

Baptismal Mystery in St. Ephrem the Syrian and *Hymnen de Epiphania*

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In terms of influence and literary quality, St. Ephrem¹ the Syrian (d. 373) may be considered as the greatest figure in the history of Syriac literature. His survived literary heritage consists of a vast corpus of poetical texts, commentaries and discourses in Syriac,² a remarkable corpus of commentaries and other texts in Armenian,³ in addition to a spurious yet influential collection of ascetic texts in Greek. During the last decades, there has been a remarkable growth of scholarly studies on the Syriac Ephrem.⁴

Ephrem's theological mission was in developing a holistic vision of all reality centred on the mystery of Christ. Ephrem's approach was enabled and enriched by the fact that the main vehicle of his theological expression was that of poetry. The main body of his vast literary output was written in poetical Syriac characterised by an effective fusion of compact expression and capacious content. Ephrem's methodical approach might be called "symbolic synecdoche", in which parts refer to the whole and the parts function as variations of certain main themes.

The philosophy behind Ephrem's discourse has aroused a lot of interest among scholars. His symbolic language has been discussed widely,⁵ albeit often in quite admiring tune, profound analytical readings being a somewhat rare virtue in studies on Ephrem. The analyses of the implications and preconditions behind the symbolic theology of Ephrem have often been somewhat fragmentary in character. The last word, for the time being, has been said by Kees den

1 Unfortunately, the scholars still use three different forms: Ephrem, Ephraem, Ephraim. Syrologists nowadays favour Ephrem, the form closest to the original Syriac form, *Afrem*.

2 For extensive bibliographies of Ephrem's works in Syriac, see K. DEN BIESEN, *Simple and Bold*, 393–397, and C. LANGE, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 174–181. A briefer one in S. BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 184–186.

3 The Armenian corpus is still almost untouched by scholars, even though it may well include plenty of genuine works. For a discussion, see E. G. MATHEWS, "Armenian Literary Corpus Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian".

4 *Bibliography of St. Ephrem the Syrian* collected by den Biesen, in 2002, was no less than 383 pp. For a basic bibliography, see DEN BIESEN, *Simple and Bold*, 398–430.

5 e.g. T. BOU MANSOUR, *La pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le Syrien*. See the discussion and notes in DEN BIESEN, *Simple and Bold*, 279–319.

Biesen (2006) who in his deep-penetrating study *Simple and Bold* (2006) emphasised the polar mechanisms functioning in the deep-structure of Ephrem's thought. The paradoxical polarisms and antithetical oppositions not only represent certain literary forms but they also express the depth of Ephrem's theological vision and the philosophy behind his poetical modes of expression. In the present context it is not possible to go into details of this discussion, but a few remarks are of relevance to our topic.

In a poetical strain of thought, the author may easily intermingle ideas that are related to each other through common associations. Therefore, baptismal themes may appear in somewhat unexpected contexts in Ephrem's theological poetry. For example, baptism may be connected with the transfiguration of Christ through the ideas of light and white clothing, both being connected with baptism as well as transfiguration.

His worshippers are made white like His garments,
the garments in Tabor and the body in the water.
Instead of the garments, the peoples are made white,
they have become for Him a clothing of glory.⁶

In poetical language, theological truths are expressed in a lively way in which limitations and definitions are not set or demanded in the same way as in standard dogmatic discourse. For example, the idea that valid Christian baptism is universal and apostolic may be expressed in the symbolical theology of Ephrem as an image of a stream of twelve fountains.⁷ Obviously, such expression is free of polemical and dogmatic connotations. Moreover, the poetical character of discourse does not indicate that texts are merely individual ponderings: Ephrem's poetry has functioned as an expression of common faith, suitable for private as well as liturgical usage.

This being the case, the contribution of Ephrem in the history of Christian thought is not so much in the development of analyses for distinct theological ideas, not to mention definitions of given terms, but rather in outlining *relations* between the ideas existing in tradition. A creative thinker may trace such relations between all possible theological facts, creating a vivid network of ideas. Therefore, Ephrem's theology of baptism is not so much a compact dogmatic entity but a firework of cross-doctrinal references to theological, biblical and other symbolical ideas.

6 *HEpi* 9:12.

7 "Our Lord, when he was baptised by John / sent forth twelve fountains, and they issued forth / cleaning by their streams the defilement of the peoples." *HEpi* 9:12.

1. *Hymnen de Epiphania* and the Baptismal Event

The most important text on baptism in the corpus of Ephremic texts is *Hymnen de Epiphania* (*HEpi*, CSCO 186), a miscellaneous collection of didactic baptismal hymns in flexible arrangement.⁸ There are serious doubts concerning the authenticity of various parts of the collection,⁹ but I have chosen to use hymns from the *HEpi* as the main source in the present paper, for several reasons. Firstly, the authorship is a somewhat open question. Some hymns are certainly authentic: one and half hymns in *HEpi* are in fact reduplicated from Ephrem's collection of *Nativity Hymns* (*HNat*). Moreover, *HNat* is known to have originally been considerably larger than the preserved version: 31 hymns seem to have been lost. It also seems obvious that the *HEpi* collection has been put together by selecting proper hymns to be used in the feast of Epiphany, and the original *HNat* hymns must have been a remarkable source in this process, given the fact that Epiphany and Christmas were thematically related and celebrated together. Therefore, it is not at all impossible that *HEpi* has preserved some lost sections of Ephrem's *HNat*.¹⁰ Thirdly, there is no serious doubt on the early dating of *HEpi* in any case.¹¹ And perhaps most importantly, the teaching of *HEpi* is well in line with the thought of Ephrem.¹² In that sense we may safely assume that we are dealing with Ephremic tradition. Moreover, Ephrem's teaching on baptism has recently been dealt with by Ferguson who left *HEpi* without proper attention,¹³ and therefore I find it reasonable to offer here a distinct perspective to the baptismal thought of late fourth century Syriac Christianity by focusing on *HEpi*. Nevertheless, other hymns and writings of Ephrem have also been consulted.¹⁴

8 Beck's edition has thirteen hymns plus six *sōgāiā*. Lamy and Johnston's translation consist of fifteen hymns. Beck has a different numbering from that of Lamy (Beck *Sōgāiā* 6 = Lamy/Johnston 13; Beck *Sōgāiā* 5 = Lamy/Johnston 14; Beck *Sōgāiā* 4 = Lamy/Johnston 15).

9 For details, see I. DE FRANCESCO, *Efrem il Siro, Inni sulla Natività e sull'Epifania*.

10 The earliest catalogue on the extant works of Ephrem is Sinai Syr. 10 that gives no less than 59 *maḏrāšē* for the Nativity-collection, as the preserved version has 28 *maḏrāšē*. Cf. BROCK/KIRAZ, *Select Poems*, xii. The festal hymns may easily have been rearranged for practical needs, since they were understood as common property of the Church. New hymns were also produced in accordance with the legacy of Ephrem. For an example of an anonymous Syriac epiphany hymn from perhaps early fifth century, see BROCK, "An Epiphany Hymn on the Church as the Bride of Christ", 131–140.

11 BROCK, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 35–36.

12 To prove the contrary one would need exceptionally strong arguments, due to the fact that Ephrem is a multi-faced author who was able to change his mode of expression depending on whether he was writing poetry, treatises, commentaries or letters, to intellectuals or to ascetics. This ability for variation has not always been realised by scholars.

13 See FERGUSON, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 499–518.

14 Ephrem deals with baptism in *HFid* 7, 10, 40, 41, 49, 65, 81–85, *HEcc* 36, *HVir* 1, 4–7, 15, *HNat* 1:16, and *HCHAer* 22, 56.

Hymnen de Epiphania as a collection is all the more relevant due to the fact that it is not only poetry about baptism but a textual witness of the actual ritual itself. The hymns have evidently been used in the baptismal ceremony. The neophytes are occasionally addressed in *HEpi* explicitly and directly: they are encouraged and invited to get anointed,¹⁵ to step to the water,¹⁶ and they even appear to be addressed while in the water.¹⁷ In this manner the neophytes are given an initiation with ecclesiological and eschatological promises.¹⁸

Receive, O you sheep, your sealing,
enter and be mingled in the flock,
for more than over all the flock,
over you rejoice the Watchers today.¹⁹

Epiphany was a baptismal feast throughout the Christian East. The fact that baptism took place simultaneously in various locations contributed further dynamism and a strong sense of universality to the understanding and experiencing of the event.²⁰ Another common celebration of initiation was during Easter.²¹ The dramatics of timing is strongly present in *HEpi* where one hymn is addressed to the newly baptised with constant references to “this day”²²

The role of priests is stressed in *HEpi*. In performing the ritual, the priests renew the bodies of neophytes in the same way as builders renew a house of clay.²³ This detail may have to do with the authorship of the hymn(s). Ephrem himself was one of the very few patristic authors who was not a priest or bishop but a deacon,²⁴ and therefore he was more unconstrained to praise the role of priests than the fathers of higher rank. The author of *HEpi* hardly ever refers to

15 “Come, you lambs, receive your seal”, *HEpi* 3:24.

16 “Come, enter, be baptised”, *HEpi* 8:6. This is not to say that the catechumens were supposed to step down during this particular verse!

17 “You (pl.) too (who are) in the water” (*HEpi* 4:3).

18 “You are anointed by the priest to be heirs in the Kingdom”, *HEpi* 5:9.

19 *HEpi* 6:6. ‘Watchers’ is a Syriac idiom used of angels. The translations of *HEpi* are my own, but I have used Johnston’s translation as a basis that I have modified into more modern and more poetical expression, and when possible, also closer to the Syriac original.

20 According to hymn 6, the angels rejoice that baptism is bringing forth heavenly beings out of earthly men in “all churches and congregations”, *HEpi* 6:8.

21 Ephrem refers to April as time when the debts are forgiven in *HVir* 7:2.

22 *Sōgīā* VI (verses 3–6, 17, 19, 20) in Beck’s edition (XIII in Lamy and Johnston), see also *HEpi* 6:13–14.

23 *HEpi* 6:10.

24 The fact that Ephrem was a deacon of Edessa is confirmed by all the early evidence, such as Jerome (*De viris illustribus*, §115), Palladius (*Lausiac History*, §40) and Sozomen (*HE* III.16). A later Byzantine *Vita* (Simeon Metaphrastes, PG 114: 1253–1268) suggests that Ephrem got his ordination from St. Basil the Great.

himself, which is due to the liturgical character of the hymns. He does once call himself “servant of the community”.²⁵

We may note here that there was an extraordinary need for baptismal teaching, as well as hymns, in Ephrem’s lifetime and the following decades. During Ephrem’s years in Nisibis, a new baptistery was added to the local church in 359/360 – a building that has, almost miraculously, survived to our times.²⁶ The same phenomenon took place after Ephrem’s migration to Edessa where a new baptistery was built in 369–370 by bishop Barsai.²⁷ It may well be that Ephrem’s teaching songs were the most important single reason for the need of these two new baptisteries. The Orthodox (i.e. Nicean) Church was becoming the dominant religion in the region, and Ephrem was undoubtedly a key figure in this development.

The outward character of the event is not described in detail in *HEpi*. It is obvious, however, that the event was a most appealing one. We are explicitly told that when the children see the glory of the baptismal event, they get the impression that the power of the ceremony is based and enhanced on its glorious outer splendour.²⁸ Evidently the baptism was performed in the twilight time, with candles and lamps. The neophytes had white robes,²⁹ and the procedure was accompanied with singing.³⁰ However, there must have been local variances and more modest procedures, depending on the location and practical circumstances. The author of *HEpi* finds it necessary to affirm that the power remains the same regardless of the amount of outward flourish in the ceremony.³¹

The impressive setting and its timing in the liturgical year imply an important aspect in the understanding of baptism. It was not only a private pursuit but a communal feast and a shared joy for the whole Church. *HEpi* presents an outstanding example of the universal, all-embracing character of Christian spirituality as experienced in the Christian East. One might speak about supra-individualistic spirituality based on the position of Christ as a universal Saviour of humanity.

25 *HEpi* 6:18. The expression would fit well with the idea of Ephrem as author.

26 The Greek inscription of the baptistery built by bishop **Vologeses (d. 361/362)** is the earliest Christian inscription survived in Nisibis. “This baptistery was erected and completed in the year 671 [= A.D. 359/60] in the time of Bishop Vologeses through the zeal of the priest Akepsimas. May this inscription be a memorial to them.” (Translation according to BROCK, *Hymns on Paradise*, 11.) See P. S. RUSSELL, “Nisibis as the background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian”.

27 This one was later known as “the great baptistery”. See J. B. SEGAL, *Edessa*, 182.

28 “Infants think when they see its glory, that by its pomp its might is enhanced”, *HEpi* 9:3.

29 *HEpi* 6:18. The custom is well known from the Early Church in the Antiochean district.

30 *HEpi* *Sōgīā* VI :11.

31 *HEpi* 9:3.

The closest we can get to the procedure of the actual ritual in the time of Ephrem is an early 5th century baptismal commentary preserved in Syriac.³² The surviving text must largely correspond to the practices of Ephrem's days. Namely, it is known to predate the schism of East and West Syrians (431), and it contains no post-baptismal anointing. Therefore it cannot be posterior to St. Ephrem with more than circa five decades, most likely even less. The text seems to be of Antiochean origin, and the original version has probably been in Greek, but it circulated widely in the East and survived only in the Syrian tradition, including even a version in Sogdian. In this document, the baptismal event runs as follows:³³

1. Renunciation of Satan
2. Confession of Creator
3. Exorcism
4. The first anointing, "on the forehead"
5. Kneeling, "on the one knee"
6. Baptism in the font (threefold, symbolising Jesus' three days in Sheol)
7. Baptismal formula ("is baptised", not "I baptise")
8. Ascent from the font
9. Wreath³⁴
10. White, soft garments
11. Incensing, in front of the baptised
12. Entry into the Church
13. Hearing of the Scripture
14. The washing of hands of priests; the baptised do not wash themselves

The expressions and explanations are basically in line with Ephrem's thought, and most of the symbolism is common to both. According to the commentary, "oil is the invincible armour", and the baptismal font is both a womb and a grave.³⁵ In *HEpi*, 'armour' appears frequently as a symbol of baptism,³⁶ and 'womb' is a central symbol due to the parallelism of incarnation and baptism.³⁷ In the commentary, kneeling symbolises the fall and ascent the resurrection of Jesus, as in the Syriac tradition in general. Entry into the Church is a "spiritual marriage",

32 The text (British Library, Add. 14496), together with a couple of later versions, is edited by Sebastian Brock in OCA 46 (1980) and republished in Brock, *Fire from Heaven*.

33 Synopsis in: Brock, "Some Early Syriac baptismal commentaries", 23–24. I have modified Brock's translations a little.

34 Brock translates *klilē* as 'crowns' (Brock, "Some Early Syriac baptismal commentaries", 44–45), but 'wreaths' is perhaps more accurate here.

35 §XI in Brock, "Some Early Syriac baptismal commentaries", 40–41.

36 *HEpi* 7:17, 10:11, *HEpi Sōgīā* V:24, VI:7.

37 For the symbolism of the womb, see *HEpi* 8:9, *HEpi Sōgīā* V:20, V:22; womb and grave appear in parallel functions in 10:3.

and the covering received by the baptised represents the hidden power they have received. Their clothing symbolises heaven by its whiteness, and the ease of spiritual birth by its softness.³⁸ All this is very Ephremic in tune. However, exorcisms and the presence of sponsors are also mentioned³⁹ – two important topics that are not dealt with explicitly in *HEpi*.⁴⁰

Both Syrian rites, Western and Eastern, have three different anointments that seem to have been distinguished by different terms from the earliest stages. The first one, *rušmā*, ‘marking’, ‘signing’, takes place before the sanctifying of the baptismal water, the forehead being ‘marked’ with the sign of the cross. Immediately preceding the baptism, there is the *mšihūtā*, ‘anointing’ in which the whole body is anointed. *Ṭeb‘ā*, ‘imprint’, or *ḥuttāmā*, ‘sealing’, takes place after the baptism and involves the forehead, and possibly also the organs of sense.⁴¹

2. The Baptism of Christ as Cosmic Mystery

In the ethos of Eastern Christianity, Christian baptism is based not so much on Pauline ideas, nor even Christ’s commandment, but first and foremost on the baptism of Christ – in other words, not on a textual entity but on an *event*. This is also the case with Ephrem and *HEpi*. In Syriac the epiphanic event is generally called *denḥā*, ‘sunrise’, ‘manifestation’, referring to the moment when Christ was revealed to the world. “The day when the Heavenly King dawned (*dnah*) opens for you His door, bidding you to enter Eden.”⁴²

The starting point in understanding the significance of the baptism of Christ is that it is a mystery by its very essence, and as such it cannot be utterly defined into a fixed number of definite meanings or functions. As a mystery, *raza* in Syriac, it is able to bear a plentitude of meanings that cannot be exhausted by a single mind. This apophatic and mystical approach to baptism is the basis from which the topic is approached in the Ephremic corpus. This kind of basis enables Ephrem to ponder and meditate the mystery of epiphany from various angles.

Ephrem offers a rich variety of observations on the meaning of the mystery. In ontological terms, the event is seen to mean no less than a challenge for the natural paradigm. In the baptism of Christ, the divine mystically mingles with the created. The event is of essential significance, comparable even with the incarnation itself. As Christ put on corporeal substance in the incarnation,

38 BROCK, “Some Early Syriac baptismal commentaries”, 38–39, 42–45, 50–51.

39 §VII in BROCK, “Some Early Syriac baptismal commentaries”, 35.

40 Cf. *HEpi* 1:12 (“Satan has been overcome”), 2:18.

41 See BROCK, “The Baptismal Anointments According to the Anonymous *Expositio Officiorum*”, <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol1No1/Baptism.html>.

42 *HEpi Sōgīā VI* :10.

Ephrem reasons, so did he “put on the waters of baptism” in Jordan.⁴³ The close, essential relationship between incarnation and baptism is portrayed in *Hymns on Church*, in which Virgin Mary and Jordan are depicted as two wombs that bore the Divine Light and were consequently illuminated.

The river in which Christ was baptised
conceived Him again symbolically;
the moist womb of the water conceived Him in purity,
bore Him in chastity, made Him rise in glory.⁴⁴

The same parallelism appears frequently in *Hymnen de Epiphania*. The concrete parallelism of Mary and Jordan is reflected in the parallelism of Incarnation and Baptism of Christ, and once again in the parallelism of Christmas and Epiphany.

The womb is smaller than Jordan;
yet was I willing to lodge in the Virgin:
and as I was born from woman,
so too am I to be baptised in Jordan.⁴⁵

Alongside Mary and Jordan, there is also a third womb of cosmic significance, that of *Sheol*. The divine economy functions through these “rest places” or “staging posts”⁴⁶ through which Christ proceeds in the divine *oikonomia*. The interrelated character of these mystical wombs is an important theme for Ephrem who draws parallels between them in various contexts. The very existence of such reflections and parallelisms favours a synchronic way of perceiving and outlining the theological phenomena, perhaps at the cost of merely diachronic interests. Sebastian Brock has used the concept “sacred time” to refer to the state of being in which the events related to each other are brought together.⁴⁷ In sacred time, the phenomena detached by time exist in eternal co-existence, the limitations of perishable condition being overcome.

In other words, baptism of Christ was ultimately not only a Messianic initiation with private significance for Jesus’ personal development, but a cosmic event of ontological importance. The dominion of the transcendent divine Kingdom was spread into the immanent human sphere. Ephrem compares this

43 *HNat* 12:2.

44 *HEcc* 36:3. Translation according to: BROCK/KIRAZ, *Select Poems*, 71. The “womb of the font” is a common symbol in Syriac literature. See, for example, §5 and §25 in an anonymous Hymn for Epiphany from the fifth century, in BROCK, “An Epiphany Hymn on the Church as the Bride of Christ”, 134.

45 *HEpi Sōgītā* V:20. Cf. *HEpi* 8:13, 10:3, 14:20, 14:34. “I am the flaming (divine) Fire, yet for man’s sake I became an embryo in the new womb of the maiden. And now I am to be baptized in Jordan.” *HEpi Sōgītā* V:34.

46 e.g. *SerDN* §1. BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 61; BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 92.

47 BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 61; BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 90–92.

with an earthly kingdom that brings peace to the desert – a no man’s land in Semitic understanding – when spreading its dominion over it. The Kingdom of God is to be understood, first of all, as *life* for the world of death.⁴⁸ It is in baptism that the eternal divine life covers those who participate in it, and this is due to the connection with Christ and his baptism. As the limitations of time and decay are overcome, even the past generations join in the delight over the baptised, as *HEpi* indicates.⁴⁹

In this way, the presence of Christ is the ultimate sanctifying power for the whole created order. According to the symbolic language of *HEpi*, “the height and the depth rejoiced in Him” in His baptism.⁵⁰ This is implied by the parallelism of incarnation and baptism: when entering the womb of Mary, Christ sanctified and illuminated her by His presence, and when entering Jordan, Christ sanctified the waters,⁵¹ conferring sanctity for all creation.⁵² Ephrem notes that the waters of heaven were not worthy of having the same honour as did those of river Jordan. Moreover, the seas “declared blessed the river where You were baptised”,⁵³ the idea being that it is Jordan from which the blessing and honour of Christ’s divine presence is spread to the oceans. In other words, the environment and nature are sanctified through the baptism of Christ. This may be understood in potential sense: it is the function of the Church to activate the sanctification by its sacramental activity.

In a similar way, Christ has perfected mankind (*nāšūtā*), and this perfection anticipates to be activated through the sacramental life and spiritual struggle. The core of Ephrem’s vision is universal. He attributes the work of Christ more to the category of humanity than that of individuals, even though in practice people enter into the communion with the divine individually. “That the purifier of all might be baptised with *all*, He came down and sanctified the water for our baptism.”⁵⁴ This was the whole purpose of incarnation. In short, water and womb are occasions that God seeks and uses in order to dwell in the world and in man.

God in His mercy stooped and came down,
to mingle His compassion with the water,

48 *HEpi* 6:5.

49 *HEpi* 6:15.

50 *HEpi* 11:2.

51 The East Syrian Hymnal book *Hudra* (I, p. 616) makes this explicit by stating that “all seas, rivers, streams, fountains and sources of water” were sanctified at the baptism of Christ. BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 61.

52 “The river in which Christ was baptised was clothed in light from within.” *HEcc* 36:6. Cf. *HNat* 12:2, *HVir* 15:3.

53 *HEpi* 6:3.

54 *HEpi* 10:2, 10:3.

and to blend the nature of His majesty
with the wretched bodies of Men.⁵⁵

The cosmic significance means also that a new kind of communion between the heavenly and earthly spheres of creation is formed through baptism. The mystical presence of angelic beings in baptism is emphasised in *HEpi*. When Ephrem exhorts to rejoice “at the lost who are found” in baptism,⁵⁶ the reference is not in human realm only. Ephrem constantly refers to the angels rejoicing for the new members of the community.⁵⁷ This is not only an isolated allusion to the wording of the Gospel: there is a certain philosophy behind it.

Namely, there are several noteworthy aspects in the angelic dimension of baptism. Through baptism, the neophyte is joined with the spiritual beings that minister to the Divinity in the celestial sphere. The joining is not to be understood in the sense of alliance only: baptismal mystery opens a transformation into a new, heavenly mode of being. “Baptism brings forth heavenly beings from the earthly ones.”⁵⁸ The baptised ones shine “in the likeness of angels”;⁵⁹ they attain the state of angelic beings and become alike them.⁶⁰ *HEpi* even employs a curious expression of clothing oneself with the Watcher,⁶¹ indicating a thorough transformation into an angelic mode of being. The context shows that the transformation is not only an elevation, however, but rather a kenotic one by its function: it is an entry into a *servicing* mode of life. The idea is logical, the angels being serving spirits by their function. In this way, the neophytes come up from the baptismal water “in the likeness of angels” and “in the armour of the Holy Spirit”.⁶²

The significance of Christ’s baptism may be illustrated also by comparing it with the experience of Moses on Sinai. As the basis and commencement of Judaism as a religion, this is a most dramatic point of comparison. Ephrem remarks that the illumination of Moses came from without, whereas in Christ’s baptism the Jordan River was illuminated from within.⁶³ Due to the cosmic significance

55 *HEpi* 8:1.

56 *HVir* 7:8.

57 “For more than over all the flock, the Watchers (i.e. angelic beings) rejoice over you today. The Angels and the Watchers rejoice over that which is born of the Spirit and of water. They rejoice that by fire and by the Spirit, the corporeal have become spiritual. The Seraphim who sing ‘Holy’ rejoice that they who are made Holy have been increased.” *HEpi* 6:6–7. Ephrem in *HEpi* constantly refers to angelic beings and their rejoicing; see 4:8, 4:12, 6:8, *Sōgīlā* VI:8, 16.

58 *HEpi* 5:1, 6:8.

59 *HEpi* 13:1.

60 *HEpi* *Sōgīlā* VI:16.

61 *HEpi* 4:8. ‘Watcher’ is a special appellation of angels in Syriac, and clothing is a symbol of transformation, often used to express incarnation.

62 *HEpi* 13:2.

63 *HEcc* 36:7.

of baptism, it is logical that baptism is also seen as a concrete opening from Jewish ethnic religiousness to universal spirituality, and this is made evident in Christ's baptism and realised repeatedly in the baptisms of the Church.⁶⁴

This all is the very basis for the Christian baptism. St. Ephrem makes it clear that Christ himself opened up the Christian baptism by his own baptism. Christ has brought forth "the first fruits of His peace" from the baptismal water sanctified by His presence.⁶⁵ All this illustrates that the authority and justification of Christian baptism is fundamentally not based on Christ's verbal command (Matt 28), which is merely a practical matter, but on his own baptism, a cosmic event of cosmic significance.

This, of course, is not only Ephrem's idea but a general principle in Orthodox thinking up to this day. Consequently, there are a lot of ideas common to both Ephrem and Byzantine tradition that may be seen as variations and derivations of the common basic approach. For example, *Sōgītā* V is dedicated to the encounter of John and Jesus, the main question being how a transient human being may baptise a person of divine fire – a famous topic in later Byzantine hymnography.

Since Christian baptism is essentially a derivation from the baptism of Christ, the relation between the two has various applications. For example, the unique and unrepeatable character of Christian baptism is an intrinsic outgrowth of the uniqueness of Christ's baptism. In other words, the Eastern understanding of the oneness of Christian baptism is ultimately not based on Paul's discussion on one baptism (Eph 4:5) but on the uniqueness of epiphany in Jordan. Paul's wording and Ephrem's stream of thought may rather be understood as more or less parallel derivations of the same epiphanic reality. Ephrem exemplifies the uniqueness and oneness of baptism also by referring to Christ's words to the Samaritan woman (John 4:14), "He that drinks the water that I shall give him, verily never again shall he thirst." The author of *HEpi* sees this as being realised in the baptismal water: "For this holy Baptism, when you thirst for it, my beloved, never again shall you be thirsty for coming to another baptism."⁶⁶

The cosmic significance of Christ's baptism is both pneumatic and eschatological, aiming towards fulfilment in the *eschaton*. The idea is expressed dramatically in a verse in which Christ himself states:

The waters are sanctified in my Baptism,
Fire and Spirit shall they receive from me.

64 "John did cry and say 'This is the Lamb of God', showing thereby that the Gentiles are children of Abraham", *HEpi* 5:3.

65 *HVir* 15:3, *HEpi* 11:2.

66 *HEpi* 7:21.

But if I be not baptised, they are not made perfect,
to be fruitful of children that shall not die.⁶⁷

From the perspective of cosmic mystery present in baptism, one may understand why baptism is portrayed as renewal of man in the collective sense. Ephrem constantly draws parallel between what happened to the primordial man and what takes place in baptism. “In Baptism Adam found again the glory that was among the trees (of Eden).”⁶⁸ Baptismal water is like mythical or cosmic water in which the wearied Adam, who brought labour into the creation, finally has found his rest.⁶⁹ In this way, the neophytes are made to participate in a cosmic drama of fall and restoration.

3. Mysticism of Immersion

For Ephrem, immersing is not only a practical matter but something of utmost theological and existential significance. The blessing and purifying nature of baptism is participated in through the descent into the water and the ascent from it. Baptism is a mysterious act in which humanity goes down in the water, receives something, absorbs it, and rises up again in a new, adorned state.⁷⁰ What exactly happens in this process is, for Ephrem, another mystery to be meditated. The baptismal descent is like a personal antitype of Christ’s *kenosis*, the whole divine οἰκονομία in microcosm. In the sanctified baptismal water the physical man, exhausted by mortality, is washed and refreshed from its toil in the world. This is a mystical washing in which there is “hidden comfort, life and delight.”⁷¹

According to Ephrem, baptismal water has two different dimensions; manifest (*galyā*) and secret (*kasyā*) – as does the whole reality, including man itself. The body perceives the manifest aspect; the inner mind discerns the secret power present in the water. However, this does not indicate a dualistic vision in which the physical is left synonymous to non-spiritual. Man is called to develop himself towards spirituality in the manifest, as well as in the secret sphere.⁷²

Ephrem’s thought was at times directed by the semantic peculiarities of Syriac vocabulary, just as the Greek fathers leaned on the semantic spheres of Greek terms. The Syriac root ‘*MD*’ means not only ‘immersing’ and thereby ‘baptising’

67 *HEpi Sōgītā* V:32.

68 *HEpi* 12:1.

69 *HEpi* 7:15.

70 “In Baptism Adam found again the glory that was among the trees (of Eden). He went down, and received it out of the water; he put it on, and went up and was adorned therein.” *HEpi* 12:1. According to *HEpi* 11:1, baptism is “dedication of your temples”: baptism is for man what dedication is for a church.

71 *HEpi* 7:15. The physical aspect of man is symbolised here by the “wearied body”.

72 *HEpi* 9:5.

but also ‘diving’. Ephrem uses this opportunity by presenting Christ as a ‘diver’ who in his baptism dived down to the waters and raised up salvation for the human race like a pearl. This happened in the incarnation (water of Mary’s womb) and then in baptism (Jordan). Thereby, Christ has “raised up from the water the treasure of salvation”⁷³ for the whole humankind in His baptism.

As the diver brings up out of the sea the pearl,
so be baptised and bring up from the water
purity that is hidden therein,
the pearl that is woven into the wreath of divinity.⁷⁴

St. Ephrem portrays the baptismal water as a treasury full of riches: “The Trinity that is unsearchable has laid up treasures in baptism.”⁷⁵ What are these treasures? The imagery implies that due to the mystical divine presence in the baptismal waters, it is the depths of the Divinity that are made available to man. In this sense, it is to God himself that the neophyte dives to when being immersed.

He who enriches all came down, and put on poverty,
that He might divide to the poor the stores that were hidden,
out of the treasure-house of the water.⁷⁶

Baptism is an epiphany of Christ, an immanent *parousia*, and as such a parallel phenomenon with the eschatological one: in *HEpi*, the bride is asked to prepare herself and be ready “when He comes and takes her from the water.”⁷⁷ In other words, it is Christ Himself who is encountered in the waters, and when one ascends, he ascends with Him. The mysterious divine presence, in turn, may be expressed in Trinitarian, Monotheistic or Christocentric terms.

4. Mysticism of Oil

The Syrian tradition was characterised by pre-baptismal anointing (*rušmā*, ‘mark’).⁷⁸ Also Ephrem explicitly states that “anointing precedes” the baptism.⁷⁹ The basic sequence anointing–baptism–Eucharist is also visible in *Hymnen de*

73 *HVir* 7:10.

74 *HEpi* 7:18.

75 *HEpi* 12:7.

76 *HEpi* 4:9.

77 *HEpi* 1:7.

78 The order remained steadfastly in the Syrian Orient. It seems that Jacob of Sarugh (451–521) knew only the pre-baptismal anointing, even though in Antioch the order had been the reverse for a hundred years or so.

79 “Anointing rushes before her, the Holy Spirit hastens upon her floods”, *HVir* 7:8.

Epiphania.⁸⁰ Historically, the order may derive from the Jewish initiation in which circumcision preceded immersion. It is also possible to interpret the order in a charismatic sense: one must purify himself to receive the Spirit and to get baptised. There is no reason to suppose that anointing had directly anything to do with exorcism.

The exact way of anointing is not described in detail, but apparently it was done in a threefold manner, in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.⁸¹ Later in history, it became customary to use two varieties of oils for two separate anointments: consecrated olive oil for the pre-baptismal anointing and the Holy Myrrh for the post-baptismal anointing.⁸² The former is more like a blessing, the latter being the actual anointing.

What about the significance and function of anointing? In the Ephremic corpus, the key texts on the meaning of (pre-)Baptismal anointing are *HVir* 4–7 and *HEpi* 3. Baptism and anointing were an inseparable totality in the Syrian early Church, and this is the case also with St. Ephrem. One might say that, in Ephrem's thought, all the good that takes place in baptism is present in anointing, and vice versa. "Oil in its love accompanies the baptised," Ephrem writes. In that sense it would be somewhat arbitrary to make a sharp division between the functions of baptismal water and oil of anointing: they do not work separately but constitute a totality. Therefore, Ephrem may note that anointing takes place for forgiveness and wipes out sins,⁸³ which is traditionally given as the basic function of baptism. This being the case, oil is an instrument of restoration and healing, which takes place outwardly for the body and mystically to the inner man.⁸⁴

The significance and function of the anointing is conveniently understood through the etymological connection between oil (*mēšḥā*) and Christ/Messiah (*mšīḥā*), 'the anointed one'. For Syriac ears, the etymological connection makes it almost self-evident that to 'anoint' means to 'christen', to make Christ-like. Ephrem makes great use of the Syriac terms derived from the root *MŠH*. Therefore, oil is an obvious symbol and figure of Christ. "In both name and deed

80 "With chrisem have you been sealed, in baptism you are perfected, in the flock you are intermixed, from the Body you are nourished." *HEpi* 3:16. See also *HEpi* 8:21.

81 "Threefold seal has stamped it", *HEpi* 12:6; "oil has three names, the trumpets of baptism", *HVir* 4:14.

82 For the use of myrrh in the subsequent Syrian liturgical tradition, see B. VARGHESE, "Studies in the West Syrian Liturgy of the Consecration of Holy Myron", 65–80. For the baptismal anointing in later Syrian liturgical tradition, see VARGHESE, "Meaning of Baptismal Anointments to the West Syrian Liturgical Texts", 21–30.

83 *HVir* 7:7, 7:9.

84 *HVir* 4:3.

does the oil depict Christ.⁸⁵ Oil in fact becomes almost a synonym of Christ for Ephrem.⁸⁶ Moreover, olive oil and even olive branches are apt symbols for baptismal themes in Ephrem's poetry that operates through associations. A series of associations may consist of images such as Oil – Olive tree – Branches – Dove of Noah – Flood – Resurrection, and all this can be presented compactly in one verse.⁸⁷ In the *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem portrays the unity of Christ and oil as if they reflect each other:

For when the waves of oil (*mešhā*) lift me up,
they hand me over to the subject of Christ (*mšihā*),
and then the waves of Christ bear me back to the symbols of oil.⁸⁸

Also in the case of anointing, the significance is derived from the baptism of Christ. According to Ephrem, Christ received from John the "perfection of the anointing". The expression probably implies that Jesus was anointed by John with concrete oil, even though a more abstract interpretation is not totally impossible. However, the intent is in the function of the "perfection" Christ received: according to Ephrem, Christ let this happen "to give it fully and in its entirety to his disciples".⁸⁹ The setting also means that the priesthood of John was essential to make the entry of Christ into Jordan an event of mystical significance.

Anointing is an outward symbol indicating and manifesting the presence of the Spirit, but it is also something more: it is a *causa* enabling, co-effecting and contributing to this presence. Therefore, Ephrem does not want to set any precise boundaries on what the anointing does not mean or effect. Due to this unique reality, oil itself absorbs a special status. Ephrem himself states that wherever he looks at the oil, the Anointed (Christ) looks at him from within.⁹⁰ Moreover, the oil itself is a "dear friend" and "minister" of the Holy Spirit who is the actual subject to perform the signing, imprinting Her mark with the oil. Ephrem compares the hidden seal of the Spirit present in baptismal anointing with a signet ring that sets its impression on wax.⁹¹ Ultimately, it is due to the presence of the Holy Spirit that the oil is seen as a source of healing.⁹²

85 "The oil became a slave for sale to free the freeborn, and Christ became a slave for sale to free those who were enslaved to sin." *HVir* 7:12, referring to 2 Kgs 4:1–7.

86 The parallelism of oil and Christ is portrayed in *HVir* 4:5–8.

87 *HVir* 7:13. Ephrem himself concludes in *HVir* 7:14 (BROCK/KIRAZ, *Select Poems*, 197) that "as the beauty of Christ is manifold, so too the olive's symbols are manifold. Christ has many facets, and the oil acts as a mirror to them all: from whatever angle I look at the oil, Christ looks out at me from it!"

88 *HVir* 7:15, translation according to BROCK/KIRAZ, *Select Poems*, 199.

89 *Comm.Diat.* 4:2.

90 *HVir* 7:14.

91 *HVir* 7:6.

92 *HVir* 7:7, 7:9.

Sebastian Brock has differentiated five different functions for the anointing (*rušmā*) in the Syriac tradition, and these are explicitly or implicitly present also in Ephrem's writings. Firstly, it is a mark of ownership and belonging to the Christian fellowship. This is a derivation of the fact that anointing replaced the Jewish circumcision. Symbolically speaking, anointing is "entry into the flock of Christ".⁹³ Secondly, anointing is a sign of protection against evil. This meaning is exemplified and preceded by the sign of protection mentioned in Ez. 9:4. As Ephrem states, the Evil One flees the seal of "three spiritual names".⁹⁴ Thirdly, oil of anointing is a cause of healing and cleaning. The oil functions as a kind of intersection between the visible and invisible worlds – the basic idea of sacramental theology, and a central *topos* in liturgical prayers that attribute healing powers to the anointing, for both inner and outer illnesses.⁹⁵ Fourthly, according to Brock, anointing is the entry to the spiritual priesthood for Christians, guaranteeing the right to stand in front of God and serve Him.⁹⁶ The notion seems to be in accordance with the logic of Ephrem who sees the priesthood of John as having been transmitted to Christ in His baptism.⁹⁷ In other words, by participating in the baptism of Christ, Christians participate in the ancient priesthood of John likewise. Fifthly, anointing means becoming God's children and His heirs.⁹⁸

Ephrem portrays the anointing with various symbols. He compares the oil with paint that repaints the image of man, replacing the corrupted image of Adam.⁹⁹ Oil is also a "beneficial fountain" that washes away the dirt of man. In other words, the sacred oil functions as a symbol and inducer of man's return to his original state.

Ephrem employs the imagery of oil in the Old Testament in a variety of ways to illustrate the character of anointing. For example, he saw a typos of Holy oil in the oil that "gave itself in place of the orphans", preventing them from being sold, in 2 Kgs.¹⁰⁰ For Ephrem, the Old Testament instances of anoint-

93 BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 68. *HEpi* 3:4. *HVir* 7:6.

94 *HEpi* 5:2.

95 BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 68–70. Cf. BROCK, "Baptismal themes in the writings of Jacob of Serugh", 338–340.

96 Cf. 1 Pet 2:5.

97 "He received the priesthood of the house of Levi through a second birth, by the baptism of the son of Aaron. [...] "through his later birth by John's baptism, [the Lord] received the priesthood of John." *Comm.Diat.* 4:3.

98 According to Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), before the spiritual birth man has Adam as his father, but after having received the Holy Spirit one may confidentially call God as "Our Father". BROCK, "Baptismal themes in the writings of Jacob of Serugh", 336.

99 "A royal portrait is painted with visible colours, and with oil that all can see the hidden (*kasyā*) portrait of our hidden King who is portrayed on those who have been signed." *HVir* 7:5.

100 2 Kgs 4:1–7; *HVir* 7:11.

ing reflected mystical pre-figurative presence of the Messiah Himself. Also the biblical anointing of kings was a symbol of baptismal anointing, the Christian anointing being more precious than that of David.¹⁰¹ The use of biblical symbolism illustrates how baptism and anointing are seen as one entity. According to *HEpi*, the meaning of the episode of David and Goliath was to show that evil is subdued through baptismal waters; in the same hymn the victory of David is attributed to the anointing he received.¹⁰²

5. Dimensions of Baptism

5.1. Pneumatic Dimension of Baptism

The ultimate spiritual function of baptism is participation in the Holy Spirit. *HEpi* makes it clear that the Holy Spirit overshadows the neophytes in baptism.¹⁰³ In Syriac Theology, baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit were largely identified with each other, and in this the role of anointing is crucial. Ephrem may explicitly identify the two baptisms: “Descend, my brethren, clothe yourselves from the waters of baptism, with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁴

In the literature of eastern Christianity, the idea of being pneumatic or charismatic is usually not focused on subjective experiences but rather on the objective reality beyond the subjective reactions. This is the case also with Ephrem. The pneumatic aspect is understood in relation to the baptism of Christ. The ultimate meaning of Christ’s baptism was to provide the descent of Spirit so that “He may dwell on the many”.¹⁰⁵ Correspondingly, the fact that baptism makes Men “children of the Spirit” is due to the Pneumatic dimension present in the baptism of Christ.

O John, who saw the Spirit
 abiding on the head of the Son
 to show how the Head of the Highest went down
 and was baptised and came up
 to be the Head for the earth.
 Children of the Spirit you have become,
 and Christ has become your Head
 you also have become His members.¹⁰⁶

101 *HEpi* 3:14.

102 *HEpi* 5:9–11.

103 *HEpi* 1:5.

104 *HEpi* 5:1.

105 *HEpi* 6:2.

106 *HEpi* 9:1.

In other words, descent of the Spirit in Christ's baptism is not seen as a detached miracle but as something of utmost importance for the whole Christendom: it was an indicator of the fact that the Holy Spirit *is* given in baptism. Moreover, the Spirit does not come independently of Christ, but it is Christ who brought the Spirit with him. Ephrem expresses this plainly in his homily: "Because the Spirit was with the Son, the Son came to John in order to receive baptism from him, so that He might mix with the visible water the Spirit who cannot be seen."¹⁰⁷ In this way, the outward water and the inner Spirit are united in the baptism of Christ for the benefit of the whole mankind. This was the goal of incarnation, and even of the whole creation: the Divine put on the human clothing in order to clothe humans with His Spirit.¹⁰⁸

This very formulation is no less than the "Semitic" way of expressing the idea of *theosis*. Ephrem did not use the literal expression of deification, *metallahānūtā*, a word rarely utilised by Syriac authors due to the problematic association of "would-be-divinity". However, the idea of *theosis* is an essential one for Ephrem who may express it through symbolism, like that of clothing, or even in quite explicit terms: "He gave us divinity, we gave Him humanity".¹⁰⁹ It is regrettable that von Harnack and others who have criticized *theosis* as a Hellenic addition alien to "real" Christianity did not take into account the witness of early non-Hellenic authors such as Ephrem.

The divine presence in Jordan during the baptism of Christ is often expressed with the image of fire in the water. Fire is an apt symbol of divinity, and its presence is sometimes understood even as a visible appearance in early Syriac Literature, in which Fire and Spirit became a common *topos*.¹¹⁰ Ephrem utilises this symbolism emphatically in his hymns:

Behold, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore you,
Behold, Fire and Spirit in the river in which you were baptised.
Fire and Spirit in our Baptism,
in the Bread and the Cup, Fire and Holy Spirit.¹¹¹

Correspondingly, the fire of the Holy Spirit is 'mingled' and 'hidden' in the baptismal water. It is a fire of mercy that quenches the defiled and sinful fire present in man.¹¹² This is the main effect and function of baptism from an individual's

107 Ephrem: *SerDN* §55.

108 "Our body was Your clothing, Your Spirit was our Robe", *HNat* 22:39.

109 *HFid* 5:17, see also *HVir* 48:17–18.

110 E.g. the anonymous fifth century hymn translated by BROCK, "An Epiphany Hymn on the Church as the Bride of Christ", 134. For more details, see BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 63.

111 *HFid* 10:17.

112 *HEpi* 8:6, 8:8.

point of view: it consumes one's offences, cleanses and hallows bodies,¹¹³ and gives protection from the bodily desires.¹¹⁴ The interesting thing here is that forgiveness of sins is in fact involved in the consuming and cleaning character of baptism. In other words, remission of sins is ultimately not a juridical concept but a charismatic act: sins disappear from man, not so much because of the individual's positive response to the divine law, but rather because of the presence of Spirit. Divinity is present in the baptismal water, and it starts to mingle with the baptised ones, functioning like a leaven.¹¹⁵ Correspondingly, the belief that the baptism of the Christian Church is the only true baptism is ultimately based not on canonical legislation but on the presence of the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁶

From this point of view, it is evident that baptism is a most pneumatic event for Ephrem. The Holy Spirit "hovers over the baptismal waters".¹¹⁷ *HEpi* contains a lot of variations on the theme: the Spirit has come down from heaven and abides on "all those that are born of the water"; the Spirit loves and abides on every one who rises up from baptismal waters.¹¹⁸ This is exhorted also to those about to be baptised: "Descend, my brethren, put on the Holy Spirit from the waters of baptism, be joined with the spirits that minister to the Divinity."¹¹⁹ This all indicates not only abstract symbolism with biblical imagery but belief in the real presence. In *HEpi* it is even stated that the Pneumatic content of baptism is delivered to the neophytes exactly "in the hour when the priest invoked the Holy Spirit".¹²⁰

The Pneumatic divine presence offers an interesting explanation for the need of water in baptism in the first place. With water, God *tempers* the strength of his presence so that mortal beings are able to stand it.¹²¹

5.2. Trinitarian Dimension of Baptism

Baptism is also a Trinitarian event by its very basics. The baptism of Christ was understood as a unique revelation and manifestation of Trinity in a sensible form. In *HEpi*, the Trinitarian dynamics is portrayed from various angles. "The Father

113 "The fire of grace has come down, it has consumed utterly your offences, and cleansed and hallowed your bodies", *HEpi* 3:10.

114 "...tempering the flaming fire" that it "harms not your bodies", *HEpi* 1:5.

115 "The Divinity in the water, behold, has mingled His leaven; the creatures of dust that leaven raises up, mingling them with the Divinity." *HEpi* 4:5.

116 *HEpi* 5:4.

117 *HVir* 7:8.

118 *HEpi* 6:1-2.

119 *HEpi* 5:1.

120 *HEpi Soghitha* VI:7.

121 "He who came down and dwelt in it, tempers within the water the might of His majesty, that He may dwell in the feeble." *HEpi* 8:2.

has sealed Baptism, to exalt it, and the Son has espoused it to glorify it, and the Spirit with threefold seal has stamped it, and it has shone in holiness.”¹²² The description portrays the varying roles as well as the common glory of the Divine Persons. The Trinitarian presence guarantees the efficacy of baptism.¹²³ Consequently, the divine presence received in baptism is Trinitarian by nature.¹²⁴

Trinity, for Ephrem, is not a secondary conceptual reference to provide some dogmatic support for the discourse by means of abstraction, but an existential reality present in the baptismal mystical experience. This is illustrated from the way how the *joyous* character of the influence of the Trinitarian presence in baptism is underlined in *HEpi*. “Who would not rejoice, in your bridal chamber, my brethren? For the Father with His Son, and the Spirit rejoice in it.”¹²⁵ In this way, the inner-Trinitarian dynamics is reflected on the human dimension, realised as joyous experience.

The Trinitarian character of baptism is, again, based on the nature of the baptism of Christ as an epiphany of the Trinity. In fact, ‘trinity’ as a concept is basically an abstraction of the actual functions of Father, Son and Spirit as experienced by the Church, and these functions operated together manifestly for the first time during the baptism of Christ.

We may note here that in the commentary on the Diatessaron Ephrem stresses the kenotic tune in Christ’s arrival to be baptised by John. In this sense, baptism was a testifying event for the *humanity* of Christ.¹²⁶ The stress on the humanity is explained by the fact that the section in the commentary is written in anti-Marcionite tune.

5.3. Paschal Dimension of Baptism

At His Birth a star of light shone in the air;
 when He was baptised light flashed from the water;
 at His Death the sun was darkened in the firmament;
 at His Passion the luminaries set along with Him;
 at His Epiphany the luminaries arose with Him.¹²⁷

Epiphany (baptism) and Christmas (incarnation) is not the only parallel pair of feasts in the liturgical year. One of Ephrem’s most illuminating contributions to the baptismal theology may be seen in the way how he relates the connection between Cross and Baptism, i.e. Easter and Epiphany. Baptism does not deliver

122 *HEpi* 12:6.

123 “The Trinity that is unsearchable has laid up treasures in baptism”, *HEpi* 12:7.

124 “Unto you shall the Father, be a wall of strength: and the Son a Redeemer, and the Spirit a guard.” *HEpi Sōgītā* VI:14.

125 *HEpi Sōgītā* VI:13.

126 *Comm.Diat.*, IV §1c.

127 *HEpi* 10:5.

some abstract mystical presence but paschal life opened in Golgotha by Christ, in Christ and from Christ. This is the ultimate reason why the baptism is able to function as the source of Christian life in the first place.

Baptism is the well-spring of life,
 which the Son of God opened by His Life,
 and from His Side it has brought forth streams.
 Come, all that thirst, come, rejoice!
 Blessed be He that has mercy on all!¹²⁸

The intimate relationship between baptism and Eucharist is based on the co-existence of water and blood in Christ himself, when being offered on Golgotha. Water and blood are presented in parallel terms in *HEpi*,¹²⁹ and the idea of water from Christ's side as the commencement of baptism appears frequently in Syriac literature. The unique purifying mercy of baptism and the constant atonement in Christ's Eucharistic blood are like a fountain and river that deliver the same life from Life, i.e. from Christ Himself.

Behold, from the side of Christ
 flowed the stream that bestowed life.
 The Gentiles, that were weary, drank,
 and in it they forgot their pains.¹³⁰

This is also the idea behind the verse in which the neophytes clothe themselves in the water with "the likeness of the living and wonderful Cross".¹³¹ Clothing oneself with the cross does not refer here to self-denial and suffering in the first place but rather to participation in the vivid emanation from the source of life. This is the reality into which baptism is the entry. In *HEpi* this is expressed in compact terms: "His baptism is the cause of our pardon; His death is the cause of our life; death He alone has overcome in His resurrection."¹³² In this perspective, birth, baptism, death and resurrection of Christ are a "fourfold bridge unto His kingdom", four cosmic mysteries that the salvation of man is built on. These function as one totality. "His birth flowed on and was joined to His baptism; His baptism again flowed on even to His death; His death led and reached to His resurrection."¹³³ This harmonious totality is the basis on which the glory of baptism is based. In *HEpi*, it even surpasses the glory of martyrs who "glorified their

128 *HEpi* 12:5.

129 "With Your *dew* besprinkle my vileness, and my crimes in Your *blood* shall be atoned!" *HEpi* 5:15.

130 *HEpi* 5:14.

131 *HEpi* 7:3.

132 *HEpi* 10:4.

133 *HEpi* 10:9.

crowns by their own blood”, as the neophytes are “glorified by our Redeemer with His own Blood”.¹³⁴

5.4. Personal Dimension of Baptism

St. Ephrem, like patristic authors in general, does not focus on the question that would be the first and last for modern man: what does it mean to me? What is the actual function of baptism for an individual Christian? The answers would be once more determined by and derived from the baptism of Christ and its cosmic significance. To begin with, baptism is meant for every human being. Even this notion finds its justification in the Baptism of Christ. If *He* was baptised, the author of *HEpi* reasons, “what man is there that shall not be baptised?”¹³⁵

In each baptism, the sanctified water of Jordan is in a certain sense reactivated in the blessing of water performed prior to baptism. This is a basic feature in the Eastern baptismal rites. Water becomes Jordan when it is sanctified, and Jordan turns into a womb for a new mode of life, mystically becoming the womb of new Christians.¹³⁶ Therefore, the baptismal water may be called simply “Jordan river”.¹³⁷ Baptism is the second womb that gives birth to new purified beings.¹³⁸ As noted above, incarnation and baptism of Christ are inseparable phenomena that form one totality, both having taken place for the same motives and aims.¹³⁹ This fact in turn is reflected in the life of the Church, as well as in the Christians themselves. Therefore, virginal birth of Christ and baptismal birth of Christian are transparently interpenetrating realities.¹⁴⁰

In other words, to participate in Christ’s baptism is exactly the reality that is the most relevant one for any individual. And the same idea from another angle: due to the cosmic nature of Christ’s baptism, Christ was mystically baptised “together with the defiled”.¹⁴¹ The idea of such fusion implies a break in diachronic understanding of events: the limitations of time and place vanishes. This is why the baptism is renewal of man: Christ by His baptism makes new the oldness of man, the barren state of humanity.¹⁴²

134 *HEpi Sōgītā* VI:15.

135 *HEpi* 10:12.

136 For more details, see BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 62.

137 *HEpi* 13:2.

138 *HVir* 7:7.

139 “For that cause for which He entered into the womb, for the same cause He went down into the river.” *HEpi* 10:3.

140 *Comm.Diat.* 2, 8:70.

141 *HEpi* 10:2.

142 “For by baptism our Lord made new your old age.” *HVir* 1:2.

This is the basis from which the actual functions of baptism may be derived. Firstly, baptism evidently is seen as being a purifying event by nature. Through baptism, one achieves purification from sins. In the words of *HEpi*, “the misdeeds of all Men are washed out in streams of water and oil”.¹⁴³ The purifying effect of baptism is symbolised by the imagery of “robe of glory”,¹⁴⁴ and the robe may be further identified with the wedding garment of the parable in Matt 22.

The purifying effect, in theological interpretation, means that baptism takes place for atonement, as the *HEpi* emphatically underline in certain key contexts. The response of *HEpi* 5 proclaims: “Blessed be He that ordained baptism, for the atonement of the sons of Adam!” These responses or refrains of hymns are highly important since they were probably sung commonly by people, and as such they had an important function as catchphrases and slogans. Therefore, they were de facto the most effective part of hymns, providing a kind of catechetical kernels for the laymen. It is noteworthy that in the refrains of no less than five hymns the main theme is the atonement and washing-away of sins, which is otherwise not a central topic in the *HEpi*:

Hymn 4: Blessed be He that blots out in water
misdeeds that are without measure.

Hymn 5: Blessed be He that ordained baptism,
for the atonement of the sons of Adam.

Hymn 6: Blessed be He who was baptised that He might baptise you,
that you should be absolved from your offences.

Hymn 7: Blessed is He who atoned your sins,
that you might receive His Body worthily.

Hymn 9: Blessed is He who came down, and sanctified water
for the remission of the sins of the children of Adam.

The archaic character of the refrains is shown by their proximity with the traditional Jewish doxologies (“Blessed be thou, our God...”). Moreover, five other refrains are directly connected with atonement. Namely, the refrains 8, 11 and 13 may be seen as consequences of the atonement, the refrains 10 and 12 as its prerequisites. In this way, 10 out of 13 responses in the collection deal with the atonement.

Hymn 8: Happy are you whose bodies have been made to shine.

Hymn 10: Glory to Him Who came and restored it.

Hymn 11: Let the bodies rejoice which the Evil One had made naked,
that in the water they have put on their glory.

143 *HEpi* 5:5.

144 *HEpi* 4:20. Cf. *HEpi* 12:1.

Hymn 12: Blessed is He who went down and was baptised in Jordan,
and turned back the People from error.

Hymn 13: Brethren, sing praises, to the Son of the Lord of all,
who has bound for you crowns, such as kings long for.

In addition to the purifying function, baptism has a certain mystical function that is more difficult to define; it causes or enables one to encounter and participate in the Divine life. The outer order of anointing, baptism and Eucharist – the concrete elements of oil, water, bread and wine – has a mystical purpose of enabling the neophyte to encounter the Divine in the physical reality. This, in Ephrem's wording, takes place in inner *vision* as well as in *hearing* His presence "in the voice".¹⁴⁵ In this way the various symbols of sensual experiencing – hearing, seeing, tasting – are employed in order to express the total and unspeakable nature of mystical presence. It is to be stressed that presence is the essential aspect here, experience being merely a subjective reaction to the presence.

In Christian thought there is always some tension between what may be called objective and subjective aspects of baptism. It is a fulfilment from the one hand and a beginning from the other. The tension is clearly seen in Ephremic texts as well. Due to the deep connection with the divine life in Christ, baptism is presented as being valuable for being an intrinsic value in itself, not only as a means to aim at something. Baptism represents total, perfect fulfilment, and this was told to the neophytes in definite terms: "in baptism you are perfected".¹⁴⁶ However, this all deals with the synchronic structure of baptism. In the neophytes' actual spiritual life, baptism is not the culmination but rather the beginning.

Therefore, baptism may also be presented as the gate to other mysteries, especially that of Eucharist.¹⁴⁷ Since the baptism is the entrance to Christian spirituality, all good things of Christian life ultimately are consequences of baptism, at least indirectly. For that reason, the consequences cannot be restricted to the ones that have been explicitly named by Ephrem in relation to baptism.

Moreover, baptism has also a *protective* function. Symbolically speaking, it "spreads her wings to shade your bodies".¹⁴⁸ In more general terms, one receives the state of "heavenly blessedness (*tūbā*)" in baptism.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, one may gain

145 "With the unction you have been anointed; you have put Him on in the water; in the bread you have eaten Him; in the wine you have drunk Him; in the voice you have heard Him; and in the eye of the mind you have seen Him." *HEpi* 8:21.

146 *HEpi* 3:17.

147 The body of Christ is portrayed as medicine of life in *HEpi* 7:23: "You have bathed your bodies, your hands together with your mouths. Go in and be of them that eat, for this medicine of life gives life to all."

148 *HEpi* 9:2.

149 *HEpi* 13:9.

peace through baptism. Divine peace is called “fruit of baptism” in *HEpi* – but the reference is again the baptism of Christ, not that of an individual.¹⁵⁰ This means that an individual may obtain the divine peace not by *taking* a baptism for himself but by *participating* mystically in the baptism of Christ in the waters sanctified by Him.

Furthermore, baptism is sensed or assumed to have a certain vivifying and life-creating quality. It is exactly this character that is symbolically expressed as a “new birth” – one of the most famous symbols of baptism, due to the use of the image in John 3. In the imagery of St. Ephrem, baptism is the womb that gives birth, and Eucharist “suckles and nurtures” the baptised ones – not with milk, however, but with “perfect Bread”.¹⁵¹

The baptised when they come up are sanctified,
the sealed when they go down are pardoned.
They who come up have put on glory,
they who go down have cast off sin.¹⁵²

Unlike many other authors of the patristic era, Ephrem does present also some explicit discussion on the subjective versus objective dimension of baptism. Namely, in *HEpi* 9 (which I tend to consider authentic) he draws a sharp distinction between these two by affirming that the objective might of baptism *per se* does not diminish nor increase but remains the same, no matter whether the baptism be performed with much or less of pomp. In individuals, however, the amount of power may still alter. The direction of process is dependent on the way how the matter is comprehended by man. Ephrem states as a law that when one has a greater understanding, “great in him is Baptism”. Consequently, when one has less understanding, the Baptismal reality diminishes in him and becomes “an empty treasure”.¹⁵³

In other words, the human cognitive response sets some outlines and limits for the subjective recognition of the baptismal reality. It is noteworthy that in this context Ephrem does not refer to ascetic or pneumatic activities, nor does he moralise against those who fail to develop their understanding. This, in fact, is a logical consequence of the basic idea: spirituality is in the baptism itself: it does not need to be produced by human activity. Nevertheless, the baptised are called to gain understanding of what the baptism is all about, but this is primarily in order to *enjoy* fully their actual baptismal reality. In that sense it is essential to develop one’s comprehension on the matter, but the efficiency of baptism *per se* is not dependent upon the level of subjective understanding. The ideal situation is what *HEpi* calls a conjunction of “two lights”, i.e. baptis-

150 *HEpi* 11:2.

151 *HVir* 7:8.

152 *HEpi* 6:9.

153 *HEpi* 9:3, 9:10.

mal mystery and deep understanding, through which one may behold the glory of Christ in its full splendour. “Baptism without understanding (*būyānā*) is a treasure full yet wanting.”¹⁵⁴

A man’s knowledge, if it be exalted,
exalted also is his degree above his brethren;
and he whose faith is great, so also is his promise;
and as is his understanding (*būyānā*), so also his crowning.¹⁵⁵

Ephrem compares the situation with men’s experience of light: light in itself is always all luminous and all equal, but in the experiential reality, one eye is more luminous than another.¹⁵⁶ However, Ephrem does not state that the understanding should have been achieved prior to baptism. In the case of catechumens this certainly was the case, but Ephrem’s point is that one may increase his/her understanding of spirituality constantly. This is basically a matter of deepening the understanding rather than achieving new data, but knowledge is of course fundamental for the understanding process.

The early Syriac literature is famous for its tendency to connect baptism and virginal life, and the general tone in Ephrem’s message and *HEpi* seems to be dealing mainly with adult converts. The setting involves one to put forward the question on Ephrem’s approach to the baptism of infants. In *HEpi*, the children (*yaldē*) are explicitly mentioned as coming to Christ in a baptismal context, but the expression does not seem to refer to infants.¹⁵⁷ In Syriac the word *šabrē* is used of children under five years old or so; the word occurs in *HEpi*, but with reference to non-participants.¹⁵⁸ The word may be used metaphorically,¹⁵⁹ and the same applies to the actual word for infant babies (*‘ūlē*).¹⁶⁰ In fact, the question remains somewhat open – if there is a question in the first place. The essential point seems to be *argumentum e(x) silentio*: the matter was not a controversial one for Ephrem, even though baptism was understood and presented as a radical renewal of man.

It may seem odd that there are no traces of patristic discussion on the legitimacy of infant-baptism in the case of ascetically oriented Early Syriac Christianity with all of its radical tendencies. I suggest that that the lack of question may be due to the fact that Christian baptism was widely understood in relation

154 *HEpi* 9:9.

155 *HEpi* 9:4.

156 *HEpi* 9:4.

157 *HEpi* 8:16 (17 in Johnston’s translation in which the line is omitted, however). See also *HEpi Soghita* V:32 (14:32). The word *yaldā* is a collective singular, ‘offspring’.

158 In *HEpi* 9:3, *šabre* appear as outsiders following the baptismal ritual.

159 “O Children of the baptismal font, infants (*šabre*) without spot, who have put on Fire and Spirit: preserve the glorious robes that you have put on from the water.” *HEpi* 4:19.

160 In *HVir* 7:7 Ephrem calls those who rise from baptismal waters “pure like babies” (*‘ule*).

to, and as derivative of the baptismal event of Christ. In Christian understanding of baptism, the basic emphasis was on the baptism of Christ, not on the individual's response to it. Therefore, the age as such could not become a crucial problem.

Another modern point of interest is the position of grace. To begin with, it is oftentimes clearly stated in *HEpi* that in baptism, the restoration of man is provided by God's grace.¹⁶¹ "Grace (*ṭaybūtā*) has come to baptism to wash away the foulness of our wound."¹⁶² The actual meaning of the term, however, is quite far from some connotations of grace in Western theology. The three Syriac words that may be rendered as 'grace' have extremely empathic nuances. *Ṭaybūtā* means literally 'goodness', *ḥnānā* 'kindness', and *rahmā* 'love'.¹⁶³ In Syriac/Aramaic there is no term available for grace with a legal connotation focusing on, or even containing, the tension between guilty and not guilty. This semantic detail is a remarkable one for the understanding of liturgical experience as well as private spirituality. Namely, the standard Christian petition "Have mercy!" does not sound in Aramaic ears like a plea for forgiveness but rather one for love and compassion. However, grace is often contrasted with 'justice' (*kēnūtā*) in Syriac theology, and this happens in *HEpi*, too.¹⁶⁴

Ephrem does realistically admit also the fact that, in spite of the mystical reality present in baptism, there are those who perceive nothing more than their outward immersion in the water, even though the power of Christ has been mingled mystically in it. In this phase Ephrem resorts to exhortation: one should be a discerning one in relation to his/her baptism. This is a call to intuitive understanding of the secret (*kasyā*) aspect of baptism, as well as a call to participate in its purifying effect: one is encouraged to let the soul be mystically washed together with the body.¹⁶⁵ The fact that this is not an easy task opens the next horizon: baptism as a challenge.

6. Baptism as a Call for Struggle

Ephrem compares baptism with clothing oneself with a new garment, and the newly baptised are called to preserve their "robe of glory" intact.¹⁶⁶ In the Syr-

161 *HEpi* 12:2. In the context, *ḥnānā* and *ṭaybūtā* appear in parallel functions.

162 *HEpi* 10:12.

163 This is illustrated by two linguistic phenomena. When *rahma* is used as a subject to portray God's action, it is often in plural, *rahmē*, 'effects of grace', 'operations of love' (e.g. *HEpi* 12:3). Moreover, the corresponding verb *rhem*, means 'to love' rather than 'to have mercy', and certainly not 'forgive'.

164 "Justice has gathered away its wrath, Grace has spread forth her love, behold, she pardons and quickens freely." *HEpi* 6:14.

165 *HEpi* 9:5.

166 *HVir* 1:1, *HEpi* 4:19.

iac tradition, clothing symbolises a thorough change in the mode of being. As Christ put on body and humanity in incarnation, so is man called to put on the new mode of life in Christ. Ultimately, the radiance of baptismal robe radiates the glory of Christ, and therefore “robe of glory” as a symbol unites the present age and *eschaton*: it refers to the present sacramental reality, as well as to eschatological fulfilment, the latter being opened by the mystery of baptism.¹⁶⁷

Behold, the sword of our Lord in the waters!
 The one that divides sons and fathers,
 it is the living sword that makes division
 of the living from the dying.
 Behold, they are baptised,
 and they become Virgins and saints,
 they have gone down, been immersed,
 and put on the One Only begotten.
 Behold, many have come boldly to Him,
 even the noble, children and the rich.¹⁶⁸

The concept of baptism as a dividing force implies not only that it divides people into two categories, but that there is a certain duality also in its own mode of being. The sacrament is at the same time mean enough to be dishonourable “in the sight of fools”, yet it is great in the sight of angelic beings,¹⁶⁹ due to its inner divine presence. This paradoxical duality of the manifest and hidden dimension of reality is characteristic for Ephrem’s understanding of Christianity. In the Christian mysteries the solemnity does not only co-exist with baseness: the greatness is *in* the meanness itself.

Baptism is a call to struggle against darkness with the Light of Christ. This “combative spirituality” may be symbolised with various biblical images, such as Gideon in the following:

O you baptised ones, receive your lamps,
 like the lamps of the house of Gideon
 conquer the darkness by your lamps,
 and the silence by your hosannas!
 Gideon likewise triumphed in the battle
 by the shout and the flame.¹⁷⁰

167 BROCK, *The Luminous Eye*, 94–95. Cf. *HNis* 43:21, in which the garment refers to the bodies of guests which should correspond to Christ’s radiance. Cf. *HPar* 6:9, “none among the saints is naked, for they have put on glory”. The Biblical reference often used in this context is Matt 22:1–14, the parable of the guest who was thrown out from the wedding feast due to the lack of proper wedding garment.

168 *HEpi* 8:16 (17 in Johnston who omits the last line).

169 *HEpi* 4:10.

170 *HEpi* 7:9.

It seems that the main weapons in the battle are liturgical rather than ascetical – praise and worship. This is not a detached detail but something deeply connected with the basic philosophic paradigm of Ephrem. Namely, the existence of God is a thoroughly balanced process of Word and silence: God the Word is eternally born of the Silence of God the Father.¹⁷¹ As a reflection of God's inner way of being, there is interplay of word and silence in the created order, especially in man, a microcosm by nature. For Ephrem, mere silence represents death, and mere speech without silence is demonic, but in balance they vitalise each other, and therefore it is the duty of man to set them in balance in his own being. When man raises in love a word of praise out of his own silence, from the depth of his inner being, he reflects the inner movement of God and sets himself in motion towards the divine way of being. Therefore, to utter a proper word of praise sets man to his own place in the cosmos as a liturgical being – or at least to the right direction.¹⁷²

The process is not easy, however, due to the fact that man has to proceed in and with full freedom, struggling against tendencies present in him. Ephrem presents various angles for the human struggle towards the divine. This has to do with the very nature of religion; the demand of purity may be understood in the light of the ancient Temple cult. *HEpi* depicts the baptismal event as an entry to the reality in which the place of offerings is taken by the human being himself.

The anointed priests used to offer the slain bodies of beasts,
 O you, anointed and excelling ones, your offerings are your own bodies.
 The anointed Levites offered, the inward parts taken from beasts;
 you have excelled the Levites, for you have consecrated your hearts.¹⁷³

Virginity and chastity are explicitly connected in *HEpi* with those who are being baptised.¹⁷⁴ Vööbus saw such remarks as signs of archaic practice in which celibacy was demanded from all those who are baptised.¹⁷⁵ It might be more

171 The idea was formulated already by Ignatius of Antioch (*Magn.* 8:2).

172 E.g. *HEcc* 9:9, 49:3–5, *HFid* 32:6–7. For discussion and references, see DEN BIESEN, *Simple and Bold*, 104, 109 ff, 201–204.

173 *HEpi* 3:13.

174 “Our priest has taken from out of the water, by the Hand which he received from Simon (i.e. Peter, reference to apostolic succession) virgins and chaste Men who are brought near to the Lord of feasts in the festival.” *HEpi* 7:27. For Ephrem's relationship to monasticism, see RAHMÉ, “Saint Ephrem et le Monachism”, 117–125.

175 Vööbus developed his radical thesis in *Celibacy, a requirement for admission to baptism in the early Syrian Church* (1951). The idea is present in the *Acts of Thomas* (e.g. paragraphs 12, 51, 84, 88–89, 144 in the Greek version) and Aphrahat the Persian (the famous baptismal homily in *Demonstrationes* 7, see especially *PS* 1: 341, 344–345) and has some biblical basis in 1Cor 7:17. There is a reference in the Syriac version of Hippolytus, those committing themselves to celibacy were to be baptised before the other catechumens. See VÖÖBUS, *Celibacy*, 57.

balanced, however, to state that in the early Syriac tradition such radical references were either rhetorical devices or indicated the idea that all the baptised ones were supposed to maintain their marital status after baptism (just as the clerics cannot change it after ordination). In addition, there were pre-monastic radical groups who could leave a greater impact on literature than their number indicated. In the Ephremic corpus, praise of virginity certainly does not imply that baptism was for ascetics only.

However, it is remarkable that *HEpi* does dare to expect that the baptised one would sin no more. The uniqueness of baptism is presented with strong terms: there is no other washing comparable with it. “Turn not again to uncleanness, for there is but one cleansing of your bodies!” *HEpi* exhorts.¹⁷⁶ The baptised Christians are even compared with clay vessels that, if once ruined, cannot be renewed again.¹⁷⁷ It is to be remembered, however, that we are dealing here with poetical and liturgical texts, not canonical regulations. The focus is in the solemn cosmic drama of fall and restoration, not in pastoral questions or personal failures. The function of such texts is exactly to lift one up from the practical problems that the canonical authors must deal with. Nevertheless, it is clear that there seems to be no room for major sins after baptism.

Where there is struggle, there is also a possibility of losing. However, the question of sinning after baptism is not dealt with in *HEpi* due to its function as a collection of joyous hymns of celebration. Nevertheless, it is noted that if one defiles himself in his freedom, he may wash himself by weeping,¹⁷⁸ i.e. repentance. A baptised one who sins is compared with a serpent that after casting away his old skin puts it on again. *HEpi* does not determine whether grace might allow a second chance for renewal. This, however, can be understood in a charismatic sense. The struggle initiated by baptism is not merely a human assault: the Spirit one has put on in baptism is able to destroy the “thorny growth of one’s sins”.¹⁷⁹ The Holy Spirit provides for the combat weaponry, “armour of victory” in symbolical terms.¹⁸⁰ The setting may be understood to indicate that all the failures are temporary and transient, victory being the eternal ultimate state in Christ.

176 *HEpi* 8:10.

177 “You are vessels of grace; beware of justice, for it does not grant two renewals.” *HEpi* 3:18 (3:19 in Johnston).

178 *HEpi* 6:18. For the fundamental significance of freedom in spirituality, see *HEpi* 10:13–15.

179 *HEpi* 8:11, *HEpi* 4:20.

180 *HEpi* 13:1, 13:7.

7. Hermeneutic Context of Baptism: Biblical Imagery

In Ephrem's poetical language there is no lack of symbolical imagery to illustrate various dimensions of baptism. The baptism is portrayed as a bridal chamber¹⁸¹, a mirror reflecting true image of man¹⁸² and so forth. The richest field of symbolism, however, is the fireworks of biblical imagery that Ephremic poetry mostly consists of.

In the early Syriac literature, the Johannine image of baptism as rebirth and the Pauline view of baptism as death, burial and resurrection exist side by side. Both perspectives interpret the same mystery from two angles, rebirth and resurrection being parallel images that are not in competition with each other.¹⁸³ For Ephrem, however, Johannine imagery of new life is clearly more central. It is interesting to note that even though Ephrem in his various writings constantly refers to the Gospels and repeatedly to the Old Testament, he very seldom alludes to the other parts of the New Testament. This is the case with his teaching on the baptism as well. The Pauline corpus was clearly not the major authority in early Syrian didactic tradition.

7.1. Paradise

The richest imagery, however, comes from the Old Testament. Perhaps the central *topos* in Ephrem's biblical imagery is paradise. The life of paradise is experienced through the Church in the present age, and it will be fully realised in the *Eschaton*. Christ is the true Tree of life, and the life of paradise ultimately is life of Christ symbolised by a robe of glory assumed in baptism. In this perspective baptism is a triumph over the condemnation of Adam. In *HEpi*, Adam is depicted as a mighty hero (*ganbar*) of cosmic drama who fell in the midst of Paradise in a dramatic fashion.¹⁸⁴ According to *HEpi*, what happened to Adam is the actual reason why Christ came down and was baptised.¹⁸⁵

The fall of Adam and the rise of the baptised are skilfully contrasted as two cosmic antitypes in *HEpi*. The story of primordial man ends up in disaster the antithesis of which is experienced by the neophytes in baptism. This is presented dramatically in the second person with an emphasis fixed on the salvific moment: Adam received Woes in Paradise, "but you have received glory *this day*". Baptism is the grand moment in which the change in cosmic balance culminates. Thus the neophytes are contrasted with the fall of primordial man.

181 *HEpi* 13:3, 13:13.

182 *HEpi* 9:7.

183 For more discussion, see BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 60–67.

184 *HEpi* 13:4, *HEpi* 12:2.

185 "This cause summoned Him that is pure, that He should come and be baptised." *HEpi* 10:2.

Adam	The baptised
cast forth by God in sorrow	made glad by God in the bride-chamber of joy ^a
receive Woes	receive glory ^b
loses his glory in a moment	clothed with glory in a moment ^c
lost (because of Satan)	participate in victory <i>today</i> because of baptism ^d
missed the fruit	taste the fruit <i>today</i> ^e
body of clay collapsed	body renewed in water ^f
a <i>HEpi</i> 13:12. b <i>HEpi</i> 13:6. c <i>HEpi</i> 6:9, 12:1. d <i>HEpi Sōgīā</i> VI, 13:4, 13:19. e <i>HEpi Sōgīā</i> VI, 13:17. f <i>HEpi</i> 6:10.	

In this way Ephrem allows the neophytes to enter the cosmic drama of fall and restoration and to grasp a new state of being. Life of Eden and life in Christ are contrasted in parallel terms. Man has lost his original beauty through Satan's envy, but he has now found it again, with the help of God's goodness.¹⁸⁶ Man has been subdued by evil since Adam, but through baptism the Evil One has been subdued, as the baptised participate in the victory of Christ. According to *HEpi*, the participation is not achieved through gradual process but in the single act of baptism.¹⁸⁷ The fact that baptism is a renewal for man ultimately means that Adam himself, as the collective man, has been restored in baptism by the divine compassion (*ḥnānā*).¹⁸⁸ Ephrem compares Adam's body with a house made of clay that has fallen but may be renewed by (baptismal) water.¹⁸⁹

In short, the beauty lost in Eden is recovered in baptism.¹⁹⁰ This idea is an apt one to be reflected with further imagery. The holy oil, for example, may be represented as the true river of Eden which pervades and irrigates the whole earth.¹⁹¹ Moreover, symbolism of Eden can be connected with the bridal images, the setting implying that in state of primordial Eden the humanity was

186 *HEpi* 12:2.

187 *HEpi Soghītha* VI, 13:19–20.

188 *HEpi* 12:2.

189 *HEpi* 6:10.

190 *HEpi* 12:3–4.

191 *HVir* 4:14.

formed and adorned as a young couple, and in baptism the same couple has been restored into their original beauty.¹⁹²

Imagery of Eden opens also to Eucharistic associations and derivations. “The fruit which Adam tasted not in Paradise, this day has been placed in your mouths with joy.”¹⁹³ Tree of life is in *HEpi* taken as an image of the body of Christ, who gave himself first as a representation (bread and wine) and then in reality (body and blood).¹⁹⁴ In this sense, the fruits of the tree of life are being delivered in the Eucharist as both representation and reality.

7.2. Other Imagery of the Old Covenant

Paradise and fall are archetypal myths for all humanity, but the emergence of Jewish religion is the actual beginning of restoration. For Ephrem, the Old Covenant is not only a textual reference but there is a genuine spiritual continuum between the old age and the new. The era of the old covenant is full of opaque motifs and symbols that start to blossom in Christ and in the Church.

The anointing of the People was a foreshadowing (*telnāyā*) of Christ,
 their rod a mystery (*rāzā*) of the Cross,
 their lamb a type (*tuḡsā* [τύπος]) of the Only begotten,
 their tabernacle a mystery of your churches,
 their circumcision a sign of your sealing.
 Under the shadow of your beautiful things, sat the People of old.¹⁹⁵

In fact, the bulk of baptismal teaching in Ephrem and *HEpi* is given through the images of the Old Testament. Most of these are traditional themes in Christian teaching. Especially the life of Moses offers various types and symbols of baptism, the most famous ones being the passing of the Red Sea,¹⁹⁶ the rock opened by Moses,¹⁹⁷ and the bitter waters of Marrah sweetened by Moses, defined as a “sign of baptism” in *HEpi*.¹⁹⁸ Moses represents a type of human being chosen by God to deliver His presence to the world. In *HEpi*, Moses is a mortal person on whom the majesty of God dwells, and this mystical dwelling is a “figure of Baptism”.

192 e.g. *HEpi* 12:3–4.

193 *HEpi Sōgūā* VI:17.

194 “Our Redeemer gave a figure of His Body in the tree, whereof Adam tasted not, because he had sinned.” *HEpi Sōgūā* VI:18.

195 *HEpi* 3:13.

196 *HEpi* 1:6, *HEpi* 7:6 (“The People passed through the water and were baptised”), and *HEpi* 5:7 (“Moses baptised the People in the midst of the sea”).

197 “By the water that flowed from the rock, the thirst of the People was quenched. Behold, in the fountain of Christ, the thirst of the peoples is quenched.” *HEpi* 5:12. “The rod of Moses opened the rock, and the streams flowed forth, and they were refreshed by its draught, the ones who had grown faint with thirst.” *HEpi* 5:13.

198 *HEpi* 1:4.

“On Moses dwelt the Breath, and on you the perfecting of Christ.”¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the imagery of water is connected with the cloud that overshadowed Israel in the desert, a symbol of the Holy Spirit that overshadows one in baptism.²⁰⁰

Other Old Testament typologies and symbols of baptism include circumcision, *halakhic* ablutions,²⁰¹ hyssop, flood,²⁰² and Elisha who purified himself mysteriously seven times.²⁰³ In the end, baptismal symbolism may be seen through any instance of water in the biblical narratives. In *HEpi* the author brings to the baptismal discourse the case of Naaman,²⁰⁴ the water with which Moses watered the sheep of Jethro,²⁰⁵ the well where Rebecca received jewels in her ears and hands,²⁰⁶ the water with the help of which Gideon chose the Men for the battle,²⁰⁷ the water of the well that David longed for,²⁰⁸ the river into which Jeremiah buried the linen girdle.²⁰⁹

Ephrem’s baptismal imagery opens further possibilities for biblical associations. As the Christian baptism is symbolically a womb, it may be paralleled with Jeremiah’s sanctification in her mother’s womb.²¹⁰ Even the occurrences of fire in the Bible offer baptismal symbolism, due to the combination of fire and spirit present in baptism. The baptismal font is mystically a furnace, and therefore the blaze of Daniel’s furnace represents another figure of baptism. And vice versa, in the baptismal furnace there “dwells and is hidden the Third one of God, Who in the furnace was the fourth.”²¹¹

In the same way, symbols of anointing include oil that Elijah multiplied, oil that Jacob poured, leaf of olive brought to Noah’s ark, anointments of Aaron

199 *HEpi* 8:2.

200 *HEpi* 1:5.

201 *HEpi* 11:3.

202 See e.g. *HNat* 1:25, 17:17; *HVir* 31:4, *HEpi* 3:4, 5:6–11, 6:12.

203 *HEpi* 1:2–3. The same verses appear in *HNat* 17:16–17. 2 Kgs. 5:10.

204 “Elisha by seven times washing, cleansed Naaman’s leprosy: in Baptism are cleansed the secret misdeeds in the soul”, *HEpi* 5:6. See also *HEpi* 3:5.

205 *HEpi* 7:5.

206 “At the well Rebecca received in her ears and hands the jewels. The Spouse of Christ has put on precious things that are from the water: on her hand the living Body, and in her ears the promises.” *HEpi* 7:4.

207 *HEpi* 7:8.

208 “David the King longed after the water of the well, and they brought it him, but he drank it not, for he saw that with blood of men it was bought. You have revelled in the midst of the water that was bought with the blood of God.” *HEpi* 7:10.

209 *HEpi* 7:12.

210 *HEpi* 8:9.

211 *HEpi* 8:6. “The famous Three in Babylon in the furnace of fire were baptised.” *HEpi* 8:5.

and Moses, as well as those of Saul and David.²¹² Likewise, the cloud of Israelites symbolises the presence of Holy Spirit in anointing.²¹³ According to *HEpi*, the Christian priest is the new Moses who “purges the defilements of the soul and with oil of anointing he seals new lambs for the Kingdom”,²¹⁴

Biblical images may also be used to contrast the old reality with the new. For example, *HEpi* declares that the crossing the river to the Promised land did not do people any good and their manna became rotten, but baptism opens the way to the “medicine of life that gives life to all”.²¹⁵ When mentioning the stone of Jacob, *HEpi* follows the Jewish exegetical tradition that identifies the stone with *even šetiyyah* on Mount Moriah.²¹⁶ In *HEpi*, the Temple of Jerusalem is presented as a pre-image of Christian’s body in which God is served. Correspondingly, the details of the Temple rituals reflect the spiritual reality present in the sacramental and mystical life of the Church. For example, the true sprinkling takes place inwardly in the baptised ones, in whom the divine sprinkling of Christ waters the inner faculties of man.²¹⁷ This internal continuity between the Temple cult and the Church in turn justifies the use of external signs of continuity such as candles, incense and liturgical vestments.

To cover all baptismal imagery of the Ephremic corpus would be an impossible task. His teaching on baptism is extremely rich in terms of quantity as well as quality. Above we have been browsing the images in *HEpi* and in Ephrem’s undoubtedly genuine texts with the aim of outlining certain principles lying between the poetical lines. In many ways, Ephrem was a figure who brought together aspects that had appeared more or less disconnected in earlier Christian literature: sacramental reality and theological ideas, cosmic vision and individual struggle, biblical themes and mystical vision of reality, not to forget Christian feasts. The tradition of his thought continued to have deep influence on the Christian thought in the Syrian Orient, and *HEpi*, even though partly unauthentic, is an outstanding example of this dynamic process.

212 *HEpi* 3:6, 3:8–11, 3:15. The Spirit dwelt and sang in David, but “The anointing which you have is greater, for Father and Son and Holy Spirit have moved and come down to dwell in you.” (*HEpi* 3:14 [16 in Johnston]).

213 *HEpi* 1:5.

214 *HEpi* 5:8.

215 *HEpi* 3:6. Similarly used ideas include water of the sons of Loot (*HEpi* 3:7) and the water of Gideon (*HEpi* 3:8).

216 *HEpi* 3:9. This possibility is missed by Johnston who translates *bēʿeh d-allāhā*, “between him and God”.

217 *HEpi* 3:11.

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