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2

SEBASTIAN P. BROCK

Spirituality
in
Syriac Tradition



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CHAPTER 1

The Importance and Influence of Syriac Spirituality

Syriac spirituality forms a distinct oriental Christian tradition; it exists alongside Greek and Latin spirituality which provides the basis of modern western Christian tradition. Its importance within Christian tradition as a whole lies in the fact that it alone is an authentic representative of the Semitic world out of which the Bible sprung: although Greek and Latin spirituality are of course also deeply rooted in the Bible, nevertheless they find expression in non-Semitic languages and in westernized thought forms of one kind or another. Earliest Syriac spirituality, especially in writings before about AD 400, is expressed in Semitic thought forms which have not yet undergone strong influence from Greek culture and thought patterns.

Looked at in another perspective, one can see that Syriac spirituality is the product of an authentically Asian form of Christianity; it thus contrasts with Greek and Latin spirituality, which are essentially the products of European forms of Christianity. Moreover, because Syriac spirituality has authentic Asian roots, it is free from the European 'cultural baggage' with which western forms of Christianity are usually associated. Appropriately enough, the oldest form of Christianity in India – going back to the very beginnings of Christianity – is this genuinely Asian Christian tradition provided by Syriac Christianity. Accordingly, it is clear that Syriac spirituality has a very important role to play in the modern Christian context in India.

Thus we need to recognize Syriac spirituality as something quite distinct within Christian spirituality as a whole. And since it is distinct, this means that it has its own particular contribution to make to Christian spirituality as a whole. It would be quite wrong to see the Syriac, Greek and Latin traditions of spirituality as rivals, each contending for primacy; rather, we should understand each tradition as complementing the others: each has its own special contribution to make to Christianity as a whole. All too often in the past (and, alas, sometimes still in the present) one tradition has tried to dominate the others, thus creating a serious imbalance: the result has always been an impoverishment of the Christian tradition. Instead, each tradition needs to recognize the value of the other traditions, and thus be enriched by them.

Syriac spirituality in fact experienced this enrichment in the course of its history. During the period from the fifth to the seventh century AD Syriac Christianity underwent strong influence from Greek Christianity. Thus Syriac writers of that time were able to benefit from the coming together of the two traditions of spirituality. This process of combining the Greek with the Syriac tradition led to an enrichment, rather than to an impoverishment; this can readily be seen from the wonderful blossoming of the East Syrian mystical tradition in the seventh and eighth centuries. Writers in this tradition, like St Isaac of Nineveh, draw on both Syriac and Greek traditions of spirituality in a highly creative manner, and to great advantage.

Nor was the influence one way only, Greek on Syriac. Syriac spirituality has also had its own influence on Greek and Latin traditions. In the fifth century St Ephrem enjoyed immense prestige as a poet and writer, and many of his works were translated into Greek, and then into Latin; Ephrem thus came to be a well known figure in the medieval West (though many of the works attributed to him in Greek and Latin are not, in fact, by him). Syriac works under his name (both genuine and not) were introduced to the West in the editions and Latin translations published by Maronite scholars in Rome in the early eighteenth century. A further series of volumes, edited by T. Lamy at the end of the nineteenth century, made some further works available: the nineteenth century also saw the first English translations,

making his works accessible to a much wider public. Although Pope Benedict XV proclaimed St Ephrem a Doctor of the Church in 1920, there was comparatively little interest taken in him until the second half of the twentieth century. Thanks to the fine edition of Ephrem's genuine works by Dom Edmund Beck in the Corpus of Oriental Christian Writers, in the last few decades there has been a great revival of interest in St Ephrem and his spirituality in the West. For English readers the world of St Ephrem and early Syriac spirituality was opened up in a wonderful way by Fr. Robert Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (1975). More recently, a number of translations of selected hymns, and some studies of Ephrem's spirituality have become available, thus making this outstanding representative of Syriac Christianity accessible to Western Christians.

Ephrem was not the only Syriac writer some of whose works were translated into Greek. In the eighth century, probably less than a hundred years after his death, a large part of the works of St Isaac of Nineveh were translated into Greek at the monastery of St Sabas in Palestine. Subsequently these works were in turn translated into Georgian, Latin, Portuguese, French, Spanish, Italian, Slavonic, Rumanian, Russian, and even (at the beginning of this century) Japanese. Through an early Arabic translation St Isaac's works also reached Ethiopia. The writings of the East Syrian hermit Isaac have travelled across ecclesiastical and linguistic boundaries in a truly astonishing way, and his influence in the twentieth century is perhaps greater than it has ever been before: his writings are especially highly valued today in Greek Orthodox monasteries, and in the Coptic Orthodox Church the recent revival in the monastic life was directly inspired by the writings of St Isaac. For the English speaking world there are now two translations available, one made from Syriac and the other from Greek. Besides these, there is also a collection of excerpts from his writings included in the English translation of the Russian anthology of spiritual writings known as the *Philokalia*; and very recently a selection of some more works by Isaac is to be found in an anthology entitled. *The Syriac Fathers on prayer and the Spiritual Life* (1987).

St Ephrem and St Isaac certainly represent the highlights of the Syriac tradition of spirituality, and it is appropriate that works of these two writers should have been made accessible to other Christian traditions by way of translations. Each represents a different aspect of Syriac spirituality, for St Ephrem stands in the early Semitic tradition of Syriac Christianity, while St Isaac belongs to the period when Semitic and Greek tradition had been brought together in a creative way.



CHAPTER 2

A Bird's Eye View of the History of Syriac Spirituality

For the present purposes it is convenient to divide up the history of Syriac spirituality into four periods:

1. The earliest period, up to about AD 400;
2. The fifth and sixth centuries;
3. The seventh and eighth centuries;
4. Later writers.

1. THE EARLIEST PERIOD, UP TO ABOUT AD 400

This formative period is of particular interest for two main reasons: first, Syriac Christianity is still essentially Semitic in its mentality, and is as yet relatively little under the influence of Greek thought patterns and of the Greek cultural world; the significance of this today for the Christian tradition as a whole has been pointed out in Chapter I. Secondly, the native Syriac ascetic tradition has not yet been fused with the Egyptian monastic tradition: only towards the end of the fourth century does the influence of the Egyptian tradition come to be effectively felt.

Our main witnesses for this early period are: the Odes of Solomon (late second century), the Acts of Thomas (third century), Aphrahat, Ephrem and the Book of Steps (fourth century).

The following are some of the prominent themes to be found in this period:

- The descent of Christ into Sheol (the world of the dead).
- The recovery of Paradise
- Christ as the Heavenly Bridegroom
- Salvation as healing
- The eye of faith

These, and some other themes, will be explored in Chapter IV.

Undoubtedly the greatest writer of this period is Ephrem (died 373). Although Ephrem deliberately avoided giving a systematic description of the Christian life, his extensive writings show that he had a distinctive spirituality which is both profound and coherent in its wide-ranging vision. The sharp dividing line between Creator (God) and the creation (which includes both spiritual beings and the visible world) can only be crossed by God himself, and he does so out of love for his creation: it is only because of this that humanity can have any knowledge of God. This self-revelation of divine love takes place in a number of different ways, but never imposes itself on humanity, since God's own gift of freewill to humanity gives to humanity the choice of whether or not to respond to this self-emptying divine love. Thus God's self-revelation is visible only to the eye of faith (for this 'luminous eye' of faith, see Chapter IV). This self-revelation culminates, of course, in the Incarnation when he 'put on a human body', but the process began in Scripture, in the Old Testament, where God condescended to 'put on names'; that is, he allowed various human metaphors to be used of himself, even though they were totally inappropriate to describe his true divine nature. The 'names' that God puts on serve two purposes: firstly, they reveal to humanity some small inkling of his true being; and secondly, they serve as a veil to protect humanity from the blinding and overpowering brightness of God's full revelation:

With the ray that comes from himself
 Christ softened his wondrous might:
 it is not that he grew weak at all,
 but it was to please us that he softened it, for our sakes.
 We have represented him as a 'Ray',

even though this is not his likeness,
for there is nothing that can accurately depict him.
He allows himself to be depicted with various likenesses,
so that we may learn of him, according to our ability.

(Ephrem, Hymns on Faith, 6.3)

Thus before the Incarnation into the flesh, God had already become incarnate, as it were, in human language, in the language of Scripture.

For the Christian, living after the Incarnation, God continues this continual self-revelation, having as his 'two witnesses' Scripture and the Natural World: in both of these there lie hidden innumerable types and symbols which act as pointers to God, revealing some aspects or other of the unknowable fulness of his true Being. These symbols and types are visible only to the eye of faith, and the greater the faith, the more these types and symbols become visible, and the more God is revealed to that individual.

For Ephrem the term symbol (Syriac, *raza*, literally 'mystery, sacrament, secret') has a very strong sense, for the symbol actually participates in the reality it symbolizes: the symbol possesses a 'hidden power (or, meaning)', which belongs to the reality its symbolizes.

The person whose eye of faith is truly luminous is able to perceive symbols everywhere, both in Scripture and in the natural world, each pointing to and revealing some aspect of the action of divine Love. The created world thus takes on a sacramental character, and at the same time the inherent interconnectedness of everything becomes apparent; and thanks to this 'descent' of God into the created world, humanity has the possibility of 'ascending' the ladder of symbols towards God—as Ephrem says, addressing Christ:

Lord, you bent down and put on humanity's types
so that humanity might grow through your self-abasement.

(Hymns on Faith, 32.9)

Ephrem's spiritual vision perceives the intimate links between the physical world and the spiritual world; whereas the

Fall – the misuse of freewill – brought about a state of disjunction and disharmony between these two worlds, Christ has provided the means for restoring harmony, and this harmony can be perceived as a reality by the person who possesses this luminous inner eye of faith. On the other hand, failure to cultivate this inner eye, will lead to the misuse of freewill and the failure to perceive the sacramentality of the natural world and the interconnectedness between everything and everyone. In all this, St Ephrem anticipates in a profound way much modern ecological thinking.

The early Syriac ascetic tradition (to which Aphrahat is an important witness) has several characteristic features which distinguish it from other traditions, notably the rich connotations surrounding the term *ihidaya* (used of those who followed Christ the *Ihidaya* (Only-Begotten) in a single-minded way), and the institution (if it can be called that) of the *bnay qyama*, or ‘sons (members) of the covenant’, consisting of ‘virgins’ (men and women) and *qaddishe*, or ‘the consecrated’, all of whom had evidently undertaken some form of ascetic vow of chastity at baptism. Since these features all belong to the period before cenobitic monasticism, born in Egypt, had taken hold in Syria and North Mesopotamia, this native Syrian ascetic development may be called ‘proto-monasticism’; it forms the subject of Chapter V.

In the Book of Steps, from the end of the period, we encounter a distinction drawn between the ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’ Commandments in the Gospels. The ‘lesser commandments’ are summed up in the Golden Rule, ‘one should not do to anyone else what is hateful to oneself; and what one wishes others to do to oneself, one should do to those whom one meets’ (Discourse 1.4). Those who confine themselves to keeping the ‘lesser commandments’ are the ‘upright.’ The ‘greater commandments’, on the other hand, involve complete renunciation of family, marriage and property, and those who follow these are the ‘perfect’ or ‘mature.’ Using the analogy of Hebrew 5:13–14 the lesser commandments are the ‘milk’ for children, while the greater commandments are the ‘solid food of the full-grown, or perfect.’

2. THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURY

Although fourth-century Syriac writers (especially Ephrem) were by no means unaware of what was going on in the world of Greek-speaking Christianity to their west, the influence of the Greek-speaking world was not usually very noticeable in their writings. During the course of the fifth and sixth centuries (and continuing into the seventh century) Christian Greek culture and literature became more and more influential among Syriac writers, and an impressively large number of Greek works were translated into Syriac, including several which were to have a profound influence on later Syriac spirituality.

Perhaps the most important of the native Syriac writers of this period is John the *Ihidaya* (conventionally translated 'the Solitary', but see Chapter V for the full range of the word's senses). Despite his evident importance, he is still a little known writer, and many of his works remain unpublished. Many later Syriac writers (among them Isaac of Nineveh) followed his three-fold division of the spiritual life, belonging to the body, belonging to the soul, and belonging to the spirit (John of course is basing himself on Paul, 1 Thess. 5:23). Many of his letters are concerned with teaching on 'the New Life' of the resurrection, which the baptized Christian should strive to anticipate already in this world (baptism, itself a death to sin' is understood] as a resurrection, prior to the general resurrection). Less advanced teaching, and of a very practical nature, is provided in his Letter to Hesychius.

Ephrem had already shown in the fourth century that poetry could be the vehicle by which a deep spirituality could be excellently expressed. Though no subsequent poet ever attained the same heights, one poet from the fifth/ sixth century does deserve particular mention in this context, Jacob of Serugh. Although most of his verse homilies are expositions of passages from Scripture, he is not just a didactic poet of distinction (like his East Syrian counterpart, Narsai;) at times his use of typology takes on mystical dimensions, as for example in his homily on the Veil of Moses.

In his ascetic writings Philoxenus takes over, from the Book of Steps, the contrast between the smaller and greater Gospel commandments. Those who follow just the smaller

commandments follow the way of uprightness, a way which corresponds to the period in Christ's own life before his baptism. The way of perfection, followed by those who seek to fulfil the greater commandments as well, corresponds to the period of Christ's life after his baptism. Philoxenus compares the two ways to different stages in human growth (but drops the analogy used in Hebrews 5): the way of uprightness corresponds to the period of an embryo's growth in the womb; only when birth takes place does the way of perfection commence. Birth here means for Philoxenus 'the apperception, or realization, of our first (spiritual) birth' (i. e. baptism).

Another important feature of Philoxenus's spirituality is his concept of the Christian living in a dual mode of existence after baptism—the mode of the body (*pagranutha*) and the mode of the spirit (*ruhanutha*). Before baptism a person exists solely in the mode of the body, but after baptism he or she exists simultaneously in both 'modes— in the mode of the body, by nature, and in the mode of the spirit, by grace. This is exactly the opposite to the situation with the divine Word: before the incarnation the Word exists by nature in the mode of the spirit, but from the moment of the incarnation He also exists simultaneously in the mode of the body, by grace.

These two features bring out the 'complementarity' between the role of Christ and the Christian, and at the same time they lend great prominence to the place of baptism, and the implications it has for any serious attempt at the imitation of Christ.

In the course of the fifth and early sixth century a number of important Greek writings on spirituality were translated into Syriac, notably the writings of Evagrius of Pontus, the Macarian Homilies, Abba Isaiah, various Egyptian monastic works, Mark the Hermit, and the corpus of writing attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite. All these were evidently widely read in Syriac monastic circles, and are not infrequently quoted by Syriac writers. In a few cases they were even provided with commentaries.

Of these Greek writers the most influential was Evagrius of Pontus (d.399); St Isaac of Nineveh, recognizing his great powers of psychological and spiritual discernment, speaks of him as 'the master of those with spiritual knowledge.' Evagrius had a threefold model to describe the stages of spiritual development.

and in view of his influence and importance it will be necessary to outline it here:

(1) the 'active' life (Greek, *praktike*), meaning not so much the externally active life (e. g. of charitable acts), as the interior struggle to eliminate sinful acts, thoughts and passions. The aim of this stage is to achieve 'passionlessness' (Greek, *apatheia*), a state of equilibrium and spiritual freedom, which meant the ability to love.

(2) and (3) the 'contemplative' life (Greek, *theoretike*), divided into two parts:

(2) 'natural contemplation' (Greek, *physike*). At this stage a person is able to contemplate the natural world, and see in everything pointers directing the mind to God (compare Ephrem's understanding of symbols in nature as pointers to God). This natural contemplation' is subdivided into 'first' and 'second natural contemplation', where the 'first' involves contemplation of the invisible creation, i. e. of angels and the spiritual world, and the 'second' involves contemplation of the visible creation.

(3) The second part of 'contemplation' (*theoria*) is called '*theologia*', or the awareness of the Trinity. This is the stage of 'pure prayer', which involves the laying aside of all thoughts (good as well as bad).

Evagrius represents the intellectual tradition of Greek spirituality, and he stands in contrast to the more experiential and affective tradition represented by the Macarian Homilies, where the emphasis is on the Christian's awareness of the activity of the Holy Spirit. Whereas for Evagrius the centre point of the spiritual person is the Mind, or Intellect (Greek, *nous*), the centre point in the Macarian Homilies is the Heart, following the biblical understanding (it should, however, be remembered that in the Bible the heart is not just the seat of the emotions, as in modern English usage; it is also the seat of the intellectual faculties, and so the contrast between Evagrius and the Macarian Homilies is not necessarily so great as it may at first seem).

Of the other Greek writings translated into Syriac, only those attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite attempted to provide

a systematic picture. The anonymous author, who must have lived in Syria about AD 500, was strongly influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, and in particular by the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (died 485). Dionysius's writings describe the process by which the whole of creation becomes united with its Creator, and is itself 'divinized'. The process is seen as having three stages, purification, illumination, and then union. This threefold pattern proved to be very popular, especially among medieval Western mystics (Dionysius's influence was considerably greater on Western Christianity than it was on Greek or Syriac Christian tradition). Dionysius speaks of a divine descent, whereby God reveals himself in symbols and language (compare Ephrem for the idea, but the two writers use very different language). This process of revelation takes place through a series of descending hierarchies (celestial, ecclesiastical) each grouped in triads (thus the top triad of the nine orders of the celestial hierarchy consists of Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones, and in the ecclesiastical hierarchy we find Sacraments, Initiators (i. e. priests) and Initiated. The divine descent thus makes possible human ascent; this takes place through each of the hierarchies in turn. Thus, for example in the triad of Sacraments, Initiators and Initiated within the ecclesiastical hierarchy the lowest order, the Initiated, are raised to the highest, the Sacraments, by the intermediary order, the Initiators. The process of ascent involves a stripping away of thoughts and images (the so-called apophatic way) as the 'unapproachable light' (1 Tim. 6:16) is approached: so bright indeed is this light that it dazzles, and Dionysius thus regularly speaks of it as 'darkness' (following Gregory of Nyssa, who bases himself on Exodus 20:21).

Dionysius's writings were clearly known in Syriac translation to many later Syriac writers, and he is quoted by name a number of times by Isaac of Nineveh. In the eighth century Joseph the Visionary tried to indicate the correspondences between Dionysius's stages and those of other writers such as Evagrius and John Solitary (See below).

3. THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES

This period coincides with a time of great political changes in the homelands of Syriac culture, modern Syria and Iraq, for in the 630s and 640s the Arabs successfully brought to an end

Byzantine rule in Syria and Sasanian (Persian) rule in Iraq. Though there were conversions to Islam as a result, these were not (except in the Gulf states) on a large scale, and for the most part the Syriac churches continued to flourish under their new political rulers.

The Church of the East during this period witnessed a truly remarkable flowering of monastic literature on the spiritual life. The beginnings of this literature in fact go back to the second half of the sixth century (a time when a monastic revival had taken place), and the great writers of the seventh century like Martyrius, Dadisho', Simeon the Graceful, and above all, St Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), simply carried on a tradition of literature on the spiritual life which had been begun by Abraham of Nathpar and Shubhalmaran in previous generations.

Many of the writers of this period were regarded with suspicion by some of the church authorities, and in some cases their works were actually condemned, on the grounds that they taught Messalian or other heretical doctrines – a charge based on miscomprehension.

Martyrius's extensive work entitled the *Book of Perfection* stands somewhat apart from the other works of this period. In the first place it is a carefully constructed work (though it remains essentially a work of exhortation rather than of systematic instruction on the spiritual life), which contrasts with the works of most of the other writers, whose treatises show few signs of interest in literary organisation, apart from the occasional use of the collection of one hundred short sayings (the 'Century'), a genre made popular by Evagrius in his *Centuries on Spiritual knowledge*. Secondly, Martyrius frequently quotes the Bible directly, whereas other writers are much more allusive in their use of Scripture (though they all clearly presuppose that their readers will be very familiar with the biblical text). One consequence of Martyrius's strong biblical orientation is the centrality which he gives to the heart as the centre of the inner person (writers who are more influenced by Evagrius and other Greek authors are more inclined to speak of the mind).

Undoubtedly the best known writer of this period is St Isaac of Nineveh. Isaac stands out as one of the giants among writers on the spiritual life, and through translations into other languages his profound insights have long been appreciated by Christians of other Churches. Isaac has no interest in providing an organised handbook or guide to the spiritual life; instead, he draws on a variety of different earlier traditions, both Syriac and Greek, and makes use of them in an eclectic fashion in order to suit his immediate purpose. Like Ephrem and Martyrius before him, Isaac lays great emphasis on divine love; at one point Isaac writes: 'The reasons for the coming into existence of the world and for the advent of Christ are one and the same: an indication to the world of the immense love of God, who brought about both events' (Century IV.79), and a little earlier he states that 'the whole purpose of our Lord's death was not to ransom (or, redeem) us from our sins, or for any other reason, but solely in order that the world might become aware of the love which God had for creation'. (Century IV.78). This divine love manifests itself in the providential care which is experienced by those who 'compel themselves to cast their care on God, thus exchanging their own care for God's care'. This providential care in fact 'surrounds everyone at all times, but it is not seen, except by those who have purified themselves from sin and think of God continuously'. God's self-emptying love seeks to be responded to by human love which also needs to be self-emptying, and in order to come to such love, profound humility is required. With true humility a person will see others from God's perspective, and not from a human perspective, and as a result that person will be filled with the same boundless compassion which God himself exhibits. (For the theme of humility, see further in Chapter VII).

It is clear from St Isaac's works that he had a number of mystical experiences; thus for example he writes: 'A fervent heat burns in the heart and ineffable joy arises in the soul. Further, sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exultation makes the mind drunk; unexplainable consolations are received by the soul; hope supports the heart and strengthens it. Then it is to him as if he dwelt in heaven' (Part I, p. 372).

Two further seventh-century writers, Dadisho, and Symeon the Graceful, should be singled out for mention in passing, since

their writings contain many passages of great spiritual insight. Like their contemporary St Isaac, they drew eclectically upon earlier writers on the subject.

In the eighth century the Church of the East produced two further great writers in the mystical tradition, Joseph the Visionary (who also wrote under the name of his brother, 'Abdisho'), and John the Elder (or John of Dalyatha, as he is sometimes known). Joseph has been called the 'theorist, of the East Syrian tradition', for in some of his writings he offers a more systematic exposition of the various stages or levels in the spiritual life. Here he provides a synthesis of earlier traditions following a threefold pattern:

(1) The stage of the body (John the Solitary), corresponding to Evagrius' *praktike*, and Dionysius's purification. This stage is concerned primarily with external practices, fasting, vigils, reciting the psalms etc; within the monastic context it belongs essentially to the cenobitic life.

(2) The stage of the soul (John the Solitary), corresponding to Evagrius's 'natural contemplation' and Dionysius's 'illumination'. This stage is concerned primarily with the cultivation of the interior virtues of humility, perseverance etc; within the monastic context it belongs essentially to the life of the solitary (the solitary would normally spend the week by himself, and then join the monastic community to which he belonged for the liturgy on Saturday evening and Sunday). The aim of this stage is *shafyuthas* which in this context means approximately 'serenity' (on this term, see Chapter IV).

(3) The stage of the spirit (John the Solitary), corresponding to Evagrius's *theologia*, and to Dionysius's 'union' or 'unification'. This highest stage is no longer concerned with the activities of the senses and of the soul, but with those of the mind: the mind in fact achieves a state of non-activity, or stillness, and it is Grace alone that stirs in it. This is the exalted state where 'pure prayer' is attained (Isaac already has much to say about this state), and where a vision of the formless light of the Trinity may be granted.

John the Elder is a much more intuitive writer, and his spiritual Letters are notable for the great fervour of their expression, and for the vividness with which he describes the

spiritual senses. Like John the Solitary (and other Syriac writers) before him, he sees the baptismal life of the Christian as an anticipation of the resurrection, provided it is lived to its full potential.

4. LATER WRITERS

Like their contemporaries who wrote in Greek and Arabic, Syriac authors of the ninth and following few centuries tended to be encyclopaedic in character. The outstanding example of this approach is provided by the great Syrian Orthodox polymath, Grigorios Abu'l Faraj, better known as Bar Hebraeus (died 1286). In his *Ethicon* Bar Hebraeus provides a codification of the Christian life (lay, as well as monastic), set out in systematic form. A much shorter work, the *Book of the Dove*, is intended as a guide for monks who have no spiritual director. In both these works Bar Hebraeus makes use, not only of earlier Syriac and Greek authors, but also of the writings of certain Muslim authors who wrote on the mystical life, notably al-Ghazali (died 1111). In particular, he follows al-Ghazali in stressing that it is not legitimate – or, indeed, possible – to describe mystical experiences in words.

Apart from these two books by Bar Hebraeus, hardly any writings on the spiritual life have been published which date from the 'renaissance' of Syriac literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For the subsequent period, down to the present day, much the same applies, and indeed this period of Syriac literature still remains largely unexplored.

From the second half of the sixteenth century, onwards the Syriac Churches came into ever increasing contact with Western Christianity, first through Catholic missionary work (from the seventeenth century onwards), and then through Protestant missions (from the nineteenth century). These contacts led to various western classics of spirituality being translated into either classical or (from the nineteenth century onwards) modern Syriac, and at the same time western feasts and western devotions (notably, to the Sacred Heart) came to be introduced into the Uniate Syrian Catholic and Chaldean Churches (corresponding to the Malankara and Malabar traditions in Kerala). Needless to say, the coming together of western and oriental spiritual tradition should result in the enrichment of both traditions, rather than the domination

of the one at the expense of the other. Here it is worth suggesting that one area where there is great potential for mutual enrichment lies in the combining of the western devotion to the Sacred Heart with the Syriac mystical understanding of the piercing of Christ's side on the Cross (John 19:34).

Before ending this rapid survey, mention needs to be made of one very important component of the Syriac spiritual tradition, namely the extremely rich liturgical heritage of the Syriac Churches. Over the centuries the liturgical texts have gathered together many of the best fruits of the Syriac spiritual tradition, often in the form of hymns and prayer songs, and these in turn can now serve as basic source material for an appreciation of the Syriac spiritual tradition in the twentieth century. In Chapter VI we shall see one example of the contribution which liturgical texts have to make, namely in the light they throw on the true meaning of baptism, and on the continuing place it should have in the life of every Christian.

CHAPTER 3

The Main Writers and Their Works

In this section we shall look at the most important writers and writings. These will be separated under six different headings:

1. The earliest period (to the end of the fourth century)
2. Syriac writers of the fifth and sixth centuries
3. Greek writers whose works were available in Syriac
4. East Syriac writers of the seventh to ninth century
5. Later Syriac writers
6. West European writers whose works were translated into Syriac. Whenever an English translation of a particular writing is available, an asterisk (*) is employed in order to draw attention to this; details of where the translation can be found are given in the Suggested Further Reading, at the end of the book.

1. THE EARLIEST PERIOD (To the end of the 4th century)

(1) * The Odes of Solomon

The collection of 42 short lyrical poems, entitled Odes of Solomon, probably belongs to the late second century (the attribution to king Solomon is fanciful). It is uncertain whether they were originally written in Greek or in Syriac (one Ode survives in Greek, but almost the entire collection is preserved in Syriac). The author of the Odes expresses his experience of Christ's love and salvation in prayer songs of great beauty. In several Odes Christ is represented as speaking in the first person. The general

character of the Odes can best be seen from a sample translation and for this purpose Ode 40 is selected:

As honey drips from a honeycomb,
 and as milk flows from a woman full of love for her children,
 so is my hope upon you, my God.
 As a fountain gushes forth its water,
 So does my heart gush forth the praise of the Lord
 and my lips pour out praise to him;
 my tongue is sweet from converse with him,
 my limbs grow strong with singing of him,
 my face exults at the jubilation he brings,
 my spirit is jubilant at his love
 and by him my soul is illumined.
 He who holds the Lord in awe may have confidence,
 for his salvation is assured:
 he will gain immortal life,
 and those who receive this are incorruptible. Halleluia!

(2) *The Acts of Thomas

The Acts of Thomas tell of the missionary travels of the apostle Thomas in India, ending with his martyrdom. The unknown author does not set out to write a historical account, but, like an author of a modern historical novel, he may well be using genuine historical traditions in order to provide the framework for his narration of the story. The author puts into the mouth of St Thomas some important teaching on the Christian life, and he provides several beautiful prayers associated with Baptism and the Eucharist.

The Acts of Thomas were written in Syriac (although Greek, Latin and other translations also survive), and they probably date from about the third century. Since hardly any Syriac literature from that time survives, the Acts of Thomas are of particular importance for the light they shed on the earliest forms of Syriac spirituality; thus we already find in the Acts of Thomas many of the themes which were to become predominant in later Syriac writers, such as the theme of Christ as the Bridegroom.

(3) Aphrahat

Aphrahat, also known as Jacob and 'the Persian Sage, lived in the first half of the fourth century, in the Persian Empire'

(modern Iraq; the Odes of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas were probably written in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, modern Syria). Virtually nothing is known about Aphrahat, though later tradition erroneously made him into a bishop of the monastery of Mar Mattai (in N. Iraq). He is author of 23 'Demonstrations', which contain teaching of a considerable variety of different topics, including Faith (*no. 1), Love (no. 2), Fasting (no. 3), Prayer (*no. 4), the 'sons and daughters of the covenant' (*no. 6; for the sons and daughters of the covenant see Chapter 5), humility (no. 9). In several Demonstrations Aphrahat seeks to persuade his readers not to adopt Jewish practices, such as keeping the Sabbath or observing the Jewish food laws.

Along with Ephrem, Aphrahat is the most important representative of early Syriac christianity. Since he lived outside the Roman Empire he is hardly influenced at all by the Greek-speaking word and Greek-speaking christianity.

(4) Ephrem

St Ephrem is undoubtedly the most outstanding representative of early Syriac christianity; he combines in a unique way the roles of both poet and theologian. He was born about 306 (the exact date is not known) in or near Nisibis, a town on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. The sixth-century life of Ephrem states that his father was a pagan priest, but this seems to be incorrect, for his own writings suggest that both his parents were christians. At Nisibis he was ordained deacon and he served as a catechetical teacher under a number of remarkable bishops (the earliest was St Jacob, or James, of Nisibis). In 363 Ephrem's home town of Nisibis was handed over from the Roman Empire to the Persian Empire as part of the peace agreement at that time; one of the conditions of the peace treaty was that the Christian population should leave Nisibis and settle further west, in the Roman Empire. Thus Ephrem was among the refugees who had to find a new home. He settled eventually in Edessa, some 100 miles to the west, and there he spent the last ten years of his life (he died on 9 June 373). One of the earliest records about his life mentions that right at the end of his life he helped in relieving the poor during a local famine. At Edessa it is likely that he came more into contact with contemporary trends in

Greek theology (though his knowledge of the Greek language was probably only very slight).

Because of Ephrem's fame as a writer, many writings have been attributed to him which were not by him. But even if these inauthentic works are laid aside, there still remains a very large number of genuine works which survive. These fall into three main categories: prose, artistic prose and poetry.

Of Ephrem's prose works, the most important for the study of his spirituality are his biblical commentaries, and above all the Commentary on the Diatessaron, or Harmony of the Four Gospels. Until fairly recently the Commentary on the Diatessaron was only known from an early Armenian translation, but now most of it has been recovered in its Syriac original, thanks to the discovery of an early manuscript. The work contains passages in a surprisingly wide range of different styles: some passages read like notes for lectures, with lists of alternative interpretations, while others resemble discourses with a sustained argument; other passages again, take on a distinctly lyrical character, as for example in the following extract, at the beginning of his discussion of John 19:34, the piercing of Christ's side with the lance; here Ephrem addresses Christ directly:

I ran to all your limbs, and from them all I received every kind of gift. Through the side pierced with the sword I entered the garden fenced in with the sword. Let us enter in through that side which was pierced, since we were stripped naked by the counsel of the rib that was extracted. The fire that burnt in Adam, burnt him in that rib of his. For this reason the side of the Second Adam has been pierced, and from it comes a flow of water to quench the fire of the first Adam. (Commentary on the Diatessaron XXI. 10)

Some parts of the Commentary on the Diatessaron are written in artistic prose, with beautifully balanced sentences and phrases, intended to invite the reader (or hearer) to a meditative frame of mind. Ephrem also adopts this style in an extended *Homily on our Lord, and in a *Letter to a certain Publius on the Last Judgement.

St Ephrem's reputation as a theologian of exceptional insight rests, however, more on his poetry than on his prose.

The major output of his poetic activity consisted in hymns (madrashe), and of these about 500 survive (a few are available in English translation). The hymns have been transmitted in a series of hymn collections; or cycles; of these the most important are: *On Faith (87 hymns), Nisibene Hymns (77 hymns; of these, only the first half concern Nisibis; most of the others are on Christ's descent into Sheol, the abode of the dead); Against Heresies (56 hymns), On the Church (52 hymns), On the Nativity (28 hymns), On Unleavened Bread, On the Crucifixion; and on Resurrection (35 hymns), On Paradise (15 hymns), On the Fast (10 hymns). Ephrem also wrote a number of verse homilies (memre), and of these the most important is the group of six *homilies on Faith.

(5) The Book of Steps

The Book of Steps (also known under its Latin title, *Liber Graduum*) is a collection of thirty Discourses, or homilies on the spiritual life by an unknown author who was probably living in the Persian Empire. The work is usually dated to the later fourth or early fifth century. The general atmosphere of these homilies is similar to that of the collection of Greek homilies on the spiritual life known as the Macarian Homilies, which probably date from much the same time, and seem to have been written in Syria.

The most distinctive feature of the Book of Steps is the distinction between the two main stages of the spiritual life: the first stage is that of the 'upright' (*kene*), who follow the 'small commandments' of active charity; these are summed up by the 'Golden Rule' that 'one should not do to anyone else what is hateful to oneself; and what one wishes others to do to oneself, one should do to those whom one meets' (Discourse 1.4, cp Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31). Only a few choose to go on to the next stage, which is that of the 'mature' or 'full grown' (*gmire*; the word is sometimes also translated 'perfect', but the author has Hebrews 5:14 in mind, and 'full grown' is more satisfactory). The 'full grown' follow the 'great commandments', which means total renunciation of family and possessions, and the taking up of Christ's cross. The author also speaks of the 'upright' as having received just the 'pledge' of the Holy Spirit, whereas the 'full grown' have received the Spirit in fulness.

*Discourse XII introduces the concept of the three different churches, the heavenly church, the visible church, and the church of the heart. To function properly, all three churches need to work in harmony. Christian growth consists in becoming aware of the existence of the heavenly church alongside the visible church and then uniting with these the internal church of the heart (see Ch. 4)

2. SYRIAC WRITERS OF THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

(6) John the Solitary

A considerable number of writings on the spiritual life are attributed to a certain John the Solitary (*Ihidaya*), sometimes also called John of Apamea (an important town in Syria). At present there is no certainty about the identity or date of this author, although it is now regarded as very improbable that this John is to be identified as John of Lycopolis or John of Thebes (both in Egypt), as is stated in some manuscripts. According to some scholars, the surviving writings attributed to John are to be allocated to two or even three different authors of the same name, all from Syria. Many of the texts attributed to John the Solitary have not yet been published, and so it is too early to seek for any firm solution to these problems. It seems likely, however, that several of the writings in question seem to fit best with a date sometime in the first half of the fifth century.

The writings under the name of John the Solitary which have been published so far are:

- three long letters of spiritual guidance; one is addressed to Theodoulos, while the other two are addressed jointly to Eutropius and Eusebius. None of the recipients can be identified.
- a further letter to Theodoulos, on baptism; a discourse on baptism, and a spiritual *letter on perfection.
- a series of Dialogues with Thaumasius.
- three Dialogues on the Soul; in these 'John the Solitary' converses with Eusebius and Eutropius.

- a short *discourse on prayer and inner silence.
- a long *letter of excellent practical spiritual advice to a certain Hesychius who had recently become a monk.

Of these texts, the Discourses and the Letters to Theodoulos, Eutropius and Eusebius are all evidently by the same author, who must have been a man of considerable education and with an interest in medicine.

In the Dialogues on the Soul there is an important passage which was to prove very influential among later Syriac writers on the spiritual life: in it the author bases himself on I Corinthians 3:3 and goes on to describe three different states or 'stages in the spiritual life – that of the body (*paganutha* 'bodiliness'), that of the soul (*nafshanutha*), and that of the spirit (*ruhanutha*).

(7) Philoxenus

Philoxenus, bishop of Mabbug (north Syria), was one of the greatest theologians of his time (he died in 523), and a leading figure in the Syrian Orthodox opposition to the Council of Chalcedon (which he saw as making too sharp a separation between the divine and human in Christ). Although most of his works are primarily theological in character (and often engaging in controversy with his theological adversaries), he also found time to write a number of important works in the area of spirituality; these are:

- thirteen *Discourses on the ascetic life.
- a *Discourse on the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit.
- a Letter of reply to Patricius, who had evidently asked Philoxenus how he could achieve the state of 'contemplation' (the Greek work *theoria* is used). This letter was later translated into Greek, where it circulates under the name of Issac of Nineveh – a remarkable ecumenical achievement.
- various short *Extracts on the subject of prayer.

Both in theology and spirituality Philoxenus offers a remarkable original fusion of Greek and Syriac tradition.

(8) Jacob of Serugh

Jacob, who died two years earlier than Philoxenus in 521, early disliked theological controversy and he only states his opposition to the Council of Chalcedon in one of his letters, when a correspondent demanded that he make his position clear. Like Philoxenus, Jacob evidently felt that the Council of Chalcedon's Definition of Faith endangered the oneness of Christ. Like his older contemporary, the East Syrian poet Narsai, Jacob is best known as the author of a very large number of verse homilies (memre), mostly on biblical subjects. Whereas Narsai is largely a didactic poet, Jacob at times writes with a mystical intensity (as, for example, in the *homily on the Veil of Moses, where he describes the spiritual betrothal of Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom to his Bride the Church). Jacob also wrote a number of letters which survive, and some of these are specifically on topics concerning the inner life.

(9) Stephen Bar Sudaili

Stephen, a monk of Edessa active in the early sixth century, was given to speculative ideas of a pantheistic nature; these led to sharp condemnation from Philoxenus and more gentle reproof from the milder Jacob of Serugh. Some later Syriac writers held that Stephen was the author of a remarkable book which survives, entitled *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos; modern scholars generally agree with this attribution. The Hierotheos in question is presented as the Hierotheos who features in the Dionysian writings (on these see 3, below): that Hierotheos is stated to be the revered teacher of Dionysius the Areopagite. The Book of the Holy Hierotheos must belong to a date after the Dionysian writings, rather than before (as it claims), for the author is clearly aware of them (though he happens to be more strongly influenced by another Greek writer, Evagrius, on whom see 3, below).

The book describes the journey of the mind's ascent, following the pattern of Christ's life; the mind is seen as ultimately going beyond 'union' to actual 'commingling' with the divinity.

The following passage will give some idea of the character of the work: Words of caution concerning the third spiritual understanding. My son, the sin which follows after

knowledge and which is unforgivable will be yours if you make public this mystery. As for me, my son, I am henceforth prepared for suffering, and the time has come when I shall be rejected for these things which I have transmitted. But such is the love of a true friend, that he should lay down his life for his friend: thus my love towards you is such that for your sake I shall be rejected by everyone.

You should realize, my son, that the nature of everything is destined to be commingled in the Father: nothing perishes and nothing is destroyed, nothing is lost; everything returns, everything becomes sanctified, everything united, everything becomes commingled. The words 'God shall be all and in all' will be fulfilled. Gehenna will pass away, torments will be brought to an end, prisoners shall be released those who reject others will be forgiven, those who were driven out will return, and those afar off shall draw close.

(10) Isaac of Antioch

A large collection of verse homilies comes down under the name of Isaac of Antioch (to be distinguished from Isaac of Nineveh, for whom see (4) below). Several of these deal with ascetic subjects, and, as we shall see, there are some interesting passages on the nature of virginity. The works transmitted under the name of Isaac of Antioch in fact seem to belong to three separate Isaacs, all of whom must have lived in the fifth or early sixth century: according to the Syrian Orthodox scholar Jacob of Edessa (died 708), these three Isaacs were to be identified as Isaac of Amid, who is said to have been a pupil of St Ephrem (on chronological grounds this does not seem very likely), Isaac 'the Great' who was born in Edessa but who spent most of his life in Antioch (probably second half of the fifth century), and third Isaac who flourished in the early sixth century, who was also born in Edessa but worked mainly in Antioch. At the moment it is rarely possible to allocate individual homilies to one particular Isaac rather than the others.

(11) Narsai

All the writers of the fifth and sixth centuries mentioned so far belong to the West Syriac tradition. From the East Syriac tradition the most important writings to survive from the fifth

century are the verse homilies by Narsai (died c. 500), on biblical, liturgical and moral topics.

Narsai was director of the School of the Persians in Edessa, but owing to the hostile theological climate there in the 470s he moved to Nisibis, in the Persian Empire; there, with the help of the metropolitan Barsauma, he set up and directed the theological School of Nisibis, which was to have such a profound influence on the subsequent theology of the Church of the East: the Persian School in Edessa (finally closed down by the Roman emperor in 489) and the School of Nisibis were famous for their study of the theology and exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia (died 428), the 'Interpreter' par excellence, and influential proponent of the 'Antiochene' christological tradition, followed by the Church of the East.

Narsai's verse homilies are rather more didactic in character than those of Jacob of Serugh. His *Homilies on Baptism and the Eucharist are of particular interest.

(12) Babai

Dating perhaps from the first half of the sixth century is a *Letter from Babai to Cyriacus on the solitary life. The small number of manuscripts which preserve the letter all happen to be Syrian Orthodox, and they identify the author as the Catholicos Baboway 'whom Barsauma [metropolitan of Nisibis] killed'; this would place the letter before 484, when Baboway was martyred. The identification with Baboway, however, does not seem likely; nor is it likely that the author is to be identified with either Babai the Great (died 628), or his contemporary Babai of Nisibis.

The author offers Cyriacus practical advice, making use of various proverbial examples, like the following:

Do not extend your labour beyond what you have the strength for, otherwise you may be obliged to depart from your place and you will be like the man who gave up carrying cockerel's wings, which was within the bounds of his strength, and was seen carrying a plank, whereupon he fell and was laughed at. Do not abandon the small advantage that is close at hand in the hope of a greater one further off; otherwise when you let go of the small one

close at hand, you will fail to catch the greater one, and you will lose both. You will be like the stupid man who, while he was carrying his son across a river on his shoulders, saw a fish swimming in the water: he let go the child in order to catch the fish- and as a result he lost his child in the river and he failed to catch the fish. Letter of Babai, ;36-37).

(12) Abraham of Nathpar, Shubhalmaran

The mid sixth century witnessed a monastic revival in the Church of the East, led by Abraham of Kashkar. This revival produced a number of monastic writings, and among these are works by Abraham of Nathpar and Shubhalmaran (his name means 'Praise to the Lord'), who belongs to the turn of the sixth/seventh century. The majority of these writings have not yet been published (an edition and English translation of shubhalmaran's 'Book of Gifts' is in preparation). One of Abraham's works was a slight *adaptation of John the Solitary's short work on Prayer.

3. GREEK WRITINGS OF THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries a very large number of Greek religious were translated into Syriac, and among these were a number of works which proved very influential among later Syriac writers on the spiritual life. The following are the most important.

(1) The Macariae Homilies

Several collections of spiritual homilies attributed to Macarius the Egyptian, or Macarius of Alexandria, are preserved in Greek. It is now generally agreed among scholars that these works originated in Syria or Mesopotamia, and not in Egypt. They belong to the late fourth or early fifth century, and have certain similarities with the Syriac Book of Steps.

A number of the Macarian Homilies were translated into Syriac, and they were clearly widely read by Syriac readers.

(2) Monastic Writings From Egypt

From the late fourth century onwards Egyptian monasticism came to enjoy immense prestige throughout the entire Christian world. In the fifth and sixth centuries many of the most

important texts concerned with Egyptian monasticism were translated into Syriac; among these were:

- the Life of St Antony, attributed to St Athanasius.
- Palladius' Lausiatic History, consisting of short biographical sketches of monastic figures.
- The History of the Monks in Egypt, an account of a journey to the main monastic centres in Egypt.
- The Apophthegmata, or Sayings, of the Egyptian Fathers (arranged in various collections).

In the seventh century an East Syriac monk named 'Enanisho brought all these works together into a single volume, which he entitled * 'The Paradise of the fathers'.

(3) Evagrius

Evagrius of Pontus (in north Turkey) was an admirer of St Gregory of Nazianzus (by whom he was ordained deacon). His early adult life was spent in the capital of the Roman Empire, Constantinople (modern Istanbul), but as a result of a scandal he had to flee the city. This traumatic experience led to his conversion to an ascetic life, and after spending some time in monasteries near Jerusalem he settled in Egypt, where he died in 399. Palladius, the author of the Lausiatic History (see above), was one of Evagrius' disciples.

Evagrius wrote extensively and perceptively on the interior life, and many of these works were translated into Syriac. (In the sixth century the Greek Church condemned his more speculative teaching on eschatology, and as a result very few of his works survive in Greek). The works preserved in Syriac range from straightforward practical advice, for example in the *Admonition on Prayer, to the more abstruse teaching (in the form of short pithy sayings arranged in 'Centuries' or groups of 100) in the Headings on Knowledge (Kephalaia Gnostica). This latter work survives in at least two different Syriac translations: one retains the more speculative passages of Evagrius' original work, while the other (which was the most widely read) has removed them.

Evagrius was regarded by St Isaac of Nineveh and other East Syriac writers as one of the great authorities on the spiritual

life. His Centuries were even provided with a commentary by Babai the Great (d. 628).

(4) Mark the Hermit

A certain Mark the Hermit is the author of a number of writings on the spiritual life which were translated into Syriac and proved to be influential. The most important of these writings was a treatise *On the Spiritual Law*, on which Babai the Great wrote a commentary. Mark probably lived in the first half of the fifth century and may have been abbot of a monastery near Ancyra (modern Ankara in Turkey); according to one late source he was said to have been a disciple of St John Chrysostom.

(5) Nilus

Nilus appears to have been a contemporary of Mark the Hermit and was also abbot of a monastery near Ancyra. A number of his works on the monastic life were translated into Syriac; amongst these is a collection of 160 short sayings, entitled 'Pearls'.

(6) The Dionysian Writings

The collection of writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, St Paul's disciple at Athens (Acts 17:34), proved to be extremely influential in all three Christian traditions, Latin West, Greek East, and Syrian Orient. The fact that the writings show the influence of the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus (who died in 485) is sufficient to prove that the real author was writing at the very end of the fifth century, or the very beginning of the sixth century. His identity remains a great puzzle, but it seems likely that he was writing in Syriac. The Dionysian writings soon became widely known and for the most part were accepted as being genuine works of the apostolic period. Two Syriac translations were made, the first almost certainly by Sergius of Reshaina (who died in 535, so must have been a younger contemporary of the real author), and the second by Phokas of Edessa, at the end of the seventh century (Phokas in fact revised Sergius' work, and did not produce an entirely new translation). Sergius' translation is fairly free, and as a result is much more readily understandable than the difficult Greek original, while Phokas' revision provides a much more literal (and less intelligible) rendering. The order of the different treatises is different in the two Syriac translations: Sergius has the sequence *Divine*

Names, Celestial Hierarchy, Mystical Theology, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, Letters; in contrast, Phokas' translation has the order Celestial Hierarchy, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, Divine Names, Mystical Theology, Letters.

A discourse on the spiritual life by Sergius, was subsequently prefaced to the collection of Dionysian writings in some manuscripts of the revised translation by Phokas. This little work in fact shows greater influence from Evagrius than from the Dionysian writings.

(7) Isaiah

Abba Isaiah, as he is usually known; is the author of an influential collection of ascetic writings, known as the 'Asceticon', which circulated widely in Syriac translation. The author has usually been identified as Isaiah of Gaza (late fifth century), but this is not entirely certain. The collection survives in two forms in Syriac, one with fifteen treatises, the other with twenty six; the aim of the smaller collection is more practical in its advice while the longer one is more theoretical.

The importance of Abba Isaiah's writings in the East Syrian tradition is shown by the fact the Dadisho (seventh century) wrote a commentary on them.

4. EAST SYRIAC WRITERS OF THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURY

The seventh to ninth centuries witnessed a truly remarkable flowering of literature on the spiritual life. The authors were monks and solitaries of the Church of the East; a few had experience in ecclesiastical office, as bishops, but this had rarely lasted long (for various reasons), and on the whole the hierarchy tended to be suspicious of them (some were unreasonably accused of Messolian teaching). Through translations into Arabic and Greek, some of them have proved to be very influential outside the Church of the East (this applies above all to Isaac of Nineveh).

(1) Babai the Great

Babai, who died in 628, was superior of one of the most important monasteries on mount Izla (North Mesopotamia); he was also the leading theologian of the Church of the East. Among his many writings is a commentary on Evagrius' Centuries on spiritual knowledge. Another work, entitled 'The Book of Perfection', is unfortunately lost.

2) Gregory of Cyprus

Gregory, who probably belongs to the early seventh century, was a monk from north Mesopotamia who spent some time in Cyprus. He is the author of seven monastic treatises and of a collection of letters; so far only one of the treatises has been published.

(3) Martyrius

Martyrius (also known by the Syriac form of his name, Sahdona) is the author of an extensive work with the title 'The Book of Perfection'. In the course of this fine work he tells how his early spiritual development was influenced by two women, one his mother and the other called Shirin, a holy woman whom he knew and visited when she was an old woman of eighty or so years old. * Martyrius became a monk at one of the most famous monasteries of the time, Beth 'Abe (in north Iraq). He was appointed bishop some time in the late 630s, but in the course of theological controversies within the Church of the East he was accused of innovation and of rapprochement with the Byzantine theological position; as a result he was deposed by a synod, but then reinstated, only to be driven out again from his see. He then settled in the neighbourhood of Edessa (by now under Arab rule, and no longer part of the Byzantine Empire); there he wrote his great spiritual masterpiece, The Book of Perfection.

The Book of Perfection survives not quite complete, for the opening chapters of the First Part are lost in the one surviving manuscript (this was written in Edessa in 837 and was donated to a monastery on Mount Sinai). The lost beginning of the work probably dealt with the dogmatic foundations of the Christian life, and then the rest of Part I contains an exhortation to the life of virtue, with chapters specifically on the solitary life, and on preparation for this in the cenobitic life. The Second Part contains fourteen chapters, and is preserved complete; here the central chapters deal with the following topics; faith, hope, love, self-emptying (for this, see below, chapter 4),

* The relevant passage is translated in S. P. Brock & S. A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (1987), pp. 177-181.

chastity, fasting, *prayer, repentance, humility, obedience, endurance, and watchfulness.

Two things in particular will strike the reader of *The Book of Perfection*: the great fervour with which the author writes, and the extensive use he makes of biblical quotations – perhaps no other work of Syriac spirituality is so deeply rooted in the Bible.

There also survive five letters by Martyrius addressed to fellow monks, and a set of spiritual maxims.

(4) Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian)

Isaac was born and educated in Qatar (in the Gulf), which was still an important Christian centre in the early seventh century. Practically nothing is known of the details of his life, except that he was appointed bishop of Nineveh (opposite Mosul, north Iraq), perhaps about 676; he was consecrated by the Patriarch, George (Giwargis) I, in the famous monastery of Beth 'Abe. Five months later, however, he resigned 'for a reason which God knows', according to one source; another text is more explicit:

As he was sitting in the bishop's residence the day after his ordination, two men disputing with each other came into the bishop's room. One of the men was demanding the return of a loan; the other, while acknowledging that he owed the money, was begging earnestly for the repayment to be deferred. The wretched rich man then said, 'if this man refuses to pay back what belongs to me, I will be obliged to take him to court'. The holy Mar Isaac answered him, saying 'Since the holy Gospel teaches us not to take back what has been given away, you should at least grant this man a day to make his repayment.' To this the impious man replied, 'Leave aside for the moment the teachings of the Gospel.' Saint Isaac then said, 'If the Gospel is not to be present, what have I come here to do?'

Though this may make a good story, it is probably just a later invention.

After resigning the bishopric (for whatever reason), Isaac retired to the mountainous area of Khuzistan (Beth Huzzaye), in

SE Iraq, where he lived as a hermit attached to the monastery of Rabban Shabur. In old age he became blind, and so came to be called 'the second Didymus' (Didymus the Blind was a famous fourth century writer of Alexandria). It is not known when he died.

Isaac's writings probably date from his old age, and represent the fruits of long experience of, and insight into, the interior life of the soul. The surviving works are divided into two Parts. The* First Part contains 82 chapters of varying length and content; of these, the first six chapters form a group of their own, with the title 'On the way of life of excellence'. This First Part has long been well known, and English translations are available of both the Syriac original and of the Greek translation (this was made at the monastery of St Saba in Palestine in the 8th or 9th century).

The Second Part of Isaac's writings, containing some 40 or so further treatises, has only recently been rediscovered, and so far only a few extracts have been translated into English. The Second Part opens with a letter to a certain Isho'zkha (who is otherwise unknown), and contains four 'Centuries' or groups of 100 short texts on spiritual knowledge.

Isaac may also be the author of a collection of seven 'Centuries', under the name of 'The Book of Grace'. This has not yet been edited or translated (apart from some extracts).

Isaac was clearly a man of wide reading, and he cites by name many of the spiritual masters of the past: of earlier Syriac writers he names Ephraim and John the Solitary, and of Greek writers Evagrius, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Macarius, Mark the Hermit, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the Sayings of the Egyptian Fathers (all these he knew in Syriac translation).

(5) Dadisho'

Like Isaac, Dadisho' originated from Qatar, but his monastic life was associated with various monasteries in Iraq. Very little is known of his life, but it seems likely that he belongs to the second half of the seventh century. His writings include an important and interesting Commentary on the writings of Abba Isaiah, a *treatise on solitude and prayer, addressed to monks

who adopt the eremitical life for a certain period, and a short *work on pure prayer.

(6) Simeon the Graceful (Shemon d-Taybutheh)

Simeon was another monastic writer of the end of the seventh century. He evidently had a medical training and this is reflected in his writings, where he shows an interest in physiology. An extensive work by him is included in Mingana's *Early Christian Mystics*. (See *For Further Reading* for the full title).

(7) Joseph Hazzaya (The Visionary)

Joseph, whose life spans much of the eighth century, was one of the most prolific monastic writers of the East Syrian tradition. His parents were Zoroastrian, and he was taken captive as a child in a raid; he was eventually converted to Christianity by the example of some local monks, while he was still in servitude. On gaining his freedom he became a monk. His writings show that he was extremely well read in the early Syriac mystical tradition; for some reason many of his works are transmitted under the name of his brother Abdisho (also a monk).

Joseph's most important surviving writings are:

- A long letter on the three stages of the spiritual life (this has been wrongly attributed to Philoxenus);
- a letter on the workings of grace (also attributed to John of Dalyatha);
- another *letter on the workings of grace;
- a *'fifth letter' to a friend, on how one may best approach God;
- on *spiritual contemplation;
- various *texts on prayer (and a fine pre-communion *prayer);
- a book of Questions and Answers!
- a collection of Headings on spiritual knowledge (attributed wrongly to John of Dalyatha).

Unlike most of the other East Syrian writers on the spiritual life, Joseph provides a much more systematic synthesis of early Syriac tradition, and he has justly been called 'the theoretician par excellence' of the East Syrian spiritual tradition.

(8) John of Dalyatha

Much confusion surrounds a sizeable group of monastic writings attributed to 'John of Dalyatha', 'John Sabha (the Elder)', etc. It now seems likely that John of Dalyatha and John the

Elder are one and the same person. Like many of the other writers so far mentioned, John of Dalyatha belongs to the East Syrian monastic tradition of northern Iraq; he evidently lived in the eighth century. His main writings consist of a collection of 22 homilies (an English translation is in preparation), and fifty one short spiritual letters (two are available in English translation). John is an intuitive writer of great fervour.

5. LATER SYRIAC WRITERS

The later Syriac tradition of spirituality has been very little studied, and here only a few important names will be mentioned.

John bar Kaldun, in the long life of his spiritual father Joseph Busnaya (died 979), gave an outline of Joseph's instructions to monks; these follow in the general tradition of Joseph the Visionary.

Grigorios Abu'l Farag, better known as Bar Herbraeus (Bar 'Ebraya), was one of most learned and prolific of all Syriac writers; he ended his life as Maphrian of the East, an office second only to that of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch. After having written extensively on philosophy, medicine, grammar and other subjects, towards the end of his life (he died in 1286) he turned to more specifically spiritual topics (one of the books which he came across was the Book of the Holy Hierotheos, which evidently impressed him). Besides giving some general directives for the Christian life (lay as well as monastic) in the Ethicon, Bar Hebraeus also wrote an influential little guide for monks, entitled *The Book of the Dove.

6. WEST EUROPEAN WRITERS WHOSE WORKS WERE TRANSLATED INTO SYRIAC

In the course of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries a number of European classics of spirituality were translated by missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, into Syriac (or, in the nineteenth century, into modern Syriac). Thus the very popular Imitation of Christ, attributed to Thomas a Kempis, was translated first into Classical Syriac by Joseph Guriel (Rome, 1857), and then into Modern Syriac by Paul Bedjan (Leipzig-Paris, 1885). Similarly, The American Presbyterian missionary D. T. Stoddard translated John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress into Modern Syriac (Urmi, 1848).

CHAPTER 4

The Early Period: Some Prominent Themes

In this section we shall look at a number of specific themes which are of particular importance and significance.

1. The Descent of Christ into Sheol (the world of the dead).

This is an important theme already in the Odes of Solomon, and St Ephrem devotes a considerable number of poems to it; its significance becomes clear if one distinguishes between ordinary or historical time, on the one hand, and sacred, or liturgical time on the other hand; ordinary time concerns a linear sequence of events, whereas in sacred time there is no before and no after; what matters in sacred time and sacred space is the quality of the salvific event, and not when or where it happened. Now the Incarnation is an event which effects both historical and sacred time: at the Incarnation God the Word was born in a particular place, and at a particular time; but at the same time the Incarnation is also effective for every place, and for all time, both past and future. Since this latter aspect could not be expressed in terms of historical time or geographical space, the early Church had to describe it in terms of non-historical time, and non-geographical space, in other words, in terms of sacred time and sacred space; and for this purpose it uses the phrase 'he descended into Sheol', the timeless abode of the dead in the Old Testament, and unlocated in space.

Seen in this light, the Descent into Sheol and Christ's victory over death takes on great significance for the life of the Church: rooted in sacred time it is effective at every moment in

historical time – which provides ample reason for St. Ephrem's many prayer songs celebrating this event.

2. The recovery of Paradise

In recounting the course of the history of salvation the early Syriac writers make great use of the themes of Genesis chapters 1–3, the creation of Adam and Eve, their time in Paradise, their disobedience and their expulsion from Paradise. Adam is understood as both the individual of the Genesis narrative, and as the representative of humanity in general; at the same time he is also the representative of each individual human being: as St. Ephrem puts it, "We left that Garden, along with Adam when he left it behind".

Christ, the Second Adam, is described as having 'put on the body of Adam', which is also 'our dody'; by so doing he reverses the effects of the first Adam's disobedience, and brings about the possibility for Adam / humanity to re-enter Paradise. In Ephrem and later writers this is often described using the typological themes suggested by the piercing of the side of Christ on the cross (John 19:34), as in the following passages:

Blessed is the Merciful One who saw the sword
beside Paradise, barring the way
to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:24): He came and took to himself
a body which was wounded so that, by the opening of his
side (John 19:34)
he might open up the way into Paradise. (Hymns on
Nativity VIII. 4)

By the edge of the sword
was the way to the Tree of Life guarded,
but now the Lord of the Tree
has given himself as food for the Peoples.
Whereas the first Adam was given the trees of Eden for food,
to us the Planter of Eden has himself become food for
our souls.

We went forth from Paradise with Adam, when he left it,
but now that the one lance is removed by the other,
let us gird ourselves and enter. (Armenian Hymns 49).

When Adam sinned and was stripped of the glory with which he had been clothed, he covered his nakedness with fig leaves (Gen. 3:7). Our Saviour came and underwent suffering in order to heal

Adam's wounds and to provide a garment of glory for his nakedness. He dried up the fig tree (Matt. 21:20-21) to show that there would no longer be any need of fig leaves to serve as Adam's garment, since Adam had returned to his former glory, and so no longer had any need for leaves or garments of skin (Gen. 3:21). (Commentary on the Diatessaron XVI. 10)

In the last of these passages Ephrem uses Adam first as a representative of humanity's present wounded, or fallen state; and then as a representative of humanity's future state of restoration, made possible by Christ, who having 'put on Adam's body', brought healing to it – and by means of it. But Adam / humanity is not just restored to the 'former glory' of Paradise: as the second passage indicates, restored humanity is no longer barred from the Tree of Life; indeed, the sacramental life of the Church can be said to anticipate Paradise here on earth, for:

The spiritual Bread of the Eucharist
gives lightness and the ability to fly:
the Peoples have been wafted on high
and have rested in Paradise.

Through the Second Adam who entered Paradise
everyone has entered it,
for through the First Adam who left it,
everyone left it.

By means of the Spiritual Bread
everyone becomes an eagle
who reaches as far as Paradise.

Whoever eats the Living Bread of the Son
flies to meet him in the very clouds. (Hymns on Unleavened
Bread XVII. 9-12).

In his Commentary on Genesis Ephrem explains how God created Adam and Eve in an intermediary state, neither mortal, nor immortal; they are given 'the tiny commandment' so that they may exercise the free will with which they have been endowed: if they had obeyed God's instruction, then they would have been rewarded with the fruit of the Tree of Life

The just One did not wish to give Adam the crown for
nothing,
even though He allowed him to enjoy Paradise without toil

The soul is your bride, the body your bridal chamber.
 Your guests are the senses and thoughts.
 And if a single body is a wedding feast for you,
 how great is your banquet for the whole Church! (Hymns
 on Faith XIV. 5)

In a similar way we often find the kingdom of heaven described as 'bridal chamber' (gnona): in this connection we should note an interesting alteration which many Syriac writers make to the biblical text in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins at Matt. 25:10: the Greek text has the Wise Virgins going in with the Bridegroom to the 'wedding feast', but in Syriac writers they are often described as entering the actual 'bridal chamber'.

In Sections 5 and 7 we shall see how important this theme is for a proper understanding of the ideal of virginity.

4. Salvation as healing

Early Syriac writers frequently speak of sin as a wound which requires healing: Christ is 'the good Doctor' who comes to bind up the wounds of fallen Adam/humanity. Thus Ephrem writes: 'When Adam sinned and was stripped of the glory in which he had been clothed, he covered his nakedness with fig leaves. Our Saviour came and underwent suffering in order to heal Adam's wounds, and to provide a garment of glory for his nakedness' (Commentary on Diatessaron, XVI, 10).

This emphasis on Christ as the healer is of particular significance for the early Syriac understanding of penance. Instead of the legal conceptual model, which tends to dominate the Latin western tradition Syriac writers prefer to use a medical conceptual model, where sin is seen more as a wound that is in need of healing; the medicine which can effect this healing is penitence. Thus Aprahat writes:

A man who is wounded in battle is not ashamed to put himself into the hands of a wise doctor, because the battle has worsted him and he has been wounded. Again, once he has been healed, the king does not reject him, but numbers and lists him in his army. In exactly the same way, a person who has been wounded by Satan should not be ashamed to acknowledge his fault and to turn away from it, seeking out penitence as a medicine. For whoever is

ashamed to show his abscess to a doctor will find it turned into gangrene, and disease will extend over his whole body. On the other hand, the person who is not ashamed [goes to the doctor and] has his abscess healed; he then returns to take part in the contest. The person with gangrene, however, cannot be healed again, and he will not put on any more the armour he has taken off. In the same manner, a person who has been wounded in our (spiritual) contest has a means of being healed, provided he says, 'I have sinned', and provided he seeks a penance; but the person who is ashamed cannot be healed because he is unwilling to acknowledge his wounds to the doctor. (Aphrahat. Demonstration VII. 3)

Christ 'the Good Doctor' has also transmitted his healing powers of forgiveness to his Apostles and to the priesthood after them. But Christ is not just the Doctor, he is also the 'Medicine of Life' (the term goes back to ancient Mesopotamian literature; 'life' in early Syriac writers also has the connotation of 'salvation', as in St John's Gospel):

Let Eve today rejoice in Sheol,
for her daughter's Son
has come down as the Medicine of Life
to revive His mother's mother. (Ephrem, Hymns on the
Nativity 13.2).

It is at the Last Supper that 'the Lifegiver of all blessed the food and it became the Medicine of Life for those who ate it' (Hymns on Unleavened Bread 14.16). From that moment on, this healing Medicine of Life is available to every Christian at each celebration of the Qurbana.

5. Divine Fire*

Fire is a frequent image of divine action or indeed of the Divinity. Thus Ephrem addresses Christ:

See, Fire and Spirit are in the womb of her who bore you,
Fire and Spirit are within the river in which you were
baptized.

Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font,
In the Bread and Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit (Hymns on
Faith X. 17)

* See also Chapter 6; 'Qurbana.'

The image of divine fire has a double aspect: On the one hand this fire may consume and burn up (the fate of a number of sinners in the Old Testament), or it may purify and sanctify.

In the Old Testament there are several passages where the the descent of divine fire indicates the acceptance by God of a sacrifice (see, for example, 2 Chron. 7:1, Solomon's dedication of the Temple). Jewish and early Christian tradition (especially among Syriac writers) sometimes extended this idea by analogy to other sacrifices known to have been accepted: thus Aphrahat speaks of fire descending on Abel's sacrifice, but not on Cain's (Gen. 4; in his *Demonstration IV*).

In the New Testament the image of divine fire appears in Acts 2:3, in the account of Pentecost. Early Syriac tradition also speaks of divine fire in two other places, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and in the River Jordan at the Baptism of Christ. Thus Ephrem addresses Christ:

See, Fire and Spirit are in the womb of her who bore You,
Fire and Spirit are in the river in which you were baptized.
(Hymns on Faith 10.17)

The theme of Christ as fire in the womb of Mary is very popular in early Syriac poetry. In a long dialogue poem* where the angel Gabriel and Mary speak in alternate stanzas we find:

Mary: You greatly disturb me now,
for if, as you say, he is all flame,
how will my womb not be harmed
at the Fire residing there?

Gabriel: Your womb will be filled with sanctity,
sealed with the hidden Divinity:
a place which is holy
is greatly beloved by God as a place where to
appear.

Likewise an anonymous prayer song on Mary opens:

1. I was full of wonder at Mary as she gave suck
to the Provisioner of all races who had become an infant.
He of whom all worlds are full
has resided in a young girl's womb.

* English translation in *Sogiatha* (Syrian Churches Series 11, 1988)

2. The daughter of poor parents
has become mother to the Rich One whose love has thus
constrained him.

He was fire in the virgin's womb,
yet she was not burnt up in the flames!

3. Lovingly she embraced the Burning Coal,
yet she suffered no harm as she held him in honour;
burning Fire has become embodied
and is clasped in Mary's hands.

The presence of Fire in Mary's womb and in the Jordan is paralleled by the presence of divine Fire in the Sacraments (Syriac Mysteries) of Baptism and the Eucharist. Thus Ephrem's tenth hymn on Faith, quoted above, goes on:

Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font,
in the Bread and Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit.

The same link between Christ as Fire in Mary's womb and Christ as Fire in the Qurbana is brought out in the poem on Mary by the use of the phrase 'the Burning Coal', derived from Isaiah 6:6, for this term is very frequently used of the consecrated Qurbana. The significance of these parallels will become apparnt in section 6.

6. The luminous eye

In section 2 mention was made of the inner eye of faith which alone is capable of perceiving the types and symbols of God hidden in both the Scriptures and in the natural world around us. This inner eye of the soul (or mind, or heart) has two essential features. Firstly, it functions with the help of faith, just as the physical eye functions with the help of light; and secondly, it is darkened by the presence of sin. Accordingly if this inner eye is to function well, it needs to be kept lucid and clear, that is, pure from sin; Ephrem describes the inner eye when it is in this state as 'the luminous eye' (Syriac, *shafiltha*), and its quality as 'luminosity' (Syriac, *shafitha*). Both these terms are of great importance in the subsequent history of Syriac spirituality, as well as in the writings of Ephrem.

It is only when this inner eye is luminous that it is able to see the types and symbols, the pointers to God, present every where, in nature and in Scripture:

The Scriptures are placed there like a mirror:
the person whose eye is luminous beholds there in the
image of Reality.

(Ephrem, Hymns on Faith 67.8)

Moreover, this inner faculty of vision grows stronger as faith grows stronger; indeed, they feed each other and so help each other to grow. And as the inner eye becomes more luminous, it will behold more and more of the divine reality. Looked at from a different perspective, one could say that more and more will be revealed to this inner eye as its capacity for spiritual vision becomes the greater.

No mortal being has had a more luminous eye than Mary had. Ephrem speaks of Eve and Mary as the two inner eyes of the world; one is darkened and cannot see clearly, while the other is luminous and so able to operate fully:

Mary and Eve in their symbols resemble a body, one of whose eyes is blind and darkened while the other is clear and bright,

providing light for the whole.

The world, you see, has two eyes fixed in it,

Eve was its left eye blind,

while the right eye, bright, is Mary.

Through the eye that was darkened the whole world was darkened,

and people groped and thought that every stone they stumbled on was a god, calling falsehood truth.

But when it was illumined by the other eye and the heavenly light which resided in its midst, then humanity became reconciled once again, realizing that what they had stumbled on was destroying their very life.

(Hymns on the Church 37.4-7)

As so often throughout Syriac literature, Mary here provides the model for the Christian.

The term 'luminous' is also used in connection with mirrors. In antiquity these were made of bronze, and not of glass; this meant that they had to be kept in a state of high polish if they were to function properly. In a passage quoted above,

Ephrem speaks of the Scriptures as a mirror; this mirror is of course polished, but in order to see 'truth', or spiritual reality, reflected in them, the inner eye needs to be luminous. Elsewhere he speaks of the mirror of the self, which needs to be kept highly polished if it is to reflect the divine Image in which humanity is created. (Gen 1:26). Our prayer too is a mirror, and if it is 'luminous' it will reflect Christ's beauty.

7. The three fold Church

In the paragraphs on the Book of Steps in Section 3 mention was made of the striking concept of the threefold church: the heavenly church, the visible church on earth, with its sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and the interior church of the heart. The second of these is modelled on the first, and the third is modelled on the second; and the ideal is that all three should function in harmony. The relevant passage reads as follows:

It was not without purpose that our Lord and his preachers, of old and in more recent times, established this church, altar and baptism which can be seen by the body's eyes. The reason was this: by starting from these visible things, and provided our bodies become temples and our hearts altars, we might find ourselves in their heavenly counterparts which cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh, migrating there and entering in while we are still in this visible church with its priesthood and its ministry acting as fair examples for all those who imitate the vigils, fasts and endurance of our Lord and of those who have preached him. Let us both do and teach this; then, once we have attained to humility and have shown honour to everyone, great and small, the heavenly church and the spiritual altar will be revealed to us, and on the altar we shall make a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the prayer of our hearts and in the supplication of our bodies, believing all the time in this visible altar, and assured in this priesthood ministering at it; for everything that exists in this church has been established in the likeness of that hidden church.

If, however, we should have doubts and despise this visible church, with its visible altar and visible priesthood, and this baptism that brings forgiveness, then our body will not become a temple, neither will our heart become

an altar or a well-spring of praise. Nor shall we have revealed to us that church on high with its altar, its light and its priesthood, where are gathered all the saints who are pure in heart, who dwell in its glory, exulting in its light, seeing that they do not despise this blessed nurse who daily gives birth to and brings up fair children whom she sends on to that great church on high.

This visible church can be seen by everyone: its altar, baptism and priesthood were instituted by our Lord. For in it our Lord prayed, and his apostles were both baptized in it and they sacrificed his Body and his Blood in it, truly serving as priests. It is the church in truth, and the blessed mother who brings up everyone as children. Likewise that body and heart in which our Lord dwells – and also because the Spirit resides there – is in truth a temple and an altar, seeing that our Lord resides there as it is written, Your bodies are temples of the Lord and Christ dwells in your inner persons (I Cor. 6:19).

As for the church in heaven, all that is good takes its beginning from there, and from there light has shone out upon us in all directions. After its likeness the church on earth came into being, along with its priests and its altar; according to the pattern of its ministry the body ministers inwardly, while the heart acts as priest inwardly. Those who are diligent in this visible church become like that heavenly church as they follow after it. This is why the visible church is supremely important, being the mother of all those who are baptized; but in particular it is because the face of our Lord shines upon her and illuminates her.

This church, with its altar and baptism, gives birth to men and women as children, and they suck her milk until they are weaned. Then they come to growth and to knowledge that belongs both to the body and to the heart, whereupon they make their bodies temples and their hearts altars; they consume solid food, superior to milk, until they become perfect and consume our Lord himself in truth, just as he himself said, Whoever shall consume me

shall become alive because of me (John 6:58). Once they have eaten the true food ... then they attain to that church on high which makes them perfect, and they enter the city of Jesus our King. There they worship in that great and perfect palace which is the mother of all the living and the perfect.

Accordingly we should not despise the visible church which brings up everyone as children; nor should we despise the church of the heart, seeing that she strengthens all who are sick. But we should yearn for the church on high, for she makes perfect all the saints. (Book of Steps, XII, 2-3).



CHAPTER 5

The Proto – Monastic Tradition

The great Syriac writers of the fourth century, Aphrahat and Ephrem, both belong to a time before monasticism (as we know it) had become a prominent feature in the life of Syriac Church; both authors are, however, important witnesses to an ascetic tradition and to a consecrated life-style which are of considerable interest.

Monasticism as we know it has its origins in Egypt; there, in the early fourth century, two particular monastic life-styles developed:

(1) the eremitical life of the hermit, initiated by St Antony (died 356). This life-style involved both times of totally solitary life and times when Antony was joined by other hermits. Antony's experience is described in his biography, written by St Athanasius – a work which proved to be a 'best-seller', and which was quickly translated from Greek into both Syriac and Latin.

(2) The cenobitic life of the monk living in a community; this was started by St Pachomius (died 346), when he founded a monastic community at Tabennisi, in middle Egypt, about 320. It was this cenobitic life-style which proved immensely popular, and soon spread beyond the boundaries of Egypt, to all over the Christian world. Cenobitic monasticism spread through Palestine into Syria and North Mesopotamia in the course of the second half of the fourth century, but it was not until after St Ephrem's death that it became an important feature in the life of the Syriac Church.

In the course of time Egyptian monastic tradition came to enjoy immense prestige throughout the Christian world, and so later writers wanted to associate men like St. Ephrem with it, even though historically they had no such connections. Thus the sixth-century life of St. Ephrem describes him as living as a monk outside Edessa, and even makes him pay a visit to Egypt, to see St. Bishoi. Likewise, later tradition claims to tell of the origins of monasticism in the Syriac Churches: according to this (unhistorical) tradition monasticism was brought from Egypt to Mesopotamia in the fourth century by St Awgen (Eugenios) and his seventy disciples. Later still, Aphrahat was anachronistically described as abbot of the monastery of Mar Mattai (in north Iraq).

These later traditions obscure the fact that the early Syriac Church had developed its own distinctive tradition of the consecrated life-style, which we can call the 'proto-monastic' tradition. This proto-monastic tradition is known to us above all from the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem, and some of its main features will be described below. In the course of the fifth century the native Syriac proto-monastic tradition became fused with the Egyptian monastic tradition, and subsequently came to be forgotten.

The distinctive features of the Syriac proto-monastic tradition are best illustrated by taking as our basis four Syriac technical terms which are central to this tradition: *ihidaya* (no single English term is adequate to translate this), *bnay qyama* ('members of the covenant'), *qaddishutha* ('consecrated state'), and *bthulutha* ('virginity').

Ihidaya. In later times *ihidaya* means a 'solitary', or 'hermit', in contrast to *dayraya*, a cenobitic monk; it can also simply serve as a translation of the Greek *monachos*, 'monk'. Neither of these senses, however, is appropriate when the term is used in connection with the proto-monastic tradition.

In fourth-century writings *ihidaya* has the following connotations:

– *ihida* (the noun) and *ihidaya* (the adjective) may refer to Christ, for these terms translate the Greek *monogenēs*, 'only-begotten' (John 1:14, 3:16).

ihidaya also has the sense of:

– 'unique, only' (e.g. of a child, as Luke 7:12, 8:42, 9:38).

- 'single, singular, unique'.
- 'single, in the sense of celibate.
- 'single-minded' (above all, in one's way of life, and in one's relationship to God).
- 'unified, integrated' (as opposed to someone 'divided').
- a follower of Christ the Ihida (ya).

Very often ihidaya combines elements of all these senses, and as a result no single English term is adequate to convey the full richness of the term.

It is interesting that in the Targums (the Jewish Aramaic interpretative translations of the Old Testament) Adam is described as having been ihiday, 'single, unified', before the Fall, just as God is Ihiday in heaven. It is thus most appropriate that Christ, the Second Adam, should also be called Ihidaya, and that those who seek single-mindedly to recover Adam's pre-Fall integrated state should be called ihidaye.

The relationship between the ihidaya as individual Christian and Christ the Ihidaya is brought out by Aphrahat when he speaks of 'the Ihidaya [Christ] from the bosom of his Father giving joy to all the ihidaya' (Demonstration VI. 6). Similarly, in one of the Epiphany Hymns (VIII. 16) attributed to Ephrem, the newly baptized are described as 'putting on that unique Ihidaya' - with the implication that they themselves become ihidaya.

In Aphrahat's Demonstrations the term ihidaya often seems to include the sense of 'single = celibate', with the underlying implication that marriage brings division (cp 1 Corinthians 7:34, where the Greek speaks of a married person as being 'divided'; the Peshitta however understands the sentence differently). The basis for this understanding is to be found in Aphrahat's understanding of Genesis 2:24.

'What Father and Mother does a man leave when he takes a wife? The sense is this: as long as a man has not yet taken a wife, he loves and honours God his Father and the Holy Spirit his Mother; but when a person takes a wife, he leaves his Father and Mother - in the sense indicated above - and his mind is caught up with this world, and his mind, heart and thought are drawn away from God to the world.'

But the ihidaya is not necessarily an unmarried person, for elsewhere in the Demonstrations we find that the ihidaya include, not only the bthule ('virgins, unmarried men / women'), but also the qaddishe, married people who abstain from sexual intercourse (thus Dem. VI. 4; VII. 25 etc; for this term, see further below).

Essentially the ihidaya is someone who has 'chosen for himself (as Aphrahat puts it) to live some form of consecrated life, a life which involves the single-minded following of Christ the Ihidaya. Since the Christian 'puts on Christ the Ihidaya' at baptism, this life should be the ideal of every Christian.

Qyama. All those who have undertaken to live the consecrated life of the ihidaya are described as bnay qyama, members (literally, sons and daughters) of the covenant. Qyama is the standard translation in the Peshitta Old Testament for the Hebrew term brith, 'covenant', and this seems to be the most likely sense in the phrase bnay qyama (other senses have been suggested, such as 'resurrection' (normally qyamta), 'stance', 'vigil, watch' - but these seem less satisfactory). The 'covenant' in question is probably best understood as some ascetic vow which would usually have been made at the time of baptism (in the fourth century this would have normally been adult baptism); other texts speak of such a vow as a 'promise' made to Christ.

It is possible that qyama, or covenant, was once a term also used of the baptismal 'promise' made by each Christian at baptism, 'I commit myself to You, O Christ...', which follows the renunciation of Satan in the West Syriac baptismal rite. In the Syriac translation of one of his catechetical homilies Theodore of Mopsuestia actually uses the term qyama in this context: 'I establish a covenant (qyama) with you, O Christ...' (Hom. 13). This does not necessarily mean (as some have supposed) that originally the baptized community consisted solely of those who had undertaken ascetic vows.

The bnay qyama did not live an organized community life. Some will have lived in their parent's house, while others would live a communal life in small groups of two or three. Where the bnay qyama lived together, these small groups sometimes comprised both men and women, though this practice was already frowned upon by Aphrahat, and was later specifically condemned as unseemly.

In the fifth century, when monasticism on the Egyptian model became the norm in Syria and north Mesopotamia, the role of the *bnay qyama* receded into the background: to a large extent the institution was taken over by monasticism, or (in the case of men) was replaced as a result of the growing need for large numbers of ordained clergy. For women, the *bnat qyama* or 'daughters of the covenant', the situation was a little different: there were fewer convents, and the need for deaconesses was more limited: accordingly, it is not surprising that we not infrequently encounter individual 'daughters of the covenant', consecrated virgins, in the sources for the fifth and sixth centuries.

(It should be noted that in the English and Latin translations of Aphrahat's sixth Demonstration, 'On the *bnay qyama*'; the term *bnay qyama* is misleadingly and erroneously translated by 'monks').

Bthulutha, 'virginity'. The terms *bthula* (masculine) and *bthulta* (feminine) are primarily used of those who have 'chosen for themselves' a consecrated life of singleness/celibacy and the single-minded following of Christ the *Ihidaya*; their choice will probably have received its public expression at adult baptism, combined with their baptismal vow.

In fourth century literature, the great biblical models of virginity are the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist.

Qaddishutha, 'holiness, the consecrated state'. In Aphrahat and Ephrem this term primarily has the sense of the consecrated state of abstinence from sexual relations with one's spouse; only in later Syriac literature does it take on the more familiar sense of 'sanctity'. The origin of this sense for the word lies in the biblical narrative of the Lawgiving at Mount Sinai, Exodus 19: in verse 10 Moses is instructed by God, 'Go to the people and sanctify (*qaddesh*) them', and then in verse 15 Moses says to the people 'Do not approach your wives'.

In the two great fourth-century writers, Aphrahat and Ephrem, the *qaddishe* are thus married people who had renounced sexual intercourse; like the 'virgins', they probably made this ascetic vow at adult baptism. Thus an early baptismal hymn says.

See, people being baptised,
becoming virgins (*bthule*) and *qaddishe*,

having gone down to the font,
 been baptized and put on
 that single ihidaya [Christ]. (Hymns on Epiphany VIII. 16).

It is likely that both Aphrahat and Ephrem were ihidaye/ bnay qyama, and many of their works were addressed specifically to fellow ihidaye. As a result they speak very highly of the ideal of virginity and qaddishutha. This has led some modern scholars to suppose that they held a very low view of marriage, and that this was partly a result of a dualistic view of the world which regarded sexuality as something essentially evil. This interpretation is extremely misguided, and finds no support in what Aphrahat and Ephrem actually say; indeed, when Aphraht gives examples of 'virginity' and 'qaddishutha' from the Old Testament, these are often cases where these states are seen as periods of preparation. The same idea of qaddishutha as a period of preparation can be seen in Ephrem's Commentary on Genesis chapter 8:

And God said to Noah, 'Go out, you and your wife, your sons and your sons' wives' (Gen. 8:16). Those whom God had caused to come in singly, to preserve qaddishutha in the Ark, He caused to leave in couples, in order to multiply and be fruitful in creation. He also said concerning the animals which had preserved qaddishutha in the Ark, 'Take out with you every animal that was with you... and let them give birth on the earth and be fruitful and multiply on it' (Gen. 8:17-18). Comm. (on Genesis VI. 12)

This idea of virginity and qaddishutha as preparation provides a pointer to one of the main motivating forces which led people to undertake these ascetic vows at baptism, namely the concept of Christ as the heavenly Bridegroom, mentioned in Section 4. In the literature on the Persian martyrs of the fourth and fifth centuries we encounter several cases where steadfast virginity on the part of a 'daughter of the covenant' is seen as the concomitant of betrothal to the Heavenly Bridegroom. Thus in the Martyrdom of Martha (a 'daughter of the covenant' of the mid fourth century) we find the following encounter:

The Mobed (the Zoroastrian religious judge) said to Martha 'Listen to me and do not be stubborn and obstinate, following your own perverted wishes in everything. Instead,

seeing that you are set on not giving up your religion, act as you want, but do this one thing only, then you shall live and not die: you are a young girl - and a very pretty one find a husband and get married, have sons and daughters, and do not hold on to the disgusting pretext of the 'covenant'.

The wise virgin Martha replied, 'If a virgin is betrothed to a man, does the natural law order that someone else should come along, attack her fiance, and snatch away this girl who has already been betrothed? Or does it say that such a virgin should give herself up to marry a man who is not her fiance?

'No' answered the Mobed.

Martha, the betrothed of Christ, then said, 'So how can your authority order me to marry a man to whom I am not betrothed when I am already betrothed to someone else?' To this the Mobed said, 'Are you really betrothed, then?' Martha replied, 'I am in truth betrothed'. 'To whom?', asked the Mobed. 'Is not your Honour aware of him?' said, the glorious Martha. 'Where is he?', asked the Mobed. Martha replied, 'He has set out on a long journey on business, but he is close by and is on the point of coming back'. 'What is his name?', enquired the Mobed. 'Jesus', replied Martha.

Still not understanding, the Mobed went on: 'What country has he gone to? In which town is he now?' Martha replied, 'He has gone off to heaven, and he is now in Jerusalem on high'. At this point the Mobed realized that she was speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereupon he said. 'Did I not say at the very beginning that this was a stubborn people, not open to persuasion. I will spatter you from head to toe with blood, and then your fiance can come along to find you turned into dust and rubbish: let him marry you then.' To which the courageous Martha replied, 'He will indeed come - in glory... he will shake from the dust the bodies of all those who are betrothed to him, wash them in the dew of heaven, anoint them with the oil of gladness... and bring them into the heavenly bridal chamber that has been set up in a place not made by hands, but built in

Jerusalem, the free city on high'. (*Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, tr. S. P. Brock and A. S. Harvey, pp. 70-71).

Aphrahat uses a similar argument when addressing 'daughters of the covenant' who were in danger of being exploited by men who also belonged to the 'covenant':

O virgins who have betrothed yourselves to Christ: when one of the bnay qyama says to one of you, 'I will come and live with you; you shall look after my needs', you should reply 'I am betrothed to a royal husband, and I am serving him; if I leave his service and serve you, my betrothed will be angry with me and will write me a letter of divorce, dismissing me from his house'. (Aphrahat, Dem. VI. 7)

The possibility of betrothal to Christ was not confined to women who live the life of consecrated virgins, even though the imagery could be exploited to its fullest with them. We have already seen in Section 4 how Ephrem describes the soul as the bride of Christ and the body as the bridal chamber. Interior virginity, or the virginity of the soul or heart, is as important as, or even more important than physical virginity. As St John Chrysostom put it,

'Fasting and (physical virginity are neither good nor bad in themselves; each becomes good or bad as a result of the intention of the person who practises them' (John Chrysostom, On Virginity IV. 2).

As we shall see further on, later writers lay great stress on the importance of virginity of heart.

Two other considerations lay behind the high regard which was accorded to virginity: the parallel seen between the baptized state of Christians and the life of the angels, and the description of baptism as a re-entry into Paradise.

After the rise of monasticism it was a commonplace in all monastic traditions, eastern and western, that the monastic life aimed at imitating the angelic life of spiritual beings. One of the features of the life of angels is, according to the Gospels (Matt. 20:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:35-6), its marriageless state. In fourth-century Syriac writers we find the idea that the baptismal life

of all Christians should ideally anticipate the Resurrection life, which will represent the marriageless life of angels. This anticipation of the resurrection life already in this world is in fact hinted at in St Luke's account of Christ's reply to the Sadducees concerning the Resurrection; in the Old Syriac translation of the passage the point is brought out even more clearly:

Those who have become worthy to receive that world (i. e. the Kingdom) and that resurrection from the dead, do not marry nor can they die, for they have been made equal with the angels, and being the sons of the resurrection (i. e. sharers in the resurrection) they are like the sons of God. (Luke 20:35-6 Old Syriac)

The idea that the sacramental life of the baptized Christian is an angelic one is expressed in quite a different way by St Ephrem when he contrasts Abraham's angelic guests who ate human food (Gen. 18) with Christians who are recreated at baptism like angels and who consume the food of angels at the Eucharist:

When the Lord came down to earth to mortal men
he created them again, in a new creation, like the angels,
mingling within them fire and spirit,
so that in a hidden manner they might be of fire and spirit...
To the angels who are spiritual Abraham brought
food for the body, and they ate.

The new miracle is that our mighty Lord has given to
bodily man Fire and Spirit to eat and to drink.

(Ephrem, Hymns on Faith X. 9, 11).

There are two words for 'angel' in Syriac, *mal'aka* and *'ira*. *Mal'aka* is related to *mal'ek*, 'messenger', which is the normal word for angel in the Hebrew Bible; *'ira*, on the other hand, is found in the Old Testament only in the sense of angel in the book of Daniel, but it came to be the normal term for angel in many Syriac writers. *'ira* literally means 'wakeful', which provides a connection with Christ's words at the end of the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt. 25). 'Therefore be wakeful, for you do not know the day or the hour' (i. e. when the Bridegroom will come). (It will be recalled from Chapter 4 that, according to early Syriac tradition, the Wise

Virgins enter the Bridal Chamber, rather than the Wedding Feast as in the Greek and the Peshitta).

The second reason why particular honour was accorded to virginity lay in the concept that baptism represented a re-entry into Paradise (see chapter 4). Now according to the normal understanding of the narrative of Genesis 1-3 among the Church Fathers, Adam and Eve lived a life of virginity in Paradise, and it was only after their expulsion that they had sexual intercourse; accordingly, it is easy to see why those who sought to live the baptismal life to the full (as did the *bnay qyama*) 'chose for themselves virginity'.

Although Jacob of Serugh lived after the early period we are considering, he nevertheless reflects earlier views when he writes:

Virginity looks towards that region on high,
to that place of the angels, exalted above marriage:
whoever remains in virginity, is one of the spiritual beings ...
The exalted position in which Adam stood before he sinned
was that of virginity, which is mingled with the angels.
The summit of virginity's beauty is Mary
- who became mother to the Fashioner of babies in wombs!
He resided in virginity
and he gave to virginity this crown. (Jacob of Serugh, *Memra on Virginity*, ed. Overbeck, pp. 387-8).

We encounter here a paradox which lies at the heart of the understanding of the meaning of virginity in the Syriac tradition: true virginity gives rise to birth-giving. Virgin-birth, of which Mary alone in the fallen world was held worthy, is in fact the natural state of Paradise, as Aphrahat explains:

It is no great thing for God to raise the dead, [In Paradise]
at a time when seed had not been sown, the earth gave
birth to plants whose seed had not fallen upon her: without
conception, she gave birth in her virginity ... Adam too
sprouted forth without having been sown, and without
having been conceived he was born. Aphrahat, *Dem VIII. 6*.

The same idea is frequently expressed typologically, when parallels are drawn between Mary's virgin birthgiving to Christ and the virgin births in Paradise, Adam's birth from the virgin Earth, and Eve's birth from Adam's virgin side. And then the consequences

of the Incarnation are expressed as the further miraculous birth-giving of the Sacraments from the side of Christ on the Cross (John 19: 34).

As we shall see later on (section 7), Mary's virgin birthgiving to Christ is seen as a model for all Christians: if they too are totally open to the Holy Spirit, they too will give virgin birth spiritually to Christ. This idea (linked to Matt. 12: 50) is already found in the third-century Greek writer Origen:

Every uncorrupted virgin soul which conceives of the Holy Spirit in order to give birth to the Father's will is a mother of Jesus. (Origen, Fragment 281 on Matthew)

In the later fourth century St Gregory of Nyssa writes in a similar way:

Virginal conception from the Holy Spirit gives birth to 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and salvation' (I Cor 1:30); in this way it is open to everyone to become a 'mother of Jesus', in accordance with Christ's own words 'Whoever does my will is my brother, sister and mother' (Matt 12:50).



CHAPTER 6

The Christian Life: Baptism* and Eucharist

In the pattern of salvation there are two Sacraments (or 'Mysteries') which are of central importance, Baptism and the Eucharist. In this section we shall consider some of the ways in which the Syriac Fathers understood these Mysteries.

Baptism

Baptism can be viewed from two different perspectives: it can be seen as rebirth, in accordance with St John's Gospel (3:3), or it can be seen as death, burial and resurrection, in accordance with St Paul's teaching (Romans 6:3). Where the emphasis is on baptism as rebirth, then Christ's own baptism in the river Jordan will be understood as the fountainhead for all Christian baptism; and where the emphasis is on baptism as death and resurrection, then Christ's own death and resurrection will be seen as the source for all Christian baptism. The Syriac Fathers combine both these views, though in the earliest texts there is more prominence given to the Johannine perspective of baptism as rebirth, and it is only from the late fourth century onwards that the Pauline perspective is given greater emphasis (in the Church of the East this was largely due to the influence of Theodore of Mopsuestia, d. 428). It is important to realize that it is not a question of one view being right and the other wrong, or the one better than the other: both are equally important.

* For the Syriac baptismal rites, see S. P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Syrian Churches Series 9, 1979).

St Ephrem speaks of 'three staging posts', or 'rest places', in the course of the Incarnation: When Christ 'rested' in the womb of Mary, when he 'rested' in the womb of the river Jordan at his baptism, and when he 'rested' in the womb of Sheol after his death on the Cross. Although these three 'resting places' were separated from one another in historical time, they all come together as one moment in sacred time, for they all share in the same salvific quality (historical time is concerned only with the sequence of events, whereas sacred, or liturgical, time is concerned with the quality of events; this means that events separate in historical time can come together in sacred time). Thus we can see that there is no real contradiction between the Johannine perspective and the Pauline perspective, seeing that Christ's baptism and his death on the Cross share in the same salvific quality and so come together in sacred time, even though they were separate in historical time.

In the same way, although Christ's own baptism and death on the Cross are far removed in historical time from each Christian baptism which takes place today, nevertheless, as a result of the blessing or 'sanctification' of the baptismal water in the font, in sacred time all these events are brought together. This is why the font is sometimes described as the Jordan, and why it is sometimes linked with the water which came forth from the side of Christ (John 19:34).

Although the Syriac Fathers usually intermingle the Johannine and Pauline perspectives, thus providing a very rich understanding of the meaning of baptism, here it will be convenient to consider the two perspectives separately.

The Johannine perspective: baptism as rebirth

Christ 'opens up baptism' at his own baptism in the river Jordan (Ephrem, Hymns Virginitas 15:3): Just as he 'put on a body' in the womb of Mary, so too he 'puts on the waters of baptism' (Ephrem, H. on Nativity 12:2), and thereby confers on them sanctification: 'The river in which Christ was baptized was clothed in light from within' (Ephrem, H. on the Church 36:6). Thus in sacred time Christ 'sanctified at his baptism all seas, rivers, streams, fountains and sources of water' (Hudra I, p. 616 = Chaldean Breviary I, p. 396, Epiphany). At each Christian

baptism the sanctified water of the Jordan becomes 'reactivated' at the blessing of water in the font; thus in the west Syriac baptismal rite attributed to Severus the priest specifically prays for 'the blessing of the river Jordan' for the baptismal water, and 'the sanctification of the Spirit', for it is the Holy Spirit who effects this, bringing together in sacred time each individual christian baptism with Christ's own baptism.

Ephrem speaks of Christ as being baptized in 'the womb of the river Jordan', and thus 'womb', now that it has been sanctified by Christ's presence within it, becomes the 'womb' which gives rebirth to Christians at baptism: 'At your baptism, O Saviour, the fountains of water were sanctified, and they became a spiritual womb for humanity' (Hudra I, p. 648 = Chaldean Breviary I, p. 421). Likewise a west Syriac baptismal rite attributed to Jacob of Serugh has the following prayer:

Your greatness, Lord, was willing to save us by your unsparing love, and you sent for our salvation your Only-Begotten Son and your everlasting Child, who was born of you without a beginning, and he left his hidden abode, descended and dwelt in the virgin's womb, so as to come to the open by means of bodily birth; he remained entirely with you, and he came entirely unto us, and, though he was not wanting or lacking in anything, he was baptized in the river Jordan and sanctified for us the womb of water, to be a womb full of health and power.

Theodore of Mopsuestia too, in his Catechetical Homilies, says that at Christian baptism the priest prays 'that the grace of the Holy Spirit may come upon the water and make it...a womb of sacramental rebirth'; similarly in the east Syriac baptismal rite 'the water is signed with holy oil to become a new womb that gives birth spiritually'. The womb of the baptismal font may also be contrasted with the womb of Eve, as in an early west Syriac baptismal service attributed to Timothy of Alexandria:

Instead of the womb of Eve which produced children who are mortal and corruptible may this womb of water produce children who are heavenly, spiritual and immortal.

In harmony with this image of the baptismal font as a spiritual womb we also find the font described as 'the new and spiritual

mother who gave birth, spiritually, from her womb to the people of the Christians' (Severus), or as 'the mother who daily gives birth to immortals' (Jacob of Serugh).

According to a tradition which can be traced back to the second century, a bright light, or (more often in Syriac tradition) fire, appeared on the Jordan water as Christ descended into it. Christ himself, who is often depicted under the image of divine Fire, sets the Jordan waters on fire:

Today the Living Fire is baptized in the [Jordan's] waves, and they become encircled with flame, without being destroyed (Anonymous Homily on the Baptism of Christ, II. 19; *Patrologia Orientalis* 38,4).

Or again,

At the sight of You, Christ, the Jordan took fire with love, when You came to be baptized, that each one might know the baptism with fire. The waters took fire with tongues of flame when the living Fire came to plunge himself there in baptism. (Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, Epiphany, III. 1, p. 498)

Thanks to this image of Christ as Living Fire it was when possible the womb of the font as a 'furnace'. Thus Narsai writes:

Christ's purpose prepared the furnace of the waters in mystical fashion: instead of with fire, he heated it with the Spirit of the power of his will he made his own handiwork into a craftsman for his creation, so that it should recast itself in the furnace of the water and the heat of the Spirit. (Narsai, tr. Connolly, p. 41).

The effect of this fire in the furnace of the font is explained by Dionysius bar Salibi in his Commentary on the Baptismal Service:

In the midst of the baptismal water there resides a hidden fire which burns away sins, while preserving the features of the body—Just as iron is preserved unharmed in fire, while its rust is purged away.

(He then goes on to compare the furnace of the font with the Fiery Furnace of Daniel 3:27, where the fire consumes the fetters that bound the Three Children, but left their bodies and hair unharmed).

This baptismal furnace is often described as purging and cleansing the divine 'image' with which humanity had been created (Gen. 1:26):

He who is good saw his image made ugly by sin; he recast it in the furnace of the water, and scoured off its ugliness, plating its shape with the gold of the Holy Spirit (Hudra I, p. 634 = Chaldean Breviary I, p. 411, Epiphany).

The link between Christ's own baptism and Christian baptism is also often brought out with the help of the image of the 'robe of glory', which had been the original clothing of Adam and Eve before the Fall. At his own baptism Christ makes this robe of glory available once again for humanity:

Christ came to baptism, he went down and placed in the baptismal water the robe of glory, to be there for Adam, who had lost it. (Jacob of Serugh, III, p. 593).

And at baptism the Christian 'has put on, in the water, the robe of glory which was stolen [from Adam and Eve] among the trees [of Paradise]' (Jacob of Serugh I, p. 209).

This theme is often picked up in the liturgical texts, as for example in a Sedro at Epiphany in the Fenqitho:

You who are without need were baptized in the river Jordan and left in it the garment of divinity for those who were naked that they might be clothed with it. (Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, III. 1, p. 496).

The theme likewise occurs in both the west and the east Syriac baptismal services themselves:

You have clothed us in the robe of glory of the gifts of your Holy Spirit, and you have granted that we should become spiritual children to the Father in the second birth of baptism (west Syriac rite attributed to Severus).

and in the east Syriac rite the priest prays that those baptized 'may preserve in purity the robe of glory with which You clothed them in Your mercy'.

Just as the themes of the baptismal womb and the baptismal furnace are often combined, so too the theme of the baptismal

robe may be linked with that of purging fire, as in an early baptismal hymn:

O children of the baptismal font,
 babes, without spot, who have put on Fire and Spirit,
 preserve this glorious robe
 which you have put on from the water.
 For whoever puts on the robe of glory
 from the water and the Spirit,
 he will destroy with its burning
 the thorny growth of his sins (Hymns on Epiphany 4:19–20).

Christ's baptism is also the betrothal of Christ to the Church, the moment when John the Baptist, 'the friend of the Bridegroom' (John 3:29), unveils and reveals the Bridegroom to the expectant bride. An early anonymous poem with a long dialogue between John and Christ, begins:

My imagination wafted me to the Jordan
 where I beheld a wonder,
 when the glorious Bridegroom was revealed
 to make a marriage feast for the Bride and to sanctify her.

Whereas Christ's own baptism represents the betrothal of Christ to the Church, each individual christian baptism represents the betrothal of Christ to each individual christian soul, for Christ 'has come to be betrothed to souls' (Ephrem, H. on Virginitv 25:16).

Now the 'robe of glory' which the baptized receive is also identified as the 'wedding garment' of the parable of Mathew 22: 1–14, which must be kept unspotted in readiness for the marriage feast: the man who was thrown out of the marriage feast was not thrown out because he could not afford a wedding garment, but because he had been given one previously, but had then either lost or soiled it. The christian is thus given this wedding garment during his or her lifetime, at baptism, in readiness for its use at the marriage feast of Christ the Bridegroom in the Kingdom of Heaven, which takes place outside time, at the resurrection at the end of time. Those who have preserved their wedding garment in purity will then experience the reality of the robe of glory which they put on in potential (St. Paul's 'pledge') at baptism.

As we shall see below, the christian should strive to anticipate already in this life this experience of being clothed in the robe of glory which will only fully be realized at the resurrection.

The Pauline perspective: baptism as death and resurrection

In the various Syriac commentaries on the baptismal service the threefold immersion in the font is associated with the three days which Christ spent in the tomb. Thus Moshe bar Kepha (died 903) writes:

The font takes the place of Christ's tomb; therefore when the person being baptized goes down, he goes down as if to the grave... The fact that he is immersed three times indicates the three days which our Lord spent in the grave. The immersion in the water symbolizes the death of Christ, and the font points to his burial. Moshe bar Kepha, (Commentary on Baptism, 14*)

Both Narsai and Jacob of Serugh speak of 'the grave of the water' and Jacob, in his fine homily on the baptism of Christ, has Christ say:

I bring people down to the grave of the water
so that I may make them immortal at the resurrection.
(Jacob I, p. 181).

From this perspective, baptism represents the moment of death to sin and to 'the old man', and the ascent from the font symbolizes both the resurrection of Christ in the past, and the resurrection of the individual christian in the future. Thus Dinoysius bar Salibi says:

The ascent from the font signifies three things: first, the ascent and resurrection of Jesus from the grave; second, that we shall have an ascent and resurrection from the grave at the last day; and third, that we shall have an ascent above the heavens if we preserve baptism undefiled. (Commentary on Baptism)

Very often the Syriac Fathers will combine both perspectives, the Johannine 'rebirth', and the Pauline 'death and resurrection'. There is one way of combining them which is very characteristic

* (Tr. K.A. Aytoun, in J. Vellian (ed), studies on *Syrian Baptismal Rites* (Syrian Churches Services 6 (1973) pp. 11-12).

of Syriac tradition: to link christian baptism with the water which issued from the pierced side of the dead Christ on the Cross (John 19:34). As we shall see in Section 7, this verse gave rise to a wealth of typological interpretation with profound implications. The aspect of interest to us here concerns the idea of the sacraments/Mysteries of baptism and eucharist being 'born' in a virgin birth, from the side of the dead Christ. This is a theme which Jacob of Serugh often explores, as in the following passage:

Christ came and opened up baptism by his cross
so that it might be a mother of life for the world in place
of Eve;
water and blood for the fashioning of spiritual babes
flowed forth from it, and baptism became 'the mother of life'.
No previous baptism (i. e. of Moses or John) every gave
the Holy Spirit,
only the baptism which was opened up by the Son of God
on the cross:
it gives birth to children spiritually with 'the water and
the blood',
and instead of a soul, the Holy Spirit is breathed into them.
(Jacob of Serugh I, p. 162).

Specific reference to John 19:34 is to be found in some of the prayers over the font in the West Syriac liturgical tradition:

May your living and holy Spirit come, Lord, and rest on
this water and kindle it with his invincible power, and
bless and sanctify it, and make it in the likeness of the
water which flowed from your side on the cross.

Jacob of Serugh, in particular, enriched the sacramental understanding of John 19:34 by introducing the theme of Christ the Bridegroom as well:

The Bridegroom's side has been pierced, and from it the
Bride has come forth,
fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve.
From the beginning God knew and depicted
Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his Only –
Begotten

he slept on the cross as Adam had slept his deep sleep,
 his side was pierced, and from it there came forth the
 Daughter of Light –
 water and blood, as an image of divine children
 to be heirs to the Father who loves his Only – Begotten.
 Eve in prophecy is the mother of all that lives,
 what, if not baptism, is the mother of life?
 Adam's wife bore human bodies subject to death,
 but this virgin bears spiritual beings who live for ever.
 (Jacob III, p. 299f).

In the various Syriac baptismal rites there are two main elements, anointing(s) with oil, and immersion in the font. In the earliest period (up to about 400 AD) the anointing came before the immersion, and was known as the 'rushma' or 'mark', a term derived from Ezekiel 9:4. Subsequently in the west Syriac liturgical tradition the most important baptismal anointing was the post-baptismal one, for which myron is used.

In the earlier writers the rushma was understood as having at least five important aspects: it is a mark of ownership, it is protective; it conveys cleansing and healing; it confers the priesthood that belongs to the People of God (1 Peter 2:9); and it conveys sonship.

The rushma as a mark of ownership takes the place of circumcision in Judaism:

God separated out the Jewish People from the gentile peoples
 by means of the former mark (rushma) of circumcision;
 with the mark of anointing
 he separated out the [Christian] people from the [Jewish]
 people. (Hymns on Epiphany attr. ephrem, 3:4)

In the East Syriac baptismal rite the baptized are actually described as 'being circumcised by it [the oil] with circumcision not performed by hands (Col. 2:11), stripping off the flesh of sins with Christ's circumcision.' Narsai reflects this idea of the oil acting as cutting away, or circumcising, when he says:

The priest holds the iron of the oil on the tip of his finger
 and he marks the body and the senses of the soul with its
 sharpness;

the mortal priest sharpens the oil with the word of his
mouth,
sharpening it like iron to cut away iniquity.

(tr. Connolly, p. 41f).

More frequently the rushma is a mark of Christ's ownership which is placed on his 'spiritual sheep' at baptism: baptism is entry into the flock of Christ the true Shepherd:

The Holy Spirit incises his mark on his sheep,
like a signet on wax, he incises his imprint:
the hidden seal of the Spirit is imprinted by the oil
on the bodies which are anointed at baptism.

(Ephrem, H. on Virginité 7:6)

This imagery of the baptized as sheep, or lambs, entering the flock of Christ, is prominent in many of the Syriac baptismal services; thus, for example, in the West Syriac rite attributed to Severus the priest prays for the person about to be baptized as follows:

May he be worthy of the rebirth from on high that comes
through water
and the Spirit, so that he may become a sheep of the
true Shepherd,
imprinted with the imprint of the Holy spirit.

The rushma, originally an anointing of the forehead alone, is also protective. In Ezekiel 9:4 the faithful Israelites are provided with a mark (rushma) on their foreheads to protect them against the outpouring of divine wrath; this mark was in the shape of the Hebrew letter tau, which in the old Hebrew alphabet was in the shape of a cross. The protective aspect of the anointing is well brought out by Narsai:

The priest traces the three names [of the Trinity] on his face as on a shield so that the tyrant [Satan] may see the image of the divinity on his head.

The reason for the marking on the forehead is to cause confusion for demons:

when they see the mark on his head they will be overcome.
On their foreheads the baptized receive the spiritual imprint
which will shine brightly before angels and men...

Demons behold the sign of God's name upon the baptised
and recoil from him;
the name of the divinity looks out from the mark on the
forehead,
and the eyes of the Crafty one are ashamed to look
upon it. (Tr. Connolly, p. 43).

In the baptismal services themselves the rushma is sometimes described as 'armour' in the battle against Satan; thus in the East Syriac service the priest prays:

May the pledge of the Holy Spirit which you have received, the Mysteries of Christ which you have partaken, and the living mark (rushma) which you have received, the new life you have acquired, and the armour of righteousness you have put on – may all this preserve you from the Evil one and his forces.

Since one of the popular titles for Christ in Syriac tradition is 'the Good Doctor', it is not surprising to find that the oil at baptism also cleanses and heals. In the Acts of Thomas, when Judas Thomas baptizes Mygdonia and pours oil on her head he prays

Heal her of her old wounds, and wash away from her all her sores, and strengthen her weakness.

This aspect of the role of the baptismal oil is found in several of the later Syriac baptismal services. Thus, for example, in the West Syriac (Maronite) rite we find:

May God cause his glorious, splendid and hidden light to dwell in the oil, and may it drive out from them sicknesses and diseases, both hidden and visible.

And in the East Syriac service the priest exclaims:

Praise to you, who have healed the sickness of our body by means of the oil and water which you applied to our wounds: you wiped away the pus of sin from our soul by the Holy Spirit, as with a sponge.

Narsai develops this idea in a delightful way:

The priest exercises the role of a doctor for the body's limbs, touching the exterior and causing sensation to reach into the hidden parts.

To body and soul he applies the remedies of his art;
 by divine power he heals both open and hidden disease.
 He mixes the medicine which is given into his hands
 in divine fashion,
 and by its power he heals all diseases without fail.
 Like a chemist shop, he has opened up the door of the
 holy church;
 he tends sicknesses and binds up the diseases of his fellow
 servants.
 With the external mark (rushma) he touches the hidden
 diseases that are within,
 and then he applies the medicine of the Spirit with the
 symbol of the water. (tr. Connolly, p. 42ff)

In the West Syriac baptismal service attributed to Timothy,
 the priest prays, before the anointing with myron:

...Grant through this imprint the union of your living and
 holy Spirit, and the honour of priesthood and the heavenly
 kingdom to those who are sanctified.

By becoming a member of 'the people of God', the newly baptized
 shares in the priestly function of God's people, as explained in
 1 Peter chapter 2, where the Peshitta translation reads 'You are
 like living stones: build yourselves up and become spiritual
 temples and holy priests in order to offer up spiritual sacrifices
 which are acceptable before God through Jesus Christ (verse 5)
 ...You are an elect family which serves as a priest for the
 Kingdom, a holy people, an assembly that has been saved; you
 shall proclaim the glories of Him who called you out of darkness
 into his wonderful light' (verse 9*).

The way in which this priesthood functions is well indicated
 in the passage from the Book of Steps on the three churches and
 the three altars, quoted at length in Ch. 4: whereas the ordained
 priesthood functions in the 'visible church', the priesthood which
 is shared by all the baptized functions in the interior church
 whose altar is the heart; and it is on the altar of the

* See further 'The Priesthood of the baptized: Some Syriac Perspectives'
 in S. P. Brocke, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (1988. Ch. 2)

heart that 'the spiritual sacrifices' are offered up. If these spiritual sacrifices are to be 'acceptable before God', then they, and the altar of the heart on which they are offered, need to be pure: only thus will the glories of God be proclaimed. This priesthood of the baptized is thus something into which the baptized grow, provided they grow in holiness – in contrast to the situation with the ordained priesthood which is an office conferred, and whose function does not depend on the holiness of the individual priest. (The theme of the interior offering of the heart is taken up again in Section 7, below).

One of the most important of the gifts of the Spirit which are conferred at baptism is 'the spirit of sonship', or 'of adoption as children, enabling us to cry, Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15). By giving to them the authority to address God as 'Father', this gift of sonship thus allows the baptized to use the Lord's Prayer, Jacob of Serugh points out that, before baptism, one can only legitimately call Adam as 'father'. Philoxenus comments as follows:

Indeed, we are quite unable to employ this term of address and call God 'Father', except through the authority of the Holy Spirit who is within us, for it is well known that those who have not yet become God's children by the holy rebirth of baptism are not authorized to use this term, and they are not permitted to say 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be the name...' The manifest reason for this is that the Holy Spirit is not yet within them. (Homily on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, English tr. p. 108f).

Another consequence of this gift of sonship is that we become brothers and sisters to Christ – but only because Christ himself first of all 'condescended to become a brother to bad servants' (Jacob of Serugh I, p. 194). Furthermore, by becoming 'children of God' the baptized also become heirs to the kingdom of heaven (cf Romans 8:17, Galatians 4:7) – a theme found in most of the Syriac baptismal services.

But above all, baptism confers the indwelling of the Spirit (Romans 8:11, 2 Timothy 1:14), with the body serving as a temple (I Corinthians 6:19). As Aphrahat was quick to see, the newly baptized has the responsibility to preserve this 'temple'

in a state of purity, otherwise he will 'grieve' the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30):

Let him who has been called the temple of God purify his body from all that is unclean, for he who grieves the Spirit of Christ will not be able to raise his head above misery. Let him who has received the body of Christ preserve his own body from all that is unclean, let him who has stripped off the old man, not return again to his former ways. (Demonstration 6:1)

Philoxenus, in his homily on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, states emphatically that Holy Spirit does not actually depart from the baptized when they 'grieve' him (this only happens in cases of apostasy): rather, 'grieving the Spirit, implies failure to allow the Holy Spirit to work within oneself; such failure to co-operate with the Spirit results in the absence of any of 'the fruits of the Spirit'. It is of course sin which grieves the Spirit, and accordingly it is only on repentance that the Spirit, becomes active once again. Ideally, there should be no further sin after baptism, but as Ephrem points out, God in his providence has provided a remedy for this, in the form of a 'baptism of tears':

Even though there is only one baptism for the whitening of stains,

yet there are two eyes which, when filled with tears, provide a baptismal font for the body's limbs.

For the Creator knew well beforehand that sins multiply in us at all times,

and though there is only a single baptism, he fixed two fonts (the eyes) that give absolution. (Ephrem, Hymns on Abraham Qidunaya 4:2-3).

In the fourth century, when Aphrahat and Ephrem were writing, adult baptism was probably still the norm, and the infant baptism the exception. As time went on, infant baptism became more common, and this new situation gave rise to different emphasis: more stress is now laid on the potential which is provided by the gifts of the Spirit at baptism; the all-important question is whether or not that potential will ever become a reality at some subsequent point in the lifetime of the baptized. Philoxenus peaks of baptism as the potential entry

into a new mode of existence: this entry takes place 'through grace' at baptism, the entry will only become real for the Christian when this grace on God's part is met by the conscious human 'will'. Thus for Philoxenus the Christian should undergo three 'births', natural birth, the birth of baptism 'when someone becomes a child of God by grace', and then a third birth 'when someone is born of their own will out of the bodily way of life into the spiritual, where self-emptying of everything is the womb that gives this birth' (Discourse 9). Elsewhere in the same Discourse he calls this 'third birth' the 'apperception for realization of our former birth [at baptism]'. When Philoxenus speaks of a person being born 'of their own will' at this 'third birth', he is not speaking of any act of self which can achieve this; rather, he is following in the tradition of Ephrem and other early Syriac Fathers who lay great emphasis on God's gift of freewill and free choice to humanity:

[God] could have forced us to please him without any trouble to himself,

but instead he toiled by every means so that we might act pleasingly to him of our own free will. (Ephrem, hymns on Faith 31:5)

Philoxenus is saying that, even at baptism God is not forcing his gift of the Holy Spirit upon us: rather, the Spirit will remain dormant until we of our own free will begin to respond to his hidden presence.

From this perspective, baptism is seen as just the beginning which opens up all sorts of new possibilities, provided the baptized person responds with openness to the presence of the indwelling Spirit. Ephrem and other early writers like to describe what these possibilities are – reentry into Paradise, Partaking of the Tree of Life (at Communion), reclothing with the robe of glory etc.; Philoxenus and other writers from the late fifth century onwards, however, concentrate more on how these possibilities can become a reality for the baptized at a time which may be many years after his or her baptism. In passing one may observe that what these Syriac writers have to say on these subjects is of particular relevance today in the context of the charismatic renewal.

In the course of the wonderful flowering of the East Syriac mystical tradition, in the seventh and eighth centuries several writers tried to describe what happens at this 'third-birth' when the christian, through the willing abandonment of self-will and through an accompanying openness to the divine will, begins to experience 'the workings of the Spirit who was received at baptism'. One such description is by Joseph the Visionary (writing under the name of his brother, ('Abdisho'), and this is worth giving in full (since he is writing specifically for a monastic audience he describes the situation as it would apply to monks and nuns; in a non-monastic context, some of the details would obviously be rather different):

The first sign of the effective working of the Spirit is when the love of God burns in the heart of a person like fire. From this, revulsion for, and complete renunciation of, the world are born; at the same time, love of solitude and the ascetic life – which is the mother and educator of all virtues – are also born.

The Second sign through which you will feel that the Spirit which you received from baptism is working in you, my brother, consists in true humility being born in your soul. I am not alluding to the humility of the body, but to the true humility of the soul., which induces a person to consider himself dust and ashes, a worm and no man (Ps. 22 : 6), notwithstanding the great and wonderful things done to him by the Spirit who dwells in him. All people become great and holy in his eyes, and there is no one in his mind who is good or bad, just or unjust. It is from humility that peace, meekness and endurance of tribulations are born in the soul.

The third sign of the working of the Spirit within you consists in the kindness which represents within you the image of God, through which, when your thoughts extent to all people, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of water, as if all people were dwelling in your heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them, while you pour your kindness on all. When you remember them, your heart is kindled with the power of the working of the Spirit within you as with fire, and from this, goodness and

kindness are born in your heart, so that you do not utter anything unkind to anyone, nor does your thought think evil of anyone, but you do good to all people, both in your thought, and in your actions.

The fourth sign from which you will know that the Spirit is working within you consists in true love, which does not leave in your thought any remembrance apart from the remembrance of God alone –which is the spiritual key through which the inner door of the heart is opened: for there Christ our Lord is hidden, whose dwelling place is spiritual and expansive, and the sight of whom is ineffable light. From this love there is born the faith which sees the hidden things which the mind is not permitted to confide to paper-things which the Apostle called ‘the sustenance of things hoped for’ (Hebrews 11:1), which are not known to the eyes of the flesh, but which are known clearly to the eyes of the mind, in the inward abode of the heart.

The fifth sign of the working within you of the Spirit which you received in baptism consists in the illuminated vision of your mind, a vision which is seen in the firmament of your heart like the sapphire sky. It is this vision which receives the light of the Holy Trinity, and it is this sign that leads you to the vision of the material natures [i.e. the physical world], from which you then rise further to the knowledge of the intelligible natures [i.e. the spiritual world]; from there you will then ascend to the revelations and the mysteries of divine judgement and providence. It is this gradual ascent that raises you up and makes you participate in the holy light of the vision of Christ our Lord. From this glorious and holy vision you will fall into a state of wonder at that extensive world, the benefits of which are ineffable. From this state of wonder you will derive a flow of spiritual speech and a knowledge of both worlds, of the one that has passed, and the one that shall pass; and you will gain a consciousness of the mysteries of things to come. This will be accompanied by a holy scent and taste, the fair sounds of the spiritual intelligences, joy, jubilation, exultation praise, glorification, songs, hymns and odes of magnification, communion with the spiritual hierarchies, vision of the souls of the

saints, the sight of Paradise, eating from its Tree of Life, and converse with the saints who dwell in it, together with other ineffable things.

The above are the signs by whose presence within you, you will realize that the Holy Spirit, which received from holy baptism, is working within you. (Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, p. 165f; in the section on the fifth sign Joseph makes use of the terminology of both Evagrius and Dionysius the Areopagite)

By way of concluding, one could say that the wonderfully rich Syriac teaching on baptism is basically an extensive commentary on the New Testament passages on baptism, and in particular it describes the nature of 'the pledge of the Spirit within our hearts' (2 Cor. 1:22, cp Eph. 1:14). Baptism is not a thing of the past, once it has taken place for a christian: instead, it is a beginning which opens up possibilities which are totally new. If lived to its full potential, then the baptized life is nothing less than an anticipation within this world of the new life of the resurrection:

In the hope of the resurrection we await the life that is to come – and indeed we already walk in this new life, in that we already have a pledge of it. (Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 21:25).

Eucharist / Qurbana

It is significant that, according to the original Syriac tradition, the baptismal service concludes with communion given to the newly baptized. In the sentence before the one just quoted, Ephrem says 'We have eaten Christ's Body in place of the fruit on the Tree [of Life] in Paradise'. As we have seen, baptism is often described as the potential reentering into Paradise – but this Paradise is even more glorious than the Paradise which Adam and Eve knew before the Fall. According to St Ephrem in his *Commentary on Genesis*, God created Adam/humanity neither mortal nor immortal, but in an intermediary state: if Adam and Eve had observed God's 'tiny commandment' not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, then he would have rewarded them with immortality; as it was, their disobedience resulted in mortality. In his hymns Ephrem explains the reason lying behind God's creation of humanity in this intermediate state:

Blessed is He who wove the commandments
so that, through them, freewill might be crowned (Against
Heresies 11:4)

and

The Just God did not wish to give Adam the crown for nothing,
even though He had allowed him to enjoy Paradise without
toil.

God knew that if Adam wanted he would win the prize:
it was because the Just God wished to enhance Adam,
for, although the rank of the supernal beings is great through
grace.

the crown for the proper use of humanity's freewill is no
small thing either. (Hymns on Paradise 12:18)

Partaking, at Communion, of Christ, the Tree of Life, is
the chief way by which the immortal life of the resurrection
may be anticipated already in this life, thanks to 'the pledge' of
it given at baptism:

The path to the Tree of Life was shut off
by the blade of the Cherub's sword (Gen. 3:24),

but now the Lord of that Tree
has given himself as food for all peoples.

Whereas Eden's other trees were provided
for Adam of old to eat,

for us the very Planter of the Garden
has become food for our souls.

Whereas we had left that Garden

along with Adam when he left it behind,

now that the sword has been removed by the lance
(John 19:34),

we may return there (Ephrem, Hymns preserved in
Armanian, 49).

And elsewhere Ephrem says 'By means of the Spiritual Bread
everyone becomes an eagle who can reach as far as Paradise;
for whoever eats the Living Bread of the Son will fly to meet
Him in the very clouds' (Hymns on Unleavened Bread
17: 11-12).

Fire* was an important image to describe the divine presence in the context of baptism; both Christ's own baptism, and the baptism of individual Christians. Fire is likewise frequently used by the Syriac Fathers in the context of the Qurbana:

In your Bread, Lord, there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed,

in your Wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk:
the Spirit is in your Bread, the Fire in your Wine,
a manifest wonder which our lips have received. (Ephrem,
Hymns on Faith 10:8)

Ephrem goes on in the same hymn to describe Christ as the 'Coal of Fire,' a title which he derives from the vision of the prophet Isaiah in the Temple at Jerusalem (Isaiah 6:6). In the case of the prophet, the Coal of Fire simply touched his lips, and no more, while the seraph had to hold it in tongs; in sharp contrast, Christians actually consume this Coal of Fire at communion:

The seraph could not touch the coal of fire with his fingers,
and the coal merely touched Isaiah's mouth:
the seraph did not hold it, Isaiah did not consume it,
but our Lord has allowed us to do both. (Ephrem, Hymns
on Faith 10:10)

This divine Fire has a double action, for it burns up and destroys sin, and at the same time it sanctifies: referring to Christ as the Coal of Fire at the incarnation, Ephrem comments 'The Coal of Fire which came to burn away thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18) had dwelt in a womb, refining and sanctifying that place of pangs and curses (Gen 3:16) (Commentary on the Diatessaron 1:5). Ephrem (and Syriac tradition in general) sees an important parallelism between the presence of Christ in Mary's womb and his presence in the Qurbana, and this too is expressed in terms of Fire in his tenth hymn on Faith (significantly, he combines this with a reference to Christ's own baptism and Christian baptism):

See, Fire and Spirit are in the womb of her who bore you,
see, Fire and Spirit are in the river in which you were
baptized.

* (See also Ch. 4)

Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font,
in the Bread and Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit (Hymns
on Faith 10:17).

Before looking at the significance of this parallelism between Christ in Mary and Christ in the Qurbana, we should consider briefly two other ways in which the Syriac Fathers introduce the theme of divine Fire into the context of the Qurbana.

Qurbana means 'offering', and we have already seen how, according to early Syriac (and Jewish) tradition, fire was said to descend on sacrificial offerings which were acceptable in God's eyes. In the sacrificial offerings of the Holy Mysteries of the Eucharist the divine fire of acceptance is seen as descending at the time when the priest invokes the Holy Spirit (the Epiclesis). Thus the poet Balai (early fifth century) writes:

The priest stands, he kindles fire [i. e. at the invocation
of the Spirit],
he takes bread, but gives forth the Body,
he receives wine but distributes the Blood.

Similarly, Narsai speaks of the priest as 'carrying Fire, without being scorched' (tr. Connolly, p. 67).

'Pearl' is another term which is frequently used in a eucharistic context: 'Christ gave us pearls – his Body and holy Blood', says Ephrem in his fine verse homily on the sinful woman (Luke 7). According to popular belief in Ephrem's time, pearls came into existence when lightning struck the oyster in the sea. Such a 'birth', brought about by the coming together of two different elements, fire and water, was thus an appropriate symbol for Christ, born of the Holy Spirit, the Fire, and of Mary, 'the watery flesh'; and at the Qurbana it is again the coming together of two different elements, divine Fire, and bread and wine, which produces the eucharistic 'Pearls', the Body and Blood:

It is not the priest who is authorized to sacrifice the Only-
Begotten,
or to raise up that sacrifice for sinners to the
Father's presence;
rather, the Holy Spirit goes forth from the Father
and descends, overshadows, and resides in the bread,

making it the Body, and making it treasured Pearls to adorn the souls that are betrothed to him. (Jacob of Serugh IV, p.597).

In this passage Jacob uses the term 'overshadows' (Syriac, *aggen*); significantly this is the term which is used in the Annunciation narrative in Luke 1:35, 'The Holy Spirit shall come and the Power of the Most High will overshadow you'. The same term occurs at the invocation of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis) in the West Syriac anaphora of St James and many other anaphoras, while in the East Syriac tradition it is found in the anaphora of Theodore (or Second Anaphora). Once again, our attention is drawn to the parallelism between the presence of Christ in Mary and his presence in the Qurbana. In his Commentary on the Liturgy Dionysius bar Salib (d. 1171) explains something of the significance of this:

The Body and Blood are called 'Mysteries' because they are not what they appear to the physical eye to be; for, to look at, they are just bread and wine, but properly understood, they are the Body and Blood of God. Just as Jesus appeared to the physical eye to be man, yet he is God; similarly the Mysteries appear outwardly to be bread and wine, but they are in fact the Body and Blood. Even though it is the Spirit who effects the Mysteries, making from them the Body and Blood, nevertheless they are the Body and Blood of the Son – just as happened in the case of the Virgin: even though it was the Spirit who provided the Son with a body, it was still the Son who was embodied. Likewise, when the angel said, 'that which is born in you is holy and comes from the Holy Spirit', even though the Holy Spirit was the cause, because he formed the body, nevertheless the person conceived and born was the Son. It is the same with that altar which is the type of both Mary's womb and of the grave; the Holy Spirit overshadows it and changes the bread and the wine, making them the Body and Blood of the Word who once became flesh in the womb. Although the body is that of the Son, it is given us by the Holy Spirit from the Father.¹

1. Ed. Labourt *C. S. C. O.* 13, pp. 61 62.

There is another important aspect of this parallelism; this emerges if we consider the Incarnation and the Qurbana, not so much as parallel static moments, but as two parallel dynamic processes. At the Annunciation we have the sequence: Mary's acceptance results in conception and giving birth to Christ; at the Qurbana the sequence is a little different, and the need for acceptance is located, as it were, between the conception (the coming of the Holy Spirit and the consecration of the Body and Blood) and the possibility of spiritual birthgiving which is provided by receiving Communion. In other words, at the Qurbana the coming of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ (corresponding to the conception) is assured within the Church, but there is no certainty that the ensuing reception of Communion will result in spiritual birthgiving: this will depend on how open to the Spirit each individual communicant is. Here, Mary's openness and acceptance provides the model for all christians.

Expressed schematically we have the following parallelism.

<i>Annunciation</i>	<i>Qurbana</i>
- Coming of the Holy Spirit dependent on Mary's prior openness and acceptance	- Coming of the Holy Spirit
- Conception of God the Word	- The bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ
- Birthgiving to Christ	- Communion, resulting in spiritual birthgiving to Christ, dependent on openness of each individual communicant

Or, sometimes a writer may have a slightly different scheme in mind, where Communion is regarded as parallel to Mary's Conception of Christ; in both patterns, the basic significance of the parallelism is the same.

Two final passages will serve to illustrate the way in which the Syriac Fathers make us of this parallelism between the presence of God the word in Mary and in the Qurbana. In a eucharistic hymn, preserved only in Armenian translation, Ephrem

uses language which elsewhere is characteristic of his descriptions of the Incarnation:

The Medicine of Life flew down from on high
to reside in those worthy of It.

Let us make our souls and thoughts holy
in honour of his glory.

We hold God in our hands:

let there be no blemish in our bodies.

Once he has entered, he takes up residence with us,
so let us make ourselves holy within. (Armenian hymns, 47).

Some four centuries later the East Syriac mystic Joseph the Visionary prays before Communion:

May I receive you, not into the stomach which belongs to
body's limbs, but into the womb of my mind, so that you
may be conceived there, as in the womb of the Virigin. (The
Syriac Fathers on Prayer..., p. 360)

Some of the results of any spiritual birthgiving to Christ have
already been described by Joseph the Visionary in the passage,
quoted above, where he tells of the signs of the working of the
Holy Spirit who has been received by all christians at baptism.

The Syriac Fathers offer an immensely rich teaching on
both Baptism and the Qurbana, and in this section it has only
been possible to draw attention to a few of the more important
aspects of this.

CHAPTER 7

Some Prominent Themes

In this final section we shall explore certain themes of particular interest; some of these represent expansions of themes already encountered in the early period, while others are new developments.

1. Divine love

A popular anonymous poem containing a dialogue between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary opens with the words 'The Power of the Father came down and resided in a virgin womb because his love so compelled him' (Sogiatha; Syriac Dialogue Hymns, Syrian Churches Series 11, p. 14). God's boundless love is a central theme throughout Syriac tradition; in earlier writers and in the poets it is expressed through the theme of Christ the heavenly bridegroom, for whom 'the soul is Your bride, the body Your bridal chamber' (Ephrem, Hymns on Faith, 14:5); among later authors, it is especially prominent in the writings of Sahdona and Isaac of Nineveh. For Isaac of Nineveh, the prime purpose of the Incarnation and Crucifixion was to express to humanity God's love for humanity:

If zeal had been appropriate for putting humanity right why did God the Word clothe himself in the body in order to bring the world back to his Father using gentleness and humility? And why was he stretched out on the Cross for the sake of sinners, handing over his sacred body to suffering on behalf of the world? I myself say that God did all this for no other reason, except to make known to the world the love that he has, his aim being that we, as a result of our increased love resulting from an awareness of this, might be captivated by his love when he provided

the occasion of this manifestation of the power of the Kingdom of Heaven – which consists in love – by means of the death of his Son. (Isaac, Part II, Century IV. 78)

This divine outpouring of love never imposes itself on humanity, out of respect for the gift to humanity of free will; nevertheless it seeks a response, and basically the christian life should be seen as a striving to respond to, and reciprocate, this boundless love. For Isaac, ‘the whole purpose of prayer is for us to acquire love of God, for in prayer there can be discovered all sorts of reasons for loving God’ (Discourse 63). Indeed, says Isaac.

The true vision of Jesus Christ our Lord consists in our realizing the meaning of his Incarnation for our sakes, and becoming inebriated with love of him as a result of the insights into the many wondrous elements contained in that vision. (From part II, tr. in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer...*, p. 284)

‘Happy is that person of love who has made God, who is love, to dwell in his heart’, exclaims Sahdona. Isaac. describes what happens when this love is discovered:

When we have found love, we eat the heavenly bread and we are sustained without labour and without weariness. Heavenly bread is that which has descended from heaven and which gives the world life: this is the food of angels. The person who has found love eats Christ at all times and becomes immortal from thence onwards. For whoever eats of this bread shall not taste death in eternity. Blessed is the person who has eaten from the bread of love, which is Jesus. Whoever is fed with love is fed with Christ, who is the all-governing God. John is witness, when he says ‘God is love’ (I John 4:16). Thus whoever lives with love in this creation smells life from God, breathing here the air of the resurrection. In this air the righteous will delight at the resurrection. Love is the Kingdom of which our Lord spoke when symbolically he promised the disciples they would eat in his Kingdom, ‘You shall eat and drink at the table of my Kingdom’ (Luke 22:30). What should they eat, if not love? Love is sufficient to feed mankind instead of food and drink. This is the wine that gladdens the heart of humanity (Psalms 104:15). Blessed is the person who has drunk from

this wine. This is the wine from which the debauched have drunk—and they became chaste; sinners drunk—and they forgot the paths of stumbling; drunkards—and they became fasters; the rich—and they became desirous of poverty; the poor – and they became rich in hope; the sick – and they regained strength; the foolish – and they became wise! (Isaac, Discourse 33).

2. Self-emptying and humility

The supreme expression of God's love is to be found in his 'self emptying' (Philippians 2:7). God's love seeks to be reciprocated, and if human love is to reflect and imitate divine love, it needs to imitate the divine self-emptying. When Joseph the Visionary described the indications that 'the Spirit whom you received at baptism is operating within you', he mentions the heart burning with love for God, and out of this, he says, there is born in the heart 'self-emptying and true humility' (for the full passage, see Section 6). The term 'self-emptying' (Syriac, *msarrqutha*) is first encountered in the Book of Steps, whose opening words are 'Let us abandon everything and proceed with our Lord's humility and with his self-emptying'. Subsequently the term is frequently encountered in writings on the ascetic lifestyle. Thus, for example, in reply to the question 'What is the beginning of the way of life of the inner person?', John the Solitary says:

Self-emptying of love of money. After self-emptying of the love of money it is absolutely necessary that one empty oneself of the passion of love of praise. Then afterwards such a person has the possibility of existing in excellence of mind, in humility and forbearance, in serenity and in mental awareness, in joy at the hope of this in wakefulness and concern for what is beautiful and good, in perfect love of God and of human beings. For it is by these things that a person approaches purity of soul, which is the sum of the entire way of life which God made human beings to follow during this life. (The Syriac Fathers on Prayer..., p. 80).

Many later monastic writings have sections specifically on the subject of self-emptying. Its close relationship to love of God is brought out by Isaac of Nineveh:

Love of God proceeds from conversing with him; this conversation of prayer comes about through stillness, and stillness, comes with self-emptying' (Discourse 63; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer...*, p. 250).

Great emphasis is also given to the need for humility, and essentially this means a radical imitation of christ and the taking up of his cross (Matt. 16: 24). Although one should strive after humility, true humility is a power full of mystery which the perfect saints receive once they have fulfilled the goal of their way of life. This power is only given to those who have perfected the full course of virtue by the power of the grace within themselves - insofar as human nature can achieve this, given its limitations. Humility is a virtue which embraces everything. (Issac of Nineveh, Discourse 82)

Such humility consists in the refusal to judge others, and in considering everyone better than oneself - even if the other person is debauched, or an adulterer, or a drunkard or a murderer' (John the Solitary). Such astonishing humility is the result of a love and compassion for humanity which is modelled on God's own love and compassion. Issac (who has much on this subject) illustrates how this is the case, giving the following practical advice:

When you meet your neighbour, force yourself to pay him more honour than may be his due: kiss his hand and his foot; make your heart fervent with a holy love for him; grasp his hands time and time again, placing them on your eyes and caressing them with great honour. Attribute to his person all sorts of virtues, even if they may not apply to him. And when he is absent, speak good and noble things of him. Address him in respectful terms. In this sort of way, not only will you impel him to desire these virtues (since he will be ashamed of the undeserved reputation with which you credit him), and will sow in him the seed of good deeds, but you will also find that, by habituating yourself in this way, you will establish in yourself gentle and humble manners, and you will be freed from many tiresome struggles, against

the likes of which others have to guard themselves by constant labours.

This should be your attitude towards everyone. Should you get angry with someone and then reprimand him or rebuke him out of zeal for the faith, or because you are provoked by his evil actions, it is precisely at this point that you should beware of your own self: we all have the just Judge in heaven. If, on the other hand, out of compassion, you seek to turn him to the truth, then you will actually suffer on his behalf. You will speak just a word or two to him in tears and love; you will not flare up at him in anger, but you will banish from your countenance any sign of hostility. Love does not know how to get angry or indignant, it does not reprimand in a hurtful way. The sign of the presence of real love and knowledge is a profound humility issuing from the inner mind. (Isaac, Discourse 5)

This kind of radical humility is far removed from a hypocritical humility which acts outwardly in accordance with Isaac's recommendation, but which inwardly judges the neighbour. The humility which Isaac is speaking about here is the 'humility of soul' of which Joseph the Visionary speaks in the passage cited in chapter 6, the 'true humility which is born in the soul' when the Spirit received at baptism begins to work effectively within one: such humility considers everyone 'great and holy' and does not judge people as good or bad, just or unjust.' It is the ability to see people from the perspective of God's own boundless compassion, looking rather to a person's potentiality, rather than his actual moral condition. 'Blessed indeed is the person who has acquired this humility, for at all times he leans on Jesus's bosom' (Isaac, Discourse 82). Genuine humility of this sort can be sensed by animals, as Isaac explains in the same Discourse:

If a person of humility comes near dangerous wild animals, then the moment these catch sight of him, their ferocity is calmed: they come up to him and attach themselves to him as though he were their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and feet. This is because they smell that fragrance which emanated from Adam when he named the animals in Paradise before the Fall: this fragrance was taken away from us at the Fall, but Christ gave it back to us at his coming.

For such a person, the potential reentry to Paradise which is granted at baptism has become a reality. The same thing will be found in the lives of many saints, where they are described as having ferocious wild animals, such as lions, as their companions (the Syriac saint Eulogius rode through a village on his lion, much to the consternation and fright of the villagers).

3. Interior virginity

In Chapter 5 we saw the great value attached to virginity in the Syriac writers of the earliest period. This virginity has three different aspects: (1) the exterior aspect of physical virginity, morally neutral in itself, and whose spiritual value is dependant on (2) and (3); (2) the interior aspect of chastity of soul or heart; and (3) the aspect of virginity as a state of betrothal to Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom. The third aspect is connected primarily with interior virginity, though it can also be expressed in conjunction with physical virginity (as was notably the case with the 'daughters of the covenant').

Whereas physical virginity cannot be regained, once lost, this is not the case with interior virginity, thanks to the workings of divine grace. Isaac of Antioch quotes a pagan poet who laments 'O for someone to pull me down and rebuild me, and make me a virgin once again'; Isaac then goes on, 'I said to him, This request of yours is possible with Jesus', and he explains how this is brought about through baptism and made possible by Christ's own baptism:

Christ by his baptism makes virgins out of old men.

Come to him, O people, that he may pull you down and rebuild you!

Come, descend and receive your renovation and your virginity from his fountain. (Isaac of Antioch, ed. Bedjan, p 676)

And baptism is itself a miraculous virgin birth:

O birth that takes place without a womb,
pregnancy which takes place outside the mother,
when a person, who first came into being as a result of
intercourse, is reborn [at baptism] in virgin fashion. (Isaac,
p. 690)

In another homily Isaac expands on the idea that baptism can restore inner virginity:

The unclean are reborn and become pure virgins, without any spot,

even adulterers are recast—and become holy vessels.

Without any dispute, people are born twice over, once from the natural womb, and another time from free will.

Those who have destroyed and lost the virginity given by nature have the possibility of coming and confessing the virginity which stems from the will;

this virginity of the will is greater than which comes from nature,

it serves as the true seal of the virgin state which comes from nature.

Grant me, Lord, virginity with that true mind:

instead of nature's virginity, may I acquire the virginity which belongs to the free will.

May I not destroy both kinds, lest I perish without either of them.

Seeing that I have destroyed the body's virginity, may I become a virgin in my mind.

Blessed is He who, from our midst, caused to come to birth from us a bandage and remedy for our wound:

from our will He has renewed us with another virgin state—there is no doubt. (Isaac of Antioch, p. 452)

In another homily Isaac comments on the foolish virgins of the parable in Matt. 25, and he emphasizes that exterior virginity is not sufficient:

Why did these five virgins not enter the marriage feast?

They were physical virgins, but they failed to perform acts of charity.

Satan has his own virgins, the Son of Perdition has his ascetics, all of whom preserve the body in purity from youth to old age.

It is not the physical state of virginity which will bring you to God, but the true state of Elijah—this will raise you up on wings among the spiritual beings. (Isaac of Antioch, pp. 84-5).

(Aphrahat had already said 'Whosoever loves virginity should imitate Elijah', Dem. VI. 1).

Elsewhere Isaac of Antioch points out the true relationship between marriage and virginity:

Marriage is not the destroyer of virginity:
intercourse in accordance with God's law does not corrupt virginity—what does corrupt it is sexual abuse, which the law does not condone. In the law everyone is crowned, but
through wickedness everyone receives blame:
intercourse outside the law destroys virginity.

In the law everyone is blessed, and by being blessed, is sanctified. (Isaac, p. 252)

Isaac's interior 'virginity which comes from the free will' is often described by other writers as a 'struggle' or 'contest': 'Truly great and most glorious is the crown of virginity, corresponding to the difficulty of the contest it involves' (Sahdona, Book of Perfection II. 6. 17). This struggle is against Satan who is always trying to corrupt this interior state of virginity. Elsewhere Sahdona warns,

Guard this most beautiful pearl warily, for many are those who would snatch and destroy its beauty. It is not only destroyed by the body's members, but also by the internal stirrings of the heart, just as our Lord said, He who looks upon a woman so as to desire her has at once committed adultery in his heart. See and realize how this takes place in the heart: it is not when one body is close to another, or when the act is performed openly; rather, while the body's limbs are still far apart, before the sexual union, and while they are still pure from the foul act, it is the thoughts of the heart which befoul their virginity. The external stirrings just corrupt the external state, whereas it is through the hidden adultery of the heart that the entire human person is rendered unclean. (Sahdona, II. 6. 20)

And a little further on he continues:

We should preserve ourselves as holy objects in a holy way, so that we may be held worthy of the spiritual indwelling of God. Let us keep ourselves pure, not just against the corruption resulting from the body's fornication but also against the corruption resulting from the hidden fornication of the soul, which takes place with evil spirits, that is, through consenting to thoughts of evil. For if the soul consents to thoughts which are sown by the

Evil One, then it has intercourse with him and this fornication in the hiddenness of the mind results in corruption, befouling the holy character of the mind's virginity – this mind which has been betrothed to Christ to keep his commandments. Just as the Israelite synagogue was betrothed to God at the hand of Moses, but committed adultery with idols of stone and wood when she turned away from God, abandoning worhsip of him and despising his commandments, so too it is the case with us, who have been betrothed to Christ at the hand of the Apostles – just as the blessed Paul said, I have betrothed you as a pure virgin to a single husband, so that I may offer you to Christ [2 Cor. 11:2] – if we despise Christ's commandments and transgress his covenant, consenting to the thoughts which Satan has sown in our minds, then we commit hidden adultery with Satan. (Sahdona II.6,23–24)

The Macarian Homilies link the theme of the parable of the Virgins with the idea of the heart as a virgin:

Let our heart be a virgin, pure and holy, so that we may see Him whose heart is virgin and holy. Now if someone acts humbly in everything, loves everyone and does good to them, then the Lord will shine out in his heart and illuminate him; and with that lamp of light he will go off to the bridal chamber and behold the Bridegroom, joining him at the banquet, as the Bridegroom banquets with him. Let our heart perform good deeds towards all people, so that with our pure heart we may behold the Bridegroom. If, on the other hand, someone, sets himself up against some one else on earth, or hates someone, then the Evil One is darkening his heart with darkness; an so with that torch of darkness he will be unable to look upon the light of the Bridegroom or the glory of his saints. Let our heart then be virgin and holy, so that we may behold the Bridegroom whose heart is virgin and holy. (Macarian Homilies, ed. Berthold, VII. 18.9)

In another passage the anonymous *Syrian* author describes what happens if the heart does not preserve her virginity:

Just as a wise virgin who has fallen into unchastity and

who has become pregnant cannot conceal her foul-smelling lasciviousness, so it is with those who become pregnant in their hearts with sin and give birth to the offspring of iniquity: on that day of judgement they are unable to escape the fearsome and all-consuming fire; both their souls and their bodies will be condemned together. (Macarian Homilies, XVIII. 6.6)

But as we saw in chapter 5, true virginity can give virgin birth and this is what Joseph the Visionary prays for in a prayer for use before Communion, already quoted in chapter 6: ‘... may I receive you into the womb of my mind, so that you may be conceived there, as in the womb of the Virgin’.

4. The pierced side of Christ

We have already had occasion to observe the importance of the single verse John 19:34, which describes the piercing of the side of Christ on the Cross. In liturgical poetry, in particular, the spiritual meanings offered for this verse take on a mystical intensity. In many ways it could be said that the Syriac tradition of devotion to the pierced side of Christ has close correspondences with the tradition of devotion to the Sacred Heart, of European origin; the two traditions, if brought together, could provide much mutual enrichment.

The spiritual interpretation given to the verse can be described as itself forming a cross: the horizontal corresponds to the typological parallels in past and future historical time, that is, in the past of salvation history (the side of Adam, the sword guarding paradise, etc, Genesis 1-3) and in its future (the birth of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist from the side of Christ), while the vertical bar of the cross is provided by the dimension of sacred time, the mystery of Christ who both died on the cross and yet remained alive:

There flowed from his water, to show that he was dead, and blood flowed too, to teach that he was alive, though dead. (Jacob of Serugh, II, p. 589).

The mystical dimensions of the verse John 19:34 were already experienced by Ephrem who writes in his Commentary on the Diatessaron:

I ran to all your limbs, and from them all I received every kind of gift. Through the side which was pierced by the sword I entered the garden fenced in by the sword (Gen 3:24). Let us enter in through that side which was pierced, since we were stripped naked by the counsel of the rib that was extracted. The fire that burnt in Adam, burnt him in that rib of his. For this reason the side of the Second Adam has been pierced, and from it comes a flow of water to quench the fire of the First Adam. (Comm. on the Diatessaron 21:11)

The poet who makes the most dramatic use of John 19:34 is Jacob of Serugh; Jacob is especially fond of introducing the theme of Christ the heavenly Bridegroom, thus providing the verse with yet further dimensions. The following short extracts will illustrate a few of these:

Christ slept on the Cross, and Baptism came forth from him;
the Bridegroom slept, and his side was pierced in his sleep,
he gave birth to the Bride, as happened with Eve, in
Adam his type.

The stillness of the sleep of death fell upon him on the
Cross,

and from him came forth the Mother [Baptism] who gives
birth to all spiritual beings

– the Lord of Adam produced the New Eve in his sleep
to serve as mother of the children of Adam, in Eve's place;
water and blood for the fashioning of spiritual babes
flowed from the side of that Living One who died in order
to bring life to Adam. (Jacob of Serugh II, p. 589).

The King's Son made a marriage feast in blood at Golgotha;
there the Daughter of Day was betrothed to him, to be his,
and the royal ring was beaten out in the nails of his hands;
with his holy blood was this betrothal made.

He took her hand there, seeing that she had shown her
love for him at the hour of his shame;

he set her at his right hand, to be with him,
he led her into the Garden – the bridal chamber he had
prepared for her (Jacob II, p. 287f).

Jacob makes much use of this imagery in his fine homily on Moses' Veil:

From the baptismal water comes the chaste and holy union of Bride and Bridegroom, united in spirit in baptism.

Women are not joined to their husbands in the same way as the Church is joined with the Son of God.

What bridegroom dies for his bride, apart from our Lord?

What bride sought out a slain man to be her husband?

Who, from the beginning of the world, ever gave his blood as the wedding gift,

apart from the Crucified One who sealed the marriage with, his own wounds?

Who has ever seen a corpse placed in the middle of a wedding feast,

with the bride embracing it, waiting to be comforted by it?

At what wedding feast apart from this did they break

the body of the bridegroom for the guests in place of other food?

Wives are separated from their husbands by death,

but this Bride is joined to her Beloved by death!

He died on the cross and gave his body to the glorious Bride,

who plucks and eats it every day at his table.

He opened up his side and mixed his cup with holy blood giving it her to drink so that she might forget her many idols.

She anointed him with oil, she put him on in the water she consumed him in the Bread,

she drank him in the Wine, so that the world might know that the two of them were one.

He died on the Cross, but she did not exchange him for another:

she is full of love for his death, knowing that from it she has life.

Man and wife were the basis of this mystery,

they served as a picture and type and image for reality;

by means of them Moses uttered this great mystery,

covering up and preserving it under a veil so that it should not be laid bare;

the great Apostle [Paul] uncovered its beauty, and showed it to the world,

and so Moses' words, 'the two shall be one', stood illumined.
(Jacob, *On the Veil of Moses*, lines 137-64)

Many passages can be found in the Hudra and Fenqitho which provide similar spiritual understanding of John 19:34; these will especially be found at the Sunday of the Consecration of the Church.*

5. The interior offering of prayer

The idea that prayer is an offering is already implied in Psalm 141 (Syriac 140) : 2, 'Let my prayer be as incense before you, and the offering of my hands as evening offerings'; in early Christianity, and in Judaism (after the destruction of the Temple, AD 70), it was a commonplace that prayer represents a replacement for the Old Testament sacrifices. Within Christianity, this 'sacrifice, or offering, of prayer' takes place in the new 'temples' where the Holy Spirit resides, that is to say, in the baptized (I Corinthians 3:16 2 Corinthians 6:19 etc.).

Syriac tradition usually identifies the location where this internal offering takes place as the heart, the biblical centre of the human person (intellectual, as well as emotional). Thus Aphrahat explains the meaning of Christ's words at Mathew 6:6:

Why my beloved, did our Saviour teach us saying 'Pray to your Father in secret, with the door shut'? I will show you, as far as I am capable. He said 'Pray to your Father with the door closed'. Our Lord's words thus tell us 'Pray in secret in your heart, and shut the door. What is the door which he says we must shut, if not the mouth? For here is the temple in which Christ dwells, just as the Apostle said 'You are the temple of the Lord' (1 Cor. 3:16), for him to enter into your inner person, into this house, to cleanse it from everything that is unclean, While the door, that is to say, your mouth, is closed. If this were not the case, how would you understand the passage? Suppose you happened to be in the desert where there was no house or door,

* See further: 'The mysteries hidden in the side of Christ' in S. P. Brock, *Studies in 'Syriac' spirituality* (1988) Ch. 7 (Ch. 8 gives a complete translation of Jacob of Serus's Poem on the veil of Moses).

would you be unable to pray in secret? (Demonstration 4. 10, *The Syriac fathers on Prayer...*, p. 14)

Aphrahat stresses that this internal offering of prayer needs to be from a pure heart if it is to be accepted.

The Book of Steps develops the theme in the Discourse on three churches, quoted above (chapter 4); there the anonymous author speaks of the heart as 'the altar' where this offering of prayer is made. This interior altar needs to function in harmony with the 'visible altar' of the visible Church, and with the 'heavenly altar' of the heavenly church: if, however, the heart should despise the visible altar and the visible church, then 'our body will not become a temple, neither will our heart become an altar or a well-spring of praise'.

The liturgical ministry of the heart plays an important part in the thought of Sahdona. Like Aphrahat, he emphasizes that one must 'cleanse the heart' of things such as resentment, pride, deceitfulness, ingratitude and hypocrisy, before proceeding to make an offering of prayer; otherwise the offering will be rejected, as was Cain's (Gen. 4; Aphrahat also used that example). If, however, the heart is pure, then the offering of prayer will be accepted and God 'will send the fire of his Spirit to consume our sacrifices'. In this passage (quoted in full below) Sahdona uses wording which is deliberately reminiscent of the Eucharistic Liturgy, and the descent of the 'fire of the Spirit' will correspond to the descent of the Spirit at the Invocation (Epiclesis) in the Qurbana.

If the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears which stem from the emotion of our hearts, then our prayer will be made perfect in accordance with God's wish; being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering. As he perceives the pleasing scent (Gen 8:21) of our heart's pure fragrance, he will send the fire of his Spirit to consume our sacrifices and raise up our mind along with them in the flames to heaven. Then we shall behold the Lord, to our delight, and not to our destruction, as the stillness of his revelation (Gen. 15:12) falls upon us and the hidden things of the knowledge of him will be portrayed in us.

Our hearts will be given spiritual joy, along with the hidden mysteries which I am unable to disclose in words to the simple (see 2 Cor. 12:4). In this way we make our bodies a living, holy and acceptable sacrifice, one that pleases God in our rational service (Rom. 12:1). Sahdona, *Book of Perfection II*. 8.20; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer ...*, (p. 210f)¹

1. (For further aspects of the spirituality of the heart in Syriac tradition, see *The Harp* (SEERI), Vol. 1, nos 2-3 (1988), pp. 93-115.

CHAPTER 8

For Further Reading

The following general works are available in English:

- S. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology* (University Press of America, Lanham 1983).
- S. P. Brock, 'The Syriac tradition', in C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold (edd.), *The Study of Spirituality* (SPCK London 1986), 199–215.
- „ , *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Syrian Churches Series 9, 1979, ed. Jacob Vellian).
- „ , *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (Syrian Churches Series 13, 1988, ed. Jacob Vellian). [a collection of articles most of which were originally published in *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review*]
- R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge University Press 1975).
- A. Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient, I–II* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 184, 197; 1958, 1960).

English translations:

a) *collected writers*

- S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Cistercian Studies 101, Kalamazoo, 1987).
- , *A Garland of Hymns from the Early Eastern Church* (Cairo, 1989).
- A. Mingana, *Eastern Christian Mystics* (Woodbrooke Studies 7, Cambridge 1934).

b) individual writers

ODES OF SOLOMON (2nd cent.)

H. F. D. Sparks (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 683–731.

(Some other English translations are also available, notably one by J. Charlesworth).

ACTS OF THOMAS (3rd cent.)

A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1962).

APHRAHAT (4th cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers* [for full title, see (a)] – Demonstration 4.

J. Gwynn, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* II. 13 (Oxford 1898; repr. Grand Rapids 1964) – Demonstrations 1, 5, 6, 8, 17, 21, 22.

J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism* (Leiden 1971) – Demonstrations, 11–13, 15–19, 21 and parts of 23.

EPHREM (died 373)

S. P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of St Ephrem* (Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, London; 2nd ed 1983).

– , *St Ephrem: Hymns on Paradise* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, forthcoming).

J. Gwynn, [for title see under Aphrahat] – Selections from Nisibene Hymns, Hymns on Nativity, and some homilies (memre).

McVey, K, *St Ephrem: Hymns* (Classics of Western Spirituality 43, forthcoming)

J. B. Morris, *Selected Works of St Ephrem the Syrian* (Oxford 1847) – includes the Hymns on Faith.

(Many excerpts from St Ephrem can be found in R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Cambridge 1975), and in S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies, 1985).

BOOK OF STEPS (c. 400)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer...*, – Discourses 12 and 18.

EVAGRIUS (died 399)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – Admonition on Prayer.

JOHN THE SOLITARY (fifth century)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – Letter to Hesychius, 3 prayers.

[D. Miller] *The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian* (Brookline 1984) – includes short treatise on prayer, and letter on stillness.

MACARIUS (early fifth cent.)

[D. Miller], *The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian* (Brookline 1984) – includes first letter by Macarius in the Syriac collection of his works.

EGYPTIAN FATHERS (Syriac collections)

E. A. W. Budge, *Stories from the Holy Fathers* (Oxford 1934) – , *The Wit and Wisdom of the Christian Fathers of Egypt* (Oxford 1934).

NARSAI (died c. 500)

R. H. Connolly, *The liturgical homilies of Narsai* (Texts and Studies 8:1, 1909) – homilies 17, 21–23 in Mingana's edition of the Syriac text.

JACOB OF SERUGH (died 521)

S. P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (Syrian Churches Series 13 1988), ch. 8 – Homily on the Veil of Moses.

PHILOXENUS (died 523)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – On the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and excerpts on prayer.

E. A. W. Budge, *The Discourses of Philoxenus* (London 1894).

ANONYMOUS AUTHORS (sixth/seventh cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – two discourses on prayer.

STEPHEN BAR SUDAILI (early sixth cent.)

F. S. Marsh, *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* (London 1927),

BABAI (sixth century?)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – Letter to Cyriacus.

MARTYRIUS (early seventh cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – extract from Book of Perfection.

ISAAC OF NINEVEH (late seventh cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers.*, – extracts from Parts I and II of his works.

[D. Miller], *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian (Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline 1984)* – complete translation of Part I (made from Greek), with extracts from other works (translated from Syriac).

A. Wensink, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam 1923, reprint Wiesbaden 1969) – complete translation of Part I.

DADISHO' (seventh cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – on pure prayer.

A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* (Woodbrooke Studies, 1934) – treatise on solitude.

SIMEON THE GRACEFUL (end of seventh cent.)

A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* – includes one of his works.

JOSEPH THE VISIONARY (Eighth cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer...*, – includes two works on prayer, and a long pre-communion prayer.

A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics* – includes several works

G. Olinder, *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug* [in fact, of Joseph] to a Friend (Goteborg 1950).

JOHN THE ELDER (Eighth cent.)

S. P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers...*, – includes two letters and two short prayers.

BARHEBRAEUS (died 1286)

A. WENSINCK, *Bar Hebraeus' Book of the Dove*, together with some chapters from the *Ethicon* (Leiden 1919).

Liturgical Texts

Since translations of the Qurbana and current baptismal services are readily available, mention is made here only of English translations of the weekday offices and of selections from the East Syriac Hudra and the West Syriac Fenqitho.

The East Syriac weekday office is translated by A. J. Maclean, *East Syrian Daily Offices* (London 1894, repr. 1969), and the West Syriac is translated by Fr Bede Griffiths, *The Book of Common Prayer of the Syrian Church* (Syrian Churches Series 3, no date); the latter was adapted and reissued by Fr Francis Acharya under the title. *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit. The Prayer of Asian Churches, I, A Weekly Celebration of the Economy of Salvation* (Kurisumala Ashram, Vagamon 1983).

HUDRA. The section for the Annunciation and Nativity is translated by J. Moolan, *The Period of Annunciation–Nativity in the East Syrian Calendar*, Vadavathoor, Kottayam (1985); that for Epiphany is translated by A. J. Maclean in F. Conybeare's *Rituale Armenorum* (Oxford 1905); that for the Resurrection is translated by V. Pathikulangara, *Resurrection Life and Renewal* Bangalore / Kottayam 1982).

FENQITHO. There is a fine adapted translation of the Pampakuda edition by Fr Francis Acharya, *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, II–IV, The Crown of the Year* (Kurisumala Ashram 1982–1986).

CHAPTER 9

A Selection of Further Texts

1. APHRAHAT, Demonstration IV. 10-11. Christ's teaching on prayer.

Our Saviour taught the following kind of prayer: 'You should pray in secret to him who is hidden, but who sees all'; for he said 'Enter the chamber and pray to your Father in secret, and the Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Matt. 6:6).

Why, my beloved, did our Saviour teach us saying, 'Pray to your Father in secret, with the door shut?' I will show you, as far as I am capable. He said 'Pray to your Father with the door closed'. Our Lord's words thus tell us 'pray in secret in your heart, and shut the door'. What is the door he says we must shut, if not the mouth? For here is the temple in which Christ dwells, just as the Apostle said: You are the temple of the Lord (1 Cor. 3:16) for him to enter into your inner person, into this house, to cleanse it from everything that is unclean, while the door - that is to say, your mouth - is closed. If this were not the cause, how would you understand the passage? Suppose you happened to be in the desert where there was no house and no door, would you be unable to pray in secret? Or if you happened to be on the top of a mountain, would you not be able to pray? Our Saviour also indicated how God knows the will of the heart and the thought - just as our Lord wrote, saying, 'Your Father knows what you require before you ask him' (Matt. 6:8). It is also written in the prophet Isaiah, 'I will hear those whom I have chosen before they call, and I will answer them before they make appeal' (Isaiah 65:24). Again Isaiah said concerning the wicked, 'Even if you multiply your prayers, I will not listen' (Isaiah 1:15). He also said, 'Let them cry in my hearing with a loud voice, yet I shall not hear them' (Ezekiel

8:18). He said this about deceitful prayer, that is, not acceptable. Listen to every word with discerning, and catch hold of its meaning.

Our Saviour says something else there, and it is to be listened to with discerning; for he said 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them' (Matt. 18:20). And how should this be understood by you, my beloved? For our Saviour said, Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them; does this mean, if you are alone Christ is not with you? It is written concerning those who believe in Christ, that Christ dwells in them (cf John 6:56-7); by this he showed that even before there are two or three, even then Christ is with them. I will further show you that there is a place where, instead of two or three, there are more than a thousand gathered in the name of Christ, but Christ is not with them. At the same time there is a man who is all by himself, and Christ is with him.

This saying which our Saviour uttered is fair and beautiful to those who hear it, for he said, Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. When a man sweeps clean his soul in the name of Christ, Christ dwells within him, and God dwells in Christ: henceforth that person becomes one of three persons – himself, Christ who dwells in him, and God who dwells in Christ. As our Lord said, 'I am in my Father, and my Father is in me' (John 14:10-11). He also said that 'I and my Father are one', and again, 'You are in me and I am in you' (John 10:30, 14:20). Likewise he spoke through the prophet, 'I shall dwell in them and walk in them' (Ezek. 43:9; 2 Cor. 6:16). It is in this sense that you can understand this saying which our Lord uttered.

2. EPHREM, Homily on our Lord, 1-2

1. Grace has drawn close to mouths [that had once been] blasphemous, and has made them into harps that sound forth praise.

For this reason let all mouths utter praise to Him who has removed from them blasphemous utterance.

Praise to You who travelled from one resting place to another, in order to make us into a resting place for His Sender: – the Only-Begotten [Ihidaya] travelled from Being, and resided

in the Virgin, so that through bodily birth the Only-Begotten might become a brother to many;

– He travelled from Sheol and resided in the Kingdom, in order to tread out a way from Sheol, the defrauder of all, to the Kingdom, the rewarder of all.

For our Lord provided his resurrection as a pledge for mortals, that he would remove them from Sheol, which receives the departed without discernment, [and bring them] to the Kingdom, which welcomes the invited with discernment.

Thus they might go from the place which treats in the same way the bodies of all, to the place which distinguishes between the labours of each individual.

He is the one who has descended to Sheol, and then ascended, so that, from the place which destroys its inhabitants, he might bring us into the place which nurtures those who dwell there with its blessings; and those who dwell there are people who have made a crown for themselves out of what they possess—the transient blossoms and flowers of this world— and adorned for themselves tabernacles there which do not pass away.

He is the Firstborn who was born [of the Father] in accordance with his nature: he was born in another birth which was outside his own nature, so that we might recognize that, after our own natural birth, we need another birth [baptism], which is outside our nature.

For just as he, a spiritual being, could not become bodily until he had come to bodily birth, so too bodily beings cannot become spiritual unless they are reborn in another kind of birth

The Son whose birth [from the Father] is unsearchable, was born in another birth which can be searched out:

– by the one birth we should learn that his greatness has no limits,
– by the other we may recognize that his grace has no measure.

His greatness is great beyond measure, seeing that his first birth cannot be depicted in the mind;

His grace is poured out without any limit, seeing that his other birth is proclaimed by every mouth.

2. This is He who was born
– from the Godhead in accordance with his nature,

- from humanity, not after his nature,
- from baptism, not after his custom.

All this was in order that we might be born

- from humanity, in accordance with our nature,
- from the Godhead, not after our nature,
- from the Spirit, not after our custom.

So he who came to second birth was born of the Godhead, so that he might bring what belongs to us to rebirth.

His birth from the Father is to be believed, not searched out;

His birth from a woman is to be exalted in honour, not despised;

His death on the Cross testifies to his birth from a woman for a person who has died was also born.

The Annunciation of Gabriel explains his birth from his Father: 'The Power of the Most High shall overshadow you'. If he is the Power of the Most High, then it is evident that this was not the case of the seed of some mortal being.

- Thus his conception in the womb is bound up with his death on the Cross.

- And his first birth is bound up with the explanation given by the angel.

- Thus anyone who denies his birth will be rebuked by his Cross,
 - and anyone who supposes that his origin is from Mary will be set right [by Gabriel's words, showing] that his divinity preexists everything.

- So that the person who has discovered his beginning in the body should get lost [in wonder] at [the words] 'Who can tell his generation?'

The Father gave him birth, and in the Father the Son creates [all] creation.

Flesh gave him birth, and in it he has slain the lusts.

Baptism gave him birth, so that in him it might make white the stains [of sin].

Sheol gave him birth, so that in him its treasures might be emptied.

By the road of those who are born did he come to us from his Father;

by the road of those who die, he departed to go to his Father,

– so that by his coming in birth, his advent might be seen;

– and by his returning through resurrection, his departure might be believed.

3. BOOK OF STEPS, XIX. 2–3. The way of the greater commandments.

If you have believed the words of Jesus and established with him a covenant that you will listen to his words and keep his greater commandments, then from that very moment either in body or in spirit you will be travelling this road of the commandments, and you will be starting on these ascents. If you are willing to climb them so as to confirm your covenant with Jesus, then you will see him and receive from him what he has promised you, namely, ‘With me you shall find delight at the table of the Kingdom (cp Luke 20:30). Unless you humble yourself as a servant before all people, both good and bad, you will be unable to climb these ascents, or to complete the road by which you are travelling to that place where our Lord promised you that you would find delight....

Listen to what our Lord has said, ‘The road leading to life is narrow’ (Matt. 7:14). So how much more narrow is the one which leads to full maturity and outstanding glory. Scripture further has said, ‘Humble yourself below everything on earth; for if you have given yourself over to the fear of God, then you have given yourself over to all sorts of testings’ (Ben Sira 2:1). Humble yourself, then, below all other human beings, and endure affliction that lasts for a short while, so that you may come to the rest which never passes away. Do not break your covenant, otherwise you will come to tribulation that cannot be contained.

4. JOHN THE SOLITARY, Letter to Hesychius 41–2. On dealing with bad thoughts.

Be attentive to the thoughts of the mind. If some evil thought passes through you, do not get upset, for it is not the transient thoughts of your mind that the knowledge of the Lord of all observes; rather, he looks at the depths of the mind to see

if you take pleasure in that evil thought which resides there. For hateful thoughts float over the surface of the mind but it is the senses that are lower down which can chase away hateful thoughts, which the Lord of all examines. He does not judge what just passes over the mind, but rather the thoughts that are lower down than those hateful ones, namely those which appear in the depths of the mind, which can drive them away with its hidden hand. For He does not pardon the thoughts which spring up from the depth of mind, for it is they which should be chasing away those which pass over the surface of the mind: He judges those thoughts which have a passage into the heart.

Even if some hateful thought finds a nest in you and remains in your mind for some time, as long as there is deeper down some other thought which finds abhorrent, and is at loggerheads with, the thought temporarily abiding in you, then you need not be alarmed, for the evil thought can be rooted out, and you will not suffer judgement for it. Rather, great is your reward in the case of the good thought which springs up in the depths of your mind, seeing that it is the foundation which prevents any evil thought being built upon it.

JOHN THE SOLITARY, Letter to Hesychius 60. Recollection in the evening.

When evening comes, collect your thoughts and ponder over the entire course of the day: observe God's providential care for you, consider the grace which he has wrought in you throughout the whole span of the day; consider the rising of the moon, the joy of daylight, all the hours and moments, the divisions of time, the sight of different colours, the beautiful adornment of creation, the course of the sun, the growth of your own stature, how your own person has been protected; consider the blowing of the winds, the ripe and varied fruits, how the elements minister to your comfort, how you have been preserved from accidents, and all the other activities of grace. When you have pondered on all this, wonder at God's love towards you will spring up within you, and gratitude for his acts of grace will bubble up inside you.

BABAI, Letter to Cyriacus 32. Unceasing prayer.

Make it your care to pray without ceasing, for prayer is light to the soul, and it acts as a guard to the body. Pray not

just when you are standing in prayer, but also when you are moving around or doing something, and even when you are asleep and when you are eating. When your mouth is occupied with nourishment, let your heart be occupied with prayer. While your right hand is looking after your body's needs at table, let your mind be given to praise and thanksgiving to Him who provides for your needs. In this way your food will be blessed and hallowed in your body, without your being concerned about this.

5. MARTYRIUS (Sahdona):

Book of Perfection I. iii. 148-54

Great love and the mind's constant gaze have the habit of veiling over the sight of visible things from the eyes. Frequently, as a result of the pondering that takes place in the heart and of the mind's gaze on what it loves, we see something but do not do so distinctly; or we hear some word, but do not hear it with any comprehension. This is because the root of our sight's ability to distinguish things, and of our hearing's understanding, is tied up with our mental faculty, and when that is occupied with other things the root of the sight is directed towards these, and so necessarily it does not perceive exterior things. This, then, is how it is with the love of God which uplifts a person and places him with God, so that he may gaze on him continually, pondering on what pertains to him.

But unless a person first enflames his soul with love for Christ, unless he fights as he enters the furnace of temptations, and unless he is assayed like gold in a multitude of afflictions, he will not be worthy of this gift. Unless he becomes as it were drunk with love for Christ, and forgets both himself and the world, standing in utter wonder in his inebriation with love for God, as though he was not longer living, but Christ, whom he loves, is living in him, he will not attain to this great state.

Those who love God and are smitten with love for him are like people who are drunk, for a drunk who is enflamed with wine is in a complete state of wonder: he walks on the ground, but is not aware of it; he stands among people, but he does not distinguish who they are. Often enough he may be struck a blow, but he does not suffer anything; he may be insulted, but he is not offended; he may be praised, but is not puffed up by it –

simply because he is incapable of understanding what he hears as a result of his great stupor. When a large number of people address him, he is not aware of it, for the awareness of his heart is snatched away as a result of the heat of the wine which enflames him. And when he sleeps on the floor, he imagines he is flying in the air.

So it is with someone who is drunk with divine love, and fired with desire for his Lord: the stirrings of his soul continually meditate on God, and his heart is snatched up towards him. While his body walks on earth, his mind dwells in heaven with Christ, for his body is dead to the world, and his soul is burning with love for the things of heaven. Though he may be standing among bodily creatures, his mind is running about and crying 'holy' along with spiritual beings, as he meditates on the profound wonder of God's majestic glory, and as he examines in amazement the great depth of his hidden wisdom; he wonders in astonishment at the outpoured riches of his grace, and when he is struck with blows for the sake of the truth he has taken hold of, he does not suffer anything; when he is abused for its sake he rejoices and exults, seeing that he has been held worthy of abuse of Christ's name's sake. And when he is praised for his conduct, he is not puffed up, for it is not he who lives; but Christ lives in him.

It was with this love that the blessed Paul, who lived in Christ, was inebriated. He said with confidence, 'Who can separate me from the life of Christ? In comparison with the love of God he considered as superfluous all things above and below, that give joy or sorrow, that exist or will do so, that are hidden and that are revealed. Who is capable of telling the great love for God that this divine apostle had? He saw his Lord on high in brilliant light surpassing that of the sun, and he was snatched up towards him to heaven; he heard ineffable words, being held worthy of a vision that cannot be expounded. For smitten with wonder at the majesty of God he proclaimed in his amazement, 'O profundity of the riches of the wisdom and the mind of God'.

It was with this love that all the rest of the apostles, too, were drunk; so too all the martyrs were enflamed by this fire: as they died each day their spirit never grew cold as a result of their love for Christ, and they never departed from this

love. Such great love do all those acquire who travel wholeheartedly on this road of righteousness, following after Christ.

All this is brought about by love of Christ in those who possess it: it puts up with and endures every thing that is difficult; it provides fatigue as well as rest, torments as well as delights, things that cause suffering as well as those which please, that give joy and that cause pain; for in it death is enmeshed with life, sufferings with glory. But even though the sufferings and afflictions may be many, they are not equal to the glory which is to be made manifest in us, for the sufferings last only for a short time, while the glory lasts for ever.

6. ISAAC OF NINEVEH, Part II, 1

Now I shall show you an easy rule suitable for someone who is weak: it is a way by which one can easily make progress. The sweetness which is soon born out of this rule is able to attract the mind, with the result that you will diligently perform the labour of this rule without any compulsion or restraint. The rule is this: because the feeble body grows weary of standing constantly upon its feet in order to perform the customary acts of worship – and as a result it is frequently hindered from making the continual prayer performed with the body from which the prayer of the heart is born: because of this, fall often upon your face in the place where you are sitting, and remain in supplication in such a manner that converse with Scripture will also be mingled into your prayer. Then from the combination of these you will receive light, and this will then be raised up as delight for your soul, so that prayer will give delight to you as a result of reading Scripture, and, furthermore, you will be enlightened in your reading by means of the keys of prayer. By prayer, you see, the door to spiritual insight is opened up before the mind, and this insight, by its awesome nature, will kindle the desire for prayer in accordance with the spiritual meaning it imparts.

ISAAC OF NINEVEH, Part II. 18, On the Love of God.

The love of God is not something that arises in a person unconsciously and indiscriminately: it cannot be set in motion in someone merely by a knowledge of the Scriptures, nor can someone compel himself to love God. It is possible, however,

that, out of the reading of Scripture and knowledge of it, the mind can receive a deep sense of reverence before the recollection of God's greatness: such a person may be in awe of God as a son or a servant is in awe, and he may be awakened to virtue's enticement and to a fervent desire for what is good. But if someone should suppose, or claim or teach that he can, [by one means or another] cause the love of God to become engraved in his soul, that person does not know what he is saying. Not even from the commandment which Christ gave concerning love (Matt. 22:38) can someone love God, for fear, not love, comes from the Law. Until a person receives the Spirit of revelations, and his soul is united to the wisdom which transcends the world, and until he perceives within himself God's exalted attributes, that person cannot approach the glorious saviour [of genuine love of God]. A man who has not drunk wine will not become inebriated by words describing wine; similarly, the person who has not been accounted worthy to receive in his soul knowledge of the sublime things of God cannot become inebriated with his love.

7. SIMEON THE GRACEFUL: On different kinds of prayer

It is written that 'idleness gives birth to a multitude of sins'. In the case of a solitary, whenever he is not at prayer, he is idle. The Fathers hand down the teaching that, provided someone is occupied with the service of God, he is prayer. While I agree that this is what is meant by continual prayer, it is incomplete. In the case of the fully grown, whose understanding has found peace and been renewed in the Spirit, and whose mind has been smitten with divine love, such people have become a dwelling place for God in the mind's inner vision.

Prayer does not consist in learning, or knowledge, or words, but in the emptying of the mind and an intellect that is serene and alert, recollected and at peace as a result of the silence of the faculties and the senses, whether this means the complete wiping out of thoughts or the stripping away of every care.

Oneness of self is also advantageous to us at the time of prayer, so that we can converse with God without any intermediary veil—whether it be some thought of evil that hinders us from it, or meditation on something good that deprives us

of it: for someone who kills off his son with honey is no different from someone who kills him with a knife.

If you are desirous of prayer, raise up on the shoulders of your intellect all the world's affairs, along with its cares and splendour. Grasp with your hands your beloved children— who have good and bad memories. At the time of prayer leave behind in the intelligible abyss all that exists and does not exist, ascend in your intellect naked to the cross, and cross over to the New World. When you are empty of everything, stand up in prayer: may be with difficulty you will be able to pray a prayer that is peaceful.

As long as you react to something with feelings of pain, or to some mental image with hate, do not imagine that you have been purified from within and that you are capable of praying in a unified way; for the soul will not shine out in prayer before it has been purified. Do not imagine that you have prayed in a pure fashion as long as any seedling of resentment is still to be found within you— even if it is just the memory of a single person.

Prayer consisting of love is a never-ceasing fountain, irrigating the soul with peace and joy. This is when the heart's fountain is inflamed with the fire of love, while the wood for this consists in labours of discernment. It is when the mind bursts into flame as it meditates on all that is good. The seedling of prayer acquires strength as it becomes illuminated and radiant with spiritual understanding; it is full of peace and joy, burning spontaneously as incense. All this is the gift of God.

Genuine prayer which issues from a pure mind so refines the heart that groans and tears of joy involuntarily flow forth, and the soul stretches itself out towards God. Blessed is that soul which has tasted its sweetness.

Prayer at which the body does not toil by means of the heart, and the heart by means of the mind, along with the intellect and understanding, all recollected in God with a profound groan of feeling—prayer which instead floats over the surface of the heart, such a prayer you should recognize to be but an embryo, not fully formed. If, while you are praying, your

mind drags you to some other matter which you have to do after your prayer is over, then you have not yet prayed in a unified fashion.

Prayer is the inner gaze which becomes illuminated in the Spirit, which perceives in a mysterious way the good which is implanted in the heart. Prayer is a mind which ceaselessly sings songs of praise in the tongue of angels. The 'mustard seed of prayer', of which the Fathers speak, is that knowledge which is sown in the very nature of our created being, wherein resides 'the Kingdom of God which is within us.' The 'seedling' is the growth in various kinds of discernment, whereby the intellect ascends to knowledge of the Maker. The 'blade' is the nourishment gathered from the two altars of the enclosure within which the intellect grows up, is exercised, and ascends towards that simple altar, namely the noetic renewal of the saints, which occurs once the intellect has been trained and perfected in itself, has died and come to life again in a mysterious way, has partially tasted here, by way of pledge, what it will fully taste once it has been freed of the dense nature of the body.

Every prayer and supplication, along with every virtuous act which people perform in this world, is for some good here on earth, or else it stems from fear of torment in Gehenna, or it is for the delight that is prepared in the world to come. In the case of the true solitary, however, all prayer, supplication, labours of repentance, as well as all the virtuous acts that they perform prior to their purification, - all these things are done for the sake of liberation from the passions, so that they may be held worthy of purification, become sanctified by the word of God, and perceptibly receive the working of the Spirit.

Prayer subsequent to purification is the grounding of the intellect, peace of heart, rest of mind, serenity of thought, contemplation of the New World, hidden consolation, converse with God, a mind which shares with God in the revelation of his mysteries. The entire course of true solitaries is aimed at liberation from 'secondary knowledge of nature' which belongs to the 'stage of the soul', so that they may be held worthy of that primary ground.

The continual prayer of perfection about which St: Basil writes is when someone offers up praise to God in every affair or event within creation that he meets with, whether he sees, hears or recollects all the good and bad things that are done in the created world.

8. JOHN THE ELDER, Letter 38

I know you, O man valiant in the Lord: you hide your treasure and go around begging from a poor man like me. Blessed is the person whose treasure lies within him, who is not nourished from outside. Blessed is the person whose sun shines out from within, thus preventing those who accept only the external sun from seeing it – people who cause harm to those who accept the interior sun. Blessed is the person whose hearing is sealed from those who hear only what is silly, but turn aside to listen for the movements of the fiery beings and the sound of their cries of ‘Holy’. Blessed is the person whose very breath is of the Holy Spirit, the fragrance of whose body is mingled with him who ‘took delight in fragrant scents’ (Cant. 4:10).

Blessed is the person whose soul has been dipped in the sweetness of his God, and whose bones have thereby acquired strength. Who is there to expound this blessed state? Not even the spiritual can do so. Blessed is the person to whom is revealed the place whither he is travelling, who burns with desire for it. Blessed is the person who recognizes the place of awareness, and has realized that there are none who have knowledge there: he has understood a great mystery. Blessed is the person who has gained permission to enter that place, and who has henceforth made into his companions those whom he finds there. Blessed is the person who has been stunned by the beauty of these things, and who has himself become ignorant, having forgotten him who fills with error those who go astray.

How wonderful are your hidden mysteries, O our God! Who could ever believe them? My heart is transported at the recollection of them; the limbs of my body are cut off at their sweetness. I forget all that I am when I meditate on these things with which I have no affinity: in my desire I try to compel the Giver, forgetting all that he is; yet it is him that I have been struggling to take hold of him: I grasp him, but he is not to be grasped; I catch him, but he is not to be caught. Having my fill, yet I

am empty. When I grasp him, he is not there. As I live in him, he lives in me.

Being hidden from me, I am hidden in him; when I want to see him, I see that he is within: whence he comes, I know not. When I would convey him somewhere, he withdraws from me. When he is clothed [by my visualizing him] he does not remain, but when he is stripped he does not depart. When he is abandoned [by me] he does not stay. When he goes with me to some place, he does not stir from any place. When I catch him, he is pleased, but when I leave? go of him, he hides. When I listen to him, he speaks with me; When I touch him, he does not move. When I walk in him, he resides in me, even though he is extended outside me. When I breathe him, he comes out from within: when I look at him, he is utterly interior. Clothed in all, he veils all. When I behold him carrying everything, I carry him around.

In what possible way can the external sun indicate to you anything of his hiddenness which shines out over all? Just as you carry the sun's rays upon your shoulder, so you carry him, but within you. Just as you can see the sun here on earth, so too he is everywhere.

Glory to you who are hidden from all, who shine out incessantly for those who love you. O darkness that is multi-radiant, O light which is described as opaqueness because of its intense brightness: praise to you from all—and upon us be mercy, amen.

9. BAR HEBRAEUS, Ethicon IV. 15. 13 'On the Stages of the Initiated concerning their love'. Bar Hebraeus here describes the highest forms of mystical union with God.

The holy solitaries teach that there are three stages or states of the Initiated concerning the growth of their love: first, middle, and third, the last one being the state of accomplishment. Having found specific experiences at each of the three stages, they have informed us concerning them. Therefore, borrowing their words, we quote a short passage for each of them.

The first state. When, in the beginning, grace casts a small spark of the love of the Lord in the novice, it sows in him great

humility, so that he thinks of himself as dust and ashes, and remembering his backslidings he sheds tears of sorrow and joy—of sorrow, because of his stains; of joy, because grace has been born and has sustained and carried him like a compassionate mother. Then it makes reciting of Psalms and frequent kneeling sweet to his heart, and it gives him delight during his long Office; it also reminds him of the saints, and incites him to imitate their labours. Then it incites him to love deeds which serve to give rest to his brethren, and pity towards the oppressed, and serving the sick. It gives him silence and solitude in order to cut off the passionate inclinations in his heart. Some solitaries are, on account of their care, made perfect by grace in all these things, others in some only. But from time to time grace withdraws its workings from the solitary, in order that he may be buffeted by temptations and so gain training; then troubles and evil passions direct their power against him. But if he be cautious against trespassing, grace will visit him again with consolations, much more profitable and elevated than the former ones, because it is really training him, and does not actually withdraw from him. In this state the novice is greatly in need of a guide, because many are brought to a fall by this testing and so fall away from the place they have reached.

The middle state. After its initial workings, grace changes its activities in the soul; it purifies and sanctifies it, and makes it apt for the sight of things spiritual and for the receiving of revelations. In the first place it causes insight into created beings to shine out in the mind. Then the intellect will be brought to the state of silence where it is free from the distraction of thoughts and becomes engrossed in the Creator alone. The Initiated will meditate day and night upon the Most High with such insight that, while he is awake, he will seem to be asleep, and when he is asleep; he will be thought to be awake.

And when he has passed a space of time with such meditations, the Lord will show Himself to him—but only as a flash of lightning which bursts forth and then disappears; or like a star which is then suddenly covered by a cloud. This happens especially during prayer, so that that sight often breaks off his Office and leaves him in a state of wonder. Then his spirit is tormented continually by burning feelings, and the love of his Lord burns in his heart like fire in the furnace heated seven times over (Dan. 3:19), with the result that his soul is enflamed,

his limbs grow feeble and he collapses on the ground. Then he gets up and prepares himself for further vision, and it is not withheld from him. He begins to lengthen the duration of this state from day to day, and his intellect is enlightened, so that it can see hidden things, and it gradually becomes familiar with hidden mysteries and ineffable visions. The feverish inclination of the initial state changes into calmness and love is brought to fulfilment.

The state of fulfilment. From here, then, begins the entrance into the bridechamber, the abiding in the apartment, reclining in the chamber, in conversation with Him who had appeared to the eye like a flash of lightning, but at whom the intellect is now gazing peacefully. The inhabitants of that place are enlightened by the sight of the beauty of the King, illumined with a light that is not mingled with any hint of darkness. There soul finds revealed its natural beauty, and it sees itself as it is, namely in the likeness of its Creator. And it is changed from one vision to another; with the essential light which clothes everything and penetrates everything, it gazes without hindrance at all the extremities of creation, and yet further, and is raised up above all heavens.

As the body's eye beholds corporeal objects with the help of created light, so too the intellect beholds, with the help of uncreated light, the angels in their natural state. And when the soul is established in the sight of the glory of their ranks and their beauty, their harmony and their joy, it becomes like them alongside them; and in a moment it crosses over towards the cloud of inaccessible light, where God is said to dwell. And when the face of its Lord is revealed to it, it becomes stupefied and is made radiant by the rays of His beauty. There the rapture described by our holy Fathers takes place, and the soul is unable to turn back from its delight: unless its Lord releases it from its union, it does not recall its partner the body. But when it does return, it imparts to the body's limbs the divine fire which remains with it, and the body's limbs too participate in the spirit's delight.

When the intellect returns again [to its Lord], the body is almost seized along with it, and the intellect can scarcely shake

it off as it is raised up. In this way it is exalted from glory to glory through the Lord, the Spirit, and it forgets not only things belonging to here on earth, but also its own self. And through the divine light with which it is clothed, it sees in itself the likeness of God, and in its boldness of speech it does not shun saying 'I am in my Father and my father is in me', and I and my Father are one', and other such things which may be spoken in the boldness induced by this kind of [spiritual] inebriation. [...]

QUESTIONS

(on SCC 2)

- I. What is the importance of Syriac Spirituality?
- II. Briefly bring out the contributions of Aphrahaat and Mar Aprem to Syriac Spirituality.
- III. What is the importance of Philoxenus of Mabbug and Isaac of Nineveh in the study of Syriac Spirituality?
- IV. Discuss the following themes found in the Syriac tradition of Spirituality:
 - (1) Divine Fire
 - (2) The luminous eye
 - (3) Interior viriginity
- V. Write a short essay on the perspectives and ways in which the Syriac Fathers understood the mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist vis – avis the Christian life.

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1. What is the importance of the Holy Spirit?

2. How is the Holy Spirit given to us? How do we receive Him?

3. What is the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in our hearts?

4. How should we live in order to receive the Holy Spirit?

(1) Faith

(2) Repentance

(3) Baptism

5. How should we live in order to keep the Holy Spirit's presence in our hearts?

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- 1 **The Person and Message of Christ: a positive evaluation of the different Christologies**
[Rev. Dr. V. C. Samuel, Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam]
- 2 **The Mother of God in the Syriac Tradition**
[Rev. Dr. C. A. Abraham, SEERI, Kottayam & Rev. Fr. Samuel Thykootam, St. Mary's Malankara Major Seminary, Trivandrum].
- 3 **The Church in the Syriac Tradition**
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- 4 **An Historical Introduction to the Syriac Liturgies**
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- 7 **“Sedre” as “Locus Theologicus” of the West Syriac Church**
[Rev. Dr. Jacob Thekeparampil, SEERI, Kottayam]
- 8 **“Anaphorae” characteristic of the creative genius of the Syriac Liturgy**
[Rev. Dr. Thomas Panicker, Mar Ivanios College, Trivandrum]
- 9 **Mar Aprem, Theologian and Poet**
[Most Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem, Metropolitan, Trichur & Prof. Dr. Pierre Yousif, Paris, Rome]
- 10 **Mysticism in the Syriac Tradition**
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(Prof. Dr. Sebastian Brock, Oxford, England)

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