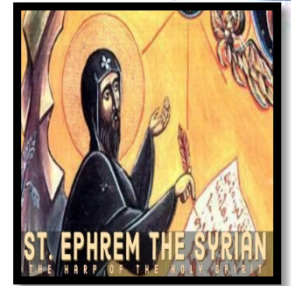




Syro Malabar Commission for Liturgy

ST. EHREM, THE SYRIAN (306-373 AD)



Every year on June 9th, the *Dukhrana* - bright remembrance - of St. Ephrem is celebrated on the Altar of the Syro-Malabar Church. Ephrem born in Nisibis, then under Roman rule, early in the fourth century; died in June, 373 AD. He was instructed in the Christian mysteries by St. James, the famous Bishop of Nisibis, and was baptized at the age of eighteen (or twenty-eight). Around the year 363 to escape from the cruel persecution that was then raging in Persia, most of the Christian population abandoned Nisibis. Ephrem went with his people, and settled first at Beth-Garbaya, then at Amid, finally at Edessa, the capital of Osrhoene, where he spent the remaining ten years of his life. He was a deacon, may be a member of *Bnay Qyama*, the indigenous proto-monastic group of Syria. At that time there were several heretical sects. Ephrem wrote and fought against all of them, notably against the disciples of the illustrious philosopher Bardesanes.

We don't know much about his life. Syrian biographers added several legendary elements regarding Ephrem in their writings which were not much credible. The relations of St. Ephrem and St. Basil are narrated by very reliable authors like St. Gregory of Nyssa (the Pseudo?) and Sozomen, according to whom Ephrem was attracted by the great reputation of St. Basil and he went to visit him at Caesarea. He was warmly received and was ordained deacon by St. Basil; four years later he refused both the priesthood and the episcopate that St. Basil offered him through delegates. Though Ephrem seems to have been quite ignorant of Greek, this meeting with St. Basil is not improbable.

Ephrem was very influential among the Syrian Christians of Edessa as poet, teacher, orator and defender of the faith. His memory was revered by all, Orthodox, Monophysites, and Nestorians. They call him the 'Prophet of Syrians', 'Treasure of Knowledge', 'Lion From Syria', 'Pillar of the Church', 'Second Moses', 'Sun of the Syrians', the 'Column of the Church', and the 'Harp of the Holy Spirit'.

His works are so numerous and important to treat them here in detail. They are generally divided under 3 categories. 1. *Turgame* (prose) 2. *Mêmre* (harmony of prose and poem) 3. *Madrāšê* (poem). From his writings Ephrem shows himself to be an heir to three main cultural traditions: 1. Heir to Mesopotamian tradition. 2. Heir to Judaism. 3. Heir to the Greek world.

These three very different cultural traditions, ancient Mesopotamian, Jewish and Greek, find a meeting point in Ephrem to an extent that cannot be paralleled in any other early Christian writer. Ephrem can be seen to provide a bridge between East and West, between Asia and Europe.

St. Ephrem is well known for his Symbolic theology. He is constantly aware of the sharp division between Creator and creation. In one of the *Hymns on Faith* (69:11) he speaks of this ontological gap as a 'chasm', reflecting the term used in the Parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:26). This means that created 'natures' are incapable of saying anything about the divine nature. At the same time Ephrem says that the human intellect has plenty of scope within the creation to search out the types and symbols available there to have glimpses of understanding of divine reality. God has revealed himself in creation, through 'revealed things' (*galyuta*); the intellect was not intended to pry into hidden things (*kasyuta*).

He speaks about two modes of time, ordinary or historical time and sacred time. Ordinary time is linear and each point in time knows a 'before' and an 'after'. Sacred time, on the other hand, knows no 'before' and 'after', only the 'eternal now': what is important for sacred time is its content, and not a particular place in the sequence of linear time.

Ephrem was not influenced by Platonizing or dualistic tendencies which denied the value of the body. According to him, body is the part of God's creation and so should not be despised. Ephrem uses plenty of imageries like, Medicine of Life, Coal of Fire, Pearl, Robe of Glory, Luminous eye, Mirror, *etc.*, to develop his theology.

For Ephrem, the primary source for any human knowledge of God is Scripture. Scriptures possess both an exterior and an interior meaning. Faith is the essential requirement to interpret Scriptures. Where there is no inner eye of faith, all that is visible is the exterior, historical, meaning of Scripture — what the Fathers generally call 'the letter'. According to him, there are infinite 'interpretations' possible for the Scripture. Each individual understands according to his capacity and interprets as it is granted to him (*Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7:22).

Soon after his death in June of 373, Ephrem was remembered in a public address by his contemporary Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who closed his remarks by asking Ephrem's intercession: "You are now assisting at the divine altar, and before the Prince of life, with the angels, praising the most holy Trinity," said Gregory. "Remember us all, and obtain for us the pardon of our sins". Not only in Syriac Churches but in all other Churches he is venerated as a great mystical theologian and a Saint. Pope Benedict XV named him as a doctor of the Church in October 5 1920, through his Encyclical *Principi Apostolorum Petro*.

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