THE THEORY OF SYMBOLISM IN ST. EPHREM'S THEOLOGY (1)

PAR

ROBERT MURRAY, s.j.
Heythrop College (University of London)

Since the main body of St. Ephrem's authentic Syriac works — and especially of his hymns — began, about 20 years ago, to become available in reliable editions, it has become increasingly possible to attempt a synthetic account of his theological concerns and methods. Dom Edmund Beck, to whom we owe the greater part of the editions, also led the way in the work of interpretation, both by his monographs and articles and by the invaluable cross-references in the brief footnotes to his translations. St. Ephrem's theological method, above all in his hymns, which is the subject of the present paper, has been the subject of a number of valuable studies not only by Dom Beck but by number of other scholars: yet no one, as far as I know, has yet attempted a comprehensive synthesis of the various areas of symbolic thinking which overlap in the mind of Ephrem as a theological poet.

Ephrem's use of biblical typology has been fairly well studied (by, among others, Beck, Leloir, Bravo, Hidal and the present writer) (2);

(1) This paper was read to the Seventh International Congress on Patristic Studies, Oxford, in September, 1975, at a session presided over by Père Graffin himself. It is a pleasure to reveal to him now the secret, shared only by a few friends on that occasion, that the paper was composed in his honour.

in this Ephrem has naturally and correctly been related to that broad typological tradition in the early Church which was so brilliantly illuminated by the late Cardinal Jean Daniélou (3).

But Ephrem's typology cannot be studied alone. It overlaps too much with his appreciation of the symbolism which, like Jesus, he draws from the world about him; and this world of natural symbols in its turn overlaps with the sacramental theology which, if still comparatively undeveloped in Ephrem, is already an important aspect of his theology of symbols and their force, as it has been well sketched by Dom Beck, Père Graffin, G. Saber, S. Brock and others (4).

Yet once again, Ephrem's poetical theological method is not fully described by reviewing only how he handles types, natural symbols and sacramental 'mysteries'. All these are elements in his theology of revelation which is based on a grand conception of the harmony between God and all the orders of his creation. God has filled creation with his traces, inadequate yet valid pointers to himself; he has given man a mind and the faculty of language which can appreciate these pointers, express them and follow them by the light of the gift of faith. Though Ephrem may develop this theme when discussing natural symbols, he comes nearest to an argued statement of this early doctrine of analogy when he speaks of 'names', the designations of persons and realities which arise in human language but which, Ephrem insists, have been accepted by God in his divine condescension, and validated by his use of them in revelation. Though Dom Beck has a few pages on this aspect of Ephrem's theology (5), a comprehensive view of it has been sketched only by Irénée Hausherr (and that only briefly) in his Noms de Jésus et voies d'oraison (6), i.e. in the context


(4) E. Beck, 'Symbolum-Mysterium'; R. Graffin, 'L'Eucharistie chez saint Ephrem', Parole de l'Orient IV (1973), pp. 93-121; G. Saber, 'La typologie sacramentaire et baptismale de saint Ephrem', ibid., pp. 73-91; S.P. Brock, 'World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers', Sobornost, Series 6, n° 10, pp. 685-96; and see his contribution to the present Festchrift.


(6) Rome, 1960, pp. 64-72, 'La philosophie du nom chez Ephrem'.
of the use of the names of Jesus, an area also studied by myself in my
*Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (7). But Ephrem’s theology of types and
of names is essentially one, even if we only discover it piecemeal in the
fabric of his poetic thought. In the present paper I try to outline (all too
briefly) the lines on which a fuller synthesis could be developed.

One further aspect of the subject, however, belongs to such a syn-
thesis — though again, except for a few pages by Dom Beck, the task of
expounding it still lies ahead. This aspect is Ephrem’s polemic against
the inflexible rationalism which he regards as the fundamental error of
Arianism. He has other wars on other fronts which would be relevant to
a full treatment of our theme, for example his scarifying attacks on Bar-
desanian allegorism; but I am restricting myself to the attack on the Arians’
attitude because it belongs so integrally to our subject — indeed, it is the
context in which Ephrem most often discusses symbolism. His treatment
of the Arians is not merely critical: he takes his stand on the rightness of
a symbolic and contemplative method as opposed to a rationalizing and
argumentative one. If in his theology of types, symbols and ‘mysteries’
Ephrem stands close to the primitive Church yet looks forward to the
theology of icons, while in his doctrine of ‘names’ he anticipates the classi-
cal theory of analogy, his defence of the symbolic method seems, to me at
least, an extraordinary anticipation, by sixteen centuries, of the basic
philosophical position of Paul Ricoeur.

I show now attempt to outline in turn the main areas of Ephrem’s
thought mentioned above, and to indicate how they are interrelated.

1. Symbols, types and mysteries.

The above three words are all renderings (each on occasion more
useful) of the one word *rāza*, which already in old imperial Aramaic was
borrowed from Persian to mean a royal secret, then divine secrets such as
Daniel revealed. *Μυστήριον* became the standard Greek rendering
and in Christian use the connotation was permanently affected both by
Jesus’ ‘secrets of the kingdom’ and by the Pauline ‘mystery’, the dispensa-

---

tion of God's plan throughout the course of history. Since this vision depended essentially on the belief that all the Old Testament pointed to Christ, μοστήριον/τάσια became the natural word for the 'Christ-bearing' sense concealed in Old Testament figures, which could be referred to by the same words or by τόπος, taken into Syriac as ἔπιστα.

The 'reality' of Christ and his work or of the Church which is illuminated by types, 'fulfilment' for which now we reserve the word antitype, is often called in Syriac  śara, 'truth' or 'reality', the equivalent of ἀληθεία. This level of fulfilment can also, of course, be itself related typologically to the ultimate, eschatological fulfilment.

In all this Ephrem, though born on the eastern frontier of the Roman empire and ignorant of Greek, stands in the main stream of ante-Nicene typology: so, for that matter, does his neighbour across the frontier, Aphrahat. In biblical typology both stand very close to, say, Hilary in his Tractatus de Mystériis.

The one development of μοστήριον in the Greco-Roman world in which the early Syriac fathers shared little or not at all is that which from the time of Clement of Alexandria on, but above all in the 4th century, was borrowed from the mystery religions (8). Dom Beck finds only one possible instance in Ephrem of a 'liturgical mystery' sense (9). Already, of course, τάσια in Aphrahat and Ephrem refers to the sacraments, at least those of initiation and the Eucharist. In the present paper I will say no more about sacraments, but will keep to my main theme, the fundamental principles of Ephrem's theological language. Nor shall I here review the variety of other Syriac words used by Ephrem which can be rendered symbol, image or parable: this has been adequately done by Dom Beck (10) and it is possible to generalize about Ephrem's principles and practice without discussing the precise sense of words which evidently all relate to symbolic functions.


(9) 'Symbolum-Mysterium', pp. 39-40, on H Nat 4, 101-2. (It is assumed that readers will recognize the common abbreviations for the works of Ephrem.)

(10) 'Symbolum-Mysterium', pp. 26 ff. I believe, however, that Ephrem also uses ἄτα, 'sign', as well as Aphrahat: see my Symbols, pp. 251-2.
It might seem appropriate to offer immediately some examples showing the essentially traditional character of Ephrem's biblical typology. Yet it would be misleading to do so, for such examples would hardly be characteristic of his full method — while examples which were characteristic might at this stage be too puzzling. The reason is that for Ephrem biblical types do not stand on their own as a special, isolated mode of revelation. He never treats the biblical text as a world on its own: rather, the Bible, as a work of God in human imagery and language, is a part, was well as a special interpreter, of the whole world and its history. The Bible contains raze, revelatory symbols of Christ, because the whole world does. The reason why so many trees or pieces of wood in the Old Testament can be seen as types of the cross is that the eye of faith sees every tree as pregnant with the mystery of the cross. In his exegetical prose works Ephrem expounds Old Testament episodes as they occur, writing soberly as an exegete of Antiochene type, with typology as currently used in that tradition, but in his hymns he constantly interweaves biblical and 'natural' symbols, and he expressly justifies this in many places. For example,

Wherever you look, his symbol is there:
wherever you read, you find his types,
For in him all creatures were created
and he marked all his possessions with his symbols
when he created the world. (H Virg 20,12) (11)

and:

In his book Moses
described the creation of the natural world
so that both the natural world and his book
might testify to the Creator:
the natural world, through man's use of it
the book, through his reading of it. (H Parad 5,2) (12)

The created world and the two testaments are harps upon which the same divine musician plays, a theme which occupies Ephrem the harpist for three hymns (H Virg 28-30).

(11) CSCO 223 (Syr. 94), p. 70.
(12) CSCO 174 (Syr. 78) p. 16; tr. from S.P. Brock, art. cit. (note 4), p. 687.
It follows from these presuppositions that Ephrem is emphatically no fundamentalist in his understanding of the Bible. He doubtless accepted more narratives as factual and unproblematic than many modern exegetes would, but he is absolutely clear that the Bible's language and method is that of symbol rather than of mere factual statement. This is not Origen's magic password to allegorism, but a recognition of biblical styles by one who stood much closer to the literary world of the Bible. In the Diatessaron Commentary Ephrem clearly refers to fundamentalist literalism:

There are some who hang on the fringes of the truth, yet it by its power keeps from falling. Do not (merely) ask the meaning of the words, which taken in their outward sense can impede the (real) point; but search out their (true) sense and what they refer to. Do not take refuge in byways, but in the strength of the essential argument, the Testament where the spirit has depicted the members of Christ, to reveal through manifest symbols his hidden form; for he has revealed great things by means of small, and by manifest things has made visible things that were hidden. He has signified times, given knowledge of numbers, ordained hours, given names their symbolic force and distinctions their subtlety. (EC 22,3) (13)

In many places Ephrem uses the figure of putting on clothes (which was traditional in Syriac literature for speaking of the Incarnation) (14) to picture God humbly clothing himself in our symbols and language (e.g. H Parad 11, 6-7: H Fid 5,7; 11,9).

As light is the condition for vision, so the condition for a proper recognition of symbolic discourse and of its force, as of the symbolic potentiality of the whole created world, is faith; Ephrem develops this common New Testament and patristic way of speaking of faith in his own way as an integral part of his theory of symbolism (e.g. H Fid 5,18; 25,5) (15). As we shall see below a propos of Ephrem's polemic against rationalism one charge he brings — of confusing the levels of discourse — essentially concerns what we now call fundamentalism; for Ephrem it is an error about faith and its working.

---

(14) Cf. R. Murray, Symbols, pp. 69 ff., 310-12.
Of the horizontal axis, where the mode of symbolization is typological, I may speak more briefly, since more has been written about it. Typical are Ephrem’s hymns on the Unleavened Bread and the Paschal Lamb, in which he meditates at length on the types from the time of the Exodus which are fulfilled in Christ, his sacrifice and the Church’s Eucharist (16). One stanza summarizes the whole plan:

The type was in Egypt, the reality in the Church:
the sealing of the reward (will be) in the kingdom (H Azym 5,23).

The symbolic force of the typology is progressive: the ‘time of the Church’ is fulfilment or reality (frara) in relation to the Old Testament types, but the Church itself is only the type of the eschatological kingdom (17). This progressive typology naturally suggests a journey, and Ephrem in fact pictures history as a road (urha) on which mankind has journeyed, in a series of hymns in the collection Contra Haereses (25,7) (18), the way, laid down by God, stretches ‘from the Tree (of life) to the Cross: from the wood to the wood and from Eden to Zion, from Zion to Holy Church and from the Church to the Kingdom’ (H c Haer 26,4).

The working of symbolism on the vertical or ontological axis could be illustrated almost endlessly; there is scarcely anything in the world which cannot serve Ephrem as a symbol of Christ. Probably his most famous symbol is the pearl, which he contemplates in a series of five hymns, beautifully translated by Père Graffin (19). He is no less inspired by the olive tree, its properties and products (20), by the sun, its light and warmth (21), and by mirrors — an important theme in his theology of symbols, as Dom Beck has well illustrated (22).

(18) Ibid., pp. 246-9.
(20) H Virg 4-7, CSCO 223 (Syr. 94), pp. 13-28.
(21) See esp. H Fid 73 and E. Beck, Die Theologie, pp. 41-6.
Scarcely anything, it seems, is unable to start a train of thought: even the rennet with which a housewife curdles milk symbolizes faith in its power to bring consistency to the unstable mind and heart of man (H Fid 5, 20). But rather than multiply examples of Ephrem’s choice of symbols, it may be more impressive to glance briefly at the extraordinarily rich complex of biblical and natural symbols, interwoven and overlapping, in the Hymns on Paradise.

For Ephrem Paradise is a mountain, a place in this world also rising above it into the divine sphere (23). The mountain is divided into levels — the summit where God came down, the garden where the tree of life grows, enclosed by a fence now guarded by the Cherub, and the lower slopes where Adam after his expulsion first settled. According to our horizontal axis, Paradise is a reality both of the beginning and of the end-time. But the threefold division of the mountain suggests far more complex relationships to Ephrem. In biblical history it is typified by the three decks in the ark and by the levels to which respectively Moses, Aaron and the elders were allowed to climb up Mount Sinai towards the Shekinah on the summit. The threefold pattern is found again in the parts of the temple sanctuary and in the Church’s three levels, the ‘victorious’ (that is, ascetics), the ‘righteous’ and penitents. Finally, the pattern is found in the tripartite division which Ephrem, though far from Plato and contemptuous of the ‘poison of the Greeks’ finds in the human personality. All the elements in this network are realities in themselves, yet they are endowed with a symbolic force which converges from every side to illuminate the mystery of Paradise.

2. ‘Names’ in Ephrem’s Theology.

In his use of symbolism Ephrem extends a biblical and early Christian tradition. His range is subtle without parallel among the Fathers, but the kind of thing he is doing is common practice in the early Church. When

---

we pass to consider his use of names and titles of Christ, though of course these too have a biblical origin and a prehistory in the early Church, Syriac Christianity shows a uniquely luxuriant proliferation of names and epithets applied to Christ, as I have shown at length in my Symbols. There I have suggested that this phenomenon (whose typical form was in litany-like prayers) seems still to reflect a native Mesopotamian religious mentality which is expressed already in Sumerian and Accadian liturgical prayers (24). Here, however, our concern is not with actual names or epithets but rather with Ephrem’s reflections on how God in his revelation has used our terms and assured us that they are valid, if always inadequate, media for approaching him: the ground of this assurance is above all the fact that God incarnate bears the human personal name ‘Jesus’ with its appropriate functional meaning (EC 1,25), and that these give true access to the transcendent, incomprehensible and infinite Godhead itself. This early formulation of the doctrine of analogy clearly concerns all terminology used in theology, not merely personal names as such; and wherever Ephrem speaks of ‘names’ (ṣmaha) or ‘appellations’ (kunnaye) we must be ready to render these words sometimes by ‘terms’ or, even more generally, by ‘words’ or ‘language’. But the source of this whole theological development was quite clearly the actual use, in worship and loving devotion, of names and symbolic epithets for Christ.

The kind of reflection which we shall review in Ephrem is seen in less developed form in Aphrahat, while the essential idea is already expressed by a pregnant phrase in the 3rd century Acts of Judas Thomas: ‘For our sake thou wast named with names’ (25). The clearest antecedents of Ephrem’s doctrine, however, are in the Gospel of Philip, which, if Valentinian in general position, is thoroughly Syrian in this element (26). Though the use of ‘names’ drawn from this world gives rise to danger of deception, says ‘Philip’ (§11), ‘The truth brought forth names in the world for our

(24) Cf. Symbols, p. 160 and many examples in Ch. V there.
sakes since it is not possible to learn it without names’ (§12) (27). In a passage on the chrisms ‘Philip’ speaks similarly about symbols:

Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in the types and the images. It (sc. the world) will not receive it (sc. truth) in any fitting to cause them to be born again through the image (§67) (28).

It must be emphasized, however, that these citations are adduced with the strictly limited purpose of illustrating the Syrian background of Ephrem’s thought. He has nothing in common with gnosticism, above all because his theology is so thoroughly incarnational, so profoundly ‘earthed’ in the corporeal order, which God saw to be good, loves in itself, has charged with symbolic power and has used for redemption.

Ephrem’s theology of names is developed between apophatic and cataphatic poles. On the one hand is God’s absolute transcendence, the incommunicability of his name to men and the inapplicability of human terms to him; on the other hand, the loving condescension shown in God’s ‘clothing himself’ alike in human names in order to communicate with us, and in a human body in order to heal us.

Creature with Creator cannot be compared
for their very names are incommensurate.
And even more than the names are the essences different.
Yet the Lord willed in his love to give his names to his servants:
by (your) grace, priests and kings have put on your titles,
Moses and Joshua your very names.

The Lord, the Merciful One, when he put on our names,
humbled himself by images, even to the mustard-seed.
He gave us his names and accepted our names from us.
His names made us great while our names made him small.
Happy is he who has spread your good Name over his own
and has made his names beautiful through yours! (H Fid 5, 6-7) (29)

Ephrem develops this theme at length in his hymns against the Arians. God, he says in another hymn, cannot share with creatures the name denoting his essence, yet

(28) Ibid., pp. 128-9.
(29) CSCO 154 (Syr. 73), pp. 18-19.
Since he has other names,  
gentle and suited to creatures,  
Which bend down so as to raise up  
his servants by his own titles,  
In these he came down and clothed  
his own possessions with them.

The heavenly king called his servants kings  
and since he is God, he called them gods:  
since he is Judge, see, his servants are judges:  
because they must journey he called himself ‘weary’;  
because of their riding he got himself a mount  
that in all things he might be like us.

Who ever could be so foolish and simple  
as to think for a moment that just because men  
are called by his names, there is but one nature  
of man and of God? Or, because the Lord  
was called by the names of his servants,  
that we can compare creature and creator?

For when he called us ‘kings’ by a name that is his own,  
the reality is his, the likeness ours:  
but when he called himself by the name of his servants  
the nature is ours, his is but a style.  
Both in our case and his it is clear  
which is the true name, which the borrowed. (*H Fid* 63, 7-10) (30)

Without philosophical language, Ephrem is saying clearly that human terms and epithets can be used validly of God, not univocally but analogically, above all because they have been used in God’s own work of revelation. Ephrem often speaks of the inadequacy yet necessity of names and images when he contemplates natural symbols. One of his fullest statements concerns not the incarnation but Paradise:

No speaker could ever be able  
to do without names of visible things  
so as to describe for his hearers the likeness of things unseen.  
If then the Creator of the Garden  
has veiled his majesty in names of our world  
may we not use our images to speak of his Garden?

Whoever so erred as to look at the mere name, 
Which God's majesty has bowed down, would blaspheme and belie Him 
by those very borrowings which God put on to help him. 
He would be ungrateful to the Goodness which bent 
its loftiness to his littleness, for though so unlike 
it put on his likeness to lead him to its own.

Therefore let not your mind be misled by language 
because Paradise has put on names familiar to you. 
Paradise is not poor for having put on your figures: 
it is your own nature which is too weak 
to grasp its greatness, and its beaties are faded 
only because it is depicted in the weak colours you use.

\textit{(H Parad} 11, 5-8) (31)

Much of Ephrem's thought along these lines is reminiscent of his 
contemporary Gregory of Nyssa (32). It is probably not yet possible, 
with our present knowledge of early Syriac culture, to assess what familiarity 
with Greek philosophy could percolate through to a Nisibene who, as far 
as we know, was neither bilingual nor inclined to seek enlightenment from 
the Greeks. We may assume that a certain amount of osmosis has affected 
even Ephrem, but he is certainly no Platonist like Gregory of Nyssa. When 
Ephrem's language becomes most philosophical, he is probably being 
forced, however unwillingly, to take up some of the Arians' weapons, 
though he is always able to maintain his chosen position based on the 
primacy of symbols and the analogical validity of human language. I 
think he would have said that in his doctrine of names he was simply 
contemplating the way God has arranged things in his world, with Christ 
as the central referent and validator of all his insight. It one of Ephrem's 
most beautiful closing stanzas, ending an acrostic poem when he has rea-
ched \textit{god}, the initial letter of Jesus, he addresses the Name which for him 
was the sole source of all light and wisdom:

\begin{footnotes}
(31) \textit{CSCO} 174 (Syr. 78), pp. 47-8.

(32) See (e.g.) Gregory's comment on 'Thy name is oil poured out', \textit{In Cant.} 1, 3 
et th\'ologie mystique} (Paris, 1944), pp. 142-51.
\end{footnotes}
Jesus, glorious name,
Secret bridge which leads
across from death to life,
to you I have come and stopped,
at yod your letter I am held.
Be a bridge for my speech,
that it may cross to the truth.
Make your love a bridge for your servant:
by you let me cross to your Father.
Let me cross and say 'Blessed be he
who made his might gentle through his Child!'  (H 6 17) (33)

3. Ephrem's polemic against rationalism.

We have necessarily already begun to touch on this subject: in fact
the polemic against Arianism is the context in which Ephrem develops
most of his thought on the value of symbols and the analogical applicability
of names and terms. Besides the brief treatment by Dom Beck in Die
Theologie des hl. Ephraem (34) valuable vocabulary studies have been done
by T. Jansma (35). It is particularly difficult to render the words which
carry Ephrem's charge against the Arians that in their wooden literalism
and naively univocal use of language they strip the mystery from the God-
head and 'pry' into it. The two main words, 'ugqaba and hqata, mean
'investigation' and 'scrutiny', but it is necessary to represent the highly
pejorative sense which these have for Ephrem. They connote prying,
improper curiosity, the stripping away of decent veils, the destruction of
mystery. In his accusations against the Arians we can recognize what
today we would call fundamentalism and simplistic rationalism. Here I
shall attempt to summarize (briefly and translated into more philosophical
terms) Ephrem's criticisms as they are made, piecemeal in the contro-
versial hymns, more coherently (though in a somewhat rambling manner)

(33) CSCO 154 (Syr. 73), pp. 30-31.
(34) Die Theologie, Ch. V, pp. 62-60.
context) F. Graffin and A.-M. Maltingrey, 'La tradition syriaque des homélies de Jean
Chrysostome sur l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu', in Epiktasis (Mélanges J. Daniélou,
in the *Prose Refutations*: then I summarize what Ephrem considers the right attitudes to maintain in the attempt to think and speak about God.

The first charge against the ‘pryers’ is a moral one. They are guilty of mistaken self-confidence which has made them fall into presumption and blindness. The second charge is in effect one of mental inflexibility, literalism and inability to distinguish the levels of discourse. The Arian positions on the Trinity are due to their univocal use of language and their inability to think analogically. This criticism involves a very interesting implication. As is well known, Ephrem is one of the Church fathers who most strongly emphasize that God has endowed men with free will. His polemic against determinism was directed principally against fatalists and dualists, but he sees a distinct correlation between the Arians’ univocal thinking and determinism, for the simplistic quest for clarity and control will regard more things as what Ephrem calls ‘bound natures’ and will impair the sense both of God’s incomprehensible transcendence and of man’s unaccountable freedom. From these charges follows the third: the claim to submit everything to scrutiny and argument leads inevitably to disputes, quarrels, breaches of charity and the rending asunder of the Body of Christ.

The attitudes recommended by Ephrem can be correlated with the above accusations of wrong attitudes. Over against mistaken self-confidence and presumption stands the creaturely humility which approaches the task of theology by acknowledging the limitations of the human mind and the inadequacy of all concepts and symbols. This humility, however, is not abject. Against that wooden literalism and rationalism which he sees as tending to a denial of freedom, Ephrem asserts, with all the force of his faith and all his power as a poet, the primacy of the symbol in all discourse and the true access which our earth-bound symbols, names and terms, for all their inadequacy, give to the reality of God revealed in Christ. As he constantly demonstrates by his use of imagery, symbols work heuristically, not apodictically: their power is due precisely to their earth-bound origin and their invitation to discovery. The heuristic process respects and requires freedom, including the freedom not to understand and accept the invitation, as Ephrem sees in his comment on Christ’s use of parables (*EC* 11,11).
And so finally, against the claim to unveil and scrutinize everything, and argue about everything, Ephrem rejects, not thought as such nor the use of reason, but all that he calls ‘prying’, in favour of a contemplative silence which both leaves the divine mystery intact and preserves peace on earth. As he says in the Diatessaron commentary, ‘Among the ancients wisdom was recognized more in works than in words, and to the use of the tongue they preferred the power of the mind reflecting in silence’ (EC 22,3).

In my introductory remarks I mentioned Paul Ricoeur, and those who are familiar with his thought will doubtless have been reminded, during this last exposition, of his philosophy of symbols and of his account of the ways the primacy of the symbol is abused, by demythologization, allegorism and gnosticism (36). Others may well have thought they caught a passing whiff of Wittgenstein. But such comparisons must await some other occasion. Here I will illustrate the summary just given from some passages from Ephrem.

On the inadequacy yet effectiveness of symbols: after speaking of the mysteriousness of natural realities, such as the wheat-plant, Ephrem continues:

See, every comparison which is sketched and worked out, if it sufficed to depict (its object with) perfection, would be found to be no figure but reality itself. It is necessary that shadows should pass away. From a net that wears out and a seed-grain of summer our Saviour for our sake made parables of the kingdom.

The insights of parables are weak and inadequate, the outreach of images is feeble and falls. (Yet) in their humble height they stand to reproach him who is proud and lifts himself up. For if he is unable to penetrate images, What madness, to grasp at the height of God’s grandeur!

(H Fid 42, 11-12) (37)

(37) CSCO 154 (Syr. 73), p. 138.
In the above verses Ephrem is slightly throwing his weight on the apophatic side, but he is never anti-intellectualist. For him, as in Ricœur’s favourite phrase, ‘le symbole donne à penser’. In the Prose Refutations Ephrem says: ‘because we have not an eye which is able to look upon His splendour, a mind was given us which is able to contemplate His beauty’ (38). And again: ‘It is not right for us to cultivate Ignorance, or deep Investigations, but intelligence between these two extremes, sound and true’ (ibid. p. vii). In the same discourse Ephrem expands on the error of ‘investigation’ (‘uqqaba) and the beneficial restraint of ignorance (p. xvi) which works analogously to the inadequacy of symbols: he also discusses free will at length, though never quite making explicit the connexions I have suggested above between freedom and the symbolic method, and between determinism and rationalism (39). This connexion is clearer in some hymns. In one place, Ephrem refers to some of the biblical anthropomorphisms of image or predicate which God adopted, humbly and laboriously, in order to win us. He continues:

See his kindness! Though he could have made us fair
by force, without toil, he has toiled in every way
that we might become fair by our own choice,
ourselves the artists of our own fairness:
using the colours our own freedom had gathered.
If he himself had beautified us we had been but an image
painted and beautified with the colours of another artist.

(H Fid 31,5) (40)

Primarily Ephrem is speaking here of sanctifying grace working through our freedom, not merely of our personal response invited by symbols. Yet the latter response is surely in his mind, since the context concerns symbols and how God used them to teach us, and he continues in the next stanza with an arresting picture of that teaching: as

One who teaches a bird to speak
hides behind a mirror and teaches it so,

(38) St Ephraim’s Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan, ed. C. W. Mitchell (London, 1912), p. iv and see E. Beck in Le Museon.
(40) CSCO 154 (Syr. 73), p. 106.
so God has used symbols familiar to us in order to win our response of faith. That response may indeed ask questions — there is a right as well as a wrong way of ‘inquiry’ (H Fid 9) — but without doubt for Ephrem the ideal is silent and adoring contemplation.

When the people in the desert were bitten by serpents,
He set up another serpent for them to look on and be saved.
Looking saved the people, believing, the Gentiles.
See, the type of the Firstborn! Healing came not by ‘prying’,
Only by looking. Look in faith
On the very Lord of types that he may save you! (H Fid 9,11) (41)

Contemplation, therefore, and in silence. Silence will save from folly and will safeguard unity, but it has a deeper value, revealing the profoundly apophatic and mystical quality in Ephrem which coexists with his feel for the earthly and concrete.

Man is too small to understand all languages:
if he could understand the language of the watchful spirits,
then perhaps he could rise to understand the silence
which is spoken between the Father and the Son.

Our language is foreign to the voice of animals,
the language of the Watchers to every language.
The silence in which the Father speaks to his Son
is foreign (even) to the Watchers.

O his kindness! as he put on all forms for us to see,
so he put on all voices in order to teach us.
His nature is one, it can be seen:
His silence is one, it can be heard. (H Fid 11, 7-9) (42)

Ephrem pleads with those whose arguments are tearing the Church apart, to cease from their speculations and embrace the way of silence, prayer and inner harmony (see, for example, H Fid 70). And if, in his polemics against Arians on the one side, dualists and gnostics on the other, he often hits hard and can use savage sarcasm, again and again Ephrem will end on a personal note of confession that breathes a disarming sincerity (43).

---

(41) Ibid., p. 46.
(42) Ibid., p. 54.
(43) Cf. R. Murray, Symbols, pp. 93, 249.
He knows that to inherit the blessing of the peacemakers one must be at peace within, and he knows (like St. Paul) that he still needs to preach to himself. The ascetic’s struggle for inner unity (one aspect of the meaning of ἰθιδαύς ‘single one’) (44) comes out clearly in the 20th Hymn on the Faith (45), with a full translation of which I close:

1. To you, Lord, my faith aloud I offer
   for prayer and entreaty are both of them able
   to be conceived within the mind
   and to be brought forth in voiceless silence.
   ¶ Blessed be your birth, known only to your Father!

2. If the babe in the womb is held back, both die;
   Lord, let not my speech thus hold back my faith
   so that one perishes and the other is extinguished
   and both of them perish each through the other.

3. A tree which holds back its bud must wither
   when the breeze brings birthpangs for tender buds.
   As from the tree’s green womb it makes the fruit sprout,
   so may my faith likewise flourish!

4. The tender seed bursts through the covering earth,
   promising the ear of corn so full of symbols.
   So faith, whose bosom is full of good fruits
   Is an ear of corn full of praise.

5. The fish in the sea is both conceived and born;
   if it plunges to the depths it escapes those who hunt it.
   In seemly silence within the mind
   let prayer be gathered so as not to wander.

6. A virgin in her bower is prayer in its purity.
   If she cross the mouth’s threshold she becomes like a gadabout.
   Truth is her bower, love her crown;
   Stillness and silence are the eunuchs at her door.

7. She is the betrothed of a King’s son;
   let her not go out or gad about.
   But faith is a bride in the open street:
   let the voice be her mount from mouth to ear’s marriage-bower!


(45) CSCO 154 (Syr. 73), pp. 74-6.
8. We are told that many believed in the Lord but in danger their voice denied the faith. Even though the heart within confessed it, He counted the speechless with renegades.

9. *Jonah* prayed a voiceless prayer; the herald was dumb in the fish’s belly. Prayer rose in dumbness but He on high heard it, for silence was an audible cry.

10. In one body are found both prayer and faith; one hidden, one visible for the hidden and the visible. The hidden prayer for the hidden Ear, and faith for the ear outwardly seen.

11. Like a secret taste is our prayer in the body; Let us breathe forth richly the sweetness of faith, a telling savour which pleases the taste of him whose crucible tests all things for sweetness.

12. Truth and Love are inseparable wings; for neither can truth take wing without love, nor can love soar apart from truth. Harmony is the yoke that joins them together.

13. One outlook, one movement unites the eyes, though the nose divides them nothing disconnects them, since not the least wink can one eye steal without the knowledge of its sister.

14. Never did feet part to take two paths, Yet one heart can hasten on parted paths. On the two ways of darkness and light In opposite directions in its freedom it hastens.

15. His feet and hands accuse the divided man. O heart, labouring beast, one yet divided! It has divided itself to bear two yokes, the yoke of right and the yoke of wrong.

16. Accursed farmer, enslaved is his will; hard yoke he drags, wilderness he ploughs. In place of wheat brambles he sows, mastered as he is by the goad of sin.

17. Let inward prayer cleanse our troubled thoughts And faith make pure our outward senses, till the one man who has suffered division gather himself again to be one before you, O Lord!