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ALISON SALVESEN

The Exodus Commentary of St Ephrem



ST. EPHREM ECUMENICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE (SEERI)

BAKER HILL, KOTTAYAM - 686 001

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The Exodus Commentary of St Ephrem

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The Exodus Commentary of St. Ephrem

By

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The Exodus Commentary of St Ephrem

INTRODUCTION

Ephrem's Exodus Commentary probably dates from the last decade of his life, a period which he spent in Edessa, having left his native Nisibis along with the rest of the Christian population when the city was handed over to the Persians by the Romans in 363.

The term commentary is a little misleading since the text may originate from notes of lectures given by Ephrem in the theological School of Edessa, as in the case of his Genesis commentary, and Ephrem more or less retells the Exodus story in his own words. The particular stress on female characters in the narrative - again, this is a feature in common with the Genesis commentary - suggests that Ephrem was aiming his interpretation at the "Daughters of the Covenant", consecrated women in the Christian community.¹

1 See Salvesen, "Ephrem's Exodus Commentary" and "Some Themes..." (References to relevant modern works generally appear in abbreviated form: full details are given in the Bibliography.)

The commentary exists in a single sixth century manuscript incorporating the Genesis commentary as well, and belonging to the Vatican Library. Towards the end of Exodus this manuscript becomes increasingly illegible, and the final sections are missing. The edition used for this translation is Tonneau's, and I have generally followed Jansma's suggestions for emending the text.² Tonneau himself produced a Latin translation as a companion volume to his edition, and Paul Féghali is responsible for a translation into French. I have been somewhat liberal with my own rendering at times, as a close reproduction of the grammatical niceties of the Syriac text does not do justice to Ephrem's lively style.

Although Ephrem sometimes explains a difficult phrase in passing, he certainly does not give us a verse by verse commentary of the biblical Exodus. Instead he offers his own interpretation of the narrative, in line with the Syriac title of the work, *turgama*, or explanation (cf. Jewish *Targum*, an Aramaic paraphrase of the Bible). It is closer in style to the retellings of the Jewish Greek writers Josephus and Philo than the biblical commentaries that the modern reader may be familiar with. Such a style enables Ephrem to omit or gloss over certain parts of the biblical narrative while highlighting others. For instance, Moses' father is never mentioned whereas his mother is brought into prominence, many of the laws are omitted and the details of the building of the Tabernacle are much abbreviated, while the episode at the inn (4.24-26) is expanded and interpreted.

² In "Some Remarks..." and "Weitere Beiträge..." See Bibliography for details of other authors and works.

The biblical text itself surfaces from time to time, in a form closest to the Peshitta (the Syriac “Vulgate”), and differences from it are probably due to the fact that Ephrem is citing from memory. I have italicised citations which coincide with the wording of the Peshitta. However, there are two or three places where Ephrem seems to be quoting the biblical text, but not as we know it: 1.21, 9.16 (cited twice) and possibly 17.16 (see the notes on these passages). Their origin is a matter for speculation.

Ephrem was no friend of Judaism or Jews, but his Exodus Commentary, as in the case of his other works, contains many parallels to rabbinic traditions. For instances he says that Hur was killed by the Israelites for refusing to act as a priest in the worship of the Golden Calf. Other parallels are indicated in the notes. But there are also distinct differences from and even reactions against certain Jewish traditions. Ephrem ties up Passover with the Annuciation as well as the Eucharist, and he weaves a web of typology through the narrative: Moses' staff often symbolises the Cross, the Passover lamb foreshadows Christ in his Passion and death. However, in contrast to the themes in Jewish literature of the Ten Plagues and the Ten Commandments Ephrem is not interested in the number of either, mentioning each plague without enumerating them, and only citing the last five of the Commandments, the ones concerned with ethics.

There are other themes apart from typology which Ephrem brings out, or in some cases, introduces. Naturally enough he stresses that God gave the Egyptians

plenty of chances to repent, and resists any suggestion that God made Pharaoh unable to do so by hardening his heart: but Ephrem can only do this by ignoring inconvenient passages in the biblical text. He is a zealous champion of free will, perhaps taking a stand against the teachings of the Bardaisanites in Edessa.³ Other preoccupations of his can be seen in the commentary: his insistence on Moses' sexual abstinence in the service of God (resembling the qaddisbutba practised by the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant), and on the fitting nature of retribution: the Egyptian first-born die for the killing of the Hebrew boys, the Egyptian soldiers' bodies lie unburied on the seashore because the bodies of the Hebrew children lay washed up on the banks of the Nile, the fish in the river die in the plague of blood because they grew fat on the bodies of the Hebrew babies. Ephrem presents such justice as an impersonal force, distancing God from its execution.

These are just a few of the features of the commentary, and they demonstrate that Ephrem was just as capable of writing prose as the hymns and verse homilies for which he is famous. In short, Ephrem's Exodus Commentary is a vivid interpretation of the biblical book, and deserves to be more widely known.

3 See Jansma, "Reflections..."

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THE VERSION OF EXODUS, THE SECOND BOOK OF THE LAW MADE BY THE BLESSED MAR EPHREM

Synopsis

Exodus, the second book, tells of the seventy people who entered Egypt with Jacob, and of the death of Joseph and his contemporaries.

A new king arises who kills the infants, but Moses is saved by an ark, and becomes the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

When he reaches manhood he goes out to his brethren, to see whether their redemption will be accomplished through his agency. He kills an Egyptian, and reproves a Hebrew, who denounces him, so he flees to Midian.

He sits by a well, and rescues some girls from rough treatment. He enters Jethro's house and becomes his son-in-law by marrying his daughter Zipporah.

Pharaoh dies and the Israelites groan⁴ under their harsh servitude. They pray and are heard.

4 The text gives *w'tunyhw*, "they had rest", but the Peshitta at 2.23 has *w'tunhw*, "they groaned", which also fits the context of the Israelites oppression rather better.

God appears to Moses in a bush.

Moses's staff becomes a serpent, and his hand turns leprous and then clean. On his journey to Egypt, an angel is revealed to him at a lodging place, and tries to kill him.

He enters Egypt, and Aaron comes out to meet him. He performs signs before the elders of the people and they believe him. He has an audience with Pharaoh, who refuses to let the Hebrews go and increases their oppression by withholding straw from them.

The staff becomes a serpent, and the river turns into blood.

There follow the plagues of frogs, pestilence, lice, swarms, ulcers, fire *blazing* within hail, locusts and darkness.

The Egyptian first-born die.

The Hebrews kill the lamb on the fourteenth day and eat it.

They leave Egypt in a hurry, armed and furnished with the Egyptians' gold and silver and garments they have taken.

The Sea parts and the Hebrews cross, while the Egyptians are drowned.

Miriam sings a hymn of praise by the Sea. They travel three days without water.

God sweetens bitter water at Mauret with a tree. He brings down manna and makes quails rise up. At Horeb he makes water flow from a rock for them.

Amalek comes to fight them.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, visits him.

The Law is given to them on Mount Sinai. God comes down on Mount Sinai. There he gives them laws and judgments. Moses ascends the mountain to bring down the tablets.

He gives instructions concerning how and out of what the Tabernacle is to be made.

The people make a calf because Moses remains on the mountain for a long time.

He returns, but goes up a second time to bring down the tablets. He intercedes for their folly.

He persuades God to go up with them, and says to him, "*Show me your glory and I will know you.*" When God has done so, he tells Moses to be mindful of the commands he repeated following the worship of the calf.

The Tabernacle is built, and all its fittings made.

Moses erects it on the first day of the first month. A cloud overshadows it by day, and whenever it goes up from the Tabernacle, the Israelites strike camp.

Moses had all these things committed to writing in the Book of Exodus, and he begins in this way:

SECTION I

1] *“These are the names of the Israelites who entered Egypt with Jacob(1.1)... seventy people (1.5).”* This is to show how what had been foretold to Abraham in the promise came to pass, since those who entered Egypt as seventy people, including the old and the infants, and lived there for two hundred and twenty five years, came out with six hundred thousand armed men, not counting those of twenty years and under.

2] After the death of Joseph and his contemporaries (1.6), there arose a new king, who initiated a new policy⁵ to kill the Hebrews’ babies⁶ (1.15-16). The action that he took had a reason behind it: though Satan saw that the four hundred years decreed to Abraham were at an end, and wanted to smother the redeemer of the Hebrews through the slaughter of the infants,⁷ Pharaoh too saw

5 This is very close to a Jewish midrash in Exodus Rabbah 1.8, but the Syriac also involves a word play on “king”(*malka*) and “policy”(*melka*).

6 Ephrem does not make it as explicit as the biblical text does that only male children were to be killed at birth by the midwives, and later to be thrown into the river, while the females were to be saved; a point developed in Jewish midrash. Ephrem also describes the genocide before the imposition of hard labour, contrary to the order of the biblical narrative.

7 The introduction of Satan to the story is unparalleled, but may owe something to the beginning of the book of Job or to 1 Chron 21.

how numerous the people had become (1.7,9) and that the whole of Egypt was swarming⁸ with them. He became envious of the Hebrews' numbers, and all the more so because ecstasies among them who claimed to know the future⁹ from the reckoning of years that had passed were proclaiming the forthcoming deliverance of the Hebrews.

3] So Pharaoh decreed death for the Hebrew babies, and made their parents labour to build *storehouses* that were not needed (1.11). For if the corn in Joseph's storehouses was sufficient to sustain Egypt, Canaan and the land of the Amorites during the seven years of famine, were they inadequate to sustain his own land with their supplies?

The more Pharaoh encouraged the killing of the infants, the more the Hebrews' children multiplied. The more he schemed to cause distress to the people in this way, the more his own distress was increased because of the people: *The Egyptians were in distress because of the Israelites*¹⁰.(1.12)

4] Because Pharaoh was careful not to pollute the river with corpses,¹¹ he summoned the midwives in order

8 The verb Ephrem uses (*rpt*), is not found in the Peshitta which has the Aph'el of *yld*, "beget" but instead is very close to the underlying Hebrews *srs*, "swarm".

9 Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* II.205: *a i πουραμματ vs* who is skilled in predicting the future tells the king that a child is about to be born to the Israelites who will exalt them and bring the Egyptians low.

10 Ephrem tries to explain the odd phrase in the Peshitta, which is very close to that found in Targum Onkelos.

11 A detail not found in the biblical account. Ephrem often alludes to the divine status of the Nile in Egyptian religion, e.g. II.3.

to make them murderesses (1.15-16). By his authority he made them the opposite of their title, since he imagined he would turn physicians into executioners.¹² But even though they promised to obey him, they did not do so (1.17). These women whom he had instructed to kill infants complied by doing the opposite, and instead of their charges they considered themselves as the ones who would be slain. But on the day they thought they would receive a martyr's crown for this, they were saved from death by the wise speech that God put in their mouth (1.19).¹³ "They became good"¹⁴ means that they became a great dynasty,¹⁵ though they had imagined that Pharaoh would wipe out their entire line because of all the babies they had saved.

12 The Syriac word for "midwife" is the same as the feminine adjective "alive" and the nouns "resurrection" and "life". The Peshitta for 1.19 could be read so that the midwives say that the Hebrew women are midwives too, which is certainly the interpretation of the Targums. When Ephrem speaks of their "wise speech", this is presumably what he is referring to.

13 There is a phrase in the Peshitta for 1.20 for which there is no corresponding Hebrew: "because they [the women] did this thing". It is not found in MS 5b1.

14 Although Ephrem introduces this phrase as if it were a lemma from the biblical text, it bears no relation to the Peshitta of either 1.20 ("God did good to the midwives") or 1.22 ("He made houses for them"), although Ephrem clearly alludes to the latter in his explanation. Ephrem may have had a text reading *'bd lhyn tbt'*, "he did *good things* for them" (I owe this suggestion to Sebastian Brock), differing from the accepted Peshitta text by the addition of a single letter, but harmonising with 1.20, "And *God was good to (w't'b)* the midwives". However, Ephrem's actual interpretation of the odd phrase in his text may owe something to a Jewish tradition which speaks of the midwives acquiring an everlasting "good name" (i.e., renown).

15 Compare the interpretation found in many Jewish sources where the midwives, usually identified with Jochabed and Miriam, are the ancestresses of the royal and priestly dynasties in Israel.

5] While Pharaoh was being mocked by the women behind his back, he decided to pollute the waters of the river with infants' blood, and to feed its fish on babies' flesh. But he failed in this too, because the Hebrews' fertility increased. The river was full of babies, just as Pharaoh had wished, but Egypt was still full of them, which he certainly did not want.

When he saw the river befouled with babies, he was glad, but when he saw Egypt teeming with Hebrews, he was gloomy. It was not that his orders were not carried out, but his wishes were not fulfilled as effectively as his orders. Dead babies were heaped on the river bank like locusts, and to his annoyance the streets of Egypt resounded with live ones.

SECTION II

1] It was during this time of oppression for the Hebrews that Moses was born. When his mother "*saw that he was fair*" (2.2), she hid him until she could "*no longer conceal him.*" She was afraid that it would come to light that they had flouted pharaoh's command, and their entire family would die while Moses himself would not survive for long. See how carefully the Egyptians were making investigations, in that she was no longer able to conceal Moses! and see how Grace preserved them, in that six hundred thousand went out from Egypt!

So his mother put Moses into an ark (2.3), went indoors and knelt in prayer. Sobbing, she appealed to the

God of Abraham against Pharaoh: "You blessed our people so that they would multiply, and now they are as many as your blessing promised. But Pharaoh's scheme is that by slaying little boys the fields will lie fallow for want of farmers, and by killing children the seed that you blessed will die out altogether."¹⁶

2] Miriam, Moses' sister, sat by the river¹⁷ to find out what would happen to the child in the ark (2.4). She and her mother were trusting in God and the child's beauty that the first person to see the ark would take it out and save him.

That day pharaoh's daughter found the weather unbearably hot, and so she went out to bathe in the river earlier than usual. Although she went out freely enough owing to the heat of that day, since she did not go at her usual time she was also going out against her will. She was forcibly led,¹⁸ freely assenting, to draw out of the river the one who was going to take vengeance in the sea for the children who had been cast into the river.¹⁹

16 Moses' father plays even less of a part in Ephrem's account than in the biblical narrative, and the prayer of Moses' mother is of course Ephrem's own creation.

17 In fact the biblical text states that Miriam stood a long way off.

18 Taking *l*-as sign of the agent for the passive *dbyr*, but see next note.

19 Ephrem is very interested in the interplay of free-will and Providence: See Jansma, "Reflections..." He suggests rendering this passage as "her freedom was subjected to compulsion so that she fetched and rescued from the river..."

3] When she saw that the boy was fair,²⁰ she and her maidservants thought that the gods of Egypt had provide her with a son through the river - for she was barren. She was persuaded to adopt him, so that he would take away her shame, bring her consolation and inherit her father's throne.

Miriam came up, neither downcast nor cheerful, as she had distanced herself from either emotion. Adopting the demeanour appropriate to her task, she said to pharaoh's daughter, "*I will call a Hebrew wet-nurse (2.7) who has a sincere heart and pure milk, and therefore most suitable for Your Majesty.*"

She ran and fetched his mother, who behaved with fitting decorum and brought special gifts. She could hardly be convinced that she was to be the wet-nurse to her own son. She had been willing to give her whole household to prevent Moses from being thrown into the river, and now that he had been given to her for nothing she could not be persuaded to take him away. She picked up her son, and did not forget the ark. In anguish she had taken him out, and with joy she brought him indoors. She had gone to the river in darkness, but took him back home in broad daylight. In both the street and the house she held in her arms the baby who had not seen daylight for the three months. He

20 This was Moses' mother's reaction in 2.2, but according to the biblical text in 2.6, when Pharaoh's daughter picks up the child, he cries, and so she is moved to take pity on him.

had seen light at the river into which he had been cast to be deprived of that very light.²¹

4] When Moses' upbringing was completed, he was taken to Pharaoh's palace, and delighted his parents with his handsome appearance while grieving them with his stammer.

However, Moses knew that he was Jochebed's son by his name and the fact that he was circumcised,²² but more especially from the story that he had heard in secret from his mother and sister.

When the completion of the four hundred years was at hand, he went out to find out whether it was by his agency that redemption would be successful. Because the taskmaster that he killed was the cruellest of all of Pharaoh's overseers and would not accept the reprimands that Moses constantly gave him, Moses *killed him and buried him in the sand*. The man had caused grief to the seed that had been blessed to be as numerous as grains of sand, and so Moses buried him in the sand by the river in front of his companions, whose own bodies were going to be cast up on the sand by the sea.

21 There is an extended play on the words for "light" and "river", which are similar in Syriac (*nouhra* and *nahra*).

In Ephrem's *Hymnus de Azymis* IX, there is a very sympathetic portrayal of the experiences of the Hebrew mothers and sons: children who liked to play in the street were hidden in inner chambers, but after the Exodus, the boys came out like the flowers of Nissan. Ephrem describes women's breasts flowering with babies in their new-found freedom!

22 Though according to Ephrem's contemporary Aphrahat, Egyptians were circumcised too.

*The next day he went out and saw two men fighting with each other (2.13). Although as the king's son he had the power to flog and to execute, he did not make use of these punishments, but gave the offender the reprimand he deserved. Instead of accepting the rebuke, the man publicly accused the king's son of murder.*²³

5] "Who appointed you as leader over us?"²⁴ You quarrelsome, shameless man, to say to the king's son, "Who appointed you as leader over us?"! He had authority over the officials placed over you: did he not have authority over you? Moses was astounded to hear such words from someone he had not thought was aware of the matter. It was not the man whom Moses had rescued from the cruel Egyptian who had denounced him, since if that man had not been the innocent party, he would have received the same rebuke that his fellow Hebrew was now receiving, and Moses would not have killed the Egyptian for his sake. The man who was saved from the Egyptian was unfairly treated, like the girls by the well. So, in killing the Egyptian, Moses had wanted to provide some relief for the Hebrews who had been maltreated by him. Out of love for Moses, the man who was rescued revealed to another man what had

23 Ephrem fails to mention Moses' furtiveness (2.11-12), and there is no evidence in the biblical text for Moses' authority over the labourers and their overseers: in fact the Hebrew's remark suggests just the opposite.

24 The phrase used by Ephrem has some similarity with the reading of MS 8b1, but is surely influenced by the Syriac of Acts 7.27 (Stephen's speech). See R. Owens, *The Genesis and Exodus citations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage* Monographs of the Peshitta Institute III (Leiden 1983), pp.180-184.

happened, and this second man denounced Moses out of malice.

6] Pharaoh heard of the matter, and it provided the generals and overseers, whom Moses had been reprimanding for their ruthless ill-treatment of the Hebrews, with an opportunity to slander him.

Hot with rage, Pharaoh was ready to wash his hands in his son's blood, and to dispatch the Crown Prince to Sheol before him. *Moses was afraid*²⁵ (2.14), and to spare his real parents distress at the torture that his adoptive parents would make him undergo, *he fled* to Midian (2.15). *He sat by a well* and saw some lazy shepherds who wanted to snatch the water the girls had drawn. Out of his sense of justice he rescued the girls²⁶ from the men's violent behaviour, and because he was compassionate by nature he drew water for their flock. When their father asked why they had returned so quickly, they told him about Moses' just and compassionate behaviour. He sent for Moses in order to repay him with a meal in his house for the kindness Moses had shown his daughters at the well.

7] When the priest sent after him, Moses had been wondering where he should go and with whom he should stay. So he knew that the one who had rescued him from death in the river through pharaoh's daughter and had

25 In fact, it is the Hebrew's accusation that makes Moses afraid, according to the biblical text.

26 The words that Ephrem chooses to describe the daughters of Reuel show that he thought of them as young children. Perhaps there is an intentional parallel with the helplessness of the infant Hebrew boys.

delivered him from even Pharaoh's hands when he fled from under Pharaoh's very eyes, had put into the priest's mind the idea of taking Moses into his house and making him his son-in-law. Moses had escaped from magicians, only to encounter a pagan priest! But he was no more afraid of the priest than he had been of the magicians. For if he helped them, he would not be harmed by them. Yet Aaron was hurt and Miriam saddened, the very people who had formerly been proud to acknowledge him.

8] Because of Moses' handsome appearance and integrity, and more importantly because God was with him, his hosts persuaded him to take Zipporah in marriage. As Jacob spared Laban's daughters the ignominy of working as shepherdesses, Moses was also to save Zipporah and her sisters from the drudgery of following the flock²⁷.

He married Zipporah, and she bore him two sons. He circumcised one, but she would not allow him to circumcise the other. She was proud of her father and brothers, and though she had been willing to become Moses' wife she had not agreed to share his faith. She was the daughter of pagan priests, reared on sacrificial meat and accustomed to worshipping many gods. So she neither gave Moses both sons, nor withheld both from him. She gave him one to perpetuate the circumcision of Abraham, and withheld one to continue the uncircumcision of her father's family.²⁸

27 Compare Ephrem's remarks about the loose morals of nomads and herdsmen in his Genesis commentary (IV.9)!

28 For a discussion of this passage and its parallels with Palestinian targum tradition, see Guillaumont in "Un Midrash d'Exode 4, 24-26..."

9] Moses did not follow his parents or in-laws in the naming of his sons. The first he named after his sojourn as a refugee for God's sake, and the second he called after his deliverance from Pharaoh.²⁹

After forty years, during which Moses was in Midian, the Pharaoh who had afflicted the Hebrew people died, and they groaned³⁰ under their bondage (2.23). They remembered God's covenant with Abraham,³¹ that the time was completed and another thirty years had already passed. Because of this they prayed and were heard.

God saw the Israelites,³² that they were in bondage, and God knew (2.25) their pain (3.7), and what kind of remedy he would bring them.

SECTION III

1] While Moses was pasturing sheep near Horeb, he saw an angel in a fire that blazed in a bush. When Moses went to look more closely at the bush that was not being burnt up in the fire, it was the ordinary likeness of an angel that was visible to him while he was approaching. When he got there, it was not the angel he had seen

29 Eliezer's name is given and explained only in 18.4 of the biblical text.

30 See note 4.

31 In the biblical text it is God who remembers his covenant.

32 The biblical text "*God saw the Israelites and God knew*" needs some explanation or expansion, which Ephrem attempts to provide.

but God who called to him, and God then appeared to him in an angel, a terrifying sight. He said to him, "*Do not approach here as you would ordinary ground, for it is a holy place*" (3.5) - like the place where Jacob slept. There it was because of the ladder and the angels who were ascending and descending to watch over him: here it was because God was present in the fire blazing in the bush. "*Take off your sandals, come and trample the Egyptians! The time of their ingathering is thirty years overdue.*"³³

Previously, Moses had been approaching without fear. But when there appeared to him a sight too great for him to look at, *he hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God in the same way that he had looked at an angel* (3.6).

2) The bush that was of no use for making an image of dead gods was able to symbolise the Living God.³⁴ Moses, this is a sign for you that you have seen the God who dwells in the midst of fire! In the same way, you³⁵ must serve with fire the God who dwells in fire.

3) His Lord said to him, "*I have indeed seen the bondage of my people who have been in Egypt eighty years now* (3.7). *I have come down that through you I may*

33 Ephrem incorporates the inconsistency in the biblical dating, and makes it an exegetical feature. "Trample" should be understood in the sense of "treading grapes".

34 Perhaps to counter possible ridicule of the idea of a theophany being connected with such a humble shrub! Ephrem implies that it is pure, since pagan idols cannot be made from it, unlike the grander trees such as cedars or oaks.

35 The verb is plural.

release them to *deliver them* and bring them into *the land of the Canaanites* which I promised to their fathers (3.8).”

Moses said, “*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?* (3.7) When I had a royal title, I was not accepted. Now that I have descended to keeping sheep, who will let me enter Pharaoh’s presence be ? And if I should admitted, what importance will he see in me that he should believe my words?”

4] His Lord said to him, “*Gather those elders* (3.16) *whose cry rose up* (2.23) before me and say to them, that I have remembered³⁶ them and I am bringing them up to the land of the Canaanites. You fear that they will not listen to you, but I tell you that *they will obey you* (3.18). Enter Pharaoh’s presence with the elders, and say to him, “*We will journey for three days, and make sacrifices to the Lord*”(3.18).

Since Pharaoh refused to allow this to take place, he and his troops marched for three days and became sacrifices to wild beasts and birds that settled on their drowned bodies lying in heaps on the sea shore.

“I have told you that your people will listen to you: similarly, I tell you that Pharaoh will not listen to you, *not because of his mighty arm*³⁷ (3.19), nor because of the might of his tutelary idols, but because of the Egyptians’ pride. For that pride *I shall smite the Egyptians with*

36 Reading ‘tdkrt with the Peshitta of 3.16.

37 The Hebrew text is traditionally interpreted as meaning that Pharaoh will not let the Israelites go except by a mighty hand i.e. by God forcing him to do so. However, the Syriac Peshitta has “and it was not by *his* mighty hand”, which Ephrem interprets as an explanation for Pharaoh’s obstinacy.

*all the wonders that I shall perform among them (3.20). And so he will let you go. To give you further assurance that you will all leave Egypt, I will give the people favour, and they will plunder the Egyptians. When my promise to Abraham is fulfilled through this, the Hebrews will be unable to see the faces of the Egyptians again because of all the treasures they have seized on departing.*³⁸

SECTION IV³⁹

1] As Moses knew his people were hard-hearted, he asked for signs that would convince them. *"They will not listen to my voice, because they will say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you'"* (4.1). God knew that he was asking for signs, and said to him, *"So that they will believe that I am the one who sent you, throw your staff on the ground". He threw it down and it became a snake, and Moses fled* (4.3). The sign God gave him to convince the people convinced him too: *"You fear Pharaoh just as you feared the serpent. You will overcome Pharaoh with the aid of plagues, just as with the aid of a command you were able to seize a rigid staff that you had feared when it was transformed into something sinuous."*

Again he said to him, "Put your hand inside the fold of your cloak" (4.6). He did so, and it turned leprous. He

38 A reference to Gen 15.13-14.

39 In paragraphs 1 and 2 of this section Ephrem uses the roots 'sr ("bind"), sr' ("free"), and shlp ("transform") in an extended wordplay that cannot easily be conveyed in translation.

put it back and it became clean. God commanded him to convince the people with the snake and with the hand that turned leprous, then clean. "Pharaoh is no more inflexible than a snake, and neither is his army, which like your hand I shall turn into whatever I wish. If the Egyptians *do not believe these two miracles* that you perform before them and before your fellow Hebrews, throw *water from the river on the ground and it will turn into blood* (4.9)".

2] After God had performed the signs that Moses had been seeking, Moses asked his Lord to free his rigid tongue as well. "*I have never been a man of eloquence; nor even since you have spoken with me* (4.10) has there been any change in my stammer!"

His Lord said to him, "You are great in this very area where you are weak. Like God who is silent, you will have a prophet to speak for you. But *I will be with your mouth* (4.12), not to free your tongue or to supply you with many arguments, but in order that eminent deeds should accompany stumbling speech."

3] Moses returned to Midian and told his father-in-law that he would go and see his brethren in Egypt. If he caused them any distress in parting from them, they certainly did not hold him back, through God's will that was working in them from above.

Moses had been a thorn in the side of the taskmasters of Egypt because of their ill-treatment of the Hebrews, and now he feared that they would incite the new Pharaoh against him as they had the old. So his Lord said to him, "*All the men who were seeking your life are dead*"(4.19).

Moses took his wife and sons, and picked up the staff in order to go to Egypt(4.20).

Once more, on his departure from Midian, God commanded him to say to Pharaoh, “*Send forth my first-born so that he may worship me (4.23); otherwise, instead of my first-born whom you have detained but cannot hold back, I will kill your first-born son, as I am able to do. Of all the plagues, that in which I slay your first-born son will be the greatest.*” God spoke to Pharaoh in words, but in terms of action, the sign of the snake was a mere trifle in comparison with all the plagues that he showed him.

4] When they were *at a lodging place, the Lord met Moses and sought to kill him, (4.24)* because he had neglected the rite of circumcision in Midian by not circumcising one of his sons. Since the day God had spoken with him at Horeb, he had not had marital relations with his wife. So she was very hurt, because she had not fully believed his story, and she was arguing with him about this, while he was blaming her for withholding his son from circumcision. They spent the night in this mood, when suddenly an angel appeared for both reasons, though he led them to think that he had appeared only on account of circumcision. Moses' arrival in Egypt would be treated with contempt in that he had failed to circumcise his son although he was free to carry out the ceremony, while the Hebrews had not neglected to perform the rite even at the cost of the death of their sons. So the angel appeared to Moses in anger: whom should he fear-God who had commanded circumcision, or his spouse who was obstructing circumcision? But when his

wife saw that Moses was going to die because she had failed to carry out circumcision, the very topic he had been arguing about with her that evening, *she took a flint*, and reeling in terror at the sight of the angel, *she circumcised her son* (4.25). She left him⁴⁰ spattered with blood, *and seizing the angel's feet*⁴¹ *she said "I have a bridegroom of blood* (4.25). Do not cause sorrow on the feast day of circumcision". (For there was great rejoicing on the day when Abraham circumcised Isaac). She said "I too *have a bridegroom of blood*. If you do not do it for my sake, for circumcising my son with my own hands, or because of Moses, do it for the sake of the very commandment of circumcision which was instituted."

5] When *he left him alone* (4.26) (meaning Moses), the opportunity arose for Moses to say to Zipporah, "If you were so afraid of him in the single moment he was revealed to you, how much more should I fear God who appears to me at all times, and consecrate myself to him? He performs great deeds through me, and sent me equipped with this staff to deliver six hundred thousand people."

He sent Zipporah back, first because of her son who had been circumcised, so that the pain should not overwhelm him on the journey, and secondly so that

40 This looks like part of a double interpretation of the Hebrew and Peshitta "and he left him" in 4.26. The enigmatic phrase "bridegroom of blood" is taken by Ephrem to mean "blood-spattered husband". For more on this passage and its parallels with Jewish tradition, see above (note 28).

41 The biblical text does not specify whose feet Zipporah takes hold of.

Zipporah and her sons would not enter Egypt at a time when all Israel was leaving the country.

6] The Lord appeared to Aaron and sent him *to meet Moses* (4.27). In this way, through this one thing that came about just as he had been told, Aaron would believe that everything else would similarly come to pass.

The two of them gathered the elders and *performed the signs* (4.30) in front of them as commanded, and they believed Moses, Just as the Lord had told him.

SECTION V

1] They entered Pharaoh's presence together and said to him, "*Thus says the Lord, 'Send forth my people that they may hold a festival to me in the desert'*"(5.1).

Pharaoh did not give Moses a harsh reception because of the crowds of Hebrew elders, and because he had heard about the signs Moses had performed in front of the elders. But he said to them, "*why are you stopping the people from working, Moses and Aaron?*" (5.5)

When they spoke to him again, he flew into a rage, and instead of asking for a sign that he should let the people go, he said, "*Who is the Lord that I should obey him?*"(5.2) Because he said, "*Who is the Lord?*", he had to perceive the Lord through signs, since God did not appear to him in visible form. That is why Scripture refers to them by the harsh term "plagues", because Pharaoh said "*Who is the Lord?*"

What Pharaoh had said did not satisfy his cruel nature: he went on to withhold straw from the people so that they would be in such a plight that they could not sit about thinking of leaving. The people scattered to collect straws, which were found with much effort as it was Nisan, the time of blossom, and not Tammuz or Av, the season for threshing. The Hebrew clerks complained to Pharaoh that they were being beaten by Pharaoh's taskmasters, but he showed them no pity. Instead, he said to them, "*It's because you are lazy* (5.17) that you want to go and sacrifice to the Lord!"

2] *When the clerks saw the unhappy plight of the Israelites* (5.19), they complained to the Lord about Moses' family in front of Moses himself. Moses said to the Lord, "Ever since I spoke in your name to Pharaoh, the deliverance that the people had been expecting has not come, and their oppression is worse than it was before."

SECTION VI

1] *The Lord said to Moses*, "If Pharaoh wants a sign, throw the staff⁴² in front of him and *it will become a serpent.*"(7.9)

But *Pharaoh summoned the magicians* and *they did the same with their spells* (7.11). This means that they produced imitations. For when Scripture says *they did it with their spells*, they did nothing out of the ordinary, since they employed the normal practice of their art.

42 Peshitta "your staff" Ephrem's text shares the same reading as MS 7al. See next note.

Because they thought that they had beaten Moses in imitating what he had done, they suffered an unforgettable defeat when Moses ⁴³ *staff swallowed up their staffs* (7.12). The men who thought they were altering the basic nature of things were unable to save their staffs from that of Moses.

The staff had swallowed the staffs so that Death should not swallow up the first-born. From the swallowing of the staffs Pharaoh should have learned that unless he repented, the first-born were going to be swallowed up too. God had warned them about it so that they would repent in order that this should not happen. Moreover, he made the death of the first-born last in the series of plagues, because of its severity, so that if they mended their ways during the earlier plagues, they would be delivered from that of the first born, which was more serious than all that preceded it.

SECTION VII

1) *And the Lord said*, not “I have hardened his heart” but “*Pharaoh’s heart is hardened, and he refuses to let the people go*” (7.14). Again the Lord said to Moses, “Go out to him and *stand on the river bank*” (7.15) Had Pharaoh gone out to the river early in order to pour libations to it, or did he go out there every morning for recreation? From his reliance on his magicians it seems that the King of Egypt used to pour libations to the river of Egypt.

43 In fact, the biblical text states that this is Aaron’s staff.

Moses went out and representing his Lord told him to let the people go. Because Pharaoh refused, Moses smote the river. Since the former Pharaoh had defiled it with the blood of the babies who had drowned in it, its waters *would be turned into blood*, and *the fish* that had grown fat on the infants' corpses *would die* (7.17). This second plague was intended to frighten them in that the fish died instead of the first-born. But since Pharaoh was unconvinced by the death of the fish, he was convinced by the death of the first-born. *The magicians also produced the same effect with their spell*, unrestrained by Moses (7.22).

2] If the magicians had acted in opposition to Moses, he would have stopped them during the first plague, since he was the one to end it and put them to flight with the plague of ulcers. But because they associated themselves with Moses against their own people, he did not prevent them from inflicting plague with him on Egypt. It is a deceitful heart that is set against God and is inconsistent with itself! Instead of the magicians afflicting the tormentors of their nation with plague, or standing firm to prevent their people from being harmed, they joined Moses in inflicting plague on their own people. He did not stop them doing this, because he would make the collapse of Egypt even worse with the help of the very people who should have been trying to prevent disaster.

While they were tampering with nature, which was a difficult thing to do, they should have taken care to prevent those very things changing at all, which would have been simple. They were turning water to blood and thereby afflicting Egypt, when they might have turned

the same blood to water and caused trouble for Moses. But they did not nothing outside their powers; they only did those things that were customary in their art.

3) After this, again Scripture says, not, “The Lord hardened his heart”, but *Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had said to Moses* (7.22). Once more Scripture says that *Pharaoh turned and entered his palace, and paid no attention to this* (7.23).

4) Since Pharaoh was not persuaded by this, *Aaron raised his hand* with the staff (Peshitta 8.2: English 8.5), symbol of the Cross. Through it began all the plagues when it devoured the snakes, foreshadowing the Cross that would abolish every idol.⁴⁴ Through the staff was accomplished the parting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptians. This prefigured the destruction of the Canaanites.⁴⁵

SECTION VIII

1) *Frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. And the magicians did the same with their spells.* (Peshitta 8.2-3/English 8.6-7) If they had cared about Egypt, they would have put a stop to the frogs, instead of creating illusory frogs in addition to Moses’ real frogs. They brought no

44 Cf. Ephrem’s *HdCruc* V.3: “By his Cross he brought to an end that People’s graven images”.

45 Ephrem’s *HdCruc* II.1 addresses “Christ, the hidden Lamb, who gave the staff to Moses...”

relief in that they were unable to get rid of Moses' frogs, but neither did they do any actual harm, since instead of real ones they produced only the illusion of them. So they did neither good nor harm, because all they performed was a conjuring trick.

One brood of fish died, and another brood, the frogs, came thick and fast. The people who were unaffected by the dead fish suffered from the live frogs. Pharaoh asked for a time when the frogs would go away, and they died and were piled up in heaps so that the Egyptians would not think it had been an illusion. *And as soon as there was a respite, Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not listen to them* (8.11/13).

2] Again Aaron struck *the dust of the ground with his staff and there were lice on men and on cattle and over all the ground* (8.12-13/17-18). *But the magicians also performed their spells, not to increase the lice as formerly, but to remove them, and they could not* (8.14/18). And so, when their lying art was checked and exposed, they admitted, *"It is the finger of God!"* (8.15/19) But Pharaoh was not persuaded by Moses or by his magicians who told him that it was the finger of God.

Scripture says, not "The Lord hardened his heart", but *Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had said* (8.15/19).

3] During the plagues of the river and the frogs and the lice, the land of Goshen where the Israelites were living was affected along with Egypt. But in the plague of swarms, God *made a distinction* between the two lands by bringing the plague on the land of Egypt and not on

the land of Goshen (8.19/23). Pharaoh said to Moses and his brother, “Go wherever you wish in our land; *sacrifice* to your God without fear.” (8.21/25) Moses said, “We sacrifice bulls and sheep, and these are actually worshipped by you; *if we sacrifice the Egyptians’ gods* in front of them *they will stone us!* But *let us journey for three days to sacrifice to him*, just as we were commanded” (8.22/27).

Pharaoh said, “I will let you go, only do not go far. And pray for me too” (8.23-24/28). After the swarm had gone, Pharaoh acted treacherously *and did not let the people go* (8.28/32). After this, God brought a plague of pestilence on their cattle, while making a distinction between the Hebrews’ cattle and the Egyptians’ cattle. But Pharaoh was not persuaded by this to let the people go.

SECTION IX

1] Next *Moses scattered ash in Pharaoh’s view and ulcers spread on men and on beasts. The magicians were unable to stand before Moses* because they were unable to simulate boils on the Hebrews’ bodies, and there was no room left on their own bodies where they could produce them! (9.10-11)

2] Then he brought pestilence on Pharaoh’s court and his people. He said to him, “*For this reason I made you continue to behave contentiously,*”⁴⁶ that is, “for this rea-

46 Literally, “I preserved you with strife.” “With strife” is an addition which also appears later in the Commentary (Section XI). It does not occur in the Peshitta, but Ephrem seems to consider it part of the Exodus text. It may depend on a variant interpretation of the Hebrew *b-'bwr*. For *'qymtk* as “preserve”, compare LXX.

son I did not kill you with the first plague: *in order to demonstrate to you my power* through the punishments which I am bringing on your land (9.16). *Tomorrow I shall bring very severe hail* (9.18). However, *send orders to bring in the cattle* you have left following the pestilence, before the hail kills them". See how little God wished to strike Egypt! He warns them of what he is going to do so that they may repent and he need not act, and he also tells Pharaoh to send orders to bring in his cattle. If they bring in the cattle as commanded, why should the hail come? *The hail will descend* so that the miracle shall be evident when it kills the cattle of those who do not believe. But let the animals be brought in, and God will take care of the reward of those who repent!

3] *Hail and fire came down* together (9.24), and the hail did not extinguish the hail, and the fire did not consume the hail. The fire *blazed* in the hail as in the thornbush, and the hail glowed with fire like red-hot iron. The fire smouldered in the hail and avoided the trees. The hail's ferocity shattered the ancient trees, and the fire within it spared the fences and gardens and orchards.

4] And Pharaoh said to Moses, "*I have sinned this tim.*" (9.27). On previous occasions when he had hardened himself, had he not sinned? Even if he had sinned on previous occasions, he had not sinned as greatly as he had in this. God had warned him to bring in his cattle and he had not believed. So in this plague his culpability was greater than in all the others.

Moses went out and as he lifted his hands the thunder fell silent and the rain no longer beat upon the

earth (9.33). Either it vanished into the air, or it rose into the clouds and went up. It ascended faster into the sky than it had descended. But after this Pharaoh and his court became stubborn and he did not let the people go.

SECTION X

1] *And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and do not fear his arrogance. For I have hardened his heart with the patience that I showed him during the plagues that came through you. It was not that I was unaware of his treacherous nature when I trusted his penitence, for I said to you before that Pharaoh would not listen to you. But it was so that through him I could perform signs that would be recounted to your descendant."*(1-1).

2] Moses said to Pharaoh, "Unless you release the people, I will release locusts, (10.4) *which will eat everything left to you after the hail. (10.5)*" *And Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long will we retain the people as a stumbling block? Let them go and sacrifice to the Lord. May we ourselves not be struck by plague as have our lands and our property! Or do you not realise that the whole of Egypt lies waste?"* (10.7) Pharaoh said to Moses, "Go out with *your belongings*. But *evil* is going to befall you (10.10) from one of the kings."⁴⁷ If you had really been keeping the Hebrews from harm, you would not have made them endure hardship in your land! And

47 Perhaps a "targumic" interpretation of the Peshitta "but take heed, lest evil be ahead of you!" (The Hebrew has "see that evil is before you".) Targum Pseudo-Jonathan speaks of a trap along the route, but in the Targums, LXX and Vulgate Pharaoh accuses the

if you had been keeping them back out of love, you would not have made your cruel oppression of them even worse by withholding your straw. But the people who has such a God working every wonder is not afraid of trouble from men.

3] Next Moses brought locusts, and they ate the grass and everything that the hail had left. Pharaoh said, *"I have sinned against the Lord and against you. Now forgive my fault."*(10.16-17). If he had been hardened, he would not have said this, because a heart that is hardened is a stranger to repentance. And if in his suffering he asked for mercy, and then rebelled during a respite, he was acting as a free agent. Both facts testify to his free will.⁴⁸ The locusts departed at Moses' command, and Pharaoh's repentance lasted no longer than the locusts.

4] Then Moses brought darkness on the whole of Egypt for three days and nights, but the Hebrews had light, so that they could rest from their labour and organise their affairs for their journey out.

5] Pharaoh said to Moses, *"Go with your wives and children, and worship the Lord. Only leave your cattle* (10.24) *to assure us that you will come back."*

Moses said, "Our cattle are too few for the great sacrifices we will make to our God. For this reason you too ought to give us animals, if you have any left, so that we may sacrifice some of them to the Lord. However, *we do not know what we are* to sacrifice to him

Israelites of evil intentions. see Y. Komlosh, *HaMiqrā' be'Or HaTargum* (in Hebrew)(Tel Aviv 1973), P. 193f.

48 See Jansma, "Reflections..."

until the Lord himself chooses the best of our cattle.”
And the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he refused to let the people go(10.27).

If God had hardened him, no change would have been possible in the heart made hard by God. But since he said, “ I will let them go,” during chastisement, and once it had passed refused and did not release them, this was not hardness of heart from God, but from the inmost mind, which in suffering submits to obeying what is commanded, and during a respite spurns your laws.⁴⁹

SECTION XI

1] The Lord said, “*Let each person ask his friend for vessels of gold and silver* (11.2) because *in the middle of the night the first-born of Egypt and the first-born of cattle will die* (11.4). *And there will be a wailing*(11.6) in the whole of Egypt as there was wailing in all the Hebrews’ houses when their children were thrown into the river.”

“*Your servants will come down to me and say to me, ‘Depart, you and this people, “and then I shall go out.”* (11.8) This very plague that released the people, made Pharaoh “continue to be obstinate”⁵⁰ because it did not take place at once.⁵¹

49 “Imagination” in the sense found in the King James Version. Perhaps the modern equivalent would be the ego.

50 Cf. 9.16 and note on Section IX.

51 A reference to the events of Ex 11.9.10, where the Lord says that Pharaoh will ignore Moses’ words, and hardens his heart again.

SECTION XII

1] *"This month shall be the first of the months of the yea."*(12.2).

"And on the tenth each man shall take a lamb for his house, (12.3) and they shall keep it until the fourteenth, and slaughter it at sunset (12.6). They shall sprinkle some of its blood on the door posts and lintels of the houses where they eat it(12.7).

2] Now the lamb is a symbol of our Lord,⁵² who was conceived on the tenth of Nisan. For Zachariah was told on the tenth day of the seventh month that John was going to be born, and six months later,⁵³ when the message was brought to Mary by the angel, was the tenth day of the first month. Because of this the angel said to her, *"This is the sixth month with her who was called barren."* (Luke 1.36)⁵⁴

3] So on the tenth when the lamb was confined, our Lord was conceived in the womb, and on the fourteenth when it was slain, the One it symbolised was crucified. As for the unleavened bread, with bitter herb that Scripture mentions, there is a sign of his renewal in the unleavened bread,⁵⁵ and the bitter herb is because those

52 The usual identification of Christian literature. However, in Ephrem's works the symbolism is particularly well-developed and exploited: see especially HdCruc II, but also HdAzym II,IV,V.

53 The reference is to Luke 1.26.

54 For Ephrem's dating of the Annunciation, see Brock, "Pass-over, Annunciation and Epiclesis..."

55 Cf. HdCruc II.5:

"The Lamb gave instructions about his symbol: they should eat it with unleavened bread; fresh bread and fresh meat, to depict the

who bear him suffer.⁵⁶ “Roasted” (12.8,9) is a symbol that he was baked with fire,⁵⁷ “with your loins girded and shoes on your feet” symbolises the new discipleship that is ready to go out and preach the gospel. “With your staffs in your hands” (12.11) are the crosses on their shoulders; “standing on their feet”⁵⁸ because no one partakes of the Living Body sitting down.⁵⁹ “No foreigner may eat of it” (12.43) because no one who is not baptised eats of the Body. “They shall not break any of its bones” (12.46) because no one who is not baptised eats of the Body. “They shall not break any of its bones” (12.46), since even though

symbol of his newness. Because the ancient leaven of Eve, that ages everything, had spread, grown old, and worn out all, through the unleavened bread that renews everything....

Blessed is the bread that renews all!”

In the Paschal Hymns Ephrem has the difficulty of explaining the purpose of unleavened bread in the original Passover, when it symbolically replaced the old order of things, while discouraging his hearers from partaking of matza with their Jewish neighbours: the unleavened bread has now been superseded by what it foreshadowed, the bread of the Eucharist. See also *HdAzym* XVII.5 where unleavened bread is the symbol of the bread of life, and XVIII.1, about renewal, and how matza makes the Jewish People obsolete. XVIII.15 describes Moses concealing a symbol of the Son as an elixir of life in the unleavened bread.

56 *HdCruc* II.3: “(The True Lamb) commanded (Moses) to gather bitter herbs, so that mourning for him would spread among those who ate it”.

57 *HdCruc* II: “The spit is a sign of the wood of his Cross, and the roast is a type of his bread”. “Baked with fire” may be a reference to Christ’s baptism in the Jordan, as the river is sometimes portrayed as a furnace. See also Ephrem’s reference to his own baptism in *HcHXXVI*.10. (I am indebted to Sebastian Brock for this suggestion.) However, Jansma (in “Weitere Beiträge...”) takes it as an allusion to the sacrament which is roasted in the fire.

58 This phrase does not appear in the Peshitta.

59 Cf. *HdCruc* II.6.

our Lord's hands and feet were pierced and his side wounded, none of his bones was broken.

4] At *midnight* the first-born of Egypt died (12.29). And everyone mourned separately with his household for his first-born, the eldest of his sons.⁶⁰

Since the river had been filled with the first-born of the Hebrew women, the graves of Egypt were filled with the first-born of the Egyptian women.

5] *Pharaoh summoned* Moses' family, *and said to them*, "Go out with all you have, *and bless me too*". (12.31-32) Moses had said that Pharaoh's servants would beg him to depart, and what he said was more than fulfilled, in that it was Pharaoh himself, instead of his servants, who begged them to leave.

They pressed them to get rid of them, not because they had repented, but because they thought that they themselves would all die like their first-born.

6] Six hundred thousand set out from Raamses and encamped at Succoth (12.37). Their stay in Egypt lasted four hundred and thirty years (12.40): you must not reckon this figure from Jacob's entry into Egypt, but from the day when god established the covenant with Abraham.⁶¹

60 As the deaths affected every family, no-one was free to mourn the dead of any other household.

61 Cf. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 12.40.

SECTION XIII

1] The people took the Egyptians' plunder (12.35), and *Moses took Joseph's bones* (13.19). They went out *armed* (13.18). From the very first day the Lord protected them with a cloud by day, and with a pillar of fire at night (13.2).⁶²

SECTION XIV

1] But the *heart of Pharaoh and his servants was changed. and they said, "What have we done?"* (14.5) After all the plagues that have come upon us, we have allowed the Hebrews to run off with our treasures and fine clothes! We should die rather than let the Hebrews make a laughing stock out of the kingdom of Egypt."

2] They rallied themselves and set out, confident that they would destroy the people and take both their own treasures and those of the people. Pharaoh went out with his army against the Hebrews who had left *with a high hand* (14.8), meaning, with silver and gold, fine clothes, herds and good health, just as God had promised Abraham.

When the Israelites *saw the Egyptians, they were afraid*(14.10). How many Egyptians were there, that six hundred thousand Hebrews were afraid of them? It was because of their wives and children and cattle that were with them that they faltered, wondering who

62 In the biblical text, it is the Lord himself who acts as the pillar and cloud.

would see to their families, and who would look after their herds.

3] Moses said to them, “It will be just the same here as it was in Egypt : *the Lord shall; fight for you, while you stay cal.*” (14.14).

The Lord said to Moses, “What do you pray that I should do for you?⁶³ (14.15) I am ready to act for your people before you pray to me! Raise your staff, which is the sign of the Cross,⁶⁴ strike the sea and divide it. Behold, I am hardening the heart - that is, I am not restraining the presumption - of the Egyptians, who though they see a fresh miracle, the Parting of the Sea, will not heed the warning. For this reason I shall be praised by the destruction which I shall effect on Pharaoh and all his army. And the Egyptians will know before they die that I am the Lord (14.18-19)”- this refers to when they said “Let us flee from the Israelites, because the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt” (14.25).

63 The Palestinian Targums use a similar phrase, “Why are you standing *praying* to me?”

64 Note the opposite interpretation of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on 14.21: “the great and glorious staff created at the Beginning and on which was engraved the great and glorious Name (of God), as well as the Ten Signs with which he struck the Egyptians, the Three Patriarchs of the World, the Six Matriarchs and the Twelve Tribes of Jacob”. According to Pirque d-Rabbi Eliezer (XL), the staff was passed down in succession from Adam to Joseph via Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then was acquired by Jethro. At 2.21 and 4.20, Pseudo-Jonathan says that Moses found it in Jethro’s garden: it was made of sapphire from the Throne of Glory, and weighed forty seah. He “was willing to stay” with Jethro and marry Zipporah for the sake of the staff.

For more on rabbinic and patristic views of Moses staff, see Salvesen, “Moses’ Staff...”

4] *The angel took the pillar of cloud that was in front of them, and placed it between the Hebrew camp and the Egyptians (14.19). The cloud had provided shade for the people by day, and when he placed between the camps at night it produced darkness for the Egyptians like that which had covered them for three days and nights. But for the Israelites it was bright, because the pillar of fire shone on them.*⁶⁵

This happened to frighten the Egyptians and to encourage the Hebrews. If the Egyptians had been chastened by the darkness they would not have dared to go down to the sea.

The sea could have been parted in the twinkling of an eye, but to give the Egyptians time to repent, *the whole night a scorching wind laboured to drive it back and make it into dry land*⁶⁶ (14.23).

5] The Egyptians chased after the Hebrews. They had no fear of the darkness between them and the Hebrews, nor did they tremble because the sea had parted. They charged at night, *into the middle of the sea* that

65 The Hebrew is difficult to understand here, but Ephrem shares this interpretation with the Targums and the Jewish Greek translator Symmachus.

66 The Syriac could imply either that God could have performed an instantaneous miracle which would have led the Egyptians to repent, but chose otherwise, or that he chose to divide the sea by slower and more natural means in order to give them more time to consider and thus to repent. I have chosen the second possibility as being more in keeping with the theme which constantly recurs in Ephrem, that God gives sinners continual opportunities for repentance, right up until the very last moment before judgement finally falls. See also Jansma ("Remarks...") on this passage.

had parted, to fight the people before whom travelled a pillar of fire!

At the morning watch, the Lord appeared to the Egyptians and threw them into confusion, and bound the wheels of their chariots, either so that they would not pursue the people, or so that they would not escape from the sea (14.24-25). But they were not afraid of the Lord who appeared to them, nor were they chastened by the binding of their wheels: they dared to drive their chariots by force (14.25).

6] When the sea was divided, Scripture says "*Moses raised his hand over the sea*(14.21). When it returned to its place, it says "*Moses let his hand drop over the sea*"⁶⁷ (14.27). So it seems that from the time it was parted until the whole people had passed through, Moses kept his arm outstretched, just as he did later during the battle with Amalek.

7] *The Lord overthrew the Egyptians, and not one of them remained. The Hebrews saw the Egyptians lying dead on the sea shore (14.27-28), as the Egyptians had seen the Hebrews' sons heaped on the river bank. Because of the things that had happened in Egypt and in the sea, the people had faith in the Lord and in Moses his servant (14.31).*

67 In fact both verses in the Peshitta have the words "Moses raised his hand over the sea". Ephrem is probably thinking of the Lord's instructions in v16.

SECTION XV

Moses' Song of Praise

1] *Moses and the Israelites sang this hymn of praise to the Lord* Moses sang the hymn, and all the people responded antiphonally. "Sing to the glorious Lord" means the Lord who was avenged⁶⁸ on the horsemen and their riders whom he cast into the sea (15.1).

Mighty and praised - the mighty drowner of the Egyptians, praised for the deliverance of the Hebrews. *Yah the Lord* - that is, it is the Lord who was, *has become our saviour*, and not the calves that were shortly to be cast. *So this is my God, I will praise him, the God of my father Abraham, I will exalt him* (15.2).

The Lord is a mighty man and warrior, because he fought for us against the Egyptians while we stood still (15.3).

The glorious chariots of Pharaoh and his mighty army in which he prided, he cast into the sea. *The chosen men of his chief warriors* that he stirred up and brought out against us, *sank in the Red Sea* (15.4).

They went down to the depths, and they sank like stones before their corpses swelled up (15.5).

Your right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power, that is, possessing power, to *shatter the Egyptians your enemies* (15.6).

68 A similar addition is found in Targums Pseudo-Jonathan and Neofiti.

You sent forth your wrath and it consumed them in Egypt and in the sea like stubble (15.7).

By your wind, the waters were heaped up; either, the waters were heaped up and divided by the wind whose direction you changed, or, at the command of your lips⁶⁹ the streams understood⁷⁰ how to remain still as if in wine skins,⁷¹ while six hundred thousand Israelites were crossing. The depths gathered in the heart of the sea to drown the Egyptians (15.8).

To explain why they were drowned, Scripture continues, *The enemy said, I will overtake them and divide the spoil, my soul shall swallow them etc. (15.9).*

But you sent your wind and the sea covered them, and their cruel plans came to nothing along with them (15.10).

Who is like you, Lord, among the famous gods? Who is as glorious as you in his sanctuary?⁷² - this means, in his holy dwelling place. Feared by the Egyptians and praised by the Hebrews, doing wonders in the sea and in the land of the Egyptians (15.11).

69 Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan take this as "By the Word (Memra) from before You".

70 Ephrem, the Mekilta and Targum Onkelos explain the root 'rm as meaning "to know, be wise".

71 A translation common to both the Peshitta and the Palestinian Targums.

72 Hebrew "Who is like you, Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness?", but Peshitta has only "Who is like you, Lord? Who is as glorious as you in his sanctuary?" Ephrem's citation may therefore reflect knowledge of a text closer to the Hebrew. Compare also the Palestinian Targums, "Who is like you among the gods on high?", and the Mekilta, shirata 8 (Lauterbach II p.61), "Those who call themselves gods".

By your grace you led with the cloud and pillar this people that you redeemed from Egypt (15.13).

The nations heard, meaning that the Amorites heard about the river that turned to blood, and trembled; quaking seized the inhabitants of Philistia because of the Egyptian first-born who died (15.14).

The nobles of Edom and the rulers of Moab, quaking seized them at the parting of the sea. All the inhabitants of Canaan were scattered, and fear fell upon them: that is, the inhabitants of Canaan were shattered on hearing that Pharaoh and his army had sunk in the sea (15.16).

Trembling shall fall on these nations, so that they will not come to fight with us until there passes among them the people whom you have redeemed (15.16).

You will plant them in the mountain of your inheritance, meaning the land of the Canaanites, the foundation for your dwelling place in Jerusalem. You have made a sanctuary, Lord: O Lord, establish it with your hands, that is, let its foundation come from you (15.17).

The Lord will reign over us for ever, and not other nations (15.18).

Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen entered the sea to overtake us, and the waters returned upon them and covered them up" (15.19).

2] *Miriam the prophetess took... (15.20)* In what way did she prophesy? Or did Scripture honour her with the title of prophetess, like Isaiah's wife, since although she was not a prophetess, she was a righteous woman?

3] So that day the People were divided into two groups to sing a wonderful hymn of praise to the One who had parted the sea and submerged their pursuers that very day. Moses led the men in the singing, and Miriam the women:⁷³ *praise the glorious Lord, who acted gloriously* in that he destroyed them effortlessly by bringing on them all these plagues while he was at rest.

SECTION XVI

1] When they had crossed the sea, God wanted to test them by withholding water. *They complained angrily about the water at Mauret, and God showed Moses a tree.*⁷⁴ He threw it *into the water and it became sweet* (15.23-25). The tree was a symbol of the Cross, by which the bitterness of the nations was going to be sweetened.⁷⁵

When he had transformed the water, he gave them laws (15.25), that the power of the tree should transform

73 Ephrem's unusual interest in the Israelite choir no doubt reflects his own activities - he is said to have taught choirs of consecrated virgins (the "Daughters of the Covenant") to sing his hymns: see Jacob of Serugh's Homily on Ephrem, in ed. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* III pp 668, 672, where Jacob explicitly compares Ephrem leading the virgins in praise to Moses who gave timbrels to young girls, and calls Ephrem "a second Moses to womenfolk". See Salvesen "Some themes..."

74 Literally "wood" ; Ephrem uses the ambiguity to point to the Cross.

75 Naturally, Jewish sources have a different interpretation : in Targum Neofiti, the Memra of God casts a word of Torah from the tree into the water, and in the Mekilta (Vayassa' 1, II p 92) Rabbi Simon ben Yoḥai says that God showed Moses a word from the Torah; in Pseudo-Jonathan, a bitter oleander tree thrown into the water has the Divine Name carved on it.

human nature, and law should entice and persuade freewill.⁷⁶

2] After they had been tested at Mauret, they came to Elim, and from Elim to the wilderness of Sinai (16.1). The people grumbled about meat, and he gave them bread from heaven. So that they should gather sufficient food for the day and not worry about the next day; and because some in their greed took too much while others out of faith⁷⁷ took too little, the measure itself made up inside it what was missing, and reduced any excessive amount. The labour they expended over the manna was to prevent them being corrupted by leisure (16.17-18).

The Sabbath was given for the sake of the slave and the hired worker, the ox and the ass. But they did not observe it because *some of them went out to collect manna and failed to find any* (16.27).

3] When Scripture says that manna resembled *coriander seed and its flavour was like honeycomb*, it teaches that manna was composed of every flavour.⁷⁸ They filled a pot with it, to be kept for future generations. If they kept manna overnight it became maggoty, but it remained in the pot for generations without decaying. *They ate it for forty years, until they entered the borders of the Promised Land* (16.35).

76 Having witnessed a miracle, the Hebrews would be more likely to accept God's laws. The "power of the tree" probably also contains an oblique reference to the transforming power of the Cross.

77 Tonneau suggests an alternative reading "out of laziness".

78 In the Mekilta (Vayassa' 5, II, p 118), Rabbi Eliezer of Modi'im says that for anyone who wanted to eat manna baked, it would have the flavour of all the baked food in the world, and a similar miracle happened for anyone who preferred it cooked!

SECTION XVII

1] When they came to Rephidim and there was no water, they stopped grumbling and began quarrelling (17.1-2). Moses said in his prayer, "*What shall I do? They are about to stone me!* Even if only to prevent me from dying at their hands, give them water, so that they leave me alone"(17.4). And God made water gush forth from Horeb for them, *in full view of the elders*(17.6).

They said, "How can *the Lord be among us?* We cannot even slake our thirst with water," and he made them realise that the Lord was truly among them by the water that he made flow in front of the elders (17.7).

Since they forgot the earlier signs they tested God by asking for the later ones. Though they had constant signs in the cloud and the pillar, the manna and the quail, because these remained with them all the time they did not regard them as miraculous. This was why they kept testing whether the Lord was among them or not, by asking for new signs.

2] After these events Amalek came to fight them, and Joshua went out to oppose him (17.8). Moses ascended the mountain with the staff of God in his hand. Moses only held the staff on the occasion of mighty deeds and miracles, so that you would know that it was a sign of the Cross, and that it was through the power of the Cross that he performed all the miracles. Aaron and Hur went up with Moses (they say that Hur was the

husband of Moses' sister).⁷⁹ When Moses raised his arms, *Israel prevailed* and destroyed the presumptuous nations who had rushed to make war on the people. When Moses lowered his arms the nations prevailed and began to destroy those who constantly grumbled against the Lord and against Moses (17.11).

The outstretching of Moses' hands and the staff that stood upright against his breast formed an unmistakable sign of the Crucified One.⁸⁰ Joshua toiled in the valley and Moses on the mountain. When the people saw that he had let his arms fall, fear fell upon them and they turned back before their enemies, and when Moses raised his arms, the Israelites were encouraged to advance against their foes.

79 Hur is Miriam's husband according to Josephus (*Antiquities* III.54, 105), but son of Caleb and Miriam in *Pirqe d-Rabbi Eliezer* (XLV) and *Exodus Rabbah* 48.4, which identify Ephrath of 1 Chron 2.19 with Miriam.

80 See also Ephrem's *Hymnus de Fide* XX.8-11: "Moses too, who was victorious by the outstretching of his hands, was a symbol of the One who vanquished and was defeated by his hands... for a hidden power gained the victory through his arms, it was present in his arms in order to depict symbols. The prophet was victorious through the symbols of the Son".

That the Israelite victory was brought about by the sign of the Cross made by Moses goes back to the *Epistle of Barnabas* (late first century), and is prominent in Justin Martyr (mid second century). It was very popular with the early Church Fathers.

Some Jewish sources rather play down the use of the staff, and emphasise that Moses' hands are raised in prayer; Moses also relies on fasting and on the merits of the patriarchs and matriarchs (*Mekilta Amalek* I (II p.142), *Pseudo-Jonathan*).

Ephrem's Paschal hymns also refer to the typology of the Cross, as well as the symbolism of Passover: e.g. *HdCruc* IV and V (responses).

See also Salvesen "Moses' Staff...".

3] The Lord said to Moses, “*Write this memorial in a scroll, because I shall surely wipe out the memory of Amalek* (17.14). Write it so that all the nations will hear and be afraid and not come to make war with you, and also that the Amalekites may repent and cancel the sentence pronounced upon them”.⁸¹

Moses *built an altar and called its name “The Lord tested”*,⁸² because all the nations weaker than Amalek tested the Hebrews with warlike Amalek⁸³ to see whether they too would be destroyed like him if they came to make war. When they realised that their advantage or rout depended on Moses’ hands, they did not ask for his right hand in peace (for he had said, “Offer your right hand in peace to the cities with whom you make war”.)⁸⁴

4] “*Behold, the hand of Yah upon the throne*” (Ex 17.16)⁸⁵ means that the Lord’s hand is on the throne of

81 A reference to 1 Sam ch. 15 and 28.18?

82 Hebrew “The Lord is my banner”, *nssy*, which transliterated into Syriac would be interpreted as the verb “he tested”.

83 Literally “the hunter”: perhaps intended to compare Amalek with Nimrod, who is also described as a hunter in the Peshitta of Gen 10.9, though in contrast to Jewish tradition Nimrod does not appear as a villain in Ephrem’s Genesis Commentary. In Jewish midrash, Nimrod is responsible for gathering people together to build the Tower of Babel. Similarly, in Mekilta Amalek 1 (II p 136), Rabbi Jose ben Halafta describes Amalek assembling all the nations to fight against Israel, but they are afraid following the fate of Pharaoh’s army. So Amalek tells them that if he is defeated, the other nations should flee; if he seems to be winning, they must come and help him fight Israel.

84 Possibly a reference to Deut 20.10, “When you approach a city to fight against it, proclaim peace to it”?

85 The Syriac follows the Hebrew more literally than the English versions here. No doubt a formula for swearing an oath.

judgement that God established for Moses over the people. "That the Lord is at war with Amalek from generation" means until he annihilates them.

SECTION XVIII

1] *Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came (18.6) and Moses went out to meet him (18.7).*⁸⁶ When Moses was in exile he used to *bow down to him*, and he maintained this custom even after all these miracles had been performed through him.⁸⁷

After he had bowed down to his father-in-law, he told him about the miracles that had happened through his agency, in order to convert him.⁸⁸ In the forty years Moses had spent with him, he had not converted him through words, but Jethro converted when he heard about the signs. He said, "*Now I Know that the Lord who has done these things for you is greater than all the gods who cannot do such things for their worshippers.*"

86 Ephrem does not mention that, according to the biblical text, Jethro brought Zipporah and her two sons as well. Perhaps mentioning Zipporah's presence would have cast doubt on Moses' prophetic chastity.

87 "Bowed down" in Hebrew and Syriac has connotations of worship. Ephrem explains that Moses was merely acting as a good host, and that he continued to behave in this humble way after his greatness was established (cf. Mekilta Amalek 3 (IIp173f.)). There is a Jewish tradition that Moses waited on the guests in person at the feast given after Jethro's sacrifices (Mekilta ibid. p177, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan v12).

88 Mekilta Amalek 3 (II p 174) naturally speaks of bringing Jethro to the Torah. See also Pseudo-Jonathan ("he made him a proselyte") and bSanh 94a.

When he says “*because of the scheme that they planned against them*” (18.11), he refers either to the Egyptians’ slaughter of the infants in order to destroy the people,⁸⁹ or to Pharaoh’s withholding of straw from the people to turn them against Moses, or to their intention to kill the Hebrews in the wilderness and take from both their own and the Hebrews property.

2] *And Jethro took sacrifices to the Lord* (18.12): either he offered them up through Moses or he set apart some animals that they would sacrifice in the place the Lord would choose.⁹⁰ On Jethro’s advice Moses appointed *chiefs of thousands and hundreds, and chiefs of fifties and tens*, to judge the people and to lighten Moses’ load (18.21-26). After this Jethro returned to his own land (18.27).

SECTION XIX

1] *In the third month, forty five days after leaving Egypt, Moses went up the mountain to God,*⁹¹ and God said to him, “*You all saw what I did to the Egyptians,*” meaning “the plagues that I brought upon them on the land and in the sea”, “*and I carried you as on eagles’*

89 Cf. Targum Neofiti, “(the plan) to throw their sons into the river”.

90 Interestingly, Ephrem seems more concerned here about correct procedure for the sacrifices than the Jewish commentators.

91 Unlike Aphrahat, Ephrem makes nothing of the three days the Israelites spend consecrating themselves in preparation.

wings, by the cloud that is leading you,⁹² and I brought you to myself, to this mountain (19.4). Now, if you obey me, you will be dearer⁹³ to me than all the nations, in that I have chosen you alone out of all the races (19.5), to be for me a kingdom and priests⁹⁴ and a holy people,” because from them would come kings and priests, and all of them would be set apart in sanctity from all the abominable deeds of the nations⁹⁵ (19.6).

SECTION XX

1] There he gave them commandments, and said, “I am the Lord, visiting the sins of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,” because in his patience he tolerates the evil man and also his son and grandson, but unless they repent he punishes the fourth generation who imitate the evildoing of their forefathers (20.5). “And I act justily for thousands of generations⁹⁶ to those who love me and who keep my commandments: as I have towards you and your people for the sake of your ancestors, the family of Abraham and Isaac (20.6).”

92 This interpretation is similar to that of Targums Pseudo-Jonathan and Neofiti 19.4; cf. also Pseudo-Jonathan on 12.37.

93 Also the Targums to this verse.

94 The Targums have “kings and priests”, as in Ephrem’s explanation of the phrase.

95 Compare the very similar explanation of Mekilta Bahodesh (II p 206): “holy and sanctified, separate from the nations of the world and their abominations”.

96 “Generations” is an addition found in the Targums as well as the Peshitta, but not in the Hebrew, as in the previous verse. The Peshitta has “(I act) graciously” instead of “justly”.

2] All the commandments he gave them depend on this maxim: "Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to you":⁹⁷ "*Do not kill,*" that another person may not kill you; "*do not commit adultery*" with your neighbour's wife, so that you do not receive through your own wife your just deserts for seducing your friend's wife. "Do not steal" what is not yours, so that others do not steal what is yours. "*Do not give false testimony against your neighbour*" so that another may not give lying testimony against you. "*Do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour*" so that another may not covet anything that is in your house.

3] Consider how right our Lord was when he said "*On these two commandments the Law hangs*" (Mathew 22.40), the Law being the natural laws contained in the "Law" and the Prophets, and not including new laws that were introduced for circumstances as they arose.⁹⁸

"*You shall build an altar of earth*" (20.24) and "do not brandish iron over the stone so that it is not polluted" (20.25) are connected with the verse, "*See that from the heavens I have spoken with you: do not make gods of*

97 The closest parallel to this saying is a rabbinic one: according to the Talmud (bShabb 31a) Rabbi Hillel, when asked by a Gentile to teach him the whole of Torah while he stands on one leg, obliged with the words "Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to you." This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it!" It is surprising that Ephrem chose this somewhat negative summary, rather than the positive injunction "You shall love your neighbour as yourself", which is found with variations eleven times in the New Testament, and of course in the Pentateuch itself.

98 Ephrem may be thinking of the divorce laws and agricultural customs.

gold(20.22) or of any type along with me”. *“You shall not go up to my altar on steps”* (20.26) so that not a trace of dressed stone would be found there, in case in fashioning the steps they made the altar into a god for themselves.⁹⁹

SECTIONS XXI-XXII

1] On this day he gave them the rulings of the laws about the relationship of one man to another. *“When a man sells his daughter as a maidservant, if she is hateful in the eyes of her master with the result that he does not marry her as he promised her when he desired her, he shall not sell her to a foreign nation, because he acted deceitfully towards her after he had satisfied her”* (21.7-8).

2] *“whoever strikes a man who then dies, shall be killed”* (21.12). *“whoever does not lie in wait for him, but God delivers him into his hand”* means that the victim’s time to die drew near and the man was the unwilling instrument of God’s will. *“For such a case appoint yourself a place to which he can flee”*. Not even the person who dies against the will of the one who kills him, dies without God willing it. God’s will brings together the killer and the victim, so that the limit set under God’s will is not passed and a mortal allowed to remain alive(21.13).

99 Ephrem connects all these rules about the altar in verses 24-26 with the injunction against idolatry, though the biblical text explicitly says that the ban on steps is to prevent the worshipper’s “nakedness” from being seen.

3] “When two men are fighting and strike a pregnant woman, but no harm results” means that if the foetal features and limbs are not fully fashioned¹⁰⁰ he shall pay a fine, but if they are fully formed he shall give life for life”(21.22-23).

SECTION XXIII

1] “Do not offer the blood of sacrifice on leaven”: this means either that they should not have any yeast at the slaughtering of the Passover lamb,¹⁰¹ or that they should not contaminate the sacrifices by offering the blood of the last sacrifice on top of the first to be slaughtered and placed on the altar. “The fat of my festival offering shall not remain until the morning,” because the fire of the altar shall consume it that same day. In his careful instructions concerning the fat he demonstrates his concern over a greater sacrifice¹⁰² (23.18).

2] “Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk (23.19) because it shall remain for seven days with its mother, and you shall give it to me on the eighth day.”¹⁰³

100 An interpretation found in the Septuagint *exeikonismenon*: the fully-formed foetus is a human being, and the penalty for causing its death is death, whereas the rabbinic interpretations understand the damage as being done to the woman, for whose death someone must die. See Le Boulluec and Sandevour *L’Exode* p 219f.

101 Targum Pseudo-Jonathan interprets the ruling in a similar way: “you shall not sacrifice the blood of my Passover Offering while leavened bread remains in your houses”, referring to Ex 12.19.

102 An allusion to the death of Christ? Ephrem certainly interprets the earlier part of this verse as applying to Passover, as do the rabbis.

103 A reference to Ex. 22.30

3] *“Behold, I am sending my angel before you !¹⁰⁴ Pay attention to him, because my name is upon him”*, since he was standing in God’s stead through the divine name that was laid upon him (23.20-21).

SECTION XXIV

1] *And Moses built an altar, and sent young Israelite men* (meaning the sons of Aaron) to prepare bulls for a burnt offering (24.4-5). For they had not yet been anointed to the priesthood. After he had read the scroll of the covenant before them, and they had said *“Everything that the Lord has said we will do”*, Moses sprinkled some of the blood over the people. *And he said, “This is the blood of the covenant that you have made,”* namely *“All that the Lord has said we will hear and we will do”*(24.7-8). This blood of the covenant symbolised the gospel that was given to all the nations through the killing of the Messiah.

2] *Moses and his relatives and seventy of the elders went up, and they saw God. Under his feet was something like a structure of sapphire brick, like the colour of the sky in purity*” (24.9-10). He reminded them of their servitude in Egypt by the brick,¹⁰⁵ and made them think of the parting of the sea by the sapphire. *The colour of the sky in purity* was because he said that they should not

104 Cf. 32.34, 33.2, Malachi 3.1. The Septuagint, Samaritan Targum and Vulgate also read *“my angel”*.

105 Targum Pseudo-Jonathan also relates the brick pavement to the Israelites’ work in Egypt.

acquire the wanton complexions of prostitutes. “*And over the elders he did not stretch out his hand*” (24.11) to overshadow them, for he had made them come up to receive a vision and not a prophecy, this being granted to them later.¹⁰⁶

3] “*He gave them tablets inscribed by the finger of God*” (31.18) so that God’s commandments would be precious in their eyes even if only because God had written them.

4] Moses and Joshua *ascended the mountain, and the Lord called to Moses on the seventh day from within the cloud*. And the whole house of Israel saw the glory of the Lord (24.13-17).

SECTIONS XXV-XXXI

1] During those days the Lord gave Moses instructions concerning the making of the Tabernacle: its materials and construction; which holy vessels they should make; the holy oil for anointing; the spices and the priestly sacrifices. He said, “*Everything that I show you, the form of the Tabernacle, thus shall you make it*(25.9).¹⁰⁷ Already

106 Ephrem is referring to Numbers 11.24-25, where the seventy elders prophesy by the Holy Spirit.

The verb translated “overshadow”, *aggen*, is something of a technical term in the Syriac Fathers for the action of the Holy Spirit on individuals. Ephrem understands the Peshitta here to mean that Moses alone received prophetic inspiration from God, while the elders were present merely as spectators. See the articles by S.P. Brock, “Passover, Annunciation and Epiclesis...”, and “An Early Interpretation of *Pasah*...”

he referred to it as a “form” and “the Tent of Time”,¹⁰⁸ to show that it would pass away to give place to the Church, which as a perfect archetype lasts forever, and so that it would be honoured by the Israelites because it was a model of the Heavenly Tabernacle.

2] God said, “I will meet to speak with you above the place of atonement”: God's voice would come from between the cherubim to the priest who entered once a year (25.22).

SECTION XXXII

1] *When the people saw that Moses was a long time coming down from the mountain, they pressed Aaron to make them gods who would go before them, “because as for Moses, who brought us up from Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him”*(32.1). Had he not ascended the mountain in front of you, and entered the cloud before your very eyes? Go up the mountain, and if you do not find him or Joshua, do whatever you want. But if the manna and the quails, the pillar and the cloud are still with you, how can he not be, since everything you had come through him to you?

2] Aaron argued with them, and he saw that they wanted to stone him as they had stoned Hur. For when

107 Cf. also 25.40, 26.30, 27.8, Num 8.4, Acts 7.44, Heb 8.5.

108 The expression “of time” in Syriac also means “temporary”. Ephrem uses the idiom to show that Jewish sacrificial worship was only a foreshadowing of the Church’s spiritual worship.

Moses went up the mountain, he told the elders to bring their judgments to Hur, but after Moses' descent, Hur is nowhere mentioned. Because of this people say that the Israelites killed him when they rioted against Aaron over the image of the Calf, since Hur forbade them to change gods.¹⁰⁹ So Aaron was afraid that he too would die, that they would incur blood-guilt for his murder.¹¹⁰ and that they would make themselves not one calf but several; and even though they would not enter Egypt, they might turn back. So he shrewdly sent them a message, asking them to bring their wives' earrings, in the hope that the women might prevent their husbands from casting the Calf, either in order to hold onto their earrings, or out of love for their God.¹¹¹

3] Scripture says that *all the people broke off the rings of gold they had in their ears and brought them to Aaron* (32.3). The earrings of the Egyptian women that they took had been given to them out of love; they loved the Calf as much when they gave up their earrings to make its image.

109 Exodus Rabbah 48.3, Leviticus Rabbah 8.3, bSanhedrin 7a and Pirque d-Rabbi Eliezer(XLV) also says that Hur was murdered by the people over the Calf, Cf. also Pseudo-Jonathan on 32.5. "Change gods" is literally in the Syriac "change God", but there may be a reference to the Peshitta of Jeremiah 2.11.

110 Cf. Pirque d-Rabbi Eliezer (XLV): Rabbi Benjamin ben Japhet in the name of Eleazers that Hur Aaron was afraid that if the people killed him as well as Hur, there would be no forgiveness for them, since they would have slain both a priest and a prophet (Lamentations 2.20).

111 The same idea occurs in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Pirque d-Rabbi Eliezer (ibid), but there the women do refuse, and are rewarded by God.

4] The craftsmen¹¹² *took* the gold, *and fashioned it in a mould,*¹¹³ *and made it into a molten Calf, and they said, "This is your god, which brought you up from the land of Egypt"* (32.4-5). They denied God all the wonders he had wrought for them at the sea and on the land, by ascribing to the Calf they loved deeds that it had not performed. When Scripture says *Aaron was afraid*¹¹⁴ *and built an altar before it* (32.5), it is likely that while they were pressing Aaron and Hur to serve as priests before the Calf, they killed Hur.¹¹⁵

5] In order to delay them until Moses came down from the mountain, *Aaron said to them, "Tomorrow is the Lord's festival"* (32.5-6).¹¹⁶ *They rose early and offered him sacrifices and ate manna, and drank the eater that Moses had made flow for them, and under the cloud that sheltered them they got up early to revel and rave in front of the Calf.*¹¹⁷

112 Ephrem shifts the blame for making the Calf from Aaron to the craftsmen, quite against the Peshitta.

113 The Palestinian Targums use the same word as the Peshitta, *tupsa*.

114 Hebrew and English "he saw", which in Hebrew is very similar to "he was afraid", hence the Syriac and Aramaic interpretations.

115 This is the interpretation of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and the margin of Neofiti as well.

116 Another exculpation of Aaron's action!

117 Ephrem emphasises the people's ingratitude by describing them feasting with the food and drink provided by God through Moses, under a canopy God has sent them. The verbs at the end are not quite as the Peshitta, but may have been chosen for reasons of assonance as well as dramatic presentation.

6] *The Lord said*, meaning that the true God said to the god of the people,¹¹⁸ “*Your people have become corrupt and made a Calf, and have said, “This is your god which brought you up out of Egypt”(32.7)*. By revealing this to Moses, God prepared him to intercede. As for saying to him, “*Leave me alone that I may wipe them out!*” (32.10) rather than “*Restrain me from wiping them out!*”, if he had meant to do the people harm, he would not have disclosed it to the man who would stand in the breach for the people.¹¹⁹ The fact that he revealed it to Moses makes it clear that he was not ready to harm the people. For he had already prepared himself to forgive, and so he invited Moses to intercede. It would be greatly to their detriment were they to be let off scot-free after committing such a serious offence. Therefore he told Moses that he was going to destroy them, so that when Moses prayed and they were forgiven, that forgiveness would be important to them, and the intercessor dear to their hearts.

7] When he had appeased his Lord on the mountain by his intercession and by reminding God of the patriarchs, *Moses turned to go down with Joshua, with the two tablets in his hands* (32.15). *Joshua said to Moses, “There is the sound of battle in the camp* (32.17). If Joshua had been in the camp, he would not have said this, because he would have been aware of the molten Calf.

118 Meaning Moses: Ephrem is perhaps trying to explain why the Lord is suddenly referring to the Israelites as Moses' people.

119 See Psalm 106.23 and also Ezekiel 22.30 for the imagery.

And if he had been with Moses, he would not have said it either, as he would have heard God say to Moses “*Your people have become corrupt*”. He was with neither Moses nor the people, but between the two. For he had stayed with his master seven days, and when the Lord had summoned Moses, he had remained alone, without his master.

8] *When Moses saw the Calf and the cymbals, he broke the tablets that he had brought down from the mountain on the foothills of the mountain (32.19). For what use were commandments to a people who had exchanged the very Lawgiver for a Calf? Because Moses did not know that through... the Calf... it with water to make the people drink it (32.20).*

As for those who were... the cause of the image of the Calf, the powdered Calf made them swell up.¹²⁰ For even if all the people had given earrings, there would have been some who had handed them over out of fear, just as Aaron who had been *afraid and built an altar for it*. Indeed, those who had conceived it in their imagination and encouraged others to ask for it...were the ones whom the powdered Calf made swell up.

120 An idea connected with the fate of suspected wives in Numbers 5.22, 27, a connection made explicit in the Talmud, ‘Avodah Zara 44a. This satisfies Ephrem’s sense of God’s justice, that punishment should be according to the degree of guilt. In Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, ‘Avodah Zarah (ibid), and Pseudo-Philo 12.7, drinking the powdered Calf produced a mark on the face of those who donated jewellery for the making of the Calf, and in Pirque d-Rabbi Eliezer (XLV) the guilty Israelites turned to gold: this was how the Levites knew whom to kill.

When Moses said...to Aaron, *“What did this people do to you, that you brought this great sin upon them?”* (32.21), he did not mean “You brought them into sin...”¹²¹

Moses stood at the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is on the Lord’s side, let him come to me” (32.26). The Levites gathered together and he said to them, *“Thus says the Lord, ‘Let everyone gird his sword to his side’*. In fact, the Lord did not say this... he had spoken more strongly than this before he reconsidered.¹²² After Moses had dissuaded him, Scripture says, *“The Lord reconsidered the evil he meant to do to his people”*(32.14). On the mountain Moses was an intercessor, but below he was an avenger; confronted with God’s justice he sought mercy, but in the camp he became a zealot who carried out chastisement.... the command of God....¹²³



121 The manuscript has become illegible in some places towards the end, but Ephrem seems to be arguing here that Aaron had not actually led them into sin, although he had brought guilt upon them.

122 This is my own translation of the Peshitta’s rendering of the Hebrew “he repented”. The Syriac could mean either “be reconciled” or “think”, perhaps avoiding the idea of God repenting, so I have rendered it in the sense in which Ephrem takes it, that God decided not to carry out his threat to annihilate the Israelites. Ephrem means that although God had not told Moses to prepare a massacre of the Hebrews by the Levites, he had certainly spoken previously of wiping them out altogether.

123 At this point the manuscript becomes illegible.

...said: "Who is this man who says that you have been defiled by eating bread and drinking wine?"

122.10 He did not mean to say that they were defiled, but that they were guilty of eating and drinking without discerning the body and blood of the Lord.

122.11 The Levites also were guilty of this, for they had not discerned the body and blood of the Lord when they ate the bread and drank the wine.

122.12 After this, Jesus spoke more strongly and said: "Whoever is on the Lord's table, he is on the Lord's table."

122.13 On the next day, Jesus said to the people: "But he was not defiled, but he was defiled by his own words."

122.14 Jesus became a zealot who followed the command of God, and he was not defiled by his own words.

122.15 The manuscript of the Gospel of John, chapter 6, verse 12, reads: "Jesus said to the people: 'Do not throw away the bread which ye have left, lest it be wasted. We will eat it, and ye will also eat.'

122.16 The manuscript of the Gospel of John, chapter 6, verse 13, reads: "The people said to him: 'We have no bread, but we have five loaves and two fishes.'"

122.17 This is my own translation of the Hebrew text, which reads: "The people said to him: 'We have no bread, but we have five loaves and two fishes.'"

122.18 At this point, the manuscript of the Gospel of John, chapter 6, verse 14, reads: "The people said to him: 'We have no bread, but we have five loaves and two fishes.'"

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St. Ephraem The Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians

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This study examines the knowledge of these fathers of what the Arians taught and how they attempted to counter these arguments. Points discussed include :

- Use of Scriptural texts
- Methods of argument
- image used in argument
- Christological teaching.

St. Ephraem's christological teaching is examined as an element in the Nicene Church's defence of its beliefs.

This study makes clear that both the Greek and Syrian languages communities were involved in the great theological controversies of the day in ways that illustrate their individual characters and their common faith. St. Ephraem's teaching is shown to share many elements with the well known greek orations of St. Gregory.