

1 Introduction

Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373) is best known today as a distinguished theological poet, whose paradoxical symbolism and disciplined wonder form a stream irrigating much of subsequent Syriac tradition. He is among the most significant early authors of the language, a dialect of Aramaic expressing a form of Christianity that prevailed in Late Antiquity from east of Antioch through Mesopotamia, and which came to stretch as far as India and China. In recognition of his inspired eloquence, this same tradition named him the Harp of the Spirit. He wrote for Christians of his native Nisibis and (after 363) of Edessa, both in Mesopotamia. Apart from a few prose commentaries and treatises, much of his extant corpus consists of about 400 *madrāšê*, a type of didactic stanzaic poem, which has been called “the most Aramaean of literary genres.”¹ To contemporary readers, Ephrem’s preference for poetry over prose as a theological and argumentative medium is especially striking.² In his symbolic theology, many discover a fresh and profound approach to exegesis eschewing what Ephrem himself regarded as impious attempts to probe and contain divine mystery. Especially in that sense, his works starkly oppose the various anti-Nicene theologies of the day that have traditionally been termed “Arian.” Accordingly, Ephrem, when he appears in the histories of the period, is usually placed alongside other pro-Nicene theologians as a distinctive Syriac voice in that controversy of the age.

Eschatology too, is a key part of his vision, and Ephrem’s poetry abounds with vivid scenes and images describing the last things and the end of salvation history. His views on these topics frequently ground his exegesis, his spiritual exhortation, his meditative wonder, his prayer, and his polemics. Buchan put it best: “Ephrem’s thought is suffused with eschatological concerns from first to last.”³ Perhaps best known in English are Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*, a detailed meditation on the shared patristic tradition of the restoration of humanity to Eden.⁴ This theme has prompted much commentary to elucidate its ramifications for topics such as sin, human freedom, the Church, and divinization, not to mention erudite study of its sources and subsequent influence.⁵ And since Christ restores Adam from Sheol to Paradise, in Ephrem’s poetic vision, many have naturally turned to study

¹ Griffith, “Christianity in the Syriac-Speaking World,” 14. For Ephrem’s context, see pp. 1–9.

² Brock, *Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, xi.

³ Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 285.

⁴ Daniélou, “Terre et Paradis.”

⁵ Representative examples, in chronological order: Séd, “Les hymnes sur le Paradis”; Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 7–75; Golitzin, “Recovering the Glory of Adam”; Buchan, “Paradise”; Rompay, “Humanity’s Sin in Paradise.”

his richly developed *descensus ad inferos* motif, his keen interest in the doctrine of universal corporeal resurrection, and the question of whether all are saved in the end.⁶ On the resurrection, Ephrem represents the distinctive view of the early Syriac tradition that held that final blessedness is impossible without the body, with the result that the souls of the righteous and unrighteous alike must sleep in Sheol until the final resurrection. Due to this sleep of the soul, Ephrem and other thinkers in his tradition only envisioned the intercession of the saints, or supplication to them for assistance, as occurring in the future at the last judgment, when they would be awake.⁷

Ephrem moves freely and routinely between protology and eschatology. In the scholarly conversation just briefly described, several of his interpreters have done the same, taking many themes and images in an eschatological sense. Amid such abundance, can one discern the coherence of Ephrem's vision of these last things? This question is important for at least two reasons. First, Ilaria Ramelli has claimed Ephrem as an implicit supporter of universalism⁸ and thus incorporated him into her broader revisionist narrative about the prevalence and acceptance of universal salvation in the early Church, a tradition she traces to the New Testament itself and to Origen. And this leads (second) to a broader question implicitly raised by that project: to what extent may one discover in Ephrem a distinctive vision amid early Christian eschatologies? Knowing how Ephrem's eschatology fits together makes its distinctive features available for contemporary theological questions about the universality of salvation and the implications of that position for how we view the human person.

To answer such questions, one must engage Ephrem's view that symbols are the necessary medium for ascending to God and knowing of his plans. These types and images derive from Scripture, from the natural world, and from the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. On the one hand, we have access to God through the symbols he gives to us, by which he "translates" (*mtargem*) and "explains himself" (*napšeh npaššeq*),⁹ and yet Ephrem also insists on their limitations:

If a person were to be confused and focus his attention on the borrowed names of the [Divine] majesty he would blaspheme and slander it by those very borrowed [characteristics] that it puts on to help him,

⁶ Apart from Buchan, see Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel*; Ramelli, "La centralità del mistero di Cristo"; Reinhardt, "The Outskirts of Paradise"; Hartung, *Imagining the Death of Jesus*, 66–106.

⁷ Ephrem's most extensive reflection on this is *Par.* 8. See also Dal Santo, "Saints' Inactivity Post Mortem."

⁸ Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 331–34.

⁹ *Fid.* 44.7.

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and would defraud the graciousness that has bent down
its height to his immaturity. For although he is not family to it,
graciousness has put on human likenesses that it might bring him to the
likenesses of itself.

...

For Paradise has clothed itself in the names of your own kindred.

Not because it is impoverished did it put on your likenesses.

... Faint indeed are its beauties,

because they have been depicted with weak pigments akin to you.¹⁰

Ephrem admonishes his audience to discern the images that God uses for our benefit, while recognizing their inadequacy. Such inadequacy does not consist in leaving us uncertain about what God has done or will do; rather, the point is that only by relying on God can we know him, and only by recognizing that the symbols he gives us do not contain him can we avoid diminishing him, to our own detriment.

Thus our own attempt to discover the coherence of Ephrem's eschatological vision must turn a discerning eye to the key images in which Ephrem couches it. In order to bring clarity to the discussion of universalism, it is also necessary to distinguish among the various eschatological themes those that are most ultimate, beyond resurrection, supplication, intercession, and judgment: namely, the beatitude of the righteous and the condemnation of the wicked. Universalism ultimately concerns itself with these conditions. Moreover, if this end state, whether of blessedness alone or of blessedness and damnation, represents the final goal to which all things tend under God's providential care, then it is reasonable to suppose that the whole drama of the end finds its meaning there. And it is also in such a vision in the "mirror of the Gospel"¹¹ that one can expect to find Ephrem's understanding of what it means to live eternally.

1.1 Organizing the End

Treatments of eschatology in Ephrem and in the Syriac tradition more broadly have tended to approach the matter by dividing it into particular and universal: that is, the account of the fate of the individual after death as distinct from the conclusion of salvation history as a whole. Thus, Murray regularly laments that the early Syriac fathers' accounts of the Kingdom and the Church tend to be individualistic rather than corporate.¹² Witakowski, in his recent treatment, explicitly distinguishes between

¹⁰ *Par.* 11.6–7.

¹¹ *Pub.* §1. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," 272.

¹² Murray, *Symbols*, 93–94, 275–76.

particular and general eschatology.¹³ The debate over universalism, as the name suggests, implies the same frame of reference. Asking questions in this way, with due caution, is not fruitless. But given that the early Syriac tradition's teaching on soul sleep obviates the particular judgment and that Ephrem prefers to move fluidly between individual and corporate perspectives,¹⁴ one might reasonably ask whether a different approach could be more congenial to Ephrem's own thought patterns.

Indeed, Ephrem's angle of vision on the last things seems to take two forms: one can look at them from the point of view of God's descent to humanity, and from the point of view of humanity's ascent to God.¹⁵ Both ascent and descent take place via symbols, and both are predicated on the sharp distinction between creator and creature that is so programmatic for Ephrem.¹⁶ This means that rather than distinguishing between individual and collective accounts, Ephrem's idiom expresses eschatology in terms of the polarity between creator and creation, and the movement between these poles.

1.2 Organizing the Argument

Given this approach, another question naturally arises: what view of humanity (the human pole, so to speak) does Ephrem both presuppose and elaborate in his account of the final things? What sort of thing is a human person, viewed from the perspective of the beatitude for which that person is created? As will become clear in Section 2, Ephrem's vision of the end foregrounds human freedom and its inherent uncertainty. Section 3 argues that Ephrem's account of such freedom is *epektatic*. That is, as for Gregory of Nyssa,¹⁷ transformative growth, specifically in knowing God, remains a feature of human life both now and in blessedness. And Section 4 argues that this remains true for Ephrem even as a possibility for the damned. He never confidently asserts that all will be saved or that one must hope for such an outcome. Yet he is remarkably consistent in allowing the possibility that human freedom, after body and soul reunite post-resurrection, has the opportunity to accept, though not to deserve, the grace of escape even from Gehenna, whose permanence is a function

¹³ Witakowski, "Syriac Eschatology in Antiquity," 499.

¹⁴ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 30–31.

¹⁵ Maximus the Confessor's *Ad Thalassium* §22 is an illuminating comparison. See Daley, *Hope*, 218–19. Ephrem is hardly so explicit as Maximus, but the pattern of the creator–creature distinction in Ephrem is well established by Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 53–84.

¹⁶ Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 26–27.

¹⁷ Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 62–64.

of our own interior impenitence. Ultimately, I argue, it is Ephrem's view of human freedom as capable of transformative growth in relation to God that grounds the coherence of his eschatological vision.

In making this case, this study limits itself to the Syriac works of Ephrem generally accepted as authentic.¹⁸ It operates both by a careful descriptive-analytic reading of the grammar of Ephrem's symbols (Section 2) and by analyzing his poetic technique to draw out the fundamental symbol pairs that function as the principles of his thought (Sections 3 and 4). Gregory of Nyssa's view that blessedness consists in perpetual progress into divine goodness occasionally punctuates the analysis, as an illuminating comparison and contrast with Ephrem's position. Gregory relied on the principle that divine goodness is infinite.¹⁹ Ephrem bases his view of progress on a different but related perspective, as will become clear.

When quoted, Ephrem's *madrāšê* are presented according to the layout in their respective critical editions listed in the bibliography, but without any attempt to convey in English the meter of the original. Ellipses indicate intentional omissions on the author's part for brevity or clarity rather than lacunae in the original. All translations from the Syriac are, except where noted, the author's own. Occasionally, words that can be contextually inferred have been inserted, within square brackets, for the sake of clarity.

2 Discerning the Kingdom and Gehenna

Given Ephrem's symbolic idiom, it makes sense to ask which symbols he prefers to use specifically for the future end of salvation history and for how the end relates to the whole. To what extent do they make that future end knowable? There is no doubt that Ephrem's repertoire of symbols is broad and deep, including some whose polysemous depth can bewilder a person, as the poet himself admits.²⁰ Yet when he seeks to refer specifically to the final state of blessedness or torment, he usually speaks of the Kingdom (*malkûtâ*)²¹ and Gehenna (*gêhannâ*).²² Clarifying what Ephrem means by Kingdom and Gehenna thus forms an essential prelude to seeing how his eschatological vision coheres around the polarity between creator and creature.

Beyond coherence, two other related issues are at stake in our task of discerning the two. As noted earlier, some have rightly focused on Ephrem's

¹⁸ Hartung, "Authorship and Dating."

¹⁹ Daniélou, *Platonism and Mystical Theology*, 344–63.

²⁰ *Par.* 6.4–5.

²¹ Matt 5–7; 13; and Luke 23, among others.

²² Matt 5.22–30; 18.8–9; 25.41; and Luke 16.23, among others.

keen interest in corporeal resurrection and Christ's victory over death, a teaching whose defense and elaboration is perhaps the most salient theme in his *Carmina Nisibena*. Can we then take the universality of resurrection as indicating something about the universality of salvation? If the answer is that Ephrem himself consistently depicts the Kingdom and Gehenna as phenomena that take place beyond the horizon of resurrection and judgment, then the answer seems to be no. Establishing this narrative distinction thus paves the way for the discussion of universalism in Section 4.

The second issue is the question of how to interpret Paradise as an eschatological symbol. Is the ultimate end a return to the state of primordial blessedness, and if so, in what way? What is the relationship between Kingdom and Paradise?²³ In any case, there seems little debate among scholars about the eschatological valence of the Kingdom image.²⁴

The business of this section, accordingly, is to unfold in turn the logic inherent in the symbolism of Ephrem's two portraits: of the Kingdom and of Gehenna, and to show their future reference. He construes the former in terms of divine wealth and nourishment, and the latter in terms of fire and the second death. In so doing, Ephrem's overall vision of salvation history also comes to light, as a pattern of return to Paradise for which Ephrem's principal concern is not so much the divine providence that orchestrates the return as the human freedom that strives for it.

2.1 The Wealth of the Kingdom

Ephrem consistently elaborates the inner logic of the Kingdom image as expressing divine wealth made human wealth. *Eccl.* 49 opens with such an image:

You stooped down, O Victorious One, to the debt of Adam (*hawbteh d-adām*).
 You paid it back from the vast treasures (*gazzē*) in your treasures (*šimātāk*).
 You led him to the blessed delights of the Kingdom (*pūnāqê brikê d-malkūtā*).²⁵

Throughout this poem, Ephrem explores how Christ ultimately reverses Adam's fall. Here in the poem's first stanza, the language of returning to the Kingdom expresses that reversal in a compact form. To return to the Kingdom is, in other words, to have one's debt of sin repaid and to have a share thereby in divine wealth.²⁶ In *Eccl.* 50, Ephrem explores the reversal

²³ Murray, "Theory of Symbolism," 7.

²⁴ Murray, *Symbols* adopts this as its premise. Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 20, also takes it as clear.

²⁵ *Eccl.* 49.1.

²⁶ The root of this conception is Jewish. See Anderson, *Sin*, chapter 8.

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at length; he views it as the work of divine mercy toward Adam, conceived as cooperating with human effort, though in an unequal partnership. The imagery of wealth and debt affords him a convenient way to establish the inequality of God's graciousness with humanity, which is like that between a king and a pauper.²⁷ "Whose effort," says Ephrem, "suffices for the price of the Kingdom (*dmāyyāh d-malkūtā*), / to receive it by justice without inheriting it for free?"²⁸ Christ sought, in fact, to "enrich our neediness (*ṣrīkūtan*) with heavenly treasures"²⁹ so that his wealth becomes ours. Ephrem sees this wealth anticipated in Enoch's return to Paradise (hinted at in Gen 5.24).³⁰ Enoch and Elijah, says Ephrem, "lived by his symbols in advance (*b-rāzaw[hy] ḥyaw lūqdam*). / For they were both snatched up and translated (*eštānnīw*) to Paradise itself."³¹ Anticipated in them, Christ's purpose is fulfilled in the Kingdom, which appears here synonymous with Paradise. The relationship between Adam and Enoch illustrates some of the complexities of Ephrem's thought about the last things. The Kingdom is a future reality, at least from Adam's point of view in the poem's implied narrative. Yet the verbs in the first stanza are perfect tense: Christ "has led" (*dbartā[hy]*) Adam to the Kingdom. Enoch's example shows that he at least could enjoy this wealth in advance. What of its present status for us? Are we or are we not already in the future Kingdom?

The argument will return to Enoch's example in Section 3.4 to consider the role of human effort. For the moment, another financial image, also used to sum up Christ's saving work, clarifies how one may enjoy the Kingdom even now. Christ, says Ephrem,

departed from Sheol and dwelt in the Kingdom in order to tread the way from Sheol, which cheats all (*tālmat kol*), to the Kingdom which rewards all (*pār'at kol*). For our Lord gave his own resurrection as a pledge (*rahbônā*) to mortals that he would transfer (*da-nšannē*) them from Sheol which receives the departed without discrimination to the Kingdom which admits those invited with discrimination.³²

Death contrasts with the Kingdom in financial terms, but Ephrem here refines the image of the reward by which they differ. For the Kingdom

²⁷ *Eccl.* 50.9–10.

²⁸ *Eccl.* 50.10.

²⁹ *Eccl.* 49.2.

³⁰ The way Ephrem describes Enoch's return to Paradise is rooted in Jewish tradition; see Kronholm, *Motifs*, 125–126.

³¹ *Eccl.* 49.9.

³² *Serm. Dom.* §1. Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem Des Syrsers Sermo de Domino Nostro*, 1.

does pay back all, but unlike death it discriminates on the basis of people's labors.³³ Thus the Kingdom is marked by a mysterious paradox of equality and discrimination. And Christ's pledge or down payment shows that Ephrem sees the reality of the Kingdom as present in Christ, but that the account is not, as it were, "settled" yet. That awaits the future resurrection of the body, foreshadowed in Christ's own.³⁴

Since, as the examples already quoted have shown, the treasure image is closely connected to the exercise of our free will and effort, it is no surprise that Ephrem uses the wealth of the future Kingdom for exhortation. For instance, in *Repr.* 3.292ff, the Kingdom is the basis for encouraging endurance of poverty.³⁵ And more positively, when Ephrem describes wisdom in opposition to investigation, he frames that wisdom in terms of the eschatological Kingdom as a treasure possessed even now:

The wisdom of the wise is this:
to inherit life in the Kingdom (*bêt malkûtâ*).
The wisdom of the wise is this:
to prepare for a good end (*ḥartâ ṭābtâ la-mṭayyābū*).
Gaze upon Joseph [the patriarch], wise in deeds.
See how he snatched his treasure (*gazzeh*) from the blazing fire.³⁶

The Kingdom is the good end of all our striving, and Ephrem's example of the wisdom that seeks it is Joseph's purity, the treasure he preserved in spite of Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce him (Gen 39.11–12), but Joseph claims his treasure even now precisely by preparing for that treasure that is to come. The image also serves as a warning. In the immediately preceding stanza, Ephrem had emphasized that Christ "established [the blessings] as a matter unforced, / and every person chooses according to his will."³⁷ In *Virg.* 40, dedicated to the parable of the talents (Matt 25.14–30), Ephrem also castigates those who freely squander the "gemstones and treasures of the Kingdom."³⁸ Throughout Ephrem's references to the Kingdom as the eschatological goal the logic of the talents applies.

³³ *Serm. Dom.* §1. Ibid.

³⁴ Sebastian Brock addresses this question of temporality in Ephrem much more generally. In his view, we must distinguish between regular time and sacred time. Transcendent realities such as Paradise or Christ's descent to Sheol are outside the realm of earthly time. See Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 29–30. Also Brock, *Singer of the Word of God*, 213–14. In fact, Ephrem's handling of Christ's ascent to the Kingdom as a pledge of our own future ascent nicely illustrates Brock's point, for the Kingdom is a transcendent reality that is simultaneously present but not yet.

³⁵ *Repr.* 3.291–294. This passage employs the same word for transfer as that used by the passage quoted in *Serm. Dom.* §1.

³⁶ *Eccl.* 27.4.

³⁷ *Eccl.* 27.3.

³⁸ *Virg.* 40.2