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THE POETIC ARTISTRY OF ST EPHREM :  
AN ANALYSIS OF H. AZYM. III

BY

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St Ephrem as a poet has met with a mixed reception among English-speaking scholars. The verdict of F.C. Burkitt was hardly flattering:

« Ephrem is extraordinarily prolix, he repeats himself again and again, and for all the immense mass of material there seems very little to take hold of... (his popularity) shows a lamentable standard of public taste » (1).

Writing over half a century later, J.B. Segal, in his fine book on Edessa, took an equally poor view of Ephrem's poetic talent:

« (Ephrem's) work, it must be confessed, shows little profundity or originality of thought, and his metaphors are laboured. His poems are turgid, humourless and repetitive » (2).

Thanks to the great authority that these two Syriac scholars enjoy, this negative judgement would appear to have become the standard one in Britain among those who claim to have sampled his work. Thus, in a review of R. Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, L.W. Barnard takes issue with that author's very different assessment (see below), and speaks deprecatingly of 'wading' through Ephrem's works (3).

Do we have here a blind spot in the poetic taste and sensibility of the English-speaking world — the reverse, as it were, of Burkitt's coin? How is it that the 'Harp of the Spirit', as St Ephrem is called in Syriac tradition,

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(1) *Early Eastern Christianity* (London, 1904), pp. 96, 99.

(2) *Edessa, the Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), p. 89.

(3) *Theology* LXXVIII, no. 660 (June 1975), p. 330.

has come to be so little appreciated, indeed actually denigrated? Several factors, I suspect, have contributed to this sad state of affairs. First, perhaps, comes the lack until recently of a good edition of St Ephrem's works; here Burkitt was considerably more justified when he pronounced the six volume Roman edition of P. Mobarak and S.E. Assemani to be "one of the most confusing and misleading works ever published" (4). Burkitt himself would indeed have had available Bickell's edition of the *Carmina Nisibena*, but many an aspiring student of Syriac must have been put off by the unattractive Syriac fount used in that edition — and Burkitt, it should be remembered, was a skilled calligrapher in Syriac as well as in Greek and Latin scripts. It is also important to recall that scholars like Burkitt were trying to extract factual information from Ephrem's poems about figures like Bardaisan and about the early history of the church in Nisibis and Edessa, and one suspects that frustration at failing to pin Ephrem down to precise statements on subjects such as these has clouded these scholars' judgement when they came to speak of Ephrem as a poet in his own right. Add to this the fact that St Ephrem has been extremely ill-served by English translations, despite the good start provided by J.B. Morris' work, published in 1847 (5). Many of the renderings in the only other standard collection of English translations of Ephrem, which appeared in 1898 (6), are so turgid that one is often forced to go back to the Syriac original in order to discover the real meaning. English sadly lacks anything like the superb French translation by R. Lavenant of the *Paradise Hymns*. There are, happily, indications that the situation may be improving, and R. Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (7), already mentioned, provides a rich selection of extracts in a very readable English translation.

There have been a few exceptions to this lack of appreciation in the English-speaking world of a writer whom tradition has always ranked

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(4) *St Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel* (Texts and Studies VII.2: Cambridge, 1901), p. 4.

(5) *Select Works of St Ephrem* (Oxford, 1847).

(6) Ed. J. GWYNN, *Selections... from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian* (A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ser. 2, vol. 13; 1898).

(7) *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975).

as a major poet. Fr. R. Murray, in an article on St Ephrem in the *Catholic Dictionary of Theology* (8), described him as “the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante”; and more recently Fr. S. Tugwell was prepared to call St Ephrem “one of the great religious poets of the world” (9).

These latter assessments are ones with which I myself would readily concur, simply adding that, in my own experience, St Ephrem needs to be read on his own terms, in order for the richness of his poetic genius to make itself apparent to the best advantage.

Ephrem’s skill as a literary artist has often been commented on, but I know of no study that investigates this artistry in any detail. It seems fitting, then, to offer as a small tribute to a fellow lover of St Ephrem’s poetry, who has rendered such great services to Syriac literature as editor of the *Patrologia Orientalis* and by his other works, the following analysis of the intricate structure of one of St Ephrem’s hymns.

On the surface *H. de Azymis III* (10) provides a straightforward set of typological comparisons between the Jewish Passover lamb and the True Passover Lamb of the Christians. A closer examination of the poem, however, shows that, while the old Passover lamb simply marks the single Jewish exodus from Egypt, the new Paschal Lamb effects a double exodus — of the Gentiles from Error, and of the Dead from Sheol. Further analysis of the poem’s composition will reveal that this proportion, 1:2 (old: new), is also brought out in the very structure of the poem, thus providing a truly astonishing fusion of form with content.

Before looking in detail at the intricacies of this elaborate structure, however, it will be best to offer, for the sake of convenience, a translation of the poem.

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(8) Ed. J.H. CREHAN (London, 1967), II, pp. 220-3.

(9) *Prayer* (Dublin, 1974), I, p. 138.

(10) Ed. E. BECK, C.S.C.O. 248, *Scriptores Syri* 108.

*H. de Azymis III*

1. In Egypt the Passover lamb was slain,  
in Sion the True Lamb slaughtered.
2. My brothers, let us consider the two lambs,  
let us see where they bear resemblance and where they differ.
3. Let us weigh and compare their achievements  
— of the lamb that was the symbol, and of the Lamb that is the Truth.
4. Let us look upon the symbol as a shadow,  
let us look upon the Truth as the fulfilment.
5. Listen to the simple symbols that concern that Passover,  
and to the double achievements of this our Passover.
6. With the Passover lamb there took place for the Jewish people  
and exodus from Egypt, and not an entry.
7. So with the True Lamb there took place for the Peoples  
an exodus from Error, and not an entry.
8. With the Living Lamb there was a further exodus, too,  
for the dead from Sheol, as from Egypt;
9. For in Egypt two symbols are depicted,  
since it reflects both Sheol and Error.
10. With the Passover lamb, Egypt's greed  
learnt to give back, against its wont;
11. With the Living Lamb, Sheol's hunger  
disgorged back the dead, against its nature.
12. With the True Lamb, greedy Error  
rejected and cast up the Peoples who were saved.
13. With that Passover lamb, Pharoah returned the Jewish people  
whom, like Death, he had held back;
14. With the Living Lamb, Death has returned  
the just, who left their graves; [Mt 27:52]
15. With the True Lamb, Satan gave up the Peoples  
whom, like Pharoah, he had held back.
16. In Pharoah two types were depicted:  
he was the pointer to both Death and Satan.
17. With the Passover lamb, Egypt was breached  
and a path stretched out before the Hebrews.
18. With the True Lamb, Satan, having fenced off all paths,  
left free the path that leads to Truth.

19. That True Lamb has trodden out, with the cry which he uttered,  
[Mt 27:50]

the path from the grave for those who lie buried.

Refrain: Praise to the Son, the Lord of symbols,  
who fulfilled every symbol at his Ressurrection.

A preliminary examination of the poem shows that it falls naturally into a number of different sections:

stanzas 1-4 : introductory.

5 : old = single; new = double.

6-8 : Jewish exodus from Egypt foreshadows exodus of gentiles from Error and of dead from Sheol.

9 : Egypt represents Sheol and Error.

10-12 : As Egypt disgorged the Jews, so does Sheol the dead, and Error the gentiles.

13-15 : As Pharoah returns the Jews, so does Death the just, and Satan the gentiles.

16 : Pharoah represents Death and Satan.

17-19 : The breaching of Egypt foreshadows the breaching of Satan and the grave.

Stanza 5 sets the theme for the whole poem: there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between the Passover lamb and the True Lamb - rather, the True Lamb doubles the achievements of his type. This proportion, 1:2, is then both illustrated in the ensuing stanzas and at the same time actually built in to the very structure of the rest of the poem. We now get variations on the theme:

Egypt/Pharoah: Error/Satan + Sheol/death.

The True Lamb not only provides an exodus, in time and space, of the gentile 'peoples' from error, to balance the exodus of the Jewish 'people' under the type of the Passover lamb, but he also effects a further exodus, on a completely different plane, outside of time and space, of the dead from Sheol. This is entirely characteristic of early eastern christianity, where the 'Descent' motif plays such a prominent part, and perhaps it is worth digressing for a moment on the prominence of this theme, since it

has either proved distasteful or embarrassing to many modern western scholars because of its obvious 'mythological' overtones. Actually the Descent motif plays a vital role in early Syriac writers as a means of expressing their rich understanding of the full effects of the Incarnation: whereas Christ's Incarnation on earth is seen as having application in *historical* time and space — from a particular point in history onwards, the Descent theme complements this by demonstrating the effects of the Incarnation in *sacred* time and space, unbounded by the limitations of historical time (11).

For Ephrem, then, the theme of the *double* exodus effected by the True Lamb, far from being a mere literary device, is basic to the entire Christian message.

In order to demonstrate how this pattern of 1:2 is woven with delicate artistry into the remainder of the poem, from stanza 6 onwards, it will be convenient to use the following symbols:

<i>Passover Lamb</i>		<i>True Lamb</i>	
Egypt = A	Error = B	+	Sheol = C
Pharoah = A'	Satan = B'	+	Death = C'
			Grave = C''
Passover lamb = X	True Lamb = Y		
	Living Lamb = Z		

In the following table these symbols are employed wherever their corresponding terms occur.

- 1 Resemblance,
- 2 Comparison of
- 3 Achievements,
- 4 Differences (shadow: fulfilment)

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(11) The vitally important distinction between sacred and historical time, to be found in the religious thinking of every faith, is well brought out in the various works of M. ELIADE.

5	Old = single, New = double	
6	Jewish Exodus from Egypt	A X
7	Gentile Exodus from Error	B Y
8	Exodus of Dead from Sheol	C Z
9	Egypt is symbol for Sheol and Error	A: C + B
10	Egypt hands back the Jews	A X
11	Sheol disgorges the Dead	C Z
12	Error casts up the Gentiles	B Y
13	Pharoah returns the Jews	A' X
14	Death returns the Just	C' Z
15	Satan returns the Gentiles	B' Y
16	Pharoah is symbol for Death and Satan	A': C' + B'
17	Egypt breached	A X
18	Satan foiled	B' Y
19	Grave emptied	C'' Z

Stanza 5 provides the model 1:2, and this is reflected in the structure of the poem in three different ways, on various levels:

(1) Stanzas 9 and 16 provide straightforward illustrations of this model.

(2) Four groups of three stanzas each follow the pattern:

6: 7 + 8	13: 14 + 15
10: 11 + 12	17: 18 + 19

(3) On a larger scale we have the same proportion in the following balance:

6-8: 10-12 + 13-15.

(Stanzas 9 and 16 provide the summaries and the boundary for 10-12 and 13-15, the former looking forward, the latter backward).

The symmetry of the poem is also extremely neat, as can readily be seen at a glance from the symbols in the table. Whereas 6-8 balances 10-12 and 13-15 in the proportion 1:2 ((3) above), 6-8 is also provided with a symmetrical balance at the end, 17-19, where we get the order



ABC, XYZ exactly corresponding, whereas in the intervening section, 9-16, we have throughout the order ACB, XZY.

In the final triad, stanzas 17-19, Ephrem's readers would no doubt have caught his allusions — by way of choice of vocabulary — to the 'breaching' (12) of the side of Christ with the lance (John 19:34), and the 'fencing off' (13) of Paradise by means of the flaming sword (Gen. 3:24) — a favourite typological contrast of Ephrem's (14), to which the present passage provides the counterpart by way of allusion: the breached side of Christ the True Lamb effects the breach of Egypt, and so removes the fence from the path to Truth, hitherto fenced off by the cherubic sword as a result of Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve.

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In this short article I have confined myself to structure, since the situation is so very clear-cut here, and cannot possibly be the result of mere chance. It would no doubt be possible to point to various other aspects of Ephrem's artistic skill in this poem, such as his use of assonance, but since the significance of his use of this is not so obvious, this would require separate study within a wider context. Enough, however, has been said to demonstrate something of Ephrem's superb technical skill and literary artistry in this short and deceptively simple poem.

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(12) Although this is not the word used in any of the Syriac Gospel versions, Ephrem himself uses it elsewhere with reference to the side of Christ and John 19:34; thus *Comm. Diat.* XXI.10 (*daḡna tri'at b-rumḡa*), *H. Nativ.* VIII.4.4; cp *H. Eccles.* XLV.3.1.

(13) This word does not occur in the Genesis narrative. But it is often introduced into the present typological context by Ephrem and other early Syriac poets on the basis of Ephesians 2:4, "He is our peace... who has broken down the fence (*da-šra syaga*) that stood between".

(14) Ephrem often uses the same word for both weapons. For their typological correspondance in Ephrem, see R. MURRAY, "The lance which re-opened Paradise", *O.C.P.* XXXIX (1973), pp. 224-34, 491.