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**“Blessed Is He Who Has
Brought Adam From Sheol”**

“Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam From Sheol”

**Christ’s Descent to the Dead
in the Theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian**

THOMAS BUCHAN



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INTRODUCTION

SAINT EPHREM THE SYRIAN

Saint Ephrem the Syrian was born ca. 306 C.E. and lived most of his life in the Mesopotamian city of Nisibis. The son of Christian parents, Ephrem was brought up in the Christian faith, and was likely catechized and baptized in the name of the Trinity in his late adolescence.¹ According to a sixth century source, he was appointed to a teaching ministry in the Nisibene church upon the bishop Jacob's return from the first council of Nicaea in 325.² Ephrem continued to serve the church during the tenures of the bishops who succeeded Jacob: Babu (338-350), Vologeses (ca. 350-361), and Abraham (ca. 361-?).³ All three of these episcopacies

¹ Concerning Ephrem's Christian parentage and formation see: Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 8-9.; Edward G. Mathews, Jr. "General Introduction," in: Kathleen E. McVey, ed. *Saint Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Fathers of the Church, Vol. 91, Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trs. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 25.

² Sebastian Brock identifies Barhadbeshabba of Halwan's *The Origin of the Schools*, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 4, p. 63 as the source of this datum: Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 10.

³ Ephrem himself provides a record of the names and deeds of the bishops Jacob, Babu, Vologeses, and Abraham in his *Nisibene Hymns*: Edmund Beck, ed. and tr., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vols. 218-219 (Louvain: Peeters, 1961). English translations of pertinent selections from this work are available in: Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, Second Series, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 180-193. Concerning the Nisibene

were punctuated by war between the empires of Rome and Persia, culminating in the cession of Nisibis to the Sassanid ruler Shapur II as part of the Roman army's terms of surrender in the wake of Julian the Apostate's failed Persian campaign of 363.⁴ Sometime after the fall of Nisibis, Ephrem relocated to the city of Edessa where he served the church of that city until he died on June 9, 373.⁵

Ephrem, who was known to his contemporaries and has been remembered in Christian tradition as “the Harp of the Holy Spirit,” was a prolific writer whose works played an important role in the liturgy of the churches he served and exerted a profound influence on the Syriac Christian tradition.⁶ Outside of the Syriac Christian milieu, his writings were known in translation even within his

episcopate see: J.-M. Fiey, “Les évêques de Nisibe au temps de saint Ephrem,” *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 123-135.

⁴ Nisibis, modern Nusaybin, Turkey, was situated on the border shared and contested by Rome and Persia. The city had been under Roman dominion since 297 C.E., but remained an important military and political stronghold equally desired by both empires. Nisibis was a long established, cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multi-religious city, and was also the exclusive site of commercial activity between Rome and Persia. In 335 C.E., the Sassanid Persian ruler Shapur II made the decision to restore the old boundaries of his empire through the reconquest of Mesopotamia. As a result, Roman Nisibis was besieged (unsuccessfully) by Persian forces in 338, 346, and 350 before it was surrendered to Shapur II in 363. See: Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 5-23.

⁵ The date of Ephrem's relocation to Edessa, modern Urfa, Turkey, is still a matter of scholarly debate. See: Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 33. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ephrem ended his life there, dying shortly after the completion of his ministry to victims of a severe famine in the early part of 373. See: Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 33-37. See also: “Introduction” in: Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 23-28.

⁶ Ephrem's exegetical technique and hymnody would provide a theological model for subsequent Syriac theologians. The inclusion of his works within the liturgical practices of the Syrian churches has ensured his continuing influence. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 3-12. See also: “Introduction” in: McVey, *Hymns*, 3-5.

lifetime.⁷ Ephrem enjoyed such fame and approval among late antique Christians that a number of works composed in a variety of other languages were circulated under his name.⁸ Though such pseudepigrapha serve to demonstrate his widespread popularity and influence, it is now generally understood that these writings do not authentically preserve Ephrem's own voice.⁹

Scholars are now generally agreed that Ephrem's authentic surviving works in prose and poetry may be divided into four categories: straight prose, artistic or rhythmic prose, verse homilies or *memre*, and hymns or *madrashe*.¹⁰ Throughout his writings, the particularity of Ephrem's Syriac approach to theological reflection is especially evident in his avoidance of doctrinal definitions as hazardous and potentially blasphemous, preferring instead to

⁷ Ephrem's Syriac writings were eventually translated not only into Greek and Latin, but also Coptic, Ethiopic, and Armenian, greatly expanding the scope of his influence. Within two decades of his death, Ephrem was already receiving the recognition of his neighbors to the West, mentioned by Epiphanius in his *Panarion* (377) and Jerome in his *De viri inlustribus* (393). Several other patristic authorities, including Theodoret of Cyr, Sozomen, and Palladius would also note Ephrem's holiness of life and acumen as a theologian. See: Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 12-25.; Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "General Introduction," in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 3-5.; "Introduction" in: McVey, *Hymns*, 4.

⁸ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 33-36.; Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 17-19.; Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "General Introduction," in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 37-45.

⁹ Kathleen McVey has pointed out that "the problem of sorting out [Ephrem's] legacy to the universal church is complicated by the fact that his authentic writings in Syriac are scarcely represented in the vast body of writings ascribed to him in these other languages. There is a nearly complete mismatch between the texts considered by Syriac scholars to be authentic and those which survive in various other languages under Ephrem's name." Kathleen E. McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd edition, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, ed. Everett Ferguson, associate eds. Michael P. McHugh, Frederick W. Norris (New York: Garland, 1997) 1228-1250. McVey has elsewhere called attention to the work of scholars attempting to sort through the non-Syriac literatures ascribed to Ephrem. See: McVey, *Hymns*, 4, n. 6.

¹⁰ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 18.

articulate Christian truth by means of symbolism and paradox.¹¹ While the distinctive character of Ephrem’s theological method finds its way into all of his writings, it flourishes especially in his verse homilies and hymnody where his brilliance as a master poet and orthodox theologian intersect with, complement, and amplify one another.

Though the intentional “imprecision” and fluidity of Ephrem’s theological writings are designed to defy systematization and remain difficult to summarize, an underlying pattern and order

¹¹ Sebastian Brock has attempted to “illustrate in a simple way the basic difference between what one may call the philosophical approach to theology, with its search for definitions, and the symbolic approach, [by visualizing] a circle with a point in the centre, where the point represents that aspect of God under enquiry. The philosophical approach seeks to identify and locate this central point, in other words to defined it, set boundaries to it. The symbolic approach, on the other hand, attempts no such thing; rather it will provide a series of paradoxical pairs of opposites, placing them at opposite points around the circumference of the circle; the central point is left undefined, but something of its nature and whereabouts can be inferred by joining up the various opposite points, the different paradoxes, on the circle’s circumference. The former procedure can be seen as providing a static understanding of the centre point, while the latter offers an understanding that remains essentially dynamic in character.” Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 24-25.

The scholarly literature on Ephrem’s poetic use of symbolism is too extensive to list exhaustively, but relatively recent representative examples may be found in: Tanios Bou Mansour, “Le concepte du symbole chez Ephrem,” in: *La pensée symbolique de saint Éphrem le Syrien*, XVI (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l’Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 23-120.; Sebastian P. Brock, “The Poet as Theologian,” *Sobornost* 7:4 (1977): 243-250.; Sebastian P. Brock, “Saint Ephrem’s Theological Approach,” in: *The Luminous Eye*, 23-51.; David Bundy, “Language and the Knowledge of God in Ephrem Syrus,” *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 5 (1986): 91-103.; Nabil el-Khoury, “The Use of Language by Ephraim the Syrian,” in *Studia Patristica XV-XVI: Papers presented to the Seventh International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, 1975*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin : Akademie-Verlag, 1985), 93-99.; Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 45-56.; Robert Murray, “The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem’s Theology,” *Parole de l’Orient* 6/7 (1975/1976): 1-20.

is nonetheless discernable.¹² Biblical revelation, interpreted in a manner more closely akin to Antiochian than to Alexandrian models, forms the core of Ephrem's thought, the Old and New Testaments providing a complementary typological unity of Divine self-disclosure.¹³ In his exegetical practice, Ephrem charted a course between rigid literalism and rampant allegorism, drawing the spiritual senses of Scripture out of its surface sense by means of carefully comparing and contrasting symbols, types, and names.¹⁴ A number of biblical and mundane images, motifs, and themes are adapted to theological use and recur with frequency throughout his literary corpus.¹⁵ Ephrem delighted in parallelism, whether

¹² As Edward G. Mathews, Jr. has pointed out: "In his hymns Ephrem employs his favorite Semitic poetic devices with marvelous technical artistry and fashions a poetry that can at times be almost breathtaking. Due to the nature of Ephrem's poetry, however, his theological method is not easily systematized. This is not to say that Ephrem had no system—much less that his thought was diffuse—it is only that his method does not conform well to standard Western models." Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "General Introduction," in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 45-47.

¹³ Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "General Introduction," in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 47. It should not be assumed, however, that there is an incompatibility between Ephrem's thought and that of Alexandrian theologians. For a survey of similarities between Origen and Ephrem see: Kathleen E. McVey, "St. Ephrem's Understanding of Spiritual Progress: Some Points of Comparison with Origen of Alexandria," *The Harp* 1:2-3 (1988): 117-128.

¹⁴ Concerning Ephrem's conception of the revelatory significance of symbols, types, and names, see: Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 53-66. On Ephrem's theology of names, see: Thomas Koonammakkal, "Divine Names and Theological Language in Ephrem," in *Studia Patristica, Vol. XXV: Papers Presented at the Eleventh International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, 1991*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1993): 318-323.

¹⁵ For a survey of themes and images, biblical and mundane, which appear in Ephrem's works, see: Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 25-51. For more detailed considerations of key images, see: Edmund Beck, "Zwei ephrämisches Bilder," *Oriens Christianus* 71 (1987): 1-23.; Edmund Beck, "Das Bild vom Weg mit Meilensteinen und Herbergen bei Ephräm," *Oriens Christianus* 65 (1981): 1-39.; Edmund Beck, *Ephräms Trinitätslehre im Bild von Sonne/Feuer, Licht, und Wärme*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 425 (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1981).; Edmund Beck, "Das

comparative or antithetical, finding analogs and types strewn throughout Scripture and nature which pointed in diverse and mysterious ways to the fulfillment of God's revelation and the accomplishment of human redemption in Jesus Christ.¹⁶

For Ephrem, nearly every aspect of Jesus' saving life, death, and resurrection was regarded as a symbol capable of unveiling an abundance of spiritual fortification for Christians who sought to faithfully emulate their Lord. Though always articulated within the limits of the Nicene orthodoxy he championed, Ephrem's vivid depictions of the redemptive significance and spiritual meaning of the events of Christ's incarnate ministry were nonetheless expressed in a number of forms uniquely characteristic of his fourth century Syriac milieu.¹⁷ One of the events of the Savior's

Bild vom Sauerteig bei Ephräm," *Oriens Christianus* 63 (1979): 1-19.; Edmund Beck, "Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephräm," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953): 1-24.; Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: Hymni de Ecclesia 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1976): 137-144.; Pierre Yousif, "Le symbolisme de la croix dans la nature chez S. Éphrem de Nisibe," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (1978): 207-227.; Pierre Yousif, "St. Éphrem on Symbols in Nature: Faith, the Trinity, and the Cross (Hymns on Faith no. 18)," *Eastern Churches Review* 10 (1978): 52-60.; Pierre Yousif, "Symbolisme christologique dans la Bible et dans la nature chez S. Éphrem de Nisibe," *Parole de l'Orient* 8 (1977/1978): 5-66.; Pierre Yousif, "La croix de Jésus et le paradis d'Éden dans la typologie biblique de S. Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975/1976): 29-48.

¹⁶ Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975/1976): 1-20.

¹⁷ Jacob, perhaps the first bishop of Nisibis to have been appointed by the Roman rather than the Persian hierarchy (ca. 308/9 C.E.), is reputed to have attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. According to tradition, he appointed Ephrem as a teacher upon his return from the council, presumably in order to effectively propagate the theological standards defined by the council. Ephrem succeeded in promoting the faith of Nicaea, but not at the expense of rejecting the heritage of ante-Nicene Syriac Christianity, which he successfully retained and wove into the fabric of the fourth century orthodoxy. See: Edward G. Mathews, Jr., "General Introduction," in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 26-28.; McVey, *Hymn*, 8-12. For a more extensive account of Ephrem's defense of the faith of Nicaea, see: Paul Russell, *St. Ephrem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians*, Moran Etho 5 (Kottayam, India: Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994).

mediatorial ministry which had received special attention in the climate of ante-Nicene Syriac Christianity and continued to occupy a particularly important place in Ephrem's theological reflection was the belief that in the interval between his crucifixion and his resurrection Jesus Christ descended to Sheol, the underworldly abode of the dead.

EPHREM THE SYRIAN'S CONCEPTION OF CHRIST'S DESCENT TO THE DEAD IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SCHOLARSHIP

One of the first twentieth century scholars to call attention to Ephrem the Syrian's thought concerning the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol was the German philologist Josef Kroll. Employing a *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* method, Kroll argued in his 1932 work, *Gott und Hölle: Der Mythos vom Descensuskampfe*,¹⁸ that the Christian affirmation of Christ's descent to the underworld represented the culmination and continuation of a series of historical, cultural, and religious antecedents. Kroll identified the Christian doctrine as a revision of an earlier mythological type which narrated a display of power in the underworld. While a close precedent was to be found in the Graeco-Roman myth of Heracles' descent to Hades for the purpose of capturing Cerberus,¹⁹ Kroll argued that the myth could be traced back further when one considered Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, Iranian, Mandaean, Manichaean, and Jewish narratives of descent to the underworld. Ephrem the Syrian's conception of Christ's descent to the dead was therefore to be understood simply as one example among many of the enduring Christian re-articulation of the ancient myths of

¹⁸ Josef Kroll, *Gott und Hölle: Der Mythos vom Descensuskampfe*, ed. Fritz Saxl, Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, Vol. XX (Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1932).

¹⁹ Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, v. Kroll states that: "Nähres Nachforschen ergab, dass die Bezeugungen der Höllenfahrt Jesu einem festen Typus der Schilderung anzugehören pflegen, und dass anderseits das, was man bei Seneca als neuartig empfindet, gar nicht singulär ist, sondern mit sonstigen antiken Darstellungen von gewaltsamen Vorgängen in der Unterwelt zusammenhängt, die als Ganzes genommen dem christlichen Typus der Höllenfahrtsschilderung verwandt sind."

underworldly descent which had been inherited by classical antiquity.²⁰

While Kroll's inclusion of Ephrem the Syrian in his survey was groundbreaking, his treatment of Ephrem was not without its deficiencies. Limited exclusively to the second half of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*,²¹ Kroll's treatment was concerned only with a small, even if very important, portion of Ephrem's corpus. More problematically, Ephrem's depiction of Christ's descent to Sheol was constrained and pressed into service to the philologist's considerable methodological commitments. As one figure among many, Ephrem appearance was exceptionally brief and nearly devoid of attention to detail. While concerned with and appreciative of the dramatic aspects of the hymns, Kroll was critical of their content and overall effect, writing that:

²⁰ Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, vi. Kroll wrote: “Es war zunächst der Einfluß des Orients festzustellen nicht nur unmittelbar auf das Christentum, sondern, was für den klassischen Philologen weit wichtiger war, auf die Antike. Denn wenn die Hypothese von der Einwirkung des Orients richtig war, war eben das antike Denken durch den Orient nachhaltig beeinflusst und gestaltet worden. Es ergab sich damit eine für die klassische Philologie eigentümliche, geradezu typische Situation. Die zentrale Stellung der Antike, in die, namentlich seit Beginn der hellenistischen Epoche, mit ihrer ganzen Fülle die Geistesströme anderer Kulturen einmünden, lässt den Philologen eine Menge von Phänomenen erfassen, anderen Durchforschung das Verständnis wichtiger Besonderheiten der griech-römischen Geisteskultur hängt. Die Bedeutung der aus der Fremde einströmenden Gedanken pflegt sich aber in der Beeinflussung des antiken Denkens nicht zu erschöpfen. In vielen Fällen gewinnen sie, indem sie durch das Medium des antiken Geistes hindurchgehen, selbst erst ihre entscheidende Form und Richtung, gelangen sie selbst erst zum Gipfel ihrer eigenen inneren Entwicklung, zu jener eigenen Vollendung, auf der ihre durchschlagende Wirkung über das Altertum hinaus für alle Folgezeit beruht. Diese, wenn man so sagen darf, transformatorische Bedeutung der Antike lässt den klassischen Philologen vorwärts und rückwärts grosse geistige Bewegungen überschauen, die zum Teil—man braucht eben nur an das Christentum zu denken—für die gesamte europäische Kultur von entscheidender Bedeutung geworden sind.”

²¹ Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, 96. Kroll's citations of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* were taken from Gustav Bickell, *S. Ephraemi Syri Carmina Nisibena Additis prologemensis et supplemento lexicorum syriacorum. Primus edidit, vertit, explicavit.* (Lipsiae, 1866).

Dem wortreichen Syrer, der die duftigen Blüten seines Geistes und seiner Sprache mit endlosem prosaischem Gerede und langweiligen Tiraden zudeckt und sich damit selbst um die Wirkung betrügt, gebricht es an eigentlich dramatischer Kraft.²²

Kroll's emphasis on the dramatic quality of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, coupled with his neglect of their distinctive literary and theological features, allowed him to disregard the genuine variety and particularity of the poet's depiction of Christ's descent to Sheol. Kroll would instead argue that Ephrem's vision could be effectively reduced to a single image which was influenced by and theologically congruent with the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the *Catechetical Homilies* of Cyril of Jerusalem.

Das Bild, das sich Aphrem von der Hadesfahrt macht, entspricht mit dem gesamten Beiwerke dem, wie wir es im Evangelium Nicodemi und bei mehreren Homileten vorfinden. Das alles ist längst Gemeingut geworden. Es wäre leicht, bis in Einzelheiten und Nebendinge die feste Topik zu erweisen. Das kann hier nicht geschehen. Es kann nur ganz obenhin auf das Fortwirken unseres alten Typus hingewiesen werden.²³

Another account of Ephrem the Syrian's thought concerning Christ's descent to the dead written in the first half of the twentieth-century appeared in William Carrington Finch's doctoral dissertation entitled *The Descent Into Hades: An Exegetical, Historical, and Theological Study*.²⁴ Submitted to Drew University in 1940, Finch's study aimed to demonstrate the uniquely Christian character of the doctrine and to answer the questions, "What was the place of this doctrine in the Church historically and what are its permanent values to the doctrine of the Person of Christ, to the Christian doctrine of Salvation, and to Christian Eschatology?"²⁵

In his survey of Christian history, Finch considered the numerous and varied references to the doctrine of Christ's descent

²² Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, 96.

²³ Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, 97.

²⁴ William Carrington Finch, "The Descent Into Hades: An Exegetical, Historical, and Theological Study" (Ph. D. diss., Drew University, 1940).

²⁵ Finch, "The Descent Into Hades", 2.

to the dead to be roughly equivalent expressions of belief in an article of faith having a relatively fixed and stable content. Eager to demonstrate the degree to which the doctrine had been believed, taught, and confessed throughout the ancient church, Finch produced an extensive catalog of early Christian testimony. Ephrem the Syrian fit into this broad framework, taking up less than three pages of text. Finch was less concerned with Ephrem's distinctive articulation of Christ's descent to Sheol and more interested in adapting the fourth-century poet's prolific use of the doctrine to his own purposes, presenting Ephrem as proof "that the Syrian Church in its most representative form maintained consistently, like her sisters, the larger churches, the Descensus as an integral part of its faith."²⁶ The assimilative drift of Finch's account allowed him to write the following with respect to Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*.

It is not possible to note all of Ephrem's references in our study. Suffice it to say that they are full of rhetorical and lyrical descriptions of the triumph of Jesus and the trembling of Satan. The conversation between Death and the Devil, the bursting of the bonds and the liberation of Adam, the emptying of Hades, the sorrow in Hell at being despoiled, the lament of Death, and a host of rhetorical details closely resembling in many respects those already seen in the Gospel of Nicodemus are all central features of these poems."²⁷

The deficiencies of Finch's account would be, despite differences in method, remarkably similar to those noted above with reference to Kroll's study. Finch considered roughly the same small portion of Ephrem's writings as had Kroll. Also like Kroll, Finch allowed the broad scope of his work to eclipse many of the most significant features of Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to the underworld. Finch, no less than his German predecessor, failed to see and value the distinctive elements of Ephrem's poetic vision, distilling the Syrian poet's numerous and vivid descriptions of the event into a single narrative account, which was conveniently equated with what was regarded by both

²⁶ Finch, "The Descent Into Hades", 164.

²⁷ Finch, "The Descent Into Hades", 164.

authors as an ideal type: the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Despite markedly different hypotheses concerning the origins of the doctrine, Finch and Kroll produced strikingly parallel homogenized versions of Ephrem, which told surprisingly little about Ephrem's own conception of the theological significance of Christ's descent to the dead.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a distinctly different approach to Ephrem the Syrian's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol emerged in Javier Teixidor's article, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez Saint Éphrem" which appeared in 1961.²⁸ Teixidor's evaluation of Ephrem's vision of Christ's descent to Sheol presupposed the legitimacy and significance of the ways in which Ephrem's conception *differed* from those of his neighbors to the west and called attention both to particular elements and to the overall theological import of Ephrem's use of the doctrine. Teixidor's work succeeded where earlier accounts had failed precisely because it was able to identify and present a number of the distinctive aspects of Ephrem's use of the doctrine which had gone largely unnoticed in earlier considerations.

From the start, Teixidor noticed and pointed out that Death was personified and used as a *dramatis persona* by Ephrem throughout the latter half of the *Nisibene Hymns*, placing much needed emphasis on the literary and poetic character of Ephrem's works.²⁹ Secondly, because he was concerned only with Ephrem's view of Christ's descent to Sheol, Teixidor provided more detailed description of Ephrem's use of the theme than had been previously

²⁸ Javier Teixidor, "La thème de la descente aux enfers chez saint Éphrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 25-40. In 1961, Teixidor also published a longer article which dealt more generally with Ephrem's conceptions of death, Heaven, and Sheol. Though not focused on the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol, the article draws on some of the same sources and has some ancillary value for the current study. See: Javier Teixidor, "Muerte, Cielo, y Seol en San Efrén," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 27 (1961): 82-114.

²⁹ Earlier scholarship had tended to overlook Ephrem's deployment of literary devices, but Teixidor's account called attention to the manner in which Ephrem's own view was consciously mediated through an elaborate cast of characters. Taken as an intentional rhetorical strategy, Ephrem's use of complex literary devices may be seen as underscoring his convictions concerning the approximate and metaphorical nature of language.

provided. Furthermore, because he was not primarily interested in the task of bringing Ephrem's view into alignment with another, he was under less constraint to reductionistically homogenize Ephrem's use of the doctrine. Instead, Teixidor highlighted the 'double aspects' of Ephrem's depictions of the nature of Sheol and the value of Christ's descent there, inaugurating a renewed appreciation of the multi-faceted poetic character of Ephrem's hymns. Thirdly, though he admitted similarities between Ephrem's account and those of other texts concerning "l'idée d'un conflit entre le Christ et l'Ennemi,"³⁰ the overall effect of Teixidor's article was to temper the tendency to see Ephrem's vision as dependent on and generally equivalent to the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.³¹ Fourthly, Teixidor considered Ephrem's implementation of the theme of Christ's descent to Sheol in works other than the *Nisibene Hymns*, including several of his *memre*, his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, his *Hymns on Paradise*, and his forty-eighth homily *Against the Heretics*.³² Teixidor thus both illustrated the particularity of the doctrine in Ephrem's works, and demonstrated that it served in a variety of theological contexts, both polemic (as in his anti-Bardaisanite *memre*) and doctrinal (as in his deployment of the highly charged image of the resurrection of Adam). Fifthly, Teixidor concluded his article with the observation that the theological shape of Ephrem's view of Christ's descent to Sheol as the extension, fulfillment, and completion of Christ's earthly ministry bore implications for the living of the Christian life in the world, presenting "la possibilité de vivre 'parfaitement et en plénitude' la vie terrestre, faisant d'elle une vie qui ne finit pas avec la mort."³³

³⁰ Javier Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez saint Ephrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 31.

³¹ Javier Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez saint Ephrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 32.

³² Teixidor's expanded scope is at least in part owing to the contributions of Dom Edmund Beck whose critical editions of Ephrem's works began to appear in 1955 in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* published by Peeters Press of Louvain.

³³ Javier Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez saint Ephrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 40. While Teixidor's observation did not receive any detailed explication, it provided an interesting suggestion for further study of the *intramundane* theological significance of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol.

In 1973, Jean Gribomont's article entitled "Le triomphe de Pâques d'après Saint Éphrem"³⁴ considered the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol as one aspect of Ephrem's theology of redemption. Gribomont's study, as he made clear from the outset, was purposely selective and based

avant tout des Hymnes pascales (en trois séries: sur le Azymes, sur la Crucifixion, sur la Résurrection = *Az*, *Cr*, *Rj*); du Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant (= *CE*); de la seconde série, eschatologique, des *Carmina Nisibena* (*CN*); et du *Memra* sur Notre Seigneur (*NS*). Certes, un dépouillement de toute l'oeuvre du saint serait utile, mais c'est une oeuvre de longue haleine, qui se heurte du rest à des problèmes critiques épineux, même pour la partie éditée scientifiquement dans le CSCO. Un point de départ limité, mais précis, autorise déjà une certaine synthèse positive.³⁵

Gribomont's article provided a broad survey and presentation of characteristic themes and motifs in Ephrem the Syrian's theology of redemption. He saw Ephrem's interest in the meaning of the supernatural and other-worldly aspects of Christ's passion recorded in the Gospel narratives (the darkening of the sun, the rending of the temple veil, and the resuscitation of the dead) as the impetus behind his detailed descriptions of Christ's descent to Sheol. According to Gribomont, the latter was a 'second act' which followed from and further elucidated the significance of Jesus' death. Synopsizing the "drama" of Christ's descent to the underworld, Gribomont brought to light a few key themes in Ephrem's depiction of the event including Christ's deception of Death and Satan, the gluttony and vomiting of Death, and the payment of the debt of Adam.

While Gribomont's account of Ephrem's redemptive theology, and of the descent to Sheol as one component within it, brought new attention to key aspects of Ephrem's thought, he also noted what he considered liabilities of Ephrem's theological method. At various points throughout his article, Gribomont stressed the absence of a systematic hermeneutic in Ephrem's use

³⁴ Jean Gribomont, "Le triomphe de Pâques d'après Saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 147-189.

³⁵ Jean Gribomont, "Le triomphe de Pâques d'après Saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 147-148.

of Scripture. Gribomont also regarded Ephrem's theological reflections, especially in the *Carmina Nisibena*, as lacking a logical sequence. Moreover, Gribomont noted disparagingly that, unlike more "serious" theologians, Ephrem failed to specify whether God or the devil was the creditor to whom the debt of Adam was due. Ironically, within the span of a couple of decades, many of the 'weaknesses' Gribomont identified in Ephrem's thought were received and prized as great strengths by a new cadre of scholars of Syriac Christianity. Suspensions of and prejudices against Ephrem's supposed deficiencies of system, logic, erudition, and seriousness would soon be quieted as Ephrem's own inner coherence, complex patterns of thought and expression, and depth of insight were steadily brought into sharper focus.

In Jouko Martikainen's 1978 study of *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers*,³⁶ the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol was considered as "ein integrierender Teil der ganzen Mission Christi."³⁷ Martikainen argued that Christ's birth from Mary, his descent to Sheol, and his resurrection from the dead were "sukzessive phasen in einem heilsgeschichtlichen Ganzen"³⁸ which had as its object the destruction of death. Seen in this way, the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol would take its place in a broad soteriological framework.

Revisiting what was by 1978 a well-established and familiar *locus* in studies of Ephrem's account of Christ's descent to Sheol, Martikainen focused his discussion primarily on the second half of the *Carmina Nisibena*. A number of previous studies had already identified these hymns as an important source, and some had already provided summaries of their thematic material. Martikainen's study, in keeping with his intention to present a systematic overview of Ephrem's thought, attempted to discern and present an underlying pattern which could provide a unified reading of the second half of the *Carmina Nisibena*. This constituted a break with many of the earlier studies in that Martikainen supposed that Ephrem's poetry possessed a legitimate logic of its

³⁶ Jouko Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: Eine Systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*, Meddelanden Från Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, Nr. 32 (Åbo: Publications of Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, 1978).

³⁷ Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel*, 86.

³⁸ Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel*, 86.

own, and moreover, that the logic of the second half of the *Carmina Nisibena* was, in fact, a robust theo-logic.

Several twentieth century scholars had identified, to varying degrees, the abundance, repetition, and absence of a singular narrative thread as weaknesses, difficulties, or challenges posed by Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*. Where a number of earlier scholars had surmounted these obstacles either by reducing the abundance and repetition through the importation of their own linear narratives, or by celebrating the genius of Ephrem's prolific imagery while despairing of any logical coherence, Martikainen broke a new trail, arguing that Ephrem's excess and repetition became more understandable when the dramatic action of the *Nisibene Hymns* 35-41 was considered as unfolding along two narrative lines, leading to two theological climaxes.

Martikainen identified the two climaxes of the *Carmina Nisibena* as Hymn 36.11 and Hymn 41.16. According to Martikainen, the first climax was related to the moment of Jesus' death and was intimately connected with the revelation of Jesus' full humanity. The second climax portrayed the Savior's resurrection from Sheol, and functioned as a theophany, displaying the fullness of Jesus' divinity. Martikainen argued that the affirmation of Christ's two natures as well as many of the thematic and theological motifs of the second part of the *Carmina Nisibena* were also present in a number of Ephrem's other writings where the poet referred to Christ's descent to Sheol.

Martikainen's work, especially as a result of its expectant approach to Ephrem, advanced the study of the Syrian poet's thought concerning Christ's deliverance of humanity from evil and death. While others had earlier identified what might be called the "temporal problematic" of Ephrem's account of Christ's descent to Sheol in the second half of the *Carmina Nisibena*, Martikainen's approach to this aspect of the work was the first to move beyond critique to a recognition of the constructive value of this component. Martikainen's attempt to discern an underlying logical pattern in Ephrem's reflections on Christ's descent to Sheol in the *Nisibene Hymns* was unprecedented and signalled what would become a fruitful reversal of the thoughts of earlier scholars who had deplored Ephrem's supposed lack of logical coherence and theological depth.

In 1983, Msgr. Seely Beggiani provided readers with a concise and informative introduction to *Early Syriac Christianity with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition*.³⁹ In addition to the works of Ephrem the Syrian, Beggiani drew on the theological writings of later figures such as Jacob of Serugh and Narsai, as well as the liturgy of the Maronite rite. Beggiani's survey acquainted readers with the broad contours of Syriac Christian thought with respect to a number of doctrinal *loci* including 'Creation and Sin,' 'Incarnation,' 'Redemption,' 'Divinization and the Holy Spirit,' 'Mysteries of Initiation,' 'Eschatology,' and 'Faith.'

It was within his chapter on 'Redemption' in the early Syriac Christian tradition that Beggiani dealt with the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol in the works of Saint Ephrem. Beggiani pointed out that this doctrine supplied the Syriac fathers with the principal image they used "to describe the cosmic struggle between Christ, who ultimately is the creator of life, and the power of death and sin."⁴⁰ By so doing, Beggiani corroborated the earlier assertion of Martikainen that Christ's descent to Sheol was an integrated component of Ephrem's redemptive theology. Beggiani went further, however, demonstrating that, within the context of Syriac Christianity, the scope of redemptive theology was cosmic and indicating the relationships between the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol and the doctrines of creation, freewill, sin, and incarnation.

Beggiani's treatment brought attention to four important aspects of Ephrem's thought concerning Christ's descent to Sheol. First of all, Beggiani stressed Ephrem's insistence that the redemptive work carried out by Jesus in his death and descent to Sheol was entirely dependent on his identity as the Creator. Secondly, he pointed out the necessity of the Incarnation as the precondition for Jesus' descent to Sheol. Thirdly, Beggiani identified a variety of images used by Ephrem in his depiction of Christ's defeat of death and spoiling of Sheol. Fourthly, he indicated the importance of the image of the liberation of Adam in Ephrem's discussion of Christ's descent to Sheol.

³⁹ Seely J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition* (New York: University Press of America, 1983).

⁴⁰ Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity*, 61.

Although Beggiani did not go on to discuss any of these aspects in detail, his study, painted in broad strokes, served the important purpose of indicating the wider scope of the significance of Ephrem's affirmation and theological use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol. Beggiani's account, general and synthetic as it was, succeeded in presenting a useful overview and in suggesting relationships that might be fruitfully explored by further studies.

In 1989, Tanios Bou Mansour's remarkable work, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien*,⁴¹ examined the significance of Christ's descent to Sheol in the thought of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, devoting attention to the particular symbols used by Ephrem in the articulation of his poetic theology. Rather than regarding Ephrem's images as a veneer of rhetorical embellishments on the surface of underlying theological concerns, Bou Mansour drew on the works of contemporary thinkers such as Gadamer, Durand, and Ricoeur, not only demonstrating Ephrem's use of a variety of images and symbols, but also explicating what he regarded as the genius of Ephrem's symbolic theological method.

Bou Mansour's treatment of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's underworldly descent was framed within his consideration of the Syrian poet's theology of "The Salvific Work of the Son,"⁴² and, more broadly, within the context of "A Symbolic Christology."⁴³ Beginning with a number of specific images, Bou Mansour pointed out the manner in which Ephrem's use of these images allowed him creatively to "express a reality transcending our human categories."⁴⁴ On the basis of Ephrem's poetic and symbolic descriptions of the underworld, Bou Mansour produced a detailed synthetic account of the environment and character of Sheol with attention given to both its positive and negative aspects.

Bou Mansour also considered several of the images deployed by Ephrem to express the effects of Christ's redemptive work in Sheol. Bou Mansour's synthesis of Ephrem's thought brought into focus the coherence and logic of the images deployed. Among the symbols he highlighted were Ephrem's depiction of Christ as

⁴¹ Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien*, XVI (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988).

⁴² Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 259-309.

⁴³ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 223-309.

⁴⁴ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 281.

"living fire,"⁴⁵ the instrumentality of the voice of the Lord in raising the dead, the insatiable hunger and the vomiting of Death and Sheol, Christ's identity as the First-born of Sheol, the instrumentality of the cross, and the "conversion" of Death.

Bou Mansour's account brought to light, in some cases for the first time, important symbolic aspects of Ephrem's thought concerning Christ's descent to Sheol. His careful attention to and insistence on the importance and diversity of Ephrem's symbolism allowed him to unlock new possibilities for those who would study Ephrem's thought. Though his study remained focused on Ephrem's soteriological use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol, his high estimation of Ephrem's use of symbolism, and his inclination to regard Ephrem's use of polyvalent symbols as the materials of theology, enabled Bou Mansour to point the way beyond the limits of his own study.

Another work published in 1989 which also contributed to the study of Ephrem's thought concerning the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol was G. A. M. Rouwhorst's *Les hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe*.⁴⁶ Rouwhorst's work was a study and translation of a small collection of Ephrem's hymns which were intended for use during the seasons of Lent and Easter. Rouwhorst was especially interested in exploring patterns of similarity and difference in the relationship between Jewish celebrations of the Passover and Syriac Christian celebrations of Easter. Being only one component of the larger study, Rouwhorst's treatment of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead was rather brief. Nevertheless, Rouwhorst brought to light two important symbolic complexes of the Syrian poet's thought which had previously gone unaddressed.

First, Rouwhorst drew attention to Ephrem's two-fold typological use of Israel's exodus from Egypt in the wake of the death of the paschal lamb. Ephrem viewed this event in Israel's history as a type of the eschatological resurrection of the dead from

⁴⁵ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 288.

⁴⁶ G. A. M. Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe: Analyse théologique et recherche sur l'évolution de la fête pascale chrétienne à Nisibe et à Edesse et dans quelques Eglises voisines au quatrième siècle*, ed. J. Den Boeft, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, J. H. Waszink, J. C. M. Van Winden, *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language*, Vol. 8, no. 1 & 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989).

Sheol, as well as a type of the liberation from sin and error available to humanity as a result of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Far from simply adding another complex of images to the collection of symbols deployed by Ephrem with reference to Christ's descent to Sheol, Rouwhorst's identification of this typology expanded the doctrine's sphere of reference beyond soteriology to include eschatology and Christian ethics.

Secondly, Rouwhorst's study of Ephrem's paschal hymns brought to light the importance placed on the month of Nisan in the poet's thought. Rouwhorst wrote:

A plusieurs reprises, la descente et la victoire au shéol sont situés au mois de printemps, Nisan (*Cruc.* VIII,3; *Res.* IV,9; V,4). En outre, la résurrection des morts est comparée avec le retour de la vie en ce temps de l'année. Au mois de Nisan, lisons-nous dans *Cruc.* VIII,3, il y eut Nisan au shéol. Le même passage rapproche les ossements des justes morts ressuscités avec les fleurs qui au printemps commencent à pousser.⁴⁷

Though Rouwhorst did not expound upon Ephrem's view of the symbolic import of Nisan, his identification of this significant set of provocative images of fertility and life suggests the need to revisit other biblical and Ephremic images of Christ's descent to and resurrection from Sheol, and calls for a reconsideration of the cosmological significance of the doctrine.

The Luminous Eye,⁴⁸ Sebastian Brock's compact introduction to Saint Ephrem's life and thought, was originally delivered as a series of lectures "under the auspices of the Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies"⁴⁹ in Rome in the spring of 1984, and was later published in a revised edition in 1992. Though Brock's study did not include a section devoted exclusively to Ephrem's view of Christ's descent to Sheol, his work identified an important aspect of the Syrian poet's theological use of the doctrine.

Brock's consideration of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol revolved around an unstated, yet evident distinction between ordinary and sacred time throughout Ephrem's

⁴⁷ Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe*, 1:108.

⁴⁸ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*.

⁴⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 11.

writings. Brock's account of this important aspect of Ephrem's thought is so important as to be quoted in full. According to Brock, the matter of the distinction between ordinary and sacred time:

... is not a topic which Ephrem ever discusses directly, but if we are to understand his poetry we must constantly be aware of the distinction, implicit in his poems, between ordinary, historical, time and sacred time. This is of course a distinction very familiar to students of anthropology and comparative religion (and essential for a proper understanding of liturgy), but it is one which is often forgotten in modern 'developed' societies.

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. This means that events situated at different points in historical time, which participate in the *same* salvific content—such as Christ's nativity, baptism, crucifixion, descent into Sheol, and resurrection—all run together in sacred time, with the result that their total salvific content can be focused at will on any single one of these successive points in linear time. This explains, for example, how the baptism of Christ, even though it comes before His death and resurrection in linear time, came to be understood in early Syriac tradition as the fountainhead and source of all Christian baptism.

The concept of sacred time is also important in Ephrem's thought from two other standpoints.

In the first place it sheds light on his understanding of the significance of the descent of Christ into Sheol, the underworld of the dead. Whereas Christ's incarnate life on earth is an entry into historical time and space, Palestine of the first century, the descent into Sheol is concerned solely with sacred time and space: it is Christ's entry into both past and future time, and it is not bounded by geographical space. The descent thus has a structural importance in the scheme of salvation equal to that of the earthly life of Christ, in that it obviates the accusation of particularity that

might otherwise arise—the accusation that Christ’s work was limited by considerations of historical time and geographical space. The purpose of the doctrine of the descent of Christ into Sheol is precisely to show that the incarnation effects *all* historical time and *all* geographical space. To achieve this, however, it has to speak in terms of sacred time and sacred space, and accordingly the descent can only be described in a story-like and mythopoeic manner—something that Ephrem does with great dramatic effect in the second half of the cycle of Nisibene hymns.

The second standpoint from which the concept of sacred time is of importance for the understanding of Ephrem’s thought concerns the tension between the Christian’s experience of the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist in historical time, and their full realization at the eschaton. Because the paradisiacal life of the eschaton belongs to sacred time, it is possible for it to be experienced, in varying degrees, by individuals already in historical time on earth.⁵⁰

Brock’s lucid explanation of the relationship between ordinary and sacred time in Ephrem’s works identified an important element which revealed their liveliness, flexibility, inventiveness, and genius. Other scholars had noticed the manner in which analysis of Ephrem’s thought seemed obliged to appeal to multiple temporal perspectives. Jouko Martikainen was not least among these, and his argument posing two dramatic and theological climaxes in the hymns dealing with Christ’s descent to Sheol in the second part of Ephrem’s *Carmina Nisibena* had been an important step in the right direction. Nevertheless, it was Brock who produced a clear account of the way in which Ephrem subjected linear, historical time to sacred time for the purpose of expressing spiritual truth, and, in so doing, proposed a plausible rationale for understanding the multiplicity of temporal perspectives in Ephrem’s work.

The most recent scholarly work to give attention to Ephrem the Syrian’s view of Christ’s descent to Sheol has been Rémi Gounelle’s *La descente du Christ aux enfers*,⁵¹ a study of the process of

⁵⁰ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 29-30.

⁵¹ Rémi Gounelle, *La descente du Christ aux enfers: Institutionnalisation d’une croyance*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 162 (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2000).

the institutionalization of belief in Christ's underworldly descent focused on its incorporation in the creeds of the fourth century. Although Gounelle's work is not exclusively concerned with Ephrem's view of the doctrine, it is nonetheless helpful and illuminating in several respects.

Gounelle's work provided a desperately needed corrective to much of the doctrinal history written with reference to the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead during the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Examining the significance of the doctrine with reference to three early Christian contexts, anti-heretical polemic, liturgical rite, and the production of creeds, Gounelle drew attention to the variety of purposes to which the doctrine had been put and demonstrated the geographical and theological diversity of early Christian affirmations of Christ's descent to the dead.

Gounelle highlighted the early and seminal importance of Christ's descent to the dead in Ephrem's native Syrian context, establishing that second and third century Syrian conceptions of the doctrine had been influential in shaping the visions of Christians in other regions of the late antique world. He also cited Ephrem's own fourth-century works throughout his accounts of the polemical, liturgical, and creedal applications of the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead. Thus, Gounelle indicated both the Syrian provenance of the doctrine, as well as its importance and varied use in Ephrem's own writings, suggesting the viability of further and more sustained inquiry into its role in the Syrian poet's writings.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This work is an examination of Saint Ephrem the Syrian's theological use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol. In the ancient church, Christ's descent to the underworld was nowhere earlier, more elaborately, or more influentially expressed than in the geographical and cultural milieu of Syriac Christianity, and it was nowhere within this milieu more frequently, effectively, and influentially implemented than in the writings of Saint Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem's use of Syriac and his appropriation of distinctively Semitic and non-Western poetic forms and structures as a mode of theological discourse, coupled with his preference for a phenomenological use of imagery and symbolism, resulted in a

diversity of vivid depictions of Christ's descent to Sheol. These 'verbal icons' imaginatively collapsed distinctions between temporality and eternity and creatively drew together cosmological, incarnational, soteriological, ecclesiological, sacramental, and eschatological themes in the context of Christian worship.

Chapter one will examine Ephrem's view of Sheol's place in the order of the universe and his conception of the cosmic scope of Christ's work of redemption. Chapter two considers the intersection between the doctrines of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol in Ephrem's thought. In chapter three, the soteriological implications of the doctrine will be explored, not only in terms of the event of Christ's descent to the dead itself, but also in terms of its typological foreshadowing in the Scriptures and its integration in the Savior's earthly ministry. Chapter four will address the ecclesiological significance of Christ's descent to Sheol, focusing on the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Chapter five will provide an account of the eschatological significance of the doctrine. The Conclusion will summarize our findings. The Appendix provides a glimpse of other early Syriac conceptions of Christ's descent to the dead.

In reconstructing Ephrem's vision of Christ's descent to Sheol and attempting to discern its various theological implications in his thought, every attempt has been made to privilege Ephrem's authentic works. With respect to Ephrem's hymns, I have cited from the *Hymns Against Julian*, the *Hymns on the Church*, the *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, the *Hymns on Faith*, the *Hymns on the Fast*, the *Hymns on the Nativity*, the *Hymns on Nisibis*, the *Hymns on Paradise*, the *Hymns on the Resurrection*, the *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*, and the *Hymns on Virginity*. Among Ephrem's prose works I have made use of the *Homily on Our Lord*, the *Letter to Publius*, the first five *Discourses to Hypatius*, and the *Commentary on Genesis*. Though its authenticity is not certain, I have also elected to cite from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* attributed to Saint Ephrem, seeking as far as possible to use this material in a manner which corroborates the vision of Christ's descent to Sheol which is discernable in Ephrem's authentic writings and occasionally noting the possibility of its inauthenticity.

CHAPTER ONE: COSMOLOGY AND CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL IN THE THEOLOGY OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

The best place to begin an investigation of the theological significance of Ephrem the Syrian's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol is with an examination of its significance relative to his cosmological thought. In its most basic articulations, Ephrem's conception of the universe as an orderly and systemic whole composed of three tiers—heaven, earth, and the abyss of waters—has much in common with many of his predecessors and contemporaries in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. Nevertheless, while it cannot be denied that this is an accurate summary of Ephrem's conception of the structure and regional differences of the universe, it must be acknowledged that much more remains to be addressed, especially where the poet's vision of the universe as a moral and spiritual environment is concerned. Here, then, we will consider Ephrem's conception of the order of the cosmos in greater detail with special attention being given to what we might call the cosmology of salvation history: thought concerning the universe as the venue in which Divine and human communion, alienation, and reconciliation take place. An account of Ephrem's vision of the cosmos, its regions, their characteristics, inhabitants, and their theological significance will provide us with an essential introduction to the environmental context within which the action and meaning of Christ's descent to the dead unfolds within Ephrem's writings.

Though cosmology plays an important role in Ephrem the Syrian's thought, the universe is never the focus of his theological reflection as a thing in itself. Instead, when he discusses the structure and character of the universe, it is always in the context of

expressing some greater theological truth. Ephrem's cosmological concerns find expression in at least two distinct yet closely related modes of theological reflection. On the one hand, in the context of his anti-heterodox polemics, Ephrem's cosmological discourse provides an arena in which to refute his theological opponents and to defend such Nicene orthodox conceptions as creation *ex nihilo* and the ontological chasm between God the Creator and his creation. It is often in the course of these writings that Ephrem deals most directly and most generally with conceptions of the structure of the universe. On the other hand, in the context of his theological reflection on the history of humanity's creation, fall into sin, and redemption, Ephrem presents the cosmos both as the physical environment in which the history of salvation unfolds and as a rich matrix of spiritual meaning. In Ephrem's hymns and poetic homilies, Scriptural revelation coupled with humanity's phenomenological experience of creation provides the basis for the community of faith's understanding the world as a coherent collection of interrelated signs and types whereby visible realities reveal the invisible reality of Divine truth.

Generally speaking, sustained scholarly discussions of Ephrem the Syrian's cosmological thought have been few and far between. A number of factors have contributed to this state of affairs. On the one hand, since the cosmos itself does not often figure as the focus of the fourth century poet's attention, the task of carefully reconstructing his cosmology on the basis of the many incidental statements he makes throughout the corpus of his work assumes both a scale and a degree of difficulty which are daunting. On the other hand, attempts to produce definitive accounts of Ephrem's cosmology are inhibited by his own disdain for theological definitions and his general orientation toward symbolic modes of expression. Ephrem's poetic and symbolic theological method allows his thought to cycle imaginatively from a variety of interrelated visible signs to a variety of interrelated invisible meanings and back again without the imposition of any strict patterns of correlation. As a result of the polyvalence of the symbols themselves and the manner in which Ephrem deploys them in numerous imaginative combinations, meaning is always in excess, preventing the success of those who would attempt to articulate univocal accounts of his cosmological thought. These challenges notwithstanding, two notable studies have brought

attention to the roles played by the cosmos in a variety of Ephrem's works, offering composite and complementary views of his thought concerning the universe and corroborating the sketch offered above.

Recently, Ute Possekkel's *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*¹ has provided a valuable account not only of the manner in which Ephrem's writings reflect Hellenic influences long thought to have been entirely absent from his habits of thought, but also of Ephrem's perspective on the structure of the universe. As Possekkel explains in the Introduction to the work:

There is a great number of ideas, images, and patterns of thought in the writings of Ephrem that are reminiscent of Greek concepts. Since it would have been impossible to analyze all of them, this study focuses on aspects of Ephrem's cosmology. This choice is not an arbitrary one, but is conditioned by the nature of the sources. As has been indicated above, Greek notions occur most frequently in the *Prose Refutations* and especially in the *Treatise Against Bardaisan's Domnus*. The *Prose Refutations* are to a large degree concerned with refuting the cosmogonies and cosmologies of Marcion, Mani, and Bardaisan. The emphasis on cosmology therefore suggests itself.²

Another important work, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien*,³ by Tanios Bou Mansour contains an important discussion of Ephrem's perception of the cosmos as both the environment in which the history of divine-human interaction unfolds and as a medium of divine self-disclosure. At the beginning of his second chapter, entitled 'Une Cosmologie Symbolique,' Bou Mansour writes:

¹ Ute Possekkel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 580 (Louvain: Peeters, 1999).

² Possekkel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 11.

³ Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien*, XVI (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 121-157. The whole of Bou Mansour's second chapter is devoted to a consideration of the symbolic significance of the universe in Ephrem's thought.

De prime abord, le cosmos ne semble pas jouer un rôle prépondérant dans les schèmes théologiques éphrémiens. Cependant, la perspective cosmologique n'y est pas pour autant absente, implicite mais suffisamment importante pour qu'elle ne soit pas négligée. Elle constitue l'horizon lointain, et en quelque sorte indispensable et fondateur des aspects plus développés d'une pensée, dont les préoccupations principales sont d'ordre trinitaire, christologique, ecclésial et anthropologique. C'est ainsi que, tout au long de la vision éphrémiennne de l'histoire du salut, le cosmos accompagne le dialogue qui s'institue entre la liberté humaine et la liberté divine: créé bon par un vouloir bon, le cosmos subit les conséquences néfastes d'un mauvais usage de la liberté humaine, mais il sera appelé par la suite à jouir des fruits du salut.⁴

In the discussion of Ephrem the Syrian's theological cosmology which follows, the contributions of both Possekel and Bou Mansour will be evident. We will turn first to a survey of Ephrem's polemical writings which will provide a view of his conception of the general structure of the universe. Secondly, we will consider the manner in which Ephrem's general conception of the cosmos is expanded theologically and made to take on moral and spiritual significance in the context of his theological reflection. Finally, we will focus our attention on the manner in which Ephrem's expanded theological vision of the universe and its regions facilitates his discussion of salvation history, paying especially close attention to the cosmic scope of Christ's work of redemption.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COSMOS IN EPHREM'S POLEMICAL WRITINGS: HEAVEN, EARTH, THE ABYSS OF WATERS, AND THE ELEMENTAL PILLARS OF THE WORLD

As has been mentioned above, Ephrem's conception of the general architecture of the cosmos is best discernable in his polemical writings. Comments on the structure of the universe are preserved

⁴ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 121.

both in Ephrem's *Prose Refutations*⁵ and his *Commentary on Genesis*.⁶ On the basis of complementary material from each of these sources we are able to derive a synthesized reproduction of Ephrem's view of the structure of the universe. In both sources, one of Ephrem's principal purposes in writing is to defend an orthodox Christian cosmology and to refute the cosmological schema promoted by Bardaisan of Edessa. Bardaisan, the earliest Syriac author to be remembered by name, flourished in the late second century. Having produced a doctrinal amalgam of Christianity, Mesopotamian paganism, and Hellenistic philosophy, Bardaisan composed a collection of 150 *madrashe* or 'teaching songs' which continued to preserve and promote his ideas after his death. The extent of Bardaisan's influence can be discerned in part by the fact that, in the latter half of the fourth century, his followers and teachings continued to be seen by Ephrem as serious theological opponents and, therefore, polemical targets.⁷

Cosmologically, Bardaisan taught that:

there were five eternal principles (in Syriac, *ityê*) each in its own region: light in the East, wind in the West, fire in the South, water in the North, while darkness inhabited the lower regions. The Lord of all (another *ityâ*) occupied the region above. Due to some sort of mingling of these eternal elements chaos ensued, and from the mixture of the elements the Lord of all made the world and set it into order.⁸

⁵ C. W. Mitchell, ed., *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan of Which the Greater Part has been Transcribed from the Palimpsest B.M. Add. 14623 and is Now First Published*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912, 1921).

⁶ Kathleen E. McVey, ed., *Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trs., *Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 91 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994).

⁷ Ephrem seems to have considered Bardaisan as an arch-heretic, prototypical in some sense for Manichaeans and Marcionites, especially with respect to cosmology. See: Edward G. Mathews, Jr., *Introduction to Commentary on Genesis* in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 61-62.

⁸ Edward G. Mathews, Jr., *Introduction to Commentary on Genesis*, in McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 61.

In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem’s close reading of Genesis 1:1-5, in which is preserved the account of the first day of creation, is laden, as is the entirety of his commentary on the six days of creation, with a heavy anti-heterodox polemic “centered on his position that God is a) the only self-subsistent being and b) the creator of everything else. To take any other position would, in Ephrem’s view, be to make God an “arranger” and not “the Creator.””⁹ Since Ephrem’s explication of the events of the first day of creation is far too lengthy to quote in its entirety,¹⁰ a summary must suffice for our current purposes.

Structured so as to provide a kind of point by point refutation of Bardaisan’s heterodox cosmology, Ephrem’s commentary on the events of the first day of creation closely follows the narrative progression of Genesis 1:1-5. Ephrem carefully accounts for the light, wind, fire, water, and darkness which Bardaisan regarded as eternal principles. In the case of the first three, Ephrem shows that these were created elements, not eternally self-subsistent beings, brought into existence from nothing along with, but after, heaven and earth. Distancing himself even further from Bardaisan with regard to light and darkness, Ephrem makes clear that these are not of the same order of creation as heaven, earth, fire, wind, and water, arguing in the case of darkness that it is merely “a shadow, as Scripture makes clear”¹¹ and in the case of light that it “came to be from something.”¹² Seeking to situate the elements and light and darkness in proper relationship to their Creator and one another, Ephrem writes:

*In the beginning God created heaven and earth.*¹³ At this point these comprised the only things that had been made, for there was nothing else created along with heaven

⁹ Edward G. Mathews, Jr., *Introduction to Commentary on Genesis* in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 60.

¹⁰ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 74-87.

¹¹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 86-87. Regarding darkness as neither self-subsistent nor even a created thing, Ephrem nevertheless feels obligated to account for its existence and its presence in the creation narrative. This he does by interpreting the darkness of the first day as the product of clouds derived from the abyss of waters. See Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 1.4-6. (77-78).

¹² McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 85.

¹³ Gen. 1:1.

and earth. Even the elements that were created on that day had not yet been created. If the elements had been created along with heaven and earth, Moses would have said so. But he did not, lest he give the names of the elements precedence over their substances. Therefore, it is evident that heaven and earth came to be from nothing because neither water nor wind had yet been created, nor had fire, light or darkness been given their natures, for they were younger than heaven and earth. These things were created things that came after heaven and earth and they were not self-subsistent beings for they did not exist before [heaven and earth].

Commentary on Genesis, 1.2¹⁴

As Ephrem's account of God's first day of creative activity progresses, he accounts for each of Bardaisan's five eternal principles in the course of the narrative, reaffirming in each case the created and contingent nature of each of the three additional elements as well as light and darkness. Ephrem writes:

After [Moses] spoke about the creation of heaven and earth and showed that the waste and desolation preceded the elements that were created by the length of that moment that followed [their creation], he turned to write about those elements saying, *Darkness was upon the face of the abyss*.¹⁵ For the abyss of waters was created at that time.

Commentary on Genesis, 1.4.1¹⁶

Having accounted for the creation of water and its related phenomenon, darkness, Ephrem next addresses wind.

After Moses spoke of the darkness that was spread over the face of the abyss, he then said, *the wind of God was hovering over the face of the waters*.¹⁷ Because Moses called it *the wind of God* and said *it was hovering*, some posit that this is the Holy Spirit and, because of what is written here, associate it with the activity of creation. Nevertheless, the faithful do not make this connection, for these things cannot be so related. Rather, by those

¹⁴ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 75.

¹⁵ Gen. 1:2.

¹⁶ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 77.

¹⁷ Gen. 1:2.

things that are truly said about it, they associate it with that element ...

Commentary on Genesis, 1.7.¹⁸

Light is created next.

After [Moses] spoke of heaven and earth, of the darkness, the abyss and the wind that came to be at the beginning of the first night, he then turned to speak about the light that came to be at the dawn of the first day.¹⁹

Commentary on Genesis, 1.8.²⁰

Finally, Ephrem writes concerning fire.

Fire was also created on the first day, although it is not written down that it was created. Since [fire] had no existence in and of itself but existed in something else, it was created with that thing in which it came to be. It is not possible that a thing which does not exist of itself can precede that thing which is the cause of its existence. That [fire] is in the earth, nature bears witness, but that it was not created together with the earth, Scripture affirms, when it said, *In the beginning God created heaven and earth.*²¹

Commentary on Genesis, 1.15.²²

Although our reconstruction of Ephrem's cosmology is far from complete, here we may note on the basis of Ephrem's reading of Genesis 1:1-5, first, his acceptance of the normative status of the biblical account of the origins of the universe, and secondly, his acceptance of the biblical notion of the structure of the universe, i.e. that it is composed of what are essentially three interrelated yet distinct regions: heaven, earth, and the abyss (of waters) all of which were brought into being on the first day of God's creative activity. But what are we to make of the elements to which Ephrem makes reference and which he understands as also created on the first day?

¹⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 79.

¹⁹ Gen. 1:3-5.

²⁰ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 80.

²¹ Gen. 1:1.

²² McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 85.

Although they do not find explicit expression within the *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem's views regarding, on the one hand, the number and nature of the elements, and, on the other, their role within the cosmic order are evident elsewhere in his writings. His views on these matters corroborate the thesis that Ephrem's conception of the structure of the universe closely resembles the basic contours of the model presented by the Hebrew Scriptures, and illustrate specific similarities between Ephrem's vision of the order of the cosmos and those outlined by Jewish theological and Hellenistic philosophical traditions. These matters have been well summarized by Ute Possekel in *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*.²³

In the first place, Possekel points out that Ephrem's enumeration of the elements as earth, fire, water, and air, along with their corresponding qualities (dry, hot, wet, and cold, respectively), demonstrates an agreement on Ephrem's part with "the vast majority of Greek philosophers and theologians, and it significantly differs from the dualist or Gnostic systems."²⁴ Moreover,

It should be emphasized that neither Ephrem's choice of elements nor his choice of the qualities of hot, moist, cold, and dry is necessarily self-evident or even obvious, but indeed shows Greek philosophical influence on his thought. In particular, it is noteworthy that Ephrem sides with the Greeks against Bardaisan, Mani, and others by not considering light as an element, which after all plays a dominant role in the Genesis account of creation. Ephrem's biblical cosmology is expanded by Hellenic philosophy, and he uses the Greek concepts to refute his theological opponents.²⁵

Secondly, Possekel notes that Ephrem, in his forty-fourth hymn *On Faith*, refers to the elements as "the pillars of the world,"²⁶ a designation that draws on both biblical cosmology and Greek philosophy.²⁷

²³ Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*.

²⁴ Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 95.

²⁵ Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 95.

²⁶ Job 9:6; Psa. 75:3.

²⁷ Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 99.

According to the cosmology of the Old Testament, the universe consists of three tiers. The world is imagined as a flat disk (or perhaps as a square, as references to the “corners” of the world may suggest). Above the earth is the vault of heaven, considered to be a solid substance on or below which the sun, moon, and stars are positioned. Below the earth are the waters of the underworld. God gave the earth a foundational structure, the pillars of the world. The sky above the world also rests on pillars, perhaps a continuation of those columns that support the earth. Ephrem’s notion of the universe essentially resembles biblical cosmology: Beneath the world is the underworld, above the world is the vault of heaven. He states the necessity of a support structure repeatedly in the context of rejecting Bardaisan’s thesis that the world is located in empty space.²⁸

We may preliminarily conclude, then, on the basis of Ephrem’s anti-Bardaisanite polemical writings, that, at its most basic level, his view of the structure of the universe corresponds to the biblical conventions of a three-tiered cosmology consisting of the heavens, the earth, and the abyss of waters. Ephrem shares this general cosmological model not only with the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures, but also with many of the other religious cultures of the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world. Additionally, Ephrem holds a conception of the elements as pillars of the world which indicates his conceptual kinship with Jewish theological and Hellenistic philosophical cosmologies.

Ephrem’s polemical writings, and especially the portions of his *Commentary on Genesis* which we have here considered, provide us with a clear view of his cosmological thought concerning the overall structure of the universe, articulated by means of a combination of exegetical, theological, and philosophical discourses. Here, it must be noted, however, that any mention of several matters which are of great importance to our current project have thus far been missing from the discussion. Where are Paradise, Sheol, and Gehenna within Ephrem’s cosmological vision? How are they related to the cosmic order articulated above? What are their characteristics? What do they mean theologically? For answers

²⁸ Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 99-100.

to these questions, we must turn to other portions of Ephrem's literary corpus where, in the context of his theological reflection on the history of humanity's creation, fall, and redemption, his vision of the cosmos may be further discerned as the environment within which the history of salvation unfolds.

EPHREM'S THEOLOGICALLY EXPANDED COSMOS: PARADISE, SHEOL, AND GEHENNA

Ephrem the Syrian's concern with the general structure of the universe in his polemical works affords us a valuable view of his cosmological thought, but as we have mentioned above, it represents only one mode of his theological discourse concerning the cosmos. In turning to consider the manner in which the structure of the cosmos is further elucidated in Ephrem's poetic theological reflection, we find the same basic cosmic order, outlined above as consisting of Heaven, Earth, and the Abyss of Waters, further expanded to accommodate Ephrem's moral and spiritual vision of the creation, fall, and redemption of humanity.

Throughout Ephrem's works, the visible created order of heaven and earth gives way to three invisible regions of the universe situated outside of the ordinary spatial and temporal order. These are Paradise, Sheol, and Gehenna. Regarded as both the primordial and the eschatological domain of Divine-human intimacy and communion, Paradise is lost in Adam and regained in Christ. Ephrem envisions Sheol as the underworldly abode of the dead, the collective destination of all human beings who return to the dust from which they were formed as the consequence of Adam's sin, wherein they await the eschatological resurrection. While Paradise and Sheol exist outside of yet in temporal parallel with the inhabited earth, Gehenna, the place of fiery torment for the wicked, is specifically eschatological, unpopulated until the day of judgment. Ephrem's visions of each of these cosmic regions are, first of all, strongly informed by his reading of Scripture, secondly, nuanced by his Mesopotamian context, and thirdly, closely related to the human phenomenological experience of the cosmos. Though each region is, as we have noted above, temporally and spatially beyond the inhabited earth, each is nevertheless somehow adjacent to it. Furthermore, each region is directly related morally and spiritually to the spatial and temporal cosmic order within which the history of Divine-human interaction unfolds.

The theological significance of Ephrem's expansions of the universe have been recognized and well articulated by Tanios Bou Mansour who has argued that these must be seen as taking place both 'horizontally' and 'vertically,' the inhabited earth being imaginatively placed "en relation avec d'autres réalités qui le précèdent ou le suivent, qui se situent au-dessus ou au-dessous de lui."²⁹ According to Bou Mansour,

Du point de vue éphrémien, la création est englobée dans deux grandeurs invisibles, que son le Paradis et les enfers. Ces grandeurs sont parfois exprimées par des images cosmiques, "les hauteurs" et "les profondeurs", qui le situent dans la continuité avec notre monde.³⁰

Bou Mansour suggests two paradigms which provide analytical models of the importance of Ephrem's theological cosmology for his discussion of salvation history: 'Paradise-Earth-Paradise' and 'Heaven-Earth(Sheol)-Paradise.' The first, 'Paradise-Earth-Paradise,' plots the history of humanity's creation, fall, and redemption along a horizontal axis from the cosmogonic past, through the present, to the eschatological future and corresponds to the trajectory of salvation history which Bou Mansour discerns in Ephrem's theological poetry, and especially in his *Hymns on Paradise*. The second model, 'Heaven-Earth(Sheol)-Paradise,' charts the history of salvation vertically, tracing the movement of Jesus' incarnation, death, descent to Sheol, resurrection and ascension as the means by which humanity, assumed by Christ, is returned to the Edenic Paradise.

Bou Mansour's observations and the paradigms he develops provide helpful guides as we consider Ephrem's morally and spiritually oriented expansions of his theological cosmology. First and foremost, Bou Mansour rightly identifies Ephrem's theological appropriation of the human phenomenological experience of the "up" and "down" of the created order by means of which the poet metaphorically relates the heights of the terrestrial heaven and the depths of the earth to what Bou Mansour describes as "other realities and other horizons."³¹ Secondly, Bou Mansour is certainly right to call attention not only to the obvious moral and spiritual

²⁹ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 149.

³⁰ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 149.

³¹ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 149.

‘vertical’ parallels which Ephrem constructs between Paradise and the heights and Sheol and the depths, but also to the manner in which Ephrem’s descriptions of these regions expand the cosmos ‘horizontally’ with reference to primordial and eschatological time. Thirdly, Bou Mansour’s caution to distinguish Paradise from Heaven by pointing out that these are not strictly commensurate or interchangeable terms in Ephrem’s thought is laudable, but one notes with some disappointment both that it cannot be said that he shows the same care in his treatment of Sheol and that his schema fail to account for Gehenna. Thus, though instructive, Bou Mansour’s two analytical models of Ephrem’s theological expansion of the cosmos leave us wanting more. In both, Bou Mansour provides concise conceptualizations, but does so at the expense of a more complex view of the significance of Ephrem’s cosmology for salvation history. The first paradigm, ‘Paradise-Earth-Paradise,’ can easily fall prey to an eschatological deficiency produced by an overly selective reading of Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*, becoming neither sufficiently emphatic concerning the eschatological character of Paradise,³² nor addressing the “other realities” of Sheol and Gehenna. The second paradigm, ‘Heaven-Earth(Sheol)-Paradise,’ tends not only to mirror the eschatological deficiency of the first, but also runs the risk of conflating two of Ephrem’s conventions of thought—the parallelism of Heaven and Sheol, and the parallelism of Heaven and Paradise—by regarding Earth as a stable ‘middle term.’³³ Furthermore, though Bou Mansour’s explication of the second paradigm suggests something of the genuine cosmological significance of the doctrine of Christ’s descent to Sheol, it does so only in a cursory fashion, leaving much to be said.³⁴ These criticisms of Bou Mansour’s account and

³² In fairness to Bou Mansour it must be noted that the eschatological character of Paradise receives attention elsewhere in his work (Chapter 7, ‘Une Eschatologie Symbolique’). Nevertheless, even here, Bou Mansour neglects to give an adequate account of the eschatological significance of Sheol and Gehenna. Because of the difference in focus, it is hoped that the portion of this work devoted to the eschatological significance of Ephrem’s conception of the doctrine of Christ’s descent to Sheol will, informed by Bou Mansour, remedy the ‘deficiencies’ of his account and further the discussion begun in his work.

³³ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 154.

³⁴ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 154-155.

models of Ephrem's theologically expanded cosmos are intended, however, not as a means to dismissal, but to creative appropriation of key elements of his work. On the one hand, the accuracy of Bou Mansour's theoretical analysis of what it is that Ephrem is attempting to do can be reiterated in his own summarizing words.

De tout ce qui précède, il s'ensuit que la conception du cosmos chez Ephrem subit une extension, qui le soustrait de plus en plus à la mainmise de l'homme et à une vision très accaparante et dominatrice. Si la réalité invisible du Paradis et des enfers constitue une partie intégrante du cosmos, celui-ci est doté de mystère qui ne lui vient plus seulement des phénomènes naturels, mais surtout d'un horizon mystérieux qui se situe au-delà des frontières du phénoménal.³⁵

On the other hand, it must be noted that Bou Mansour's models of the cosmos as the environment of salvation history will later provide the basis for our own exploration of the significance of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol within the frame of the theologically expanded cosmos.

References to the nature, character, and theological significance of Paradise, Sheol, and Gehenna appear throughout Ephrem's works as a result of the manifold and intimate connections between these three cosmological regions and the moral and spiritual life of humanity. As the environment intended for humanity by God, Paradise assumes a paradigmatic status, not only in terms of Ephrem's conception of salvation history from cosmogony to eschaton, but also in terms of the poet's discussion of physical and spiritual life and death within the context of the current temporal and terrestrial order. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the methodological contours of Ephrem's thought concerning the regions "beyond the borders of the phenomenal" receive their fullest articulation in the context of his meditative *Hymns on Paradise*. In these hymns, Ephrem makes several statements concerning his vision of Paradise which will aid us not only in our consideration of this cosmic region, but in our subsequent endeavors to understand his conceptions of Sheol and Gehenna as well.

³⁵ Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 155.

Sebastian Brock has called attention to the fact that, concerning his conception of Paradise and the method he employed to describe it “Ephrem was deliberately going against some much more literalist views of Paradise that were current in the early Christian period.”³⁶ Indicating the distance between the narrative account of Paradise preserved in Genesis and the invisible reality which it is intended to disclose, Ephrem makes use of one of his favorite theological dialectics: the tension between what is hidden and what is revealed. Insisting on the hiddenness of Paradise’s true reality, he writes:

What mouth has ever described Paradise,
 what tongue has told of its glory,
 what mind has depicted its beauty?
 Indeed its hidden recesses cannot be scrutinized;
 I can only marvel at what is visible, at those things
 which lie outside of Paradise,
 and so I realize how far I remain from its hidden secrets.

Hymns on Paradise, 10.1³⁷

Elsewhere he expresses the same idea:

My brethren, consider the wind: though its blast is
 tumultuous,
 it lacks any color by which it can be seen, for it is
 hidden in its manifestation;
 having no outer array or substance at all,
 it is both hidden and yet manifest when it is blowing.
 So too the abode of Paradise is both hidden and manifest:
 while it can be perceived to exist, what it really is
 cannot be perceived.

Hymns on Paradise, 15.1³⁸

Though adamant that its fullness lies hidden, Ephrem maintains nevertheless that Paradise is also partly revealed by Scripture. In the book of Genesis:

³⁶ Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 54.

³⁷ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 147-148.

³⁸ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 182.

Moses, who instructs all men with his celestial writings,
 He, the master of the Hebrews, has instructed us in his
 teaching—
 the Law, which constitutes a very treasure house of
 revelations,
 wherein is revealed the tale of the Garden—
 [is] described by things visible, but glorious for what
 lies hidden,
 spoken of in few words, yet wondrous with its many
 plants.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.1³⁹

Furthermore, Ephrem describes the manner in which Scripture is able to reveal what remains hidden.

Joyfully did I embark on the tale of Paradise—
 a tale that is short to read but rich to explore.
 My tongue read the story's outward narrative,
 while my intellect took wing and soared upward in awe
 as it perceived the splendor of Paradise—not indeed as
 it really is,
 but insofar as humanity is granted to comprehend it.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.3⁴⁰

Meditating further on Scripture's ability to reveal what is hidden, Ephrem offers us a glimpse of his hermeneutical approach to the challenge of describing regions of the cosmos which are both adjacent to and beyond phenomenal experience.

I read the opening of this book and was filled with joy,
 for its verses and lines spread out their arms to
 welcome me;
 the first rushed out and kissed me, and led me to its
 companion;
 and when I reached that verse wherein is written
 the story of Paradise, it lifted me up and transported me
 from the bosom of the book to the very bosom of
 Paradise.

³⁹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 77-78.

⁴⁰ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 78.

The eye and the mind traveled over the lines
as over a bridge, and entered together the story of
Paradise.

The eye as it read transported the mind;
in return the mind, too, gave the eye rest
from its reading, for when the book had been read
the eye had rest, but the mind was engaged.

Both the bridge and the gate of Paradise
did I find in this book. I crossed over and entered;
my eye indeed remained outside but my mind entered
within.

I began to wander amid things not described.
This is a luminous height, clear, lofty, and fair:
Scripture named it Eden, the summit of all blessings.

Hymns on Paradise, 5.3-5⁴¹

Throughout his description of Paradise, Ephrem's references to the "eye of the mind" and the speculative activity of the intellect in his meditation on Paradise emphasize the role of the theological imagination. It is this human faculty which is engaged in a bidirectional process of translation by which the splendors of invisible reality are partially or approximately revealed by means of their visible symbolic analogs. Stimulated by the biblical narrative, Ephrem's "eye of the mind" (HPar. 1.4) gazes on the mysteries of Paradise, allowing him to render intelligible what the physical eye is not able to see. Recognizing the inevitable shortcomings of human attempts to depict realities which lie beyond the visible, Ephrem acknowledges his creaturely limitations, confessing that:

... because the sight of Paradise is far removed,
and the eye's range cannot attain to it,
I have described it over simply, making bold a little.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.8⁴²

Nevertheless, in defense of the method he writes:

For him who would tell of [Paradise] there is no other
means
but to use the names of things that are visible,
thus depicting for his hearers a likeness of things that
are hidden.

⁴¹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 103-104.

⁴² Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 80.

For if the Creator of the Garden
has clothed His majesty in terms we can understand,
how much more can His Garden be described with our
similes?

If someone concentrates his attention solely on the
metaphors used of God's majesty,
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty and thus errs
by means of those metaphors with which God clothed
Himself for his benefit,
and he is ungrateful to that Grace which stooped low
to the level of childishness; although it has nothing in
common with him,
yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness in order to bring
him to the likeness of itself.

Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names,
for Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are
akin to you;
it is not because it is impoverished that it has put on
your imagery;
rather, your nature is far too weak to be able
to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much
diminished
by being depicted in the pale colors with which you are
familiar.

Hymns on Paradise, 11.5-7⁴³

In addition to acknowledging the metaphorical nature of human discourse about Paradise and other invisible realities, Ephrem offers another qualifying corrective to the latent possibility of oversimplification inherent in this theological method.

And because my tongue overflows as one who has
sucked
the sweetness of Paradise, I will portray it in diverse
forms.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.9⁴⁴

In Ephrem's view, no single, univocal, or totalizing account can ever convey the full complexity of the invisible reality of Paradise, or, by extension, of Sheol or Gehenna. Instead, by means of the

⁴³ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 155-156.

⁴⁴ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 80.

deployment of a diverse range of complementary and mutually informing descriptive models, Ephrem constructs and offers something very much like a collage of verbal images. Charting a course between kataphatic and apophatic theological discourse, Ephrem offers positive verbal depictions of invisible realities which cannot be described. The nature, character, and theological significance of the unseen regions of the cosmos are rendered accessible through the implementation of an abundance of images which are not strictly commensurate and reducible to a single unified perspective. Instead, they are necessarily manifold and correlative with one another, offering, by means of imaginative imitation, a multi-faceted vision of the cosmos beyond the physical limits of sight, and an approximate yet meaningful environment of spiritual experience which is both distinct from and analogous to the human experience of the phenomenal world.

This method, although much less fully articulated, is also apparent in Ephrem's depictions of Gehenna and Sheol. Not only in his *Hymns on Paradise*, but also in his *Letter to Publius*,⁴⁵ Ephrem emphasizes the metaphorical and speculative quality of all discourse concerning the eschatological Judgment and the cosmic environments of Paradise and Gehenna. This is expressed from the outset of the work through the deployment of one of his favorite theological symbols: the mirror.⁴⁶ Accenting the mirror's reflective action of non-identical repetition, Ephrem calls attention to the manner in which invisible reality is mediated via the theological imagination. According to Ephrem, the Gospel acts as a moral and spiritual mirror.

To everyone who peers into this mirror, his sins are visible in it. And everyone who takes careful notice will see in it that portion which is reserved for him, whether good or evil.

Letter to Publius, 2⁴⁷

⁴⁵ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 338-355.

⁴⁶ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 338ff. See also: Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 294ff.; Edmund Beck, "Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephräm," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953): 5-24.

⁴⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 339.

In this mirror, Gehenna in flames can be seen by those who deserve to dwell there. In Paradise there are joyous promises for the good as they wait for [the day] when they will receive their masters with uncovered faces.

Letter to Publius, 3⁴⁸

Elsewhere, Ephrem identifies the metaphorical nature of the language he employs to describe the eschatological Judgment and the "places" accorded to the righteous and unrighteous. Commenting on his assertion that "there is given out the reward of good things and the punishment of evil things to the two sides: those on the right hand and those on the left," (LPub. 9.2)⁴⁹ Ephrem writes:

It is not that there really are a right and a left in that place, but rather these are names for those who are honored among us and for those in our midst who are unworthy. Rather we reckon that there is a throne for the Judge in that place and we call the place of the good "the right," while we label the place of the wicked "the left." We call the good "sheep" because of their docility, and we call the wicked "goats" because of their impudence. We call His justice "a balance" and His retribution to us "the measure of truth."

Letter to Publius, 9.3⁵⁰

Qualifying his vision of Gehenna still further by means of the literary device of the mirror, and providing a reiteration of the distance between himself and other much more literal interpreters among his contemporaries, Ephrem writes:

And maybe it is that the Gehenna of the wicked consists in what they see, and it is their very separation that burns them, and their mind acts as the flame. The hidden judge (dajjana kasja) who is seated in the discerning mind has spoken, and has become for them there the righteous judge (dajjana d-kinuta), who beats them without mercy with the torments of contrition. Perhaps it is this which separates them out, sending

⁴⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 340.

⁴⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 347. cf. Matt. 25:33.

⁵⁰ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 347.

each one to the appropriate place; perhaps it is this which grasps the good with its right hand stretched out, sending them to that right hand of mercy; and it again which takes the wicked in its upright left hand, casting them into the place called 'the left'; maybe it is this which silently accuses them, and quietly pronounces sentence upon them.

Letter to Publius, 22⁵¹

The prominent role of the theological imagination is no less evident in Ephrem's descriptions of Sheol. Here, as in the *Letter to Publius*, Ephrem is less concerned with articulating the method whereby one might envision the cosmological regions on the far side of the temporal and terrestrial horizons, opting instead for a seamless deployment of a comprehensive literary device which provides the metaphorical space in which the underworld of the dead may be better perceived and understood. Ephrem's ideas concerning Sheol find their most vivid expression by means of several dramatized conversations between Satan and the personified conceptions of Death, Sheol, and Sin in his *Nisibene Hymns*.⁵² The dramatic scene is set at the outset in the context of Jesus' earthly ministry.

The Voice proclaimed and they gathered and came
the hosts of the Evil One with his ministers
the encampment of the Tares assembled fully
for they saw that Jesus—the grief of all those on the
left hand—was victorious
and there was none among them that was not
tormented. They began one by one to repeat
all that they had suffered. Sin and Sheol were terrified
Death trembled for the dead rebelled
and Satan [trembled] for the sinners rebelled against him.

Nisibene Hymns, 35.1⁵³

⁵¹ Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 261-305.

⁵² Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, Second Series, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 167-219.

⁵³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 193.

Placing his words in the mouths of a cast of others who look on the temporal events of salvation history from beyond its limits, and presenting his vision of the underworld within the context of a collection of hymns, Ephrem's strategy of non-commensurate converging images comes into play with remarkable effect. By means of the deployment of Satan and Death as well as other dramatic characters, Ephrem frees himself from the burden of formulating a univocal depiction of Sheol. Also, through setting these dramatized conversations within the space of the underworldly abode of the dead, Ephrem situates them atemporally, furnishing the possibility of creatively collapsing strict distinctions between past, present, and future. Additionally, because it is presented in a series of image laden and dramatic hymns, rather than in a single unified narrative, the vision of the underworld provided by Ephrem is intentionally pluriform and not easily bounded or reduced to definition. Thus, in his "writing," "casting," and "staging" of the dramatic portions of the *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem employs a variety of rhetorical resources which contribute to the facilitation of a complex perspective on Sheol, its place in the cosmos, and its role in the history of salvation.

Given these methodological considerations, what more can be said concerning Paradise, Sheol, and Gehenna as components of Ephrem's cosmological thought? Here, we turn to a consideration of these three regions giving special attention to their characteristics, their relationships to one another, and their relationships to the spatial and temporal order of the terrestrial earth within the context of the history of salvation.

THE COSMIC SCOPE OF SALVATION HISTORY

Paradise

As we have already stated above, Paradise, as the environment specifically prepared for humanity by God, assumes a paradigmatic status both in terms of Ephrem's conception of humanity's physical and spiritual life and death and in terms of the poet's discussion of salvation history from cosmogony to eschaton. Therefore, in the context of Ephrem's reflection on the history of humanity's creation, fall, and redemption in Christ, Paradise is not simply lost, but, as a result of God's great mercy and love for His fallen creation, it is also ever and always the only truly befitting

beatific abode and ultimate destination of humanity. It is the normativity of Paradise as the properly human environment in Ephrem's thought which makes it the ideal point of departure for a consideration of the moral and spiritual significance of the cosmos relative to the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol.

Ephrem's vision of Paradise, as we have already stated, is strongly informed by the cosmogonic narrative of Genesis. Discussing its origins in his *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem writes:

After Moses spoke of how Adam was so gloriously fashioned, he turned to write about Paradise and Adam's entry therein saying, *The Lord had previously planted Paradise in Eden and there He placed Adam whom He had fashioned.*⁵⁴

Eden is the land of Paradise and [Moses] said *previously* because God had [already] planted it on the third day. He explains this by saying, *the Lord caused every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food to sprout forth from the earth.*⁵⁵ And to show that he was talking about Paradise, [Moses] said, *and the tree of life was in the midst of Paradise, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*⁵⁶

Commentary on Genesis, 2.5.1-2⁵⁷

Here, Ephrem seems to suggest that Paradise is part of the earthly creation, planted on the third day and identified with Eden. Elsewhere, and especially in the *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem makes it clear that, though it is somehow adjacent to the currently inhabited earth, Paradise is not, strictly speaking, merely earthly. Neither is it, however, entirely unearthly. This seeming inconsistency should not be taken as a shortcoming of Ephrem's thought, but seen rather as an intentionally deployed strategy to describe the simultaneous situation of Paradise both in moral and spiritual relation to and in temporal and spatial distinction from the inhabited earth. In Ephrem's writings, Paradise occupies and operates as a liminal space: it is the part of the created cosmos intended to serve as the venue for Divine and human communion.

Within his description of the primordial Paradise, Ephrem presents humanity's original condition with reference to the role of

⁵⁴ Gen. 2:8.

⁵⁵ Gen. 2:9.

⁵⁶ Gen. 2:9.

⁵⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 99-100.

active participation in creation God bestowed on Adam (CGen. 2.10). Ephrem speaks also, not in terms of humanity’s original perfection, but in terms of the blessed perfectibility of Adam and Eve (CGen. 2.17.3). Clothed in glory (CGen. 2.10.3; 2.14.2; 2.17.2), Adam was given rule over creation (CGen. 2.10), over all within and all outside of Paradise (CGen. 2.17.2). Nevertheless,

God, in His justice, withheld one tree from that one to whom He, in His goodness, had given everything in Paradise, on the earth, in the air, and in the seas. For when God created Adam, He did not make him mortal, nor did He fashion him immortal, so that Adam, either by keeping or transgressing the commandment, might acquire from one of the trees, the [life] that he preferred.

Commentary on Genesis, 2.17.3⁵⁸

Ephrem clarifies the purposes of God’s decree further, noting that:

Even though God, in His goodness, had given them everything else, He wanted, in His justice, to give them immortal life that was to be conferred by their eating from the tree of life. Therefore, God set down for them a commandment. It was not a great commandment relative to the great reward that He had prepared for them; He withheld from them one tree, only enough for them to be under a commandment. God gave them all of Paradise so that they would be under no constraint to transgress the law.

Commentary on Genesis, 2.17.5⁵⁹

According to Ephrem’s vision of the primordial Paradise, it was God’s intention that Adam and Eve should actively seek and freely choose “the immortal life that was to be conferred by their eating from the tree of life” by means of the proper application of their divinely bestowed freewill (HPar.12.15-18). Through the misapplication of their wills, however, Adam and Eve thwarted the divine purpose for humanity’s perfection, transgressing the commandment and falling into sin. Consequently, humanity was exiled from Eden (CGen. 2.35),⁶⁰ its reentry prevented by God’s

⁵⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 108-109.

⁵⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 109. cf. Gen. 2:15-17.

⁶⁰ Gen. 3:22.

placement of an angelic sentry described by Ephrem as a “living fence” (CGen. 2.36).⁶¹

Ephrem’s discussion of the ‘movement’ of salvation history combines the vertical and horizontal theological expansions of the cosmos which we have considered above. One of the best examples of this can be seen in the way in which Ephrem’s conception of Paradise as the borderland between heaven and the terrestrial earth is expressed by means of a complex of imagery centered around one particularly evocative ancient Near Eastern motif: the cosmic mountain.⁶² Envisioning Paradise as a mountain higher than all other mountains, Ephrem writes:

With the eye of my mind I gazed upon Paradise;
the summit of every mountain is lower than its summit.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.4⁶³

Sebastian Brock has offered an explanation of this convention of Ephrem’s thought, pointing out that, though there is no mention of a Paradisiacal mountain in the Genesis account:

there are hints elsewhere in the Old Testament which point to such a conception, notably in Ezekiel 28:13-14, where “Eden, the Garden [Paradise] of God” is described as “the holy mountain of God.” The prophet makes use here of an idea, well attested throughout the ancient Near East, of a cosmic mountain on which the deity resided (elsewhere in the Old Testament this holy mountain is sometimes identified with Sion, as in Psalm 47(48):1-2). Jewish literature of the intertestamental period indicates that by that time the concept of Paradise as a mountain was a widespread one.⁶⁴

The base of the Paradisiacal mountain is circular and encompasses both the land and the sea of the terrestrial earth

⁶¹ Gen. 3:24.

⁶² Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 49-57; Nicolas Séd, “Les hymnes sur le paradis de saint Ephrem et les traditions juives,” *Le Muséon* 81 (1968): 455-501; G. A. Anderson, “The Cosmic Mountain: Eden and Its Early Interpreters in Syriac Christianity,” in *Genesis 1-3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden*, ed. G. A. Robbins (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1988), 187-224.

⁶³ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 78.

⁶⁴ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 51-52.

(HPar. 1.8-9). Ephrem, true to his promise to describe Paradise "in diverse forms" (HPar. 1.9), provides numerous depictions of the mountain's topography and altitudinal subdivisions (HPar. 1.8; 2.6; 3.3-4; 4.1).⁶⁵ At the peak of this conical mountain is the Shekinah of God's presence (HPar. 2.11).

Within this symbolic model, vertical distance provides the principal metaphor of divine-human communion. This idea finds expression as a mental image when coupled with the placement of the tree of life within Ephrem's vision of Paradise at the very summit of the mountain (HPar. 3.1-2). Originally situated midway up the Paradisiacal mountain, Adam and Eve were intended to find the tree of life, and, in the process of seeking it, to actively ascend to the summit of Paradise. As a result, they would simultaneously move into closer communion with the divine, drawing near to the Shekinah of God's presence (HPar. 2.11), which as we noted earlier, was also situated at the Paradisiacal peak. The imagery of communion with or alienation from the Divine relative to humanity's altitude on the Paradisiacal mountain continues to find application even after the sin of the first parents as Ephrem presents the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden as a complete descent of the mountain to dwell on, and eventually to die and return to, the terrestrial earth from which they were made, either in the lowlands adjacent to Paradise (HPar. 1.10-11) or, as is suggested later in the *Commentary on Genesis*, "on a mountain on the outskirts of Paradise" (CGen. 3.5.1).⁶⁶

As Sebastian Brock has noted, "the expulsion from Paradise ... represents the transition from sacred to historical time and space; it is the entry into the fallen world of geographical space and historical time with which we are all too familiar."⁶⁷ Here, the vertical paradigm of Divine-human communion expressed in terms of 'height' and 'depth' persists even as it is further enmeshed in horizontal paradigms of terrestrial distance and time. Throughout

⁶⁵ Nicholas Séd has provided a useful and illuminating collection of schematic diagrams of the Paradisiacal topography described by Ephrem. See: Nicholas Séd, "Les hymnes sur le paradis de saint Ephrem et les traditions juives," *Le Muséon* 81 (1968): 455-501.

⁶⁶ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 126.

⁶⁷ Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series, No. 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 32.

his works, motifs of proximity and access to Paradise articulated by means of these various conceptual axes either in isolation from or combination with one another provide Ephrem with a variety of modes of expressing the progression of the history of salvation.

In the initial period after the fall of the first parents and their exile from Eden, Adam and Eve and their descendants are permitted by God to remain in relative geographical nearness to the blessed Garden (HPar. 1.10-11). Ephrem's comments on the story of Cain and Abel also suggest this where he regards Cain's invitation to Abel, "Let us go out to the field,"⁶⁸ as a possible indication "that they dwelt on a mountain on the outskirts of Paradise" (CGen 3.5).⁶⁹ Furthermore, in the aftermath of the first murder, Cain "separated himself from his parents and his kin" (CGen. 3.11),⁷⁰ removing to the land of Nod, a place still more vertically distant from Paradise (HPar. 1.11), denoting his sin's production of a further twofold alienation from humanity and from God. Ephrem's interpretation of the story of Enoch also contributes to the image of relative nearness to Paradise enjoyed by the earliest descendants of Adam and Eve, as well as the continuing possibility of human access to Eden in the ancient period when Paradise was still within Adam's visual range:

[Moses] wrote about Enoch who was pleasing to God and *was not*.⁷¹ Some say that while Adam was looking at him God transported him to Paradise lest [Adam] think that Enoch was killed as was Abel and so be grieved. This was so that [Adam] might be comforted by this just son of his and that he might know that for all who were like this one, whether before death or after the resurrection, [Paradise] would be their meeting-place.

Commentary on Genesis, 5.2.1⁷²

In contrast with Cain whose sin drove him further away from Paradise, Ephrem depicts "the descendants of the blessed [Seth] ... dwelling in the land along the boundary of the fence of Paradise"

⁶⁸ Gen. 4:8.

⁶⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 126.

⁷⁰ cf. Gen. 4:16.

⁷¹ Gen. 5:24.

⁷² McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 133-134.

(CGen. 6.5.1).⁷³ It is, in fact, not until Noah’s lifetime that humanity finally loses geographical proximity to Paradise when they are removed by the flood. Ephrem writes in the *Hymns on Paradise*:

When Adam sinned God cast him forth from
Paradise,⁷⁴
but in His grace He granted him the low ground
beyond it,
settling him in the valley below the foothills of
Paradise;
but when mankind even there continued to sin they
were blotted out,⁷⁵
and because they were unworthy to be neighbors to
Paradise,
God commanded the Ark to cast them out on Mount
Qardu.⁷⁶

Hymns on Paradise, 1.10⁷⁷

The increasingly great distance between humanity and Paradise in the period between the Fall and the days of Noah and the irreversible separation of humanity from the terrestrial vicinity of Eden in the flood are both indicative of the degree to which the sin of humanity produced its alienation from God. Ephrem affirms, nonetheless, that both spiritual and physical access to Paradise remained available to human beings, even after their radical dislocation from it. Spiritual access to Paradise is demonstrated, on the one hand, by means of God’s continuing gifts of His grace manifested through a variety of visible and historical events including Noah’s ark and the giving of the Law on Sinai (HPar. 2.10-13). The Divinely ordained typological representations of Paradise in historical time and reach their Old Testament zenith in God’s presence to Israel in the Tabernacle and later the Temple, which Ephrem regards both as a visible and

⁷³ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 136.

⁷⁴ Gen. 3:22-24.

⁷⁵ Gen. 6:5-9.

⁷⁶ Gen. 8:4 (Peshitta). Sebastian Brock points out that: “Ephrem follows the Syriac Bible which, together with Josephus and the Targumim, identifies the mountain where the Ark came to rest as Mt. Qardu in North Iraq, rather than Mt. Ararat in Armenia.” Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 189.

⁷⁷ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 81.

approximate manifestation of the topography of Paradise, as well as the actual presence of Paradise on earth by virtue of the Shekinah's residence between the cherubim of the Ark of the Covenant (HPar. 3; 15.7, 8).⁷⁸

On the other hand, Ephrem's insistence on the continuing possibility of humanity's physical access to Paradise, which we have already seen demonstrated in his comments regarding Enoch, finds an additional occasion for expression in the context of the story of the prophet Elijah.⁷⁹ Here, even after humanity's displacement from the precincts of Eden, Elijah's bodily departure from the terrestrial earth in a whirlwind as the antecedent of his direct entry into Paradise, provided Ephrem with evidence that the prophet had escaped death (HNis. 67.10) and attained to Paradise. Though extraordinarily rare events (HNis. 36.7), Enoch and Elijah's successful evasions of death by virtue of their righteousness were seen by Ephrem as ethical examples of what was possible when God's good gift of freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ) was properly applied even within the post-Fall context of ordinary historical time (HNis. 68.10). In the fourteenth of his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem wrote:

Since Elijah repressed
the desire of his body, he could withhold the rain⁸⁰
from the adulterers. Since he restrained his body,
he could restrain the dew from the whoremongers
who released and sent forth their streams.

Since the hidden fire, bodily desire,
did not prevail in him, the fire of the high place
obeyed him,⁸¹ and since on earth he conquered
fleshly desire, he went up to [the place] where
holiness dwells and is at peace.⁸²

Hymns on the Nativity, 14.16-17⁸³

⁷⁸ I Sam. 4:4; II Sam. 6:2; II Kings 19:15; Psalms 80:1; Psalm 99:1; Isaiah 37:16.

⁷⁹ II Kings 2:11-12.

⁸⁰ I Kings 17:1ff.

⁸¹ I Kings 18:20-40.

⁸² II Kings 2:1-12.

⁸³ Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 144.

Sheol

Despite the real spiritual and typological manifestations of Paradise on earth, and the rare, though not unachieved, possibility of physical transposition to Paradise, every other human being besides Enoch and Elijah had a common destination in death: Sheol (שְׁאוֹל). Literally translated as ‘pit’ or ‘grave,’ and envisioned as the underworldly abode of the dead, Ephrem’s conception of Sheol was strongly informed by three interrelated sources: Scripture, his Mesopotamian cultural milieu, and many of the physical aspects of death and the human experiences of practices related to it.⁸⁴ Represented in all three of these sources, practices of burial and the decomposition of the body contributed to the habit of thought which located Sheol under or within the earth, as well as to many of the descriptive images Ephrem deployed in his depictions of its environs. Just as in Ephrem’s thought Paradise occupied a liminal space above the terrestrial earth between the inhabited world and the transcendent heaven where God dwells, so Sheol occupied a liminal space beneath the terrestrial earth between the world of ordinary human temporal and spatial experience and the abyss of waters (HNis. 36.7). Using language and images which capitalize on the human phenomenological experience of the physical cosmos, Ephrem frequently compares and contrasts Sheol with Heaven, setting these unseen regions of the universe in parallel with one another by means of the terms the ‘height’ or ‘heights’ and the ‘depth’ or ‘depths’ (HCruc. 5.17; 7.11; HRes. 4.11,13,14). Ephrem also occasionally makes reference to the same relationship by means of the terms ‘heavenly’ or ‘heavenlies’ and ‘earthly’ or ‘earthlies’ (HEccl. 35.22). Elsewhere, Ephrem uses the same terms without setting them in parallel, such as when he refers to the ‘depths’ or the ‘depth’ as personified Death’s domain (HEccl. 35.20-22; HEccl. 41.16), a usage which clearly indicates that he has Sheol in mind (HNis. 38.1; 53.16).

According to Ephrem’s reading of the Scriptures, descent to Sheol in death was the consequence of Adam’s sin and the inheritance of all his progeny. Formed, according to Genesis, from

⁸⁴ Other sources, including but not limited to rabbinic Judaism, apocalyptic literature, and other (Greek?) Christian sources, could conceivably be added to the three sources I have here identified, but given the focus of this study, these will have to await further exploration.

the dust of the earth, Adam, as we have noted, was intended to inherit “eternal life through the fruit of the tree of life” (CGen. 2.31.2). When Adam sinned, however, he “let the sleep of death enter Creation” (HNat. 1.62). Through the misapplication of his freewill (*heruta*, *ܚܪܘܬܐ*), Adam alienated himself and all his descendants from the divine source of his own and all human life, initiating the process of his own and all subsequent human physical decomposition whereby what was made of dust would return to dust (CGen. 2.31.2; HNis. 41.14). Though the process of human degradation and the return of humanity’s dust to its earthly source in the interrelated prospects of death and descent to Sheol appeared on the human horizon as the result of Adam’s sin, they were, in Ephrem’s thought, accelerated and, in some sense, prematurely actualized in Cain’s murder of Abel (CGen. 3.7; HNis. 39.16).

While Death was but desiring to taste of your corpses
Cain refreshed me beforehand with blood of man.

While I was but desiring to wait patiently till Adam
should die
before I had power ye gave me power over your
bodies.

Cain with his sword overthrew the gate of Sheol
for it was closed and before the time he first opened it.

Nisibene Hymns, 69.9-11⁸⁵

The environs of Sheol are described vividly by Ephrem in his *Nisibene Hymns*. Through the deployment of a variety of images which do not easily yield to a single comprehensive depiction, one is presented, as was the case in the *Hymns on Paradise*, with a multifaceted description, highlighting here one aspect, there another, of the underworld of the dead. Taken together, the images provide not a definition, but a vision of Sheol as a dark (HNis. 36.11, 14), cold (HNis. 36.14), and silent (HNis. 35.5; 65.15; 66.13; HEcl. 13.28, 29) subterranean cavern (HNis. 38.4), gated (HNis. 36.14; 37.9; 38.641.16; 61.25; 62.3) and barring the exit of its inhabitants.

⁸⁵ Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 240 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963), 111-112. (my translation) cf. Gen. 4:8-11.

Javier Teixidor⁸⁶ has called attention to the fact that at various points Ephrem seems to regard Sheol as a collection of individual graves (HNis. 36.11; 39.6, 21; HEccl. 13.26), whereas he elsewhere gives the impression of one large collective space in which are located all the dead (HNis. 36.3), both “good and bad” (HNis. 53.4). In either case, Sheol is “that (place) which corrupts its lodgers” (SdDN 1.3): there “the bodies of all are treated the same” (SdDN 1.2), decomposing to dust while their bones remain (HNis. 37.5). Ephrem emphasizes Sheol’s dustiness and its impartiality towards even those of great worldly stature in his *Letter to Publius*:

Come, I will lead you out to the gloomy sepulchres.
 Come down, in your mind, with me even to lowest
 Sheol and I will show you
 there kings cast down upon their faces, their
 crowns buried in the dust with them.
 Come, see the princes, those who once luxuriated in
 silks, how the worm has
 now become their bed and the grub their
 covering.⁸⁷
 Come, look at those military chiefs who used to
 command thousands of
 armies, how they have become useless vessels of
 dust and things of no understanding.
 Look carefully at the dust of the earth and consider that
 it is your kin.

Letter to Publius, 19.1⁸⁸

There are a number of key metaphors or metaphorical complexes Ephrem deploys with reference to Sheol which contribute to his depiction of it as an unseen region of the cosmos. The first of these revolves around the conception of Sheol as a “treasury.” Applied to Sheol in a variety of contexts, it is used by Ephrem to denote the stockpile of valued and treasured dead who lie sleeping in Sheol (HNis. 37.1; 38.6; 55.16; SdDN 2.5; 3.2). The question as to whom the treasure belongs—God, Death, or Satan each being identified as possessors of the dead—is answered differently in a

⁸⁶ Javier Teixidor, “Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez Saint Ephrem,” *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 25-40.

⁸⁷ cf. Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:48; James 5:1.

⁸⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 352.

variety of contexts depending on which character is speaking and which point in the history of salvation is in question (HNis. 57).

Other metaphors employed by Ephrem with reference to Sheol grant it a more personified status. The first of these metaphorical complexes has to do with child-bearing. At points Ephrem speaks of Sheol as a barren womb (HNis. 37.2, 4); he also refers to Sheol as delivering without difficulty (HNis. 67.6-7). Elsewhere he speaks of the womb of Sheol giving birth to Christ, the First-born, in His resurrection (HNis. 38.7). Ephrem also places the womb of Sheol in comparison and contrast with the Virgin womb of Mary (HNat. 4.190; 10.7), drawing Christ's descent to and resurrection from Sheol into close symbolic parity with His Incarnation.

An additional personifying metaphor for Sheol revolves around images of eating. In relation to Sheol's status as a receptacle for all the dead it is regarded as the hungry (Serm. I.3.433) "all-consuming" (SdDN 4) "eater" (HEcl. 39.10) or "devourer" (HNis. 35.15), "a pit that swallows and closes on all movements" (HNis. 52.22). Similarly, Sheol is referred to as the stomach of personified Death (SdDN 3.4), Death being regarded in much the same fashion in Ephrem's works as greedy, ravenous, hungry, and voracious (SdDN 3.3), an "eater of humanity" (HEcl. 39.10), a "devourer" and "swallower" who feeds on mortal fruit (SdDN 3.2).

Within Sheol, Death reigns as "the king of silence" (HNis. 52.9; 62.1). Sheol is regarded variously as the place of his throne (HNis. 38.1), his stronghold (HNis. 53.16), and his den (HEcl. 35.20-22; 41.16). Possessing the power to conquer all (HNis. 52.2; 53.2; 54.14), Death carries out his work fearlessly (HNis. 52.11). Granted his power by God (HNis. 52.8), Death serves with integrity before Him (HNis. 38.3) impartially taking possession of only those whose time has come (HNis. 36.5). Death is just, uncorrupted, and radically egalitarian (HNis. 38.2). Guileless (HNis. 52.17) and righteous, he is called upon by many (HNis. 52.13), rescuing men from Satan (HNis. 55.7), granting rest (HNis. 66.4) from sorrow and sins (HNis. 64.1), and freeing people from their miseries (HNis. 66.12). Death contends that he is less violent than human beings (HNis. 61) and desires peace with them and freedom from the weeping of the bereaved (HNis. 66). Nevertheless, he professes to be tormented by grace (HNis. 39.16) and robbed by just men (HNis. 39.18), some of whom have deterred many from

entering Sheol prematurely, and a select few of whom have restored the dead to life. Though reviled for the efficiency and impartiality with which he executes his duties, Death comforts himself with the notion that his suffering is not unlike God's own, who "though He is good He is denied everyday and endures it" (HNis. 38.3).

It is to Sheol as the domain of the righteous, impartial, and just Death that all human beings depart after their earthly lives have come to an end. An account of all those who have made their way to the abode of the dead would be excessive, there being over seventy-five separate references to individuals or groups remanded to Sheol within the scope of the *Nisibene Hymns*. Nevertheless, two points should be made here concerning the inhabitants of Sheol and the quality of their afterlife. First of all, it must be noted that, in Ephrem's thought, Sheol houses both the righteous and the unrighteous. Not only the very unrighteous such as the Sodomites (HNis. 35.7; 53.8),⁸⁹ Goliath (HNis. 36.3),⁹⁰ Korah (HNis. 39.4),⁹¹ Zimri and Cozbi (HNis. 39.5),⁹² Ahab (HNis. 39.11),⁹³ the Edomites (HNis. 39.13),⁹⁴ and the Assyrians (HNis. 53.8),⁹⁵ but also the heroes of the Old Testament such as Noah (HNis. 68.7),⁹⁶ Joseph (HNis. 53.10),⁹⁷ Moses (HNat. 1.35-37),⁹⁸ Samuel (HNis. 53.18),⁹⁹ and Elisha (HNis. 41.10).¹⁰⁰ Two righteous New Testament figures are also reported as dwelling in Sheol: Simeon

⁸⁹ cf. Gen. 13:13.

⁹⁰ cf. I Sam. 17.

⁹¹ cf. Num. 16.

⁹² cf. Num. 25.

⁹³ cf. I Kings 16:29-34.

⁹⁴ cf. I Kings 11:1-8.

⁹⁵ cf. Ezek. 23.

⁹⁶ cf. Gen. 5:28-9:28.

⁹⁷ cf. Gen. 30:24-50:26.

⁹⁸ cf. Exod. 2-Deut. 34:12. It is noteworthy that Ephrem differs from most of his Christian neighbors to the west on this point. Both Greek and Latin Christianity tended to regard Moses' departure from earthly life to parallel that of Enoch and Elijah. By contrast, Ephrem regarded Moses to have died an ordinary human death and to have descended to Sheol.

⁹⁹ cf. I Sam. 1:20-25:1.

¹⁰⁰ cf. I Kings 19:16-II Kings 13:20.

(HNat. 6.12),¹⁰¹ and John the Baptist (HNis. 53.22).¹⁰² Death reports:

Prophets and priests and men of renown have I carried
off.
I have conquered kings in their armies and mighty men
in their hunts and righteous men in their
excellencies. Streams of corpses
are hurled by me into Sheol and though they pour into
her, she is athirst.
Though one be near or though he be far off,
the end brings him to the gate of Sheol.

Nisibene Hymns, 36.4¹⁰³

Secondly, concerning the quality of afterlife of the residents of Sheol, it must be said that Ephrem's descriptions, while gloomy and melancholic, are relatively benign when compared to many of the competing visions of Sheol and Gehenna on offer in his time.¹⁰⁴ Though, in Ephrem's thought, death and descent to Sheol are, in fact, regarded as Divine punishments (CGen. 2.31.2), care

¹⁰¹ cf. Luke 2:25-35.

¹⁰² cf. Matt. 3, 11:11; John 1, 3:23-30.

¹⁰³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 196.

¹⁰⁴ One of the distinguishing characteristics of Ephrem's conception of Sheol is the notable absence of torment of the wicked. This can, in some respects, be regarded as *the* difference between Sheol and Hell. On the development of the Western Christian conception of Hell, see: Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). On the diversity of conceptions of the underworld, its environment, and purposes see: Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983). It would seem that Ephrem's conception of Sheol provides one of the best examples of the manner in which his thought was strongly informed by his Mesopotamian context. On Mesopotamian religion and the underworld, see: Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop, trs. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. 268-286. On the thanatologies of Mesopotamians and their ancient Near Eastern neighbors and Mediterranean successors, see: Jon Davies, *Death, Burial, and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, Religion in the First Christian Centuries (New York: Routledge, 1999).

must be taken, nevertheless, to understand the nuances of his thought concerning these aspects of fallen humanity’s experience of the created order. Ephrem’s depiction of Sheol as a place characterized by rest and peace (HNis. 38.1) and freedom from misery (HNis. 66.12), filled with silent, happy, and tranquil dead (HNis. 66.13) represents a contrast with the perspective on Sheol offered by the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke, a perspective which Ephrem relegates to discussions about the eschatological punishment of sinners.¹⁰⁵ While Ephrem’s Sheol is not a place which offers any opportunity for repentance (HNis. 36.16; 52.22; 64.9), it is nevertheless a place which bears comparison to Heaven in its freedom from iniquity (HNis. 38.4). Most significantly, Ephrem’s vision of Sheol includes no mention of torment.¹⁰⁶

CHRIST’S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND HUMANITY’S RETURN TO PARADISE

Though intended and destined for eternal communion with God, as the result of sin, Adam and his entire human posterity have become subject to this underworldly detention, returning in death to the dust of the earth in Sheol. Nevertheless, God in his great mercy was not willing that his creation should be so easily surrendered. In his thirty-ninth hymn *On Virginity*, Ephrem portrays the condition of humanity and God’s response as follows:

You came down and became the Guide to the House
of Life,
the Way¹⁰⁷ to discipline, the smooth [Way] to the
Kingdom,
and the Gate¹⁰⁸ of entry.

¹⁰⁵ Ephrem does mention the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus, most notably in his *Letter to Publius*, but also in the *Hymns on Paradise*. Some of the not entirely unchallenging aspects of Ephrem’s use of this Scriptural material will be addressed in the chapter on the eschatological significance of Christ’s descent to Sheol in Ephrem’s theology. cf. Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁰⁶ Though the inhabitants of Sheol may indeed *suffer* (especially in terms of deprivation), they are not *tormented* (that is, punishment is not inflicted on them). For more on this distinction see note 67 above.

¹⁰⁷ cf. John 14:6.

Adam had sunken down. Spiritual angels came down
to help, but he did not come up. Prophets [came], but
he did not rise.

By You he who had sunken like iron turned and came
up.

You made the heavy one fly, and You sank the light
one
like iron and wood.¹⁰⁹

O Jesus, for Whose exploits the mouth does not
suffice,
nor the voice for His helps, nor a measure for His
abundance,
to Your Father be glory, for You came down from His
[place]
and went up from ours. His grace came down to us in
You,
and glory goes up by means of You.

Hymns on Virginity, 39.12, 15-16¹¹⁰

As we shall see in much greater detail in a subsequent chapter, the doctrines of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol are intimately connected in Ephrem's thought. Here, however, it must suffice to note the importance of the incarnation only insofar as it provides the necessary precondition for the cosmic event of Christ's descent to Sheol. Ephrem writes in his *Homily on Our Lord*:

Since death was unable to devour Him without a body,
or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a
virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol.... And
with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into
its vaults, and carried off its treasures.... When death
came confidently, as usual, to feed on mortal fruit, life,
the killer of death, was lying in wait, so that when death
swallowed (life) with no apprehension, it would vomit
it out, and many others with it.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.2¹¹¹

As we have seen above, images of Sheol's treasures and their contents have reference to the entirety of humanity collectively

¹⁰⁸ cf. John 10:7-10.

¹⁰⁹ cf. II Kings 6:1-7.

¹¹⁰ McVey, *Hymns*, 431.

¹¹¹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 278-279.

stored within it. Within the logic of Ephrem's conception of the cosmic scope of salvation history, not only the righteous, but all human beings are the object of Christ's descent to and resurrection from Sheol. This point is clearly made when Ephrem speaks of Adam with language which Sebastian Brock has identified as indicative of "the freedom with which, in Semitic thought, the individual can merge into the collective, and the collective into the individual":¹¹²

'Adam' in Ephrem may refer to the individual of the Genesis narrative or to the human race in general, or indeed to both simultaneously. Adam is Everyman. The Pauline reference to Christ as the 'last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45) thus takes on particular significance for Ephrem: on several occasions he specifies that it is 'Adam's body', or 'the body of mortal Adam' that the Word puts on at the Incarnation; it is 'the body of Adam which proves victorious in Christ' (*Crucifixion* 5:11). Or again Ephrem may use the term 'Adam' in order to link the effect of the Incarnation both with primordial and with eschatological time:

Blessed is He who put on Adam,
leaped up and made him pass over
on the Wood into Paradise.

(*Fast* 2:4)¹¹³

Christ, as the last, or second, Adam, completes the work of humanity's intended perfection interrupted and left unfinished by the sin of the first Adam, restoring humanity to its original glory and securing its re-entry to Paradise in the eschaton. As Ephrem puts it in his forty-fifth *Nisibene Hymn*, "the son of Adam has regained and put on the glory of Adam" (HNis. 45.14)¹¹⁴ The fullness of Christ's compassionate identification with Adam, and by extension, with all of sinful humanity is manifested differently throughout the various stages of His incarnate life. On the one hand, this is seen in Christ's participation in the universal human experience of birth, by means of which he "put on" or "clothed

¹¹² Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 30-31.

¹¹³ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 31.

¹¹⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 217.

himself” with Adam’s body,¹¹⁵ becoming “the One who took from us in order to give to us, so that we should all the more abundantly receive what is His by means of what is ours” (SdDN 10.1). On the other hand, Christ’s identification with His fallen creation reaches its fulfillment in the fact that “He extended His descent to the lower regions” (HRes. I.16), entering Sheol as “one who submitted and endured death, as it willed, in order to overthrow death, contrary to (death’s) will” (SdDN 3.1). In his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem writes:

And as He began in birth, He continued and completed
in death.
His birth received worship; his death repaid the debt.
As He came to birth, the magi worshipped Him.¹¹⁶
Again, He came to suffering and the thief took refuge
in Him.¹¹⁷
Between His birth and death He placed the world in
the middle;
By [His] birth and death He revived it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 21.19¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Clothing metaphors constitute one of Ephrem’s favorite ways of speaking of Christ’s incarnation. Sebastian Brock has noted that: “Perhaps the most frequent of all Ephrem’s images is that of putting on and taking off clothing.... it is by means of clothing imagery that Ephrem is able to present his readers with a cohesive picture of salvation history. In keeping with this, his favorite term for the Incarnation is ‘He put on a body’ (following the earliest Syriac translation of *esarkothe*, ‘He became incarnate’, in the Nicene Creed).” Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 39. For an analysis of the theological uses to which clothing metaphors were put by Ephrem and other Syriac Christian writers see: Sebastian P. Brock, “Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition,” in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und parallelen im Mittelalter*, Schriftenreihe der Katholischen Universität Eichstätt Band 4 Abteilung Philosophie und Theologie, ed. Margot Schmidt with Carl Friedrich Geyer (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982) 11-38. This mode of speaking of this incarnation will receive more attention in the subsequent chapter.

¹¹⁶ Matt. 2:1-12, esp. v. 11.

¹¹⁷ Luke 23:39-43.

¹¹⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 177.

All these changes did the Merciful One make,
 stripping off glory and putting on a body;
 for He had devised a way to reclothe Adam
 in that glory which he had stripped off.
 He was wrapped in swaddling clothes,¹¹⁹
 corresponding to Adam's leaves,¹²⁰
 He put on clothes
 in place of Adam's skins;¹²¹
 He was baptized for Adam's sin,¹²²
 He was embalmed for Adam's death,
 He rose up and raised Adam up in His glory.
 Blessed is He who descended,
 put on Adam and ascended.

Hymns on the Nativity, 23.13¹²³

Ephrem articulates the cosmic significance of what takes place in Christ's death on the cross, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead in various ways. On the one hand, imagined along a vertical axis running through the cosmos, the progression of Christ's incarnation, descent to Sheol, and restoration of Adam to Paradise represents not only the fullness of his identification with sinful humanity, but also his “pacifying” passage through every human region of the cosmos (HNat. 18.36). Tracing Christ's cosmic movement from the heights to the depths and back again, Ephrem writes that:

The Greatest of All descended utterly
 to unspeakable humiliation.
 He returned from that humiliation
 to seize the unlimited height on the right hand.¹²⁴

Hymns on the Nativity, 27.14¹²⁵

The cosmological significance of Christ's crucifixion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection are also made clear in Ephrem's affirmation of their extension throughout the six spatial dimensions of the cosmos (HCruc. 7.11).

¹¹⁹ Luke 2:12.

¹²⁰ Gen. 3:7.

¹²¹ Gen. 3:21.

¹²² Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:31-34.

¹²³ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 69.

¹²⁴ cf. Phil. 2:5-11.

¹²⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 212.

The light was awakened out of darkness.
 In Your symbol He also emerged from the grave.
 Instead of six days that came out to [the light] and were
 adorned,
 the height and the depth and the four directions,
 [these] six worship you.

Hymns on Virginité, 51.12¹²⁶

The created order of visible nature itself is also presented as bearing witness to the events of Christ's passion, both as they occurred and even as they are commemorated in the church. Ephrem invests the cycles of nature and their corresponding months of the year with a symbolic significance which bears witness to what takes place in Christ, not only in the paschal season, but also in the season of his nativity.

In January when seed hides in the earth,
 the Staff of Life sprang up from the womb.
 In April when the seed springs up into the air,
 the Sheaf propagated itself in the earth.

Hymns on the Nativity, 4.31-32¹²⁷

With more direct reference to the portion of the solar and lunar calendars during which Christ was crucified, died, and rose again, Ephrem regards both the sun and the moon as providing typological indications of what takes place on the cross (HCruc. 4.15; 6.1,10; 7.6). Focusing specifically on the events of the day of Christ's crucifixion as they are recorded in the Gospels, the darkening of the sun (HCruc. 1.10; 4.14), as well as the rending of the temple veil (HCruc. 4.12), the earthquake (HCruc. 4.13), and the breaking open of the tombs and the "disgorging" of Sheol (HCruc. 4.14) at the moment of Christ's cry from the cross are all seen by Ephrem as cosmic events which symbolize the divinity of the Savior (HNat. 4.167).¹²⁸ In his *Hymns on the Resurrection*, Ephrem symbolically relates the Church's celebration of Christ's resurrection to images of thunder, lightning, and rain drawn from the experience of seasonal spring storms (HRes. 2.3).¹²⁹

¹²⁶ McVey, *Hymns*, 464.

¹²⁷ McVey, *Hymns*, 92. cf. John 12:24.

¹²⁸ Matt. 27:45-54; Mark 15:33-41; Luke 23:44-49.

¹²⁹ G. A. M. Rouwhorst, *Les Hymnes Pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe: Analyse théologique et recherche sur l'évolution de la fête pascale chrétienne à Nisibe et*

Elsewhere in his paschal hymns, Ephrem deploys an image of the cosmic scope of Christ's descent to Sheol which can be found throughout his work: the sprouting of seeds lying dormant in the earth. In some instances in the paschal hymns, the seeds are those of flowers which bud and blossom in the spring:

And by the thunder of your Voice the flowers sprouted
up.

In the month of Nisan there was a Nisan in Sheol.

Hymns on the Crucifixion, 7.3¹³⁰

Ephrem also uses the same metaphor for resurrection substituting "a grain of wheat" for flowers and staying closer to the biblical prototype for this symbol (John 12:24).

Also like a grain of wheat he fell into Sheol.
He ascended like a sheaf and new bread.

Hymns on the Resurrection, 1.3¹³¹

The grain of wheat that was sown, after three days
came up and filled the storehouse of life.

Hymns on the Nativity, 4.96¹³²

Glory to you who clothed yourself with the body of
mortal Adam, and made it a fountain of life for all
mortals! You are the Living One whose killers became
the sowers of your life: like a grain of wheat, they
sowed it in the depths, so that it would sprout and raise
up many with it.

Homily on Our Lord, 9.1¹³³

Still elsewhere in his thought on Christ's descent to Sheol and the resurrection, Ephrem speaks of Jesus as the plant which sprouts from the earth as a flower and grows into the Tree of Life.

à Edesse et dans quelques Eglises voisines au quatrième siècle, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language, Vol. 7,1, ed. J. den Boeft, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, J. H. Waszink, J. C. M. van Winden (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 108.

¹³⁰ Edmund Beck, ed. *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschalhymnen*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 247 (Louvain: Peeters, 1964), 69-70. (my translation)

¹³¹ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 78. (my translation)

¹³² McVey, *Hymns*, 97.

¹³³ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 284-285.

Satan and death with the serpent, their companion,
immediately desired the Bloom [and] choked it in their
assembly.

Gloomy hot blasts surrounded it in their perfidy
The Blossom, troubled by
gloom and darkness and night,
sprouted [into] a flower in Sheol.
It became the Tree of Life that saved creation.
It ascended for coronation,
and God magnified the coronation of him who
conquers the conquerors.

Hymns on Virginity, 51.8¹³⁴

The cosmic proportions of this tree are indicated by means of the six spatial dimensions of the universe noted above.

The first day, the source and beginning,
is a type of the root that germinated everything.
Much greater than it is our Redeemer's day planted in
the universe.

For His death is like a root inside the earth,
His resurrection like the summit in Heaven,
His words [extend] in every direction like branches,
and His fruit [is] His body for those who eat it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 26.4¹³⁵

Ephrem's depiction of Jesus himself as the Tree of Life, and his cross as "akin to the Tree of Life" and "the son of its stock" (HNis. 58.21), provides the deployment of tree metaphors with reference to Christ's crucifixion yet another complex of symbolic connections with regard to the cosmic significance of Christ's descent to Sheol in death. As the Tree of Life, Christ's cross and the redemptive action he performs in his death on it provide the means of humanity's restoration to Paradise.

Greatly saddened was the Tree of Life
when it beheld Adam stolen away from it;
it sank down into the virgin ground and was hidden—
to burst forth and reappear on Golgotha;
humanity, like birds that are chased,
took refuge in it

¹³⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 463.

¹³⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 207

so that it might return them to their proper home.
 The chaser was chased away, while the doves
 that had been chased
 now hop with joy in Paradise.

Hymn on Virginité, 16.10¹³⁶

The access to Paradise granted to humanity through Jesus’ death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection finds expression in several of the joyous responsive exclamations in Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*:

Blessed is He Who was pierced¹³⁷ and so removed the
 sword from the entry to Paradise!¹³⁸

Hymns on Paradise, 2.R¹³⁹

Blessed is He Who through His cross has flung open
 Paradise!

Hymns on Paradise, 6.R¹⁴⁰

Blessed is He Who with His keys has opened up the
 Garden of Life!

Hymns on Paradise, 7.R¹⁴¹

Blessed is He Who exalted Adam and caused him to
 return to Paradise!

Hymns on Paradise, 11.R¹⁴²

In this chapter, we have surveyed both the significance of Sheol as a region of the cosmos, and the significance of Christ’s salvific descent to and resurrection from Sheol as an integral part of the process of effecting human redemption. By so doing, we have outlined the cosmic context of the history of humanity’s salvation in Christ, and have provided a frame within which we might consider other aspects of the theological significance of Ephrem the Syrian’s use of the doctrine of Christ’s descent to Sheol.

¹³⁶ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 60-61.

¹³⁷ John 19:34.

¹³⁸ Gen. 3:24.

¹³⁹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 85.

¹⁴⁰ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 109.

¹⁴¹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 119.

¹⁴² Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 154.

CHAPTER TWO: CHRIST'S INCARNATION AND DESCENT TO SHEOL IN THE THEOLOGY OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

Scholars of Syriac Christianity have consistently noted the importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation in the works of Ephrem the Syrian. The mystery of the Word made flesh has been identified as “the linchpin of Ephrem’s theology,”¹ its role being that of “the central mystery of the faith and the heart and pinnacle of God’s revelation to humanity.”² In Ephrem’s thought, the incarnation is the divinely initiated and accomplished bridging of the ontological chasm between the Creator and his fallen creation for the purpose of reconciliation and human salvation. In an act of love fraught with paradox, God, in his mercy and compassion, humbled his greatness, accommodating himself to human weakness by clothing himself with “our body” (HNat. 22.39).³ Both as an act of

¹ Kathleen E. McVey, “Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd edition, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, ed. Everett Ferguson, associate eds. Michael P. McHugh, Frederick W. Norris (New York: Garland, 1997), 1233.

² Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in: Kathleen E. McVey, ed., *Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trs., Fathers of the Church, Vol. 91 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 52.

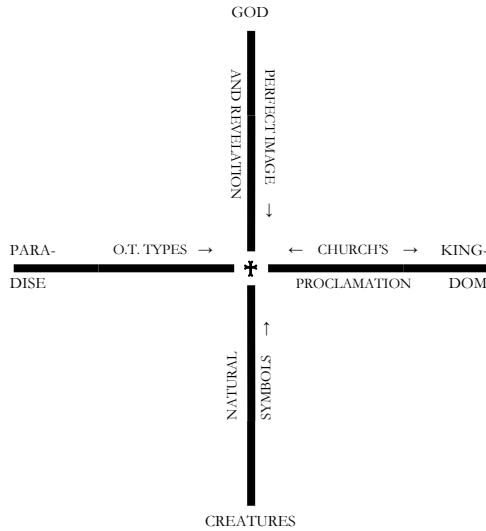
³ Clothing metaphors constitute one of Ephrem’s favorite ways of speaking of Christ’s incarnation. Sebastian Brock has noted that: “Perhaps the most frequent of all Ephrem’s images is that of putting on and taking off clothing. . . . it is by means of clothing imagery that Ephrem is able to present his readers with a cohesive picture of salvation history. In keeping with this, his favorite term for the Incarnation is ‘He put on a body’ (following the earliest Syriac translation of *esarkothe*, ‘He became

revelation and as an act of redemption, Christ's incarnation possesses a pivotal significance in Ephrem's thought that is difficult to overemphasize. Robert Murray has lucidly summarized the central importance of Christ's earthly life in his discussion of Ephrem's symbolic view of the created order and the history of salvation which unfolds within it.

Ephrem's symbolic thinking might be plotted schematically by means of a figure with horizontal and vertical axes intersecting at their centre. The horizontal is the axis of time, including all history from creation to the eschatological kingdom; the vertical axis is ontological, from God 'above' to creatures 'below'. The point of intersection is Christ's incarnation, passion (appropriately symbolized by our figure!) and resurrection. He is the centre to which all things point: as God's perfect image he is the focus of revelation, by typological prefiguring he is the term of biblical prehistory; to him the Church points back by memory and proclamation, while all creation likewise points to him by symbolic hints and vestiges. Christ is the 'Lord of symbols' (*H Fid* 9,11), 'the term of all symbols, towards whom they home in from every side' (*EC* 1,1), while he himself is the perfect image of God.⁴

incarnate', in the Nicene Creed)." Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series, No. 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 39. For an analysis of the theological uses to which clothing metaphors were put by Ephrem and other Syriac Christian writers see: Sebastian P. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und parallelen im Mittelalter*, Schriftenreihe der Katholischen Universität Eichstätt Band 4 Abteilung Philosophie und Theologie, ed. Margot Schmidt with Carl Friedrich Geyer (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982), 11-38.

⁴ Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975/1976): 7.



For Ephrem, the Incarnation of Christ from Mary is the junction of Divine self-disclosure and Divine pardon. For this reason it provides, in a sense, a lens by means of which the faithful may properly perceive, if not the full extent, at least the contours of the true reality of all that is, seen and unseen. This is clearly displayed in Ephrem's discussion of the manner in which Divinity remains hidden even as it is revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation. While the majesty of the ineffable and transcendent Godhead remains hidden and impenetrable to the inquiries of the human mind, the truth and meaning of God's grace and compassionate love for humanity become clear to those who respond in faithful love, contemplating Christ's nativity in awe and wonder. Ephrem writes:

Who, being a mortal, can tell about the Reviver of all,
 Who left the height of His majesty and came down to
 smallness?
 You, Who magnify all by being born, magnify my weak
 mind
 that I may tell of Your birth, not to investigate Your
 majesty,
 but to proclaim Your grace. Blessed is He Who is
 [both] hidden and revealed in His actions!

It is a great wonder that the Son, Who dwelt entirely in
 a body,
 inhabited it entirely, and it sufficed for Him. Although
 limitless, he dwelt in it.
 His will was entirely in Him; His totality was not in
 Him.
 Who is sufficient to say that although He dwelt entirely
 in the body,
 still He dwelt entirely in the universe? Blessed is the
 Unlimited Who was limited!

Your majesty is hidden from us; Your grace is revealed
 before us.
 I will be silent, my Lord, about Your majesty, but I will
 speak about Your grace.
 Your grace seized hold of You and inclined You
 toward our evil.
 Your grace made You a babe; Your grace made you a
 human being.
 Your majesty contracted [and] stretched out. Blessed is
 the Power that became small and became great!

Hymns on the Nativity, 23.1-3⁵

Stressing the limits of human cognition in the context of understanding the infinite grandeur of the Godhead, Ephrem states above that Christ's Divine "totality" was not contained within the body he put on in the incarnation. Nevertheless, Ephrem also affirms that there is a sense in which the Son's condescension to his creation effected, in the words of Kathleen McVey, "a permanent change in the relationship between human beings and their Creator." McVey cites as evidence of this Ephrem's declaration that "the Deity imprinted Itself on humanity, so that humanity might also be cut into the seal of the Deity. (*Nat.* 1.99)"⁶ In his *Homily on Our Lord*, Ephrem articulates the same reciprocity of Christ's condescension to humanity for the purpose of our redemption with the words, "Glory to the One Who took from us in order to give to us, so that we should all the more abundantly

⁵ Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 187-188.

⁶ McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1235.

receive what is His by means of what is ours.”⁷ Discernable within this exclamation is Ephrem’s assent to the common Eastern patristic convention of thought which regards salvation as *theosis* or the divinization of humanity through the grace of God made accessible in Christ’s incarnation and saving death. Finding repeated expression throughout his works, many of Ephrem’s concise statements on the salvific nature of the incarnation, including the one cited above, have been frequently compared to the assertion of his contemporary, Athanasius of Alexandria, who wrote, “He was made man that we might be made God.”⁸ While there are manifold and clear similarities between the statements of these two thinkers, Ephrem’s conception of *theosis* is often stated with a noticeable Syriac accent.

On the one hand, the peculiarly Syriac character of Ephrem’s affirmations of the incarnation’s significance for human divinization take an interesting cultural-linguistic turn in his deployment of a number of poetic parallelisms. Ephrem states that Christ “descended and became one of us that we might become heavenly” (HNat. 3.16). This same conception is articulated at greater length:

I am in wonder of Your mercies which You poured out
on the evil ones.
You made poor Your greatness that our poverty might
grow rich,⁹
that we might become by our treasures the companions
of the angels.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 1.2¹⁰

In these citations, Ephrem might seem to stop short of the terms of Athanasius’ celebrated affirmation that “God became man in order that man might become God” (αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν ἵνα

⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 285

⁸ Athanasius, *Dei Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 54.3, in: Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Second Series, Vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 65.

⁹ I Cor. 8:9.

¹⁰ Edmund Beck, ed. *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschalhymnen*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 247 (Louvain: Peeters, 1964), 1. (my translation)

ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν),¹¹ but his language here, especially in light of what we have already seen above, can in no way be taken to indicate an ambivalence or reticence toward ideas of *theosis*. Instead, these statements must be regarded as rhetorical expansions, particular to Ephrem’s Syriac cultural milieu, of the same type of conception of human divinization found expressed more prosaically elsewhere in Ephrem’s works and throughout the writings of the Eastern fathers.

Another example of the Syriac character of Ephrem’s christology and thought on divinization is visible at points throughout his *Hymns on the Nativity* where he employs the Syriac verb *mzag* (ܡܙܐܓ) to describe the union of the divine and the human in Christ and, through him, in those he came to save. Translated as “mingled,” Ephrem’s use of *mzag* (ܡܙܐܓ) represents a conventional pattern of thought in early Syriac christology—one that would be particularly hard pressed by the definition of Chalcedon in the century after Ephrem’s death. With reference to the incarnation, Ephrem writes:

Glorious is the Wise One Who allied and joined
Divinity with humanity,
One from the height and the other from below.
He mingled the natures like pigments,
and an image came into being: the God-man!

Hymns on the Nativity, 8.2¹²

Later, in another iteration of the language of *theosis*, Ephrem refers to the same mingling of the human and the divine with reference to the salvation of humanity, writing: “Blessed is He Who came in what is ours and mingled us into what is His” (HNat.

¹¹ Athanasius’ famous statement is only the first phrase of a longer thought: “For he became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption.” (αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐφανερώσεν ἑαυτὸν διὰ σώματος ἵνα ἡμεῖς τοῦ ἀοράτου Πατρὸς ἐννοίαν λαβώμεν καὶ αὐτὸς ὑπέμεινε τὴν παρ’ ἀνθρώπων ὕβριν ἵνα ἡμεῖς ἀφθαρσίαν κληρονομήσωμεν.) Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, Robert W. Thomson, ed. & tr., Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 268, 269.

¹² McVey, *Hymns*, 119.

21.12).¹³ Kathleen McVey has argued that these aspects of Ephrem's thought should be taken to indicate the distinctive manner in which "for him the Incarnation not only opens up the way to *theosis* but it also brings a humanization of God."¹⁴ The importance of Ephrem's use of anthropomorphic language, and especially images of the feminine with respect to the Incarnation and its effects will be further explored below.

Ephrem's emphasis on humanity's elevation to participation in the Divine life as a result of the economy of salvation inaugurated in Christ's incarnation is also evident in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron* where he explicates the significance of the rejoicing of the angels at Christ's birth.

Thus, as peace began to be [established], the angels proclaimed, *Glory in the highest and peace on earth*.¹⁵ When lower beings received [peace] from superior beings, *they cried, Glory on earth and peace in the heavens*.¹⁶ At that time when the divinity came down [and] was clothed in humanity, the angels cried, *Peace on earth*. And at the time when that humanity ascended in order to be absorbed into the divinity and sit on the right,—*Peace in heaven*,—the infants were crying forth before him, *Hosanna in the highest*.¹⁷ Hence, the apostle also learned

¹³ McVey, *Hymns*, 92. Elsewhere, McVey has written with reference to Ephrem's view of human divinization: "The similarity of Ephrem's thought to Athanasius' dictum, 'The Word of God became human so that we might become divine' has been noted. But the difference in Ephrem's view needs also to be stressed. For him the Incarnation not only opens up the way to *theosis* but it also brings a humanization of God. He explores the dimensions of that humanization of God especially through images of birth and suckling." McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1235. See also: Kathleen E. McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian," in *The Early Christian World*, Vol. II, Philip F. Esler, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1228-1250, esp. 1235ff; Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 72-74.

¹⁴ McVey, "Ephrem the Syrian," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1235.

¹⁵ Luke 2:14.

¹⁶ Luke 19:38.

¹⁷ Matt. 21:1-11, esp. v. 9; Mark 11:1-10, esp. vv. 9-10; Luke 19:28-40, esp. vv. 37-38; John 12:12-15, esp. v. 13.

that one should say, *He made peace by the blood of his cross*
[for] that which is in heaven and on earth.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 2.14¹⁸

Here, in addition to affirming the “clothing” of divinity in humanity and the redemptive and transformative divinization of humanity in Christ, Ephrem clearly associates the nativity and Christ’s entry to Jerusalem. This arrangement sets Christ’s birth and death in parallel and indicates yet another symbolic schema implemented by Ephrem to affirm the soteriological end of the incarnation. Identified with Easter, the Church’s celebration of the festival of the Nativity is a “day of redemption” (HNat. 1.87). Later in the *Hymns on the Nativity*, we find another expression of the same type of equation between the incarnation and the Church’s paschal feast:

In January when seed hides in the earth,
 the Staff of Life sprang up from the womb.
 In April when the seed springs up into the air,
 the Sheaf propagated itself in the earth.

Hymns on the Nativity, 4.31-32¹⁹

Ephrem’s symbolic twinning of Christ’s birth and death is clearly displayed again in the twenty-first of his *Hymns on the Nativity*:

But let us sing the birth of the First-Born—how
 Divinity in the womb wove herself a garment.
 She put it on and emerged in birth; in death she
 stripped it off again.
 Once she stripped it off; twice she put it on.
 When the left hand snatched it, she wrested it from
 her,
 and she placed it on the right hand.

¹⁸ Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 66.

¹⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 92. Kathleen McVey has commented that by means of this paradoxical parallelism, “Ephrem makes the nativity and Easter interchangeable: the birth is a resurrection, the resurrection a birth.” p. 92, n. 136. cf. John 12:24.

And as He began in birth, He continued and completed
in death.

His birth received worship; His death repaid the debt.

As He came to birth, the magi worshipped Him.²⁰

Again, He came to suffering and the thief took refuge
in Him.²¹

Between His birth and death He placed the world in
the middle;

by [His] birth and death He revived it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 21.5, 1922

Elsewhere in Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron* his clear and adamant insistence on the mutual dependence and reciprocity of Christ's incarnation and death as events in the history of salvation is articulated in terms of Christ's descent to Sheol. Here, Ephrem makes one of his most straightforward statements concerning the complementarity of these two events in the history of salvation. Placing his comment in Jesus' own mouth, Ephrem expands on Christ's rebuke to Peter, "*Get behind me, Satan.*"²³

"Have you not learned the reason for my coming? Just as I became an infant and was placed in the cradle, and gave joy to those born [of women], so too it is fitting that I go down to Sheol, and console the dead, in the presence of those just ones, who for ages have been waiting to see me. *The prophets, the kings, and the just have desired,*²⁴ and *Abraham was waiting to see my day.*²⁵ I will go down to see him. Who does not wish that I should ascend upon the cross and liberate creatures, if not Satan?"

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 14.4²⁶

In the remainder of this chapter, we will turn our attention to two elaborate symbolic complexes deployed by Ephrem the Syrian in his explication of the intersection between Christ's incarnation

²⁰ Matt. 2:1-12, esp. v. 11.

²¹ Luke 23:39-43.

²² McVey, *Hymns*, 174, 177.

²³ Matt. 16:21-23; Mark 8:33.

²⁴ Matt. 13:17.

²⁵ John 8:56.

²⁶ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 214-215.

and descent to Sheol. First, we will survey the manner in which Ephrem accounts for the pivotal events of salvation history, by means of the deployment of language related to childbirth, and above all, by means of the verbal image of the maternal womb. Secondly, we will explore Ephrem’s affirmation of the universality of Christ’s incarnate identification with humanity and saving work by means of a consideration of his appropriation and expansion of Saint Paul’s identification of Christ as the last Adam.

FOUR WOMBS

The paradigmatic status Ephrem accords to Christ’s birth from the womb of Mary provides one of the most powerful and evocative images in his discussion of the history of salvation: the maternal womb. By means of this image, Ephrem creatively conveys the essential importance of the Incarnation in the economy of redemption, both in its capacity as the event of Divine self-disclosure *par excellence*, as well as in its capacity as the precondition of Christ’s saving activity in life and in death.

According to Ephrem there are four wombs which Christ opens as the First-Born: the womb of the Father in his eternal generation, the womb of Mary in his incarnation, the womb of baptism at the inauguration of his ministry, and the womb of Sheol in his triumph over death. Ephrem makes reference to Christ’s successive passage through these four wombs with reference to their importance in the progression of salvation history in his *Homily on Our Lord*.

The Father begot Him, and through Him He made all creation. Flesh begot Him, and in His flesh He put passions to death. Baptism begot Him, that through Him it might make (our) stains white. Sheol begot Him to have her treasures despoiled by Him.

Homily on Our Lord, 2.5²⁷

²⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277. The Syriac text reads:
 ܡܬܬܠܝܢ ܕܚܝܬܐ ܕܐܬܪܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
 ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
 Edmund Beck, ed. *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro*.
 Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 270 (Louvain:
 Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1966), 2.

This straightforward inventory of the four wombs inhabited and passed through by Christ in his capacity as the Creator and Redeemer of humanity is the only one of its kind in Ephrem's writings. Though articulated in careful and artistic balance, it is, nonetheless, an exceptionally prosaic statement for Ephrem. Throughout the rest of his works, there are surprisingly few places where Ephrem makes explicit reference to all four of these wombs in the same context. Instead, Ephrem's deployment of the image of the womb is executed in a much more poetic manner where two or three of the pivotal and salvific births of Christ are placed in parallel with one another in one strophe and comparative and contrasting substitutions are made in subsequent strophes. An exception that proves the rule, since it mentions (albeit implicitly) all four wombs, will serve to illustrate Ephrem's more customary method of linking the wombs through which the Son passes.

He poured forth dew and living rain
upon Mary, the thirsty earth.
Also like a grain of wheat He fell into Sheol.
He ascended like a Sheaf and New Bread.²⁸
Blessed is His offering!

From the height His Power descended to us
and from within the womb hope sprang forth for us.
From the tomb life rose for us
and upon the right hand the King sits for us.
Blessed is His glory!

The Word of the Father came from His womb
and put on the body in another womb.
From womb to womb He went forth
and chaste wombs are filled by Him.
Blessed is He Who dwelled with us!

From the height He descended like the Lord
and from within the womb he went forth like a servant.
And Death knelt before Him in Sheol.
And by His resurrection the living worshipped Him.
Blessed is His triumph!²⁹

²⁸ cf. John 12:24.

²⁹ cf. Phil. 2:5-11.

His birth is a purification to us
 and also His baptism is a remission to us.
 Also His death is life to us.
 Also His ascension is exaltation to us.
 How much ought we to give thanks to Him!

Hymns on the Resurrection, 1.3, 5, 7, 8, 16³⁰

Ephrem's resolute affirmation of Christ's birth from the Virgin can come as no surprise, but many readers may find his insistence on Christ's three additional births somewhat strange and disorienting. Though Ephrem's discussion of the Son's birth from the womb of the Father may seem especially bewildering, his classification the Jordan River and Sheol as wombs is really no less peculiar. How might one understand this exceptional convention of Ephrem's thought?

As has already been suggested, the answer to this question is located in the archetypal status Ephrem accords to Christ's incarnation from the womb of Mary. In Ephrem's thought, the paradoxical event of Christ's incarnation graciously and extravagantly undoes conceptions of fixed separations both between the Divine and the human and between the eternal and the temporal. In the incarnation, Divinity's clothing of itself in humanity creates new possibilities of understanding both the Divine and the human. In Christ, the Creator becomes a creature and creation is restored to communion with the Creator. As we noted above, God's compassionate and humble self-disclosure in Jesus Christ provides a lens which makes possible the perception of the true relationship between ordinary and sacred time, revealing God's glory, and making his purposes clearly manifest in the world. Christ's birth from Mary's physical womb thus supplies a symbol of axial importance which enables Ephrem to identify several key events, eternal and temporal, in the history of salvation as component parts of the achievement of the same eternal Divine intent for humanity's participation in the life of the Trinity. As Sebastian Brock has written:

From the point of view of linear historical time all this is indeed bizarre and illogical, but Ephrem's thought clearly makes use here of the concept of sacred time: the total effect of the Incarnation is operative at any

³⁰ Beck, ed., *Paschallhymnen*, 78, 79, 81. (my translation)

single point along its main ‘staging posts’ (as Ephrem often calls them), that is to say, Mary’s womb, the ‘womb’ of the Jordan, and the ‘womb’ of Sheol. Thus what is still to be effected by Christ in historical time by His death and resurrection can be anticipated in sacred time already while He is still in the womb, or at His baptism in the Jordan.³¹

The Womb of the Father

For many readers, Ephrem’s affirmation of Christ’s birth from the womb of the Father may provoke some measure of surprise. Though it cannot be denied that certain challenges are raised by beginning here in our discussion of the wombs through which Christ passes, doing so will preserve the ‘temporal’ progression of the events of salvation history. From the outset, then, two matters relative to Ephrem’s language concerning Christ’s birth from the womb of the Father must be addressed.

First, a closer consideration of the poet’s deployment of feminine imagery with respect to the Divine will aid us in understanding his use of this exceptional image. Above, in the context of Ephrem’s thought on the divinization of humanity, we have noted Kathleen McVey’s claim that for Ephrem “the Incarnation not only opens up the way to *theosis* but it also brings a humanization of God.”³² McVey has observed further, that in relation to Christ’s Incarnation from Mary, Ephrem uses not only masculine, but also feminine imagery, and especially “images of birth and suckling”³³ in his depiction of the Divine. Elsewhere, she has shown that Ephrem’s use of feminine imagery for the divine extends to each of the persons of the Trinity,³⁴ and should not

³¹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 92.

³² McVey, “Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1235.

³³ McVey, “Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1235. See also, Kathleen E. McVey, “Ephrem the Syrian’s Use of Female Metaphors to Describe the Deity,” *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 5 (2001): 261-288.

³⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 10-11, n. 28. McVey writes: “For the Father’s or Divinity’s womb, cf. Nat. 13.7, 21.7, 27.15 and 27.19; for the Son as a mother through the incarnation, Nat. 4.149-54, cf. Nat. 23.5; and for the related image of Christ as a bird, cf. Nat. 17.1, 26.13, and Virg. 12.7 and 41.2; for references to the Holy Spirit using feminine pronouns, cf. Nat.

necessarily be regarded as innovative given the existence of theological precedents in the *Odes of Solomon*.³⁵ Thus, though this form of attribution may seem unusual, it cannot be regarded as uncommon, nor even untraditional, for Ephrem.

Moreover, Ephrem's use of feminine imagery relative to the Godhead should not be regarded as being without biblical precedent. Accounting for "the use Ephrem makes of the term 'ubba (ܐܒܒܐ), 'bosom', but also 'womb', with reference to the Father", Sebastian Brock has written:

The term derives from John 1:18, 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known'. The Greek text here has *kolpos*, 'bosom', but the early Syriac translators chose to render the word, not by *kenpa*, 'lap, bosom', but by 'ubba, which has a much wider range of meaning than does *kolpos*, and includes 'womb' as well as 'lap'.³⁶

Though his analysis calls for caution with respect to the translation of the Syriac 'ubba (ܐܒܒܐ), Brock's explication of Ephrem's use of the term serves to fully corroborate our current discussion.

In Ephrem's poetry we encounter the word 'ubba in a great variety of different meanings, and by no means every time that he uses the word does he intend it in the sense 'womb', whether metaphorically or not. Nevertheless there remain many passages where Ephrem juxtaposes the 'ubba of the Father with the 'ubba of Mary, and in these it seems that we can justifiably understand the sense of 'womb' as uppermost.³⁷

5.10 and Virg. 7.6; for God as weaver, the archetypal occupation of women in antiquity, cf. Nat. 21.5 (Father) and Virg. 37.6 (Christ); God as housekeeper, cf. CJ 2.11; for some suggestions of Ephrem's place among patristic writers on this subject, cf. esp. Nat. 17.1 and note *ad loc.*"

³⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 10. Despite some traditional congruencies, care must be taken here to point out that Sebastian Brock asserts that "it does not seem likely that Ephrem knew the *Odes* directly." Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: *Hymni De Ecclesia* 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975): 142.

³⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 171.

³⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 171.

In addition to Ephrem's extension of feminine language to the Godhead on the basis of Christ's Incarnation from Mary, we must also address the tension between the temporal and eternal implicit in Ephrem's discussion of Christ's birth from the womb of the Father. As the citation from Sebastian Brock suggests, one of the principal reasons for regarding the Syriac *'ubba* (ܐܘܒܐ) of the Father as a womb lies in the fact that Ephrem constructs a number of careful comparisons and contrasts between the Son's eternal generation from the Father and his physical birth from the Virgin. Here, we encounter in Ephrem's thought, as we noted above, an example of a "bold reversal of our usual categories of time,"³⁸ whereby "events that are of equal significance from a religious point of view, or whose effect is achieved by a combination of events, come together on the 'sacred time' scale, even though these events may be far separated by 'horizontal time'."³⁹ For this reason, it is, in fact, as a result of Christ's visible and *temporal* birth from Mary that his invisible and *eternal* generation from the Father, though in its essence remaining hidden, is nonetheless revealed to humanity. Though it takes place outside of the boundaries of ordinary time and space, the eternal generation of the Son, as one of the crucial events of salvation history, is made known "openly" in Christ's Incarnation from Mary. Ephrem writes:

Christ, You have given life to the creation by Your
birth
that took place openly from a womb of flesh.
Christ, You dazzled understanding by Your birth
that shone forth from eternity from the hidden womb.
I am amazed by You in two [ways]: The wandering find
life in You,
but investigators go astray in You.

Hymns on Virginity, 31.1⁴⁰

Christ's birth from the virgin womb of Mary is thus understood as the visible symbol or analog of the eternal generation of the Son from the womb of the Father. Ephrem expresses the paradox of

³⁸ Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: *Hymni de Ecclesia* 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975): 141.

³⁹ Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: *Hymni de Ecclesia* 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975): 141.

⁴⁰ McVey, *Hymns*, 398-399.

Christ's hidden divinity revealed in his humanity in the thirteenth of his *Hymns on the Nativity*.

If anyone seeks Your hidden nature
 behold! it is in Heaven in the great womb
 of Divinity. And if anyone seeks
 Your revealed body, behold it rests and looks out
 from the small womb of Mary!

The mind wanders among Your attributes,
 O Rich One! Copious inner chambers
 are in Your godhead, contemptible appearances
 in Your humanity. Who will measure You,
 Great Sea Who made Himself small?

We came to see You as God.
 Behold! You are a human being. We came to see You
 as a human being—the banner of Your godhead
 shines forth! Who can bear
 Your transformations, O True One?

Hymns on the Nativity, 13.7-9⁴¹

Ephrem's conception of the incarnation as the event by which God overcomes the gulf of alienation between the Divine and the human and between the eternal and the temporal is thus seen clearly in the fact that Christ's birth from Mary's womb is the historical event which makes possible the comparative attribution of a womb to the ineffable and transcendent Father. Christ's incarnation from Mary is the temporally and epistemically prior paradigmatic event of Divine self-disclosure which facilitates the conception, formed in the human intellect, of the Son's eternal generation from the womb of the Father. In a sense, this is an extension of Ephrem's thought concerning the mingling of the human and the divine in Christ: "Blessed is He Who came in what is ours and mingled us into what is His" (HNat. 21.12).⁴²

It must be admitted that Ephrem makes no direct, one-to-one comparisons between the womb of the Father and the womb of Sheol. Nevertheless, the manifest and unmistakable kinship between the eternal generation of the Son and his descent to the abode of the dead will become clear below. In his *Homily on Our Lord*, Ephrem discusses the importance of the relationship of the

⁴¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 138.

⁴² McVey, *Hymns*, 92.

Son's eternal generation from the Father and his virgin birth with reference to his salvific activity on humanity's behalf in his life and death. Ephrem's language in this context echoes what we have already noted above concerning both the hiddenness of Christ's birth from the Father's womb and the revelation of his divinity in the incarnation, but it locates the mystery of the Son's divine and human births within the context of human salvation. In a section worth quoting at some length, Ephrem writes:

It is He Who was begotten of Divinity,
according to His nature,
and of humanity,
which was not according to His nature,
and of baptism,
which was not His habit;
So that we might be begotten of humanity,
according to our nature,
and of divinity,
which is not according to our nature,
and of the Spirit,
which is not our habit.

And so the One Who was begotten of Divinity underwent a second birth in order to bring us to birth again.

His birth from the Father is not to be investigated; rather it is to be believed. And His birth from a woman is not offensive; it is noble! His death on a cross is evidence of His birth from a woman, for whoever dies was also born.

The announcement of Gabriel declares His generation from His Father: "*The power of the Most High will overshadow you.*"⁴³ Now, since it is the power of the Most High, it is certain that He is not the offspring of a mortal. So His conception in the womb is related to His death on a cross, and His first birth is related to the angel's explanation. For whoever denies His birth will be refuted by His cross. And whoever supposes His origin was from Mary will be corrected, since His divinity is prior to all else. For whoever thinks that His origins were physical falls into error by reason of (the Scripture): *Who shall declare his generation?*⁴⁴

⁴³ Luke 1:35.

⁴⁴ Isa. 53:8.

The Father begot Him, and through Him He made all creation. Flesh begot Him, and in His flesh He put passions to death. Baptism begot Him, that through Him it might make (our) stains white. Sheol begot Him to have her treasures despoiled by Him.

In the way of those who are born, He came to us from His Father. And in the way of those who die, He set out to go to His Father, so that by the fact that he came by birth, His coming would be seen; and by the fact that He returned by resurrection, His going would be affirmed.

Homily on Our Lord, 2.1-6⁴⁵

Throughout this long quotation, Ephrem's conception of the relationship between the eternal generation of the Son and his descent to Sheol becomes clear. Through the redemptive mediating structure of the Incarnation, the Creator of humanity enters his fallen creation, passing through the salvific wombs of Mary, baptism, and ultimately Sheol for the purpose of restoring to humanity the divinely intended opportunity of participation in the life of the Trinity. Thus, Ephrem conveys both the necessity of the Savior's identity as the eternally generated Son of the Father and the necessity of his Incarnation as the twin preconditions for God's salvation of humanity which finds its fulfillment in his death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection. The Son's eternal generation from the Father and his descent to Sheol, while never associated with one another in isolation from the mystery of the incarnation, are, nevertheless, through the image of the womb, depicted as fundamentally congruent manifestations of God's singular will for humanity in creation and redemption.

The Womb of Mary

Though, as we noted above, Ephrem makes no direct comparison or correlation between the womb of the Father and the womb of Sheol, his discussion of Christ's archetypal birth from the Virgin is altogether different. As we have already seen above, Ephrem regards Christ's incarnation as the necessary precondition for his salvific work in the world. The historical and physical relationship between Christ's clothing of himself with humanity and his descent

⁴⁵ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 276-277.

to Sheol for the salvation of humanity is clearly expressed in Ephrem's *Homily on Our Lord*, where he writes:

Our Lord was trampled by death, and turned to tread a path beyond death. He is the One Who submitted and endured death, as it willed, in order to overthrow death, contrary to (death's) will. Our Lord carried His cross and set forth as death willed. But on the cross He called out and brought the dead out of Sheol, contrary to death's will.⁴⁶ With the very weapon that death had used to kill Him, He gained the victory over death. Divinity disguised itself in humanity and approached (death), which killed, then was killed: death killed natural life, but supernatural Life killed death.

Since death was unable to devour Him without a body, or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol... And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into its vaults, and carried off its treasures.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.1-2⁴⁷

Ephrem's insistence that Christ's birth from Mary's womb is the mandatory historical and spiritual prerequisite to his saving death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead is merely the beginning of his thought concerning the symbolic relationship between these two transitory abodes of Christ during the course of his incarnate ministry. Elsewhere, Ephrem draws clear parallels between Christ's virgin birth and his resurrection, comparing and contrasting Mary's womb to the womb of Sheol. Speaking through the musings of personified Death in his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem alludes to the Scriptures he perceives as mandates for such a comparison.

Two utterances that were different have I heard from him, even this Isaiah.

For he said that a virgin should conceive and bring forth⁴⁸

and he said again that the earth should bring forth.⁴⁹

But lo! the Virgin has brought Him forth,

⁴⁶ Matt. 27:50-53.

⁴⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277-278.

⁴⁸ Isa. 7:14.

⁴⁹ Isa. 66:8

and Sheol the barren has brought Him forth.
 Two wombs that contrary to nature have been changed
 by Him;
 the Virgin and Sheol both of them.
 The Virgin in her bringing forth He made glad,
 but Sheol He grieved and made sad in His resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 37.4⁵⁰

The same type of relationship between the womb of Mary and the womb of Sheol provides the context for Ephrem's expression of wonder at the paradoxical character of Christ's incarnation in his *Hymns on the Nativity*.

The womb of Sheol conceived Him and burst open
 and how did the womb of Mary sustain Him?

With His Voice He split stones upon graves
 and how did Mary's bosom sustain Him?

Hymns on the Nativity, 4.190-191⁵¹

As the preceding citation demonstrates, and as we have seen above, the divine economy of Christ's entry into the human condition remains veiled in mystery. Nevertheless, Ephrem, adopting a posture of love and wonder, cannot refrain from meditative explanations of the event. Answering the question in reverent awe, Ephrem oscillates between Christ's hidden majesty and his revealed grace. On the one hand, Ephrem simply and enigmatically affirms that the incarnation and its underworldly analog are the product of the "will" of God. The following citation from Ephrem's *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* illustrates this well, relating the incarnation and descent to Sheol to the same eternal divine will which brought the world into being.

For it is He who willed and all [the universe] was.
 Indeed, on account of [His] willing the creatures were.

It is He who willed [it] and the womb of Sheol held Him
 Who also willed that Mary's womb held Him.

⁵⁰ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, Second Series, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 198.

⁵¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 103. cf. Matt. 27:50-53.

It was because He willed [it] that gluttonous Death
swallowed Him.

He swallowed Him, then He escaped because He [so]
willed.

He hid His life in order that Death might find
Him a dead one that he might swallow the Living One.

The fragrance of His life spread in Sheol
and she disgorged Him and rejected Him [by Whom]
she was not nourished.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 16.3-7⁵²

On the other hand, Ephrem also describes the accomplishment of Christ's saving births stressing the manner in which the Son mercifully constrained his power for the sake of humanity. The following excerpt from his *Hymns on the Resurrection* reiterates the symbolic parallelism between the wombs of Mary and Sheol. Here, Ephrem's contemplation of Christ's humble accommodation to humanity makes clever use of the structure of the Church's liturgical calendar.

In you, tranquil Nisan, the Most High thunders for our
hearing.

In Nisan again, the Lord of thunder
softened His strength with His mercy and descended
and dwelt in the womb of Mary.

In Nisan also He was mighty
and loosed the womb of Sheol and ascended.

He entered again in Nisan and softened His Voice and
persuaded them
who had heard and despaired concerning His
resurrection.

Hymns on the Resurrection, 4.10⁵³

Two additional symbols are deployed by Ephrem in his comparisons between the womb of Mary and the wombs of Christ's baptism and descent to Sheol. Images of fire and light on the one hand, and seed and sowing on the other, both serve to analogically expand and enhance the womb to womb parallelism of the crucial events of the Incarnate Son's saving life and death. Here

⁵² Beck, ed. *Paschalhymnen*, 28. (my translation)

⁵³ Beck, ed. *Paschalhymnen*, 91. (my translation)

we may briefly introduce these images with reference to their application to Christ's birth from Mary.

Appropriating the biblical convention whereby imagery related to fire and light are used to signify the presence of the divine, Ephrem speaks of Christ as fire which "dwelt in the womb," likening the revelatory character of his virgin birth to God's appearance to Moses, keeping his father-in-law's sheep near Mount Horeb.

He was the live coal which had come to kindle the briars and thorns. He dwelt in the womb and cleansed it and sanctified the place of the birthpangs and the curses. The flame which Moses saw was moistening the bush and distilling the fat lest it be inflamed. The likeness of refined gold could be seen in the bush, entering into the fire without being consumed. This happened so that it might make known that living fire which was to come at the end, watering and moistening the womb of the virgin, and clothing it like the fire that [enveloped] the bush.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 1.25⁵⁴

As we shall see in the sections which follow, Ephrem extends the range of images of fire and light to include other key moments in the history of human redemption in Christ. In the Syriac theological tradition, Christ is not only to be regarded as the "Fire [that] entered the womb, put on a body and emerged" (HNat. 21.21), but, as Seely Beggiani has pointed out:

Christ is described in terms of light especially at his Baptism at the Jordan, [and] his cross is seen exalted as a cross of light and a lighthouse. The light which is Christ shatters the darkness of 'sheol', and the shining of the Father and/or Christ is the hope of the deceased.⁵⁵

Ephrem appropriates and expands another biblical image in his use of seed and sowing metaphors on the basis of John 12:24.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 53. cf. Exod. 3:1-6.

⁵⁵ Seely J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1983), 7-8.

An example of Ephrem's application of this complex image to Christ's Incarnation from Mary can be found in the fifteenth of his *Hymns on the Nativity*. Here, Ephrem places his words in Mary's mouth, who confesses to Christ:

With You I shall begin, and I trust
that with You I shall end. I shall open my mouth,
and You fill my mouth. I am for You the earth
and You are the Farmer. Sow in me Your voice,
You who are the sower of Himself in His mother's
womb.

Hymns on the Nativity, 15.¹⁵⁶

The importance of this agricultural image at the intersection of Ephrem's thought on Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol will be addressed in greater detail and at greater length below.

The Womb of Christ's Baptism at the Jordan

Christ's baptism at the Jordan⁵⁷ is also regarded by Ephrem as womb through which the incarnate Lord passes, representing both a furtherance of Christ's identification with sinful humanity and the means by which Christ receives, fulfills, transforms, and passes on to his Church the baptism of repentance administered by John within the framework of the Old Testament. Therefore, as we shall see both here below and in more detail in Chapter Four, Ephrem regards Christ's baptism in the womb of the Jordan as the prototype and source of Christian baptism. In Ephrem's thought, John's baptism of Jesus stands between his birth and death and is likened both to the womb of Mary and the womb of Sheol.

Ephrem clearly displays his conviction that Christ's identification with humanity is at stake in the waters of the Jordan. In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Ephrem's discussion of one of the details in the account of John's baptism of Jesus provides evidence of this and illustrates that the question of Christ's full humanity remained a matter of controversy in the Syriac churches of his time.

⁵⁶ McVey, *Hymns*, 145.

⁵⁷ Matt.3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:31-34.

*Jesus was about thirty years old,*⁵⁸ when he came to be baptized. This [was a cause of] confusion for Marcion. For, if he had not assumed a body, why should he have approached baptism. A divine nature does not need to be baptized. Does not the fact that he was thirty years old also disclose his humanity?

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.1a⁵⁹

Further on, Ephrem reiterates Christ's identification with sinful humanity in his baptism, underscoring this with his concern to clarify the nature of that identification. Ephrem emphatically states that Jesus' baptism was not 'corrective' of any deficiency in the Savior:

It was not so that John might fill in something that was [still] needed by our Lord that he was considered worthy to baptize him, but rather [the Lord] came to be baptized because he was clothed with the guilty Adam.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.1b⁶⁰

On the contrary, since

John was proclaiming *a baptism of repentance*⁶¹ and baptizing sinners, and it was written concerning our Lord that *sin was not found in him*,⁶² it was therefore evident that it was not because he was in need like sinners that he approached the baptism of penitents. For John also testified, for it was in fear and supplication that he had said to his Lord, *It is fitting for me that I be baptized by you*.⁶³

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.1b⁶⁴

According to Ephrem, Christ's baptism by John must be understood as an act of solidarity with sinful human beings having the purpose of appointing Jesus to the task of fulfilling the Law even as he effects the liberation of humanity from sin. Ephrem's two comments on Christ's words to John when the baptizer

⁵⁸ Luke 3:23.

⁵⁹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 83.

⁶⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 83.

⁶¹ Matt. 3:1; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3.

⁶² cf. II Cor. 5:21.

⁶³ Matt. 3:14.

⁶⁴ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 83.

attempts to respectfully decline his Savior's request are illustrative of this.

*Permit that we may fulfill all justice now,*⁶⁵ [referring to] that which is in the Law. For since there was also a curse on those who were transgressing the Law in minor matters, and since no one can fulfill all the justice that is in the Law, and escape from the curse, therefore he who fulfils justice came to undo the curse and abolish sin.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.1b⁶⁶

*Permit that we may fulfil justice now,*⁶⁷ since liberators and kings receive [both] the anointing and the Law from the priests. Just as he clothed himself with a [human] body and appeared as in need, so too he drew near to baptism to testify to the truth [of his humanity], especially that through his baptism he might mark an ending for that [of John], for he had baptized once again those who had been baptized by John. He showed that [John's baptism] had served up until his time only, since true baptism, which purifies from the evil of the Law, was revealed through him.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.1c⁶⁸

As the citation above indicates, in addition to affirming and amplifying the degree to which Christ willingly abases and unites himself to his fallen creatures, his passage through the womb of the waters also signals the transformative end of an era. In the waters of the Jordan, Christ inherits baptism from John in order to fulfill its anticipatory typological import.

Because John was the treasurer of baptism, the Lord of stewardship came to him to take the keys of the house of forgiveness from him. John had been whitening the stains of debts with common water, so that bodies would be fit for the robe of the Spirit imparted by our Lord.⁶⁹ Therefore, since the Spirit was with the Son, he came to receive baptism from John to mix the Spirit, which cannot be seen, with water, which can be seen,

⁶⁵ Matt. 3:15.

⁶⁶ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 83-84.

⁶⁷ Matt. 3:15.

⁶⁸ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 84.

⁶⁹ cf. Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16.

so that those whose bodies feel the wetness of the water should be aware of the gift of the Spirit in their souls, and that as the outside of the body becomes aware of water flowing over it, the inside of the soul should become aware of the Spirit flowing over it. So when our Lord plunged down into baptism, He clothed Himself with baptism and drew it out with Him, just as He had put on prophecy and priesthood when He was presented in the temple,⁷⁰ and He left bearing the purity of the priesthood on His pure limbs and the words of prophecy in His innocent ears.

Homily on Our Lord, 55⁷¹

We have already noted Ephrem's symbolic depiction of Christ as fire in the womb of Mary in his incarnation and noted the implicit parallels which obtain as a result of the poet's use of this image with reference to Christ's baptism and descent to Sheol. According to Ephrem, the same "Fire [that] entered the womb, put on a body and emerged" (HNat. 21.21),⁷² was also present in the Jordan at Christ's baptism. Casting the events of the baptismal narrative in poetic form, Ephrem extols the Baptist, writing:

Blessed are you, even you, a barren woman's son,⁷³
 whose hand was made worthy to be placed upon His
 head.
 You baptized the Baptizer Who baptized the Gentiles
 with a flash of fire and the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴
 Blessed is your discernment that trembled and did not
 approach
 and your intellect that was commanded and did not
 resist.
 The heavens were divided, the Watchers were amazed
 and gave glory
 that the Purifier of all was baptized.⁷⁵

Hymns on Virginity, 15.1⁷⁶

⁷⁰ cf. Luke 2:21-39.

⁷¹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 330-331.

⁷² McVey, *Hymns*, 178.

⁷³ cf. Luke 1:7.

⁷⁴ cf. Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16.

⁷⁵ cf. Matt. 3:16-17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22.

⁷⁶ McVey, *Hymns*, 325-326.

Elsewhere, Ephrem draws the same correspondence between Christ's presence in Mary and in the Jordan:

See, Fire and Spirit are in the womb of her who bore
You;
see, Fire and Spirit are in the river in which You were
baptized.

Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font,
in the Bread and the Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit.

Hymns on Faith, 10.1777

Here, Ephrem extends his deployment of the symbol of fire as divinity or divine presence, bringing it to bear on the sacramental life of the Church. Structuring his thought chiastically, Ephrem delineates the relationships between the life of Christ and the sacramental gifts of his life in the Church, associating Christ's incarnate body with the Eucharist (lines 1 and 4) and Christ's baptism with Christian baptism (lines 2 and 3). This is but one indication of a pattern in Ephrem's thought to which we will return in a subsequent chapter.

The sparkling waters of Christ's baptism are mentioned again in the sixth of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity*. Here, Ephrem's view of Christ's baptism as one of the 'staging points' of the history of salvation is displayed in the manner in which he clearly links Christ's immersion in the Jordan with both his nativity and his entry to Jerusalem on the way to the cross. Ephrem writes:

The sky was opened; the water sparkled;
the Dove hovered over; the voice of the Father,
more weighty than thunder, said,
"This is My Beloved";⁷⁸ the Watchers proclaimed
Him,⁷⁹
the children shouted joyfully with their hosannas.⁸⁰

Hymns on the Nativity, 6.22⁸¹

The same conception of the relationship between these events is articulated in Ephrem's reference to Christ's luminous baptism as

⁷⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 108.

⁷⁸ cf. Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34.

⁷⁹ Luke 2:8-14.

⁸⁰ Matt. 21:1-11, esp. v. 9; Mark 11:1-10, esp. vv. 9-10; Luke 19:28-40, esp. vv. 37-38; John 12:12-15, esp. v. 13.

⁸¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 114.

another form of clothing "put on" by him in the course of his incarnate life.⁸² Here, the water of baptism is compared and placed in continuity with the swaddling clothes of the manger in Bethlehem and the grave clothes of the garden tomb.

He [was] wrapped [in] swaddling clothes⁸³ in baseness,
but they offered him gifts.⁸⁴

He put on the garments of youth, and helps emerged
from them.

He put on the water of baptism,⁸⁵ and rays flashed out
from it.

He put on linen garments in death,⁸⁶ and triumphs
were shown by them.

With His humiliations [came] His exaltations. Blessed is
He Who joins His glory to His suffering!

Hymns on the Nativity, 23.12⁸⁷

In the thirty-sixth of his *Hymns on the Church*, the implicit parallel between Christ's incarnation and baptism becomes explicit in Ephrem's comparison of the womb of Christ's baptism with the womb of his mother. Setting these two events in relationship to each other and to additional epiphanic moments such as Christ's transfiguration⁸⁸ and burial, Ephrem utilizes not the image of fire, but the related image of light as the signification of divine presence.

When it is associated with a source of light
an eye becomes clear,
it shines with the light that provisions it,
it gleams with its brightness,
it becomes glorious with its splendour,
adorned by its beauty.

Refrain: Blessed is the Creator of light.

⁸² For the importance of clothing metaphors as a mode of expressing the mystery of the incarnation see note 3 above.

⁸³ Luke 2:7.

⁸⁴ Matt. 2:10-11.

⁸⁵ Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34.

⁸⁶ Matt. 27:59; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:40.

⁸⁷ McVey, *Hymns*, 189-190.

⁸⁸ In Ephrem's commentary on the Diatessaron, the significance of the event of Christ's transfiguration is articulated with reference to his death and resurrection from the dead. See: McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 215-219.

As though on an eye
 the Light settled in Mary.
 It polished her mind,
 made bright her thought
 and pure her understanding,
 causing her virginity to shine.

The river in which He was baptized
 conceived Him again symbolically;
 the moist womb of the water
 conceived Him in purity,
 bore Him in chastity,
 made Him ascend in glory.

In the pure womb of the river
 you should recognize the daughter of man,
 who conceived having known no man,
 who gave birth without intercourse,
 who brought up, through a gift,
 the Lord of that gift.

As the Daystar in the river,
 the Bright One in the tomb,
 He shone forth on the mountain top⁸⁹
 and gave brightness too in the womb;
 He dazzled as He went up from the river,
 gave illumination at His ascension.⁹⁰

Hymns on the Church, 36.1-5⁹¹

So far we have seen ample evidence of Ephrem's conception of Christ's baptism as a womb and of the relationship between it and the womb of Mary. Furthermore, hints of the relationship between Christ's baptism and descent to Sheol have also been disclosed. It must be admitted that Ephrem's conception of the reciprocal relationship between Christ's baptism and his death is not frequently articulated in a strictly dyadic manner apart from any association with his incarnation from the virgin womb of Mary. Nevertheless, there are at least a few selections from Ephrem's writings which make it clear that Ephrem saw Christ's baptism as

⁸⁹ Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36.

⁹⁰ Luke 24:50-51.

⁹¹ Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: *Hymni De Ecclesia* 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975): 137-138.

an analog of his death and descent to Sheol. In the course of his explication of Jesus' baptism by John in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Ephrem refers to the anointing of Jesus at Bethany⁹² in anticipation of his death as an elucidating parallel.

John kept himself from all sins because he was to baptize him who was without sins. "Do not be amazed, John, that you should baptize me, for I have yet to receive a baptism of anointing from a woman." *She has done this for my burial*,⁹³ for his death was called a baptism.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 3.17⁹⁴

Ephrem again compares Christ's death to his baptism with the intent of making clear the relationships between Christian baptism and the prototypical baptism and life of Christ.

There were two baptisms to be found in the case of our Lord, purifier of all. One was through water, and the other was through the cross, so that he might teach about [the baptism] of water through that of suffering. For, repentance for sinners is a crucifixion for them, which nails their members secretly, lest they yield to pleasures. This is what John had proclaimed before our Lord.⁹⁵ Consequently, the two baptisms are necessary for both just and sinners. If [only] one is present, it cannot vivify without its companion.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.17⁹⁶

Here, Ephrem presents Christ's saving death on the cross as the instructive content of Christian baptism. In Chapter 4, we will revisit this provocative coupling of Christ's baptism and death, examining the manner in which their exemplary and sacramental imports complement and illuminate one another in Ephrem's thought.

⁹² John 12:1-8.

⁹³ John 12:7.

⁹⁴ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 81.

⁹⁵ cf. Matt. 3:1-2; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3.

⁹⁶ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 325.

The Womb of Sheol

By now, Ephrem's classification of Sheol as a womb through which Jesus passes has already been well noted. As we have seen above, Christ's births from the womb of the Father, the womb of Mary, and the womb of the Jordan, all salvific events in themselves, reach their culmination and fulfillment in the history of human redemption in Christ's death, descent to the underworld, and resurrection, depicted in terms of his conception in and birth from the womb of Sheol.

As is the case with both the womb of the Father and the womb of baptism, Christ's incarnation from the womb of his mother provides the paradigm and starting point for Ephrem's implementation of images of childbearing with reference to Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead. We have already considered the close comparisons Ephrem makes between Mary's womb and the womb of Sheol, noting the manner in which Christ's incarnation from the Virgin constitutes the necessary precondition of his saving death and resurrection on humanity's behalf. In addition to the numerous parallels which Ephrem constructs between the womb of Mary and the womb of Sheol (HNis. 37.4; HNat. 4.190; HAzym. 16.4; HRes. 4.10), he also sustains the imagery of infernal childbearing, identifying Jesus as "the First-born of Sheol" (HNis. 38.7).⁹⁷ Elsewhere, Ephrem affirms the complementarity of Christ's births from Mary and Sheol, offering Christ's resurrection from a sealed tomb and birth from a virgin womb as corroborative and fitting proofs of one another and his divinity.

So that even Your resurrection might be believed
among the doubters, inside the sealed
grave they placed You, for they sealed [it] with a stone
and guards stood [there].⁹⁸ It was for Your sake
that they sealed Your grave, O Son of the Living One.

When they buried You, if they had given up,
left You and gone, there would be occasion
to assert falsely that they really stole You,⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198. cf. Col. 1:18.

⁹⁸ Matt. 27:62-66.

⁹⁹ Matt. 27:64.

O All-saving One. Contriving
to seal Your grave, they increased Your glory.

Types for You were both Daniel
and Lazarus: the one in the den
that the peoples sealed,¹⁰⁰ and the other in the grave
that the people opened.¹⁰¹ Behold their signs
and their seals confuted them.

Open would be their mouth if they had left open
Your grave and gone away. Since they shut up Your
grave
and sealed and secured [it], they have shut up their
mouth.

And although they desired it not, all the slanderers
covered their heads since they covered Your grave.

But by Your resurrection You convinced them
about Your birth, for the den was sealed
and the grave was secured—the pure one in the den
and the living one in the grave. Your witnesses were
the sealed den and grave.

The womb and Sheol shouted with joy and cried out
about Your resurrection. The womb that was sealed
conceived You;¹⁰² Sheol that was secured
brought You forth.¹⁰³ Against nature
the womb conceived and Sheol yielded.

Sealed was the grave which they entrusted
with keeping the dead man. Virginal was the womb
that no man knew. The virginal womb
and the sealed grave like trumpets
for a deaf people, shouted in its ear.

The sealed womb, the secured stone:
among the slanderers the conception is slandered,
that it was human seed, and the resurrection,
that it was human robbery. Seal and signet
refute and convince that He was a heavenly one.

¹⁰⁰ Dan. 6, esp. v. 17.

¹⁰¹ John 11:38-44, esp. v. 39.

¹⁰² Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:26-27.

¹⁰³ cf. Matt. 27:66.

The people stood between Your birth
 and Your resurrection. If they slandered Your birth,
 Your death reproved them. [If] they dismissed Your
 resurrection,
 Your birth confuted them. The two athletes
 have struck the mouth that slandered.

Hymns on the Nativity, 10.2-10¹⁰⁴

At other points, Ephrem parallels Sheol not with the virgin womb of Mary, but with the maternal womb in general. In the ninth of his *Hymns on the Church*, Ephrem equates the similar states of consciousness between a fetus in the womb and one who is dead in Sheol (HEccl. 9.5). Ephrem uses a comparable image in his *Nisibene Hymns*, offering the birth of an infant as a type of the resurrection of the dead.

The babe in the womb confutes [Death], which is as
 buried there.
 To me it proclaims life from the dead, but to thee
 despoiling.

Nisibene Hymns, 65.17¹⁰⁵

Elsewhere in the same collection of hymns, Ephrem expresses this idea in even greater detail.

Thus, from and in the human seed
 Humanity can take an image of its resurrection
 Because it is also, in a symbol of the dead, kept in the
 womb.
 By pains it is resuscitated and awakened
 and goes forth to the light in another world.
 Its conception and its birth guarantee its resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 46.17¹⁰⁶

Above, we noted that in addition to Ephrem's clear and explicit comparisons between the maternal womb of Mary and the womb of Sheol, he deploys two other metaphors with reference to

¹⁰⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 129-130.

¹⁰⁵ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 217.

¹⁰⁶ Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 240 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963), 57. (my translation)

Christ's presence in Mary and in Sheol. Just as Ephrem conceives of Christ as the "living fire" (CDiat. 1.25) which enters the womb of Mary, "put on a body and emerged" (HNat. 21.21), so does he depict Christ as the living fire which enters Sheol, lighting and warming that cold and dark place for the first time. In the thirty-sixth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, Death says:

I will haste and will close the gates of Sheol before this
 Dead One
 Whose death has spoiled me.
 Whoever hears will wonder at my humiliation
 that by a Dead Man Who is without I am overcome.¹⁰⁷
 All the dead seek to go forth, but this one presses to
 enter in.
 A medicine of life has entered into Sheol and has
 restored life to its dead.
 Who then has brought in and hidden from me that
 living fire
 which has loosed the cold and dark womb of Sheol?

Nisibene Hymns, 36.14¹⁰⁸

As we have already observed, Ephrem's use of seed and sowing metaphors begins with Christ's words in John 12:24, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit." Taking hold of this New Testament image, Ephrem identifies Christ as "the Living One whose killers became the sowers of your life: like a grain of wheat, they sowed it in the depths, so that it would sprout and raise many up with it" (SdDN 9.1). At other points, Ephrem modifies the image, retaining the figure of a sprouting seed, but speaking of Christ according to a variety of botanical metaphors. In the twenty-sixth of his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem depicts Christ alternately as both a tree (HNat. 26.4) and a blossom (HNat. 26.6). In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Ephrem speaks of Christ as "the first-flowering Fruit of Sheol" (CDiat. 21.27). In his *Hymns on Virginity* Ephrem writes:

The Blossom, troubled by
 gloom and darkness and night,

¹⁰⁷ cf. Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁰⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

sprouted [into] a flower in Sheol.
It became the Tree of Life that saved creation.

Hymns on Virginity, 51.8¹⁰⁹

Ephrem also symbolically expands the range of this image of the resurrection, applying it to the Incarnation where he regards Christ as both Farmer and seed, the “sower of Himself in His mother’s womb” (HNat. 15.1). In the fourth of his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem brings the semantic fields of these agricultural metaphors together, speaking both of Christ’s virgin birth and resurrection as sprouting wheat, and placing between these two images a discussion of the variety of breads (and the wine of Cana) provided by God for his people which have their fulfillment in the bread (and wine) of the Eucharist.

From a virgin womb as if from a rock,
sprouted the Seed from which harvests have come.

Joseph filled innumerable storehouses,
but they were emptied out and consumed in the years
of the famine.¹¹⁰

The one True Ear [of wheat] gave bread,
heavenly bread without limit.

The bread that the first-born broke in the desert
was consumed and passed away, although He
multiplied it greatly.¹¹¹

Once again He has broken new bread¹¹²
that ages and generations will not consume.¹¹³

They consumed the seven loaves of bread that He
broke,¹¹⁴
and they finished also the five loaves of bread that He
multiplied.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 463.

¹¹⁰ Gen. 41:46-57.

¹¹¹ Exod. 16:4-5.

¹¹² Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; I Cor. 11:23-24.

¹¹³ cf. Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; I Cor. 11:26.

¹¹⁴ Matt. 15:34; Mark 8:5.

¹¹⁵ Matt. 14:17; Mark 6:38; Luke 9:13; John 6:9.

The one loaf of bread that He broke conquered
creation;
for however much it is divided it multiplies all the
more.

Again a great deal of wine filled the water jugs;
it was poured out and consumed although there had
been a great deal.¹¹⁶

Although small was the drink of the cup that He
gave,¹¹⁷
very great was its power—infinite.

In the cup that accepts all wines,
the mystery remains the same.

The one loaf of bread He broke cannot be confined,
and the one cup that He mingled cannot be limited.

The grain of wheat that was sown, after three days
came up and filled the storehouse of life.¹¹⁸

Hymns on the Nativity, 4.85-96¹¹⁹

Our consideration of the wealth of botanical and agricultural imagery deployed by Ephrem with respect to Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection and, by extension, to his birth from Mary leads us to yet another symbol at the intersection of these two doctrines: the womb of the earth. Ephrem, as attentive readers will recall, makes use of a number of symbolic convergences to depict Mary in likeness to the earth at different points throughout his writings. In the *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem compares Christ's mother to "fields" and "plantings" (HNat. 21.16). Elsewhere in the same collection of hymns, he speaks through Mary, naming her as the earth in whom Christ sows himself (HNat. 15.1). Again, in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Resurrection*, Mary is called "the thirsty earth" (HRes. 1.3). Ephrem's identification of Sheol as the womb of the earth is similarly produced by the convergence of a number of symbolic relationships. Both the cosmogonic significance of the earth as the source of Adam's, and by extension, every human physical body, and Sheol's cosmological "location" within the earth

¹¹⁶ John 2:1-11.

¹¹⁷ Matt. 26:27-28; Mark 14:23-24; Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25.

¹¹⁸ cf. John 12:24.

¹¹⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 96-97.

and designation as a womb contribute strongly to the production of this identification. Ephrem's conception of Sheol as the womb of the earth, and its relationship to Christ's virgin birth from Mary, was further aided, however by his reading of the prophet Isaiah. In the thirty-seventh of the *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem's personified Death meditates on the emptying of Sheol, the womb of the earth, at Christ's death, comparing this event to childbirth.

All women grieve that are barren;
 Sheol rejoices because of her barrenness;
 she is desolate if so be that she brings forth.
 The all-compelling Power constrained it,
 even the womb that was barren and cold,
 and it rendered back though wont to deny its debts.
 Rebekah, when the two babes afflicted her, asked for
 death.¹²⁰
 How great then the pain of Sheol when there smote her
 strange pangs.
 The dead were roused and brake forth and came out
 from her bowels.¹²¹
 Is this then perchance that saying which was heard by
 me from Isaiah?
 (but I despised it) when he arose and said,
 "Who hath heard such a thing as this?
 that the earth should travail in one day,
 and bring forth a nation in one hour."¹²²
 Is it this that has come to pass?
 Or else is it reserved for us hereafter?
 And if it be this, it is a vain shadow that I thought I am
 a king.
 I knew not it was but a deposit I was keeping.
 Two utterances that were different have I heard from
 him, even this Isaiah.
 For he said that a virgin should conceive and bring
 forth¹²³
 and he said again that the earth should bring forth.¹²⁴
 But lo! the Virgin has brought Him forth,

¹²⁰ Gen. 25:22.

¹²¹ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹²² Isa. 66:8.

¹²³ Isa. 7:14.

¹²⁴ Isa. 66:8.

and Sheol the barren has brought Him forth.
 Two wombs that contrary to nature have been changed
 by Him;
 the Virgin and Sheol both of them.
 The Virgin in her bringing forth He made glad,
 but Sheol He grieved and made sad in His resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 37.2-4¹²⁵

In the above citation, Ephrem generates a poetic equivalence between the image of the womb of Sheol and the image of the parturition of the earth. Coupled with the way in which elsewhere in his writings Ephrem makes the same type of reference to the womb of the earth, this clearly establishes a poetic parallel between the phrase "the womb of the earth" and Sheol.

Far from being just another name for Sheol, however, Ephrem's identification of the womb of the earth opens another horizon of symbolic relationships between Christ's incarnation and his descent to Sheol. In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Ephrem writes:

The Virgin's conception teaches that He who begot Adam without intercourse from the virgin earth,¹²⁶ also fashioned the second Adam without intercourse in the Virgin's womb.¹²⁷ Whereas the First [Adam] returned back into the womb of his mother,¹²⁸ [it was] by means of the Second [Adam], who did not return back into the womb of His mother, that the former, who had been buried in the womb of his mother, was brought back [from it].¹²⁹

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 2.2¹³⁰

It is to Ephrem's consideration of Christ as the Second Adam that we now turn.

¹²⁵ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198.

¹²⁶ Gen. 2:7.

¹²⁷ Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:26-27.

¹²⁸ cf. Gen. 3:19.

¹²⁹ cf. I Cor. 15:22, 45.

¹³⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 61.

CHRIST THE SECOND ADAM

Appropriated and adapted from the writings of Saint Paul, the image of Christ as the second or last Adam is another of Ephrem the Syrian's favorite metaphorical devices in his discussion of the related doctrines of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol. Viewing Adam as a symbol of humanity as a whole, Ephrem articulates both the fullness and the universality of Christ's identification with humanity in life and death by means of one of his favorite metaphors for the incarnation: Christ's "clothing himself" in the body of Adam. Depicting Christ as clothed in Adam, Ephrem articulates a series of close parallels between the life and death of Adam and the life and death of Christ which serve to make manifest the Savior's redemptive re-creation of humanity in the image of God. It is above all in Christ's descent to Sheol in death and birth from its barren womb in the resurrection which typologically mirrors Adam's birth from the womb of his earthly mother, signaling the restoration of humanity to Paradise and participation in the divine life of the Trinity.

Pauline Sources and Ephremic Expansions

Ephrem's language concerning the symbolic parallelism of Adam and Christ is not purely innovative, but borrowed from the Christian Scriptures, and more precisely from the writings of Saint Paul. Both in Romans 5 and in I Corinthians 15, the Apostle explicates the redemptive significance of Christ's death and resurrection, contrasting Adam and Christ as paradigmatic figures in the history of humanity's salvation.

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought

condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men.

Romans 5:12-18

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.

I Corinthians 15:20-22

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

I Corinthians 15:42-49

It is worthwhile here to point out that Ephrem reiterates the Apostle's language not only with regard to the symbolic relationship between the two Adams, but also with regard to images of sowing and reaping as analogies for the resurrection of the body. Above, we noted Ephrem's depiction of Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of all humanity by means of a wealth of agricultural and botanical imagery, calling attention to the significance of John 12:24. In *The Resurrection of the Body in Western*

Christianity, 200-1336,¹³¹ Carolyn Walker Bynum helps to make clear the degree to which Ephrem's conception of the resurrection is also indebted to Saint Paul's writings. This is evidenced especially in the retention of certain similarities with Saint Paul's images of seed and sowing even as contemporaries of the fourth century poet had already begun to develop alternate metaphors with reference to the resurrection of the body.¹³² It is interesting, then, that not only does Ephrem appropriate and use the particular images of the fecundity of the earth and the complementarity of Adam and Christ in his discussion of the resurrection, but he also brings agricultural and Adamic images into convergence in his writings, echoing the complex pattern of the Pauline scriptural precedent.

Glory to you who clothed yourself with the body of mortal Adam, and made it a fountain of life for all mortals! You are the Living One whose killers became the sowers of your life: like a grain of wheat, they sowed it in the depths, so that it would sprout and raise up many with it.¹³³

Homily on Our Lord, 9.1¹³⁴

As we have already seen above with reference to Ephrem's use of biblical images of seed and sowing, he is very rarely content in his references to canonical sources simply to quote chapter and verse, so to speak. Instead, Ephrem tends to regard scriptural metaphors as flexible and dynamic archetypes to be creatively reiterated rather than finite and fixed expressions to be identically restated. Thus, far from merely appropriating and making liberal use of Saint Paul's symbolic pairing of Adam and Christ as the representative origins of fallen and redeemed humanity, Ephrem also creatively expanded the field of the metaphor through the

¹³¹ Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, Lectures on the History of Religions Sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, New Series, No. 15 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

¹³² For her discussion of Saint Paul and the continuing importance of his seed metaphors for later Christian conceptions of the resurrection, see, Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 3-7. For her discussion of Ephrem the Syrian and his use of Pauline categories, see pages 75-78.

¹³³ John 12:24.

¹³⁴ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 284-285.

addition of another typologically parallel couple: Eve and Mary.¹³⁵ In the forty-seventh of his *Hymns on the Church*, Ephrem writes:

My brothers, sons of Eve, hearken to the story
of our mother who became old, who was surpassed by
Mary.
[Eve] opened the stopped mouth of Death,
and opened the sealed gate of Sheol,
and trod out a new way to the grave.¹³⁶

Hymns on the Church, 47.1¹³⁷

Modeled on the symbolic pair Adam/Christ, Ephrem's parallelism between Eve, whose disobedience opened the way of death, and Mary, whose obedience opened the way of life, enlarges the field of reference of this typology to include the Incarnation of the Son as the corollary of his resurrection from the dead. This is clearly articulated by Ephrem in the forty-ninth of his *Hymns on the Church*.

In the womb of one body, an entirely small vessel,
You mingled Your greatness with the soul which dwelt
in it.¹³⁸
Truly, Your birth is a miracle, that [birth] from Mary.
Just as from the small womb of [Eve's] ear
Death entered and was infused,¹³⁹ so by the ear
the new, that of Mary, Life entered and was infused.¹⁴⁰
And just as one tree was the cause of death,¹⁴¹
so another Tree was the cause of life.¹⁴²
For by one Death conquered; by one Life triumphed.

Hymns on the Church, 49.6-8¹⁴³

¹³⁵ Edmund Beck, "Die Mariologie der echten Schriften Ephräms," *Oriens Christianus* 40 (1956): 22-39; Robert Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1971): 372-384.

¹³⁶ cf. Gen. 3:6.

¹³⁷ Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ecclesia*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 198 (Louvain: Peeters, 1960), 120. (my translation)

¹³⁸ cf. John 1:14.

¹³⁹ Gen. 3:1-7.

¹⁴⁰ Luke 1:26-38.

¹⁴¹ Gen. 3:6ff.

¹⁴² cf. Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18.

Not only does Ephrem make straight-forward comparisons between Adam and Christ and Eve and Mary, but he also occasionally constructs complex comparisons between the symbolic pairs Adam/Eve and Mary/Christ. An example of this can be found in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron* where he discusses Mary's conception of Jesus, pointing out that "just as Adam fills the role of father and mother for Eve, so too does Mary for our Lord." (CDiat. 2.3) Elsewhere, Ephrem compares and contrasts both Adam's 'birth' from the earth and Eve's 'birth' from Adam with Christ's birth from Mary, articulating the correspondence between humanity's creation and humanity's redemption.

Man imposed corruption on woman when she came
forth from him;¹⁴⁴
today she has repaid him—she who bore for him the
Savior.¹⁴⁵

He gave birth to the mother, Eve—he, the man who
never was born;¹⁴⁶
how worthy of faith is the daughter of Eve, who
without a man bore a child!¹⁴⁷

The virgin earth gave birth to that Adam, head of the
earth;
the Virgin today gave birth to [second] Adam, head of
heaven.

Hymns on the Nativity, 1.14-16¹⁴⁸

The expanded symbolic relationships between Adam, Eve, Mary, and Christ which we have considered above provide Ephrem with the rhetorical resources to articulate what has been identified by Sebastian Brock as "a detailed pattern of complementarity between the processes of fall and restoration."¹⁴⁹ Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron* preserves a compact statement of this pattern, presenting Adam and Eve as the human sources of humanity's sin and Mary and Christ as the human sources of

¹⁴³ Beck, ed., *Hymnen de Ecclesia*, 126. (my translation)

¹⁴⁴ Gen. 2:21-23.

¹⁴⁵ Matt. 2:20-21.

¹⁴⁶ Gen. 2:7.

¹⁴⁷ Luke 1:34.

¹⁴⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 65.

¹⁴⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 32.

humanity’s redemption and making reference to Christ’s descent to Sheol for the purpose of rescuing Adam.

[Mary] gave birth without [the assistance of] a man.¹⁵⁰ Just as in the beginning Eve was born of Adam without intercourse,¹⁵¹ so too [in the case of] Joseph and Mary, his virgin and spouse. Eve gave birth to the murderer,¹⁵² but Mary to the Life-Giver.¹⁵³ The former gave birth to him who shed the blood of his brother,¹⁵⁴ but the latter to Him whose blood was shed by His brothers.¹⁵⁵ The former saw him who was trembling and fleeing because of the curse of the earth,¹⁵⁶ the latter [saw] Him who bore the curse *and nailed it on His cross*.¹⁵⁷ The Virgin’s conception teaches that He, who begot Adam without intercourse from the virgin earth,¹⁵⁸ also fashioned the second Adam without intercourse in the Virgin’s womb.¹⁵⁹ Whereas the first [Adam] returned back to the womb of his mother, [it was] by means of the second [Adam], who did not return back to the womb of His mother,¹⁶⁰ that the former, who had been buried in the womb of his mother, was brought back [from it].¹⁶¹

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 2.2¹⁶²

Adam as Humanity and as the Garment of Christ

Another aspect of Ephrem’s adoption of Saint Paul’s comparison of Adam and Christ as the two “representative men”, and one which is of great importance for our further discussion, has been

¹⁵⁰ Luke 1:34.

¹⁵¹ Gen. 2:21-23.

¹⁵² Gen. 4:1.

¹⁵³ Matt. 2:20-21.

¹⁵⁴ Gen. 4:8.

¹⁵⁵ cf. Matt. 27:22-23; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23:21-23; John 19:6-15; see also John 1:11.

¹⁵⁶ Gen. 4:11.

¹⁵⁷ Col. 2:13-15.

¹⁵⁸ Gen. 2:7.

¹⁵⁹ Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:26-27.

¹⁶⁰ cf. Gen. 3:19.

¹⁶¹ cf. I Cor. 15:22. 45.

¹⁶² McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 60-61.

commented on by both Robert Murray¹⁶³ and Sebastian Brock.¹⁶⁴ In *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, Murray identified the “headship” of Adam and Christ as one aspect of the ‘Hebraic’ character of the theme of the second Adam, pointing out that “Ephrem frequently shows that he sees both Adams as ‘corporate personalities’.”¹⁶⁵ In *The Luminous Eye*, Sebastian Brock provides a concise explanation of Ephrem’s use of this convention of thought.

The freedom with which, in Semitic thought, the individual can merge into the collective, and the collective into the individual, is familiar to all students of the Old Testament. This way of thinking is very much present in Ephrem’s writings, above all when he is talking of Adam: ‘Adam’ in Ephrem may refer to the individual in the Genesis narrative or to the human race in general, or indeed to both simultaneously. Adam is Everyman.¹⁶⁶

In Ephrem’s thought, the distinction between Adam as the first man and Adam as the whole of humanity is frequently elided. Adam, formed of the dust of the earth and the breath of life, was not only the first man, but also the father of the whole of humanity. According to Ephrem, Adam’s status as the material source of all subsequent human persons, male and female, is made clear in the fact that even Eve has her husband as “father and mother” (CDiat. 2.3). In his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem explicates Adam’s status as the original repository and source of all human beings, placing his words in the mouth of personified Death, who refers to Adam as “that fountain from whence flowed all races of men” (HNis. 35.9). Elsewhere in the same collection of hymns, Death identifies Adam as “him in whom are buried all the dead; even as when I first received him, in him were hidden all the living” (HNis. 36.17).

It is precisely Adam’s status as a symbol of humanity as a whole that provides Ephrem with a potent image in his articulation the fullness and universal significance of Christ’s identification with

¹⁶³ Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 82-86.

¹⁶⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 30-31.

¹⁶⁵ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 83.

¹⁶⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 30-31.

humanity in his incarnation and death. Earlier in this chapter, we noted with Sebastian Brock the prominent role played by clothing metaphors in Ephrem's thought. According to Brock, Ephrem's "favorite term for the Incarnation is 'He put on a body' (following the earliest Syriac translation of *esarkothe*, 'He became incarnate', in the Nicene Creed)."¹⁶⁷ Brock has also, however, demonstrated the degree to which Ephrem expressed the complementarity of Adam and Christ by means of clothing metaphors. He points out that

The Pauline reference to Christ as the 'last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45) thus takes on particular significance for Ephrem: on several occasions he specifies that it is 'Adam's body', or 'the body of mortal Adam' that the Word puts on at the Incarnation; it is 'the body of Adam which proves victorious in Christ' (*Crucifixion* 5:11).¹⁶⁸

Clothed in Adam/humanity, Christ is both fully identified with and uniquely capable of restoring his fallen creation. In the twenty-third of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity*, the symbolic relationship between Adam/humanity and Christ is articulated with reference to the major events of salvation history.

All these changes did the Merciful One make,
stripping off glory and putting on a body;
for He had devised a way to reclothe Adam
in that glory which Adam had stripped off.
Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes,¹⁶⁹
corresponding to Adam's leaves,¹⁷⁰
Christ put on clothes, instead of Adam's skins;¹⁷¹
He was baptized for Adam's sin,¹⁷²
His body was embalmed for Adam's death,¹⁷³
He rose and raised up Adam in his glory.¹⁷⁴
Blessed is He who descended, put on Adam and
ascended!

Hymns on the Nativity, 23.13¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 39.

¹⁶⁸ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 30-31.

¹⁶⁹ Luke 2:7, 12.

¹⁷⁰ Gen. 3:7.

¹⁷¹ Gen. 3:21.

¹⁷² Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; cf. John 1:32-33.

¹⁷³ Matt. 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42.

¹⁷⁴ cf. I Cor. 15:22, 45.

Adam and Christ:

The Image of God Created, Lost, and Restored

Above, we have observed that Saint Paul's typological coupling of Adam and Christ as the representative heads of fallen and redeemed humanity was theologically expanded by Ephrem to address the redemptive significance not only of the resurrection but also of the incarnation. Pressing the relationship still further, Ephrem perceived the reciprocity between Adam and Christ and its significance for humanity's intended participation in the Divine life of the Trinity beginning not with the incarnation, but with Adam/humanity's creation in the image of God. Thus, as we noted earlier in this chapter with respect to Ephrem's use of the imagery of the maternal womb and childbearing, Ephrem affirms the continuity of God's will for humanity in creation and redemption by means of the complementarity between Adam and Christ. One way in which Ephrem expresses the profound unity of God's purpose for his human creation is by means of the creation, loss, and restoration of the image of God in humanity.

In his masterful study of *Motifs From Genesis 1-11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian*, Tryggve Kronholm demonstrates that

The biblical account of the creation of Adam/man on the sixth day of the creative week in the Beginning (Gen. 1:26-2:25) is seen by Ephrem mainly as a mysterious revelation of God's First-born (Christ), *the* image of God, in his creating and redeeming activity. This applies to the defining aspect of this account, viz that of Adam/man as made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26ff.), as well as to the narrative, viz that of Adam/man as formed from the dust of the earth and placed in Paradise (Gen. 2:5ff).¹⁷⁶

Kronholm explicates the relationship between Christ the image of God and Adam created in God's image, pointing out that

as Christ is the *non-created* πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, Adam/man is formed the *created* πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως and as Christ is εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου

¹⁷⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 85.

¹⁷⁶ Tryggve Kronholm, *Motifs From Genesis 1-11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian with Particular Reference to the Influence of Jewish Exegetical Tradition*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 11 (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1978), 46.

beyond creation, Adam/man is moulded and breathed the *is εικων του θεου του αορατου* *in* creation: he is created the corporeal-psychical-spiritual depiction of God's non-created First-born and Image, a living and full reproduction of the divine glory, splendour, beauty, honour, purity, greatness, authority, and supreme dominion ... He greatly surpasses every other created being, and is distinguished also in regard to his Paradisiacal habitation...¹⁷⁷

Created in the image and likeness of God, Adam/humanity bore a special “resemblance” to Christ, which was subsequently lost as a result of his disobedience. Not only does Ephrem depict Adam as the one who lost the image of God, but also as the image lost, deploying a number of symbols culled from the Gospels. Ephrem identifies Adam with the “lost sheep” (HNat. 18.5) of Luke 15:3-7 and Matthew 18:10-14. Playing on images of oil and the depiction of kings on coins, Ephrem likens the image of Adam found by “the Anointed” to the “lost coin” of Luke 15:8-10:

Darkness is the food of light, since where it finds
[darkness], [light] swallows it.
[This is] a revealed symbol of the Anointed Who by
His life consumes death.
By the lamp, again, are found the things lost in the dark,
and by the Anointed, too, is found the soul that was lost.
The lamp returned our lost things, and the Anointed
also [returned] our treasures.
The lamp found the coin,¹⁷⁸ and the Anointed [found]
the image of Adam.

Hymns on Virginity, 5.8¹⁷⁹

Already in Christ's Incarnation, the restoration of the image of God in Adam is begun. Though the original resemblance of Adam/humanity to the Creator had been lost, in his birth from the Virgin, the Son takes on the likeness of fallen Adam/humanity. As we have already observed, Ephrem articulates the relationship between Christ's birth from the Virgin and Adam's birth from the virgin earth as an example of their complementarity in the economy of redemption.

¹⁷⁷ Kronholm, *Motifs From Genesis 1-11*, 49.

¹⁷⁸ Luke 15:8-10.

¹⁷⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 284.

Teach me, my Lord, how and why
 from a virgin womb it was fitting for You to shine
 forth for us.
 Was He a type of splendid Adam [taken]
 from the virgin earth that had not been worked until he
 was formed?¹⁸⁰

Hymns on the Nativity, 2.12¹⁸¹

In addition to this, however, Ephrem muses on the mystery of the incarnation, placing his thoughts in the mind of Mary who confesses not only Christ's similarity to his invisible Father, but also his external and visible likeness to his human 'father'.

When I see Your outward image
 before my eyes, Your hidden image
 is portrayed in my mind. In Your revealed image
 I saw Adam,¹⁸² but in the hidden one
 I saw Your Father who is with You.¹⁸³

Hymns on the Nativity, 16.3¹⁸⁴

Having put on the body of Adam/humanity in the incarnation, Christ continues the restoration of the lost image of God by means of his baptism. In the context of Christ's baptism in the Jordan, Ephrem writes that the Lord "came to be baptized because he was clothed with the guilty Adam." (CDiat. 4.1b) Furthermore, Christ "was baptized for [Adam's] wrongdoing." (HNat. 23.13) Ephrem specifies, however, that despite Christ's identification with sinful Adam/humanity, he did not receive baptism as a sinner. (CDiat. 4.1b) Instead, Christ's baptism in the Jordan was for the benefit of the fallen humanity with whom he was identified, serving to fulfill justice (CDiat. 4.1b) and to transform John's baptism of repentance into the baptism of rebirth. (SdDN 55) As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 4, as a result of this transformation, Christian baptism becomes the sacramental source of the restoration of the image of God in humanity. In the seventh of his *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem compares Christ to oil and depicts the saving significance of his baptism as follows:

¹⁸⁰ Gen. 2:4-7.

¹⁸¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 78.

¹⁸² cf. Gen. 1:26-27.

¹⁸³ John 1:1-18.

¹⁸⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 149.

Oil by its love became companion to the diver who in
 his need
 hates his life and descends and in water buries himself.
 Oil, a nature that does not sink, becomes a partaker
 with the body that sinks,
 and it dove down to bring up from the deep a treasure
 of wealth.
 The Anointed, a nature that does not die, put on a
 mortal body;
 He dove down and brought up from the water the
 living treasure of the house of Adam.

Hymns on Virginity, 7.10¹⁸⁵

In Ephrem's thought, it is above all in Christ's death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection that the Savior's identity with and restoration of Adam/humanity is brought to completion. Clothed in the body of fallen Adam/humanity, Christ's corporeal identification with humanity was complete not only in his willing subjection to the physical and temporal limitations of bodily existence experienced by all who are born into the world as children of Adam, but even in the likeness of his body to "our body" in death. (HVirg. 37.9) Not only in being born into the creation marred by the effects of Adam/humanity's sin, but also in experiencing death, the universal effect of the curse, Christ entered fully into the human condition. According to Ephrem, Christ's restoration of the creation took place from within it in order to demonstrate that "he was not manifesting another creation" (CDiat. 5.11), nor was he "introducing an alien creation, but was transforming the original creation, so that, through having transformed it, he would make it known that he was its Lord." (CDiat. 5.12) Therefore, it was by passing through each stage of life that "the Living One sought to refute death in every kind of way":

He was an embryo, and while in the womb [death] was not able to destroy him. [He was] an infant and while growing up, it was not able to disfigure him. [He was] a child and during his education it was not able to confuse him. [He was] a young man, and with its lustful desires it was not able to lead him into error. [He was] instructed, and with its wiles, it was not able to overpower him. [He was] a teacher, and because of his

¹⁸⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 295.

intelligence, it was not able to refute him. [He was] vigilant, and with its commands, it was not able to turn him aside [from his purpose]. [He was] strong, and in killing him, it was not able to frighten him. [He was] a corpse and in the custody of the tomb, it was not able to hold him. He was not ill, because he was a healer. He did not go astray, because he was a shepherd. He did not commit error, because he was a teacher. He did not stumble, because he was the light. This is the perfect way that the Messiah opened up for his Church, from the beginning through conception until the completion of the resurrection.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.14¹⁸⁶

In Ephrem's writings, nearly every aspect of the events leading up to and culminating in Christ's death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection finds a typological counterpart in the fall of Adam. Sebastian Brock attests to this in *The Luminous Eye*, writing that Ephrem's perception of the complementarity of Adam and Christ "becomes most close-knit at the Passion."¹⁸⁷ Brock cites two examples from Ephrem's hymns to demonstrate the point.

In the month of Nisan our Lord repaid
the debts of that first Adam:
He gave His sweat¹⁸⁸ in Nisan in exchange for Adam's
sweat,¹⁸⁹
the Cross, in exchange for Adam's Tree.¹⁹⁰
The sixth day of the week¹⁹¹ corresponded to the sixth
day of creation,¹⁹²
and it was at 'the turn of the day'
that He returned the thief to Eden.¹⁹³

Hymns on the Church, 51.8¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁶ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 91.

¹⁸⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 33.

¹⁸⁸ Luke 22:44.

¹⁸⁹ Gen. 3:19.

¹⁹⁰ Gen. 3:1-6.

¹⁹¹ cf. Mark 15:42; John 19:42.

¹⁹² Gen. 1:26-31, esp. v. 31.

¹⁹³ cf. Gen. 3:8; Luke 23:42-44.

¹⁹⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 33.

Our Lord subdued His might and they seized Him¹⁹⁵
 so that His living death might give life to Adam.¹⁹⁶
 He gave His hands to be pierced by the nails¹⁹⁷
 in place of that hand that had plucked the fruit;¹⁹⁸
 He was struck on the cheek in the judgment hall¹⁹⁹
 in return for that mouth that had devoured in Eden.²⁰⁰
 Because Adam had let slip his foot,
 they pierced His feet.²⁰¹
 Our Lord was stripped naked²⁰² so that we might be
 clothed in modesty;
 with the gall and vinegar²⁰³ He made sweet
 that bitter venom that the serpent had poured into
 human kind.²⁰⁴

Nisibene Hymns, 36.1²⁰⁵

Other examples of the typological reciprocity between Adam's sin and Christ's redemptive death abound in Ephrem's works. In the first of his *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*, Ephrem writes:

Because Adam sinned and went astray in Paradise,²⁰⁶
 in the place of delights, the Just One in the judgment
 house,
 in the place of sufferings, was scourged in his place.²⁰⁷
 And also as Adam in his body killed the living ones,
 so in this type, in the body of Him who perfected all,
 Behold! the just ones we perfected and the sinners also
 found mercy.²⁰⁸

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 1.8, 10²⁰⁹

¹⁹⁵ Matt. 26:50; Mark 14:46; Luke 22:54; cf. John 18:12.

¹⁹⁶ cf. I Cor. 15:45.

¹⁹⁷ Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18.

¹⁹⁸ Gen. 3:6.

¹⁹⁹ cf. Matt. 27:30; Mark 15:19.

²⁰⁰ Gen. 3:6.

²⁰¹ Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18.

²⁰² Matt. 27:28.

²⁰³ Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:23.

²⁰⁴ Gen. 3:1; cf. 3:14-15.

²⁰⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 33.

²⁰⁶ Gen. 3:6.

²⁰⁷ Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1.

²⁰⁸ cf. I Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:12-21.

Additionally, the coincidence of Adam's loss of the image of God and expulsion from Eden provide Ephrem with another symbolic means of expressing the restoration of the image of God in humanity as a result of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Several of the refrains of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* take up the image of Paradise regained, identifying the purpose of Christ's death and descent to Sheol as the restoration of Adam to Eden.

To Thee be glory by Whose humiliation Adam was
exalted
and by Whose death he was raised and regained Eden!
Nisibene Hymns, 54.R²¹⁰

To Thee be glory Who descended and plunged after
Adam
and drew him out from the depths of Sheol and
brought him into Eden.
Nisibene Hymns, 65.R²¹¹

In the eighth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, the same relationship between Adam's fall and expulsion from the Garden and Christ's death and descent to Sheol for the purpose of returning Adam to Paradise finds more sustained expression. Ephrem writes

Adam was heedless as the guardian of Paradise,
for the crafty thief stealthily entered;
leaving aside the fruit—which most men would
covet—
he stole instead the Garden's inhabitant!²¹²
Adam's Lord came out to seek him; He entered Sheol
and found him there,
then led and brought him out to set him once more in
Paradise.

Hymns on Paradise, 8.10²¹³

²⁰⁹ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 2. (my translation)

²¹⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 208.

²¹¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 216.

²¹² cf. Gen. 3.

²¹³ Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 134-135.

Adam and Christ:

Humanity Born and Reborn from the Womb of the Earth

Throughout the course of this chapter we have examined Ephrem's use of two potent symbols: the maternal womb and Christ as the second Adam. Both of these figure prominently in his thought pertaining to the history of salvation and serve to illustrate the manner in which his conceptions of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol inform one another. An account of the convergences between these two powerful images will close this chapter.

First, in explicitly relating Adam's birth from his virgin mother earth to Christ's birth from his virgin mother Mary (HNat. 1.16, 2.12; HRes. 4.4), Ephrem draws a close correspondence between humanity's primordial creation in the image of God and the beginning of the restoration of the image of God in humanity in the current temporal order. Secondly, Ephrem's explicit comparisons of the virgin womb of Mary and the barren womb of Sheol (HNis. 37.2-4), coupled with his explicit comparisons of Christ's birth from Mary and Christ's birth from Sheol further articulate the identity of these events in terms of their salvific content in sacred time and relate Christ's temporal saving deeds to the eternal will of God for humanity's salvation as expressed both in the primordial acts of creation and in the history of redemption. Thirdly, Ephrem's identification of Adam and Christ as men both born of the womb of the earth generates a symbolic equivalence between God's creation of Adam/humanity from the dust of the earth (CGen. 2.4), and God's re-creation of Adam/humanity from the dusty depths of Sheol (HNis. 68.32). Thus, Christ's descent to Sheol provides the precondition for the symbolic and saving reiteration of God's original creation of humanity: born of the womb of the earth, Christ, *as* Adam/humanity (re)enters Paradise, bringing human destiny to its fulfillment.

CHAPTER THREE: CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND SOTERIOLOGY IN THE THEOLOGY OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

In the previous chapter, we examined the intersection of the doctrines of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol in Ephrem the Syrian's thought. Such a consideration depended upon the identification of the Savior's incarnation as an integral component of his redemptive work. This aspect of Ephrem's theology was not wholly unique, being a convention not only of early Syriac Christianity, but also of Greek and Latin patristic thought. Seely Beggiani has noted the inseparability of redemption and incarnation in the Syriac fathers in general, and in Ephrem in particular, and has written that Christ's work of redemption was seen among them as:

a continuous movement [in which] the Word humbles himself and becomes flesh, enters the womb of Mary, the waters of the Jordan, and the mouth of Sheol (i.e. the region of the dead) where he overcomes death and leads all humans on a path that takes them to the kingdom of the Father.¹

The central significance of Christ's passion was emphasized, however, when Ephrem explicitly stated that the incarnate Son's work of redemption, symbolized by the paying of a debt, though begun in his birth, could only be completed in his death.

Our debt so surpassed everything in its enormity that neither the prophets nor the priests, nor the just nor kings were able to acquit it. Therefore, when the Son of

¹ Seely J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 53.

the Lord of everything came, although omnipotent, he did not acquit our debt, either in the womb [of his mother], or by his birth, or by his baptism. [He did not acquit it] until he was delivered over to the cross and tasted death, so that his death might be redemption for our debt.² Through it, that [debt], which all creatures were incapable of paying, would be acquitted.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.32³

And as He began in birth, He continued and completed in death.

His birth received worship; His death repaid the debt.

As He came to birth, the magi worshipped Him.⁴

Again, He came to suffering and the thief took refuge in Him.⁵

Between His birth and death He placed the world in the middle;

by [His] birth and death He revived it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 21.19⁶

Elsewhere, Ephrem articulated the soteriological unity of Christ's desire "to kill death and destroy its traces," a desire that is of necessity fulfilled both by entering the womb of the Virgin and the womb of Sheol.

Those who pronounce him defiled through his birth do not know, because they are in error. They are unable to learn because they are haughty, just as they are also without fear, because they are unrepentant. This world into which he came is no different from the womb, for all defilements are in it. He also entered Sheol, which is repugnant and unclean beyond all else. But [since] in particular it is said concerning the body that they are temples of the divinity, it was therefore not unclean for God to dwell in his temples. Because he wanted to kill

² cf. I John 1:5-2:6.

³ Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 333.

⁴ Matt. 2:10-11.

⁵ Luke 23:42-43.

⁶ Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 177.

death and destroy its traces, he began with the roots of the matter. For where the body is, there too is death, and the root of the body is the womb. There it begins to be formed, and it is there that death begins in it unto its corruption. How many women in fact are there, whose infants die in the month in which they are conceived, or perish in the second or third, or in any one of the remaining months? If death begins then from the womb, and comes to completion in Sheol, how could he, who is the hunter of death, not begin to walk with it from the womb until its end in Sheol, its stronghold?

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.13⁷

It was, in fact, by virtue of Christ's incarnation from Mary that his death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead were made possible, opening the way for humanity to return to its divinely intended participation in the blessed communion of the Trinity in the Edenic paradise.

The Only-Begotten⁸ journeyed from the Godhead and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many.⁹ And he journeyed from Sheol and resided in the kingdom, to tread a path from Sheol, which cheats everyone, to the kingdom, which rewards everyone.... It is He who went down to Sheol and came up from that (place) which corrupts its lodgers, in order to bring us to that (place) which nurses its inhabitants with its blessings. Its inhabitants are those who have crowned and festooned unfading dwellings for themselves in that world with what they possess of the fading buds and blossoms of this world.

Homily on Our Lord, 1.2-3¹⁰

⁷ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 90-91.

⁸ John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18.

⁹ Rom. 8:29.

¹⁰ Kathleen E. McVey, ed. *Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trs., The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 91 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 273-275.

Perceived as the hinge between his crucifixion and resurrection, Christ's descent to Sheol thus constitutes the pivot of the Son's salvific work. It is the center of the center of the mystery of redemption, the point of convergence where the downward movement of the Divine identification with humanity is carried to its most profound abasement and, rebounding against its uttermost limit, is transformed into the upward movement of the Divine regeneration of humanity.

Nevertheless, Ephrem indicated that the effects of the Savior's redeeming death which overcame death radiated from the soteriological epicenter of Christ's descent to Sheol, finding expression in every aspect of the Son's earthly life and ministry and setting the paradigm for his church.

Take note therefore how the Living One sought to refute death in every kind of way. He was an embryo, and while in the womb [death] was not able to destroy him. [He was] an infant and while growing up, it was not able to disfigure him. [He was] a child and during his education it was not able to confuse him. [He was] a young man, and with its lustful desires it was not able to lead him into error. [He was] instructed, and with its wiles, it was not able to overpower him. [He was] a teacher, and because of his intelligence, it was not able to refute him. [He was] vigilant, and with its commands, it was not able to turn him aside [from his purpose]. [He was] strong, and in killing him, it was not able to frighten him. [He was] a corpse and in the custody of the tomb it was not able to hold him. He was not ill, because he was a healer. He did not go astray, because he was a shepherd. He did not commit error, because he was a teacher. He did not stumble, because he was the light. This is the perfect way that the Messiah opened up for his Church from the beginning through conception until the completion of the resurrection.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.14¹¹

The current chapter will focus on the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol as it relates both to his earthly ministry and to the soteriological *sine qua non* of his passion and resurrection.

¹¹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 91.

CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY

Close soteriological correspondences between Christ's descent to Sheol and the events of his earthly ministry are evident throughout Ephrem the Syrian's works, a situation which is clearly seen in the following passage from his *Hymns on the Resurrection*, where Ephrem depicted Jesus' healing ministry as being extended to include "the lower regions" as well as the temporal earth.

From every side he stretched out and gave
both healings and promises.
The simple hastened to his healings;
the discerning hastened to his promises.
Blessed is his appearance!

From the mouth of a fish a coin was given;¹²
a seal of the age and its passing away.
From his mouth the new seal
of the new covenant he gave us.
Blessed is the Giver of it!

From God his divinity,
from mortals also his humanity.
From Melchizedek his priesthood¹³
and from the house of David also his kingdom.¹⁴
Blessed is his mingling!

Among the guests he was at the banquet,¹⁵
and among the fasters in temptation.¹⁶
Among the watchers he was in the struggle,
and a teacher he was in the holy place.¹⁷
Blessed is his discipline!

He did not loathe the unclean,¹⁸
and from sinners he did not shrink.¹⁹

¹² Matt. 17:27.

¹³ Psa. 110:4.

¹⁴ Luke 1:32-33.

¹⁵ John 2:1-12.

¹⁶ Matt. 4:1-11; cf. Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.

¹⁷ Matt. 21:28-23:39; Mark 12:1-44; Luke 20:9-21:4.

¹⁸ Matt 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-44. Matt. 26:6; Mark 14:3.

¹⁹ Luke 19:1-10; John 8:3-11.

In the innocents he was exceedingly glad,
and he eagerly longed for the supplicants.
Blessed is his teaching!

His feet did not fail from the sick,²⁰
nor his words from the commoners.
He extended his descent to the lower regions,
and also his ascension to the heavens.
Blessed is he who sent him!

Hymns on the Resurrection, 1.10-15²¹

Though every facet of Jesus' incarnate life possessed soteriological implications, three aspects of the Messiah's redemptive ministry acquired an especially close identification with his descent to Sheol in Ephrem's works. These were Christ's temptation in the wilderness, his miraculous transformation of water to wine at the wedding at Cana, and his raising of the dead.

Christ's Temptation in the Wilderness

For Ephrem the events of Christ's temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) constituted an important component of the history of redemption. Led by the Spirit into the wilderness, the Savior entered into open conflict with Satan in order to liberate humanity from the effects of the curse brought upon them by their misuse of the Divine gift of freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ) at the instigation of the evil one. Describing the post-baptismal confrontation between Christ and Satan as a contest or combat, Ephrem emphasized the close correspondence between Christ and Adam in the twelfth of his *Hymns on Paradise*. Ephrem wrote:

There came another Athlete, this time not to be beaten;
He put on the same armor in which Adam had been
vanquished.
When the adversary beheld the armor of conquered
Adam,
he rejoiced, not perceiving that he was being taken by
surprise;

²⁰ Matt. 4:23.

²¹ Edmund Beck, ed. *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschalhymnen*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 247 (Louvain: Peeters, 1964), 80-81. (my translation)

He who was within the armor would have terrified him,
 but His exterior gave him courage.²²
 The evil one came to conquer, but he was conquered
 and could not hold his ground.²³

Hymns on Paradise, 12.6²⁴

In the thirty-fifth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, Satan recounted the episode, lamenting his failure and recalling the relative ease with which he had ensnared Adam.

After his fast, I tempted Him
 with pleasant bread,²⁵ but He did not desire it.
 To my grief I struggled to learn a psalm,
 that by His psalm I might ensnare Him.²⁶ I failed. I
 learned a recitation,
 but He made my recitation vain. I brought Him up the
 mountain; I showed Him
 all possessions; I gave them to Him and he was not
 moved.²⁷
 It was better for me in the days of Adam,
 who gave me no trouble in teaching him.

Nisibene Hymns, 35.4²⁸

Drawing on Mark 3:27, Ephrem saw Christ's conquest of Satan in the wilderness as the preliminary and preparatory phase of his earthly ministry. Ephrem's identification of fasting as the key element of the Son's victory over the evil one served as an anti-type to Adam and Eve, who sinned by eating from the tree, and set the paradigm for Christian asceticism.

[The phrase,] The Spirit led him out into the desert to
 be tempted²⁹ is [like] No one is able to enter the house

²² Re. armor cf. Luke 11:21-22.

²³ Matt. 4:10-11; cf. Luke 4:13.

²⁴ Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 162.

²⁵ Matt. 4:3; cf. Luke 4:3.

²⁶ Matt. 4:6; cf. Luke 4:9-12; cf. also Psa. 91:11-12.

²⁷ Matt. 4:8-10; cf. Luke 4:5-8.

²⁸ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, Second Series, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 193-194.

²⁹ Matt. 4:1; cf. Mark 1:12-13; cf. Luke 4:1-2.

of a strong man in order to plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man and then plunders his property.³⁰ Thus [the Lord] bound the strong one and conquered him in his own dwelling, and then began his preaching. He opened up the path of fasting³¹ for us so that we might conquer [Satan's] wiles through it.

Commentary on the Diatessaron 4.6³²

Clothed in Adam and tempted by the evil one, Christ succeeded where Adam failed, "fulfilling the will of his Father" (CDiat. 4.12)³³ and effecting the reversal of the curse. The refrain of Ephrem's fortieth *Nisibene Hymn* illustrates the heart of the matter where Ephrem wrote, "Blessed is He that has come and undone the snares of sin!" (HNis. 40.R)³⁴ Elsewhere, the effects of Christ's victory over Satan's temptations were stated as follows.

On this mountain therefore our Lord trod underfoot the desires of the tempter, and cast them down below, so that the peoples who were [formerly] trampled upon by them might trample upon them [in turn]. In their place he brought forth all good things, so that these [goods] that had been trampled upon by all might reign over all.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.11³⁵

Many of the elements we have noted above were woven together in an extensive meditation on Christ's temptation in the wilderness in the twelfth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity*. In the following citation, Ephrem brilliantly intermingled the complementarity of Adam and Christ as the respective sources of fallen and redeemed humanity, Satan's role as the tempter of each man in turn, the symbolic twinning of the temptations to eat (of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and of stones turned to bread (HVirg. 12.1ff.)) and to "become god" (by means of the tree of knowledge or by means of displays of Divine power (HVirg.

³⁰ Mark 3:27; cf. Matt 12:29; cf. Luke 11:21-22.

³¹ Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2.

³² McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 86.

³³ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 90.

³⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 203.

³⁵ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 89.

12.11)), and the second Adam's foundational thwarting of the tempter's wiles in the inauguration of his public ministry.

Our Lord labored and went out to the contest
not to use force
but to be victorious in conflict.
Therefore he hungered, and by fasting he conquered
that one who is justified by eating.³⁶

Refrain: Blessed is He Who humbled the pride of Satan.

The evil one saw an opportunity in [His] hunger;
he demanded that He make stones into bread.³⁷
[Satan] became a stone among stones;
his heart trembled when he saw that He was a
craftsman
and [yet] defeated him in a debate.

This thought came upon the evil one,
"If He is divine and He is hungry,
how will He regard me if I say,
'Make the stones bread and be nourished?'
Why will He bear the burden of His hunger?"

Blind was the evil one in his pride and his question,
for if He were God, as he said,
it escaped his notice that God does not hunger.
He approached to make [Him] err, but erred himself,
for he did not discern what he said.

[Satan] remembered questioning the house of Adam;³⁸
by his inquiry he persuaded;
he leapt from the inquiry to the explanation;³⁹
he asked, disputed, explained and conquered.
Here he asks and fails.

He lifted Him up and stood Him on the pinnacle⁴⁰
as a symbol of the height of pride,
as a type of the depth of the Fall.
He lifted Him up to pride as He ascended
to lower Him to the Fall as He descended.

³⁶ Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2; cf. Gen. 3:6.

³⁷ Matt. 4:3; Luke 4:3.

³⁸ Gen. 3:1.

³⁹ Gen. 3:4-5.

⁴⁰ Matt. 4:5; cf. Luke 4:9.

He was blind in this again as in that:
 for if the psalm is fulfilled concerning Him:
 "With his pinions," it is written there, "that he might
 save you."⁴¹

Indeed, unable to fall is the bird
 under whose pinions the air is like the earth.

He sought a pretext by which to make Him fall
 [to see] whether He was divine or human
 to know which is the way to go,
 so that if He were God, he would find out,
 and if human, he would lead Him astray.

This was the work of our Athlete
 Who did not let him know there that He was God.
 For if he had known He was God
 from the beginning, he would have fled
 and would have spoiled the completion.

While he was leading into error, error entered upon him.
 For he was unable to know He was God,
 nor again was he able to investigate His being human.
 For not as God did He exalt Himself
 nor as human did He lose His footing.

For upon the sanctuary he lifted Him up⁴²
 to convince Him that a human could become
 god from the house of Divinity,
 as he convinced Adam a human could
 become god from that tree.⁴³

He remembered that the fore-parents listened to him;
 his counsels were a trick for youth,
 but Sagacity came to overpower him.
 His temptations were like a coronation
 for Wisdom Who came to humble him.

He lifted Him up and set Him on a mountain,⁴⁴
 yet he did not call Him by the name to make Him proud,
 as if he had become persuaded that He was needy.
 He was startled and offered Him a gift
 so that the gift would bring Him to worship.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Psa. 91:11-12.

⁴² Matt. 4:5; cf. Luke 4:9.

⁴³ Gen. 3:4-5.

⁴⁴ Matt. 4:8; cf. Luke 4:5.

With schemes He blinded the schemer,
 and instead of being confused, He remained quiet
 like one who knows that [Satan] is deceitful.
 Since One is worshipped by all, the Lord of all,
 He showed that acts of worship are suitable [only] for
 Him.⁴⁶

Upon this foundation of the beginning
 our Lord built and erected His triumphs.
 For although the deceiver changed his opinion,
 he did not alter truth with him
 Truth was pleased, and deceit was dispersed.⁴⁷

Hymns on Virginity, 12.1-15⁴⁸

Though possessed of their own features and significance as temporal moments in the history of redemption, Christ's temptation and victory over Satan and sin in the wilderness nevertheless participated in and manifested the eternal salvific content of the Son's redeeming work. This point was demonstrated in the thirty-fifth of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Church*, where the poet placed Christ's conquest over the evil one in the wilderness in the context of Eve's sin in the garden, Mary's conception of the Son, the proclamation of the angels at Christ's nativity, and the Savior's descent to Sheol.

In gladness Eve saw the beauty of the tree,
 and the counsel of the deceitful one was formed in her
 intelligence,
 and remorse was the result of the action.⁴⁹

By her ear Mary saw the Hidden One who came by the
 voice.⁵⁰

Conceived within her womb the power became a body.⁵¹
 Death and Satan asked, "What do we hear of him?"

⁴⁵ Matt. 4:9; Luke 4:6-7.

⁴⁶ Matt. 4:10; cf. Luke 4:8.

⁴⁷ Matt. 4:11; cf. Luke 4:13.

⁴⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 310-313.

⁴⁹ Gen. 3:1-6.

⁵⁰ Luke 1:26-38.

⁵¹ cf. John 1:14.

While standing they heard the Watchers who shouted
concerning Him,⁵²

"This one brings death to Death and this one destroys
the Evil One.

He is the joy of those in heaven ones and the hope of
those on earth."

Death and Satan looked one at the other and trembled.
They took counsel for where they should flee and hide
themselves.

The Evil One fled to the desert. Death descended to
the depth.

And because they fled from Him, He went to their
dwellings.

To the desert He went forth and conquered the Evil
One in his wilderness.⁵³

To the depth He descended and conquered Death in
his den.

And because the two who had cut off the hope of
humanity came to an end,

there is much hope on the earth and also joy in the
height

as when the angels descended bringing glad tidings to
those on earth.⁵⁴

Hymns on the Church, 35.17-22⁵⁵

Elsewhere, Ephrem reiterated the soteriological parallelism of the Savior's temptation in the wilderness and his crucifixion by setting these two events in relation to one another as events of Christ's combat with the evil one. Ephrem concluded the twelfth of his *Hymns on Virginity*, which is an extended meditation on Christ's post-baptismal temptations, with a final strophe illustrating the connection between this event and the crucifixion.

⁵² Luke 2:8-15.

⁵³ Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.

⁵⁴ Luke 2:8-15.

⁵⁵ Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ecclesia*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Vol. 198. (Louvain: Peeters, 1960), 89-90. (my translation)

The Evil One fled from Him for awhile.⁵⁶
 In the time of the crucifixion he arrived,⁵⁷
 and by the hand of the crucifiers he killed Him
 so that He fell in the contest with Death
 to conquer Satan and Death.⁵⁸

Hymns on Virginity, 12.30⁵⁹

Ephrem restated the same conception at greater length in his
Hymns on Unleavened Bread.

The Victorious One descended, not to be conquered
 by Satan,
 for He conquered and choked him. He was conquered
 by the crucifiers.
 He has conquered by His justice and He was
 conquered by His goodness.
 He conquered the strong man⁶⁰ and He was conquered
 by the feeble ones.
 They crucified Him who gave Himself and He was
 conquered that He might conquer.
 He conquered in His temptations and he was
 conquered on account of his mercies.
 He conquered Satan in the desert when he was
 provoking Him,⁶¹
 and He was conquered by Satan in the cultivated land
 when he crucified Him.
 When He was killed He killed him that even in His
 defeat He might conquer him.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 1.11-13⁶²

The correspondence and complementarity of Christ's victory over Satan and sin in his temptation in the wilderness and his victory over Death in Sheol was also stated in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Church* in the context of the Savior's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on his way to the cross.

⁵⁶ Luke 4:13.

⁵⁷ cf. Luke 22:3.

⁵⁸ cf. I Cor. 15:54-57.

⁵⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 314-315.

⁶⁰ Mark 3:27; cf. Matt. 12:29; cf. Luke 11:21-22.

⁶¹ Matt. 4:10-11; cf. Luke 4:13.

⁶² Beck, ed. *Paschalhymnen*, 2. (my translation)

Child joined with child and to the Son
the infants issued forth a crown of Hosannas⁶³
clear and pure and entirely resembling
the Conqueror who conquered the Evil One
and came that He might also conquer Death.

In two symbols He conquered two
on two sides. He conquered Satan
on the high mountain⁶⁴ and laid low his pride
who laid low Adam.⁶⁵ And He conquered in the depth
Death who had trampled Eve in Sheol.

Hymns on the Church, 41.15-16⁶⁶

The duality of Christ's victory over sin and death was again
repeated in the refrains of some of the *Nisibene Hymns*.

Glory to Thee Who by Thy crucifixion didst conquer
the Evil One and by Thy resurrection gain victory
likewise over Death!

Nisibene Hymns, 58.R⁶⁷

To Thee be glory from Thy flock, for by Thee are
subdued both Death and Satan under Thy feet!⁶⁸

Nisibene Hymns, 59.R⁶⁹

Glory to the One Who alone conquered the Evil One
and to Him, yea Him, be also confession, who
vanquished Death!

Nisibene Hymns, 60.R⁷⁰

⁶³ Matt. 12:1-11, esp. v. 9; Mark 11:1-10, esp. vv. 9-10; Luke 19:28-40, esp. vv. 37-38; John 12:12-15, esp. v. 13.

⁶⁴ Matt. 4:8-10; cf. Luke 4:5-8.

⁶⁵ Gen. 3;1-6.

⁶⁶ Beck, ed., *Hymnen de Ecclesia*, 105. (my translation)

⁶⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 211.

⁶⁸ Psa. 110:1; I Cor. 15:25.

⁶⁹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 212.

⁷⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 212.

Ephrem's symbolic twinning of Christ's victories over Satan/Sin and Death/Sheol served to underscore the unity of Jesus' saving work. The incarnate Son's ministry of revelation and redemption constituted an organic whole intended to heal humanity entirely and save them from the twin enemies to whom they had been made hostage as the result of their misuse of the Divine gift of freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ). Linking Christ's descent to and triumph over Sheol with his victory over the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, Ephrem articulated the universal scope of the Son's total victory over sin and death, both within the temporal order and beyond it.

Christ's Miracle at the Wedding in Cana

Another event of Christ's earthly ministry which Ephrem considered as an analog of the Savior's descent to Sheol was the miraculous transformation of water to wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). In commenting on the numerous possible senses of Jesus' words to Mary, "My hour has not yet come," Ephrem related Christ's first miraculous sign to other aspects of his redeeming work. On the one hand, Ephrem related Christ's words to their immediate narrative context, suggesting that in his statement "My hour has not yet come" Jesus should be understood to mean, "'Shall I impose myself on them? Rather, let them perceive themselves that the wine has run short, and let them all ask to drink.'" [He said this] so that his gift might increase in their eyes" (CDiat. 5.1).⁷¹ Ephrem was quick to point out, however, that

an alternative [interpretation] of "My hour has not yet come"⁷² is that it could refer to the hour of his death. Since they were intoxicated, perhaps he might have escaped from suffering, if he had forced his gift upon them. But as yet this was [only] the beginning of his Gospel.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 5.1⁷³

Ephrem identified a third sense of the saying, pointing out that

⁷¹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 95.

⁷² John 2:4.

⁷³ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 95.

It was because Mary thought that the occasion of his miracles would be a source of glory and honour to him among the crowds that [he said], *My hour has not yet come*.⁷⁴ "For it is not as you think." He wanted to put an end to her [way] of thinking, since she was convinced that he would perform a miracle.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 5.2⁷⁵

Again, Ephrem offered an alternative interpretation of the saying, stating that Christ's words to Mary actually meant that his time had indeed come, so that "she learned from him therefore that he was about to perform a sign there" (CDiat. 5.2).⁷⁶ Suggesting a fifth sense of Jesus' statement, Ephrem placed his miraculous provision of wine in contrast to his victory over the evil one through fasting, writing "an alternative [interpretation] of *My hour has not yet come*⁷⁷ is that after the victory in the desert when he laid the enemy low,⁷⁸ he entered, like a conqueror, to effect a victory in at the wedding feast" (CDiat. 5.4c).⁷⁹ Finally, Ephrem compared Jesus' word of caution to Mary in her desire to see Jesus miraculously fulfill the need of the hosts of the wedding to the word of caution spoken to Mary after his resurrection from the dead in John 20.17.

Mary hastened to be a servant of his will therefore instead of the apostles, but since it was not her place either to give orders or to anticipate his word, he reproved her for having been hasty. *My hour has not yet come*,⁸⁰ that is, they will ask to drink and they will all become aware that the wine had run short, and thereafter will be the miracle. Thus after his victory over Sheol, when she saw it, she wished to express affection for him like a mother.⁸¹ He entrusted Mary, who had followed [him] to the cross, to John there, saying, *Woman, behold your son, and Young Man, behold your mother*.⁸² He restrained her again from drawing near to

⁷⁴ John 2:4.

⁷⁵ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 95.

⁷⁶ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 95.

⁷⁷ John 2:4.

⁷⁸ Matt. 4:10-11; cf. Luke 4:13.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 96.

⁸⁰ John 2:4.

⁸¹ John 20:11-18. See note 83 below.

⁸² John 19:26-27.

him, because he said, "From henceforth, John is your son."

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 5.5⁸³

Though none of these comments state an explicit equivalence between Christ's miracle at the wedding in Cana and his descent to Sheol, three of them do provide enticingly suggestive hints of an implicit commonality between these two events. In the first place, Ephrem associated Christ's "hour" which had not yet come with "the hour of his death." (CDiat. 5.1) Secondly, a correspondence was drawn between Christ's impending transformation of water into wine and his victory over the temptations of the evil one in the wilderness—an event which, as we have seen, served as an analog and complement to the Savior's descent to Sheol elsewhere in Ephrem's works. (CDiat. 5.4c) Thirdly, Ephrem's conception of the parity between the words of restraint that Jesus spoke to Mary (his mother) at the wedding feast and (Mary Magdalene) at the garden tomb provides the context for a passing reference to Christ's "victory over Sheol" in his resurrection. (CDiat. 5.5)

It must be admitted that, while tantalizing to the imagination, none of these oblique remarks can be taken on their own as statements of a definite correlation between the inauguration of

⁸³ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 96-97. In a footnote appended to this citation, McCarthy points out that "Ephrem appears to confuse Mary the mother of Jesus with Mary Magdalene here." 96, n. 3. Earlier, in a footnote appended to section 2.17, McCarthy writes: "Ephrem's writings attest a confusion or 'fusion' between Mary, Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene. See V, 5 and XXI, 27 below for further instances. In *Symbols of the Church*, [sic] Robert Murray notes that this "fusion" is not a peculiarity of Ephrem, but is found in other Syrian witnesses (p. 146). He traces the development of this "fusion" from the earlier Judaeo-Christian and Gnostic fields (cf. *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Philip*) into the Syriac tradition (pp. 329-335) and suggests that "Syriac tradition, starting from Judaeo-Christian ideas, many of which received unacceptable expression at the hands of the Gnostics, gradually purified its beliefs with the help of typology, till the sharing of the name of Mary by our Lady and Magdalen came to have a purely symbolic significance and to be quite innocent" (pp. 333-334). Cf. also L. Leloir, EC-SC 121, p. 75, n.3 for a useful summary of Robert Murray's conclusions." McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 68, n. 4.

Christ's wonder-working ministry and his descent among the dead. Nevertheless, as a trio, they do seem possessed of a certain suggestive convergence which is not entirely out of keeping with the general tenor of Ephrem's theological reflection.

Those who desire a more explicit correlation between Christ's miracle at Cana and his descent to Sheol will not be disappointed, however. In a subsequent comment the transformation of water into wine was compared with a pair of redemptive moments whose connections to one another we have already considered in the previous chapter. Ephrem wrote:

Why then did our Lord change the nature [of water] in the first of his signs?⁸⁴ Was it not to show that the divinity, which had changed nature in the depths of the jars, was that same [divinity] which had changed nature in the womb of the virgin? At the completion of his signs he opened the tomb to show that the greed of death had no hold over him. He sealed and confirmed these two uncertainties, that of his birth, and of his death. For these waters, with regard to their nature, were transformed into the [fruit of the] vine, but without the stone jars [themselves] undergoing change in their nature inwardly. This is a symbol of his body which was wondrously conceived in a woman, and, without a man, miraculously formed within the virgin.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 5.6⁸⁵

Elsewhere Ephrem reiterated the similarity between Christ's miracle at the wedding feast in Cana and his descent to Sheol, drawing comparisons between the transformation of water into wine and the dead who were resuscitated at the moment of the Savior's death. (Mt. 27.52) In one instance, Ephrem used the Syriac verb *gsa* (ܩܫܐ), "vomited," a term which, as we shall see below, played an important role in his description of the event of Christ's resurrection from the dead, in order to affirm the complementarity of a number of miraculous yields produced during the course of Christ's earthly ministry.

⁸⁴ John 2:9.

⁸⁵ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 97.

The sea vomited the catch of fishes
and piled [it] before him.⁸⁶ The dry land vomited
plenty of bread.⁸⁷ The marriage feast vomited
the wine of rejoicing.⁸⁸ Death vomited
the sorrowful dead against its nature.⁸⁹

Hymns on the Church, 39.⁹⁰

In his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem placed his words in the mouths of Death and Sheol in order to affirm the same symbolic parallelism between Christ's miracle at Cana and the resuscitation of "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep" (Matthew 27:52).

Gluttonous Death lamented and said,
"I have learned fasting which I used not to know.
Behold! Jesus gathers multitudes, but to me
in his feast a fast is proclaimed for me. One man has
closed my mouth
which closed the mouths of many. Sheol said, I will
restrain my greed;
hunger therefore is mine. Behold! He triumphed at the
marriage.
As he changed the water into wine⁹¹
so he changes the vesture of the dead into life.

Nisibene Hymns, 35.⁹²

Raising the Dead and the Descent to Sheol

At various points throughout his works, Ephrem the Syrian also associated the resuscitation of the righteous dead at the moment of Jesus' death and descent to Sheol with another aspect of the Savior's earthly ministry: his ability to restore physical health and well-being to humanity, exemplified most fully in the raising of the dead to life. In his thirty-sixth *Nisibene Hymn*, Ephrem linked Christ's restoration of three dead people to life during his public ministry

⁸⁶ John 21:1-14.

⁸⁷ Matt. 14:13-21, 15:29-39; Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-13; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15.

⁸⁸ John 2:1-11.

⁸⁹ Matt. 27:50-53.

⁹⁰ Beck, ed., *Hymnen de Ecclesia*, 99. (my translation)

⁹¹ John 2:1-11. esp. v. 9.

⁹² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 194.

and the effect Jesus' death and descent to Sheol had with respect to the depopulation of the underworld. These events were depicted as sources of compounding displeasure for Death, who wailed:

"The death of Jesus to me is a torment;
I prefer for myself his life rather than his death.
This is the dead whose death (lo!) is hateful to me;
in the death of all men else I rejoice,
but his death, even his, I destest;
that he may come back to life I hope.
While he was living he brought to life and restored
three that were dead;⁹³
but now by his death at the gate of Sheol they have
trampled on me,
the dead who have come to life,⁹⁴
whom I was going to shut in."

Nisibene Hymns, 36.13⁹⁵

The "three that were dead" whom Jesus restores to life—the son of the widow of Naim (Lk. 7.11-17), the daughter of Jairus (Mt. 9.18-26; Mk. 5.21-43; Lk. 8.40-56), and Lazarus (John 10.40-11.44)—were all seen by Ephrem as demonstrations of Christ's power over death (CDiat. 6.23; 7.26-27a; 17.1-10), precursors of the resuscitation of the saints at the crucifixion, harbingers of his own death and resurrection, and antecedent evidence of the resurrection of all the dead. In his *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem depicted Christ's raising of the widow's son as a decisive triumph over Sheol.

Nain, may you worship Him; may you offer Him a
crown.
With that dead man who lives may you crown life.
The deed of our Lord is the crown of his crowning.
Death was crowned as it conquered the youth
who marched with his crowns into Sheol;
he completed the victory when he returned it
to that Voice who summoned him and revived him.⁹⁶

⁹³ These three are the son of the widow of Naim: Luke 7:11-17; the daughter of Jairus: Matt. 19:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56; and Lazarus: John 11:1-44.

⁹⁴ Matt. 27:50-53.

⁹⁵ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

Even the dusty city walls were polished by the All-conquering.
 Even the dark gates were gladdened by the All-smiting.
 Even the mourning crowds were rejoicing in the All-merciful,⁹⁷
 and those who had wept for the dead man, lifted up
 and carried the living man.
 He consoled the widow and made her rejoice,
 and He gladdened the city and enlightened it,
 but he made Sheol gloomy and sorrowful.

Hymns on Virginity, 33.4-5⁹⁸

With reference to Christ's raising of the daughter of Jairus, Ephrem drew a more explicit correspondence between the miracle and the Savior's own death and resurrection, writing:

So also [in the case of the little girl] he said, *She is sleeping*,⁹⁹ so that [the spectators] might testify that she was dead, and then, on seeing her restored to life, these scorners would be converted into believers. The witness [given] by them concerning the death of the little girl and her restoration to life performed by [the Lord] was a witness in anticipation of his death, so that those who would see that he was alive [again] would not deny it.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 7.27a¹⁰⁰

It was, however, above all in the case of Lazarus that Ephrem's inclination toward theological symbolism found expression. Not only did Ephrem offer explanations of the event similar to those we have seen above in order to demonstrate the significance of Lazarus' restoration to life, he also allowed his fertile imagination to capitalize on the details of the Gospel account with truly impressive results. In his *Hymns on the Church*, Ephrem situated Christ's raising of Lazarus within the context of his ministry of healing, writing:

⁹⁶ Luke 7:14.

⁹⁷ Luke 7:16.

⁹⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 408.

⁹⁹ Matt. 9:24; cf. Mark 5:39; cf. Luke 8:52.

¹⁰⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 142.

On the peaks of Judea [there was]
 great wonder at our Lord. Who indeed sat
 upon the mountaintop and saw our Lord
 amongst the multitudes who was healing
 sicknesses by mercies not drugs.

The lame leap, the crippled exult,
 the deaf hear, the broken ones are bound up,
 the sick ones are made well. Even Bartimaeus¹⁰¹
 sees and runs. Even Lazarus¹⁰²
 answered and went forth from the grave.

Hymns on the Church, 38.4-5¹⁰³

Elsewhere, in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Jesus was identified as “Lazarus’ Physician” who “was waiting for [Lazarus] death in order to show his victory over death.” (CDiat. 17.3). Further on in the *Commentary*’s extensive treatment of this event, a number of agricultural images were applied to Lazarus’ own restoration to life.

He went forth to bring the dead man out from the tomb, and asked, *Where have you laid him?*¹⁰⁴ *Our Lord’s tears were welling forth.*¹⁰⁵ His tears were like the rain, and Lazarus like a grain of wheat, and the tomb like the earth. He gave forth a cry like that of thunder, and death trembled at his voice. Lazarus burst forth like a grain of wheat.¹⁰⁶ He came forth and adored his Lord who had raised him.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 17.7¹⁰⁷

Some of these images—the rain, the grain of wheat, and the earth—have been noted in association with Jesus’ own descent to Sheol and resurrection in the previous chapters, but the identification of Jesus’ voice with thunder is one which merits further attention both here and below. In many of Ephrem’s *Nisibene Hymns*, Christ’s dying cry uttered from the cross (Mt. 27.50; Mk. 15.37; Lk. 23.46) was identified as “the voice” which rent

¹⁰¹ Mark 10:46-52.

¹⁰² John 11:1-44.

¹⁰³ Beck, ed., *Hymnen de Ecclesia*, 94. (my translation)

¹⁰⁴ John 11:34.

¹⁰⁵ John 11:35.

¹⁰⁶ cf. John 12:24.

¹⁰⁷ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 264.

either the tombs of the righteous (HNis. 36.11) or Sheol (HNis. 39.R), so that “at the sound of his voice many just ones came out of Sheol” (CDiat. 14.10; cf. Mt. 27.52). In the refrain of Ephrem’s sixty-sixth *Nisibene Hymn*, we read: “To Thee be glory, Watcher that didst come down after them that slept and utter the voice from the tree and waken them.”¹⁰⁸ This same voice was symbolically identified with thunder and the resuscitated dead with flowers in *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 7.3: “And by the Thunder of your voice the flowers sprouted up. In the month of Nisan there was a Nisan in Sheol.”

Other details of the Gospel narrative of Lazarus’ restoration to life and resurrection from Sheol were deployed by Ephrem in order to depict this event as an analog of the resuscitation of the righteous dead at the moment of Christ’s death. In Ephrem’s *Nisibene Hymns*, Death, weeping over his dispossession of the dead, lamented that he and Sheol have learned something of the sense of loss human beings must feel when their loved ones die.

Sheol was made sorrowful when she saw them,
even the sorrowful dead, made to rejoice.
She wept for Lazarus when he went forth,¹⁰⁹
“Go in peace thou dead that livest,
bewailed by two houses of mourning.”
Within and without were lamentations for him;
for his sisters wept for him when he came into the
grave unto me,
and I wept for him as he went forth.
In his death there was weeping among the living;
likewise in Sheol is great mourning at his resurrection.

Now it is that I have tasted of his sorrow,
even of him who weeps over his beloved.
The dead that are thus beloved of Sheol,
how dear were they to their fathers!
The limbs which I severed and carried away,
lo! they are shorn away and carried off from me.
If I thus suffer for the departure of him,
the youth who was restored to life,

¹⁰⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 217.

¹⁰⁹ John 11:44.

blessed is He who had compassion on the widow;¹¹⁰
in her only son He gave peace to her dwelling that had
been made desolate.

Nisibene Hymns, 37.6-8¹¹¹

An additional aspect of Christ's raising of Lazarus in which Ephrem found important symbolic resonance with Christ's own resurrection were the four days that Lazarus had laid dead in the tomb and the three days of Christ's own interment.

With regard to death, its power was exposed after four days,¹¹² when [the Lord] recalled a corpse [to life], so that [death] would know that it was easy for him in his own case to leave it [there] for three days.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 17.7¹¹³

He had said, *On the third day I will rise*.¹¹⁴ Whenever they would hear that this would be difficult [to believe], let them consider him who was raised on the fourth day.¹¹⁵ He said something that was difficult, but then did something even more difficult, so that, through what he had done for Lazarus, one could believe what he spoke of regarding himself.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 17.8¹¹⁶

The same comparison of four days and three days was reiterated with a slightly different emphasis in the forty-first of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*:

Satan came with his servants
that he might see our Lord cast into Sheol
and might rejoice with Death his counsellor
and he saw him sorrowful and mourning
because of the dead who at the voice of the
Firstborn¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Luke 7:11-17.

¹¹¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198.

¹¹² John 11:39.

¹¹³ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 264.

¹¹⁴ cf. Matt. 12:40; 16:21; 17:23; 20:19 (cf. Mark 10:34; cf. Luke 18:33); 27:63.

¹¹⁵ John 11:39.

¹¹⁶ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 265.

lived and came forth thence even from Sheol.
 The Evil One arose to console Death his kinsman:
 “Thou hast not destroyed as much as thou was able.
 Even as Jesus is in thy midst
 to thy hand shall come they that have lived and that
 live.”

“Open for us to see Him, yea, and mock Him.
 Let us answer and say, “Where is Thy power?”
 For lo! three days have passed for Him.
 And let us say to Him, “O Thou of three days
 Who didst raise Lazarus when he had lain four days¹¹⁸
 raise Thine own self.” Death opened the gates of Sheol
 and there shone from it the splendor of the face of our
 Lord.
 And like the men of Sodom they were smitten.¹¹⁹
 They groped and sought the gate of Sheol
 which they had lost.

Nisibene Hymns, 41.15-16¹²⁰

In his use of these complex images culled from the Gospel narratives of Christ’s earthly ministry, Ephrem the Syrian symbolically articulated the soteriological complementarity of that ministry and the Savior’s descent to Sheol. Conquering sin and evil in his victory over Satan in the wilderness, transforming nature in the miraculous conversion of water into wine at the wedding of Cana, and raising the dead to life in the instances of the widow’s son, the daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus, Christ was seen and depicted by Ephrem as the One whose activity in life foreshadowed his triumph over Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death in his passion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead—a triumph which he, as the second Adam, achieved on behalf of and shared with all of humanity.

¹¹⁷ cf. Col. 1:15-20, esp. v. 18.

¹¹⁸ John 11:39, 44.

¹¹⁹ Gen. 19:11.

¹²⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 205.

CHRIST'S PASSION, DESCENT TO SHEOL, AND RESURRECTION

Thus far in our survey of the various theological contexts in which Saint Ephrem the Syrian made use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol we have noted the manifold correspondences drawn by the fourth century poet between the Savior's underworldly sojourn and the creation, structure, and Divine intention for the cosmos, as well as the doctrine of Christ's incarnation, and His earthly ministry of reconciliation and redemption. In chapters still to come, we will examine the reciprocal relationships of significance that exist in Ephrem's writings between Christ's descent to Sheol and ecclesiology and sacraments, as well as eschatology and human destiny. In all of this, it should be clear that, in Ephrem's theological poetry, Christ's descent to Sheol was both a seamlessly integrated and an important integrating doctrine. Nevertheless, for all its wide-ranging distribution throughout Ephrem's works and its correlation with doctrines which would later be more formally systematized and identified as cosmology, incarnation, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, it can not be denied that the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol is most closely and most basically associated with the passion and resurrection of the Savior. If, as Christians have believed, taught, and confessed through the ages, Christ's death and resurrection constitute the center of the Gospel, then his descent to Sheol may be seen as the center of that center, the theological hinge or pivot between the occupied cross and the empty tomb.

Christ's Crucifixion and Descent to Sheol

What we have seen in this and other preceding chapters, coupled with what remains to be seen in the chapters to follow, has already clearly indicated the inadequacy of the pronouncement made by no less an authority than J. N. D. Kelly, who, in asserting the Syrian provenance of early Christian belief in Christ's descent to the underworld, stated that "it was no doubt initially regarded as no more than a more colourful equivalent of DEAD and BURIED."¹²¹ Kelly's dismissal of the theological significance of the

¹²¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1950), 383.

doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol is most glaringly apparent in his account of the Fourth Formula of Sirmium (359), a creed which

stands out as being the first to give official recognition to the Descent to Hell. But its real importance is theological. It was a mediating manifesto, designed as far as possible to please everybody, and it gave expression to the new "Homoean" formula of compromise proposed by Acacius of Caesarea and accepted by the emperor—LIKE IN ALL RESPECTS—and strictly avoided technical terms.¹²²

Here, the inclusion of so early, frequently, variously, and persistently expressed a Christian doctrine as the Savior's underworldly descent is effectively glossed by a reputable scholar of patristic Christianity as an interesting and anecdotal detail in a creed *otherwise* possessed of "real theological importance." While a detailed analysis of the historical and ideological machinery behind the rather severe curtailment of Kelly's treatment of this, by all appearances, important Christian belief is not feasible here, it is enough to note that the "more colourful" curio of Christ's underworldly descent was considered by Kelly to be rather less deserving of consideration as theologically significant than a number of other theologoumena.

In order that Kelly should not be misrepresented, however, it must be admitted that his account of the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead as it appears in *Early Christian Creeds* is not entirely defective, but rather profoundly insufficient in its explication of the doctrine's meaning. Kelly was, in fact, correct in asserting the close relationship between the Savior's death on the cross and his descent to Sheol: these are, as we shall see below, nearly synonymous phrases at a certain level in Ephrem's thought. Moreover, the doctrine of Christ's underworldly descent is, in every iteration—whether Ephremic or not—a doctrine intimately and necessarily related to the doctrine of the Savior's death on the cross. Where Kelly's account runs short is not in its identification of Christ's descent to the dead with his death, but in the supposition that this relatively narrow sense is *the exclusive sense* of

¹²² Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 290.

the doctrine in its earliest expressions and in its inclusion in formal creedal discourse of the fourth century.¹²³

Nevertheless, for all of Kelly's shortcomings, and those of accounts which either mirror or have too closely followed his own, it is nonetheless true that Christ's descent to the underworld is inextricably bound up with the events of his passion. Though this relationship has been implicit and essential to our considerations up to this point, we will now turn to more closely examine this aspect of Ephrem's articulation of the theological meaning of Christ's descent to Sheol.¹²⁴

One of the greatest attributes of Ephrem's writings, and equally one of the greatest difficulties of the task of explicating his works, is his use of theological symbolism to express complex truths through approximation and metaphor. Ephrem, as we noted above, was wary of doctrinal definitions, regarding them as potentially harmful, and preferring a more flexible vocabulary of signs, types, and symbols. Delighting in the play of shades of meaning, in parallelism, in contrasts, in paradox, and in non-identical repetition, Ephrem constructed countless word-pictures to express the mysterious meaning of Christian revelation. These "verbal icons," though strictly speaking non-commensurate in their portrayal of the mystery of faith, were nonetheless possessed of a complex complementarity which displayed theological truth as a multifaceted gem, variously refracting and reflecting the Divine Light in its dynamic and alternating splendor.

Such is the case in Ephrem's depiction of Christ's descent to Sheol, an event for which a single, univocal, and linear narrative account is difficult to locate in Ephrem's works. Instead, the poet-theologian offers a variety of depictions of this event, some prose, most poetic, some in his own voice, others by means of a dramatic

¹²³ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 378-383.

¹²⁴ In all of this, it must be remembered in fairness to Kelly, that the work in which his treatment of this matter first appeared in 1950—considerably prior to the critical editions of Ephrem the Syrian's works compiled by Dom Edmund Beck. Perhaps Kelly would have written a different account of the matter had he had access to more of Ephrem's works. Yet, the work has appeared in at least two revised editions with no change in language on these matters. I hasten to add that Kelly is not being singled out here as some sort of chief offender, but as the esteemed author of a work widely regarded and regularly used as a standard text.

ventriloquism in the voices of Satan, Death, Sin, and Sheol. In much the same way that it is unwieldy, impractical, and unnecessary to present a comprehensive catalog of the technically finite yet widely varied visual manifestations of a good kaleidoscope, it is not worthwhile here to attempt to present an exhaustive unified account of Ephrem's diverse depictions of Christ's descent to Sheol. The point, in both instances, is not taxonomy, but wonder.

Here, however, in commenting on the relationship between Christ's death on the cross and descent to Sheol, and subsequently, in commenting on the relationship between Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection, it has become necessary to address the temporal situation of these redemptive events in a more detailed manner than has been the case up to this point. While what has been said above concerning the fluidity and variety of Ephrem's depictions of Christ's underworldly descent remains true, some sort of provisional and composite linear chronology must be tentatively reconstructed in order to facilitate our exploration of Ephrem's theological reflection on Christ's descent to Sheol relative to his crucifixion and resurrection.

Of greatest importance in these matters is an appropriate understanding of Ephrem's conception of the temporal and theological significance of the moment of Christ's death. Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* are undeniably the source possessing the richest veins of material concerning the temporal intersection of the Savior's death and descent to Sheol, and it is upon these writings that our understanding of the matter will depend. Ephrem's view of Christ's dying moment, as we noted in passing above, was informed by the synoptic tradition (Matt. 27.50; Mark 15.37; Luke 23.46) and seems to be especially indebted to the Matthean and Markan materials in that Christ's death is inextricably linked with his final cry from the cross (HNis. 36.11; 63.R; 66.R). The moment of the Savior's death is identical with the moment of his descent into Sheol (HNis. 36.11; 39.21; 41.12), a feature of the early Christian confession of Christ's descent to the dead which Christian scholarship has learned to recognize, even if it has persisted in misunderstanding the patristic vision of the full scope of the event's significance. Christ's death cry and entry into the underworld coincide simultaneously with and cause the rending of the graves and resuscitation of many righteous dead, a cataclysmic event of eschatological moment (HNis. 36.11; 37.8; 39.R, 6; 63.R;

66.R). Additionally, Christ's descent to Sheol is both a moment of profound confusion for Death and Sheol (HNis. 36.2, 12, 15; 41.13; 60.31) and a moment of revelation (HNis. 36.16; 37.9-11). It is also the precondition for his resurrection by which he secures his complete victory over Satan, Death, Sin, and Sheol upon his *exit*¹²⁵ from the underworld/grave (HNis. 36.18; 41.15-16; 58.R).

It should be stated again, for the sake of clarity, that what is offered here is not something that Ephrem himself offers: he does not present a single temporally-systematized account or a simple, linear, chronological progression of events, principally because the chronology is less important (not unimportant!) to him than the moral and spiritual content in which the events participate. Perhaps overly aware of the potential danger that this analysis might bestow a false impression of uniformity, one feels compelled to recommend as the best corrective the reader's own familiarization with Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*.¹²⁶ However, given the limitations of the current study, it is hoped that the thirty-sixth of those hymns will be received both critically and charitably as a 'representative example' of Ephrem's thought concerning the significance of the moment of Christ's death and descent to Sheol.

¹²⁵ This represents an important difference in Ephrem's conception of the Savior's descent to Sheol compared with other ancient Christian visions of the event. Christ is occasionally depicted as a conqueror who storms the gate of the underworld, breaking in, conquering Satan, and leaving him chained and bound in the place of the human beings He has come to save. Ephrem's understanding contrasts with this depiction at a number of points, not least of which being that Christ enters Sheol as a 'conquered' and pallid corpse, engages in no combat *per se*, breaks the gate of Sheol upon his exit, and, though he secures Death's allegiance, Satan remains defiant.

¹²⁶ Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* dealing with Christ's descent to Sheol and related themes can be found in Edmund Beck's critical edition and German translation: Edmund Beck, ed. and tr., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vols. 240-241 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963). A French translation is also available: Paul Fégali, tr. *Saint Ephrem, Les Chants de Nisibe*, Antioche Chrétienne III (Paris: Cariscript, 1989). A selection of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* is currently available in English translation in: Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 193-219. A new English translation of the complete collection by Gary Anderson and Edward G. Mathews is underway.

Our Lord subdued His might and constrained it¹²⁷
 that His living death might give life to Adam.¹²⁸
 His hands He gave to the piercing of the nails¹²⁹
 instead of the hand that plucked the fruit.¹³⁰ He was
 struck on the cheek in the judgment hall¹³¹
 instead of the mouth that ate in Eden.¹³² And because
 his foot bore Adam thence
 His feet were pierced.¹³³ Our Lord was stripped,¹³⁴ that
 He might make us modest.
 With the gall and vinegar¹³⁵ He made sweet
 the bitterness of the serpent which he had poured into
 humanity.¹³⁶

Refrain: Blessed is He Who gave me the victory and
 quickened the dead to His glory!

“If Thou be God show Thy power.
 And if Thou be man feel our power.
 And if it be Adam that Thou seekest get Thee hence!
 Because of his transgressions he is shut up here.
 Cherubim and Seraphim are not able
 in his stead to pay his debt. There is none among them
 mortal so as to give
 his life in his stead. Who can open the mouth of Sheol
 and plunge and bring him up from her
 who has swallowed him and keeps a hold on him and
 that forever!

“I am He who has conquered all the wise men
 and lo! in the corners they are heaped for me in Sheol.
 Come, enter, son of Joseph, and see terrible things:
 the limbs of the giants,¹³⁷ the mighty corpse of
 Samson,¹³⁸

¹²⁷ Matt. 26:50; Mark 14:46; Luke 22:54; cf. John 18:12.

¹²⁸ cf. I Cor. 15:45.

¹²⁹ Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18; cf. John 20:24-29, esp. v. 27.

¹³⁰ Gen. 3:6.

¹³¹ Matt. 27:30; Mark 15:19.

¹³² Gen. 3:6.

¹³³ Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18; cf. John 20:24-29.

¹³⁴ Matt. 27:28.

¹³⁵ Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:23.

¹³⁶ Gen. 3:1; cf. 14-15.

and the skeleton of the stubborn Goliath,¹³⁹ Og,¹⁴⁰
 moreover, the son of the giants,
 who made for himself a bed of iron and lay thereon,
 from whence I hurled him and cast him down.
 That cedar I laid low to the gate of Sheol.

“I by myself alone have conquered multitudes
 and one may single-handed seek to conquer me.
 Prophets and priests and men of renown have I carried
 off.

I have conquered kings in their armies and mighty men
 in their hunts
 and righteous men in their excellencies. Streams of
 corpses
 are hurled by me into Sheol and though they pour into
 her she is athirst.

Though one be near or though one be far off,
 the end brings him to the gate of Sheol.

“Silver I despised at the hand of the rich
 and their offerings corrupted me not.
 The lords of slaves never once persuaded me
 to take a slave instead of his lord and a poor man
 instead of a rich man
 or an old man instead of a child. As for wise [ones] that
 are able to charm
 wild beasts, their charms enter not into my ears.
 Hater of Persuasion all men call me
 and the one thing that is commanded me, that I do.

“Who is this, or whose son is He,
 or what is His lineage who has conquered me?
 The book of families is by me.
 Lo! I went in and read and studied the names from
 Adam till now
 and not one of the dead do I forget. Family by family,
 lo! they are written
 upon my limbs. Because of Thee, O Jesus,
 I went in and made a reckoning
 that I might show Thee that there is none that escapeth
 my hands.

¹³⁷ cf. Gen. 6:1-4.

¹³⁸ Judg. 13-16.

¹³⁹ I Sam. 17.

¹⁴⁰ Num. 21:3.

“Yet were there two men (that I lie not)
 whose names have escaped me in Sheol.
 For Enoch¹⁴¹ and Elijah¹⁴² came not to me.
 In all the world I have sought them; yea thither where
 Jonah descended,¹⁴³
 I descended and sought that they were not. And
 though I suppose that into Paradise
 they have entered and escaped, a mighty Cherub guards
 it.
 The ladder Jacob saw¹⁴⁴—
 what if haply by it they have entered into Heaven!

“Who is there that has measured the sand of the sea
 and has spilt only two grains?
 This harvest wherein every day there labor
 diseases as harvesters I alone carry
 the handfuls and gather them up. Other gatherers in
 making haste
 drop handfuls. Vintagers overlook clusters
 but two grapes have escaped me
 in that great vintage which I alone have plucked.

“I am He that has taken,” said Death,
 “on sea and on dry land all prey in chase.
 Eagles of the air come to me,
 yea, and dragons of the deep, creeping things and fowl
 and cattle,
 old men, youths and children. These will convince
 Thee,
 O Son of Mary, that this my power rules over all.
 Thy Cross—how shall it conquer me,
 who by a tree, lo! I have prevailed and conquered from
 old time?¹⁴⁵

“But I was desirous to speak farther yet,
 for I am not wanting in words.
 Yea, words are not to be sought by me, for lo!
 deeds call on me close at hand. Not as You do I make
 promise

¹⁴¹ Gen. 5:24.

¹⁴² II Kings 2:11-12.

¹⁴³ Jon. 1:17-2:9.

¹⁴⁴ Gen. 28:12.

¹⁴⁵ Gen. 3:6.

to the simple of secret things that forsooth there is to
be a resurrection¹⁴⁶

at some time or other. If then Thou art very powerful
give a present pledge
that Thy distant promise also may be believed.”

Death ended his speech of derision
and the voice of our Lord sounded into Sheol
and He cried aloud and burst the graves one by one.¹⁴⁷
Tremblings took hold on Death. Sheol that never of
old had been lighted up—
into it splendors flashed from the Watchers who
entered in and brought out
the dead to meet Him who was dead and gives life to all.
The dead came forth and the living were ashamed
they who thought that they had conquered the Life
Giver of all.

“But who gave me the day of Moses,”
said Death, “who made a feast for me?
For that lamb that was slain in Egypt gave me
from every house the first fruit.¹⁴⁸ Heaps and heaps of
the first born
at the gate of Sheol he piled me them. But this Lamb of
the festival
has robbed Sheol. He has taken title of them and
carried them off from me.
That lamb filled the graves for me,
but this has emptied the graves that were full.

“The death of Jesus to me is a torment.
I prefer for myself His life rather than His death.
This is the Dead [One] whose death (lo!) is hateful to me.
In the death of all men else I rejoice, but His death,
even His, I detest.
That He may come back to life I hope. While He was
living three that were dead
He brought to life and restored,¹⁴⁹ but now by His death

¹⁴⁶ Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40.

¹⁴⁷ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁴⁸ Exod. 12:29.

¹⁴⁹ These three are the son of the widow of Naim: Luke 7:11-17; the daughter of Jairus: Matt. 19:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56; and Lazarus: John 11:1-44.

at the gate of Sheol they have trampled on me—the
 dead who have come to life,¹⁵⁰
 whom I was going to shut in.

“I will haste and will close the gates of Sheol
 before this Dead [One] Whose death has spoiled me.
 Whoso hears will wonder at my humiliation
 that by a dead man who is without I am overcome.¹⁵¹
 All the dead seek to go forth,
 but this one presses to enter in. A medicine of life has
 entered into Sheol
 and has restored life to its dead. Who then has brought
 in and hidden from me
 that living fire whereby was loosed
 the cold and dark womb of Sheol?”

Death has seen the Watchers in Sheol,
 the immortal instead of the mortal,
 and he said, “Confusion has entered our abode,
 for in these two things is torment to me: That the dead
 have come forth out of Sheol
 and the Watchers that die not have entered therein. Lo!
 one at the pillow in His tomb
 has entered and sat down by it and a second, his
 companion, at His feet.¹⁵²
 I will entreat of Him and will persuade Him
 with His pledge to ascend and go to His Kingdom.

“Be not wroth against me, gracious Jesus,
 for the words that my pride has spoken before Thee!
 Who is there that when seeing Thy cross
 shall have doubted that Thou art man? Who is there
 that shall have seen Thy Power
 and shall not believe that Thou art also God? Lo! thus
 by these two things
 I have learnt to confess that Thou art man and likewise
 art God!
 For as much as the dead in Sheol repent not,
 go up among the living, O Lord, and preach
 repentance.

¹⁵⁰ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁵¹ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁵² John 20:11-12.

"O Jesus King, receive my supplication
 and with my supplication take to Thyself a pledge,
 even Adam the great pledge accept for Thyself—
 him in whom are buried all the dead even as when I
 received him
 in him were hidden all the living.¹⁵³ The first pledge I
 have given Thee—
 the body of Adam. Go Thou up, therefore, and reign
 over all
 and when I shall hear Thy trumpet,
 I with mine own hand will lead forth the dead at Thy
 Coming."

Our Living King has gone forth and gone up
 out of Sheol as Conqueror.
 Woe He has doubled to them that are of the left hand.
 To evil spirits and demons He is sorrow, to Satan and
 Death He is pain,
 to Sin and Sheol mourning. Joy to them that are of the
 right hand
 has come today. On this great day, therefore,
 great glory let us give to Him
 who died and is alive that unto all He may give life and
 resurrection!

Nisibene Hymns, 36¹⁵⁴

Christ's Submission to Death in the Crucifixion

It has been noted above that in Ephrem the Syrian's thought there is an essential complementarity between Christ's birth and death. These two events, though compatible as moments in the history of salvation in their revelatory capacity, are yet not, strictly speaking, equal. According to Ephrem, the mystery of redemption which is begun (and in some measure already is) in Christ's nativity awaits its completion in his death. As Ephrem states in the twenty-first of his *Hymns on the Nativity*:

And as He began in birth, He continued and completed
 in death.
 His birth received worship; His death repaid the debt.
 As He came to birth, the magi worshipped Him.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ I Cor. 15:22.

¹⁵⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 196-198.

Again, He came to suffering and the thief took refuge
in Him.¹⁵⁶

Between His birth and death He placed the world in
the middle;

By His birth and death He revived it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 21.19¹⁵⁷

The element of necessity in Christ's death and descent to Sheol upon which depends the completion of the world's redemption is just as present, if more implicit, in many of Ephrem's other writings. In his *Homily on Our Lord* Ephrem writes:

The Only-Begotten¹⁵⁸ journeyed from the Godhead and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many.¹⁵⁹ And he journeyed from Sheol and resided in the Kingdom, to tread a path from Sheol which cheats everyone, to the Kingdom, which rewards everyone. For our Lord gave His resurrection as a guarantee to mortals that He would lead them out of Sheol, which takes the departed without discrimination, to the Kingdom, which welcomes guests with discrimination, so that we might journey from where everyone's bodies are treated the same, to where everyone's efforts are treated with discrimination.

It is He who went down to Sheol and came up from that (place) which corrupts its lodgers, in order to bring us to that (place) which nourishes its inhabitants with blessings. Its inhabitants are those who have crowned and festooned unfading dwellings for themselves in that world with what they possess of the fading buds and blossoms of this world.

Homily on Our Lord, 1.2-3¹⁶⁰

Intrinsic to the salvific efficacy of the Savior's nativity and passion was the fullness of Christ's humble identification with humanity. Not only in his birth from the Virgin Mary, but also in

¹⁵⁵ Matt. 2:10-11.

¹⁵⁶ Luke 23:42-43.

¹⁵⁷ McVey, *Hymns*, 177.

¹⁵⁸ John 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Rom. 8:29.

¹⁶⁰ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 273-275.

the full reality of his death, Christ participated in the essential experiences of what it is to be human. In a defense of the full humanity of the incarnate Savior, Ephrem stated, "His birth from the Father is not to be investigated; rather, it is to be believed. And His birth from a woman is not offensive; it is noble! His death on a cross is evidence of His birth from a woman for whoever dies was also born" (SdDN 2.3).¹⁶¹ Not only did Christ's death corroborate his full humanity, but his incarnation had his death and descent to Sheol, with all this entailed, as its *telos* or goal:

Since death was unable to devour Him without a body,
or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a
virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol....
And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke
into its vaults, and carried off its treasures.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.2¹⁶²

The emphasis Ephrem placed on Christ's humanity was complemented by his affirmations of Christ's full divinity in the context of discussions of the passion. One of the principal modes by which Ephrem called attention to the Savior's deity was by means of the stress he laid on his willing submission to death. In his *Homily on Our Lord*, Ephrem wrote:

Our Lord was trampled by death, and turned to tread a path beyond death. He is the one who submitted and endured death as it willed, in order to overthrow death, contrary to (death's) will. Our Lord carried His cross and set forth as death willed. But on the cross He called out and brought the dead out of Sheol contrary to death's will.¹⁶³ With the very weapon that death had used to kill Him, He gained the victory over death. Divinity disguised itself in humanity and approached (death), which killed, then was killed: death killed natural life, but supernatural Life killed death.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.1¹⁶⁴

Ephrem made the point similarly although more compactly and poetically in his *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*.

¹⁶¹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 276.

¹⁶² McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 278.

¹⁶³ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁶⁴ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277-278.

Gluttonous Death swallowed Him because He willed it.
He swallowed Him then He escaped because He willed
it.

He hid His Life so that Death found Him
[as] one dead that he might swallow the Living One.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 16.5-6¹⁶⁵

Elsewhere, Ephrem placed the confession of Christ's willingness to die for reasons of his own in the mouth of Satan, who was disconsolate in his recognition that death has no claim over the Savior.

"Your consolations are of small power,"
said the Evil One to them of his company.
"For He Who brought Lazarus to life though dead,¹⁶⁶
how can Death suffice against Him? And if Death
conquers Him,
it is that He wills to be subdued unto him; and if so be
He wills to be subdued,
fear ye greatly, for He dies not in vain.
He has wrought in us great terror,
lest when dying He may enter in to raise Adam to life."

Nisibene Hymns, 41.12¹⁶⁷

As we have noted above, there is a sense in which Christ's death and descent to Sheol are, in Ephrem's thought, so temporally coincident that it is legitimate to regard them as two aspects of the same dyadic event. This is not to say, however, that in speaking of Christ's descent to Sheol we are dealing with what earlier scholarship has tended to regard somewhat dismissively as a "poetic" or "merely rhetorical" idiomatic embellishment. The Savior's descent to the dead is indeed intrinsically related to his death as its specific corollary, but its theological meaning is neither limited nor exhausted by this identity. In other words, though Christ's death can be said to be equivalent to his descent to Sheol, his descent to Sheol can not be said to be simply comprehended by the temporal event of his physical death. The intersection of

¹⁶⁵ Beck, ed. *Paschalhymnen*, 28. (my translation)

¹⁶⁶ John 11:1-44.

¹⁶⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 205.

Christ’s death on the cross and descent to Sheol was concisely rendered by Ephrem in his *Hymns on the Nativity*.

Let us thank Him Who was beaten and Who saved us
by His wound.¹⁶⁸

Let us thank Him Who took away the curse by His
thorns.¹⁶⁹

Let us thank Him Who killed Death by His dying.¹⁷⁰

Let us thank Him Who was silent and vindicated us.¹⁷¹

Let us thank Him Who cried out in death that had
devoured us.¹⁷²

Blessed is He Whose benefits have laid waste the
enemies of God.

Let us glorify Him Who watched and put to sleep our
captor.

Let us glorify the One Who went to sleep and awoke
our slumber.

Glory to God the Healer of human nature.

Glory to the One Who plunged in and sank
our evil into the depth and drowned our drowner.

Let us glorify with all our mouths the Lord of all means
[of salvation].

Hymns on the Nativity, 3.18-19¹⁷³

Elsewhere, in his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem made it clear that it is as a dead man that Jesus has both entered and terrified Sheol.

...This carpenter’s Son¹⁷⁴
with His crown of thorns¹⁷⁵ has humbled and cast
down my pride
in His shame and His dying.
Sheol has seen Him, yea, and fled from before Him.

¹⁶⁸ Matt. 27:30; Mark 15:19; Luke 22:63.

¹⁶⁹ Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2.

¹⁷⁰ cf. I Cor. 15:54-57.

¹⁷¹ Matt. 27:14; Mark 15:4-5.

¹⁷² Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37.

¹⁷³ McVey, *Hymns*, 87.

¹⁷⁴ Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3.

¹⁷⁵ Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2.

When the sea saw Moses and fled
 it feared because of his rod and likewise because of his
 glory.¹⁷⁶
 His splendor and his rod and his power [were seen]
 also [by] the rock which was cleft.¹⁷⁷ But Sheol, when
 her graves were rent,
 what saw she in Him, even in Jesus? Instead of
 splendor, the paleness of the dead
 He put on and made her tremble. And if His paleness
 when slain slew her,
 how shall she be able to endure when He comes to
 raise the dead in His glory.

Nisibene Hymns, 39.20-21¹⁷⁸

The Voice and the Rending of the Graves

One detail of the Gospel narrative of Christ's death to which Ephrem frequently appealed in his discussion of the effects of the Savior's descent to Sheol was his dying cry uttered from the cross.¹⁷⁹ The Diatessaronic text which was in all likelihood the version of the passion narrative with which Ephrem was familiar would seem to have been dependent on Matthew's Gospel in this particular, since it is only in Matthew that we read:

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

Matthew 27.50-53

Identifying Christ's dying cry from the cross as "the voice," Ephrem compactly articulated the relationship between the moment of the Savior's death, his descent to Sheol, the rending of the graves, and the resuscitation of the dead. In the refrains of two of the *Nisibene Hymns* Ephrem writes, "Blessed is He who cleft the

¹⁷⁶ Exod. 14:21-22.

¹⁷⁷ Exod. 17:5-6.

¹⁷⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 202.

¹⁷⁹ Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37.

tombs of Sheol by His voice!" (HNis. 39.R) and "Glory be to Thee, Watcher that didst come down after them that slept and utter the voice from the tree and waken them." (HNis. 66.R). Elsewhere, the poet reiterated the intersection of Christ's expiry and his despoiling of Death and Sheol. In the *Hymns on the Resurrection* Ephrem stated:

By the voice the tombs were cleft.
His voice revived all. All-killing Death heard him
and was paralyzed and let go his treasures. Glory to
You, Son who revives all!

Hymns on the Resurrection, 3.10¹⁸⁰

Again, at greater length and with more idiomatically Syriac vocabulary, Ephrem wrote in his *Nisibene Hymns*:

Death ended his speech of derision
and the voice of our Lord sounded into Sheol.
And He cried aloud and burst the graves one by one.
Tremblings took hold on Death. Sheol that never of
old had been lighted up—
into it splendors flashed from the watchers who
entered in and brought out
the dead to meet Him who was dead and gives life to all.
The dead came forth and the living were ashamed—
they who thought that they had conquered the Life
Giver of all.

Nisibene Hymns, 36.11¹⁸¹

Ephrem's identification of Christ's death cry as "the voice" had another important theological function in his writing which asserted a continuity between the voice of the dying Jesus and the voice of the Divine Creator and Redeemer. In several stanzas of the thirty-seventh of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, the poet, speaking as Death, tied together the voice of Ezekiel's vision in the valley of dry bones, Christ's death, his raising of Lazarus, and the eschatological resurrection of the dead binding these events to Christ's identity as the "Master of all creatures" (HNis. 37.5), the "Creator" (HNis. 37.9), and the "Power which created them" (HNis. 37.10).

¹⁸⁰ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 87. (my translation)

¹⁸¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

I saw in the valley that Ezekiel
 who quickened the dead when he was questioned.
 And I saw the bones that were in heaps and they
 moved.¹⁸²
 There was a tumult of bones in Sheol, bone seeking for
 its fellow
 and joint for her mate. There was none that questioned
 or that was questioned whether those bones lived.
 Unquestioned, they were made alive
 by the voice of Jesus, the Master of Creation.¹⁸³
 Sheol was made sorrowful when she saw them
 even the sorrowful dead made to rejoice.
 She wept for Lazarus when he went forth,¹⁸⁴
 “Go in peace thou dead that livest, bewailed by two
 houses of mourning.”
 Within and without were lamentations for him for his
 sisters wept for him
 when he came into the grave unto me and I wept for
 him as he went forth.
 In his death there was weeping among the living.
 Likewise in Sheol is great mourning at his resurrection.
 Lo! this suffering which I cause
 men to suffer in their beloved ones
 in the end on me it gathers itself altogether.
 For when the dead shall have left Sheol for every man
 there will be resurrection
 and for me alone torment. And who is he then that
 shall bear for me
 all these things. For I shall see Sheol left alone,
 because this voice which has rent the graves¹⁸⁵
 makes her desolate and sends forth the dead that were
 in her midst?
 If a man reads in the Prophets he hears there of
 righteous wars
 but if a man meditate in the story of Jesus
 he learns of grace and tender mercy.

¹⁸² Ezek. 37:1-14.

¹⁸³ cf. Gen.1; cf. John 1.

¹⁸⁴ John 11:44.

¹⁸⁵ Matt. 27:50-53.

And if a man think of Jesus that He is a strange God
 it is a reproach against me. A strange key into
 the gate of Sheol could never be fitted.
 One is the key of the Creator
 that has opened it, yea, is to open it at His coming.

Who is he that is able to join the bones
 save that Power which created them?
 What is it that shall reunite the shreds of the body,
 save the hand of the Maker? What is it that shall restore
 the forms,
 save the finger of the Creator? He who created and
 turned and destroyed
 is He that is able to renew and raise up.
 Another God is unable
 to enter in and restore creatures not his own.¹⁸⁶

Nisibene Hymns, 37.5, 6, 8, 9, 10¹⁸⁷

Noticeably absent from Ephrem's conception of the resuscitation of the dead as the result of Christ's descent to Sheol, especially given the inclinations of earlier scholars to assert the fundamental similarity of the accounts, are any of the details of the type one finds in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* concerning Christ's combat with Satan in the underworld. Though a critical and detailed consideration of the similarities and differences discernable between Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol and the account preserved in the latter portion of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* is much needed, such analysis far exceeds the scope of the current study. Here, it must suffice to note that though a previous generation of scholars regarded the *Gospel of Nicodemus* as precedent-setting source material utilized by Ephrem in the composition of his *Nisibene Hymns*, this hypothesis has been severely undermined by more recent scholarship which has indicated a considerably later date for the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ cf. Gen. 1; cf. John 1.

¹⁸⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198-199.

¹⁸⁸ G. C. O'Ceallaigh, "Dating the Commentaries of Nicodemus," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963), 21-58. In 1963, O'Ceallaigh concluded: "We have now demonstrated, first, that there is no known manuscript of the Commentaries of Nicodemus, in any language, that can reasonably be dated earlier than the ninth century; second, that no extant

More to the point here, however, is the difference between Ephrem and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* concerning where and in what manner Christ's conquest over the enemies of humanity takes place. In Ephrem's more poetic and less temporally linear account, the righteous dead are resuscitated and Death and Satan conquered at the moment of Christ's death and descent to Sheol by the Savior's cry from the cross. In the words Ephrem places in Death's mouth, "by a dead man who is without I am overcome." (HNis. 36.14) By contrast, in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Christ's victory over Satan and Death in his descent to Sheol is more univocally

version represents a prototype of that work which dated anterior to the eighth century; third, that the internal evidence of the Commentaries demands a *terminus post quem* at the year 555." As Robert Murray reported in 1975, O'Ceallaigh "shows up Tischendorf's arbitrary methods and proves that the earliest draft (the 'commentaries') cannot be earlier than 555, while the 'Gospel' with the *Descensus* is later. It is regrettable that works such as Hennecke's *NTA* (I, 444-9) and J. Grosdidier de Matons' edition of Romanos (SC 128 [1967], 269) are still alleging a fourth-century origin, misled by the antiquity of the basic material." Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 325, n. 6. More recently, Felix Scheidweiler has registered some criticism of O'Ceallaigh's view arguing that the existence of the *Grundschrift* of the Acts of Pilate can be demonstrated by Epiphanius' use of the text in 375/6, but that "[t]he older of the extant Greek versions (A) goes back, according to the statements in the prologue, to the year 425. We have it also in Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and Old Slavonic translations." While establishing an earlier date for the Acts of Pilate, however, Scheidweiler has nevertheless noted that by 425 "it was still not expanded by the addition of the second part of the Gospel of Nicodemus, the 'Descensus Christi as inferos'. The addition is thoroughly out of keeping, since the work is complete and does not admit of any expansion." Scheidweiler sees Greek version (B) of the Acts of Pilate as a later redaction of (A) which must date from the Council of Ephesus (431) or later and which contains structural changes accommodating the addition of the 'Descensus.' Scheidweiler offers no specific date for the added material noting only that "[a] substantially older fragment has thus been simply added, without the redactor noticing that the real theme of the Acts of Pilate had not yet been brought to a close." See: Felix Scheidweiler, "The Gospel of Nicodemus Acts of Pilate and Christ's Descent into Hell," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, I Gospels and Related Writings, Revised Edition, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., R. McL. Wilson, English trans. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 501-536.

narrativized and takes place within the underworld where the chains (also absent in Ephrem's accounts) in which the righteous dead are bound are transferred to Satan who is left bound in Hades.¹⁸⁹

Equally 'wanting' in Ephrem's iterations of this doctrine is any evidence of dependence on I Peter 3:18-22, a text which had by the fourth century poet's time become customarily associated with Christ's descent to the dead in the works of other Christian theologians. The text, which has had (and continues to have) extensive, though frequently contested, influence as a theological *locus* informing Christian conceptions of the Savior's underworldly sojourn between his crucifixion and resurrection, reads:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

I Peter 3:18-22

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215) had been the first to explicitly cite this text in support of his conception of Christ's descent to the underworld, which he named as Hades in keeping with his Greek cultural and linguistic context. Clement taught that Christ's activity in the underworld was undertaken in order to extend to the dead the proclamation of the same Gospel that had been the mark of his earthly ministry. In explaining his view Clement wrote,

¹⁸⁹ A. Cleveland Coxe, rev., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325: Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, The Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, Vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 450-452.

What then? Did not the same dispensation obtain in Hades, so that even there, all the souls, on hearing the proclamation, might either exhibit repentance, or confess that their punishment was just, because they believed or not? And it were the exercise of no ordinary arbitrariness, for those who had departed before the advent of the Lord (not having the Gospel preached to them, and having afforded no ground from themselves, in consequence of believing or not) to obtain either salvation or punishment. For it is not right that these should be condemned without trial, and that those alone who lived after the advent should have the advantage of the divine righteousness.

Stromateis, 6.6¹⁹⁰

It must here be admitted that the absence of appeals to I Peter 3:18-20 in Ephrem's writings and the absence of conceptions of Christ preaching in the underworld both constitute only an argument from silence. However, Ephrem's dissent from such viewpoints as Clement's was clearly enunciated through personified Death in his *Nisibene Hymns*:

Be not wroth against me gracious Jesus
for the words that my pride has spoken before Thee!
Who is there that when seeing Thy cross
shall have doubted that Thou art man? Who is there
that shall have seen Thy power
and shall not believe that Thou art also God? Lo! thus
by these two things
I have learnt to confess that Thou art man and likewise
art God!
For as much as the dead in Sheol repent not,
go up among the living, O Lord, and preach
repentance.

Nisibene Hymns, 36.16¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ A. Cleveland Coxe, rev., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325: Ante-Nicene Fathers: Hermas, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria*, Vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 491.

¹⁹¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

Captivity and Liberation

Although, as we have noted above, his depictions differ dramatically from other patristic conceptions of the doctrine, themes of captivity and liberation, though articulated with different emphases, figure no less prominently in Ephrem the Syrian's representations of Christ's descent to Sheol. One variation on these themes which pertains to our current discussion has to do with the manner in which Christ, taken captive by death, became the captor of his captor. As Death states in Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*:

"My throne was set for me in Sheol
and One arose that was dead and hurled me from it.
Every man feared me alone
and I feared no man. Terror and trouble were among
the living,
rest and peace among the dead. In a man that was slain
lo! there has entered into Sheol He that takes her
captive. I used to take all men captive:
the Son of captivity Whom I took captive has taken me
captive.
He Whom I took captive has led her away and is gone
to Paradise."

Nisibene Hymns, 38.1¹⁹²

In Ephrem's thought another variation on the more general theme of captivity and liberation is also discernable running parallel to the theme of Death the captor taken captive by his captive. This is the theme of Christ's liberation of the dead from the captivity in which they have been held by Death. These two themes are, in fact, intertwined in the thirty-eighth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* as evidenced by the refrain which follows the stanza cited immediately above: "Blessed is He Who has quickened the dead of Sheol by His Cross!" (HNis. 38.R). We will return to this theme in a subsequent portion of the current chapter, but it is worth introducing this aspect of Ephrem's thought in slightly more depth here in the following citation.

¹⁹² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 200.

You are also the son of the dead and bound father¹⁹³
 whom the Son of the Living Father released.
 The Good One Who was bound released the bad.

...

The bound were released by One bound;
 the crucifiers were saved by the Crucified.
 For the crops that were stored up by sinners
 there are springs of assistance.

The result of Your death is full of life.
 You released the captives of Your captivity.
 Your body You stripped off, my Lord, and, as You lost
 it,
 among the dead You descended and sought it.
 Death was amazed at You in Sheol,
 that You sought Your garment and found [it].
 O Wise One Who lost what was found
 in order to find the lost!

Hymns on Virginity, 30.11-12¹⁹⁴

The Soldier's Lance

Another detail of the Gospel narrative which took on important symbolic overtones in Ephrem the Syrian's discussion of the effects of Christ's death and descent to Sheol is the piercing of the Savior's side recorded in the canonical Gospel of John.

Since it was the day of preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

John 19:31-34

¹⁹³ McVey indicates that "the dead and bound father" Ephrem to whom Ephrem refers is Adam.

¹⁹⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 397.

Ephrem's use of this theme has received considerable attention in the works of Robert Murray¹⁹⁵ and Sebastian Brock,¹⁹⁶ both of whom have amply demonstrated its significance as an organizing motif deployed by Ephrem in the context of his discussions of the continuities of the history of salvation. Our current concern revolves around the timing of this event. Taking place in the interval between his death and resurrection, the soldier's piercing of Christ's side with his spear or lance, is co-temporal with the Savior's descent to Sheol. Though attention will also be given to this theme in subsequent chapters of this work, two very similar aspects of Ephrem's implementation of it are especially noteworthy in our current context.

On the one hand, Ephrem relates the spear of the soldier to the sword entrusted to the cherub who serves as the sentry of Eden. In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem describes origin and purpose of the sword and the cherub who bears it as follows:

Then, after Adam was cast out from Paradise [Moses] wrote, [God] set in the east of the Paradise of Eden a cherub and a sharp sword to go about in every direction and to guard the way to the tree of life.¹⁹⁷ That fence was a living being who itself marched around to guard the way to the tree of life from any one who dared try to pluck its fruit, for it would kill, with the edge of its sword, any mortal who came to steal immortal life.

Commentary on Genesis, 2.36¹⁹⁸

Brock notes that the correspondence between the spear and the sword "is the typological pair in which Ephrem shows most interest. The lance which pierced Christ's side effectively removes the cherub's sword that guarded Paradise."¹⁹⁹ Brock points out that

¹⁹⁵ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 125ff.; Robert Murray, "The Lance Which Reopened Paradise," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973): 224-234, 391.

¹⁹⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 80-84.; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 464-72.

¹⁹⁷ Gen. 3:24.

¹⁹⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 123.

¹⁹⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.

“often Ephrem uses the same word for both weapons,”²⁰⁰ citing the following passage as an example.

Happy are you, living wood of the Cross,
for you proved to be a hidden sword to Death;
for with that sword which smote Him
the Son slew Death, when He Himself was struck by
it.²⁰¹

The sword that pierced Christ removed the sword
guarding Paradise;²⁰²
His forgiveness tore up our document of debt.

Hymns on the Crucifixion, 9.2²⁰³

Brock also cites this selection from Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Nativity* to illustrate that “the piercing of Christ’s side thus makes it possible for humanity to reenter Paradise,”²⁰⁴ a result that Ephrem elsewhere attributes alternately to Christ’s death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead.

Blessed is the Merciful One who saw the sword
beside Paradise, barring the way
to the Tree of Life.²⁰⁵ He came and took Himself
a body which was wounded
so that, by the opening of His side
He might open up the way to Paradise.²⁰⁶

Hymns on the Nativity, 8.4²⁰⁷

The same point is made by Ephrem in the refrain of the second of his *Hymns on Paradise*: “Blessed is He Who was pierced²⁰⁸ and so removed the sword from the entry to Paradise!²⁰⁹” (HPar. 2.R).²¹⁰

A second aspect of Ephrem’s use of the theme of Christ’s pierced side has particularly intriguing significance in the context of

²⁰⁰ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.

²⁰¹ John 19:34.

²⁰² Gen. 3:24.

²⁰³ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.

²⁰⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.

²⁰⁵ Gen. 3:24.

²⁰⁶ John 19:34.

²⁰⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81-82.

²⁰⁸ John 19:34.

²⁰⁹ Gen. 3:24.

²¹⁰ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 85.

the Savior’s descent to Sheol. In the thirty-ninth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Death speaks for Ephrem saying:

“The lance of Phinehas²¹¹ again has caused me to fear
for by the slaughter he wrought with it he hindered the
pestilence
The lance guarded the tree of life;²¹²
it made me glad and made me sad. It hindered Adam
from life
and it hindered death from the people. But the lance
that pierced Jesus—
by it I have suffered. He is pierced and I groan.
There came from Him water and blood.²¹³
Adam washed and lived and returned to Paradise.”

Nisibene Hymns, 39.7²¹⁴

Though heavily dependent on familiarity with other aspects of Ephrem’s thought, it is possible to see here a particularly close connection between the issue of water and blood from the dead Savior’s side and the effect which this event has for Adam in Sheol, and by extension, as we shall consider in more detail in a later chapter, for the whole of humanity represented in Adam.

Conquest of Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death

Ephrem often describes the effect of Christ’s death and descent to Sheol as victory over four enemies of humanity: Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death. These four are variously related to one another, Satan and Sin constituting one particularly synergetic and symbiotic pair, Death and Sheol another. Ephrem depicts Satan and Death as the principal malefactors, with Sin and Sheol serving as supportive accessories—Sin providing Satan with the tools by which he deceives and oppresses humanity (HNis. 41.1-9), and Sheol serving as the treasury wherein Death stores his hoard of defunct human beings (HNis. 36.3-4; 37). Occasionally, Ephrem stresses the cooperation of Satan and Death, identifying Death as Satan’s “Counselor” and “kinsman” (HNis. 41.15). The two commiserate

²¹¹ Num. 25:6-8.

²¹² Gen. 3:24.

²¹³ John 19:34.

²¹⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 201.

in the hardships Jesus causes them (HNis. 35.1ff; 41.15), collaborate in plotting against him (HNis. 35.21-22), and are both equally undone by their own schemes which bring about the Savior's descent to Sheol, but cannot keep him there (HNis. 36.18; 41.15-16; 52.R; 58.R; 59.R; 60.R). Elsewhere, however, Ephrem depicts the development of divisions between these co-conspirators brought on by the losses they suffer at the hands of the Savior.

Though Ephrem lays varying degrees of emphasis on the relationships among these four enemies of humanity, this does not detract from the fact that he sees Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death as equally complicit in the exploitation and oppression of humanity, and equally opposed and overcome by Jesus. Ephrem depicts the common hardships and misery faced by these four in the light of Christ's advent and ministry of redemption in the thirty-fifth of his *Nisibene Hymns*:

The voice made proclamation and they gathered and
came
the hosts of the Evil One together with his ministers.
The army of the tares was gathered altogether
for they saw that Jesus had triumphed to the grief of all
them on the left hand
for there was none of them but had been tormented.
They began one by one to relate
all that they had endured. Sin and Sheol were terrified
Death trembled and the dead rebelled
and Satan because sinners rebelled against Him.

Refrain: Glory to Thee because the Evil One saw Thee
and was troubled!

Sin cried aloud. She gave counsel to her sons—
the demons and the devils—and unto them she said,
“Legion, the head of your ranks, is no more.
The sea has swallowed him and his company and the
same will happen to you, my sons, if you despise
this Jesus will destroy you.²¹⁵ You who took Solomon
in a snare, it is therefore a reproach to you that you
should be overcome by his disciples—
takers of fish and ignorant men.
For lo! they have taken the catch of men which had
been caught by us.”

²¹⁵ Mark 5:1-20.

“This is great above all evils,”
 said the Evil One concerning our Savior,
 “for this suffices Him not that He has spoiled us,
 but likewise on us He has begun retribution for Jonah,
 son of Amittai.
 On Legion, therefore, He was avenging him when He
 seized and cast him into the sea.
 Jonah emerged after three days and came up,²¹⁶
 but Legion, yea, not after a long season,
 for the depth of the sea closed upon him at the
 command.

“After His fast I tempted Him
 with pleasant bread²¹⁷ but He did not desire it.
 To my grief I struggled to learn a psalm
 that by His psalm I might ensnare Him.²¹⁸ I failed. I
 learned a recitation,
 but He made my recitation vain. I brought Him up the
 mountain and showed Him
 all possessions. I gave them to Him and He was not
 moved.²¹⁹

It was better for me in the days of Adam
 who gave me no great trouble in teaching him.”

The Evil One ceased from his activity and said,
 “This Jesus is a suspension of labor to me
 for behold! publicans and prostitutes take refuge in
 Him.

What work can I seek for myself? I who was the master
 of humanity,
 whose student will I be?” Sin said again,
 “It is fitting, then, to cease and change from what I am
 because this Son of Mary who comes
 creates in humanity a new creation.

Gluttonous Death howled and said,
 “I who did not know [how have] learned to fast!
 Behold! Jesus has drawn a crowd, but to me
 His feast proclaims a fast. One man closed my mouth
 which closed the mouths of many.” Sheol said, “I have
 been rebuked for my greed;

²¹⁶ Jon. 1:17.

²¹⁷ Matt. 4:3; Luke 4:3.

²¹⁸ Matt. 4:6; cf. Luke 4:9-12; see also Psa. 91:11-12.

²¹⁹ Matt. 4:8-10; cf. Luke 4:5-8.

I am hungry from now on. Behold! This One
triumphed at the wedding feast.
Just as He turned the water to wine²²⁰
He changes the vesture of the dead to life.

“Furthermore, God made a flood
and washed the earth and purified her darknesses.²²¹
Fire and brimstone, also, he applied to her
[and] he whitened her spots. By fire he gave to me the
Sodomites²²²
and by the flood the mighty ones. He shut the mouth
of the host of Sennacharib
and opened [that of] Sheol.²²³ These and their like I
delighted in.
He exchanged plagues of justice
[and] made the dead live in his Son by grace.

Nisibene Hymns, 35.1-7²²⁴

Challenged and undone by Jesus in what had been their customary spheres of influence, Ephrem depicts Satan and Death plotting the Savior’s death in order to bring his incursions into their domains of authority to an end. Though both uncertain at points as to whether Jesus’ death would in fact be preferable to his life (HNis. 35.15-22), Satan and Death are both encouraged to believe that the Savior can be brought down to Sheol in death by the signs of his humanity. Speaking of Christ’s night in Gethsemane, Satan says,

But one token there is which I have seen in Him
that heartens me exceedingly above all.
For while He was praying I saw Him and was glad
because He changed color and was afraid. His sweat
was as drops of blood²²⁵
because He felt that His day was come. This is pleasant
to me
exceedingly above all if it be not that deceiving He has
deceived me therein.

²²⁰ John 2:1-11, esp. v. 9.

²²¹ Gen. 6-8.

²²² Gen. 19:1-29.

²²³ II Chron. 32:20-21.

²²⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 193-194.

²²⁵ Luke 22:44.

But if beguiling He has beguiled me,
this is both for me and for you alike my ministers.

Nisibene Hymns, 35.18²²⁶

Ephrem depicts Satan, so encouraged, as the mastermind behind the events leading to Jesus' crucifixion. In the thirty-fifth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* Death advises Satan to mobilize those parties over whom he has influence in order to bring about Christ's demise.

"I counsel then, if this our strife
permits us to do anything,
go thou into that disciple,²²⁷ let thyself loose,
that head may speak with heads. And let loose all thy
host,
let it go and stir up the Pharisees. And beware lest thou
speak contentiously
as thou are wont. If thou be a god, descend from hence,
with fondness kiss them and betray Him.
And lo! we will bring on Him the envy and the sword
of the Levites."

Nisibene Hymns, 35.22²²⁸

Thus, though overcome in the wilderness when his temptations fail to ensnare Christ, Satan later returns to actively participate in the Savior's execution. In their second encounter, the Evil One, who in Ephrem's depiction is ultimately culpable for the crucifixion, prevails against Christ and brings him to death by the hand of the Jews.²²⁹ Ephrem expresses this as follows:

The Evil One fled from Him for awhile.²³⁰
In the time of the crucifixion he arrived,
and by the hand of the crucifiers he killed Him

²²⁶ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 195.

²²⁷ Luke 22:3.

²²⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 196.

²²⁹ This aspect of Ephrem's thought is mentioned in: Christine C. Shepardson, "'Exchanging Reed for Reed': Mapping Contemporary Heretics onto Biblical Jews in Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith*," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 5:1 (January 2002): <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol5No1/HV5N1Shepardson.html>; also in print, pp. 15-33.

²³⁰ Luke 4:13.

so that He fell in the contest with death
to conquer Satan and death.

Hymns on Virginity, 12.30²³¹

Death also finds signs of hope in Jesus' humanity, taunting the crucified and dying Savior in the forty-first of the *Nisibene Hymns*.

Death looked forth from within his den
and marvelled when he saw our Lord crucified
and he said, "O Raiser of the dead to life where art thou!
Thou shalt be to me for meat instead of the sweet
Lazarus²³²
whose savor lo! it is still in my mouth. Jairus'
daughter²³³ shall come and see
this Thy cross. The widow's son²³⁴ gazes on Thee.
A tree caught Adam for me²³⁵—
blessed be the cross which has caught for me the Son
of David!"

Death opened his mouth and said,
"Hast Thou not heard, O Son of Mary,
how Moses was great and excellent above all?
Became a God and wrought the works of God?²³⁶ Slew
the firstborn and saved the firstborn?²³⁷
Turned aside the pestilence from the living? To the
mount I went up with Moses
and He Whose glory be blessed gave him to me from
hand to hand.²³⁸
For however great the son of Adam becomes,
dust he is and to his dust returns because he is of the
ground."²³⁹

Nisibene Hymns, 41.13-14²⁴⁰

²³¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 314-315.

²³² John 11:1-44.

²³³ Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56.

²³⁴ Luke 7:11-17.

²³⁵ Gen 3:6.

²³⁶ Exod 4:16ff.

²³⁷ Gen 12:21-32.

²³⁸ Deut. 34:1-8.

²³⁹ Gen. 3:19.

²⁴⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 205.

However, as has already been alluded in the citation from *Nisibene Hymns* 35.22 above, despite the best attempts of Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death to take stock of the situation with which they are faced in the incarnate Lord, they are nonetheless "deceived" and "beguiled." As a result, the victory they gain by bringing the Lord of Life to death becomes the occasion of the completion of his own victory over them. As Ephrem writes in his *Homily on Our Lord*:

Our Lord was trampled by death, and turned to tread a path beyond death. He is the one who submitted and endured death as it willed, in order to overthrow death, contrary to (death's) will. Our Lord carried His cross and set forth as death willed. But on the cross He called out and brought the dead out of Sheol contrary to death's will.²⁴¹ With the very weapon that death had used to kill Him, He gained the victory over death. Divinity disguised itself in humanity and approached (death), which killed, then was killed: death killed natural life, but supernatural Life killed death.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.1²⁴²

Ephrem describes Christ's redeeming death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead as his conquest over Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death in a variety of contexts and by means of a wealth of imagery. In the thirty-sixth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, each of these enemies of humanity is mentioned as a conquered foe in the context of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

Our Living King has gone forth and gone up
out of Sheol as Conqueror.
Woe He has doubled to them that are of the left hand.
To evil spirits and demons He is sorrow, to Satan and
Death He is pain,
to Sin and Sheol mourning. Joy to them that are of the
right hand
has come today. On this great day, therefore,
great glory let us give to Him
who died and is alive that unto all He may give life and
resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 36.18²⁴³

²⁴¹ Matt. 27:50-53.

²⁴² McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277-278.

While it is clear that Ephrem sees Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death as conquered enemies of humanity, there is sufficient nuance in his language concerning Death to merit closer inspection. This has been noted by other scholars in the past including Javier Teixidor,²⁴⁴ Jouko Martikainen,²⁴⁵ and Tanios Bou Mansour,²⁴⁶ and it is a matter which must be attended to here as well. It cannot be denied that in Ephrem's thought, Death is represented as a vanquished foe as the following selections from Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* and *Hymns on the Crucifixion* both amply demonstrate.

The censer of Aaron caused me to fear
for he stood between the dead and the living and
conquered me.²⁴⁷
The cross causes me to fear more exceedingly
which has rent open the graves of Sheol.²⁴⁸
The Crucified Whom on it I slew, now by Him am I slain.
Not very great is his reproach who is overcome by a
warrior in arms.
Worse to me is my reproach than my torment
that by a crucified man my strength has been overcome.
Nisibene Hymns, 39.6²⁴⁹

Since by the cross each one is conquered by Death
He was taken by [Death] and He conquered [Death]
[who,] like Goliath, perished and died by his own
sword.²⁵⁰

Hymns on the Crucifixion, 7.4²⁵¹

²⁴³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198.

²⁴⁴ Javier Teixidor, "Le thème de la descente aux enfers chez Saint Ephrem," *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961): 25-40.

²⁴⁵ Jouko Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*, Meddelanden Stiftelsen för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, Nr. 32 (Åbo: Publications of the Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, 1978), 101-110.

²⁴⁶ Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique du Saint Ephrem le Syrien*, XVI (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 281-295.

²⁴⁷ Lev. 16.

²⁴⁸ cf. Matt. 27:50-53.

²⁴⁹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 201.

²⁵⁰ I Sam. 17:51.

Nevertheless, there is another strand of Ephrem’s thought concerning the effects of Christ’s descent to Sheol relative to Death. In this material, Death is not only a conquered enemy, but also as a penitent servant of the Lord who begs forgiveness and vows allegiance to Jesus.

“Be not wroth against me, gracious Jesus,
for the words that my pride has spoken before Thee!
Who is there that when seeing Thy cross
shall have doubted that Thou art man? Who is there
that shall have seen Thy Power
and shall not believe that Thou art also God? Lo! thus
by these two things
I have learnt to confess that Thou art man and likewise
art God!
For as much as the dead in Sheol repent not,
go up among the living, O Lord, and preach
repentance.

“O Jesus King, receive my supplication
and with my supplication take to Thyself a pledge,
even Adam the great pledge accept for Thyself—
him in whom are buried all the dead even as when I
received him
in him were hidden all the living.²⁵² The first pledge I
have given Thee—
the body of Adam. Go Thou up, therefore, and reign
over all
and when I shall hear Thy trumpet,
I with mine own hand will lead forth the dead at Thy
Coming.”

Nisibene Hymns, 36.16-17²⁵³

The significance of Death’s repentance is emphasized all the more by Ephrem when he contrasts it with the recalcitrance of Satan. In the thirty-eighth of Ephrem’s *Nisibene Hymns*, Death says,

“To one man because of one that is dead
every man hastes to comfort him.
But for me though many of my dead have come to life

²⁵¹ Beck, ed. *Paschalhymnen*, 70. (my translation)

²⁵² I Cor. 15:22.

²⁵³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197-198.

there is none that comes in and comforts me. Satan
 came in against whom had
 been proclaimed seven woes even against him. Though
 mightily the Son of Mary had trodden on him
 yet uplifted is his spirit. For he is the serpent that
 strives though bruised.
 Better is it for me to fall and worship
 before this Jesus who has conquered me by His cross.
 “When He enters at the gate of Sheol
 in place of John who preached before His coming²⁵⁴
 then will I cry, “Lo! He that quickens the dead is come!
 Thy servant am I from henceforth, Jesus! Because of
 the body I reviled Thee,
 for it covered Thy Godhead. Be not angry, O Son of
 the King,
 against Thy treasury. At Thy command I have opened
 and closed.
 Though my wings be very swift
 it is at Thy nod I haste to every quarter.””

Nisibene Hymns, 38.5-6²⁵⁵

Already suggested above in *Nisibene Hymns* 38.5, the repentance of Death signals a parting of the ways between Satan, who remains impenitent and rebellious against God, and Death whose pride is humbled by the realization of his limitations. Ephrem makes the distinctions between Satan and Death clearer in a number of *sogitha* (سقيثا) or dialogue poems which constitute the last portion of his *Nisibene Hymns*.²⁵⁶ Hymn 52

²⁵⁴ John 1:6-9.

²⁵⁵ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 199-200.

²⁵⁶ These are available in English translation in: Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 206-219. *Nisibene Hymns* 52-57 are competitive dialogues between Satan and Death. In hymns 58 and 59, Death reproaches Satan. Hymn 60 reports Satan's confusion concerning the conversion of the sinful woman of Luke 7:36-50. In hymns 61-64, Death reproves humanity, offering an apology for himself. Hymns 65-68 are competitive dialogues between Death and Humanity.

For more on the *sogitha* as a literary form and for examples of the genre see Sebastian Brock's numerous publications, including: Sebastian P. Brock, "The Dispute Between the Cherub and the Thief," *Hugoye*:

provides an excellent example of the division engendered between these erstwhile collaborators as a result of Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead.

I heard Death and Satan as they disputed
which has the more powerful among men.

Refrain: Glory be to Thee, Son of the Shepherd of All,
Who delivered His
flock from the secret wolves that devoured it, the Evil
One and Death!

Death showed his power that he conquers all.
Satan showed his guile that he makes all to sin.

Death: To thee, O Evil One, none hearkens save he
that wills.
To me he that wills and he that wills not, even
to me they come.

Satan: Thine, O Death, is but the force of tyranny.
Mine are snares and nets of subtlety.

Death: Hear, O Evil One, that who so is subtle breaks
off thy yoke,
but none is there that is able to escape my yoke.

Journal of Syriac Studies 5:2 (July 2002): available on-line at: <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol5No2/HV5N2Brock.html>; also in print, pp. 169-193. (see esp. bibliography); Sebastian P. Brock, "The Dispute Poem: From Sumer to Syriac", *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1 (2001), 1-10.; Sebastian P. Brock, "Syriac Dispute Poems: The Various Types," in G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, eds., *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Medieval Near East*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 42 (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), 109-119.; Sebastian P. Brock, *Sogitha: Syriac Dialogue Hymns*, Jacob Vellian, ed., Syrian Churches Series, XI (Kottayam: Jacob Vellian, 1987).; Sebastian P. Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, ed. H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, S.J., C. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 135-147.; Sebastian P. Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems: Marginalia to a Recent Edition", *Le Muséon* 97 (1984): 29-58.; Sebastian P. Brock, "Dialogue Hymns of the Syriac Churches," *Sobornost* 5:2 (1983): 35-45.

- Satan: Thou, Death, on him that is sick provest thy
might,
but I over them that are whole am exceeding
powerful.
- Death: The Evil One prevails not over all those that
revile him,
but for me he that has cursed me and curses me
come into my hands.
- Satan: Thou, Death, from God hast gotten thy might.
I alone by none am I helped when I lead men to
sin.
- Death: Thou, O Evil One, like a weakling,
while I like a king exercise my dominion.
- Satan: Thou art a fool, O Death, not to know how
great am I
who suffice to capture freewill—the sovereign
power.
- Death: Thou, O Evil One, like a thief, lo! thou goest
round.
I like a lion break in pieces and fear not.
- Satan: To thee, O Death, none does service or
worship.
To me kings do service of sacrifice as to God.
- Death: In Death there are many that call as on a kind
power.
On thee, O Evil One, none has called or calls.
- Satan: Markest thou not this, O Death, how many
there are
who in sundry fashions call on me and make
oblation?
- Death: Hated is thy name, O Satan, nor canst thou
clear it.
Thy name everyone curses. Hide thy reproach.
- Satan: Thine ear, O Death, has waxed dull that thou
hearest not
how against thee all men groan. Conceal thyself.
- Death: My face is shown to the world for I am
guileless,
not like thee who without guile canst not abide.

Satan: Thou hast not in aught surpassed me for it is
true
that thou art as hateful as I to the sons of men.

Death: Of me all men are afraid as of a lord,
but as for thee, they hate thee as the Evil One.

Satan: For thee, O Death, they hate thy name and also
thy work.
My name they hate, but my delights they greatly
love.

Death: To bitterness of teeth is turned this thy
sweetness.
Penitence of soul cleaves ever unto thy lusts.

Satan: Sheol is hated because in her is no
repentance—
a pit that swallows and closes on all movements.

Death: Sheol is a gulf wherein whoso falls shall rise
again.
Sin is hated because it cuts off the hope of man.

Satan: Though I mislike penitents, I give place for
repentance.
Thou cuttest off hope from the sinner who dies
in his sin.

Death: It was of thee that at first his hope was cut off
for he whom thou hast not caused to sin dies
happily.

Blessed is He Who raised against each other those
cursed servants
that we might see them as they have seen us and
mocked at us.

This that we have seen of them is a pledge, my
brethren,
of what we shall see of them hereafter when we rise
again.

Nisibene Hymns, 52²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 206-207.

From this and the other dialogues which make up the latter portion of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, as well as from other hymns in that collection, a description of the changes wrought in Death by Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead may be discerned and carefully reconstructed.²⁵⁸ First, it is a matter of paramount importance that Death is granted his authority and his power by God. As we have seen above in the context of Satan's boasting, "Thou, Death, from God hast gotten thy might." (HNis. 52.8). Elsewhere, a similar point is made at greater length, where Death offers the following defense of his integrity in carrying out his duty:

All men complain much against me
and I against One only have I complained.
Who among men is so just as I?
Has corruption touched my integrity? I held all men in
affection
and whoso hates me knows it. I know not all my days
what a bribe is.
The person of a king have I not accepted.
By me is preached equality
for bondman and his lord in Sheol I make equal.

Before God it is that I minister
with whom is no acceptance of persons.
What other is there that endures as I do—
I that am cursed when I do good? Perversely are
requited to me
the benefits I have rendered. Though my deeds are
goodly,
my name is not goodly. Yet my mind rests in its integrity.
In God it is that I comfort myself
for though he is good He is denied every day and
endures it.

The old I remove from all sufferings
likewise the young from all sins.
Secret contention I quell in Sheol.
In our land there is no iniquity. It is Sheol and Heaven
alone

²⁵⁸ As has been noted throughout this study, the point must be reiterated that the comprehensive and synthetic description offered here is nowhere offered by Ephrem himself.

that are removed from all sins. This earth that lies
 between
 in her iniquity dwells. He therefore that is prudent will
 either go up into Heaven
 or, if that be too hard, will go down to Sheol which is
 easy.

Nisibene Hymns, 38.2-4²⁵⁹

Since his authority has been entrusted to him by God, and since Death would in fact serve to remove the pains of the curse that had been brought upon humanity as a result of the sins of Adam and Eve,²⁶⁰ his dismay upon being undone seems to stem from two errors of judgment. On the one hand, Death mistakenly perceived Jesus to be only a man, an error which caused him to over-reach his authority. It is this breach for which Death apologizes in the thirty-sixth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*:

"Be not wroth against me, gracious Jesus,
 for the words that my pride has spoken before Thee!
 Who is there that when seeing Thy cross
 shall have doubted that Thou art man? Who is there
 that shall have seen Thy Power
 and shall not believe that Thou art also God? Lo! thus
 by these two things
 I have learnt to confess that Thou art man and likewise
 art God!
 For as much as the dead in Sheol repent not,
 go up among the living, O Lord, and preach repentance."

Nisibene Hymns, 36.16²⁶¹

On the other hand, Ephrem portrays Death as having over-estimated the degree of his importance in the overall scheme of cosmic history of redemption. Seeking to make sense of the event of the resuscitation of the righteous dead at the moment of Christ's death on the cross, Death muses:

²⁵⁹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 199.

²⁶⁰ See Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* 2.35.1-3. McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 122-123.

²⁶¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

“Is this perchance that saying
 which was heard by me from Isaiah
 (but I despised it) when he arose and said,
 “Who hath heard such a thing as this: that the earth
 should travail in one day
 and bring forth a nation in one hour?”²⁶² Is it this that
 has come to pass?
 Or else, is it reserved for us hereafter? And if it be this,
 it is a vain shadow that I thought I am a king.
 I knew not it was but a deposit I was keeping.”

Nisibene Hymns, 37.³²⁶³

Having learned his proper place as a result of the Savior’s descent to Sheol, Death also identifies himself as the treasurer of the dead in dialogue with Satan, saying, “I confess, O Evil One, that as usury I lay up the King’s treasures till His coming.” (HNis. 56.7).

Another image deployed by Ephrem to convey the change which has taken place as a result of the Savior’s descent to Sheol is that of sleep. Javier Teixidor has done more than anyone else to call attention to this aspect of Ephrem’s thought.²⁶⁴ Teixidor points out that as a result of the resurrection, the phenomenon of humanity’s death and descent to Sheol are regarded by Ephrem as sleep (“este período se resumiría para San Efrén en el verbo “dmek”: la muerte es un “dormir”).²⁶⁵ As Ephrem writes in the forty-third of his *Nisibene Hymns*:

As sleep is very dear to one who is weary,
 so death is beloved to one who keeps vigil and watches.
 As natural sleep does not kill the sleepers,
 neither has Sheol killed nor does it kill.

²⁶² Isa. 66:8.

²⁶³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198.

²⁶⁴ Javier Teixidor, “Muerte, Cielo, y Seol en San Efrén,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 27 (1961): 82-114.

²⁶⁵ Javier Teixidor, “Muerte, Cielo, y Seol en San Efrén,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 27 (1961): 82. The Syriac verb *dmek*, ܕܡܝܬܐ, to which Teixidor refers translates into English as “sleep.” See: Jessie Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded Upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 94.

As sleep [offers] refreshment, so Sheol [offers] the resurrection.

It is the second death²⁶⁶ from which there is no way of escape.

Nisibene Hymns, 43.15²⁶⁷

Teixidor is careful to report that, while the sleep of death is not necessarily uniformly peaceful, it is nonetheless a slumber from which the righteous and the unrighteous alike will be awakened by the voice of the Lord at the eschatological resurrection. This has already been signaled by Christ's own death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead, a complex of events which transforms and relativizes the human experience of death. This is an aspect of Ephrem's thought to which we will return in subsequent chapters.

For all his penitence and the transformation which Ephrem depicts as having taken place in Death, however, this 'eater of humanity' has not quite lost his appetite. In a complex passage, Death defends his 'consumption' of the dead, explains his relationship to Satan, and confesses the reality of the resurrection which he admits he has no power to oppose. Addressing humanity, Death states:

"Ye have made me hated by you though I be not hateful.

I am he that gives rest to your aged and your afflicted.

Ye have made me as one that troubles, O ye mortals.

Adam brought death upon you²⁶⁸ and I bear the blame.

Gently will I expose you for I am a slave

and ye are they that by your sins have made me king.

The will of Adam roused me for I was at rest.

I was dead and ye quickened me that ye might die by me.

I accuse the lying ones who slew and denied it.

For Adam slew himself and charges me.

²⁶⁶ cf. Rev. 2:11, 20:14.

²⁶⁷ Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 240 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963), 44. (my translation)

²⁶⁸ Gen. 3:6.

The beginning of strife was the accursed serpent,²⁶⁹
 which has rightly been crippled,²⁷⁰
 which crept, entered, and set enmity between me and
 you.

Satan is passed by and it is against me that ye are roused.
 Go, strive with the Evil One who made you transgress.

He is my comrade and I deny it not, but though he be
 much hated
 what need [is there] that I be blamed for him. I deny
 him henceforth.

Hearken to my words, O mortals, and I will console you.
 I have afflicted you and I confess the life from the dead.

For there begins to steal into my ears a voice of
 preparation,
 of the trumpet²⁷¹ that holds itself ready to sound.

Hear my words and put much oil into your lamps²⁷²
 for hindrance from my part there is none for you.

Yet, know ye that even although I have said these things
 dear is the sound of your voice in the solitude of Sheol.

For man has been weighed by me and great is his peace
 for snakes and fishes and birds come to meet him.

But it is a marvel that to the Watchers, too, his
 converse is dear.

Yea, the Evil One in Gehenna desires his presence.

Ye shall have life from the dead, O ye mortals,
 and I who am bereft shall be bereft in the midst of
 Sheol.”

Nisibene Hymns, 68.17-31²⁷³

²⁶⁹ Gen. 3:1.

²⁷⁰ Gen. 3:14-15.

²⁷¹ Matt. 24:31; I Cor. 15:52.

²⁷² cf. Matt. 25:1-13.

²⁷³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series,
 Vol. 13, 219.

Paschal Imagery

One of the most compact yet potent modes of symbolic discourse by which Ephrem related Christ's death and descent to Sheol to one another while exploring their soteriological significance was his appropriation of the scriptural narrative of the first Passover and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The central component of this strand of Ephrem's thought is the typological identification of Christ with the paschal lamb. In his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem causes Mary the mother of Jesus to confess this truth.

"Who will revile You? For even Your abuse
is a blessing of the peoples. Who will kill You?
For even Your death is the Word of life
for humans. And even if You mount
a cross, You are the Paschal Lamb!"

Hymns on the Nativity, 19.17²⁷⁴

On the one hand, Ephrem calls attention to the similarity between the slaughtered paschal lamb and the crucified Savior, both brought to death in order that others might live. Here, Ephrem seems to stress the continuity between Israel's sacrificial system and Christ's expiating death.

For He gave Himself to them that they might live by His death,

and like the Lamb in Egypt that gave life in a symbol of
its Lord,
He was killed and redeemed them by His love for His
killers.²⁷⁵

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 1.7²⁷⁶

Elsewhere, however, though the continuities remain implicit, Ephrem stresses the differences inherent in Christ's sacrificial death, emphasizing that the Savior serves as both priest and victim.

The True Lamb knew that the priests were defiled
and that the priests were defiled and not worthy of Him.
He became by His body priest and high priest.

²⁷⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 169.

²⁷⁵ Exod. 12.

²⁷⁶ Beck, ed. *Paschallhymnen*, 2. (my translation)

The priests of the People sacrificed the High Priest
 for our Priest became a sacrifice. By His sacrifice,
 sacrifices came to an end.
 On all sides, He extended His aid.

There was no greater lamb than the Lamb from on high.
 The priests were earthly and the Lamb was heavenly.
 He was Himself sacrifice and sacrificer.

For the blemished priests were not worthy to offer
 the unblemished Lamb. He became the Victim of peace
 and He pacified above and below; by His blood, He
 pacified all.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 2.2, 3, 5, 6²⁷⁷

The same simultaneously continuous and discontinuous typological parallelism between Christ and the paschal lamb provides the central theme of an extended meditation, not only on the sacrificial likenesses of the two lambs, but on the salvific effects of their deaths. Brilliant examples of Ephrem's use of paschal imagery to explore the unity of salvation history are preserved in his *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*. The third is cited in its entirety below.

Behold! the paschal lamb killed in Egypt
 and the True Lamb sacrificed in Zion.

Refrain: Glory to the Son, the Lord of symbols who
 fulfilled all symbols by His crucifixion!

My brothers, consider the two lambs.
 See whether they are alike or different.

Weigh and compare their exploits—
 the symbolic lamb and the True Lamb.

Consider the symbolic as a shadow.
 Consider the True as the consummation.

Attend to the simple symbols of this pasch,
 and the double exploits of our pasch.

By the paschal lamb, there was from Egypt
 an exodus of the People but not an entry.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 4. (my translation)

²⁷⁸ Exod. 12:30-32.

Alternately, by the True Lamb, there was from Error
an exodus of the peoples but not an entry.

Again, by the Living Lamb, from Sheol [there was]
an exodus of the dead as from Egypt.

Egypt represented a pair of symbols.
It was a mirror for Sheol and Error.

By the paschal lamb, the avarice of Egypt
learned to give back, which was not in keeping with her
custom.

By the Living Lamb, the hunger of Sheol
vomited [and] gave [back] which was contrary to her
nature.

By the True Lamb, devouring Error
vomited, let escape, [and] ejected the peoples who were
revived.

By the paschal lamb, Pharaoh gave back
the People—he who had kept them detained like Death.

By the Living Lamb, Death gave back
the righteous who went forth from their tombs.

By the True Lamb, Satan gave [back]
the peoples—he who had kept them detained like
Pharaoh.

Pharaoh represented a pair of types.
He was an example of Satan and Death.

By the paschal lamb Egypt was riven
and before the Hebrews the way was made straight.

By the True Lamb Satan who had blocked the ways
[was made to] restore the way of truth.

The Living Lamb trod for the buried
the way from the grave by the voice that cried out.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 3²⁷⁹

The salvific similarity between the sacrifice of the paschal lamb
which coincided with Israel's exodus from Egypt and the death of
Christ which effected the resuscitation of the righteous dead is

²⁷⁹ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 6-7. (my translation)

elsewhere expressed more compactly by Ephrem as is the case in this stanza from his *Hymns on the Resurrection*.

In the day that symbolic lamb, which came to an end,
 broke open Egypt
 its strength was seen in its death, for the dead departed
 to life.²⁸⁰
 Also the Firstborn, in the day of His death, broke open
 Sheol like Egypt.
 The dead ones went forth. They proclaimed the
 strength of the Lamb who by His death,
 brought [them] out from the womb of Sheol.²⁸¹ Glory
 to You who delivered what belongs to You.

Hymns on the Resurrection, 3.11²⁸²

We noted above with reference to the manner in which Ephrem sees Christ not only as the fulfillment of the paschal type, but also the one in whom the corrupted priesthood is superseded or replaced by one superior to it. The same general conception can also be seen in the poet's thought concerning Christ as the True Lamb who exceeds the paschal lamb in redemptive significance and efficacy. Both the close connections between Christ's sacrificial death and his descent to and victory over Sheol as well as the soteriological unity between Christ's conquest of Satan and Death are described by Ephrem in the fourth of his *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*.

Attend to the type revealed within Egypt.
 Attend to the revealed and hidden within Zion.

Refrain: Glory to the Son who by His crucifixion
 fulfilled all types which were written by his
 servants.

Our Lord put to shame Error and Sheol.
 Likewise, He condemned Satan and Death.

For, in Sheol, our Lord rent asunder Error
 that He might teach what is hidden by what is revealed.

For just as He openly rent asunder Sheol,
 so He invisibly rent asunder Error.

²⁸⁰ Exod. 12:21-32.

²⁸¹ Matt. 27:50-53.

²⁸² Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 87. (my translation)

For just as He openly conquered Death,
so Satan was invisibly beaten.

Many saw that the tombs were rent asunder,²⁸³
but that Satan was beaten was not seen.

By what was near He gave a demonstration
of what was hidden and far off.

For although He was dead He was ultimately prevailing.
On the Friday He was killed He restored life to all.

When the peoples repented, Satan was put to shame.
And on the Friday He departed He conquered all.

Egypt was terrified by the paschal lamb.
The lamb that was killed, killed her firstborn [males].²⁸⁴

Error—who saw Him—was terrified
[by] the True Lamb who exposed her deceits.

Sheol also heard and her heart was broken
[by] the Living Voice which restored the dead ones to life.

The paschal lamb conquered only Egypt.
The True Lamb conquered Error and Sheol.

In Sheol He visibly rent asunder Error
that the two of them whom He beat might reproach
one another.

Because of the paschal lamb Pharaoh howled.
He mourned over his firstborn, the chief of his sons.

Because of the True Lamb the Evil One howled
because Adam, the chief of sinners, was justified.

Because of the Living One Death howled
because Abel, the first of the firstborn, was raised.

He rent asunder Satan and Death openly
that one to another they might cry out that One
conquered them.

Behold the simple strengths of the symbolic lamb
and the double triumphs of the True Lamb.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 4.1-19²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Matt. 27:50-53.

²⁸⁴ Exod. 12:21-32.

Examples of Ephrem's conception of the close and complex relationships that exist between the type of the paschal lamb and the reality of Christ the True Lamb could easily be multiplied here. In closing this section, however, it seems fitting allow Ephrem's personification of Death to have the final word.

“But who gave me the day of Moses,”
said Death, “who made a feast for me?
For that lamb [that was slain] in Egypt gave me
from every house the first fruit²⁸⁶—heaps and heaps of
the first born
at the gate of Sheol he piled me them. But this Lamb of
the Festival
has robbed Sheol of the dead He has taken title and
carried them off from me.²⁸⁷
That lamb filled the graves for me
but this has emptied the graves that were full.”

Nisibene Hymns, 36.12²⁸⁸

CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

Having argued above that the event of Christ's descent to Sheol serves as the hinge or pivot between his death and resurrection, and having explored the relationship between his death and descent to the underworld, we turn now to a more concentrated examination of the connections between Christ's descent to Sheol and his resurrection from the dead. While, as has been stated elsewhere, this type of analysis is foreign to Ephrem's own conception of the organic unity of the events of Christ's passion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection, it is nevertheless possible to gain a clearer perspective on the manifold significance Ephrem ascribed to the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol by considering it, on the one hand, relative to the Savior's death, and on the other, relative to his resurrection from the dead.

Considered as two elements of the mystery of redemption, it becomes clear that, as has been reiterated throughout this work,

²⁸⁵ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 8-9. (my translation)

²⁸⁶ Exod. 12:21-32.

²⁸⁷ Matt. 27:50-53.

²⁸⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

Ephrem regarded Christ's descent to Sheol as the necessary precondition for his victorious and redemptive resurrection from the dead. Ephrem's conception of the relationship of these aspects of the Christic paschal mystery are manifest in a passage from his *Homily on Our Lord* which we have already had occasion to cite in other contexts. Referred to symbolically by means of the themes of the despoilation of Sheol and the vomiting of death (themes which will be more closely considered below), the relationship of necessity between Christ's resurrection and his death and descent to Sheol, as well as his incarnation from the Virgin Mary, is nonetheless made perfectly clear. Ephrem writes:

Since Death was unable to devour Him without a body, or Sheol to swallow him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide himself with a means to Sheol.... And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into its vaults, and carried off its treasures.... When death came confidently, as usual, to feed on mortal fruit, life, the killer of death, was lying in wait, so that when death swallowed (life) with no apprehension, it would vomit it out and many others with it.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.2²⁸⁹

Christ's Conquest of Death

One of the clearest indications of Ephrem's conception of the soteriological unity of the events of Christ's death and resurrection, joined as they are by his descent to Sheol, can be seen in the poet's use of the same language of conquest relative to each event. Above we noted that Ephrem describes Christ's death and descent to Sheol as the occasion of his conquest of Satan and Death, citing such statements as the following:

The Evil One fled from Him for awhile.²⁹⁰
In the time of the crucifixion he arrived,
and by the hand of the crucifiers he killed Him
so that He fell in the contest with death
to conquer Satan and death.

Hymns on Virginity, 12.30²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 278-279.

²⁹⁰ Luke 4:13.

²⁹¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 314-315.

Ephrem also expresses the redemptive unity of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection from the dead by means of complementary poetic parallelism, proclaiming, "Glory be to Thee Who by Thy crucifixion didst conquer the Evil One and by Thy resurrection gain victory likewise over Death" (HNis. 58.R).²⁹² Still elsewhere, Ephrem deploys the same language of conquest, yet refers exclusively to the resurrection as a victory over Death: "Glory be to Thee that by Thy command Death has reigned and by Thy resurrection has been humbled to low estate" (HNis. 68.R).²⁹³

Ephrem's diverse use of the language of conquest relative to Christ's death and resurrection should be seen as an indication, not of confusion and haphazard patterns of thought on his part, but as an intentional rhetorical strategy. By means of his varied use of conquest language, Ephrem is able both to underscore the soteriological unity of Christ's passion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead, and to emphasize or more closely consider various aspects of this complex of events by means of alternately highlighting or contrasting the Savior's death, descent to Sheol, or resurrection.

The Darkened Sun

As we have seen above, many of the details of the Gospel narratives of Christ's crucifixion, such as his final cry from the cross, the rending of the graves and the resuscitation of the righteous dead, and the piercing of his side were interpreted by Ephrem in ways which indicated the connections which existed between his death and descent to Sheol. Another aspect of the Scriptural account of the Savior's passion which was seen by Ephrem as a symbolic proclamation, not only of Christ's descent to Sheol in death, but also his resurrection from the grave, was the darkening of the sun during the crucifixion.

In his study of *Les Hymnes Pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe*, G. A. M. Rouwhorst provides a useful overview of Ephrem's varied interpretations of the theme of the darkening of the sun during the

²⁹² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 211.

²⁹³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 218.

Savior's crucifixion.²⁹⁴ Rouwhorst calls attention to Ephrem's theological use of this element of the passion narrative, locating it in *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* 13.16-24, *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 4.14, *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 1.10, and *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 7.4-6.²⁹⁵ Rouwhorst briefly catalogs the meanings attributed by Ephrem to the three hours of darkness, noting the manner in which they display a genuine diversity. The sun is in each case depicted as an active participant-observer in the events of Christ's passion. In one case, the sun seeks to hide Christ's humiliation from the rest of creation (HAzym. 13.16-24); at other points, the darkness is interpreted as the sun's donning of garments of mourning (HCruc. 4.14; 7.5). Elsewhere, the darkening of the sun is interpreted as an acknowledgement of the Invisible Divine Sun on the part of the visible created sun (HCruc. 1.10; 7.4, 6). Summarizing the significance of Ephrem's use of this theme, we might note that the darkening of the sun demonstrates the cosmic scale of Christ's passion and serves in various ways to call attention to the Divine reality hidden within the event of the death of this man.

The same type of interpretation of the darkening of the sun at Christ's crucifixion and death may also be found in Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron*. In the course of explicating the significance of the star which led the Magi to Jesus at his nativity Ephrem asserts an interesting parallel, stating that "at his radiant birth therefore a radiant star appeared,²⁹⁶ and at his dark death

²⁹⁴ G. A. M. Rouwhorst, *Les Hymnes Pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe: Analyse théologique et recherche sur l'évolution de la fête pascale chrétienne à Nisibe et à Edesse et dans quelques Eglises voisines au quatrième siècle*, Vol. 7,1 (Etude), Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language, ed. J. Den Boeft, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, J. H. Waszink, J. C. M. Van Winden (New York: E. J. Brill, 1989), 105-107.

²⁹⁵ On a somewhat related note, Rouwhorst also points out that the sixth of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Crucifixion* consists principally of "very complex reflections" on a number of solar and astronomical matters which are tangentially akin to the theme of the three hours of darkness during the Lord's execution. See: Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe*, 1:106. Other interesting instances of Ephrem's use of solar imagery and astronomical calendrical phenomena relative to God's self-disclosure in Christ may be found in *Hymns on the Nativity* 27 and *Hymns on Virginity* 51 and 52. See: McVey, *Hymns*, 210-213; 461-468.

²⁹⁶ Matt. 2:2, 10.

there appeared a dark gloom” (CDiat. 2.24).²⁹⁷ Again, in the context of reflecting on the theological meaning of Christ’s passion, Ephrem reiterates the significance of the darkening of the sun in a manner which parallels the seventh of his *Hymns on the Crucifixion*. Summing up an extended explanation of this solar event, Ephrem writes: “He drew the sun back to darkness so that those who had failed to recognize him and had crucified him, although they were walking in the light, would perhaps recognize him if darkness surrounded him” (CDiat. 21.3).²⁹⁸

In what we have seen thus far, we may note the general consistency of Ephrem’s interpretation of the darkening of the sun at the death of Christ. It must also be admitted, however, that we have not yet addressed the relationship between this unusual solar phenomenon and the Savior’s descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead. The symbolic connections between these occurrences are made abundantly clear in a brief statement from Ephrem’s *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, where he writes:

The sun hid its face so as not to see him when he was crucified. It retracted its light back into itself so as to die with him. There was darkness for three hours, then it shone [again],²⁹⁹ thus proclaiming that its Lord would rise from Sheol on the third day.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.5³⁰⁰

Jonah

Just as the story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt provided him with a potent set of symbols for the explication of Christ’s descent to Sheol in death, so did another narrative from the Old Testament provide Ephrem with rhetorical resources to describe a number of aspects of the theological significance of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. In the story of the prophet Jonah, Ephrem found a number of details which bore typological resemblances to the events of Christ’s passion and resurrection. In the fifty-fifth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem depicts Satan referring to “Jonah who

²⁹⁷ Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44.

²⁹⁸ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 318.

²⁹⁹ Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44.

³⁰⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 319.

conquered [Death] and returned back from Sheol." (HNis. 55.3)³⁰¹ This is an important facet of Ephrem's interpretation of the story of Jonah, and one which helps to place heightened emphasis on the parallel he draws between Jonah's three days in the great fish and Christ's three days in Sheol. Though the common duration of their respective times in Sheol is mentioned only in passing, it is nonetheless present where Ephrem writes:

Three days reckoned the Messiah like Jonah.³⁰²
Behold! there was the Friday whose light set
from the People and another day, the Sabbath,
the symbol of rest from labor, for he brought Death to
an end.

Hymns on the Crucifixion, 6.1³⁰³

A much more extensive comment on Jonah as a typological foreshadow of Christ can be found in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* where the scriptural precedent for this kind of parallelism is reflected upon.³⁰⁴

*Thus will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth,*³⁰⁵ in order to make known to them in advance that it was not they who would be able to kill him. For the symbol of his death had been depicted in Jonah a thousand years earlier. Where Abel had been killed, was not there the mouth of the earth, the earth which *opened its mouth and received the blood of your brother?*³⁰⁶ Where our Lord was buried, was not there the heart of the earth? *The Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth, just as Jonah was in the fish.*³⁰⁷ Just as Jonah was not in any way decomposed in it, neither was our Lord in the depths of Sheol. *You did not abandon my soul in Sheol, and you did not allow your Holy One to see destruction.*³⁰⁸ Just as [Jonah] went up from the sea and proclaimed to the Ninevites who repented

³⁰¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 209.

³⁰² Matt. 12:38-41.

³⁰³ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 64. (my translation)

³⁰⁴ Matthew 12:38-42; Luke 11:29-32

³⁰⁵ Matt. 12:40.

³⁰⁶ Gen. 4:11.

³⁰⁷ Matt. 12:40.

³⁰⁸ Psa. 16:10.

and lived,³⁰⁹ so too our Lord, after having raised his body from Sheol, sent his disciples into the midst of the Gentiles, who were completely converted and received life in its fullness.³¹⁰ Three days therefore are reckoned in relation the descent and the rising from the dead of both of them.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 11.3³¹¹

These examples demonstrate clearly that Ephrem perceived a series of close correspondences between Jonah and Christ, not least of which being the symbolic equivalence between Jonah's whale and Sheol. However, in order to more fully appreciate the similarities between the prophet and the Savior, it is necessary to consider some of the less overtly stated parallels present in Ephrem's writings. The poet's use of two powerful images which are deployed with reference both to Jonah's expulsion from the whale and Christ's resurrection from the dead are especially important in this context. These are the bodily metaphors of vomiting and childbirth.

Several of Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity* contain sustained reflections on the story of Jonah.³¹² Hymn 42 in particular presents Jonah as a christological type, where Ephrem states that "the servant bore the symbols of his Lord in his conception and his birth and in his raising to life." (HVirg. 42.29)³¹³ The conception and birth of Jonah to which Ephrem refers is explored in earlier stanzas where the poet writes:

A whale in the sea swallowed him too.³¹⁴
It conceived and brought him forth instead of females.

In the sea it conceived him; on land it brought him forth.
It delivered him to the all-suckling land.

He was conceived and born as in nature,
Once more conceived and born unnaturally.

A woman conceived as usual,
and in addition she brought forth as in nature.

³⁰⁹ Jon. 2:10-3:10.

³¹⁰ cf. Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:8.

³¹¹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 176.

³¹² See *Hymns on Virginity* 42-50 in: McVey, *Hymns*, 438-460.

³¹³ McVey, *Hymns*, 440.

³¹⁴ Jon. 1:17.

A fish conceived him unnaturally,
and in addition he brought him forth not in the usual
way.

Hymns on Virginity, 42.12-16³¹⁵

Though the passage from *Hymns on Virginity* 42 cited above contains no explicit statement equating Jonah and Christ in terms of conception and birth, there is an important element of parallelism present on account of Ephrem's use of the image of a double conception and birth one of which is "natural," the other "unnatural." We have noted at some length in the previous chapter on the intersection of the doctrines of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol that Ephrem similar language concerning the multiple births of Christ from the Father, from the Virgin Mary, from the Jordan, and from Sheol in his resurrection from the dead. In his *Homily on Our Lord* Ephrem writes, "The Firstborn, who was begotten according to His nature, underwent yet another birth outside his nature, so that we too would understand that after our natural birth, we must undergo another (birth) outside our nature." (SdDN 1.4)³¹⁶ The same language of natural and unnatural multiple births is soon more poetically reiterated, incorporating a reference to Christ's baptism as yet another birth.

It is He Who was begotten of Divinity,
according to His nature,
and of humanity,
which was not according to His nature,
and of baptism,
which was not his habit;
so that we might be begotten of humanity,
according to our nature,
and of divinity,
which is not according to our nature,
and of the Spirit,
which is not our habit.

Homily on Our Lord, 2.1³¹⁷

Seeking to drive home the salvific import of these events, Ephrem sums up this section with the statement "and so the One Who was

³¹⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 439.

³¹⁶ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 275.

³¹⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 276.

begotten of Divinity underwent a second birth in order to bring us to birth again” (SdDN 2.2).³¹⁸

Below, we will return to Ephrem’s use of the language of conception and childbirth relative to Christ’s descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead. First, however, it is necessary to point out and attend to another symbolic equivalence between Jonah and Christ which is present in Ephrem’s writings. In addition to identifying Jonah’s whale with Sheol, Ephrem also describes the actions of these two ‘swallowers’ by means of the same language. The whale which swallows and vomits out Jonah is a type of Sheol which swallows and vomits out Christ. It is to Ephrem’s use of this remarkable image as a symbol of Christ’s descent to and resurrection from the dead that we now turn.

Swallowing and Vomiting

Though at first sight they might seem unlikely images for Christ’s resurrection from the dead, Ephrem’s use of the bodily metaphors of swallowing and vomiting produced intriguing, if not immediately aesthetically pleasing, results. While the foundation for this metaphorical complex is laid in Ephrem’s identification of Death and Sheol as the greedy and gluttonous eaters and swallowers of humanity (HNis. 52.22; HEcl. 39.10; SdDN 3), it receives one of its fullest explorations in Ephrem’s *Homily on Our Lord*, where Christ is identified as the Medicine of Life.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 276.

³¹⁹ Ephrem’s use of the title “Medicine of Life” for Christ represents a portion of his inheritance from ancient Mesopotamian culture. Three works provide especially helpful treatments of Ephrem’s use of the term “Medicine of Life.” In *The Luminous Eye*, Sebastian Brock notes the Mesopotamian provenance of this theme and directs readers interested in its background to: George Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism (King and Saviour II): Studies in Manichaean, Mandaean, and Syrian-Gnostic Religion* (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1946). For other Mesopotamian themes in Ephrem’s work, Brock also suggests: Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 307-310, 338-340.

Ephrem’s theological use of the term “Medicine of Life” is most frequently deployed with reference either to Christ or the Eucharist, or to both symbolically. Ephrem’s use of the term in this way will be more closely considered in the next chapter. On Ephrem’s theological use of the phrase, see: Aho Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of Saint Ephrem*, Gorgias Dissertations: Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 1 (Piscataway, NJ:

Since death was unable to devour him without a body, or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol.... And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into its vaults, and carried off its treasures. Then He came to Eve, *mother of all the living*.³²⁰ She is the vine whose fence death broke down with her own hands in order to sample her fruit. And Eve, who had been *mother of all the living*,³²¹ became a fountain of death for all the living. But Mary, the new shoot, sprouted from Eve, the old vine, and new life dwelt in her. When death came confidently, as usual, to feed on mortal fruit, life, the killer of death, was lying in wait, so that when death swallowed (life) with no apprehension, it would vomit it out, and many others with it.

So the Medicine of Life flew down from above and joined Himself to that mortal fruit, the body. And when death came as usual to feed, life swallowed death instead. This is the food that hungered to eat the one who eats it. Therefore, death vomited up the many lives which it had greedily swallowed because of a single fruit which it had ravenously swallowed. The hunger that drove it after one was the undoing of the voraciousness that had driven it after many. Death succeeded in eating the one (fruit), but it quickly vomited out the many. As the one (fruit) was dying on the cross, many of the buried came forth from Sheol at (the sound of) His voice.³²²

This is the fruit that escaped death, which had swallowed it, and brought the living out of Sheol, after whom it had been sent. Sheol stored up all that it had devoured. But because of the one thing which it could not eat, it gave back everything inside which it had eaten. When a person's stomach is upset, he vomits out what agrees with him as well as what disagrees with him. Death's stomach became upset, so when it

Gorgias Press, 2002), 147-151.; Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 19-20, 99-114, 175 n.4, 177 n.1.; and Pierre Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez Saint Éphrem de Nisibe*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, No. 224 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1984), esp. 317-319.

³²⁰ Gen. 3:20.

³²¹ Gen. 3:20.

³²² Matt. 27:50-53.

vomited out the Medicine of Life which had soured it,
it vomited out with Him the living as well, whom it had
been pleased to swallow.

Homily on Our Lord, 3.2-4³²³

Thus, by means of this unusual image, Ephrem strikingly demonstrates the organic unity of Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead as events in the history of humanity's redemption. In the following chapter we will return to Ephrem's use of the image of the Medicine of Life which causes the devourers of humanity to vomit their prey, noting the manner in which the benefits of Christ's resurrection from the dead are extended to humanity in the church.

Childbirth

Ephrem's use of childbirth metaphors relative to Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead have already been closely examined in the previous chapter addressing the intersection of the doctrines of Christ's incarnation and descent to Sheol. It is nevertheless fitting that we should return to this theme here in the context of the soteriological implications of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead.

As we have noted previously, Sheol is frequently symbolized as a womb in Ephrem's theological poetry (HNis. 37.4; HNat. 4.190; HAzym. 16.4; HRes. 4.10). Correspondingly, Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead are depicted as a conception (HNat. 4.190) and birth (HNis. 38.7) from the womb of Sheol. In his *Homily on Our Lord* Ephrem compares Christ's resurrection to his eternal generation from the Father, his birth from the Virgin, and his baptism in the Jordan, identifying each in turn as a type of birth.

The Father begot Him, and through Him He made all
creation. Flesh begot Him, and in His flesh He put
passions to death. Baptism begot Him, that through
Him it might make (our) stains white. Sheol begot Him
to have her treasures despoiled by Him.

Homily on Our Lord, 2.5³²⁴

³²³ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 278-279.

³²⁴ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277.

Within Ephrem's use of metaphors of conception and childbirth relative to Christ's descent to and resurrection from the dead, an important soteriological element is especially discernable where the poet speaks of Christ as the Firstborn of Sheol. In the *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem allows Death to explain the manner in which, though others had been restored to life from death prior to Christ, it is nevertheless the Savior who is the Firstborn.

All that have been raised were not firstborn
for our Lord is the Firstborn of Sheol.³²⁵
How can any that is dead precede Him—
that power whereby he was raised? There are last that
are first
and younger that have become firstborn. For though
Manasseh was firstborn
how could it be that Ephraim should take his
birthright?³²⁶
And if the second was born and set before him,
how much more shall the Lord and Creator precede all
in His resurrection.

Lo! John as a herald
declares that he is later though he was elder born.
For he said, "Behold a man comes after me
and yet He was before me."³²⁷ For how could he be
before Him—
that power in Whom he preached? For everything that
happens because of another
thing is after that other even though it seem to be before.
For the cause which called it into being
is elder than it and before it in all things.

The cause of Adam was elder
than all creatures which were made for him.
For to him, even to Adam, He had respect continually—
the Creator even while He was creating. Thus though
Adam as yet was not
he was elder than all creatures.³²⁸ How much more
then, my Lord, must
this Thy manhood be elder, which in Thy Godhead is

³²⁵ cf. Col. 1:18.

³²⁶ Gen. 48:11-20.

³²⁷ John 1:15.

³²⁸ Gen. 1:26-31.

from eternity with Him that begat Thee!
To Thee be praise and through Thee to Thy Father
from us all!

To Thee be praise for Thou art the first
in Thy Godhead and in Thy Manhood!
For even though Elijah was first to go up,³²⁹
he was not able to precede Him for whose sake he was
taken up.

For his type depended on Thy verity and even though
the types apparently
are before Thy fulfillment, it is before them secretly.
Creatures were before Adam.

He was before them because for his sake they were made.

Nisibene Hymns, 38.7-10³³⁰

Though Ephrem does not make mention of the Apostle in this context, it is difficult not to hear echoes of the first chapter of Saint Paul's letter to the Colossians in Ephrem's identification of Christ as the Firstborn of Sheol.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have the first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1.15-20

The influence of another Pauline reference to Christ as the Firstborn is similarly simultaneously difficult to firmly establish and to dismiss. In the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

³²⁹ II Kings 2:11-12.

³³⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 200.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8.28-30

While it is not really possible to know with certainty whether Ephrem had either of these scriptural texts from the Pauline epistles in mind when he deployed images of conception and childbirth to describe Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead, it is nevertheless clear that the poet's designation of the Savior as the Firstborn of Sheol is one that has implications for the whole of humanity which was the object of his redemptive work.

The Only-Begotten journeyed from the God-head and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many. And He journeyed from Sheol and resided in the kingdom, to tread a path from Sheol, which cheats everyone, to the kingdom, which rewards everyone. For the Lord gave His resurrection as a guarantee to mortals that He would lead them out of Sheol, which takes the departed without discrimination, to the kingdom, which welcomes guests with discrimination, so that we might journey from where everyone's bodies are treated the same, to where everyone's efforts are treated with discrimination.

Homily on Our Lord, 1.2³³¹

Having become the "brother of many," a human being among human beings, Christ is also, in Ephrem's thought, the one whose death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead is the means by which all human beings are assured of their own future resurrection from the dead. Ephrem also affirms the universal scope of the eschatological resurrection of the dead, insisting that all of the dead will be raised to judgment.

³³¹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 273-274.

Glory be to Thee, Son of the Lord of All Who died for
all!
For He was raised to give life to all in the day of His
Coming!

Nisibene Hymns, 55.R³³²

Glory to Him Who endured all for the sake of all
people,
yea, Who tasted death for the sake of all to bring all to
life!

Nisibene Hymns, 64.R³³³

Glory be to Thee Who by Thy sacrifice has redeemed
our disgrace
and Whose death was instead of all deaths that Thou
might raise all!

Nisibene Hymns, 67.R³³⁴

We may also note Ephrem's emphasis on the universal scope of human liberation from death in Christ by recalling our earlier considerations of his use of another Pauline image, Christ as the second or last Adam and the representative head of humanity made new by his redeeming work. This aspect of Ephrem's theology finds expression in a number of the refrains of other *Nisibene Hymns*.

Praise be to Thee Who came down to follow Adam
and found Adam and also in Him the children of Adam!

Nisibene Hymns, 61.R³³⁵

Glory be to Thee Who did descend and plunge after
Adam
and draw him out from the depths of Sheol and bring
him into Eden!

Nisibene Hymns, 65.R³³⁶

³³² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 209.

³³³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 216.

³³⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 218.

³³⁵ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 213.

At other points, Ephrem explores this symbolism at somewhat greater length. Though an important eschatological element of Ephrem's thought on this matter remains to be discussed in a subsequent chapter, it is nevertheless necessary here to note the manner in which the poet regards Christ's resurrection as his second clothing of himself with the garment of the body (HNat. 21.5), a body elsewhere complementarily identified as "our body" (HNat. 22.39) and "the body of Adam" (HNis. 35.8). On the basis of Christ's status as the Second Adam, the symbolism of Death's offer of Adam as the "great pledge" of the resurrection of all humanity to Christ in Sheol underscores the universal scope of the redemption Christ has achieved on behalf of humanity. Yet another Pauline echo seems easily detectable here: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22) In the thirty-sixth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, we read:

O Jesus King, receive my supplication
and with my supplication take to Thyself a pledge.
Even Adam the great pledge accept for Thyself,
him in whom are buried all the dead even as when I
received him
in him were hidden all the living.³³⁷ The first pledge I
have given Thee,
the body of Adam. Go Thou up therefore and reign
over all
and when I shall hear Thy trumpet
I with mine own hand will lead forth the dead at Thy
coming.

Nisibene Hymns, 36.17³³⁸

On account of Christ's identity as the Firstborn among many and the Second Adam, his experiences of death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead "tread out a way," as Ephrem writes in his *Homily on Our Lord*, from Sheol to the Kingdom. This symbolic complex enables Ephrem to expand the metaphors of underworldly conception and childbirth which he applies to Christ

³³⁶ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 216.

³³⁷ I Cor. 15:22.

³³⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197-198.; cf. *Hymns on Paradise* 8.10-11in: Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 134-135.

to include all of humanity. Thus, as we have noted previously, Ephrem places Sheol in parallel not only with the virgin womb of Mary, but also with the maternal womb in general. In his *Hymns on the Church*, Ephrem compares the similar states of consciousness of a fetus in the womb and one who is dead in Sheol (HEccl. 9.5), and in his *Nisibene Hymns*, he depicts the birth of a human infant as a type of the resurrection of the dead.

The babe in the womb confutes [Death], which is as
buried there.
To me it proclaims life from the dead, but to thee
despoiling.

Nisibene Hymns, 65.17³³⁹

Elsewhere in the same collection of hymns, Ephrem expresses this idea in even greater detail.

Thus, from and in the human seed
Humanity can take an image of its resurrection
Because it is also, in symbol of the dead, kept in the
womb.
By pains it is resuscitated and awakened
and goes forth to the light in another world.
Its conception and its birth guaranteed its resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 46.17³⁴⁰

Here we conclude our survey of the soterological significance of Ephrem the Syrian's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol. We now turn, in the chapters that follow, to examine both the manner in which Christ's underworldly descent informs the church's reception of the salvation procured by Christ, as well as the ways in which Christ's descent to Sheol and its effects afford proleptic visions of the eschatological consummation of the history of redemption.

³³⁹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 217.

³⁴⁰ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 57. (my translation)

CHAPTER FOUR: CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL, ECCLESIOLOGY AND SACRAMENTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

True to his own poetic and liturgically-oriented form, Ephrem the Syrian wrote no theological treatises devoted solely to explicating matters of ecclesiology or sacraments. Instead, Ephrem's conceptions of the Christian church and its mysteries of baptism and Eucharist appear in his writings as integrated themes, living components of the organic whole which is the history of salvation. A considerable body of literature on Ephrem's conceptions of the Christian church and its sacraments has traced the contours of the poet's thought on these matters by exploring the numerous references to the origins, composition, and practices of the Christian community of faith which appear throughout Ephrem's works.¹ Though this material will not be reviewed in detail here, it

¹ Though not comprehensive, the following survey should provide readers with a representative sample of scholarly works on Ephrem's theology of the church and its sacraments. For treatments of Ephrem's ecclesiological and sacramental thought as one expression among other early Syriac Christian conceptions of the church, see: Seely J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 79-89, 101-124, 125-132; Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Ephrem's ecclesiology was also the subject of two earlier articles by Robert Murray: "The Rock and the House on the Rock: A Chapter in the Ecclesiological Symbolism of Aphraates and Ephrem," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 30 (1964): 315-362.; Robert Murray, "St. Ephrem the Syrian on Church Unity," *Eastern Churches Quarterly* 15 (1963): 164-176. On Ephrem's use of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the articulation of the boundaries and the identity of the church, see: Robin A. Darling, "The 'Church From the Nations' in

will provide the basis and background for our exploration of the

the Exegesis of Ephrem," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, ed. H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant S. J., C. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 229 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 111-121. Ephrem's conception of a synergistic relationship between the Christian church and the Roman Empire is brought into focus in: Sidney H. Griffith, "Ephraem the Deacon of Edessa and the Church of the Empire," in *Diakonia: Studies in Honor of R. T. Meyer*, ed. T. Halton and J. P. Williman (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 22-52.

For a consideration of Ephrem's sacramental theology, see: Georges Saber, "La typologie sacramentaire et baptismale de saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 73-91. Insight to Ephrem's sacramental thought can be gained via: Robert Murray, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ on the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1970): 142-150.

Ephrem's baptismal theology has been the subject of one book-length study: Georges Saber, *La théologie baptismale de saint Ephrem: essai de théologie historique*, No. VIII (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1974). Ephrem's vision of Christian initiation has also figured in works authored by Sebastian Brock on the broader subject of the Syrian baptismal tradition. See: Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series No. 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 85-97, esp. 90ff.; Sebastian P. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, ed. Jacob Vellian, The Syrian Churches Series Vol. 9 (Poona, India: Jacob Vellian, 1979).; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Syrian Baptismal Rites," *Concilium* 22 (1979): 98-104.

Finally, Ephrem's Eucharistic theology has been examined in at least one book-length study and numerous articles. See: Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephrem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15:2 (April 1999): 225-246.; Pierre Yousif, "Le sacrifice et l'offrande chez saint Éphrem de Nisibe," *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988/89): 21-40.; Sebastian P. Brock, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem on the Eucharist," *The Harp* 1 (1987): 61-68.; Pierre Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez saint Éphrem de Nisibe*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* No. 224 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientale, 1984).; Pierre Yousif, "L'Eucharistie et le Saint-Esprit d'après St. Éphrem de Nisibe," in *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East*, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Chicago: The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1977), 235-246.; François Graffin, "L'Eucharistie chez saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 93-121.

ecclesiological and sacramental significance of Ephrem's use of the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol.

At the outset of this chapter, it must be noted that the task of correlating Ephrem's theological vision of the Savior's descent to the dead and his thought concerning the constitution and life of the church is one which has not yet been taken up in this way. On the basis of what we have seen thus far, however, it cannot be denied that Ephrem found in the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol a profoundly resonant symbol of the Savior's participation in and redemptive transformation of the human condition. It is therefore fitting that this chapter should present an initial attempt to trace out symbolic parallels between Christ's bodily experience and the experience of the body of Christ in Ephrem's thought.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

In previous chapters we have repeatedly noted the central importance of Christ's incarnation in Ephrem's theological reflection. The physical embodiment of the Divine Son from the womb of the Virgin Mary constituted the revelatory and redemptive epicenter of Ephrem's theology.² Emphasis has also been laid on the potent symbolic complexities of Ephrem's favorite metaphor for the incarnation. As Sebastian Brock has written, "at the Incarnation God the Word clothes himself not only with 'Adam' and 'Adam's body,' but also 'our body,' 'humanity,' 'our weak state.'"³ In the chapter immediately preceding this one, we have seen the significance of this clothing metaphor for Ephrem's theology of human redemption: Christ's clothing of himself in the body of Adam/humanity makes possible his liberation of Adam/humanity from Satan and Sin as well as from Death and Sheol. In this chapter, another facet of Ephrem's use of the polyvalent imagery of Christ's embodiment provides the point of departure, for, as Robert Murray has observed in his work *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*,

Ephrem, without explicitly expressing any such doctrine, provides material for us to find an implicit ecclesiological argument which could be summed up by

² Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975/76): 1-20.

³ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 32.

saying that the whole dispensation of salvation has its source in the human body of Christ; that same body in which he healed men and rose again, he gave us in sacramental form (in 'mystery') to heal us, to incorporate us in him in the Church, and to give us a pledge of the resurrection."⁴

Murray went on to argue that Ephrem's conception of the church as the body of Christ was closely related to his thought concerning Christ and Adam as "corporate personalities." As we have noted above, Ephrem appropriated and adapted the Pauline conception of Christ as the second Adam in order to express symbolically his conception of salvation history as a pattern of restorative reversals wherein all that was undone and broken by the disobedience of Adam was renewed and made whole through the obedience of Christ. In order to demonstrate Ephrem's conception of Christ as the representative source of redeemed humanity, Murray cited a passage from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* where, after recounting "the perfect way that the Messiah opened up for his Church, from the beginning through conception until the completion of the resurrection,"⁵ Ephrem identified the church as the body of Christ which had passed through all of Christ's own experiences with him. Electing to cite from this portion of Ephrem's writings more lengthily than Murray, we may note the emphasis Ephrem places on Christ's descent to Sheol and victory over death in this context.⁶

Take note therefore how the Living One sought to refute death in every kind of way. He was an embryo, and while in the womb [death] was not able to destroy him. [He was] and infant and while growing up, it was not able to disfigure him. [He was] a child and during his education it was not able to confuse him. [He was] a young man, and with its lustful desires it was not able to lead him into error. [He was] instructed, and with its

⁴ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 70.

⁵ Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 91.

⁶ Murray's citation begins with the final sentence of *CDiat.* 4.14. See: Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 83-84.

wiles, it was not able to overpower him. [He was] a teacher, and because of his intelligence, it was not able to refute him. [He was] vigilant, and with its commands, it was not able to turn him aside [from his purpose]. [He was] strong, and in killing him, it was not able to frighten him. [He was] a corpse and in the custody of the tomb it was not able to hold him. He was not ill because he was a healer. He did not go astray because he was a shepherd. He did not commit error because he was a teacher. He did not stumble because he was the light. This is the perfect way that the Messiah opened up for his Church, from the beginning through conception until the completion of the resurrection.

If the Church therefore is his body, as Paul his witness has said,⁷ then believe that his Church has journeyed through all this without corruption. Just as, by the condemnation of the one body of Adam, all bodies died and continue to die, so too, through the victory of this one body of the Messiah his entire church lived and continues to live.⁸ So, just as [it was] because these bodies themselves have sinned and are themselves dying, that the earth, their mother, was also accursed, so too, because of this body, which is the Church without corruption, its earth is blessed from the beginning. The earth of the temple is the body of Mary, in whom it was sown. Observe too the envoy who, with a clear voice, came to sow it in her hearing, He began the sowing of the seed thus, *Peace be with you, blessed among women*.⁹ [This was] so that it might be made known that, because the first mother was cursed, this second mother was therefore addressed with blessed names.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.14-15¹⁰

Murray explained the ecclesiological sense of this passage in the following words.

⁷ cf. Rom. 12:5; I Cor. 12:12-31; Eph. 1:15-23, 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 5:21-33; Col. 1:15-20.

⁸ I Cor. 15:22.

⁹ Luke 1:28.

¹⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 91-92.

Because Adam was the head of all mankind, the bodily death he incurred became the lot of all mankind. Christ is the new head, and by conquering Satan in his (personal) body, he won this victory for the Church; even more, his body *is* the Church. Here we have an unmistakable expression of the Semitic concept of 'corporate personality'. Further, the earth, man's mother, was cursed because of sin committed in the body; and now, because of Christ's body, *which is the Church and incorruptible*, the earth is blessed, and was so even in the beginning, in the Protevangelion, by virtue of the Christ to come. The new earth is Mary's body, Christ's temple, and she was called blessed precisely in contrast with the cursing of the earth. Implicitly it is hinted that Mary, the new Eve, is in some sense mother of all the redeemed and sinless by virtue of Christ's sinlessness.¹¹

Ephrem's conviction that the church, as Christ's body, had already passed through death with him was also stated much more compactly in two refrains from his *Nisibene Hymns*.

Glory to You for in Your victory we have gained
strength
and in Your resurrection we defy even Death itself!
Nisibene Hymns, 56.R¹²

To You be great glory praise Who descended to us here
below
and suffered and rose again and in His Body, raises our
bodies!

Nisibene Hymns, 62.R¹³

The same sense of the church's participation in Christ's own experience of death and resurrection was also stated in Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*.

¹¹ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 84.

¹² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 209-210.

¹³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 214.

In times of temptation console yourselves with God's
 promises,
 for there is no deceit in the word of Him who repays
 all,
 and his treasure house is not so paltry that we should
 doubt His promise;
 He has surrendered His own Son for us so that we
 might believe in Him;
 His Body is with us, His assurance is with us,
 He came and gave us His keys, since it is for us that
 His treasures lie waiting.

Refrain: Blessed is He Who, with His keys, has opened
 up the Garden of Life.

In the evening the world sleeps, closing its eyes,
 while in the morning it arises. He who repays is distant
 as it were but a night's length away; now light dawns
 and He is coming.

Weary not, my brethren, nor suppose
 that your struggle will last long or that your
 resurrection is far off,
 for our death is already behind us, and our resurrection
 is before us.

Hymns on Paradise, 7.1-2¹⁴

Though a more detailed discussion of Ephrem's conception of the church's participation in Christ's life and victories over Satan and Death will emerge in what follows, here we may note that, in the most general of senses, the implications of Christ's descent to

¹⁴ Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 119.; cf. refrain with the first of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Resurrection* where Christ's cross is identified as the key to Paradise. See: Edmund Beck, ed. and tr., *Des Heiligen Ephraems des Syrers Paschalhymnen*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vols. 247-248 (Louvain: Peeters, 1964). In addition to Beck's critical edition of the Syriac text and German translation, a French translation is available in: G. A. M. Rouwhorst, *Les Hymnes Pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe: Analyse théologique et recherche sur l'évolution de la fête pascale chrétienne à Nisibe et à Edesse et dans quelques Eglises voisines au quatrième siècle*, Vol. 7,2 (Textes), *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language*, ed. J. Den Boeft, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, J. H. Waszink, J. C. M. Van Winden (New York: E. J. Brill, 1989). A full English translation is in preparation.

Sheol for his church consist in the fact that the Savior has passed through the experience of human death and resurrection on behalf of all humanity. Incorporated in Christ by means of baptism and Eucharist, both of which will be more closely considered below, Christians are already proleptic participants in Christ's own victories over sin and death.

THE PIERCING OF CHRIST'S SIDE

In the previous chapter we noted the soteriological significance of the post-mortem piercing of Christ's side which was typologically identified by Ephrem as the reversal of humanity's expulsion from Paradise. Taking place after the Savior's death and descent to Sheol, this event occurred in the same interval between the Son's death and resurrection and was seen by Ephrem, as we have seen, to remove the "the cherub's sword that guarded Paradise"¹⁵ ("Blessed is He Who was pierced and so removed the sword from the entry to Paradise!" (HPar. 2.R); see also HCruc. 9.2), as well as to make "it possible for humanity to reenter Paradise."¹⁶

Blessed is the Merciful One who saw the sword
beside Paradise, barring the way
to the Tree of Life.¹⁷ He came and took Himself
a body which was wounded
so that, by the opening of His side
He might open up the way to Paradise.¹⁸

Hymns on the Nativity, 8.4¹⁹

In Ephrem's thought, the conception of Paradise opened and regained through the piercing of Christ's side and his descent to Sheol was not merely a reference to the reversal of humanity's primordial alienation from God nor solely an acknowledgement of Christ's provision of an eschatological hope. For Ephrem, Christ's opening of Paradise was, of course, both of these things as is clear on the basis of numerous statements he makes throughout his works. Yet, by an intentional act of theological anachronism, Ephrem articulated another vision of Paradise, one which

¹⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.

¹⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.

¹⁷ Gen. 3:24.

¹⁸ John 19:34.

¹⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81-82.

combined the lost primordial and the regained eschatological Eden, commingling both of these atemporal realities with the current spatial and temporal order through his conception of the church as the new creation and the proleptically present eschaton. In other words, Ephrem understood the primordial and the eschatological Paradise to be rendered mystically present in the ecclesiological Eden of the church. Ephrem's vision is beautifully expressed in the eleventh of his *Hymns on Paradise*:

God planted the fair Garden,²⁰ He built the pure
Church;²¹
upon the Tree of Knowledge He established the
injunction.²²
He gave joy, but they took no delight, He gave
admonition, but they were unafraid.
In the Church He implanted the Word
which causes rejoicing with its promises, which causes
fear with its warnings:
he who despises the Word, perishes, he who takes
warning lives.

The assembly of saints bears resemblance to Paradise:
in it each day is plucked the fruit of Him who gives life
to all;
in it, my brethren, is trodden the cluster of grapes to be
the Medicine of Life.
The serpent is crippled and bound by the curse,²³
while Eve's mouth is sealed with a silence that is
beneficial²⁴
—but it also serves once again as a harp to sing the
praises of her Creator.

Among the saints none is naked, for they have put on
glory,
nor is any clad in those leaves or standing in shame,
for they have found, through our Lord, the robe that
belongs to Adam and Eve.
As the Church purges her ears

²⁰ Gen. 2:8.

²¹ cf. Eph. 2:19-22.

²² Gen. 2:16-17.

²³ Gen. 3:14-15.

²⁴ I Cor. 14:34.

of the serpent's poison, those who had lost their
garments,
having listened to it and become diseased, have now
been renewed and whitened.

The effortless Power, the Arm Which Never Tires,
planted this Paradise, adorned it without any effort.
But it is the effort of freewill that adorns the Church
with all manner of fruits.

The Creator saw the Church and was pleased;
He resided in that Paradise which she had planted for
His honor,
just as He had planted the Garden for her delight.

Hymns on Paradise, 6.7-10²⁵

The piercing of Christ's side during his participation in the human condition of death also afforded Ephrem another opportunity to combine paradisaical and ecclesiological themes. Through his use of Adam/Christ typology, expanded, as in other contexts, to include Eve and Mary as well, Ephrem was able to depict the church as Christ's bride, formed from his own body, and created as a second "mother of all living" (Gen. 3.20) which through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, symbolized in the blood and water which issued from Christ's pierced side, gave birth to and nourished Christians. In a passage of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* replete with rich sacramental and ecclesiological figures, we read:

Since all vitality is in the blood, blood also issued forth in grace, the symbol of vitality for [humanity] which justly deserved mortality. Through the power of the evil mediator, fire was kindled against them, but, through the power of the [good] Mediator, extinguishing waters gushed forth for them. No one is more evil than he who deceived Adam, who had not sinned against him, and there is none comparable to him apart from the one who pierced our Lord after he had died. That evil, therefore, which had been victorious, was vanquished in turn. For, *there came forth blood*,²⁶ through which we were brought back from

²⁵ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 111-112.

²⁶ John 19:34.

slavery, [and] *water*²⁷ too, so that everyone who approaches the redeeming blood will be washed and purified from that evil slavery which was enslaving him. *There came forth blood and water*,²⁸ which is his Church, and it is built on him,²⁹ just as [in the case of] Adam, whose wife was taken from his side.³⁰ Adam's rib is his wife, and the blood of our Lord is his Church. From Adam's rib there was death, but from our Lord's rib, life. The olive tree [symbolizes] the mystery of Christ, from which spring forth milk, water and oil; milk for the children, water for the youths and oil for the sick. The olive tree gave water and blood through its death, [just as] the Messiah gave these through his death.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.11³¹

²⁷ John 19:34.

²⁸ John 19:34.

²⁹ cf. Eph. 2:11-22, esp. v. 20.

³⁰ Gen. 2:22.

³¹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 322-323. See also: Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 464-472. Many of the themes implicit in Ephrem's thought on these matters, especially (given our current investigation) Christ's sleep in death during the piercing of his side, were made more explicit in the writings of Ephrem's later admirer Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451-521). The following passages are from Jacob's third homily.

The Bridegroom's side has been pierced, and from it
the Bride has come forth,
fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve.
For from the beginning God knew and depicted
Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his Only-
begotten;
He slept on the cross as Adam had slept in his deep
sleep,
his side was pierced and from it there came forth the
Daughter of Light,
—water and blood as an image of divine children
to be heirs to the Father who loves his Only-begotten.
Eve in prophecy is the mother of all that lives—
what if not baptism is the mother of all life?
Adam's wife bore human bodies subject to death,
but this virgin bears spiritual beings who live for ever;

Ephrem's mingled references to the church and the sacraments, both of which proceed from the pierced side of Christ, serve to remind us that, in the words of Seely Beggiani, "the Syriac mind views the church itself in sacramental terms. The church is not only the source of the mysteries, but is a sacrament of the union of Christ with his people."³² That Ephrem conceived of the Christian sacraments issuing from the side of Christ is clear from the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, where we read:

Let us also say that, if Adam died because of sin, it was fitting that he who removed sin would assume death too. Just as it was said to Adam, *The day on which you eat of it you will die*,³³—he did not die, however, on the day when he ate it, but [instead] received a pledge of his death through his being stripped of his glory, chased from Paradise and haunted daily by [the prospect of] death,—so too, in like manner, with regard to life in Christ, we eat his body instead of the fruit of the tree, and we have his altar in place of the garden of Eden. The curse is washed away by his innocent blood, and in the hope of the resurrection we await the life that is to

Adam's side gave birth to a woman who gives birth to immortals.

In the crucifixion he completed the types that had been depicted,
and the hidden mystery that had been covered revealed itself.

The virgin earth gave birth to Adam in holy fashion
so as to indicate clearly Mary's giving birth.
Adam in turn slept, and his side was pierced;
from it came forth Eve to be mother for the whole
world,
serving as an image of that sleep of death on the cross
and of that side which gave birth to baptism.
Adam slept and gave the whole world a mother;
the Savior died, and there flows from him baptismal
water.

If the side gave birth to Eve, as is written,
then a virgin too gave birth to the Son, as is indicated.

³² Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity*, 81.

³³ Gen. 2:17.

come. Already we walk in a new life, for these [the body of Christ and his altar] are the pledges of it for us.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.25³⁴

For Ephrem, both sacraments have two symbolic sources. In the case of Christian baptism these sources were seen as Christ's own baptism in the Jordan, frequently depicted as his betrothal of the church,³⁵ and the blood and water which flowed from his side on the cross, frequently depicted as the fulfillment of the betrothal by means of the spousal imagery we have noted above. Similarly, the church's Eucharist, or, as Sidney Griffith has helpfully pointed out, *qûrbânâ* (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ),³⁶ originated both in Christ's institution of

³⁴ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 329.

³⁵ Sebastian P. Brock has provided a number of brief and informative surveys of the uses to which early Syriac theologians put the New Testament precedents for the image of Christ as the Bridegroom. Identifying Matthew 9:15, 25:1-13, and John 3:29 where the Baptist refers to himself as "the friend of the Bridegroom," Brock notes that "the movement from the image of Christ as the Bridegroom who is revealed at his baptism in the Jordan to that of the Church as the Bride of Christian baptism is found in the fifth of Ephrem's hymns on the Fast [where Ephrem wrote]...

Assiduous fasts have stirred themselves
to become companions to guide the Bride of the King
so that she might be escorted and come
to the wedding all in white,
that she might be baptized there, and so shine out:
her crowns will come from her companions,
her adornment will come from her fasts.
She shall proceed amidst shouts of hosanna,
before her shall shine a lamp with enduring oil.
Blessed is He who sent and escorted the Bride
of His First-Born Son, so that she might come
to the Bridal Chamber of His Light.

(*Fast 5:1*)"

Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 115-130, esp. 122-123. See also: Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 462-472.

³⁶ Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15:2 (April 1999): 229. Griffith has written: "Ephraem

the meal in the Last Supper and in the blood and water which issued from the crucified Savior’s broken body. Both baptism and the Eucharist served to create and nurture Christians, incorporating and drawing them into conformity with Christ. For Ephrem, baptism was a spiritual womb which provided humanity with the restoration of the image of God in which Adam was made.

With visible pigments the image of kingship is
 portrayed,
 and with visible oil is portrayed the hidden image of
 our hidden King.
 With the drawings that baptism labors to bring forth in
 her womb,
 from the portrayal of the primal man who was
 corrupted
 she portrays a new image, and she gives birth to them
 with three labor pangs
 that [are] the three glorious names of Father and Son
 and Holy Spirit.
 Oil is, therefore, the friend of the Holy Spirit and Her
 minister.
 As a disciple it accompanies Her, since by it She seals
 priests and anointed ones,
 for the Holy Spirit by the Anointed brands Her sheep.
 In the symbol of the signet ring that in sealing wax
 marks its imprint,
 also the hidden mark of the Spirit is imprinted by the
 oil on bodies
 anointed in baptism and sealed in the dipping.

never used the Greek word “Eucharist”. But he had much to say about the Body and the Blood of the Lord in the bread and wine of the church’s daily sacrificial offering to God... *Qûrbânâ* is the Syriac word Ephraem and his contemporaries used for the liturgical action westerners call the Eucharist. It has the sense of “sacrificial offering”, and as it occurs in the “teaching songs” it refers both to the sacrificial offering associated with the Jewish Passover, and to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, commemorated at the Last Supper, and in its sacramental representation in the daily liturgies of the churches.” (229) See also: Jessie Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded Upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 498.

For by the oil of departure are anointed for absolution
 bodies full of stains, and they are whitened, without
 being beaten.
 They descended in debts as filthy ones and ascended
 pure as babes
 since they have baptism, another womb.
 [Baptism's] giving birth rejuvenates the old just as the
 river rejuvenated Na'man.
 O to the womb that gives birth to royal sons every day
 without birthpangs!

Priesthood is a servant to this womb in her giving birth.
 Anointing rushes before her; the Holy Spirit hastens
 upon her floods;
 the crown of Levites surrounds her; the High Priest
 was made her servant.
 The Watchers rejoice in the lost that were found by her.
 O to the womb that, having given birth, is nourished
 and educated by the altar!
 O to the babes who immediately eat perfect bread
 instead of milk!

Hymns on Virginity, 7.5-8³⁷

As is suggested by the last two lines of the previous selection, baptism, in addition to being the womb by which sons and daughters are born to the church, was also seen by Ephrem as the rite of passage which granted Christians access to the spiritual food of the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ which would sustain and nurture them, mystically uniting them to the Savior. This idea is vividly expressed in the second strophe of Ephrem's thirty-seventh Hymn on Virginity:

In a novel way, his body is kneaded into our bodies.
 Even his pure blood is poured into our arteries.
 His voice is in our ears, his appearance in our eyes.
 By reason of his compassion, all of him is kneaded into
 all of us.
 And since he loved his church very much,
 he did not give her the Manna³⁸ of her rival—
 he became himself the living bread for her to eat.

Hymns on Virginity, 37.2³⁹

³⁷ McVey, *Hymns*, 294-295.

³⁸ Exod. 16:4ff.

Ephrem's conception of the interrelatedness of baptism and the Eucharist is driven home even more effectively when this strophe is seen in its context. In the third strophe of his thirty-seventh Hymn on Virginity, Ephrem affirmed the mutuality of the church's sacraments naming "wheat, the olive, and grapes" as the "three medicines" with which Christ healed the disease of humanity. More than this, however, the first six strophes of this hymn draw together several of the themes we have been discussing throughout the course of this work: Eve "wounded" by "the serpent" and Adam leaping "for joy in Sheol" as figures of humanity's fall and redemption, the Eucharist as spiritual food which sacramentally mingles Christ's presence into Christians and the church, Christ's body given for "our body" which was "consumed" by Death and caused it to "burst," and baptism as the process by which the sinner's soul is washed in Christ's blood and re-clothed in a "garment of light." Such an arrangement places the Christian sacraments and Christ's victory over death in his descent to Sheol in close and mutually illuminating contact with one another:

The serpent wounded Eve and she became old;⁴⁰ he
rebelled against all—

against kings and priests, prophets and saviors.

The Root of Isaiah⁴¹ wearied the dragon.

By the early Root from Mary he was conquered,
prayer murmured and he was enfeebled.

The Signet blew on him and dried him up
Adam's bones leapt for joy in Sheol.

His body was newly mixed with our bodies,
and His pure blood has been poured into our veins,
and His voice into our ears, and His brightness into our
eyes.

All of Him has been mixed into all of us by His
compassion,

and since He loves His church very much,
He did not give her the manna⁴² of her rival.
He had living bread for her to eat.

³⁹ Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15:2 (April 1999): 230-231.

⁴⁰ Gen. 3:1-6.

⁴¹ Isa. 11:10.

⁴² Exod. 16:4ff.

Wheat, the olive, and grapes, created for our use—
the three of them serve You symbolically in three ways.
With three medicines You healed our disease.

Humankind had become weak and sorrowful and was
failing.

You strengthened her with Your blessed bread,
and You consoled her with Your sober wine,
and You made her joyful with Your holy chrism.

The sheep and also the ewe, who were created for our
use—

a cloak from the wool of sheep He wore ...

Instead of ... His four symbols ...

Behold the Source ... from the hem of Whose garment
... our help ...

And [to] each one according to the capacity of his
understanding

Your spring gives without jealousy.

The body thanks You that it was saved by Your
abasement—

the sheep that had strayed,⁴³ while the lion⁴⁴ lay in
ambush to dismember it:

sin in secret is a wild animal that tears it to pieces.

David preserved himself while he saved the lamb.⁴⁵

Instead of our body You gave Your body

to that Death that consumed us but was not sated.

By You alone it was sated and burst.

Let the soul thank You—that filthy thing that You
wiped clean

of the stains and debts she incurred by her freedom.

For her whose will wove her a stained garment,

the Merciful One wove a garment of light, and He
clothed her.

Whereas priests cleansed with a bird at daybreak,⁴⁶

You cleansed the soul that had acted foolishly.

You bathed it in Your blood, bleached [it] and made it
gleam.

Hymns on Virginity, 37.1-6⁴⁷

⁴³ Matt. 18:12-18; cf. Luke 15:3-7.

⁴⁴ cf. I Peter 5:8.

⁴⁵ I Sam. 17:34-36.

⁴⁶ cf. Lev. 14:1-7.

CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

No author has contributed more to English language scholarship of the baptismal rites of Syriac Christianity than Sebastian Brock.⁴⁸ In numerous essays, articles, and books, Brock has provided thorough and useful studies of the baptismal theology of the Syrian fathers and the churches which are their spiritual, liturgical, and theological heirs. In the course of his extensive work, Brock has frequently and repeatedly made mention of Ephrem the Syrian's vision of the Christian sacrament of initiation, carefully and explicitly differentiating it from somewhat later Syriac conceptions and interpretations of its theological meaning. According to Brock, early Syriac Christians tended to interpret "baptism as a rebirth, rather than as a death and resurrection, following the Johannine,

⁴⁷ McVey, *Hymns*, 424-426. My understanding of this portion of Ephrem's work is especially indebted to McVey's excellent introductory overview of its themes.

⁴⁸ Sebastian Brock's numerous publications addressing or touching on the baptismal theology of Saint Ephrem and/or the Syrian tradition include: Brock, *The Luminous Eye*; Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie*, 11-38.; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Transition to a Post-Baptismal Anointing in the Antiochene Rite," in *The Sacrifice of Praise: Studies on the Themes of Thanksgiving and Redemption in the Central Prayers of the Eucharistic and Baptismal Liturgies in Honor of Arthur Hubert Couratin*, ed. B. D. Spinks, Ephemerides Liturgicae, Subsidia 19 (Rome: C.L.V. - Edizioni Liturgiche, 1981), 215-225.; Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Syrian Baptismal Rites," *Concilium* 22 (1979): 98-104.; Sebastian P. Brock, "Jacob of Edessa's Discourse on the Myron," *Oriens Christianus* 63 (1979): 20-36.; "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 462-472.; Sebastian P. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (1978): 325-347.; Sebastian P. Brock, "The Syriac Baptismal Ordines, With Special Reference to the Anointings," *Studia Liturgica* 13 (1978): 177-183.; Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: Hymni De Ecclesia 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975): 137-144.; Sebastian P. Brock, "A New Syrian Baptismal Ordo Attributed to Timothy of Alexandria," in *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites*, ed. Jacob Vellian (Kottayam, India: J. Vellian, 1973), 72-84.; Sebastian P. Brock, "Consignation in the West Syrian Baptismal Rite," in *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites*, ed. Jacob Vellian (Kottayam, India: J. Vellian, 1973), 100-118.; Sebastian P. Brock, "A Short Melkite Baptismal Service in Syriac," *Parole de l'Orient* 3 (1972): 119-130.

rather than the Pauline, conceptual model.”⁴⁹ Although Syriac baptismal rites would later be influenced by Saint Paul’s language in Romans 6,⁵⁰ mentioning “the ‘old man’ and ‘being planted in likeness of the death of Christ,’”⁵¹

Curiously little emphasis is given to this Pauline teaching in Syrian tradition, at least until a fairly late date. In the services themselves the water is never described as the ‘grave’ or the baptized as ‘being buried’, perhaps because of the dominance of the image of the font as a womb (see below). Likewise early Syriac writers such as Ephrem and Aphrahat, give little attention to this aspect of baptism. ... For the fourth-century writers baptism is primarily to be seen in Johannine terms, as a rebirth (John 3:3), and not as a death followed by resurrection (Romans 6).⁵²

Coupled with his unimpeachable erudition, Brock’s emphasis on Ephrem’s typically early Syrian concern with “baptism as a rebirth, rather than as a death and resurrection” would seem either to preclude or, at the very least, to curtail severely, inquiries of the type which is here attempted. As the result of his substantial

⁴⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 39.

⁵⁰ Saint Paul writes in Romans 6:1-7: “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin.”

⁵¹ Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 79.

⁵² Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 79. Brock notes, however, that in the fifth and sixth centuries, “both Jacob of Serugh and Narsai speak of the ‘grave of the water’. In it, Narsai says, ‘the priest buries the whole man’ and ‘resuscitates him by the saving power concealed in his words’ (i.e. the baptismal formula). Jacob has a very similar passage in his homily on our Lord’s baptism: ‘(Christ speaks) I bring men down to the grave of the water so that I may make them immortal at the resurrection.’” (80)

scholarship on the topic and the challenge his work poses, Brock's presence will be clear throughout this portion of our discussion. Nevertheless, for reasons which shall become clear in the process of its execution, the following investigation of the intersection between Christ's descent to Sheol and Christian baptism is one which is not pursued in vain.

In the first place, it is clear from numerous accounts, some of which we have already surveyed above, that Ephrem the Syrian did in fact observe and forge symbolic links between Christ's baptism and his death on the cross. Sebastian Brock has himself identified these two events in the history of salvation as the "twin fountainheads of Christian baptism,"⁵³ and he has been accompanied in his assessment by a number of others, perhaps most notably, Georges Saber. Calling attention to a passage in Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Saber argued that "la rémission baptismale des péchés ne trouve son fondement et sa raison d'être que dans le sacrifice de la croix."⁵⁴ That passage reads:

Our debt so surpassed everything in its enormity that neither the prophets nor the priests, not the just nor kings were able to acquit it. Therefore, when the Son of the Lord of everything came, although omnipotent, he did not acquit our debt, either in the womb [of his mother], or by his birth, or by his baptism. [He did not acquit it] until he was delivered over to the cross and tasted death, so that his death might be redemption for our debt. Through it, that [debt], which all creatures were incapable of paying, would be acquitted.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.32⁵⁵

Ephrem's conception of Christ's death as the fulfillment of the work of human redemption which was begun in his birth and which repaid the debt of humanity's sin also found clear expression in a strophe from one of his *Hymns on the Nativity* which corroborates the comment cited above.

⁵³ Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 466.

⁵⁴ Saber, *La théologie baptismale de saint Ephrem*, 133.

⁵⁵ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 333.

And as He began in birth, He continued and completed
 in death.
 His birth received worship; His death repaid the debt.
 As He came to birth, the magi worshipped Him.⁵⁶
 Again, He came to suffering and the thief took refuge
 in Him.⁵⁷
 Between His birth and death He placed the world in
 the middle;
 By [His] birth and death He revived it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 21.19⁵⁸

In one instance, the baptism which originated from the side of the crucified Savior was depicted by Ephrem as having salvific significance for Adam in Sheol, and by extension for all humanity. In the thirty-ninth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Death speaks for Ephrem saying:

“The lance of Phinehas again has caused me to fear
 for by the slaughter he wrought with it he hindered the
 pestilence.⁵⁹
 The lance guarded the tree of life;⁶⁰
 it made me glad and made me sad. It hindered Adam
 from life
 and it hindered death from the people. But the lance
 that pierced Jesus—
 by it I have suffered. He is pierced and I groan.
 There came from Him water and blood.⁶¹
 Adam washed and lived and returned to Paradise.”

Nisibene Hymns, 39.7⁶²

Sebastian Brock has suggested that the reason that Ephrem associated the water and blood of the church's sacraments which issued from Christ's side with Adam in Sheol might be traced to “a rather quaint and literalistic explanation in the anonymous *Cave of Treasure*”:

⁵⁶ Matt. 2:10-11.

⁵⁷ Luke 23:42-43.

⁵⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 177.

⁵⁹ Num. 25:6-8.

⁶⁰ Gen. 3:24.

⁶¹ John 19:34.

⁶² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 201.

The blood and water flowed from the side of Christ and came down into the mouth of Adam (buried immediately below the cross on Golgotha) and they constituted for him the baptismal water, and he was baptized.⁶³

Thus, on the basis of the Christian tradition which located Adam's grave at Golgotha, Ephrem interpreted the blood and water from Christ's side as having sacramental efficacy for Adam, dead and buried in Sheol. In this very unusual manner, which may be seen as fitting for the one who was the representative and the father of fallen humanity, Adam was integrated into the church through his reception of its sacraments. Adam's status as the representative man meant that his baptism in Sheol held significance for all of humanity, and we now turn to consider the Christian sacrament of initiation in its more customary form, among those participating in the life of the church in the current temporal order of creation, in order to examine the intersection between Christ's descent to Sheol and Christian baptism.

According to Saber, one of the ways in which Christ's crucifixion was reiterated in Christian baptism was by means of the liturgical use of the sign of the cross. In an article entitled "La typologie sacramentaire et baptismale de saint Éphrem," Saber called attention to one of the biblical narratives which Ephrem used to draw together themes of baptism and crucifixion, noting that "entre le déluge, la Passion du Christ, le baptême chrétien, et le jugement dernier, une étroite correspondance existe."⁶⁴ The close correspondance to which Saber referred in his article was also clearly described in his book, *La Théologie Baptismale de Saint Ephrem*,⁶⁵ where he cited from the forty-ninth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith*:

Noah's ark⁶⁶ marked out by its course the sign of its
 Preserver,
 the cross of its Steersman and the wood of its Sailor
 who has come to fashion for us a church in the waters
 of baptism:

⁶³ Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 90.

⁶⁴ Georges Saber, "La typologie sacramentaire et baptismale de saint Éphrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 80.

⁶⁵ Saber, *La théologie baptismale de saint Ephrem*, 52-54, 132-134.

⁶⁶ Gen. 6-8; cf. I Peter 3:18-22, esp. vv. 20-22.

with the three-fold name He rescues those who reside
 in her,
 and in place of the dove, the Spirit administers her
 anointing
 and the mystery of her salvation. Praise to her Savior!

Hymns on Faith, 49.⁶⁷

Saber also noted Ephrem's emphasis on the sign of the cross in the rite of baptism in two strophes from *Hymns on Virginity* 15 and 21 where Ephrem declared:

Blessed are you, too, Simon Peter,
 holder of the keys that the Spirit forged.
 Great is the word and inexpressible
 that above and below binds and looses.⁶⁸
 Blessed are the flocks He gave you;⁶⁹ how much they
 have increased!
 For you fastened the cross upon the water.
 The flock in its love gave birth to every sort of
 virgins and chaste ones.

Hymns on Virginity, 15.⁷⁰

You are the son of Asenath,⁷¹ the daughter of a pagan
 priest;
 she is a symbol of the church of the Gentiles.
 She loved Joseph, and Joseph's son
 in truth the holy church loved.
 She had many children by the Crucified,
 and on every member the cross is engraved.
 By the symbol of Ephrem crosses are crowded into her,
 by the birth from water.

Hymns on Virginity, 21.⁷²

Another link between Christ's descent to Sheol and Christian baptism in Ephrem's thought may be established on the basis of

⁶⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 58.

⁶⁸ Matt. 16:17-19.

⁶⁹ cf. John 21:15-19.

⁷⁰ McVey, *Hymns*, 327.

⁷¹ Gen. 41:45.

⁷² McVey, *Hymns*, 353. In a note appended to the end of this strophe McVey states: "Ephrem's understanding of baptism is closely linked with the crucifixion; cf. Saber, *Théologie*, 51-55, 132-134."

the poet’s use of the Syriac verb *‘mad* (ܡܕ).⁷³ As Brock himself has pointed out, Ephrem seizes on the double connotations of this verb “meaning both ‘to be baptized’ and ‘to dive’” in order to depict Christ’s baptism as a dive “for the treasure that will give life and salvation to Adam’s children.”⁷⁴ Brock provides an example from the seventh of Ephrem’s *Hymns on Virginity*:

Christ, though immortal by nature, clothed himself in a
mortal body;
He was baptized (*or* He dived down)—and raised up
from the water
the treasure of salvation for the race of Adam.

Hymns on Virginity, 7.10⁷⁵

⁷³ ܡܕ fut. ܡܕܐ, act. part. ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ, pass. part. ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ a) *to dive, plunge, sink, set*; ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ, *when the day begins to set*; ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *he plunged into the depth of the sea*; ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *they dive and come up, sink and rise*; metaph. ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *he had sunk from this earth = his day of life set*. b) *to penetrate*; ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *the point of the arrow entered his brain*. c) *to dip in or under water, to bathe, wash*; ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *she bathed in the spring*. d) *to be baptized*; ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *He came to be baptized by him*. Pass. part. *plunged, immersed; set beneath the horizon; a candidate for baptism*. ETHPE. ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *to be baptized*. APH. ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ trans. *to dip, immerse* ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *in water; to baptize*. Pass. part. pl. ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ ܡܕܐ *baptized in blood*. DERIVATIVES, ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ, ܡܕܐ. Payne Smith, ed. *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 416.

⁷⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 90-91.

⁷⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 91.; cf. McVey, *Hymns*, 295. Perhaps on the basis of context, “to dive” is the sense of *‘mad*, ܡܕ that McVey opts for in her translation of this strophe:

Oil by its love became companion to the diver who in
his need
hates his life and descends and in water buries himself.
Oil, a nature that does not sink, becomes a partaker
with the body that sinks,
and it dove down to bring up from the deep a treasure
of great wealth.
The Anointed, a nature that does not die, put on a
mortal body;
He dove down and brought up from the water the
living treasure of the house of Adam.

Hymns on Virginity, 7.10

This same verb, laden with the double meaning highlighted by Brock above, was also deployed by Ephrem in the context of his discussion of Christ's descent to Sheol in his *Nisibene Hymns*. In both Hymn 36 and Hymn 65, *'mad* (ܡܕ) is translated according to another of its possible meanings, "to plunge."⁷⁶ Resonances between Ephrem's use of *'mad* (ܡܕ) in the context of Christ's baptism which procured "the treasure of salvation for the race of Adam" are underscored in these two hymns on the salvific nature of Christ's descent to Sheol by references to Adam's restoration as the object of this event.

(DEATH) "If You are God, show Your power;
and if You are a man, feel our power;
and if it is Adam you seek, be gone!
He is imprisoned here because of his debts. Cherubim
and seraphim cannot
make restitution in his place. None of them are mortal
so as to give
his life in his stead. Who can open the mouth of Sheol
and plunge and bring him from her
who has swallowed him and keeps hold of him
forever?"

Nisibene Hymns, 36.²⁷⁷

Glory to You Who descended and plunged after Adam
and drew him out from the depths of Sheol and
brought him into Eden!

Nisibene Hymns, 65.R⁷⁸

Ephrem also implicitly brought the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol into contact with Christian baptism in a number of hymns which explore the theological symbolism of the pre-baptismal anointing (*rušmā*, ܪܘܫܡܐ) of Christians. Earlier in this chapter we noted Ephrem's use of the olive, the source of the oil (*mešhā*, ܡܫܗܐ) used in this anointing, as a synecdochic symbol of

⁷⁶ See note 41 above. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 416.

⁷⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 193-194, 196.

⁷⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 193-194, 216.

the baptismal experience as a whole (HVirg. 37.3).⁷⁹ In Ephrem's thought, symbolic theological value was not confined merely to the olive and its oil, but was often extended metonymically to include the olive tree as well. Such is the case in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* where we read:

The olive tree [symbolizes] the mystery of Christ, from which spring forth milk, water and oil; milk for the children, water for the youths and oil for the sick. The olive tree gave water and blood through its death, [just as] the Messiah gave these through his death.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.11⁸⁰

⁷⁹ As Georges Saber has observed, "Il se trouve chez EPHREM des textes où ruchmo est l'équivalent pur et simple du baptême." Saber, *La théologie baptismale de saint Ephrem*, 63.

⁸⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 322-323. See also: Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 462-472. Many of the themes implicit in Ephrem's thought on these matters, especially (given our current investigation) Christ's sleep in death during the piercing of his side, were made more explicit in the writings of Ephrem's later admirer Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451-521). The following passages, cited by Brock, are from Jacob's third homily.

The Bridegroom's side has been pierced, and from it
the Bride has come forth,
fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve.
For from the beginning God knew and depicted
Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his Only-
begotten;
He slept on the cross as Adam had slept in his deep
sleep,
his side was pierced and from it there came forth the
Daughter of Light,
—water and blood as an image of divine children
to be heirs to the Father who loves his Only-begotten.
Eve in prophecy is the mother of all that lives—
what if not baptism is the mother of all life?
Adam's wife bore human bodies subject to death,
but this virgin bears spiritual beings who live for ever;
Adam's side gave birth to a woman who gives birth to
immortals.

Ephrem's use of the olive tree as a symbol of baptism also allowed him to express the intersection between Christ's descent to Sheol and Christian baptism. In the sixth of his *Hymns on Virginity*, Christ's baptism in the Jordan, by means of which he inherited, fulfilled, and transformed priesthood and kingship of the Old Testament,⁸¹ provides the implicit context in which Ephrem links themes of baptism and victory over death through references to the biblical narrative of Noah's flood.

Again Zechariah saw two olive branches as sources;⁸²
 [from] the one would flow priesthood, and [from] the
 other, its companion, kingship.
 In the Captivity the treasure of the two poured forth
 [and] gave two branches:
 atonement and redemption after the Captivity

In the crucifixion he completed the types that had been
 depicted,
 and the hidden mystery that had been covered revealed
 itself.

The virgin earth gave birth to Adam in holy fashion
 so as to indicate clearly Mary's giving birth.
 Adam in turn slept, and his side was pierced;
 from it came forth Eve to be mother for the whole
 world,
 serving as an image of that sleep of death on the cross
 and of that side which gave birth to baptism.
 Adam slept and gave the whole world a mother;
 the Savior died, and there flows from him baptismal
 water.

If the side gave birth to Eve, as is written,
 then a virgin too gave birth to the Son, as is indicated.

Sebastian P. Brock, "The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ," *Sobornost* 7 (1978): 463-464.

⁸¹ Gabriele Winkler, "The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and its Implications," *Worship* 52 (1978): 24-45.; cf. Ephrem's discussion of Christ's inheritance of the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices in his *Homily on Our Lord* 50-59 in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 325-332.

⁸² Zech. 4:11-14.

to the polluted and constrained People. He gave, again,
two covenants:
purification and redemption to the polluted and
oppressed peoples.

The olive tree, again, became the first-born of the trees
that were buried
in the Flood, in the likeness of its Lord Who became
the First-born from the house of the dead.

Therefore the olive tree passed through the Deluge,
and before all [else] it was revived.

It rose up [and] gave its leaf as a pledge for the revival
of all.

The dove found and eagerly desired it—the bird that
seeks our inhabited land.

[The dove] announced that there was a survivor, and
[the olive tree] sent a greeting in her mouth.⁸³

[The olive tree] passed through the waves [and] rose up
as king and sent its envoy of peace,
and it gave good tidings to the confined and brought
forth praise in the mouth of the silent.

Plucked from it was consolation, a leaf that enlightened
the eyes of all.

It announced to Noah that anger was defeated, and
mercy was victorious.

The sight of the leaf, although mute, sowed exultation
with the sorrowful.

For them it became a mirror of peace in which they
saw the peace of the earth.

Hymns on Virginity, 6.2-4⁸⁴

The same themes noted above were again brilliantly interwoven in the next of Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity*, where they are also combined with other images of baptism which might be considered characteristically Ephremic such as baptism as a womb, the pre-baptismal anointing as a seal or signet-impressed wax, and the font as a place of cleansing and purification, as well as the means of access to the Eucharistic altar. Though the following citation is lengthy and intricate, our discussion up to this point will

⁸³ Gen. 8:11.

⁸⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 288-289.

have familiarized the reader sufficiently to note the symbolic convergences Ephrem seeks to express.

With visible pigments the image of kingship is
 portrayed,
 and with visible oil is portrayed the hidden image of
 our hidden King.
 With the drawings that baptism labors to bring forth in
 her womb,
 from the portrayal of the primal man who was
 corrupted
 she portrays a new image, and she gives birth to them
 with three labor pangs
 that [are] the three glorious names of Father and Son
 and Holy Spirit.

Oil is, therefore, the friend of the Holy Spirit and Her
 minister.

As a disciple it accompanies Her, since by it She seals
 priests and anointed ones,
 for the Holy Spirit by the Anointed brands Her sheep.
 In the symbol of the signet ring that in sealing wax
 marks its imprint,
 also the hidden mark of the Spirit is imprinted by the
 oil on bodies
 anointed in baptism and sealed in the dipping.

For by the oil of departure are anointed for absolution
 bodies full of stains, and they are whitened, without
 being beaten.

They descended in debts as filthy ones and ascended
 pure as babes

since they have baptism, another womb.

[Baptism's] giving birth rejuvenates the old just as the
 river rejuvenated Na'man.

O to the womb that gives birth to royal sons every day
 without birthpangs!

Priesthood is a servant to this womb in her giving
 birth.

Anointing rushes before her; the Holy Spirit hastens
 upon her floods;
 the crown of Levites surrounds her; the High Priest
 was made her servant.

The Watchers rejoice in the lost that were found by
 her.

O to the womb that, having given birth, is nourished
and educated by the altar!

O to the babes who immediately eat perfect bread
instead of milk!

The Anointed, source of all helps, accompanied the
body, source of pains.

For oil blots out debts as the Flood blotted out the
unclean.

For the Deluge, like the Just One, justly blots out evil
people.⁸⁵

Since they did not conquer their lust, those who
deluged [the earth] with it, floated.

But oil in the likeness of the Gracious One blots out
our debts in baptism.

Since sin is drowned in the water, let it not be revived
by desires.

Oil by its love became companion to the diver who in
his need

hates his life and descends and in water buries himself.

Oil, a nature that does not sink, becomes a partaker
with the body that sinks,

and it dove down to bring up from the deep a treasure
of wealth.

The Anointed, a nature that does not die, put on a
mortal body;

He dove down and brought up from the water the
living treasure of the house of Adam.

Oil gave itself for purchase instead of orphans that they
not be sold.⁸⁶

For the orphans it was like a guardian that restrained
force that entered to tear away

from the root of freedom two brothers like shoots
and onto the root of slavery to graft them.

The payment of oil silenced the promissory notes
crying out against the debtors.

It cut off those coming to cut off a mother from her
children.

⁸⁵ Gen. 6:7.

⁸⁶ cf. II Kings 4:1-7.

Oil by its love in a symbol of the Anointed repaid the
 debts that were not its own.
 A free treasure was found in an earthen vessel for
 debtors
 like the Treasure found for the peoples in an earthly
 body.
 Oil became a slave for purchase for the freeing of the
 noble.
 The Anointed became a slave for purchase for the
 freeing of the slaves of sin.
 Both in name and in deed oil portrayed the Anointed.
 Oil acknowledges You entirely, for oil revives all.
 It serves as the Anointed, Reviver of all; in streams,
 branches, and leaves it portrays Him.
 With its branches it praised Him through children; with
 its streams it anointed Him through Mary;
 with its leaf, too, through the dove it serves as His
 type.⁸⁷
 With its branches it portrays the symbol of His victory;
 with its streams it portrays the symbol of His
 mortality;
 with its leaf it portrays the symbol of His resurrection,
 and like death the Flood vomited it up.

Hymns on Virginity, 7.5-13⁸⁸

Christ's triumph over Death in Sheol is also evoked in a
 baptismal context where Ephrem again compared baptizands to
 divers as in *Hymns on Virginity* 7.10 above. Here Death is
 symbolized as Leviathan, the monster of the deep which threatens
 to consume them.

In symbol and truth Leviathan⁸⁹ is trodden down
 by mortals: the baptized, like divers, strip
 and put on oil, as a symbol of Christ
 they snatched you and came up: stripped,
 they seized the soul from his embittered mouth.

Hymns on Faith, 82.10⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Gen. 8:11.

⁸⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 294-296.

⁸⁹ cf. Psalms 74:14; Isaiah 27:1.

⁹⁰ Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity*, 114.

A similar identification of death with the oil with which Mary anointed Christ was made in Ephrem's *Homily on Our Lord*:

Mary anointed the head of our Lord's body, as a symbol of the "better part" she had chosen.⁹⁷ The oil was a prophecy of what her mind had chosen. While Martha was occupied with serving, Mary hungered to be satisfied with spiritual things from the one who also satisfies bodily needs for us. So Mary refreshed Him with precious oil, just as He had refreshed her with His most excellent teaching. With her oil, Mary indicated a symbol of the death of Him⁹⁸ who put to death her carnal desire with His teaching.... Mary openly received the title "blessed" from His mouth in payment for the work of her hands at His head. She poured precious oil on His head and received a wonderful promise from His mouth.

Homily on Our Lord, 49.¹⁹⁹

Though the association of Mary's anointing of Christ as a symbolic burial is clear within these passages, it is not specified here that this anointing is in any way evocative of baptism. For such a correlation we must recall an earlier passage of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* which was cited in Chapter 2, where Mary's anointing of Jesus at Bethany in anticipation of his death was offered to John the Baptist as an analog to the service he is to render to the Lord.

John kept himself from all sins because he was to baptize him who was without sins. "Do not be amazed, John, that you should baptize me, for I have yet to receive a baptism of anointing (*d-meshā*, ܕܡܫܗܐ) from

ed. and tr., *Saint Éphrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant Texte Syriaque*, 198.

⁹⁷ Luke 10:42; cf. Matt. 26:6-7; cf. Mark 14:3-9. See note 99 below.

⁹⁸ Matt. 26:12; Mark 14:8.

⁹⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 324-325. Joseph Amar has called attention to the way in which Ephrem "identifies Mary (and Martha) who anoints the feet of Jesus (John 12.3), with the woman mentioned in Matt 26.7 (Mark 14.3) who anointed the head of Jesus. On the fusing of Mary the mother of Jesus with Mary Magdalene see Sebastian P. Brock, "Mary and the Gardener," *Parole de l'Orient* 11 (1983): 223-34; and Murray, *Symbols*, 146-48 and 329-35." (324)

taken (borrowing Brock's typology) as a Pauline reference to baptism as a death, a more sensitive reading, attuned to "the whole emphasis of the earliest Syrian [rite on] a charismatic rebirth to

he will not obtain eternal life? [Let us listen] to the apostle, *We have been baptized in Christ; it is unto his death that we have been baptized.* It was through the mystery of the water and blood issuing forth from [the Lord's] side that the robber received the sprinkling which gave him the remission of sins. *You shall be with me in this garden of delights.*" (McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 307.) If this is, in fact, Ephrem's own comment on the passage in question, it would represent the only clear reference to what Brock has called the Pauline model of baptism as death and resurrection in the writings of the fourth century Syrian poet. That the passage has certain resonances with Ephrem's thought and imagery is undeniable (e.g., the baptismal "robe of glory" in the context of Adam and the thief as anti-types; see also *Hymns on Paradise* 4.5 in: Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 99. However, since this comment occurs in a portion of the Commentary which is missing in Syriac and reconstructed in McCarthy's translation from an Armenian text which "tends to expand at times in comparison to the Syriac towards the end of the Commentary" (McCarthy, 272), prudence demands a certain hesitation in accepting this Pauline interpretation of baptism as Ephrem's own.

Another passage in McCarthy's translation, however, at CDiat. 21.17, presents us with the following comment: "There were two baptisms to be found in the case of our Lord, purifier of all. One was through water, and the other through the cross, so that he might teach about [the baptism] of water through that of suffering. For repentance for sinners is a crucifixion for them, which nails their members secretly, lest they yield to pleasures. This is what John had proclaimed before our Lord. Consequently, the two baptisms are necessary for both just and sinners. If [only] one is present, it cannot vivify without its companion." (McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 325) Despite the pronounced penitential element, which Gabriele Winkler (G. Winkler, "The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications," *Worship* 52 (1978):24-45.) and Sebastian Brock have both considered alien to Syrian baptismal theologies up to the fourth century, this selection seems even more enigmatic than the one previously mentioned because of its identification not of Christ's baptism as one of two deaths, but of his death as one of two baptisms.

The complicated textual tangles of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* make this a matter deserving of further inquiry (see: W. L. Petersen, "Some Remarks On The Integrity of Ephrem's Commentary on the Diatessaron," *Studia Patristica* 20 (1989): 197-202.).

something new, with little stress on death to something old,"¹⁰³ will note that the polarity of the symbolic charge of this statement is actually reversed, interpreting death as a baptism, not baptism as a death. This allows the statement to assume an implicitly Johannine cast, and to be harmonized with the tone and content of existing studies of baptismal theology and practice in the context of early Syriac Christianity.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly in terms of establishing the link between Christian baptism and Christ's descent to Sheol, it must be remembered above all that Ephrem articulated a symbolic parallelism between the womb of the Jordan and the womb of Sheol, both of which serve as mystically unified, though temporally discrete, moments in the history of salvation in which Christ humbly identifies himself with and effects redemption for fallen humanity. As was noted in Chapter 2, Ephrem's conception of the salvific unity of these events was emphatically incarnational, taking the Divine Son's birth from the womb of the Virgin Mary as paradigmatic both in terms of Divine revelation and human redemption and providing a pliable metaphor for describing crucial events in the history of salvation. Thus, Ephrem writes in his *Homily on Our Lord*:

The Father begot Him, and through Him He made all creation. Flesh begot Him, and in His flesh He put passions to death. Baptism begot Him, that through Him it might make (our) stains white. Sheol begot Him to have her treasures despoiled by Him.

Homily on Our Lord, 2.5¹⁰⁴

Evidence of Ephrem's conception of baptism as another birth undergone by Christ is preserved in the thirty-sixth of his *Hymns on the Church*. Likening this event to the Savior's nativity, interment, transfiguration, and ascension (strophe five), Ephrem presented Christ's baptism in the Jordan as a birth from the "moist womb of the water" (strophe 3).

When it is associated with a source of light
an eye becomes clear,
it shines with the light that provisions it,

¹⁰³ Sebastian P. Brock, "The Syrian Baptismal Ordines (with Special Reference to the Anointings)," *Studia Liturgica* 13 (1978): 181.

¹⁰⁴ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277.

it gleams with its brightness,
it becomes glorious with its splendor,
adorned by its beauty.

Refrain: Blessed is the Creator of light.

As though on an eye
the Light settled in Mary.
It polished her mind,
made bright her thought
and pure her understanding,
causing her virginity to shine.

The river in which He was baptized
conceived Him again symbolically;
the moist womb of the water
conceived Him in purity,
bore Him in chastity,
made Him ascend in glory.

In the pure womb of the river
you should recognize the daughter of man,
who conceived having known no man,¹⁰⁵
who gave birth without intercourse,
who brought up, through a gift,
the Lord of that gift.

As the Daystar in the river,
the Bright One in the tomb,
He shone forth on the mountain top¹⁰⁶
and gave brightness too in the womb;
He dazzled as He went up from the river,
gave illumination at His ascension.¹⁰⁷

Hymns on the Church, 36.1-5¹⁰⁸

For the moment, we will pass over the implicit reference to the descent to Sheol in the baptismal context of this hymn in strophe five's mention of "the Bright One in the tomb." Here it is important to note, instead, the manner in which Ephrem saw

¹⁰⁵ Luke 1:34.

¹⁰⁶ Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36.

¹⁰⁷ Luke 24: 50-51.

¹⁰⁸ Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: *Hymni De Ecclesia* 36," *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975): 137-138.

Christ's baptism in the womb of the Jordan as the prototype and paradigm for all Christian baptism. This conception is clear in the fifteenth of the *Hymns on Virginity*.

Blessed are you, little Jordan River,
into which the Flowing Sea descended and was
baptized.
You are not equal to a drop of vapor
of the Living Flood that whitens sins.
Blessed are your torrents, cleansed by His descent.
For the Holy One, Who condescended to bathe in you,
descended to open by His baptism
the baptism for the pardoning of souls.

Hymns on Virginity, 15.3¹⁰⁹

As a result of Christ's "opening" of Christian baptism for his church, the font itself became the "womb of the water," allowing Christians to mystically participate in the same salvific reality present in the Savior's own immersion in the Jordan. In the third of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Crucifixion*, the basin in which the feet of the apostles were washed and the baptismal font in which believers are "composed anew" function as components of a symbolic complex overtly signifying the unity of the church and implicitly figuring the church's unity with Christ.

Our Lord purified the body of the brothers
with the basin which was a symbol of unity.¹¹⁰
In a symbol a member was also torn off
who cut himself off and gave himself up.¹¹¹
In the womb of the water, He composed us anew
that we might not be divided members
who stand in opposition to each other
and do not perceive that [those] who blame strive with
their Beloved.

Hymns on the Crucifixion, 3.8¹¹²

As has been observed throughout our discussion, Ephrem also made frequent use of the imagery of the womb in his depictions of Sheol, both with reference to Christ's descent there,

¹⁰⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 325-326.

¹¹⁰ John 13:1-17.

¹¹¹ John 13:2.

¹¹² Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 51. (my translation)

and with reference to the eschatological resurrection of humanity. In Ephrem's deployment of this symbolism, clear parallels with his use of womb imagery relative to baptism are discernible. In the first place, in the thirty-seventh of the *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem compares the barren womb of Sheol to the virgin womb of Mary. Death, seeking to make sense of what has occurred in Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead muses:

Is this then perchance that saying which was heard by
me from Isaiah?
(but I despised it) when he arose and said,
"Who hath heard such a thing as this?
that the earth should travail in one day,
and bring forth a nation in one hour."¹¹³
Is it this that has come to pass?
Or else is it reserved for us hereafter?
And if it be this, it is a vain shadow that I thought I am
a king.
I knew not it was but a deposit I was keeping.
Two utterances that were different have I heard from
him, even this Isaiah.
For he said that a virgin should conceive and bring
forth
and he said again that the earth should bring forth.
But lo! the Virgin has brought Him forth,¹¹⁴
and Sheol the barren has brought Him forth.¹¹⁵
Two wombs that contrary to nature have been changed
by Him;
the Virgin and Sheol both of them.
The Virgin in her bringing forth He made glad,
but Sheol He grieved and made sad in His resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 37.3-4¹¹⁶

In the previous chapter we noted Ephrem's identification of Christ as the Firstborn of Sheol (HNis. 38.7), calling attention to the Pauline precedents of this theological convention in the epistle to the Colossians where Christ is spoken of as the "Firstborn from

¹¹³ Isa. 66:8.

¹¹⁴ Isa. 7:14.

¹¹⁵ Isa. 66:8.

¹¹⁶ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198.

the dead" (Colossians 1:18) and in the epistle to the Romans where the Apostle states:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that He might be the firstborn within a large family. And those who he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8:28-30

Conflating both of these Pauline senses of Christ's status as the Firstborn and regarding the Savior as the 'Firstborn of many from the dead,' Ephrem seems to have adopted and adapted these themes, taking them for his own purposes. In the thirty-eighth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem wrote:

All that have been raised were not firstborn
for our Lord is the Firstborn of Sheol.¹¹⁷
How can any that is dead precede Him—
that power whereby he was raised? There are last that
are first
and younger that have become firstborn. For though
Manasseh was firstborn
how could it be that Ephraim should take his
birthright?¹¹⁸
And if the second was born and set before him,
how much more shall the Lord and Creator precede all
in His resurrection.
Lo! John as a herald
declares that he is later though he was elder born.
For he said, "Behold a man comes after me
and yet He was before me."¹¹⁹ For how could he be
before Him—
that power in Whom he preached? For everything that
happens because of another

¹¹⁷ Col. 1:18.

¹¹⁸ Gen. 48:12-20.

¹¹⁹ John 1:15.

thing is after that other even though it seem to be
before.

For the cause which called it into being
is elder than it and before it in all things.

The cause of Adam was elder
than all creatures which were made for him.
For to him, even to Adam, He had respect
continually—
the Creator even while He was creating.¹²⁰ Thus though
Adam as yet was not
he was elder than all creatures. How much more then,
my Lord, must
this Thy manhood be elder, which in Thy Godhead is
from eternity with Him that begat Thee!
To Thee be praise and through Thee to Thy Father
from us all!

To Thee be praise for Thou art the first
in Thy Godhead and in Thy Manhood!
For even though Elijah was first to go up,¹²¹
he was not able to precede Him for whose sake he was
taken up.
For his type depended on Thy verity and even though
the types apparently
are before Thy fulfillment, it is before them secretly.
Creatures were before Adam.
He was before them because for his sake they were made.

Nisibene Hymns, 38.7-10¹²²

Through his conflated Pauline conception of Christ as the 'Firstborn of many from the dead,' Ephrem argued that Christ was the one who opened the womb of Sheol, even despite the apparently contrary evidence of Old Testament figures who defied death in some respect. It must also be observed, however, that Ephrem saw Christ's opening of the womb of Sheol as an event which had extenuating significance for all of humanity, and especially for those who would be "conformed to his image" in the sacramental practices of the church.

¹²⁰ Gen. 1:26-31.

¹²¹ II Kings 2:11-12.

¹²² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 200.

The Only-Begotten¹²³ journeyed from the God-head and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many.¹²⁴ And He journeyed from Sheol and resided in the kingdom, to tread a path from Sheol, which cheats everyone, to the kingdom, which rewards everyone. For the Lord gave His resurrection as a guarantee to mortals that He would lead them out of Sheol, which takes the departed without discrimination, to the kingdom, which welcomes guests with discrimination, so that we might journey from where everyone's bodies are treated the same, to where everyone's efforts are treated with discrimination.

Homily on Our Lord, 1.2¹²⁵

Ephrem's use of the image of the maternal womb allowed him to construct a series of clear parallels between Christ's passage through baptism and through Sheol, both of which the Savior opened for his church, transforming them into places of new birth to the life of victory over sin and death. Governed by the revelatory and redemptive archetype of Christ's incarnation from the womb of the Virgin Mary, Ephrem saw both Christ's baptism and his descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead as salvific births from unlikely wombs. Sebastian Brock's assessment of Saint Ephrem's baptismal thought as representative of the early Syriac tradition concerning that rite as a rebirth in the Johannine sense and not as a death and resurrection in the Pauline sense may still be affirmed as providing a useful distinction, especially insofar as comparisons are made between Ephrem's theology of baptism and those of his Greek and Latin contemporaries to the west, as well as those of his later Syriac heirs. We have seen with Brock the emphasis on new birth within Ephrem's own theological reflection on Christian baptism. We have also seen, however, that the Johannine conception of rebirth is articulated just as clearly in Ephrem's discussions of the mystery of Christ's death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead, a symbolic complex which is explicitly and implicitly related to Christian baptism throughout

¹²³ John 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18.

¹²⁴ Rom. 8:29.

¹²⁵ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 273-274.

Ephrem's writings, even in places where Pauline theological categories are deployed.

He poured forth dew and living rain
upon Mary, the thirsty earth.
Also like a grain of wheat He fell into Sheol.
He ascended like a Sheaf and New Bread.¹²⁶
Blessed is His offering!

From the height His Power descended to us
and from within the womb hope sprang forth for us.
From the tomb life rose for us
and upon the right hand the King sits for us.
Blessed is His glory!

The Word of the Father came from His womb
and put on the body in another womb.
From womb to womb He went forth
and chaste wombs are filled by Him.
Blessed is He Who dwelled with us!

From the height He descended like the Lord
and from within the womb he went forth like a servant.
And Death knelt before Him in Sheol.
And by His resurrection the living worshipped Him.
Blessed is His triumph!¹²⁷

His birth is a purification to us
and also His baptism is a remission to us.
Also His death is life to us.
Also His ascension is exaltation to us.
How much ought we to give thanks to Him!

Hymns on the Resurrection, 1.3, 5, 7, 8, 16¹²⁸

CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND THE EUCHARIST

The symbolic relationship between the Eucharistic practice of the church and Christ's passion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead in Ephrem's thought derived principally from the identification of the bread and wine with Christ's body and blood. As Robert Murray has noted, and Seely Beggiani has echoed, "that same body in which he healed men and rose again, he gave us in

¹²⁶ cf. John 12:24.

¹²⁷ cf. Phil. 2:5-11.

¹²⁸ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 78, 79, 81. (my translation)

sacramental form (in 'mystery') to heal us, to incorporate us in him in the Church, and to give us a pledge of the resurrection."¹²⁹ For Ephrem, the Eucharist, like baptism, originated from twin sources: Christ's institution of the church's sacramental meal in the Last Supper and the blood and water which flowed from the pierced side of the Crucified. Since we have already considered the manner in which Ephrem saw the pierced side of the Savior as the source of the church's sacraments, let us consider the manner in which Ephrem attributed the same significance to the Last Supper. In one of his *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*, Ephrem declared:

The bread was broken by His hands in a symbol of His
body.
The cup was mixed by His hands in a symbol of His
blood.
It was Himself He sacrificed and offered—the Priest of
our Reconciliation.¹³⁰

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 2.7¹³¹

Similar themes of sacramental presence in the bread and wine and of Christ's identity as priest and victim found expression in the third of Ephrem's *Hymns on the Crucifixion*. In a poetic address to the room in which the Last Supper was eaten, Ephrem wrote:

Blessed are you, O Upper Room,¹³²
so small in comparison to the entirety of creation,
yet what took place in you
now fills all creation—which is even too small for it.
Blessed is your abode, for in it was broken
that Bread¹³³ which issues from the blessed Wheat Sheaf,
and in you was trodden out
the Cluster of Grapes that came from Mary
to become the Cup of Salvation.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 70.; see also: Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity*, 125.

¹³⁰ Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-22; I Cor. 11:17-26.

¹³¹ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 4. (my translation)

¹³² Mark 14:15.

¹³³ Mark 14:22.

¹³⁴ Mark 14:23-24.

Blessed are you, O Upper Room,
 no man has ever seen
 nor shall ever see, what you beheld:
 Our Lord became at once
 True Altar, Priest, Bread, and Cup of Salvation.
 In His own person He could fulfill all these roles,
 none other was capable of this:
 Whole Offering and Lamb, Sacrifice and Sacrificer,
 Priest and One destined to be consumed.

Hymns on the Crucifixion, 3.9-10¹³⁵

Redeploying the same christological images of the cluster of grapes and of wheat in other contexts, Ephrem depicted Christ's crucifixion as the source of the church's Eucharistic practice. An excellent example of this aspect of his thought is preserved in the thirty-first of his *Hymns on Virginity*.

The Cluster of mercy, glorified in the vineyard,
 Who refused labor but seized [its] fruits
 for the one who gave Him gall, shared His sweetness.
 He was trampled on and gave the medicine of life to
 the peoples.
 Blessed is the One Who gave drink from the sober grape
 and was not despised in secret.
 The beautiful Staff [of Wheat] that grew among the
 ugly tares
 gave the bread of life without toil to the hungry.
 He released the curse that held Him captive in Adam
 to eat by sweat the bread of pains and thorns.¹³⁶
 Blessed is he who eats from His blessed bread
 and makes pass away from him the curse.

Hymns on Virginity, 31.14¹³⁷

Though only expressed latently in the selections considered thus far, throughout his works, Ephrem depicted the church's Eucharist as the replacement of the Jewish Passover, fulfilled through Christ's offering of himself on the cross as the True Lamb of which the Passover or "symbolic lamb" was only a type.

¹³⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 102.

¹³⁶ Gen. 3:17-19.

¹³⁷ McVey, *Hymns*, 401.

Sebastian Brock has written of this aspect of Ephrem's thought that

with Christ reality or 'truth' takes over from symbol, the Bread of Life takes the place of the Unleavened Bread; the True Lamb takes the place of the Passover Lamb. This occurs for Ephrem at the Last Supper, which he takes to be the Passover meal (following the account of Luke and the other synoptic Gospels); at the Last Supper Christ 'sacrificed Himself,' prior to His actual death.¹³⁸

One example of Ephrem's supercessionist interpretation of the Eucharist found expression in the following citation from Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith*.

¹³⁸ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 101. Brock notes briefly that the symbolic interpenetration of the Last Supper and the crucifixion was seen by early Syriac theologians to have been so complete as to provide one way of measuring the duration of the Son's three days among the dead was to be reckoned, citing Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 12:6-7 as an example. (178) The same mode of reckoning is also preserved only in Armenian sources: "From the moment when *he broke* his body for his disciples and *gave it* to his apostles, three days are numbered during which he was counted among the dead like Adam. For, although after having eaten of the fruit of the tree, [Adam] lived for many years afterwards, he was nonetheless numbered among the dead for having transgressed the commandment. Thus did [God] speak to him, *The day on which you eat of it you shall die*. [Scripture] also says, *Your descendants shall be for four hundred years*, and the years were numbered from the day on which this word was pronounced. It was likewise for our Lord. Or [alternatively], the sixth day must be counted as two and the Sabbath as one. It was because he had given them his body to eat in view of the mystery of his death that he entered into their bodies, as [afterwards he entered] into the earth. It was because Adam had not blessed [the fruit] at the time when, as a rebel, he gathered it, that *Our Lord blessed [the bread] and broke it*. The bread entered [into them], making up for the avarice by which Adam had rejected [God]. Or, the three days [must be reckoned] from the descent [into hell] and the ascent: the sixth day, the Sabbath, and the first day of the week." McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 284-285.

If a crucifier buys a lamb and kills it
 he hangs it, my Lord, on wood to depict Your killing;¹³⁹
 And also when he hides grains of wheat in the ground,
 the living seed proclaims Your resurrection.¹⁴⁰

Behold, in his flock is Your symbol because it is
 guarded with Your staff.
 In his vineyard [is] a cluster of grapes which is full of
 the symbol of Your blood.
 On his tree hangs fruit: a symbol of Your cross and the
 fruit of Your body.

Hymns on Faith, 18.13-14¹⁴¹

The complex network of typology and symbolism which Ephrem discerned between the Last Supper, the Jewish Passover, the Christian Eucharist, and Christ's crucifixion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead enabled him, especially on the basis of his equation of Christ and the paschal lamb, to interpret the salvific import of the church's Eucharistic practice in terms of Israel's Passover and exodus from Egypt. In the *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* Ephrem wrote:

The Lamb of God brought forth by His blood
 The Peoples from error as from Egypt.

In this feast was sprinkled
 the blood of the paschal lamb on all the doors.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ cf. Exod. 12:7; I Cor. 5:7.

¹⁴⁰ cf. John 12:24.

¹⁴¹ Paul S. Russell, *Ephraem the Syrian, Eighty Hymns on Faith* (unpublished typescript, 1995), 66. The "crucifier" of the first line of this citation is one of Ephrem's more offensive epithets for his real/imagined Jewish contemporaries and religious competitors. For more on Ephrem's anti-Jewish rhetoric, see: Christine C. Shepardson, "'Exchanging Reed For Reed': Mapping Contemporary Heretics onto Biblical Jews in Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith*," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 5:1 (January 2002): 15-33. Shepardson's article is also available online at: <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol5No1/HV5N1Shepardson.html>. See also: A. P. Hayman, "The Image of the Jew in the Syriac Anti-Jewish Polemical Literature," in *"To See Ourselves as Others See Us": Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs, eds. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 423-441.

¹⁴² Exod. 12:7.

In this feast was mingled
the blood of the True Lamb within the disciples.

The symbol within Egypt, the Truth in the Church,
the end of payment within the Kingdom.

Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 5.1, 15, 16, 23¹⁴³

Though the previous chapter contains an account of the manner in which Ephrem made use of paschal imagery, especially the image of the paschal lamb, in order to express the salvific effect of Christ's descent to Sheol, that material must nevertheless be revisited here in order to illustrate the manner in which those themes were implicit in the Eucharistic remembrance and expectation of the church. In his third and fourth *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* Ephrem related Israel's Passover and Christ's crucifixion, comparing "the paschal lamb killed in Egypt and the True Lamb sacrificed in Zion." (HAzym. 3.1) In these hymns, both Egypt and Pharaoh were interpreted as symbols of Sheol from which there was "an exodus" as the result of Christ's descent there. A brief statement of the relationship between the two lambs and their sacrificial victories envisioned by Ephrem is preserved in the following citation from his *Hymns on the Resurrection*.

In the day that symbolic lamb, which came to an end,
broke open Egypt
its strength was seen in its death, for the dead departed
to life.¹⁴⁴
Also the Firstborn, in the day of His death, broke open
Sheol like Egypt.
The dead ones went forth. They proclaimed the
strength of the Lamb who by His death,
brought [them] out from the womb of Sheol.¹⁴⁵ Glory
to You who delivered what belongs to You.

Hymns on the Resurrection, 3.11¹⁴⁶

Just as the Jewish Passover provided a commemoration of a sacrificial event which effected the redemption of the people of Israel, Ephrem envisioned the Eucharist as the commemoration of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross as the True Lamb which

¹⁴³ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 10, 12. (my translation)

¹⁴⁴ Exod. 12:29-31.

¹⁴⁵ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁴⁶ Beck, ed., *Paschalhymnen*, 87. (my translation)

canceled the debt of sin and “broke open Sheol like Egypt” (HRes. 3.11). In the “Living Bread” of the Eucharist which replaced the “unleavened bread” of Israel’s Pasch (HAzym. 6),¹⁴⁷ Christ’s bodily presence was continued sacramentally in the church, and was mixed or “kneaded” into the bodies of Christian believers. (Hymns on Virginity, 37.2) Receiving in the Eucharist the body of Christ which was given to be consumed by Death and which caused Death to burst (HVirg. 37.5), Christians were “mingled” (HVirg. 36.9) with Christ, incorporated into his body, and assured of their own participation in his victory over death. Christians, therefore, should perseverance in hope and expectation, as the following words of encouragement from Ephrem suggest.

In times of temptation console yourselves with God’s
promises,
for there is no deceit in the word of Him who repays
all,
and his treasure house is not so paltry that we should
doubt His promise;
He has surrendered His own Son for us so that we
might believe in Him;

¹⁴⁷ Themes concerning the Eucharist as the fulfillment and replacement of the Jewish Passover are especially prevalent in Ephrem’s paschal hymns and particularly in his *Hymns on Unleavened Bread*. Ephrem used these themes both theologically and polemically in order to explicate the significance of the church’s Eucharistic practice and to forge typological and symbolic links between the Old and New Testaments, as well as to construct boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. While an English language translation of this collection is yet forthcoming, Dom Edmund Beck’s critical edition and German translation and G. A. M. Rouwhorst’s French translation from Beck’s Syriac text are both available. See: Edmund Beck, ed. and tr., *Des Heiligen Ephraems des Syrers Paschalhymnen*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vols. 247-248 (Louvain: Peeters, 1964).; and G. A. M. Rouwhorst, *Les hymnes pascales d’Ephrem de Nisibe: Analyse théologique et recherche sur l’évolution de la fête pascale chrétienne à Nisibe et à Edesse et dans quelques Eglises voisines au quatrième siècle*, ed. J. Den Boeft, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, J. H. Waszink, J. C. M. Van Winden, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language, Vol. 8, no. 1 & 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989). For examples of the tendencies in Ephrem’s thought which we have here been discussing see especially: *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* 6.4-7, 19.22-28, 21.24-25.

His Body is with us, His assurance is with us,
 He came and gave us His keys, since it is for us that
 His treasures lie waiting.

Refrain: Blessed is He Who, with His keys, has opened
 up the Garden of Life.

In the evening the world sleeps, closing its eyes,
 while in the morning it arises. He who repays is distant
 as it were but a night's length away; now light dawns
 and He is coming.

Weary not, my brethren, nor suppose
 that your struggle will last long or that your
 resurrection is far off,
 for our death is already behind us, and our resurrection
 is before us.

Hymns on Paradise, 7.1-2¹⁴⁸

Ephrem's conception of the salvific unity of the Christian Eucharist and Christ's body also found expression, perhaps not surprisingly, by way of his theology of the incarnation of the Word. In one of his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem depicted the Virgin Mary meditating on the manner in which the church's Eucharistic bread served to reveal Christ in a manner akin to, but "far more honorable" than the human body of Christ.

"When I see Your outward image
 before my eyes, Your hidden image
 is portrayed in my mind. In Your revealed image
 I saw Adam, but in the hidden one
 I saw Your Father who is united with You.

"Have You shown Your beauty in two images
 to me alone? Let bread and the mind
 portray You. Dwell in bread
 and in those who eat it. In hidden and revealed [form]
 let Your church see You as [does] the one who bore You.

"Whoever hates Your bread is like that one
 who hates Your body. A distant one
 who loves Your bread [is like] a near one
 who cherishes Your image. In bread and body
 the former and the latter have seen You.

¹⁴⁸ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 119.

“Indeed, Child, Your bread is far more honorable
than Your body. For even the unbelievers
saw Your body, but they do not see
Your living bread. The distant ones rejoiced;
their portion surpassed that of the near ones.

“Behold Your image is portrayed with the blood of the
grapes
upon the bread and portrayed upon the heart
by the finger of love with the pigments of faith.
Blessed is He Who made
graven images pass away by His true image.”

Hymns on the Nativity, 16.3-7¹⁴⁹

Ephrem also expressed the close connection between the incarnate Christ and the Eucharistic body of Christ by means of other incarnational images and themes. One such theme, which we have encountered repeatedly in the course of our investigation, was Ephrem’s conception of the Son’s clothing of himself in humanity in the womb of Mary. Extending the metaphor to encompass the garment in which Christ clothed himself that he might remain present to his church, Ephrem wrote:

Who would compare the clothing of Your human
nature to Your robe?
Who would compare the clothing of Your divine
nature to Your body?
They were both clothing for You, Lord: the robe and
the body, and the bread: the Bread of Life.

Who would not wonder at the clothing of Your
alternation?
Behold, the body hides Your brightness: the fearsome
nature.
Robes hide weak nature; the bread hides the Fire which
dwells in it.

Hymns on Faith, 19.2-3¹⁵⁰

Ephrem’s use of the Syriac term *šra* (ܫܪܐ)¹⁵¹ the word which is translated as “dwells” in the last line of the previous citation, may

¹⁴⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 149-150.

¹⁵⁰ Russell, *Eighty Hymns on Faith* (unpublished typescript, 1995), 67.

¹⁵¹ ܫܪܐ fut. ܫܪܐ, parts. ܫܪܐ, ܫܪܐ and ܫܪܐ, ܫܪܐ, ܫܪܐ. ... II. intrans. e) to dwell, lodge, stay with ܐܢܝܢܐ at or with, ܐܢܝܢܐ near; to reside, be

also be seen as another mode of expression employed by Ephrem to affirm the symbolic similarity between Christ’s presence to humanity in the incarnation and in the Eucharist. Sebastian Brock has identified this word which can be translated as “to take up residence, to dwell” as the “term that Ephrem regularly uses with reference to Christ’s presence both in Mary’s womb and in the consecrated bread and wine.”¹⁵² Brock illustrates Ephrem’s use of this verb both with reference to Christ’s nativity and the Eucharist, citing examples from the *Hymns on the Resurrection*, the *Hymns on the Nativity*, and the *Hymns on Faith*.

In Nisan the Lord of thunder
in His mercy modified His might,
descended and took up residence in
Mary’s womb

Hymns on the Resurrection, 4.10¹⁵³

Blessed is He Who took up residence in the womb
and built there a temple wherein to dwell,
a shrine in which to be,
a garment in which He might shine out.

Hymns on the Nativity, 3.20¹⁵⁴

The Fire of compassion descended
and took up residence in the Bread.

Hymns on Faith, 10.12¹⁵⁵

In Your Wine there resides
the Fire that is not drunk.

Hymns on Faith, 10.8¹⁵⁶

Another powerful image, that of Christ’s divine presence as fire, served to reiterate Ephrem’s emphasis on the unity of that divine presence in the incarnation and in the Eucharistic bread and cup. The same imagery was also deployed by the poet relative to

situated; to rest upon with ܐܢܝܢܐ, ܐܢܝܢܐ; ܐܢܝܢܐ ܐܢܝܢܐ nomads; ܐܢܝܢܐ ܐܢܝܢܐ ܐܢܝܢܐ having his habitation among the just, deceased. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 596.

¹⁵² Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 111.

¹⁵³ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 111.

¹⁵⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 111.

¹⁵⁵ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 112.

¹⁵⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 112.

Christ's descent to Sheol, suggesting an intersection between the Savior's participation in the human condition of death and the church's sacramental participation in Christ. Sacramental implications can be detected in the depiction of Christ's descent to Sheol in the thirty-sixth of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns*, where Ephrem depicts Death, dismayed that he has been plundered by Christ, who is identified as "that Living Fire," stating:

I will haste and close the gates of Sheol
 before this dead One Whose death has spoiled me.
 Whoever hears will wonder at my humiliation,
 that by a dead man who is without I am overcome.¹⁵⁷
 All the dead seek to go forth, but this One presses to
 enter in.
 A Medicine of Life has entered into Sheol and has
 restored its dead to life.
 Who then has brought in and hidden from me
 that Living Fire which has loosed
 the cold and dark womb of Sheol?

Nisibene Hymns, 36.14¹⁵⁸

Ephrem's use of the term "Medicine of Life" as a title of Christ is another aspect of this passage which contributes to its sacramental tone, and one which will be revisited below. It may also be noteworthy to recall here, that in the second strophe of this hymn, *Nisibene Hymns* 36.2, Ephrem refers to Christ's descent to Sheol by means of the Syriac verb *'mad* (ܡܕ) which can be translated both as "to dive, to plunge" and "to baptize." Though it may be merely coincidental, the concentration of terminology related to sacramental practices in this hymn recounting Christ's descent to Sheol is intriguing and provocative.

Nevertheless, on its own, the previous citation is merely suggestive and does not explicitly provide evidence of clear links between the Christ's sacramental presence in the Eucharist and Ephrem's conception of the salvific import of the Savior's descent to Sheol. Fortunately, the connection between Christ's victory over death and the church's sacramental meal was made more clearly by Ephrem in his *Hymns on Faith* where he wrote:

¹⁵⁷ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁵⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

See, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore You!
 See, Fire and Spirit in the river where You were
 baptized!
 Fire and Spirit in our baptism;
 in the Bread and the Cup, Fire and Holy Spirit!
 Your Bread kills the Devourer who had made us his
 bread.
 Your Cup destroys Death which was swallowing us up.
 We have eaten You, Lord, we have drunk You,
 not to exhaust You, but to live by You.

Hymns on Faith, 10.17-18¹⁵⁹

Again, then, and perhaps even more clearly, we detect Ephrem's conception of the church's Eucharistic memory of and participation in Christ's victory over Death and Sheol. Given to his church in the bread and cup, Christ, "eaten" and "drunk," is incorporated into the bodies of his disciples that they might share his life and his victory over "the Devourer who had made us his bread" and "Death which was swallowing us up." Ephrem's use of fire as a symbol of Christ's divine presence has thus provided a sufficient statement of the salvific connection between the Eucharistic practice of Christians and the Savior's descent to Sheol, yet the case may be made further by a consideration of Ephrem's use of another image frequently deployed both in the contexts of the Eucharist and of Christ's descent to the dead.

It is above all in Ephrem's use of the ancient Mesopotamian motif of the "Medicine of Life"¹⁶⁰ as a designation both for Christ

¹⁵⁹ Robert Murray, "A Hymn of Saint Ephrem to Christ on the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the Sacraments," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1970): 142-150.

¹⁶⁰ Three works provide especially helpful treatments of Ephrem's use of the term "Medicine of Life." In *The Luminous Eye*, Sebastian Brock identifies the term "Medicine of Life" as one of "a number of themes and symbols from Ancient Mesopotamia" inherited by Ephrem, and directs readers interested in the background of this phrase to: George Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism (King and Saviour II): Studies in Manichaeism, Mandaeism, and Syrian-Gnostic Religion* (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1946). For other Mesopotamian themes in Ephrem's work, Brock also suggests: Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 307-310, 338-340. Furthermore, Brock himself provides a chapter on Ephrem's use of the term "Medicine of Life." See: Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 19-20, 99-114,

and for the Eucharist that we find the most pronounced symbolic linkages between Christ's descent to Sheol and the sacramental meal of the church. Sebastian Brock has summarized Ephrem's varied implementation of the term noting that, in the Syrian poet's writings:

Christ is the 'Medicine of Life which flew down from on high' (*Discourse 3*). Previously 'Moses had hidden the symbol of Christ as a Medicine of Life in the unleavened bread' (*Unleavened Bread* 18:15), and Ruth had already recognized the hidden presence of the Medicine of Life in Jesus' ancestor Boaz (*Nativity* 1:13). At the Last Supper 'the Lifegiver of all blessed the food and it became the Medicine of Life for those who ate it' (*Unleavened Bread* 14:16), and at the descent into the underworld Ephrem writes:

Let Eve today rejoice in Sheol,
for her daughter's Son
has come down as the Medicine of Life
to revive His mother's mother.

(*Nativity* 13:2)¹⁶¹

For all of this, however, Brock states that

It is above all Christ's hidden presence in the Eucharistic Bread and Cup that is for Ephrem the Medicine of Life:

The Grape of Mercy was pressed
and gave the Medicine of Life to the Peoples.

(*Virginity* 31:3)

Our Lord baptized humankind with the Holy
Spirit,
He nourished it with the Medicine of Life.

(*Nisibis* 46:8)¹⁶²

175 n.4, 177 n.1. Two other useful overviews of Ephrem's implementation of this term may be found in Aho Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of Saint Ephrem*, Gorgias Dissertations: Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 1 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002), 147-151.; and Pierre Yousif, *L'Eucharistie chez Saint Éphrem de Nisibe*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, No. 224 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 1984), 317-319.

¹⁶¹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 99.

Echoing Brock, Sidney Griffith has more recently observed that "in Ephraem's writings the constant epithet for the Eucharist is the phrase "living medicine" or "medicine of life" (*sam hayye*, **ܣܡ ܗܝܝܥ**). The body and blood of the Lord are thought to bring healing, forgiveness of sin, and preservation from eternal death to the faithful Christian."¹⁶³

Ephrem's conception of the symbolic equation of Christ as the Medicine of Life with the Eucharist attained very clear expression in the *Hymns on the Nativity*. In the context of Herod's slaughter of the innocents and the flight of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph into Egypt which followed Christ's nativity, Ephrem refers to the Savior by means of the Eucharistic symbols of bread and wine.

In Bethlehem the slayers mowed down the fair flowers
so that with them
would perish the fair Seed in which was hidden the
Living Bread.¹⁶⁴
The Staff of life had fled so that it might come to the
sheaf in the harvest.
The Cluster that fled while young, gave Himself in the
trampling
to revive souls with His wine. Glory to You, the
Medicine of Life!

Hymns on the Nativity, 24.17¹⁶⁵

According to Ephrem, the same Medicine of Life which escaped death in his infancy, "gave Himself in the trampling to revive souls with His wine." Christ's death was also referred to as a "trampling" in Ephrem's *Homily on Our Lord*, where the salvific event and effects of Christ's descent to Sheol were described in artistic prose. Though it requires a citation of some considerable length, it is best not to summarize this section, but to let Ephrem speak for himself.

Our Lord was trampled by Death, and turned to
tread a path beyond Death. He is the One who

¹⁶² Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 99.

¹⁶³ Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15:2 (1999): 239.

¹⁶⁴ Matt. 2:16-18; cf. John 12:24.

¹⁶⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 196.

submitted and endured Death, as it willed, in order to overthrow Death, contrary to (Death's) will. Our Lord carried His cross and set forth as Death willed. But on the cross He called out and brought the dead out of Sheol, contrary to Death's will.¹⁶⁶ With the very weapon that Death had used to kill Him, He gained the victory over Death. Divinity disguised itself in humanity and approached (Death), which killed, then was killed: Death killed natural life, but supernatural Life killed Death.

Since Death was unable to devour Him without a body, or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol. They had brought Him a donkey to ride when He entered Jerusalem to announce her destruction and the expulsion of her children. And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into its vaults, and carried off its treasures. Then He came to Eve, *mother of all the living*.¹⁶⁷ She is the vine whose fence Death broke down with her own hands in order to sample her fruit. And Eve, who had been *mother of all the living*,¹⁶⁸ became a fountain of death for all the living. But Mary, the new shoot, sprouted from Eve, the old vine, and new life dwelt in her. When Death came confidently, as usual, to feed on mortal fruit, life, the killer of Death, was lying in wait, so that when Death swallowed (life) with no apprehension, it would vomit it out, and many others with it.

So the Medicine of Life flew down from above and joined Himself to that mortal fruit, the body. And when Death came as usual to feed, life swallowed Death instead. This is the food that hungered to eat the one who eats it. Therefore, Death vomited up the many lives which it had greedily swallowed because of a single fruit which it had ravenously swallowed. The hunger that drove it after one was the undoing of the voraciousness that had driven it after many. Death succeeded in eating the one (fruit), but it quickly vomited out the many. As the one (fruit) was dying on

¹⁶⁶ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁶⁷ Gen. 3:20.

¹⁶⁸ Gen. 3:20.

the cross, many of the buried came forth from Sheol at (the sound of) His voice.

This is the fruit that escaped Death, which had swallowed it, and brought the living out of Sheol, after whom it had been sent. Sheol stored up all that it had devoured. But because of one thing which it could not eat, it gave back everything inside which it had eaten. When a person's stomach is upset, he vomits out what agrees with him as well as what disagrees with him. Death's stomach became upset, so when it vomited out the Medicine of Life which had soured it, it vomited out with Him the living as well, whom it had been pleased to swallow.

Homily on Our Lord, 3¹⁶⁹

Thus, we return again to another theme which we have already encountered in Ephrem's soteriological thought concerning the Savior's descent to Sheol, that of Death's consumption of Christ, the Medicine of Life in the crucifixion, only to be forced to vomit him out and all humanity with him. Christ was also identified as the Medicine of Life which entered Sheol in the thirty-sixth of the *Nisibene Hymns*, and though Ephrem did not describe the event in terms of the vomiting of Death, the victory won over Death and the vivification of the dead are the same.

I will haste and close the gates of Sheol
before this dead One Whose death has spoiled me.
Whoever hears will wonder at my humiliation,
that by a dead man who is without I am overcome.¹⁷⁰
All the dead seek to go forth, but this One presses to
enter in.

A Medicine of Life has entered into Sheol and has
restored its dead to life.

Who then has brought in and hidden from me
that Living Fire which has loosed
the cold and dark womb of Sheol?

Nisibene Hymns, 36.14¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 277-279.

¹⁷⁰ Matt. 27:50-53.

¹⁷¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197.

Despite the deleterious and emetic effects he held for Death, Christ as the Medicine of Life, provided humanity with life-giving sustenance. Ephrem expressed this using Adam as a symbol of all his human offspring in the twenty-ninth of his *Hymns on the Nativity*:

The Medicine of Life diffused Himself to them both.
He put on a body and was offered to them both.
The mortal tasted Him and lived by Him;
the Devourer who ate Him was destroyed.

Hymns on the Nativity, 26.9¹⁷²

When offered in the Eucharist, Christ as the Medicine of Life also became the nourishment of humanity and an assurance of the resurrection of the body (HNis. 46.8). As we have reiterated throughout this chapter, Ephrem considered Christ's divine presence to be continued and physically mediated to the church through the sacraments. Sidney Griffith has summarized the analogy Ephrem supposed between the Incarnation and the Eucharistic epiclesis, noting that

By invocation, Fire and Spirit are for Ephraem the agents of Christ's presence in the church and in the sacraments, just as at the Anunciation, by Mary's invitation, they were the agents of the divine son's presence in her womb. In the holy *Qûrbânâ*, the church, in the words of the priest, invites Fire and Spirit to come into the bread and wine, transforming them for the eyes of faith into the body and blood of Christ. For Ephraem, and the Syrian tradition after him, the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist is, therefore, a continuation of the presence of the Word of God incarnate in Christ.¹⁷³

Thus, the salvific mingling (*m̐ag*, ܡܥܓ) of the divine and the human which began in Christ's incarnation and provided the necessary precondition for his descent to Sheol in death and his restoration of humanity in the resurrection, was also the basis for Ephrem's understanding of Christ's presence in the sacramental meal of the church. Moreover, Ephrem viewed the Eucharist as the

¹⁷² McVey, *Hymns*, 208.

¹⁷³ Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15:2 (1999): 231.

means by which the Savior continued to mingle himself with humanity, mystically incorporating Christians into his body. Ephrem wrote in *Hymns on Virginity* 36 that:

Our Lord descended to Sheol and returned.
He ascended to His heavens and behold He is mingled
with the lower [world].
Again He mingles with [and] has those who love Him
sit down to eat.

Hymns on Virginity, 36.9¹⁷⁴

Elsewhere, Ephrem's conception of Christ's impartation of himself to the church in the Eucharist is stated with an unmistakable sacramental realism.

In a novel way, his body is kneaded into our bodies.
Even his pure blood is poured into our arteries.
His voice is in our ears, his appearance in our eyes.
By reason of his compassion, all of him is kneaded into
all of us.
And since he loved his church very much,
he did not give her the Manna¹⁷⁵ of her rival—
he became himself the living bread for her to eat.

Hymns on Virginity, 37.2¹⁷⁶

In what we have seen thus far, it is clear that for Ephrem, Christ's blood consumed in the Eucharist and "poured into our arteries" is the very same as Christ's blood shed on the cross. As a result, the redeeming and vivifying blood of Christ provided Ephrem with another means of expressing the manner in which Christ's descent to Sheol intersected with the sacramental practice of Christians. In the *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem depicted the terror Christ's blood held for Death, despoiled by the Savior's descent to Sheol.

¹⁷⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 423.

¹⁷⁵ Exod. 16:4ff.

¹⁷⁶ Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *Modern Theology* 15:2 (April 1999): 230-231.

I was afraid because of the sprinkled blood
 which Moses sprinkled on every door
 for though it was the blood of the slain, it saved the
 living.¹⁷⁷
 Never had I feared blood, except for the blood that
 was on the doors
 and this moreover that was on the Tree. The blood of
 the slain is a delight,
 and is like sweet perfume, but the blood of Jesus is to
 me a terror;
 for whenever I come and smell His blood
 the odor of life hidden in it terrifies me.

Nisibene Hymns, 39.19¹⁷⁸

Christ's deliverance of the Gentiles or the nations from idolatry and his gathering of them into the church provided another context in which Ephrem mentioned Death's fear of Jesus' blood in his *Homily on Our Lord*. Arguing that Christ's crucifixion "became a mirror" which provided a visible manifestation for the Gentiles of idolatry as a "hidden death devouring their lives," Ephrem wrote of Christ:

This is the mighty one whose proclamation (of the Gospel) became a bridle in the jaws of the nations, turning them away from idols to the one who sent Him. Dead idols with closed mouths fed upon the life of their worshippers. For this reason, you mixed Your blood, which repelled Death and terrified it, in the bodies of Your worshippers, so that the mouths of those who consume them would be repelled by their life.

Homily on Our Lord, 5.2¹⁷⁹

We may conclude this section with a selection from the tenth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* where the themes we have been considering in this section touching on Christ's identification with and redemption of humanity in his descent to Sheol, his continuing presence in the Eucharistic feast of the church, and the church's

¹⁷⁷ Exod. 12:7ff.

¹⁷⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 202.

¹⁷⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 280-281.

participation in his victory over Death and Sheol were carefully and creatively interwoven.

In Your bread is hidden a Spirit not to be eaten,
in Your wine dwells a Fire not to be drunk.
Spirit in Your bread, Fire in Your wine,
a wonder set apart, [yet] received by our lips!

When the Lord came down to earth, to mortals,
a new creation He created them, like to the Watchers.
He mingled Fire and Spirit in them,
to make them Fire and Spirit within.

See, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore You!
See, Fire and Spirit in the river where You were
baptized!


Fire and Spirit in our baptism;
in the bread and the cup, Fire and Holy Spirit!

Your bread kills the Devourer who had made us his
bread,

Your cup destroys Death which was swallowing us up.
We have eaten You, Lord, we have drunk You,
not to exhaust You, but to live by You.

Hymns on Faith 10.8,9,16,17¹⁸⁰

THE CHURCH'S PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST'S LIFE AND VICTORIES

Throughout this chapter we have observed the manner in which Ephrem the Syrian regarded the church as the body of Christ and the sacraments as the means by which individual Christians became participant members of that body, being mingled (*m̐zag*, ) with the Savior by virtue of his divine presence graciously bestowed in baptism and Eucharist. Individual Christians, as those who received the sacraments, and the church as a whole, as the collective community of Christian disciples, were mystically united to Christ, made one body with him, and received the benefit of the salvation he achieved on their behalf through his Incarnation, death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead. For,

¹⁸⁰ Robert Murray, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ on the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the Sacraments," *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1970): 143-144.

If the Church therefore is his body, as Paul his witness has said,¹⁸¹ then believe that his Church has journeyed through all this without corruption. Just as, by the condemnation of the one body of Adam, all bodies died and continue to die, so too, through the victory of this one body of the Messiah his entire church lived and continues to live.¹⁸²

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 4.15¹⁸³

Ephrem considered the church not only to have already participated in Christ's life and victories over Satan, Sin, Death, and Sheol, but to continue to participate in that life and those victories in their own temporal context, as well as to participate in the eschatological fulfillment of the salvation obtained for humanity by Christ. The primordial past and the eschatological future, the temporal and the eternal were all compressed in the church's present experience by virtue of the continuing presence in her midst of Christ, the God-man who had already penetrated the borders of the temporal order in his nativity, his descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven, transforming and redeeming every facet of human experience in order to open up a "perfect way" for his church.¹⁸⁴ On the basis of Christ's incarnate work of redemption, continuing presence in the church through the sacraments, and the confident expectation of their own resurrection in the coming Kingdom, Ephrem taught the church to sing to her Savior: "To Thee be glory in whose victory we have gained strength and in whose resurrection we defy even Death itself?" (HNis. 56.R)

Ephrem's correlation of the church and Paradise, observed earlier in this chapter, provided him with a series of vivid images which could convey the church's proleptic participation in the eschatological Eden reopened and regained for humanity in Christ. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem depicted the church, nourished by the Medicine of Life, clothed in the glory made available through baptism, and rightly exercising God's gift of freewill as "bearing resemblance" to Paradise:

¹⁸¹ Rom. 12:5; I Cor. 12:12-31; Eph. 1:15-23, 2:16ff., 3:6, 4:4, 5:21-33; Col. 1:15-20, esp. v. 18.

¹⁸² I Cor. 15:22.

¹⁸³ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 91-92.

¹⁸⁴ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 91.

The assembly of saints bears resemblance to Paradise:
 in it each day is plucked the fruit of Him who gives life
 to all;
 in it, my brethren, is trodden the cluster of grapes to be
 the Medicine of Life.
 The serpent is crippled and bound by the curse,¹⁸⁵
 while Eve's mouth is sealed with a silence that is
 beneficial¹⁸⁶
 —but it also serves once again as a harp to sing the
 praises of her Creator.

Among the saints none is naked, for they have put on
 glory,
 nor is any clad in those leaves or standing in shame,
 for they have found, through our Lord, the robe that
 belongs to Adam and Eve.
 As the Church purges her ears
 of the serpent's poison, those who had lost their
 garments,
 having listened to it and become diseased, have now
 been renewed and whitened.

The effortless Power, the Arm Which Never Tires,
 planted this Paradise, adorned it without any effort.
 But it is the effort of freewill that adorns the Church
 with all manner of fruits.

The Creator saw the Church and was pleased;
 He resided in that Paradise which she had planted for
 His honor,
 just as He had planted the Garden for her delight.

The diligent carry their own fruits and now run forward
 to meet Paradise as it exults with every sort of fruit.
 They enter that Garden with glorious deeds,
 and it sees that the fruits of the just
 surpass in their excellence the fruits of its own trees,
 and that the adornments of the victorious outrival its
 own.

Hymns on Paradise, 6.8-11¹⁸⁷

Here, the tension between the "now" and the "not yet" of the church's experience of Paradise is especially evident in the final

¹⁸⁵ Gen 3:14-15.

¹⁸⁶ I Cor. 14:34.

¹⁸⁷ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 111-113.

strophe of the previous citation where Ephrem states that “the diligent...run forward to meet Paradise...with glorious deeds...that... surpass in their excellence the fruits of its own trees.” Already the faithful produce by their labors “fruits” which are fitting of Paradise, even as they are still on their way to the eschatological Garden. Though an interval between the church and Eden is evident, its brevity is stressed by the “running” of the saints.

Ephrem stated the same “now” and “not yet” quality of the church’s paradisaical experience in other terms elsewhere in the *Hymns on Paradise*, exhorting the church to perseverance and likening the approaching eschatological hope of the church to the coming of dawn at the end of a night.

In times of temptation console yourselves with God’s
promises,
for there is no deceit in the word of Him who repays
all,
and his treasure house is not so paltry that we should
doubt His promise;
He has surrendered His own Son for us so that we
might believe in Him;
His Body is with us, His assurance is with us,
He came and gave us His keys, since it is for us that
His treasures lie waiting.

Refrain: Blessed is He Who, with His keys, has opened
up the Garden of Life.

In the evening the world sleeps, closing its eyes,
while in the morning it arises. He who repays is distant
as it were but a night’s length away; now light dawns
and He is coming.
Weary not, my brethren, nor suppose
that your struggle will last long or that your
resurrection is far off,
for our death is already behind us, and our resurrection
is before us.

Hymns on Paradise, 7.1-2¹⁸⁸

Ephrem’s vision of the church’s proleptic participation in the eschaton, and especially of its own hope of resurrection, depended

¹⁸⁸ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 119.

heavily on his understanding of the incorporation of her members in the body of Christ which had already passed through death. Death, however, as an ordinary and universal event of human life, remained a fact of the church's experience despite its sense of mystically sharing in Eden's blessings and its confident defiance of the enemies of humanity. Ephrem did not expect that Christians would not physically die, but that, on the basis of Christ's victory over death, they might learn to regard death as a restful sleep in Sheol.¹⁸⁹ Images of death and life as sleep and wakefulness allowed Ephrem to construct the following depiction of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and to convey its significance for Israel and the church.

By these voices that proclaimed and cried out
above and below, the sleep of Sion
was not frightened away. By His colt she was startled;
he trampled and grieved her; she started and rose up.
She killed the Watcher because He awakened her.

The Watcher rose up from within the grave,
for He was sleeping while awake, and He came and
found
the peoples asleep. He shouted for joy and cried out
and awakened them. The sleeping [people] thanked
the Watcher who made [them] watchers on earth.

Hymns on the Nativity, 6.23-24¹⁹⁰

Awakened from sleep and made "watchers on earth," the church was conformed to Christ's image. In using the terms "Watcher" (ܝܪܐ, ܚܬܐ) for Christ and "watchers" (ܝܪܐ, ܚܬܐ) for Christians, Ephrem employed an ancient christological convention sometimes

¹⁸⁹ Javier Teixidor, "Muerte, Cielo, y Seol en San Efrén," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 27 (1961): 82-114. Teixidor points out that "aunque la muerte sea una dormición y la resurrección un despertar, no todos los hombres consideran la muerte como un sueño apacible. Con otras palabras, no todos los hombres se preparan de la misma manera para el sueño de la muerte." (83) As a result of Ephrem's conception of the death and eschatological resurrection of humanity, though every dead human being in Sheol may be said to sleep until they are awakened to judgement in the resurrection, those who have prepared themselves for Paradise will sleep and dream peacefully.

¹⁹⁰ McVey, *Hymns*, 114.

referred to as angel-christology,¹⁹¹ and in doing so he intentionally depicted the church's participation in Christ's own life. Ephrem's use of this image may be clarified by Kathleen McVey who has explained that

"Watchers" is ... the most common general designation of angels in Ephrem, especially in his earlier writings, and is characteristic of his angelology. Rooted in Iranian conceptions of Amesha Spenta and Mithra as heavenly beings who are constantly alert, never sleeping, this sort of angel appears in the extra-canonical I Enoch as well as in Syriac literature before Ephrem in the *Acts of Thomas* and in the writings of Aphrahat. The word *ʿyr* occurs in the Book of Daniel, thus giving a kind of biblical pedigree to a notion fundamentally unlike the usual biblical angel. Ephrem is aware of the root meaning of the word and sometimes indulges in elaborate word play on it. Watchfulness is symbolic of holiness; its opposite, sleep, represents sin and death. So Christ is the "Watcher" par excellence, who makes it possible for faithful Christians to be "watchers" and ultimately to live the angelic life, i.e., eternal life. For him the human life most like the angelic life is the ascetic life, a proleptic participation in the paradisaal state.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ "One of the characteristics of theology which is genuinely archaic and Jewish Christian is the use of terms borrowed from the vocabulary of angelology to designate the Word and Holy Spirit. 'Angel' is one of the names given to Christ up to the fourth century." Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 'The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Vol. 1, John A. Baker, tr. (Chicago: The Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 117ff.

¹⁹² Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 229. McVey directs readers to: Winfrid Cramer, *Die Engelvorstellungen bei Ephraim dem Syrer*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 173 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum 1965). Payne Smith states: ܘܝܪܐ, ܠܘܝܪܐ, ܠܕܝܪܐ *vigilant; a watcher*: see under ܝܪܐ. Under ܝܪܐ we find: ܝܪܐ, ܝܪܐ, parts. ܝܪܐ, ܠܝܪܐ; ܝܪܐ, ܠܝܪܐ, ܠܕܝܪܐ. *to wake, watch*. Part. adj. a) *waking, watchful, vigilant, attentive, diligent*; ܠܝܪܐ ܕܝܪܐ ܝܪܐ I sleep but my heart waketh; ܠܝܪܐ ܝܪܐ ܕܝܪܐ or ܠܝܪܐ ܝܪܐ half-awake; ܠܝܪܐ ܕܝܪܐ watchful shepherds; ܠܝܪܐ or ܠܝܪܐ ܝܪܐ sober, prudent. b) subst. *a watcher, guardian angel, angel*; ܠܝܪܐ ܝܪܐ ܠܝܪܐ He left an

Not only did life as a watcher entail participation in the eschaton, but it also modified the experience of death. In his *Nisibene Hymns* Ephrem states:

As sleep is very dear to one who is weary,
so death is beloved to one who fasts and watches [in
vigils].
As natural sleep does not kill the sleepers,
neither has Sheol killed nor does it kill.
As sleep [offers] refreshment, so Sheol [offers] the
resurrection.
It is the second death¹⁹³ from which there is no way of
escape.

Nisibene Hymns, 43.15¹⁹⁴

In Ephrem's thought, the Christian who has been baptized and born to new life in Christ, nourished with the Medicine of Life at the Eucharistic altar, and diligent in the application of his or her freewill has already mystically become a participant in the eschatological Eden. For such a person, death itself holds no terror, for, incorporated in the body of Christ which descended to

angel to guard their limbs. Jessie Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 412 and 407.

¹⁹³ cf. Rev. 2:11, 20:14.

¹⁹⁴ Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 240 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963), 44. (my translation)

The Syriac verb translated as “watches” in the phrase “one who fasts and watches [in vigils]” (ܝܡܠܐ ܡܚܝܬܐ ܡܠܐ) in the citation is *shar*, ܝܡܠܐ. Payne Smith offers the following:

ܝܡܠܐ fut. ܝܡܠܝ, act. part. ܝܡܠܐ, ܚܝܡܠܐ, ܚܝܡܠܐ, pass. part. ܝܡܠܐ. to watch, keep vigil; ܚܝܡܠܐ ܕܐܕܡ she was awake; ܚܝܡܠܐ ܡܝܡܝܐ they say nocturnes. PA. ܝܡܠܐ to keep diligent watch with ܕܠ. APH. ܝܡܠܐܐ to cause to watch; to be wakeful; ܝܡܠܐܐ ܠܡܠܐܐ ܡܠܠܐܐ gold makes its owners wakeful. DERIVATIVES, the following words:— ܝܡܠܐ, ܚܝܡܠܐ, rt. ܝܡܠܐ. m. a) a vigil, watch, watching; ܠܡܠܐܐ ܚܝܡܠܐ vigil and fast. b) the office of the night, nocturns. c) watching by the dead, a funeral feast, wake. ܚܝܡܠܐ, ܚܝܠ rt. ܝܡܠܐ. m. vigilant; observing vigil. Eccles. E-Syr. a priest whose office it was to intone nocturns. ܚܝܡܠܐ part. Peal of verb ܝܡܠܐ = ܚܝܡܠܐ. ܠܝܡܠܐ and ܠܝܡܠܐ, ܚܝܠ rt. ܝܡܠܐ. nocturnal; of vigils or nocturns; keeping vigil. ܚܝܡܠܐ rt. ܝܡܠܐ. f. vigils. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 561.

Sheol and rose from the dead, he or she has, on the one hand, already passed through the resurrection, and, on the other, merely awaits its eschatological fulfillment. Dying the physical death common to all fallen human beings, and in some sense sanctified and transformed by Christ's own participation in it, the righteous, awaiting entry to Paradise, sleep peacefully in the earth until the resurrection of the body, when all humanity, just and sinners alike, will be "awakened" to judgment. It is to matters of the universality of human death and the general resurrection, judgment, Gehenna, and Paradise that we now turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE THEOLOGY OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

In Ephrem the Syrian's thought, what God intended for humanity from the beginning—blessed communion with the Divine Trinity in Paradise—was what God intended for humanity throughout the course of the history of salvation, what God achieved for humanity in Christ's salvific incarnation, death, and resurrection, what God made available to humanity in the church, and what God will bring to completion in the eschaton. The history of human redemption may thus be understood as the history of God's merciful expedition to reconcile humanity to himself and return them to Eden, and in this respect, it may be argued, Ephrem's thought is suffused with eschatological concerns from first to last. Furthermore, it may be seen, in fact, that from first to last, redeemed humanity is brought full circle to the destiny intended for it in the regained Paradise lost. Ephrem's conception of the mysterious unity of the beginning and the end was expressed in the fifty-second of his *Hymns on Virginity*.

Darkness was made king and conquered and was
conquered,
but since it was not a being, it was overcome and
reproved.
The evil one conquered Adam and expected not to
succumb.
Although our Light was hidden,
by that light nearby He was portrayed.
Since it conquers the darkness, it was prophesied
that by the advent of our Lord, Satan would succumb.
In the beginning darkness succumbed and announced
that the evil one, too, would succumb in the End.

Therefore from before this hateful victory of his
 while he had not yet conquered that Adam and been
 exalted,
 he was first portrayed in the humiliation of the
 conquered darkness,
 the prophet that resembles him.
 The dark proclaimed about the Darkness,
 and the brightness instructed about our Light.
 O the proclaimed who resemble their proclaimers!
 On Sunday the Light conquered,¹
 and it portrayed our Savior, His day and His victory.

Hymns on Virginity, 52.1-2²

Ephrem's clear conception of the *telos* of the history of human redemption, articulated most vividly in images of the conquest of evil and death and of humanity's return to Paradise, was expressed, as indeed was all his theological reflection, through types and symbols, offering explicitly mediated depictions of human destiny. As we noted earlier in our discussion of cosmology, Ephrem was adamant about the metaphorical nature of the language he used to describe the beatific primordial and eschatological environment intended for humanity in his *Hymns on Paradise*.³ Ephrem's eschatological reflection was also expressed by means of an elaborate literary apparatus in portions of his *Nisibene Hymns* where Death and Satan, as well as other personae, made reference to the

¹ Gen. 1:3.

² Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 465-466.

³ Ephrem wrote:

For him who would tell of it there is no other means
 but to use the names of things that are visible
 thus depicting for his hearers a likeness of things that
 are hidden.
 For if the Creator of the Garden
 has clothed His majesty in terms that we can understand,
 how much more can His Garden be described with our
 similes?

Hymns on Paradise, 11.5

See this strophe, and the continuance of this thought in the strophes following it, in context in: Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 155-157.

general resurrection and the judgment.⁴ In one of his most sustained meditations on the nature of God's eschatological judgment, found in the *Letter to Publius*,⁵ Ephrem framed the whole of his discussion in terms of the device of the mirror—a technology which offers not a direct apprehension, but a mediated reflection of reality.⁶ Even in one of the few portions of his collected works where he seems to have spoken more or less directly of matters of death and the eschatological resurrection of humanity, *Nisibene Hymns* 43-51, Ephrem still articulated his vision of the events of human redemption yet to come by means of paradoxical images and symbols.⁷

Should Ephrem's circumspection in matters of theological language be taken as an indication of a sense of "eschatological indeterminacy" on his part? On the one hand, we must answer in the negative. While he did regard the knowledge humanity could

⁴ Though only representative of a portion of the collection, see the selection of the *Nisibene Hymns* in: Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, Second Series, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 193-219.

⁵ Ephrem's *Letter to Publius* is available in English translation in: Kathleen E. McVey, ed. *Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trs. The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 91 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 333-355. A critical edition of the Syriac text and accompanying English translation and commentary is also available in: Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 261-305.

⁶ The mirror is one of Ephrem's favorite theological images, deployed in various ways throughout his works. See: Edmund Beck, "Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephräm," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953): 5-24.

⁷ These hymns are not currently available in English translation, but the critical edition of the Syriac text and a German translation are available in: Edmund Beck, ed. and tr., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vols. 240-241 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963). An occasionally loose French translation is also available in: Paul Fégali, *Les Chants de Nisibe*, Antioche Chrétienne, 3 (Paris: Cariscript, 1989). A new English language translation of the whole of Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* is currently underway.

have of unseen realities to be limited and mediated, Ephrem, as we have seen throughout this study, insisted that such knowledge as was granted to humanity by God's gracious acts of self-disclosure in Scripture, nature, and above all in the Incarnate Son was, though partial, nonetheless reliable and capable of paradoxically disclosing to the one who approached in faith and love even that which remained hidden and veiled in Divine mystery. On the other hand, however, there is a limited sense in which the question of eschatological indeterminacy may be answered in the affirmative on the basis of Ephrem's conception of the role of God's good gift of freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ) to humanity. Because the human will, though impaired by sin, could be by God's grace turned to reflect the goodness and glory of the Creator in love and obedience, it was possible that those destined for Gehenna could through repentance and faith, make their way to Paradise. In this way, Ephrem's view of the eschatological outcome of salvation history was tempered as the result of the ability of each human being, by the grace of God, to affect his or her own eternal destiny in some measure.

The destiny for which humanity was created and to which it was called to return in Christ, though disclosed to imperfect human knowers in types and symbols, could nevertheless be apprehended by those who responded in faith and love to God's gracious self-disclosure. Though Ephrem believed some, in persistent misuse of their freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ), would not receive God's salvation and would consign themselves to Gehenna, he affirmed that the constancy of God's mercy and humanity's capacity for repentance held open the possibility that one's eschatological destiny could be changed. Thus, though portrayed in metaphorical and figurative language, the eschaton was already revealed and could be embraced by means of God's revelation in Christ, particularly in his descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead.

THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF DEATH

In Ephrem's thought, eschatology was not only a matter of the reordering of the cosmos, but also an intensely personal phenomenon, an experience particular to each human being and all but universal with reference to humanity as a whole.⁸ In addition to

⁸ There are, in Ephrem's thought, theological exceptions which prove the rule of the universality of the experience of death. Two Old

and before the end of all things which would bring with it the fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity, there was for each human being an end in death and an awaiting of the resurrection of the body. Thus we note, on the one hand, despite all that we have seen in the previous chapter concerning the victory of the Christian over sin, the Devil, Death, and Sheol, and despite the proleptic participation of the church in the life of Eden, Ephrem recognized that the human experience of physical death remained for Christians, as well as for humanity in general, persistent, mundane, and painful.

Ephrem's recognition of the tragedy of death and the sadness that inevitably accompanies it provided him with the emotional and experiential basis for a series of meditations on the meaning of this universal aspect of human existence. Though Christ's resurrection assures humanity that physical death is not in itself the ultimate end of human existence, in *Nisibene Hymns* 74-77, Ephrem seems to have granted that the suffering associated with the experience of death was real, disturbing, and worthy of grief. In the seventy-fourth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem began his reflection on this topic with an acknowledgement of the contrast between humanity's original splendor and its current subjection to decay and death. Adam, whom God had made was "glorious in his creation," was brought to great humiliation by his capitulation to the deception of the Evil One. (HNis. 74.1-2) Throughout this hymn, Ephrem compared the lingering glory of God's good creation with its

Testament figures, Enoch and Elijah, evaded death through their righteousness. Concerning Enoch, see: *Commentary on Genesis* 5.2 in: McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 133-134. For Elijah, see: *Hymns of the Nativity* 14.16-17 in: McVey, *Hymns*, 144. Enoch and Elijah are together considered in *Nisibene Hymns* 36.7: Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 196. Regarding Enoch and Elijah as evaders of death, cf. Genesis 5:21-24 and II Kings 2:1-12. Additionally, Ephrem seems to take into account New Testament passages such as I Corinthians 15:51-52 and I Thessalonians 4:13-18 when he indicates that at Christ's return in glory the existences of some human beings will be translated without the mundane experience of death. See: *Hymns on Virginity* 27.6 in: McVey, *Hymns*, 384.; and *Nisibene Hymns* 62.24-30 in: Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 215.

inevitable undoing in death, calling on the Savior of humanity to restore its intended splendor. Of humanity Ephrem wrote:

It was elected and magnified in its creation⁹ and
despised in its death.
In its life it is like something, in its death it is like
nothing.
Magnify it again my Lord!

It judges and condemns and searches and justifies.
[It is] like God and it dies [like] the animals.
Increase Your image in [it]!

Behold its word is great and spreads out over all.
It fills the habitable earth and in Sheol it is silenced.
Renew its songs!

Nisibene Hymns, 74.3-5¹⁰

As the result of humanity's sin which abrogated the purposes of the Creator and alienated it from communion with God, each human being is brought not only to his or her own day of death, but also to the grief of loss and separation upon the death of loved ones. In *Nisibene Hymn* 75, Ephrem described the experience of the bereaved and petitioned divine comfort for those who suffered.

The day of death, a day of bitterness,
a day of groaning, a day of weeping.
My Lord, be our comfort!

Refrain: My Lord, be our comfort!

A day of cutting, it takes a member
from the harmonious body of brothers and
companions.
My Lord, may it be reconstructed in You!

A day of sons grieving for old men
for death breaks the staff of old age.
My Lord, may they be knit together in You!

A day that leads away the only son from his mother
and cuts off the arm that supported her.
My Lord, support her!

⁹ Gen. 1:26-31.

¹⁰ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 125. (my translation)

A day in which parents depart, it separates
and leaves [behind] children orphaned and alone.
My Lord, rear them!

A day that separates a brother from his brothers
and decreases the number and reduces the count.
My Lord, may our number be completed in You!

A day that separates his daughter from the old man
and his eye is darkened for in it is an abyss.
Let Your Light comfort him!

A day that separates husband from wife
and leaves the earth barren that has no head for its
body.
She finds it again in Eden!

A day that separates a woman from her house
and it declines and also scatters for her administration
comes to nought.
Console her in Your kingdom!

A day that resembles sudden news—
tidings enter and disturb the hearing.
Pacify us by Your voice!

A day that incites the eyes to tears
and the hands to lamentation and the mouth to wailing.
My Lord, may they be quieted in You!

A day that calls forth much weeping.
Woe fills the mouth of him that enters and goes forth.
May they be comforted by Your kindness!

A day that separates a friend from his companion—
A team of oxen separated from harmonious service.
May they be united in Your love!

A day that separates grooms and brides
and exchanges dancing for mourning.
Bring them to Your wedding feast!

A day that brings to an end the promise of betrothal
and exchanges the bridal bed for the grave prepared for
her.
Make her worthy of Your bridal bed!

A day that separates the daughter and breath
and takes [her] away like doves from their dwelling
place.

Let us alight in Paradise!¹¹

A day that separates the little girl from her mother—
the vine mourns that she has no cluster.

Let it grow strong in Eden!

A day that separates many babies—
the vine that is plucked mourns and grows lonely.
May they be kept in Your storehouse!

When the only Son departed branches inclined
themselves
for they trembled. The fruit upon them fell to Him.
My Lord, may it be gathered to You!

Glory to Him who strangled Death in the midst
between life and life. He laid himself in the grave that
he might teach you
that He brought your death to an end.

They participate in death from and in the body
that they arrive in order by rank and series.
May the Perfecter of All complete them!

In his suffering and mourning a man complains.
My Lord, give to him a place of brief refreshment
that in all things he might praise [You].

He is troubled for he thinks little of [how] easily he is
raised.

Not so troubled is the good one, and he hastens.
Blessed is he who endures all!

¹¹ In this strophe Ephrem puns on the word *barta* (ܒܪܬܐ, ܒܪܬܐ), which may mean either “daughter” or “egg, young.” See: Jessie Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary Founded Upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 56. Since the rest of the hymn deals with the human experience of death, I have selected “daughter” as the dominant meaning, yet the orinithological cast of the strophe seems much more intelligible when it is remembered that *barta* may also mean “egg.”

They are troubled, thus they suppose fruits before buds
 and children before conception and rightly we weep for
 you
 for He delays to revive all.

We are submerged in our sorrow for we see our deaths
 and [those of] all our beloved. He will suddenly wake
 [every one of us]
 who raises and gives life to all.

Nisibene Hymns, 75¹²

Ephrem's final word in this section of the *Nisibene Hymns* was, as one might expect, a word of hope. As we have seen even in the selections cited above, in the face of the truly loathsome and sorrowful tragedy and grief of death, Ephrem encouraged his audience to enduring hope in the promise of the resurrection.

The hours are ordered every one in its moment.
 So also the Lord of all ordered the times.
 Glory to the Foundation of all!

The tenth hour does not precede the sixth.
 Neither seek the time before its time.
 Blessed is the One who orders all!

The setting of the months in order is also good.
 And no month is before the other months in number.
 Blessed are His arrangements!

There is disorder if Nisan was before Tishrin.¹³
 And there is disorder when one asks: "Where is the
 resurrection?"
 Blessed is the Arranger of All!

There is disorder is reaping was before sowing.
 And thus resurrection preceded death.
 Glory to our Farmer!

For when the sowing of the dead is completed and
 sufficient
 the time comes for the Watchers to go forth to harvest.
 Glory to our Sower!

¹² Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 128-131. (my translation)

¹³ The month of Nisan would be roughly equivalent to April. Tishrin was the name given to two months in our calendar: October and November. November would correspond to "latter" Tishrin.

It is indeed good that birth precedes death
and good that death is consummated by the
resurrection.

Glory to the One who knows all!

Nisibene Hymns, 77.13-19¹⁴

According to Ephrem, Christians could face the horror of death with the expectation of their resurrection on the basis of Christ's own descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead. Ephrem, as we have observed in the previous chapters, made this point in many ways throughout his writings. In his *Homily on Our Lord* Ephrem wrote:

The Only-Begotten¹⁵ journeyed from the Godhead and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many.¹⁶ And he journeyed from Sheol and resided in the kingdom, to tread out a path from Sheol, which cheats everyone, to the kingdom, which rewards everyone. For our Lord gave His resurrection as a guarantee to mortals that he would lead them out of Sheol, which takes the departed without discrimination, to the kingdom, which welcomes guests with discrimination, so that we might journey from where everyone's bodies are treated the same, to where everyone's efforts are treated with discrimination.

Homily on Our Lord, 1.2¹⁷

Where Ephrem depicted Christ's victory over Death in *Nisibene Hymn* 36, he made a similar point concerning Christ's resurrection from the dead as the basis for the bodily resurrection of humanity in general, but he did so by means of a dramatic apparatus. In a moment representative of what we have described as the repentance of Death, the potentate of the underworld petitions Jesus:

O Jesus King, receive my supplication
and with my supplication take to Thyself a pledge,
even Adam the great pledge accept for Thyself,

¹⁴ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 136-137. (my translation)

¹⁵ John 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18.

¹⁶ Rom. 8:29.

¹⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 273-274.

him in whom are buried all the dead even as when I
 received him
 in him were hidden all the living.¹⁸ The first pledge I
 have given Thee,
 the body of Adam; go Thou up therefore and reign
 over all;
 and when I shall hear Thy trumpet,
 I with mine own hand will lead forth the dead at Thy
 coming.

Nisisbene Hymns, 36.17¹⁹

In expectation of the resurrection, Ephrem argued that death was better understood as a kind of sleep from which humanity would be awakened in the eschaton.²⁰ For humanity as a whole, but especially for the righteous who restfully “sleep in their graves” (HNis. 48.12), death in Sheol is not the end, but a time of refreshing slumber prior to the day of judgment. In the forty-third of the *Nisisbene Hymns*, Ephrem described death as rest for weary ascetics which would not hold them forever, but granted them repose for a time.

As sleep is very dear to one who is weary,
 so death is beloved to one who keeps vigil and watches.
 As natural sleep does not kill the sleepers,
 neither has Sheol killed nor does it kill.
 As sleep [offers] refreshment, so Sheol [offers] the
 resurrection.
 It is the second death from which there is no way of
 escape.

¹⁸ I Cor. 15:22.

¹⁹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 197-198.

²⁰ Ephrem's use of the themes of sleeping and dreaming to describe the condition of the dead in Sheol has been explored in: Javier Teixidor, “Muerte, Cielo, y Seol en San Efrén,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 27 (1961): 82-114. Teixidor observed that Ephrem regarded the death of the righteous to be a peaceful slumber during which the promise of resurrection and Paradisaal life in communion with the Trinity bore a resemblance to a pleasant dream. (83ff.) Teixidor also noted that Ephrem's works seemed to contain suggestions that though the unrighteous dead must also be regarded as sleeping in Sheol while awaiting their wakening at the eschatological resurrection, their sleep was not the same as the peaceful sleep of the just. (88)

Sleep does not keep one forever in bed.
 One who slumbers and sleeps soon awakens again.
 Thus Sheol has not kept nor does it keep the living.
 Behold sleep reproves Sheol.
 For morning awakens the sleepers and the voice raises
 the dead.
 Death is freely chosen by the hands that cut off their
 hope.

Nisibene Hymns, 43.15-16²¹

Ephrem used the imagery of sleep again in *Nisibene Hymn* 70 to underscore the passing nature of death in the light of the resurrection.

The one who lies down to sleep resembles the departed
 and death resembles a dream, and resurrection the
 morning.
 The truth shines forth in us in the figure of light on the
 eye
 but behold we look on death as a nightmare.
 He is stupid who considers sleep to be without
 morning
 and to suppose of death that it is a sleep that continues
 forever.

If one has the eye of hope, one can see in secret
 that the sleep of death comes to an end in the morning.

Nisibene Hymns, 70.15-18²²

In the fifty-third of the *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem depicted even Satan as convinced of the likeness of death to sleep.

This dying of the body is sleep for a time.
 Think not, O Death, that thou art Death who art as a
 shadow.

Nisibene Hymns, 53.5²³

Thus, though human beings rightly grieve the loss of their loved ones to death, and though they might look on their own

²¹ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 44. (my translation)

²² Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 114-115. (my translation)

²³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 207.

deaths with some amount of fear, their sadness and loss, as well as the terror of death have been tempered by the promise of the resurrection. Ephrem made the point inversely as well, depicting Death and Sheol, for whom the pattern is reversed in that the certainty of the eschatological resurrection of humanity on the basis of Christ's own resurrection is the guarantee of their ultimate sorrow and bereavement when their dead are taken from them.

Now it is that I have tasted the taste of his sorrow,
 even of him who weeps over his beloved.
 The dead that are thus beloved of Sheol,
 how dear were they to their fathers! The limbs which I
 severed and carried away,
 lo! they are shorn away and carried off from me. If I
 thus suffer
 for the departure of him, the youth who was restored
 to life,
 blessed is He Who had compassion on the widow.²⁴
 In her only son He gave peace to her dwelling that had
 been made desolate.

Lo! this suffering which I cause
 men to suffer in their beloved ones
 in the end on me it gathers itself altogether.
 For when the dead shall have left Sheol, for every man
 there shall be resurrection,
 and for me alone torment. And who is he then that
 shall bear for me
 all these things that I shall see Sheol left alone,
 because this Voice which has rent the graves
 makes her desolate and sends forth the dead that were
 in her midst?²⁵

Nisibene Hymns, 37.7-8²⁶

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Ephrem was a staunch advocate of the eschatological resurrection of the body, a doctrine he defended against heretical opinions, especially those held by the followers of Bardaisan, but also of

²⁴ Luke 7:11-17.

²⁵ cf. Matt. 27:50-53.

²⁶ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198-199.

Manichaeans and Marcionites.²⁷ Ephrem's arguments against these opponents depended heavily on his conception of the human being as a unity of body and soul, a conception expressed in detail in a series of prose discourses addressed to Hypatius.²⁸ Due to the nature of these polemical treatises, an exhaustive account of their contents lies beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, a brief survey of Ephrem's understanding of the unity of the body and soul expressed in these *Prose Refutations* will provide a helpful cipher for decoding his more poetic meditations on the resurrection of the body.

Ephrem's arguments against his heretical opponents were based primarily on the Scriptures with a heavy emphasis being laid on his close reading of the narrative of God's creation of humanity in Genesis.²⁹ Though Ephrem did not frequently cite from the cosmogonic narrative in the discourses addressed to Hypatius, it is clear that this portion of the Scriptures stands behind his refutation of the anthropologies of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. Defending the created goodness and dignity of the body against heretical dualisms that regarded matter as evil and spirit alone as good, Ephrem wrote:

²⁷ The use to which Ephrem the Syrian put the doctrine of Christ's descent to Sheol in his polemics against heretical conceptions of the resurrection was recently addressed by Ute Possekel in a paper entitled "Bardaisan, Marcion, and Early Edessan Christianity" which was delivered at the IV North American Syriac Symposium held July 9-12, 2003 at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. Dr. Possekel has informed me she is preparing the paper for publication.

²⁸ C. W. Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan of Which the Greater Part has been Transcribed from the Palimpsest B.M. Add. 14623 and is Now First Published* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912).

²⁹ In the Introduction of his translation of Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, Edward Mathews calls attention to the studies of T. Jansma and A. Guillaumont who "have shown that Ephrem's entire account of the six days of creation, on the surface a very literal commentary, is a polemic aimed primarily against the teachings of Bardaisan." Mathews also points out that "Ephrem's polemic extends also to the teachings of Marcion and Mani." McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 60-62. As the crowning glory of God's creative activity, the creation of humanity was an integral aspect of the cosmogonical narrative and as such was a major site of Ephrem's theological polemic.

the body is akin to all the beauties of the soul, and is a partner with it in all good things, since it is able to learn by means of it, and teach by means of it,—it (*i.e.*, the Body) is, as it were, a trumpet for it; for by its (*i.e.*, the Body's) mouth, it (*i.e.*, the Soul) preaches Truth in the World, and it is a pure harp for it, by means of which it sounds forth Truth in creation. For along with it (*i.e.*, the Body) the Soul is adorned just as along with it the Soul is defiled. For they are alike in the matter of gain and loss, in every respect like friends they suit one another. For (they come) to the struggle like companions and to the (victor's) crown like partners, even if it is thought that it (*i.e.*, the Soul) contends in it (*i.e.*, the Body) against it. But it does not escape the notice of a wise (Hearer) that the triumph is on behalf of both. For when the Body is chaste and the Soul chaste it is a common gain, just as also when the Soul is impure and the Body impure it is a common loss.

Fifth Discourse to Hypatius³⁰

Ephrem also argued that “the Soul and the Body exist one in the other, and one of them cannot exist apart from its companion.”³¹ In fact, “the Soul which is great and perfect ... is ... altogether dependent on the Body”:³²

³⁰ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 53. The full complicity and complementarity of the body and soul was also depicted in *Nisibene Hymns* 45 where the practice of fasting was taken to illuminate the close cooperation of the physical and the spiritual. The first strophe of this hymn states:

If the soul of the eater fasts that it may be rewarded
it is fitting that the body will also be rewarded with it.
And if this is clear, the body that eats and also fasts
rebukes the erring, how much they err
that the soul that does not fast [has] its old age [as]
reward,
and [that there] will be no reward for the body that
fasts and labors.

Nisibene Hymns, 45.1

Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 50. (my translation)

³¹ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 54.

³² Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 54.

For [the Soul] can do nothing without [the Body]. For hearing enters into it by the ears, smell comes to it by the body's inhalation, it (*i.e.*, the Soul) sees forms through the Body's eyes, it tries taste with the Body's mouth, with the Body's heart it discerns knowledge, and with the whole of it all manner of things.

Fifth Discourse to Hypatius³³

Moreover,

when the end comes, the Soul learns all these perceptions by means of the Body; and just as these things which are here are learnt by means of it, so likewise these things which are to come are acquired in conjunction with it.

Fifth Discourse to Hypatius³⁴

Thus, when the soul and body are separated by death,³⁵ "it (*i.e.*, the Soul) awaits it (*i.e.*, the Body) in the Resurrection so that in both worlds it (*i.e.*, the Body) may be to it (*i.e.*, the Soul) a brother and a servant and a companion."³⁶

In his hymns Ephrem retained his anti-heretical polemical commitments, but expressed them in more poetic language and imagery. One of the richest veins of Ephrem's defense of the orthodox position on the resurrection of the body would be preserved in *Nisibene Hymns* 43-51. Many of the same themes we observed above can be detected here as well, articulated by means of typological exegesis and complex metaphors. Ephrem's polemical intent was made manifest in the forty-sixth of his *Nisibene Hymns*, where he wrote:

Let us ask the sons of error whether he was defiled by
the body—the Savior who descended and dwelt in Mary
and in our day dwells in the bodies of chaste men and
women.

Where the King dwells that place

³³ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 54.

³⁴ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 55.

³⁵ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 56.

³⁶ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 56. Many of the ideas were also expressed in the eighth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*. See: Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 131-135.

is free and exalted. And the Good One who dwells in
the body
promises to it that it will be drawn out in the
resurrection.

He humbled Himself to join with the body³⁷
and washed their feet and honored the heels³⁸
to illustrate the exaltation of the head in the
resurrection.

He bore and extolled it in the children.³⁹
He bore it upon his breast and embraced it in John.⁴⁰
This is sufficient to reproach Bardaisan.

For our Lord's care persuades us
that He heals the whole man in everything.⁴¹
He baptizes him in the Holy Spirit. He nourishes him
with the Medicine of Life.

How hateful indeed are Mani and Marcion
and blind Bardaisan who read and do not perceive
that the whole image of man will be gathered together
in the resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 46.1-2, 8⁴²

In his refutation of those who denied the resurrection of the body, Ephrem offered a variety of proofs drawn from Scripture and nature. Childbirth was one metaphorical complex deployed by Ephrem with respect to the eschatological resurrection of the body in his polemics against heretical teachers and their followers. We have surveyed Ephrem's use of this imagery in previous chapters of this work, especially with regard to the incarnational and soteriological dimensions of his conception of Christ's descent to Sheol. As the "firstborn of many" (SdDN 1.2; cf. Romans 8:29) and the "firstborn of Sheol" (HNis. 38.7; cf. Colossians 1:18), Christ's birth from the womb of Sheol (HNis. 37.4; HNat. 4.190; Azym. 16.4; HRes. 4.10) provided the prototype of the eschatological resurrection of humanity as a whole. In the forty-third of his *Nisibene Hymns*, Ephrem observed the vicissitudes and

³⁷ cf. Phil. 2:5-11.

³⁸ John 13:1-17.

³⁹ Mark 10:14.

⁴⁰ John 13:25, 21:20.

⁴¹ In Syriac this line reads: ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ

⁴² Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena* (Zweiter Teil), 54, 55. (my translation)

With the locust thy plea is overthrown and ended, O
 Death.
 For in coming forth from the dust it teaches the life
 from the dead.

Nisibene Hymns, 65.17-21⁵¹

In his refutation of the views of Manichaeans, Marcionites, and Bardaisanites, Ephrem also argued that the eschatological resurrection of the body was necessary in order to satisfy the demands of God's justice. In his seventy-second Nisibene Hymn, Ephrem argued that God's gift of the divine law required an eschatological resurrection in order to account for temporal perversions of justice. (HNis. 72:13) Meditating on the fate of the righteous dead of the Old Testament, Ephrem wrote:

The Spirit spoke in David: "I will reward the deeds
 of Moses and Aaron and Samuel." He did not say he
 had rewarded them
 but that he will reward them. Blessed is He who [so]
 concisely made clear
 the glory of their resurrections.

Refrain: Blessed is He who in the upright and the
 prophets depicted the mystery of the resurrection
 of the dead.

Noah and Job and Daniel—the prophet showed that
 they are living.

If the hearer knows that they are righteous
 and their souls can be roused, so also they will be saved
 from death
 and will be roused from Sheol.

For why should they remain persecuted for their
 righteousness?
 If the dead do not live it is stupid that they should
 die—
 for a God who does not revive and defrauds the
 upright of their rewards—
 and be in Sheol as any man.

Nisibene Hymns, 71.1-3⁵²

⁵¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 217.

⁵² Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 115-116. (my translation)

The same concerns are evident in Ephrem’s seventy-second *Nisibene Hymn* where he asked how God could withhold reward from Abraham, Isaac, the faithful prophets who suffered under Jezebel, Lot, and others. The hymn concluded with the following strophe:

In the fire the triumphant burned. In the sea the
upright drowned.
With swords the ascetics were slaughtered. With stones
the prophets were stoned.
On crosses the Apostles were hung. Will the Just One
defraud
millions on these deposits?

Nisibene Hymns, 72.19⁵³

Perhaps not surprisingly, however, it was from the creation narrative of the book of Genesis that Ephrem appropriated the terms by which he constructed his most frequently deployed typological argument for the resurrection of the body. Envisioning the eschatological resurrection as the recapitulation of God’s creation of humanity in his image from the dust of the earth, Ephrem wrote:

Behold in His intelligence our Maker drew him out.
He distinguished and traced out the man in the dust.
He distinguished and took the dust of Adam and
molded him.⁵⁴
So He distinguishes and draws out by His intelligence
the dust of humanity and raises it alone
and look—the beginning testifies to the end.

Nisibene Hymns, 43.19⁵⁵

Elsewhere, Ephrem depicted God’s primordial creation and eschatological restoration of humanity’s physicality, locating the unity of these events in the constant loving and merciful care of the Creator.

You molded the dust from the beginning⁵⁶
and You will complete Your gift in love.⁵⁷

Refrain: Glory to Your Lordship!

⁵³ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 119. (my translation)

⁵⁴ Gen. 2:7.

⁵⁵ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 45. (my translation)

⁵⁶ Gen. 2:7.

⁵⁷ cf. Phil. 2:6.

In goodness You created Adam though it was revealed
to You
that he would wrong You and err. You fashioned him
that he might be overcome.

You looked on the body while mourning, on the soul
while sad
for you mingled them in love and they parted and
separated in suffering.

The body was formed in wisdom—the soul breathed in
grace.
Love mixed them in peace. The serpent separated them
in cruelty.

The body and the soul seek judgment: “Which leads its
companion to sin?”
Transgression is common [to both] for freedom is
common [to both].

It belongs to You, O Blessed One, that You have
mercy repeatedly.
Your hand formed the earth. Your finger fashioned
Adam.

For behold, my Lord, Your mercy never fails from him.
You began with him in love. Complete him in mercy!

For if when he was not You created him that he might be.
Now that he has returned to his dust⁵⁸ may his temple
be rebuilt by You.

It is fitting to the King who sees his image grown old
that with choice paints he might gladden the sad image.

You showed a wonder for Your glorious height inclined
unto the ordinary dust that it might fashion the
splendid image.

This Latter One who was in the beginning is good
for he did not remove his creature but clothed himself
in him to clothe him.

The Exalted One knew that Adam desired to be god⁵⁹
He sent His Son and clothed him to give him his desire.

⁵⁸ Gen. 3:19.

⁵⁹ cf. Gen. 3:5-6.

The Evil One was sad to see that as much as he
 defeated Adam
 [the Creator] desired more to elevate [him] that [the
 Evil One] might be ashamed for defeating him.

Nisibene Hymns, 69.1-13⁶⁰

God's original intention for humanity and the eschatological resurrection of the dead were coupled in Ephrem's thought by means of his vision of Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead as the prototype of the recreation of humanity from the dusty womb of the earth. In Ephrem's thirty-seventh *Nisibene Hymn*, Death confessed that Christ's raising of the dead from Sheol was only possible on the condition that the Savior was in fact the "Power which created them." (HNis. 37.10) In the closing strophes of this hymn, Ephrem poetically drew together God's creation, redemption, and eschatological restoration of humanity, expressing the unity of the economy of salvation, and articulating his anti-heretical polemic, through the musings of Death.

If a man reads in the Prophets he hears there of
 righteous wars.
 But if a man meditate in the story of Jesus
 he learns of grace and tender mercy.
 But if a man thinks of Jesus that he is a strange God
 it is a reproach against me. No other strange key
 into the gate of Sheol could ever be fitted.
 One is the key of the Creator,
 that which has opened it, also is to open it at His coming.
 What is able to join the bones
 but the Power which created them?
 What shall reunite the shreds of the body
 but the hand of the Maker? What shall restore the forms
 but the finger of the Creator? He who created and
 turned and destroyed
 is He who is able also to renew and raise up.
 Another God is unable
 to enter in and restore creatures not His own.

Nisibene Hymns, 37.9-10⁶¹

⁶⁰ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 111-112. (my translation)

⁶¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 199.

THE EMPTYING OF SHEOL

As we have already noted above, Ephrem conceived of Christ's descent to and despoilment of Sheol as an event of eschatological moment which proleptically revealed the destiny of every deceased human being. In Ephrem's thirty-ninth *Nisibene Hymn*, Death contemplated the prospects of the parousia on the basis of what had already transpired as a result of the Savior's presence in Sheol.

When the sea saw Moses and fled
it feared because of his rod and likewise because of his
glory.⁶²
His splendor and his rod and his power
the rock also saw which was cleft.⁶³ But Sheol when her
graves were rent,
what saw she in Jesus? Instead of splendor He put on
the paleness of the dead
and made her tremble. And if His paleness when slain
slew her
how shall she be able to endure
when He comes to raise the dead in His Glory?

Nisibene Hymns, 39.21⁶⁴

In Ephrem's thought, the answer to Death's question was that Sheol would not be able to endure Christ's coming in glory to claim the dead. In the twenty-seventh of his *Hymns on Virginity*, Ephrem composed the following image of the parousia.

The dead who came out of their graves
will sing glory on their kitharas.
The living who fly up in their chariots
will sing glory with their harps.
The watchers will blow their horns.
The evil ones will inherit a shutting of the mouth.
Since I have no [more] voice, sing in me that I may sing
for you.
Glory to Your advent.

Hymns on Virginity, 27.6⁶⁵

⁶² Exod. 14:21-29.

⁶³ Exod. 17:5-7.

⁶⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 202.

⁶⁵ McVey, *Hymns*, 384.

The Savior's raising of the dead was articulated in much more detail in *Nisibene Hymn* 62, where Ephrem depicted Death explaining to humanity that:

Your infants and your sons in the resurrection
shall be foremost to come forth as the first fruits.

Then after them shall come the just as victorious.
Last shall come forth the sinner as put to shame.

For although in the twinkling of an eye they be
quickened⁶⁶
yet it is in order that their ranks come forth from Sheol.

Prophets come forth and Apostles, and holy Fathers
following them in due array according to command.

Lo! that which is now sown in random mixture
is yielded back in great order as garden herbs.

For though one in the sowing should mix all seeds
that which is earlier than its fellow prevents its fellow.

And not as their going down was confused so
disordered shall be
their coming up from the earth for its order is fixed.

Nisibene Hymns, 62.24-30⁶⁷

It should be noted here that Ephrem's enumeration of those raised from Sheol on the last day included not only the righteous dead, but sinners as well. (HNis. 62.25) Another interesting example of this aspect of Ephrem's thought (and one to which we will return below) was enunciated in *Nisibene Hymn* 38.11:

O my Lord, work for me this resurrection
not of Thy compulsion, but of Thy love
for Thy compulsion gives life to sinners also.
Iscariot would rather choose for himself again the
death of Sheol
than the life of Gehenna. Work for me then the
resurrection

⁶⁶ I Cor. 15:52.

⁶⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 215.

of Your mercy. And even though Thy justice
permits it not, let there be occasion for Thy grace.
This only let it remember for me: that in it I have
sought refuge.

Nisibene Hymns, 38.11⁶⁸

Ephrem left no doubt in his writings that Christ's resurrection from the dead provided the sure foundation for the hope of the resurrection of all human beings. The eschatological resurrection was to be universal in scope—Sheol would be emptied, and all who were buried in Adam would be raised in Christ. Ephrem articulated this perspective in repeatedly throughout his *Nisibene Hymns*.

Our Living King has gone forth and gone up
out of Sheol as Conqueror.
Woe He has doubled to them that are of the left hand:
to evil spirits and demons He is sorrow, to Satan and
Death He is pain,
to Sin and Sheol mourning. Joy to them that are of the
right hand
has come today. On this great day, therefore,
great glory let us give to Him
who died and is alive that unto all He may give life and
resurrection.

Nisibene Hymns, 36.18⁶⁹

Glory be to Thee, Son of the Lord of All who died for
all
and who was raised to give life to all in the day of His
coming!

Nisibene Hymns, 55.R⁷⁰

Great praise be to Him who came down to us here below
and who suffered and was raised and in His body raises
our bodies!

Nisibene Hymns, 62.R⁷¹

⁶⁸ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 200.

⁶⁹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 198.

⁷⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 209.

Glory to Him who endured all for the sake of all
and tasted death for all that He might raise all!

Nisibene Hymns, 64.R⁷²

There is coming a reaping, O Death, that will leave thee
bare.
And the Watchers shall go forth as reapers and make
thee desolate.

Nisibene Hymns, 65.6⁷³

Glory be to Thee who by Thy sacrifice hast redeemed
our disgrace
and whose death was instead of all deaths that Thou
mightst raise all!

Nisibene Hymns, 67.R⁷⁴

The universal scope of the resurrection of the body, already achieved in Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead and yet awaiting its fulfillment in the eschaton, was also expressed in Ephrem's hymnody by means of Adam/Christ typology. In *Nisibene Hymns* 57 and 61 we find the following refrains:

Glory be to Thee that by Thy humiliation Satan was
subdued
and that Thy abasement has exalted Adam who was
abased!

Nisibene Hymns, 57.R⁷⁵

Praise be to Thee who came down to follow Adam
and found Adam and also in him the children of Adam!

Nisibene Hymns, 61.R⁷⁶

⁷¹ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 214.

⁷² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 216.

⁷³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 217.

⁷⁴ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 218.

⁷⁵ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 210.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT

Ephrem's conception of the universal scope of the resurrection of the dead, coupled with his emphasis on the restoration of humanity to life and to Paradise have sometimes contributed to a deficit of attention to his thought concerning matters of eschatological divine judgment. While it is true that Ephrem conceived of and composed an elaborate and magnificent vision of Eden regained in his *Hymns on Paradise*, and that humanity's return to the Garden played the dominant role in his eschatological imagination, it cannot be forgotten that, even within the *Hymns on Paradise* themselves, Ephrem also gave careful consideration to the fate of those who by the continual misapplication of their divinely bestowed freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ) "cut off their hope with their own hands" (HNis. 43.16) and gave themselves over to the "the second death from which there is no way of escape." (HNis. 43.15)

While detailed descriptions of it in his writings were relatively scarce, Ephrem believed there would be an eschatological judgment of humanity. This can be seen implicitly in his expectation of rewards for the righteous which we noted above in our consideration of the resurrection of the body. A second and more revealing source concerning Ephrem's conception of a judgment which would separate the righteous from the wicked, although still not an explicit account of the event itself, can be located in his *Hymns on Paradise* where he depicted a gulf of separation between those in Paradise and those in Gehenna.

The children of light dwell on the heights of Paradise,
and beyond the Abyss they espy the rich man;
he too, as he raised his eyes, beholds Lazarus,
and calls out to Abraham to have pity on him.⁷⁷
But Abraham, that man so full of pity, who even had
pity on Sodom,⁷⁸
has no pity yonder for him who showed no pity.

⁷⁶Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 213.

⁷⁷ Luke 16:19-31.

⁷⁸ Gen. 18:16-33.

The Abyss severs any love which might act as a
mediary,
thus preventing the love of the just from being bound
to the wicked,
so that the good should not be tortured by the sight, in
Gehenna,
of their children or brothers or family—
a mother, who had denied Christ, imploring mercy
from her son
or her maid or her daughter, who all had suffered
affliction for the sake of Christ's teaching.

There the persecuted laugh at their persecutors,
the afflicted at those who had caused them affliction,
the slain at those who had put them to death,
the Prophets at those who had stoned them, the
Apostles at those who had crucified them.
The children of light reside in their lofty abode
and, as they gaze on the wicked and count their evil
actions,
they are amazed to what extent these people have cut
off all hope by committing such iniquity.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.12-14⁷⁹

It was, however, in his *Letter to Publius* that Ephrem's clearest description of the eschatological judgment of humanity received its expression. This letter was in its entirety "essentially a meditative vision on the last judgment"⁸⁰ written in "a highly artistic prose style"⁸¹ which, according to Sebastian Brock, may be regarded as most closely resembling that of the *Homily on Our Lord*. In the *Letter to Publius* Ephrem depicted the scene of the last judgment and the demeanor of those there assembled as follows.

Notice the twelve thrones that are fashioned on it for
judgment.⁸²
Notice how the tribes stand there trembling and how
the many nations stand there quaking.
Notice how their bodies shake and their knees knock.

⁷⁹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 82-83.

⁸⁰ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 336.

⁸¹ Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 263.

⁸² cf. Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30.

Notice how their hearts palpitate and how their minds
pine.

Notice how their faces are downcast and how their
shame is thick upon them like darkness.

Notice how their souls languish and how their spirits
flicker.

Notice how their tears overflow and soak the dust
beneath them.

Notice how their complexions are changing to green.

One takes on that color and hands it on to his
companion.

Notice their faces, which used to be joyful, have been
transformed to look like soot from a cauldron.⁸³

Hear their many groans and their wailing moans.

Hear their sighs of grief and their churning innards.

Notice their deeds:

those that were in secret have now become
manifest;

those that were done in darkness now shine forth
like the sun;⁸⁴

those that they had committed in secret now make
their complaint with loud voice.

Notice how everyone stands, his deeds before him
justly accusing him in the presence of his judge.

Notice how their evil thoughts have now taken on
shape and stand before their masters to accuse
them.

Notice their slanderous whisperings crying out in a
loud voice, and how the snares once hidden are
now revealed before them.

Letter to Publius, 5⁸⁵

Thus assembled, the resurrected mass of humanity would stand before Christ the judge. In the *Letter to Publius*, Ephrem identified the “Judge of righteousness”⁸⁶ by means of extensive catalogues of titles and deeds too lengthy to include here in their entirety. Emphasizing Christ’s divinity and unity with the Father, his identity as the Savior of humanity, his role in the creation of the

⁸³ cf. Joel 2:6; Nah. 2:10 (Peshitta).

⁸⁴ cf. Matt. 10:26; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17, 12:2.

⁸⁵ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 341-342.

⁸⁶ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 342.

universe and all in it, and his incomparable wisdom and justice, Ephrem also wrote of the Judge as:

the renewer of creatures,
 the restorer of natures,
 the resuscitator of mortality,
 who rolls away the cloud of darkness,⁸⁷
 who brings to an end the reign of iniquity,
 who destroys the power of Sheol,
 who shatters the sting of evil,⁸⁸
 who brings the captives to the light,⁸⁹
 who raises up from Abaddon⁹⁰ those who were cast
 down,
 who removes the darkness,
 who makes worthy of rest,
 who opens mouths that had been shut and
 who breathes in life just as of old.⁹¹

Letter to Publius, 7⁹²

This one was he whom Publius should consider:

... this one who does the will of Him who sent Him,
 this one whose will fulfills the will of Him who begot
 Him.⁹³ Look at Him, on that day, sitting at the right
 hand of Him who begot Him,⁹⁴ in that hour, placing
 the sheep at His right hand and the goats at His left
 hand,⁹⁵ at that moment, calling out to His blessed ones,
 while giving them thanks, “Come, inherit that
 kingdom,”⁹⁶ which from of old had been made ready
 for them in His knowledge and which from the
 beginning had been prepared for them.

Letter to Publius, 8⁹⁷

⁸⁷ cf. John 8:12.

⁸⁸ cf. I Cor. 15:56; Hos. 13:14.

⁸⁹ cf. Isa. 42:7.

⁹⁰ Rev. 9:11.

⁹¹ cf. Gen. 2:7.

⁹² McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 345.

⁹³ cf. John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38.

⁹⁴ cf. Mark 16:19.

⁹⁵ cf. Matt. 25:31-32.

⁹⁶ cf. Matt. 25:33-34.

⁹⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 346.

According to Ephrem, it was by the testimony of their deeds that the righteous and wicked would be judged. Basing this conception on Matthew 25:35-40, Ephrem wrote of the righteous:

When He was hungry, they fed Him in the poor.
 He was thirsty and they gave Him to drink in the disabled.
 He was naked and they clothed Him in the naked.
 He was imprisoned and they visited Him in the imprisoned.
 He was a stranger and they took Him in with the aliens.
 He was sick and they visited Him in the infirm.⁹⁸

And when they did not make their good works known before Him, those same beautiful works, which were depicted on their limbs, sounded the trumpet and gave witness on their behalf. Like luscious fruits on beautiful trees they hung on them and stood like bunches in order to be witnesses to the truth that these persons had truly wrought them.

Letter to Publius, 8⁹⁹

Rounding out the image, Ephrem contrasted the testimony of the good works of the righteous with the accusations leveled against the wicked by their misdeeds.

For just as the deeds of the wicked are their accusers¹⁰⁰ before the righteous Judge, making them bend and bow down their heads silently in shame, so also their beautiful deeds plead cause for the good before the Good One. For the deeds of all mankind are both silent and speak—silent by their nature yet they speak when one sees them.

Letter to Publius, 9.1¹⁰¹

The testimony of deeds was seen by Ephrem to be so complete and so effective a form of disclosure that:

In that place, there is no interrogation, for He is the judge of knowledge; nor is there any response, for

⁹⁸ cf. Matt. 25:35-40.

⁹⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 346-347.

¹⁰⁰ cf. Isa. 59:12.

¹⁰¹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 347.

when He sees it, He hears. He hears with sight and He sees with hearing. Because in that one thing, which is not a composite, is hearing and sight, swiftness, touch, sensation, smell, taste, discernment, knowledge, and judgment. Also by that which is not a composite, there is given out the reward of good things and the punishment of evil things to the two sides: those on the right hand and those on the left.¹⁰²

Letter to Publius, 9.2¹⁰³

With this vivid imagery, Ephrem constructed a compelling vision of the eschatological judgment, and one he hoped would be of spiritual aid to Publius. Even so, Ephrem hastened to assure Publius that, just as was the case with the evocative and striking depiction of Eden regained in his *Hymns on Paradise*, his language concerning the last judgment must be understood as metaphorical and approximate in nature—images meant to convey a reality yet to come.

It is not that there really are a right and a left in that place, but rather these are names for those who are honored among us and for those in our midst who are unworthy. Rather we reckon that there is a throne for the Judge in that place and we call the place of the good "the right," while we label the place of the wicked "the left." We call the good "sheep" because of their docility, and we call the wicked "goats" because of their impudence. We call His justice "a balance" and His retribution to us "the measure of truth."

Letter to Publius, 9.3¹⁰⁴

Later in the letter, Ephrem offered yet another description of the judgment of humanity, one which, as Mathews has observed, should be seen as corresponding well with the poet's emphasis on human freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ).¹⁰⁵ Speaking of the human conscience as a "hidden judge," Ephrem wrote:

¹⁰² cf. Matt. 25:33.

¹⁰³ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 347.

¹⁰⁴ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 347.

¹⁰⁵ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 337. Mathews directs readers to: Tanios Bou Mansour, "Aspects de la liberté humaine chez saint Ephrem le Syrien," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 60 (1984): 252-282.; and,

Perhaps, for the wicked, that which they see is Gehenna, and their separation is what burns them with their mind as the flame. That hidden judge who dwells in the discerning mind has spoken and there has become for them the judge of righteousness and he scourges them without mercy with torments for the compunction of their soul. Perhaps, it is this that separates them and sends each of them to the place suitable for him. Perhaps, it is this that lays hold of the good with its extended right hand and sends them to the Exalted Right Hand. It also takes hold of the wicked in its left hand, equal in power, and casts them into the place which is called "the left."¹⁰⁶ And perhaps, it is this that silently accuses them and quietly pronounces judgment upon them.

Letter to Publius, 22¹⁰⁷

An understanding of Ephrem's conception of the coming judgment of humanity in the resurrection of the body can only be offered with a full acknowledgment of the limited sources in which he addressed the matter, the linguistic and epistemic limitations he placed on all matters of theological reflection, his insistence on the necessarily metaphorical and approximate nature such descriptions, and the inherent eschatological indeterminacy of the events under consideration. Nevertheless, what remained clear throughout Ephrem's humbly speculative view of the workings and mechanics of the judgment of humanity, even where it is repeatedly prefaced with the word "perhaps," was the conviction that there would be a judgment which would lead to the elevation of some and the casting out of others. Ephrem believed and argued that there would be, in some sense, reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, both clad in the resurrected body. As Ephrem wrote in his seventy-third *Nisibene Hymn*:

Tanios Bou Mansour, "La liberté chez saint Ephrem le Syrien," *Parole de l'Orient* 11 (1983): 89-156; 12 (1984/1985): 3-89.

¹⁰⁶ cf. Matt. 25:33.

¹⁰⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 354.

One is the way for all of us, my brothers, from birth
towards death
and from death to the resurrection. But from there,
there are two ways:
one to the Fire, and one to Eden. Let each one pray
concerning his death.

Nisibene Hymns, 73.4¹⁰⁸

GEHENNA

One of the very few considerations of Ephrem's conception of Gehenna and the life of the sinners and evil ones consigned to it was offered by Jouko Martikainen in *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers*.¹⁰⁹ Martikainen began his survey cautiously noting that:

In den echten Schriften Ephraems findet man auffällig wenig Material von der Gehenna. Ausserdem verdient der Umstand Beachtung, dass die Gehenna bei ihm eine rein eschatologische Realität ist. Die Scheol und die Gehenna haben nichts miteinander zu tun. Die Scheol ist das kollektive Grab, das nur bis zur Auferstehung aller existieren wird. Wie die Darstellung gezeigt hat, erfuhr die Scheol eine Umwandlung durch die Niederfahrt Christi zum Totenreich. Die Gehenna dagegen wird erst nach der Auferstehung aller aufgerichtet. Die Trennung der Scheol und der Gehenna entspricht der 'Rollenverteilung' zwischen dem Tod und dem Teufel. Der Tod verliert seine Funktion gleichzeitig mit der Verödung der Scheol. Ob

¹⁰⁸ Beck, ed., *Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, 123. (my translation)

¹⁰⁹ Jouko Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*, Meddelanden Stiftelsen för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, Nr. 32 (Åbo: Publications of the Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, 1978), 127-130. In contrast to Martikainen, other authors who have considered Ephrem's eschatology have tended to focus on Paradise, giving significantly less thought to Gehenna. For examples of this tendency, see: Seely J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Christianity with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 133-137.; and, Tanios Bou Mansour, *La Pensée Symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien*, XVI (Kaslik: Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 491-526.

die Gehenna ewig fortbestehen wird, ist in den echten Schriften Ephraems nicht ganz ersichtlich.¹¹⁰

Martikainen was certainly right in his analysis of the difficulty of reconstructing Ephrem's depiction of Gehenna. His emphasis on the strictly eschatological quality of Gehenna, however, while accurate in one sense, may have been something of an overstatement. Though Gehenna was never described by Ephrem as a region of the universe inhabited by human beings during the temporal history of humanity, it was not the case that Gehenna had no function within the history of salvation. On the contrary, in Ephrem's works Gehenna posed a great threat to the unrepentant wicked and a strong deterrent to sin for those who would be saved. The temporal presence of Gehenna, mediated to the theological imagination through the "mirror" of the Scriptures, was brilliantly depicted by Ephrem in his *Letter to Publius*.

... the Gospel is a foreshadowing of that heavenly unfading beauty by which all the sins of Creation are reprieved and by which reward is given to all those who have preserved their beauty from being defiled with filth. To everyone who peers into this mirror, his sins are visible in it. And everyone who takes careful notice will see in it that portion which is reserved for him, whether good or evil.

There the kingdom of heaven is depicted and can be seen by those who have a pure eye.¹¹¹

There the exalted ranks of the good ones can be seen.

There the high ranks of the middle ones can be discerned.

There the lowly ranks of the evil ones are delineated.

There the beautiful places, which have been prepared for those worthy of them, are evident.¹¹²

There Paradise can be seen rejoicing in its flowers. In this mirror, Gehenna in flames can be seen by those who deserve to dwell there. In Paradise there are joyous promises for the good as they wait for [the day]

¹¹⁰ Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel*, 127.

¹¹¹ cf. Matt. 5:29.

¹¹² cf. John 14:2-3.

when they will receive their masters with uncovered faces. But in Gehenna, the promises for the wicked will be grievous at the time when they see their masters abased in stature.

There the outer darkness can be seen clearly and from within it can be heard the sound of wailing and weeping, of groans, and of gnashing of teeth.¹¹³

There in their bonds people wail as they are tortured, and it becomes more intense according to their wickedness so that they are punished with all justice.

There that rich man,¹¹⁴ who used to wear different clothes every day and used to take delight in his luxuries, wails from anguish inside Sheol.

There the groaning cry of the rich man can be heard crying out to Abraham, the father of the just, "Send Lazarus, your son, to moisten my tongue for I am afflicted,¹¹⁵ for my sins are burning me up and my evil deeds like coals of a broom tree¹¹⁶ are roasting me."

Letter to Publius, 2-4¹¹⁷

Additionally, Martikainen's statement that Sheol and Gehenna have nothing to do with each other must also be somewhat qualified. Though Ephrem typically drew a distinction between Sheol and Gehenna, it must be noted that there are at least a few places in the poet's writings where this difference is not altogether clear. At one point in his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem declared with reference to the eschaton, "Those whom the Good One loves shall be in Eden, those whom the Just rejects, in Sheol" (HPar. 6.19). Elsewhere, addressing the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Ephrem had a tendency to alternate the identity of the location in which the rich man suffered torment.

¹¹³ cf. Matt. 8:12, 22:13, 25:30.

¹¹⁴ Luke 16:19-31.

¹¹⁵ Luke 16:24.

¹¹⁶ Psa. 120:4.

¹¹⁷ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 339-340.

There that rich man, who used to wear different clothes every day and used to take delight in his luxuries, wails from anguish inside Sheol.¹¹⁸

Letter to Publius, 4¹¹⁹

This place, despised and spurned by the denizens of Paradise,
those who burn in Gehenna hungrily desire;
their torment doubles at the sight of its fountains,
they quiver violently as they stand on the opposite side;
the rich man, too, begs for succor, but there is no one
to wet his tongue,
for the fire is within them, while the water is opposite
them.¹²⁰

Hymns on Paradise, 1.17¹²¹

The reasons behind Ephrem's occasional conflations of Sheol and Gehenna are not particularly clear, especially when considered in light of the numerous descriptions of Sheol Ephrem presented throughout his works in which it was depicted, as we have seen, as a place of relative rest and tranquility where human beings were removed from the vicissitudes of earthly life. The experience of the dead in Sheol might have been one of confinement in its cold, dark, silence, but it was not characteristically depicted by Ephrem as one of torment. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Ephrem's works do occasionally make reference to some degree of suffering for the wicked dead in Sheol. In addition to Ephrem's varying treatment of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Death's "dishonoring" of the bones of the wicked dead in *Nisibene Hymn* 63 must also be mentioned. Depicting Death offering the following admonition to humanity, Ephrem wrote:

Dishonor not your members by your sins
for in Sheol the bones of evildoers are despised.

Whenever I see the body of one of the evil
I trample on it and curse even his memory.

¹¹⁸ Luke 16:19-31.

¹¹⁹ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 340.

¹²⁰ cf. Luke 16:19-31.

¹²¹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 84.

But wherever I see a bone of one of the just
I set it apart and honor it and do it worship.

Nisibene Hymns, 63.15-17¹²²

Given what we have seen of Ephrem's depiction of Sheol as the collective abode of the dead wherein just and sinner alike await the eschatological resurrection, what is to be made of these passages concerning the suffering of the wicked dead in Sheol? In the course of this work, we have observed that Ephrem's depiction of Sheol was consciously and intentionally articulated in multiple, complementary, and non-identical poetic 'narratives' and images which yielded a multi-faceted and complex vision of the underworld of the dead. At points the cumulative effect of Ephrem's diverse descriptions of Sheol and its denizens have been described as collage-like or kaleidoscopic. Here, these visual metaphors may be augmented by means of one that is aural: in the complex symphony of Ephrem's thought on Sheol, his few comments concerning the suffering of the wicked served as a contrapuntal theme. Thus, while Ephrem occasionally depicted Sheol as a place wherein the unrighteous rested less easily than the righteous, both nevertheless slept in death until the resurrection, and while the unrighteous may have experienced a degree of suffering that the righteous did not, the anticipatory suffering of Sheol was not the same as the fiery torment of Gehenna.

Despite these qualifications, Martikainen's general points must be conceded: whereas Sheol is an inhabited region of the created temporal order, Gehenna will not be inhabited until the eschaton, and whereas Sheol is merely a collective grave or abode of the dead, Gehenna will be a place of fire and torment. Ephrem's depiction of this aspect of Gehenna was, in many respects, exactly what one might expect. Ephrem referred to "those who burn in Gehenna" (HPar. 1.17), to "floods of fire" (HNis. 57.11), choking smoke (HNis. 57.13), flame kindled on the head (HNis. 57.15) and under the hanging body (HNis. 57.18), and coals heaped upon the body (HNis. 57.22). Elsewhere he appropriated the language of Scripture speaking of "worms and gnashing of teeth" (CDiat. 8.10).

Among the inhabitants of Sheol Ephrem included the personified "troublers" of humanity, Death, Satan, Sin, and Sheol,

¹²² Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 216.

imprisoned within Gehenna at the day of judgment, their powers broken and their usefulness outlived (HNis. 56.23). Ephrem also made it abundantly clear that some human beings would be found among them, referring to the population of Gehenna including the “children or brothers or family” (HPar. 1.13) of residents of Paradise. Elsewhere he stated that “the terrible cries of the wicked ... proclaim in Gehenna that the Just One is righteous” (HPar. 7.29). Ephrem reported that “the Evil One in Gehenna” would desire the presence of humanity with him (HNis. 68.30), but Death warned him that he would be more tormented than tormentor:

The evil [people] in the fire shall stab thee who madest
them evil.

They shall upbraid thee, “Wherefore broughtest thou
us hither?”

Sinners shall rail against thee and haply their threats
shall be worse to thee than the torment of yonder hell.

These shall be unto thee there, all of them Satans
as thou have been to them here the one Satan.

The Watchers shall seize and hurl thee down calling to
mind
how through thee men hurled their Lord from height
to depth.

All men will run to stone thee not forgetting
that through thee the maddened people ran to stone
their Maker.

On thee, Evil One, from all mouths shall be the
spitting of wrath
for through thee they spat on Him whose spittle gave
sight to the blind.

On thee, Evil One, from all tongues shall be all curses
for through thee men blasphemed Him who opened
dumb mouths.

Nisibene Hymns 59.11-18¹²³

¹²³ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 212.

For all of this, however, there was another side to Ephrem's depiction of Gehenna, yielding a perspective far different from what one might expect. Sebastian Brock has noted that:

In a few passages St. Ephrem hesitatingly speculates about the possibility of some sort of intermediary position for repentant sinners:

Blessed is the sinner
 who has received mercy there
 and is deemed worthy to be given access
 to the environs of Paradise:
 even though he remains outside,
 he may pasture there through grace.
 As I reflected I was fearful again
 because I had presumed
 to suppose that there might be
 between the Garden and Hell's fire
 a place where those who have found mercy
 can receive chastisement and forgiveness.¹²⁴

Elsewhere, there are indications, at points, that Ephrem regarded Gehenna as a place of purification or rehabilitation for human beings who were willing to repent. A striking example of this strand of thought found expression in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*.

*Neither here nor beyond will it be forgiven him.*¹²⁵ Now our Lord forgave many people their sins freely, and indeed his baptism forgives freely the debts of those who believe. But neither our Lord, however, nor his baptism, could forgive this [sin] in this world, nor could his mercy, which hides in the midst of many good things, and covers over evil things unto the end. For our Lord has not said that [such a sin] will be requited by compensation, but that it will not be freely forgiven. In other words, even if one were to do all kinds of good deeds and be complete in every kind of righteousness, there is no way that this [sin] can be freely forgiven him. [God] will require its retribution in Gehenna. Even David gave his righteousness by way of

¹²⁴ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 56-57. Brock's citation is from *Hymns on Paradise* 10.14.

¹²⁵ Matt. 12:32.

compensation for the homicide which he had committed. With confidence then [I say], “There is no sin that has resisted nor will resist repentance, except this one.” But this sin does not prevent that a person might be justified eventually. When one will have made retribution in Gehenna, [God] will reward him for this in the Kingdom.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 10.4¹²⁶

Though, as we have noted above, Ephrem argued that there was no opportunity for repentance in Sheol (HNis. 36.16), he may have supposed the case be otherwise in Gehenna, at least in part because of the fact that while the human inhabitants of Sheol were dead, those in Gehenna will have been raised to life. Above, we noted that life is given to sinners as well as to the righteous in the resurrection, noting the contrast Ephrem drew between the “death of Sheol” and the “life of Gehenna.” (HNis. 38.11) Elsewhere, in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Gehenna was also identified as a place of life:

If you say, “How can the soul perish in Gehenna, since neither power nor death have dominion over it?,” and if you also ask concerning the body, “How can it perish, given that there will be *worms and gnashing of teeth*¹²⁷ there?,” this saying illuminates this. For not only does the soul, which is itself immortal, not die, but neither does the body die, since it remains on without corruption. [The words], *He who destroys the body*,¹²⁸ refer to the temporal death. If the body perished entirely in Gehenna it would not be [there], for Gehenna torments those who are living, but without the destruction of the corruptible [bodies].

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 8.10¹²⁹

If, as Ephrem’s depiction of Gehenna as a place of life would suggest, the human residents of this region of the cosmos will be

¹²⁶ Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 166-167.

¹²⁷ cf. Matt. 8:12; Mark 9:48.

¹²⁸ Matt. 10:28.

¹²⁹ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 151.

possessed of the same freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ) that they had in earthly life, this would seem to open the possibility of their repentance and restoration. While this remains a matter much in need of more detailed investigation, it must be noted that Ephrem’s conception of Gehenna was strongly informed not only by the demands of God’s justice, but also by his enduring mercy. Though they may only be offered here as moments of speculation in Ephrem’s works, the following strophes do at least suggest the mitigation of Gehenna’s torments for penitents. In Ephrem’s fifty-ninth *Nisibene Hymn* Death says to Satan:

Perhaps, in mercy Gehenna will be emptied
and you will remain in it alone with your ministers.

Nisibene Hymns, 59.8¹³⁰

Elsewhere, Ephrem enigmatically suggested the possibility of a remote portion of Paradise in which those whose sins were committed in ignorance might partake of “the crumbs” of Eden.

What I have told must suffice my boldness;
but if there is anyone who dares to go on and say
“As for the dull-witted and simple people, who have
done wrong out of ignorance,
once they have been punished and paid their debt,
He who is good allows them to dwell in some remote
corner of Paradise
where they can graze on that blessed food of ‘the
crumbs’¹³¹ ...

This place, despised and spurned by the denizens of
Paradise,
those who burn in Gehenna hungrily desire;
their torment doubles at the sight of its fountains,
they quiver violently as they stand on the opposite side;
the rich man,¹³² too, begs for succor, but there is no
one to wet his tongue,
for fire is within them, while water is opposite them.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.16-17¹³³

¹³⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 212. Due to a discrepancy in numbering, this strophe corresponds to 59.9 in Beck’s critical edition.

¹³¹ cf. Matt. 15:24-28; Mark 7:24-30; cf. also Luke 16:19-21.

¹³² cf. Luke 16:19-31.

Finally, we note Ephrem's "fearful" speculation on the possibility that God's mercy might moderate the horrors of Gehenna. In the strophe with which we began our consideration of this possibility and in the one which follows it, Ephrem wrote:

Blessed is the sinner who has received mercy there
and is deemed worthy to be given access to the
environs of Paradise;
even though he remains outside, he may pasture there
through grace.
As I reflected I was fearful again because I had
presumed
to suppose that there might be between the Garden
and the fire
a place where those who have found mercy can receive
chastisement and forgiveness.

Praise to the Just One who rules with His grace;
He is the Good One who never draws in the limits of
His goodness;
even to the wicked He stretches forth in His
compassion.
His divine cloud hovers over all that is His;
it drips dew even on that fire of punishment so that, of
His mercy,
it enables even the embittered to taste of the drops of
its refreshment.

Hymns on Paradise, 10.14-15¹³⁴

PARADISE

For all that we have considered thus far concerning Gehenna, it must nevertheless be admitted that humanity's return to Paradise was the predominant theme of Ephrem the Syrian's eschatological reflection. Envisioning it as the original and divinely intended domain of human existence, Ephrem regarded Paradise as the portion of the cosmos in which humanity was created and destined to live in blessed communion with God and one another. Created not perfect, but perfectible (CGen. 2.17.3), God endowed humanity with the gift of freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ) and the opportunity to pursue "the immortal life that was to be conferred

¹³³ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 83-84.

¹³⁴ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 152-153.

by their eating from the tree of life.” (HPar. 12.15-18) Had they kept the one commandment of God—which Ephrem regarded as “not a great commandment relative to the great reward that He had prepared for them” (CGen. 2.17.5)—and

if the serpent had been rejected along with sin, Adam and Eve would have eaten from the tree of life and the tree of knowledge would not have been withheld from them; from the one they would have gained infallible knowledge and from the other they would have received immortal life.

Commentary on Genesis, 23.1¹³⁵

Attending to the temptation of the Evil One, however, Adam and Eve transgressed the commandment of God through the misuse of his good gift of freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ), alienated themselves from their Creator, set out on the way of sin and death, and, banished from Eden, were prevented from reentering by an angelic sentry. Even the expulsion of the first parents from Paradise, however, was to be understood not only as indicative of divine justice, but of divine mercy as well, and, in a sense, constitutive of the first act of the history of God’s salvation of humanity. Ephrem wrote:

*“And now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever ...”*¹³⁶ If Adam had rashly eaten from the one tree he was commanded not to eat, how much faster would he hasten to that one about which he had not been so commanded? But it was now decreed that they should live in toil, in sweat, in pains, and in pangs.¹³⁷ Therefore, lest [Adam and Eve], after having eaten of this tree, live forever and remain in eternal lives of suffering, [God] forbade them to eat, while they were clothed with a curse, that which He had been prepared to give them before they incurred the curse and when they were still clothed with glory.

[God did this], lest this life-giving gift that they would receive through the tree of life become misery, and thus bring worse evil upon them than what they

¹³⁵ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 114.

¹³⁶ Gen. 3:22-24.

¹³⁷ Gen. 3:16-19.

had already obtained from the tree of knowledge. From the latter [tree] they obtained temporal pains, whereas the former [tree] would have made those pains eternal. From the latter they obtained death which would cast off from them the bonds of their pains. The former [tree], however, would have caused them [to live] as if buried alive, leaving them to be tortured eternally by their pains. [God], therefore, withheld from them the tree of life. It was not right either that a life of delights be allowed in the land of curses or that eternal life be found in a transitory world.

If they had eaten, however, one of two things would have occurred. Either the decree of death would have become a lie, or the life-giving capacity of the tree of life would have been denied. Therefore, lest the decree of death be loosed or the life-giving capacity of the tree of life become false, God took Adam far away from there lest he also incur loss from the tree of life just as he had been harmed by the tree of knowledge.

Commentary on Genesis, 35.1-3¹³⁸

Barred from Paradise and subject to death, which in Ephrem's thought was both the just penalty for their sin and the merciful release from an unending life of sin and suffering, humanity awaited God's salvation in Christ. In his nativity, Christ clothed himself with the body (HVirg. 29.1; HNat. 22.39) of Adam (HFast. 2.4; HNis. 35.8; SdDN 9), entering his creation to effect its complete redemption. As the second Adam, Christ was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, but in contrast to the first Adam and in order to restore what had been lost in him, the Savior, possessed of human freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ), overcame the wiles of the Evil One, conquering him in the desert and opening the way of obedience and life. (HPar. 12.6; HNis. 35.4; CDiat. 4.6, 11, 12; HVirg. 12) In his death, as well, Christ stood in the place of Adam in order to redeem Adam. Considering Christ's sufferings in a relationship of measure-for-measure reciprocity relative to Adam's sin and death which were inherited by all the human heirs of the fore-parent, Ephrem wrote:

¹³⁸ McVey, ed., *Selected Prose Works*, 122-123.

Our Lord subdued His might and they seized Him¹³⁹
 so that His living death might give life to Adam.¹⁴⁰
 He gave His hands to be pierced by the nails¹⁴¹
 in place of the hand that had plucked the fruit;¹⁴²
 He was struck on the cheek in the judgment hall¹⁴³
 in return for that mouth that had devoured in Eden.¹⁴⁴
 Because Adam had let slip his foot
 they pierced His feet.¹⁴⁵
 Our Lord was stripped naked¹⁴⁶ so that we might be
 clothed in modesty;
 with the gall and vinegar¹⁴⁷ He made sweet
 that bitter venom that the serpent had poured into
 human kind.¹⁴⁸

Nisibene Hymns, 36.1¹⁴⁹

Because Adam was imprisoned in Sheol for his transgressions (HNis. 36.2), it was necessary for him to be reclaimed from the grip of Death. Thus, by means of his death on the cross, Christ descended to Sheol in order to restore Adam and all humanity to the Paradaisal life for which he/they had been created. Ephrem expressed this succinctly in the refrain of his sixty-fifth *Nisibene Hymn*:

Glory be to Thee Who didst descend and plunge after
 Adam
 and draw him out from the depths of Sheol and bring
 him into Eden.

Nisibene Hymns, 65.R¹⁵⁰

¹³⁹ Matt. 26:50; Mark 14:46; Luke 22:54; cf. John 18:12.

¹⁴⁰ cf. I Cor. 15:45.

¹⁴¹ Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18; cf. John 20:24-29, esp. v. 27.

¹⁴² Gen. 3:6.

¹⁴³ Matt. 27:30.

¹⁴⁴ Gen. 3:6.

¹⁴⁵ Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18; cf. John 20:24-29.

¹⁴⁶ Matt. 27:28.

¹⁴⁷ Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:23.

¹⁴⁸ Gen. 3:1, cf. 3:14-15.

¹⁴⁹ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 33.

The same conception was more allusively articulated with emphasis being laid on the universal significance of Christ's rescue of all humanity in the thirtieth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity*.

You are also the son of the dead and bound father,
whom the Son of the Living Father released.
The Good One who was bound released the bad.

...

The bound were released by One bound;
the crucifiers were saved by the Crucified.
For the crops that were stored up by sinners
there are springs of assistance.

The result of your death is full of life.
You released the captives of Your captivity.
Your body You stripped off, my Lord, and as You lost
it,
among the dead You descended and sought it.
Death was amazed at You in Sheol,
that You sought Your garment and found [it].
O Wise One Who lost what was found
in order to find the lost!

*Hymns on Virginity, 30.11-12*¹⁵¹

In depicting Christ's death as the reopening of Paradise, Ephrem placed special emphasis on the typological complementarity between the spear with which the Savior's side was pierced and the sword with which the entrance to Eden was guarded. In *Hymns on the Nativity* 8, Ephrem wrote:

Blessed is the Compassionate One Who saw, next to
Paradise,
the lance that barred the way
to the Tree of Life.¹⁵² He came to take up
the body that would be struck so that by the opening in
His side
He might break through the way into Paradise.¹⁵³

*Hymns on the Nativity, 8.4*¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 216.

¹⁵¹ McVey, *Hymns*, 397.

¹⁵² Gen. 3:24.

¹⁵³ John 19:34.

Ephrem considered the significance of this event for Adam in the thirty-ninth of his *Nisibene Hymns*:

The lance guarded the tree of life.¹⁵⁵
 It made the [Death] glad and sad. It hindered Adam
 from life
 and it hindered death from the people. But the lance
 that pierced Jesus
 [made Death suffer]: He is pierced and [Death]
 groan[s].
 There came out from Him water and blood.¹⁵⁶
 Adam washed and lived and returned to Paradise.

Nisibene Hymns, 39.7¹⁵⁷

In a number of contexts, Ephrem combined the imagery of the crucifixion, descent to Sheol, and resurrection of Christ with the imagery of primordial and eschatological Paradise. One of the most powerful unifying elements of this aspect of his thought can be seen in his identification of the cross or of Christ himself as the tree of life.

Jesus, bend down to us Your love that we may grasp
 this Branch that bent down her fruits for the
 ungrateful;
 they ate and were satisfied, yet they demeaned her who
 had bent down
 as far as Adam in Sheol.
 She ascended and lifted him up and with him returned
 to Eden.
 Blessed is He Who bent her down toward us that we
 might seize her and ascend on her.

Hymns Against Julian, On the Church.⁸¹⁵⁸

In a similar vein, Ephrem depicted Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection as a tree of cosmic proportions which provided the fruit of his body, an image which strongly suggests the church's

¹⁵⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 119-120.

¹⁵⁵ Gen. 3:24.

¹⁵⁶ John 19:34.

¹⁵⁷ Schaff and Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series, Vol. 13, 201. I have made modifications to the translated text to better suit it to this context.

¹⁵⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 223.

proleptic participation in the Paradaisal life through the sacraments.
(CDiat. 21.25)

The first day, the source and beginning,
is a type of the root that germinated everything.
Much greater than it is our Redeemer's day planted in
the universe.

His death is like a root inside the earth,
His resurrection like a summit in heaven,
His words [extend] in every direction like branches,
and like His fruit [is] His body for those who eat it.

Hymns on the Nativity, 26.4¹⁵⁹

Ephrem, as we have seen, considered Christ's elevation of Adam from Sheol, his opening of Paradise, and his church's participation in the life of the eschatological Eden, all to be in some sense present realities through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son, who, as the second Adam and representative head of redeemed humanity, had already accomplished these acts of redemption. Nevertheless, Ephrem also emphasized that the final fulfillment and consummation of these mystically present events was still awaited, dependent upon the eschatological resurrection of the body. This event too, however, was also regarded as both achieved and anticipated, accomplished once for all in Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead, and yet to be realized in his church.

Ephrem's most extensive description of the environment for which humanity was created and toward which it was destined in God's economy of salvation was beautifully articulated in his *Hymns on Paradise*. In this small collection of *madrashé*, Ephrem reminded his listeners again and again that his description of the eschatological Eden was not to be taken literally, but to be understood as a theological and imaginative meditation on "the tale of Paradise":

Joyfully did I embark on the tale of Paradise—
a tale that is short to read but rich to explore.
My tongue read the story's outward narrative,
while my intellect took wing and soared upward in awe

¹⁵⁹ McVey, *Hymns*, 207.

as it perceived the splendor of Paradise—not indeed as
it really is,
but insofar as humanity is granted to comprehend it.

Hymns on Paradise, 1.3¹⁶⁰

Ephrem depicted Paradise as a cosmic mountain, conical in shape, the circular base of which encompassed the spatial earth of human existence. (HPar. 1.8-9) The Edenic mountain was divided into three sections, and at its peak dwelled the Shekinah of God’s presence.

When the just ascend its various levels to receive their
inheritance,
with justice He raises up each one to the degree that
accords with his labors;
each is stopped at the level whereof he is worthy,
there being sufficient levels in Paradise for everyone:
the lowest parts for the repentant, the middle for the
righteous,
the heights for those victorious, while the summit is
reserved for God’s presence.

Hymns on Paradise, 2.11¹⁶¹

Within the borders of Paradise, the redeemed enjoyed the delights of the Garden planted for them by God. Depicting the inhabitants of Paradise as rewarded according to the measure of their good deeds, Ephrem wrote:

There too did I see the bowers of the just
dripping with unguents and fragrant with scents,
garlanded with fruits, crowned with blossoms.
In accord with a person’s deeds such was his bower;
thus one had few adornments, while another was
resplendent in its beauty;
one was but dim in its coloring, while another dazzled
in its glory.

Hymns on Paradise, 5.6¹⁶²

Ephrem’s extensive descriptions of Paradise cannot be exhaustively recapitulated here, but some attempt must be made to

¹⁶⁰ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 78.

¹⁶¹ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 89.

¹⁶² Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 104.

offer a sense of his remarkable vision of the beatific abode of the blessed. The effectiveness with which he portrayed the delights of Paradise, in fact, may offer one of the most immediate indications of his true poetic genius. Far from vague and abstract notions of well-being and rest, Ephrem's conception of the eschatological Eden is one of vibrant life and sensuous delights, described by means of vivid physical imagery.

In Ephrem's thought, the very soil of Paradise was so "glorious" as to be "defiled" by gemstones which, drawn out of its ground, laid piled around the outside of the Garden. (HPar. 7.4) From the earth of Paradise, all manner of fruitful vegetation grew, filling the Garden with "savors," "colors," "beauties," (HPar. 6.2) which Ephrem described as an intoxicating fragrance (HPar. 6.4). Of the plants of Paradise, Ephrem wrote:

Nothing there in Paradise is useless:
both grass and roots bring benefit and profit;
whoever tastes them is rejuvenated, whoever breathes
in their scent grows fair;
in the bosom of its blossoms and flowers is hidden
a veritable treasure, a gift for those who pluck it;
the fruits of Paradise bear rich wealth for those who
gather them.

Hymns on Paradise, 7.21¹⁶³

His description of the fruit trees (HPar. 6.12), was even more striking:

Should you wish to climb up a tree,
with its lower branches it will provide steps before your
feet,
eager to make you recline in its bosom above,
on the couch of its upper branches. So arranged is the
surface of these branches,
bent low and cupped—while yet dense with flowers—
that they serve as a protective womb for whoever rests
there.

Who has ever beheld such a banquet in the very bosom
of a tree,
with fruit of every savor ranged for the hand to pluck.

¹⁶³ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 126-127.

Each type of fruit in its due sequence approaches, each
 awaiting its turn:
 fruit to eat, and fruit to quench the thirst;
 to rinse the hands there is dew, and leaves to dry them
 with after
 —a treasure store which lacks nothing, whose Lord is
 rich in all things.

Around the trees the air is limpid as the saints recline;
 below them are blossoms, above them fruit;
 fruits serve as their sky, flowers as their earth.
 Who has ever heard of or seen
 a cloud of fruits providing shade for the head,
 or a garment of flowers spread out beneath the feet?

Such is the flowing brook of delights that, as on tree
 takes leave of you,
 the next one beckons to you; all of them rejoice
 that you should partake of the fruits of one and suck
 the juice of another,
 wash and cleanse yourself in the dew of a third;
 anoint yourself with the resin of one and breathe
 another's fragrance,
 listen to the song of still another. Blessed is He who
 gave joy to Adam!

Hymns on Paradise, 9.3-6¹⁶⁴

Even the air of Paradise was regarded by Ephrem as nurturing, sustaining, and refreshing for its inhabitants. (HPar. 9.7-11). The air of Paradise "can ... give to spiritual beings pleasure as they partake and drink of it, fly about and swim in it." (HPar. 9.16) The climate of the eschatological Eden was considered to be temperate (HPar. 10.2-4) and sustaining of a steady stream of produce (HPar. 10.6-7). As a result, the vegetation of Paradise "resembles a necklace: when the fruits of the first are finished and plucked, then the second ones are ready, with a third species following them." (HPar. 10.11)

In addition to the environmental delights summarized above, Ephrem also imagined the eschatological Paradisaical state of humanity to be characterized by certain notable absences. Dressed not in ordinary clothing but in the robe of glory (HPar. 6.9) or in "rainment of light" (HPar. 7.5), the righteous live without

¹⁶⁴ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 137-138.

wickedness, anger, scorn, guile, harm, hatred, envy, judgment, or oppression. (HPar. 7.11) In Paradise, there are no bodily infirmities. (HPar. 7.12-13) Neither is there any toil, hunger, shame, wrong, contrition, cause to repent, aging, death, burial, or birth. (HPar. 7.22) According to Ephrem:

If we momentarily throw aside the veil from our eyes
and glance at that place, we will rue our delay
which we have prolonged in this world, the harbor of
debts,
where merchants each day suffer great loss,
where ships are wrecked and cargoes are seized.
Blessed are the children who have passed through it
without toil.

Hymns on Paradise, 14.10¹⁶⁵

So splendid is the Paradise awaiting the redeemed, that Ephrem muses:

Paradise delighted me as much by its peacefulness as by
its beauty:
in it there resides a beauty that has no spot;
in it exists a peacefulness that knows no fear.
How blessed is that person accounted worthy to
receive it,
if not by right, yet at least by grace;
if not because of good works, yet at least through
mercy.

I was in wonder as I crossed the borders of Paradise
at how well being, as though a companion, turned
round and remained behind.
And when I reached the shore of earth, the mother of
thorns,
I encountered all kinds of pain and suffering.
I learned how, compared to Paradise, our abode is but
a dungeon;
yet the prisoners within it weep when they leave it!
I was amazed at how even infants weep as they leave
the womb—
weeping because they come out from darkness into
light
and from suffocation they issue forth into this world!

¹⁶⁵ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 179.

Likewise death, too, is for the world
 a symbol of birth, and yet people weep because they are
 born
 out of this world, the mother of suffering, into the
 Garden of splendors.

Hymns on Paradise, 5.12-14¹⁶⁶

Ephrem's notion of death as humanity's birth into Paradise brings us back around once more to the matters of Christ's descent to Sheol and the resurrection of the body. It is noteworthy that throughout Ephrem's depiction of the delights of the eschatological Eden, human embodiment is not only assumed, but expatiated at certain points in ways which suggest that, even in light of Ephrem's emphasis on the metaphorical nature of his description, the bodies of humanity matter for humanity's participation in the Paradisaical life. The colors, fragrances, tastes, banquets, climbing, swimming, reclining, and even soaring through the air that Ephrem speaks of in the *Hymns on Paradise* all carry with them the implication that the delights of Eden are delights for the senses. As we noted above, Ephrem regards Paradise as a place wherein the bodies of the redeemed are restored to wholeness (HPar. 7.12-13), and where there are rewards for virgins and ascetics (HPar. 7.15-16), as well as for others who "forge here on earth and take the key to Paradise" (HPar. 2.2) through bodily disciplines and physical participation in the sacramental life of the church. Ephrem did take into account that the resurrection body would be transformed, a feature of his thought that is evidenced by the following strophes from *Hymns on Paradise* 9.

Bodies, with their flow of blood,
 receive refinement there after the manner of souls;
 the soul that is heavy has its wings refined
 so that they resemble resplendent thought.
 Thought, too, whose movements are ever in a state of
 disturbance,
 will become unperturbed, after the pattern of that
 Majesty.

Far more glorious than the body is the soul,
 and more glorious still than the soul is the spirit,
 but more hidden than the spirit is the Godhead.

¹⁶⁶ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 106-107.

At the end the body will put on
 the beauty of the soul, the soul will put on that of the
 spirit,
 while the spirit shall put on the very likeness of God's
 majesty.

For bodies shall be raised to the level of souls,
 and the soul to that of the spirit,
 while the spirit will be raised to the height of God's
 majesty;
 clinging to both awe and love
 it neither circles too high, nor holds back too much,
 it discerns when to hold back, so that its flight is
 beneficial.

Hymns on Paradise, 9.19-21¹⁶⁷

Recognizing the transformation of the body that had taken place in Christ, Ephrem defended the unity of the nature of the earthly and the "ascended" body in an anti-heretical context in *Hymns on Virginity* 37.9 observing that:

The body from Mary rebuked that one who said
 that with another body the Heavenly One dwelled in
 her.
 Perfect is the body, but how did it grow with our
 bread?
 It has sweat and spit and tears and even blood.
 And if the ascended body is unsullied
 still it resembles our body since it died.
 Renounce [error] and confess that their nature is one.

Hymns on Virginity, 37.9¹⁶⁸

According to Ephrem, however, the unity of the nature of Christ's earthly and resurrected body was also significant for humanity in general, "for by means of that body, too, in which our Lord was raised, all bodies have received a pledge that they will be raised with it in like manner."¹⁶⁹ In the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* we find this statement of the importance of Christ's own physical death and bodily resurrection for the resurrection of humanity in general:

¹⁶⁷ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 143-144.

¹⁶⁸ McVey, *Hymns*, 426-427.

¹⁶⁹ Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, 3.

[The Lord] raised up our body with him, so that he would be the protector of his [human] race, and that, through him, inferior creatures would be recognized in the hall of the heavenly king, since it was through our [body] that this divinity was brought down unto us.

Commentary on the Diatessaron, 21.33¹⁷⁰

The matter of the necessity of the resurrection of the body for redeemed humanity's participation in the life of the eschatological Eden was exquisitely expressed in the eighth of Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*. Here, his use of Adam/Christ typology with reference to the eschatological resurrection reached an unparalleled pinnacle of beauty and subtle complexity, weaving together doctrines of creation, fall, descent to Sheol, and the resurrection of the body in a brief account of the history of salvation with which we may conclude.

There came to my ear from the Scripture which had
been read
a word that caused me joy on the subject of the
Thief;¹⁷¹
it gave comfort to my soul amidst the multitude of its
vices,
telling how He had compassion on the Thief. O may
He bring me too
into that Garden at the sound of whose name I am
overwhelmed by joy;
my mind bursts its reins as it goes forth to contemplate
Him.

Refrain: Hold me worthy that we may become heirs in
Your kingdom.

I behold a dwelling there and a tabernacle of light,
a voice proclaiming, "Blessed is the Thief
who has freely received the keys to Paradise."
I imagined that he was already there, but then I
considered
how the soul cannot have perception of Paradise
without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre.

¹⁷⁰ McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 333.

¹⁷¹ Luke 23:39-43.

In this place of joys anguish seized me
as I realized that it is not profitable to delve into hidden
things.

With respect to the Thief a dilemma beset me:
if the soul were able to see and hear
without its body, why then is it confined therein?
And if the body is no longer alive, why should the soul
be put to death with it?

That the soul cannot see without the body's frame,
the body itself persuades, since if the body becomes
blind
the soul is blind in it, groping about with it;
see how each looks and attests to the other,
how the body has need of the soul in order to live,
and the soul too requires the body in order to see and
to hear.

If the body grows deaf, the soul does too,
and it grows delirious when the body reels with
sickness.

Though the soul exists of itself and for itself,
yet without its companion it lacks true existence;
it fully resembles an embryo still in the womb,
whose existence is as yet bereft of word or thought.

If the soul, while in the body, resembles an embryo
and is unable to know either itself or its companion,
how much more feeble will it then be once it has left
the body,
no longer possessing on its own the senses
which are able to serve as tools for it to use.
For it is through the senses of its companion that it
shines forth and becomes evident.

That blessed abode is in no way deficient,
for that place is complete and perfected in every way,
and the soul cannot enter there alone,
for in such a state it is in everything deficient—
in sensation and consciousness; but on the day of
Resurrection
the body, with all its senses, will enter in as well, once it
has been made perfect.

When the hand of the Creator fashioned and formed
the body
so that it might sing hymns to its Maker,

this lyre was silent and had not voice,
 until at last He breathed into it
 the soul which sang therein. Thus the strings acquired
 sound,
 and the soul, by means of the body, acquired speech to
 utter wisdom.¹⁷²

When Adam was in all things complete,
 then the Lord took him and placed him in Paradise.¹⁷³
 The soul could not enter there of itself and for itself,
 but together they entered, body and soul,
 pure and perfect to that perfect place—and together
 they left it, once they had become sullied.¹⁷⁴
 From all this we should learn that at the Resurrection
 they will enter again together.

Adam was heedless as guardian of Paradise,
 for the crafty thief stealthily entered;
 leaving aside the fruit—which most men would
 covet—
 he stole instead the Garden’s inhabitant!
 Adam’s Lord came out to seek him; He entered Sheol
 and found him there,
 then led and brought him out to set him once more in
 Paradise.

Thus in the delightful mansions on the borders of
 Paradise
 do the souls of the just and righteous reside,
 awaiting there the bodies they love
 so that, at the opening of the Garden’s gate,
 both bodies and souls might proclaim, amidst
 Hosannas,
 “Blessed is He who has brought Adam from Sheol and
 returned him to Paradise in the company of
 many.”

Hymns on Paradise, 8¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Gen. 2:7.

¹⁷³ Gen. 2:8.

¹⁷⁴ Gen. 3:24.

¹⁷⁵ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 131-135.

CONCLUSION: CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL IN THE THEOLOGY OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

SUMMARY

As it has appeared here, Ephrem the Syrian's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol has been reconstructed from the numerous allusions he made throughout his works, not only of the Savior's descent to the abode of the dead, but also of related cosmological, incarnational, soteriological, ecclesiological, sacramental, and eschatological themes. A number of real risks inhere in attempting to systematize the thought of early Christian writers for whom 'systematization' *per se* was not necessarily an authorial intention, and strong arguments can be made that these risks are especially pronounced in the case of Ephrem the Syrian whose preferred dynamic, paradoxical, and poetic manner of theological reflection intentionally avoided the setting of boundaries and definitions. Nevertheless, such a method, keeping the risks in mind and seeking as far as possible to allow Ephrem's writings to suggest the connections to be made, may succeed in presenting a reliable composite image which is faithful to the contours of his thought.

Sheol, the underworld of the dead, was envisaged by Ephrem the Syrian as a region of the cosmos adjacent to and "beyond the borders of the phenomenal"¹ terrestrial and temporal earth of ordinary human existence. Though it did not feature prominently in his cosmological polemics against Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan, Ephrem's descriptions of the "place," "environment," and theological meaning of Sheol were elaborated in the context of his

¹ Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique du Saint Ephrem le Syrien*, XVI (Kaslik, Lebanon: Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 155.

theological reflection in a variety of *memre* and *madrashé*. Ephrem's conception of Sheol as the cold, dark, silent, and inescapable subterranean prison in which human beings, alienated from God by their freely chosen sin, returned in death to the dust from which they were made stood in contrasting parallel with his conception of Paradise as the intended environment of human cohabitation and communion with the Holy Trinity—a nurturing and sustaining Garden of Delights, temperate, radiant, and filled with “thunderous praise” (HPar. 5.11). Ephrem imagined both of these environments as regions beyond physical sight and sense, accessible by means of Divine revelation in Scripture and nature when rightly apprehended by the “eye and the mind” (HPar. 5.4) of the one who approached in ‘faith and fear.’ Paradise and Sheol were to be regarded not as portions of the current temporal and spatial order of the inhabited terrestrial earth, but rather as human environments of a different order of reality, situated outside ordinary time and space,² and accessible to human understanding through the mediation of names, metaphors, and symbols.

Sheol appeared on the human horizon as the result of the sin of the first parents and their concomitant alienation from God. Ephrem regarded the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Paradise which was intended for them and the subjection to death which was imposed upon them as the merciful as well as just punishment of their disobedience. Through exile from the Garden and the Divine ‘invention’ of physical death,³ the first parents and their subsequent progeny were spared from the possibility of a life of eternal suffering and remanded instead to Sheol where they might ‘sleep’ in death, awaiting the fulfillment of God’s redemptive activity in Christ, who descended to Sheol in death in order to seek out Adam—the father and symbol of all humanity—and restore him and his progeny to the health and salvation of Paradise. In the Incarnate Christ’s descent to Sheol to restore Adam/humanity to

² Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 49-57.

³ This compact and felicitous description of Ephrem’s conception of the origin of the human experience of death in God’s creative and redemptive salvific response to the sin of humanity was offered in: Aho Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of Saint Ephrem*, Gorgias Dissertations: Near Eastern Studies, 1 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002), 461.

Paradise, the cosmic scope of redemption was revealed in the transformation of every humanly inhabited region of the universe.

In order to redeem Adam/humanity from slavery to Satan and Sin as well as from subjection to Death and Sheol, Christ clothed himself with the human body of Adam(?s race), taking “from us in order to give to us, so that we should all the more abundantly receive what is His by means of what is ours” (SdDN 10.1). In Ephrem’s thought, Christ’s embodiment was the necessary precondition, not only for his saving life, but especially for his death on behalf of humanity. Imprisoned in Sheol, humanity awaited liberation, but “since Death was unable to devour Him without a body, or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol.”⁴ Christ’s birth from the womb of the Virgin Mary provided Ephrem with a potent and multivalent symbol which emphasized the human union of the physical and the spiritual. Additionally, Ephrem regarded Christ’s incarnation as illuminating of the salvific unity of the history of redemption, shedding light on the Son’s eternal generation from the womb of the Father, the inauguration of his ministry and his opening of the sacrament of Christian initiation in his baptism in the womb of the Jordan, and his saving rebirth for the sake of humanity from the womb of Sheol in his resurrection from the dead. In his nativity, Christ participated in the universal experience of human birth. In his baptism, Christ identified with sinful humanity and opened up a new way of human life which rejected temptations to sin, choosing instead free and willful obedience to God. In his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection, Christ participated in and transformed the other universal experience of human life, death, opening up the way for humanity to return to Paradise.

Ephrem’s appropriation, adaptation, and expansion of the Pauline conception of Christ as the second or last Adam featured prominently in his thought concerning the Incarnate Son’s work of redemption.⁵ Conceiving of Adam as both the representative of

⁴ Kathleen E. McVey, ed. *Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord, Letter to Publius*, Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trs. Fathers of the Church, Vol. 91 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 278.

⁵ Romans 5:12-18; I Corinthians 15:20-22, 42-49.

fallen humanity as well as the garment with which Christ clothed himself, Ephrem underscored the Savior’s identification with and his status as the representative of the redemption of his sinful human creation. Adam, created in the image of God from the dust of the earth by the eternally generated Son of the Father, had effaced and marred his likeness to his Creator through his sin. In his deathly return to dust, the image of God was all but lost in the decomposition of Adam. This image was restored, however, in Christ whose likeness to Adam allowed him to stand in Adam’s place, die Adam’s death, and, in his resurrection from the dusty depths of Sheol, to recapitulate the creation of Adam from the womb of the earth.

The soteriological implications of Christ’s descent to Sheol to redeem Adam/humanity from death were already made manifest in the events of his earthly ministry which took place within the temporal and spatial limits of the fallen created order. In Christ’s victory over Satan’s temptations to sin in the wilderness, he presented an anti-type to the fall of Adam (especially in the temptations to eat and “become god” (HVirg. 12.11)), exemplifying the restoration of human freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ) and according a paradigmatic status to the spiritual and bodily discipline of fasting while simultaneously foreshadowing in parallel his victory over Death in Sheol. At the wedding of Cana, Christ’s miraculous transformation of water to wine symbolically manifested the transformation of death to life that would take place in his descent to and resurrection from Sheol. Christ’s restorations to life of three that were dead—the son of the widow of Naim, the daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus—were also regarded by Ephrem as revelations of the Savior’s power over death which caused Sheol grief and showed Christ’s ability to wake “sleepers” from death. In the raising of Lazarus, Christ’s grief demonstrated the real sorrow of death, but Lazarus’ response to the Savior’s voice and his restoration after four days in the grave prefigured Christ’s rending of the graves in his descent to Sheol and the relative ease with which he would rise from his own grave after only three days.

As an event of salvation history, Christ’s descent to Sheol was most closely linked in temporal sequence with his death on the cross and his resurrection from the tomb, serving as a hinge or pivot between these two events. Ephrem considered that the Incarnate Savior, clothed in the body of Adam/humanity, standing

in Adam/humanity's place in judgment, and dying on Adam/humanity's behalf "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8), submitting to death as an ordinary human being and entering Sheol at the moment of his expiry in "the paleness of the dead" (HNis. 39.21). Yet, even in the moment of his death and descent to Sheol, Christ cried with a loud voice (Matt. 27:50-53), rending the graves and emptying Sheol of its dead. Ephrem understood the voice of Christ, which by its death cry emptied Sheol, as the same voice which uttered the words by which creation came into being and which had spoken life to the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision. By becoming captive to Death who held all humanity in captivity, Christ made his captor captive, and by his living presence in Sheol, described in terms of fire and light, freed those who had been imprisoned there. Ephrem also regarded the soldier's spear with which Christ's side was pierced to be an important detail of the Savior's death and descent to Sheol, symbolically removing the cherub's sword which prevented humanity's access to the fruit of the tree of life in Paradise, and, in the water and blood which issued from the body of the Savior, providing a baptism for Adam in Sheol.

Ephrem regarded the organically united complex event of Christ's death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection from the dead as the fulfilling 'moment' of his salvific victory over Satan, Sin, Death, and Sheol—the enemies and oppressors of humanity. Begun in his nativity, and put into effect in his identification with humanity in baptism, his triumph over Satan and Sin in the wilderness, and his merciful ministry of reconciliation to humanity, Christ's redemption of his fallen creatures was brought to completion in his conquest of the "last enemy" (I Cor. 15:26). Although the consummation of full human participation in Christ's victory would await the eschatological resurrection of the body, the rending of the graves and the opening of Paradise were indications of the mystical presence of the eschaton.

Ephrem expressed the significance and effects of Christ's redemptive descent to Sheol by appealing to a number of Scriptural precedents and details. In the narrative of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, Ephrem found numerous typological parallels to Christ's death and resurrection, identifying the Savior as the true paschal lamb, likening Satan and Death to Pharaoh, and viewing humanity's liberation from Sheol as the realization of the type of

Israel's departure from Egypt. The three hours of darkness preceding Jesus' death (Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45) were also interpreted by Ephrem as testimony to his divinity and to his resurrection from Sheol. Another Old Testament figure which provided Ephrem with an analog of Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead was the prophet Jonah. Jonah's return to life from within the fish which swallowed him foreshadowed Christ's resurrection from Sheol which had swallowed him. Similarities between Jonah and Christ were also articulated in terms of the vomiting of their eaters: just as the whale vomited Jonah back to life, Death and Sheol were said to have vomited Christ. Since Christ was not only the fulfillment of Jonah's type, but also the second Adam, Death's disgorgement of him would have implications for the rest of humanity as well. Another complex image of the effects of Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead deployed by Ephrem was that of childbirth. Drawing on Saint Paul's identifications of Christ as the "firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18) and "the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29), Ephrem combined these images with his own conception of Christ's birth from the womb of Sheol in his resurrection in order to express the Savior's preeminence, but also humanity's eschatological participation, in the mystery of the parturition of the womb of earth.

The piercing of Christ's side which Ephrem regarded as significant in terms of the opening of Paradise for humanity, also took on important implications in terms of his ecclesiological thought. Ephrem saw the opening of Christ's side as the source of the Christian sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and therefore the source of the church's life. Reprising his frequently deployed Adam/Christ typology, Ephrem compared the church's "birth" from the side of her Lord to Eve's "birth" from the side of Adam, symbolically emphasizing the unity of Christ's ecclesial and Incarnate body. Christ's embodied experience of human life provided the paradigm and exemplar for the life of every individual Christian, and his sacramental presence in the church mystically bound believers to one another and to him. Ephrem emphasized the role of baptism as the womb of rebirth for Christians, a womb which had analogs in Christ's own baptism in the Jordan and in his rebirth from the womb of Sheol. The same salvific realities of victory over Satan, Sin, Death, and Sheol which Jesus had achieved

in his own flesh were opened to Christians who put on Christ in baptism. In the Eucharist, baptized Christians were nourished by the Christ the Medicine of Life, receiving him into themselves, “kneading” his body into their bodies, and “pouring” his blood into their veins. United with and mingled in his church, Christ as the Medicine of Life who sickened Death and caused him to disgorge all he had eaten, provided Christians with the assurance that they, too, would be vomited out by Death in the eschatological resurrection. Having already been reborn from Sheol in the body of Christ, and being nurtured on the Eucharistic fruit of the new tree of life of Christ’s cross, the church proleptically participated in the life of the eschatological Eden.

On the basis of Christ’s conquest of Death and resurrection from Sheol, Ephrem encouraged Christians to look on their deaths as sleep from which they would be wakened at Christ’s parousia. The righteous, and especially ascetics who had spent their lives in fasting and vigils, could look forward to death as a restful slumber filled with pleasant dreams. In the eschaton, Christ’s paradigmatic bodily resurrection would be brought to fulfillment in humanity as a whole, and Sheol would be rendered purposeless, emptied of her dead whose bodies would be reunited with their souls and made to stand in judgment. In their resurrected state, the wicked would be consigned, with Satan, Sin, Death, and Sheol, to Gehenna, a place of fire and torment, while the righteous would receive the reward of Paradise, entering the Garden embodied to enjoy its delights.

OBSERVATIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

In the latter portion of the twentieth century, Western scholars of ancient Christianity began to suggest that the doctrine of Christ’s descent to the dead had found particularly early and rich expression in the Syriac-speaking portion of the church. In 1950, J. N. D. Kelly called attention to the probable Syrian origins of the article “*descendit ad inferna*” in the Apostles’ Creed.⁶ Jean Daniélou argued that the theme of Christ’s victory over death in the underworld was closely linked with the liturgical theme of baptism in “Oriental

⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1950), 378-383.

liturgy, especially that of Syria."⁷ More recently, Rémi Gounelle's work entitled *La descente du Christ aux enfers: Institutionnalisation d'une croyance* has closely examined the history of the doctrine's inclusion in a number of fourth- through sixth-century creeds, taking into account the genuine diversity of the early sources and noting that, "si nous laissons de côté plusieurs productions d'origine syrienne, la brièveté des sources conservées est en outre remarquable. La plupart du temps, la venue du Fils de Dieu dans le monde infernal est mentionnée en passant, l'auteur s'intéressant à une autre question."⁸

For several reasons, then, Saint Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol should be of great interest, not only to scholars of early Syriac Christianity, but to patristics scholars in general, as well as others interested in the history of the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead more generally. In the first place, Ephrem may be seen as something of a 'mediating theologian' who brought many of the themes and images of the earlier heterodox Syriac Christian literature which preceded him into a creative conformity with the orthodox faith of Nicaea of which he was a strong proponent.⁹ Secondly, Ephrem exerted enormous influence not only on his own native Syriac Christian tradition, but also, via translations of his work, on Greek, Latin, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic Christian traditions as well. Thirdly, Ephrem was a prolific writer and enough of his literary corpus has survived to make him the earliest Syriac Christian theologian whose works we possess in abundance. Fourthly, Ephrem's repeated and distinctively Syriac reiterations of Christ's descent to Sheol appear widely distributed throughout his works giving us what we have in no other patristic figure: an opportunity to consider the doctrine's meaning in the works of a single author on the basis of its repeated appearance in different contexts within the cultural milieu in which

⁷ Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Vol. 1, John A. Baker, tr. (Chicago: The Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 244.

⁸ Rémi Gounelle, *La descente du Christ aux enfers: Institutionnalisation d'une croyance*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 162 (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2000), 30-31.

⁹ Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 10-11.

it was earliest, frequently, persistently, and most creatively articulated.

The differences inherent in Ephrem's Syriac cultural context and poetic and paradoxical theological method which in some ways set him apart from his Greek and Latin contemporaries also distinguished his vision of Christ's descent to Sheol. With respect to literary sources, Ephrem's conception of the Savior's underworldly sojourn was most markedly different from those of his neighbors to the West in the absence of any mention the biblical text of I Peter 3:18-22 or 4:1-6—texts which, under the influence of Clement of Alexandria, shaped (and, especially in the Latin West, rationalized, complicated, and problematized) the Greek and Latin conceptions of Christ's "proclamation" in *Hades* or *Inferos*. This is not to say that Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol was unbiblical—indeed, it is often a challenge to account for the full range of biblical imagery and allusions he made in his discussion of the doctrine. Instead, Ephrem considered a different selection of Biblical texts to be particularly pertinent to the matter of Christ's descent to Sheol, the most notable of these among New Testament texts being drawn from the Pauline epistles at I Corinthians 15, esp. vv. 20-28 and vv. 42-50, Colossians 1:15-19, and Romans 8:28-30 in addition to the crucifixion narratives in Matthew 27:45-54, Mark 15:33-39, Luke 23:44-49, and John 19:28-37. Though Pauline influences on Saint Ephrem's conception of the work of redemption in his *Nisibene Hymns* has been very briefly observed by Paul Féghali,¹⁰ the current study sheds greater light on the matter, and presses the question of Saint Paul's influence on Ephrem's theology further by noting its presence relative to the theme of Christ's descent to Sheol in other works as well. This is an area of inquiry which would benefit from further study.

Ephrem's conception of the Savior's descent to the dead and its salvific effects may also be understood to differ from those of his Greek and Latin contemporaries as the result of his use and adaptation of early Syriac literary sources. Though it has not been the focus of this dissertation to discern patterns of similarity between Ephrem's vision of Christ's descent to Sheol and those of other earlier Syriac documents, it may be noted that some of

¹⁰ Paul Féghali, "Note sur l'influence de S. Paul sur les Carmina Nisibena de S. Ephrem," *Parole de l'Orient* 9 (1979/1980): 5-25.

Ephrem's language and imagery presents interesting and intriguing parallels with the *Odes of Solomon*, *The Acts of Thomas*, and Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*. Several selections from these documents are collected in the Appendix of this work. This is another matter which would undoubtedly provide benefit to scholars of early Christianity upon further examination.

One early Christian document which had long been supposed as a literary source which informed Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to the dead was the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. A number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars in the history of doctrine and the history of religion found in this work's purported Palestinian context and "Jewish-Christian" motifs a linear narrative which fit their conceptions of an 'ideal type' for the early Christian belief in Christ's descent to the abode of the dead. Ephrem's depictions of Christ's descent to Sheol were often and rather superficially compared to this work, without notice of several marked differences of theological significance. Although the *Gospel of Nicodemus* is still occasionally accorded a somewhat privileged status and regarded as nearly contemporary with or prior to Ephrem's works, scholarship has shown that the earliest portions of the work are, in fact, much more likely to have been products of the mid- to late-sixth century with the *descensus* material appended even later. Since Ephrem's works predated the Gospel of Nicodemus by nearly two centuries, it is not possible that they informed his vision of Christ's descent to the dead. However, it is possible that the author of the portion of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* concerned with Christ's descent to the dead was influenced either knowingly or unknowingly by Ephrem, whose works were translated early into Greek and Latin as well as several other ancient Christian languages. Furthermore, it is known that Ephremic themes traveled West as a result of Romanos the Melode's borrowing from Syriac sources, and Sebastian Brock has identified the theme of Christ's descent to Sheol as one which might benefit from further scholarly investigation.

Ephrem the Syrian's representation of Christ's descent to Sheol has occasionally been slighted in other ways by academics whose preconceptions have prevented them from appreciating the ways in which it differs from other representations with which they are more familiar. Not very recently, but within the past fifty years, Ephrem's vision of the Savior's underworldly descent has been

chastised for its lack of a systematic hermeneutic, its absence of logical sequence, and its inattention to the question of whether the debt Christ paid for Adam's sin was due to God or Satan. While it must be granted that there is a sense in which each of these criticisms is valid, it is more to the point to note that to approach Ephrem with such expectations is to set oneself up for disappointment. Moreover, while one will not find in Ephrem's works a contemporary Western attempt at a "systematic hermeneutic," there is nonetheless a powerful coherence in his theological reflection and biblical interpretation which manifests itself in his use of images and symbols. Adapted from Saint Paul and theologically expanded, Ephrem's conception of the complementarity of Adam and Christ is perhaps the premiere example of a unifying pattern of explication in his discussion of Christ's descent to Sheol.

Also, while the West's preferred mode of exposition in "logical sequence" with its implication of linear thought was not privileged by Ephrem, his thought concerning the Savior's descent to the underworld cannot legitimately be regarded as illogical or lacking in an appreciation of sequentiality. Ephrem's view of the history of redemption is especially instructive in this respect where we observe that it is not merely the linear, historical sequence of the events, but their eternal salvific content which determine their logical order. Therefore, though it is not inconsequential that Christ's incarnation from the womb of the Virgin preceded his death and descent to Sheol as its necessary precondition, just as his death and descent to Sheol preceded his resurrection as its necessary precondition in Christ's work of redeeming and restoring humanity to eschatological communion with the Triune God, it is nevertheless the case that the meaning and logic of this sequence of events is not co-terminal with the order of the events themselves. Rather, the meaning of Christ's descent to Sheol as an event in the history of human redemption possessed of eternal salvific content is to be explicated by means of comparison with other events in the history of human redemption which, though distant from it in time, nevertheless participate in the same eternal salvific content. In other words, for Ephrem, it is the theological content of an event which determines its logic or range of meaning, and though that

event's position in the history of redemption is significant, it is subordinate to the eternal content it discloses.¹¹

Furthermore, it is true that Ephrem shows no interest in the question concerning to whom Adam's debt was due, yet it is not at all clear that this should of necessity be regarded as a deficiency of Ephrem's thought. Arguments from silence are treacherous and one will not be offered here. Instead, it might be observed that to Ephrem's West a number of questions were generated by the doctrine of Christ's descent to the dead which seem never to have been questions Ephrem felt compelled to address. This becomes especially clear when one considers even just the headings of the eight articles of the fifty-second question of the third part of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*:

Whether it Was Fitting for Christ to Descend into Hell
Whether Christ Went Down into the Hell of the Lost
Whether the Whole Christ Was in Hell
Whether Christ Made Any Stay in Hell
Whether Christ Descending into Hell Delivered the
Holy Fathers from Thence
Whether Christ Delivered Any of the Lost from Hell
Whether the Children Who Died in Original Sin Were
Delivered by Christ
Whether Christ by His Descent into Hell Delivered
Souls from Purgatory¹²

While it is neither unreasonable nor illegitimate to inquiringly compare the theological views of figures distant from one another in temporal and cultural location, it can be neither fair nor productive to fault an earlier figure for 'deficiencies' which he can only anachronistically be supposed to have. To suggest, as some have, either that Ephrem's theological reflection in general or his conception of Christ's descent to Sheol in particular is somehow inferior to the work of other, usually later, Greek and Latin theologians simply because he does not ask the same questions is

¹¹ No one has done more to explain this aspect of Ephrem's thought than Sebastian Brock. See: Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercian Studies Series, No. 124 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 29-30.

¹² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Four Volumes*, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Vol. IV (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 2296-2302.

recklessly reductionistic and runs the risk of missing Ephrem's own distinctive genius.

How might Ephrem's "own distinctive genius" with respect to his theological reflection on Christ's descent to Sheol be understood? One of the most apparently different aspects of Ephrem's vision can be seen in the manner in which he described the event. Ephrem's view of the Savior's underworldly sojourn was nowhere within his works "definitively" rendered—there is no single, univocal, discursive or narrative account which may be taken as a standard and against which his other iterations of the event may be compared. Instead, Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol was articulated in a number of non-identical repetitions which are, as has been argued elsewhere in the course of this work, complementary but non-commensurate. Put more simply, this is to say that Ephrem's many depictions of the Savior's descent to the dead are everywhere "similar, but not the same." Moreover, the event and its meaning were articulated in Ephrem's works primarily by means of images, types, and symbols, but also in a number of narratives and dramatized dialogues, generating a collection of "verbal icons" which imaginatively collapsed distinctions between temporal moments in the history of salvation as well as distinctions between ordinary and sacred time, and creatively drawing together cosmological, incarnational, soteriological, ecclesiological, sacramental, and eschatological themes, usually in the context of Christian worship. In Ephrem's works, Christ's descent to Sheol was portrayed in multiple accounts which aimed to produce through repetition, parallelism, and contrast, not a fixed definition, but an inexhaustible poetic excess of meaning.

Ephrem's emphasis on the location of Sheol outside of, yet mystically adjacent to, the ordinary time and space of human existence exonerates him from the accusation that his view of that region of the cosmos and of Christ's descent to it are crudely or naïvely materialistic. Ephrem's conception of the environment of the underworld of the dead, and the effects of the Savior's passage through it were elaborated in an explicitly metaphorical and imaginative way on the basis of Scriptural revelation and the human experience of phenomenal reality. This allowed him vividly to depict Christ's full and redemptive participation in the human

experience of the universe in readily accessible images which appeal to the embodied experience of human beings.

One scholar has already identified Ephrem the Syrian's conception of Christ's descent to Sheol as an "integrating"¹³ component of his theological vision of the redemptive work of the Savior. Just as Christ's earthly ministry opened the way of freedom from Sin and Satan for humanity, his descent to and resurrection from the dead opened the way of liberation from Death and Sheol. More than this, however, Ephrem's conception of Christ's descent to the underworld of the dead must be seen as an event of cosmic scope, not only in the 'vertical' terms of the Son's passage through and transformation of every humanly inhabitable region of the created order (Earth, Sheol, and Paradise), but also in the 'horizontal' terms of the unity of God's salvific intent for humanity from the primordial beginning to the eschatological end. This is especially clear in Ephrem's emphasis on the unity of God's creative power in humanity's first formation from the dust of the earth and second formation from the dusty depths of Sheol.

Christ's incarnation from the Virgin Mary plays a particularly important and central role in Ephrem's depiction of the Savior's descent to Sheol. It is especially noteworthy that the human body which Christ puts on in the womb of the Virgin is identified as the body of Adam, which is necessary not only for his redemptive earthly ministry, but especially for his saving death, descent to Sheol, and resurrection on behalf of humanity as a whole. Ephrem's emphasis on Adam as the object of Christ's descent to Sheol may be taken as an indication of the significance of that event and those which participate in the same eternal and salvific content (e.g., Christ's and Christian baptism, Christ's passion and the church's Eucharist) for every human being in whom God's impaired but redeemable image resides, most notably in the capacity of freewill (*heruta*, ܚܪܘܬܐ). In his incarnation, Christ put on the body of Adam, which was taken off in his death, and put on again in his resurrection, symbolically and salvifically reiterating Adam's birth from the womb of the earth. In this recapitulation of

¹³ Jouko Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: Eine Systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*, Meddelanden Från Stiftelsens för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, Nr. 32 (Åbo: Publications of Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, 1978), 86.

humanity's creation, Paradise is regained and the unity of God's creative and redemptive activity in the history of salvation is demonstrated. Furthermore, it is by means of the body that Christ achieves his parallel and interrelated triumphs over Satan and Sin and Death and Sheol, setting the embodied paradigm which his church, reborn in baptism and nourished on the Medicine of Life, is called and empowered to emulate through the proper application of their restored freewill (*heruta*, ܠܗܘܬܐ) as Christ's continuing incarnate presence in the world. Finally, Christ's descent to Sheol and resurrection from the dead provides humanity with an assurance of the eschatological resurrection of the body, exhorting the wicked to repentance and freeing the righteous from anxiety concerning their deaths. In closing, it should be noted that Ephrem's profound emphasis on Christ's incarnation in his depiction of the Savior's descent to Sheol for the purpose of renewing the image of God in Adam/humanity suggests that this was not a matter of "purely spiritual" or metaphysical interest to Ephrem, but a theological vision with substantive significance for the bodily existence of Christians in their ethical emulation of Christ, participating in and living out his victory over Satan, Sin, Death, and Sheol within the created temporal and spatial order.

APPENDIX:
CHRIST'S DESCENT TO SHEOL IN
SELECTIONS FROM SYRIAC CHRISTIAN
LITERATURE PRIOR TO SAINT EPHREM

THE ODES OF SOLOMON

Ode 15

1. As the sun is the joy to them who seek its daybreak,
So is my joy the Lord;
2. Because He is my Sun,
And His rays have lifted me up;
And His light has dismissed all darkness from my face.
3. Eyes I have obtained in Him,
And have seen His holy day.
4. Ears I have acquired,
And have heard His truth.
5. The thought of knowledge I have acquired,
And have lived fully through Him.
6. I repudiated the way of error,
And went towards Him and received salvation from Him
abundantly.
7. And according to His generosity He gave to me,
And according to His excellent beauty He made me.
8. I put on incorruption through His name,
And took off corruption by His grace.
9. Death has been destroyed before my face,
And Sheol has been vanquished by my word.

10. And eternal life has arisen in the Lord's land,
And it has been declared to His faithful ones,
And it has been given without limit to all that trust in Him.
Hallelujah.¹

¹ J. H. Charlesworth, ed. and tr., *The Odes of Solomon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 66-69.

Ode 17

1. Then I was crowned by my God,
And my crown is living.
2. And I was justified by my Lord,
For my salvation is incorruptible.
3. I have been freed from vanities,
And I am not condemned.
4. My chains were cut off by His hands;
I received the face and likeness of a new person,
And I walked in Him and was saved.
5. And the thought of truth led me,
And I went after it and wandered not.

(Christ speaks)
6. And all who saw me were amazed,
And I seemed to them like a stranger.
7. And He who knew and exalted me,
Is the Most High in all His perfection.
8. And He glorified me by His kindness,
And raised my understanding to the height of truth.
9. And from there He gave me the way of His steps,
And I opened the doors which were closed.
10. And I shattered the bars of iron,
For my own shackle(s) had grown hot and melted before me.
11. And nothing appeared closed to me,
Because I was the opening of everything.
12. And I went towards all my bondsmen in order to loose them;
That I might not leave anyone bound or binding.
13. And I gave my knowledge generously,
And my resurrection through my love.
14. And I sowed my fruits in hearts,
And transformed them through myself.

15. 'Then they received my blessing and lived,
And they were gathered to me and were saved;

16. Because they became my members,
And I was their Head.

(Doxology)

17. Glory to Thee, our Head, O Lord Messiah.
Hallelujah.²

² Charlesworth, ed. and tr., *The Odes of Solomon*, 73-77.

Ode 22

(Christ speaks)

1. He who caused me to descend from on high,
And to ascend from the regions below;
2. And He who gathers what is in the Middle,
And throws them to me;
3. He who scattered my enemies,
And my adversaries;
4. He who gave me authority over bonds,
So that I might unbind them;
5. He who overthrew by my hands the dragon with seven heads,
And set me at his roots that I might destroy his seed;
6. Thou wert there and helped me,
And in every place Thy name surrounded me.
7. Thy right hand destroyed his evil venom,
And Thy hand levelled the Way for those who believe in Thee.
8. And It chose them from the graves,
And separated them from the dead ones.
9. It took dead bones
And covered them with flesh.
10. But they were motionless,
So It gave (them) energy for life.
11. Incorruptible was Thy way and Thy face;
Thou hast brought Thy world to corruption,
That everything might be resolved and renewed.
12. And the foundation of everything is Thy rock.
And upon it Thou has built Thy kingdom,
And it became the dwelling-place of the holy ones.
Hallelujah.³

³ Charlesworth, ed. and tr., *The Odes of Solomon*, 88-91.

Ode 24

1. The dove fluttered over the head of our Lord Messiah,
Because He was her head.
2. And she sang over Him,
And her voice was heard.
3. Then the inhabitants were afraid,
And the foreigners were disturbed.
4. The bird began to fly,
And every creeping thing died in its hole.
5. And the chasms were opened and closed;
And they were seeking the Lord as those who are about to give
birth.
6. But He was not given to them for nourishment,
Because He did not belong to them.
7. But the chasms were submerged in the submersion of the
Lord,
And they perished in the thought with which they had
remained from the beginning.
8. For they travailed from the beginning,
And the end of their travail was life.
9. And all of them who were lacking perished,
Because they were not able to express the word so that they
might remain.
10. And the Lord destroyed the devices,
Of all those who had not the truth with them.
11. For they were lacking in wisdom,
They who exalted themselves in their mind.
12. So they were rejected,
Because the truth was not with them.
13. For the Lord revealed His way,
And spread widely His grace.

14. And those who understood it
Knew His holiness.
Hallelujah.⁴

⁴ Charlesworth, ed. and tr., *The Odes of Solomon*, 97-24.

Ode 29

1. The Lord is my hope,
I shall not be confused in Him.
2. For according to His praise He made me,
And according to His grace even so He gave to me.
3. And according to His mercies He exalted me,
And according to His great honour He lifted me up.
4. And He caused me to ascend from the depths of Sheol,
And from the mouth of death He drew me.
5. And I humbled my enemies,
And He justified me by His grace.
6. For I believed in the Lord's Messiah,
And considered that He is the Lord.
7. And He revealed to me His sign,
And He led me by His light.
8. And He gave me the sceptre of His power,
That I might subdue the devices of the Gentiles,
And humble the power of the mighty.
9. To make war by His Word,
And to take victory by His power.
10. And the Lord overthrew my enemy by His Word,
And he became like the dust which a breeze carries off.
11. And I gave praise to the Most High,
Because He has magnified His servant and the son of His
maidservant.
Hallelujah.⁵

⁵ Charlesworth, ed. and tr., *The Odes of Solomon*, 111-113.

Ode 42

1. I extended my hands and approached my Lord,
For the expansion of my hands is His sign.
2. And my extension is the common cross,
That was lifted up on the way of the Righteous One.
(Christ speaks)
3. And I became useless to those who knew me [not],
Because I shall hide myself from those who possessed me not.
4. And I will be with those
Who love me.
5. All my persecutors have died,
And they sought me, they who declared against me, because I
am living.
6. Then I arose and am with them,
And will speak by their mouths.
7. For they have rejected those who persecute them;
And I threw over them the yoke of my love.
8. Like the arm of the bridegroom over the bride,
So is my yoke over those who know me.
9. And as the bridal feast is spread out by the bridal pair's home.
So is my love by those who believe in me.
10. I was not rejected although I was considered to be so,
And I did not perish although they thought it of me.
11. Sheol saw me and was shattered,
And Death ejected me and many with me.
12. I have been vinegar and bitterness to it,
And I went down with it as far as its depth.
13. Then the feet and the head it released,
Because it was not able to endure my face.
14. And I made a congregation of living among his dead;
And I spoke with them by living lips;
In order that my word may not be unprofitable.

15. And those who had died ran towards me;
And they cried out and said, Son of God, have pity on us.
16. And deal with us according to Thy kindness,
And bring us out from the bonds of darkness.
17. And open for us the door
By which we may come out to Thee;
For we perceive that our death does not touch Thee.
18. May we also be saved with Thee,
Because Thou art our Saviour.
19. Then I heard their voice,
And placed their faith in my heart.
20. And I placed my name upon their head,
Because they are free and they are mine.

(Doxology)

Hallelujah.⁶

⁶ Charlesworth, ed. and tr., *The Odes of Solomon*, 143-148.

THE ACTS OF JUDAS THOMAS THE APOSTLE

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And he [Judas] began to pray and to say thus: "Our Lord,—companion of his servants, and guide and conductor of those who believe in Him, and refuge and repose of the afflicted, and hope of the poor, and deliverer of the feeble and healer of the sick souls, life-giver of the universe, and saviour of (all) creatures,—Thou knowest what things are going to happen, and through us Thou accomplishest them, Thou art the discloser of hidden secrets, and the revealer of mysterious sayings. Thou art the planter of the good tree, and through Thy hands all acts take place. Thou art hidden in all Thou works, and art manifested in all their acts, Jesus, perfect Son of perfect mercy; and Thou didst become the Messiah, and didst put on the first man. Thou art the power, and the wisdom, and the knowledge, and the will, and the rest of Thy Father in whom Thou art concealed in glory, and in whom Thou art revealed in Thy creative agency; and Ye are one with two names. And Thou didst manifest Thyself as a feeble (being), and those who saw Thee, thought of Thee, that Thou wast a man who had need of help. And Thou didst show the glory of Thy godhead in Thy longsuffering towards our manhood, when Thou didst hurl the evil (one) from his power, and didst call with Thy voice to the dead, and they became alive; and those who were alive and hoping in Thee, Thou didst promise an inheritance in Thy kingdom. Thou wast the ambassador, and wast sent from the supernal heights, because Thou art able to do the living and perfect will of Thy sender. Glorious art Thou, Lord, in Thy might; and Thy renovating administration is in all Thy creatures, and in all the works which Thy Godhead hath established; and no other is able to annul the will of Thy majesty, nor to stand up against Thy nature as Thou art. And Thou didst descend to Sheol, and go to its uttermost end; and didst open its gates, and bring out its prisoners, and didst tread for them the path (leading) above by the nature of Thy Godhead. Yea, Lord, I ask of Thee on behalf of these young people, that whatever Thou knowest to be beneficial for them, Thou wilt do for them".

And he laid his hand upon them, and said to them, "Our Lord be with you"; and he left them and went away.⁷

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And Judas began to pray and to speak thus: "Companion and Help of the feeble; Hope and Confidence of the poor; Refuge and Rest of the weary; Voice that came from on high, comforting the hearts of Thy believers; Resort and Haven of those that go forth into the region of darkness; Physician without fee, (who) was crucified among men for many, and for whom no man was crucified; Thou didst descend into Sheol with mighty power, and the dead saw Thee and became alive, and the lord of death was not able to bear (it); and Thou didst ascend with great glory, and didst take up with Thee all who sought refuge with Thee, and didst tread for them the path (leading) up on high, and in Thy footsteps all Thy redeemed followed; and Thou didst bring them into Thy fold, and mingle them with Thy sheep. Son of perfect mercy, who wast sent to us with power by the Father, whom His servants praise; Son, who wast sent by the supreme and perfect Fatherhood; Lord of possessions that cannot be defiled; wealthy (One), who hast filled Thy creation with the treasure of Thy wealth; needy (One) who bore poverty and fasted forty days; Satisfier of our thirsty souls with Thy blessing; be Thou, Lord with Vizan and with Tertia, and with Manashar, and gather them into Thy fold, and mingle them with Thy number, and be to them a guide (when they are) in the path of error. Be to them a healer in the place of sickness; be to them a strengthener in the weary place; make them pure in the unclean place; and make them clean of corruption in the place of the enemy. Be a physician for their bodies, and give life to their souls, and make them holy shrines and temples, and may the holy Spirit dwell in them".⁸

⁷ A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 69-70.

⁸ Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 148.

APHRAHAT'S *DEMONSTRATIONS*

Demonstration 6.13: On Covenanters

Our Lord testifies concerning John that he is the greatest of the prophets. He received only a measure of the Spirit, for he obtained the Spirit in the same amount as Elijah. Just as Elijah lived in the wilderness, so too the Spirit of God led John into the wilderness, and he lived on mountains and in caves. Birds brought food to Elijah, and John ate flying locusts. Elijah girded his loins with a leather strap, and John girded his loins with a leather belt. Jezebel persecuted Elijah, and Herodia persecuted John. Elijah rebuked Ahab, and John rebuked Herod. Elijah divided the Jordan, and John opened up baptism. The spirit of Elijah rested two-fold upon Elisha, and John placed his hand on our Saviour, and he received the Spirit without measure. Elijah opened the heavens and ascended, and John saw the heavens open and the Spirit of God came down and rested on our Saviour. Elisha received twofold of the spirit of Elijah, and our Saviour received from John and from heaven. Elisha received the cloak of Elijah, and our Saviour [received] the laying on of hands of the priests. Elisha made oil from water, and our Saviour made wine from water. With a little bread, Elisha satisfied a hundred men, but our Saviour satisfied five thousand men (not counting women and children) with a little bread. Elisha cleansed Namaan the leper, but our Saviour cleansed ten [lepers]. Elisha cursed [some] children and they were eaten by bears, but our Saviour blessed children. Children scorned Elisha, but children glorified our Saviour with hosannas. Elisha cursed Gehazi his disciple, and our Saviour cursed Judas his disciple, but blessed all of his [other] disciples. Elisha brought back to life only one person, but our Saviour brought three people back to life. One dead person came to life because of the bones of Elisha, but our Saviour, when he went to the house of the dead, gave life to many and raised them up. Many are the signs performed by the Spirit of Christ, of which the prophets received.⁹

⁹ Adam Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* with a Complete Annotated Translation of the Text and

Demonstration 12.6:
On the Passover Sacrifice

Our Saviour ate the Passover sacrifice with his disciples during the night watch of the fourteenth. He offered to his disciples the sign of the true Passover sacrifice. After Judas left them, he took bread and blessed [it], and gave [it] to his disciples. He said to them, *"This is my body. Take and eat from it, all of you."* He also blessed the wine as follows, saying to them, *"This is my blood, a new testament, which is shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. Keep doing this in memory of me when you gather together."* Our Lord said these things before he was seized. He stood up from where he had offered the Passover sacrifice and given his body to be eaten and his blood to be drunk, and he went with his disciples to that place where he was seized. Whoever eats his body and drinks his blood is counted with the dead. By his own hands our Lord gave his body to be eaten, and before he was crucified he gave his blood to be drunk. He was seized on the night of the fourteenth and judged before the sixth hour. At the sixth hour, they condemned him, raised him up, and crucified him. When they were judging him he did not speak, and he gave no reply to his judges. He could have spoken or replied, yet [on a deeper level] it was impossible for one who was counted with the dead to speak. From the sixth hour to the ninth there was darkness, and at the ninth hour he handed over his spirit to his Father. He was among the dead during the night of the dawn of the fifteenth, the night and the whole day of the Sabbath, and three hours on Friday. During the night of the dawn of Sunday, at the [same] time that he had given his body and blood to his disciples, he rose from among the dead.¹⁰

Demonstration 12.7:
On the Passover Sacrifice

Now show us, O sage, what these three days and three nights were in which our Saviour was among the dead! We see the three hours on Friday, and the night when the Sabbath dawned, and the whole day, and [then] during the night of the first [day] of the week he

Comprehensive Syriac Glossary" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2003), 199-201.

¹⁰ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 274-275.

rose. Define for me what they are, these three days and three nights! Take note that although the day and the night were completed, our Saviour spoke truly when he said, *"Just as Jonah son of Mattai in the stomach of a fish for three days and three nights, so too will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth."* Thus, from the time when he gave his body to be eaten and his blood to be drunk, there were three days and three nights. It was night when Judas left them, and the eleven disciples ate the body of our Saviour and drank his blood. Now take note: [this was] one night, when Friday was dawning. And take note [that the time] up to the sixth hour, when they judged him, [was] one day and one night. [Then] there were three hours that were dark, from the sixth hour to the ninth, and there were [also] three hours after the darkness. Take note [that this makes] two days and two nights. [Then] the night when the Sabbath dawned was completed, as well as the whole day of the Sabbath. Thus our Lord completed three days and three nights among the dead, and during the night of Sunday he rose from among the dead.¹¹

Demonstration 12.8: On the Passover Sacrifice

The Passover of the Jews is on the day of the fourteenth, its night-time and day-time. Our day of great suffering, however, is Friday, the fifteenth day, its night-time and day-time. After the Passover, Israel eats unleavened bread for seven days until the twenty-first day of the month, but we observe the [days of] unleavened bread as the festival of our Saviour. They eat unleavened bread with bitter herbs, but Our Saviour rejected that cup of bitterness and removed all the bitterness of the peoples when he tasted but did not wish to drink. The Jews bring their sins to mind from season to season, but we remember the crucifixion and disgrace of our Saviour. They departed from the slavery of Pharaoh by means of the Passover sacrifice, but we were saved from the slavery of Satan on the day of [Christ's] crucifixion. They sacrificed a lamb from the flock and by its blood were delivered from the destroyer, but we have been saved from the destructive actions that we were doing by the blood of the Son [who is] approved. Moses was a leader for them, but for

¹¹ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 275.

us Jesus has become a Guide and Saviour. Moses divided the sea for them and enabled them to pass through, but our Saviour divided Sheol and broke down its gates when he went inside of it and opened them and prepared a way for all those who believed in him. Manna was given to [the Israelites] to eat, but our Lord gave us his body to eat. [Moses] brought forth water from a rock, but for us our Saviour let living water flow from within himself. [God] promised them the land of the Canaanites as an inheritance, but through a declaration he promised us the land of life. Moses lifted up the bronze serpent for them, so that whoever looked at it would survive the bite of the serpent, but Jesus lifted up himself for us so that when we look to him we might be saved from the bite of the serpent who is Satan. Moses made the temporary tabernacle for them, so that they might bring sacrifices and offerings into it and be purged of their sins, but Jesus raised up the tent of David, which had fallen, and it [continues] to stand. He said to the Jews, "*After you destroy this temple that you see, I will raise it up in three days,*" and his disciples understood that he was speaking about his body when he said that after they destroyed it he would raise it up in three days. In that tent he has promised us life, and in it our sins have been purged. [Moses] called their [tent] the 'temporary' tabernacle because it would function for [only] a short time, but ours [is called] the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is forever.¹²

Demonstration 14.31:

An Argument in Response to Dissension

Behold, brothers, how worthy of honourable memory are those who work for the peace and harmony of the people. For why did our Saviour have to die? And why did he borrow from Sheol? Though being the Living One, he died on behalf of the rebellious and reconciled them to his Father, and he went to Sheol and brought forth its prisoners. He fought with the Evil One and defeated and trampled him. He forced his way into his streets and seized his possessions. He broke down his doors and smashed his bars. He took the thorns of [the Evil One] and put them on his head. He sealed our souls with his own blood. He set free the prisoners from the confining pit. He broke through the fence and

¹² Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 275-276.

the point of the sword and took the curse and nailed it on his cross. He gathered together those who were scattered and pacified the rebellious. He satisfied the hungry and gave water to the thirsty. He opened the eyes of the blind and healed the sick. He straightened those who were bent over and caused the lame to walk. He took our sorrows, healed our wounds and cured our diseases. He brought near we who were distant, and gathered together we who were scattered, and made us inhabitants of his dwelling-place. He enriched us through his poverty and restored us through his sickness. He healed us through his crucifixion and brought us relief through his suffering. And because he endured all these things on our behalf, his Father *"gave him the name that is above all names, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, not only on earth but also in heaven,"* and while bowing and worshipping they will say *"Jesus Christ is Lord," to the glory of God his Father.*" And he became the Judge and Lord of the dead and the living, as it is written in his gospel: *"The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to his Son."* The reward of our Saviour for his suffering was this: a great and honourable name, for having pacified a rebellious region. Those who associate themselves with him and make peace and harmony become his brothers and sons of God. They inherit the kingdom; they serve and are served by the watchers of heaven, those who are not envious or jealous, who do not grow weary or sleep, and who rejoice over these sinners who turn from [their] sins.¹³

Demonstration 17.10: On Christ Who is the Son of God

David said, *"They pierced my hands and my feet, and all my bones cried out,"* but after that passage he said, *"Be present to help me, God, and save my soul from destruction."* Christ was saved from destruction: he came up from Sheol and lived and rose on the third day.¹⁴

¹³ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 315-316.

¹⁴ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 362.

Demonstration 21.9: On Persecution

Jacob was persecuted and Esau was the persecutor. Jacob received the blessings and the birthright, but Esau was rejected from both. Joseph was persecuted and his brothers were the persecutors. Joseph was elevated and his persecutors bowed down to him; his dreams and visions were fulfilled. The persecuted Joseph was the image of the persecuted Jesus: the father of Joseph clothed him in a long-sleeved tunic, and the Father of Jesus clothed him in a body from the Virgin. The father of Joseph loved him more than his brothers, and Jesus was his Father's Loved and Cherished One. Joseph saw visions and dreamed dreams, and Jesus fulfilled the visions and the prophets. Joseph was a shepherd, along with his brothers, and Jesus is the Chief of the Shepherds. When Joseph's father sent him to visit his brothers, they saw that he was coming and they made plans to kill him. When his Father sent Jesus to visit his brothers, they said, "*This is the heir. Let us kill him!*" The brothers of Joseph threw him into a pit, and the brothers of Jesus sent him down among the dead. Joseph came up from the pit, and Jesus rose from among the dead. After he came up from the pit, Joseph ruled over his brothers. After he rose from among the dead, the Father of Jesus gave him a great and excellent name, so that his brothers might be in subjection to him and his enemies placed under his feet. When Joseph made himself known to his brothers, they were ashamed and afraid and amazed at his majesty. When Jesus comes at the end of time so that his majesty will be revealed, his brothers, who previously crucified him, will be ashamed and afraid and troubled. By the counsel of Judah, Joseph was sold into Egypt, and by Judas Iscariot, Jesus was betrayed to the Jews. When they sold him, Joseph gave no response to his brothers, and Jesus did not speak or give a response to the judges who were judging him. Joseph's master wickedly put him in prison, and Jesus was condemned by his own people. Joseph gave up two garments, one to his brothers and one to his master's wife. Jesus gave up his garments, and the soldiers divided them among themselves. Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh and became lord of Egypt. Jesus was about thirty years old when he came to the Jordan to be baptized, received the Spirit, and went out to preach. Joseph supplied the Egyptians with bread, and Jesus supplied the

whole world with the bread of life. Joseph married the daughter of the wicked and unclean priest, and Jesus brought the Church to himself from the unclean peoples. Joseph died and was buried in Egypt, and Jesus died and was buried in Jerusalem. The brothers of Joseph brought his bones up from Egypt, and the Father of Jesus raised him up from among the dead, and brought his body up with him to heaven uncorrupted.¹⁵

Demonstration 21.16:

On Persecution

Hezekiah was also persecuted, just as Jesus was persecuted. Hezekiah was persecuted and scorned by his enemy Sennacherib. Jesus was scorned by the foolish people. Hezekiah prayed and defeated his enemy. Our enemy was defeated by the crucifixion of Jesus. Hezekiah [was] the king of all Israel, and Jesus is the king of all the peoples. The sun moved backwards because Hezekiah was sick, and the sun in its brightness grew dark because of the suffering of Jesus. The enemies of Hezekiah became corpses, and the enemies of Jesus will be thrown beneath his feet. Hezekiah was from the tribe of the house of David, and Jesus is the Son of David according to the flesh. Hezekiah said, *"There will be peace and justice in my days."* Jesus said to his disciples, *"I am leaving my peace with you."* Hezekiah prayed and was healed of his sickness. Jesus prayed and rose from among the dead. Hezekiah added to his years after he rose from his sickness, and Jesus received a great glory after his resurrection. After his added [years], death ruled over Hezekiah. After he rose, death will never again have power over Jesus.¹⁶

Demonstration 21.18:

On Persecution

Daniel was also persecuted, just as Jesus was persecuted. Daniel was persecuted by the Chaldeans, an assembly of godless men. Jesus was persecuted by the Jews, an assembly of wicked men. The Chaldeans slandered Daniel, and the Jews slandered Jesus before the governor. They threw Daniel into a pit of lions, but he was

¹⁵ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 405-406.

¹⁶ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 410-411.

delivered and rose up vindicated from within it. Jesus was made to go down to the pit among the dead, but he ascended and death had no power over him. They hoped that Daniel would not come up again when he fell into the pit, and concerning Jesus they said, "*Now that he has fallen, he will not rise again.*" The mouth[s] of the greedy and devouring lions were shut by Daniel, and the mouth of greedy death, the devourer of appearances, was shut by Jesus. They sealed the pit of Daniel and guarded it carefully. They guarded the tomb of Jesus carefully, since they said, "*Order them to keep watch over the tomb.*" When Daniel came up his slanderers were confused, and when Jesus rose all those who had crucified him were confused. The king who judged Daniel was greatly troubled by the wickedness of the Chaldeans, his slanderers. Pilate, the judge of Jesus, was greatly troubled because he knew that the Jews were wickedly slandering him. Through the prayer of Daniel the captives of his people went up from Babylon. Jesus prayed and made all the captives of the peoples return. Daniel interpreted the visions and dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, and Jesus explained and interpreted the visions of the Torah and the Prophets. When he explained the vision of Belshazzar, Daniel became third in command in the kingdom. When Jesus fulfilled the visions and the prophets, his Father handed over to him all authority in heaven and on earth. Daniel saw wonders and spoke secrets, and Jesus revealed secrets and fulfilled what is written. Daniel was led away with the hostages instead of his people, and the body of Jesus [became] a pledge in the place of all the peoples. Because of Daniel, the anger of the king toward the Chaldeans was quelled, and they were not killed. Because of Jesus, the anger of his Father toward all the peoples was quelled, and they were not killed and did not die from their sins. Daniel made a request of the king, and [the king] gave his brothers authority over the affairs of the province of Babylon. Jesus made a request of God, and [God] gave his brothers (his disciples) power over Satan and his army. Daniel said of Jerusalem: "*Until the decrees [are fulfilled] it will remain in desolation.*" Jesus said of Jerusalem: "*Not one stone will be left on [another] stone, since she did not know the day of her majesty.*" Daniel saw the weeks that remained for his people, and Jesus came and fulfilled them.¹⁷

¹⁷ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 411-412.

**Demonstration 21.19:
On Persecution**

Hananiah and his brothers were also persecuted, just as Jesus was persecuted. Hananiah and his brothers were persecuted by Nebuchadnezzar, and the people of the Jews persecuted Jesus. Hananiah and his brothers fell into a fiery furnace, but it became as cool as dew over them, those who were righteous. Jesus went down to the place of darkness, crushed its gates, and brought forth its prisoners. Hananiah and his brothers came up from the fiery furnace and flames burned their slanderers. Jesus lived and came up from the darkness, and his slanderers and those who crucified him will burn in flames in the end. When Hananiah and his brothers came up from the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar, the king, trembled and was terrified. When Jesus rose from among the dead, the people, who had crucified him, were terrified and trembled. Hananiah and his brothers did not worship the image of the king of Babylon, and Jesus held back the peoples from the worship of dead images. Because of Hananiah and his brothers, the peoples and tongues glorified the God who had rescued them from the fire. Because of Jesus, the peoples and all the tongues glorify he who rescued his Son, who did not see corruption. The fire had no power over the clothing of Hananiah and his brothers. The fire at the end will have no power over the bodies of all the righteous who believe in Jesus.¹⁸

**Demonstration 22.4:
On Death and the End Times**

When Jesus, the Slayer of Death, came, he put on a body from the seed of Adam, and was crucified in his body and experienced death. And when [death] perceived that [Jesus] had come down to him, he was shaken from his place, and was disturbed when he saw Jesus. He closed his gates and did not want to receive him. Then [Jesus] broke down his gates and went in to him, and began to liberate all his possessions. When the dead saw light in the darkness, they lifted up their heads from the bondage of death; they looked and they saw the brightness of Christ the King. Then the powers of his darkness sat down in mourning, because death

¹⁸ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 413.

had been removed from his position of authority. Death tasted the medicine that was his slayer, and that made his hands became feeble. He knew [then] that the dead would live and escape from their slavery to him. When [Christ] had afflicted death by liberating his possessions, [death] wailed and cried out bitterly, and said, “Depart from my realm and do not enter in [again]! Who is this who comes alive to my realm?” Death saw that his darkness was beginning to come to an end, and that some of the righteous who were dead were rising up to ascend with [Christ]. While [death] was crying out in terror, [Christ] made known to him that when he comes in the fullness of time, he would bring out all the prisoners from under his power, and they will come out to him and see the light. Then, when Jesus had completed his ministry among the dead, death released him from his realm, since he could not bear to have him there. He was not enjoyable food like all the [other] dead. He had no power over the Pure One, who was not given over to corruption.

Demonstration 22.5:
On Death and the End Times

With a sense of relief, [death] released [Jesus]. But when Jesus came out from his realm, he left with him a poison (the promise of life), so that gradually his power would be diminished. [This is] like a man who has taken in a deadly poison with [his] food, which is given [to bring] life. When he realizes that he has taken in a deadly poison with his food, he vomits up the nourishment in which the deadly poison was mixed, but the power of this poison remains in his limbs, so that gradually the structure of his body breaks down and is destroyed. Jesus, the Dead One, has brought an end to death. Through him life is made to reign and death (of whom it is said “*Where is your victory, O death?*”) passes away.¹⁹

Demonstration 23.12:
On the Grapecluster

Let your mind learn and understand and be persuaded that it was out of necessity that the prayer of these two great prophets and glorious shepherds was not heard when they prayed for themselves.

¹⁹ Lehto, “Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*”, 419-420.

For a covenant is not established unless the one who has written it dies. For through Moses a covenant was promised to the people of Israel, that [God] would give them the land of the Canaanites as an inheritance. And through Jesus a covenant was promised, that he would give the peoples the land of life. Moses died at the crossing of the Jordan, and the covenant which was promised to his people was established. And Jesus died in the land of our death and the covenant which he promised for the peoples was established, since he promised to give them the land of life. The Lord of Moses showed him the promised land before Israel had inherited it. Jesus, our Saviour, rose from the house of the dead and went to prepare for us the land that he promised. As he said to his apostles, *"I am going away to prepare a place for you, and then I will come [back] and lead you, so that you might also be at the place where I am."* And he affirmed for us the promise that we would be with him. He gave a revelation to his apostles in advance, when they asked for the sign of his coming. [This was] when he took [up the mountain] three of his disciples, Simon, James, and John: Simon the rock, the foundation of the church, and James and John, the firm pillars of the church. He showed these three reliable witnesses a sign of his coming when his appearance was transformed to the likeness of his coming, when Moses and Elijah were with him. He gave heart to the dead who were ready to live, like Moses, who appeared, and the living who remain at his coming will be confident that they will be transformed when they meet him to be like Elijah, who did not taste death and was [also] seen with him. For [God] made known to us that when it was appropriate for Moses, the great prophet, and Jesus, the beloved firstborn son, to be heard, they were making atonement through their prayer for a multitude of people. And when at other times their requests were ignored, this was an example, so that those many people who pray and are not heard might be encouraged. When, through the example of these heroes, they understand that they prayed but were not heard, they will no longer be sad; they accept [it] in their minds and are persuaded, because of the pattern of Moses and our Saviour, and the prophets and righteous ones of the past.²⁰

²⁰ Lehto, "Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*", 445-446.

THE TEACHING OF ADDAI

Abgar said to him: "Now every man knows that by the power of Jesus the Messiah you are doing these wonders. Behold we are amazed at your deeds. Therefore I beseech you that you tell us concerning the coming of the Messiah, and how it came about, concerning his glorious power, and concerning the wonders which we have heard that he was doing which you and the rest of your companions saw."

Addai replied: "From proclaiming this I will not be silent. For because of this I was sent here that I might speak and teach every one who like you is willing to believe. Tomorrow assemble all the city to me and I will sow in it the word of life by the preaching which I will proclaim to you, concerning the coming of the Messiah, how it was, his glorious power, the one who sent him, why and how he sent him, his power and his wonderous deeds, the glorious mysteries of his coming which he spoke in the world, and concerning the genuineness of his preaching. [I will proclaim to you] how and why he diminished himself, abased his exalted divinity by the body which he took, was crucified, went down to the house of the dead, broke through the barrier which had never been broken through before and gave life to the dead by being himself killed. He descended alone, but ascended with many to his glorious Father, with whom he was from eternity in one exalted godhead.²¹

Addai began to speak to them as follows: "Hear all of you and understand that which I speak to you. I am not a physician of medicines and roots belonging to the art of human beings. I am a disciple of Jesus the Messiah, the physician of troubled souls, the savior in regard to future life, the Son of God who came down from heaven, put on the body, became a human being, gave himself, and was crucified for all people. When he was hung upon the cross he made heaven dark in the firmament. When he entered the tomb he was raised and went forth from it with many. Those who kept watch over the tomb did not see in what manner he went

²¹ *The Teaching of Addai*, George Howard, tr., Texts and Translations 16, Early Christian Literature Series 4 (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1981), 14-17.

forth from the grave. The watchers on high became heralds and proclaimers of the resurrection of the one who, if he had not wished, would not have died, because he is the lord of terminal death. If he had not so pleased he would not again have put on a body, since it is he who is the fashioner of the body. For the desire which brought him down to the birth of a virgin also humbled him to the suffering of death. He abased the greatness of his exalted divinity, he who had been with his Father from the beginning, even from eternity, of whom the prophets of a former time spoke in their secrets and drew pictures of his birth, suffering, resurrection, ascension to his Father, and his sitting at the right hand.²²

[Addai said:] “Therefore, may my death, with whose pain I am already bound and lying sick, be considered in your eyes as a sleep in the night. Remember that by the suffering of the Son, death which governs people has passed away and ceased.”²³

²² *The Teaching of Addai*, George Howard, tr., 38-41.

²³ *The Teaching of Addai*, George Howard, tr., 90-91.

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