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ST. EPHREM ON WAR, CHRISTIAN SUFFERING, AND THE EUCHARIST

BY

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Suffering, wars, and persecutions in the Middle-East and Mesopotamia are not new phenomena, nor is the Christian reflection on them. In the following passages from the fourth century Nisibene hymns of St. Ephrem we will meet the above phenomena in relation to his view of Christian faith and the Eucharistic sacrifice. Let us see what we can learn from him today.

The situation on which we will focus in particular is the third siege of Nisibis, the Syriac-speaking Christian city on the border of the Roman and Persian empires in 350 A.D. In this siege the city was surrounded by the Persian armies of Shapor II for six months. St. Ephrem is said to have been in the city where he wrote his early Nisibene Hymns¹.

Because of the strong fortifications of the city, Shapor decided to construct an embankment intercepting the river which passed by Nisibis. This, in effect, formed a lake in the middle of which the city stood as an island, with the battlements of its wall barely appearing above the surrounding waters!².

It is not hard for us to imagine the horror of the people inside the city. Nor is it surprising that Ephrem with his poetic and biblical imagination would compare Nisibis to Noah's ark battered by the waves of the flood. He prays

1) *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 13, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979 reprint), p. 151. I have taken the liberty to modernize the English in many of these poems and adapt some of the punctuation.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 139. For the account of the siege I am dependent on J. GWYNN who uses Emperor Julian's more objective account.

that God may stretch his 'bow' of salvation, the Cross, over the horizons of the battle: «Stretch forth your bow against the flood; for, behold, it has lifted up its waves against our walls!»³.

Ephrem also draws on the saving power of Christ's sacrificial blood and compares it to Noah's sacrifice which saved his people: «That lowly blood which Noah sprinkled, wholly restrained your wrath for all generations; how much mightier then shall be the blood of your Only Begotten, that the sprinkling of it should restrain our flood!»⁴. Ephrem in another biblical image compares the faith of Nisibis to the solid 'house built on the rock'. Thus speaks Nisibis personified: «... for on your rock have I built my faith; the secret foundation of my trust shall support my walls»⁵.

On the surface of the encircling lake, Shapor is said to have launched armed vessels and floating warengines. «By these the fortifications were ceaselessly battered for several days, till of a sudden the river (then in flood) burst its barrier and carried away not only the embankment but a hundred cubits of the city wall»⁶.

Thereafter Shapor attacked the city, which seemed at his mercy, with cavalry and then elephants. He was repulsed both times by the Nisibene defenders, «who, in the energy inspired by their deadly peril, showered missiles upon their assailants as they strove to struggle onward»⁷.

On the next morning, when Shapor prepared to renew the assault, «he found himself confronted by a new wall hurriedly raised in the night to fill the gap in the ramparts, reaching already the height of six feet and manned by fresh and well-armed defenders»⁸. After this, Shapor is said to have been discouraged, raised the siege and departed.

As would be expected with St. Ephrem, he found spiritual meaning in this event of the wall that fell on the Sabbath and was raised on Sunday! He

3) *Ibid.*, p. 168. Hymn 1: 8.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 167. Hymn 1:2. In the same stanza Nisibis prays: «Be propitiated by the gift upon my altar, and stay from me the deadly flood».

5) *Ibid.*, p. 168. Hymn 1: 8.

6) *Ibid.*, p. 139.

7) *Ibid.*

8) *Ibid.*

exhorts Nisibis: «the day of the Resurrection of the Son raised again thy ruins»⁹. We shall find again in Ephrem this theme of the Resurrection of Christ in relation to Christian victory.

In his Hymn on the Church, Ephrem sees the participations of Christians in the suffering of Christ something to be expected, since they are already sharers in the life-giving 'fruits' (sacraments) of his Cross:

He shall be crucified on the Cross,
whoever has eaten of its fruits.
Let us therefore hang ourselves to the wood of the Cross,
that gives us the Bread of Life¹⁰.

It is in his early Nisibene Hymns, However, that Ephrem so well expresses the anxieties and fears of Christians. Thus we hear Nisibis praying: «A voice of terror I have heard on my towers, as my defenders cry while they guard my walls. Still it with the voice of peace!»¹¹.

In her mourning and lament, Nisibis sounds like David in the Psalms, like Job, and even like Jesus: «Look, O my Lord, on my limbs, how the swords are thick in me and have left their mark on my arms, and the scars of the spears, are planted in my sides!»¹².

Even in her praise for victory, Nisibis betrays her anxieties during war: «For the old men have been rescued from captivity, the youths from torture, the sucklings from being dashed in pieces, the women from dishonour, and the Church from mockery»¹³.

'Teaching' and 'chastisement' are the reasons given by Ephrem why God (as a mother) has permitted this trial: «Your chastisement is like that of a mother of our infancy whose rebuke is merciful, in that you have restrained your children from folly — and they have been made wise!»¹⁴. Again we hear:

9) *Ibid.*, p. 171. Hymn 3: 6.

10) E. BECK, *Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, (Louvain: CSCO 174/175: Syr 78/79), pp. 63, 69. Stanza 13. The English translation is from the Syriac by P.YOUSIF. The term 'Bread of Life' refers to the Eucharist.

11) *Nicene and Post Nicene*, p. 173. Hymn 4:25.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 178. Hymn 10:19.

13) *Ibid.*, p. 169. Hymn 2:6.

14) *Ibid.*, p. 179. Hymn 11: 1.

«He smote the enemy who did not understand that He was teaching us»¹⁵. Nisibis' faithful response in the tenth hymn is: «Blessed be your chastisement!»¹⁶.

Ephrem also sees these times of trial as a time for purification, prayer, and penance. Nisibis, the faithful Christian city, sees a cleansing potential in the waves of the flood: «You have gathered the waters by the hand of the unclean, that you might purify me from guilt... For the waves will stir up to prayer which will wash away my guilt»¹⁷.

From the Cross, the 'sign' of Christ's passion, there is a healing medicine that pours down to heal Nisibis: «Apply to my afflictions the medicine of your salvation, and the passion of your help! Your sign can become, a medicine to heal all... Let your mercy, my Lord, take the bitterness from the cup that my sins have mixes»¹⁸.

After her victory, Ephrem proclaims to Nisibis that it was the sacrament of the Body of Christ that delivered her: «... in you was eaten the Body, living and life-giving; of a sudden He delivered them: the Eaten delivered the eaters»¹⁹. And in another poem Ephrem teaches the Nisibeans: «Place you within you the Living Body, that it may be a wall for your lives!»²⁰.

The altar of the church of Nisibis has become the place of mourning and penance for its people. Here again Nisibis compares herself to Noah's ark: «Compare the souls which are in me with the living things that were in the ark; and, instead of Noah who mourned in it, behold your altar mourning and humbled»²¹. And in another hymn: «Make an end, O Lord, of the mourning,

15) *Ibid.*, p. 169. Hymn 2: 5.

16) *Ibid.*, p. 178. Hymn 10: 1.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 167. Hymn 1: 5. 'Prayer' here has a sense of penance. See on this R. MURRAY, «A special sese of slotha as *absolution*», *O.C.P.* (1966) pp. 523-527.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 172. Hymn 4:20,21. 'Sign' (Syriac: Nisha) refers to the Cross, and 'Medicine' refers to the sacraments pouring from the Cross. Cf. S. BROCK, «*The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ*». *Sobornost*, Vol. 7:6 (1978) pp. 463-471.

19) *Ibid.*, p. 171. Hymn 3: 6.

20) *Ibid.*, p. 181. Hymn 13: 21. In the same hymn Ephrem speaks of Christ as the 'fruit' (Sacrament) inside Nisibis: «the fruit that was in her preserved her». Hymn 13: 19.

21) *Ibid.*, p. 168. Hymn 1: 9.

of this your pure altar, and of your chaste priest, who stands clothed in mourning, covered over with sackcloth!»²².

It is important to point out the theological relation between St. Ephrem's early Nisibine hymns (the siege experience) and the later ones. While in the early hymns, Ephrem is responding to the situation of the physical war, in the later hymns he is describing a spiritual war between Christ and the powers of Evil and Death. There is a symbolic and theological confrontation between Christ and these powers written in a poetic form similar to an epic.

From Ephrem's first Nisibene hymn it becomes evident that the war between Shapor's army and the Christians is at the same time a war between Christ and the Principalities (to use a Pauline term). Thus we find Nisibis praying to Christ:

Let not the Evil One overcome your lovingkindness: seeing he has assailed me twice and thrice overcome you him! Let my victory fly abroad through the world, that it may earn you praise in the world! You who rose on the third day, give us not over to Death in our third peril!²³.

In the above stanza, the three-time victory of Christ over the Evil One reflects Jesus' temptation in the desert. While the second victory, over Death, is of Christ's resurrection. The 'third peril' seems to be Nisibis' third siege.

In the later Nisibene hymns we discover that it is through the sacrificial Blood of Christ that the decisive victory is attained and the 'souls of the precious' are snatched from the Evil One²⁴. And that through the sacrificial Body of Christ «a Medicine of Life has entered into Hell, and has restore life to its dead»²⁵.

22) *Ibid.*, p. 173. Hymn 4: 27. The 'altar' may be a symbol of Christ. The theme is reminiscent of the repentance of the Ninevites.

23) *Ibid.*, p. 168. Hymn 1: 11.

24) *Ibid.*, p. 189. Hymn 19: 5.

25) *Ibid.*, p. 197. Hymn 36: 14. The term 'Medicine of Life' refers to the Eucharist. In the same stanza it is also referred to as 'the **Living Fire**'!

Death personified expresses his horror at the sight of Christ's blood:

The blood of the slain is a delight and as sweet as perfume: but the blood of Jesus to me is a terror; for, whenever I come and smell His blood, the savor of life that lurks therein terrifies me²⁶.

The saving aspect of Jesus' death, seen in the vivication of Adam and his return to Paradise, is also attested by Death:

But the lance that pierced Jesus, by it I have suffered: He is pierced and I groan. There came out from Him water and blood; Adam washed and lived and returned to Paradise²⁷.

Therefore the Cross of Christ is a terror for Death:

The Cross caused me to fear more exceedingly, which has rent open the graves of Sheol. The crucified Whom on it I slew, now by Him am I slain²⁸.

And the Church proclaims:

Glory to you who by your crucifixion, conquered the Evil One: and by your resurrection gained victory likewise over Death²⁹.

The saving Cross of Christ is often portrayed by St. Ephrem as the Tree of Life, feeding the Christians with its fruits (the sacraments), leading them to Paradise. In the following Nisibene hymn, and in a unique way, the Cross is also portrayed as a gentle mother bearing her children in her arms (wings, boughs) and feeding them from her bosom:

The bosom and wings of the Cross He opened in mercy: its pinions bowed and bore³⁰ the nations, to go to Eden. It is akin to the Tree of Life, and unto the son of its stock: it leads its beloved that on its boughs, they feed on its fruits³⁰.

Also in these later Nisibene Hymns we find the theme that the salvation of Christians is assured by their sacramental incorporation into the body, death, and resurrection of Christ 'the Living Sacrifice':

26) *Ibid.*, p. 202. Hymn 39: 19.

27) *Ibid.*, p. 201. Hymn 39: 7.

28) *Ibid.*, p. 201. Hymn 39: 6.

29) *Ibid.*, p. 211. Hymn 58: 2.

30) *Ibid.*, p. 212. Hymn 58: 21, 22. This stanza is rich with the multiple images of Christ, the Cross, the Tree of Life, and perhaps mother-bird.

Praise to Him who clothed Himself in our body and died and rose again:
He died in us and we live in Him; blessed be He who sent Him!³¹

In another hymn Ephrem asserts: «His bread, beyond dispute, bears witness to our resurrection»³².

Yet Ephrem's best expression of the salvific power of the Body of Christ — in terms of loving union and consolation for the suffering Church — can be found in one of his Virginité Hymns:

In a new way his body
has been fused with our bodies,
and his pure blood
has been poured into our veins.
His voice, too, is in (our) ears
and his splendour in (our) eyes.
The whole of him with the whole of us
is fused by his mercy.
And because he loved his church greatly,
he did not give her the manna of her rival;
He became the Bread of Life
for her to eat him.

.....

humanity was weak,
suffering and failing;
you have strengthened it
with your blessed Bread,
you have consoled it
with your sober Wine,
you have given it joy
with your holy Anointing³³.

31) *Ibid.*, p. 218. Hymn 66: 21. Verse 20 of this hymn reads:

«Praise from us all be to you, O Lord, the Living Sacrifice!
Who by the sacrifice of your Body gave life to quick and dead».

32) R. MURRAY, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 76. Hymn 46. See this book also on the titles of Christ in the Syriac tradition, and the many sacramental terms in this early tradition.

33) *Ibid.*, p. 77. The word 'fused' is a translation of the Syriac verb *mzag* for 'mingle'.

This above theme of confidence and consolation in Christ is also reflected in a later Nisibene hymn:

For it is in our Lord that the root
of our faith is grafted;
though far off, He is still close to us
in the fusion of love.
Let the roots of our love be
bound up in Him.
Let the full extent of His compassion
be fused in us³⁴.

In summary, for Ephrem the faith of Christians is built on Christ the Rock, the Living Sacrifice, and the Tree of Life. From these are poured out the love and the sacraments that console, comfort, heal, strengthen, and renew the Church.

The struggle between Christ and the Principalities (particularly Death and the Evil One) underlies war, suffering and the stress of Christians. At the same time Ephrem seems aware of inner struggles and fears to which the outer war, as fearful as it might seem, is just a counterpoint. All these emotions are sounded in Nisibis as she undergoes her trial.

Nisibis, the personified Christian city, seems to go through a conversion at this time of stress and disaster. The signs of Christ's love, especially the Cross and the life of the sacraments flowing out from it bring to those who recognize them comfort, healing, assurance, and peace. Hence comes the hope, that since Christ is victorious in oneself, the outer wars will also turn to victory.

Another lesson that can be learned from St. Ephrem's vivid Eucharistic imagery is the close relation between the sacrifice of Christ and the suffering of Christians. There is a strong bond of union between Christ and those he loves. Thus, the greater the suffering of Christians, the more they can realize that they are part of the body of Christ, 'the Living Sacrifice'. Like a physical body that heals itself, the Body of Christ can bring to its members healing and peace.

³⁴) S. BROCK, *The Harp of the Spirit* (Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergis, 1975), p. 58. Hymn 50.

Like Nisibis, trampled humanity today cries for peace and for sings of mercy and compassion. Today, too, Christians need to recover this sense of belonging to the Living Christ, our divine sacrament who is broken for us and pours into us God's love and mercy.

The context of the war of Nisibis is reminiscent of some of the horrifying wars, destruction and sieges of cities in this century — and in the Middle-East in recent times. In a new way we need to hear the voice of Christ in us, as echoed in the poetry of St. Ephrem, and reflected in our sacraments and prayers.

Our present-day wars, which bring death and suffering for many and threaten to expand and plague us **wherever we are, are** a new reminder for us Christians of the suffering of Christ and of his way of sacrificial love against the forces of evil and death.

Like Nisibis, suffering and divided humanity can pray for re-union, as in the following Nisibene hymn:

May (God) teach (us) by his testing
 not to renew the suffering!
 I am in pain from being cut
 and from their being cut off.
 May we learn by our healing at last,
 that we may not perish!
 And both I and they
 will thank you daily,
 For you have remitted our suffering,
 taught us by our testing,
 have gathered us and granted
 Love through our trials³⁵.

And like Ephrem, each one of us can pray for personal as well as universal healing:

Kindest Lord, who weary yourself with the world
 to make it all one healthy body,
 in your pity, Lord, do not spurn
 (this) one miserable member!³⁶

35) MURRAY, *Symbols*, p.91. Nisibene hymn 26. Here Nisibis is speaking of the union of the Christian factions within her.

36) *Ibid.*, p. 93.