

Mary's Fertility As The Model Of The Ascetical Life In Ephrem The Syrian's Hymns Of The Nativity

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MARY'S FERTILITY AS THE MODEL OF THE ASCETICAL LIFE
IN EPHREM THE SYRIAN'S *HYMNS OF THE NATIVITY*

By

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ABSTRACT
MARY'S FERTILITY AS THE MODEL OF THE ASCETICAL LIFE
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Marquette University, 2014

My thesis is that Ephrem uses Mary's pregnancy in his Hymns on the Nativity both as a model for the ascetical life and as a way of explaining, theologically, what it means to be a Christian ascetic. For Ephrem, Mary is the first to have her body transformed through the union of Christ and humanity, a transformation that prefigures both the resurrected body and the common Christian experience of Christ prior to that. Thus, the fact that Mary was physically pregnant is theologically significant for Ephrem. Mary's personal and free response to God's invitation uniquely illustrates that the transformative experience of God is at once spiritual and bodily; Ephrem believes that Christ provides the means for this transformation, but throughout the Hymns on the Nativity Mary's pregnancy shows how to say "yes" to Christ in order to receive that transformation. For Ephrem, this image of the woman, in her fertility of mind and body, represents the Christian who himself would be transformed. Mary's pregnancy serves to provoke our imagination to visualize Christian salvation in a very real and common way, in the image of a pregnant, expectant woman. After Mary, everyone can conceive; Mary's fertility best captures the totality of the Christian experience

A central aspect of my thesis is that we can best examine Ephrem's development of Mary as exemplar by locating his treatment of Mary within the context of Jewish and Jewish-Christian treatments of Eve. I will argue that in this Jewish Christian Eve tradition, the problem of Eve is her deception, but even more important to Ephrem is that this tradition suggests that Eve's deception resulted in the loss of humanity's glory. It is both this deception and the resulting loss of glory that Ephrem believes Mary's pregnancy overcomes. Ephrem's description of Mary's pregnancy in the Hymns of Nativity, especially his emphasis on how that pregnancy restores "glory" to humankind, recalls the Jewish-Christian Eve traditions.

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CHAPTER 1

READING EPHREM'S *HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY*

The thesis of this dissertation is that Ephrem uses Mary's pregnancy in his *Hymns on the Nativity* both as a model for the ascetical life and as a way of explaining, theologically, what it means to be a Christian ascetic. For Ephrem, Mary is the first to have her body transformed through the union of Christ and humanity, a transformation that prefigures both the resurrected body and the common Christian experience of Christ prior to that. Thus, the fact that Mary was physically pregnant is theologically significant for Ephrem. Mary's personal and free response to God's invitation uniquely illustrates that the transformative experience of God is at once spiritual and bodily; Ephrem believes that Christ provides the means for this transformation, but throughout the collection of hymns Mary's pregnancy shows how to say "yes" to Christ in order to receive that transformation. For Ephrem, this image of the woman, in her fertility of mind and body, represents the Christian who himself would be transformed. Indeed, it is Mary's very pregnancy that serves as the concrete image of the Christian in union in God and of the experience of such a union as that between an expectant mother and her child. Mary's pregnancy serves to provoke our imagination to visualize Christian salvation in a very real and common way, in the image of a pregnant, expectant woman. In the waters and blood of her womb, which protect, nourish, and form the growing child, the mother Mary

herself has been sanctified. After Mary, everyone can conceive; Mary's fertility best captures the totality of the Christian experience.

Ephrem in Context: Mary and the *Hymns on the Nativity*

This insight into the place of Mary in the *Hymns on the Nativity* is worth pursuing because it helps us substantially refine our understanding of Ephrem's ascetical thought as a whole. Accordingly, this thesis makes three contributions to our understanding of Ephrem's thought:

Contribution 1: Identifying Mary as the Theological Heart of Ephrem's Asceticism

First, this thesis highlights the extent to which bodily experience is fundamental for Ephrem's approach to understanding and knowing God. As I will discuss in more detail below, scholars have recognized that Ephrem uses the body as a source of central focus for experience and knowing, and as the common place in which and by which the human and divine encounter each other; bodily experience thus becomes the location in which humans attain their primary understanding and knowledge of God. In this way, this dissertation's insight into the place of Mary in Ephrem's thought helps to identify the broader theological significance of a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the degree to which Ephrem affirms the role of women and female fertility as examples for the ascetical life. Ephrem employs the examples of a number of pregnant women, such as Sarah and Tamar, to illustrate the way in which fertility provides a model for the Christian experience of salvation. These pregnancy/birth stories affirm that God is Creator, and Ephrem uses them to illustrate the reality of God's abiding presence with humanity. However, the example of Mary stands out, for Ephrem, for at least two

reasons. One is that she inverts the traditional understandings of fertility. Her pregnancy becomes a demonstration of the transformation brought by the Incarnation through the celibate life. In the same way that Mary's virginity can become a pathway to fertility, so too can the ascetic become spiritually fertile through his or her celibacy. Ephrem also emphasizes the fact that Mary is pregnant with Christ in order to discuss the kind of transformation that Christ makes possible for the ascetic. In the same way that Mary's body is transformed by being pregnant with Christ, the ascetic can become pregnant with Christ spiritually and so experience a transformation of the body to its resurrected form.

Thus for Ephrem, the ascetic is at once a new creation and a source of new life for those in the Christian community. Ephrem believes that the ascetic carries the entire community, so that the ascetic's bodily and spiritual transformation affects the community as a whole. By examining the theme in Ephrem through the lens of his Marian theology, we can discern at least two insights into Ephrem's notion of the ascetic as life-bringer. One is that Mary's pregnancy highlights the priority of passivity in the ascetical experience. Ephrem believes that Mary is the paradigmatic example of how to wait to be filled with Christ; ascetic fertility is a gift that comes only as the ascetic ceases to strive and instead adopts a posture of passivity and prayer. The second insight is that Ephrem develops a paradox from Mary's situation by asserting that she is both single and communal. Ephrem holds singleness and celibacy to be among the primary ascetical virtues. Ephrem continually insists that virginity is necessary in order to receive Christ and that Mary is the consummate model of this kind of chastity. At the same time, however, although the ascetic is to be single, he or she is not to be isolated--the ascetic is to be a source of fertility for the community. Mary's pregnancy thus illustrates a

communal asceticism. She is celibate but not alone, both because she carries the human Christ within her and because she is to give birth to Christ for the community. Mary's chastity reveals a communal fertility in a pregnancy that exists to transform not only the ascetic, but the ascetic community.

Contribution 2: Identifying the Jewish Context of Ephrem's Mariology

Another contribution of this dissertation is its attempt to locate Ephrem's thought in these hymns within their historical context. Thus, a central aspect of my thesis is that we can best examine Ephrem's development of Mary as exemplar by locating his treatment of Mary within the context of Jewish and Jewish-Christian treatments of Eve. I will argue that in this Jewish-Christian Eve tradition, the problem of Eve has two components, both of which help explain how Ephrem understands Mary's fertility. The first is that Eve's primary sin was to allow herself to be deceived by the Serpent. The *Life of Adam and Eve* emphasizes that both Eve and Adam fell victim to deception because neither of them was prepared to defend himself or herself against it. This emphasis on deception underscores the instructive motif of Eve's testimony. One must practice vigilance, even in the Garden. This practice is one's adherence to, or trust in, the commandments of God. Second, this tradition suggests that Eve's deception resulted in the loss of humanity's glory. This theme is woven throughout the text and is underscored in God and Adam's indictments of Eve both in Gen. 3 and *Life of Adam and Eve*. Nowhere is this more evident than at Adam's deathbed. Not only does Eve suffer, but so does Adam. Not only was Adam and Eve's glory lost by lack of vigilance, but all of creation became vulnerable.

Accordingly, as I will argue more fully in Chapter 2, by locating Ephrem's treatment of Mary within this Eve tradition we can gain important insight into the content of that treatment and also recognize how important Mary's response to Eve is to the overall scope of Ephrem's thought in these hymns.¹ It is both this deception and the resulting loss of glory that Ephrem believes Mary's pregnancy overcomes. She hears God properly, which results in the conception by ear, which then leads to the transformation of all things through Christ, including her own corrupt body. Ephrem's description of Mary's pregnancy in the *Hymns of Nativity* and *Hymns on Virginity*, especially his emphasis on how that pregnancy restores "glory" to humankind, recalls the Jewish-Christian Eve traditions, and I will use this connection to identify the central features of that description. This Jewish-Christian Eve material is crucial for locating Ephrem's thought, therefore, because it helps explain why Ephrem emphasized Mary's role as he did. For Ephrem, what Mary's pregnancy overcomes is precisely what Eve bequeathed to the rest of humanity. Mary's free choice led to the reversal of Eve's original bad choice. But perhaps even more importantly, Mary's free choice allowed her—and, by extension ascetics who follow her example—to restore that glory to her own body. If Eve "put off" the glory, then through her pregnancy, Mary puts it back on, and in the process she reveals how to properly say yes to Christ and so exemplifies the goal and task of Christian asceticism.

¹ That Ephrem drew on Jewish and Jewish-Christian sources is well attested in scholarship on Ephrem. See Chapter 2, note 1, for bibliography and discussion of the Jewish influences on Ephrem's theology.

Contribution 3: Reading the Hymns on Nativity

I will argue for both the Jewish background to Ephrem's thought and the centrality of Mary to Ephrem's asceticism more fully within subsequent chapters: the role of the Eve tradition will be explored in Chapter 1, and seeing the centrality of Mary to the broader context of Ephrem's thought defines the purpose of Chapter 2 – 5. The final contributions of this dissertation are different in that they provide the dissertation's methodological foundation but are not necessarily specific points of argument about the character of Ephrem's theology. Accordingly, I will address each of these here in some detail.

The provenance of the *Hymns on the Nativity*

Treatments of Ephrem's theology typically deal with specific themes as they are manifested across his theology; much of the monograph-level scholarship on Ephrem attempts to synthesize the various elements of Ephrem's corpus.² This approach to Ephrem has a number of benefits, not least its comprehensiveness and recognition that there is consistency across the scope of his writings. Nevertheless, an exclusive focus on the broader themes of Ephrem's writing risks obscuring ways in which the specific circumstances of his writing both affects, and so reveals, important dimensions of his

² One thinks here especially of Sebastian Brock's seminal and influential work on Ephrem's theology, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992). Robert Murray's, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, revised edition (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 2006) also follows this trend, though the scope of Murray's investigation moves outside of Ephrem's corpus. A number of works by Edmund Beck have examined specific works, especially his *Ephräms Reden über den Glauben, ihr theologischer Lehrgehalt und ihr geschichtliche Rahmen*, Studia Anselma (Roma, 1953). To my knowledge, there is no book length treatment of the *Hymns on the Nativity*.

theological agenda. What is a strength of the synthetic approach to Ephrem is also a weakness. By assuming the fundamental continuity of Ephrem's thought, scholars obscure the historical locatedness of the poetry and the ways in which he develops themes through a series of poems or hymns. Indeed, Ephrem's treatment of Mary in the *Hymns on Nativity* is unique to this collection, and we do not find him working with the same themes in quite the same way outside of it. That this is true is not surprising given the way that Ephrem's symbolic poetry works. He works with images and symbols not to develop a theological theme in a systematic way, but to serve the particular symbolic – poetic goals of the hymns. Identifying whatever “system” arises out of Ephrem's thought in these hymns will require both a broad synthetic approach and a particular examination of the symbolism of a specific collection. Accordingly, one of the arguments of this dissertation is that we can only recognize the importance of these themes to his larger thought by examining them first, at least, as he develops them within a specific collection or collections.

To be sure, at least since Murray's *Symbols*, scholars have recognized the crucial importance of symbolic language to Ephrem's poetry and theology, and there are a number of fine works on elements of Ephrem's symbolic poetry.³ Sebastian Brock has helpfully observed that one dimension of Ephrem's use of poetry is his willingness to adopt ambiguity and paradox, which often leaves the center of Ephrem's theology

³ The standard work on Ephrem's symbolic theology is Murray, *Symbols*, followed by Brock, *Luminous Eye*. Also important is Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de saint Éphrem le Syrien*, Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik-Liban, XVI (Kaslik-Liban, 1988). But see now Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

undefined.⁴ It may be, however, that scholars have tended to discount the cohesiveness of the collections because of the symbolic nature of the poetry. If Ephrem's poetry is inherently paradoxical and resists "centering" and systemization, there is a natural inference that his poetry is also inherently episodic and that the collections as we have them are loosely grouped around a common theme, perhaps, but reveal nothing about the logic, structure or conceptual ideas of Ephrem's thought. By this approach, individual hymns from within a collection can be lifted out of the collection and usefully compared with individual hymns from other collections or even sections from his prose commentaries. Although this approach has produced a great deal of valuable scholarship on Ephrem's writings, it also neglects two important aspects of Ephrem's writings. The first is that at least some of the hymn collections were composed as collections for a specific occasion or purpose, which suggests at least the possibility that Ephrem develops themes throughout the entire collection. Second, one of the ways that scholars have compared common themes in Ephrem's writings across his corpus is to examine his use of key images and vocabulary in the various hymns. Again, such an approach has been helpful, especially with regard to Ephrem's ascetical theology, as we will see more fully in Chapter 5. However, a "word study" approach to Ephrem's theology can also be unhelpful, not least because Ephrem often uses different vocabulary for a similar theme within a large collection.

Accordingly, this dissertation considers one collection, Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity*. Because so much of my argument depends on the cohesiveness of this collection, I turn now to its provenance. The collection known to modern readers as the

⁴ See *Luminous Eye*, 24.

Hymns on the Nativity consists of three groups of hymns: a collection of 16 hymns that Ephrem probably composed as a sequence to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, a group of seven hymns that are loosely grouped around the theme of Christ's birth, and a shorter collection of four hymns on Jesus' status as the Messiah and its implications for the Christian life. In addition, the modern critical edition includes an additional hymn that may not be a self-contained hymn at all but a number of stanzas from other authentic hymns that a later editor grouped into the semblance of an actual hymn.⁵ Thus what we have under the broader heading of *Hymns on the Nativity* is actually three distinct collections of hymns that are related only in that they are loosely concerned with a common theme, the birth of Jesus, and perhaps a common liturgical setting, the feast of the Nativity. Further refinement of the hymns' provenance is impossible; partially because all three groups of hymns have traveled together in the same collection, they are nearly impossible to date with accuracy. Because of their similarity in theme and content

⁵ For discussion of the compilation of these hymns, see Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 186 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusCSO, 1959), v – viii. The grouping of Hymns 5 – 20 is well attested in the manuscript tradition. The primary scholarly question for Beck concerned the authenticity of the collection of seven hymns, which he numbers Hymns 21 – 27. Beck argues strongly for their authenticity in his translation of the collection. See Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 187 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusCSO, 1959), vii, largely on the basis of the manuscript tradition, but also because of their thematic continuity and language similarities with Ephrem's other authentic hymns. Because Beck's primary interest is in the hymns' authenticity, he has relatively little to say about their cohesiveness as a collection. Beck also included in his critical edition of the *Hymns on the Nativity* a collection of hymns in Syriac on the theme of the Epiphany, which were transmitted with the Nativity collections because of their thematic similarity, although they are not by Ephrem.

with the *Hymns on Virginity*, we will assume that they belong at the end of Ephrem's career, perhaps as late as his Edessan period.⁶

Because the three different collections within the larger grouping known as the *Hymns on the Nativity* have not been studied as separate works, some consideration of each grouping's coherence, structure and theme will help to establish more precisely how they should be treated. If we can establish some structure among a group of hymns, then it is possible to analyze them as a distinct work. My argument throughout this dissertation is that Hymns 5 – 20 and Hymns 21 - 27 in the *Hymns on the Nativity* should be understood as though there were composed as a collection and so read together in their traditional grouping. Hymns 1 – 4 should be treated as having a theme in common with these other two collections, but they are otherwise not necessarily connected to each other, nor are they potentially parts of the other two collections.

Hymns on the Nativity 1 – 4: "On the Messiahship of Jesus." The first collection of hymns is the least cohesive of the group as presented in the critical text. This collection consists of a group of hymns that is built around theological consideration of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. These hymns are less about the birth of Jesus than they are about how the coming of the Son fulfills the messianic expectation of the Old Testament. Accordingly, both Hymns 1 and 2 contain extensive reference to the foretelling of the Son's arrival as the Messiah in the Old Testament. In Hymn 1, for example, Ephrem first establishes that the birth of the Messiah outside of normal human

⁶ For Ephrem's biography, see André de Halleux, "Saint Éphrem le Syrien," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 14 (1983): 328-355.

procreation was a genuine fulfillment of the messianic expectation.⁷ He then walks his readers or listeners through a series of Old Testament figures, from Cain and Abel to Elijah, affirming in each case that they anticipated the Messiah.⁸ He then repeats and expands on that sequence, though in this case he ends the recital with Abraham and concludes the hymn with a long exhortation to vigilance that imitates our forefather in the faith and that mirrors the example of Jesus himself.⁹ Hymn 2 continues with this theme by turning to the theological and exegetical basis for calling Jesus the Messiah. Ephrem is especially interested in Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation that the Messiah would be a king, and he devotes a number of stanzas in the hymn to exploring why and how we should understand Jesus to be a king. As we will discuss more fully below, however, Ephrem is also intrigued in this context by Jesus' relationship with Mary, primarily because he sees Jesus' virgin birth, that is, from a mother but without a human father, as a potential impediment to establishing Jesus within an institution that requires the father's line to continue.¹⁰ Hymn 3 in this collection functions as a kind of interlude. Ephrem abandons the Old Testament imagery almost altogether, and instead focuses on exploring a series of images and expressions of praise for the Incarnation. Likewise, in Hymn 4, Ephrem embarks on a long series of images that explore the meaning of Jesus' birthday. Like Hymn 3, but unlike Hymns 1 and 2, Hymn 4 contains no reference to the Messiahship of Jesus. Instead, this hymn is more interested in

⁷ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.1-18; CSCO 186, 1-3.

⁸ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.19-40; CSCO 186, 3-6.

⁹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.41-99; CSCO 186, 6-12.

¹⁰ See, for example, *Hymns on the Nativity* 2. 22-23; CSCO 186, 19.

portraying the effects of the Incarnation. We will have occasion to explore Hymn 4 in much more detail, because in the course of explaining those effects, Ephrem articulates a number of Marian images that provide important insight into his Mariology as a whole.

Hymns on the Nativity 21 – 27: “On the Incarnation.” By contrast, the other short collection in the *Hymns on the Nativity* does cohere and can be treated as an extended meditation on the Incarnation. In fact, the entire sequence can be positioned within the *de Incarnatione* tradition of Athanasius and other fourth-century theologians, along with Ephrem’s own anti-Arian works.¹¹ This collection opens with a hymn that explores the mystery of the divine taking human form, and in the process evokes a number of images for the Incarnation that resonate throughout these Hymns.¹² Ephrem is especially fascinated here by the mystery of the Divine limiting itself in a human body, and one of the key themes of this hymn, and of Ephrem’s theology in general, is the transformative effects of Incarnation on creation. Accordingly, we find Ephrem drawing on fertility images at the end of this hymn that will become an important witness to the way that his Mariology affects the broader scope of his Incarnational theology.¹³ The second hymn in

¹¹ For Athanasius’ work, and Incarnation literature in the fourth-century generally, see the introduction in Charles Kannengiesser, *Athanase: Sur l’Incarnation du Verbe*, Sources Chrétiennes 199 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973). For Ephrem’s anti-Arian writings, see Edmund Beck, *Ephräms Trinitätslehre im Bild von Sonne/Feuer, Licht und Wärme*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 425, Subsidia 62 (Louvain, 1981).

¹² See below, Chapter 4, for a discussion of these images and their place within Ephrem’s Mariology and description of the Incarnation. For a good overview of Ephrem’s imagery for the Incarnation in general, see Brock, *Luminous Eye*, pp. 85-98.

¹³ See *Hymns on the Nativity* 21.16 – 19; CSCO 186, 108. Verse 19 marks the actual end of this hymn, but some manuscripts extend the hymn by another 5 stanzas. As Beck notes, these added stanzas were lifted by a later editor directly from Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Faith*. That a series of lines from a collection of explicitly anti-Arian

this collection is an acrostic that examines Ephrem's conception of the human problem, which he here frames as idolatry and human pride. Ephrem takes the humility of the Son's birth as a paradoxical sign that such pride has been overthrown.¹⁴ Hymn 23 is the first to focus on the birth of the Son, though here again Ephrem's interest is primarily on the character of the Incarnation. He meditates throughout the hymn on the paradox of the God of creation inhabiting a child, and he contemplates, in an echo of themes he established in the first hymn of this collection, on what the Incarnation means for the restoration of life to all creation.¹⁵ The third hymn of this series continues with the nativity theme by mentioning the visit from the Magi after Jesus' birth. The hymn is quite dramatic in its portrayal of the slaughter of the innocents by Herod, but Ephrem's theological interest lies both in how the visit and subsequent events fulfill prophecy and in how the Magi themselves become prophets to the rest of the world about the truth of Jesus' birth.¹⁶ The last three hymns devote themselves to what we might call the cosmic significance of the Incarnation.¹⁷ Ephrem considers how the Incarnation functions against the backdrop of the liturgical calendar, how creation itself provides a kind of allegory for

hymns could be thought to fit so neatly in this collection highlights its place within the *De Incarnatione* tradition. See Beck, CSCO 186, 109.

¹⁴ See *Hymns on the Nativity* 22.31; CSCO 186, 114.

¹⁵ See *Hymns on the Nativity* 23.11-13; CSCO 186, 120.

¹⁶ See *Hymns on Nativity* 24.13; CSCO 186, 24.

¹⁷ This from Kathleen McVey, who refers to the "cosmic and mysterious significance" of the Incarnation according to these hymns. Kathleen McVey, trans. and ed., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 199.

the Incarnation, and how numerology and other cosmic phenomena relate to Jesus' birth.¹⁸

Taken together, this collection offers an intriguing entry into fourth-century discussion of the meaning of the Incarnation, and the hymns provide a remarkably consistent vision of the Incarnation, despite Ephrem's use of different thematic elements and poetry styles. Ephrem's vision of the Incarnation is tied to his vision of creation as a whole: the Incarnation marks a fundamental paradox as the cosmos itself, or at least the ruler of the cosmos, can be contained within a small child, just as the drama of creation is contained within that child's birth. The anti-Arian possibilities of this approach are evident. Insofar as the Arians and their Homoian successors attempted to subordinate the Son on the basis of his "createdness," Ephrem's imagery takes that limitation as a sign of divinity, and in so doing, he articulates a vision of the Incarnation in which the paradox of the Son's Incarnation becomes the source of healing for all of creation. Thus, for Ephrem, the Incarnation reveals the deep structure of the universe by showing how self-giving represents the proper posture towards creation, and how the healing of creation occurs when the divine Lord of the universe reveals himself through his birth as a human.¹⁹ Ephrem's emphasis on the birth of the Son, though serving his larger interest in

¹⁸ See *Hymns on the Nativity* 25.9-11; CSCO 186, 130; *Hymns on the Nativity* 26.2; CSCO 186, 133; *Hymns on the Nativity* 27.2ff; CSCO 186, 137ff.

¹⁹ In this regard, Ephrem's theology of the Incarnation has some similarities to that of Athanasius's own *De Incarnatione*. The two works are structured very differently. Athanasius proceeds more systematically than Ephrem, beginning with creation, moving to the Incarnation itself, then to the death of Jesus, and ending with the Resurrection, whereas the coherence of Ephrem's seven hymns lies in the way he ties together themes of birth, Incarnation and creation. Nevertheless, they are similar with regard to their emphasis on the cosmic significance of the Son and in their common, and often overlooked, emphasis on the direct consequences for the Incarnation itself on creation.

the self-emptying of the Son, allows him to reflect on Mary's role in facilitating the Incarnation, and we will have occasion to consider some of the material from this collection in our discussion below.

Hymns on the Nativity 5 – 20: the original “Hymns on the Nativity.” The longest collection of the Nativity hymns are the sixteen hymns that make up the bulk of the manuscript tradition. It is these hymns that were probably originally called the “Hymns on the Nativity” by Ephrem.²⁰ This collection's coherence lies in Ephrem's use of a number of thematic and structural elements. The argument of this dissertation is that one of the most important of the thematic elements is the way Ephrem develops his theology of Mary and then integrates it into the larger theological vision of his ascetical theology, and I will examine that aspect of these hymns in subsequent chapters. For now I will highlight only two themes as they help orient the reader towards Ephrem's purpose in the collection. First, although the hymns in this collection are about the birth of Jesus, they are really about the Incarnation, much as with the collection that we have identified as “On the Incarnation,” i.e. Hymns 21 – 27. And as in the shorter collection, Ephrem continually refers to the mystery or paradox of the divine entering into human form and to the effects of the Incarnation for creation, and it is this mystery that provides Ephrem with the basic imagery that drives the entire collection of hymns. Thus we find Ephrem pondering the mystery of the divine kenosis,²¹ questioning how the Son is to be

For an important examination of “creation” in every aspect of Athanasius's thought, see Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of his Thought* (Oxford: Routledge, 1998).

²⁰ Beck, CSCO 187, v.

²¹ For an example, see *Hymns on the Nativity* 5.1-4; CSCO 186, 45-6.

recognized and manifested within the limitations of human understanding,²² describing the kind of people who are capable of responding to the entry of the divine Son into creation,²³ advocating the moral superiority of virginity as the proper response to the Incarnation,²⁴ and chastising those who fail to properly recognize the incarnated Son.²⁵ This list does not exhaust the themes that the nativity of Jesus evokes from Ephrem, but it does give a good indication of how creation – centric Ephrem’s theology in the hymns is. Ephrem wants to frame all of his theological reflections here, including his soteriology and account of the moral life, within the context of the transformation of creation that is brought about by the birth of the Son. Indeed, on the basis of all three nativity collections, it would be possible to argue that one of the distinctive characteristics of Ephrem’s theology is precisely his emphasis on the healing effects of the Incarnation for all of creation. As we will see, Ephrem will draw heavily on his conception of Mary’s fertility to describe the Incarnation and its effects, so much so, as I argue below, that Mary’s fertility emerges as the lynchpin for the entire project. In the *Hymns on the Nativity*, Mary’s fertility provides an example for ascetics to follow, and Mary herself becomes an allegory for what happens to creation through the Incarnation. But most of all, Mary, in

²² See *Hymns on the Nativity* 13.10-11; CSCO 186, 75.

²³ This is the theme of all of *Hymns on the Nativity* 9; CSCO 186, 63-66.

²⁴ See *Hymns on the Nativity* 16.13; CSCO 186, 85-6.

²⁵ The object of his criticism is almost always the Jews, though it is worth noting that he rarely names the Jews specifically in these hymns, and it is possible that he is using apparently anti-Jewish tropes to attack a different foe, including his anti-Nicene enemies. See *Hymns on the Nativity* 10; CSCO 186, 66 – 68. For Ephrem’s anti – Jewish polemic, see Christina Shepherdson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem’s Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria*, Patristic Monograph Series (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America, 2008).

her humility and virtue, provides the divinity with its humanity, and in so doing becomes both an example of the humility that marks the divine experience of the Incarnation while also becoming its source.

A note on the *Hymns on Virginit*

Although the focus of this dissertation is on the *Hymns on the Nativity*, I will have occasion to interact with a collection of Ephrem's hymns known as the *Hymns on Virginit*. These hymns are important to the argument of this dissertation because they contain some of the most explicit statements of Ephrem's Mariology outside of the *Hymns on the Nativity*, and because these statements illustrate and expand on the way Ephrem develops similar themes in the *Hymns on the Nativity*. Here again we face a difficulty in studying Ephrem, because it is difficult to judge the chronological relationship between the two collections.²⁶ One often unacknowledged issue with dating Ephrem's hymns is that the collections as we have them are often compilations by later editors, and the connection between the various sub-collections can be arbitrary thematically as well as historically. This is not true of all of Ephrem's hymns, but it is true of large important collections such as the two we are discussing in this chapter. Thus to treat a collection such as the *Hymns on Virginit* as though it were a single collection with a common set of themes and historical circumstances risks substantial distortion of some of the hymns in the collections.

²⁶ McVey, following Beck, places the *Hymns on Virginit* during Ephrem's later Edessan period, which may make their circumstances similar to that of the *Hymns on the Nativity*. But any judgment beyond that rather speculative one would be the result of even deeper speculation. See McVey, *Hymns*, 40.

Like the *Hymns on the Nativity*, the *Hymns on Virginity* contain a number of sub-collections. As McVey argues, the central sub-collection is a group of hymns that comprises Hymns 13 – 30 in the present collection.²⁷ According to McVey, these hymns, especially Hymns 27 – 30, are among the most representative of Ephrem’s entire corpus of hymns, and they are especially important as witnesses to Ephrem’s symbolic theology.²⁸ The way Ephrem uses symbols has received a great deal of scholarly attention, more perhaps than any other topic besides Ephrem’s ascetical theology. I will discuss the scholarship on Ephrem’s theory of symbols later in this chapter. However, in the course of exploring the symbols of God in nature, Ephrem has occasion to address aspects of Mary’s place in creation and the role of women in general. As we will see in Chapter 4, Hymn 17 is especially important in this regard, and we will examine it thoroughly. Likewise, the first seven hymns in the present collection stand alone in their treatment of virginity itself as a theme, and like the larger middle sub-collection, this sub-collection is an important witness to Ephrem’s ascetical theology. These hymns are also especially important to the argument of the entire dissertation, because part of the thesis of this dissertation is that Ephrem’s Mariology both undergirds and illumines Ephrem’s ascetical theology in general. Consequently, these hymns, with their explicit development of the theme of virginity, help to establish that connection.

²⁷ This analysis of the sub-sections in the *Hymns on Virginity* follows that of McVey, *Hymns*, 39-40.

²⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 40.

Present Status of the Problem

The primary argument of this dissertation is focused on the intellectual background and thematic elements of a collection of hymns by Ephrem. Because these works have not been widely studied, the contribution of this dissertation is to offer an initial assessment of Ephrem's purpose and theological method in them. A traditional *status questionis* is not possible for the specific thesis of this dissertation because its subject has been so little studied. However, an important facet of the dissertation's argument is that we can use Ephrem's treatment of the role of Mary in the *Hymns on the Nativity* to illuminate aspects of Ephrem's wider theological interests and his place within the larger theological concerns of fourth-century asceticism.²⁹ In its attempt to identify the implications of the thesis within the wider contexts of Ephrem's thought and contact, this dissertation participates in a wider scholarly discussion as well. This section, therefore, attempts to identify and frame the wider scholarly discussion that forms the backdrop for the reading of Ephrem that is proposed here.

²⁹ There is also the question of where both Ephrem and early Syriac Christianity fit within the fourth-century and within the wider context of Christian thought, especially Christian asceticism. The narrow focus of a dissertation does not allow for this synthetic discussion, but the relative infancy of Syriac studies would seem to require studies like the one in this dissertation in order better to assess these wider questions. For some initial reflections on the relationship between Syriac Christianity and the wider Christian context, see Brian E. Colless, "The Place of Syrian Christian Mysticism in Religious History," *The Journal of Religious History* 5 (1968): 1-15.

*Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Scenting Salvation*³⁰

We begin with a work that touches directly on both how to approach Ephrem's thought and how to locate him within the wider context of fourth-century asceticism. Harvey argues that early Christians used their olfactory sense in an epistemological way, in order to "posit knowledge of the divine and, consequently, knowledge about the human" (3). This is not the only way that Christians acquired knowledge of the divine, but Harvey believes that scent was especially important for early Christians. The early Christian emphasis on scent has been overlooked, she claims, because scholarship has focused on the role of sight and hearing to describe these epistemological concerns within Christianity in late antiquity. The reason to focus on the sense of smell in early Christianity is twofold. First, the sources themselves readily indicate that concern for olfactory experiences was important, both within and without Christianity, and a closer look at those sources suggests that Christians used olfactory experiences to situate themselves over against their pagan counterparts. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Harvey notes a tendency in scholarship on early Christian asceticism to over-emphasize certain aspects of ascetical discussion of the body at the expense of other aspects that may have been just as important. Thus, Harvey notes, despite recognizing how important "the body" was to early Christian ascetics, scholars still have a tendency to assume that these ascetics were primarily concerned with renunciation when, in fact, ascetical approaches to the body were often much more nuanced and "constructive." Likewise, scholarship on ascetical use of the body has focused on sexuality, again at the expense of

³⁰ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

recognizing some of these Christians' broader concerns about what it means to inhabit a body for their life of faith (4). By examining Christian ascetical accounts of the olfactory sense, therefore, Harvey believes that it will be possible to attain a much more positive picture of how early Christian ascetics viewed the body.

Harvey looks for traces of olfactory experiences within a wide swath of early Christian and pagan sources, but she focuses her account of early ascetical olfactory experiences on Syriac asceticism. In the process, she opens up two insights into Ephrem's theological concerns that will be especially relevant to this dissertation. First, Harvey shows that Ephrem sought to portray the body as a dwelling place for God. Far from being body – denying, Ephrem, in concert with his Syriac tradition, believed that the body could be transformed into something that smelled like a “censer full of fragrance,” that is, a place divinity could choose to inhabit (183). According to Harvey, this bodily transformation was initiated at baptism and continued through the “liturgical practice of the Eucharist” (62). And in an observation that is especially important for this dissertation, Harvey notes that Ephrem offers Mary's transformation as the paradigm for how the ascetic is to become the dwelling place for God (63). Harvey goes on to show how for Ephrem, this process of sanctification anticipates and prepares the ascetic for the ultimate experience of the Resurrection. In Ephrem's thought, according to Harvey, paradise will be a total-body experience, one that requires all of the senses in order to be experienced. A number of early Christian theologians described paradise as a vision of the divine, but for Ephrem, paradise will be what Harvey calls “a dazzling sensory encounter” (235). Paradise will require a fully transformed body so that those there will be able to encounter what Harvey calls “the sensory feast” that Paradise will be (236); the

transformed and fully healed body will revel in the lushness and fullness of the new creation. However, and this is the crucial point, nowhere does Ephrem suggest that this experience in paradise requires the ascetic to separate himself or herself from the body. Consequently, Ephrem can manifest concern for transforming the body, and for anticipating the full sensory experiences of paradise, precisely in the present, because preparing the body to experience the total transformation of creation is what asceticism is supposed to accomplish. Thus the body now is as much a part of the ascetical practice as is the soul, because both the soul and body will be necessary to experience the final consummation of paradise (238).

Harvey's approach to Ephrem marks a substantial contribution to our understanding of Ephrem's asceticism, and it departs considerably from earlier scholarly readings of Ephrem's ascetical thought. Scholars have long recognized that Syriac asceticism arose in dialogue with other ascetical milieus, but that it had its own sources, theological perspectives, and ascetical practices.³¹ In particular, scholars such as Sebastian Brock have argued that Syriac asceticism was shaped by its geographical location and climate, which allowed for more radical efforts to escape the world and mortify the body. From this perspective, the paradigm of Syriac asceticism is Simeon the Stylite, who flourished in the early fifth century, and who gained fame by withdrawing to the desert and engaging in what Brock calls "a life of extreme penance and mortification."³² When reading Ephrem through this lens, one can easily recognize a

³¹ For this claim, see S. P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen* 20 (1973): 1 – 19. Brock's essay is a summation of the standard approach to Syriac asceticism.

³² Brock, "Asceticism," 14.

similar kind of mortification and renunciation of the world, albeit one that is somewhat less radical than that of Simeon Stylites. One of the most influential accounts of Syriac asceticism paints a picture of Ephrem's ascetical practices that recalls the extreme radicalism of Simeon:

It does not take long, even after the first acquaintance with Ephrem's authentic writings, to realize that here we are in the province of mortification. Asceticism with all its means is directed against the human body. A longing for the spiritual life is equated with the contempt for nature. This inaugurates a continuous fight, the "subjugations of the body", aiming at the changing of nature. The ultimate purpose of subjugation is the killing of bodily needs. Life is death for the monk.³³

Vööbus goes on to say that "the idea of mortification is fundamental to the concept of asceticism in Ephrem," largely because in Ephrem's mind, asceticism is the replacement of martyrdom. So just as the martyrs "were for bodily ordeals, torture and destruction, so do the monks accomplish the same through mortification."³⁴

Although neither Harvey nor the argument of this dissertation attempt to deny *in toto* the conclusions of scholars such as Vööbus and Brock, Harvey does demonstrate that a different approach to Ephrem's asceticism is possible. Following Harvey, then, the central argument of this dissertation is that by focusing on how Ephrem paints Mary as an ascetical exemplar, we can better recognize how Ephrem's asceticism, even with its

³³ It should be noted that Brock himself draws heavily from the classic work of Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Subsidia 17 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), 97. Vööbus' work on Syriac asceticism casts a long shadow over subsequent scholarship, despite its reliance on Syriac texts that were later demonstrated not to be by Ephrem. Indeed, the Brock essay on the development of Syriac asceticism we just mentioned draws heavily from Vööbus' conclusions. For discussion of the criticisms of Vööbus's *History*, see den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 13.

³⁴ Vööbus, *History*, 99.

apparently radical renunciations, is actually body – affirming and concerned with guiding the ascetic towards both present and future experiences of the Resurrection.

Harvey's concerns are broader than just re-narrating Ephrem's theological concerns, though when Harvey wants to make a broad, synthetic point about early ascetical olfactory experiences, and what those experiences mean for the body, she turns to Ephrem, especially in her pivotal chapter on the Resurrection.³⁵ Thus, even though it is not exclusively about Ephrem, Harvey's book emerges as one of the most important works on Syriac asceticism to demonstrate the way of Ephrem's theology of the ascetical life is attached to the present world. Following Harvey, it is no longer possible to describe Ephrem's asceticism as world – denying, which suggests that identifying precisely how Ephrem describes the transformation of the world, in part through ascetical practices, is an important concern for scholarship on Ephrem's theology.

Although Harvey's work has successfully drawn Syriac asceticism, including Ephrem's, into the larger conversation about asceticism in late antiquity, she has not substantially investigated the theological framework within which Syriac asceticism, and Ephrem's in particular, found its form. Her project focused on situating Ephrem and other Syriac writers within the classical world in general. My work will recast Harvey's approach, therefore, by focusing on the theological roots of Ephrem's asceticism, particularly the degree to which Ephrem drew from the Jewish-Christian tradition. Likewise, my work will develop Harvey's approach by identifying Mary as the exemplar of the ascetical life. I will argue that Ephrem expects the ascetic to imitate a particular woman, Mary, and that this imitation plays a defining role in Ephrem's ascetical doctrine

³⁵ *Scenting*, 222-240.

as a whole and helps us to recognize ways in which Ephrem is both in continuity with his tradition and makes unique contribution to it. By exploring in its historical context Ephrem's use of Mary's image, we gain a greater sense of how Ephrem's asceticism was oriented towards both the body and the community. Thus, this dissertation will contribute to the development of another picture of fourth-century asceticism, one that is already slowly coming into scholarly focus. This new scholarship has shown that fourth-century Syriac ascetical practices cultivated an understanding of the body as a source of God's revelation, an embodied image of God. My contribution will extend this understanding by pointing out the role Ephrem gives to Mary, and specifically her chaste pregnancy, as a primary image of the manner in which Christians work for holiness. This dissertation will contribute to this new scholarly picture by locating Ephrem's use of Mary in its context and using that location to explore how his ascetical thought is both body-affirming and communally oriented.

*Robert Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers"*³⁶

My reading of Ephrem's Mary material also expands on the standard scholarly perspective on how Ephrem uses Mary as an exemplar. Scholars have recognized the importance Ephrem places on Mary's role as the "Second Eve," and there are a number of interesting short studies of Ephrem's use of Mary. The most important of these is Murray's "Mary, the Second Eve."³⁷ Murray makes a number of points about how the

³⁶ Robert Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1971): 372-84.

³⁷ See also Pierre Yousif, "La Vierge Marie et le disciple bien-aimé chez saint Éphrem de Nisibe," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 55 (1989): 283 – 316. Stephen Bonian, "Mary and the Christian in the Mystical Poetry of St. Ephrem," *Diakonia* 17

Syriac tradition, especially Ephrem, understands Mary and her role in the Christian life. He notes, for example, that both Ephrem and Aphrahat use the image of “conception by ear” to evoke the parallel between Eve and Mary. Citing a text from Ephrem’s commentary on the Diatessaron, Murray notes that a variety of Syriac authors, extending back to an early Syriac text called “The Acts of John,” all refer in some way to death entering Eve through the ear, while the salvation of Christ enters Mary through her ear (374). In this reading, Ephrem presents Mary as the central human figure in facilitating the Incarnation. As the counterpart to Eve, who by her wrongful conception brought death, Mary conceives “rightly” and thus brings forth life, thereby canceling the great burden of sin left upon humanity by Eve. Ephrem offers a number of hymns in which he explores the contrast between Eve, who sews a corrupt garment for humanity, and Mary, who provides the means for Christ to restore our “robe of glory” (378). The Mary-Eve contrast, however, does not adequately account for the full range of Ephrem’s Mariology, and Murray goes on to show that in other places, such as the commentary on the Diatessaron, Ephrem will push the Mary- Eve contrast to the point that he will identify Mary as the earth in which Christ planted the seeds of salvation (380).

Murray’s essay is important because it highlights the value of Marian images for Ephrem, and he does shed some light on how Ephrem uses Mary theologically to describe the effects of the Incarnation on creation. For the most part, however, Murray is

(1982): 46-53; Sebastian Brock, “Mary in Syriac Tradition,” in *Mary’s Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. A. Stacpole (Slough, 1981), 182 – 91. idem, “Mary and the Eucharist, an Oriental Perspective,” *Sobornost* 1 (1979): 50-59; idem, “St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan (=Hymns on the Church, 36),” *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1976): 137-44. Edmund Beck, “Die Mariologie der echten Schriften Ephräms,” *Oriens Christianus* 40 (1956): 22-39.

content to illustrate the ways that Ephrem contrasts Eve with Mary, how his depictions of Mary function as symbolic gestures that reveal how Christ overcame the fall. Ultimately, in Murray's telling, there is no deeper theological meaning for Ephrem's Mariology beyond her symbolic role as the "second Eve." Although, again, this insight helps us to recognize the importance of Mary in Ephrem's symbolism, the argument of this dissertation is that for Ephrem, Mary is more than just an antitype of Eve, she is an example of how we should receive Christ, a model of the fertility and of the glorious transformation that should mark the ascetical life, and so an exemplar for all ascetics to imitate.

A question related to the specific issue of how Ephrem developed his Mariology within his own theological system is how Ephrem's treatment of Mary, and of women in general, fits within the broader context of fourth-century asceticism. Scholarship on women in early Christian asceticism has not, for the most part, considered examples from the Syriac tradition. Likewise, scholarship on Ephrem's theology has largely operated independently of some of the recent scholarship that has offered new insight into the place of women in fourth-century asceticism. For example, Susanna Elm's *Virgins of God* attempts to incorporate developments from "eastern" Christian asceticism, but it concentrates on examples from Asian Minor and Egypt.³⁸ No single monograph can do everything, of course, but it is worth noting that there is much in Elm's argument that potentially sheds light on the development of asceticism in fourth-century Syria. In this book, Elm attempts to show that when we examine the development of asceticism by

³⁸ Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

looking at the examples of women ascetics, we find that Christian asceticism did not progress in a straight line from coenobitism to monasticism of the Benedictine variety. Instead, Elm argues, Christian asceticism emerged from a variety of styles and contexts, and that instead of tracking a single story of asceticism, we must think of “asceticisms” that manifest a great deal of diversity (vii). Elm’s focus is not on an account of the female ascetic *per se*; she is asking broader questions about the development of Christian asceticism as a whole, which includes the participation of both male and female ascetics. In some ways, her primary contribution is simply including female voices in the larger story and allowing those voices to shape the larger narrative. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the prominent role of some women in fourth-century asceticism in particular, Elm has made a number of contributions to our conception of how women functioned and were perceived by their contemporaries. A number of reviews of *Virgins of God* have suggested that one of the book’s great strengths is that it opens up possibilities for even deeper exploration of women’s roles in the early church.³⁹ It is certainly true that there would be much to gain from a similar study of the role of female ascetics in Syriac asceticism that builds on some of Elm’s findings and methodological approaches.⁴⁰

³⁹ See, for example, Blake Layerle, “Review of *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.4 (1996): 576-578.

⁴⁰ Susan Ashbrook Harvey has some work that points in this direction. See especially her *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), especially pages 108-133. Also of interest is her “Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996): 27 – 56. Vööbus also has an essay that at least distinguishes female from male ascetics in Syria. For an overview, see Arthur Vööbus “The Institution of the Benai Qeima and Benat Qeima in the Ancient Syrian Church,” *Church History* 30 (1961): 19-27.

However, as important as it is, Elm's work also suggests the possibility of a significant lacunae in scholarship on women's role in fourth-century asceticism. In neither Elm nor Murray do we find an account of women in early asceticism that considers how, or whether, women influenced theological trajectories within the development of Christian asceticism. Murray is content to observe the various ways that Ephrem employs the Marian typology, but he draws no broader conclusions about what Ephrem's use of a female "type" might mean for Ephrem's asceticism. Elm does take seriously the role of women as women, but her focus is on the social status of women and the ways that women were able to exploit that status to disrupt patterns of ascetical practice and organization. Elm does not consider whether women influence ascetical theology. Consequently, the work of both Murray and Elm make it possible to ask whether a theologian like Ephrem can use Mary as an ascetical exemplar: Murray by establishing that Mary was an important theme in Ephrem's work, and Elm by showing that women played an important and sometimes disruptive role in fourth-century asceticism. Together, their two studies suggest that it would not necessarily have been that radical for Ephrem to have used a female figure in a prominent place in his theological system. Women occupied prominent roles in fourth-century asceticism, and we should not be surprised when women emerge within a theological context. At the same time, the work of Murray and, especially, Elm, helps throw into relief how Ephrem uses Mary's femininity to shape his theological agenda.

Kathleen McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian's Use of Female Metaphors to Describe the Deity"

Elm is working from the perspective of women's role in the development of ascetical theologies and practices, but at least one scholar has very helpfully considered the place of feminine imagery in Ephrem's theology, Kathleen McVey's "Ephrem the Syrian's Use of Female Metaphors to Describe the Deity."⁴¹ McVey observes, correctly, that most scholarly discussion on feminine imagery in Ephrem has concentrated on his treatment of the Holy Spirit or, slightly more rarely, the church (261, n.1). Although these studies are valuable, there are several feminine images that are more central to Ephrem's theology than commonly allowed. She highlights three images as being particularly important. The first is the "womb." As McVey shows, womb – related imagery runs throughout Ephrem's writings and covers a variety of theological topics. After reading McVey, in fact, one avoids only with difficulty the sense that the "womb" is one of Ephrem's most important theological themes. McVey notes, for example, that Ephrem uses the image of the womb to describe the generation of the Son from the Father, and the birth of the Incarnate Son as a human: the Son is "born" twice, once from the Father's womb and once from Mary's (262). Such imagery is important because it allows Ephrem to describe the two natures of the Son, which becomes especially important in his polemics against the Arians. McVey also notes, however, that Mary's "womb" establishes her as a dwelling place of God, which gives rise to a number of images that allow Ephrem to develop what McVey calls "a very exalted sense of the symbolic importance of Mary's motherhood" (266). Likewise, McVey shows that Ephrem will use

⁴¹ Kathleen McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian's Use of Female Metaphors to Describe the Deity," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 5 (2001): 261-288.

this womb imagery to describe the economy of salvation, such that the world is ready to bring forth new life, just like Mary's womb at the Incarnation (271).⁴² These two themes will become especially important to this dissertation. The other feminine images that Ephrem uses are also important to this dissertation but ultimately secondary to the womb imagery. These include clothing imagery, which we will discuss below in Chapter 2, and nursing imagery, which only shows up in a few hymns, but one of those hymns is in the *Hymns on the Nativity* collections.⁴³

Ultimately, McVey is interested in what Ephrem's use of "female fertility symbols" tells us about the socio-religious context of his theology (286). She argues, for example, that Ephrem does not treat women's bodies as inherently inferior to male bodies (287), a move that may make sense within the context of both fertility religions and some Stoic cosmologies that viewed the "cosmos as a huge, living being" (288). Her discussion here, though helpful, lies outside of the scope of this dissertation. However, two of McVey's conclusions will form the backdrop for much of this dissertation. The first is her finding that Ephrem's use of this feminine symbolism is both "comprehensive" and crosses the spectrum his theological poetry, and that it is unique to him. Indeed, it seems possible to argue that Ephrem's use of feminine symbolism is his distinguishing characteristic as a theologian. McVey's explanation for precisely how Ephrem arrives at

⁴² Also useful on this point is Simon Jones, "The Womb and the Spirit in the Baptismal Writings of Ephrem the Syrian," *Studia Patristica* 33 (2003): 175-193.

⁴³ Somewhat less successfully, McVey relates themes of "compassion" in Ephrem's theology with this feminine imagery (pp.280-284). Though he does often discuss compassion in relationship with these feminine images, as McVey shows, there does not seem to be an inherent correlation between compassion and the feminine. Many of Ephrem's portrayals of divine compassion work just as well in a genderless context.

this symbolism is tentative, and it may be that a comprehensive explanation simply is not available to scholarship. Nevertheless, the argument of this dissertation is that when we consider Ephrem's use of these images by beginning with the collections in the *Hymns on the Nativity*, we can make one judgment, that Ephrem develops his feminine imagery in response to the "Eve tradition" and in the context of his broader sense of what the Fall and its restoration entails.

A second conclusion from McVey's article is also important to the argument of this dissertation. She notes that Ephrem's Mariology straddles early Syriac emphases on feminine imagery (at least with regard to the Holy Spirit) and early Syriac emphases on "enkratism" and other forms of radical renunciation.⁴⁴ McVey notes these two themes but does not attempt to develop them given her other interests. However, I will argue that Ephrem wants to show how these two practices are actually pathways to true fertility, that they give birth to Christ and are an anticipation of the kind of fertility that will mark the Resurrection.

⁴⁴ It is important to note here that the fertility image that McVey is talking about here is much different than the fertility imagery that arises in Ephrem's Mariology, especially in the *Hymns on Nativity*. Indeed, part of McVey's argument in the rest of the essay is to establish that difference and, so, the uniqueness of Ephrem's theology. For the purposes of this dissertation, there is no "Syriac tradition of fertility imagery" that feeds Ephrem's Mariology and treatment of feminine imagery. He may well be drawing on earlier Syriac traditions of using feminine imagery for the Holy Spirit, but he develops that imagery in new and unexpected ways, and his development of the feminine imagery is driven by his soteriology and reaction to the Eve tradition. This is not to argue that the feminine imagery for the Holy Spirit is not an important part of the Syriac tradition. For that theme, see especially Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, The Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 111-139.

Plan of the Dissertation

In his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem uses an account of Eve's fall like the one in the *Life on Adam and Eve* to establish Mary's role as an ascetical exemplar. Turning to Mary to provide an example of the ideal ascetical life allows Ephrem to explore the place of certain feminine images or traits, especially "fertility;" for Ephrem, Mary's fertility mirrors the fertility of both male and female ascetics. Once we recognize how Ephrem employs these images of Marian and ascetical fertility, we can gain additional insight into some of Ephrem's important theological themes within his corpus as a whole. Ephrem's ascetical theology is body-centric in that he believes that the practice of asceticism is to transform the body in ways that anticipate paradise. The fertility of the Resurrection can become present in the body of the ascetic through practices such as celibacy and renunciation of the world.

To establish this thesis, this dissertation will examine Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity* in the context of a Jewish-Christian Eve tradition and Ephrem's other ascetical writings. Although we will consider the entire collection now known as the *Hymns on the Nativity*, the argument of the dissertation will begin with the original collection of hymns known to antiquity as "Hymns on the Nativity." This collection is a natural place to begin because it is self-contained and so shows continuity of theme and theology, but they also focus on Mary. By beginning with these hymns, we can establish a base reading of Ephrem's Mariology and use that reading to examine additional instances of Ephrem's use of Marian imagery and to consider how that imagery influences or reflects his larger theological perspective. The dissertation will also examine other collections of Nativity hymns, especially those known as Hymn 21 – 27 of the *Hymns on the Nativity*, which I

have labeled “On the Incarnation.” This collection is related to the original collection of “Hymns on the Nativity” only by theme and the judgment of a later editor. However, as we shall see, they also represent many of the same themes as the larger collection and so shed light on this project. It should also be noted that although the primary focus of this dissertation is on the nativity hymn collections, we will also give extensive consideration to hymns from the collection known as *The Hymns on Virginit*y. These hymns offer important insight into Ephrem’s ascetical theology generally, and at least part of the reason to consider them is that a number of the hymns from this collection provide Ephrem’s most sustained reflections on Mary and Eve outside of the nativity hymns. Recognizing the thematic connections between a collection of hymns about the nativity of Jesus and a collection of hymns about the celibate life helps us recognize a number of important elements of Ephrem’s thought, particularly the way that he employs his Marian imagery in the service of his ascetical theology. Unfortunately, it is impossible to place any of these hymns in chronological order, which precludes us from tracing lines of development and influence among Ephrem’s treatment of the themes.

I will develop the main argument of this dissertation in four chapters after this initial introductory chapter. Chapter 2 identifies the Eve tradition that forms the backdrop for Ephrem’s development of his Mariology in the *Hymns on the Nativity*. It then turns to the various collections known as the *Hymns on the Nativity* to show how Ephrem develops his Mariology in light of this Eve tradition and in concert with his Syriac tradition, especially Aphrahaat the Persian Sage. This chapter also gives substantial attention to how Ephrem develops his Mariology in the *Hymn on Virginit*y. The reading

of the nativity hymns and the *Hymns on Virginity* that we establish in this chapter will provide the basis for the more synthetic work of the three subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 begins that synthetic work by examining Ephrem's Mariology within the larger context of fourth-century ascetical accounts of "the body." Ephrem's thought, in the context of his Syriac tradition, is compared with his contemporary from the Greek speaking world, Evagrius of Ponticus. Comparing Evagrius and Ephrem is useful because Evagrius is more suspicious of the body and so may be properly called "body denying." This contrasts with Ephrem's more open approach to the body, and the comparison of the two helps us then recognize ways that Ephrem believes that the body itself is an agent and sign of transformation. The final section of this chapter, will argue for one of the fundamental claims of this dissertation, that in the nativity hymns, Mary's fertility provides the basis for understanding the purpose of the ascetical life, namely, to manifest lives of fertility and openness to God.

Chapter 4 turns to Ephrem's treatment of Mary in particular and women in general in the context of fourth-century treatments of women. Here the primary point of comparison is one suggested by Susanna Elm's work on women ascetics in the fourth-century. Elm uses Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* as an important example of a fourth-century theologian using a woman as an ascetic ideal, which provides a good starting point of reflecting on how Ephrem uses Mary as a female ascetic ideal. What we find is that although Ephrem and Gregory are both using a woman as their ideal, their portrayals of these ideal women could not be more different. For Gregory, Macrina becomes an ideal by becoming genderless. Her ascetical practices separate her from the effects of her gender, to the point that she seems to transcend gender altogether and so

anticipate the angelic life. Ephrem, by contrast, embraces Mary's gender and uses her feminine fertility to imagine the ideal ascetic. This chapter also examines how Ephrem treats other Biblical women besides Mary, and we find that his openness to women as moral and ascetical ideals extends beyond Mary, including to women that might otherwise be overlooked or considered to be examples of immoral behavior.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by considering the place of the "single one" in Ephrem's theology. Ephrem's use of "singleness" as an image to describe the life of the ascetic is one of the most well-attested themes in scholarship on Ephrem. The goal of this chapter is to show how Ephrem uses Mary's fertility and chastity, or her "fertile chastity," to describe how the single ascetic can maintain a life of fertility. Unlike previous chapters, the focus of this chapter is largely internal, concentrating on a number of Ephrem's hymns and some additional texts from his Syriac tradition. Although this chapter will consider the ascetical discussions in the *Hymns on the Nativity*, the *Hymns on Virginity* loom large here, and close examination of several of these hymns helps establish the way Ephrem ties together his Mariology with his ascetical theology.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF MARY IN THE *HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY*

The goal of this chapter is to examine the place of Mary in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity* by locating Ephrem's discussion of Mary within the wider context of Jewish and Jewish – Christian discussion of Mary's role in overcoming the "Fall of Eve." My thesis here has two components. First, I want to demonstrate that Ephrem uses Mary in the *Hymns on the Nativity* to show how the Incarnation, and Mary's role in the Incarnation, overcomes the "loss of glory" that some Jewish and Jewish – Christian writers attributed to Eve's transgression. Although it is difficult to trace a direct line from sources such as the *Life of Adam and Eve* to Ephrem, reading Ephrem through that tradition helps illuminate precisely what Ephrem was trying to accomplish in his Mariology: a typology in which Mary stands in contrast to the portrayal of Eve in the earlier tradition.¹ Second, describing the context of Ephrem's

¹ This chapter presents an argument for the presence of what I call an "Eve Tradition" that was available to Ephrem, that had Jewish roots, and that Ephrem utilized in the *Hymns on the Nativity*. It does not require a direct line of transmission between the *Life of Adam and Eve* and Ephrem, though the *Life* offers the clearest expression of that tradition in the relevant sources. For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to note that Ephrem knew of a tradition in which Eve's Fall resulted in the "loss of glory." Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there is ample evidence that Ephrem could have known a tradition with Jewish roots such as the one represented by the *Life of Adam and Eve*. See, for example, Elena Narinskaya, *Ephrem, A 'Jewish' Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions*, *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 7 (Turhout: Breplos, 2010). Narinskaya does not discuss the *Life of Adam and Eve*, but she does note that Ephrem

Mariology presented in the *Hymns on the Nativity* helps us recognize the extent to which that Mariology reflects some of Ephrem's fundamental theological themes, and the other goal of this chapter is establish those themes in ways that will shed light on the broader scope of Ephrem's ascetical theology.

The Fall of Eve in the *Life of Adam and Eve*

We begin with the Eve tradition as represented by the *Life of Adam and Eve*. The textual history and transmission of the *Life* is complicated, and before turning to our examination of Eve's loss of glory, it is necessary to survey that history briefly in order to establish its place in Ephrem's theological tradition. The document has come down in several different versions and translations, the two most important of which are a Greek version, traditionally known as the *Apocalypse of Moses*, and a Latin version commonly known as the *Life of Adam and Eve*. There is a substantial body of scholarship on the *Life*. Two recent and important contributions are Jan Dochhorn: *Die Apokalypse des Mose. Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar* and Johannes Tromp, *Life of Adam and Eve in Greek: A Critical Edition*.² Dochhorn's work is especially

draws on Jewish sources for some Eve material, though in each case the references to Eve are incidental to Ephrem's purpose in the relevant passage and not specifically related to the argument of this dissertation. Narinskaya's work contributes to a growing consensus among scholars that the use of Jewish theological and exegetical sources by early Syriac writers, including Ephrem, is well attested. For additional discussion see Sebastian Brock, "Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979): 212 – 232.

² Jan Dochhorn: *Die Apokalypse des Mose. Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar, Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 106 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2006); Johannes Tromp, *Life of Adam and Eve in Greek: A Critical Edition, Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

important for demonstrating the fundamentally Jewish character of the Greek *Life*, which among other things helps locate the work within a larger Jewish tradition that may also have influenced Ephrem. Tromp, by contrast, accepts with some qualifications a Christian context for the work, though he acknowledges that very little of the material would be out of place in Jewish context.

Tromp has also provided an extensive discussion of the various manuscript traditions, concluding that the primary Greek version represents the oldest known strata of the work, and that the other versions rely on the Greek for their core narrative while also adding new material. This decision reflects a number of judgments, some of which Tromp acknowledges must be made with reservation, since it is impossible to reconstruct definite lines of influence between translations, but it does seem likely that the Greek texts form the archetype for all subsequent version of the *Life*.³

Although these and the other versions share a number of common elements, they also can differ significantly in both content and message.⁴ The presence of these diverse versions raises a number of important questions; two are especially relevant for this dissertation. First, there is no known Syriac version and dating any of the versions proves difficult. It is impossible to determine what version of the *Life* Ephrem would have known if he knew any of them. Although my argument in this chapter does not require literary dependence between Ephrem and any single version

³ See Tromp, *Life of Adam and Eve in Greek*, 96-101.

⁴ See Marinus de Jonge and Johannes Tromp, *The Life of Adam and Eve and Related Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 28-44 for a detailed examination of the content and message of the various versions.

of the *Life*, I will focus my examination of the *Life* on the Greek version on the basic assumption that any version Ephrem might have known would have included the material that is in the Greek. Second, and somewhat more speculatively, the presence of such different material in the various version of the *Life* suggests that there must have been a number of Adam and Eve traditions, and that those traditions were well established enough that subsequent editors and translators of prior versions of the *Life* felt comfortable incorporating that material.⁵ This is important for my argument because one theme that runs throughout the versions, especially the Latin and the Greek, is the idea that Eve's transgression resulted in the loss of her glory. To be sure, the later versions may simply be picking up on something that was in the original, but the later versions expand on this theme and include developments of it that have no antecedent in the original Greek version. In light of that evidence, therefore, I argue that the *Life* in all its versions reflects a well-established, if not mainstream, Jewish – Christian tradition that describes Eve's sin as a loss of her glory. This is the tradition, which he may well have gotten from the *Life* or somewhere else, that Ephrem draws upon to explore the theme of Mary's fertility in the *Hymns on Nativity* and the *Hymns on Faith*.

Unlike some portrayals of Eve's transgression from the era, the writer of the *Life* is careful to include Adam's role in the error, and though Eve is condemned for her failing, she is not condemned as someone who is irredeemably wicked or solely

⁵ For this claim see Dochhorn, *Die Apokalypse*, 3. Dochhorn refers to these Adam and Eve stories as "Adamdiegesen."

responsible for the Fall of humankind.⁶ This situation makes the precise nature of Eve's failure all the more interesting. If Eve did not fail because of, for example, her gender, then what was the source of her error? One important theme that emerges very quickly in the *Life* is that the nature of the transgression was lack of vigilance. As Levison notes, Eve understood herself as capable of—and responsible for—guarding her own portion of the Garden.⁷ This responsibility to be watchful is part of what renders Adam culpable. Both Adam and Eve were responsible for guarding their own part of the Garden, and the *Life* even implies that it was through Adam's unguarded portion of the Garden that the serpent entered. This dimension of the story leaves the impression that both Adam and Eve were ignorant and unheeding of God's commandment. According to Eve's testimony, both she and Adam fell victim to deception because neither of them had taken appropriate measures to defend themselves against the serpent's deception.⁸ Throughout the interchange with the serpent, Eve is afraid. She struggles with discerning what is truly of God, but fails to properly stay alert to the lies of the serpent and so opens herself to the possibility of deception.⁹

⁶ For a full development of this claim, see Vita Daphna Arbel, *Forming Femininity in Antiquity: Eve, Gender, and Ideologies in the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷ Jon Levison, "The Exoneration of Eve in the Apocalypse of Moses 15 – 30," *Journal of the Study of Judaism* 20 (1989): 142.

⁸ See *Life of Adam and Eve* 16:3; 18:1; 21:3.

⁹ Levison, "Exoneration of Eve," 148. The importance of vigilance becomes a key theme in later Syriac asceticism, as we will see in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

The result of Eve's deception is her loss of glory. The writer of the *Life* is very interested in psychological interplay between the serpent and Eve, and one of the reasons for the *Life*'s endurance is the sophistication with which it accounts for the serpent's attempt to win Eve over. The serpent frequently misdirects Eve, for example, telling her not to do something as a way of manipulating her into doing it.¹⁰ Ultimately, however, the serpent plays upon what the writer calls Eve's "desire" (ἐπιθυμία), which manifests itself as a desire for glory (δόξα).¹¹ What happens, though, is that when Eve Falls victim to her lust for glory, she finds not only that she does not receive the prize that the serpent had offered her, but that she has lost her own glory as well.¹² That "glory" had at least two dimensions. The first and most important was "righteousness" (δικαιωσύνη), which vanished from Eve as soon as she ate from the fruit.¹³ The second is related to her loss of righteousness, but is more visceral: Eve lost her innocence and became aware of her nakedness.¹⁴ The sexual overtones here remain more implied than explicit, but there is a suggestion that in losing her glory Eve lost her chastity, a theme that will become more overt in the Syriac tradition.

The later Latin version of the *Life* also contains the idea that in the Fall Eve lost her glory. The Latin, however, explores the loss of glory motif in a much

¹⁰ *Life of Adam and Eve* 18.5; Tromp, 140.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Life of Adam and Eve* 20.2; Tromp, 144.

¹³ *Life of Adam and Eve*, 20.1; Tromp, 144.

¹⁴ *Life of Adam and Eve*, 20.3; Tromp, 144.

different way than we saw in the Greek version.¹⁵ The Latin *Life* opens with Adam and Eve having been sent forth from the Garden and mourning for a period of seven days.¹⁶ Once this period of penitence has passed, both Adam and Eve rise to look for food because they are experiencing hunger pangs.¹⁷ Their hunger, which they had not experienced in paradise, causes them great fear, and they begin to think that they are going to die.¹⁸ Eve is so distraught when they cannot find proper food that she begs Adam to kill her, so that he can return to paradise, since she was the one who had introduced condemnation to them both.¹⁹ Adam chastises Eve for this suggestion, and instead insists that they both begin a vigorous penitential routine so that God will have mercy on them.²⁰ Adam instructs Eve to spend thirty-four days in the Tigris River, and he exhorts her to be silent, because her lips have been made unclean by the

¹⁵ There is no Latin equivalent to the Greek description of Eve's temptation that we just discussed in the Greek, and there is no Greek equivalent to the glory material in the Latin. For comparison, see Gary A. Anderson and Michael E. Stone, eds., *A Synopsis of the Books of Adam and Eve*, SBL Early Judaism and its Literature Series 17 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1999), 58E.

¹⁶ *Life of Adam and Eve* 1.1. Text in *Synopsis*, 2. An additional critical edition of the Latin text is now available as Jean-Pierre Pettoirelli, ed., *Vita latina Adae et Evae*, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 18 (Turnhout: Brepols 2012).

¹⁷ *Life of Adam and Eve* 2.1; *Synopsis*, 2.

¹⁸ *Life of Adam and Eve* 3.1-2; *Synopsis*, 3.

¹⁹ *Life of Adam and Eve* 3.2; *Synopsis*, 4. As Gary Anderson notes, there is a difference between this story of Eve's penance and the similar story about Adam doing penance in the river. In the later story, Adam is unaffected by this penance, but it affects Eve physically. Anderson agrees that this may be a sign of the *Life's* emphasis on Eve's deeper culpability. Gary A. Anderson, "The Penitence Narrative in the *Life of Adam and Eve*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 64 (1993): 9.

²⁰ *Life of Adam and Eve* 4.3; *Synopsis*, 5.

forbidden tree. Adam himself vows to mourn in the Jordan River for forty days.²¹ After eighteen days has passed, Satan approaches Eve in the guise of an angel and once again deceives her. He convinces her to cease her penance prematurely.²² Eve then emerges from the water and, with Satan, goes to Adam. When Adam sees her with Satan, he at once recognizes what has happened, and he agonizes at the loss of her penance.²³ Eve then recognizes what she has done and begins to grieve for her second deception, wondering out loud why Satan wishes them such calamity, especially since they had done nothing to injure Satan, not even by taking his glory (*gloria*) from him.²⁴ Satan explains that his own Fall was Adam's fault because he (Satan) had been expelled from heaven for refusing to bow down to the "image of God," that is, Adam himself, and that his exile had resulted in the loss of his glory.²⁵ Because Satan had lost his own glory on account of Adam, he made it his mission to assail Adam and Eve so that they would lose the "delights" (*delicia*) of their "happiness" (*laetitia*).²⁶ The story ends with Adam crying out to God that God would give Satan's glory to Adam.²⁷

²¹ *Life of Adam and Eve* 6.1-2; *Synopsis*, 9.

²² *Life of Adam and Eve* 9.1- 10.1; *Synopsis*, 11-12.

²³ *Life of Adam and Eve* 10.3; *Synopsis*, 13.

²⁴ *Life of Adam and Eve* 11. 3; *Synopsis*, 14.

²⁵ *Life of Adam and Eve* 12.3; *Synopsis*, 15.

²⁶ *Life of Adam and Eve* 16.3; *Synopsis*, 18.

²⁷ *Life of Adam and Eve* 17.1; *Synopsis*, 18. The Latin is the only version where Adam explicitly calls for God to give Adam Satan's "glory."

The Latin writer seems to be using *gloria* and *laetitia* as synonyms, so that the effect of the exchange between Satan and Adam is to confirm that Satan wants to take away Adam and Eve's glory in revenge for the loss of his own. The entire story has a number of interesting elements, especially in comparison with the Greek *Life*. The account of the Fall is different. Although Eve is deceived in both, Satan's motivation is different, so much so that in the Latin version he emerges as a sympathetic character, at least to some degree. Likewise, the account of what glory entails is different. Whereas in the Greek version glory has an explicit moral component, in the Latin it has more to do with something related to being in God's presence; in the Latin, *gloria* is a tangible entity that can be lost and restored by virtue of one's proximity to God.²⁸ However, what the two accounts share is a common sense that glory is what Eve lost, which means that glory is what needs to be restored. This common emphasis on glory in the two otherwise different accounts of Eve's Fall suggests the presence of a particular tradition that described the Fall and Eve's role within it as a larger account of glory and its loss.

Returning to the Greek version, we can now see that Eve's loss of her glory highlights the character of Eve's transgression; it was a choice between two apparent goods. She does not choose against God, but she seeks what is like God. The process of the deception presented in Eve's testament demonstrates that Eve's lack of attentiveness, along with Adam's lack of attentiveness, was the cause of her loss of

²⁸ So, for example, when Eve asked Adam to kill her, she makes the request in the hope that God would then allow Adam to return to paradise (*paradisio*). See *Synopsis*, 4.

God's commandment.²⁹ Likewise the cunning of the serpent is revealed as he persuades Eve to “fear not” (μὴ φοβοῦ) and put aside her fear of God.³⁰ Her dilemma, demonstrated in her initial resistance (and Adam's to her offering of the fruit to him), is identifiable. Eve acknowledges that it was her own lack of watchfulness that binds Adam to the same fate of death. Knowingly, and yet without seeming to have the ability to stop herself, Eve becomes the Devil's minister to invite Adam to eat of the fruit.³¹ The loss of glory of Adam and Eve is directly correlated to the complexity of the deception itself.³² Likewise, and most importantly for our exploration, Eve's loss of glory has consequences beyond her own circumstances. One of the most important themes in the Greek *Life* is the far – reaching effects of Eve's loss of glory. In 11:1-2, for example, Eve is confronted by a beast who responds to her admonishment for its lack of subjection to Seth and herself. The beast first chastises Eve for worrying about them when she is at fault. He then claims that the natural order has been overturned, so that “the rule of beasts” (ἀρχὴ τῶν θηρίων) has superseded the rule of humans, and that because of Eve's transgression, everyone's “nature has been transformed” (φύσεις μετηλλάγησαν).³³ Not only was Adam and Eve's glory lost by lack of vigilance, but all the created were and are vulnerable, which in turn results in the creatures' loss of their own nature.

²⁹ See *Life of Adam and Eve* 15-21, especially 16:4, 18:2, 21:4.

³⁰ See *Life of Adam and Eve* 16:5, 18:3-4, 21:4.

³¹ *Life of Adam and Eve* 21.3; Tromp, 146.

³² *Life of Adam and Eve* 20:1-2, 21:6, 21:2; Tromp, 144-6.

³³ *Life of Adam and Eve* 11.1 – 2; Tromp, 132.

Three key themes emerge from this part of the Greek account of Eve's story. First, it subtly exonerates Eve from sole culpability for the primeval transgression. Adam is equally culpable, and there is a sense that Eve struggled to do the right thing and simply lacked the capacity to do so. Second, it underscores the instructive motif of Eve's testimony. One must practice vigilance, even in the Garden, and this practice of vigilance is one's adherence to or trust in the commandments of God. This is a motif that will have a deep resonance in later Syriac asceticism, including Ephrem's.³⁴ Third, it demonstrates the nature of sin as universal. The result of the primeval transgression and all transgressions is the loss of humanity's glory.

The Eve Tradition in Aphrahat

According to the *Life of Adam and Eve*, therefore, Eve's Fall brought about a loss of glory, a loss that was the result of a bad choice on her part, and that had disastrous consequences for her body. We can best set the stage for Ephrem's use of Mary by first turning to his Syriac predecessor, Aphrahat the Persian Sage.³⁵

³⁴ See Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 140.

³⁵ The question of Ephrem's sources remains an important consideration for scholars of Ephrem's theology. Ephrem certainly sees himself as working within an established tradition, but outside of some obvious candidates, it is difficult to determine with precision precisely who or what belongs to that tradition. We have already discussed the possibility of Jewish or Jewish-Christian influences on Ephrem's thought. Within the context of Syriac Christianity, the *Odes of Solomon* and Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* emerge as important sources for Ephrem. The influence of other early Syriac texts, such as the third-century *Acts of Thomas*, is much more difficult to ascertain. For a discussion of the various texts that arise out of this tradition, see Sebastian P. Brock, "The Earliest Syriac Literature," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. F. Young, L. Ayres, A. Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161-72. For the *Odes of Solomon*'s influence on Ephrem's theology, see M. Lattke, "Salomo-Ode 13 im Spiegel-Bild der Werke von Ephraem Syrus," *Le Muséon* 102 (1989): 255-266.

Aphrahat is important not only for his place in Syriac ascetical tradition, but because he offers an important test case for examining Ephrem's development of the Eve tradition. As we will see, Aphrahat's treatment of Eve's role in the Fall is different than that presented by the *Life of Adam and Eve* and ultimately adopted by Ephrem. Thus, although Aphrahat was an important source for Ephrem's ascetical theology generally, he does not witness to Ephrem's views about Eve.³⁶

For Aphrahat, the monk is the "single one," (ܐܘܢܐܢܐ) whose life is marked by the angelic qualities of vigilance and purity.³⁷ Along with most Syriac ascetical writers, Aphrahat extends his understanding of purity to include virginity; the "single one" is always a "virgin" (ܐܘܢܐܢܐ ܘܘܪܘܝܢܐ). Aphrahat recognizes that marriage is lawful, but in a move that becomes commonplace in Syriac thought, he elevates virginity to a

³⁶ It may be, in fact, that Aphrahat's theology belongs more in a tradition that emphasized *Adam's* loss of glory. The identification of such a tradition is tentative, but it is suggestive, because it contrasts Aphrahat and Ephrem—the former emphasizing Adam while the latter Eve—while highlighting their common emphasis on the loss and regaining of the glory. For an initial attempt to describe this Adam-glory tradition, see Alexander Golitzin, "Recovering the 'Glory of Adam: 'Divine Light' Traditions in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Ascetical Literature of Fourth-Century Syro-Mesopotamia," unpublished paper given at the International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls, St. Andrews Scotland, June 18, 2001 and John R. Levison, "Adam and Eve in Romans 1.18-25 and the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*," *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004): 529-534.

³⁷ As Sidney Griffith has shown, Aphrahat's *Demonstration 6* is the single text for "our knowledge of the institutions of asceticism in the Syriac-speaking world in the fourth century." Accordingly, it has attracted significant scholarly attention. For this and discussion of those institutions, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Monks, 'Singles' and the 'Sons of the Covenant: Reflections on Syriac Ascetic Terminology," in *Eulogema: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft*, ed. Ephrem Carr (Rome: 1993): 141-160. We will discuss the place of the "single ones" in Ephrem's system below; see Chapter 5.

more exalted status.³⁸ As Robert Murray has shown, Aphrahat describes the “single ones” in three ways.³⁹ First, the single one represents the purity of both the unmarried state and the departure of the ascetic from family. As is typical in fourth-century asceticism, the monk must turn his or her back on the world and become married to Christ.⁴⁰ Second, Aphrahat uses the doctrine of singleness to emphasize the single-mindedness of the ascetic, especially with regard to the moral life. He consistently urges his readers to be vigilant, especially by engaging in ascetical practices that keep them focused on Christ and turned away from the world.⁴¹ Third, and perhaps most importantly, Aphrahat emphasizes the unique relationship that the “single one” shares with the *Ihîdāyâ*, Christ himself. By engaging in a life of singleness, Aphrahat believes that the monk is engaging in the most perfect imitation of Christ, and throughout his writing he uses the language of “putting on” (ܦܘܬܘܢܐ) the new garments that the Word makes available to those who imitate him; just as Christ “put on” humanity, so does the ascetic “put on” Christ.⁴²

³⁸ As Shafiq Abouzayd argues, virginity as a dedicated, or institutionalized, way of life is not apparent prior to Aphrahat, for whom, by contrast, it becomes a centerpiece of Christian asceticism. See Shafiq Abouzayd, “Virginity in Aphrahat,” in *V Symposium Syriacum, 1988: Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 29-31 août 1988*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 236, ed. R. Lavenant (Roma: 1990): 123-133.

³⁹ Murray, *Symbols*, 15. Murray here presents the three descriptions of the single ones in Syriac theology in general. I will here flesh this out with reference to Aphrahat.

⁴⁰ See *Demonstration* 6.9; Syriac text in J. Parisot, *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae*, in *Patrologia Syriaca* vols. 1–2, ed. R. Graffin (Paris: 1894), col 276 – 8.

⁴¹ See *Demonstration* 6.2; Parisot, col. 256.

⁴² *Demonstration* 6.18; Parisot, col. 305 - 9. For the importance of this language in Syriac theology generally, see Sebastian Brock’s seminal essay,

These themes pervade Syriac ascetical theology, and we will return to additional ways in which Ephrem employs them in Chapter Five. For now we will concentrate on how Aphrahat uses the Adam and Eve story to account for the human Fall. Aphrahat is explicit in his use of Adam and, especially, Eve motifs to describe the problem that asceticism overcomes. Aphrahat accuses Eve of being the means by which the serpent gained access to Adam, and he uses that accusation to warn his male ascetics (who were Aphrahat's primary audience) about contact with women, lest they too be inflamed with the "desire of Eve" (ܠܘܫܐܢܐ ܠܗܘܐ ܝܘܢܐ).⁴³ He goes on to call Eve a "weapon" (ܠܘܫܐܢܐ) of Satan, not only one that Satan used at creation but one

"Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter*, ed. M. Schmidt (Eichstatt, 1981), 11-40. As Brock shows, the language of "putting on" is one instance of an image that pervades a large cross section of early Syriac literature, especially Aphrahat and Ephrem. This is significant for our purposes, because, again as Brock notes, the "putting on" was often attached to the drama of the Fall and the restoration of humanity through the Incarnation, Baptism and Resurrection. (Brock quotes approvingly E. Peterson's argument that these images point us towards the problem of "Metaphysik und der Theologie," more than just morality—or, I would add, typology. See "Clothing Metaphors," p. 23.) The only thing that Brock does not discuss is the role of Eve and Mary in losing and recovering, i.e. taking off and putting back on, the robe of glory. One of the primary arguments of this dissertation is that Ephrem believes that Mary's role in restoring—putting on—the glory is central to the economy of salvation. Following Brock, we can say that one indication of how central Mary is to Ephrem's theology of salvation is the extent to which he applies the clothing imagery to her roles in the salvific drama. For a discussion of the imagery that relates it to the development of religious symbolism in the near eastern context, see Christopher Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 100 – 103. Buck notes, helpfully, that Ephrem uses clothing metaphors, especially the "robe of glory" image to encompass all four stages of the salvation-historical drama, including the primordial state of glory, the loss of that glory in the Fall, the Incarnation which returns the glory to earth, and the "re-investiture" of that glory at Baptism and the Resurrection (102).

⁴³ *Demonstration* 6.2; Parisot, col. 256, (line 22).

he continues to employ and who will help usher in the end times.⁴⁴ In *Demonstration* 6.3 he lists a number of Biblical figures who fell from grace “through Eve” (ܠܥܘܘܘܢ).⁴⁵ Aphrahat quickly makes it clear that by “though Eve” he really means “through the agency of women,” because after noting that Adam was tricked “though Eve,” Aphrahat then lists stories from the Bible in which a woman had some role in causing a man to stumble. His implication is clear: the greatest threat to the ascetical life is the agency of women who emulate their forerunner, Eve.

Aphrahat then implies the immediate objects of his frustration are male ascetics who have taken in women who are also practicing asceticism. In this circumstance, he suggests, it would be best simply to marry and not be tempted.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, his treatment of women here is unsparing of all women: she who does not pursue chastity is a “daughter of Eve” (ܠܥܘܘܘܢ ܕܥܘܘܘܢ), and there are several moments, especially *Demonstration* 6.6 where he calls out women in general for their perfidy, going so far as to expand the curse of women from pain in childbirth to childbirth itself.⁴⁷ The problem of women is not just that they suffer in the experience

⁴⁴ *Demonstration* 6.6; Parisot, col. 266, (line 6).

⁴⁵ *Demonstration* 6.3; Parisot, col. 256, (line 23-4).

⁴⁶ *Demonstration* 6.4; Parisot, col. 260.

⁴⁷ See *Demonstration* 6.6; Parisot, col. 269, (lines 17-19). Aphrahat does not make this claim explicitly, but it becomes apparent within the overall structure of his argument. He begins the chapter by noting that women bear the brunt of the curse that followed Adam and Eve’s exile from the garden, especially the pain of childbirth. He ends the chapter claiming that because the virgins do not “bear children” (ܠܥܘܘܘܢ ܕܥܘܘܘܢ), they will enter heaven. There is an allusion here to Isaiah 56.5, which in context is about eunuchs receiving the blessing of children. This context would not be lost on Aphrahat, who is advocating a vision of the Resurrection in which gender and sex play no role and everyone receives the blessings of generation without the fertility.

of their fertility, but their fertility itself is a sign of the Fall. To be sure, there is no point in the *Demonstrations* where Aphrahat shies away from criticizing the ascetical practices of male ascetics, and there are moments when it is possible that he is using the female imagery as a cipher for the human condition in general. Near the end of *Demonstration* 6.6 he cites Galatians 3.28 to remind his readers that in the Resurrection there will be neither male nor female, and his exhortations to male and female ascetics are notably similar.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Aphrahat is ultimately suspicious of the role of women in the ascetical life, especially of how they continue to model the example set by Eve herself.

Aphrahat contrasts the experience of the daughters of Eve with that of the offspring of Mary, whose Son's coming signals the overcoming of the curse of Eve. Aphrahat describes this new life by referring to the parable of the virgins and the lamps. This was a favorite passage for Syriac ascetical writers, and we will return to it again when we examine Ephrem's ascetical writing. For Aphrahat, the parable describes the entrance into the bridal chamber of Christ, which he takes as a symbol of the resurrected life itself. In that new life, everything that belonged to the curse is replaced by its opposite or transformed into something permanent and real. There will be no death, no childbearing, and no corruption and pain. The ascetic, through the agency of Christ, overcomes the agency of Eve and so is removed from the curse.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Demonstration* 6.6; Parisot, col. 268.

⁴⁹ *Demonstration* 6.6; Parisot, 269.

As we will see, a number of the themes that Aphrahat presents in these passages will reemerge in Ephrem, especially his emphasis on being single-minded and watchful, and his exegesis of the parable of the virgins and the lamps. What Aphrahat does not do is discuss Mary beyond her role in bringing Christ into the world. For Aphrahat, the solution to the human problem is Christ, and he continually urges his ascetics to follow the example of Christ, the Single One, whose coming is what spells the end to Eve's curse. To be sure, Aphrahat offers some tantalizing hints at the importance that Mary will play in Ephrem's theology, but those hints are just that. Ultimately, for Aphrahat, as for early Christian ascetical writings in general, Adam is the one who lost the glory, not Eve, and it does not seem that Ephrem found in Aphrahat an antecedent for his own treatment of Eve. Likewise, nowhere in Aphrahat or the rest of Syriac tradition do we find the emphasis on Mary's role in overcoming that Fall that forms such an important part of Ephrem's theology.⁵⁰ Accordingly, we turn to Ephrem's account of Mary.

Ephrem, Mary and Eve

One entry point into Ephrem's treatment of Mary is a theme in his thought that Sebastian Brock has called, "conception by ear." In *Hymns on the Church* 49.7,

⁵⁰ As we have just seen, Aphrahat has relatively little to say about Mary, and what he does say is conventional. (Also see Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve," 374.) Another possible source is the *Odes of Solomon*. As we will see, the *Odes* provide some additional background for the "putting on" language that is so important to Ephrem's ascetical theology. Although this motif influences Ephrem's discussion of Mary, especially in the connection between putting on Christ and bodily incorruption, the *Odes* say almost nothing about Mary and certainly do not apply this language to Mary. Their ultimate usefulness as background to Ephrem's Mariology proper is somewhat limited.

Ephrem refers to Eve's ear, which the serpent used to seduce her, as a womb. Through that womb, he claims, death was allowed to enter the world. He contrasts this ear with Mary's ear, which becomes the source of life.⁵¹ This image of conception becomes one of Ephrem's most important themes, especially in the *Hymns on the Nativity* and the *Hymns on Virginity*. It serves a number of purposes in his poetry. He uses it to establish a contrast with Eve, which further allows him to describe the effects of the Incarnation as overcoming Eve's loss of glory. As I will argue below, Christ's restoration of the glory that Eve lost is one of the central themes in both the *Hymns on the Nativity* and the *Hymns on Virginity*. However, Ephrem also uses the theme of conception to establish a constructive vision of what Mary's conception means, both for the Incarnation and for the ascetical life. Indeed, Mary's fertility, which is signaled by her conception of Christ, becomes the paradigm for understanding the scope of the ascetical life as a whole: Mary's conception overcomes the effects of Eve's conception, not just by being the means by which Christ enters the world, but also by helping ascetics recognize that fertility is the mark of true asceticism.

Ephrem and Mary in Overview

We begin our discussion of how Ephrem develops this theme of Mary's "conception," or fertility, by examining two aspects of that theme. The first way that Ephrem develops the theme of Mary's fertility is by using it to highlight the importance of the body in the ascetical life and the process of salvation. Thus in the

⁵¹ *Hymns on the Church* 49.7; CSCO 198, 117; ET in Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 19.

Hymns on Paradise 8.5 Ephrem declares that a soul cannot enter Paradise without the body. For Ephrem, the union of the body and the soul is substantive and organic to humanity's paradisaic form. Indeed, the effect of the body upon the soul and the effect of the soul on the body underscore this union: without a soul, he suggests, the body has no true "existence" (ἔσθῆ).⁵² The language and imagery of pregnancy and fertility here is substantial to Ephrem's argument, and it draws forth the image of a mother's body and that of the child. Ephrem will go on to describe how this "embryo-soul" is feeble apart from the body, and how to the outside world it is yet to be known.⁵³ It is only because of body that the soul knows itself, and through its senses makes the embryo-soul present in the world.⁵⁴

Thus, the body is necessary as part of the soul's maturation. However, it is equally certain to Ephrem that the body is also in need of transformation, for it is weak and subject to corruption.⁵⁵ It is in this regard that Ephrem invokes Mary's pregnancy as an illustration of this bodily transformation. In one of his *Hymns on the Church*, Ephrem claims that Mary's body gleamed while Christ was in her womb.⁵⁶ This image of Mary's body gleaming from within is multi-faceted. On one hand, it is an indication of the divine Son who gestates within her womb. On the other hand, Mary's body itself is transformed by her pregnancy. Mary arrives physically (and

⁵² *Hymns on Paradise* 8.5; CSCO 174, 34.

⁵³ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.6; CSCO 174, 26.

⁵⁴ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.7; CSCO 174, 26.

⁵⁵ *Hymns on the Church* 36.13; CSCO 198, 93.

⁵⁶ *Hymns on the Church* 36:6; CSCO 198, 92.

spiritually) at what the rest of humanity will experience through her Son. Moses' radiance was only external, but like Christ's baptized body, Mary's glows from within. Later on in this hymn, Ephrem will claim that the body of Mary is not simply returned to Paradise, but is restored, even elevated by the Son's glory.⁵⁷ And towards the end of this hymn, Mary's state evokes from Ephrem an awareness of his own body's state, including its obvious inability to sustain itself in times of sickness.⁵⁸ He desires the same radiant garments which Mary has brought forth and received herself; garments that reflect the outward change of the body to its glorified state.

Thus, the bodily formation of Christ's person in Mary's womb underscores the capacity of humanity to participate in the divine life. Ephrem acknowledges Mary's fecundity in her free ascent to the Word and the opening of herself, bodily, to the Son, and by doing so he tries to capture the intimacy of birth, how a mother and child, through the sharing of their natures, demonstrate human capacity for holiness and glory. Both Eve and Mary experience the physical reality of pregnancy; yet each woman's experience in Ephrem's theology draws a powerful portrait of life without God and life within God. In contrast to Eve's failed "pregnancies," which brought shame to creation, Mary's pregnancy transforms humanity now the Word has become Flesh. Through Mary's action, the mother of all living can now return to the Garden.⁵⁹ In this way, then, Mary provides a concrete example of what humanity's participation in the divine life will resemble.

⁵⁷ *Hymns on the Church* 36:1; CSCO 198, 91.

⁵⁸ *Hymns on the Church* 36: 13; CSCO 198, 93.

⁵⁹ *Hymns on Paradise* 4.5; CSCO 174, 11.

In addition to highlighting the importance of the body, Ephrem's images of conception and pregnancy also illustrate how salvation is a free response on the part of the one receiving it. Mary's free choice is especially important to Ephrem, because it replaces that same freedom Eve relinquished. Eve, in whose ears the serpent poured his venom so that she lost her glory, chose by listening to the serpent, death. Eve's shame corresponds to Ephrem's understanding of humanity's own shame and loss of freedom. All of humanity covers itself in false and stained garments, awaiting the transformation and the robe of glory.⁶⁰ In almost every aspect, this description of paradise in this passage reverses the effects of Eve's transgression, including the loss of glory. For Ephrem, Eve, in her industry, has brought forth a curse upon humanity. Her own pregnancies are filled with the pain and bear her children only for them to be buried.⁶¹ The burial at birth is the primary signifier of humanity's loss of freedom in Ephrem. Again in *Hymns on Paradise* 6:8-9, Ephrem laments humankind seeks his neighbor as his god and seeks, therefore, to please this god. In doing so, Ephrem notes how humanity expends its freedom in exchange for slavery. The original freedom of Paradise has been exchanged for slavery as Eve sought to please another besides God.⁶² It is this very condition of Eve that all of humanity inherits.

A similar picture of Eve's Fall emerges in Ephrem's prose commentary on Genesis. Ephrem begins his comments on the Fall narrative by noting that Adam and

⁶⁰ *Hymns on Paradise* 4.5; CSCO 174, 11.

⁶¹ *Hymns on Paradise* 7:8; CSCO 174, 27.

⁶² *Hymns on Paradise* 6:8-9; CSCO 174, 22.

Eve only felt shame after their glory was taken away from them.⁶³ In Ephrem's telling of Eve's Fall, Eve is enticed by the serpent's promise that if she ate from the tree, she would receive "divinity" (ܠܗܘܬܐܢܘܬܐ), and the tragedy of the story is that after eating, she did not receive that reward, nor did she enter paradise as she expected.⁶⁴

However, Ephrem's primary interest in this section is not so much in Eve's deception or in the effects of the Fall, though he does describe those effects by relying heavily on the Biblical narrative.⁶⁵ Instead, Ephrem is concerned about both Adam and Eve's lack of repentance for their actions.⁶⁶ His comments really depart from the Biblical narrative only when he describes moments where, had either Adam or Eve repented, God would have been able to ameliorate the effects of their transgression. At several pauses in the story, Ephrem opines that they each had a chance to repent, and that had they done so, they would not necessarily have moved back to their original condition, but they would not have received further punishment.⁶⁷ At no point in this commentary does Ephrem look forward to Mary, nor does he describe Eve's failure using fertility language, although the reference to Eve's failure to attain divinity does

⁶³ *In Genesim commentarii* II. 14; CSCO 152, 35.

⁶⁴ *In Genesim commentarii* II. 21; CSCO 152, 38.

⁶⁵ *In Genesim commentarii* II. 30-31; CSCO 152, 43-44.

⁶⁶ It is possible that Ephrem's emphasis on penitence in this commentary arises from the influence of traditions represented by the *Life of Adam and Eve*, where penance, and Adam's and especially Eve's refusal to perform it, plays a significance role. For full discussion of that theme in the *Life*, see Anderson, "Penitence," 1-38. For the importance of penitence in Ephrem's theology generally, see Mathew Paikatt, "Repentance and Penitence in Mar Aprem of Nisibis," *Christian Orient* 12 (1991): 135-146.

⁶⁷ *In Genesim commentarii* II. 23; CSCO 152, 39.

point towards the imagery he employs in the hymns. None of Ephrem's prose works contain the same approach to Eve and Mary as we find in the *Hymns on the Nativity* collections. Indeed, outside of the examples in the *Hymns on the Church* and the *Hymns on Paradise* we have just discussed, the only place where Ephrem develops this Mariology is in the *Hymns on the Nativity* and in selected *Hymns on Virginity*. It is to these Hymns that we now turn.

Portraying Mary in the Hymns on the Nativity

We begin with Hymn 17, which is from the original collection known as “Hymns on the Nativity,” where Ephrem explicitly connects the differing choices of Eve and her daughter, Mary, contrasting Eve's “leaves of shame” (ܠܘܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ) with Mary's “robe of glory” (ܠܘܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ).⁶⁸ The comparison between Eve and Mary is not simply the results of their actions, but it expresses their individual and personal participation in the events. Both Mary and Eve “put on” (ܦܘܬܘܢ) their respective garments and likewise have, by their respective actions, affected great change in humanity. Yet the universal effect of these women's actions does not diminish their personal nature. Eve and Mary stand as real and distinct persons in relation to God. The context of those particular relationships, for Ephrem, provides a vision for every ascetic's relationship to God. The ideal of these two personal examples, of course, is Mary. For unlike her mother Eve, Mary, by the giving forth of her body, has brought forth Life. By her assent, Mary exchanges slavery for freedom, first for herself, and then for all Christians. As Ephrem continues in this

⁶⁸ *Hymns on Nativity* 17.4; CSCO 186, 87; ET in McVey, 154.

same hymn, Mary has freed herself from all earthly concerns, including “household” (ܠܗܘܣܘܬܐ) and “husband” (ܠܘܘܬܐ).⁶⁹ Such freedom is not Mary’s alone, which is great cause of praise for Ephrem. The very robe that adorns Mary is one that adorns all of humanity. Mary ensures that Jesus is the God Incarnate who has come into the world. She provides a concrete moment, by her real self, at which Christ enters into history, thereby reversing the choice of Eve. Mary is the first to experience the reality of transformation by Christ in the world and is the first to be brought into the freedom of God. Thus, Mary’s original act of freedom provides the means of her own transformation, and through her act, the means of transformation for all of humanity in the person of Christ.⁷⁰

Ephrem thus uses the contrast between Mary and Eve’s virginal states to describe the salvific effect of Mary’s virginity. By virtue of her true openness to Christ, Mary enters into life with Christ, whom she describes as our “bridal chamber” (ܠܘܘܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ).⁷¹ This is the second theme that shows how Mary’s fertility overcomes Eve’s Fall. For Ephrem, the historical reality of Mary’s sacred marriage consummated in the bridal chamber is also a model for how the body of the ascetic serves as a bridal chamber. In this ascetical vision, the body, as bridal chamber, is where the soul meets the Christ. The vision is explicit in its shift from the external

⁶⁹ *Hymns on Nativity* 17:5; CSCO 186, 88. Also see 17.10; CSCO 186, 89.

⁷⁰ See *Hymns on Nativity* 17.11; CSCO 186, 89.

⁷¹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 17. 6; CSCO 186, 88. For a detailed discussion of Ephrem’s use of the bridal chamber imagery, see Brock, *Luminous Eye*, pp. 125- 40.

imagery to its interior imagery. The heart of the human is the very center of the human person.

Blessed is the woman in whose heart
and mind you are. She is the King's castle
for You, the King's Son, and the Holy of Holies. . . .⁷²

ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ

Through Mary's example, the heart (ܩܘܕܫܬܐ) of the chaste woman is now the dwelling place of Christ and the model of the ascetic for his or her own experience.

Ephrem's emphasis on the correlation between Mary's "heart" and her role in overcoming Eve's Fall also appears in the small collection of hymns concerned with Jesus' status as the Messiah. In *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.111, Ephrem presents a vivid image in which the Evil One uses Eve to pluck out the heart of Adam.⁷³ Eve's sin resulted in the loss of "heart," which Mary then restores through her chastity. In the lines following these, Ephrem describes the "winter that made the earth barren" (ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ)⁷⁴ All has been made infertile in the Fall. By contrast, Ephrem describes Mary as the "rib" (ܩܘܕܫܬܐ) from which "the hidden Power" (ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ) that strikes down Satan shines forth.⁷⁵ This contrasts with Eve,

⁷² *Hymns on the Nativity* 17.5; CSCO 186, 87; ET in McVey, 154-55.

⁷³ *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.111; CSCO 186, 35.

⁷⁴ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.121; CSCO 186, 98.

⁷⁵ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.112; CSCO 186, 35.

who was the “rib plucked out of Adam” (ܘܢܐܪ ܥܘܢܐ ܕܐܕܡ ܕܠܥܘܒܐ).⁷⁶ Mary has recovered what was lost by making herself an appropriate vessel. Mary, then, becomes the ideal model for kind of relationship the individual human and God shares. The language of fertility is central to Ephrem’s description in these hymns of how Mary overcomes Eve’s Fall. For both Mary and Eve, the relationship with God is reflected in their respective fecundity. Mary fulfills her potential where Eve fails. Thus, for Ephrem the fertility of the ascetic should reflect Mary’s fertility as opposed to that of Eve’s. In Mary’s womb dwells the Son who was “opening graves” (ܘܕܥܘܒܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ) and “opening wombs” (ܘܕܥܘܒܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ).⁷⁷ Through the juxtaposition of Mary and Eve, specifically on the subject of their fertility, Ephrem is able to show that Mary can give birth to the one who will gladden all of creation.”⁷⁸

Portraying Mary in the Hymns on Virginity

Many of the themes the Ephrem deploys in the four collections from the *Hymns on the Nativity* reappear in the *Hymns on Virginity*, and drawing a comparison between the two offers a useful way of illustrating the basic trend of Ephrem’s Mariology. Hymn 17 of the *Hymns on Virginity* contains the most explicit reference to Eve, and so is a good beginning place to examine the way that he works out his vision of Mary in contrast to Eve. Ephrem opens the hymn, somewhat unexpectedly, with the Biblical story of the destruction of the city of Shechem and the rape of

⁷⁶ *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.111. CSCO 186, 35.

⁷⁷ *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.171. CSCO 186, 41. Ephrem is using ܘܕܥܘܒܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ and ܘܕܥܘܒܐ ܕܥܘܒܐ as synonyms, which is consistent with his imagery in these hymns.

⁷⁸ *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.120. CSCO 186, 37.

Dinah, but he is interested in the Dinah story primarily because he sees in it an allusion to Eve's Fall. He likens Shechem's destruction to that of creation, which is destroyed through Eve's transgression. In both instances, the earth becomes a grave, infertile and filled with corpses.⁷⁹ Likewise, Ephrem compares Dinah and Eve, so that the disgrace of each woman signals the Fall of all of creation.⁸⁰ The rape of Dinah and the deception of Eve by the serpent occasion the individual loss for each woman of her fertility.

Thus, and this is Ephrem's point in the hymn, although the city fell because of a woman, it was also "resuscitated" (أُحْيِيَ) by a woman.⁸¹ Ephrem's reference is to Mary, but he also makes it clear that there is a strong Christological basis to his Mariology. Instead of invoking Mary directly, Ephrem describes the graves of men as transformed by the Son, who visits their graves, entering into the destruction to retrieve the treasure. Ephrem applies this image to the male biblical figures, who in their graves, are visited by the Christ and restored like the land that holds their bones.⁸² The individual figures of Joseph, Joshua, and Eleazar bear witness from the graveside of this revival in creation. This turn to male imagery should not overshadow the importance of Ephrem's female imagery, however. Within the

⁷⁹ *Hymn on Virginity* 17.1-2; CSCO 223, 334.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Hymns on Virginity* 17.1; CSCO 223, 334. McVey, 334, identifies this woman as the woman at the well from John 4.1-42. However, because of the contrast with Eve, a more natural referent in this context is to Mary, though Ephrem does not explicitly invoke her here.

⁸² *Hymns on Virginity* 17.8; CSCO 223, 60.

symbolic logic of the hymn, the loss and restoration of creation, through the Incarnation, require feminine fertility to overcome Eve's loss. The connection that Ephrem draws from Dinah and Eve's creation fertility and infertility to the graves of Joseph, Joshua, and Eleazar creates a dynamic in which God's existence and creative activity are present in all things. Ultimately, for Ephrem, the Incarnation reveals the hidden symbols (ܠܝܠܝܢܝܘܬܐ) dwelling within these biblical figures.⁸³

In the next hymn, which continues the "Shechem" theme, Ephrem exclaims that one result of this "resuscitation" is the restoration of female modesty by Christ, whose victory allows "the virgins" (ܠܝܠܝܢܝܘܬܐ) win their own "crowns" (ܠܠܝܠܝܢܝܘܬܐ).⁸⁴ This imagery continues later in the hymn, where Ephrem invokes the biblical figure of Rahab. Her action to save her household was a hidden symbol that has now been revealed by the incarnation and made clear in Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well. Just as Rahab saved her people, the Samaritan woman saved many Schechemites.⁸⁵ All of this comes to a head in 18.9, where Ephrem sums up the divine activity of Christ, as pre-figured in the examples of Dinah and Rahab, using fertility images.

Types shine forth and even bones are revived in those
Who by deeds are saved by their Lord.

Blessed are you, O Schechem, for symbols and bones

⁸³ *Hymns on Virginity* 6.8; CSCO 223, 23; Also see *Hymns on Virginity* 17.4; CSCO 223, 59. For further discussion of Ephrem's use of ܠܝܠܝܢܝܘܬܐ, see below, Chapter 5.

⁸⁴ *Hymns on Virginity* 18.5; CSCO 223, 62.

⁸⁵ *Hymns on Virginity* 18.7; CSCO 223, 63.

Thunder in your womb.⁸⁶

ⲁⲙⲓ ⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲉⲛⲁ ⲛⲉⲙⲉⲃⲏⲧⲏ [ⲁⲙⲓⲛⲓ]
ⲁⲙⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ [ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ]

ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲉⲛⲁ ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲉⲙⲉ ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲛⲓ
ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ

Because the womb is in some sense both the dwelling place of bones and the source of life, Ephrem can describe the salvation of humankind by Christ as the transformation of the womb from a sealed, lifeless tomb to an open, life-giving space that reveals the symbols of God. In one sense, Ephrem is playing with the entire notion of typology. Because of the Incarnation, we can recognize the presence of these symbols in the examples from the past. However, these symbols, both past and present, are productive to us in the present. They yield the treasure of salvation, which Ephrem calls “truths that shine forth,” but they also bring to life the mysteries of God’s interaction with his creation throughout time.

Hymns on Virginity 18 contains another important reference to Eve. In 18.4, Ephrem alludes to Eve by describing the “dove who trusted the serpent” (ⲁⲛⲉⲃⲏⲛⲓ ⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ) and who has been saved by the “Lamb” (ⲛⲓⲛⲓ).⁸⁷ Two things are happening here that are important. First, the image of the serpent and dove evokes the familiar image of the deception of Eve in the garden. Second, the following verses describe the effect of the Eve’s transgression on creation and humankind in

⁸⁶ *Hymns on Virginity* 18.9; CSCO 223, 63-4. It is worth noting that Ephrem uses ⲛⲓⲛⲓ for “womb” instead of ⲛⲓⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲛⲓ as we saw in the *Hymns on Nativity*. Ephrem’s poetry resists studies that concentrate solely on vocabulary because he frequently uses synonyms to carry the same conceptual image. Such is the case here. The different vocabulary carries the same image.

⁸⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 18.4; CSCO 223, 62.

ways that are characteristic of Ephrem, primarily by emphasizing how those who follow her transgression are led astray. Ephrem here describes the disruption with animal imagery; in the disorder the sheep (here named as the Jews) continue to rebel against God, while the wolves, who are the inhabitants of Schechem attempt to reconcile with him by, Ephrem implies, reversing Eve's refusal by learning to put on humility and allowing themselves to be tamed by Christ. Ephrem uses the paradox of the ewe and wolf, Eve and creation, to describe the work of Christ through the Incarnation by accounting for every detail of the Fall such that even the images of disorder become indications of divine reality.⁸⁸ That which seems domesticated is actually in rebellion, while that which seems wild and untamed has actually been restored to Christ.

Eve returns once more in the *Hymns on Virginity* as a contrast to the figure of the Samaritan woman. Ephrem portrays the Samaritan woman as a source of life. He describes her, for example, as sowing life into dead city through her transformation by Christ, who has blessed her mouth. In fact, Ephrem notes that unlike the apostles, who were forbidden to announce Christ's presence, the Samaritan woman was commissioned by Christ to go forth to her kinsmen and speak. Ephrem likens the Samaritan woman's witness of her encounter with Christ to her village to bringing forth fruit.⁸⁹ This is striking because later in the hymn Ephrem invokes the image of

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.7; CSCO 223, 83.

Eve with fruit. However, unlike the Samaritan woman whose fruit is life-sustaining, the fruit that Eve shares is fatal.⁹⁰

It is here that Ephrem builds on something that had been present, but not explicit, so far in his treatment of Eve: he invokes Mary. This is unexpected because Mary plays no overt role in the Biblical story of the Samaritan woman, and nothing in Ephrem's exegetical traditions made that connection. However, Ephrem asserts that the Samaritan woman is a "wonder as great as in Mary" (ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ) because her actions recall—for Ephrem—Mary herself.⁹¹ Mary is Ephrem's lens by which he can exegete the Biblical text and explain what the Christian life entails. This dynamic is further illustrated by Ephrem's use of Eve as a contrasting sign. The image of Eve as the source of humanity's pains, such as thirsting, and her barrenness, stands in strong contrast to figures of Mary and the Samaritan woman.

But the contrast with Eve hardly exhausts the scope of Ephrem's Mariology in the *Hymns on Virginity*. Mary plays a crucial role in the Hymns as the model of the ascetic life whose fertility becomes the source of life for all. In Hymn 25, for example, Ephrem correlates the maternal image of Mary with the Christ event.⁹² Mary is a "mirror" (ܩܘܕܫܬܐ ܕܩܝܡܬܐ) in which the Christian sees Christ.⁹³ The Marian mirror works in two ways. First, it teaches the ascetic how to recognize Christ. And secondly, the Marian mirror shows the ascetic how to make Christ present to all who

⁹⁰ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.9; CSCO 223, 83.

⁹¹ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.4; CSCO 233, 82; ET in McVey, 362.

⁹² *Hymn on Virginity* 25.2-3; CSCO 223, 89.

⁹³ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.9; CSCO 223, 91.

seek Him. The second point would seem to be Ephrem's main goal, but there is a correlation between them: it is necessary to recognize Christ in order to make Him present.⁹⁴ Here, as elsewhere, Mary provides the means by which the ascetic can both attain a true vision of Christ and, by imitating her example, move to make Christ present. The primary means of making Christ present, for Ephrem, is through the ascetic's Marian-like fertility.⁹⁵ The ascetic must become a Christ-bearer. Ephrem uses fertility imagery in order to demonstrate how Christ is the actual source of redemption.⁹⁶ But it is still Mary that supplies the basic imagery for how the ascetic should live and be. Not incidentally, Hymn 25 ends by moving from the fertility imagery to medical imagery. Here Christ is the great "Physician" (ܦܘܨܝܩܐ) who comes to heal creation. Ephrem will often shift imagery in the middle of a hymn, and in this case the two images correspond. Healing and fertility both reflect Ephrem's deep sense that growth and life, in the context of creation itself, is the scope and purpose of the Incarnation; to correct Eve's Fall requires both healing and fertility.

Ephrem draws on another dimension of Mary's fertility when he portrays her as motherly and caring, cradling the Son of her womb to her breast. Mary stands as an exemplar because God has entrusted to her of all women to care for the "Son of His bosom" (ܦܘܨܝܩܐ ܕܥܡܐܝܗܘܢ).⁹⁷ Both Mary and God the Father embrace Christ as a parent

⁹⁴ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.5; CSCO 223, 90.

⁹⁵ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.9; CSCO 223, 91.

⁹⁶ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.3; CSCO 223, 89.

⁹⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 25.2; CSCO 223, 89. In lines 3 – 6 of this hymn, Ephrem constructs a parallelism with ܥܡܐܝܗܘܢ and its synonym ܦܘܨܝܩܐ: lines 3 and 4 use ܥܡܐܝܗܘܢ while lines 5 and 6 use ܦܘܨܝܩܐ. McVey translates the first ܥܡܐܝܗܘܢ as "womb," which

would a child. Ephrem is doing a little bit of technical Christology here, and in what will become a classical Christological motif, he asserts that Christ inherits his humanity from his mother, Mary.⁹⁸ However, the imagery is evocative because Ephrem also seems to be suggesting that Christ's "debt" to Mary goes beyond physical parentage. Ephrem recognizes that Mary's humanity retains the corruption that is inherent to all humanity, and that as a result, it is only Christ's divinity that can overcome this.⁹⁹ As McVey notes, however, although this ostensibly means that Christ has healed Mary's corruption along with everyone else's, there is also here a strong sense that his humanity itself is a kind of debt that Christ owes to Mary.¹⁰⁰ The nurturing fertility would seem to confirm this judgment. Christ receives humanity from Mary in such a way, i.e. as a life – affirming the act of fertility, in which Mary's act becomes the first instance of the healing of creation. So when Christ affects the healing of all creation, he is, in a sense, reciprocating Mary's initial fertile act.

Similarly, this interplay of Mary and God the Father, each nurturing Christ as an infant, anticipates the same care that Christ gives humanity at the Crucifixion. The love of Christ for his creation is such that it inspires John to become "creature who

is allowable and does preserve the standard poetical technique of repeating lines with synonyms. However, since *ܠܘܘܐ* can only be translated as "bosom" in lines 5 and 6, it seems best to translate all occurrences of *ܥܘܒܐ* as "bosom" as well. Ephrem uses *ܥܘܒܐ* as a term of fertility that derives from his vision of Mary, and a translation of "womb" certainly fits that general usage. In this instance, it is best to preserve the particular fertility image, i.e., nursing at a bosom, to capture the overall effect of the hymn's imagery.

⁹⁸ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.2; CSCO 223, 89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ McVey, 370. n. 353.

put on his Creator” (ܡܬܘܢ ܕܥܡܢ ܡܪܝܡ ܕܥܡܢ ܕܥܡܢ).¹⁰¹ It is a love that echoes that of his mother for her newborn Son.¹⁰² This imagery is heightened by Ephrem later in the hymn when he describes Mary’s devotion to her Son as the means by which Christ’s image is made visible to all others.¹⁰³ The maternal imagery used by Ephrem in the hymn also parallels Christ’s unity with all of humanity. Christ takes on a spiritual paternity, first toward Mary, and in turn, toward all of humanity. Hence, at the Crucifixion, Ephrem observes that it is humanity who is dependent upon Christ, just as a newborn is upon his mother. Furthermore, just as Christ receives nourishment in the “visible milk” (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ) of his mother, he likewise receives nourishment from the bosom of his heavenly Father that is a “hidden symbol” (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ).¹⁰⁴ Even as Christ’s divinity remains hidden, it is fully present in him, through Mary, to all who seek him because it is Mary who has gifted her Son with his human body. Christ, in assuming his human body from his mother, joins all of humankind in a natural solidarity.¹⁰⁵ Ephrem notes that it is through this solidarity that Christ, both at his incarnation and his redemptive sacrifice, elevates humanity to a spiritual unity with himself, but throughout the hymn, the primary image for this new unity is Mary.

This Marian fertility imagery continues in the next stanzas, where Ephrem compares Mary’s womb to the Tabernacle, only here Ephrem makes explicit what has

¹⁰¹ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.4; CSCO 223, 89.

¹⁰² *Hymn on Virginity* 25.4-5; CSCO 223, 89-90.

¹⁰³ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.6, 9; CSCO 223, 90, 91.

¹⁰⁴ *Hymn on Virginity* 25. 3; CSCO 94, 89.

¹⁰⁵ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.5, 8; CSCO 223, 90, 91.

been implied throughout this Hymn, that he sees Mary's womb as a symbol. Here the symbol is the "temporal Tabernacle" (ܠܗ ܕܘܢܐ ܕܚܘܒܐ). So when John and Joseph call on Israel not to "belittle God in his temples" (ܘܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ) they are actually talking about Mary's womb, because Mary's womb is the tabernacle in which Christ was dwelling.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, Ephrem calls on the ascetic to imitate Mary's virginity as the pathway to true fertility. The ascetic must too become a temple for the Son to dwell within.¹⁰⁷ As we will see in Chapter 5, as a Temple of Christ, the ascetic becomes a witness to Christ's divine activity to others.

We can see how Ephrem develops his vision of Mary as the ascetical ideal by stepping back one hymn in this collection, to Hymn 24. In this Hymn, Ephrem is especially interested in creating imagery that calls on ascetics to emulate Mary's example. He calls on the ascetic to become a "daughter to Mary" (ܕܘܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ), and he exhorts his readers to become a bride for Christ and to seek for the true "bridal chamber" (ܘܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ), an image that extends the Mary symbolism to a nuptial image that speaks of the ascetic's love of and commitment to Christ.¹⁰⁸ In an evocative stanza that begins the hymn, Ephrem exhorts his ascetics to a particular kind of virginity, praying, "May your womb be a nest for her dwelling place" (ܘܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ ܕܠܗܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܢܐ).¹⁰⁹ Like that of Mary, the virgin's chaste womb becomes the dwelling

¹⁰⁶ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.11; CSCO 223, 91.

¹⁰⁷ *Hymn on Virginity* 25.10-11; CSCO 223, 91.

¹⁰⁸ *Hymns on Virginity* 24.7, 5; CSCO 223, 86, 85. Bridal chamber is a prevalent image in Ephrem's work. See Brock, *Luminous*, 115-130.

¹⁰⁹ *Hymn on Virginity* 24.1; CSCO 223, 84-5.

of Christ within the living body of the virgin. Having Christ “dwell” in the womb necessitates a change in the person, particularly in how she lives in relationship to God and others, and Ephrem returns to Mary as a model, citing the undivided devotion to Christ of her “whose eye scorned all other persons” (ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ).¹¹⁰ In another image, Ephrem describes the virgin as a “heavenly sparrow” (ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ) who builds her nest high above earthly cares, and who, like Mary, contemplates only God.¹¹¹

Again later in the hymn, Ephrem evokes the figure of Anna as an ascetical model, offering Anna as a Mary-like example of what the chaste life resembles. It is here that Ephrem specifically invokes Eve’s transgression and the ascetic’s role in overcoming it. Anna, barren in her age, maintained her gaze upon Christ, preserving herself for Christ alone. She remains steadfast in her devotion despite those who mock her.¹¹² And because of this steadfastness, Anna, like (and because of) her daughter Mary, overcomes the curse of Eve.¹¹³ So, too, does the virgin overcome Eve’s curse.

Your womb escaped from the pangs of the curse
 By the serpent pains of the female entered.
 Let the defiled one be put to shame, as he sees that
 His pangs were not in your womb.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ *Hymn on Virginity* 24.7; CSCO 223, 86; ET in McVey, 367.

¹¹¹ *Hymn on Virginity* 24.3; CSCO 223, 85.

¹¹² *Hymn on Virginity* 24.10; CSCO 223, 87.

¹¹³ *Hymns on Virginity* 24.10-11; CSCO 223, 87.

¹¹⁴ *Hymns on Virginity* 24.11; CSCO 223, 87; ET in McVey, 368.

ܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ
 ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ
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 ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܪܝܡ

Unlike Eve, the virgin does not experience the suffering of childbirth. Rather the virgin's fertility is free from this pain. Moreover, the virgin's offspring live because she, in her Marian-like chastity, bears her children to heavenly life.¹¹⁵ Eve's children, by contrast, are vulnerable to the serpent. The virgin, as a "daughter to Mary," corrects what Eve's transgression has produced. The virgin as a dwelling place of Christ, a "Temple of the Lord," is blessed precisely in contrast with the cursing of Eve, and therefore, the serpent is conquered by the body of the virgin. The virgin, then, becomes the antitype to Eve, and a sign of the restoration brought forth by Christ in the Incarnation. Ephrem unites the consecrated virgins with Mary and Anna in natural solidarity because all of these women experience the salvific work of Christ. And as with Mary, the body is the primary location for the consecrated virgin's ascetical experience of this new unity with God. Their chastity is the sign of their union with Christ but also the source of their fertility in the world. Thus like Mary, the ascetics bear Christ into the world and become a source of life for all of creation. As in other places, Ephrem uses his Marian imagery to describe who the ascetic is, i.e. the one whose consecration and chastity helps bring forth Christ into the world.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ See *Hymns on Virginity* 24.3, 5; CSCO 223, 85.

¹¹⁶ Also see *Hymns on Virginity* 25.3 and 25.9 for a similar image.

One final fertility image in the *Hymns on Virginity* has to do with Ephrem's use of baptism and holy oil to symbolize the results of the Incarnation. Baptism is typically a Christological image, but Ephrem describes it with Marian symbolism. In Hymn 7, Ephrem identifies Mary as the primary agent who brings the oil that makes visible to the world the invisible image of Christ. Mary's fertility stands as counterpart to Jezebel's fertility; whereas Jezebel's fertility is deadening, Mary's is life-giving. Thus, Mary's fertility presents, for Ephrem, a model of conversion for the ascetic, one properly fashioned so that fruit can be born.

*Oil acknowledges You entirely, for oil revives all.
It serves as the Anointed, Reviver of all; in streams, branches, and
leaves it portrays Him.
With its branches it praised Him through children; with its streams
it anointed Him through Mary.*¹¹⁷

ܐܝܠܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ
ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ

Precisely how Ephrem believes that Mary “anoints” Christ is not entirely clear. Later in that verse he connects the “steam” of Mary’s anointing with Christ’s mortality, and it may be that he believes that Mary anoints Christ by giving him his humanity. If so, then this helps us see why Ephrem goes on to connect the natural elements of the womb, oil and the waters of baptism, with God’s salvific activity in the world. The latency of each of these natural elements is revived by the Incarnation. Hence, the waters of Mary’s womb by which Christ enters the world, and by which she herself is also sanctified, identify a new kind a birth. This new birth does not struggle in

¹¹⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 7.13; CSCO 223, 27-8; ET in McVey, 117.

conception nor does it suffer birthpangs. Rather, the baptized are reborn in the waters of baptism, which Ephrem calls “another womb” (ܠܕܝܘܪܐ ܠܘܡܝܢ).¹¹⁸ Fertility images run throughout this section of the hymn. Ephrem describes priests who serve this new womb as the anointing rushes in upon her floods, which invokes both baptism and the waters of birth.¹¹⁹ Thus the new birth and perfect nourishment are an indication creation’s restored fertility through the Incarnation.

Conclusions

This discussion of Ephrem’s Mariology in the *Hymns on the Nativity* and the *Hymns on Virginity* highlights several important aspects of Ephrem’s thought in these hymns. Most importantly, it shows that Ephrem uses Mary in contrast to Eve in order to frame his conception of the human problem and its solution. For Ephrem, Eve’s Fall resulted in a loss of glory that affected all of creation, and his primary way of describing those effects is with fertility imagery. In Ephrem’s thinking, whereas before the Fall, creation was to be fertile, after the Fall it has become infertile. That Ephrem is so drawn to fertile imagery may be why he seizes on the Eve traditions to account for the Fall, and it may be equally why he is drawn to Mary to explain the solution to this problem. Whereas Eve lost the fertility, Mary restores it through her womb. The primacy of Mary, therefore, within Ephrem’s theological account of Incarnation, is central to Ephrem’s thought here. Mary’s fertility gives Ephrem a conceptual and symbolic framework that he uses to model both the collective and individual experiences of restoration. Mary’s free choice led to the reversal of Eve’s

¹¹⁸ *Hymns on Virginity* 7.7; CSCO 223, 26.

¹¹⁹ *Hymns on Virginity* 7.8; CSCO 223, 26.

original bad choice. But perhaps even more importantly, Mary's free choice allowed her—and, by extension ascetics who follow her example—to restore that glory to her own body. If Eve “put off” the glory, then through her pregnancy, Mary puts it back on, and in the process she reveals how to properly say yes to Christ and so exemplifies the goal and task of Christian asceticism.¹²⁰

The way that Ephrem employs Mary's fertility has a number of implications for the rest of his theology. We will turn to one of those in the next chapter, how Mary's womb brings about the restoration of all creation.

¹²⁰ This is a point which Murray makes as well, though in a slightly different context. See “Mary, the Second Eve,” 376 – 77.

CHAPTER 3

EPHREM, MARY AND THE BODY

Concern for the body has dominated modern scholarship on asceticism in late antiquity, led by Peter's Brown's seminal *Body and Society*. The scope of this literature is vast, and it covers topics ranging from gender identity to questions of health and food consumption.¹ Susan Ashbrook Harvey observes, however, that scholarship on Christian asceticism has been especially interested in questions of sexuality and the body.² This scholarly concern undoubtedly reflects modern sensibilities, especially questions about how ancient sexual practices have been replicated in modern ecclesiastical contexts. However, this scholarly concern is also a result of scholars paying attention to ancient concerns, because ascetical theologians in late antiquity were intensely interested in how their bodies, sexuality, and sexual practices come into contact with the demands of religious commitments. This was no mere abstract speculation. Christians of all varieties believed that imitating Christ fully required them to imitate Christ's celibacy. Trying to live up to that ideal raised practical questions about how to discipline the body. But it

¹ For an overview of the state of the question in the context of modern theoretical concerns, see Sarah Coakley, *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-14. Coakley notes that there is a deep ambiguity in the tradition towards the body. The body is at once a place for profound suspicion as well as profound holiness; it is a problem because of the Fall, but it also remains a sign of revelation and transformation.

² Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Embodiment in Time and Eternity: A Syriac Perspective," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43 (1999): 105.

also raised theological questions about what it meant to have a body. If celibacy was the Christian ideal, then why is sexual desire such a powerful experience? Is sexual desire a sign of corruption, or is it something that we can integrate into a theology of creation and recapitulation? The most influential scholarly attempt to attribute celibacy to a dualistic tendency in Judeo – Christian thought, which resulted in a deepening sense that chastity was a means by which one emphasized devotion to God by renouncing the body has been Peter Brown’s *Body and Society*.³ Recent scholarship has, to some degree, updated and challenged some aspects of Brown’s approach, but it remains the scholarly consensus.⁴

The goal of this chapter is to situate Ephrem’s Mariology within the larger context of concern for the body in fourth century asceticism. Accomplishing this goal

³ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Twentieth-anniversary edition with a new introduction, Columbia Classics in Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). First published in 1988, this book helped established the parameters within which scholarly conversation about the role of the body in early Christianity now operates. Brown’s primary question is why these early Christians wrote so much about sex (xli). Brown notes that there was a diversity of perspectives on what the body and its sexuality meant for early Christians, but that nearly every Christian perspective in late antiquity had something to say about the body and sexuality. The reason for this, Brown argues, was that “the body had to bear an oceanic weight of social expectations” across the spectrum of cultures in late antiquity (xlii). As such, the body became the focus for what Brown calls the “mighty aspirations” for human flourishing (xliii). Thus, to put this into Christian categories, the body becomes the means by which one attains or demonstrates holiness, and anxiety about questions of sexuality become tied up in these larger issues about how best to employ the body towards greater ends.

⁴ Elizabeth Clark, for example, has argued that Christian renunciations of sexual expression both resulted from and produced exegetical patterns of Scripture. If so, then the impetus for Christian renunciation of the body through celibacy was as much an internal dynamic as it was one influenced by external societal forces. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). For a recent discussion of scholarship on the body in early Christianity, see now Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

will require two movements. The first is to identify the distinct characteristics of Syriac asceticism. The second is to show how Ephrem lives within the historical context of his Syriac tradition and integrates and transforms it through his emphasis on Mary. Through this process we will discover Ephrem emphasizing that Mary had a human body that became the source of the Son's humanity, which has, according to Ephrem, significant implications for the ascetical practices of celibacy, and entails a more positive appraisal of "the body" than we find in other traditions, including some that form Ephrem's Syriac context. We begin by examining the distinctive characteristics of Syriac theories of the body in the fourth century. We will then turn to Ephrem in order to show how he brings Mary to bear on this conversation. As we will see, for Syriac theologians like Ephrem, chastity does not amount to a renunciation of the body. Instead, chastity functions within a larger transformative vision of the body and creation; it is a sign of the transformed body, not a rejection of the corrupt body. Ephrem's emphasis on Mary's virginal fertility becomes central to his conception of that transformation because Mary and her role in the transformation of all creation becomes a way of highlighting how the body participates within that very creation.

The Body in Syriac Asceticism

As Susan Ashbrook Harvey has recently suggested, Syriac asceticism can be distinguished by its openness to the body as a necessary part of the Christian ascetic's experience; in Harvey's reading, for many Syriac ascetics, "the body is the location of Christianity."⁵ What this means is that Syriac asceticism not only saw the body as the

⁵ Harvey, "Embodiment," 110.

location for ascetical practices, but it assumed that the body could constructively participate in the spiritual life. To put the matter slightly differently, in contrast to a more dualistic vision of the ascetical life, Syriac ascetics did not seek to overcome the body or to release the soul from the body. Instead, they believed that the transformation of the body was as important to the ascetical life as purity of heart.

The Beginning of the Tradition: The Place of the Body in the Odes of Solomon

Harvey makes her case by examining two important witnesses to the Syriac tradition, the *Odes of Solomon* and Ephrem. The witness of the second-century *Odes* is especially important. The *Odes of Solomon* is an enigmatic text, but one that is crucial for understanding the character of Syriac Christianity, and before examining its approach to the body as necessary for the purity of heart, some background is in order.⁶ Assuming that the *Odes* reflect a Jewish-Christian theology roughly contemporaneous with the Gospel of John, the end of the first century or beginning of the second century seems a likely date for their composition.⁷ The *Odes* are hymns, and as such are somewhat

⁶ For the background and theology of the *Odes*, see L. Abramowski, "Sprache und Abfassungszeit der Oden Salomos," *Orientalia Christiana* 68 (1984): 80-90; Henry Chadwick, "Some reflections on the character and theology of the *Odes* of Solomon," in *Kyriakon: Festchrift for J. Quasten*, ed. P. Granfield and J. A. Jungmann (Munster, 1970), 266-70; J.H. Charlesworth, "Introduction to the *Odes* of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol 2, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York, 1985), 725-734; A.F.J. Klijn, "The influence of Jewish Theology on the *Odes* of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas," in *Aspects du judeo-christianisme: Colloque de Strasbourg 23-25 avril 1964*, (Paris, 1965), 167-79.

⁷ The precise dating and provenance of the *Odes* remains a matter of some scholarly discussion. Early scholarship assumed that the *Odes* came out of a Gnostic context, although that view has largely been discarded. More pressing is the question of the *Odes*' Christian character. Modern scholars have largely argued in favor of a Christian author, although one heavily indebted to Jewish (or Jewish-Christian) theology. Although the author was Christian, he approaches Christianity from a Jewish perspective.

generic in context. They contain, for example, no explicit polemic. Nevertheless, certain distinctive theological themes do emerge. The author consistently rejoices in the coming of the Messiah, and in the eternal life that his coming entails. The Odist uses dramatic imagery to describe this life; he rejoices because he has taken off a corrupt garment, and put on a garment of incorruption. This incorruption, which he consistently describes with such clothing metaphors, is his primary way of describing the effects of salvation. The *Odes* do not have a “two-ways” dualism.⁸ For the Odist, the evil one has already been defeated by the Messiah. Instead of a “two-ways” ethical concern, therefore, the *Odes* concentrates on exhorting the reader (or singer) to spiritual virtues.⁹

An important theme of the *Odes* is its emphasis on the goodness of creation and on the inclusion of the body in the spiritual life. Harvey points to an especially evocative and famous passage that extols the inherent worth of the human body:

For example, the anthropomorphic imagery that the *Odes* uses to describe God (and the Son and the Holy Spirit), such as portraying God with breasts that were milked by the Holy Spirit to yield the “milk” of the Son, may also reflect a grounding in Jewish theology. Furthermore, the Apocalyptic character of the *Odes*, which scholars are only now beginning to explore in detail, may also account for the presence of Jewish concepts without the need for an actual Jewish author. For discussion of the *Odes*’ provenance, see Michael Lattke, *The Odes of Solomon*, Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

⁸ For a discussion of the presence of “Two Ways” dualism in early Christianity, see L. W. Barnard, *The Dead Sea Scrolls, Barnabas, the Didache and the Later History of the “Two Ways,”* in *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and Their Background* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 87-107.

⁹ See, for example, *Ode* 20:5-8 for a list of these virtues that is reminiscent of the Decalogue. Here the Odist exhorts the reader to prepare oneself to enter into Paradise with Christ through the offering of the one’s soul. The Odist understands this offering to require a disposition of clemency towards others, honesty, care for one’s neighbor and refraining from the purchasing of slaves.

I fashioned their members,
 And my own breasts I prepared for them,
 That they might drink my holy milk and live by it.
 I am pleased by them,
 And am not ashamed by them.¹⁰

אני אה אהם על מוגמתי
 אהנין אהנין אהנין אהנין
 על לבא מוגמתי אהנין אהנין
 אהנין אהנין
 אהנין אהנין אהנין אהנין

As Harvey points out, part of what makes this passage interesting is its use of anthropomorphic language for God, something that expresses the comfort that the Odist has in finding metaphors within creation for the created – creator relationship.¹¹ But this passage is also important because it highlights the Odist’s explicit affirmation of the fundamental goodness of the body. God is not “ashamed” (אָשָׁם) by humanity, which almost certainly includes the human body. This conclusion is suggested by the anthropomorphic language that Harvey highlights. The Odist uses metaphors from creation in order to emphasize God’s concern for the entirety of the human experience, including the created body.

This kind of anthropomorphism reoccurs throughout the *Odes*. Like all ascetical writers, the Odist sees in the body the primary barrier to true knowledge and purity of heart, and much of his instruction has to do with ways of disciplining the body.¹²

¹⁰ *Odes of Solomon* 8.14 – 16; Charlesworth, 40. ET in Harvey, “Embodiment,” 111.

¹¹ Harvey, “Embodiment,” 112.

¹² *Odes of Solomon* 8.9; Charlesworth, 40. ET in Charlesworth, 41.

Nevertheless, Harvey's point is worth pursuing, because even as the Odist acknowledges the problems of the body in passages such as *Ode* 8.9, he also lays the groundwork for including the body as part of the solution. Throughout the collection, the writer insists that knowledge has come in and through the body. In *Ode* 7, for example, the writer proclaims that the Incarnation allows us to know God, that the purpose of the Incarnation is "knowledge" (عرفة).¹³ The epistemological dimension of the Incarnation is a theme that reappears throughout the *Odes*. Indeed, the writer invokes a variety of epistemological concepts in nearly every *Ode*.¹⁴ Thus in *Ode* 18, to take one example, the writer offers a paean to the power of the divine presence in the Incarnation. He prays that God not remove his Word so that truth will not be overwhelmed by lies.¹⁵ He then makes a strong comparison between vanity and ignorance, and humility and wisdom. He cites ignorance as something that was embraced by the vain who did recognize it for what it was.¹⁶ By contrast, the wise avoided the error, and because they were in the mind of God, they were able to speak truth and resist those who were in error.¹⁷ What the Incarnation

¹³ *Ode* 7.13; Charlesworth, 36.

¹⁴ The epistemology of the *Odes* has not received sufficient scholarly attention, but there is evidence that it is one of the author's central concerns. Such a study might continue some work that has tried to connect the thought world of the *Odes* with that of John's Gospel. Like that Gospel, but also in contact with a variety of traditions in Eastern Christianity, the Odist emphasizes the epistemological function of the Incarnation. See R. A. Culpepper, "The *Odes* of Solomon and the Gospel of John," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 35 (1973): 298-322; J. Brownson, "The *Odes* of Solomon and Johannine Tradition," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 2 (1988): 49-69.

¹⁵ *Odes of Solomon* 18.6; Charlesworth, 77.

¹⁶ *Odes of Solomon* 18.11-12; Charlesworth, 78.

¹⁷ *Odes of Solomon* 18.13-15; Charlesworth, 79.

accomplishes, therefore, is a reversal of the primordial ignorance that has pervaded creation since the Fall.¹⁸

Ultimately, however, the writer of the *Odes* views the revelation of the Word as the first step in the transformation of creation and the body, and it is here that we find Syriac asceticism at its most distinctive. In the *Odes*, the Word becomes flesh so that bodies can be transformed into incorruption. Thus the *Odes*, and, as we will see, Ephrem, are “body-friendly” in their insistence on the truth claim that the Word brings also facilitates the immediate transformation of the body, as well as leading to the future Resurrection.

A few examples of the Odist’s insistence of the transformation of the body will have to suffice as illustrations of this theme in the *Odes*. In *Ode* 15, the writer reaffirms his joy at having acquired eyes to see, ears to hear the truth, all of which leads him to the “thought of knowledge” and fullness of life.¹⁹ As a result, the Odist has rejected the pathway of falsehood and, according to the divine generosity, has “put on” incorruption (ܩܘܪܘܢܐ). The significance of ܩܘܪܘܢܐ in Syriac asceticism can hardly be overstated. As Murray has shown, the Syriac ascetical tradition uses that term as a means of “describing the Incarnation” and is one of the most frequently used Incarnational terms in that tradition.²⁰ Murray also notes that the *Odes*, being closer to the New Testament in composition, echo a Pauline construction. Unlike later uses, the *Odes* typically speak of humanity “putting

¹⁸ See *Odes of Solomon* 18.11; Charlesworth, 78.

¹⁹ *Odes of Solomon* 15.5; Charlesworth, 67.

²⁰ Murray, *Symbols*, 69-70.

on Christ” instead of Christ putting on a body.²¹ This is consistent with the Odists’ construction: what is put on is “incorruption” (ܠܐ ܡܫܝܒܐ). The putting on of “incorruption” is body-friendly as it is a reference to the Resurrection and the salvific role of the body in humanity’s restoration by Christ. It is also important to note that the “putting on” is a present experience for the Christian and not simply something anticipated for the future. Indeed, part of the importance of the Syrian ascetical emphasis of the “putting on” is that it presents a positive expression of the body in the present. We see this especially in this early example of the *Odes* in that the writer is focusing on the present bodily experience of the Christian. Even if Murray is right that later Syriac writers switch the focus to Christ, nevertheless the roots of the idea are focused on the human body. As I will argue below, we see this origin reflected in Ephrem’s treatment of the body, especially Mary’s body and her experience which serve as the prototype for the Christian’s experience of bodily incorruption.

The emphasis in Ode 15 is on a present experience. Though the writer clearly anticipates an eternal life in the future, he is also celebrating the present joy of incorruption as well as truth. The writer returns to this theme in Ode 17. Here he connects his experience of learning the truth to receiving the “face” (*prosopon*) of a new person.²² Later in the ode, the writer shifts to Christ’s voice and has the Son affirm that, “I gave my knowledge generously/And my Resurrection through my love.”²³ Here again, the

²¹ See *Odes* 7.4 and Murray, *Symbols*, 311.

²² *Odes of Solomon* 17.4; Charlesworth, 73. Charlesworth notes the use of the Greek loan word in note 3 on page 75.

²³ *Odes of Solomon* 17.13; Charlesworth, 74.; ET in Charlesworth, 75.

experience of “Resurrection” or eternal life is correlated with the knowledge that the Word brings forth. Without denying the future experience of the Resurrection, the author is also moving that experience to the present.

In *Ode* 38 we get an especially rich description of the present and future dimensions of this incorruption:

For I was established and lived and was redeemed,
And my foundations were laid on account of the Lord’s hand;
Because He has planted me.²⁴

ከወይን ጋር ለመጠጣት ለመብረቅ
እና ለመጠጣት ለመብረቅ
እና ለመጠጣት ለመብረቅ

Here again we see the Odist’s emphasis on the connection between the revelation and knowledge brought by the Word and the experience of growth. The writer describes what happens in the revelation of the Word with a planting metaphor. The writer has been “planted” (دَعَى) by God and is in the process of being cultivated to grow fruit that will live forever. One of the advantages of poetry in this instance is that it allows the writer to demonstrate a particular flexibility with regard to the time-frame of the planting experience. The writer has experienced the “planting” and cultivation already, even as he looks forward to the eternal fruit that will mark the fullness of the resurrected, incorruptible life.

²⁴ *Odes of Solomon* 38.17; Charlesworth, 131; ET in Charlesworth, 132-33.

The Tradition Affirmed: Ephrem's Hymns on Paradise

Harvey also discusses the epistemological significance of the body in Syriac asceticism; her primary examples come from Ephrem. These examples are instructive not only for Harvey's argument, but also because they highlight the way in which Ephrem continues the same emphasis on transformation that we saw in the *Odes*. Harvey quotes at length from Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* 8.

The hymn opens with a meditation on the experience of the thief on the cross. Ephrem is worried that the biblical language might indicate that the thief was in heaven even as Jesus spoke from the cross, but he realizes that cannot be, because it would be impossible for the soul to perceive without its body.²⁵ What follows is a long meditation on the relationship between the soul and the body. Although the body requires a soul in order to be alive, the soul requires a body in order to see and hear.²⁶ Ephrem asserts that they exist in a symbiotic relationship, so much so that a soul without a body is non-existence (ܕܐܢܐ) and can be compared to an embryo that is still in the womb.²⁷ Without a body, the soul is unable to perceive anything because it has no sensory perception of its own. Likewise, without a body, the soul is unable to make its own wisdom known, because it has no voice of its own.²⁸ Ephrem concludes the Hymn by affirming that this

²⁵ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.3; CSCO 198, 33.

²⁶ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.4; CSCO 198, 33-4.

²⁷ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.5; CSCO 198, 34.

²⁸ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.6; CSCO 198, 34. Capturing Ephrem's thought here is difficult. "ܕܐܢܐ" is best translated as "non-existence." However, as the rest of this stanza suggests, his point is not so much that the soul lacks existence without a body, but that its existence is symbiotic with that of its body. Brock's translation as "true existence"

intimate connection between body and soul continues into the Resurrection, that what we learn from the biblical story is that at the Resurrection, body and soul enter together.²⁹

As Harvey points out, the epistemological dimension of Ephrem's account of the body is important. According to Harvey, the hymn demonstrates Ephrem's belief that the knowledge requires the senses, so much so that "without their contribution, nothing can be fully encountered or comprehended."³⁰ By affirming the priority of sensory perception in this way, Ephrem has also affirmed the fundamental goodness of the things that can be perceived with the senses. In the *Hymns on Paradise*, as Harvey points out, the ultimate experience of sensory perception belongs to the Resurrection, where humans will experience what Harvey describes, via Ephrem, as "a place of breathtaking, sumptuous beauty: shimmering in resplendent light, billowing with myriad exquisite scents. . . ."³¹

Ephrem does not limit the beauty of paradise to the Resurrection, however. As we saw in the *Odes of Solomon*, Ephrem also believes that the transformation of the

attempts to capture this sense, but it also leaves the reader with the impression that the soul is non-existence without the body. "Full existence" would thus seem to be an adequate translation.

²⁹ *Hymns on Paradise* 8.9, 35; CSCO 198.

³⁰ Harvey, "Embodiment," 124.

³¹ Harvey, "Embodiment," 125. Also see her *Scenting Salvation*. I have engaged Harvey's work already in an earlier chapter, especially as one the most important modern scholarly accounts of that recasts ascetical practices of late antiquity as body-friendly. For example, in chapter four, Harvey challenges the traditional view that ascetical practices were opposed to the body. Rather Harvey concludes that the body serves as a source of knowledge of both the natural as well as the divine world. (171) Moreover, the natural senses of the body are the beginnings of the Christian's "spiritual senses" as the Christian progresses in his/her transformation. Harvey's understanding culminates in her assertion that body was a sign of the Resurrection as it remains a vital part of the Christian's participation in divine life. The body, according to Harvey, would be "unlimited in what could experience of the divine" (224).

Resurrection is available prior to entering into paradise. In *Hymns on Paradise* 6, Ephrem affirms that the assembly of saints in the church resembles paradise.³² In the church, the serpent is crippled and Eve is “silenced” (ܠܡܢ ܥܘܢܐ).³³ The church can anticipate paradise in this way because its saints are all clothed with the glory of God. Whereas Adam and Eve had to clothe themselves with leaves because of their shame, through the Incarnation, they can now recover the robe that they lost; those who became ill because of Eve’s failure are now renewed and made whole. Those who have attained paradise are no longer “naked,” but they have received the robe that they lost when Eve spoke.³⁴ Ephrem’s emphasis on bodily imagery in this passage highlights just how important the restoration of a holy body is to the entire salvific experience, both present and future.

Thus the body matters for early Syriac ascetics because it is ultimately tied up in with the entire plan of salvation. These Syriac ascetics believe that the body is the location of salvation, that what the Incarnation accomplished was nothing less than the transformation of the body. This is where ascetic practices become so important in this tradition. What the ascetic accomplishes by his or her discipline is the bearing of fruit that anticipates the Resurrection. Asceticism does not attempt to suppress the body. Instead it transforms it, opens it to a new range of possibilities, and ushers both the body and the soul toward the final consummation in paradise.

³² *Hymns on Paradise* 6.8; CSCO 198, 21.

³³ *Ibid.* Brock takes this reference to Eve’s silence as an allusion to 1 Cor. 14:34, but readers should also note the story of Eve’s penitential silence in the *Life of Adam and Eve*. The church, in this reading, becomes a place of repentance in which the “saints” can complete the silent penitence that Eve failed to carry out.

³⁴ *Hymns on Paradise* 6.9; CSCO 198, 21.

Evagrius on Prayer and the Body

We can situate the theology of the body in early Syriac asceticism by comparing it with a prominent Greek ascetic, Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius recommends himself for this comparison for a number of reasons. First, despite his reputation for being at the fringes of orthodox Christianity in the fourth century, he was widely popular in both Eastern and Western Christianity during his own lifetime.³⁵ Moreover, recent scholarship has begun to challenge widely held assumptions about just how radical Evagrius' theology really was. As Kevin Corrigan has recently argued, for example, Evagrius has a great deal in common with the Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa, and Evagrius' views on the mind – body relationship are far more mainstream than commonly thought.³⁶ Second, though he wrote in Greek, Evagrius eventually became an important authority for Syriac-speaking Christians of the generations following Ephrem.³⁷ This is not to argue for influence or correspondence between Evagrius or Ephrem, but it does

³⁵ For an overview of Evagrius' life and career, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique: Traité pratique ou Le Monde I*, Sources chrétiennes 170 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 21 – 28.

³⁶ Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century* (London: Ashgate, 2009). Corrigan argues that the body does matter to Evagrius, especially as it is a means of purification. Corrigan, however, does acknowledge that ultimately Evagrius wants his readers to escape from the body, that eventually the soul must be separated from the body to attain true virtue (122).

³⁷ For all of his great influence on Eastern asceticism in general, there seems virtually no chance that Evagrius had any role in the development of Syriac asceticism in the fourth-century. It was not until the mid-fifth century that Evagrius' thought began to make inroads into Syriac asceticism. For an overview of Evagrius' substantial influence on later Syriac Christianity, see Robin Darling Young, "The Influence of Evagrius of Pontus," in *To Train His Soul in Books: Syriac Asceticism in Early Christianity*, ed. Robin Darling Young and Monica Blanchard (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 157-175.

suggest that Evagrius worked within a thought and practice system that was amenable to his Syriac ascetical counterparts. Evagrius' asceticism was not tied to a philosophical or theological system that could speak only to Greek ascetics, which not only expands his influence, but also makes his theology a standard by which to test other fourth century asceticisms. Finally, Evagrius and Ephrem were near contemporaries, and they shared many of the same concerns, which makes them a natural object of comparison.

Evagrius believes that the Christian faith consists of what he famously calls the *praktike*, which he defines as being directed towards both creation and the contemplation of God.³⁸ Both of these are equally important. The practice that is directed towards God is concerned with knowledge of God, which we will discuss more fully below. The practice that is directed towards creation is concerned with disciplining the body and removing that which keeps it from the practice directed towards God. So, for example, Evagrius frames the ascetical struggle as a battle with demons who prey on the ascetic and try to turn him away from God. Evagrius surely believes in the physical reality of demons, but he is also willing to offer a psychological analysis of the “demons” that plague the ascetic in his pursuit of virtue. He lists, for example, eight kinds of evil thoughts or demons that lead the ascetic astray. These include glutton, the demon of impurity or lust, avarice, sadness, passion, *acedia*, vanity and pride.³⁹ If the ascetic is going to succeed at his task, he must overcome these demons.

³⁸ *Praktikos*, 1; SC 171, 498.

³⁹ *Praktikos*, 6 – 14. For an analysis of the philosophical foundations of this list and the way that Evagrius employs it, see Corrigan, 73 – 102.

Evagrius will discuss a number of practices that help address each of these demons, and he draws upon both the desert tradition and an Origenistic tradition—mediated through the Cappadocians—in developing his approach.⁴⁰ Prayer becomes the cornerstone for his own spiritual edifice, but he joins the discipline of prayer to the entire range of the spiritual disciplines. Evagrius intends to instruct his ascetics to aims towards the right ordering of passions and the contemplation of the Divine Trinity, and so Evagrius begins by concentrating his readers on the struggle of the ascetic to obey the commandments of God and practice virtue. For Evagrius, obedience is the key to the attainment of perfection. The language used by Evagrius to describe the endeavor to achieve this obedience is often martial: the ascetic is to become an obedient soldier for God. The monks and priests are likewise joined by the heavenly armies in a battle against demons, who seek to pull man away from the life of virtue and God. Evagrius, in language reminiscent of the *Life of Antony*, often describes the monk as engaged in hand to hand combat.⁴¹ Only by acting in obedience, fasting, praying, and vigils can the monk subdue the body and make himself suitable for spiritual contemplation.⁴²

⁴⁰ For an overview on Evagrius as an Origenist, see Guillaumont, *Évagre*. In addition to Guillaumont, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992). See also Gabriel Bunge, “Origenismus—Gnostizismus: Zum geistesgeschichtlichen Standort des Evagrius Pontikos,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 40 (1986): 24–54; “Hénade ou monade? Au sujet de deux notions centrales de la terminologie évagrienne,” *Le Muséon* 102 (1989): 69–91.

⁴¹ *Praktikos* 72; SC 171, 661. Evagrius describes an encounter between the ascetic and demon as a “wrestling match.” In *Life of Antony* 9–10, Athanasius uses similar images to describe Antony’s encounters with demons. Throughout this text demons seek out Antony. See Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 39.

⁴² *Praktikos* 20; SC 171, 548.

The goal of this initial practice is to attain *apatheia*. Evagrius believes that *apatheia* is the moment at which the ascetic transitions for contemplating creation to contemplating the Trinity. *Apatheia* is a level of perfection at which the passions are under control because of the presence of divine love. It is conceived through obedience and nourished with the humility of the ascetic's recognition of his sin. *Apatheia* is not a permanent or static disposition that once achieved remains with the monk. Rather, it is something that the monk has to stand guard to maintain and to protect from the assaults of demons.⁴³ Furthermore, Evagrius' concept of *apatheia* allows for continuous growth and degrees of perfection.

Perfect purity of heart develops in the soul after victory over all the demons whose function it is to offer opposition to the ascetic life. But there is designated an imperfect purity of heart in consideration of the power of the demon that meantime fights against it.⁴⁴

The ascetic's prayer and his participation in the power of Christ becomes the determiner of the level of his growth. Evagrius likens the priests to the angels who, through their ministry of Christ, prepare the Christian for battle and help them adhere to the commandments of God. The victory at the *praktike* is marked by the absence of passions and the emotional disorder brought by situations that provoke passions.⁴⁵ In addition, the

⁴³ *Praktikos*, 60, 72, 77, 76.

⁴⁴ *Praktikos* 60; SC 171, 640. ET in John Eudes Bamberger, *Evagrius Ponticus: Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, Cistercian Studies 4 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 33. Bamberger translates *ψυχῆ ἀπάθεια* as "purity of the heart" As I will argue below, however, in the Syriac tradition the concept of "purity of heart" takes on a much more body-friendly understanding. This makes Bamberger's mistranslation potentially misleading regarding Evagrius' influence on that tradition. Evagrius' *apatheia*, which involves a renunciation of the body, is not the Syriac "purity of heart."

⁴⁵ *Praktikos* 34, 64, 67, 68.

apatheia is noted by the ability to pray without distraction. As he says in the *Praktike* 69: “A great thing indeed---to pray without distraction; a greater thing still---to sing psalms without distraction” (Μέγα μὲν τὸ ἀπερισπάστως προσεύχεσθαι, μείζον δὲ τὸ καὶ ψάλλειν ἀπερισπάστως).⁴⁶

This is not to say that Evagrius’ spiritual view is entirely world-denying. On the contrary, Evagrius regularly urges the ascetic to move from a naive understanding of the body to its reason, or *logoi*. By using natural symbols and phenomena, and penetrating the meaning of Scripture, the ascetic begins to understand the order of the universe and, consequently, the inner-connectedness of this order. Through the discovery of the inner *logoi*, or the reasons of things, one can begin to derive the attributes of God.⁴⁷ This knowledge then leads the ascetic to concentrate on the attributes of God, which eventually produces the apathetic contemplation of God the Trinity. It is worth noting that an ascetic can contemplate God’s attributes without having attained *apatheia*; such contemplation lacks the calm or peace—or simplicity—of the highest contemplation because it is still marked by the effort and struggle of the ascetic in his quest to find complete concentration.

When the ascetic attains *apatheia*, he is then able to contemplate the Blessed Trinity. Such contemplation is not ultimately the result of an accomplishment on part of the monk for Evagrius, though the ascetic must work at prayer and other disciplines to receive that grace. Instead, it is the result of a grace given as a gift in response to prayer.

⁴⁶ *Praktikos* 69; SC 171, 654; ET in Bamberger, 35.

⁴⁷ *Praktikos* 86; SC 171, 676.

Moreover, the apprehension of such an exalted state can only take place in a spirit stripped bare. The best language Evagrius can find to describe this event is that of light or light entering the soul. The soul becomes the location of the vision. It is not a vision of God in and of Himself. It is, instead, a knowing of His presence; it is a revelation. In fact, in Evagrius, in an explicit allusion to an Old Testament image, this light resembles a sapphire.⁴⁸ The highest form of contemplation is the soul's mirroring of the Divine Light. The ascetic becomes a dwelling place for the Light.

Again, it is important not to over-emphasize the mind-body dualism in Evagrius. As we have seen, he believes that the tangible material of creation can be a pathway to the contemplation of the Trinity, and he is aware that our love of God should also manifest itself as love of neighbor.⁴⁹ Evagrius also has a sense that true contemplation requires or results in the integration of mind, body and soul, and he sometimes speaks in ways that recall Ephrem in the *Hymns on Paradise*. In *Praktikos* 89, for example, Evagrius notes that the same virtue can permeate the various aspects of the human person. The virtue that we call "prudence" in the rational soul we call "temperance" in the lower part of the soul, and so forth. These virtues are to work together to unite the various parts of the soul and lead it to higher contemplation. Evagrius even names "justice" as that virtue that binds the various parts of the soul together and makes them

⁴⁸ *Skemmata* 2; PG 40, 1244A. For a full exegesis of this passage, see William Harmless, S.J., and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, S.J., "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The Skemmata of Evagrius Ponticus," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 498-529. Harmless and Fitzgerald argue that for Evagrius, pure prayer is a journey of self-discovery, but one that requires that the ascetic remove all representations of the natural world from the mind and attain a state of passionlessness. Here again, in contrast to the Syriac tradition, we find Evagrius de-emphasizing the importance of the body.

⁴⁹ *Praktikos* 100; SC 171, 710; For discussion, see Corrigan, 158.

work in union with each other.⁵⁰ Evagrius is not Gnostic, and he is not attempting to separate the body from the mind.

Nevertheless, Evagrius and Ephrem come at the mind-body relationship from significantly different directions. We can best trace that difference by paying attention to how they understand spiritual progression. For Evagrius, the goal of the ascetical life is to progress through the body to the ultimate contemplation of God. Although the body can be a source of authentic insight about the divine nature, it works best when contemplation on it leads the ascetic to the higher goal of contemplating the immaterial Trinity. Evagrius' theory of contemplation corresponds with his theology of creation, which understands the body as a sign of the Fall.⁵¹ For Ephrem, however, the goal of the ascetical life is to progress with the body to the Resurrection. Ephrem not only takes the body as the object of revelation, but he also thinks that it is a necessary element in the human transformation. Thus, whereas Evagrius sees the end of the ascetical journey as a state of being, Ephrem believes that the goal of human transformation is an actual place, a paradise which reflects the goodness of creation and the final hope for its redemption.

Mary's Body in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity*

One of the implications of Syriac asceticism's emphasis on the transformed body in the ascetical life is that it highlights the place of creation within Syriac asceticism. That is, for the Syriac tradition represented by Ephrem and the *Odes of Solomon*, the goal of the ascetical life is to transform or renew creation. Indeed, Ephrem conceives of paradise

⁵⁰ *Praktikos* 89; SC 171, 680.

⁵¹ See Corrigan, 45-6.

as an actual place is significant here, because the physicality of his descriptions of paradise implies that the materiality of the created world is an inherent good, no matter how Fallen it might be. Likewise, that Ephrem asserts that it is possible to surpass the goodness of paradise through the ascetical life, and that this “surpassing” takes place in human bodies further highlights the physical rootedness of his ascetical theology. In this Syriac tradition, the ascetic does not practice to escape the world, he or she practices to embrace the world.

Mary’s Bodily Transformation

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Mary plays a central role in Ephrem’s account of the body because of her fertility. If the world is to be embraced and transformed, these images of fertility allow Ephrem to show how that transformation can take place and to give his ascetics a set of “fertile” practices that will lead the ascetics to produce their own paradise – surpassing fruit.

We begin with a hymn from the first collection of the *Hymns on the Nativity*, identified now as “On the Messiahship of Jesus,” which presents us with Mary as an ascetical model for the imitation of Christ. Ephrem describes in detail the everyday images of a newborn infant with his human parents. Joseph carries him, while Mary feeds and holds him against her bosom. The portrait of a newly created family is repeated throughout the hymn, reflecting a common scene repeated throughout all of humankind, only now this familiar scene includes the divine Son as well.⁵² The Incarnation, which at first glance, might seem completely inaccessible, is now accessible through the most

⁵² *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.183-189; CSCO 186, 42.

natural and shared experience of all humankind--a birth. More significantly, the point of accessibility for the Christian is the central figure of Mary. Ephrem positions Mary not only as a human point of contact, but as an exemplar for the Christian's experience of bodily transformation.

Ephrem explores this theme throughout Hymn 4, which he uses to address the problem of the Fall and to show Mary's role in overcoming that problem. In the opening lines of the hymn, Ephrem presents the problem as the infertility of creation, and continues with a series of fertility images to express just what creation needs, such as "spring," (ܐܦܪܝܩܝܘܬܐ) (4.7), since the world is presented in "winter," (ܩܘܠܕܝܘܬܐ) (4.29, 121) in the midst of a "frost" (ܩܘܠܕܝܘܬܐ) (4.30).⁵³ Ephrem culminates this sterile imagery in verse 190 by equating the lifeless grave or pit of Sheol with the current state of the world. Christ is literally, and figuratively, conceived within a grave, the "Womb of Sheol" (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܫܘܐܠܐ).⁵⁴ This image serves to underscore the gap that exists between creation and the Creator. The image, furthermore, includes the understanding that the separation from God is within each human person. What has happened in humanity, therefore, and likewise in creation, is that we have lost our ability to conceive, to produce "fruit." Humanity's diminished fertility is the sign of the Fall.

⁵³ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.7, 29, 30, 41, 121.

⁵⁴ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.190; CSCO 186, 42. Brock, *Luminous Eye*, helpfully notes that Ephrem frequently uses "womb" to denote what Brock calls a "staging post" for the Incarnation. The three main "staging posts" are the womb of Sheol, Mary's womb, and the womb of the Jordan. In Brock's judgment, Ephrem uses this imagery, in part, to extend the effects of the Incarnation outside of time; in a real sense Ephrem believes that what Christ accomplished in the womb of Sheol is present in Mary's womb and in the womb of the Jordan (92). It is also worth noting, however, that Ephrem almost always employs this imagery in contexts that emphasize fertility. In the example that Brock cites, the added image is water. In *Hymns on Nativity 4*, the added image is Spring.

The solution to this problem is Mary's fertility. Through her womb, Mary can restore life to a barren creation. Ephrem deploys a number of fertility images to underscore this point. His favorite image is that of the womb (ܠܘܒܝܐ), which appears at least twelve times *Hymn 4*.⁵⁵ The image of the womb in the hymn provides the paradigm for the relationship between the feminine fertility of childbearing and Christ's incarnation. Ephrem describes both Mary and Christ as having wombs in which life dwells.⁵⁶ But it is Mary's womb—by Christ's power—that is able to bring forth Christ even as his own womb was productive of all creation. Ephrem's point seems to be that while Christ was becoming human, Christ still retained his divinity, that is, his power over all of creation. However, at this point in *Hymn 4*, the womb is the location of the Incarnation, and therefore the womb can also be the location of Christ's divine activity.⁵⁷ In some sense Mary's womb is the source of life for all of creation, the place where life is created, sustained, and borne into the world, and this life is not exclusive of the human life of the Son. There is a strong sense in which Ephrem is arguing that the Incarnation depends on the fertility of Mary. Just as a child depends on its mother's womb, the Son of God requires Mary's womb.

Ephrem extends this salvific theme by using a number of equally maternal images. Throughout *Hymn 4*, Ephrem uses the images of breast or bosom, milk, and sucking to describe the activity of Christ; the potency of the maternal body to fulfill and

⁵⁵ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.34, 85, 130, 154, 160-162, 165, 169, 171, 173-174, 176-177, 182, 190, 193.

⁵⁶ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.154; CSCO 186, 39.

⁵⁷ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.174-177; CSCO 16, 40.

sustain a newborn child is strongly linked to power of Christ. Ephrem compares a mother's milk sustaining the life of her nursing child to God's life-giving sustenance from which all creation draws nourishment.⁵⁸ This maternal image reveals the potency of the body to completely fulfill what it is created to do. The body's latent potential, now animated by the Incarnation, is awakened and newly capable of participating in the eternal life of God.⁵⁹ The feminine fertility language Ephrem deploys throughout *Hymn 4* demonstrates the role of the body in the encounter between the divine and the human. Mary, as a figure, provides an exemplar of this kind of encounter, one that is fully embodied and fully spiritual.⁶⁰

Ephrem believes that the life that begins in Mary's womb transfuses all of creation. In *Hymns on Virginity 5*, he introduces the image of light to describe how the Incarnation has transformed creation. In the original *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem identified Jesus as the one who brought forth the missing "radiance" (ܠܘܥܝܢܐ) into creation.⁶¹ The use of light in ascetical teachings to describe the unity between the divine and human is was common in the fourth-century. For example, Evagrius identifies the light or radiance of the ascetic who has entered into the "sapphire light" of the Trinity within his purified mind (nous).⁶² Radiance or light is for Evagrius, and for many Syriac-Christian writers that follow, a characteristic of perfect prayer. Unlike Evagrius,

⁵⁸ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.149; CSCO 186, 39. Also see 4.154, 184, 185, 191, 193.

⁵⁹ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.150; CSCO 186, 39.

⁶⁰ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.130; CSCO 186, 37.

⁶¹ *Hymns on Nativity* 5.5; CSCO 186, 45.

⁶² *Praktikos* 64; SC 171, 648.

however, the Syriac ascetical tradition takes a more corporeal understanding of light and radiance as being reflected within or from the human body of the ascetic. For ascetical writers such as Ephrem, the radiance of the human body is a clear sign of the restoration by Christ who, while in Mary's womb, transforms her body causing it to shine from within itself.⁶³ Ephrem's use of Christ's transformative presence in Mary's womb, a presence signaled by the light of her body, is thus a body-friendly account of the union between human and divine.

In the *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem extends this light image in a long reflection on the parable of the virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom. Here Ephrem interprets the missing "radiance" with the lamps that run out of oil; human bodies, because of the Fall, resemble the oil-less lamps.⁶⁴ The Incarnation, then, is the pouring of this vital oil back into humanity's lamp-body.⁶⁵ In doing so, Christ finds and restores the lost "image of Adam" to humanity and with that image restored, the ascetic can rightly apprehend Christ whose image humanity bears.⁶⁶ This is more so for those who remain chaste.

⁶³ See *Hymn on the Church* 36.3-6. Cited in Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 92.

⁶⁴ *Hymns on Virginity* 5.12; CSCO 223, 20.

⁶⁵ *Hymns on Virginity* 5.8 – 9; CSCO 223, 19.

⁶⁶ *Hymns on Virginity* 5.8; CSCO 223, 19. Murray notes that of the Syriac-speaking writers, Ephrem maintains the most developed Adamic theme, seeing both the primordial figure of Adam and Christ as the Second Adam as both "corporate personalities." And while other writers, such as Aphrahat, emphasize the spiritual body of the heavenly Adam, the impact of Ephrem's treatment of the Adam motif is to emphasize what Murray calls both Adams' "corporate personalities." See Murray, *Symbols*, 83.

Oil enriches the light of the lamps symbolically

The Anointed enriches the lamps of virgins espoused to Him.

The lamps take types from visible lamps.

For small is the light of the lamp whose [supply of] oil is small.

Since the time of the Bridegroom is not revealed to us, you virgins have become our Watchers

So that your lamps might gladden, and your hosannas might glorify.⁶⁷

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Ephrem equates virginity here with the angelic state. The virgin's lamps (bodies—see 5.12) are a sign of the restoration accomplished through the Incarnation.⁶⁸ But here again, the first person to experience this revitalization by Christ is Mary. Ephrem

⁶⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 5.10; CSCO 223. 19. ET in McVey, 107.

⁶⁸ Ephrem's sense that the ascetical practice of chastity transforms our apprehension of both Christ and the ascetic's body corresponds to what Patricia Cox Miller as an important dimension of ascetical practices. According to Miller, fasting and other practices, "offer to perception a body so different that it can be declared "angelic" and still retain its status as human" (150, here in reference to Ephrem). See Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Asceticism and the "Body from Nowhere,"" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 137-153. We might extend this insight to Ephrem's Mariology in that he believes that Mary's celibacy becomes an agent both of ontological transformation in anticipation of the Resurrection, but also of transformed perception about what constitutes true humanity.

describes Mary as the one who gave birth to the “Light” (ܐܘܪܐ).⁶⁹ Even though his primary theme is the light supplied by the oil, Ephrem cannot escape water and fertility imagery in this hymn. Thus the waters that would take a life, such as those of the womb or those of the sea, are now life-giving such that those who would perish in the womb, drowning, are now rescued just as Mary and Peter are by oil of the “Anointed One.”⁷⁰

Signs of the Solution

What then is the result of this transformative work on the ascetic’s body? The Marian material gives Ephrem an effective image to describe how ascetics should open themselves to Christ, namely, by imitating Mary’s openness in perceiving and so allowing Christ to enter.⁷¹ However, the Mary imagery also allows Ephrem to emphasize the bodily dimension of the ascetical journey. In a hymn from the original collection of “Hymns on the Nativity,” Ephrem assumes Mary’s voice to describe the freedom of the virgin who has conceived rightly and thus becomes a dwelling place of Christ.⁷² Mary continues in the hymn describing her Son in some classic Ephremic imagery, as the “bread” (ܐܘܪܐ), “bridal chamber” (ܩܘܪܐ) and “robe of glory” (ܩܘܪܐ ܕܗܘܪܐ).⁷³ It is Christ who for the chaste provides everyday essentials of those that preserve themselves for him. Ephrem’s emphasis on these essentials, through the voice of Mary reflecting on her mother Eve, not only addresses the immediate concerns of maintaining chastity, but it

⁶⁹ *Hymns on Virginity* 5.3; CSCO 223, 18.

⁷⁰ *Hymns on Virginity* 5.14; CSCO 223, 20.

⁷¹ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.132; CSCO 186, 37.

⁷² *Hymns on Nativity* 17.5; CSCO 186, 88.

⁷³ *Hymns on Nativity* 17.6-7; CSCO 186, 88.

reflects again the role of Marian fertility in signaling the redemption of creation. These needs of food, clothing, and intimacy are not simply a temporal aspect of humanity's condition, but an eternal one. The ascetic is freed from the world but, ironically, gains the world. This corresponds both to Eve's Fall in that the Fall resulted in the loss of freedom and also the way that Ephrem connects Mary's fertility and chastity to the restoration of creation.

Ephrem also develops a creative analysis of the freedom of Mary and its effects on creation. Ephrem contrasts the figures of Mary and Eve, and their individual freedoms. Eve, having put on "leaves of shame" (ܠܘܘܐܝܡ ܠܥܝܢܐ) must now labor with worldly concerns unlike her daughter, Mary, who in her virginity, has put on "the garment of glory" (ܠܘܘܐܝܡ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܝܐ).⁷⁴ However, in an interesting turn, Ephrem develops what the loss of the garment by Eve truly means for humanity. Humanity has lost its freedom as evidenced by Eve's shame. Yet through Mary's invitation to all persons to accept Christ and so, by implication, accept this new vision of fertility, Ephrem demonstrates that it is chastity which secures our freedom and signals our restoration. Ephrem describes this vision in Mary's voice as she disavows Eve's example

⁷⁴ *Hymns on Nativity* 17.4; CSCO 186, 88. As we have already discussed, the theme of the "Robe of Glory" has a long tradition in Syriac literature, and as we see here it is especially important to Ephrem's soteriology. Ephrem's thought in this passage corresponds to his general use of the image. As Brock as shown, Ephrem developed it within the context of an exegetical tradition that saw the loss of the "robe of glory" as a sign of the Fall. When Christ "puts on" a body, therefore, Ephrem believes that he restores the possibility of glory to the human condition (252). Brock goes on to show that the way Ephrem works out this theme appears in a number of theological contexts, including his treatment of Christ's and our baptisms and Resurrections. It is noteworthy again how body-centric this theology is, and how Ephrem adapts this exegetical tradition to emphasize Mary's role in restoring the glory. See Sebastian Brock, "The Robe of Glory: A Biblical Image in the Syriac Tradition," *The Way* 39 (1999): 247-259.

and assures the chaste that their virtue will be guarded by her Son.⁷⁵ All fears are addressed by Christ, Mary reassures in the hymn, and these burdens can now be let go as the intended role of humanity in creation is to share in the life of God.

Thus the primary sign of this ascetical practice in the body is the practice of chastity. It is important to note that chastity, for Ephrem, is extended beyond just the purity of the individual human's physical state. Physical virginity is central, but there is a moral component for the ascetic as well that focuses on the kind of relationships the ascetic develops not only with God, but with others and the world. Ephrem continues in Mary's voice through the hymn, claiming that the slave has carried a "double yoke" (ܠܥܘܠܡ ܕܥܝܠܘܬܝܢ) and so will be rewarded doubly for his or her labor.⁷⁶ The work of the body, both as an earthly worker and a heavenly one, gains the gift of Christ's blessing. Ephrem suggests that Mary's invitation to join her in this new relationship does not disown the current condition the individual finds him or herself in, such as free-born or slave. These conditions do not change in the temporal, earthly state. A slave remains a slave. Rather, in joining her, the human experiences an interior change that is only experienced through her Son. This interior change is a new freedom, and very much like the restored fertility signified and fulfilled the chaste life of Mary, it produces an emancipation of earthly cares for the individual. Thus, Ephrem goes on to describe that in her Son the "enslaved woman" is "a freewoman" as a sign of this interior attainment.

⁷⁵ *Hymns on Nativity* 17.7; CSCO 186, 88.

⁷⁶ *Hymns on Nativity* 17.9; CSCO 186, 88.

My Son, the free-born woman is also Your handmaiden

if she serves You, and the enslaved woman
in You is a freewoman. By You she is consoled

that she is a freed woman. Invisible emancipation
is placed in her bosom if she loves You.⁷⁷

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The state of freedom remains invisible to all outside of Christ. The “enslaved woman” (ܕܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܐ) is still subjugated to the external observer, but in Christ she is a “free-born woman” (ܕܘܢܐ ܕܘܢܐ). The free woman becomes Christ’s slave, while the slave is freed by Christ. This change of status serves as a powerful salvific image for the ascetical vision as it anticipates, through Mary’s voice, the realized transformation of the human individual. It should be noted that this invitation begins with Mary’s observation about Eve and Eve’s duress, as well as that of her children, after the Fall. The contrast of Eve’s life to that of her daughter Mary’s is a favorite poetic implement of Ephrem’s. Hymn 17, however, continues by having Mary invite women to join her in becoming handmaidens, brides, and servants to her Son. Mary restored the early status of Eve whose loss was her own birthright, Eve’s own spiritual birth from heaven. Mary, because of her chastity, conceived in her womb and gave birth to the Divine Son; in doing so, Mary’s motherhood sanctified her, freeing her from the emptiness of Eve’s infertile curse.

⁷⁷ *Hymns on Nativity* 17.10; CSCO 186, 89; ET in McVey, 155.

Ephrem's emphasis on the correlation between the ascetical life and sight helps explain his use of the metaphor of "hiddenness" in the Messiah hymns (=Hymns 1-4 of *Hymns on the Nativity*).⁷⁸ Ephrem may be using "hiddenness" here as an allusion to the Trinitarian Controversy. Nearly every time he uses that motif in Hymn 4, it refers to the divinity of Christ which is "hidden" (ܠܡ ܕ) from view.⁷⁹ This hiddenness motif accomplishes two things for Ephrem's theology of the body. One is Ephrem's assertion that in the Incarnation the divinity and power of Christ is being made known in such a way as to bring life to all of creation.

Mary bore a mute Babe
though in Him were hidden all our tongues.

Joseph carried Him, yet hidden in Him was
a silent nature older than everything.

The Lofty One became like a little child, yet hidden in Him

⁷⁸ A number of scholars have recognized the importance of divine "hiddenness" within Ephrem's theological vision. Ephrem, like many of his contemporaries, held that a great gap exists between the Creator and creation as a consequence of the Fall. Likewise, humanity lacks the ability to cross that gap by its own powers, but does retain the capacity to find the types and symbols within creation that reveal previews of the divine reality to come. And it is this very capacity for discovery of God's self-revelation within creation, as well as the indications of divine reality themselves as seen by the ascetic's "eye of faith," that point to the restoration of creation by God's movement within the world. The fullest expression of God's hiddenness in the world is the Incarnation. It is Christ, via the Incarnation, who links together both the natural world and divine reality. Mary, herself a symbol both as an individual but also a corporate figure, serves to communicate many different meanings of the divine reality within Ephrem's framework. One meaning is the role of the body itself in the transformation and salvation of humanity. In fact, Ephrem often uses the images of barren, biblical women who through the blessing of God bring forth children as models for the ascetic who to must bring forth the Christ-child. Only with the "eye of faith" does the Christian perceive these blessings and the interconnectedness of all the rich, multi-faceted symbols within God's created world. See Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 27 – 29.

⁷⁹ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.146 -148, 165, 172, 180, 193; CSCO 186, 38-39, 40, 41,43.

was
a treasure of Wisdom that suffices for all.

He was lofty but he sucked Mary's milk,
and from His blessings all creation sucks.⁸⁰

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However, the fertility itself is not hidden, and Ephrem wants to account for moments when the hiddenness emerges and can be seen. The key to this motif remains the child's relationship with his mother. Once again, Ephrem draws on maternal fertility images to explain both how the the Son affects creation. But he also here suggests that the nurturing relationship between mother and child is a sign of the child's divinity and power. The true ascetic, the one who can truly see Christ, can see in the mother – child relationship how the Son himself has become the “mother” of Mary.⁸¹

Conclusions

To conclude this discussion of Mary's fertility and Ephrem's theology of the body: in the *Hymns on Virginity* and the *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem means to articulate the fullness and universality of Christ's identification with humanity. Indeed,

⁸⁰ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.146-149; CSCO 186, 38.

⁸¹ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.185; CSCO 186, 42.

Christ, like all of humanity, has “taken off His glory.”⁸² He now wears a garment measured and woven by Mary, a garment that cannot “measure his grandeur.”⁸³ Christ, newly clothed by his mother, “has made Himself small.”⁸⁴ And yet, unlike those born of the barren earth, Christ entered the world through “the birthpangs of virginity.”⁸⁵ The emphasis on Mary’s virginal womb is significant because it indicates the culmination of Christ’s reconciling act through the Incarnation. Christ conceives creation even as he was conceived in Mary’s womb.⁸⁶ Mary’s womb analogous to the divine womb is now also a place and source of new life. Moreover, Mary’s womb, is for the ascetic, a sign of God’s compassion for humanity. The Incarnation took place specifically in the body of Mary, and in doing so, revealed the body as a means for knowing God for all humanity. Mary’s profound experience of being filled with the Son of God is extended by Ephrem to all persons; all humans must make themselves dwelling places of Christ.⁸⁷ Within the intimacy of pregnancy and birth, Mary conceives God and in doing so remains chaste.⁸⁸ Her chastity, in turn, opens Mary to have perceived and so allowed Christ dwell within her. The body itself, therefore, becomes and dwelling place for Christ, and chastity is the means by which the ascetic can allow Christ to enter. For Ephrem, this dwelling of Christ

⁸² *Hymns on Nativity* 4.188; CSCO 186, 42.

⁸³ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.187; CSCO 186, 42.

⁸⁴ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.188; CSCO 186, 42.

⁸⁵ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.121-22; CSCO 186, 36.

⁸⁶ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.154; CSCO 186, 39.

⁸⁷ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.130; CSCO 186, 37.

⁸⁸ *Hymns on Nativity* 4.132; CSCO 186, 37.

within the Christian is epitomized in Mary, whose pregnancy and motherhood symbolize the bodily as well as the spiritual change produced by the Incarnation.⁸⁹

⁸⁹*Hymns on Nativity* 4.145; CSCO 186, 38.

CHAPTER 4

FEMALENESS AS THE ASCETIC IDEAL

Most treatments of women in late antiquity focus on the kinds of issues raised in Chapter 3. As we saw there, in these accounts, women are problematic because of their bodies, both in terms of bodily functions such as menstruation and especially because of their sexuality and role in childbearing. However, recent scholarly studies have also explored the role of women as participants in the ascetic life on their own terms. Especially noteworthy here is Susanna Elm's groundbreaking work on fourth-century asceticism, in which she argues that women played a decisive role in the development of some aspects of the rise of asceticism at the end of the fourth-century, and Gillian Cloke's work on portrayals of women in the mid fourth-century.¹ Cloke's monograph

¹ See Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age AD 350-450* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995); Suzanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). As we saw in Chapter 1, Elm is primarily interested in the role of women in the construction of Orthodoxy in fourth-century asceticism, and so many of her arguments and conclusions lie outside of the scope of this chapter. However, one of Elm's many contributions is her chapter on the *Vita S. Macrinae*, which helps establish its importance as a witness to the possibility of a positive portrayal of women within the milieu of fourth-century asceticism. See also Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-styles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Antique Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, 1994, 155-184; Gillian Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Gender and Status," in *The Ascetic Dimension in Religious Life and Culture*, ed. V. L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, (New York: OUP, 1995), 33-48; I. Kalavrezou, "Representations of Women in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium," in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. S. L. James and S. Dillon (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2012), 513-525.

articulates the problems in studying the influence of women on the development of fourth-century asceticism and the place of women in the ascetical movement. As she notes, one of the problems when investigating the portrayals of women in the mid fourth-century is that these portrayals are almost always written by men, such as Jerome, who were suspicious of the women they were describing. Accordingly, it is often necessary to adduce information about the place of women in the development of asceticism from texts that were written for other purposes. This is, again, why Gregory's *Vita S. Macrinae* is so important to our understanding of how women could be portrayed (12). Cloke's conclusions about portrayals of women in the fourth-century are indicative of the general trend of this scholarship and are worth quoting:

And yet, despite all the examples of these powerful women. . .feminine spirituality as a concept had no currency in the eyes of the patristic writers of their period—indeed, to these guardians of the perceptions of the church it was almost a contradiction in terms. To the Fathers, women remained 'harlots or hearthkeepers' (Ward 1985: 66); the constant re-iteration of the theme 'so holy was she that she was more man than woman' in fact only serves to reinforce this. The paradigm of patristic thought on women was that women were not holy; they were created of error, of superstition, of carnal disposition—the Devil's gateway. This being so, anyone holy enough to [be] an exemplar of the faith could not be a woman: every one of the many who achieved fame through piety was held to 'surpass her sex'—never, be it noted, to elevate the expectations that might [be] held of her sex. The argument is self-fulfilling: however many of this kind of women there were, in being superior they were always excepted from their sex, never taken as representative; always regarded as a superior anomaly from their sex and in spite of it, and never as an example of their sex's capacity.²

It is not my purpose in this chapter to counter the notion that some male ascetical writers in the fourth-century distrusted women because of their gender. However, Cloke and many of the scholars interested in this topic pay relatively little attention to Ephrem,

² Cloke, *This Female Man*, 135.

and I do want to argue that placing Ephrem's treatment of women in this context sheds new light on the possibilities of positive portrayals of women in the fourth-century. In this chapter we will situate Ephrem's treatment of Mary in the context of fourth-century Christian treatments of women by comparing Ephrem on Mary and other women to Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*. The *Vita S. Macrinae* is not the only positive treatment of women from the fourth-century, but I agree with Elm that it is the most significant and one of the only full-length fourth-century ascetical documents to reveal the important place of women in the development of asceticism.³ My argument is not only that Ephrem's treatment of Mary belongs in the conversation about the role of women in late antiquity, but that including Ephrem in this conversation helps us recognize strategies that he and other writers used to describe women as moral exemplars. As we will see, Ephrem applies what he learns about Mary's virtue to other women and in so doing offers a wide-ranging treatment of women as ideals for all Christians. We see a similar strategy in the *Life of Macrina*.

However, the ultimate argument of this chapter is that Gregory's understanding of how Macrina is an example of the ideal ascetic differs significantly from how Ephrem understands Mary and the other women precisely because, unlike Gregory, Ephrem believes that Mary and the other women's femaleness is what makes them able to open themselves to Christ and the ascetical life. Both Gregory and Ephrem are willing to offer women as ascetical ideals. Gregory portrays Macrina as an ideal ascetic because she

³ This point is also made effectively by Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 19, ed. L. Wickham and C. Bammel (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 227-246.

shows how to transcend gender, which is something every ascetic strives to do. But Ephrem, perhaps uniquely among fourth-century ascetical writers, is interested in offering a gendered portrayal of the ascetical life, one in which the gendered experiences of femaleness point the way towards the ideal ascetical life. The differences between Gregory and Ephrem on this point offer a useful means of tracking the various theological trajectories of late fourth-century asceticism, but the comparison between the two is especially useful as a way of recognizing Ephrem's willingness to use femaleness itself as an ascetical ideal.

Life of Macrina and the Angelic Life

Scholars have long been attracted to the Macrina's role as a teacher, and a great deal of important scholarship has explored Macrina's asceticism by examining her pedagogical activity along with the pedagogical function of the text itself.⁴ Earlier scholarship was interested in the Neo-Platonic elements of Macrina's teaching.⁵ More

⁴ See now, for example, Ellen Muehlberger, "Salvage: Macrina and the Christian Project of Cultural Reclamation," *Church History* 81 (June 2012): 273–297.

⁵ See A.H. Armstrong, "Platonic Elements in St. Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Man," *Dominican Studies* I (1948): 113-126; Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1944). For analysis of the *Life of Macrina* text itself that emphasizes Macrina as an ideal philosopher, see Pierre Marval's "Introduction" to his *Sources chrétiennes* edition of *Vie de sainte Macrine*, (Paris: Cerf, 1971), 90-105. Each of these studies has specifically examined the philosophical background of St. Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine and has been successful in teasing out the Platonic antecedents of his corpus. These scholars have made it clear that Gregory's works are not simply pieces of undigested Platonism with Christian trappings by showing how Gregory's doctrines are thoroughly Christian and, in many ways, original. "Platonism" does not exhaust the full range of Gregory's spiritual tradition, however. Gregory also uses apocalyptic theology to help Christians realize they are living between the two Comings, and that living in this state requires us to achieve more than the ideal, Platonic mystical experience. Instead it demands that the Christian must experience a continuous dying. It is through death, which begins at Baptism, that

recent scholarship, however, has shifted focus to Macrina's status as an angel and her role in guiding Gregory and his readers into the angelic life.⁶ I will follow this latter approach in this chapter. By recognizing the angelic elements in Gregory's thought, we can gain two important insights into how Gregory portrays Macrina as an ideal ascetic, both of which will, in turn, shed light on how Ephrem portrays women as ascetical exemplars. The first of these insights concerns Macrina's administration of the apocalyptic cure. As Gregory portrays her, Macrina's pedagogical function is not primarily to instruct her followers. Instead, she "cures" them by revealing to them, both in her actions and words, the reality of the angelic life, and so inspires them to attain that life. As we will see, this approach has some similarities to Ephrem's portrayal of women, especially in their common use of apocalyptic categories. The second insight concerns the role of gender in the angelic life. Gregory ultimately portrays Macrina as genderless because he believes that gender has no place in the angelic life. As a result, that Macrina is a woman becomes both crucial to his portrayal of her and irrelevant to it. He is intrigued by her gender, but in the end, what makes her so special is her ability to transcend her gender. In this, I will

the Christian begins the restoration of the perfect, paradisaal mode of being. That perfection is expressed in the resurrection (Daniélou, 2-45). Other studies include: J. Carvarnos, "The Relation of the Body and Soul in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa," in *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie: Zweites Internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa*, ed. H. Dorrie, M. Altenburger and U. Schramm, (Leiden, 1976), 61-78; and G. Ladner, "The Philosophical Anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa," *Dumarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 59-74.

⁶ See especially J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2004); Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Analogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

argue, Gregory's portrayal of the ideal female ascetic departs significantly from Ephrem's.

Macrina and the Apocalyptic Cure

In his account of his sister Saint Macrina's life and death, Gregory of Nyssa makes it clear that he believes Macrina achieves "angelic" status. It is as an angel that Macrina administers, to Gregory and to others surrounding her, a form of what scholars call the "apocalyptic cure." Macrina demonstrates her angelic status to those around her by "curing" them, that is, by revealing God's overarching plan and assuring Gregory and the others of God's eternal providence. Her angelic status provides hope that there is a realized end that contrasts with our present reality, and so, for Gregory, Macrina is a moral exemplar for all Christians because her spiritual discipline allows her to become a location or contact point between heaven and earth.

Gregory's portrayal of Macrina is highly stylized, and he takes pains to describe Macrina in idealistic terms.⁷ From the beginning Macrina is set apart from others by her birth, which is heralded by a dream-vision that her mother experiences.⁸ In the dream, a figure described in angelic terms appears to Macrina's mother and addresses the infant by

⁷ For the literary style of *Life of Macrina*, see Marval, "Introduction," 114-133.

⁸ Virginia Woods Callahan, ed., *Vita S. Macrinae*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (=GNO 8.1), ed. Werner Jaeger (Leiden, Brill, 1959), 372, line 23. I will refer to this work as VSM and cite the page and line numbers in GNO 8.1, which is the standard scholarly critical edition of Gregory's works. Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from Virginia Woods Callahan, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church 58 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 1967).

the name of Thecla, a famous virgin.⁹ Waking, the Cappadocian mother finds her dream realized and her child born. The vision that Macrina experienced within the womb foretells her unique childhood and her celibate life. Gregory creates a framework in which he indicates how the divine clearly marks Macrina's life early on. It establishes her purity, and it witnesses to her as one set aside in God's providence for a special service or mission. Within the vision that Gregory describes, Macrina's life has been set into motion by a power apart from this world. Her history is not her own, but it becomes a window to the greater cosmic order.

Gregory uses two models or images to describe how Macrina achieves this ideal. The first is an ascetic model. In stylistic and theological terms, Gregory's account of Macrina's life follows the archetype of the desert ascetics. She does not study secular subjects but is fed upon a spiritual curriculum of the Scriptures and prayer.¹⁰ Macrina follows a routine of prayer, work, and contemplation that Gregory interprets as part of her discipline, even in childhood.¹¹ Her call to virginity is intensified as she refuses her father's command that she marry upon the death of her betrothed; instead, Macrina is determined to "to spend the rest of her life by herself." Throughout the text there are numerous examples of the practices of manual labor, simple clothing, fasting, and

⁹ For a comparison between Gregory's portrayal of Macrina and "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," see Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Macrina: Virgin and Teacher," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17 (1979): 105-117. It seems likely that Gregory used the story of Thecla as a model when composing the *Vita S. Macrinae*.

¹⁰ *VSM*, 373.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

vigilance.¹² These outward manifestations are used to reflect the ultimate goal of Macrina's life: attainment of the resurrected life. The practice of service, poverty, humility, and virtue are for Gregory a conditioning of the mind that makes it receptive to the divine will.¹³

The second main image in Gregory's portrait of his sister is that of teacher or philosopher. In this role, Macrina's life becomes a compass for her mother and siblings spiritual direction. As Marval shows, Gregory describes Macrina the philosopher according to philosophical ideals that existed in fourth-century Hellenistic literature.¹⁴ Thus, for example, Macrina achieves philosophical perfection by engaging in perpetual progress towards greater purity.¹⁵ Likewise, Macrina achieves liberation from the human passions, thereby achieving *apatheia*. By denying the material world, Macrina escapes her body and thereby escapes her human, corporeal nature and becomes incorporeal.¹⁶ In

¹² VSM, 374 – 5.

¹³ Gregory's account of Macrina mirrors certain aspect of Athanasius' account of Antony in *Life of Antony*. Like Macrina, Antony considers every act a way to reflect the ultimate goal of the Christian, the attainment of eternal life. See, for example, *Vita Antonii* 7, PG 26, 847.

¹⁴ For Macrina as a philosopher see Marval, "Introduction," 90-103 and Rowan Williams, "Deathbed."

¹⁵ VSM, 383 (4-5).

¹⁶ Maraval, 95. Maraval discusses Macrina's angelic status in this passage as another example of her as philosopher (96-97). However, Gregory seems to use the angelic motif to include more than just Macrina's philosophical achievements. Gregory describes the existence of Macrina and her community's as bordering "on both the human and the incorporeal nature." He wants to affirm their bodily appearance while at the same time communicate the state of their perfection which was freed from human cares. Thus their natures were both human and not. It is precisely at this point where the Platonic background falls short. Macrina and her community are not just escaping the

short, Macrina becomes a spiritual guide, especially for her family members. Not only does she instruct them in spiritual matters, but the lives of her family members are caught up in Macrina's own ascension toward God. Through her own contemplation and service, Macrina provides a model of the philosophical life to those around her. She instructs her family in contemplation and virtue, teaching them how to escape the body and achieve *apatheia*.¹⁷

Gregory brings both of these images, philosopher and ascetic, together when he calls Macrina an angel. Gregory believed that Macrina's life was aimed heavenwards and expressed the hope of the resurrection. The true expression of her perfection was in her angelic likeness in form and in spirit. As Macrina became detached from this world and escaped her body, so did her life attain an "imitation of the existence of angels" (πρὸς μίμησιν τῆς τῶν ἀγγέλων).¹⁸ Not only did Macrina and her community imitate the heavenly world, but they participated in it through the portal of their perfection.¹⁹ Gregory consistently describes Macrina's life not only as angelic but celestial. He understands her to be presently living in her paradisaal state, which means that she is like the angels.

Therefore, not only is Macrina Gregory's philosophical sage, but she is his angelic guide, ministering to him as his mediator and helper. By naming Macrina an

material body; their elevation is in the context of a divine order and understood primarily through the resurrection, a resurrection that, for Gregory, takes place in this life.

¹⁷ For discussion of this point, including examples from Greco-Roman lives of philosophers, see Maraval, "Introduction," 102.

¹⁸ *VSM* 382 (6); ET in Callahan, 171.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

angel, Gregory calls upon a longstanding tradition in which angels are mediators, teachers, guides, helpmates, and participants in the heavenly liturgy, a tradition that is especially prevalent in apocalyptic literature.²⁰ The theme of angelic mediation is especially evident in apocalyptic texts such as the books of Daniel, Qumran literature, and early ascetical literature such as *Life of Antony*. The classic archetype for the desert tradition, the *Life of Antony* develops the apocalyptic theme of mingling between the human and angelic worlds. For example, Antony claims that the purity of the soul is what enables one to see the angels who are not of this world.²¹ In contrast, demons, which are of this world since they are anchored by their passions are more easily seen and are more dangerous for the monk, who might mistake the demon for an angelic figure.

Furthermore, in *Antony* the ascetic himself takes on angelic status. Upon emerging from

²⁰ Debate concerning the term *apocalyptic* has taken place for over a century. There is now widespread agreement that rather than considering *apocalyptic* to refer to a manner or mode of thinking, it can be best considered by understanding *apocalyptic* as a technique. Whatever the underlying problem the text is grappling with, the manner in which it is being framed is what defines the text or passage as *apocalyptic*. For an apocalyptic perspective, the problem is framed by the supernatural world and by the eschatological judgment. Thus, the function for apocalyptic material or thought is primarily a message of hope, strength, and ultimate reliance upon God. It provides a framework for belief or thought and seeks to re-establish the faith which God demands. Most importantly, apocalyptic thought or material communicates that actual history experienced is in union with the larger, universal providence. Both are orientated toward the same goal: hope and trust in God. Thus, the apocalyptic technique frames the smaller and more immediate struggle within the context of a larger picture. In such a framework, fears of things like death or vices are no longer a human limitation; they are part of a process, things to be overcome in pursuit of restating one's relationship with God. For further discussion see: E. J. C. Tigchelaar, "More on Apocalyptic and Apocalypses," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 18 (1987): 137-144; J. J. Collins, "Genre, Ideology, and Social Movements in Jewish Apocalypticism," in *Mysteries and Revelations. Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium*, ed. J. J. Collins and J. H. Charlesworth (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1991), 11-32.

²¹ VA 34, PG 26, 843.

the abandoned fortress after twenty years, Antony's state of being has changed. Those who had come "were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition...The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection.... He maintained an utter equilibrium."²² His body was still human. Athanasius is clear in this passage that Antony was governed by reason and existed according to his nature. However, the lack of change in his body after twenty years, the acts Antony undertook after his reemergence, such as administering acts of healing and took on students to his discipline, all point to his angelic appearance.²³

Placing Macrina against this background sheds additional light on her role within *Life of Macrina* as the angelic figure who administers an apocalyptic cure. "Apocalyptic cure" is a scholarly construct that describes a facet of apocalyptic thought in which the apocalyptic guide provides further revelation necessary to make sense of human experience. An example of an apocalyptic cure occurs in the *Testament of Abraham*. In this text, Abraham refuses to obey the divine command to die. In the early part of the narrative, Abraham attempts to evade death, but Death eventually tricks Abraham, and then angels come to convey his soul to heaven. At this point, the archangel Michael becomes Abraham's guide through the heavenly realm, especially the final judgment. So when Abraham faints at the prospect of being judged, Michael is able to instruct him about God's providence and mercy. Thus, the *Testament* makes Abraham a point of reference for all humans, because, like all humans, even Abraham must face death.

²² VA 14, PG 26, 874.

²³ Ibid.

However, by witnessing the extension of human experience to include Abraham's eschatological journey, the reader can then receive a "cure" for fear of death. The revelations Abraham receives at the judgment scene unmask the hideousness of death, but the victory of death is empty in the context of God's judgment.²⁴

The key component of the apocalyptic cure is an angelic figure who administers the cure by turning the subject's attention toward a more transcendent perspective. The angel can "cure" the subject either directly or by a dream. In *Life of Macrina*, the angelic Macrina patiently explains that her death is part of a larger divine plan.²⁵ By doing so, Macrina reorients Gregory's present grief by placing it in context of the grand design of God's salvific plan. Macrina reassures Gregory and gives him a basis for overcoming his grief. This basis is the divine knowledge Macrina gives him that convicts Gregory of the deliverance entailed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Macrina assures Gregory that the eschatological age has already begun, and in addition to her instruction, her life confirms and illuminates this belief. Macrina's philosophical detachment testifies to her belief in the vindication beyond death, and her struggle for perfection undercuts Gregory's grief. Macrina, in her role as a divine messenger, assuages Gregory's grief by placing her death (and that of their other deceased siblings) within a proper, transcendent perspective. As Rowan Williams points out, the remedy for Gregory's grief is that he come to some understanding of what happens to Macrina's soul at death. Williams also

²⁴ "Apocalyptic Cure" was first identified by J.-C. Picard in "Observations sur l'Apocalypse grecque de Baruch.I: Cadre historique et efficacité symbolique," *Semitica* 20 (1970): 77 – 103.

²⁵ *VSM*, 390 (4).

argues that there is a philosophical side to this remedy.²⁶ However, Macrina's remedy also includes aspects and techniques of the apocalyptic cure as well.

Gregory, thus, emphasizes Christ's exaltation through lives that sought to emulate him. Within his narrative, Macrina's living, flesh-and-blood example brings expression to God's divine love and to the Christian hope in the Resurrection. Macrina's dying prayers illustrate this hope in the rapture and glorification, and it is in this context that she demands from Gregory cheerfulness in place of grief.²⁷ Gregory is, eventually, cured by Macrina, and soon after her death he commands her attendants to observe Macrina's instructions by ceasing to wail and by beginning to singing psalms. Moreover, Gregory takes Macrina's post-death luminosity as a sign of grace and divine power—further proof of Macrina's angelic status and, by implication, the hope and healing her life offered.²⁸

In *Life of Macrina*, Gregory's description of his sister as an angel draws upon a rich tradition in which angels guide and instruct humans. Faced with Gregory's overwhelming grief at her impending death, Macrina administers an "apocalyptic cure." By using this therapeutic technique, Macrina frames Gregory's immediate fear of death within a more proper, transcendent context. She gently urges him to remember his hope in the resurrection and to understand her death as part of her ascension. Her own

²⁶ Williams, "Deathbed," 233. Williams, drawing on both *On the Soul and Resurrection* and *Life of Macrina*, believes that the key question Gregory must answer is "what the soul is," or "what its nature is." Gregory's grief, according to Williams, helps move him toward the answer to these questions.

²⁷ *VSM*, 391-2.

²⁸ *VSM*, 406 (10-21). This is a crucial passage for the entire narrative, as it marks the moment when Gregory visualizes Macrina's transformation into the angelic state.

conviction of this hope is exemplified by her life and practice of virtue. Within this context, therefore, Gregory's fear and grief are transformed into consolation and hope. Macrina uses knowledge of God's divine design to assure Gregory of God's eternal providence, and her angelic status provides Gregory with hope in the realized end, even after her death.

The Genderless Angel

The second feature of Gregory's portrayal of Macrina as an angel is her genderlessness. The question of Macrina's gender has attracted significant scholarly attention, though in the *Vita S. Macrinae*, at least, this scholarship agrees that the issue is straightforward.²⁹ For Gregory, Macrina's attainment of the angelic life both results in and is caused by her transcending her gendered body. Macrina's body is not irrelevant in Gregory's view. When it becomes angelic, however, it transforms into a reality in which gender does not exist. As Warren Smith and Morwenna Ludlow have recently argued, Gregory's suspicion of Macrina's gender corresponds to his theological anthropology as a whole. For Gregory, the soul is the source of Christian freedom, and while the body matters as a way of interacting with the world, gender is ultimately a sign of the fall. In the Resurrection, human bodies will in some sense retain their created gender, but those distinctions will play no role in the eschatological angelic life.³⁰ Genderlessness will become the norm. And so, from almost the beginning of the text, Gregory is at pains to

²⁹ See now the very useful discussion in Boersma, 109-116.

³⁰ Smith, 42. Ludlow cites the following from *On the Making of Humanity* (16. 18): "Human nature as a whole, extending from first to last, is the single image of the one who is; but the distinction of kind into male and female was added last to what was made" (161).

show that Macrina transcends her gender. At the death of their brother Naucratius, Macrina famously does not succumb to her “nature” (φύσις) and give in to her grief. Instead, she is able to remain passionless and offer comfort to her mother and recall her mother to the philosophical life. Gregory’s use of nature here is oblique: persons of any gender can succumb to passion in Gregory’s theology, but he makes a point here of connecting Macrina’s ability to overcome her nature with her refusal to act “womanly” (γυναικός).³¹ In his introductory remarks to Olympius, Gregory even wonders whether Macrina could even be called woman since she so transcended her nature.³² Gregory’s emphasis on Macrina’s transcendence of her gender is significant because, as Boersma correctly notes, he believes that the angelic life is genderless. Accordingly, one of the most important signs of her entry into that life is her own genderlessness.³³

Thus, while Gregory’s portrayal of Macrina falls within the broader tradition of ascetical writers who were suspicious of the female gender, in the case of Macrina, at least, his suspicion was less about femaleness than gender itself. In Gregory’s view of asceticism, the goal of the ascetical life was to anticipate the angelic life, which was for Gregory, genderless. That the angelic life will be genderless suggests to Gregory that any gender is capable of anticipating it, and his experience of Macrina only confirmed that suspicion.

³¹ *VSM*, 380 (24).

³² *VSM*, 371. As Boersma notes, throughout the text Gregory puts himself in the position of the traditional “female,” frequently weeping and losing his sense of reason, a rhetorical move that heightens his portrayal of Macrina’s loss of gender (109).

³³ Boersma, 111. For the background in Jewish-Christian thought to the notion that angels are genderless, see Kevin Sullivan, “Sexuality and Gender of Angels,” in *Paradise Regained: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April D. DeConick (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 211-228.

Women as Exemplars in Ephrem's Theology

Gregory's portrayal of Macrina's asceticism stands as a vital witness to the positive portrayals of women as ascetics in the fourth-century. Indeed, in a manner reminiscent of Ephrem's portrayal of Mary, Macrina is the ideal ascetic, and he uses her example to set the standard by which the ascetic can enter into the resurrected or angelic life. It is too much to suggest that Gregory and Ephrem's use of female exemplars represents a trend in fourth-century ascetical writings. Even so, that they both choose female exemplars confirms the findings of some scholarly research into fourth-century asceticism that has emphasized the significant role played by women in the development and practice of Christian asceticism.

More importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, Gregory's portrayal of Macrina helps highlight two general features of Ephrem's treatment of Mary and of other female ascetics. The first is his use of female ascetic exemplars to depict the goal of ascetical practice, which is the entry into the angelic or resurrected state. To be sure, fourth-century ascetical writers could just as easily use the example of male ascetics to describe this transformation. However, both Gregory and Ephrem use female ascetics to demonstrate a key facet of their theology: the transformation of the body anticipates the resurrected, paradisaical state. We will examine what this emphasis means for Ephrem below. For Gregory, Macrina's example gives him a platform to emphasize that entry into the angelic realm results in an experience that is genderless, passionless and so forth. Escaping the body and overcoming passion are central themes in Gregory's ascetical writings. Gregory's emphasis on Macrina's genderlessness also highlights a second feature of Ephrem's theology, his positive portrayal of femaleness as an essential part of

the ascetical experience. Unlike Gregory, Ephrem values female ascetics not because they are able to transcend their gender, but because their gender plays a significant role in the practice of asceticism. It is this second feature of Ephrem's theology that will be the primary focus of the second part of this chapter.

Ephrem's treatment of women is one of his most distinctive contributions to fourth-century ascetical theology and has attracted important scholarly commentary. In particular, scholars have noted that Ephrem's view of women is remarkably positive by the standards of many fourth-century writers, and that Ephrem uses women as models for the ascetical life.³⁴ A great deal of Ephrem's attitude towards women may reflect his emphasis on Mary as an ascetical ideal. Susan Ashbrook Harvey has argued that Ephrem produced positive portrayals of Mary's female predecessors as a way of countering Greco-Roman critiques of the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth. These critiques were ultimately a larger critique of Christian sexual ethics which, as Harvey argues, "disrupted the social order in the Roman east."³⁵ In this reading, Ephrem reclaims the Mary's predecessors as a way of affirming the centrality of Mary's virginity and celibacy, but also as a way of affirming the way of life that the women of Ephrem's choir had accepted. Ephrem thus takes the criticism of his own contemporary ascetics and redirects it to Biblical women, which then allows him to reclaim the Biblical narrative in order to reaffirm and strengthen the lives of his congregants.³⁶ These women were Old Testament

³⁴ For discussion and bibliography, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Song and Memory: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 41 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).

³⁵ Harvey, *Song*, 56.

³⁶ Harvey, *Song*, 54-55.

types for Mary, and as such, their struggles and eventual vindication through Mary were models for others perhaps suffering under similar injury.³⁷

Harvey makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the role of women in Ephrem's works. However, by reading Ephrem in light of his treatment of Mary's chastity, we can recognize a different dimension to the role of women in Ephrem's ascetical theology. In this section, I will argue that Ephrem uses the discussion of the Biblical women in the *Hymns of the Nativity* to accomplish two closely related purposes. First, he uses the Biblical women as moral exemplars for the ascetical life. This point of emphasis is straightforward in Ephrem's writing, but it is worth highlighting both because using the Biblical women as ascetical ideals is relatively uncommon in Ephrem's fourth-century context, and because he specifically reclaims the women's stories as a way of vindicating Mary's virginity and the celibate life in general. Here my argument will follow Harvey's closely, though I will also emphasize not only the social role of celibacy in the fourth-century church, but also the status of celibacy as something that is "hidden" and that must be recognized by the true seeker of Christ. Second, and perhaps most importantly for this thesis, Ephrem uses the Biblical women as types of Mary who signify the restoration of creation, specifically the restoration of the fertility that was lost by Eve. As we have seen with Mary, therefore, the Biblical women are signs of, as well as recipients of, God's divine activity in the human person of Christ. Ephrem uses a great deal of fertility language when discussing the Biblical women, which I will

³⁷ Harvey, *Song*, 41-43.

argue is crucial to his purpose in the *Hymns*, but has been largely unexplored by contemporary scholarship.³⁸

Female Ascetics as Moral Exemplars

We begin with *Hymn on the Nativity* 1, from the collection concerned with Jesus' Messiahship, where Ephrem explores a comparison of key biblical women with Mary. The purpose of the hymn is to establish Jesus' messianic genealogy, but it manages to give the figures of Tamar, Ruth, and Rahab a central place in the development of Ephrem's Marian fertility imagery and his understanding of the Incarnation. Ephrem here exonerates the women of Christ's genealogy who find themselves in humiliating and scandalous contexts.³⁹ Ephrem assigns to each woman slightly different qualities, but taken together, we can recognize a pattern in which the redemption of each of these women comes through their anticipation of Christ and their willingness to pursue him, even at the risk of being shamed by others for their seemingly inappropriate actions.

³⁸ There is important scholarship on women in Syriac Christianity and on the role of women in asceticism in late antiquity. (For the latter, see above, note 1.) However, almost all of this scholarship refers to texts that were written well after Ephrem. See especially Sebastian Brock and Kathleen McVey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988). Some of the texts in question below have been examined in two articles by Phil J. Botha. See Phil Botha, "Ephrem the Syrian's Treatment of Tamar in Comparison to Jewish Sources," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 6 (1995): 15-26; "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Mary—the Bold Women in Ephrem's the Syrian's Hymn *De Nativitate* 9," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 17 (2006): 1-21. See also T. Kronholm, "Holy Adultery: The Interpretation of the Story of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38) in the Genuine Hymns of Shraem Syrus (ca. 306-373)," *Orientalia Suecana* 40 (1991): 149-163.

³⁹ See Harvey, *Song*, 85-86.

Thus Rahab gets singled out because she can behold (ܝܘܘܢܝܢ) Christ.⁴⁰ In a move that mirrors some moments in the *Vita S. Macrinae*, Ephrem joins Rahab with several other significant male biblical figures, such as Noah and Moses, who all continue to look for Christ, anticipating (ܠܥܘܡܢܐ) his revelation without ever fully seeing him.⁴¹ Each of these figures, including the men and the woman Rahab are described as someone who, in their own unique way, is anticipating Christ. For example, Elijah is noted here as someone who increased his prayers so that he could ascend into heaven, and in so doing, became a “type” (ܠܥܘܡܢܐ) for those who will attain the Resurrection.⁴² Throughout this passage, Ephrem emphasizes the virtue of anticipation, especially, as he concludes in the case of Elijah, that anticipation is of the Resurrection. This virtue is connected with the capacity to perceive something hidden, such as the hidden typology, and to provide examples of this virtue, Ephrem singles out three women as exemplars of this capacity for insight. So Tamar loves the hidden form of the King, while Ruth sees the medicine of life in Boaz.⁴³ After calling forth the stories of Ruth and Tamar, Ephrem turns immediately to another female typology, that of Eve – Mary, which he explains as an overcoming of corruption. The “man” (Adam) imposed corruption on the woman (Eve), but now the woman (Mary)

⁴⁰ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.33; CSCO 186, 5. Ephrem is using ܝܘܘܢܝܢ in a way very similar to how he uses ܝܘܘܢܝܢ in *Hymns on the Nativity* 4.132 and other places. His emphasis is not on sight in itself, but on the act of perception that accompanies that sight.

⁴¹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.19-35; CSCO 186, 3-5. The reference to Rahab is in 1.33; CSCO 186, 5.

⁴² *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.34, 36; CSCO 186, 5.

⁴³ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.12-13; CSCO 186, 2-3.

to the second Adam, the king of heaven.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Ephrem paints these women as heroic ideals at least on the level of Moses and Elijah and maybe even, through their capacity for insight and association with Mary, to a status even higher than these male heroes.

It is possible to see another theme emerge in this hymn that also pertains to Ephrem's view of women, that of overcoming shame. In the middle of the hymn he notes that Eve also looked for Christ, like Rahab and the other male heroes, but in her case she looked because of the "shame" (ܠܫܝܢܐ) of women, a shame which she brought about.⁴⁵ This reference to shame noteworthy in part because the women Ephrem chooses as heroes all acted in ways that might be construed as shameful, especially in contrast with Mary's celibacy: Rahab was a prostitute, Tamar pretended to be a prostitute, and Ruth seduced Boaz.⁴⁶ In each case, therefore, these women demonstrate the reality of Eve's shame for women. Ephrem does not explicitly connect these women's shame to Christ, but he does end the hymn by describing Christ's humiliation in ways that recalls the shame of the women. Christ, like these women, suffered humiliation from those that did not perceive him correctly, especially in his human form. Ephrem points out that the Creator transformed into a nature that is the opposite of his divine nature for the sake of

⁴⁴ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.14-15; CSCO 186, 3.

⁴⁵ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.43; CSCO 186, 6.

⁴⁶ Ephrem's portrayal of Ruth in *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.13 (CSCO 186, 3) seems to go beyond that of the Biblical narrative, which does not explicitly state that Ruth had sex with Boaz when she entered the threshing floor. Ephrem does not either, but his use of "lay down" (ܠܫܝܢܐ) here, stripped of any context, gives a stronger impression that her act of lying down was an act of seduction.

all humanity.⁴⁷ Yet, these apparent circumstances in which Christ placed himself are not displays of weakness. Rather these circumstances are demonstrations of an all-encompassing love, just as the seemingly disgraceful conditions of Ruth, Tamar, and Rahab's situations are really acts of love for God. The apparent identification of Christ with these women here in *Hymn 1* is used by Ephrem to show a central dimension of the Incarnation; its apparent scandal. Like that of the three women, the apparently scandalous action is what provides the pathway for the return of fertility.

Female Fertility and the Goals of Asceticism

It is worth highlighting again that Ephrem is deliberately choosing women to provide his examples of true humility and searching. The similarity here with Gregory's *Vita S. Macrinae* is noteworthy if only because it suggests the possibility of a common trope in fourth-century ascetical literature in which ascetical women provide the example for their male counterparts. In Ephrem's writings, however, his positive portrayal of the Biblical women has another, even more central dimension. These women serve as moral examples because they either anticipate or mirror Mary's fertility. That is, these women can serve as examples of proper asceticism because they are women, which means that their bodies, in a way analogous but not identical to Mary's body, are able to bear fruit and so bring Christ into the world. Thus these women are models of the kind of ascetical practice that strives to emulate Mary's fertility.

We begin our examination of this theme in *Hymn 8* from *Hymns on the Nativity*. This Hymn belongs to the original collection known as the "Hymns on the Nativity," and

⁴⁷ *Hymns on the Nativity* 1.97; CSCO 186, 12.

Ephrem opens the hymn with the incarnational imagery of divinity and humanity mingling.⁴⁸ He presents the image of Adam as dust (ܐܬܪ ܥܘܢܐ) being consumed by the serpent. This image is used later to describe Eve as well in *Hymn 17* when Mary, in a self-comparison with Eve, calls Eve the one who became dust.⁴⁹ The repetition of this image in Ephrem's description of the primordial couple underscores the inherent link between the fall of Adam and Eve and the fertility of creation. Adam and Eve, without their glory, are comprised of only their earthly element, and so their bad choice has far-reaching, consequences, which is reflected in the stark image of the serpent consuming Adam, who had become dust. The image here is one of a famine, in which the fallen creation has become flavorless. By contrast, not only does the Incarnation restore the glory of humanity, but it provides the means by which to sustain that restored glory. In other words, without its glory, humanity is merely food for the devil, and very poor food at that. But the Incarnation seasons creation with salt and restores its flavor and so confounds the presumably malnourished serpent.⁵⁰

Later in *Hymn 8*, Ephrem contrasts Mary with other prominent female figures in the Bible. In keeping with the maternal imagery, Ephrem begins with famous mothers, turning first to Sarah and Isaac, drawing out the prefiguration of Christ's crucifixion through Isaac's sacrifice before turning to Rachel who begs for her own children. Rachel's request to Jacob for children is followed immediately with the figure of Mary. Ephrem describes Mary in her virginity offering no words or pleas, but simply as the one

⁴⁸ *Hymns on the Nativity* 8.2; CSCO 186, 59

⁴⁹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 8.3; CSCO 186, 59. Also see 17.6; CSCO 186, 88.

⁵⁰ *Hymn on the Nativity* 8.3; CSCO 186, 59.

in whom Christ chooses to dwell in. From her womb, Christ “pours Himself out upon His recipients” (ܐܘܪܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ).⁵¹ Ephrem follows this soteriological theme of Christ’s self-pouring with emphasis on several biblical matriarchs and their prayers for fertility.

Anna with her bitter sobs
 asked for a child; Sarah and Rebekah
 with vows and words, and even Elizabeth,
 again, with her prayer [asked] for a long time.
 although they suffered, afterward they were consoled.⁵²

ܐܢܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ
 ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
 ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
 ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
 ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ
 ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܢܝܚܝܢ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

Just as the desire for fertility—children—was granted to these women, so too does Mary receive and bear the Son—indeed, Mary’s conception of Jesus surpasses that of the other women because she does not ask for it. Thus, just as there is no Redemption without Jesus, there is no Incarnation without Mary. Mary’s fertility figures in two ways as Ephrem develops his idea. First, Mary’s example is drawn against the powerful examples of Sarah, Rachel, Anna, Rebekah, and Elizabeth, whose stories tie Mary to the struggle to overcome the loss of fertility in creation. Each of these women stands in an important place in both the history of Israel, and in the lineage of Mary and Jesus as their collective struggle with barrenness shares an intimate and familial tie to Mary and Jesus.

⁵¹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 8.13-14; CSCO 186, 61.

⁵² *Hymns on the Nativity* 8.15; CSCO 186, 61; ET in McVey, 122.

Secondly, the infertility of these women also recalls the infertility of Eve.

Ephrem is careful to emphasize that the anguish of Sarah, Rachel, Anna, Rebekah, and Elizabeth lies in the difficulties of conception, even though a more generic approach might focus on the pain of childbirth, since that was the original curse. There is no evidence in traditional accounts of Eve's curse that she struggled to conceive children, but for Ephrem, the curse of these women is the struggle to conceive. Ephrem contrasts the bodies of these sorrowful, barren women with the virginal, fertile body of Mary. Mary's body does not toil or labor to conceive. Rather Mary, unlike the great matriarchs before her, conceives through her chastity. Ephrem holds her chastity not only as a physical state, but a relational one as well. Therefore, Mary does not make any promises or issue prayers for God to restore her fertility. She does not share in the lament of her fellow matriarchs.⁵³ Mary's fertility is present in her virginity; her chaste womb is the appropriate dwelling place for the Word Incarnate.

Blessed is Mary, who without vows
and without prayer, in her virginity
conceived and brought forth the Lord of all
the sons of her companions who were and will be
pure and just men, priests, and kings.⁵⁴

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⁵³ *Hymns on the Nativity* 8.16; CSCO 186, 62.

⁵⁴ *Hymns on the Nativity* 8.16; CSCO 186, 61; ET in McVey, 122.

Mary's fertility thus sets forth Ephrem's ascetical vision of the restoration and transformation of humanity in the Incarnation against the backdrop of the struggles for fertility in these other well-known maternal figures; Mary's fertility represents an anti-type to the example of her forerunners. Mary, through Christ, has undone the effects of Eve's fall giving birth to the one who restores the possibility of true fertility.

Ephrem returns to Ruth, Tamar and Rahab in *Hymn 9*, and he describes them in this hymn from the original collection in much the same way as in the Messianic collection that we discussed above. Ephrem opens the hymn by reflecting on the uniqueness of Mary as the mother of God.⁵⁵ He returns to one of his characteristic themes, that Jesus creates his own body within Mary's womb, and in his humanity, unites himself to the frailty of humankind.⁵⁶ Mary, in her unique position as mother, alone stands before her Son. However, Ephrem quickly moves from Mary's fertility to the true subject of this hymn, Ruth, Tamar and Rahab. Ephrem explores how these women of ill-repute can be models of devotion to the Messiah. Their scandalous behavior is rehabilitated by Ephrem and deployed as an instruction for unwavering faith.⁵⁷ Ruth, Tamar, and Rahab are all described as pursuing, desiring, and loving Christ.⁵⁸ Ephrem

⁵⁵ *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.1; CSCO 186, 63.

⁵⁶ *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.2; CSCO 186, 63-4.

⁵⁷ See *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.13-14; CSCO 186, 65-66.

⁵⁸ Botha helpfully identifies Ephrem's use of the theme of "boldness" to describe the actions of these women. As Botha demonstrates, by using a number of rhetorical techniques, including binary oppositions and polarities between images such as "God" and "humanity," Ephrem shows how these women displayed "boldness" in order to overcome whatever opposition they faced to the fulfillment of their love of God. In this way, then, the women become examples of the kind of boldness that all ascetics should emulate. See Botha, "Bold Women" 17.

describes Tamar in especially dramatic terms. Tamar's adulterous actions reveal a holy zeal that covers her immorality, securing her chastity.

Tamar went out and in the darkness
 she stole the light, and by filth
 she stole chastity, and by nakedness
 she entered furtively to You, the Honorable One
 Who produces chaste [people] from the licentious.⁵⁹

ܢܦܩܬܐ ܘܥܝܕܐ ܘܢܘܪܐ
 ܘܥܝܕܐ ܘܢܘܪܐ ܘܢܘܪܐ
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As we have already discussed, the connection that Ephrem draws between Tamar's and the other women's infidelity and her chastity seems unique to Ephrem, and it is certainly striking to affirm the lack of chastity as a virtue.⁶⁰ As Harvey has suggested, at least part of the reason Ephrem seems so concerned to redeem Tamar is that he wants to redeem Mary from his contemporary critics. Specifically, it is the unlikely and unexpected way that God chose for his divine action that evoked suspicion and contempt

⁵⁹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.8; CSCO 186, 65; ET in McVey, 126.

⁶⁰ *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.10-11; CSCO 186, 65. Botha traces a number of similarities between Jewish exegesis of the Tamar story and Ephrem's in this Hymn. Ultimately, however, Botha concludes that Ephrem's exegesis of the story differs from rabbinic exegesis in substantial ways, especially in Ephrem's positive portrayal of marriage. See Botha, "Tamar," 22. I would argue that the most significant difference between Ephrem's treatment of Tamar and the other women and his Jewish and Christian sources is that Ephrem has used Mary's fertility to overcome the problem set forth by Eve's "infertility" as we discussed above in reference to Hymn 8.

from critics, and Ephrem may be addressing some of these challenges in the *Hymns*.⁶¹ By creating an overarching narrative in which God transforms the absence of chastity into an ascetical virtue, Ephrem has provided a way of defending the apparent scandal of Mary's virgin birth. The key to this narrative is Ephrem's emphasis on chastity. What is notable in each of the *Hymns* in which Ephrem takes on this matter is his continued emphasis on chastity as centerpiece of both Mary's virtue and the ascetical life. Each one of these women, especially Mary in her virginity, is vindicated in their chastity.

However, Ephrem's emphasis on the chastity of the predecessors to Mary also highlights his emphasis on fertility and transformation as signs of the ascetical life. Ephrem is trying to demonstrate how the proper posture towards Christ can become transformative, so much so that even immoral acts, such as sexual immorality, can be transformed into chastity: even Tamar's adultery is chaste because of her search for God.⁶² Ephrem continues to explore the transformation of shame into chastity in the stanzas devoted to Ruth, though here he emphasizes how Ruth's quest for Boaz arises out of her love of God, and how that love is repaid with the transformation of her humiliation. As a widowed Moabite woman, Ruth leaves her destroyed home to follow the God of her deceased husband, and in doing so, ends up marrying Boaz. Ephrem describes Ruth's actions as "bold" (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) in her ardor for Christ.⁶³ Ephrem

⁶¹ For discussion see Harvey, *Song*, 54. The ridicule of Mary's pregnancy appears in several of the *Hymns on the Nativity*, all from the original collection known as "Hymns on the Nativity." See 6:3-4; 13.13; 14.11-13; 15:7-8.

⁶² *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.8-11, 13-14; CSCO 186, 65.

⁶³ *Hymns on the Nativity* 9.14; CSCO 186, 65.

also strengthened by the oil of Christ. In each of these women, Ephrem highlights the role of Christ in overcoming what we have seen elsewhere is the shame of women.

Barren women (ܠܗܝܐ ܥ) are now consoled; marriage is now redeemed. And like Mary, the ascetic can also experience this transformation through Christ; it is only through Christ that the restoration of creation and accordingly, chastity, can be experienced.

To be sure, Ephrem is not trying to exonerate all of the scandalous women of the Old Testament, and at least one notorious woman of the Old Testament becomes a counter example, someone whose lack of chastity has a negative impact both on her own journey and on creation itself. That woman is Jezebel, whose wrongdoing results in barrenness that is likewise mirrored in creation. Because of her refusal of the truth, Jezebel resulted in the land becoming “barren” (ܠܗܝܐ ܥ)—the same barrenness that Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah experienced, only here the infertility remains untransformed.⁶⁷ Ephrem continues to draw forth the feminine fertility imagery to explain the destruction that Jezebel’s actions wrought. His description of Jezebel’s actions is reminiscent of his portrayals of Eve, as a way of accounting for the loss of fertility in creation:

Since Jezebel refused truth, the earth refused her ingathering.
A reproach bereaved the womb of the seed that the farmers lent her.
It choked seeds inside it since her dwellers bereaved truth,
And the bearer became barren, which was not her custom....⁶⁸

ܡܠܠܝܢܝܢ ܠܗܝܐ ܥ ܠܗܝܐ ܥ ܠܗܝܐ ܥ ܠܗܝܐ ܥ
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⁶⁷ *Hymn on Virginity* 7.3; CSCO 223, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* ET in McVey, 293.

Ephrem here indicates that the sterility of Jezebel and creation are not as it should be; something has gone amiss. The abandonment of God by Ahab at the urging of Jezebel serves within Ephrem's vision as a negative instance of conversion, a grave wrongdoing with deadening consequences. Moreover, Jezebel's actions, like those of Eve, do not only impact her, but all those dependent upon her as queen. Jezebel's gender is inseparably part of the account of these effects as Ephrem ties Jezebel's infertility into the larger sterility of creation.⁶⁹ Later in the *Hymn*, Ephrem identifies the oil that anoints Christ as a symbol of the Resurrection and as that which "revives all."⁷⁰ Mary Magdalene's anointing of Jesus stands as counterpart to Jezebel's anti-fertility; whereas Jezebel's act is deadening, Mary's act is life-giving.⁷¹

We have so far discussed Ephrem's treatment of women from the Old Testament narratives. However, he does portray women from the New Testament in very similar ways. In *Hymn on Virginity* 6, for example, Ephrem draws on Mary—Mary Magdalene, this time, not Jesus' mother—as a preparatory figure of Christ's entrance into the world. Mary meets Christ in Bethany, pouring oil upon him and revealing him as the Anointed One. When she pours out the oil upon Christ, she poured upon him "symbols" (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ) that are then revealed under the "Lord of symbols" (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܝܢܐ).⁷² Mary Magdalene's actions, therefore, help facilitate the encompassing of all creation under the

⁶⁹ In this Hymn Ephrem contrasts Jezebel with Elijah in keeping with the Biblical narrative. It is worth noting that he continues to use fertility images such as a rain and growth, even though Elijah is a male figure.

⁷⁰ *Hymns on Virginity* 7.13; CSCO 223, 27-28.

⁷¹ *Hymns on Virginity* 7.13; CSCO 223, 27.

⁷² *Hymns on Virginity* 6.7; CSCO 223, 22.

transformation brought forth by the Incarnation. Mary's actions emulate those of the other Mary, Christ's mother, who "conceived his limbs" (ܘܡܪܝܡ ܘܡܘܠܕ ܘܠܗܝܘܬܝܗ), thus also revealing the Messiah to the world.⁷³ Ephrem goes on to say that the anointing of Jesus, which produced the symbols that then reveal the Son, becomes a kind of second womb because it brought forth the symbols. He assigns this womb to creation, and he compares it to Mary's womb, which brings forth the Son through the pain of childbirth.⁷⁴ The link between the two Marys, both of whom are women, along with his use of the "womb" imagery, thus emphasizes the role of feminine fertility in communicating Christ's revelation to creation.

In *Hymn on Virginity* 23, Ephrem uses feminine fertility as the model by which all other figures within the *Hymn* are measured, and in doing so, he provides an ascetical model through the figure of Mary for the transformation of the Christian. The first example of the Marian model is the parallel Ephrem draws between Mary and the Samaritan woman. In this hymn, Ephrem continues his efforts to rehabilitate shameful women of the Bible. Ephrem identifies the Samaritan woman as being as great as Mary, despite her reputation in the biblical story as a woman of uncertain moral standing. However, for Ephrem, the Samaritan woman's thirst at the well, which recalls the ordinary human reality of thirst and the need for water, becomes a way of understanding Christ's work in the human experience.⁷⁵ The human body in thirst is a sign of the Fall. For Ephrem, then, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is an image of

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Hymn on Virginity* 6.8; CSCO 223, 23.

⁷⁵ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.5; CSCO 223, 82.

Christ's salvific work to restore creation. The ordinary, common act of administering water to Jesus restores brings life to the parched land.⁷⁶

The Samaritan woman's actions thus elevate her as a Christian model of transformation.

O, to you, woman in whom I see
 a wonder as great as in Mary!
 For she from within her womb
 in Bethlehem brought forth His body as a child,
 but you by your mouth made Him manifest
 as an adult in Shechem, the town of His father's household.
 Blessed are you, woman, who brought forth by your mouth
 light for those in darkness.⁷⁷

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Ephrem here draws two parallels between the Samaritan woman and Mary. The first parallel is birth. Both women bear Christ into the world; Mary by her womb and the Samaritan woman by her witness. Both births stand as models, for Ephrem, of the Christian experience of the Incarnation. Second, the Samaritan woman also emulates Mary by conceiving rightly. Ephrem describes each woman as conceiving by her ear. Their respective conceptions take place within their common experience of “thirsting.” The satisfaction of each woman’s thirst is through her hearing; Ephrem describes their ears as drinking “the source that gave drink to the world.” Furthermore, just as Mary

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.4; CSCO 223, 82; ET in McVey, 362.

presented Christ in the manger for the world to see, so does the Samaritan woman for others to hear.⁷⁸ Ephrem expounds upon the Samaritan woman as a conduit for transformation when he calls her a “mirror by which we might see your hidden heart.”⁷⁹ The modest Samaritan woman, in her Marian-like transformation, is now a means and sign by which others might too conceive Christ.⁸⁰ Thus, Mary’s “thirsting” is the means by which Christ offer transformation, becoming a source of transformation, both for themselves and for the world.⁸¹

Both Mary and the Samaritan woman bring forward life. For example, Ephrem describes the Samaritan woman as sowing life through her transformation by Christ who has blessed her mouth. In fact, Ephrem notes, unlike the apostles who were forbidden to announce Christ’s presence, the Samaritan woman was commissioned by Christ to go forth to her kinsmen and speak. Ephrem likens the Samaritan woman’s witness of her encounter with Christ to her village to bringing forth fruit.⁸² Once again we see Ephrem using his description of Mary to drive his poetry and exegesis. “Fertility” plays no role in the Biblical story of the Samaritan women, but for Ephrem she is a “wonder as great as Mary,” because she is “fertile” in a way that recalls—for Ephrem—Mary herself. Indeed, throughout these *Hymns*, Mary is Ephrem’s lens or sign by which he can both read and exegete the Biblical text and explain what the Christian life entails. Though he does not

⁷⁸ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.5; CSCO 223, 82.

⁷⁹ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.6; CSCO 223, 83.

⁸⁰ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.7; CSCO 223, 83.

⁸¹ *Hymns on Virginity* 23.5-6; CSCO 223, 82.

⁸² *Hymns on Virginity* 23.7; CSCO 223, 83.

specifically invoke Eve, he does have in mind Eve's example as contrasting form of fertility. The image of Eve as the source of humanity's pains, such as thirsting, and her barrenness, stands in strong contrast to figures of Mary and the other fertile woman.

Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that Ephrem's Mariology is unique among fourth-century theologians, and an important distinguishing mark of Ephrem's theology is his use of Mary's fertility to produce his fundamental theological categories. Nevertheless, as we saw in the case of Gregory's *Vita S. Macrinae*, Ephrem is working within a context that utilized holy women to work out a narrative of salvation. For Ephrem that narrative revolves around the restoration of "fertility" to creation in the joining of the divine to the human in Mary's womb. Gregory's narrative works within an only slightly different conceptual framework. For Gregory, the breaking of the apocalyptic age is a sign of the truth of the Resurrection itself. The profundity of Macrina's philosophy and chastity allow her to bridge the two realms and so testify in her word and body what salvation entails.

However, unlike Gregory, Ephrem is interested in these female examples precisely because they are women and have female bodies. Mary and her compatriots are more than just mere exemplars for Ephrem. They testify to the soteriological impact of the Incarnation. Their female bodies participate in the incarnation either because Christ enters with creation by means of their chaste fertility or because their chastity anticipates the transformation of creation. Thus, their bodies are also a testimony to what the Incarnation has made possible, which is the renewal of all creation. Thus their fertility is

both source and sign, and in the end, Ephrem is primarily interested in using these women to communicate the divine narrative of salvation.

CHAPTER 5

MARY'S CHASTITY AND THE ROLE OF THE SINGLE ONES AS WATCHERS

If there is a consistent scholarly approach to Ephrem's theology, it is to read Ephrem through the lens of his ascetical thought. This is, of course, an appropriate way to approach Ephrem. As we have seen, Ephrem composed his hymns for and in support of the ascetical communities and individuals in his church, and for all of the diversity in his theology, the place of the celibate ascetic in the community of faith is the theme that runs throughout his writings. Although Ephrem's ascetical theology has attracted substantial scholarly attention, scholars have not made a strong connection between Ephrem's Mariology in the the *Hymns on the Nativity* and his asceticism. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to draw these two elements together and to situate Ephrem's Mariology within the wider context of his ascetical theology. Most scholarly accounts of Ephrem's asceticism neglect Ephrem's treatment of Mary. The goal of this chapter is to show that, in fact, Mary is central to Ephrem's vision of the celibate life.

Making this claim requires a reappraisal of Ephrem's vision of the "single ones" and their role in the Christian community. Scholarship on Ephrem's asceticism focuses on the character of the "single ones" and on whether their asceticism was individual or communally based. I want to extend this discussion by arguing that an over-emphasis on two of Ephrem's ascetical terms, *ܩܕܝܫܐ* and *ܩܕܝܫܐ* risks neglecting the fundamental role of the ascetic in the Christian community. Without denying the importance of these

two terms, I will argue for a third term, “watcher” (ܘܫܘܦܘܬܐ) as being equally important to Ephrem’s conception of the ascetical life. Reading Ephrem’s asceticism through the lens of “watcher” helps us recognize two additional aspects of Ephrem’s ascetical thought. First, the category of “watcher” is the means by which Ephrem describes how ascetic serves the community by providing an embodied sign of the Resurrection and, in so doing, by calling the community to deeper levels of holiness. Ephrem’s account of the “watcher” as someone who mediates the transition to the heavenly life has roots in both his Syriac tradition and in Jewish – Christian mysticism, though Ephrem develops this tradition according to his emphasis on Mary as the ideal ascetic. Secondly, then, the theme of “ascetic as watcher” also helps us recognize the importance of Mary to Ephrem’s ascetical theology. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, Mary stands for Ephrem as a sign of the Resurrection. In this chapter, I will argue that Mary serves as an embodiment of the watcher. Mary’s status as the ideal ascetic is important for understanding Ephrem’s ascetical theology because it is Mary even more than Christ who provides the model for Ephrem’s emphasis on celibacy. Scholars tend to assume that Ephrem derives his emphasis on ascetical celibacy from Christ, who as the first “Single One” provides the model for the “single one’s” celibacy. However, Ephrem rarely describes Christ as being celibate. Instead, he uses Mary’s celibacy as the ideal, drawing on her fertile chastity to account for the productive role of the celibate watcher in the Christian community.

This chapter begins with an overview of the standard scholarly account of Ephrem’s ascetical thought and its background in his Syriac tradition. We then turn to an examination role of the celibate ascetic as “watcher” of the community and their role in

guiding the community to embrace the Resurrected life. We will then examine how Ephrem developed these vision of the ascetic's place in the community by using the Marian themes, especially Mary's fertility as a sign of the Resurrection, we have found in the *Hymns on Virginity* and the *Hymns on the Nativity*.

Scholarly Accounts of the Role of the “Single Ones” in Ephrem’s Asceticism

Scholars have recognized for some time that the term “single ones,” (ܫܘܠܘܢ or *ihidaya*), stands at the center of Ephrem’s ascetical theology.¹ According to this scholarly account, Ephrem builds a theological system on this term that positions the celibate ascetic as the ideal Christian, someone who stands at the pinnacle of Christian faith and practice but who bears responsibility for his or her community.² By elevating the status of

¹ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 131-141.

² Much of the scholarly debate about Ephrem’s asceticism has concerned whether Ephrem is advocating the more radical asceticism of the desert tradition or something more focused on already established Christian communities. In his influential work, Arthur Vööbus presented a “monastic” image of Ephrem. Similar to what is found in the Greek tradition, Vööbus’ Ephrem is an ascetic athlete who practices a life of extreme solitude and denial. This portrayal of Ephrem has been largely discredited, however, primarily by the work of Edmund Beck. In two articles Beck showed that Ephrem’s genuine works, a much smaller corpus than that accepted by Vööbus, contains little evidence of the rigid asceticism described by Vööbus. Far from being an Egyptian desert ascetic, Ephrem appears as a defender of orthodoxy and active in the life of the church. See Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient II*, 70–110; Edmund Beck, “Ein Beitrag zur Terminologie des ältesten syrischen Mönchtums,” in *Antonius Magnus Eremita*, *Studia Anselmi* 38 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum S. Anselmi, 1956): 254-267 and “Asketentum und Mönchtum bei Ephraem,” in *Il monachesimo orientale*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 153 (Rome: 1958): 341-62. Beck’s general analysis, if not all the details, has been accepted by the majority of scholarship. For a representative example see Sidney H. Griffith, “‘Singles’ in God’s Service: Thoughts on the the *Ihidaye* from the Works of Aphrahat and Ephraem the Syrian,” *The Harp* 4 (1991): 145-159; idem., “Monks, ‘Singles’ and the ‘Sons of the Covenant,’” in *Eulogema: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft*, ed. Ephrem Carr (Rome: 1993), 141–170; idem., “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-245.

the *ihidaya* in this way, Ephrem participates in what by his time had become a long – standing, geographically diverse tradition of identifying asceticism as the Christian ideal.³

As Brock notes, in the Syriac tradition up through Ephrem, *ihidaya* has three “basic ideas,” including singleness in the sense of being unique, single in the sense of being celibate (though unmarried is an important connotation), and single in the sense of being undivided.⁴ We can see at least two of these themes in a passage from the *Epiphany Hymns*, where Ephrem compares the “single ones” to Christ as the “Single One.”

See, Our Lord’s sword is in the waters,

Which divides sons and fathers;

For it is a living sword which (see!) makes division of the living among the dead.

See, (people) being baptized and becoming virgins and consecrated ones,

Having gone down, been baptized and put on that single “Only One” (*Ihidaya*).

See the many rush at him with kinsmen, offspring and riches.

For whoever is baptized and put on

the Only One (*Ihidaya*), the Lord of many,

³ There is now a widespread sense among scholars that there is a correlation between experiences of martyrdom in the early church and ascetical practices. Many of the practices that became hallmarks of early Christian asceticism were first developed to help Christians cope with martyrdom. Accordingly, as martyrdom became less central to Christian experience in late antiquity, asceticism grew in importance as the means by which someone witnesses to their faith. For an account of the relationship between martyrdom and asceticism, see Maureen Tilley, “The Ascetic Body and the (Un)Making of the World of the Martyr,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991): 467-479; M. Therese Lysaught, “Witnessing Christ in Their Bodies: Martyrs and Ascetics as Doxological Disciples,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000): 239-262.

⁴ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 136. For a similar analysis, see Murray, *Symbols*, 16.

visible body; by putting on the visible, human body, Christ acquires human nature.⁶ We will discuss the Marian overtones of this “putting on” in a moment. From this text, it is enough to observe how Ephrem uses the motif to establish the relationship between the celibate ascetic and the community. Those who are about to consecrate themselves as virgins put on Christ “in place of” (ܕܘܢܐܢܐ) the many. Thus, those consecrated for the ascetical life represent the presence of Christ in the community.

One of the most important contributions of recent scholarship on Ephrem’s ascetical theology is the recognition that Ephrem was not the first Syriac writer to elevate the single ones to this status. *Ihidaya* has Biblical roots, and Ephrem’s reflection on it begins here.⁷ In the Syriac New Testament, *ihidaya* appears prominently as a title of Christ, translating the Greek *monogenes*, “only begotten.”⁸ The connection between Christ the *Ihidaya* and the human *ihidaye* is decisive for Ephrem, and he explores it in a number of ways. However, Ephrem’s development of *ihidaye* as a theological concept is

⁶ “Homily on our Lord,” sections 9–10; Edmund, Beck ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 270 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973), 34.

⁷ See Griffith, “Singles,” 149 and Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 136. The significance of this observation traces back to discussion outlined above, namely the attempt by scholars to align Syrian asceticism with the Greek desert ascetic and monastic tradition. Compare Griffith and Brock with Antoine Guillaumont, “Monachisme et éthique Judéo-chrétienne,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 60 (1972): 199–218 and Alfred Adam, “Grundbegriffe des Mönchtums in sprachlicher Sicht,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 65 (1953): 209–239. Adam, for example, claims that *ihidaya* “ist die genaue Entsprechung für *monachos*” (217). Although both Adam and Guillaumont provide helpful analyses of the term, they fail to properly locate its Biblical roots and thus its full range of meaning for Ephrem and the Syriac tradition.

⁸ *Ihidaya* occurs eight times in the Syriac New Testament. Five of these describe Christ as “Only Begotten”: Jn 1:14, 1: 18, 3: 16, 3: 18; Heb. 11:17; I Jn 4:9. In Luke the term refers to human “only children.” See Luke 7:12, 8:42 and 9:38.

not just a product of his own speculation or exegesis, but something he developed in conversation with his theological tradition.⁹

Two sources in particular provide the background for Ephrem's development of the concept of the *ihidaye*. We begin with the *Odes of Solomon*, where we find two themes that become important to Ephrem's thought. First, *Odes* provide a witness to the theme of "putting on" (ܩܘܠܘܢ) the attributes of Christ. Throughout the *Odes* the reader is encouraged, for example, to put on the incorruptibility of Christ, replace the corruptibility of the body, and thus be found incorruptible.¹⁰ Other images urge putting on Christ's name and even Christ himself.¹¹ Second, the *Odes* maintain that the goal of this putting on is to follow the way of the Lord, have a simple heart, and so to manifest Christ's virtues. This theme leads the Odist to explore an image that will become important for Ephrem's ascetical theology as well: to be Christlike is to be simple and undivided.

There is no hard way where there is a simple heart,

Nor barrier for upright thoughts.

Nor whirlwind in the depth of the enlightened thought.

Where one is surrounded on every side by pleasing country,

⁹ The source tradition of Syriac asceticism has been widely studied. In addition to the work already cited, see George Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973): 197–215; 419–444; E. Morard, "Monachos, moine: Histoire du terme jusqu'au 4e siècle," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 20 (1973): 332–411; S. P. Brock, "Early Christian Asceticism."

¹⁰ *Odes of Solomon* 15. 8. Charlesworth, 68. See also *Odes* 8. 22, 25.8, and 28. 6.

¹¹ *Odes*, 39.8 and 7. 4.

There is nothing divided in him.¹²

ܠܥܠܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ
 ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܝܢܐ
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Christ-likeness entails the perfect unity of the human with the divine. The simple heart is the one which has embraced right thinking and surrounding himself by “pleasant country,” which could either reflect a life of devotion or Christ himself.¹³

Aphrahat provides the other clearly identifiable source to Ephrem’s ascetic thought. Especially important is Aphrahat’s “Demonstration 6,” addressed to the “Sons of the Covenant” (ܒܢܝ ܩܝܡܐ or *bnay qyama*). Aphrahat uses *ihidaya* in ways similar to Ephrem’s usage, primarily to refer either to Christ or to voluntary celibates.¹⁴ Scholars

¹² *Odes of Solomon* 34.1–5; Charlesworth, 123.

¹³ Reference to a “single one” occurs outside of the Syriac tradition, most notable in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*. A. F. J. Klijn has identified three senses of this concept in the work. First, the “Single Ones” are the elect who will enter the Kingdom. Second, because humans were originally “one” but became two, salvation entails a return to being “one.” Third, related to the second, becoming two meant division into male and female. Becoming one, therefore, requires a return to a genderless, asexual state. To become a single one, therefore, requires the setting aside of bodily impediments, including family, possessions and sexuality, and entering the child-like state of the first Adam. The Single One stands out, therefore, as one who has renounced the world and totally devoted himself to Christ. A.F.J. Klijn, “The Single One in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 272. Also important is Howard Kee, “‘Becoming a Child’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963): 313.

¹⁴ A. J. van der Aalst, “A l’origine du monachisme syrien: Les ‘ihidaye’ chez

have also recognized that Aphrahat emphasized another dimension of the *ihidaya*, however, which will be less clear in Ephrem: the *ihidaye* are part of a distinct group in the church called the *bnay qyama*.¹⁵ The nature of this group seems to have had several facets. On the most basic level, they existed as a group that had taken a vow of celibacy. Those who wished to become *ihidaye* did so on the basis of this vow, becoming, in effect, “an inner circle of elite Christians.”¹⁶ Their chastity is a sign of their betrothal to Christ and an anticipation of his return. Thus, as single ones they stand for Christ in the midst of the church. They represent the church’s hope in Christ’s return by anticipating it in the purity of their lives and imitation of Christ. As Griffith observes, their primary posture was as a living example for their people of the coming of the Lord.¹⁷

Accordingly, this scholarly approach to Ephrem’s asceticism paints a picture of

Aphraat,” in *Fructus Centesimus*, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst, C.H. Kneepkens (Steenbrugis: In Abbatia S. Petri, 1989), 317. See also Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). 129-174.

¹⁵ For evidence of this claim see Nedungatt, 200–204. The most important indication of their separated (from the community) status comes from the demonstration’s title and conclusion, where Aphrahat seem to assume he is addressing a group distinct from the community. See also the end of Demonstration 10. That the *ihidaye* comprised this group is confirmed by internal evidence. In 6.8, for example, the *bnay qyama* are included with a list which includes the classic terminology of early Syriac asceticism: the virgins (ܐܘܪܫܝܢܐ), saints (ܩܕܝܫܝܢܐ) and *ihidaye* and *bnay qyama* (Parisot, 272). For further discussion of the status of the *bnay qyama* in Aphrahat, see Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Yokes of the Holy-Ones: The Embodiment of the Christian Vocation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001): 207-220

¹⁶ This is the conclusion of Nedungatt, 203.

¹⁷ Griffith, “Monks,” 153. Griffith also suggests that the root of *qyama*, *q-y-m*, itself carries a sense of “resurrection.” Although “resurrection” is not an appropriate translation, Aphrahat does seem to have used *bnay qyama* in situations where the resurrection idea might be implied (151).

Ephrem's thought that emphasizes the status of the *ihidaye* as the one who is "single:" single in their devotion to God, single in their chastity, and single in their imitation of Christ. These single ones occupy a unique place within the fabric of the Christian community. Their position is confirmed, in part, by a number of outward signs, the most distinctive being celibacy. The meaning of the term *ihidaye*, "single," hints at the centrality of celibacy for the *ihidaye*. The importance of celibacy stems from Christ's own "celibacy." To be sure, Ephrem rarely refers to Christ explicitly as celibate, and as I argue below, one reason for this is that Mary is his primary paradigm for celibacy. Nevertheless, scholars have reasonably insisted he considers Christ to be a model for celibates as well as a source of celibacy itself.¹⁸ Putting on Christ, therefore, requires that the *ihidaye* be celibate. It is through celibacy that the prospective *ihidaye* prepare themselves to receive Christ. Once they have received Christ, virginity becomes a sign of this reception and a way of anticipating paradise. For Ephrem, *ihidaya* functions as a title to denote the "single one," the ascetic who is celibate and wholly devoted to Christ. The term also acts as a moral category, pointing qualitatively to the "single one's" celibacy and to his or her state of mind and heart. These various characteristics are important because they provide foundation on which Ephrem judges the status of the ascetic and establishes the basis for theological reflection.

The Place of the Watcher in Ephrem's Asceticism

I do not want to argue that this way of reading Ephrem is invalid. Indeed, the persistence of scholarship on the meaning and status of the *ihidaye* in Ephrem's ascetical

¹⁸ See Murray, *Symbols*, 156. Murray translates a portion of Hymn 7 from the Armenian collection: "Jesus, who was to perfect virginity in the holy Church. . . ."

theology testifies to its importance for understanding Ephrem's thought. However, I do want to argue that in concert with this tradition, Ephrem develops the concept of the ascetic as "watcher," one who is called out from the community to call the community to embrace the Resurrected life. It is as this "watcher" that the *ihidaya* emerges as a spiritual leader. Not only does he or she enjoy a special relationship with Christ, whom he imitates, but he is positioned both corporately and personally as a symbol of Christ's presence in his people. The image of the watcher has roots in Ephrem's Syriac tradition, primarily Aphrahat, and my identification of it may help open up a broader appreciation for how Ephrem used his sources. Ephrem and his predecessors intend for the ascetic's celibate life to make a positive impact on the spiritual life of community. This dimension of Syriac asceticism has been understudied, but it lies at the core of how he conceives the place of celibacy in the ascetical life. As the "watcher," the *ihidaya* keeps him or herself pure and chaste in order to stay alert for the coming of her groom. Her task is at once personal and communal. As she watches, she keeps not only herself awake but also her community. To be awake is to be single-minded. The watcher is one who has removed all distraction from her devotion to Christ. His or her undivided heart allows her to participate in the divine nature, uniting her will with Christ's. In this section, therefore, we will examine the way that Ephrem develops theme of the "watcher" before turning to the way that his Marian theology shaped his vision of the ascetic as the single-minded "watcher" of the church.

The Watchers as Guardians of the Church

Scholars have recognized that “watcher” (ܩܘܘܘܬܐ) is one of Ephrem’s most important terms for his angelology.¹⁹ Following the analysis of R.M.M. Tuschling, we can identify two primary uses of the term in Ephrem’s thought, both of which point us towards important aspects of Ephrem’s ascetical theology. First, Ephrem uses “watcher” to draw a distinction between “heavenly purity and earthly sin.”²⁰ Hymn 1 of the *On the Nativity* is especially important in this regard. Ephrem announces that the angelic “watchers” are rejoicing because Christ the Watcher (ܩܘܘܘܬܐ) came down to awaken all of creation.²¹ The “watcher” imagery is fluid. Ephrem begins with the angelic watchers themselves, but he immediately assigns that role to Christ. But then, he turns the image around all together and calls on his hearers to “keep vigil” (ܩܘܘܘܬܐ) as do those who are caught up in their sin: we are to be vigilant in the same way that a rich person tries to keep his riches safe, or as a glutton who has eaten too much, and a variety of other, similar examples.²² Ephrem is drawing on the nighttime setting of the hymn to produce a list of activities that happen when people stand vigil at night for the wrong reasons. The portrayal of negative vigilance stands in contrast to the example of the Watcher, Christ, and ultimately Ephrem concludes that this type of wakefulness is unworthy because it is a sign of our sin.²³ What is important about this for our purposes connection that Ephrem makes between the heavenly watcher, Christ, and the ascetical task of being a watcher. This convergence is central to Ephrem’s ascetical theology: Christ the Watcher descends from the heavenly watchers to urge us to engage in true watchfulness.

¹⁹ Ephrem employs this term in a number of contexts. In addition to the texts discussed here, also see *Hymns on Nativity* 6.23-4, *Hymns on Epiphany* 4.8, *Hymns on*

The second use of “watcher” concerns the contrast Ephrem makes between what Tuschling calls “immortality and mortality,” but what might better be identified as resurrected and non – resurrected.²⁴ The key passage for this theme is *Hymn on Nativity* 6. Here again Ephrem moves from the heavenly watchers, to Christ the Watcher, to humans acting as watchers. He begins the final sequence of the hymn by claiming that the watchers joined with the Father and the Spirit to proclaim the Son as my beloved.²⁵ Ephrem then turns to the death and resurrection of the Watcher, who emerged from the grave and found the people still asleep. When the people woke up, the Watcher made

the Faith 55,4 and *Hymns on the Church* 42.3 – 4. For discussion of these texts in the context of Ephrem’s angelology, see R.M.M. Tuschling, *Angels and Orthodoxy: A Study of their Development in Syria and Palentine from the Qumran Texts to Ephrem the Syrian*, *Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity* 40 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007): 115-176. For a discussion of Ephrem’s angelology in general, but one that acknowledges the importance of ܠܘܚܘܬܐ to that angelology, see Winfrid Cramner, *Die Engelvorstellungen bei Ephräm der Syrer*, OCA 173 (Rome, 1965). Scholars have not emphasized the correlation between Ephrem’s angelology and his ascetical theology, rarely drawing a close connection between “watcher” and “single one.” See, however, McVey, *Hymns*, 229 n.36. McVey’s comments in this footnote anticipate but do not develop some of the conclusions of this section.

²⁰ Tuschling, 168.

²¹ *Hymns on Nativity* 1.61; CSCO, 186, 8. McVey translates the second instance of ܠܘܚܘܬܐ in this verse, which applies to Christ, as “Awakener,” presumably to distinguish Christ from the angelic watchers and to capture Ephrem’s use of the same root to denote the sense of “awaken us from the slumber of sin” (ܠܘܚܘܬܐ ܘܢܘܫܐ ܡܢ ܫܘܢܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ). However, this translation risks obscuring the way Ephrem develops the theme of vigilance and watchfulness in these stanzas.

²² *Hymns on Nativity* 1.67, 1.65; CSCO 186, 8 – 9.

²³ See *Hymns on Nativity* 1.73 and 1.76; CSCO 186, 9 – 10.

²⁴ Tuschling, 168.

²⁵ *Hymns on Nativity* 6.22; CSCO 186, 55.

them all watchers on earth (ܠܕܝܢܝܢܐ ܕܠܘܟܝܢܐ).²⁶ Ephrem's imagery in this hymn is similar to that of Hymn 1, though, following Tuschling, it is distinguished by its emphasis on the angelic status more than the act of being watchful.²⁷

These two uses of “watcher” are closely related. Ephrem believes that angels model the ideal ascetic life, something we have already seen in the *Vita S. Macrinae*. But he also believes that the angelic realm aids the ascetical life.²⁸ In the *Hymns on Virginit*y, for example, these angelic watchers are the “dear friends” (ܠܘܟܝܢܐ) of virginity. When in trouble virginity flees to the Watchers for comfort and protection.²⁹ As Brock observes, however, this image has a Christological dimension. In the Nativity hymns Christ is seen as the “The Watcher” who has come to make us watchers on earth. As a result the human “vigilants” (ܠܝܘܟܝܢܐ) become “partakers” (ܠܫܪܝܩܝܢܐ) with the heavenly Watchers. Spiritual wakefulness, therefore, is a sign of participation in the angelic life. Like the angels, the ascetic lives a life of purity devoted to praise of God.³⁰

This theme of the ascetic as watcher comes to the forefront in Ephrem's exegesis of the parable of the wise and foolish virgin. Ephrem uses this parable to suggest that the

²⁶ *Hymns on Nativity* 6.23-24; CSCO 186, 55.

²⁷ Intriguingly, Tuschling also notes that the state of the “watcher” may also have existed prior to the Fall, and that Ephrem can portray Adam as a watcher while in the Garden (168).

²⁸ Thus Tuschling: “The principal function of angels vis-à-vis humans is to act as role models.” Tuschling also notes, however, on the basis of *Hymn on Nativity* 21.4, that it is the incarnation that ushers humanity into this angelic existence, because the coming of the Watcher makes us watchers of all creation (163).

²⁹ *Hymns on Virginit*y 1. 8; CSCO 223, 3; McVey, 263.

³⁰ *Hymns on Nativity* 21.4; CSCO 186, 105.

ascetic's watchfulness prepares him or her for entry into the heavenly bridal chamber. It is important to note, however, that the preparation for entrance into this chamber takes place on earth. Ephrem builds his discussion of the bridal preparation around the parable of the wise and foolish virgins from Matthew 25. As we saw in Chapter 2, Ephrem draws heavily on this parable in the *Hymns on Virginité*, providing an especially fruitful meditation on the "oil" (ܐܝܠܐ) which lights the virgin's lamps. The oil takes on many faces, symbolizing, for example, Christ himself, the light of the world, and even virginité. This last image is important for his ascetic theology—the wise virgin is the one who guards her own chastity in anticipation of Christ's return. At the same time, however, the wise virgin is also the one who allows the light of her oil to shine in the community. Unlike the foolish virgins from the biblical parable, the *ihidaye* must remain watchful, ready for the Bridegroom to come and take them away. By doing so the virgins not only watch for themselves, but they become "our watchers" (ܐܘܪܝܢܐ), that is those who remain vigilant for the entire church.³¹

As with so much of Ephrem's imagery, his emphasis on the "watcher" has antecedents in his tradition, which helps confirm our suggestion that it functions as a central motif in his ascetical theology. We can begin to trace that tradition through Aphrahat. The watchers play a distinct if minor role in Aphrahat's ascetical theology. Demonstration 6, which we have already noted as both central to Aphrahat's ascetical thought and a possible source for Ephrem, is replete with images of resurrection and

³¹ *Hymns on Virginité* 5.10; CSCO 223, 19; McVey, 284. McVey correctly notes the deliberate ambiguity in the term "Watchers," something we have seen every time Ephrem employs the term. Here it recalls the Watcher angels, the virgins' angelic state as well as the virgins' call to wakefulness.

expectation, including the notion that the ascetics will be served by the “Watchers of Heaven” (ܩܘܪܝܢܐܝܝܢ).³² As Alexander Golitzen has observed, scholars have recognized Aphrahat’s use of a watcher motif—or, at least, Aphrahat’s connection with an older, Jewish watcher tradition.³³ Robert Murray, for example, suggested that Aphrahat’s use of “watcher” in Demonstration 14.35 has distinct echoes in 3 Enoch 28. Murray’s argument is that Aphrahat is attempting to describe a heavenly journey by the holy sage, during which the sage encounters the watchers of the throne of God (an allusion to Isaiah 6). The way Aphrahat frames the journey, according to Murray, makes it seem as though he believes this sage can ascend to a heavenly status even higher than that of the watcher, so that the watcher declares holy not God, but the sage, which is similar to how 3 Enoch portrays a heavenly journey.³⁴ Golitzen wants to shift attention away from the watchers here to the figure of Metatron here, but the connection with a watcher tradition in the *Demonstrations* is interesting if only because it suggests that Aphrahat had self-consciously appropriated this tradition to articulate his own ascetical theology: for Aphrahat, as for Ephrem, the goal of the ascetical journey is, in some sense, communion with the heavenly watchers. Aphrahat does not seem to identify Christ himself as a watcher, but he does continue to see fellowship with watchers as an ascetical ideal.

The evidence of Aphrahat is intriguing because it appears to connect Ephrem’s

³² Aphrahat “*Demonstrations* 6. 6;” Parisot, 269.

³³ Alexander Golitzin, “The Place of the Presence of God: Aphrahat of Persia’s Portrait of the Christian Holy Man,” in *ΣΥΝΑΞΙΣ ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΙΑΣ: Studies in Honor of Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonos Petras, Mount Athos* (Athens: Indiktos, 2003), 391-447.

³⁴ Robert Murray, “Some Themes and Problems of Early Syriac Angelology,” in *V Symposium Syriacum*, ed. R. Lavenant (Rome: 1990), 150-1.

use of watcher with much older Jewish traditions about the watcher. The earliest use of “watcher” occurs in Daniel 4, though only in a generic way to refer to angel. In later Enoch merkavah tradition, however, the role of the watcher gets expanded significantly, focusing on the *nephilim* from Genesis 5 who rejected heaven.³⁵ Thus in 1 Enoch, the eponymous hero is asked to intercede on behalf of the watchers that fell from heaven.³⁶ Precisely how the watcher angels of Daniel became identified with the *nephilim* of Genesis is not clear, but what is certain is that for much of the Enoch tradition, these “watchers” are negative examples, not something to be emulated. So, in 1 Enoch, the earthly offspring of these fallen watchers are an abomination because they represent a merging of the immortal spiritual existence with physical bodies. As a result, these offspring will be evil and cause much turmoil, because they are neither truly spiritual nor truly physical.³⁷ However, this same tradition also offers a positive portrayal of the heavenly watchers. Even in 1 Enoch, it is the watchers who remained in heaven that ask Enoch to go on his mission to the fallen watchers.³⁸ In 2 Enoch, we actually find a shift in Enoch’s activity from those watchers on earth to those who remained in heaven. After

³⁵ For discussion of the development of this tradition in general, see Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 107 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

³⁶ See 1 Enoch 12 – 16; James Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 19-22.

³⁷ 1 Enoch 15; Text in Michael Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments*, 2 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 2.100; ET in Charlesworth, 21-22.

³⁸ 1 Enoch 12; Knibb, 1.41; Charlesworth, 19. For a helpful discussion of this passage, see Orlov, 54.

being transported to the “fifth heaven,” he encounters a group of watchers who though fallen, did not fall as far as the others. Enoch informs them that he has seen the group that fell to earth, acknowledges the fallen group’s condemnation, and then encourages the present group to resume their liturgy before God. This passage may represent a development in the watcher tradition. The watchers are still fallen in some sense, and they still require Enoch’s ministrations. But scene has shifted to heaven, and the figure of Enoch is far less concerned with the evil brought about those who have fallen to earth.³⁹

This movement away from focus on the fallen watchers reaches its fulfillment in 3 Enoch 28.⁴⁰ Here we get a completely different setting and vision of the watchers. The main character now is Metatron, who has replaced Enoch in this tradition as a kind of “second divinity” whose primary function is to “reveal the ultimately mysteries of the universe.”⁴¹ Metatron describes the watchers as the most glorious figures in the heavenly realm. They are stationed opposite the throne of glory, and their own glory is reflected directly from the divine glory of God. They serve as God’s chief counselors, and they are responsible for debating matters before the court of God and rendering judgment on the

³⁹ 2 Enoch 18; Charlesworth, 130-31. This suggestion that the watchers tradition underwent development between 1 and 2 Enoch follows Orlov’s argument that 2 Enoch itself represents a development in the Metatron material and, so, merkavah tradition as a whole. See e.g. *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, 207.

⁴⁰ The dating of 3 Enoch is difficult, and in its present form, it may date well after Ephrem’s time. However, scholars acknowledge that the later edition of the text contains material that is much older and that could well date to before or around when Ephrem was writing. I am not arguing for direct literary influence of 3 Enoch on Ephrem. I am arguing that the watcher tradition that Ephrem employs in his hymns derives from the third stage in the development of the watcher tradition as I have described it here. For discussion of the dating of 3 Enoch, see Charlesworth, 225-229.

⁴¹ Orlov, 23.

sins of all. 3 Enoch then concludes the passage by asking how the watchers got their name. The answer, he claims, lies in their role as God's agents. As watchers, they execute divine judgment; "watcher" here carries echoes of its linguistic sense of vigilance or seeing. The watchers have the proper insight to mediate on God's behalf, just as their status in heaven gives them the authority to do so. In fact, the title "watcher" seems to function as much as an indicator of their status in the divine hierarchy as it tells us anything about their function. It is their second title that reveals more about their function. They are both "watcher" and "holy ones." As holy ones who also have the status as "watcher," their role is to "sanctify the body and the soul with lashes of fire on the third day of judgment."⁴² In the latter stages of the watcher tradition, therefore, both Aphrahat and Ephrem had access to a vision of the watcher as an angelic figure second only to Metatron in status among the heavenly realm. The Christological application of the vision of the watcher is straightforward: the watcher is someone from the highest level in the divine realm whose purpose is to execute judgment but also to sanctify both body and soul.

One implication of this background to the watcher material in Aphrahat and Ephrem is that it connects Ephrem's use of the "watcher" motif to the larger Enoch - Metatron tradition. The entire merkavah tradition drew heavily on the possibility of fellowship with angels, and the easy movement in these texts between Enoch or Metatron, humanity, and the council of watchers has some resonance with Ephrem's description of the watcher, Christ the Watcher, and elevation of humans to the level of watcher. If we replace Enoch/Metatron with Christ as Watcher, a possible pathway for

⁴² 3 Enoch 28; Charlesworth, 283-4.

Ephrem to have used that tradition emerges: Ephrem simply replaced Enoch or Metatron with Christ. As Orlov shows, moreover, Enoch's role as mediator between God and the fallen angels undergoes an intensification as the tradition develops. Enoch's status progresses from someone who connects the angelic guide to the fallen watchers, to someone who has a status even above the heavenly watchers (which is a theme Aphrahat may have drawn on as well), to God's right hand, Metatron, who also mediates the divine knowledge and intercedes on behalf of the people.⁴³ I would argue that this intensification suggests a strong desire within the merkavah tradition to draw humanity back into the angelic realm. By drawing on the watcher material, therefore, Ephrem signals his own emphasis on the correlation between the ascetical life and the angelic life. The goal of asceticism, for Ephrem, is not simply renunciation, but, not unlike the activity by the fallen watchers in 1 Enoch, an attempt to re-enter the heavenly realms.

The Single-Minded and the Angelic Life

One aspect of the watcher motif that Ephrem did not appropriate from the Enoch tradition is his emphasis on vigilance. Of course this emphasis is suggested by the term "watcher" itself, so there is no need for a specific antecedent to recognize where Ephrem got the idea to frame the watcher as one who is vigilant, especially since, as we will see, he can connect vigilance with the notion of being single-minded, which is a theme Ephrem develops out of his treatment of *ihidaye*. It is important to note, however, that vigilance becomes one of Ephrem's central images for describing the ascetic's pathway to the angelic life. Throughout his corpus, Ephrem maintains that the effect of ascetical

⁴³ Orlov, 65, 104-111.

practices such as chastity is to make the *ihidaye* single-minded in their devotion to Christ. Part of this has to do with the pragmatic effects of not having familial distractions: not having to worry about a spouse or children frees the *ihidaye* for this single-minded devotion to Christ. There is no division of concentration or attention.⁴⁴ In this vein, therefore, Ephrem can assert that acts such as celibacy result in a uniting of the human will with Christ's will. In the *Crucifixion Hymns*, for example, Ephrem contrasts Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane with the effects of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. Through his sin Adam's will was separated from his creator. In Gethsemane, Christ reversed this. He prayed and harmonized the will that had been divided.⁴⁵ Ephrem is drawing on one of his favorite theological themes, the contrast between the first Adam and Christ as the second Adam.⁴⁶ His exploration of this type is wide-ranging, encompassing many dimensions of his Christology. Its impact on his ascetic theology concerns the importance of "will" (ܩܘܘܠܐ). By restoring the unity of will between humans and their creator, Christ makes submission of the body to the will possible. The first Adam weakened the body by "dividing" (ܩܘܠܐ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) his will, but Christ strengthens it so that it can be restored.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 137. Brock draws attention to Biblical roots of this image, pointing out Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians 7:34 that the married person is "divided up."

⁴⁵ *Hymns on Crucifixion* 8. 2; CSCO, 78, 72. A similar image is found in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 20. 8-9. Here Ephrem contrasts Adam following the enemy's will with Jesus following the creator's will. The first Adam weakened the body by "dividing" his will. Christ unites the will and subsequently hardens the body to resist the enemy.

⁴⁶ For Christ as the Second Adam in Ephrem see Murray, *Symbols*, 82–86.

⁴⁷ *Hymns on Crucifixion* 8.2; CSCO 78, 73.

Part of the reason that this single-mindedness is so important is Ephrem believes that it is the proper posture for authentic spirituality and exegesis. Throughout his hymns, Ephrem extols those who have properly approached inquiry into the divine. He contrasts the Magi, for example, with the Pharisees. The former worshipped and offered praise to the Son, while the latter investigated his birth.⁴⁸ As Yousif remarks, Ephrem believes that the ascetic's mental attitude should correspond to the nature of the subject being discussed.⁴⁹ As a result, the spiritual ascetics must begin their inquiry with awe and contemplative silence, which is the proper posture for theological exploration. Spiritual inquiry begins and ends in the silence of the ascetic.⁵⁰

The picture Ephrem presents of these ideal spiritual practices corresponds with his picture of the *ihidaya* as someone who is single-minded, free from the world to enjoy perpetual contemplation of God. This connection is made explicit in the *Hymns on the Faith*. Here Ephrem describes “purifying prayer” (ܠܗܘܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) itself as a virgin (ܘܠܗܘܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ), an image that calls to mind both the one who should be praying, but also the kind of practices that makes prayer pure.⁵¹ Far from prayer being something that happens in public and in the frenzy of theological disputes, Ephrem asserts that only an ascetic can truly pray, because only an ascetic is free to pray in “stillness” (ܠܗܘܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) and “silence”

⁴⁸ *Hymns on the Faith* 7.4–6; CSCO 154, 32–33.

⁴⁹ Pierre Yousif, “Foi et raison dans l’apologétique de saint Éphrem de Nisibe.” *Parole de l’Orient* 12 (1984/85): 135.

⁵⁰ Also see *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 22. 3 for this theme.

⁵¹ *Hymns on the Faith*, 20.6; CSCO 154, 74–5.

(ܠܥܘܠܗܐ).⁵² The true spiritual practitioner is the one who has cultivated a single-minded devotion to Christ.⁵³ Ephrem continues in this hymn by calling on the ascetic to stay on the way of truth and not become divided by strife and controversy. Single-mindedness remains the highest virtue for the ascetical life.⁵⁴ The *ihidaya*, in adopting a “single” life of devotion to God, provides the proper posture for exploration of God through his symbols and names.

One of the things the “watchers” should watch for is the presence of the divine symbols in the world. Ephrem has a dualistic cosmology that asserts that a gap exists which separates God from creation. All of creation exists on its own side, and the creator exists on the other side. As Koonammakkal demonstrates, this divide does not allow for dualism on the created side. Thus angelic and demonic beings, which in Hellenistic systems mediate between God and matter, are here considered to be on the created side. The dualism is between created and creator.⁵⁵ Ephrem’s image of the gap between heaven and earth is drawn from Luke 16: 26, the story of the man Lazarus who cries out to Abraham for relief from his affliction. Having crossed the chasm Lazarus is unable to respond because of the impassible chasm that does not permit inhabitants of one realm to cross over to the other.⁵⁶ The divine response to this dilemma is to populate the world, at

⁵² *Hymns on the Faith*, 20.6; CSCO 154, 74–5.

⁵³ *Hymns on the Faith*, 15.7, 9; CSCO 154, 64.

⁵⁴ *Hymns on the Faith* 20.14-15; CSCO 154, 76. This theme carries over from Hymn 9.6, CSCO 154, 45.

⁵⁵ Thomas Koonammakkal, “Theology of the Divine Names in the Genuine Works of Ephrem,” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1991), 39.

⁵⁶ ”Letter to Publius,” 4. Critical text in Sebastian Brock, “Ephrem’s Letter to

creation, with “symbols” (ܠܘܠܐ), which reveal God as both Father and Creator.⁵⁷ The task of the ascetic, therefore, is to meditate on these, exploring the glimpses into the Divine Nature which the symbols afford to us.

The most important of these symbols are the divine names.⁵⁸ Ephrem’s discussion of the divine names flows from his basic theological method. He is especially fond of extending the Christological image of “putting on” to these names; God has come to us, and with an interwoven “garment of names” God addresses us in our own language. These names, however, are more than just appellations added after the fact to reveal God (although they do serve this purpose). The names have an ontological character in that they indicate God’s very nature.⁵⁹ Ephrem makes a close connection between “name” and “qnômâ,” the Syriac word for “self.” The divine names, for Ephrem, refer to God’s nature in a real, concrete sense.⁶⁰ Thus, even the names and symbols are not objects of

Publius,” *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 275–6. ET in Edward G. Mathews, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, Fathers of the Church 91 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 341.

⁵⁷ See *Hymns on Virginity* 6.8; CSCO 223, 23.

⁵⁸ For divine names in Ephrem see Koonammakkal, *op. cit.*; idem, “Divine Names and Theological Language in Ephrem,” *Studia Patristica* 25 (1991): 318-323; Corrie Molenberg, “An Invincible Weapon: Names in the Christological Passages in Ephrem’s Hymns on Faith XLIV-LXV,” in *V Symposium Syriacum, Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 21-31 août, 1988*, ed. René Lavenant (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1990), 135-142. Kees Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*. 79-81.

⁵⁹ See, for example, *Hymns on the Faith* 60.10. CSCO 154, 187.

⁶⁰ Guy Noujaim, “Essai sur Quelques Aspects de la Philosophie d’Ephrem de Nisibie,” *Parole de l’Orient* 9 (1979/1980): 31: “En effet, ici, ‘Qnôma’...[est] une notion qui exprime directement cette existence comme réelle et concrète.” See also Sidney Griffith, “Faith Seeking Understanding in the Thought of Saint Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, ed. George C. Berthold (New York: St. Anselm College Press, 1991), 49. Griffith argues that “qnôma” here functions as the equivalent to

intellectual inquiry, but objects of faith. Through the names and symbols we can describe elements of God's nature, but our language always remains incomplete because we are describing that which lies on the other side of the chasm.

Ephrem establishes, therefore, a picture of the ascetic as someone set aside for service to Christ. By virtue of their baptism the ascetics have put on the divine nature, shedding their "earthly" covering in exchange for the divine clothing. Following Christ in this specialized way requires that an ascetic manifest certain characteristics— including some which we have not mentioned, such as suffering and humility.⁶¹ Striving to live angelic lives, the *ihidaye* manifest the virtues of purity, especially chastity and single-mindedness. Through these virtues and devotion they prepare themselves to receive Christ, just as a bride prepares to receive her bridegroom. Yet by Ephrem's conception the impact of being *ihidaye* is not only, or even primarily, personal. In at least two ways the *ihidaye* play a crucial role in the Christian community. First, the *ihidaye* are living "types" of Christ. They represent, in effect, the presence of Christ in the community. Second, the *ihidaye* anticipate Christ's coming; they are the "watchers" for the entire community. By remaining "watchful" the *ihidaye* keep the community "awake" and help prepare it for Christ's arrival.

"hypostasis" in Cappadocian theology.

⁶¹ Ephrem provides an extended discussion on the importance of humility as a virtue and as a characteristic of Christ in *Homily on our Lord*, 34–41; Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 270 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973), 31–37.

Mary's Fertility and the Watcher-Role of the Ascetic

As the watchers of the church, the *ihidaye* are to emulate Mary. I have argued for the priority of Mary as the ideal ascetic throughout this dissertation. In this section, I want to examine the theme of Mary's celibacy in part to demonstrate how Mary's celibacy emerges as the consummate model of chastity in the *Hymns on Virginity* and the *Hymns on Nativity*. As we will see, Ephrem portrays Mary as being so filled with the holiness and purity of Christ that desire and marriage had no place within her. As a result she became the "pure tablet" (ܟܠܘܬܐ ܟܠܘܬܐ ܕܢܐ) that made her the perfect vessel for the Incarnation.⁶² However, Ephrem's examination of Mary's celibacy goes well beyond treating her just as an example of someone who was celibate, though that theme is central to Ephrem's ascetical thought. In a number of these *Hymns*, Ephrem expands on Mary's celibacy by treating it as the means by which fertility returns to fallen creation. Here, as before, Mary's fertility becomes a symbolic language by which Ephrem understands the restoration of creation. Now we are in a position to see both how Ephrem treats Mary's celibacy as an essential component of her fertility, and how the way he describes her fertility influences his vision of the role of celibacy in the *ihidaye*. What we have described as the role of the ascetic in being celibate, single-minded, and an interpreter of the symbols becomes, when filtered through Marian categories, a comprehensive mode of restoring fertility to the fallen creation.

The way Ephrem explores the theme of chastity in these hymns, even in a Christological context, returns again and again to feminine imagery that derives from his

⁶² *Hymns on Nativity* 16.17. CSCO 186, 57. ET in McVey, 152.

Mariology. We can begin to see the extent to which Ephrem correlates fertility with chastity in the first two of the *Hymns on Virginity*. At the end of *Hymn 2*, Ephrem asks the ascetic virgin not to waste her youth so that in her old age she will feel no shame. The beauty and vigor of youth does not linger with age, and the tragedy born by humanity is expressed in the passing of time. By contrast, virginity, unlike youth and time, is not temporary. Rather, virginity is the means by which the ascetic attains honor and portrays the image of Christ, which means that the ascetic should not exchange his or her virginity for a temporary gain, lest the ascetic too become poor in both this life and the next.⁶³ Ephrem associates fear and shame for those that find themselves with this poverty. In *Hymn 3*, then, Ephrem extols those “who are chaste “and “weaned of all desires” because they enjoy openness and purity. Like Adam before them, the ascetic risks mistaking that which is truly living with that which is truly dead.⁶⁴ The place of this choice is located in the body.

He is the one who, if he arises in you, is able to repay you [with] as fall,
 So that when he has stood up, he will cast you down, for his desire
 is dead, my beloved,
 But your flesh is able to revive and vivify it.
 When it lives in [your flesh], it kills [the flesh] in return.
 O body, if you give life to its death,

⁶³ *Hymns on Virginity* 2.14-15; CSCO 223, 8.

⁶⁴ *Hymns on Virginity* 3.2-3; CSCO 223, 9.

There will be death for your life.⁶⁵

ܡܘܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ * ܡܘܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ
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The body is the location of this struggle, and Ephrem draws a provocative image of the body being consumed by Satan even as it consumes the temporary food, which could be a reference to the temptation of actual food or a metaphor for some other temptation, that is used to lure the ascetic to forsake his or her vows.⁶⁶ Ephrem cautions the ascetic against allowing the senses become closed to the true nature of the enemy. Using an analogy of fire and wood, Ephrem illustrates how the body can allow desire to live dormant. When rubbed together with another body, through the temptation of sex, that desire rekindles and fills both bodies; just as two pieces of dead wood can contain the barest ember of a fire and still have that fire come back to life when they are joined together. When this happens, the body consumed by its own desires, no longer chaste in body or soul.⁶⁷ In order to win this struggle, the ascetic must be able to discern the voice of Christ and thereby become “revived” (ܡܘܬܐ).⁶⁸ Chastity emerges as the central ascetical practice, therefore, because if the body is to be the place where the Christ dwells, it must remain

⁶⁵ *Hymns on Virginity* 3.6; CSCO 223, 9; ET in McVey, 272.

⁶⁶ *Hymns on Virginity* 3.4-5; CSCO 223, 9-10.

⁶⁷ *Hymns on Virginity* 3.7; CSCO 223, 10.

⁶⁸ *Hymns on Virginity* 3. 6; CSCO 223, 10.

chaste. If the ascetic chooses chastity, then the body lives, though if the ascetic does not choose rightly, then the body is dead.⁶⁹

Ephrem extends his exploration of chastity to the examples of biblical women. Ephrem opens the first of the *Hymns on Virginity* with an image of the pre-baptismal body as a garment to be shed and urges the ascetic to take up a new garment, chastity, in baptism. Only then, Ephrem instructs, can the body become a place in which God lives. Thus, the role of the body is significant because the body serves, for Ephrem, as the location for the ascetic's understanding of God's desire for intimacy with the humanity; it is the body that Ephrem exhorts to strip off the old man, and it is the body that must engage in habits of virtue that prevent the old nature from asserting itself.⁷⁰ The foremost expression of this new nature is revealed in the body's chastity. Ephrem exemplifies this notion in the biblical figures of Sarah, whom he vindicates from her encounter with Pharaoh by demonstrating the chastity that she maintained in her willful resistance to the conditions she found herself in; Sarah's was a chastity preserved despite those circumstances. Ephrem does not perceive Sarah as adulterous because, according to Ephrem, Sarah did not commit this act of her own will.⁷¹ Rather, Sarah becomes for Ephrem both victim and victor, demonstrating the paradoxical relationship between the body and the will; because of the purity of her will, Sarah's body remains chaste. Her will becomes pure when it is directed towards Jesus, who purifies those who are forcibly defiled; Christ made her will pure when she came to love him.

⁶⁹ *Hymns on Virginity* 3.8; CSCO 223, 10.

⁷⁰ *Hymns on Virginity* 1.1; CSCO 223, 1.

⁷¹ *Hymns on Virginity* 1.9; CSCO 223, 3.

A similar approach to chastity emerges in the second hymn. In his discussion of Tamar, to take one brief example, Ephrem describes how Tamar rends her clothing after her defilement and grieves the loss of her virginity, which Ephrem describes as her “pearl” (ܩܘܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ).⁷² No amount of worldly pearls can console Tamar who laments the loss of the heavenly pearl that she lost. The treasure of Tamar, her virginity, is redeemed by the work of the Lord of All to restore what has been spoiled.⁷³ In the same hymn, Ephrem describes other female figures such as Jephthah’s daughter and Susanna as models of chastity in the mold of Mary. In both examples, Ephrem upholds these women as those who protected their “pearl” amidst grave personal danger, even comparing their likeliness to Mary.

A married woman willed to die to put an end to adultery.

A virgin died to fulfill her father’s vow.

A married mother of offspring willed to die

lest she receive a stolen seed whose sowing is cursed.

The Virgin will not steal a defiled seed in secret

lest the pure Infant inside her be a lawless one.⁷⁴

⁷² *Hymns on Virginity* 2.4; CSCO 223, 5. The image of the pearl appears regularly in Ephrem’s writings. For a helpful discussion, see Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 106-108.

⁷³ *Hymns on Virginity* 2.4, 5; CSCO 223, 5-6.

⁷⁴ *Hymns on Virginity* 2.12; CSCO 223, 7; ET in McVey, 269. That the reference to ܩܘܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ in the second to last line is to Mary is confirmed by Ephrem’s use of ܩܘܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ in the last line. The most natural translation of ܩܘܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ is “infant,” which is why I have here followed McVey’s translation.

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Ephrem offers these women as representative types of women who have kept their chastity. Each one of the female figures described in the above passage retains her chastity within her own social circumstances. Furthermore, each of these women participates in the chastity of Jesus' own mother, Mary, who in her virginal state conceives the pure Infant, who in turn easily restores what had earlier seemed now impossibly lost.⁷⁵

This is where Ephrem begins to work in his Marian categories. He notes that to forsake one's chastity is to experience the fall, not simply as a collective member of humanity, but in a concrete individual experience wherein the ascetic, like humanity's primordial parent, Adam, undergoes a spiritual impoverishment. Ephrem also compares the loss of chastity by an ascetic to Adam losing his likeness to God. Ephrem describes Adam's loss in terms of treasure, though the loss is not a privation of riches of the world (though that is certainly a concern for Ephrem especially as he cultivates an image of the barrenness of creation throughout his hymns) but the loss of a deeply interior connection with God on the part of humanity.⁷⁶ The end result of this loss is death.⁷⁷ Later in the

⁷⁵ See *Hymns on Virginit*y 2.4; CSCO 223, 4.

⁷⁶ *Hymns on Virginit*y 3.2; CSCO 223, 9. Ephrem explores a similar image in Hymns 16.9, 29.11, 48.15, and 51.7.

hymn, Eve, the mother of all living, stands as an example of such a loss. Ephrem warns the ascetic to avoid falling into the same trap that snared Eve lest they share her remorse.⁷⁸ That reference to Eve is especially stark, both for its symbolic value and for its meaning for Ephrem's thought. What Eve learns is what a new husband in the nuptial bed of an unfaithful bride discovers: her chastity and glory have been lost.

Intriguingly, the last hymn in the larger *Hymns on the Nativity*, which is most likely a compilation of genuine Ephrem lines, but not a hymn composed by Ephrem, has a clear emphasis on the centrality of Mary's celibacy, which may serve to highlight its importance in Ephrem's thought in the genuine hymns. Though Ephrem revels in the fertility imagery that his emphasis on Mary's chastity has provoked, he also recognizes that the virgin birth is a difficult concept to accept, not least because conception and marriage typically go together, and he asserts it requires a depth of insight to recognize that Mary could be both virgin and wife.⁷⁹ But here he attempts to turn the tables on those skeptics by claiming that Mary's virginity leads to a new kind of conception, one that does not participate in the bodily desire that marks normal human conception. Instead, Mary's chaste conception of Christ removes the desires of her body and replaces those desires with purity and holiness.⁸⁰ As a result, Ephrem concludes, Christ and Mary share

⁷⁷ Cf. *Hymns on Virginity* 3.8; CSCO 223, 10.

⁷⁸ *Hymns on Virginity* 3.16; CSCO 223, 12.

⁷⁹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 28.5; CSCO 186, 142.

⁸⁰ *Hymns on the Nativity* 28.6; CSCO 186, 142.

a kind of symbiotic relationship. Christ receives his humanity from Mary, but Mary receives Christ's glory over her entire body.⁸¹

Ephrem will eventually urge ascetics to present proof of their virginity to the Lord in a way that is analogous to how the father of a rejected bride proves the virginity of his daughter.⁸² And throughout these lines, Ephrem describes celibacy as an attribute that is well suited for feminine imagery, which makes it all the more natural that he turns to Mary to illustrate the true model of chastity. Mary's virginity floats through Hymn 28 as a consistent marker of Mary's virtue, but on occasion it emerges as the primary theme of the hymn, and it is here that we get a fuller sense of why Ephrem thought that Mary's virginity was so important—and why Mary stands as the primary human example of chastity. The hymn begins by reminding the audience that Mary's free decision to remain a virgin “increased” (ܐܘܘܩܘܣܐ) and “sanctified” (ܘܘܨܘܩܘܣܐ) her.⁸³ It then suggests that her motherhood led to communion with the angels, an image that recalls a similar theme in the *Vitae S. Macrinae*. In their angelic vigil, by which Ephrem seems to mean the attendance of the angels at the birth of the Son, he exclaims that earth turns into a new heaven, and that Mary's earthly home turned into a place of heaven.⁸⁴ This is a reference to the Incarnation, but Ephrem is also being deliberately vague, allowing the image of heaven on earth to apply not just to the Incarnation, but to Mary's own body, which is made “heavenly” by her virginity. Ephrem goes on to remind his listeners that the reason

⁸¹ *Hymns on the Nativity* 28.7; CSCO 186, 142

⁸² *Hymns on Virginity* 3.14; CSCO 223, 12.

⁸³ *Hymns on the Nativity* 28.1; CSCO 186, 141.

⁸⁴ *Hymns on the Nativity* 28.3; CSCO 186, 141.

for Mary's glory is precisely her virginity. There is nothing wrong with marriage, he maintains, but chastity is greater because, in Mary's case, it allows the true light to shine in her body so that she can give birth to the "spiritual man" (ܠܥܡܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ). Indeed, Mary's chastity makes her into a "spiritual woman" (ܠܥܡܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ) and so worthy to bear the Son.⁸⁵

Conclusions

I earlier suggested that Ephrem's vision of the ascetical life revolves around the ascetic's single-minded devotion to God that results in his or her role as both a type of Christ in the community and as a watcher that safeguards the church and helps the church interpret the divine symbols. Each of these points is contained within and expanded upon by Ephrem's Mariology. Mary is the model of chastity, as we just saw, to such a degree that she could bear the divine Son of God. Likewise, Mary is herself the one who mediates the incarnation of the divine Son. But it is the third of these roles where Ephrem's Mariology becomes the most important. Not only does Mary have a role in protecting the church, but her place as the ideal ascetic signals that the ascetical life should be "fertile." That is, for Ephrem, the ascetical life is never an end in itself. It is always the means to a great purpose, which is the restoration of the glory that Eve lost in the Fall. Mary facilitates the restoration of that glory by giving birth to the Son. At the same time, she invites the ascetic into the angelic life and teaches them that chastity is both a sign and means of transformation.

⁸⁵ *Hymns on the Nativity* 28.4; CSCO 186, 141.

Conclusions

My thesis is that Ephrem uses Mary's pregnancy in his *Hymns on the Nativity* both as a model for the ascetical life and as a way of explaining, theologically, what it means to be a Christian ascetic. For Ephrem, Mary is the first to have her body transformed through the union of Christ and humanity, a transformation that prefigures both the resurrected body and the common Christian experience of Christ prior to that. Thus, the fact that Mary was physically pregnant is theologically significant for Ephrem. Mary's personal and free response to God's invitation uniquely illustrates that the transformative experience of God is at once spiritual and bodily; Ephrem believes that Christ provides the means for this transformation, but throughout the *Hymns on the Nativity* Mary's pregnancy shows how to say "yes" to Christ in order to receive that transformation. For Ephrem, this image of the woman, in her fertility of mind and body, represents the Christian who himself would be transformed. Indeed, it is Mary's very pregnancy, the "moist womb," which serves as the concrete image of the Christian in union in God and of the experience of such a union as that between an expectant mother and her child. Mary's pregnancy serves to provoke our imagination to visualize Christian salvation in a very real and common way, in the image of a pregnant, expectant woman. In the waters and blood of her womb, which protect, nourish, and form the growing child, the mother Mary herself has been sanctified. After Mary, everyone can conceive; Mary's fertility best captures the totality of the Christian experience

This insight into the place of Mary in the Hymns on the Nativity is significant because it helps us substantially refine our understanding of Ephrem's ascetical thought as a whole. First, it highlights the extent to which bodily experience is fundamental for Ephrem's approach to understanding and knowing God. Scholars such as Brock (1992) and Harvey (1999) have recognized that Ephrem uses the body as a source of central focus for experience and knowing, and as the common place in which and by which the human and divine encounter each other; bodily experience thus becomes the location in which humans attain their primary understanding and knowledge of God. Second, my dissertation's insight into the place of Mary in Ephrem's thought helps to identify the broader theological significance of a growing body of scholarship that recognizes the degree to which Ephrem affirms the role of women and female fertility as examples for the ascetical life. As scholars such as Botha (1995, 2006) have shown, Ephrem employs the examples of a number of pregnant women, such as Sarah and Tamar, to illustrate the way in which fertility provides a model for the Christian experience of salvation. These pregnancy/birth stories affirm that God is Creator, and Ephrem uses them to illustrate the reality of God's abiding presence with humanity. However, the example of Mary stands out, for Ephrem, for at least two reasons. One is that she inverts the traditional understandings of fertility. Her conception is "by the ear," and so her pregnancy becomes a demonstration of the transformation brought by the Incarnation through the celibate life. In the same way that Mary's virginity can become a pathway to fertility, so too can the ascetic become spiritually fertile through his or her celibacy. Second, Ephrem emphasizes the fact that Mary is pregnant with Christ in order to discuss the kind of transformation

that Christ makes possible for the ascetic. In the same way that Mary's body is transformed by being pregnant with Christ, the ascetic can become "pregnant with Christ" spiritually and so experience a transformation of the body to its paradisaical form.

Third, my thesis highlights the role of the ascetic as life-bringer in Ephrem's theology. For Ephrem, the ascetic is at once a new creation and a source of new life for those in the Christian community. Echoing a notion in his near-contemporary, Pseudo-Macarius, Ephrem believes that the ascetic carries the entire community, so that the ascetic's bodily and spiritual transformation affects the community as a whole. By examining the theme in Ephrem through the lens of his Marian theology, we can discern at least two insights into Ephrem's notion of the ascetic as life-bringer. One is that Mary's pregnancy highlights the priority of passivity in the ascetical experience. Ephrem believes that Mary is the paradigmatic example of how to wait to be filled with Christ; ascetic fertility is a gift that comes only as the ascetic ceases to strive and instead adopts a posture of passivity and prayer. The second insight is that Ephrem develops a paradox from Mary's situation by asserting that she is both single and communal. Ephrem holds singleness and celibacy to be among the primary ascetical virtues. Ephrem continually insists that virginity is necessary in order to receive Christ and that Mary is the consummate model of this kind of chastity. At the same time, however, although the ascetic is to be single, he or she is not to be isolated--the ascetic is to be a source of fertility for the community. Mary's pregnancy thus illustrates a communal asceticism. She is celibate but not alone, both because she carries the human Christ within her and because she is to give birth to Christ for the community. Mary's single and celibate

chastity pregnancy reveals a communal fertility in a pregnancy that exists to transform not only the ascetic, but the ascetic community.

A central aspect of my thesis is that we can best examine Ephrem's development of Mary as exemplar by locating his treatment of Mary within the context of Jewish and Jewish-Christian treatments of Eve. I will argue that in this Jewish Christian Eve tradition, the problem of Eve has two components, both of which help explain how Ephrem understands Mary's fertility. The first is that Eve's primary sin was to allow herself to be deceived by the Serpent. The *Life of Adam and Eve* emphasizes that both Eve and Adam fell victim to deception because neither of them was prepared to defend himself or herself against it. This emphasis on deception underscores the instructive motif of Eve's testimony. One must practice vigilance, even in the Garden. This practice is one's adherence to, or trust, in the commandments of God. Second, this tradition suggests that Eve's deception resulted in the loss of humanity's glory. This theme is woven throughout the text and is underscored in God and Adam's indictments of Eve both in Gen. 3 and *Life of Adam and Eve*. Nowhere is this more evident than at Adam's deathbed. Not only does Eve suffer, but so does Adam. Indeed this suffering not only occurs immediately after the expulsion from the Garden and their search for food, but at Adam's deathbed when Eve cries out: "My lord Adam, rise, give me half of your illness and let me bear it, because this has happened to you through me; because of me you suffer troubles and pains" (9:1-2) Not only was Adam and Eve's glory lost by lack of vigilance, but all of creation became vulnerable.

It is both this deception and the resulting loss of glory that Ephrem believes Mary's pregnancy overcomes. She hears God properly, which results in the conception by ear, which then leads to the transformation of all things through Christ, including her own corrupt body. Ephrem's description of Mary's pregnancy in the Hymns of Nativity, especially his emphasis on how that pregnancy restores "glory" to humankind, recalls the Jewish-Christian Eve traditions. This Jewish-Christian Eve material is crucial for locating Ephrem's thought, because it helps explain why Ephrem emphasized Mary's role as he did. For Ephrem, what Mary's pregnancy overcomes is precisely what Eve bequeathed to the rest of humanity. Mary's free choice led to the reversal of Eve's original bad choice. But perhaps even more importantly, Mary's free choice allowed her—and, by extension ascetics who follow her example—to restore that glory to her own body. If Eve "put off" the glory, then through her pregnancy, Mary puts it back on, and in the process she reveals how to properly say yes to Christ and so exemplifies the goal and task of Christian asceticism.

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