephraem the agents of Christ's presence in the church and in the sacraments, just as at the Annunciation, by Mary's invitation, they were the agents of the divine son's presence in her womb. In the holy *Qûrbânâ*, the church, in the words of the priest, invites Fire and Spirit to come into the bread and wine, transforming them for the eyes of faith into the Body and Blood of Christ. For Ephraem, and the Syrian tradition after him, the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist is, therefore, a continuation of the presence of the Word of God incarnate in Christ. Dionysius bar Şalîbî (d. 1171) put the matter clearly in his *Commentary on the Liturgy*.

The Body and Blood are called "mysteries" (*râzê*) because they are not what they appear to the physical eye to be; for to look at, they are just bread and wine, but properly understood, they are the Body and Blood of God. Just as Jesus was seen by the physical eye as man, yet he is also God; similarly the mysteries are seen outwardly to be bread and wine, but they are in fact the Body and Blood. And although the Spirit makes the mysteries the Body and Blood, they are nevertheless [the Body and Blood] of the Son. It is like what was done in the virgin; although the Spirit embodied the Son, it was nevertheless the Son who was embodied.³⁶

As for the connection between Fire and Spirit in the Eucharistic bread and cup, as Ephraem described it in the "teaching song" quoted above, the fire is "a symbol of the consecratory role of the Holy Spirit".³⁷ In this connection there is a striking passage, illustrative of the sacramental thinking in Syriac-speaking, Christian communities, included in a biography of Jacob Baradaeus

(c. 500–578). It describes what happened one day when Jacob visited a certain monastery. The text says,

One day, when he was offering the *Qûrbânâ*, a certain Arab who had recently been baptized was present there; and he saw that fire came down from heaven, and he saw tongues of flame hovering over the *Qûrbânâ*, and hosts of angels with bowed heads before the divine sacrifice.³⁸

The association of fire with the Holy Spirit as a powerful symbol of divine presence in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and even in Mary's conception of the Word of God, is widespread in Syriac liturgical texts. It owes its prominence to the eastern Christians' observance of the role of fire and fire imagery in numerous passages in the Old Testament which describe the signs of God's acceptance of sacrifices from his faithful servants, and thereby for Syrian Christians also signifying the action of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ Ephraem himself makes the point explicitly in what he says about fire in one of his "teaching songs" *On Faith*. He says,

The mystery symbol (*râzâ*) of the Spirit is in it (i.e., in fire),
and the type of the Holy Spirit,
who is blended with water,
so it yields forgiveness,
and is kneaded into bread,
so it becomes the *Qûrbânâ*.⁴⁰

Even the priest's role in praying the *epiclesis* in the Syrian liturgy is reported by the poet Balai (d. after 432) in fire imagery. He says of the officiant at the holy *Qûrbânâ* on the occasion of the consecration of a church,

The priest stands, he kindles the fire, he takes bread,
but gives forth the Body; he receives wine, but
distributes the Blood.⁴¹

Similarly, fire imagery figures in a number of other expressions not infrequently used in reference to the Eucharist in Syriac texts. For example, particles of the Eucharistic bread are often called "embers" or "burning coals" (*gmûrâthâ*), usually with at least an implicit reference to the passage in Isaiah 6:6–7, where the prophet speaks of the Seraph who touched his mouth with a burning coal from the altar of the temple. Ephraem makes this connection in the following stanzas from his "teaching songs" *de Fide*. He says,

The Seraph could not touch the fire's coal with his fingers,
the coal only just touched Isaiah's mouth:
the Seraph did not hold it, Isaiah did not consume it,
but us our Lord has allowed to do both!

To the angels who are spiritual Abraham brought
food for the body and they ate. The new miracle
is that our mighty Lord has given to bodily man
Fire and Spirit to eat and to drink.⁴²

In the following prayer of thanksgiving after communion, found in the ancient *anaphora* called *Sharar*, the text similarly likens the Eucharist to a burning ember. The celebrant prays:

Consuming Fire which our hands have held, Live Ember
which our lips have kissed, the seraphim do not dare take
it in their hands. The prophet held it and was purified
by it.⁴³ Lord, purify our mouths and lips and hands which
hold your body. Sanctify the bodies, souls, and spirits
which have received your victorious blood.⁴⁴

Finally, there is a fire-related image to be seen in the practice of Ephraem and Jacob of Sarug to speak of the Eucharistic elements as "pearls". For in the Syrian conception, the pearl is born when lightning strikes the mussel that produces it in the sea.⁴⁵ Similarly, according to the Syrian fathers, Christ was conceived in the womb of Mary, when Fire and Spirit came within her, and bread and wine regularly become the Body and Blood of Christ due to the action of Fire and the Spirit. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find Ephraem and others in the Syrian tradition often using the popular symbol of the pearl for Christ himself and for the Eucharistic elements. In one place Ephraem says, "Christ gave us pearls, his Body and Blood".⁴⁶ And Jacob of Sarug, in a striking passage referring to the holy *Qûrbânâ*, says,

It is not the priest who is authorized to sacrifice the Only-Begotten or to raise up that sacrifice for sinners to the Father's presence: rather, the Holy Spirit goes forth from the Father and descends, overshadows and resides in the bread, making it the Body, and making it treasured pearls to adorn the souls that are betrothed by him.⁴⁷

Finally, in another homily, after an extended comparison of the Eucharistic elements to expensive pearls, Jacob of Sarug gives this advice to would-be communicants in attendance at the holy liturgy:

The Body and the Blood are living pearls;
let them not be demeaned in soul and body that are unclean
vessels.
Heaven and earth are in the incomparable pearl;
do not receive your Lord's holiness in an unclean vessel.⁴⁸

VI

According to Ephraem, the Eucharist makes Christ visible and accessible to people in the church comparable to the way that his birth from his mother Mary made him physically visible and accessible to the people of his time on earth. In one of his "teaching songs" *On the Nativity*, Ephraem compares the two images (*salmê*) of God's incarnate Son to which human beings have access. There is the visible (*galyâ*) one, born of Mary, whom Mary herself and all their contemporaries could see in the flesh, like Adam, and the invisible (*kasyâ*) one, portrayed in the mind of the beholder. In the song, Mary says,

When I see your image,
 the created one,
 which is before my eyes,
 your invisible one
 is depicted (*sîr*) in my mind.
 In your visible image
 I see Adam;
 in the invisible one
 I see your Father
 who is kneaded into you.⁴⁹

As the song continues, Mary ponders the fact that it is not to her alone, or only to those who saw him in the flesh, that her Son has revealed himself in two images, one visible and one invisible. She recalls that to the eyes of faith he is visible also in the Eucharistic bread. And so, in Ephraem's song, she says to her Son:

Let bread depict you,
 the mind too.
 Dwell in the bread
 and in those who eat it.
 In the visible and the invisible
 your church will see you,
 just as your mother does.⁵⁰

The marvel of it all for Ephraem, and for Mary in whose voice he speaks in this song, is that whether one loves or hates Christ in the flesh or Christ in the bread, both visible, he will nevertheless, as Mary says to her son, "have seen you"⁵¹ in the flesh or in the bread. This realization then leads Mary to ask,

Is then, O child, your bread
 more momentous
 by far than your body?
 For even infidels
 saw your body,

but they do not see
your living bread.
Those remote in time rejoice;
their lot surpasses
that of the nearly contemporary!⁵²

In Ephraem's view then, the perception of Christ in the living bread of the Eucharist is more momentous because it requires the eyes of faith to perceive it. As he goes on to say to Christ in the next stanza,

See—your image is depicted
in the blood of grapes
on the top of the bread,
and it is depicted on the heart
by the finger of love,
with all the pigments
of faith.
Blessed is he who made
the sculpted images pass away
in favor of his true image.⁵³

Ephraem here uses the liturgical image of the priest at the holy *Qûrbânâ*, in the liturgy of St. James, anointing the Eucharistic bread with a few drops of the precious blood, to highlight the eye of faith's active perception of the Son of God in the visible Eucharistic bread. That perception then leads to the mind's recognition of the invisible Father, "kneaded", as Ephraem likes to say, into the very bread and flesh of his eternal Son. The role of the "eye of faith" in lovingly recognizing Christ in the visible bread of his Eucharistic presence, as Ephraem conceives of it, highlights the intentional dimension of this "sacramental" or "mysterious" presence. He emphasizes the point in the following lines from one of the "teaching songs" *On the Nativity*. He says,

The bread is spiritual
like its giver;
it enlivens spiritual people
spiritually.

Whoever takes it
in a bodily way,
takes it obtusely,
without any profit.

It is distinctly
the bread of compassion;
the mind takes it in
as living medicine.⁵⁴

As Dom Edmund Beck has pointed out, this intentional, spiritual dimension of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic bread, visible to the "eye of faith", portrays Ephraem's conception of "the temporal and local universality of the Eucharist, which, along with the church itself, extends over all peoples and times, but always remains the one bread, which Christ broke, and the one cup, which Christ gave".⁵⁵ Beck then reminds the reader that the basis of this temporal and local universality of the one bread and the one cup is the "unconditioned power of the Spirit",⁵⁶ which, as we have seen above, is, in Ephraem's view, the power by means of which Christ is in the bread and in the wine sacramentally. Accordingly, the implication is that when the mind fails to connect with the hidden Spirit within the Eucharistic elements, because of the willful perversion of sin or heresy, Christ's own presence there is missed. Ephraem's reflection on Judas' role in the Gospel account of the Last Supper calls attention to this aspect of his thought.

In the "teaching songs" *de Azymis*, Ephraem evokes the scene of the Last Supper as recounted in John 13:21–30, where Jesus broaches the issue of the one who will betray him. John leans close to him to ask the identity of the betrayer. The text says, "Jesus answered, 'It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it'. So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot" (John 13:26). Commenting on this passage, Ephraem wrote:

He dipped the bread,⁵⁷ he gave it to him,
to the concealed dead man,
bread washed of
the medicine of life.

The Enlivener of All had put a blessing
on that food,
and it became the medicine of life,
right in front of its eaters.

Bread washed
of blessings,
that accursed man took,
the second serpent.

He took the bread and withdrew
from the disciples;
he removed himself,
they did not put him out.

Our Lord did not remove him,
so no one could utter the blasphemy
that coercion forced him,
and not [his own] will.

...

When he withdrew and left,
the concealed wolf
from within the flock
of the twelve,

the true Lamb rose
and broke his own body
for the sheep who had eaten
the Paschal lamb.⁵⁸

On the face of it, these lines seem to support the allegation that it was Ephraem's interpretation of John 13:23 that by dipping the morsel of bread he had earlier blessed, Jesus in effect washed away his "real presence" from it before he offered it to Judas, because of the latter's willful sin. When Judas subsequently left the room, Jesus then broke the bread of his body and distributed it to the remaining disciples. However, in another passage from the same collection of songs, Ephraem again speaks of a "washing" of the morsel of bread in John 13:26. Beginning with a mention of the unleavened bread of the Jewish Passover, he says:

Moses had hidden
the mystery-symbol (*râzâ*) of the Son
in that unleavened bread (*paḥrâ*),
as the medicine of life.

He (i.e., Jesus) washed the unleavened bread
of the medicine of life;
He gave it to Judas as the medicine of death.

Therefore, a man gets
Iscairiot's
medicine of death
from that unleavened bread.⁵⁹

This passage identifies the bread that Jesus "washed" as the unleavened bread of the Jewish Passover, which heretofore, as Ephraem conceived of it, had served as a type for the Christian Eucharist.⁶⁰ In the context of John 13:23, Judas' betrayal seems to stand in Ephraem's mind for what he perceived as the general Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Therefore, in his "teaching songs" he strongly contrasted the unleavened bread of the Jews (*paḥrâ*) with the leavened bread (*ḥmîrâ*) of the Christian Eucharist.⁶¹ But the problem remains about whether or not it was Ephraem's view that John 13:26 must be interpreted to mean that Jesus washed the "real presence" out of the morsel of bread he dipped and offered to Judas.

Scholars are divided on the issue. Dom Edmund Beck, following the hint in the song *De Azymis* XVIII:16, just quoted, thought that the bread in question was not the Eucharistic bread as such, but simply the unleavened bread of the Passover meal Jesus was sharing with his disciples.⁶² After the meal, according to Beck, Jesus broke and distributed the Eucharistic bread.⁶³ Therefore, in his view, there is no substance to the idea that according to Ephraem Jesus “washed” the “real presence” out of the bread he gave to Judas at the Last Supper. G. A. M. Rouwhorst, on the other hand, relying on an earlier study he had done,⁶⁴ showing that the prayer of blessing in the Syrian liturgy is the Eucharistic *epiclesis*, by which the celebrant calls the Spirit and the Fire into the bread of the Eucharist, making it the Body of Christ, points out that the language of *de Azymis* XIV:16 fits this prescription. Therefore, in his view, Ephraem meant precisely that Jesus did “wash” away, or remove, the consecratory blessing he had put on the bread he offered to Judas.⁶⁵

This certainly seems to have been the view of those in what one might call Ephraem’s “school”, who after his death passed on his teachings in works attributed to him. In the *mêmrê* on Holy Week, for example, texts which are attributed to Ephraem in the manuscript tradition, but which seem in fact to come from a sixth century writer,⁶⁶ one finds the following account of the Judas scene at the Last Supper. The text says:

When Jesus gave his Bread
to the eleven, without any discrimination,
Judas came forward to receive,
just like his companions who had come up to take it.
Jesus dipped the bread
in water and gave it to Judas.
He washed the blessing out of it
and by this he distinguished the wretched man,
and then the disciples knew
it was Judas would betray Him.
Jesus dipped the Bread he gave him,
so the blessing would be released from the Bread.
He did not eat blessed bread,
nor did he drink from the Cup of life.⁶⁷

Clearly the writer of this *mêmrê* interpreted Ephraem’s exegesis of John 13:26 to mean that Jesus did remove the Eucharistic consecration from the Bread offered to Judas, but one notices that while he seems to be following the account of the Last Supper in Luke 22:14–22, Ephraem himself was following the account in John.⁶⁸ What is more, the writer of the *mêmrê* had already expressed the view that Christian faith was a prerequisite for the perception of the Body of Christ in the Eucharistic bread.

Just a few verses earlier, recounting the institution of the Eucharist, he has Jesus say:

Take, eat in faith,
and do not doubt that this is my body.
Whoever eats it in faith,
eats the Fire and Spirit in it.
Whoever doubts and eats it,
for him it is plain bread.⁶⁹

Here is not the place to try to settle the difference of opinion over the proper interpretation of Ephraem's meaning when he said that Jesus gave Judas "bread washed of the medicine of life" at the Last Supper. Whether he had the Eucharistic bread in mind, as Rouwhorst maintains, or only the unleavened bread of the Jewish Passover supper, conceived as a *râzâ* for the true "medicine of life", as Beck came to hold, it is clear that for Ephraem the "real presence" of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Bread and Wine of the holy *Qûrbânâ* was something physical, which affected its recipients physically, albeit perceived only through the eyes of faith. In one of his "teaching songs" *On Virginity*, he wrote of the moment of communion:

In a new way his body
has been fused with our bodies,
and his pure blood
has been poured into our veins.
His voice, too, is in [our] ears
and his splendour in [our] eyes.
The whole of him with the whole of us
is fused by his mercy.
And because he loved his church greatly,
he did not give her the manna of her rival;
He became the Bread of Life
for her to eat him.⁷⁰

VII

In Ephraem's writings the constant epithet for the Eucharist is the phrase "living medicine" or "medicine of life" (*sam hayyê*). The Body and the Blood of the Lord are thought to bring healing, forgiveness of sin, and preservation from eternal death to the faithful Christian. Addressing Christ himself, Ephraem put it this way in one of his "teaching songs" *On Faith*. He says,

Your Bread slays the greedy one who has made us his bread,
your Cup destroys death who had swallowed us up;
we have eaten you, Lord, we have drunken you—
not that we will consume you up, but through you we shall have life.⁷¹

As for the forgiveness of sins, in Ephraem's view it flows directly from the Eucharist. He makes this point in a striking way in the following stanza from one of his "teaching songs" *On the Church*, where he contrasts the willfulness of the sinner with the gratuity of God's forgiveness. He says,

I am amazed at our will:
 while it is strong, see it brought low;
 while it is a lord, see it enslaved;
 while it is a victor, it wills to succumb;
 free, it surrenders its mouth like a slave,
 and sets its own hand on the bill of sale.
 See the foolish scribe, who is the one
 setting his own hand to the statement of his debts!
 Blessed is the one who has given us emancipation in his Bread,
 and in his Cup has erased the statement of our debts.⁷²

There are many other statements about the Eucharist in the works of Ephraem the Syrian. But enough has been quoted to give one a fair idea of how he customarily spoke about it. His ideas and his words about this central Christian institution have instructed the faith of the Syriac-speaking communities for centuries, and they are still held to be authoritative. It is noteworthy that while his thoughts on the subject lack the theoretical elaboration Eucharistic theology has enjoyed in other churches, with different patristic and liturgical heritages, his language is concrete and almost entirely biblical in its inspiration. It became the classic idiom of Eucharistic thought in the Syriac-speaking world, echoed in the writings of later figures such as Jacob of Sarug (c. 451–521), Narsai (d. c. 503), Babai the Great (c. 550–628), and Jacob of Edessa (c. 640–708).

There were no great controversies within the Syriac-speaking churches over the nature of the Eucharist, which may explain why there were no elaborate developments of doctrine in this area, particularly in the realm of theory. Most of the adversaries were outside the Christian community, groups such as the Manichaeans, who denied that matter could be holy at all; the Jews, whose unleavened bread of the Passover was a constant temptation for Christians in Ephraem's day; and later the Muslims, who were always puzzled about the Christian Eucharist. Syriac-speaking Christians responded to them all in the traditional terms of their biblical faith, arguing that in the matter of the Eucharist, they simply followed the prescriptions of the scriptures, and particularly the Gospel. Meanwhile, within their own communities they developed an incredibly rich tradition of symbolic theology of the Eucharist, almost an iconology, the fruit of meditating on the Word of God in song and prayer, in the context of the liturgy, not so much in the mode of *fides quaerens intellectum*, but very much in the exercise of *fides adorans mysterium*, to borrow the felicitous expression of Robert Murray.⁷³

The final words on the subject belong by right to St. Ephraem himself, who uttered the following prayer:

In your Bread there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed,
in your Wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk;
the Spirit is in your Bread, the Fire in your Wine—
a manifest wonder, that our lips have received.⁷⁴

NOTES

- 1 On these matters see Sidney H. Griffith, "Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire", in Thomas Halton & Joseph P. Williman (eds), *Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), pp. 22–52; *idem*, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian': Meditations on History and Imperial Power", *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987), pp. 238–266; *idem*, "'Faith Seeking Understanding' in the Thought of St. Ephraem the Syrian", in George C. Berthold (ed), *Faith Seeking Understanding: Learning and the Catholic Tradition. Selected Papers from the Symposium and Convocation Celebrating the Saint Anselm College Centennial* (Manchester, N.H.: Saint Anselm College Press, 1991), pp. 35–55; *idem*, "Setting Right the Church of Syria: Saint Ephraem's Hymns against Heresies", to appear in a forthcoming Festschrift for Robert A. Markus. See also Peter Bruns, "Arius Hellenizans? ... Ephrem der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit", *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 101 (1990), pp. 21–57; Paul S. Russell, *St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians* (Kottayam, Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994).
- 2 See Paulus Peeters, "La Légende de saint Jacques de Nisibe", *Analecta Bollandiana* 38 (1920), pp. 285–373; P. Krüger, "Jakob von Nisibis in syrischer und armenischer Überlieferung", *Le Muséon* 81 (1968), pp. 161–179; David Bundy, "Jacob of Nisibis as a Model for the Episcopacy", *Le Muséon* 104 (1991), pp. 235–249.
- 3 On the life of Ephraem see Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "The Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian, the Deacon of Edessa", *Diakonia* 22 (1988–1989), pp. 15–42; Sidney H. Griffith, "Images of Ephraem: the Syrian Holy Man and his Church", *Traditio* (1989–1990), pp. 7–33.
- 4 Robert Murray, "Ephrem Syrus", in *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology* (vol. II; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1967), pp. 220–223. Murray reaffirmed this opinion in his landmark book, Robert J. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 31.
- 5 The long list of them, with further bibliography, can be found in M. Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (vol. II; Turnhout: Brepols, 1974), pp. 366–468. A reprinting of the Greek works, together with a translation into modern Greek, is available in Konstantinou G. Phrantzolas (ed. & trans.), *Osiou Ephraim tou Surou Erga* (6 vols. to date; Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis "To Periboli tes Panagias", 1988–). See also the Web site of Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, "Saint Ephrem the Syrian; Ascetical and Other Writings Extant Only in Greek", <http://www.orthodox.org.uk/Ephr-Int.htm>.
- 6 See Joseph P. Amar, "Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and Greek Bias in the Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 58 (1992), pp. 123–156.
- 7 On the relevant terminology in Syriac see Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: the Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism", in Vincent L. Wimbush & Richard Valantasis (eds) *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 220–245.
- 8 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses* (CSCO, vols. 169 & 170; Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1957), vol. 169, LVI:10&11, pp. 211–212.
- 9 See the convenient representation of the titles of Ephraem's Syriac works by genre, their editions, and notice of the available translations into English in Sebastian P. Brock, "A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations of the Works of Ephrem", *The Harp* 3 (1990), pp. 7–29. See also Joseph Melki, "S. Ephrem le Syrien, un bilan de l'édition critique", *Parole de l'Orient* 11 (1983), pp. 3–88.
- 10 See Michael Lattke, "Sind Ephraems Madrašē Hymnen?" *Oriens Christianus* 73 (1989), pp. 38–43.

- 11 See Andrew Palmer, "A Lyre without a Voice, the Poetics and the Politics of Ephrem the Syrian", *ARAM* 5 (1993), pp. 371–399. For more on Ephraem's poetics, see also Andrew Palmer, "The Merchant of Nisibis; Saint Ephrem and his Faithful Quest for Union in Numbers", in J. Den Boeft & A. Hilhorst (eds), *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 167–233; *idem*, "Words, Silences, and the Silent Word: Acrostics and Empty Columns in Saint Ephraem's *Hymns on Faith*", *Parole de l'Orient* 20 (1995), pp. 129–200; *idem*, "St Ephrem of Syria's Hymn on Faith 7: An Ode on his Own Name", *Sobornost* 17 (1995), pp. 28–40.
- 12 See J. Schirmann, "Hebrew Liturgical Poetry and Christian Hymnology", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 44 (1953–1954), pp. 123–161; J. Yahalom, "Piyyut as Poetry", in L. I. Levine (ed), *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, PA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987), pp. 123–134; W. Jac. Bekkum, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (Piyyut) of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries", in J. Den Boeft & A. Hilhorst (eds), *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 22 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 297–308.
- 13 See J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); William L. Petersen, "The Dependence of Romanos the Melodist upon the Syriac Ephrem; its Importance for the Origin of the Kontakion", *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985), pp. 171–187; *idem*, *The Diatessaron and Ephrem Syrus as Sources of Romanos the Melodist* (CSCO, vol. 475; Louvain, Peeters, 1985); *idem*, "The Dependence of Romanos the Melodist upon the Syriac Ephraem", in E. A. Livingstone (ed), *Studia Patristica* (vol. XVIII, 4; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications & Leuven: Peeters, 1990), pp. 274–281; S. P. Brock, "From Ephrem to Romanos", in E. A. Livingstone (ed), *Studia Patristica* (vol. XX; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), pp. 139–151.
- 14 See E. C. Richardson, *Hieronymus, Liber de Viris Illustribus* (Leipzig, 1896), p. 51.
- 15 See Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), pp. 225–247.
- 16 Joseph P. Amar, "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug; Critical Edition of the Syriac Text, Translation and Introduction", *Patrologia Orientalis* (tome, 47, fasc. 1, no. 209; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), # 48, p. 37.
- 17 Amar, "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem", ## 40–44, pp. 34–35.
- 18 See Sidney H. Griffith, "The Image of the Image Maker in the Poetry of St. Ephraem the Syrian", in E. A. Livingstone (ed), *Studia Patristica* (vol. XXV; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), pp. 258–269.
- 19 See Sidney H. Griffith, "Faith Adoring the Mystery": *Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, 1997; Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997).
- 20 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschahymnen; (De Azymis, de Crucifixione, de Resurrectione)* (CSCO, vols. 248 & 249; Louvain: Peeters, 1964), *De Azymis*, III:1, 'unitā.
- 21 The most comprehensive discussion of Ephraem's thought in this regard is Tanios Bou Mansour, *La Pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le Syrien* (Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 16; Kaslik, Lebanon: L'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988).
- 22 See Pierre Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez saint Éphrem de Nisibe* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 244; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1984), pp. 145–156. On the development of the *Anaphora* in the east see A. Gelston, *The Eucharistic Prayer of Addai and Mari* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- 23 For Ephraem's ideas about Passover and the Paschal season, Jewish ideas and practices versus Christian theology and liturgy see G. A. M. Rouwhorst, *Les Hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe* (2 vols.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), vol. I, pp. 128–203.
- 24 Ephraem, and other Syriac writers, regularly speak of the "people" versus the "peoples", or the "nation" versus the "nations" (*ammā* versus *ammē*) to contrast the Jews and the Gentiles, the Jews, from one nation or people, and the Christians from many nations and peoples. See the discussion in Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, pp. 41–68.
- 25 Beck, *Paschahymnen, de Azymis*, XIX:22–24.
- 26 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (CSCO, vols. 174 & 175; Louvain: Peeters, 1957), VI:8. There also seems to be a reference to the daily liturgy in a stanza of Ephraem's *Carmina Nisibena*. Speaking of the bones of the biblical patriarch, Joseph, which the Israelites carried with them during

their wanderings in the desert, Ephraem says of Moses' account of this phenomenon (Exodus 13:19),

It was a mystery symbol he portrayed there
for the church,
in which every day there is proclaimed
the death of the Enliverer of All.

Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carnima Nisibena (zweiter Teil)* (CSCO, vols. 240 & 241; Louvain: Peeters, 1963), XLVIII:6.

- 27 See Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses* (CSCO, vols. 169 & 170; Louvain: Peeters, 1957), XXVII:3.
- 28 See Edmund Beck, *Paschahymnen, De Azymis*, XII:5.
- 29 Beck, *Paschahymnen, De Azymis*, II:7. The Syriac phrase translated here as "in token of" is *brāz*. The strong Syriac term *rāzā*, usually translated as "symbol" or "mystery symbol", often corresponds in sense to the Greek term *μυστήριον*, and thus to the term "sacrament". See the classic study by Edmund Beck, "Symbolum-Mysterium bei Aphraat und Ephrām", *Oriens Christianus* 42 (1958), pp. 19–40, and Bou Mansour, *La Pensée symbolique*, pp. 23–120.
- 30 Edmund Beck, "Die Eucharistie bei Ephrām", *Oriens Christianus* 38 (1954), p. 50.
- 31 See the lengthy discussion of these scriptural types and symbols as Ephraem employs them in Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez saint Éphrem*, pp. 31–107.
- 32 Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, p. 126. See also R. Murray, "The Lance Which Re-opened Paradise, a Mysterious Reading in the Early Syriac Fathers", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973), pp. 224–234, and the important adjustment published in the same vol., "The Lance Which Re-opened Paradise: a Correction", p. 491. See also Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez saint Éphrem*, pp. 48–56. For further typological associations see S. P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ", in S. P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (The Syrian Churches Series, vol. 13; Poona: Anita Printers, 1988), pp. 62–72.
- 33 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate* (CSCO, vols. 223 & 224; Louvain, Peeters, 1962), XXXVII:2.
- 34 Bou Mansour, *La Pensée symbolique*, p. 393.
- 35 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* (CSCO, vols. 154 & 155; Louvain: Peeters, 1955), X:17.
- 36 Hieronymus Labourt (ed. & trans.), *Dionysius bar Šalībī Expositio Liturgiae* (CSCO, vol. 13; Paris & Leipzig: Bibliopola & Harrassowitz, 1903), pp. 61–62. The first part of the English translation is that of S. P. Brock, "Mary and the Eucharist: An Oriental Perspective", in Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality*, p. 32.
- 37 S. P. Brock, "Fire from Heaven: from Abel's Sacrifice to the Eucharist; a Theme in Syriac Christianity", in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed), *Studia Patristica* (vol. XXV; Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993), p. 229.
- 38 Quoted in Brock, "Fire from Heaven", p. 229, from E. W. Brooks (ed. & trans.), *John of Ephesus; "Lives of the Eastern Saints"* (Patrologia Orientalis, vol. 19, fasc. 2; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1925), p. 265. In the passage, Brooks translates the Syriac word *Qûrbānā* by the English term "oblation".
- 39 See Brock, "Fire from Heaven", and S. P. Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (The Syrian Churches Series, vol. 9; Poona: Anita Printers, 1979), pp. 11–14.
- 40 Beck, *Hymnen de Fide*, XL:10.
- 41 Quoted in Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, p. 12, from J. J. Overbeck, *S. Ephraemi Syri, Rabulae, Balaei aliorumque Opera Selecta* (Oxford, 1865), p. 252.
- 42 Beck, *Hymnen de Fide*, X:10–11. The English translation is from Sebastian Brock (ed. & trans.), *St Ephrem; a Hymn on the Eucharist (Hymns on Faith, no. 10)* (Lancaster: J. F. Coakley at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster, 1986).
- 43 See Isaiah 6:6–7.
- 44 Quoted in Joseph P. Amar, "Perspectives on the Eucharist in Ephrem the Syrian", *Worship* 61 (1987), p. 451, from J. -M Sauguet (ed), *Anaphorae Syriacae* (2:3; Rome, 1973), p. 320.
- 45 See C. M. Edsman, *Le baptême de feu* (Uppsala, 1940), pp. 190–199, as cited in Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, p. 17, n. 7. For an extended discussion of St. Ephraem's hymns on the pearl, see Andrew Palmer, "The Merchant of Nisibis; Saint Ephraem and his Faithful Quest for Union in Numbers", in J. Den Boeft & A. Hilhorst (eds),

- Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays* (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 22; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 167–233.
- 46 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones, II* (CSCO, vols. 311 & 312; Louvain: Peeters, 1970), IV:9–10. The English translation is by S. P. Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, p. 14.
- 47 P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (5 vols.; Paris & Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1905–1910), vol. IV, p. 597. The English translation is by S. P. Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, p. 14.
- 48 Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae*, vol. II, p. 222. See the important study by J. Van Der Ploeg, “Une homélie de Jacques de Saroug sur la réception de la sainte communion”, in *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant* (vol. III, 2, Studi e Testi, vol 233; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1964), pp. 395–418.
- 49 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)* (CSCO, vols. 186 & 187; Louvain: Peeters, 1959), XVI:3. For another English translation of this and the following passages from this *madrāshā* see Kathleen E. McVey (trans.), *Ephrem the Syrian; Hymns* (The Classics of Western Spirituality; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 149–150. This passage evokes the role of the *rāzā* and of the *šalmā*, the “image”, the Ephraem’s thought, which, like a line of Scripture, engage the mind through the eye. In the *Hymns on Paradise* he described his reading of the book of Genesis as follows:
- The eye and the mind
traveled over the lines
as over a bridge, and entered together
the story of Paradise.
The eye as it read
transported the mind;
in return the mind, too,
gave the eye rest
from its reading,
for when the book had been read
the eye had rest
but the mind was engaged.
- Both the bridge and the gate
of Paradise
did I find in this book.
I crossed over and entered;
my eye remained outside
but my mind entered within.
- Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, V:4–5.
- 50 Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate*, XVI:4.
- 51 Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate*, XVI:5.
- 52 Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate*, XVI:6.
- 53 Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate*, XVI:7. For the imagery used here see Sidney H. Griffith, “The Image of the Image Maker in the Poetry of St. Ephraem the Syrian”, in E. A. Livingstone (ed), *Studia Patristica* (vol. XXV; Leuven: Peeters, 1993), pp. 258–269.
- 54 Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate*, IV:97–99.
- 55 Beck, “Die Eucharistie bei Ephrām”, p. 59.
- 59 Ibid.
- 57 For the Greek word τὸ ψωμίον in John 13:26 the Syriac Peshitta uses simply the Syriac word ܠܫܡܐ i.e., *lahmā* “bread”.
- 58 Beck, *Paschahymnen, De Azymis*, XIV:15–23.
- 59 Beck, *Paschahymnen, De Azymis*, XVIII:15–17.
- 60 See Yousif, *L’Eucharistie chez saint Éphrem*, pp. 82–84.
- 61 See especially “teaching songs” XVII & XVIII *De Azymis* in Beck, *Paschahymnen*, where the responsory verses are, respectively, “Blessed is he who cast away the People of the unleavened bread, whose hands were defiled with his precious blood”, and “Thank the Son who gave us his body instead of that unleavened bread which he had given to the People.”

- 62 See Edmund Beck, *Ephraem Syrus; Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctam* (CSCO, vols. 412 & 413; Louvain: Peeters, 1979), vol. 413, pp. 4–7. In particular Beck wrote, "Hier aber müssen sie auf Grund der herausgestellten Situation mit dem ungesäuerten Brot des jüdischen Paschamahles verbunden werden, das der Eucharistie voranging und and dem Judas noch teilgenommen hatte" (p. 5). While he does not say it in so many words, Beck leaves the impression that in Ephraem's view Jesus gave Judas a morsel of unleavened bread used in the Jewish Passover, while the bread of the Eucharist which he later gave to the disciples could have been leavened bread. Actually, Ephraem nowhere suggests that he thought that the bread of the Eucharist at the Last Supper was leavened bread, in spite of the fact that in songs XVII and XVIII *De Azymis* he makes much of the contrast between the unleavened bread of the Jews and the leavened bread of the Christians. In his works generally he makes considerable use of the image of "leaven". See Edmund Beck, "Das Bild vom Sauerteig bei Ephräm", *Oriens Christianus* 63 (1979), pp. 1–19. But when he comes to the Eucharist no mention of leaven is to be found. Pierre Yousif says, "De ces considérations générales, on ne peut pas voir à quel pain pense Ephrem lorsqu'il se réfère à la liturgie ... On peut donc penser que l'Eglise de Nisibe, pour mieux se distinguer des juifs, a adopté le pain fermenté pour l'Eucharistie qui, malgré le ferment, revouelle l'esprit." Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez saint Ephrem*, p. 85. Yousif goes on to say that in spite of the polemics to the contrary, he does not think that Ephraem would have objected to the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist!
- 63 This view is in contrast to the interpretation Beck offered twenty years earlier, when he wrote that Ephraem's interpretation of John 13:26 offered a biblical warrant for his conviction "das für den Sünder (Ungläubigen) das eucharistische Brot der Segensgabe des Geistes beraubt ist. Er deutet nämlich den Bissen, den Jesus nach Joh 13,27 dem Verräter gab, auf das eucharistische Brot; seine Ausdrucksweise lässt darüber keinen Zweifel, obwohl dann auch bei ihm die Erwähnung der Kommunion der Apostel in Strophe 23 sehr aus dem Zusammenhang fällt. Das Eintauchen des eucharistischen Brotes in das Wasser deutet er somit in seiner konkreten Denkweise als ein Auslöschen des Geistesfeuers." Beck, "Die Eucharistie bei Ephräm", pp. 61–62.
- 64 See G. Rouwhorst, "Bénédiction, action de grâces, supplication; les oraisons de la table dans le Judaïsme et les célébrations eucharistiques de chrétiens syriaques", *Questions Liturgiques* 61 (1980), pp. 211–240.
- 65 See Rouwhorst, *Les Hymnes pascales*, vol. I, pp. 88–89. See also Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez saint Ephrem*, p. 216.
- 66 See Beck, *Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctam*, vol. 413, p. 12. It is important in the present context to notice that in 1954 Beck accepted the authenticity of these texts and quoted from them in support of his earlier view of Ephraem's interpretation of the John passage in question. See Beck, "Die Eucharistie bei Ephräm", p. 62.
- 67 Beck, *Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctam*, IV:174–187.
- 68 Similarly, the *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* attributed to Ephraem seems to agree with the author of the *mêmrà*. In reference to John 13:26 the text says: "He dipped it, to render [evident] the total participation [of Judas] in his death, for his body was destined to be dipped in his blood. Or [alternatively], he dipped it so as not to give the testament with him. He moistened it and then gave it to him; moistened first because it had been prepared for [the testament] which was to follow." Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes* (Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement, 2; Oxford: Oxford University Press on Behalf of the University of Manchester, 1993), XIX, 3, p. 284. This awkward text, which in this part of the *Commentary* has not survived in Syriac but only in Armenian, seems to be referring to the "covenant" in Luke 22:20, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood". It is worth recalling here that in the view of Edmund Beck, "Ephraem was not the author of the commentary. On the other hand, the many and large connections with Ephraem's hymns and homilies allow the supposition that the work originates from his school." Edmund Beck, "Ephräm und der Diatessaronkommentar im Abschnitt über die Wunder beim Tode Jesu am Kreuz", *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), p. 119.
- 69 Beck, *Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctam*, IV:106–111.
- 70 Beck, Hymnen de Virginitate, XXXVII:2. The English translation is from Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, p. 77.

- 71 Beck, *Hymnen de Fide*, X:18. The English translation is from Sebastian Brock, *St Ephrem: A Hymn on the Eucharist (Hymns on Faith, no. 10)* Lancaster, U.K.: J. F. Coakley, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster, 1986).
- 72 Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ecclesia* (CSCO, vols. 198 & 199; Louvain: Peeters, 1960), XXXII:2.
- 73 See Murray, *Symbols in Church and Kingdom*, p. 89.
- 74 Beck, *Hymnen de Fide*, X:8. The English translation is by Sebastian Brock, *St Ephrem: A Hymn on the Eucharist*.