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Catechesis and Mystagogoy in St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Liturgy of Baptism and the Madrashe

Kim, Jung

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

CATECHESIS AND MYSTAGOGY IN ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN:
THE LITURGY OF BAPTISM AND THE MADRASHE

By

Jung Kim
(B.A. Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, 1989; M.A., Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary, 1993; M.Div., Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary, 2001; Th.M., Emory University School of Candler, 2004)

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THE LITURGY OF BAPTISM AND THE MADRASHE

By

Jung Kim

APPROVED

By

First Reader

Dr. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker
Professor of Worship

Second Reader

Dr. Christopher B. Brown
Associate Professor of Church History
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Boston University

Jung Kim
CATECHECIS AND MYSTAGOGY IN ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN:
THE LITURGY OF BAPTISM AND THE MADRASHE

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Jung Kim
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Major Professor: Karen Westerfield Tucker, Professor of Worship

ABSTRACT

Ephrem’s madrashe (catechetical hymns sung in the liturgy) held a distinctive role in early Syriac-speaking Christianity, and were remarkable not only for the catechetical and mystagogical characteristics that they contributed in public worship, but also for the poetic and lyrical features that were displayed when performed by female liturgical choirs (Bnat Qyama). This study investigates the context and content of Ephrem’s madrashe, with an emphasis on the catechumenate and the liturgy of baptism, both of which have an overall bearing on his mystagogy. The poetic and hymnic characteristics of his madrashe enable Ephrem to be recognized as a poetic theologian. Furthermore, the catechetical and mystagogical characteristics of his madrashe also serve to identify him as a mystagogical figure.
Ephrem’s *madrashe* and the Syriac *Vita* tradition of Ephrem serve as key sources for studying the catechumenate, the liturgy of baptism, Ephrem’s mystagogy and his faith formational methodology. The following methodological features are discussed: scriptural formation, song-actions and body-learning, mystagogical reflection, and continual reaffirmation through liturgical participation. Ephrem’s rhetorical strategies in his *madrashe* are also examined, namely *inclusio*, symbol, paradox, and typological juxtaposition. Through an analysis of Ephrem’s *madrashe* from the perspective of mystagogy, this study finds that the ultimate role of Ephrem’s *madrashe* was to praise God, to sing in the liturgy the mystery of God that continues time and time again. For this reason, Ephrem composed *madrashe*, which are intrinsically catechetical, liturgical, and mystagogic.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation arose from a question, “Did St. Ephrem the Syrian practice mystagogy?” To answer this question, I examined Ephrem’s writings with an eye to his presentation of mystagogy or mystagogical catechesis—instruction on the “mysteries” or sacraments delivered after a person has experienced them. Along with this fresh reading of Ephrem, I reviewed the purpose and function of the typically recognized form of mystagogy—the sermon—as practiced by the fourth-century mystagogues Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.\(^1\) The writings of these theologians and church leaders are the best known and most often studied representatives of the fourth century’s golden age of mystagogy. I also considered the possibility of non-sermonic presentations of mystagogy. Unfortunately, very little work has been done on other literary forms from the fourth century that may have functioned both catechetically and mystagogically within and outside the liturgy. I contend that it is possible to consider St. Ephrem’s stanzic madrashe (ܡܪܕܫܐ in Syriac translated variously as “hymns,” “teaching songs,” or “liturgical poetry”) used in the liturgy of Nisibis from the perspective of mystagogy.

Previous scholarship has established Ephrem as a biblical exegete, a teacher, a catechist, a preacher, and a theologian-poet. Moreover, Ephrem has been studied as a figure in the great christological controversies of the fourth century, and as a precursor of the distinctive Syriac

\(^1\) In his book, Mystagogy, Enrico Mazza introduces Ambrose as the first person to practice mystagogy. “In order to speak correctly of mystagogy,” Mazza suggests that we need to know which text is the first mystagogical work, “otherwise one risks building an arbitrary theory.” He determines the chronology to be: (1) Ambrose and his two works De sacramentis (probably written c. 380-390) and De mysteriis (written c. 387-391); (2) Theodore of Mopsuestia’s sixteen catechetical homilies c. 383-392; (3) Chrysostom’s three series of baptismal homilies in 387-388; and last (4) Cyril of Jerusalem’s procatechesis and five mystagogical catecheses—probably the writings are not by Cyril, but by John the successor of Cyril, who would have delivered them after 392. Enrico Mazza, A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age (New York: Pueblo, 1989), x.
tradition of asceticism and poetic theology. Nevertheless, the liturgical and mystagogical functions of Ephrem’s writings have been virtually ignored, as Kees den Biesen has noted: “the moral implications of Ephrem’s symbolical understanding of reality reveal aspects of his theology that have until now drawn little or no scholarly attention, that is, its liturgical and mystagogical dimensions.”² This dissertation offers a fresh reading of Ephrem’s literature by exploring the liturgical and mystagogical dimensions of his madrashe and by considering him as a mystagogical figure—a mystagogue.

A Fresh Reading of Ephrem’s Madrashe (ܡܕܪܣܐ)

One reason Ephrem may have been overlooked as a mystagogue and as a practitioner of mystagogy is because there is no evidence that he delivered a regular series of mystagogical homilies—the most typical form of mystagogical catechesis in the fourth century. In addition, Ephrem does not appear to have written a prose commentary or treatise on the sacraments.³ Thus my hypothesis that Ephrem may be viewed as a mystagogue raises multiple questions. What are the basic characteristics of a mystagogue and mystagogical teaching in the fourth century? How does Ephrem’s life and literary output compare to those of the commonly identified mystagogues? Might Ephrem be identified as a mystagogue even if he shows distinct differences from the recognized mystagogues?

Enrico Mazza states that the fourth century needed “an innovative liturgy” to embrace the increasing number of pagans converting to Christianity and that the Church was required to think

² Kees den Biesen, Simple and Bold: Ephrem’s Art of Symbolic Thought (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 89.

creatively about “rites for the reconciliation of heretics.”\textsuperscript{4} Consideration of the pastoral and pedagogical dimensions of mystagogy supports my theory that Ephrem may be identified as a mystagogue. Regarding mystagogy’s pastoral task, Hugh M. Riley notes:

Mystagogy, then, is a pastoral function. It is a task which is never completed, but must be creatively renewed, since the actual liturgy itself of Christian Initiation undergoes changes in its developing history, the word and the consciousness of those who hear the divine call to faith is constantly varied, and the creative and historically educated insight into the rich meaning of the symbols of which the liturgy is composed is constantly capable of development. \textsuperscript{5}

Riley suggests three features that need to be considered for ongoing mystagogy’s pastoral work:

“the liturgical rite itself,” the context of the people, and the methods engaged to explain the “symbolic words and gestures” used at baptism.\textsuperscript{6}

Sidney Griffith, in his study of Ephrem entitled \textit{Faith Adoring the Mystery}, suggests that the main purpose of Ephrem’s \textit{madrashe} was to support his pastoral ministry.\textsuperscript{7} Ephrem saw himself as an \textit{allana}—which can be translated as “herdsman” or “pastoral minister”—who guided and protected the Christian flock through his poetry:

O Lord, may the works of your herdsman (\textit{allana}) not be defrauded; I will not then have troubled your sheep, but as far as I was able, I will have kept the wolves away from them, and I will have built, as far as I was capable, Enclosures of hymns (\textit{madrashe}) for the lambs of your flock.

\textsuperscript{4} Enrico Mazza, \textit{Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age}, x.


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7} Sidney Griffith, \textit{Faith Adoring the Mystery: Reading the Bible with St. Ephrem the Syrian} (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), 8: “Everything we know about Ephrem’s career in Nisibis and Edessa, most of it from his own pen, suggests that he participated wholeheartedly in the pastoral work of the bishops whom he served.”
I will have made a disciple of the simple and unlearned man. And I will have made him hold onto the pastoral ministers’ (*allane*) staff, the healer’s medicine, and the disputants’ arsenal.\(^8\)

Ephrem composed *madrashe* for his congregation out of pastoral concern—that those in his care might deepen in faith and become better Christian disciples.

The pedagogical task of mystagogy requires not only teaching the language of faith with which religious experience may be expressed but also understanding how the faithful (weak or strong) interpret that language in their own contexts. James J. Bacik states that mystagogy “enable[s] persons to interpret correctly their deeper experiences, to move from a vague awareness of the mystery dimension of their lives to a greater conceptual clarity, to find a proper symbolization of their genuine religious experience.”\(^9\)

Examination of Ephrem’s mystagogical reflection through his *madrashe* seems to show that it functioned both as a retrospective pedagogy to elucidate the meaning of the baptismal experience, and as a resonant pedagogy to illumine the grace of God given from baptism. Syriac-speaking Christianity considered the church’s teaching ministry to be primary and developed *madrashe, memre* (metrical homilies of 7+7 syllable couplets), and *sogyata* (songs) as vehicles to convey its official teaching.\(^10\) Ephrem, called *interpreter*,\(^11\) played a significant role in theological instruction by composing his

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11 G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 427: “Bishop Jacob of Nisibis, upon returning from the Council of Nicea, to which he was a signatory, selected Ephrem as his official “interpreter” (*mpashquna*: apparently of Scripture). Although the precise meaning of this appointment is unclear to modern scholars, Barhadbeshabba, the 6th
madrashe—which had a mystagogical purpose. The catechetical songs were thus “theology in poetical form.”

Commenting on Ephrem, Benedict XVI states:

Poetry enabled him (St. Ephrem the Syrian) to deepen his theological reflection through paradoxes and images. At the same time, his theology became liturgy, became music; indeed, he was a great composer, a musician. Theology, reflection on the faith, poetry, song and praise of God go together; and it is precisely in this liturgical character that the divine truth emerges clearly in Ephrem’s theology.

The language in Ephrem’s madrashe is therefore a counterbalance to an exclusively moral or doctrinal expository treatise. Indeed, as Kathleen Hughes has suggested, the language of mystagogy should be more like “poetry than prose.” Ephrem chose poetry as a methodological matrix, in which he elaborated his spirit-language with symbol and paradox, and thereby his symbolic vocabulary embraced the multivalent dimensions of the sacraments cohesively. Syrian scholar and Ephrem expert Sebastian Brock has explained:

It is precisely because Ephrem’s theology is not tied to a particular cultural or philosophical background, but rather operates by means of imagery and symbolism which are basic to all human experience, that his theological vision, as expressed in his hymns, has a freshness and immediacy today that few other theological works from the early Christian period can hope to achieve.

Study of Ephrem’s symbolic theology exposes his rhetorical strategies, and enables me to suggest what Ephrem might have considered to be the most effective and convincing conduct of

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13 Ibid.


mystagogy. This study thus expands previous considerations of the genre of mystagogy as it looks at other literary and rhetorical methods that have been used to illuminate and interpret the meaning of the baptismal experience and deliver a theology of the sacraments.

In addition to exploring the significance of the pastoral and pedagogical dimensions of Ephrem’s mystagogy, this study makes a new contribution by introducing and analyzing Ephrem’s particular methodology for mystagogy. His method has several key features for developing new Christians and for encouraging them again and again to live ethical and sacramental lives: scriptural formation; song-actions and body-learning; mystagogical reflection; and continual reaffirmation through liturgical participation. Through the reading of the madrashe from the perspective of mystagogy and by understanding Ephrem’s faith formational mystagogical methodology, I suggest that Ephrem appears to have regarded mystagogy as an ongoing pastoral ministry. Ephrem’s goal of mystagogy was not simply the private or individual interiorization of grace, but also the social or relational exteriorization of life, furthermore, the moral reorientation of life at various levels.

**Method and Content**

This study principally employs the methodologies of liturgical theology, lyrical theology (the theological content of the madrashe interpreted within and outside their liturgical context), comparative textual and structural analysis, and ritual analysis. The task of liturgical theology, according to Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, is to discover the meaning of what is done in worship,¹⁶ and to give “a theological basis to the explanation of worship.”¹⁷ To engage in

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the task of liturgical theology, one must (1) define “the concepts and categories” that express the essential nature of the liturgical experience of the church, (2) connect “these concepts and categories” with “the system of concepts” that theology uses when it expounds the faith and doctrine of the church, (3) present “the separate data of liturgical experience” as a whole, and (4) analyze the “rule of prayer” (lex orandi) extant in the church and determine the “rule of faith” (lex credendi). On the basis of the understanding of “worship as the public act of the church,” the final goal of the task is to “explain how the church expresses and fulfills herself in this act.”

The method must begin with the “historical study of the basic structures and elements of worship” and then proceed to “a theological synthesis.” Thus, the use of the methodology of liturgical theology includes investigation of the basic structures of worship, an explanation of elements of worship, and “an orderly theological synthesis of all data.” This study, however, will focus mainly on the analysis of the basic structure and elements of worship in the early Syriac liturgical traditions, especially the baptismal tradition in Ephrem’s texts. A theological synthesis that draws upon the actual performance of historic communities is hard to define, due to lacunae of information.

Schmemann argues that knowledge of God comes through liturgical experience; that the “the language of worship,” such as its structures, its ceremonies, its performance, and its whole spirit, is to be translated into “the language of theology,” thus transforming the liturgical

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17 Ibid., 14.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 17.
20 Ibid., 19.
experience of the church into “one of the life-giving sources of the knowledge of God.”\(^{21}\) A prerequisite of this methodology is an understanding that experience, prayer, and devotional poetry are valid forms of encounter and theologizing, in addition to an intellectual apprehension.\(^{22}\) Worship is also to be understood as “the life of the church” and “a self-revelation of the church,” and not as an individualistic or privatized event.\(^{23}\)

As best as possible, despite the limitation of sources, this study considers the liturgy of baptism highlighted in the writings of Ephrem, including its prayers and hymns, symbols and images, and cultic actions. Using the tools of liturgical theology and ritual analysis, I strive to uncover the deep structure of the baptismal liturgy and examine how Ephrem’s *madrashe* may illuminate those life-changing meanings.\(^{24}\)

One advantage of using of Schmemann’s methodology is that it resonates with the methodology of early Christian writers such as Ephrem. According to Schmemann, a theologian “has [to master] to perfection the necessary asceticism of intellectual discipline and integrity,” and “has to learn to immerse himself into the joy of the Church. . . . He has to rediscover the oldest of all language of the Church: that of her rites, the rhythm and the ordo of her *leitourgia* . . . . He has to become again not only the student of the Church’s faith but, above all, its *witness.*”\(^{25}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 12.


Utilizing these methodological principles, Chapter 2, *Ephrem and His World*, considers the fourth century Christian communities of Nisibis and Edessa, Syriac language and culture, asceticism and ascetic baptismal communities, and Ephrem’s works. Chapter 3, *The Catechumenate*, examines the structure and liturgical orders of the catechumenate in the church of Nisibis. Along with the methodology of liturgical theology, Chapter 4, *The Liturgy of Baptism*, employs a method of comparative historical-textual and structural study when engaging the historical data, thus reconstituting “the past from its leftover debris” in order to expose “the deep structure” of the liturgy—the baptismal liturgy in early Syriac-speaking Christianity. As Robert Taft notes, “knowledge is not the accumulation of data, not even new data, but the perception of relationships, the creation of hypothetical frameworks to explain the new data, or to explain in new ways the old.” On the basis of some findings from the historical study, this study “examines, compares, and hypothesizes,” by “sifting and analyzing, classifying and comparing, liturgical texts and units within and across traditions.” Even though the sources do not tell us everything, this historical study of the liturgy of baptism helps to expose what is done in worship and allows me to consider the *madrashe* as mystagogical literature in the liturgical context.

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26 This methodology was described by Anton Baumstark, *Comparative Liturgy*, trans. F. L. Cross (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1958). Liturgical scholars Robert Taft and Gabriele Winkler are current advocates of this method.


29 Ibid.
In Chapter 5, *Ephrem’s Mystagogy*, I add a mystagogical method to unfold the meaning of the mysteries or the sacraments that liturgical communities practice, as suggested by Robert Taft, for the “fuller and more effective understanding” of the liturgy: “[l]ike the scriptures, the rites of the Church await an exegesis and a hermeneutic and a homiletic to expound, interpret, and apply their multiple levels of meaning in each age. Mystagogy is to liturgy what exegesis is to scripture. It is no wonder, then, that the commentators on the liturgy used a method inherited from the older tradition of biblical exegesis.”

However, Ephrem’s theology and liturgy in his poetical works were embedded and embodied in the early Syriac literary tradition. Continuing the methodological principles introduced above, Chapter 6 develops *Ephrem’s Faith Formational Methodology*, by studying Sebastian Brock and Robert Murray’s exposition of symbolic expression in early Syriac literature to delineate a method of how to understand ancient Syriac literature. In order to avoid misinterpretation of the meaning of Ephrem’s language, this chapter looks at his rhetorical strategies such as inclusio, symbol, paradox, and typology. Robert Murray, in his *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, notes that commonly in Syriac writing, “an argument proceeds not by exhausting topics successively but with frequent inclusio, circling round on itself like a conversation round a fire, gradually advancing and going deeper,” thus marking a significant difference from the western way of thinking according to “a logical

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order.” A full-faceted analysis to place his works in their cultural/literal context may provide a proper understanding of Ephrem’s faith formational methodology.

**Sources and Translations**

The principal source for this dissertation is Ephrem’s *madrashe*, that his “profound theological vision can best be perceived.” Sebastian Brock has made a list of the *madrashe* that relate to baptism: *Madrashe on Faith* 7, 10, 40, 41, 49, 65, 81-5; *Madrashe on Virginity* 1, 4-7, 37, 46; *Madrashe on the Church* 36; *Madrashe on Nativity* 1, 16; and *Madrashe against Heretics* 22, 56. These sources are primarily used for the study of Ephrem’s mystagogy, along with his other *madrashe* and commentaries.

In the years since Edmund Beck’s translation of the writings of Ephrem into German (1955) and Arthur Vööbus’ studies of Ephrem and asceticism (1958), scholarship on Ephrem has flourished. This study depends largely on English translations from Robert Murray, Sebastian Brock, and Kathleen McVey. When specifically comparative and detailed meanings are required, however, I do my own translation of the Syriac texts into English, or select a proper translation when different translations exist. In general for my work, *Hymns on the Nativity* and *Hymns on Virginity* are translated from McVey; *Hymns on Paradise* from Brock.

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34 In 1955 *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* was published, then other writings of Ephrem was published through 1979 by Edmund Beck. See the bibliography.

Among the various resources, Robert Murray’s *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* focuses upon Ephrem’s various symbolic expressions and their meanings. Sebastian Brock’s *The Luminous Eye* demonstrates that Ephrem viewed the world as a sacramental reality, and that only symbolic language is capable of embracing God’s abundant revelation.36 Sidney Griffith’s *Faith Adoring the Mystery* contributes a vital perspective on the early Syriac tradition. Susan Harvey points out that women’s voices existed in the early Syriac church through her study of the women’s choir, “the daughters of the covenant” (*Bnat Qyama* ﺡﻨﺎت ﺪﻨﺎ). Kees den Biesen’s *Simple and Bold* enlarges an understanding of Ephrem’s symbolic theology; moreover, his *Bibliography of Ephrem the Syrian* is an extremely helpful resource for Ephrem studies. The data from these primary sources and critical supplementary commentaries provides not only the deep and broad substance of Ephrem’s thinking, but also a fine balance between theory and praxis. For understanding the multivalent meanings in Ephrem’s *madrashe*, there are many recently published articles and books and the materials available through the e-magazine *Hugoye*.

Other primary sources are also used to study of the early Syriac liturgical and baptismal traditions so that I may compare and analyze ritual practices, symbolism, and biblical typology. The *Odes of Solomon*, poems with a baptismal background, are helpful for an examination of rhetorical strategies. The most recent English translation with commentary is *Odes of Solomon* by Michael Lattke, translated by Marianne Ehrhardt. J. H. Bernard’s *The Odes of Solomon* was the first scholarly edition to recognize the baptismal background of many of the Odes. James Charlesworth’s edition still remains a helpful commentary.

36 Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 119-23. The full citation of Brock’s work, and the other texts identified in the narrative following, may be found in the bibliography at the end of the dissertation.
In terms of the baptismal structure, its catechesis, and mystagogy, *The Acts of Thomas*, written in Syriac and translated into Greek, serves as a crucial source. The work, dated to the third century, is interesting for its anointing-baptism sequence. A. F. J. Klijn’s *The Acts of Thomas* includes a brief discussion about baptism. Klijn’s “Baptism in the Acts of Thomas” in J. Vellian’s *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites*, and H. J. W. Drijvers’ “The Acts of Thomas,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, mention the text’s characteristic prebaptismal anointing and “the bridal hymn in the first Praxis and the Hymn of the Pearl in the ninth”—which reflects the worldview of Syriac Christianity as seen in the writings of Ephrem.37 Drijvers, furthermore, notes that the Hymn of the Pearl has been delivered “in the form of a didactic poem.”38

Another source is Ephrem’s contemporary, Aphrahat the Persian sage, whose *Demonstrations* is devoted to baptism, especially chapters 6, 7, 11, and 12. J. Parisot’s translation of Aphrahat is regarded as the best.39 Translations by Jacob Neusner, Adam Lehto,

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38 Ibid., p. 331. Drijvers summarizes the didactic narrative, stating, “The Hymn is a symbolic portrayal of the life of Adam, the man who of his own free will left his Father’s house, Paradise, with a part of his inheritance. His parents, God and the Holy Spirit, sent him out, and took from him the splendid robe, the image of God, which however they kept ready for him for the time when he had robbed the serpent of the pearl, that is, deprived Satan of his power (cf. Gen. 3:15-24). Then the whole process is put into reverse: he recovers his splendid robe, the image of God, and will rule with his brother, his heavenly second self, Jesus (cf. Thomas and Jesus as twins) in the (heavenly) kingdom… Then man knows again what his task in the world is, he seizes the pearl, the serpent (Satan) is overpowered in the name of the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son… He receives the image of God again, the lost son is once again installed, man becomes again one in a single form.”

and Kuriakose Valavanolickal are also used. A good study of the baptismal rites has been done by E. J. Duncan in *Baptism in the Demonstrations of Aphraates the Persian Sage*.

**Problems in Catechetical and Liturgical Understanding of Ephrem**

In studying the catechumenate and the liturgy of baptism of the fourth-century church of Ephrem, I limit my research to the published and translated writings of Ephrem and the generally agreed texts as known to early Syriac-speaking Christianity. My purpose will not question the historicity of the event recounted in Ephrem’s *madrashe*, although the meaning of the event and its historical-critical issues are considered when appropriate. For example, when the Syriac church called the Lent as “The Holy Fasting of Forty Days” (*ṣawma quadisha darb’in* in Syriac), I focus on how the church practiced fasting in the baptismal context, without asking the historicity of the duration.

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41 According to Edmund Beck, J (a) and J (b) manuscripts of *Hymns on Fasting* state “The Holy Fasting of Forty Days” (*ṣawma quadisha darb’in* in Syriac). Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ieiunio* vol. 246, p. 1, 33.

42 I have dealt the issues in chapter 4, section “Prebaptismal Fasting: “The Holy Fasting of Forty Days” (*ṣawma quadisha darb’in* in Syriac).
CHAPTER TWO

EPHREM AND HIS WORLD

This chapter sketches the historical and cultural context in which Ephrem worked, and considers how the situation of the Christian communities at Nisibis and Edessa functioned in Ephrem’s life and theology. The following key features are discussed: (1) fourth century Nisibis and Edessa, (2) language and culture, (3) asceticism and baptism, and (4) Ephrem’s works in the context of the catechetical school.

Fourth Century Nisibis and Edessa

The Syriac-speaking milieu in Nisibis and Edessa may be considered a “life on the frontier,” because the borders were “constantly shifting, depending on unpredictable military sallies and excursions from one side or the other.”¹ Political and military actions convulsed Nisibis throughout its history: Persian king Shapur II attacked Nisibis in 338, 346, and 350 A.D., and eventually possessed Nisibis in 363.² Nisibis had to be evacuated in three days; thus Ephrem and the Christian population moved to Edessa (Urfa, Turkey), where Ephrem remained until his death in 373.³


² Jacob Neusner introduces Shapur II as “a brilliant leader, a shrewd politician, an effective administrator, a brave and selfless soldier, an emperor of grand dignity and poise, surely the greatest leader of his times”; thus, he “achieved what had proved too difficult for Iranian armies over the generations, namely, possession of Nisibis and predominance in Mesopotamia, Armenia, and the Caucasus.” Jacob Neusner, A History of the Jews in Babylonia, vol. 4: The Age of Shapur II (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 1.

Located 85 kilometers east of the Euphrates, Edessa sits at the conjunction of several roads that connect it to Nisibis and beyond to India and China.\(^4\) Products of the Persians and the Far East were transported to Rome via the roads that crisscrossed the region of the Tigris and Euphrates, and both Nisibis and Edessa gained fame as trading centers.\(^5\) The fourth century document *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* speaks about Nisibis and Edessa as prosperous commercial centers:

> Even Mesopotamia has numerous and varied cities, of which I want to mention the excellent ones. They are, then, Nisibis and Edessa, which have the best men of all, both especially wise in business and good hunters. Above all they are both rich and adorned with all goods. For, receiving from the Persians, they themselves cross over into all the land of the Romans, selling and buying again, except for bronze and iron, because it is not permitted to give bronze or iron to enemies.\(^6\)

Along these roads, diverse religions converged as a result of those “going and coming freely between Babylonia, probably via Nisibis and Edessa, and Palestine.”\(^7\) Christianity travelled along those roads “from synagogue to marketplace to house and, finally, to imperial palace”; Christianity of this time was, as Thomas Finn calls it, “a traveling faith.”\(^8\) Although the


\(^5\) Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Beyond the Land of Nod: Syriac Images of Asia and the Historiography of the West,” *History of Religions* 49:1 (August 2009), 48-87. Reed notes that there were “caravan cities in Syria, such as Palmyra, Edessa, and Nisibis along the Tigris and Euphrates, and Antioch and Tyre on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.”


origin of Syriac Christianity is uncertain,\(^9\) Jewish Christians and the synagogue played a substantial role in the establishment and development of the early Syriac Christianity.\(^{10}\) Susan Harvey indicates that “the Syrian Orient was Christianized mainly through semitic Judaism rather than pagan religion or philosophy; its religious culture continued to reflect that heritage and differed from those of the Greco-Latin churches accordingly.”\(^{11}\) Christianity also was likely spread by tradesmen and pilgrims who followed behind the Roman armies:

Along these roads Roman armies marched to the east in order to fight the Parthians and Sassanians, caravans carried silk, spices and other precious products from the east to the luxurious Roman cities in the west, missionaries and pilgrims travelled with little luggage and great ideas and dream. Along these roads Christianity became known through merchants and travelers in that east Syrian and northern Mesopotamian area, where Aramaic was the main spoken language, but Greek too was widely known and understood.\(^{12}\)

\(^9\) W. Stewart McCullough states that Jewish merchants must have been the earliest missionaries, while traveling “along the merchant routes”; “Syriac Christianity must have started from Antioch,” and then, “Aleppo, Samosata, Edessa, Nisibis, Arbeia, and Seleucia on the Tigris” (McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* [Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1982], 8). On the other hand, F. Crawford Burkitt contends that the Christian faith reached not from Antioch, but directly from Jerusalem/Palestine, because Addai came from Palestine to preach in Edessa probably before the middle of the second century (Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* [London: J. Murray, 1904; Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2004], 34). Arthur Vööbus also insists on Syriac Christianity’s Palestinian origin, stating that it must have been related to “Aramaean Christianity in Palestine,” by emphasizing the role of Jewish synagogues as “the medium” in which the Christian message could have been delivered (Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*. vol. 1, CSCO 184 [Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1958], 6-7). However, Jacob Neusner speculates that growth occurred in two stages: “first, it reached the upper Euphrates, where it was established in Edessa by the apostle Addai, and second, moved eastward and southward from the Edessan base, carried by apostles and traders, the main lines of development following the trade routes which radiated from the upper Euphrates northward to Armenia, southward to Babylonia and the middle Euphrates, and eastward to Khuzistan” (Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 1, 49).

\(^{10}\) McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, 8: “We are further told in the Doctrine of Addai that when Addai first came to Edessa… some Jews who were silk merchants were added to Addai’s converts.”


Although no one can say for sure how Christianity first came to the Syriac-speaking communities, Christianity came to be planted in the military, mercantile, and religious cities of Mesopotamia.

### Christian Communities

There was a Christian community in Edessa by the time of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (193-211): according to the Chronicle of Edessa, “in the year 201 A.D. the church of the Christians was destroyed by a flood.”

There is evidence that Bishop Quna (reg. c. 289-313) “organized orthodoxy in Edessa in an ecclesiastical manner and gave to it significant impetus.”

St. Jacob is considered as the first recognized bishop of Nisibis, for as David Bundy notes, “No bishop is mentioned in earlier sources, although the Aberkios inscription suggests there were Christians in Nisibis more than a century before Jacob’s episcopate.”

St. Jacob was appointed in 309 as bishop, and Ephrem was baptized under his episcopacy. Ephrem served the church as deacon and teacher, under the four remarkable bishops—St. Jacob (c. 309-338), Babu (c. 338-50), Vologeses (c. 350-361), and Abraham (c. 361-?).

The Christian community continually grew, despite the frontier environment between Rome and Persia. Bundy suggests that a baptistery was established in Nisibis when “Nisibis

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13 As seen in footnote 9, there are some issues: (1) it came from Antioch; (2) it came from Palestine.

14 Sidney Griffith, “Christianity in Edessa.” Since Bar Daisan and his followers were regarded as the first notable Christians of Edessa, it is uncertain whether the church was composed of orthodox Christians or Bar Daisanian followers.


endured a siege by the Persians led by Shapur II, “17 since a physical sign of the spiritual power of faith and the invocation of divine assistance would have given consolation to a community under threat of attack. 18 In connection with this new baptistery, Ephrem and his catechetical school might have practiced baptismal liturgy and catechesis. 19 The inscription on the baptistery in Greek, rather than in Syriac, attests to the bilingual culture of the Nisibis community: “This baptistery was erected and completed in the year 671 (=A.D. 359/360) in the time of Bishop Vologeses through the zeal of the priest Akepsimas. May this inscription be a memorial to them.” 20 The baptistery still stands today. 21

Language and Culture

In the first century, Syriac was a vernacular, living language in Nisibis and Edessa, and it shaped both literary works and theological concepts. It had become a Christian language, primarily for religious literature, in the fourth century when St. Ephrem was born. The fact that the Syriac language is very close to the Aramaic that Jesus used often evokes a “romantic and nostalgic” assumption that early Syriac-speaking Christianity preserved “precious authentic


18 Similarly, the thirteenth-century Goryeo dynasty of Korea carved “Palman Daejanggyeong” (eighty-thousand tripitaka, Buddhist scriptures) during the Mongol invasions of Korea. With the spiritual power of faith in Buddha, the Goryeo dynasty of Korea strove to overcome the threat and fear of the invasions, which lasted for forty years. When the monks carved letters (over fifty two million) in birch woodblocks, they bowed down each time for each letter, as a prayer for invoking the Buddha’s help.

19 I mention in the later section of this chapter the rise and function of the catechetical school of Nisibis.


words of Jesus himself and gospel traditions of the Jerusalem congregation” lost elsewhere. On the use of Greek, Aramaic and Syriac in east Syria, H. J. W. Drijvers notes:

Most of these theories are characterized by a certain romantic flavour probably due to the use of Aramaic or Syriac… which supposedly is very close to Jesus’ own language… Whoever was literate in that particular time and area usually knew both languages, and it may even be supposed that most texts were written down in two versions from the very outset. That does not mean that writings and ideas stemming from the east Syrian region belong without any differentiation to the mainstream of Greek Christian literature as we know it from more western areas, but their special features are not exclusively due to the fact that they were written by chance in Syriac and often also transmitted in Greek. Rather, the whole cultural and religious situation determined their particular contents and tendencies, which react on and reflect that situation.

Nevertheless, the reason that special interest has been attached to the earliest surviving Syriac texts is because we have scanty information about the Aramaic-speaking population to which Jesus and his apostles belonged. Instead, as Sebastian Brock argues, third- and fourth-century Syriac texts provide “the best evidence for the distinctive character of Aramaic-speaking Christianity” in a milieu of the relatively “unHellenized.” According to A. L. Frothingham, the Syriac language shaped the Byzantine East’s history, and enlivened it spiritually, in a way similar to what the Greek language did in the Byzantine West. Thus, Frothingham calls the Syriac language “the organ of Christianity.”

Gradually, the Syriac language became a cultural vehicle for teaching Christianity. Robert Murray informs us of the predominant position of Syriac as the language of Christianity:

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23 Ibid., 1-3.


Syriac is a major dialect of Aramaic, which from at least the sixth century BCE was the main *lingua franca* of the whole near east till it gave way to Arabic from the seventh century CE, though after Alexander’s conquests in the fourth century BCE Greek shared the dominant place, especially in major cities… In fact… from at least the fourth century CE Edessene Syriac is predominantly the language of Christian.\(^{26}\)

Not only Syriac-speaking Christians but also local Jews and pagans eventually adopted Syriac as “a literary language,”\(^ {27}\) in which they developed proper expression of their faith. Syriac, furthermore, became a sacred language in a new level as the Bible and religious texts were gradually translated into the language.

In the fourth century, Aphrahat and Ephrem made a significant contribution to the use of Syriac as a cultural vehicle for Christian teaching, by producing didactic writings in Syriac. Ephrem and his Syriac writings represent a “Semitic-Asian Christianity,”\(^ {28}\) and his *madrashe* called teaching songs, didactic songs, or catechetical songs are a particular genre in Syriac literature.

**Asceticism and Baptism**

According to F. Crawford Burkitt, the very earliest Christianity was not severely ascetic: John the Baptist lived ascetically in the wilderness, but Jesus lived together with and among people, and did not say “Blessed are the fasting,” but “Blessed are hungry.”\(^ {29}\) However, as


\(^{27}\) Sebastian Brock, “The Earliest Syriac Literature,” 161.

\(^{28}\) Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 15. Brock also points out the historical importance of early Syriac Christianity, stating, “here is genuinely Asian Christianity which is free from the specifically European cultural, historical, and intellectual trappings that have become attached to the main streams of Christianity with which we are familiar today.”

\(^{29}\) Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, 118.
Arthur Vööbus notes, when the message of Jesus reached the territories of the Tigris and Euphrates, the “receptive ground of rigorously ascetic mode” developed spiritual yet ascetic Christianity. Eventually, ascetic tendencies permeated in the early Syriac-speaking Christianity, and fundamentally affecting baptismal thoughts and practices.

Ascetic vows at baptism sprouted up in the indigenous Syrian tradition, seemingly promoting “a religion with asceticism as a possible vocation.” Evidence for this asceticism is found in Aphrahat’s Demonstrations, written in Syriac between 336 and 345. Edward Duncan describes this valuable document as “a representative of the mind and practice of a church virtually uninfluenced by Greek and Roman culture, even in the fourth century.” The Demonstrations indicates that Aphrahat’s church annually administered baptismal rites on the evening of the fourteenth Nisan and with paschal connections, commemorating the Paschal Lamb Jesus. It reveals how the Syrian church understood baptism in the ascetic environment.

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31 Harvey, Asceticism and Society in Crisis, 10.

32 Edward J. Duncan, Baptism in the Demonstrations of Aphraates the Persian Sage (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945), 104-132. This is also found in Jacob Vellian, ed., Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites (Kottayam: C.M.S Press, 1973), 16-36.

33 According to the Jewish lunar calendar, the fourteenth day of Nisan falls on the day of the full moon after the vernal equinox, therefore it comes often April. There were two different days of celebrating Easter in the early churches—“the feast on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover” and the feast on “the fourteenth Nisan (Quartodecimans).” Paul Bradshaw, ed., “Easter,” in The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 160.

34 Aphrahat described Christ as the true Lamb in the Demonstrations 12:9, stating, “Whoever eats from the true lamb, the Messiah, binds up his loins in faith” (translation from Jacob Neusner, Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-century Iran [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971], 37). According to Aphrahat, “The Holy One commanded Moses concerning the paschal sacrifice to make it on the fourteenth of the first month” (Dem., XII-1); “But as for us, it is required that we keep the festival in its time from year to year, fasting in purity, praying firmly, praising diligently, saying psalms as is appropriate, giving the sign (of the cross) and the baptism as is right” (Dem., XII-13) Translations taken from ibid., 31, 40.
He who is afraid, let him turn back from the contest (Jud. 7:3), lest he breaks the heart of his brothers as his (own) heart (Deut. 20:8).

And he who has plants a vineyard, let him return to work it, lest he thinks about it in the battle and be weak in the fight (Deut. 20:6).

And he who is betrothed to a woman and wishes to marry her, let him return and take pleasure with his wife (Deut. 20:7).

And he who has built a house let him return to it, lest he thinks of his house and not fight with his full attention (Deut. 20:5).

He whose heart is set on the state of marriage, let him get married before baptism, lest he fall in the contest and get killed.

And he who is afraid of this lot of fighting let him return, lest he break the heart of his brethren, like his own heart.

And he who loves belongings, let him return from the army, lest when the battle becomes intense for him, he remembers his belongings and returns to them; and he who turns back from the fight will have opprobrium.

While he who has not vowed himself, and has not put on the armour, if he turns back he is not blamed.

But everyone who has vowed himself and put on his armour, if he turns back from the contest, he becomes a laughing stock.

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35 It is translated by Kuriakose Valavanickal, Aphrahat: Demonstrations, Catholic Theological Studies of India, vol. 3 (Changanassery: HIRS Publications, 1999), 147. Neusner did not translate chapters 1-10; Adam Lehto did not articulate the seemingly liturgical aspects in his translation. According to Arthur Vööbus, these sections must have been the liturgical text, “the rite of baptism with its liturgical elements and its paraenetical portions,” for “Aphrahat…must have had the rite of baptism before his eyes” (Arthur Vööbus, Celibacy, A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile 1 [Stockholm: The Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1951], 53). Although it is uncertain that the portions belonged to liturgical formulations, sections VII: 18 and 20 need to be translated not in a prosaic style. Therefore, I follow Valavanickal’s translation.

36 Ibid., 148-149.
The man who has emptied himself (Phil. 2:7) is suitable for fighting, because he does not remember what is behind him, and return back to it.

Although these two passages do not provide the general sequence of the baptismal ceremony, they may reflect the characteristics of baptism in Aphrahat’s community, as “not the common seal of every Christian’s faith, but a privilege reserved for celibates,” as Burkitt states.

Did Aphrahat’s church therefore effectively practice the ascetic vows as a requirement for admission to baptism? How strict and long were the ascetic vows practiced at the baptismal rites of the Syrian church tradition? How many churches required the ascetic vows as a prebaptismal credential? Arthur Vööbus, in *Celibacy, a Requirement for Admission to Baptism* (1951) searches for the answers to these questions. He introduces Aphrahat’s admonition in Dem.VII:18 and 20 as “an ancient Syrian baptismal liturgy,” and disagrees with Burkitt’s argument from 1904 that Aphrahat’s church practiced ascetic vows at baptism. Vööbus carefully examines the passages, and classifies them as “a heterogeneous piece,” namely, “an ancient liturgical portion” that the church had obtained, but not practiced in Aphrahat’s time:

Thus, from the vacillating attitude which puzzles the reader, it becomes clear that in the church to which Aphrahat belonged, celibacy was not considered any longer as a

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37 Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, 125. Burkitt argues (p. 127) that Aphrahat’s church consisted of “baptized celibates, together with a body of adherents who remain outside and are not really members of the body,” because the church thought that the married life and the baptized Christians’ life were “quite incompatible!”

38 Vööbus, *Celibacy*, 55.

39 Vööbus confirmed his argument with Anton Baumstark, who was an expert of liturgical research in early Syriac Christianity. He said, “I submitted this study to him with the request that he express his authoritative opinion as to the validity of my solution, at the same time asking him to give his criticism. He examined anew Aphrahat’s homily from this point of view and admitted that his is indeed the solution—these sections are from the baptismal liturgy” (Vööbus, *Celibacy*, 55-56).

40 Ibid., 53. Vööbus argued, “the result of this examination is that this section in the seventh homily definitely proves to be a heterogeneous piece in Aphrahat’s homilies. Studying the whole homily, one feels that it is difficult to resist the impression that Aphrahat is quoting a source which in origin and historical background must have been quite different.”
requirement for admission to baptism and membership in the church. Aphrahat, following the contemporary norms, did not deny baptism to married people and did not demand that one’s life, once baptized, should be continent. Everyone who believed became eligible to receive baptism. Virginity had become a state chosen and practiced voluntarily.  

In an article from 1974, Robert Murray advocated that the admonition was “a standard homily.” Vööbus still maintained his position in a 1988 publication that the admonition was an ancient liturgical text, and explained that married people were also members of the Christian community. Accordingly, the portion of the Demonstration was not Aphrahat’s invention, but a traditional text, even going back to “a very primitive Mesopotamian liturgy of baptism.” Vööbus mentions that the admonition in Dem.VII:18 and 20 served as the last rite in the preparation for baptism, saying, “We see the candidates for baptism before us and we are allowed to listen to the admonitions delivered on this occasion.”

Nevertheless, the second admonition of Dem. VII:20 speaks of a more strongly and urgently emphasized asceticism, which Vööbus claims can be understood as “self-emptiness.” These passages may be viewed as the rites of renunciation; in sequence: renunciation (of worldly life), scrutiny (with the water of proof), and renunciation of oneself (self-emptiness). After all, the candidates presumably professed their faith in Christ with an oath of celibacy (ihidayā), thus to put on the Christ, the Ihidayā, in/through the water of baptism. The term ihidayā

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41 Ibid., 48.
43 Ibid., 61.
46 Ibid., 23.
(συριακά) is crucial in understanding early Syriac asceticism. Robert Murray defines *ihidaya* in three senses: singleness (celibacy), single-mindedness, and a special relationship to the Only-Begotten Son:

This term, *ihidaya*, embraced three elements, which required three Greek words to render them: (1) “single” in relation to a spouse (actual or potential), rendered by μοναχός; (2) “single-minded,” the opposite of δίψυχος (James 1:8, 4:8), and the state to which Eusebius applies the term μονότροπος in his comment on Psalm 68:7; and (3) “unique” in virtue of a special relationship to the only Son of God, the μονογενής (Syriac *ihidaya*) of John 1:18.47

It is unclear whether the section of *Demonstrations* was the ancient liturgical portion preserved in his church, or the ascetic vow practiced in Aphrahat’s time; however, it is obvious that Aphrahat’s church was very familiar with such a liturgical expostulation or homily that the baptized should live in an ascetic celibacy. This reflects Aphrahat’s church’s baptismal fidelity in which an ascetic life was understood as “a living sacrament of baptismal fidelity for all.”48 Furthermore, a baptized ascetic was likely to have been “a living embodiment” of the truth, as written in Romans 6:49

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* VII: 18 and 20, therefore, attests to a fundamental baptismal ethos in asceticism—a call to participate in the holy war, a betrothal to Christ, and celibacy as a Christian


49 Ibid., 237.
The Baptismal Ethos in Asceticism

Before dealing with a baptismal ethos embedded in a baptized celibacy, it is necessary to notice that it was possible for a person who vowed celibacy at baptism to marry, as the Dem. VI implies that an honorable married life was also a legitimate part of the Christian life:

Therefore, my brethren, any man who is a Bar Qyama (a son of Covenant) or a qaddisa (a holy person) who loves ihidayutha (a life of solitude or celibacy) and wants a woman, who is a Bat Qyama (a daughter of Covenant) like him, to live with him, in such a case it is better that he should take a wife openly and not be unrestrained in lust (1 Cor. 7:9). Likewise, in the case of a woman, it is appropriate for her, if she is not going to separate from a man who is an ihidaya, to be openly with a husband. (Dem. VI: 4)

As a result, Aphrahat admitted, “[I]n any case marriage does not belong to evil works, but adultery does” (Dem. XXIII: 62).

Baptismal Celibacy: The Call to Participate in the Holy War

The Syriac-speaking churches were permeated with an ascetic tendency within a strong baptismal ethos, in which the holy war theme functioned to describe the inner-spiritual

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50 Bar/Bat Qyama is the singular form of Bnay/Bnat Qyama (Sons/Daughters of the Covenant). Edmund Beck called the Bnay Qyama (“sons/daughters of the covenant”) the “Elitenkirche” or “church within the church,” (cited by Robert Murray from Edmund Beck, “Asketentum und Mönchtum bei Ephräm,” in Il Monachesimo Orientale, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 153 [Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1958], 354-355); Robert Murray described the Bnay/Bnat Qyama as a body within the Church, explaining that “by the fourth century we see these as a recognizable body within the Church (though not yet to be called monks and nuns), some living at home, others in small communities, but not yet isolated from the laity” (Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 13-14, n. 72). According to R. M. Price, it was “a special order” between the laity and the clergy, presumably functioning as a choir and/or an ascetic devotional body” (R. M. Price, History of the Monks of Syria [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985], xxii, 13-14). The characteristic of Bnay/Bnat Qyama as the ascetic baptismal community is mentioned later in this section.

51 See the definition above.

52 Valavanolickal, Aphrahat, 115-116.
relationship between asceticism and baptism—baptism is “the call to the holy war.” 53 Along with the theme of the holy war, other themes such as that of contest (agona), athletes, and spiritual warfare frequently appeared in the baptismal context of the commitment to celibacy, connected with biblical passages such as “Christ’s call to discipleship (Matthew 10:34-39), the call to holy war or to the contest drawing on the Old Testament, athletes in the Pauline passages (1 Corinthians. 9), spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6), a typological exposition of Joshua’s second circumcision with stone swords (Joshua 5:2) as Christ the Stone’s circumcision with his word which is sharper than a two-edged sword.” 54

The baptized Christian life was to include renunciation not only of marriage, but also of a vineyard and a house, because Christians were to prepare for an eschatological holy war. Within the Christian community, the Bnay/Bnat Qyama were “the inner core of celibates.” 55 After certain ascetic vows at their baptisms, Aphrahat and Ephrem had been Bnay Qyama, since “evidently they had undertaken certain ascetic vows at their baptism, and they lived in small groups or communes serving the local church in a variety of different ways.” 56 Sebastian Brock considers the ascetic status as a “Syrian proto-monasticism,” for “unlike Egyptian monasticism, this Syrian proto-monasticism was essentially an urban or village phenomenon.” 57

53 Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 16.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 17.
56 Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 26.
57 Ibid.
Baptismal Celibacy: Betroth to Christ

The baptismal ethos of Syriac-speaking Christianity was also characterized by an emphasis on the theme of betrothal to Christ. Aphrahat narrated in *Dem. VII:* 18 and 20 that “anyone who is betrothed to a woman and wishes to marry her, let him return” or “let him get married,” instead of coming into baptismal celibacy. Aphrahat exhibited betrothal to Christ as bliss—“All the pure virgins who have betrothed themselves to Christ, light their lamps and go with their bridegroom into their chamber” (*Dem. VI.7*)—with an eschatological expectation of their faithful adherence to Christ. Therefore, in the church of Aphrahat, baptism was reserved for those who consecrated themselves to Christ in virginity or by renouncing marital intercourse.58 Ephrem also viewed Christ as the Bridegroom, following the early church tradition, based on the biblical passages Mt. 9:15, Jn 3:29, and Mt 25:1-13.59 These passages mention Christ as the bridegroom; thus Ephrem wrote, “he [John the Baptist] told her that he was not even worthy to loosen the strap of the Bridegroom’s sandal.”60 Baptismal celibacy as betroth to Christ was strongly exhorted, as Burkitt notes: “people who intend to marry are warned off from receiving baptism and are actually recommended to go away and sow their wild oats, because the married life and the life of the baptized Christian are quite incompatible!”61


59 Sebastian Brock (*The Luminous Eye*, 115) provides additional explanations about the biblical passages: (1) Mt 9:15: “This is Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees’ question to him about fasting: ‘Can the children of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them?’”; (2) Jn 3:29: where John the Baptist identifies himself, not as the Messiah, but rather as “the friend of the Bridegroom to whom the bride belongs”; and (3) Mt 25:1-13: “the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.”

60 *Hymns against Heresies* 24:6; translation from Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 121.

Baptismal Celibacy: Christian Vocation—“The Water Proves Him!”

Aphrahat affirmed ascetic celibacy to be a fundamental vocation of Christians in order to keep them faithful over time. He stated in Dem. VII:19 that the water itself proved the candidates suitable for baptism or not, as in the story of Gideon in Judges 7:4-8, for “many are called and few are chosen”:

Also, when he [Gideon] had proved them by the water, from ten thousand only three hundred men were elected to perform the battle; moreover this agrees with the word that our Lord spoke: “Many are called and few chosen”… Everyone who is valiant—the water proves him; and those who are slothful are excluded (separated) from thence.  

Accordingly, Burkitt insists that Aphrahat divided Christians into two groups: “baptized celibates” and “the penitents.” Aphrahat seems to affirm ascetic celibacy as the starting point of Christian vocation, repeating in Dem.VII.22, “The water of baptism will prove those who are selected for the combat.” Moreover, Vööbus indicates that early Syrian Christianity retained the ascetic element and its application in its liturgy, “no matter how the multi-hued, variegated context and the variety of stimuli and movements,” in which “full agreement existed in the basic substructure—the very essence of Christian life was ascetic.”

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62 Demonstrations VII:19.

63 F. Crawford Burkitt, “Syriac-speaking Christianity,” in The Cambridge Ancient History, vol. 12, ed. S. A. Cook et al. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1937), 499. But Vööbus takes into consideration Burkitt’s assertion, since “the cogency of Burkitt’s statements can only be estimated after a general consideration of the ecclesiastical-historical promises and a literary-critical analysis of Aphrahat’s homilies. Therefore, any light that can be thrown on the problem would be very welcome” (Vööbus, Celibacy, 36).

The word *qyama* (قدامًا) was originally derived from a Syriac root “q-y-m” meaning “to rise up and to stand.”

Robert Murray correlates *Qyama* with the meaning of “the act of standing.” Following Edmund Beck who called the *Bnay Qyama* the “Elitenkirche” (meaning “Church within the Church”), Murray identifies the *Bnay/Bnat Qyama* as “Church within the Church,” stating that “by the fourth century we see these as a recognizable body within the Church (though not yet to be called monks and nuns), some living at home, others in small communities, but not yet isolated from the laity.”

Shafiq AbouZayd also writes they were “not a clerical institution, but an ascetic group,” which were “integrated into the daily life of their society.”

A significant characteristic is that the ascetic ecclesiastical body took up “residence in the towns, where they could make the full impact of their eschatological calling apparent to one and all in the very midst of the new society.”

Peter Brown succinctly explains the characteristic of Syriac asceticism as “impingement on society,” for the ascetics lived at home or in communities, unlike a solitary monk in a cave, thus taking a certain responsibility for their community.

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67 Ibid., 14.


71 Robert Murray also affirms that Syrian asceticism was not derived from Egypt, but probably earlier
Presumably, the Bnay/Bnat Qyama seem to have played a pastoral role in an ecclesiastical dimension. *Dem. XXIII:* 25 witnesses to the Bnay/Bnat Qyama’s role at the baptismal rites for other candidates, for “the priests are said to convoke the whole Qyama at baptism.” Ephrem also wrote that the bishops of Nisibis had exercised “their pastoral concern” through the Bnay/Bnat Qyama, since the Qyama had exerted strong influence on the community. Furthermore, the Bnay/Bnat Qyama symbolized the baptismal life—whether “forming house communities or informal religious communes”—as a *living* icon to typify self-commitment at baptism.

*Ihidaya* (*חָיָדָא*): Ascetic Baptismal Individual

*Ihidaya* is another significant term for understanding the ascetic baptismal ethos in the early Syrian churches. Although it is not clear how exactly *ihidaya* and Bnay/Bnat Qyama were to be connected, these two key terms must have been somehow related in the baptismal ascetic context. *Ihidaya* embraces the meanings of “single” in relation to a spouse (*μοναχός*), “single-minded” (*μονότροπος*), and the unique relationship to Christ, “the Only-Begotten” (*μονογενής*). Drawing upon these literal meanings, Robert Murray clarifies the meaning of


75 Ibid.

76 Robert Murray, “The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and"
“becoming *ihidaya*” in the light of baptism: “(1) becoming ‘single’ (*ihidaya*) by accepting Christ’s call to leave dear ones; (2) becoming single-minded (*ihidaya*) by accepting a ‘circumcision of heart’; and (3) ‘putting on’ the supreme *Ihidaya*, Christ, and thus ‘standing up (*qym)*’ for him as a sort of representative, and thereby joining the *Qyama*, the ‘heart’ of the Church.”

Therefore, *ihidaya* was distinguished from the monastery-dwelling monk, a *dayraya*. According to Sebastian Brock, “as far as Aphrahat and Ephrem are concerned, *ihidaya* has nothing directly to do with *monachos* in the sense of ‘monk,’ and neither writer yet *knows* the term *dayraya*.” For them, *ihidaya* did not mean “a monk, or a hermit, or a solitary,” rather, it referred to “the unity of man with God.” Shafiq AbouZayd speaks to the use of *ihidaya* after the third century, insisting that “the word *ihidaya* is used to indicate a Christian who seeks a life of unity with Christ through ascetic practices; in particular, silence and the subjugation of the body.” He claims that such unity required a life of celibacy.

For example, Ephrem described Jacob of Nisibis as *ihidaya* in his *Nisibene Hymns* XV: 9, which seems to indicate that Jacob of Nisibis was an *ihidaya* from his early days, attaining unity with God, in celibacy and in solitary dwelling.

In two abodes was he

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77 Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 16.


79 Ibid.


81 Ibid., 272.
a solitary recluse (*ihidaya*) from his early days;
for he was holy within his body
and solitary (*ihidaya*) within his dwelling;
openly and secretly was he chaste.\footnote{Nisibene Hymns XV: 9, translation by J. T. Sarsfield Stopford, “The Nisibene Hymns,” 184.}

Furthermore, the term *ihidaya* appeared in a baptismal context. Aphrahat described the
capitalized *Ihidaya* (Christ) and *ihidaye* (the plural of *ihidaya*) in terms of the baptismal
relationship, such as “the *Ihidaya* from the bosom of the Father who gives joy to all the *ihidaye*”
(*Dem.VI*:6). *Hymns on the Epiphany*, attributed to Ephrem, also uses the capitalized term
*Ihidaya* to refer to Christ:

See, those who are baptized and become virgins and saints (*quaddishe*),
Those who have gone down to the font, have been baptized, and have put on the

The *madrashe* sings that people are baptized and become virgins and saints; people have been
baptized and have put on the *Ihidaya*, Christ. When *ihidaya* was used in the meaning of Christ, it
included the meaning of the Only Begotten, which implied the symbolic meaning of baptism as
*birth* or *rebirth*. For example, in singing “O to the Only-begotten (*Ihidaya*), who was fruitful
multiplied in all [His] benefits,”\footnote{Hymns on the Nativity 8:6. Translation taken from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 120.} *Hymns on the Nativity* 8:6 embraces the baptismal image of
*birth* or *rebirth*. The baptismal image of birth or rebirth, rather than death, is a significant
characteristic of Syriac-speaking Christianity.
Ephrem’s Works and the Catechetical School

Sebastian Brock labels Ephrem “a prolific writer” and places his writings into four categories: (1) commentaries (prose commentaries on biblical books), (2) prose (other works in artistic prose), (3) memre (verse homilies in 7+7 syllable couplets) and (4) madrashe (stanzaic poems with rhythm).  

The focus here is on the madrashe which are examined in the catechetical context. The terms madrasha (singular) and madrashe (plural) are simply translated as “hymn” or “hymns”; the madrasha is a literary genre of Syriac—a stanzaic poem with rhythm, which is variously translated as “didactic hymn,” “teaching song,” “catechetical hymn,” or “liturgical poem.” It has been reported that not only Ephrem but also previously Bar Daisan (154-222) and Mani (216-276) favored the genre of madrashe to disseminate their teachings in Nisibis and Edessa. Uniquely Ephrem composed madrashe for liturgical use, sung by Bnat Qyama, in order to catechize his congregation with the Nicene faith, stating, “I will have kept the wolves away from them (Your sheep), and I will have built, as far as I was able, enclosures of madrashe for the lambs of your flock.”

According to the anonymous Vita tradition, the Life of Ephrem, Ephrem composed and taught madrashe to the Bnat Qyama (Daughters of Covenant) who served worship as liturgical choirs; the madrashe were then passed to the congregation through choral singing in public worship:

He prepared himself a choir to do battle against them… against the heresies of which we have spoken before, by means of the daughters of the covenant (Bnat Qyama) who

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85 Sebastian Brock classifies the works of Ephrem into four sections in the appendix of St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 228-233.

assembled regularly in church. He initiated instruction for them and taught them doctrinal hymns. Evening and morning they would gather in church before the service and on the feasts of martyrs… He was very becoming as he stood among the sisters, leading them with a voice raised in song.⁸⁷

Ephrem composed madrashe in order to protect the church against the heresies in his time. Sidney Griffith remarks that Ephrem, through the madrashe, “found the most effective way intellectually to inculcate Christianity into the life and institutions of the Aramean frontier.”⁸⁸ Griffith finds one common thing among native Aramaic-speaking authors, such as Bar Daisan (154-222), Mani (216-276), and Ephrem (306-373), that they were “frontier figures” living in the borders between Rome and Persia, accordingly, “whose minds were challenged by the currents of political and religious thought that circulated in the wider worlds that came together in Mesopotamia.”⁸⁹ Interestingly, all three, whether orthodox or not, used the stanzaic poetic madrashe as a didactic instrument to institute their own thoughts into the public. In fact, as Murray notes, “It [madrasha] was that age’s effective means of propaganda, as Arius had found in Alexandria and Bardaisan’s followers (whom Ephrem is said to have imitated) in Edessa.”⁹⁰ Just as Bardaisan established youth choirs,⁹¹ so Ephrem founded the female choirs, Bnat Qyama, for singing his madrashe in the liturgy.⁹²


⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 30.


Madrashe (ܡܕܪܝܫܐ) and the Role of Bnat Qyama (ܒܢܬ ܩܝܡܐ)

By singing the catechetical *madrashe* in their liturgical choirs during public worship, the *Bnat Qyama* (Daughters of Covenant) played a didactic and sacramental role. Susan Harvey elaborately develops an argument of the didactic, kerygmatic, and liturgical role of the *Bnat Qyama* in her study of the women choir’s “social implications.” She claims that just as “Moses had led the Hebrew women in song at the crossing of the Red Sea,” so did Ephrem lead the women choirs to sing *madrashe* to celebrate “the deliverance of humanity from the powers of sin and death.”

Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) called Ephrem “a second Moses,” singing:

> The blessed Ephrem saw that the women were silent from praise and in his wisdom he decided it was right that they should sing out; so, just as Moses gave timbrels to the young girls, thus did this discerning man compose hymns for virgins. As he stood among the sisters it was his delight to stir these chaste women into songs of praise, he was like an eagle perched among the doves as he taught them to sing new songs of praise with pure utterance. Flocks of meek partridge surrounded him, Learning how to sing a sweet song with purity of voice. He taught the swallows to warble

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93 Susan Harvey in “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant” (p. 134) explicates the kerygmatic characteristic of the contents of what Ephrem taught to the liturgical women’s choirs: “the Daughters of the Covenant were trained to sing on matters explicating the entire salvation drama, as well as the devotional life of Christians, and about the saints—about the exact list of topics expressly forbidden for widows to teach about in the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*!”

94 Ibid., 125.

95 Ibid., 140.

96 Ibid.

97 Jacob of Serugh stated in his *Letter to Publius* 1, “The wise Moses caused the Virgins not to hold back from the praise that was requisite: so too Ephrem, who proved a second Moses to the women folk, taught them to sing praise with the sweetest of songs.” Translation by Dr. Mar Aprem (formerly George Mooken) in *Mar Aprem Theologian & Poet, 306-373 A.D.* (Kottayam: SEERI, 1990), 62.
and the Church resounded with the lovely sound of chaste women’s voices.  

Jacob of Serugh emphasized the kerygmatic role of the Bnat Qyama to proclaim Christian teaching and beliefs through hymnography. According to Jacob, the Bnat Qyama were called female teachers (mālpānāthā). A Compendious Syriac Dictionary defines mālpānā (male counterpart of mālpānāthā) as a term to designate a great doctrinal figure, usually referring to Ephrem and Jacob. That the title mālpānāthā is given to the women’s choirs (Bnat Qyama) is very impressive:

Our sisters also were strengthened by you [O Ephrem] to give praise,  
For women were not allowed to speak in church.  

Your instruction opened the closed mouths of the daughters of Eve;  
And behold, the gatherings of the glorious (church) resound with their melodies.  

A new sight of women uttering the proclamation  
And behold, they are called (female) teachers (mālpānāthā) among the congregations.  

Your teaching signifies an entirely new world;  
For yonder in the kingdom (of heaven), men and women are equal.  

You labored to devise two harps for two groups;  
You treated men and women as one to give praise.

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98 Jacob of Serugh, A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem; translation in Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 23.

99 Noting Jacob of Serug’s homily on Ephrem, Susan Harvey states, “according to Jacob, then Ephrem’s choirs do more than proclaim that with Christianity a new era has dawned for humanity… The term he (Jacob of Serug) uses is karuzutha, the Syriac equivalent of kerygma. These women sing the full doctrinal proclamation of the church” (Harvey, “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant,” 139-140).

100 J. Payne Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 278. The dictionary explains the term, “given as a title to many of the Fathers, especially to St. Ephrem Syrus mālpānā raba (the Great Master), and to St. James of Sarug (Jacob of Serugh) mālpānā tcheilaya (the Ecumenical Doctor) and mālpānā alahaya (the divine Doctor).”

101 1 Cor. 14: 34.

Although it might not have been an official title given to them, the hymn reports that the church called the *Bnat Qyama* “female teachers, *mālpānāthā*.” Jacob of Serugh claimed that the church of Nisibis in the fourth century perceived “a new sight of women uttering the proclamation,” stating, “behold, they are called *mālpānāthā* among the congregations.” The *mālpānāthā* also taught the salvation story, which was originally to be taught by male teachers (*mālpānā*). Through this image of the *mālpānāthā*, Jacob of Sarugh declared “the heavenly kingdom to come,” where men and women are present together, and men and women are equal. “A single salvation is yours [women] and theirs (alike); Why then have you [women] not learned to sing praise with a loud voice?” Jacob of Sarugh praised Ephrem’s eschatological typology of the new *image* of women, the *mālpānāthā*.

Based on the women’s didactic and kerygmatic performance as liturgical singers, Susan Harvey further examines “the eschatological significance of women’s participation,” in the liturgy:

According to Jacob, Ephrem had founded these choirs explicitly to instruct the congregation of Edessa in right doctrine…Ephrem founded choirs of women where there had been none. Ephrem was initially prompted to do so, Jacob says, because in the task of composing hymns and homilies adequate for teaching God’s truth, he realized the eschatological significance of women’s participation.

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103 Ibid.

104 Harvey, “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant,” 140.


106 Harvey, “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant,” 133-134, 139.
The contents of the madrashe aimed not only for the liturgical and catechetical purposes of teaching doctrinal truth to the congregation in liturgy,¹⁰⁷ but also for a “subtle connotation and spiritual understanding concerning the birth and baptism and fasting and the entire plan of Christ: the passion and resurrection and ascension and concerning the martyrs.”¹⁰⁸ When compared with the office of deaconesses, therefore, the role of mālpānāthā seemed to be much broader.¹⁰⁹ Deaconesses were able to teach, but limited to only female catechumens.¹¹⁰ However, mālpānāthā practiced madrashe for the whole congregation, thus instructing both men and women in public. Harvey observes, “the role of civic liturgical singing placed the Daughters of the Covenant in the midst of the entire worshiping community.”¹¹¹ “Daughters of the Covenant (Bnat Qyama) were charged with the task of singing psalms and various kinds of hymns in certain liturgical celebrations of the civic churches.”¹¹²

Ephrem identified various roles in the worshiping community:

We may plait a great garland. Blessed is He who invited us to plait it! Let the chief pastor [bishop] weave together his homilies like flowers let the priests make a garland of their ministry, the deacons of their reading, strong young men of their jubilant shouts, children of their psalms, chaste women of their songs (madrashe), chief citizens of their benefactions, ordinary folk of their manner of life.

¹⁰⁷ According to Harvey, in addition to madrashe, Ephrem taught various kinds of songs, such as seblatha (songs) and 'ounyatha (antiphons). Ibid., 134.


¹¹¹ Harvey, “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant,” 130.

¹¹² Ibid., 128.
Blessed is He who gave us so many opportunities for good!\textsuperscript{113}

The \textit{madrashe} instructs that each group had its own liturgical position: the bishop’s biblical exegesis permeated the entire liturgy; the priests made their ministry flower; the deacons read their lections; the young men sang their alleluias; the boys chanted their psalms; the virgins sang their \textit{madrashe}; and the rulers and the lay people testified to their achievements and virtues.

The performance of the \textit{Bnat Qyama} in the public liturgy portrayed one of the most prominent liturgical characteristics of early Syriac Christianity. Remarkably, Ephrem composed the \textit{madrashe} for the \textit{Bnat Qyama}, thus making them teach \textit{in public}, which was entirely different from his age’s contemporaries. Even Aphrahat, in the \textit{Demonstrations}, generally supposed limitations on women’s liturgical participation in public.\textsuperscript{114} Although the relationship between the catechetical school and the \textit{Bnat Qyama} is not exactly known, the female choirs shared a didactic role, singing the \textit{madrashe} that were intrinsically catechetical and mystagogical.\textsuperscript{115}


\textsuperscript{115} The titles of \textit{madrashe} indicate instructional contents: Sebastian Brock accounts for the \textit{madrashe}, entitled, On Faith (87 hymns), On Nisibis (77 hymns), Against Heresies (56 hymns), On Virginity (52 hymns), On the Church (52 hymns), On the Nativity (28 hymns), On Paradise (15 hymns), On Lent (10 hymns), and On the Paschal Season (three separate groups, in all 35 hymns). See Brock, \textit{St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise}, 35.
The Rise and Function of the Catechetical School

As Christianity spread out, it confronted different cultures; accordingly, it sought to find a proper way to cultivate people, depending on local contextual issues, thereby developing the catechumenate at various levels.\textsuperscript{116} The catechumenate refers to a basic structure and process related to forming and instructing usually adults preparing for baptism. Those in the catechumenate received catechesis. Thomas Finn notes that catechesis has “its Greek root, \textit{echo}, which gives the early Christians sense of the term: instructions were to be so internalized that they ‘echoed’ not only in one’s mind but in one’s conduct. As a result, the candidates bore the name ‘catechumens,’ designating those under instruction for baptism. Indeed, the whole process of conversion, from enrollment to the threshold of immersion, came to be called the ‘catechumenate.’”\textsuperscript{117} A catechism, however, refers to a popular manual of Christian doctrine; baptismal catechesis refers to the whole instruction concerning baptism inclusive of prebaptismal rites, the rite of baptism itself, and postbaptismal rites.

According to Joseph Jungmann, catechetical instructions for individuals were replaced by those for groups at the very end of the second century, with the result that “there were special catechists and for their continued training catechetical schools were founded.”\textsuperscript{118} Eventually, the catechumenate associated with “mass-conversions” flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{116} Michel Dujarier writes that “it was around the year 180 that what we have come to call the catechumenate was born,” when the catechetical school of Alexandria flourished. See his \textit{A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries} (New York: Sadlier, 1979), 35.

\textsuperscript{117} Finn, \textit{Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate}, 4.


\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 2-3.
The early churches show some degree of commonality in their practices of the catechumenate in that they offered catechetical instructions not in a school system but in the liturgical context, and mainly for adults. Jungmann explains the reason: “at that time Christianity was concerned with propagation, with missionary activity which naturally was directed to adults. In these early days this adult catechesis was identical with the mission sermon.”

Different instructions were needed for the Jews and the Gentiles, as Jungmann points out from the evidence of Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*:

To the Jews the missionaries had to make clear that Christ was the promised Messiah… To the Gentiles, on the contrary, the doctrine of one God and of the futility of polytheism had to be preached and Christian moral law accepted. Thus we find that for them (the Gentiles) a longer preparation was necessary, this also meant a longer term of probation, with prayers and fasting.

The duration and contents of the catechetical instructions varied depending upon contextual issues, as the *First Apology* attests.

**Vestiges of the Catechetical School in the Second Century: Rome and Syria**

The writings of Justin Martyr (100-165) reflect the general situation of the second-century church in Rome, or a Syrian community living in Rome because of his Syrian origins. It is unclear whether Justin established a catechetical school as an institution in any formal sense,

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120 Ibid.

121 Ibid. Jungmann cites Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* chapter 61.

122 E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, rev. and exp. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1960, 1970, 2003), 2. He and his six students were martyred in 165, in Rome. Tatian was also his student, who was the author of the *Diatessaron*—the early Gospel harmony that the Syrian churches used as a principal Gospel text until the fifth century. Ephrem also used the text and wrote a commentary of Tatian’s *Diatessaron*. 
however, Justin and his “school” taught about prayers and fasting in a Christian way, according to his *Apology*, chapter 61:

> Those who are convinced and believe what we say and teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive their past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated. In the name of God, the Father and Lord of all, and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water.\(^{123}\)

Chapter 61 indicates that Justin’s “school” performed prebaptismal catechesis—“what we say and teach is the truth”—together with learning about prayer and fasting in a liturgical context.

The “school” also taught postbaptismal catechesis, associated with the liturgy of “prayers in common” and in the Eucharist:

> After thus baptizing the one who has believed and given his assent, we escort him to the place where are assembled those whom we call brethren, to offer up sincere prayers in common for ourselves, for the baptized person, and for all other persons wherever they may be, in order that, since we have found the truth, we may be deemed fit through our actions to be esteemed as good citizens and observers of the law, and thus attain eternal salvation. At the conclusion of prayers we greet one another with a kiss. Then, bread and chalice containing wine mixing with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren.\(^{124}\)

Possibly this “school” played a great role in providing catechetical instructions in the liturgical context where the catechesis and liturgy were mutually complementary.

Maxwell Johnson states that according to Justin, “baptism is not only for the forgiveness of sins, but it is, primarily, a ritual of ‘new birth’ and/or ‘regeneration’ along the lines of John

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Kilian McDonnell points out that Justin taught the baptism of Jesus as the foundation of baptism for all people, in that Christ was demonstrating the plan of salvation for humanity through his baptism.\(^{125}\)

The *Didache*, the earliest Church-order compiled from Syria, dates from the turn of the first century through the mid-second,\(^ {127}\) and its contents suggest that some local churches practiced baptismal catechesis, although it is unclear whether it was within a formal catechetical institution or not. A prebaptismal catechesis was performed through the “Two Ways”: “Having said all this beforehand, baptize” (7:1). Kurt Niederwimmer claims that the original Jewish didactic document, *On the Two Ways*, served the community as a model catechesis for baptismal candidates,\(^ {128}\) in which the teacher gave the lecture on the moral life, such as love of the enemy, renunciation of violence, almsgiving, a list of prohibitions, rules for life in society, relationship to one’s teachers, and so on.\(^ {129}\) In addition to moral catechesis, it is likely that the baptismal candidates received other instructions, such as prayer and fasting in the liturgical context.\(^ {130}\)

The *Didache* is important because it is the first book recording real practices in the early church. With the written document, the “didachist” might want to keep the meaning and practice of baptismal catechesis, to transmit it to other communities and also to the next generation, and to transmit its theology to ordinary people (not just the intellectual) through baptismal rites.


\(^{128}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{129}\) *Didache*, chapters 1-6.

\(^{130}\) Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, 130.
Catechetical Instructions in the Third-century East and West

The *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus is usually regarded as an early third-century church order that addresses various liturgical rites and ecclesiastical issues in Rome—a Rome that was for Christians a battlefield because of “the gods, their cultic processions, the races, the theater, the gladiatorial extravaganzas, every conceivable vice, even the instruments of the Muse of music.” Thomas Finn claims that the *Apostolic Tradition* led Roman Christians to “survival, subsequent growth, and development,” with a richly articulated catechumenal liturgy. It is unclear whether “Hippolytus” (a single writer and/or multiple redactors) belonged to a catechetical school or not.

Because of the Roman pagan culture that overwhelmed the whole society with a formidable power, a Christian catechumenal process was needed that contained “a rigorous examination for the purpose of determining whether the profession and the way of life of the candidates were compatible with the Christian moral law.” The catechumenate lasted for three years, the duration considered necessary for overcoming the unseen enemy—the real obstacle to conversion. The catechumenate of Rome made maximum use of the practice and symbol of exorcism, used in order to address and overcome the contextual problems abiding in culture, habit, and life’s addictions that were threatening the individual. Even the prebaptismal anointing

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in the church was to exorcize, heal, and strengthen the candidate for combat with Satan; the 
postbaptismal anointing was to emphasize and seal the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the 
church in the Roman pagan culture hardly took up the messianic features embedded in the rite of 
anointing as can be found in the Didascalia Apostolorum.

Compared with Apostolic Tradition, the Didascalia Apostolorum did not emphasize 
exorcism and scrutiny as much. Didascalia Apostolorum advocated a twofold prebaptismal 
anointing (over head and over the whole body). In the strong Jewish context, Didascalia 
Apostolorum developed a messianic interpretation of baptism, quoting Psalm 2:7, “Thou art my 
son: this day have I begotten thee.” According to Gabriel Winkler, the sentence might have been 
told “by the bishop as a formula while he laid his hand upon the head of the baptizandus.”
This messianic imagery pressed the recognition that “Jesus is the Messiah, who is revealed at the 
Jordan through the descent of the Spirit in the appearance of a dove.” The Didascalia 
Apostolorum follows the baptismal process—the prebaptismal catechesis, the prebaptismal 
anointing, baptism with the Trinitarian formula, and the Eucharist. The prebaptismal anointing is 
a significant characteristic of the Syrian baptismal tradition; anointing is understood as the 
symbol of a connection between the Holy Spirit and human beings, made only by God: baptism 
is taught to be not a human construction, but a blessing from God.

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135 Didascalia Apostolorum, chapters 9 and 16. The prebaptismal anointing in the Didascalia Apostolorum is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.


137 Ibid., 36.
The Catechetical School of Fourth-century Nisibis

The focus here is on the catechetical schools of fourth-century Nisibis, and does not fully consider the catechetical schools of Alexandria and Antioch, though they are discussed when appropriate.\(^{138}\) It is known that “a single school, a non-rabbinic Jewish community” translated the Old Testament into Syriac, the *Peshitta*, at the end of the second century; probably some of the community eventually accepted Christianity.\(^{139}\) The school was located somewhere in Syria (probably Edessa); however, it is unclear whether the school became a foundation of the catechetical school of Syriac-speaking Christianity, though it did contribute to the development of Syriac literature and Syriac Christianity. Arthur Vööbus claims that the power of Syriac-speaking Christianity lies in “a certain refinement of spirit” and “a deepening of the spiritual life,”\(^{140}\) which flourished Syriac literature over all other Aramaic literatures.\(^{141}\) The development of spiritual literature, together with an interest in education, was “a marked idiosyncrasy” of Syriac Christianity.\(^{142}\)

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\(^{138}\) The catechetical school of Alexandria is usually known as the first formal institution founded in 195 by Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), whose famous scholar was Origen; the catechetical school of Antioch was another great catechetical school, founded by Lucian of Antioch (d. 312) in the third century, to which Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia belonged. Thomas P. Rausch, *Who is Jesus?: An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 153-154.


\(^{140}\) Arthur Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, CSCO 266, Sub. 26 (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1965), 4. Even though Vööbus develops his study on the history of the school of Nisibis, he does not include the pre-history of the school of Jacob of Nisibis and Ephrem in this book.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 4.
Vööbus states that there is not enough reliable information to support Ephrem as a founder of the school of Edessa, even though Barhadbsabba recorded the tradition.\textsuperscript{143} Despite his assessment, Vööbus admits the fact that Ephrem was a teacher, a \textit{mpashqana}, in the school of Nisibis,\textsuperscript{144} a title which was also given to Theodore of Mopsuestia. Based on the role of Theodore of Mopsuestia in his catechetical school as “the Exegete” or “the Interpreter,” the term \textit{mpashqana} was used to designate the principal teacher of the school. Robert Murray and Sidney Griffith also mention the record of Barhadbsabba, in which Jacob of Nisibis was described as the founder of the catechetical school of Nisibis who appointed Ephrem to the position of \textit{mpashqana} after the Nicene council (325).\textsuperscript{145} Such complexities make it difficult—if not impossible—to prove the historical exactness the origins and foundations of the catechetical school. Thus the emphasis here instead will be on the examination of Ephrem’s role—from Ephrem the catechumen through Ephrem the Exegete, and furthermore, thestructure and content of the catechumenate that seems to have been known in early Syriac-speaking Christianity. This study thus proceeds with caution since the scanty evidence does not fully detail Ephrem’s exact role, except to identify that he was involved in the catechetical school of Nisibis as a \textit{mpashqana}.

Ephrem’s catechetical role and the purpose of the catechetical school of Nisibis were not only just for catechumens, but also for the whole church. From a through reading of the works of Ephrem, especially his \textit{Hymns against Heresies}, one can certainly conclude that Ephrem played a great role as defender of faith. The Syriac \textit{Vita} of Ephrem describes how he countered the

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 8. Barhadbsabba, the seventh-century Nestorian bishop of Halwan, wrote it in his \textit{The Cause of the Founding of the Schools}.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{145} Murray, \textit{Symbols of Church and Kingdom}, 23; and Griffith, \textit{Faith Adoring the Mystery}, 7.
influence of Bar Daisan and Harmonios: “When he observed how much false teaching sought out these melodies, he took arrangements of songs and melodies and added true doctrine to them and offered it to the hearers as an agreeable and fitting antidote.” Ephrem taught his madrashe to the Bnat Qyama, so as to guide the congregation into the orthodox faith.

Furthermore, “his texts were used for the most part by busy churchmen like himself, who had liturgies to celebrate or catechetical classes to teach.” Therefore, his catechetical school was closely associated with the churches of Syria: it catechetically and liturgically served the churches, in retaining orthodox faith and theology and performing liturgical practices. The close relationship between school and church was also reported by Ephrem himself, in the prologue of his Commentary on Genesis:

I had not wanted to write a commentary on the first book of Creation [Genesis], lest we should now repeat what we had set down in the metrical homilies (memre) and hymns (madrashe). Nevertheless, compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things of which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns.

As seen from his prologue, Ephrem and his catechetical school seem to have put a priority on madrashe and memre playing a catechetical role through liturgy; meanwhile, the church of Nisibis confronted the necessity of supplying instructional readings for the congregation and for the increasing number of catechumens.

Under the circumstances, Ephrem and his catechetical school were requested to write commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, and other texts. Therefore, the Sitz im Leben for the

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147 Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 12.

commentaries was catechetical instruction. Robert Murray refers to “Ephrem’s Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, his Interpretation of Exodus, and his commentaries on the Diatessaron and The Apostolos,”¹⁴⁹ as the curriculum used in the fourth century church of Ephrem and thereafter. By writing the commentaries, Ephrem and the catechetical school might have expanded their role of liturgical instruction through madrashe and memre, to catechetical instruction through readings. Here, liturgy and catechesis functioned complementarily in the whole process of church life, especially associated with the baptismal instruction. To examine this complementarity, I take a closer look at the catechumenate in the Syrian church—how Ephrem and his catechetical school cultivated catechumens catechetically and liturgically in preparation for baptism in an ecclesiastical setting.

¹⁴⁹ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 23; here Murray studies the school of Nisibis under Narsai and Hnana.
CHAPTER THREE
THE CATECHUMENATE

This chapter and the following chapters present what may be considered to be the catechetical, mystagogical, and liturgical dimensions of Ephrem’s writings, organized according to each stage of the baptismal process: the catechumenate, pre-baptismal liturgy, baptism, and post-baptismal liturgy. I will trace, first, the catechumenate of early Syriac-speaking Christianity by examining Ephrem’s madrashe and the Syriac Vita tradition as the key sources, and thereby demonstrate the structure, content, and rites of the catechumenate that seemed to be known by Ephrem. The anonymous Syriac Vita tradition is the most important resource for biographical information about Ephrem written in Syriac. I will also look at the Hymns on the Epiphany as a

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1 For definitions of the terms catechumenate, catechumen, catechesis, and catechist, see chapter two.

2 I use Joseph Philip Amar’s translation from his dissertation “The Syriac ‘Vita’ tradition of Ephrem the Syrian” (Ph. D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1988), which has been published under the same title in CSCO 629, Syri 242 (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 2011). Unless otherwise identified, citations from Amar’s work are from the dissertation.

3 Amar, “The Syriac ‘Vita’ tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” iv-vi. The Syriac Vita tradition has been preserved in the three recensions—British Library Manuscript 9384 (BL 9384), Vatican Syriac Manuscript 117 (Vat. 117), and Paris Syriac Manuscript 235 (Par. 235). The three recensions of the Syriac Vita present certain similarities with one another since they presumably originated in a common substratum, though subtle differences exist. The place and time of authorship are unknown; however, Vat. 117 is traditionally dated to the twelfth century, and Par. 235 to the thirteenth century. BL 9384 was completed in 1892. Although a few sentences present Ephrem as a hymnographer and instructor of the Bnat Qyama that sings his madrashe (ibid., 296), a large part of the Syriac Vita represents him as “the figure of a recluse” pursuing solitary asceticism, but does so by anachronistically enumerating an activity that he never practiced under the influence of the Greek historians Palladius, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret who considered Ephrem to be an ascetic monk. The fifth century Greek monasticism recorded in Lausiac History of Palladius (composed around the year 420) influenced the formation and development of the Syriac Vita tradition. Palladius described Ephrem as a monk from the perspective of “the Evagrian-inspired anchoritism of Palestine and Egypt” (ibid., 9). In addition to Palladius, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret influenced in their writings the Greek monastic image of Ephrem, especially since they may have not known the work and life of Ephrem in Nisibis. They erroneously translated ihidaya as a monastic ascetic, a monachos, living in a cell. However, the term ihidaya simply had the meaning of someone who had taken a vow of celibacy, but who did not live in a cell. Kathleen McVey concludes that Ephrem “had never been a monk,” (Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns [New York: Paulist Press, 1989], xi).

4 Although Edmund Beck excludes the hymns from the writings of Ephrem, they contain distinctive Syriac terms—possibly archaic terms—that might have been known to Ephrem and some local churches.
source in that they expose the teaching and context in which the Syrian catechumenate had been brooded.

**Ephrem in the Catechumenate**

I was born in the path of truth,  
even though my childhood was unaware;  
but once I grew aware I acquired it in the furnace.  
The crooked paths that I came across  
did my faith spurn,  
for they led to the position on the left [Matthew 25:33].  
Because I have acknowledged You, Lord, do You acknowledge me;  
have compassion on this sinner who has believed in You,  
for even if he sins, he still knocks at Your door,  
even if he is sluggish, he still travels on Your road.\(^5\)

In *Hymns against Heresies*, Ephrem depicted the catechumenate as the journey of faith in becoming a Christian, where travel along “the path of truth” culminated at the baptismal font, “the furnace.” The furnace is a well-known and common metaphor for the baptismal font in the Syrian tradition,\(^6\) signifying the Holy Spirit. In Ephrem’s writing, the image of the furnace connected with the image of the fire of the Holy Spirit:

That visible fire that triumphed outwardly,  
pointed to the fire of the Holy Ghost,  
which is mingled. Lo! and hidden in the water,  
In the flame baptism is figured,  
in that blaze of the furnace.\(^7\)

As seen with the metaphor, Syrian baptismal theology has been characteristically enriched with

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\(^6\) Sebastian Brock refers to the furnace as a popular metaphor that is connected with the baptismal font in the Syrian baptismal tradition. See ibid., 9; and also Brock’s *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, The Syrian Church Series vol. 9 (Poona: Anita Printers, 1979; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2008), 135.

the various images and symbols of the Holy Spirit. Ephrem taught that Christ came to baptism “in order to mix the invisible Spirit with the visible water.” The Holy Spirit, mingled and hidden in the baptismal water, was mixed furthermore “in the bread and wine, and the baptized themselves.”

Ephrem the Catechumen

In his Nisibene Hymns, Ephrem witnessed to his catechumenal discipline as “terror” in his childhood, “fear” in his youth, and “meekness” in his full age. Ephrem expressed in a similar way that the catechumenate had stages, and it was severely disciplined: “when I rose from the degrees, of childhood and of youth, there passed away the terror that was first, there passed away the fear that was second, He gave me a kind pastor. Lo! For my full ages his food, for my wisdom his interpretations, for my peace his meekness, for my repose his kindness, for my chastity his gravity!”

This hymn implies two features of the Syrian catechumenate: steps or stages in the catechumenate and adult baptism. Ephrem entered the catechumenate as a young catechumen.

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8 Homily on Our Lord, 55; translation taken from Brock in The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition, 8.

9 Ibid.

10 Ephrem expressed in a similar way that the catechumenate had stages, and it was severely disciplined: “when I rose from the degrees, of childhood and of youth, there passed away the terror that was first, there passed away the fear that was second, He gave me a kind pastor. Lo! For my full ages his food, for my wisdom his interpretations, for my peace his meekness, for my repose his kindness, for my chastity his gravity!” (Nisibene Hymns XVI. 19-20; translation of the “Nisibene Hymns” by J. T. Sarsfield Stopford, in Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 4th ed., A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 186.


12 The steps in the catechumenate are discussed later in this chapter.

13 Thomas Finn remarks that the early Syriac tradition did not address infant baptism at all: “[A]dult baptism is the norm, and the baptismal rites embrace those brought up in Christian as well as pagan homes (so Aphrahat and Ephrem).” In Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 115.
June-Ann Greeley states that Ephrem as “a youthful catechumen” had been rigorously disciplined in the catechumenate of the church of Nisibis. After the death in 305 of Diocletian who had persecuted the church, the church of Nisibis in 309 installed Jacob as bishop, and tried to reestablish the Christian community more firmly. As a result, Ephrem’s childhood, youth, and even his early thirties fell within the episcopacy of St. Jacob (308-338). Ephrem wrote in his madrashe, “[I]n the forwardness of the degree of childhood, my instructor was a fear to me; his rod restrained me from wantonness, and from mischief the terror of him, and from indulgence the fear of him.” Even though we do not know if the feared educator was indeed Bishop Jacob, the relationship between a catechumen and the catechist must have been like a spiritual father and son. Ephrem perceived the instructors as “fathers, helps, medicines, and adornments,” saying, “Thou should rebuke us as though we were children!”

Another testimony comes from Ephrem’s Hymns on Virginity:

Your truth [was] in my youth; Your truth [is] in my old age.
I rejected and expelled the party of the crucifiers;
I scorned graven images and the metal of strangers
and the new fraud that would be contrived to deceive us.

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15 Ibid.

16 Nisibene Hymns XVI:17; translation taken from Stopford in Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat, 186. Arthur Vööbus makes this translation in History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient, vol. 3 (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1988), 27: “In all the exuberance (of life) at the level of childhood, I had a feared educator; his rod held me back from play and his warnings from sin and his threat from softness.”

17 Nisibine Hymns, XVI: 21-22; translation taken from Stopford in Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat, 186.

18 Hymns on Virginity 37:10; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 10.
Moreover, in his *Hymns against Heresies*, Ephrem professed his learning as a young catechumen (prebaptismal catechesis) and the baptismal practice (in the name of the Trinity):

- I was taught and believed in You
- Who are the only One.
- Through Your being I heard and held You as true,
- You Who are Father through your Only-begotten (*Ihidaya*).
- I was three times baptized,
- also in the name of the Holy Spirit.
- I learned that it is all true,
- that Your treasure remains impossible to investigate
- although Your wealth is widespread.\(^{19}\)

Based on his *madrashe*, it is certain that Ephrem had been placed in the catechumenate as a catechumen in the church of Nisibis (under bishop of Jacob of Nisibis), and then he had been baptized.

The life of Ephrem is portrayed in the three recensions of the Syriac *Vita* tradition (Vat. 117, Par. 235, and BL 9384), two of which describe the process of how Ephrem was placed in the catechumenate:\(^{20}\)

- And he (St. Jacob) placed him (Ephrem) in the catechumenate (*taksa d’mettar[†]yana*)
  - established in the church, and he was […] discerning and […] meek. And he advanced daily before him, and was faithful to fasting and prayer and great diligence […]. Every day he would go with the catechumens (*shamu‘e*) and those under instruction

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\(^{20}\) Amar translated and compared the three extant Syriac *Vita* traditions found in British Library Manuscript 9384 (BL 9384), Vatican Syriac Manuscript 117 (Vat. 117), and Paris Syriac Manuscript 235 (Par. 235). The three recensions of the Syriac *Vita* provide very similar information about Ephrem’s biography. They were “dependent upon a wide variety of reports that purport to preserve authentic biographical information about Ephrem” (“The Syriac ‘Vita’ Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” v). The *Vita* traditions “do not pass critical scrutiny; they contain numerous anachronisms, and betray no appreciation for the development of asceticism in the Syrian east” (ibid., 30). For example, unlike Sebastian Brock and Robert Murray who argue that Ephrem was born in a Christian family, the *Vita* traditions record that his father was a pagan priest, and his mother was a Christian from Amid: “His Father was from the city of Nisibis borders, which was under Roman authority. The holy one’s mother was from the city of Amid. The father of the holy one was a priest in Nisibis, and ministered to a certain idol whose name was Abnil” (ibid., 197).
(mettart[yana]) to hear the holy scriptures read in church (Vat. 117).21

And when blessed Ephrem came before him (St. Jacob), he informed him of his entire situation. He took great joy in him, and received him lovingly, and placed him in the catechumenate (taksa d’ shamu’ e). And the youth advanced daily before him, always fasting and praying and regularly going with the catechumens (shamu’ e) to hear the holy scripture (Par. 235).22

Vat. 117 and Par. 235, while telling of Ephrem’s placement in the catechumenate, also imply the ecclesiastical structure, contents, and rites of the catechumenate. BL 9384 mentions only that Ephrem was under instruction, stating that “there arose a persecution in the church of Christ [Nisibis], so he left there and came to the city of Amid.”23 It does, however, indicate Ephrem’s postbaptismal catechesis: “he received baptism there when he was eighteen years old. And he began to learn the psalms and the praises of the Holy Spirit from the one who baptized him.”24

According to the Syriac Vita tradition, the Syrian catechumenate employed daily instruction, catechizing “the hearers” with scripture reading (scriptural formation) and fasting and prayer (ritual formation), as well as moral teachings. The Syrian Vita tradition refers to Ephrem’s baptism, probably after completion of the catechumenate,25 received in Garbaya at the age of eighteen (or, according to Vat. 117, at the age of twenty eight).26 Then he entered the

21 Ibid., 204. Here Amar also translated “catechumenate” from taksa d’ mettartyana, literally meaning “the liturgical order of those who are under instruction before baptism.”

22 Ibid., 203. Amar translated “catechumenate” from taksa d’ shamu’ e in Syriac, which literally means “the liturgical order of the hearers.”

23 Ibid., 227.

24 Ibid., 202.

25 Neither Didache nor the First Apology of Justin Martyr mention the length of the catechumenate. The Apostolic Tradition identifies a three-year catechumenate for the formation of candidates.

26 Amar, “The Syriac ‘Vita’ Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” 202, 226. “The youth (Ephrem) was elated, and set out from there for a place called Garbaya, and he received baptism there when he was eighteen years old” (BL 9384); “Then he left there and came to a place called Beth Garbaya, and there received holy baptism when he
ascetic community, the Bnay Qyama (Sons of Covenant), “living a life of asceticism, continence, and strict piety.”

“He [Ephrem] was beloved by the true pastor of Christ, Mar (St.) Jacob, as well as by all the people… He was living a life of asceticism and continence and strict piety. And holy Mar Ephrem was constantly imitating the ways of the holy pastor, and was a student in the pastor’s residence.”

According to Josef Jungmann, the meaning of becoming a Christian in the early churches was “compatible to entering some strict Order at the present time.” The emphasis on the ascetic life in early Syriac Christianity caused the deferral of baptism, and so the churches had to respond to the increasing number of catechumens. In order to teach them authentic faith and doctrine, the churches had to perform the task of catechetical mission. Ephrem and his school were requested to write catechetical materials, thus producing “a long list of biblical commentaries, metrically constructed sermons, doctrinal, moral, and commemorative hymns, as well as more prosaic texts in heresiography and devotional writing.”

Hence, the traditions of the

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30 Ibid., 248. Jungmann suggested one of the reasons for the delayed baptism in the West: “For one thing, the catechumen was still free from many of the obligations imposed on the baptized and did not have to live as strict a life. Baptism was still ahead, and with it the possibility of obtaining the remission of sins without undergoing the terrible conditions associated with ecclesiastical penance” (ibid.).

31 As seen previously in chapter 2, the church asked Ephrem and the catechetical school to make commentaries on Genesis and Exodus.

Syriac-speaking churches always remember St. Ephrem as the “Teacher (malpānā)”; he called himself “pastoral minister/herdsman” (allānā); the church of Nisibis appointed him as “The Exegete” (mpashqana).  

Ephrem the “Exegete”

Robert Murray strove to bring to light information on the first Christian school in Nisibis when examining *The Cause of the Founding of the Schools* written by the early seventh century Nestorian bishop of Halwan, Barhadbsabba. Murray writes:

The first Christian school properly so called in our area seems to have been at Nisibis. Barhadbsabba (“Sunday’s Child”), Bishop of Holwan (to the north of Seleucia-Ctesiphon) … tells how Bishop Jacob of Nisibis founded the school in his city and appointed Mar Ephrem Exegete (mpashqana) there; on the fall of Nisibis Ephrem moved to Edessa, opened a school there and had many disciples.  

According to the document, Bishop Jacob appointed Ephrem as “Exegete” (mpāshqānā), the chief theologian, after attending the Council of Nicea in 325. Athanasius was also appointed to

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33 Ibid.  
34 *Hymns against Heresies* 56:6, 10-11; in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses*. CSCO 169, Syr. 76 (Louvain: Peeters, 1957), 211-212. For Ephrem, Christ is “the Good Shepherd,” or “Shepherd” (rā’yā); a pastor is an “under-Shepherd” (allānā) (Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 187). The term allānā may also be defined as “pastor” or “disciple” (J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999], 415), or “deacon” (Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 191).  
35 This has been given to Ephrem and Theodore of Mopsuestia.  
36 Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 23.  
37 This word is also translated as “Interpreter,” meaning the chief teacher in the school. Murray reports, “when the title is used without name in East-Syriac tradition, it means Theodore of Mopsuestia” (ibid.).  
38 St. Jacob was one of the 318 persons who attended the Nicene Council; see Sebastian Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 9. The *Vita* indicates that St. Jacob accompanied Ephrem to the Nicene Council; see Amar, “The Syriac ‘Vita’ Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian,” 214.
the position in the school of Alexandria after the council of Nicea.\(^{39}\) According to Barhadbsabba, after moving to Edessa, Ephrem founded the school of Edessa and had many disciples.\(^{40}\) However, as noted previously, Arthur Vööbus doubts Ephrem’s foundation of the school of Edessa.\(^{41}\) Unlike Vööbus, Georges Florovsky claims that Ephrem founded the school and taught biblical studies there, and that probably Lucian and Eusebius of Emesa were his pupils.\(^{42}\)

The Syriac \textit{Vita} tradition also speaks of Ephrem’s role of leading the choirs of women, the \textit{Bnat Qyama}:

\begin{quote}
When he observed how much false teaching sought out these melodies, he took arrangements of songs and melodies (\textit{madrashe}) and added true doctrine to them and offered it to the hearers as an agreeable and fitting antidote…He initiated instruction for them (the daughters of the covenant \textit{Bnat Qyama}) and taught them doctrinal hymns.\(^{43}\)
\end{quote}

In the Syriac \textit{Vita} tradition, the term “hearers” signifies the catechumens in his church, so that it reveals that Ephrem catechized with his \textit{madrashe} the catechumens as well as the \textit{Bnat Qyama}. When his \textit{madrashe} were used in liturgy, they could also function as catechetical instruction for the whole congregation. As a result, the catechetical instruction through his \textit{madrashe} and \textit{memre} not only taught the congregation, but also animated worship, thus shaping the faith.

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\(^{39}\) Sidney Griffith, \textit{Faith Adoring the Mystery: Reading the Bible with St. Ephrem the Syrian} (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), 7.
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\(^{40}\) Murray, \textit{Symbols of Church and Kingdom}, 23. Here Barhadbsabba also told how Narsai (probably 399-502) moved the school back to Nisibis.
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\(^{41}\) As mentioned previously, Vööbus questions the statement of Barhadbsabba, doubting that Ephrem founded the school of Edessa. Arthur Vööbus, \textit{History of the School of Nisibis}. CSCO 266, Sub. 26 (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1965), 8.
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community’s worship as well as the community in faith. Sidney Griffith claims that most of Ephrem’s writings were used for liturgical, catechetical, or memorial purposes.\footnote{Griffith, \textit{Faith Adoring the Mystery}, 10-11.}

He did not write primarily tracts for scholars or meditation pieces for monks, or even literary homilies intended for circulation among the theological trend-setters. His texts were used for the most part by busy churchmen like himself, who had liturgies to celebrate or catechetical classes to teach.\footnote{Ibid., 12.}

Even though the Syriac \textit{Vita} tradition does not mention Ephrem as the Exegete \textit{(mpāshqānā)},\footnote{Murray, \textit{Symbols of Church and Kingdom}, 23. Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) was also called by the name “Exegete” \textit{(mpāshqānā)}.} he must have played a role as a hymnodist and catechist to nourish and catechize the church. He served the church, together with four bishops of Nisibis—St. Jacob (308-338), Babu (338-350), Vologeses (350-361), and Abraham (361 -?)—and the bishop of Edessa, Barsai (361-378).\footnote{Thomas Finn, \textit{Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria}, 151.} Ephrem opened a school of Edessa, where his commentaries were used until Theodore of Mopsuestia’s were translated into Syriac.\footnote{Besides Ephrem, Theodore of Mopsuestia was the most famous person in Syriac Christianity, who had the title of the “Exegete” (or the “Interpreter”). Kathleen McVey, ed., \textit{St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works}, trans. Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 22.} In this regard, Griffith introduces Ephrem as “a bishop’s man,” serving the churches of Nisibis and Edessa, and as a “deacon who was also a teacher, a poet, who was also one of the most insightful exegete of the Bible in the fourth century.”\footnote{Griffith, \textit{Faith Adoring the Mystery}, 3.}

Ephrem’s abiding concern was to keep his Christian community from the influence of the
various heresies—Marcion, Bar Daisan, and Mani. Hymn 56 from *Hymns against the Heresies* demonstrates Ephrem’s vocational resolution:

O Lord, may the works of your pastoral minister/herdsman (‘allānā) not be discounted/defrauded. I will not then have troubled your sheep, but as far as I was able, I will have kept the wolves away from them, and I will have built, as far as I was capable, Enclosures of “teaching songs”/hymns (madrashe) for the lambs of your flock.

I will have made a disciple (talmida) of the simple and unlearned man. And I will have made him hold onto the pastoral ministers’ (‘allānē) staff, the healer’s medicine, and the disputant’s arsenal.  

As seen in this hymn, Ephrem, calling himself “your pastoral minister/herdsman” (‘allānā), goaded his “lambs” with the rod of madrashe, and through hymnic instructions kept his “lambs” from the “wolves.” This image came from Ephrem’s “pastoral symbolism,” in which Christ is addressed as “Good Shepherd” or “Chief Shepherd” (raya or rab rawata), pastors or clergy as “under-shepherd” (allānā), the congregation as “flock” (dayra), and the monastery as “dwelling sheepfold” (tiyara). Therefore, Ephrem praised and acclaimed with the refrain, “Blessed be the

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52 According to the *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, its literal meaning is: “a) pastor, esp. a chief pastor of the Church, bishop, pontiff, prelate; b) a disciple” (p. 415). Griffith translates ‘allānā as “pastoral minister” in *Faith Adoring the Mystery* and “herdsman” in his article posted at [http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/ld/Ephraem.htm](http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/ld/Ephraem.htm).

Shepherd, who became the Lamb for our atonement!"^54

According to the tradition of Syriac-speaking Christianity, Syriac homilists and hymn writers played a great role both in liturgy and in pedagogy:

Syriac Christianity has always placed enormous weight on the instructional role of the liturgy—on the liturgy as the primary teaching context of the church. Two areas of the liturgy were explicitly utilized for this purpose: homilies (mimre) and hymns (madrashe)… One of the favorite types of teaching employed by Syriac homilists and hymn writers was the presentation of biblical stories in imaginatively elaborated form, starting from the base of a biblical text and re-telling the story through the eyes—and especially through the imagined words—of its characters. The rhetorical technique of imagined speech, sometimes in the form of soliloquies and sometimes in dialogue with other biblical characters, was an often used and brilliantly engaged aspect of Syriac homiletic and hymnographic instruction.^55

Standing in this tradition, Ephrem also taught his congregation, especially with his madrashe.

However, his teaching style and attitudes were not like an academic discourse; he never scrutinized God through the lens of human knowledge. Rather, he suggested:

Let us not allow ourselves to go astray
and to study our God.
Let us take the measure of our mind,
and gauge the range of our thinking.
Let us know how small our knowledge is,
too contemptible to scrutinize the Knower of All.^56

Ephrem perceived a great chasm between God and the creature, stating that Jesus is “the hidden bridge,” through which human language could reach the truth and eventually God:

O Jesus, glorious name,
hidden bridge which carries one over
from death to life,
I have come to a stop with you;

^54 Hymns on the Nativity 3:15; translation in Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 167.


^56 Hymns on Faith 15:3; translated by Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 22.
I finish your letter yodh.
Be a bridge for my words
to cross over to your truth.
Make your love a bridge for your servant.
By means of you I shall cross over to your Father.
I will cross over and say, “Blessed is the One
who has made his might tender in his offspring.”

In Ephrem’s madrashe, Jesus “the hidden bridge” leads us to God, thus to participate in His love.

Through singing in the liturgy, Christians praise the Lord, which is their principal Christian task:

In the heavenly host sent for praise,
in the glorious age appointed (signed with oil) for salvation,
and in the blessed day preserved for rejoicings,
I have been made a partaker in love by Him—even, I, and I have burst into song.
With pure hymns I shall sing hallelujahs to Him,
and with a holy melody I shall sing to Him;
this child who saved us I shall praise.

Therefore, Jacob of Serugh admired Ephrem as “a marvelous rhetor, who surpassed the Greeks
in declamation; who could include a thousand subjects in a single speech.” Murray, in a similar
vein, appraises Ephrem as “the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only
theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”

Didactic Offices in the Catechumenate

Although Ephrem called himself an allana, he did not explicitly identify other teaching

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58 Hymns on the Nativity 2:1; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 75-76.
59 Translated by Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 6.
60 Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 31.
roles. The contents of some of the *Hymns on the Epiphany*, however, do provide information about such didactic or teaching offices—the *sāiūmā* (ܐܫܘܡܐ), the *dārūshā* (ܕܪܘ), and the *cānā* (ܩܢܐ):

To the speaker [the liturgical reader] (*sāiūmā*) who has toiled in words,  
be reconciliation in rest!  
To the [verbal/oral] instructor (*dārūshā*) who has toiled with voice,  
be forgiveness through grace!  
To the priest (*cānā*) who has toiled in baptizing,  
let there come the crown of righteousness.\(^6^2\)

The hymns were supposed to be sung at the feast of the Epiphany, on which day the Syrian church practiced enrollment for baptism as attested by both the *Hymns on the Epiphany* and the *Hymns on the Nativity*.\(^6^3\) Therefore, the hymns reflect the baptismal context, and are deeply related to the catechumenate. The church integrated baptismal catechesis into the hymns, thus instructing the catechumens during the liturgy. Even though the *Hymns on the Epiphany* are attributed to Ephrem, it is uncertain whether Ephrem was aware of the didactic offices.\(^6^4\)

However, the hymns show that the Syrian church perceived and possibly practiced the catechumenate organized with the articulated didactic offices. These hymns therefore reflect the


\(^{63}\) *Hymns on the Epiphany* 2:1-2 and *Hymns on the Nativity* 18:1-2 describe the enrollment of baptism on the day of Epiphany.

\(^{64}\) Even though Ephrem and his church might not know the didactic offices, his pastoral staff or catechists possibly devoted themselves to liturgical reading, elementary instruction, or ritual training. Edmund Beck was not certain of the genuineness of the *Hymns on the Epiphany*. Nevertheless, the hymns have been quoted as the baptismal teaching of the Syrian Church by Leonel L. Mitchell, who states, “We shall therefore content ourselves with looking at the explanations of baptism given in the *Hymns on the Epiphany*, without entering into the question of their authenticity, since it is precisely the teaching of the Syrian Church with which we are concerned” (“Four Fathers on Baptism,” 44).
baptismal context, as well as the three didactic offices—the speaker for liturgical reading, the verbal/oral instructor of the Scriptures, and the priest for ritual formation.

Sāiūmā (סַיּומָה): Speaker for Liturgical Reading

Because the definition of sāiūmā varies, the role of the office is unclear to modern scholars. According to the description in the Hymns on the Epiphany, sāiūmā may signify the person who reads sacred words (melle in Syriac) or speaks the liturgical readings. Gerard A. M. Rouwhorst provides a plausible argument for understanding a sāiūmā as a speaker for liturgical reading. He exposes the function of the bema in the second and third century synagogue as the location where the scriptures, namely the Torah and the prophets, were read and interpreted. Rouwhorst observes that the bema appears in Ephrem’s Memra on Nicomedia, where Ephrem attests that the bema was located “in the middle” of the church so that “the congregation flocks together.” This was where “the liturgy of the Word was celebrated, i.e. where the sermon was held, and psalms were sung.” Therefore, one could possibly assume that on the platform, the bema, Ephrem’s madrashe were sung, the sermon was proclaimed, and the liturgical reading was spoken out by the sāiūmā.

Justin Martyr witnessed to the office of reading the Word of God in liturgy:

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65 A Compendious Syriac Dictionary (p. 374) gives this definition: “a) an author, writer; b) one who ordains, consecrates; c) a founder; d) a legislator, an umpire; e) a depositor, owner of goods deposited; f) gram. Positive, affirmative, an affirmative proposition; hypothetical, a hypothesis.”

66 Gerard. A. M. Rouwhorst, “Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity,” Vigiliae Christianae 51 (1997): 72-93. All the synagogues did not have the bema, as Rouwhorst presented examples of synagogues without traces of a bema.

67 Ibid. 75.

68 Based on these sources, Rouwhorst concluded that “the entire first part of the Eucharist—including sermon and the psalms—was celebrated on the bema.” Ibid.
And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.\textsuperscript{69}

The liturgical reader or speaker taught the people by reading the sacred words; the reader is described as one “who has toiled in words.”\textsuperscript{70} Justin Martyr’s witness to the office of reading of “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets” may be viewed as the role of śāiūmā. Justin’s description of the role of the president, who “verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things,”\textsuperscript{71} was similar to the role taken by the Syrian dārūshā.

\textit{Dārūshā (.drawRect弧)): Verbal/Oral Instructor of the Scriptures}

Although a dārūshā may be defined as “a debater, disputant, dialectician, or controversialist,”\textsuperscript{72} it seems the dārūshā may also have functioned as an instructor or teacher who verbally taught the scriptures (hence the translation as a [verbal/oral] instructor of the scriptures).\textsuperscript{73} It is interesting that the terms sāiūmā and dārūshā (sāiūme and dārūshe, in plural) appear together in the \textit{Hymns on the Epiphany}:

\begin{quote}
From the speakers and the instructors (sāiūme wa-dārūshe) from the hearers and the signed\textsuperscript{74}

Let glory go up to Christ, and through Him to His Father be exaltation!
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{70} The word \textit{melle} in Syriac signifies the sacred Words or Torah.

\textsuperscript{71} Justin Martyr, \textit{First Apology}, chapter 67.

\textsuperscript{72} Smith, \textit{A Compendious Syriac Dictionary}, 97.

\textsuperscript{73} Hereafter, “instructor” for dārūshā is my translation.

\textsuperscript{74} The hearers and the signed often appear together, comprising the catechumens (the beginners and the advanced).
He who gives words to speakers (sāiūme), and
gives voice to the preachers (dārūshe)
have given understanding to the hearers, and consecrates oil to the signed.75

Hypothetically, the speaker and the instructor (sāīūmā and dārūshā) existed together as two
categories of catechists; the “hearers” and the “signed”76 appear together as categories of
catechumen, thus constituting different catechumenal units.

When it comes to the similarity of the term dārūshā to darshan in Hebrew,77 a dārūshā
can be viewed as a teacher of Torah, following the scriptural reading. Presumably, the role of
the dārūshā seems to be a teacher, interpreting the scripture and instructing “verbally” the
scriptures. Thus the hymn illustrates dārūshā as a person “who has toiled with voice.” Another
usage of dārūshā comes from Ephrem’s Sermons on Faith. Paradoxically, he asserts that even if
the dārūshā abandons the Lord and misleads the catechumens (“the hearers”), they should not be
disturbed because of the help of the Scriptures themselves:

O learner, you must not fall sick if the instructor (dārūshā) goes astray.
If he has departed from your Lord, come, consider the Scriptures.

Because, where the instructor (dārūshe, plural of dārūshā) has turned aside, the
discerning have not been ensnared,
and where the teachers (Rabbi) have erred, the hearers have not been disturbed.78

Ephrem recognized that the instructor’s false teaching or interpretation might have led his
congregation into a false faith. Ephrem warned the catechumens not to be led into the wrong way,

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76 This will be examined in the next section that addresses catechumenal groups in the structure of the catechumenate.

77 In the Jewish synagogue, the darusan might preach following the reading of scriptures.

but to protect themselves with the help of the scriptures, since “the proclamation of the Truth depends on the Word of God,” but not on the verbal teaching of a dārūshā.

*Cānā (骖馬): Priest for Ritual Formation*

In the Syrian baptismal tradition, the role of priest significantly took place in the rites of the catechumenate, thus allowing for a ritual formation. Catechesis and liturgy are mutually complementary in the catechumenate because the priest (cānā) is enlisted along with the sāiūmā and the dārūshā as catechetical instructors. The role of priest (cānā) was certainly related to the baptismal liturgy, as on of the *Hymns on the Epiphany* indicates:

Lo! The priest (cānā) in the figure of Moses cleanses the defilements of soul  
By means of oil, lo! he [priest(cānā)] signs the new lambs of the kingdom.

Samuel anointed David to be king among the people  
But lo! the priest(cānā) anoints you to be heirs in the Kingdom.  

Every catechetical moment depends on spiritual formation through proclaiming, teaching, and worshipping. The didactic office of the priest played a crucial role in all the rites of the catechumenate, from participating in the rites of inquiry in the stage of the hearers, signing in the stage of the signed, to writing down the names of baptismal candidates. The priest had a role in catechizing, fasting, anointing, and baptizing.

These three categories of didactic offices represent three types of catechumenal formation:  
sāiūmā: speaker of liturgical reading (spiritual formation); dārūshā: instructor of the Scriptures (scriptural formation); cānā: priest (ritual formation). Through reading/hearing, teaching, and

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ritualizing in worship, the Syrian catechumenate provided faith formation of the catechumens in an elaborately articulated catechetical system, namely, by the “clericalization of teachers.” The early church’s clericalization of teachers appeared in Justin Martyr, whose church had the reader of the scripture, the verbal instructor, and the priest. Murray has identified in the seventh century Syrian Christian schools of Narsai and Hnana three didactic offices: an instructor in liturgical reading, an elementary reading master, and teacher of secular subjects. In addition to the teaching groups, there might have been learning groups in the catechetical school, making the Syrian catechumenate more systematic and liturgical within an ecclesiastical setting.

Three Liturgical Orders in the Catechumenate

Although Ephrem did not explicitly refer to the names of each catechumenal grouping, he implied that there were distinct stages in the catechumenate when he wrote: “I was born in the path of truth, even though my childhood was unaware; but once I grew aware I acquired it in the furnace”; “By measure He made my steps advance to my childhood…to my youth…to my age

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81 “Apostolic Constitutions refers specifically to ‘deacons’ presenting the newcomers ‘to the bishop or to the presbyters’; the Canons of Hippolytus notes that the newcomers are to be ‘instructed by the deacon’; and the Testamentum Domini later states that the bishop is the one who will provide the instruction. This clericalization of the ‘teacher’ reflects the fourth-century context of these documents, in which such a tendency was increasing, and should not be read back into an earlier period, even though Apostolic Tradition 39 also refers to deacons teaching in the assembly, as that section of the church order probably belongs to a fourth-century stratum” (Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, eds., The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002], 84). For more detail, see Paul F. Bradshaw, Liturgical Presidency in the Early Church (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove, 1983), 15-20.

82 Justin Martyr, 1 Apology, chapter 67.

83 Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 23.

84 Hymn against the Heresies XXVI; translated by Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 9.
of wisdom”;85 and, “I was taught and believed in You…through Your being I heard (probably as a member of the hearers and then the signed).”86 Possibly he knew the categories according to the degree to which someone enters the catechumenate.

However, the sixth hymn of the *Hymns on the Epiphany* explicitly mentions three divided catechumenal groups: the hearers (*shamuʿe*), the signed (*rshime*), and the baptizands (*ʿamide*):87

> From every mouth with one consent of those beneath and those above Watchers, Cherubim, Seraphim; The baptizands (*ʿamide*), the signed (*rshime*), and the hearers (*shamuʿe*) Let each us cry aloud and say, “Glory to the Lord of our feasts!”88

This section looks at the features of the groups, how Ephrem understood and described or implied the catechumenal structure and contents in his *madrashe*, and how the three groups that the hymn designates functioned characteristically, as the liturgical order or ecclesiastical order in the catechumenate of the Syrian church, by studying and comparing the rites and contents in each stage.

In some texts, two catechumenal groups appear,89 “those remotely preparing for baptism”

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87 Compare with my translation of “the hearers, the signed, and the baptizands.” A. Edward Johnston translated them into “the hearers, the sealed, and the baptized,” in his translation of “Fifteen Hymns: For the Feast of the Epiphany,” 274.

88 *Hymns on the Epiphany* VI: 20; translation from Johnston,“Fifteen Hymns: For the Feast of the Epiphany,” 274.

89 The Syriac *Vita* tradition identified two catechumenal groups as *shamuʿe* (the hearers) and *mettar[yana]* (those under instruction). However, the documents were not written in Ephrem’s times. The sources that appeared in
and “those proximately preparing for baptism.” Membership in the group depended upon the extent to which catechumens had been entered and prepared for their baptism. For instance, Origen’s statement in his *Contra Celsum* insinuated the existence of two groups with the names of “one class” and “another class.” Eusebius identified the “catechumen” and those “under instruction for baptism,” while Chrysostom understood the groups as “uninitiated” (ἀμύητοι) and “those about to be initiated” (οἱ μέλλοντες μυσταγωγεῖσθαι).

However, Ephrem’s *Hymns on the Epiphany* inform us of the three categorized classes of the Syriac *Vita* tradition were compiled later—Vat. 117 was dated to the twelfth century; Par. 235 was dated to the thirteenth century—and thus might possibly reflect the later time’s baptismal terminology. However, the catechumenate had been in decline since sixth century. Even a liturgical book written sometime between the sixth and eighth centuries, the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, did not say anything about the making of catechumens. This might be because the shift to a normative infant baptism was already occurring. See Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1974), 55.


91 “But as far as they can, Christians previously examine the souls of those who want to hear them, and test them individually beforehand; when before entering the community the hearers seem to have devoted themselves sufficiently to the desire to live a good life, then they introduce them. They privately appoint one class consisting of recent beginners who are receiving elementary instruction and have not yet received the sign that they have been purified, and another class of those who, as far as they are able, make it their set purpose to desire nothing other than those things of which Christians approve. Among the latter class some are appointed to inquire into the lives and conduct of those who want to join the community in order that they may prevent those who indulge in trickery from coming to their common gathering; those who do not do this they whole-heartedly receive, and make them better every day” (Origen, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans., intro. and notes Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 225. The emphases in italics are my addition.

92 Eusebius presented in his *Ecclesiastical History* a “catechumen” (κατηχούμενος) in the beginning class, and those “under instruction for baptism” (κατηχουμένη τοῦ βάπτισμα) to prepare their baptism in the advanced class. See Eusebius, *Eusebius Bishop of Caesarea, The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans., intro. and notes Hugh Jackson Lawlor and John Ernest Leonard Oulton (London: SPCK, 1954), 181. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI:4 “κατηχούμενος” and “κατηχουμένη τοῦ βάπτισμα” (emphases added): “And, after Plutarch, Serenus was the second of Origen’s pupils to show himself a martyr… Heraclides was the third martyr, and after him Hero, the fourth; the former of these was still a catechumen (κατηχούμενος), the latter lately baptized… And among the women, Herais, who was still under instruction for baptism (κατηχουμένη τοῦ βάπτισμα), as Origen himself says somewhere, received the baptism by fire, and so ended her life” (ibid.).

93 Thomas Finn, *The Liturgy of Baptism in the Baptismal Instructions of St. John Chrysostom*, 32-33. In fact, Chrysostom had used various terms to mean the second class, however, this term, “those about to be initiated,” had been most frequently used. However, Finn explained the second term mentioned as “the baptizands.”
catechumens—and it is a threefold grouping that the Roman Catholic Church has recovered in the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), which are designated as inquirers, catechumens, and the elect.\(^94\)

The Hearers: *Taksa d’Shamu’e* (ܬܵܣܕ’ܫܡܥుܐ)

The term “the hearers,” which seems to have originated from “a common substratum” (to hear),\(^95\) has been the most commonly used formulation to refer to catechumens. As seen above, Origen, *Apostolic Tradition*, and Syriac documents (the *Vita* tradition and Ephrem’s *madrashe*) indicate its baptismal usage for catechumens. Significantly, the Syriac *Vita* tradition reveals its ecclesiastical character in the structure of church—*Taksa d’Shamu’e*, signifying, “ecclesiastical or liturgical order in church of the Hearers.”\(^96\) Therefore, the Hearers (*shamu’e*, derived from the verb *šܚܡܥ* ‘*aܥ, “to hear”’) represented those who first entered the church and were placed in the preliminary stage in the Syrian catechumenate.\(^97\) As seen in the definition, their main catechetical instructions were inextricably linked to *hearing* the Word of God. What the contents of the catechesis was like in this stage, as well as in the other stages, we may assume from Ephrem’s *madrashe, memre*, and exegetical *Commentaries on Genesis, Exodus*, and the *Diatessaron*.


\(^96\) Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 173; *taksa* means ecclesiastically “liturgical order, an office, rite, ritual, liturgy.”

\(^97\) As mentioned above, the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults places this period of “the inquiry” into the “Precatechumenate.”
From the beginning period to the advanced stages in the catechumenate, catechesis and liturgy play a great role together. Aidan Kavanagh speaks of a “ritualization of catechesis”: 98

Catechumens were signed with the cross, and baptism was seen to begin in this. Catechumens were fed the sacrament of salt, and the Eucharist was seen to begin in this. Catechumens, it seems, were even taught doctrine out of Scripture homiletically in an event that was much like a service of the word which concluded with prayer, hand-laying, and dismissal. 99

By narrating the general characteristic of the catechumenate in the early church, Kavanagh recapitulates the essential feature of the ritualization of catechesis, noting that “catechesis was intrinsically sacramental from beginning to end.” 100 Certainly, in the Syrian catechumenate, these rituals took place, although it is unclear whether the feeding of the catechumenal salt was practiced or not, and each order was accompanied by each rite of the catechumenate. For instance, the hearers were admitted by the rite of inquiry, the signed by the rite of signing of the cross, and baptizands by the rite of writing down names.

The Rite of Inquiry

When the hearers were accepted into the local church, the rite of inquiry welcomed them yet also raised serious questions regarding their status of life—similar to what Ephrem experienced when he was first placed in the catechumenate. 101 Although the Syriac Vita tradition did not say that there was a detailed ritual processing when they entered the church, it did reveal

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99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 The *Vita* tradition holds that St. Jacob of Nisibis welcomed Ephrem and made an inquiry on his situation. See the note in the section of Ephrem the catechumen.
that a public scrutiny proceeded in the solemn presence of bishop. As quoted earlier, Ephrem came before St. Jacob, bishop of the church of Nisibis, who questioned Ephrem about his entire situation.\textsuperscript{102}

Similarly, the \textit{Apostolic Constitutions}, written in Syria (probably in Antioch) between 375 and 380,\textsuperscript{103} reveals a ritualized structure of inquiry:

Let those first coming to the mystery of the godly life be brought by the deacons to the bishop or to the presbyters, and let them be examined as to why they came to the Word of the Lord. Let those who brought them give witness to them, after examining the things concerning them. And let them examine also their manner and life.\textsuperscript{104}

Although this document describes the situation of Antioch, it may help to conjecture the situation of Nisibis. In Antioch, people who wanted to enter the church were questioned before the bishop or the presbyters concerning their reason for coming to the church and their lifestyle, a practice similar to what Ephrem experienced. It was common in East Syrian Christianity and West Syrian Christianity, indeed in the whole Church, that the catechumens were “expected to begin living in a manner befitting a Christian.”\textsuperscript{105} Inquiry was “not a mere formality,”\textsuperscript{106} but a public witness to the catechumen’s willingness to change his or her lifestyle into the lifestyle of the Christian.

As Kavanagh explains, the process of inquiry took place in “a prayer context,” not in a school setting; thus, the catechumens were gradually “formed in the gospel not only by learning

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\textsuperscript{102} The Syriac \textit{Vita} tradition, Par. 235. See the previous section on Ephrem in the catechumenate.

\textsuperscript{103} Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, \textit{The Apostolic Tradition}, 83.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Apostolic Constitutions} 8: 32.2-4.

\textsuperscript{105} Kavanagh, \textit{The Shape of Baptism}, 55.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
but by worship as well, the two being articulated in a balanced continuum." Once placed in the
catechumenate, Ephrem also concentrated on the daily instruction, along with fasting and prayer.
This stage was essential for Ephrem to transform his daily life by hearing of God’s words and
words of instruction and by conforming his ordinary life to the ecclesial life. The stage required
“intentional involvement in all of the dimensions of shared ecclesial life,” hence, “a
thoroughgoing process of socialization.” The catechumenate was therefore a “complex ritual
process through which the subjects passed from an old way of life to a new way.”

Catechumenal Journey: The “Way of the Son”

Not only the hearers but all catechumens, even the whole congregation, were required to
do their best with “great diligence” in fasting, praying, and listening to the holy scripture.

Ephrem always emphasized the theme of diligence for the journey of the “Way of the Son”:

Repentance and diligence: for both worlds they are required.
For the work of the earth, diligent [people]; for the work of the spirit, penitents.
Although he may not become rich, a diligent man’s prosperity stands on its own,
and though he may utterly fail, the penitent is one of the victorious.
Miserable people and sinners put on the entire evil name,
for the idle have shame, and sinners have reproach.

107 Ibid., 56-57.
110 Finn, Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria, 3.
111 The Syriac Vita tradition, Vat. 117.
112 Hymns on Virginity 7:1, translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 293.
The seventh hymn in the *Hymns on Virginity* strongly urged “repentance” and “diligence.” Although it is uncertain that Ephrem’s *Hymns on Virginity* were written for the purpose of baptismal catechesis (it might have been for postbaptismal catechesis), it is certain that the *Bnat Qyama* sang the *madrashe* in public worship. The words of “repentance” and “diligence” that the hymn emphasizes might have impressed the catechumens as well as the penitents.

Because of scant information, we know neither the duration nor the contents of this stage of the catechumenate. Nowhere is there reference to the detailed curriculum of what and how they learned in this stage of the catechumenate. We could assume that the hearers, who were standing at the threshold of the Christian faith and life, had to be diligent for their catechumenal journey toward baptism. Ephrem invited them in the “Way of the Son.”

An essential baptismal catechetical instruction underlying his *madrashe* is the” Way of Life” in the fulfillment of the “Way of the Son.” Ephrem did not mention the content of the way of life; rather, he concluded with the invitation to the Way of Life, further, the Way of the Son. The Way that Moses walked was ultimately fulfilled in the “Way of the Son”; therefore Ephrem invited his “brothers” to walk in the “Way of Life”:

In the Torah Moses trod
the Way of the “mystic symbols” before that People
who used to wander every which way.
But our Lord, in his testaments,
definitely established the path of Truth
for the Peoples who came to the Way of Life.
All the “mystic symbols” thus travelled
on that Way which Moses trod
and were brought to fulfillment in the Way of Son.
Let our mind then become cleared land for that Way.

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113 *Hymns against Heresies* 25:3; translation by Griffith, *Faith Adoring the Mystery*, 20.

114 Ibid.
Instead of on the ground, my brothers,
let us, on the souls, tread the Way of Life.\textsuperscript{115}

In some aspects, the “Way of Life” in Ephrem’s hymns also reminds us of the Two Ways tractate (the Way of Life and the Way of Death), which was widely spread as moral catechism in the early Jewish Christian communities. Kurt Niederwimmer observes that the “motif of the ways” frequently appears in Jewish texts as well as Jewish-Christian texts, and quotes Alfred Adam: “the Two Ways teaching could have originated in the Judaism of Adiabene as a handbook for the instruction of catechumens.”\textsuperscript{116} Niederwimmer analyzes the Two Way chapters of the \textit{Didache} as “baptismal catechesis”:\textsuperscript{117}

[T]here are two ways, one to life and one to death, but the difference between the two ways is great. The “Way of Life” is “first, you shall love God, who made you; second, your neighbor as yourself.” Whatever you do not want to happen to you, do not do to another.\textsuperscript{118}

Neiderwimmer indicates that the “Two Ways was highly regarded in the fourth-century Church; Athanasius mentioned it as suitable for catechetical reading,”\textsuperscript{119} thereby suggesting that Ephrem and his community possibly knew about the Way of Life. However, Ephrem expanded the “Way

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Kurt Niederwimmer, \textit{The Didache: A Commentary} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 36-37.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Kurt Niederwimmer designates chapters 1 to 6 of the \textit{Didache} as “Baptismal Catechesis: The Tractate on the Two Ways.” He explains the “two ways” as “a widespread commonplace of ancient moral philosophy,” found in the Old Testament (Ps 1:1-6, Ps 139:24, Prov 2:13 and Prov 4:18-19, and etc.) and early Judaic texts (1 Enoch 94:1-5, 2 Enoch, etc.). See Niederwimmer, \textit{The Didache}, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{118} \textit{Didache} 1:1-3a. Then, the teaching took place: (1) the commandment of love of enemies (1:3b-4a), (2) the renunciation of violence (1:4b-5a), (3) almsgiving (1:5b-6), (4) a list of prohibitions (2:2-7), (5) fatherly teaching to the catechumens (3:1-6), (6) quiet and gentle humility as a way of life (3:7-10), (7) rules for life in society (4:1-11), (8) the way of death (5:1-2), (9) final admonition (5:2), and (10) epilogue and appendix (6:1-3).
\item \textsuperscript{119} Athanasius wrote in his \textit{Festal Letter} chapter 39, “that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles [the Didache], and the Shepherd” (cited from \texttt{http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaфф/npnf204.xxx.iii.iii.xxx.html}; accessed November 2, 2011).
\end{itemize}
of Life” to the “Way of the Son” by emphasizing Christology, since the “Way of Life” was deeply associated with Jewish moral catechism. Therefore, he asserted that the Way that Moses walked should be ultimately fulfilled in the “Way of the Son.” Presumably, Ephrem might have used either a different version of the Way of Life, or a transformed version of it for christianized baptismal catechesis, moving beyond moral catechism as is found in the Didache.

Interestingly, in his Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron, Ephrem used the text of the great love commandment differently from the Didache text, where he illustrated the text with a christianized nuance. Whereas the Didache wrote, “You shall love God who made you; second, your neighbor as yourself,” Ephrem changed it to, “You shall love the Lord, your God, and your neighbor as yourself.” Ephrem inserted “your God,” following Matthew 22:37, 39, therefore adding the Christian color of the biblical scriptures similar to the way in which he gave precedence to the christianized expression of the “Way of the Son” over the expression the “Way of Life.”

Arthur Vööbus’ analysis of the Didache is helpful for understanding what Ephrem made as key features in his baptismal instruction for catechumens:

However, it must be said that not only is the scheme Jewish, so is the content… It is interesting that this catechesis does not include a creed nor even the Christian features of the kerygma… This instruction includes nothing on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, nothing on the redemptive significance of His ministry and nothing on the Holy Spirit.

Ephrem seems to expect his faith community to be built up on a biblical foundation. It is hard to find catechumenal formation in detail in Ephrem’s madrashe; nevertheless, the “Way of the Son”

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in his madrashe represented his catechetical instruction that was deeply rooted in the biblical scriptures, beyond the Jewish schema of the Two Ways. In speaking of Ephrem’s “Way,” Robert Murray remarks:

For Ephrem, in contrast, “The Way” is neither a moral figure nor a title of the Church, nor (as in Dante and Bunyan) a symbol for the course of human life; it stands for the whole heilsgeschichtlich process, the pilgrimage of the human race through time.¹²²

Ephrem encouraged the catechumens to find Christ in the Bible, since Christ established “the path of Truth” in his Testaments, especially “in the Holy Gospel”:

Like the body of the alphabet, which is complete in its members, neither subtracting a letter, nor adding another one, so is the Truth which is written in the Holy Gospel, in the letters of the alphabet, he perfect measure which does not accept less or more.¹²³

For Ephrem, “only the integral scriptures can be the measure of truth.”¹²⁴ Therefore, reading the Bible was a crucial key for faith formation, which has been described in his Hymns on Paradise.¹²⁵

Both walking in the “Way of the Son” and finding Christ in the Bible¹²⁶ were accompanied by the help of the Holy Spirit; from the starting point in the catechumenate, the

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¹²² Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 246.

¹²³ Hymns against Heresies 22:1; translation from Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 21.

¹²⁴ Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 21.

¹²⁵ I will address the relationship between faith formation and reading the Bible in chapter four, in the section of fasting and scripture reading.

¹²⁶ Ephrem’s several writings, such as the Commentary on Genesis, the Commentary of Exodus, and the Commentary on the Diatessaron, had been heard in church in the daily instruction, as was typical of the Syrian church tradition. As noted earlier, the readings were proclaimed from the bema.
emphasis on the Holy Spirit was essential characteristic in the Syrian tradition. Ephrem was regarded as “the Harp of the Spirit” since he led people into the spiritual life throughout his hymns. In the time of Ephrem, the Holy Spirit (ruha) was treated as a feminine noun, but under the influence of Greek it came to be constructed as a masculine from the fifth century; however, the liturgical texts of Ephrem still preserved the Holy Spirit in the feminine form.

The hearers daily devoted themselves to hearing the Word of God and to being instructed in the Way of the Son, thus gradually growing into a christianized way of life. Eventually, when they came to declare their faith in front of the church, the hearers advanced to the next stage, Taksa d’Rshime—the second liturgical order in the catechumenate, the signed.

The Signed: Taksa d’Rshime (ܐܪܫܡܐ ܕܪܫܡܐ)

The meaning of the term rshime in Syriac is not clearly and consistently defined by modern scholars. The plural noun, rshime, is derived from the verb r (ܪ)-sh (ܫ)-m (ܡ) (pronounced rsham). According to A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, the verb rsham carries five meanings: “(1) to grave, engrave; (2) to draw, delineate; (3) to assign, appoint; (4) to entitle; and (5) to make the sign of the cross.”¹²⁷ Based on the fifth definition, the term rshime is translated as “the Signed,” meaning, the second order of catechumens. Payne Smith explains that rshime refers to “those who received signing of the cross with oil, yet not to be baptized.”¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, 551.

¹²⁸ Ibid.
Gradually the term *rshime* was used to indicate “the whole of Christian initiation,” which caused confusions between the signed as catechumens and the signed as baptized Christians.

Kathleen McVey takes a different approach by translating *b-rshime* as “with the drawing”\(^\text{131}\), she explains that the Syriac verb *rsham* “evokes the image of seals, engraving or drawing.”\(^\text{132}\) Therefore, interpreting *rshime* as “the drawing,” derived from the verb *rsham*, she translates its passive and active derivations into “(he was or is) appointed”\(^\text{133}\) and “(he) engraved.”\(^\text{134}\) A. Edward Johnston translates the word as “the sealed” in *Hymns on the Epiphany*; however, the *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* does not include “to seal” among the meanings of the verb.\(^\text{135}\) Gabriele Winkler notes the confusion between *rushma* (“sign” or “mark”) and *hatma* (“seal”), while examining various anointings in the Syrian baptismal tradition:\(^\text{136}\)

Great confusion was created by the inaccurate translation of *rushma* (derived from *r-sh-m*) as “seal” instead of “sign” or “mark.” This misleading translation of the terms for “oil” and “anointing” occurs in all texts and studies dealing with this subject… We have seen that the prebaptismal anointing of the head was regularly called *rushma* (sign, mark). The main term for the prebaptismal anointing of the body seems to have been *meshihuta*


\(^\text{130}\) Here “the signed” is frequently mistakenly translated as “the sealed.”

\(^\text{131}\) “With the drawings that baptism labors to bring forth in her womb” (*Hymns on Virginity* 7:5); translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 294.

\(^\text{132}\) McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 76.

\(^\text{133}\) “In the glorious age appointed for salvation” (*Hymns on Nativity* 2:1; from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 76); “Your feast is appointed” (*Hymns on Nativity* 4:1; from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 90).

\(^\text{134}\) “Blessed is He who engraved our soul and adorned and betrothed her to Him” (*Hymns on Nativity* 3:7); translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 84.


(anointing), whereas the postbaptismal anointing was normally referred to as hatma (seal).\textsuperscript{137}

Winkler’s classification makes it clear: mesha as “(olive) oil,” rushma as “sign or mark,” and hatma as “seal.” In usual practice, rushma was used for the prebaptismal anointing of the head with oil, and hatma for postbaptismal anointing, though the early Syrian churches did not know the postbaptismal anointing in the fourth century. Just as rushma is translated into “sign,” accordingly, rshime is translated into “the Signed,” capitalized for the order of catechumens.

Furthermore, Payne Smith introduced rshime in a phrasal expression—shamu’e wa-rshime, meaning, “the hearers (shamu’e) and (wa-) the signed (rshime), i.e. catechumens and those who have received chrism and are about to be baptized.”\textsuperscript{138} Smith excerpted “the speakers and the instructors” (sāīmā wa-dārūshā) from the same stanza, as quoted earlier in the section on didactic offices:

> From the speakers and the instructors (sāīmā wa-dārūshā), from the hearers and the signed (shamu’e wa-rshaimē)
> Let glory go up to Christ, and through Him to His Father be exaltation!
> He who gives words to speakers (melle in this manuscript; sāīme in the manuscript of Lege JaO), and gives voice to the instructors (dārūshe),
> has given understanding to the hearers (shamu’e), and consecrates oil to the signed (rshime).\textsuperscript{139}

In this hymn, the signed obviously has been placed in the second stage of the catechumenate—“the hearers and the signed (shamu’e wa-rshime).” In the baptismal context,

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{138} Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, 551. Here chrism refers to (olive) oil.

\textsuperscript{139} Hymns on the Epiphany 3:28. I translated it with the words in Syriac, since Johnston had translated rshaime into the sealed, as seen in the following: “From them that write and them that preach, from them that hear and them that are sealed, let glory go up to Christ, and through Him to His Father be exaltation! He who gives words to them that speak, and gives voice to them that preach, has given understanding to them that hear, and consecrates chrism for him that is sealed”; translation by A. Edward Johnston, “Fifteen Hymns: For the Feast of the Epiphany,” 271.
both the catechists (the speaker and the instructor, sāīmā wa- dārūshā) and the catechumens (the hearers and the signed, shamuʾe wa-rshime) were invited to glorify God, who gives the catechists talents in instructing the catechumens, and the catechumens talents in understanding the instructions.

*The Rite of Signing of the Cross*

The admission to the second stage of the catechumenate involved at least the signing of the cross, undoubtedly on the forehead, and probably accompanied by the laying on of hands or the rite of tasting salt in some area.\(^{140}\) In fact, in the Roman liturgy, the rite of salt was practiced in the part of the baptismal liturgy until 1969, but Eastern liturgies do not contain it.\(^{141}\)

Interestingly, Ephrem made reference to salt in his hymns as a symbol of wisdom and preservation, though it is unclear that the Syriac church knew the catechumenal salt. In his *Hymns on the Nativity*, Ephrem wrote:\(^{142}\)

> The sweet salt of the prophets today is scattered among the peoples; Let us acquire by it a new taste by which the former people would lose its flavor. (*Hymns on the Nativity* 1:86)

> Glory to the Heavenly One who mingled His salt with our mind, His milk with our souls. His body became bread to revive our mortality (*Hymns on the Nativity* 3:9)

\(^{140}\) Augustine wrote of these rites in his *Confessions* (I.11.17): “I was signed with the sign of His Cross and seasoned with His salt straight from the womb of my mother, who had great hope in You.” Ambrose was a catechumen in Gaul, where Ambrose was born; he thought “the ceremony consisted in the sign of the cross and the imposition of the priest’s hands on the candidate.” See Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and His Times*, trans. M. Joseph Costellone (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 11. The rites, however, varied from place to place. Remarking upon Augustine’s catechumenal rites, Paredi notes, “in Africa candidates were enrolled by making a sign of the cross on the forehead and placing a pinch of blessed salt, the symbol of wisdom, upon the tongue” (ibid.).

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 6

\(^{142}\) I use McVey’s translation of *Hymns on the Nativity* taken from *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, pp. 73, 85, 119, 163.
O Zealous One who saw Adam
who became dust and the accursed serpent
eating him. Reality dwelt
in what had lost its flavor. He made him salt
by which the cursed serpent would be blinded. (*Hymns on the Nativity* 8:2)

In the nineteenth year let salt
give thanks to Your body, O Blessed Babe.
The soul is the salt of the body,
and faith is the salt of the soul,
by which it is preserved. Blessed be Your preservation! (*Hymns on the Nativity* 18:24)

For Ephrem, salt not only signified wisdom, but also the sweet salt of the prophets. It has also carried the meaning of nourishment: by eating salt—His salt—our mind enlivens and our mortality revives. Moreover, salt functioned as a protection from evil, and preservation from ruin. John the Deacon in the sixth century expressed a similar meaning of the salt as “wisdom” and “preservation.”143 In some areas, catechumens received the salt continuously as a substitute for the Eucharist.144

The rite of signing of the cross made the catechumenal life more responsible and faithful, as well as the communal life more enriching and revitalizing. While participating in and watching the liturgy, the faith community had been building up together, as “brethren.”145 In regard to the laying on of hands upon the catechumens, the *Apostolic Tradition* spoke of it in relationship with the catechetical context: “when the one who teaches, after the prayer, lays land

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143 John the Deacon in the 6th century explained the meaning of the salt: “Now that he is a catechumen he will receive blessed salt, with which he is signed, because just as all flesh is seasoned and preserved by salt, so too the mind, sodden and soft as it is from the waves of the world, is seasoned by the salt of wisdom and of the preaching of the word of God” (*Ad Senarium*, 3); cited in Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1971, 1994), 5.


on the catechumens, let him pray and dismiss them. Whether a cleric is the one who teaches or a layperson, let him act the same way. This testimony revealed the relationship between the rite of the imposition of hands and dismissal of catechumens. But Ephrem did not draw attention to this, which implies that it did not play a significant role for the catechumens in early Syriac-speaking Christianity.

*Catechetical Instructions for the Signed*

Presumably, the advanced class was composed of “the deeper things of doctrine and the sacraments,” as Everett Ferguson has claimed. Other than indicating that the catechetical moments were deeply associated with praising and worshipping God, Ephrem does not specify the content and curriculum in this stage. Nevertheless, Ephrem showed in his *madrashe* the existence of baptismal catechesis for the signed:

Descend, my signed (*rshime*) brethren; put ye on our Lord
And be rejoined to His lineage, for He is son of a great lineage
As He has said in His Word.

From on high is His nature, and from beneath His Vesture
Each that strips off his vesture, commingled is that vesture
With His Vesture forever.  

The hymn witnesses to the baptismal practice of taking off clothing in the baptismal ceremony, and recommending the putting on of the garment of the Lord. Presumably because of

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the phenomenon of the deferral of baptism, the hymn might have encouraged the second order of catechumens (the signed) to receive baptism, thus putting on the nature of the Lord—the garment of the Lord which is forever. It is unclear whether the fourth century Syrian churches were inclined to defer baptism where adult baptism was the norm. Nevertheless, this hymn urged the signed *rshima* to “descend” to the baptismal font, as if the author purported to write for this purpose.

In another hymn, Ephrem revealed his baptismal theology—baptism as birth, referring to the signed. He anthropomorphized baptism as a mother who is laboring in travail to give birth to the children (the signed *rshima*) in her (baptismal) womb:

> With visible colors the image of kingship is portrayed, and with visible oil is formed the invisible image of our hidden King. With the Signed *rshima*, that baptism labors to give birth to them within her Womb, from the portrayal of the first man Adam, who was corrupted, she transforms into 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.¹⁵⁰

The baptismal liturgy was celebrated in the name of the Trinity. *Hymns on the Epiphany* persistently invited the catechumens to come down to find the treasure in baptism that the Trinity had laid up:

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Finn’s examination revealed the dates of his baptism and his consecration: “Within the month Ambrose decided to accept the election, put himself in the hands of the man he would come to call his father, Simplicianus, for instruction, and was baptized on November 30, 374. With imperial approval, a week later he was consecrated bishop.” See Thomas Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 214. Ambrose (330-397) and Augustine (354-430) had long remained in the catechumenate. Ambrose was unbaptized right before he was appointed to bishop of Milan (374). Augustine, who entered the church in his youth, resumed his catechumenate in his thirties (385-386), attending again the Mass of the Catechumenate (Augustine, *Confessions* 5,14,24).

¹⁵⁰ *Hymns on Virginity* 7:5; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 294; however the translation of third line is mine. She translated it as “the drawing”; rather, I would suggest the term’s definition as “the Signed,” as I argued above, the second stage of catechumens in the Syrian church.
The Trinity that is unsearchable
has laid up treasure in baptism.
Descend! ye poor, to its fountain.
And be enriched from it, ye needy!
Blessed be he that has mercy on all!  

Through these hymns, the church strongly requested the catechumens, specifically the signed, to receive baptism. The signed seem to be considered as brothers in the community, though not baptized yet, for the hymn called them as “my brethren.” They could also participate in the liturgy of “the prayers, biblical readings, and homily.” The early Syrian church’s inclusiveness for the catechumens as members of the community revealed how pastorally elaborate and sensitive the church was in the task of ongoing ministry to initiate catechumens into the life of the Christian community. Comparatively, Chrysostom spoke of his catechumens, “You who have not yet been deemed worthy of them, do everything so as to become worthy, that we may be one body, that we may be brethren.”

The catechumens, who could stay for the liturgy of the word, were catechized by listening to the lessons and the sermon; presumably the sāiūmā and dārūshā played their roles as speaker and instructor in the liturgy. Regarding the contents of instruction, Ephrem did not provide direct lists of the curriculum. Comparatively, the Apostolic Constitutions, in comparison, describes the syllabus as containing the Trinity, creation, human nature, and the events of the

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152 Hymns on the Epiphany 4:1 (in direct vocative term), and 5:1 (in the implication of the content).

153 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 192.

Exodus. It is not clear if Ephrem knew these subjects as catechetical contents.

Ephrem’s known catechetical materials were the madrashe sung by the female choirs (Bnat Qyama) by which the church catechized the signed as well as the whole congregation participating in the liturgy. Ephrem did not pursue a theological curriculum in stated logical arguments; rather, he located teaching and learning in the context of the liturgy. His catechetical ethos and plan can be summarized thus: “The voice is to give birth to the utterance of Faith, the heart is to give birth in silence to Prayer.” According to Ephrem, prayer and faith are the key elements to be learned.

The Baptizands: Taksad’ Amide

The signed were not allowed to stay in the liturgy of the Eucharist and were required to leave after the liturgy of the word. When ready to move forward in the catechumenal process, the signed submitted their names for enrollment as baptismal candidates—as the baptizands (‘amide in Syriac), the last liturgical order in the catechumenate. The chart below shows the various names of the third liturgical order—baptismal candidates in the final preparation:

| Competentes | Augustine | Petitioners, those seeking admission |

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155 “Let him, therefore, who is to be taught the Truth in regard to piety be instructed before his baptism in the knowledge of the unbegotten God, in the understanding of His only-begotten Son, in the assured acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit. Let him learn the order of the several parts of the creation, the series of providence, the different dispensations of your laws. Let him be instructed why the world was made, and why man was appointed to be a citizen therein; let him also know his own nature, of what sort it is; let him be taught how God punished the wicked with water and fire, and glorified the saints in every generation… and how God still take care of, and did not reject, humankind, but called them from their error and vanity to acknowledge the truth at various seasons, leading them from bondage and impiety to liberty and piety, from injustice to justice, from death eternal to everlasting life” (Apostolic Constitutions, trans. James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 17 [Edinburgh: T&T. Clark, 1870], 200).

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<td>Rome</td>
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Payne Smith’s dictionary gives the term `amide (plural passive participle of the verb `aמ-ממ-ד `amad) four meanings: “(a) to dive; (b) to penetrate; (c) to dip; (d) to be baptized.” Based on the fourth definition, and from the meaning of the content, the translation of `amide can reasonably be “the baptizands”—those who are about to be baptized. Since early Syriac-speaking Christianity administered baptism at Easter, the baptizands represented those about to be baptized soon (at Easter).

Cyril of Jerusalem called them baptizomenoi (baptizands—those about to be baptized) or

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158 The baptism date appears in chapter four, in the section on baptism.
photizomenoi (those being enlightened); however, Chrysostom used the term photizesthai, which signified also those in the proximate stage of preparation. In addition, in Gaul, where Ambrose was born and raised up in the catechumenate, “when a catechumen finally decided to receive baptism, he gave his name to the bishop and thus became one of the immediate candidates, or competentes.” The same terms was also found in Augustine, who was baptized by Ambrose in Milan. Augustine used both “competentes” (petitioners) and “baptizandi” (those to be baptized). The Syriac term ‘amide corresponds with these other terms in reference to the immediate candidates for baptism. Thus, ‘amide can be translated in the Hymns on the Epiphany 6:9 using this definition:

The baptizands who ascended were sanctified.
The signed who descended were pardoned.
They who ascended were clothed in praise.
They who descended stripped off sin.
Adam stripped off his glory suddenly.
You (m.pl) put (perfect tense) on glory suddenly.

159 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 196.

160 Thomas Finn, The Liturgy of Baptism in the Baptismal Instructions of St. John Chrysostom, 33. Chrysostom used the term of μέλλοντες φωτίζεσθαι in the sub-titles (the first, second, ninth, eleventh, and twelfth chapters) of his Baptismal Instruction.

161 Paredi, Saint Ambrose, 11.

162 Hymns on the Epiphany 6:9. I supply a new translation in order to reveal the liturgical order of the catechumen—the baptizands and the signed. Furthermore, their translation of “the baptized” results in confusion between the baptismal candidates (the baptizands) and the already baptized Christians (the baptized). See the translations by Johnston and Brock:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&lt;Johnston’s translation (“Fifteen Hymns”)&gt;</th>
<th>&lt;Brock’s translation&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The baptized when they come up are sanctified</td>
<td>The baptized who have come up from the water are sanctified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the sealed when they go down are pardoned</td>
<td>Those who went down to it have been cleansed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they who come up have put on glory</td>
<td>Those who have come up have been robbed in praise,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The poet juxtaposed two opposite verbs that contain baptismal images—ascend and descend (slaq and nhat in Syriac) into the baptismal water. While the signed who decided to descend in the baptism water had been pardoned from their sin, the baptizands who were in the final step were sanctified when they ascended from the baptismal water. The poet used poetic imagery to deal with time gap between the signed and the baptizands. With baptismal images such as taking off clothes and putting on the garment of the Lord, the poet evoked the baptismal liturgy to the whole congregation, in which people experienced the mysteries of God.

Finally, the poet shouted to the baptizands, “take your lamps!” and “conquer the darkness!”

Baptizands! Take your lamps
Like the lamps of the house of Gideon
Conquer darkness with your lamps, and silence with your hosannas,
Likewise Gideon triumphed in the battle with shout and flame.\(^{163}\)

At first glance, the lamps remind us of the baptismal candle; however, this is far-fetched view, since the fourth century mystagogues did not directly refer to the baptismal candle as a postbaptismal rite,\(^{164}\) though they adopted numerous images of light and lamp.\(^{165}\) The context of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>they who go down have cast off sin</th>
<th>Those who went down have stripped off sin.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam put off his glory in a moment</td>
<td>Adam stripped off his glory all of a sudden,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ye have been clothed with glory in a moment</td>
<td>You have put on glory all of a sudden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{164}\) Chrysostom might have used lamps or candles, even though he did not mention them directly. However, Proclus, Patriarch of Antioch in AD 434, attested to the neophytes holding lamps. See Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation: A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of the Baptismal Liturgy in the Mystagogical Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 351. Other mystagogues never referred to the rite of postbaptismal candle or lamp. But the current Roman Catholic missal uses the baptismal candle as a postbaptismal rite.
this poem likely was the baptismal preaching at the Epiphany vigil, so that the use of candles or lights would have been necessary for practical reason at night as well as for figurative reasons.

According to Egeria, the church of Jerusalem lit many lamps at the feast of Epiphany:

Everything they use for the services at the festival [Epiphany] is made of gold and jewels. You simply cannot imagine the number, and the sheer weight of the candles and the tapers and lamps and everything else they use for the services.¹⁶⁶

The light-darkness theme was a well known example in catechetical instructions. Hugh Riley remarks that the light-darkness paradigm contained the symbolic gesture of turning from West to East; turning was associated with conversion experience, metanoia.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, the hymn requested the baptizands to take up the lamps and win a victory over the darkness, with lamps and hosanna, just as Gideon triumphed in battle with flame and shout.

I suggest that there were three stages in the catechumenate of early Syriac-speaking Christianity: (1) people who recently entered the church (shamu’e ܡܕܢܚܐ in Syriac, “the hearers”); (2) those in the advanced class, yet not baptismal candidates (rshime ܡܕܢܚܐ in Syriac, “the signed” to indicate those receiving the signing of the cross with oil); and (3) those who who were handed over as candidates for baptism (‘amide ܡܕܢܚܐ in Syriac, the baptizands). We do not know the duration of each stage in the Syriac community; however, they had been accompanied with rites at each stage.

The Rite of Writing down Names on Epiphany

¹⁶⁵ Yarnold, The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation, 34.


¹⁶⁷ Riley, Christian Initiation, 76.
The baptizands prepared for their baptism for an unspecified length of time. They began the final prebaptismal stage by the submission of their names to request baptism. Similar to the fourth century mystagogues, Ephrem spoke of the rite of writing down names, poetically and catechetically, in his madrashe. In his Hymns on the Nativity, Ephrem juxtaposed the king’s enrollment of people with the Savior’s enrollment of people, thus catechizing the congregation about the manifestation of the Lord, which was for our salvation:

In the day of the king who enrolled (ktab خَطْب) people  
For the poll tax, our Savior descended  
And enrolled (ktab) people in the Book of Life (spar haye)  
He enrolled (ktab) [them], and they enrolled (ktab) Him. On high He enrolled (ktab) us;  
On earth they enrolled (ktab) Him. Glory to His name!  

With the poetic skill of repetition, Ephrem appealed to the significance of the enrollment of their names as baptismal candidates.

Once the catechumens inscribed their names in a registry of the baptismal candidates, their position in the community had been changed to baptismal candidates (the baptizands).

Ephrem’s Hymns on the Nativity, a collection of sixteen hymns composed for liturgical use, was composed for use during the Epiphany liturgy, and thus embraces Epiphany themes such as the nativity, birth, and baptism. From the perspective of baptism, Ephrem composed the

168 *Hymns on the Nativity* 18:2; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 159.
170 “The January 6 feast of the Epiphany, long associated in the West with the coming of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-12), celebrates in the East the event of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan by John, a celebration already attested among some communities in Egypt in the late second century by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* I, 21, 146, 1-2), who also claimed that January 6 was known in Egypt as the date of Jesus’ ‘birth.’ Gabriele Winkler not only underscores the overall Eastern origins of this feast and argues for a date within the earliest stratum of Christian history, but also, by means of a detailed analysis of early Syrian and Armenian texts, proposes that the earliest layer of celebration had to do with Jesus’ ‘pneumatic birth’ in the Jordan, where, according to these texts, the Holy Spirit comes to ‘rest’ on him and the divine voice and fire or shining light reveal the moment of his ‘birth’” (Maxwell E.
*Hymns on the Nativity* with baptismal images and symbols, since the enrollment of baptismal candidates was done on Epiphany for Easter baptism.\(^{171}\)

Similar to the Syrian church, the Egyptian church also enrolled candidates for baptism on Epiphany. \(^{172}\) On the Epiphany, the church of Ambrose enrolled candidates by writing down their names in a church book, and announced the date of Easter;\(^{173}\) "Epiphany was the occasion for the enrollment of *competentes* for Easter baptism."\(^{174}\) Chrysostom in Antioch mentioned a registry of the candidates for baptism: “All of you, then, who have to be enrolled in this heavenly book, bring forward a generous faith and a strong reason.”\(^{175}\) Chrysostom expected the candidates to enroll up until the tenth day of Lent, called the “Forty Days” (τεσσαρακοστή) in his church.\(^{176}\) Theodore of Mopsuestia also witnessed to a “Church book” in which the names of those who

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\(^{171}\) I will examine the day of baptism in chapter four.

\(^{172}\) Maxwell Johnson claims that the Egyptian church also enrolled candidates for baptism on Epiphany; see Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition,” 40.

\(^{173}\) Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 171: “In the north of Italy in the time of Ambrose the situation is similar to that of both Rome and Alexandria, appearing as something of a blend of those two traditions. At Milan, as at Alexandria, there is on the Epiphany an announcement of the date of Pascha. As at Alexandria, neither Sunday nor the Sabbath can be a fast day. As at Rome, on the other hand, the period is focused on preparation for baptism, and the period serves for the public penance of those seeking reconciliation. As with both of those cities, the fast is observed for six weeks, the last of which is Holy Week.”


\(^{176}\) Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 168; According to Canon 5 of Nicea (325 A.D.), Lent was called the “Forty Days” (tesserakoste) and recognized as an integral part of the Church year.
were enrolled for Paschal baptism were inscribed.\textsuperscript{177} When Augustine submitted his name to the church of Milan, it took place \textit{on} Epiphany; accordingly, Augustine began his final preparation for baptism on the day after Epiphany. Since Bishop Ambrose of Milan would seem to have limited the day of baptism to Pascha,\textsuperscript{178} Augustine was baptized at the paschal vigil in the church of Bishop Ambrose. These practices are shown comparatively in the chart below.

Ephrem narrated in his \textit{Hymns on the Nativity} that the names of the baptismal candidates had been written down in the “Book of Life” \textit{on} Epiphany.\textsuperscript{179} Presumably, in the rite of writing down their names on Epiphany, the \textit{Bnat Qyama} would have sung \textit{Hymns on the Nativity}. Syriac-speaking Christianity used the verb \textit{ktab} as a “technical term for the request for baptism.”\textsuperscript{180} In describing the definition of the verb \textit{k-t-b} (pronounced \textit{ktab}, “to write”), Smith gives an example with a sentence containing both \textit{ʿamide} (the baptizands) and \textit{ktab} (to write): “candidates for baptism (\textit{ʿamide}) come to have their names written down (\textit{k-t-b}).”\textsuperscript{181} The evidence that Smith’s dictionary provides supports the existence of baptizands in Syriac-speaking Christianity, as well as the practice of the rite of writing down names.

Ephrem emphasizes the verb \textit{ktab} and his Christology in describing Christ’s enrollment as the Son of David:

\begin{quote}
The succession of kings is written (\textit{ktab}) in the name of men instead of women.
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{178} Talley, \textit{The Origins of the Liturgical Year}, 36.

\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Hymns on the Nativity} 18:2. Translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrme the Syrian: Hymns}, 159.

\textsuperscript{180} Yarnold, \textit{The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation} (1\textsuperscript{st} ed.), 7.

\textsuperscript{181} Smith, \textit{A Compendious Syriac Dictionary}, 230: “\textit{atein wa-maktabin ʿemaide shmahaihon}.”
\end{footnotes}
Joseph, a son of David, betrothed to a daughter of David,
For the child could not be registered in the name of His mother.
He became, therefore, Joseph’s offspring without seed,
And His mother’s offspring without man,
And by the two of them He bound Himself to their people,
So that among the kings He is written (ktab), Son of David.

It was not fitting that from the seed of Joseph He be born,
Nor without Joseph that from Mary he be conceived.
He was not registered (ktab) by the name of Mary, who gave birth to Him,
But Joseph, who registered (ktab), did not register (ktab) his [own] seed.
Without the body of Joseph, He was united with his name;
Without the betrothed of Mary, He sprang forth, her Son.
He was Lord to David and son.\(^{182}\)

In Syrian culture, a formally-enrolled name carried a significant meaning, sometimes a
proclamation. Ephrem repeated that Jesus was written (ktab)—registered or enrolled—as the Son
of David, but not of Joseph or of Mary. Enrolled with the name of the Son of David, Jesus today
(on Epiphany) enrolls his people in his Book of Life (spar haye). Therefore, Ephrem claimed,
“Greater is this day than every day”,\(^{183}\) the first-born feast day is this day.\(^{184}\)

Ephrem made the date of Epiphany clear, stating that it followed the thirteenth day after
from the day of the Conquering Sun, the Christmas day.\(^{185}\)

\(^{182}\) _Hymns on the Nativity_ 2:13-14; translation from McVey, _Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns_, 79.

\(^{183}\) _Hymns on the Nativity_ 4:23; translation from McVey, _Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns_, 91.

\(^{184}\) _Hymns on the Nativity_ 4:28; translation from McVey, _Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns_, 91. As Ephrem’s work
reveals, Epiphany was the greatest feast of the church among the three crucial feasts in the Syrian tradition
(Epiphany, Easter and Ascension). During Ephrem’s lifetime, Christmas was gradually accepted by the Eastern
churches.

\(^{185}\) Christmas was called the day of the Conquering Sun. Ephrem showed the feast of Epiphany is January
6\(^{\text{th}}\) in the following stanzas: “[5:11] On this feast the openings in the curtains are joyous...The Messiah rejoices in
His feast as Commander of the host... [5:12] On the birth of the Son, the king was enrolling (ktab) the people in the
census...and He wrote (ktab) in His name another debt, so that He would be indebted to us...[5:13] The sun
conquered and engraved (rsham, signed) a symbol on the degree that it ascended. Since it ascended it is twelve days,
and today this is the thirteen: a perfect symbol of the birth of the Son and of His Twelve” (_Hymns on the Nativity;
translated by McVey, _Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns_, 107).
Moses shut in the lamb in Nisan
on the tenth day—a symbol of the son
Who came into the womb and closed Himself up
on the tenth day. He came out from the womb
in this month when the light conquers.  

Early Syriac-speaking Christianity did not celebrate Christmas; instead, it celebrated Epiphany as Jesus’ day of birth.

**Remarks on Enrollment for Easter Baptism**

The following chart excerpts from fourth century texts statements about the rite of enrollment for Easter baptism and the terms for the book in which the names of baptismal candidates were written.

| Ephrem the Syrian | Enrollment on  
| Epiphany:  
| *ktab* (‘writing down their name’) | “Thus Semha (Manifestation of king) and Denha (Epiphany of the King) reigned together, the king on earth, and the Son on high…Our saviors came down and wrote down men in the **Book of Life** (*spar haye*). He wrote down and was written; on high He wrote us; on earth He was written; glory to His name!” Ephrem, *Hymns on the Epiphany* 2:1-2; *Hymns on the Nativity* 18:1-2 |


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Passage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ephrem</td>
<td>Hymns on the Nativity 1:3</td>
<td>“The Lord registers (ktab) the peoples; this one was born there.” Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity 1:3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephrem</td>
<td>Hymns on the Nativity 3:10</td>
<td>“He registered (ktab) and became indebted for us again.” Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity 3:10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephrem</td>
<td>Hymns on the Nativity 5:12</td>
<td>“This one day, the [most] perfect day in the year [Epiphany]… the king was enrolling the people in the census… To us the King came out to cancel our debts, He wrote (ktab) in His name another debt, so that He would be indebted to us.” Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity 5:12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrose</td>
<td>Enrollment on Epiphany</td>
<td>“We toiled all night (Epiphany Vigil) and took nothing,” which came from Ambrose’ preaching. He preached and requested all night long at Epiphany vigil, but not too many catechumens submitted their names to the church of Milan. Ambrose, In Expos. Ev. Luc. 4. 76 (PL 15.1634f.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyril</td>
<td>Give in names before the first day [Sunday] of Lent</td>
<td>“Already there is an odour of blessedness upon you, O ye who are soon to be enlightened; already ye are gathering the spiritual flowers, to weave the heavenly crowns: already the fragrance of the Holy Spirit has breathed upon you: already ye have gathered round the vestibule of the King’s palace; may ye be led in also by...” Cyril, Give in names before the first day [Sunday] of Lent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Monday] of Lent after examination</td>
<td>the King… Thus far there has been an inscription of your names, and a call to service, and a good purpose, and hope attendant thereon.” Cyril of Jerusalem, <em>Procatechesis</em> I.</td>
<td>“Names must be given in before the first day [Sunday] of Lent… a presbyter takes down all the names before the start of the eight weeks for which Lent lasts here, as I have told you. Once the priest has all the names, on the second day [Monday] of Lent at the start of the eight weeks… the ones who are seeking baptism are brought up…if his [bishop] inquiries show him that someone has not committed any of these misdeeds, he himself puts down his name.” Egeria, 45:1-4; translated from Wilkinson, <em>Egeria’s Travels</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Enrollment period: | “All of you, then who have to be enrolled in this Heavenly Book, bring forward a generous faith and a strong erason.” Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions* 2:9, trans. Harkins, *ACW* 31, 46. |

| Chrysostom of Antioch | Enrollment: | “He writes down in the Church Book the sponsors’ |

| Enrollment: | | |
This evidence shows that several fourth century communities performed the rite of enrollment for Easter baptism. In addition, a particular book preserved a written record of the candidates’ names. Ephrem named it the “Book of Life”; Chrysostom, the “Heavenly Book”; and Theodore of Mopsuestia, the “Church Book.”

**Catechetical Instructions for the Baptizands**

In the Syrian catechumenate, the baptismal candidates were enrolled on Epiphany.\(^{187}\)

*Hymns on the Nativity* and *Hymns on Epiphany*, which were written for the liturgy of the feast of Epiphany, contained elaborately articulated catechesis for the ritual context. Unlike *Didascalia Apostolorum* that presented “minimal stress on catechesis,”\(^{188}\) Ephrem’s *madrashe* included catechetical instructions for the baptizands as well as for the whole congregation.

The *madrashe* brought up the various themes of Epiphany, that is, the images and symbols of God’s manifestation through the birth and baptism of the Lord, thus teaching the

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\(^{187}\) The churches of Ephrem and Ambrose enrolled baptismal candidates on Epiphany, and practiced baptism at Easter. However, the Egyptian catechumenate administered baptism forty days later after enrollment on Epiphany, thus in mid-February baptism was practiced.

\(^{188}\) Instead, it emphasized a prebaptismal anointing. See Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition,” 39.
essential features of baptism to the liturgical assembly and specifically to the baptizands enrolled on the feast of day of Epiphany. The *madrashe* vivified the catechesis in the ritual performance, by portraying the birth of the Lord, the Magi, and the Lord’s baptism:

The whole creation became for Him as one mouth and cried out concerning Him  
The Magi cry out in their gifts  
The barren cry out with their children  
The star of light, lo! It cries out in the air, “Behold the Son of King!”

The heavens are opened, the waters break forth, the dove is in glory!  
The voice of the Father is stronger than thunder  
As it utters the word, “This is My Beloved”  
The Watchers brought the tidings, the children acclaimed him in their Hosannas.  

In the integrative approach to baptism that intensified from Epiphany onward, the baptizands would have been preparing for the baptismal faith and life, since the ecclesial and liturgical life in Ephrem’s church was inextricably linked to baptism. In the *madrashe*, Ephrem portrayed ecclesial and social images of baptism rather than individual and personal images. For example, on the feast of Epiphany, the baptismal candidates, as well as the whole congregation, gathered together in the liturgy to celebrating the birth, and anticipated that later generations would also celebrate the birth:

Your birth made that generation glad, and Your day makes our generation glad.  
Double is the bliss of that generation who was the birth and the day.  
Smaller is the bliss of the later people who see only the day of your birth.  
But since the nearer people doubted, greater is the bliss of the later people who believed in You without seeing You. Blessed is Your bliss that was increased for us!  

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One of the communal images of baptism was the tremendous power of regeneration, by which persons were born again as children of God, thus to live in the new family of the faith community. This is also a crucial theme of the feast of Epiphany, the birth and baptism of Jesus. Therefore, Ephrem reminded the whole congregation of the significance of the baptismal faith and life, especially on the feast day. He charged the congregation to festoon the door of their hearts that the Holy Spirit might “desire to enter”:

> On this feast [Epiphany] let everyone garland the door of one’s heart. May the Holy Spirit desire to enter in its door to dwell and sanctify. For behold, She [the Holy Spirit] moves about to all the doors [to see] where She may dwell.\(^{191}\)

After the day of enrollment, the baptismal candidates proceeded to the final preparation with the Forty Days of Fasting, the so-called Lenten catechumenate. They prepared their minds and hearts to be fit for the Spirit’s entering by receiving intensive instruction; they prepared their bodies by fasting. Unfortunately, details do not exist of this period of preparation for Ephrem’s community. However, a full description of the catechesis and liturgy during this catechumenal stage is provided for the fourth century church of Jerusalem from the travel diary of the pilgrim Egeria, who writes:

> I feel I should add something about the way they instruct those who are about to be baptized at Easter….They have here the custom that those who are preparing for baptism during the season of Lenten fast go to be exorcized by the clergy first thing in the morning… As soon as that has taken place, the bishop’s chair is placed in the Great Church, the Martyrium, and all those to be baptized, the men and the women, sit round him in a circle. There is a place where the fathers and the mothers stand, and any of the people who want to listen (the faithful, of course) can come and sit down, though not catechumens, who do not come in while the bishop is teaching.

> His subject is God’s Law; during the forty days he goes through the whole Bible, beginning with Genesis, and first relating the literal meaning of each passage, and then

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interpreting its spiritual meaning. He also teaches them at this time all about the resurrection and the faith. And this is called *catechesis*. After five week’s teaching they receive the Creed, whose content he explains article by article in the same way as he explained the Scriptures, first literally and then spiritually. Thus all the people in these parts are able to follow the Scriptures when they are read in church, since there has been teaching on all the Scriptures from six to nine in the morning all through Lent, three hours’ catechesis a day.\footnote{Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels*, 161-162.}

In the final period for baptism, the Holy Spirit was an essential and dynamic feature underlying the whole process, thus to initiate the baptismal candidates into the baptismal font.

In this chapter the catechumenate in the church of Ephrem has been studied. The next chapter involves the relationship between ritual and faith formation, based on the liturgy of baptism of Ephrem. For Ephrem, faith formation in the church life is to a catechumen what growing up in the family life is to a baby:

> The Divinity is attentive to us, just as a wet-nurse is to a baby, 
> Keeping back for the right time things that will benefit it, 
> For she knows the right time for weaning, 
> And when the child should be nourished with milk, 
> And when it should be fed with solid food, 
> Weighting out and providing what is beneficial to it 
> In accordance with the measure of its growing up.\footnote{Hymns on the Church 25:18; translation from Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985), 172.}

The church is now aware that it is the time for the catechumens to be fed with “solid food,” no longer to be nourished with “milk,” and thus proceed toward the liturgy of baptism. Church life is a crucial feature for the catechumens’ faith formation—the Forty Days of Fasting, prebaptismal anointing, and eventually baptism and the Eucharist. Ephrem enhances these characteristic episodes of the Syrian baptismal tradition with spiritually enriching symbols and images.
Ephrem was a creative theologian who included theology in poetic forms—in singing—for the liturgical assembly. In the next chapter, the liturgy of baptism is examined in a way that shows how Ephrem nourished believers with a baptismal theology embedded in the liturgy. Pope Benedict XVI, in speaking of Ephrem, states, “[H]is theology became liturgy, became music.”

By fusing biblical images with daily life images, Ephrem instilled the deep meaning of the Christian faith into daily life, through the madrashe sung in liturgy. No matter how or where the madrashe were used, the hymns themselves were intrinsically catechetical—they taught the essentials of the Christian faith. These hymns were also mystagogic. Strictly speaking, mystagogy is confined to a particular time following baptism as the final period of baptismal catechesis; however, the process of unfolding the mysteries of baptismal life continue even after this specific period, since the mystery of God continues again and again. Ephrem therefore expanded the meaning and point of mystagogy by practicing a unique form of mystagogy—ongoing mystagogy.

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195 Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom of Constantinople, and Theodore of Mopsuestia delivered mystagogical homilies during Eastertide for the newly-baptized. However, Chrysostom and Theodore delivered lectures to people who were in Lenten catechesis and about to be baptized.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE LITURGY OF BAPTISM

The enrollment at Epiphany was a sign that the candidates had embarked on the next liturgical journey to the baptismal font. Ephrem understood the structure in this period as “fasting, anointing, immersing and whitening (baptismal garment).”¹ This chapter discusses the basic scheme (prebaptismal fasting, anointing, immersion, and the Eucharist) in the Syrian church, in which the spiritually enriched and elaborated rites nourished the baptismal candidates as well as the whole congregation in baptismal faith and life.

Lenten Fasting: “The Holy Fasting of Forty Days” (ṣawma quadisha darb῾in in Syriac).² The church catechized people to open the door of their hearts through fasting during the post-Epiphan baptismal preparation. For the task of ritual formation, the church assigned fasting, prayer, and vigil to the baptizands,³ together with the whole congregation.

Fasting in the Syrian church was deeply related to prayer, vigil, and reading the scriptures. The church launched the Fasting of Forty Days, proclaiming the refrains, “Blessed is the King,

¹ Hymns on Virginity 7:2; translation from Kathleen McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 293.

² According to Beck, J(a) and J(b) manuscripts comment on the duration of fasting, pointing to Lenten fasting as “the Holy Fasting of Forty Days.” Edmund Beck, Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Jejunino. CSCO 246, Syr. 106 (Louvain: Peeters, 1964), 1.

³ As chapter three has shown, the church performed the rite of writing down baptismal candidates’ names in the “Book of Life.” Ephrem called it the “Book of Life”; Chrysostom “Heavenly Book”; Theodore of Mopsuestia “Church Book.”
who has adorned his Holy Church, with fasting, prayer and vigil,”⁴ or “Praise be to the Son, who has adorned his Holy Church, with fasting, prayer and vigil.”⁵ Fasting was *intrinsically* integrated into prayer in the early Syriac-speaking church, although the actual duration and practices related to fasting were not homogenous throughout the church.⁶

In fact, the length of the fast varied. The Egyptian church started Lenten fasting on the day of Epiphany, exactly practicing forty days. They celebrated baptism on the day that ended the forty days’ fasting, therefore baptizing in February.⁷ However, the Jerusalem church, according to Egeria, practiced Lenten fasting for eight weeks; some churches in Rome and North Africa preferred a shorter fasting, presumably three weeks of fasting.⁸ The fourth century churches gradually augmented the significance of the fasting days prior to Easter. As Thomas Talley asserted, “whatever the length of the liturgical Lent, it is nonetheless clear that at Jerusalem, as at Rome and Milan (but not in the festal letters of Athanasius), Lent was the time for the final formation of those to be baptized at Easter.”⁹

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⁶ The number forty references several biblical episodes: “Moses stayed there with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, without eating any food or drinking any water” (Ex 34:28); “Elijah walked 40 days and 40 nights to the mountain of the Lord (1 Kgs 19:8); Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert after his baptism (Mt 4:2).


In this final baptismal preparation, the baptismal candidates commonly prepared their baptism at Easter, with hearing/reading the scriptures, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Early Syriac-speaking Christianity ascetically and spiritually augmented the baptismal instruction, emphasizing fasting, together with prayer, vigil, and scriptural reading. However, the Syrian church did not strongly associate fasting with exorcism, although some passages imply the image of renunciation in the darkness-light frame.

Fasting and Prayer

In the early church, ascetic discipline was composed mainly of fasting. The church proceeded to the ascetic preparatory discipline of fasting when getting ready for baptisms.

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11 The *Didache* and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* also did not emphasize exorcism. Comparatively, the *Apostolic Tradition* contained frequent exorcism and scrutinies. Cyril of Jerusalem’s ceremony began with a renunciation of sin, dramatically facing westward in the darkness of night outside: “First you entered the vestibule of the baptistery; standing, facing the West, you listened, and you heard the order to stretch out your hand, and, as though he were actually present there, you renounced Satan” (Cyril of Jerusalem, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s Lectures on the Christian Sacraments: The Procatechesis and the Five Mystagogical Catecheses*, trans. F. L. Cross [London: SPCK, 1951], Mystagogical Catechesis 1:1, p. 53).


According to Edmund Beck, Ephrem’s *Hymns on Fasting* testified to fasting in the baptismal liturgical context.\(^{14}\)

Lo! The heavy fasting seasons raised those to be leaders of the royal bride
She is going to the feast of White [garment]\(^{15}\) where she is baptized and shines.
Her garlands are made of rules and ornaments from the fasting.
She is going with Hosannas.
The lamp will be shining before her, along with the eternal oil.
Blessed is He who sent to celebrate the first-born (\(\texttt{בּוּקְרָא}\))\(^{16}\) bride
She is coming to the bridal chamber of His light.

Response: Praise be to the Son, who has adorned his holy Church.
with fasting, prayer and vigil.\(^{17}\)

The hymn presented the paradox that the garlands were decorated with the rules and ornaments from the fast. The bride who put on the garlands supplied a metaphor for the baptismal candidates who were waiting for their baptism. Ephrem articulately juxtaposed the wedding feast with the baptismal liturgy by using the words “the feast of White.” In the midst of fasting, the baptismal candidates prayed for another kind of food from God—food that was bountifully prepared and abundantly descended into the baptismal water. As such, fasting and praying went together. While the community practiced the ascetic discipline of fasting, they were also praying for the food provided from God—spiritual food. Ephrem claimed that just as the

\(^{14}\) Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syriers Hymnen de Ieiunio*, CSCO 246, Syr. 106, i.

\(^{15}\) According to J. Payne Smith (*A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999] 134), the plural term of white (*heware* in Syriac) signifies “white garments,” that is, baptismal garments.

\(^{16}\) “The first born” \(\texttt{בּוּקְרָא}\) in Syriac is very often used of Christ; however, it also signifies “young,” (*A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 38). In this hymn, it seems to describe the young bride.

\(^{17}\) *Hymns on Fasting* 5:1. My translation.
clothes were required of an invited guest to a banquet, so tears were required of the penitent. For this reason, fasting was required of the baptismal candidates.¹⁸

**Fasting and Scripture Reading**

Ephrem perceived the communal characteristic of the Lenten fast and requested that people gather together and listen to the scriptures read in the church, especially during the forty days of fasting:

> Assemble yourselves, and become traders in the time of fasting! Because the books of Scripture are the treasure house of God and with that sacred keys of the voice they are set before the audience. Blessed be the King, who opened his treasure house to the needy!¹⁹

Ephrem depicted the scriptures metaphorically as “the treasure house of God.” He urged the baptismal candidates to be traders that they might possess the valuables from the treasure house of God. The key of the voice, presumably the *saiuma* who read the books of scripture in the church, would unlock the door of the treasure house.

The strong connection between fasting for forty days and listening to the biblical scriptures might have been evoked by Jesus’ fasting in the desert. While Jesus was fasting, he was tempted by the devil, who told him to turn stones into bread. Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus answered that man shall not live by bread alone, but by the word of God. Fasting humbles humans because it reveals human characteristics of limits and frailty—human beings are ultimately dependent upon God. Physical hunger is to deepen spiritual hunger for the word of


God; fasting makes it clear that the body and the soul go together. Ephrem started his catechesis by stating that “fasting purifies the soul secretly,” and he then concluded his Hymns on Fasting with the phrase, “to end the ten hymns on the forty days of fasting.”

Ephrem expected his madrashe to be edible for the hungry ear. Furthermore, he used metaphor to describe reading the scriptures as grazing pastures in a Paradise, full of beauty for the eyes, sounds for the ears, tastes for the mouth, and scent for the nostrils:

Scripture brought me to the gate of Paradise,
And the mind, which is spiritual, stood in amazement and wonder as it entered,
The intellect grew dizzy and weak as the senses were no longer able
To contain its treasures—so magnificent they were—
Or to discern its savors and find any comparison for its colors,
Or take in its beauties so as to describe them in words.

Paradise surrounds the limbs with its many delights:
The eyes, with its handiwork, the hearing, with its sounds,
The mouth and the nostrils, with its tastes and scents.
Blessed is that person who has gathered for himself the company of all
Who have kept vigil and fasted; they, in return for their fasts,
shall delight to graze upon its luxurious pastures.

Gazing around the luxurious pastures with empirical sensitivity—visible, audible, edible, and olfactory, Ephrem envisaged the beauty of Paradise. Ephrem’s poetic description seems to encourage people who feel physical hunger to overcome it with the spiritual food of the Word of God, thus transforming infirmity from fasting into the full of joy of reading scriptures.

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20 They appeared in the beginning of the hymn (1:2) and at the end of the tenth madrashe of Hymns on Fasting.

Fasting and Vigil

As seen in the hymn above, Ephrem held the tradition of vigil in addition to fasting. Ephrem’s madrashe supplied not only nourishment for spiritual hunger, but also a guardian to keep vigil. Ephrem had already conveyed the significance of keeping vigil through his Hymns on Nativity sung at the Epiphany vigil:\(^{22}\)

Keeping vigil also is the glutton in order to eat more and to suffer agony;
His vigil was torment for him since he did not eat with moderation

Keeping vigil also is the merchant; at night he wearies his fingers
To calculate how much [interest] came [in on] his mina\(^{23}\) and whether he doubled and tripled his obol.

Keeping vigil also is the rich [man] whose sleep mammon pursues;
His dogs are sleeping, but he is keeping his treasures from thieves.

Keeping vigil also is the worrier whose sleep has been swallowed up by his worries,
Whose death stands at his pillows, and he watches, worried, for years.\(^{24}\)

Here, Ephrem recommended his congregation to keep vigil, metaphorically, as glutton, merchant, rich man, and worrier. Moreover, he dissuaded people from keeping vigil falsely, for example, to avoid being like Judas Iscariot, the Pharisees (the sons of darkness), a jealous man, an angry man, and a garrulous man.\(^{25}\) As a conclusion he described a good vigil of “a discerning man,” in a way which “he chooses one of two: either he sleeps sweetly, or he keeps vigil righteously,” with ear cleared, eye chastened, heart sanctified, and mouth purified.\(^{26}\)

\(^{22}\) Ephrem conveyed the effect of keeping vigil in Hymns on Nativity 1:63-99.

\(^{23}\) Mina and obol are units of money used in the Syriac church.


\(^{25}\) Hymns on the Nativity 1:69-80; translation by McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 72.

\(^{26}\) Hymns on the Nativity 1:81-83; translation by McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 72-73.
Through fasting, prayer, and vigil, as well as listening to the scriptural reading, the catechumens prepared to adopt and adapt the new identity of the children of God by baptism. Simultaneously, the whole congregation—who were also fasting—prepared to welcome the new children of God into the family. The fasting in the church was an individual and social instrument incorporating people into the life of the faith community: we are starving—the church is feeding us. In fact, Ephrem regarded his madrashe as “a banquet to hungry ears,” spread out in public worship. At the very heart of fasting was growth in prayer in the Holy Spirit.

Ephrem expected the rites in the Holy Fasting of Forty Days to make the baptismal candidates more proper and worthy to enter baptism. He revered the “love and learning commingled with truth” underlying the scriptural reading, stating that “the intellect can grow and become rich with new things as it meditates with discernment on the treasure store of hidden mysteries [Scripture].” He prayed for his being worthy to possess Paradise continuously after baptism:

For my part, I have loved and so learned, and become assured that Paradise possesses the haven of the victorious.
As I have been held worthy to perceive it, so make me worthy to enter it!

Praying especially within the Holy Fasting of Forty Days (sawma quadisha darb ‘in), people drew closely to the baptismal water with their wholehearted conversion, their metanoia.

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27 Regarding the practice of the church in Jerusalem, Egeria observed: “No one lays down how much is to be done, but each person does what he can; those who keep the full rule are not praised, and those who do not less are not criticized” (Egeria 28:4; translation from John Wilkinson, Egeria’s Travels, 3rd ed. [Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1999], 150).


29 Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 6:25; translation from Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 118. The source was already cited, so an abbreviation is appropriate here.
Silence of the Daily Exorcism during the Forty Days of Fasting

As Gabriele Winkler indicates, “In the Syrian hinterland and the regions of Armenia, the necessity for a wholehearted conversion of the candidates naturally formed a basic theme as well, but the purificatory elements never became ritualized to such an extent as in fourth century Syro-Palestine.” Unlike churches of the Greek-speaking coastline of the Mediterranean, Syriac-speaking Christianity did not develop the ritualistic expression of daily exorcisms to the extent of “warfare being waged between the catechumen and Satan,” namely “a drama-like battle with Satan.” Syriac-speaking Christianity recognized the basic confrontation with demons, but it never became too fully ritualized, though it might have practiced, as seen in this madrashe:

The force of oil like [that] of the Anointed chases away the iciness in the body that maddens and removes help so that this suffering is even a second demon. Strong is the power against diseases of oil that soothes the limbs, like its Lord who soothes bodies and punished demons. He took pity on the man; He oppressed the legion; He persecuted the fierce demons who had made fierce the man on whom grace took pity.

Instead, Ephrem warned those who fasted of the dangers of backbiting, since spitefulness would provide delight for the Evil One. A slanderous tongue should be exorcised, especially from the fasters who forbade food; they should not devour their neighbors with backbiting. Thus, Ephrem exhorted the fasters:

Let not our fast provide delight for the Evil One as we use backbiting on our friends;

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31 “[I]n the writings of Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and above all Cyril of Jerusalem, it is obvious that the confrontation with the demonic powers becomes one of the main issues in the homilies they addressed to the candidates for baptism” (ibid.).

32 Ibid.

33 Hymns on Virginity 4:13; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 279.
For of old they proclaimed a fast—and stoned Naboth to death (1 Kgs 21:12-13)
The Evil One was delighted with their fasts!
O fasters, who instead of bread devoured the flesh of a man; during the fast they lapped up blood.
Because they devoured human flesh, they became food for the dogs.
Blessed is He who gives His own Body
To our crazed mouths, so that we might cease from backbiting.\textsuperscript{34}

Ephrem was aware of the easily committed mistake of “backbiting” even in the time of fasting, as Matthew recorded in the Bible of when Jesus had been tempted in his fasting:

He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (NRSV Mt. 4:2-4)

Early Syriac-speaking Christianity emphasized that “the fast secretly cleans the soul, so that it will see God… Pure is the fast and becoming for who has to be purified in order to see God.”\textsuperscript{35} Meanwhile, Ephrem argued the necessity of “sackcloth and tears for all kinds of penitents,”\textsuperscript{36} since he was aware of the fatal weaknesses of human beings whose sins should be repented. As the month of Nisan approached, those fasting prepared for the anointing and immersion in the baptismal water.

\textbf{Anointing: Prebaptismal Rite}

Early Syriac-speaking Christianity practiced the spiritually enriching rite of prebaptismal anointing. Stating that “cathartic and apotropaic elements” did not permeate the early Syriac-


\textsuperscript{35} *Hymns on Fasting* 1:2-3; translation from Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem’s Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 85.

\textsuperscript{36} *Hymns on Fasting* 6:2; translation from den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 86.
speaking churches, Gabriele Winkler argues that early Syriac-speaking Christianity developed a charismatic aspect “with its sudden epiphanic character before the immersion into the water.” These elements were alien to the writers of the early Syriac documents such as *The Odes of Solomon, The Acts of Thomas, Demonstrations*, and the *madrashe* of Ephrem. There are two key issues presented here in terms of the prebaptismal anointing: the meaning of the prebaptismal anointing in the early Syrian baptismal tradition and the absence of the postbaptismal anointing.

The prebaptismal anointing implied an “essentially charismatic” meaning, rather than a “cathartic and exorcistic” character, as suggested in Winkler’s research.

Another issue resulted from the absence of the postbaptismal anointing in early Syriac documents: the prebaptismal anointing was the only one that the Syriac churches knew. Hence, this discussion involves the characteristics of the early Syrian baptismal tradition—the meaning of the prebaptismal anointing and the absence of the postbaptismal anointing—by looking attentively at the dominant typology integrated in the *Odes of Solomon, Acts of Thomas*, Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*, and Ephrem’s hymns. Robert Murray also found a common key feature among them—the “hovering” or “brooding” image of the Holy Spirit: “this image, frequent in the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Acts of Thomas*, Aphrahat and Ephrem, can probably be

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37 Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications,” ibid., 42.

38 Ibid., 39.


41 John Chrysostom also did not know postbaptismal anointing; prebaptismal anointing was practiced in Antioch.

42 There are rich literatures in Syriac on the subject of baptism; however, the list is not selected to be complete, but designed for my examination of the dominant typology in the early Syrian baptismal tradition.
regarded as the clearest sign of explicit consciousness of rites being what we mean by sacraments."

*Odes of Solomon*

Presumably dated to the first quarter of the second century, the *Odes of Solomon* has been called by Michael Lattke “enigmatic texts.” Lattke placed the odes on a “hymnological line of development” or “trajectory.” However, according to Adrian Nocent, these odes are “a mystagogical catechesis,” and, in particular, Odes 4, 25, and 36 seem to describe baptismal rites “despite of the lyrical nature of these odes.” The discussion here is limited to what seems to be the description of baptismal rites in the *Odes*.

*Ode 4* displays the baptismal picture at the water:

> For who shall put on Your grace  
> And be rejected?  
>  
> Because Your seal (*hatma*) is known;  
> And Your creatures are known to it.  
>  
> And Your hosts possess it;

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45 Ibid., p. 1. “We do not know whether the *Odes of Solomon* are the work of a single person. Their unity, which has been almost universally accepted since 1914 (Gerhard Kittel’s book *Die Oden Salomos-üerrarbeitet oder einheitlich?*), at least suggest that the poems originated in one religious community… The only conclusion possible is that the author(s) will probably never lose their anonymity” (ibid., 5).

46 Ibid., 12.


And the elect archangels are clothed with it.

You have given us Your fellowship,
Not that You were in need of us,
But always we are in need of You.

Sprinkle upon us Your sprinklings;
And open Your bountiful springs
which abundantly supply us with milk and honey.⁴⁹

This hymn seems to reveal the baptismal structure, hint at the practice of clothing with the “robe of glory”⁵⁰ at the baptismal water, and reference the Eucharist. Even though this ode does not present a direct expression of the prebaptismal anointing, in a metaphorical way it implies the image of abundant baptismal water through “bountiful springs,” and the enriching rite of the Eucharist with “milk and honey.” As Lattke observes, however, it is unclear whether the “seal” (hatma) signified “baptism, circumcision, the Spirit, or a sign of the cross of or of a name.”⁵¹ Lattke assumes that the meaning of “seal” in this stanza Ode 4 probably is a “general metaphor for that which confirms or authenticates.”⁵² Accordingly, he concludes the meaning of seal to be some kind of “guarantee of God’s grace.”⁵³


⁵⁰ In Ephrem the robe of glory appears frequently to signify that baptismal candidates put on the robe of glory when they ascend from the baptismal water. I will look at the robe of glory in detail in the next chapter.

⁵¹ Lattke, Odes of Solomon, 55.

⁵² Ibid., 55.

⁵³ Ibid., 459 Lattke cites Peter Cameron’s remarks; “It might be better to understand the word as referring to some kind of … guarantee of God’s grace” (Peter Cameron, “The ‘Sanctuary’ in the Fourth Odes of Solomon,” in William Horbury, ed., Templum amicitiae: Essays on the Second Temple Presented to Ernst Bammel [Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 48; Sheffield: JSOP Press, 1991]).
Ode 25, however, seems to integrate the spiritual image into the baptismal rite, although the baptismal association is still controversial. Lattke rejects the hymn as a “baptismal hymn”; J. H. Bernard argues that the Ode was “placed in the mouth of the neophyte,” and Nocent also claims its baptismal context.

And I was covered with the covering of Your spirit,
And I removed from me my garments of skin.

Because Your right hand raised me,
And caused sickness to pass from me.

And I became mighty in Your truth,
And holy in Your righteousness.

And all my adversaries were afraid of me.
And I became the Lord’s by the name of the Lord.

It seems to me that the hymn contains baptismal language: “I” took off the old body of a sinner at the baptismal water, and since “You” saved me in “Your” truth and righteousness, “I” became a child of the Lord. Nevertheless, the Odes of Solomon does not obviously comment upon the baptismal rite, causing Lattke to argue that Ode 25 is a “personal testimony of salvation, which, at the end of the Syriac text, merges into a theological statement of eternity in the “rest” of the totally other-worldly “Lord.”

The Ode 36, however, seems to adumbrate the rite of anointing through the Anointed Jesus:

54 Lattke, Odes of Solomon, 357.
56 Nocent, “Christian Initiation during the First Centuries.”
57 The Odes of Solomon 25:8-11; translation from Charlesworth, The Earliest Christian Hymnbook, 75-76.
58 Lattke, Odes of Solomon, 357.
I rested on the Spirit of the Lord.
And She raised me up to heaven.

And She caused me to stand on my feet in the Lord’s high place,
Before His perfection and His glory,
Where I continued praising (Him) by the composition of His odes.

(Christ Speaks)

(The Spirit) brought Me forth before the Lord’s face.
And because I was the Son of Man,
I was named the Light, the Son of God,

Because I was the most praised among the praised,
And the greatest among the great ones.

According to the greatness of the Most High, so She [the Holy Spirit] made me;
And according to His newness He [God] renewed Me [Christ].

And He anointed Me from His perfection;
And I became one of those who are near Him.\(^{59}\)

J. Rendel Harris notes that the “Illuminated Son of God is Christ.”\(^{60}\) Following Harris, James Charlesworth inserted “Christ Speaks” into the text, so that these stanzas were read as a part of Christ’s singing.\(^{61}\) The ode speaks of a new status of Christ—supposing this translation is correct—by the Spirit who is “the agent of his renewal before the face of the Lord.”\(^{62}\) According to Lattke, the “actual performance of anointing is not visualized,”\(^{63}\) but rather the anointing from


\(^{61}\) Lattke, in *Odes of Solomon* (p. 501), did not insert the clauses.


\(^{63}\) Lattke, *Odes of Solomon*, 501.
His perfection signifies metaphorically a “rebirth” or “renewal” in some sense. Yet, “in the Christian circles, however, mention of anointing must have called up associations with the name or title Messiah/Christ.” Therefore, Ode 36 seems to have foreshadowed the rite of anointing of the baptismal candidates through the Anointed Jesus, although explicit mention of the prebaptismal anointing was absent.

*The Acts of Thomas*

It is assumed that the *Acts of Judas Thomas* was originally written in Syriac (and translated in Greek), and presumably in Edessa in the beginning of the third century. A. F. J. Klijn indicates that the textual contents of baptism and the Eucharist, in particular, originate from the Syrian tradition. Hence, chapters 25-27 and 132-133 refers to one anointing (prebaptismal anointing over the head), and chapters 121 and 156-158 contain two anointings (prebaptismal anointing of the head and of the whole body)—both of which embrace the Syrian baptismal typology and its anointing-immersing structure (absence of the postbaptismal anointing).

In chapters 27 and 132, one anointing took place—the anointing of the head:

> And Judas went up and stood upon the edge of the cistern, and poured oil upon their heads… And he baptized them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Spirit of holiness… And when it dawned and was morning, he broke the Eucharist. (chap. 27)

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64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 The Greek translation differed a lot from the Syriac manuscripts; even some contents were preserved only in the Greek version.


68 Ibid.
he cast oil upon their heads… they brought a large vat and he baptized them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit of holiness. (chap. 132)

However, a double anointing—the anointing of the head and then of the whole body—is indicated in chapters 121 and 157:

he cast it upon the head of Mygdonia… he told her nurse to anoint her, and to put a cloth round her lins, and he fetched the basin of their conduit. And Judas went up stood over it, and baptized Mygdonia in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit of holiness. And when she had come out and put on her clothes … he fetched and broke the Eucharist. (chap. 121)

he cast it upon the head of Vizan and then upon the heads of these (others)… And he commanded Mygdonia to anoint them and he himself anointed Vizan. And after he anointed then, he made them go down into the water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit of holiness. (chap. 157)

By comparing these two groups of practices, Gabriele Winkler concludes that the Acts of Thomas was composed of multiple layers of traditions. The prebaptismal anointing, namely, the anointing of the head, extended to the whole body; therefore, the second group (chapters 121 and 157) belongs to a later tradition. Interestingly, the Greek version of the Acts of Thomas does not contain the whole body anointing. Thomas Finn testifies to this hypothesis in examining the Didascalia Apostolorum, one of the oldest Syriac documents, by stating that the major concern of this document is particularly with the prebaptismal anointing of the head, even though it told about the whole body anointing.

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Ibid., 77, 214.

Ibid., 206, 240.


Winkler also examines the shift of meaning of the prebaptismal anointing in the two groups, observing that “the most striking evidence, however, for assuming a later stratum for chapters 121 and 157 is indicated by the shift from the leitmotiv centered around the Messiah to the healing aspect of the anointing.”

Even though the Didascalia regarded the prebaptismal anointing as the “oil of anointing” (*mesha da-meshihuta*), thus calling to mind the Messiah, it associates healing with the prebaptismal anointing, similar to what is found in documents of the West.

In the ritualization of the *Acts of Thomas*, a prayer for the anointing of the head appears:

Glory to thee, (thou) beloved fruit!
Glory to thee, (thou) name of the Messiah!
Glory to thee, (thou) hidden power that dwellest in the oil [*mesha*].

As Winkler claims, this prayer implies the gesture of anointing as “the entry into the messianic kingship of Christ (the Anointed), which is made known through the coming of the Spirit at this anointing.” Furthermore, Winkler examines the form of an epiclesis after anointing; the anointing was inextricably connected to the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Syrian baptismal tradition. The *Acts of Thomas* supplies the epiclesis, “Come, holy name of the Messiah… Come, sharer of the blessing, Come, revealer of the hidden mysteries… Come, Spirit of holiness.”

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77 Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing,” 43.

chapter 121, a baptismal invocation of the Holy Spirit appears: “May your power come and rest on this baptismal oil.”

The baptismal tradition known by the Acts of Thomas was connected with the role of the Holy Spirit, and anointing had a pneumatological association; anointing was not interpreted as either renunciation or exorcism. Similar to other early Syrian documents, the Acts of Thomas shows the structure of anointing-baptism, the meaning of the prebaptismal anointing as true initiation into “the messianic kingship of Christ,” and the absence of the postbaptismal anointing.

_Demonstrations of Aphrahat_

In the church of Aphrahat, the ascetic vow at baptism, as the previous chapter has shown, was likely to have been a living sacrament of baptismal fidelity. The Syriac-speaking community practiced the solemn and ascetic administration of baptism, annually, in accordance with the feast of Pascha, as written in _Demonstrations:_

> It is required that we keep the festival in its time from year to year, fasting in purity, praying firmly, praising diligently, saying psalms as is appropriate, giving the sign [of cross] and the baptism as is right… Thus it is appropriate for us: All the days of the week we should do what is right before the Lord our God.

Like other Syriac-speaking writers, Aphrahat also did not mention a postbaptismal anointing, and instead gave the structure of anointing, baptism, and then Eucharist.

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79 _The Acts of Thomas_, chapter 121.

80 Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing,” 43.


Prebaptismal Anointing

Jacob Neusner’s translation of Aphrahat interprets rushma as “giving the sign,” thus not clearly revealing the meaning as a prebaptismal anointing. Edward Duncan summarizes the baptismal sequence in Aphrahat as fasting, prayer, singing the psalms, handing over of signs, baptism, and celebration of the Eucharist, and gives no indication of a prebaptismal anointing.83 In order to determine whether the church of Aphrahat practiced prebaptismal anointing, Duncan examines closely the general structure of baptism in the church, thus reconstructing the baptismal order in Aphrahat—“anointing (rushma), baptism, Eucharist.”84 Duncan interprets rushma from three usages of Aphrahat:

Summing up the individual results of our investigation of the Persian Sage’s usage of signum (rushma), we see that in the first case signum, considered separately, was apparently equivalent to a signing or sealing in the form of a cross given to the candidates for baptism at some time before their immersion. In the second instance, we found that there was added to the notion signum the concept of an anointing. The third passage from Aphraates (Dem.23), although not entirely clear, reveals signum either as an anointing of the head with the invocation of the Blessed Trinity, or as a pars pro toto expression for the whole rite of baptism, more likely the latter.85

Finally, on the basis of the data, Duncan claims that he is “justified in concluding that the tradition signi mentioned in the demonstration On the Pasch (Dem. 12) is nothing other than an anointing, probably in the form of a cross, which more or less immediately preceded the descent into the baptismal font.”86

84 Ibid., 26.
85 Ibid., 24.
86 Ibid.
A recent translation of Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* makes Duncan’s argument more convincing. Adam Lehto translated *rushma*, meaning “mark” or “sign,” as an indicator of prebaptismal anointing:

This is what is required: to observe the festival in its time from season to season, to fast in purity, to pray continually, to give glory [to God] eagerly, to chant psalms when appropriate, to administer the anointing oil (*rushma*) as well as baptism in the proper way, to consecrate the holy things in their time and to fulfill all the customary rituals.  

The church of Aphrahat also revealed the common structure in the early Syrian baptismal tradition—fasting, anointing, immersing and the Eucharist. Moreover, according to Duncan’s research, “the *signum*,” namely anointing, was not given after baptism, thereby affirming the absence of the postbaptismal anointing in Aphrahat.  

In the prebaptismal anointing, images of the olive indicate Christ as the source of the sacrament. Robert Murray states:

Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Cyril of Jerusalem agree in bringing in olive-symbolism to designate Christ as source of the sacraments. The reason is the great part played by the pre-baptismal sacramental anointing (*rushma*) in the Syrian Church. All the aspects of the olive—its provision of light, anointing and healing—serve the Syrian Fathers, whether of Syriac or of Greek tongue, when they speak of the baptismal anointing, the *rushma* or “signing.”  

In Aphrahat and Ephrem, the imagery of olive or vine themes, frequently intermingled, formed a typology associated with Christ (the Anointed), and established the background of the symbolism in the early Syriac-speaking churches.

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87 Adam Lehto, “Divine Law, Asceticism, and Gender in Aphrahat’s Demonstrations, with a Complete Annotated Translation of the Text and Comprehensive Syriac Glossary” (Ph.D.diss., University of Toronto, 2003), 280.

88 Duncan, “The Administration of Baptism in the *Demonstrations* of Aphraates,” 24-25.

Paschal Baptism

Edward Duncan concludes that Aphrahat’s church preserved paschal baptism on the evening of the fourteenth of Nisan, since Aphrahat “reckoned the timing of the Paschal festival by the Jewish calendar, the administration of baptism might fall, therefore, on any of the days of the week.” However, if the Pasch (the fourteenth Nisan) fell on a Sunday, it had to be deferred to the following day, Monday:

For the people who hold correct opinions these things will not be difficult to comprehend. Now it should happen to us that the day of the paschal sacrifice of the passion of our redeemer should fall on the first day of the week (Sunday), according to the law it is appropriate that we should make it on the second day (Monday), so that the entire week should be kept in his passion and his unleavened bread.

Furthermore, Aphrahat witnessed to a week-long celebration of the Pasch.

For after the paschal sacrifice, there are seven days of unleavened bread until the twenty-first. On another day of the days of the week the passion should fall, we have no reason to be vexed by these things, for our great day is Friday… Now if we are vexed about these things and about the fourteenth alone, let us be diligent… let us take delight to keep the fourteenth of every month, and on the Friday of every week shall we mourn.

This confusion resulted from the Jewish calendar, since the baptismal date could be on any day of the week. Thus, Aphrahat ironically talked to his congregation to be diligent, so as to celebrate both fourteenth day of every month and Friday of every week!

The church of Aphrahat celebrated the annual paschal baptism, based on the biblical evidence. Aphrahat stated, “Israel was baptized in the middle of the Sea on that night of the paschal sacrifice… and our redeemer washed the feet of his disciples on the night of the paschal

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sacrifice, which is the mystery of baptism.” What is significant here is that the church interpreted the foot-washing (pedilavium) in a baptismal fashion, practiced on the night of the fourteenth Nisan. Aphrahat insisted on the yearly observance of the Pascha on the fourteenth Nisan, in coincidence with the Jewish calendar, stating that “it is required that we keep the festival in its time from year to year, fasting in purity, praying in firmly, praising diligently, saying psalms as is appropriate, giving the sign [of the cross] and the baptism as is right.”

Nevertheless, Aphrahat focused on Friday because it was the day when Jesus suffered. As Richard McCarron observes, Aphrahat’s three day celebration (Friday-Saturday-Sunday) had been “the beginning of a fusion of Quartodeciman practice and conformity to Nicea in the Persian area.” However, by the time of Aphrahat, “the Christian Pasch had been moved from 14-15 Nisan to the fixed day of Friday after 14 Nisan.” Aphrahat’s Demonstrations reports “his liturgical innovation, namely the move of the Christian Pasch from 14 Nisan to a Friday,” and accordingly Aphrahat began to find a fusion style of “Quartodeciman practice and conformity to Nicea.” As a result, McCarron asserts that Aphrahat preserved the contextualized adaptation of

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93 Demonstrations 12:12; translation from Neusner, Aphrahat and Judaism, 38.

94 This indicates people who keep the Easter on the fourteenth day of Nisan. “Quartodecimanism is not some local aberration from a supposed normative practice dating from apostolic times, but is instead the oldest form of the Easter celebration” (Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Origin of Easter,” in Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence Hoffman, Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times, Two Liturgical Traditions 5 [Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999], 82).


96 Ibid.


a “three-day celebration (Friday-Saturday-Sunday).” Nonetheless, it is quite possible that baptism had been administered, as Edward Duncan concluded, on the evening of the fourteenth Nisan.

Ephrem’s Understanding of Anointing

Before observing prebaptismal anointing in Ephrem, it is helpful to address the usage of the rite of anointing. Cyril of Jerusalem employed the words “exorcized oil” (elaio eporkisto), in which he revealed the characteristic of prebaptismal anointing as the exorcistic rite before baptism. Chrysostom of Antioch described the oil as “spiritual oil” (elaion pneumatikon), “oil of gladness” (elaion agalliasos), and “myron.” Ambrose of Milan regarded the anointing as “oil in preparation for combat with his adversary.” Even though Theodore of Mopsuestia preserved the old name of “the oil of anointing,” the meaning of the prebaptismal anointing changed, as Winkler states:

The reason for this alteration lies, beyond any doubt, in the considerable change in the concept of baptism as a whole: the entire ritual assumed more and more a predominantly purificatory character. From the fourth century onward the cathartic and apotropaic

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99 Ibid., 138.

100 “Then, when you stripped, you were anointed with exorcized oil, from the very hairs of your head to your feet, and were made partakers of the good olive-tree, Jesus Christ. For you were cut off from the wild olive-tree, and grafted into the good one, and were made to share the fatness of the true olive-tree.” Cited from Mystagogical Catechesis 2.3, St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s Lectures on the Christian Sacraments, 60.


102 Thomas M. Finn, The Liturgy of Baptism in the Baptismal Instructions of St. John Chrysostom (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 121ff and 130. As noted previously, in Chrysostom, there was no postbaptismal anointing.

elements grew to such a proportion that one can…speak of an estrangement of the original concept of baptism.¹⁰⁴

Winkler concludes that from fourth century onward, “the cathartic and apotropaic elements” of the prebaptismal anointing had been widely spread, eventually overwhelming the charismatic and messianic features.¹⁰⁵

For Ephrem, on the contrary, oil always portrayed the Anointed, the Christ, whether in name or in doing.¹⁰⁶ Thus, Ephrem’s madrashe were full of references to the charismatic and messianic scented oil, in which the main theme of the prebaptismal anointing was, as Winkler states, “the entry into the eschatological kingship of the Messiah, being in the true sense of the word assimilated to the Messiah-King through this anointing.”¹⁰⁷ Ephrem employed messha “(olive) oil” and rushma reciprocally:¹⁰⁸

Noah’s Ark 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: 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.¹⁰⁹

Sebastian Brock remarks that in this poem Ephrem integrated the (olive) leaf, the Holy Spirit, and the oil of anointing into a comprehensive meaning of oil, messha.¹¹⁰ These symbolic

¹⁰⁴ Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing,” 42.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Hymns on Virginity 7:12.


meanings of oil evoke the following images: the dove bringing the olive leaf to Noah, the Holy Spirit descending into the baptismal water in the form of dove, and the baptismal candidates anointed with the symbolical unction of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, as Brock notes, Ephrem used metaphorically the symbols of oil (messha) to express the multivalent dimensions of Christ, for “the treasurer of the symbols of oil completed the symbols for the Lord of symbols”.

Let oil in all its forms acknowledge You in Your entirety for oil gives rest to all. The olive served Christ, who gives life to all, depicting Him in its abundance, its branches and leaves:
With its branches it praised Him—through the children; with its abundance—through Mary
With its leaf again, through the dove which served Noah His type;
With its branches it depicted the symbol of His victory, with its leaf it depicted the symbol of His dying
With its leaf it depicted the symbol of His resurrection, the Flood disgorging it, as Death disgorged Christ.

Ephrem depicts the symbols of Christ’s victory and resurrection through the mysterious oil of the prebaptismal anointing—the rushma (of the head) or the meshha (of the whole

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110 Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 58.


113 *Hymns on Virginity* 4:9 may be viewed as the anointing of the head: “oil filled the place of lineage for strangers whom it accompanied. On the road it gave rest to their weariness; in vexation it bandages their head” (translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 278). However, Baby Varghese views that Ephrem probably knew only one anointing of the whole body; he indicates the only one anointing in *Hymns on Virginity* 7:7, 9 and *Hymns on Faith* 82.10 (Baby Varghese, *Les Onctions Baptismales dans la Tradition Syrienne* CSCO 512 Subsidia 82 [Louvain: Peeters, 1989], 47): “Ephrem made very frequent allusions to the anointing of the body. Probably he had one pre-baptismal anointing, that of the whole body. Probably in his thought the anointing over the head (or forehead) is not detached from the body” (my translation). On the other hand, Edmund Beck argues that that Ephrem manifested “a total anointing” in *Hymns on Virginity* 7:5: “Possibly it seems to me that for Ephrem the twofold anointings come into question, of which it can say as a unit without precise separation” (my translation). Edmund Beck, *Dorea und Charis. Die Taufe. Zwei Beiträge zur Theologie Ephräms des Syrers*, CSCO 427. Subsidia 72 (Louvain: Peeters, 1984), 90.
The Hymns on Virginity 4 to 7 are linked with the baptismal rites, as indicated by the collection’s subtitle, “On Oil, the Olive and the Symbols of the Lord.” The hymnic refrains speak of these symbols:

- Glory to the Anointed Who rose and enlightened the symbols that were veiled. (Hymn 4)
- Glory to the Anointed Who came, and the symbols ran to His fulfillment. (Hymn 5)
- Blessed is He Who gave eyes to the peoples to see the symbols of the Son, the Anointed. (Hymn 6)
- How much can we marvel at You, our Savior? Your glory is greater than our tongue. (Hymn 7)

In Hymn 7, Ephrem praises the multivalent dimensions of the beauty of Christ, in comparison with the polyvalent features of the symbols of oil: “As the beauty of Christ is manifold, so the olive’s symbols are manifold.” His acclamations reveal how deeply oil functioned as a fundamental feature of the baptismal rites in the early Syrian tradition.

The Hymn 4 describes the oil as “a treasure of symbols” and the olive tree as “the treasure-house,” in which “His symbols rest”:

Let my mouth have Your teaching, my Lord, as a merchant capital,  
For on [Your teaching] depend all forms of wisdom and from the olive a treasure of symbols…

My gaze succumbed and was conquered by its beauties  
that gave a glimpse and gazed into the treasure-house  
of the olive tree in which His symbols rest: as its oil the Light entered  
and it bore His types as fruits. And who is able to pluck the fruit,  
hidden and revealed, of this glorious tree that bears

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114 Hymns on Virginity 4:14 may be read as an expression of the flowing of the oil down to the whole body: “the river of Eden is divided in four directions in a symbol, and the flowing of oil is divided in the churches in a glorious symbol” (translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 279).

openly the fruits and leaves and secretly the symbols and types,
and it gives life to the body with its visible things and to the mind with its secrets.\footnote{116} 

Although it is uncertain when and where this \textit{madrashe} was used, the phrase, “it gives life to the body with its visible things,” may suggest this hymn’s relationship to the prebaptismal anointing rite. The early Syrian baptismal rites, in which the prebaptismal anointing played a great role, recognized easily the olive-symbolism as Christ, the source of the sacraments.\footnote{117} In addition, this \textit{madrashe} mentions the healing role of oil, as Kathleen McVey indicates: “Just as the oil of the olive gives life to the body through its healing properties, it gives life to the mind by its symbolism.”\footnote{118}

Oil is the scepter for old age and the armor for youth.
It supports sickness and is the bulwark of health.
It is one but it is many in its uses: it gives chrism for altars,
And they bear the offering of reconciliation…

An abundance is oil with which sinners do business: the forgiveness of sins.
By oil the Anointed forgave the sins of the sinner who anointed [his] feet.\footnote{119}

This \textit{madrashe} informs us of the baptismal ceremony and Ephrem’s theology. Ephrem uses \textit{meshha} (in strophe 4.5), which signifies the anointing of the whole body. The early church would have practiced anointing of the sick by placing oil upon the wounded body, and believed that the blessed oil had a power to forgive sins. Anointing seems to have been practiced with the Trinitarian formula, as suggested in 4.14: “That one of Eden has four names, the heralds of river, and oil has three names, the trumpets of baptism.”

\footnotetext[116]{Hymns on Virginity 4: 2-3; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 276.}

\footnotetext[117]{Murray, \textit{Symbols of Church and Kingdom}, 116.}

\footnotetext[118]{McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 275.}

\footnotetext[119]{Hymns on Virginity 4:10-11; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 278-279.}
An expanded notion of oil as the “Light” appears vividly in Hymn 5:

Again, oil fixes for us a lamp, a luminary in the height,
And the glory of the Anointed, the true Light, shone forth from Golgotha.
By the luminary all is arranged, and by the Anointed all is explained.
Without light all would be devoid of usefulness,
And without the Anointed everything would be lacking fulfillment.
The light is sufficient for visible things and the Anointed for all hidden things.¹²⁰

Ephrem asked for “all forms of wisdom” from the oil, since he looked upon the olive as
“a treasury of symbols.”¹²¹ Interestingly, he used a familiar metaphor in expressing the
multivalent symbols of the oil—“oil became the key of the hidden treasure-house of
symbols”¹²²—which was linked with his illustration of the Bible as “the treasure house of God”
and the voice of reading the scripture as “the key of the treasure house of God.”¹²³ As all the
scriptures were explained in the Anointed (Christ), so all the symbols were unveiled in Him:

For oil became the key of the hidden treasure-house of symbols.
It propounds for us the similes of God Who became human.
The whole creation gave Him all the symbols hidden in it.
The scriptures also gave their parables, and they were explained in Him.
And the writings [gave] all their types and the Law also its shadow.
The olive tree stripped off and gave to the Anointed the comeliness of the symbols upon
it.¹²⁴

In Hymns on Virginity 6:1, Ephrem opened up the theological and liturgical
characteristics of oil—its charismatic and messianic features related to the prebaptismal
anointing:

¹²⁰ Hymns on Virginity 5:1; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 281-282.
¹²¹ Hymns on Virginity 4:2; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 276. In Ephrem, the olive
frequently signified Christ.
¹²² Hymns on Virginity 5:16; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 286.
¹²⁴ Hymns on Virginity 5:16; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 286.
Oil in the likeness of the Heavenly One became the giver of kingship. From the horn [of oil] a pure cloud descended upon the head of a body, As God descended upon the top of the mountains and gave brightness to Moses, And Solomon received brightness symbolically From the horn of messiahship. From the People to the peoples it went out. Instead of the few, many will be anointed and cleansed.  

The oil conferred “kingship” to “many” to be anointed and baptized, as the kings and priests had been anointed in the Old Testament. As the hymn reveals, the oil definitely conveys “messiahship” to the “many,” thus making “an allusion to the priests and kings of the old covenant.”  

Significantly, as Winkler observes, Ephrem understood the relationship between oil and the Holy Spirit—the oil as “the gift of the Spirit bestowed on the baptizandus at this prebaptismal anointing”.  

This oil is a dear friend of the Holy Spirit, it serves Him, following Him like a disciple. With it the Spirit signed priests and anointed kings For with the oil the Holy Spirit imprints His mark on His sheep. Like a signet ring whose impression is left on wax, So the hidden seal of the Spirit is imprinted by oil on the bodies of those who are anointed in baptism. Thus are they marked in the baptismal mystery.  

Finally, his Hymns on Virginity portray the bucolic landscape of the countryside, drawing upon the characteristics of October and April in view of the baptismal celebration: October (Tishri) revives the weary from the dust and dirt of summer; its rain bathes and its dew anoints even trees and their fruits.

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125 Hymns on Virginity 6:1; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 287-288.


127 Ibid. 33.

April (Nisan) revives fasters, anoints, dips and whitens; it scour[s] the dirt of sin from our souls. October tramples the oil for us; April increases mercy for us. In October fruits are harvested; in April debts are forgiven.¹²⁹

This hymn sings that April (Nisan) provides mercy for us through the baptismal rites, in which anointing was followed by baptism:

The Anointed, source of all helps, accompanied the body, source of pains. For oil bolts out debts as the Flood blotted out the unclean. For the Deluge, like the Just One, justly blots out evil people. Since they did not conquer their lust, those who deluged [the earth] with it, floated. But oil in the likeness of the Gracious One bolts out our debts in baptism. Since sin is drowned in the water, let it not be revived by desires.¹³⁰ Poetically yet articulately, Ephrem unfolds the messianic and charismatic features of the prebaptismal anointing, which is deeply associated with the Holy Spirit. The rite of anointing “imprints the mark of Christ’s ownership” on the baptizands,¹³¹ with the three names (Trinity), as Ephrem described:

The river of Eden is divided in four directions in a symbol, And the flowing of oil is divided in the churches in a glorious symbol That one waters the Garden of Eden; this one enlightened the holy church. That one gladdens trees, and this one bodies. That one of Eden has four names, the heralds of rivers, And oil has three names, the trumpets of baptism.¹³²

As Eden has four rivers but is one, so is oil, of which rite has been celebrated with the three names—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Baptism**

In the Syrian initiatory sequence, baptism proper followed the period of fasting (the Holy

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¹²⁹ *Hymns on Virginity* 7:2; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 293.


Fasting of Forty Days) and the prebaptismal anointing.\textsuperscript{133} As the previous section has shown, anointing and immersing belonged together, as Ephrem illustrated:

\begin{quote}
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.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

The baptismal candidate was anointed with oil, and then “dived down” to the water. Then, some questions appear: Who administered the ceremony? When, how, and where was baptism practiced? What formula did the church proclaim at the font? What significance was applied to baptism proper? This section will discuss these questions relative to the ceremony of baptism in the Syriac-speaking community.

\section*{Administration of Baptism}

Even though a major theme of the feast of the Epiphany was the baptism of Christ, Ephrem never alluded to the administration of baptism at that season. Unlike Aphrahat, Ephrem did not provide any exact date of baptism. Instead, he stated that the church celebrated baptism in Nisan (April).\textsuperscript{135} Other mystagogues—Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Chrysostom—practiced baptism at the Easter vigil, since Easter became the preferred season of baptism after the Nicene Council (325). Presumably, Ephrem celebrated baptism at the Easter vigil.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 7:2, 5-10; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 293-295.

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 7:10; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 295.

\textsuperscript{135} Ephrem used the verbs “anoint, dip, and whiten” in relation to Nisan, in \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 7:2.
Ephrem’s *Hymns on Virginity* indicate significant features of his baptismal practices: the baptism proper is assisted by the bishop, priests, and the “crown of Levites” (deacons):

It is the priesthood which ministers to this womb as it gives birth; Anointing precedes it, the Holy Spirit hovers over its streams, A crown of Levites surrounds it, the chief priest is its minister, The Watchers rejoice at the lost who in it are found. Once this womb has given birth the altar suckles and nurtures them: Her children eat straight away, not milk, but perfect Bread!

This hymn reveals the outline of the baptismal sequence in the early Syriac-speaking church:

“the anointing, the sanctification of the baptismal water, with the Holy Spirit ‘hovering’ over it, the baptism in water, officiated by the chief priest (or bishop) and assisted by the deacons, and culminating in Communion.” The bishop (“the chief priest”) served at the ceremony of baptism, assisted by priests, together with deacons (“a crown of Levites”) surrounding the baptismal candidates at the baptismal water. This hymn highlights the baptismal image of a womb. Ephrem regarded baptism as a birth and the baptismal water as a womb. The newly born in baptism were nourished with the “the perfect bread,” the Eucharist. Significantly, the hymn indicates that baptized Christians were to be nourished and nurtured by “the altar,” the Eucharistic liturgy. In this regard, Ephrem played a great role in instructing the congregation by catechizing the community with his madrashe throughout the liturgy, aiming for a better nourishment and education after baptism.

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136 *Hymns on Virginity* 7:8; translation from *Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems*, 191.

137 *Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems*, 182.
Sanctification of the Baptismal Water

As noted earlier, the *Hymns on Virginity* reveals that the epiclesis over the baptismal water took place after the anointing: “anointing precedes it, the Holy Spirit hovers over its streams.” Similarly, Aphrahat’s *Demonstration* narrates the invocation of the Spirit: “At that moment when the priest invokes the Spirit, she [Spirit] opens up the heavens, descends and hovers over the water [Gen. 1:2], while those who are being baptized clothe themselves in her. The Spirit remains distant from all who are of bodily birth until they come to the birth [that belongs to the baptismal] water: only then do they receive the Holy Spirit.” Ephrem also employed the technical term “hover,” indicating “the Spirit’s activity” over the water: “The Holy Spirit hovers over the streams (of the baptismal water).” The *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* defines the noun of “hover,” ruhhafa as “the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Eucharistic and baptismal elements.”

According to Sebastian Brock, there are two formulations for the epiclesis on the baptismal water:

In most of the West Syrian services the Father is addressed, and he is asked to send the Holy Spirit, while in the Maronite and East Syrian traditions the invocation takes the form “may the Spirit come …,” which represents the more archaic of the two phrases. We


139 *Hymns on Virginity* 7:8; translation from *Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems*, 191.


141 *Hymns on Virginity* 7:8; translation from *Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems*, 191.

will also find differences in the description of what the Holy Spirit will effect: the Spirit is asked to “bless” or “sanctify” or “perfect” the waters, or to “rest and reside” upon them, or to “make” them into the Jordan waters, or the water from the side of Christ (John 19:34).\textsuperscript{143}

Brock presents various types of epiclesis in his writings in order to acknowledge the diversity of prayers extant, even though “we can only sketch the bare outlines.”\textsuperscript{144} In conclusion, Brock offers two types of epiclesis—“send your Spirit” and “may your Spirit come.”\textsuperscript{145} The archaic type, “may your Spirit come,” predominated in the whole Syrian area, and thus it can be seen in relation to the baptismal water and the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{146} The hymn supports this presumption:

\begin{quote}
The Spirit came down from on high  
And sanctified the water by her hovering,  
In the baptism of John  
She [the Spirit] passed by the rest and abode on One  
But now she has descended and abode  
On all that are born of the water.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

This hymn employs the ancient type of invocation prayer, by using the verb “come,” indicating that the Holy Spirit came down from heaven to abide upon the baptismal water.

**Baptism by Immersion**

According to John Baldovin, “[t]he presumption in the fourth century and following centuries is that baptism is performed by either a total immersion of the body or by pouring

\textsuperscript{143} Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 70.

\textsuperscript{144} Brock presents the traditions of the East Syrian, Maronite Jacob, Syrian Orthodox Timothy, Syrian Orthodox Severus, Syrian Orthodox Philoxenus, Melkite Basil, Melkite Shor services.

\textsuperscript{145} Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 73.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 73-74.

\textsuperscript{147} *Hymns on Epiphany* 6:1; translation from Johnston, “Fifteen Hymns: For the Feast of the Epiphany,” 273.
water over the head of a person standing in water.”  In Ephrem’s description of Jesus’ baptism, his head “bent down and was baptized”:

There is wonder in Your footsteps, which walked on the water:
You subjected a great sea beneath Your feet,
Yet Your very head was subject to just a small river,
In that it bent down and was baptized therein.  

Ephrem described Jesus’ baptism as bending his head down to the water possibly based on the practice of his own church. The bending down of the head may be a reference to immersion or to affusion in conjunction with immersion. However, the “diving down” image of baptism that frequently appears in Ephrem’s madrashe supports an understanding that his church practiced baptism by immersion.

The “Diving Down” Image of Baptism

The image of pearl divers, who dive into the water and bring up pearls, is a key metaphor for baptismal candidates that Ephrem used quite frequently. Ephrem’s baptismal hymns were permeated with the mercantile images, suitable for the fame of Nisibis as the center of trading. Ephrem identified the baptizands with “pearl divers who oil their bodies before plunging into the depths to search for Christ the Pearl”:

In Symbol and in truth is Leviathan trodden down
by mortals; the 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.  

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149 Hymns on Faith 10:20; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 213.


151 Hymns on Faith 82:10; translation from Brock, The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition, 103.
The Pearl signifies Christ: the pearl divers “raise up from the sea the pearl; dive down and take up from the water the purity that is hidden there—the pearl that is entwined in the crown of divinity.”

In the period of Bishop Vologeses, a baptistery was built (359-360) that still stands today. David Bundy reports:

The year 359 was an important year in the city of Nisibis. In the spring of that year, Nisibis endured a siege by the Persians led by Shapur II. In 359 the baptistery attached to the church of Jacob of Nisibis was built. This carefully-crafted building, dedicated by Bishop Vologeses, the third bishop of Nisibis recognized by Ephrem, was replete with its inscription in Greek and still stands.

A carved inscription records these words: “This baptistery was erected and completed in the year 671 (=A.D. 359/360) in the time of Bishop Vologeses through the zeal of the priest Akepsimas. May this inscription be a memorial to them.”

Presumably, the baptistery had an impact on Ephrem’s writing, at least in terms of the way of baptizing, the immersion. As noted above, the Hymns on Faith depicted Jesus’ baptism by immersion; in imitation of Jesus, the baptismal candidate walked down to the water of the baptistery and bent down the head in order to be baptized.

How wonderful your footsteps, walking on the waters!
You subdued the great sea beneath your feet

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155 Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 11.
[Yet] to a little stream you subjected your head,
bending down to be baptized in it.

The stream was like John who baptized in it,
in their smallness each an image of the other.
To the stream so little, the servant so weak,
the Lord of them both subjected himself.

See, Lord, my arms are filled with the crumbs from our table;
there is no room left in my lap.
As I kneel before you, hold back your Gift;
Keep it in your storehouse to give us again! 156

Furthermore, Ephrem’s hymns reveal that the divers—the baptismal candidates—were naked, in order to reach the pearl at the bottom of the water:

Men stripped bare dived down and drew you up,
O pearl. It was not kings
who first presented you to humankind,
but men stripped, symbols of the apostles, poor Galilean fishermen.

They could not approach you with their bodies clothed
so they came stripped, like little children;
they buried their bodies and descended to you.
You eagerly met them and you take refuge in them
because they loved you so.

The tongues of these poor men, the apostles,
proclaimed glad tidings of you before they opened their bosoms
and brought out their new wealth to show it
amidst the merchants, placing you
in people’s hands as the Medicine of Life. 157

This diving image supports baptism by immersion and may suggest other details of the structure
of the baptismal ceremony—the stripping of the garments, anointing, and then the immersion—

156 Hymns on Faith 10:20-22; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems, 213.
practices found in other fourth century churches. Candidates plunged into the water naked like innocent children in order to pick up the treasure at the bottom, the Pearl. The baptismal candidate in Ephrem’s church walked down to the water of the baptistery, and then bent down his or her head into the water (presumably three times) to be baptized.

Baptism in the Name of Trinity

The baptism proper was performed in the name of the Trinity and possibly with a passive formula, although Ephrem did not quote the liturgical formula as Chrysostom and Theodore did; “N. is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Ephrem mentioned “the threefold name” (Hymns on Faith 49:4), “the three glorious names” (Hymns on Virginity 7:5), and “three labor pangs” (Hymns on Virginity 7:5) to signify the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hymns on Faith remarks on the Trinity in the baptismal context:

[The Ark] 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]:  
With the threefold name He rescues those who reside in her,  
And in place of the dove, the Spirit administers Her anointing  
And the mystery of His salvation, Praises to its Savior!  

This hymn described the members of the Trinity cooperating with one another in the baptismal context as the Ark’s (the Church’s) Preserver (God), Cross of its Steersman and Wood of its

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158 Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopusestia attest to nakedness prior to the prebaptismal anointing.

159 The pearl was one of Ephrem’s favorite symbols. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., accounted for Ephrem’s four favorite symbols—the mirror, oil, the olive tree and the pearl—in “St. Ephrem, Madrășe on Faith, 81-85: Hymns on the Pearl, I-V,” St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 38 (1994): 53. Sebastian Brock explains that “the pearl came into existence when lightning struck the mussel in the sea,” and it was “seen by Ephrem as a symbol of Christ’s birth in the flesh from the Holy Spirit, the Fire, and from Mary, ‘the watery flesh’” (The Luminous Eye, 107).

160 Hymns on Faith 49:4; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 35.
Sailor (Christ), and the dove (Spirit). Ephrem sang that the Trinity fashions us a Church in the baptismal water. In another hymn, Ephrem mentioned the name of Trinity in the context of baptism.

Great is the marvel that is within thy abode
The flocks together with the Shepherds,
Those at the stream of the waters,
Two unseen with one manifest who baptizes.
Blessed is he who is baptized in their fountains!
For three arms have upheld him
And three Names have preserved him!\(^{161}\)

Another passage describes the Trinity to be manifested in Christ’s baptism in the Jordan:

It is audacity in us to call Thee by a Name which is a different one from what Thy Father called thee, who called Thee “My Son” alone on the river Jordan; and when Thou wert baptized, even Thou, the mystery of the Trinity baptized Thy humanity, the Father by His voice, and the Son by His power, and the Spirit by His over-shadowing. Praises to the over-shadowing of Thee! Who could deny the Threefold Names, whose over-shadowing ministered of old, by the Jordan? True is it that by the Names wherewith Thy Body was baptized, that our bodies are baptized; and through there be very many Names of the Lord of all, He hath baptized us in the Father and the Son and the Spirit distinctively. Praises to Thy Majesty!\(^{162}\)

Impressively, this hymn appeals to our senses for the understanding of the Trinity—the Father by his voice audible, the Son by his power touchable, and the Spirit by the descending as a dove visible.\(^{163}\) Accordingly, we are baptized in the name of the Trinity—“who could deny the Threefold Names?” asked Ephrem. Therefore, the author praised the Trinity in the hymn:

The Father has signed Baptism, to exalt it!
and the Son has espoused it to glorify it


and the Spirit with threefold seal
has stamped it, and it has shone in holiness.
Blessed be He that has mercy on all!

The Trinity that is unsearchable
has laid up treasures in baptism.
Descend, ye poor, to its fountain!
and be enriched from it, ye needy!
Blessed be He that has mercy on all!\(^\text{164}\)

The hymn exalts the Trinity, by acclamation of the Father who instituted baptism, the Son who manifested himself as the Son in baptism, and the Spirit who sealed the mystery of salvation revealed through baptism. Hence, the hymn requests people who are poor and needy to come to the water, thus taking up the treasures in the enriching baptismal water, since the Trinity, unsearchable yet merciful, permeates the baptismal ceremony and, furthermore, the whole life of the baptizands. The Trinity would provide the poor and the needy with profound treasures when they come and descend into the baptismal water.

The Syriac-speaking church rejected baptism “in one name,” making it clear instead that “it gives birth to them with triple pangs, accompanied by the three glorious names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”\(^\text{165}\)

Blessed are you, O church, whose congregation
Sings with three glorious harps.
Your finger plucks the harp of Moses
And [the harp] of our Savior and [the harp] of nature.
Your faith plays the three [harps],
For three names baptized you.
You were not able to be baptized in one name nor
To play on one harp.\(^\text{166}\)


\(^{165}\) *Hymns on Virginity* 7:5; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 294.

The Syrian church, furthermore, encouraged the congregation to “play three harps,” which metaphorically signifies that the Christians perceive instruction to come from the three instruments—the harp of Moses (the Word of God, Torah), the harp of our Savior (the New Testament), and the harp of nature (instruction from nature itself). Ephrem let his congregation play the music of Christ, harmonized in the three instruments of the Old and New Testament and nature, thus to augment their faithful life in the scriptures.

As a disciple of the Nicene Creed, Ephrem emphasized repeatedly the Trinity, based on the scripture; moreover, he illustrated the equality and unity of the three names:

The Names of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, equal are they, and at unity in the ellipse at Baptism. The Names are united, the movement is the concordant one of one Will. They bear as it were one yoke, and come; and as They are equal in the ellipse at Baptism, so are They also in Their unanimity.

Furthermore, he revealed his Trinitarian thoughts in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, regarding the passages of the blind man who was cured in Siloam: “it is not the water of our atonement that cleansed us. Rather, it is the names pronounced over it which give us atonement.” The names of the Trinity cured the blind man. Therefore, the poet sang a song of joy in *Hymns on Epiphany*, “Who would not rejoice, in your bride chamber, my brethren? For

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167 Ephrem presented frequently “Nature and Scripture (The Old Testament and The New Testament)” as agents to “testify to God by means of the symbols and types which they contain, for these act as pointers to spiritual reality or truth,” (Sebastian Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990], 41-42). Brock emphasizes his point by citing Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise* 5:2:

In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world, so that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator:

Nature, through man’s use of it, Scripture, through his reading it; they are the witnesses which reach everywhere, they are to be found at all times, present at every hour, confuting the unbeliever who defames the Creator.


the Father with His Son, and the Spirit rejoice in you!”

“Fire and Spirit” in Baptism

The early Syriac-speaking communities preserved the tradition of the appearance of fire on the Jordan. Sebastian Brock notes that “the water itself is described as going up in flames; this goes back to an ancient tradition that the Jordan went up in flames at Christ’s own baptism.” Brock cites also Jacob of Serugh’s poem: “fire over the baptismal water was seen by Constantine.” The tradition also is found in Ephrem:

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!

Robert Murray notes that this stanza summed up succinctly his “doctrine of the Spirit’s agency in the Incarnation and the sacraments,” such as in Mary’s womb, in the Jordan, in Christian baptism, and in the Eucharist. The reference to the fire and the Spirit at baptism is significant, for it reflects the pneumatic characteristic of baptism and therefore the “intrinsic unity of the

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171 In addition to Ephrem, the Acts of John, Jacob of Serugh, and the Syrian baptismal ordines were acquainted with the appearance of fire on the Jordan. However, Tatian’s *Diatessaron* recorded that light, not the fire, appeared on the Jordan, as stated by Ephrem in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, “from the splendor of the light which appeared on the water”; see McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 85. Interestingly, light is *nuhra* in Syriac; fire is *nura* in Syriac. Thus there might have been confusion in the copying of the manuscript.


173 Ibid.


baptismal event”: “baptism and the outpouring of the Spirit are one mystery and sacrament.”

Whitening

Ascending from the water, the newly baptized “sheep” rejoice more than the rest of the flock, since they have just received baptism and for the first time are “mingled in the flock!”

Even though the giving of robes to the newly baptized resulted from practical necessity, Ephrem interpreted the white robes from the perspective of a biblical image by selecting the word “sheep.” He associated the rich image of sheep with the color of whiteness and the folk of Christ:

The sheep that beforetime were in the fold
Lo! They hasten forth to greet
The new lamb that have been added to it
They are white and are clad in white
Within and without white are your bodies as your vestments.

From the hymn, it is certain that Ephrem embraced a dual meaning “whitening,” that is, by baptism their bodies were white “within and without”; their inner sin has been whitened—forgiven—and their outer body has been whitened by being clothed in the white robes. Therefore the people who were participating in the baptismal liturgy shouted, “Blessed are ye; sin from you is driven out.” This scene evokes the biblical image of Isaiah 1:18 where the Lord says, “Come now, let us argue it out: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” Ephrem employed appropriately the dual

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176 Winkler, “Confirmation or Chrismation?”, 217.

177 *Hymns on Epiphany* 6:6 called “the sheep” those who were just being baptized and ascending up out of the water.


image of wool—sheep as the flock of Christ and sheep with wool of white color. Therefore, Ephrem told the newly baptized sheep in white, “May ye from all defilement be kept by the power of our white robes.”\textsuperscript{180} Finally, they were told that their “stains are made white…pure like infants”:

With the oil of discernment bodies are anointed for forgiveness, bodies that were filled with stains are made white without effort: they go down sordid with sin, they go up pure like infants, for baptism is a second womb for them. Rebirth [in the font] rejuvenates the old, as the river rejuvenated Naaman. O womb that gives birth every day without pangs to the children of the Kingdom!\textsuperscript{181}

After being robed in white, the newly baptized proceeded to the Eucharist. The newborn children from the “womb of the waters”\textsuperscript{182} were led to the Eucharist—the nourishment from God—where they were united in the family of God. Ephrem stated, “From the womb of the waters we are newly mounted up; let us not be divided members.”\textsuperscript{183} The newborn children from the baptismal water were led to the sanctuary, where the congregation, keeping the Easter vigil, gathered together to greet them. To them, Ephrem acclaimed, “Blessed were those who might enter and see congregations at peace in the Churches!”\textsuperscript{184}

**Eucharist**

Early Syriac-speaking Christianity integrated anointing, baptism, and the Eucharist, into

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\textsuperscript{181} Ephrem, \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 7:7; translation from \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems}, 191.


\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Hymns on Crucifixion} 3:8, translation from Murray, “St. Ephrem the Syrian on Church Unity,” 171.

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Hymns on the Church} 51:3; translation from Murray, “St. Ephrem the Syrian on Church Unity,” 171. Murray excerpts these passages in the same page.
the unity of the initiation rites. As has already been shown, postbaptismal anointing did not exist in the Syriac-speaking church.\textsuperscript{185} On the Eucharist within the initiation rites, John Baldovin remarks that in the fourth-century churches “it seems to be granted that receiving the eucharistic elements is the logical culmination of the initiation—a literal “in-corp-oration” into the community of the faithful.”\textsuperscript{186} Ephrem depicted the cohesive sequence of baptism and the Eucharist by overlapping the baptismal feast with the wedding feast through a common image of whitening:

\begin{quote}
The Firstborn wrapped himself in a body, as a veil to hide his glory; the immortal bride shines out in that robe, let the guests in their robes resemble him in his; let your bodies, which are your clothing, shine out, for they bound in fetters the man whose body was stained. O whiten my stains at your banquet with your radiance.\textsuperscript{187}
\end{quote}

The baptismal mystery culminated at the banquet of the Eucharist, presumably on Easter eve, for “it was on Easter eve that in many places it was the custom for baptisms to take place.”\textsuperscript{188}

Drawing upon \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 7:5, Brock notes that “October (Tishir) provides the oil for the baptismal anointing in April (Nisan),” namely, “the month of the Feast of the Resurrection.”\textsuperscript{189}

\textbf{Ephrem’s Terminology for the Eucharist: \textit{Qurbana} (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ)}

Ephrem used the Syriac word, “\textit{Qurbana},” for the Eucharist, literally meaning “sacrificial

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item<1,0> \textsuperscript{185} Except for Chrysostom, the fourth century preachers on baptism—Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, and Theodore of Mopsuestia—remarked on postbaptismal anointing in their baptismal structure. But Aphrahat and Ephrem, in the early Syriac-speaking churches, did not mention it.
\item<1,0> \textsuperscript{186} Baldovin, “The Empire Baptized,” 91.
\item<1,0> \textsuperscript{187} \textit{Hymns on Nisibene} 43:21; translation from Brock, \textit{The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition}, 116.
\item<1,0> \textsuperscript{188} \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems}, 181.
\item<1,0> \textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
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Ephrem discerned the Christian meaning of *Qurbana* from the sacrifice of the Jewish Passover, by emphasizing the “sacrifice of Christ on the cross,” thus commemorating the Last Supper. He emphasized the differences between the unleavened bread of the Passover and the Eucharistic bread, stating that Jesus gave the bread of life to the disciples on that night, instead of the unleavened bread that they ate in Egypt. The church gave us the living bread, instead of the unleavened bread of Egypt; the Virgin Mary gave us the living bread to replace Eve’s vanished bread.

Ephrem forbade his congregation to take the two breads together, since “the medicine of life” and “the medicine of death” could not belong together:

My brothers, do not eat, along with the medicine of life, the unleavened bread of the People, as it were, the medicine of death.

For Christ’s blood is mingled, spilt, in the unleavened of the People and in our Eucharist (*Qurbana*).

Whoever takes it in the Eucharist (*Qurbana*) takes the medicine of life. Whoever eats it with the People, takes the medicine of death.

In the early church, the interpretation of the *Qurbana* as the “Medicine of Life” was widespread. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 98-117), in his letter to the Ephesians (20:2) described the Eucharist as the “medicine of immortality.” Justin Martyr (*First Apology* 66) noted that the Eucharist was not

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190 A *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (p. 498) describes the meaning of *Qurbana* as: “(a) an offering, oblation to God, a sacrificial offering; (b) the Eucharistic oblation, eucharist, anaphora.”


193 *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread* 19:22-24; translation from Griffith, “‘Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine,’” 229.
“common bread or common drink” but the “flesh and blood of [the] incarnate Jesus.” Therefore, Ignatius and Justin identified the Eucharistic bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ in a realistic manner.  

Ephrem also described a picture of Paradise where baptized Christians pluck the fruit of Christ, tread the clusters of grapes, and then make them into the “Medicine of Life”:

The assembly of the 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.  

Regarding this hymn, Sebastian Brock states that “Ephrem envisages daily Communion” with paradisiacal overtones. Sidney Griffith also posits that Ephrem and his contemporary Christians might have practiced the holy Qurbana, “not only at Eastertime,” but also “on Sundays and major feast days,” as well, “every day.” A daily celebration of communion could, in fact, have existed. Citing Tertullian (Ad uxorem 2.5), Maxwell Johnson notes, “Christians regularly took enough of the Eucharistic elements home with them each Sunday to be able to receive communion at other times during the week, even daily.” Possibly these Christians thought the more, the better, since they regarded the sacraments as the medicine of life. A daily practice of the Qurbana is not certain; however, it is clear that the first Qurbana started after baptism.

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195 Hymns on Paradise 6:8; translation from Brock, The Luminous Eye, 100.

196 Brock, The Luminous Eye, 100.

197 Griffith, “‘Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine,’” 229.

The Eucharist within the Initiation Rites

Ephrem pointed out that baptism was followed by the Eucharist, stating, “Our Lord baptized human kind with the Holy Spirit, he nourished it with the Medicine of Life.” The imagery of Jesus as the medicine of life has been also used in the meaning of Christ himself; however here it signifies the Eucharist. As Ephrem indicated, the newly baptized received the Eucharist thus to be nourished in the life of the church. One hymn from *Hymns on Epiphany* places the Eucharist within the baptismal structure:

In it, with the unction ye have been anointed  
    ye have put Him on in the water  
    in bread ye have eaten Him  
    in the wine ye have drunk Him  
    in the voice ye have heard Him  
    and in the eye of the mind ye have seen Him!

Ephrem integrated baptism and the Eucharist in sequence, locating the bread and wine in the baptismal context.

*Holy Spirit in Baptism and the Eucharist*

In the integrative sequence of baptism and the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit played a great role. Ephrem highlighted the presence of the Holy Spirit “in the womb, in the Jordan, in our baptismal font, and eventually, in the Bread and Cup.” The bread and cup functioned as “the agents of Christ’s presence in the church and in the sacraments,” as Griffith noted:

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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. 202

More poetically, Ephrem depicted that the partaker of the Eucharist as an “eagle who reaches as far as Paradise”:

Poetry of Ephrem

Earthly creatures consumed the heavenly Manna
And they became dust on the earth, because of their sins.

The spiritual Bread of the Eucharist makes light and causes to fly:
the Peoples have been wafted up and have settled in Paradise.

Through the Second Adam who entered Paradise
everyone has entered it,

for through the First Adam who left it
everyone left it.

By means of the Spiritual Bread everyone becomes
an eagle who reaches as far as Paradise.

Whoever eats the Living Bread of Son
flies to meet Him in the very clouds. 203

As an eagle flies to Paradise, so Ephrem thought that the Eucharist functioned to transform the mode of the person who has eaten it, enabling him or her to fly in the clouds like an eagle and finally meet the Living Bread, the Son, in Paradise.

According to Sebastian Brock’s argument of the role and function of the Holy Spirit in baptism and the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit transforms the physical materials (water, bread, and wine) into “a new mode of existence,” and the materials “are rendered capable of conveying this

202 Griffith, “‘Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine,’” 231.

203 Unleavened Bread 17:8-13; translation from Brock, The Luminous Eye, 101.
new mode of existence to those who participate in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.” Hence, the person who is baptized and then participates in the Eucharist becomes “an eagle who reaches as far as Paradise.” Accordingly, Brock concludes that the eagle implies the baptized Christian’s new mode of existence, which is transformed by virtue of the Holy Spirit residing in the bread. Brock understands Ephrem’s eagle to mean that “the fire of the Holy Spirit becomes mingled in the baptized, transforming them into angelic beings, denizens of Paradise.” In order to recapitulate the role and function of the Eucharist as a re-entry into Paradise, Ephrem applies the image of the medicine of life; “Our Lord baptized humankind with the Holy Spirit, He nourished it with the Medicine of Life.” Ephrem was aware that baptized Christians in the Holy Spirit should be nourished with the medicine of life, the Eucharist.

Three Medicines

Ephrem narrated in his hymns that Jesus came down to the earth and mingled human beings with Fire and Spirit, thus making humanity a new creation; it was a miracle that the Lord gave Fire and Spirit to bodily man thereby to eat and to drink. Furthermore, he specified the materials of the medicine—wheat (bread), olive (anointing), and grapes (wine):

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,

205 Ibid.
and You consoled her with Your sober wine,  
and You made her joyful with Your holy chrism.\textsuperscript{208}

\textit{Christ: “The Medicine of Life”}

Ephrem raised his voice to proclaim that Christ himself is the Medicine of Life. For Ephrem, salvation was essential and provided by Christ the physician, who came down with three medicines—bread, wine, and oil—and was by his gifts and person the Medicine of Life. Ephrem drew upon his own context of ancient Mesopotamia for these images:

Ephrem furthermore inherited a number of themes and symbols from ancient Mesopotamia; one which he employs a great deal is the term Medicine of Life (or Salvation), \textit{sam hayye} in Syriac, \textit{sam balati} in Akkadian. Very often Ephrem refers the term to Christ himself (“the Medicine of Life flew down from on high,” \textit{Discourse 3}), or to the Eucharist (“Your body is the Medicine of Life,” \textit{Nisibis 76:6}). It is interesting to discover that quite a number of titles which Ephrem gives to Christ have their origins in the religious literature of Ancient Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{209}

Ephrem and his \textit{madrashe} were thus culturally embedded. Much of his baptismal imagery and language embodied characteristics from ancient Mesopotamia, but in a revitalized, refreshing form, which made him a creative writer in his own context.

Ephrem was a “source of new inspiration for creative liturgy and literature,” thereby earning him from Robert Murray the designation of “a great theological poet.”\textsuperscript{210} His inspired-imagery of Christ bursts into the liturgical acclamation:

\begin{quote}
Blessed be the \textit{Shepherd}, who became the Lamb for our atonement!
Blessed be the \textit{Vineshoot}, which became the Chalice for our salvation!
Blessed also be the \textit{Grape}, the source of the \textit{Medicine of Life}!
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{208} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 37:3; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 425.

\textsuperscript{209} Brock, \textit{The Luminous Eye}, 20.

Blessed also be the *Farmer*, who became the wheat which was sown and the sheaf which was harvested! The *Architect*, who became the *Tower* for our *house of refuge*.

This *madrashe* provides a good sense of his insightful symbolic titles of Christ—Shepherd, Vineshoot, Grape, Medicine of Life, Farmer, Architect, Tower, and House of Refugee. His contribution as an awakening writer will be studied in next chapter.

Kees den Biesen notes that “God’s revelation is an ongoing process that starts with one’s initiation in baptism, is continuously nourished by the Eucharist, and is meant to affect every single moment of one’s individual life.” Ephrem’s methodology is one of ongoing mystagogy, through which he glorified God and sanctified his congregation.

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212 den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 25.
CHAPTER FIVE

EPHREM’S MYSTAGOGY

Ephrem’s poetic language utilizes rich baptismal imagery in metaphor, thus contributing to the formation of a baptismal ethos—baptism is the way the church is, the way the church lives; baptismal life is the way a Christian is, the way a Christian lives. Ephrem’s madrashe have an intrinsically catechetical dimension, but do not take the shape of logical theological treatises. Rather, Ephrem tried to initiate the people into the mystery of God through his madrashe, thereby animating the liturgy and enlivening the sacramental life. This chapter will explicate his mystagogical interpretations of the liturgy of baptism that are seemingly obscurely scattered all over his madrashe. Kees den Biesen acknowledges these mystagogical aspects of Ephrem’s madrashe: “[T]he aim of his ‘teaching poem’ was not to provide information but initiation… In essence, liturgy is a ritual process of symbolization that initiates its participants into the mystery of life and is deeply connected to mystagogy, the initiation of people into an all-embracing symbolical world vision.”

A lack of understanding of the liturgy can contribute to making people’s faith a servile devotion much like blind love. The fourth century church recognized the significance of mystagogy, thereby deepening the understanding of the sacraments—what was said and done at

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1 In the liturgical context, mystagogy is defined as an instruction in the mysteries of the sacraments that people have already experienced. Etymologically, according to Joyce Ann Zimmerman, the term “mystagogy” is derived from two Greek words, “agein” meaning “to lead, guide, ring along,” and “mysterion” meaning “a mystery, especially in the sense of secret” (“Editor Notes,” Liturgical Ministry [Summer 2009]: 142).

2 As noted previously, madrashe can be translated as teaching songs, catechetical hymns or liturgical hymns.

3 Kees den Biesen prefers to translate madrashe as “teaching poems” and “teaching songs.” See his Simple and Bold: Ephrem’s Art of Symbolic Thought (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

4 Ibid., 90.
baptism—and of living an ongoing sacramental life. Ephrem acknowledged that no matter how people participate in the rites of baptism and experience the mystery of God therein, without continual reflection there is no resonant power of baptismal life. Therefore, he practiced his *madrashe* within the liturgy in order to catechize the true meaning of the liturgy.

In this respect, Ephrem can be regarded as a mystagogical figure. To support this claim, answers must be sought for these questions: Why can he be interpreted as a mystagogical figure? How do his literature and life vindicate his task of mystagogy and mystagogue? Is he a mystagogue like other mystagogues in the fourth century? If not, what different characteristics can be defined as the task of mystagogy?

**Ephrem as a Mystagogical Figure**

Mystagogy flourished in the fourth century. However, few scholars ascertain that Ephrem’s *madrashe* may be read as mystagogy and he may be viewed as mystagogue. In order to answer the question of whether or not Ephrem may considered a mystagogue, the characteristics of the content and method of his *madrashe* needs to be compared with the writings of the well-known fourth century mystagogues.

**Content and Method**

Ephrem’s *madrashe* are written as poetry and sung in the liturgy, which is distinct from the commonly-identified mystagogues’ sermonic catechesis. In terms of the practice of mystagogy, Ephrem’s *madrashe* were not confined to the period before or after Easter; rather, his *madrashe* were sung regularly in public worship. The other mystagogues practiced their mystagogy during Easter and the week afterward or right before Easter. Cyril of Jerusalem and
Ambrose of Milan adhered to the practice of mystagogy after baptism, during Easter week. Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia practiced mystagogy “just prior to the vigil.”

According to Chrysostom, prebaptismal mystagogy was done so that “you might be carried on by the wings of hope and enjoy the pleasure before you enjoyed the actual benefit… you might see the objects of bodily sight more clearly with the eyes of the spirit.” Chrysostom and Theodore possibly performed mystagogy for the baptizands who were about to be baptized, not for all catechumens, right before Easter vigil (possibly on Holy Thursday), but they did not speak about the Eucharist until it had been experienced by the newly baptized. The sermons were preached after baptism, during week after Easter.

In terms of the method or style of delivery, the mystagogues preached the meaning of what happened in baptism for the purpose of deepening the understanding of the liturgy, thus to enliven the baptismal faith. Ephrem, however, sang by way of poetry the meaning of the baptismal rites which had been experienced, by activating the ritual memory of baptism with symbol and image. The four mystagogues preached their mystagogical homilies—sermonic catechesis, especially for the newly baptized Christians. Yet, Ephrem performed in singing his madrashe in public worship—hymnic catechesis for the whole congregation as well as the neophytes.

5 William Harmless, Augustine and the Catechumenate (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 70.


7 In fact, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Chrysostom practiced mystagogy right before the baptismal ceremony, and for baptismal candidates immediately baptized. It is interesting that Chrysostom and Theodore offered explanations about baptism, but not about the Eucharist, before baptism. Theodore spoke: “I have already instructed you sufficiently about the rites which according to ancient tradition the candidates for baptism must celebrate”; Theodore of Mopsuestia, Baptismal Homily II: 1; translation from Edward Yarnold, The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 168.
St. Jerome (347-420) attested that Ephrem’s madrashe were recited in some churches after the scripture lessons: “Ephrem, deacon of the church of Edessa, composed many writings in Syriac, and reached to such a fame that his writings were recited in public (liturgy) in certain churches after the reading of the Scriptures.” If Jerome’s witness is accurate, catechumens could hear Ephrem’s madrashe in the public liturgy.

Ephrem’s mystagogy aims at leading the congregation “step by step” into the liturgy with his madrashe. Like “a farmer waters the seed,” the Lord leads his people “step by step”:

Our Lord labored and He went like a farmer
  to water the seed that Moses sowed.
  Directly to the well He went to give
  hidden and living water for the sake of the revelation…

Because she in her desire said, “The Messiah will come,”
  He revealed to her with love, “I am He.”
  That He was a prophet she believed already;
  soon after, that He was the Messiah.
  O wise One, Who appeared as a thirsty man,
  [and] soon was called a prophet,
  [and next] she understood He is Messiah; she is a type of your humanity
  that He leads step by step.9

Since the truth of the Lord is both “hidden” and also “revealed,” Ephrem encouraged the congregation to live with the Messianic faith, just as Jesus led the Samaritan woman to the

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8 My translation. The Latin text, De viris inlustribus, written by Jerome, is: “Ephrem, Edessenae ecclesiae diaconus, multa Syro sermon compositum, et ad tantam venit claritudinem, ut post lectionem Scripturarum publice in quibusdam ecclesiis eius scripta recitentur” (E. C. Richardson, ed., Hieronymus Liber de Viris Illustribus. Gennadius: Liber de viris illustribus. Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 14 [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1896], 51); English translation of Jerome is also found in Thomas P. Halton, Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men. Fathers of the Church 100 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 149: “Ephrem, Deacon of the church of Edessa, composed many works in Syriac, and came to enjoy such prestige that his works are read publicly after the Scripture readings in some churches” (Ibid.).

Messianic faith *step by step*. Ephrem sang about the Samaritan woman in John 4, “You left your pitcher, but you filled understanding and gave your people to drink.”\(^{10}\)

Although Ephrem did not leave any commentaries on the sacraments, his mystagogy opened up throughout his *madrashe* by the prudent use of heuristics of symbols and images of the sacraments. Ephrem’s *madrashe* are concerned with the full comprehension of the sacraments and the sacramental life. For example, one of the *Hymns on Virginity* expresses Ephrem’s understanding of life *after* baptism: “O body, strip off the utterly hateful old man, lest he wear out again the new [garment] you put on when you were baptized…O body, obey my advice; strip him off by [your] way of life, lest he put you on by [his] habits.”\(^{11}\) The content of this hymn is not different from the recognized mystagogues. On the stripping rite of baptism, they all mentioned in their mystagogical homilies the image of the “old man,” as Ephrem did.\(^ {12} \) Ephrem spread out his symbolic heuristics throughout his *madrashe*, not in description, but in poetry, thus moving the participants in the liturgy more and more toward the baptismal life if they perceived the mystagogical implications. Ephrem thus can be identified as a mystagogical figure, as well as a creative theologian, using poetry as his theological matrix.

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\(^{10}\) *Hymns on Virginity* 22:2; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 355.

\(^{11}\) *Hymns on Virginity* 1; translation from McVey. *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 261.

\(^{12}\) They employed the statement of Paul in Col 3:9-10: “having stripped off the old man with his deeds” and “having put on a new man, which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator.”
Pastoral and Liturgical Dimensions of Mystagogy

On the pastoral task of mystagogy, Aidan Kavanagh writes that the “rationale underlying postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogia should be seen not as having to do with some sort of disciplina arcani, but with the pedagogical fact that it is next to impossible to discourse effectively about an experience of great moment and intensity with someone who has never really had such an experience.” Mystagogy needs a rhetorical device to interpret properly the experience of the rites of baptism in a wider cultural context, thus there is a call for continuously developing hermeneutical tools. When the famous mystagogues in the fourth century chose the preaching type of discourse as a methodological instrument, Ephrem had already used the hymnic catechesis of madrashe as a methodological matrix, together with the rhetorical devices of symbol, image, and paradox.

According to Ephrem, human beings are fragile in perceiving the transcendental dimension of God, yet subject to awe and love in the face of His majesty:

I stood in the middle between awe and love:
[my] affection for Paradise invited me to explore it,
awe at its majesty restrained me from searching [it].
With wisdom, however, I reconciled the two:
I revered what of it is hidden, and meditated on what of it is revealed;
I searched in order to gain profit, and I kept silent in order to receive help.

Ephrem gives a clue why he chose poetry and the rhetorical devices of symbol: human beings are subject to the “awe and love” of God, not investigation. In awe and love, “the language of poetry, music, and symbol” are necessary: “one cannot speak tellingly of love to the unloving.

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13 See my first chapter of this dissertation.
15 Hymns on Paradise 1:2; translation from den Biesen, Simple and Bold, 194.
Those who do love, moreover, speak not in analytical or discursive terms, but in the language of poetry, music, and symbol.”

Ephrem also performed elaborately the liturgical task of mystagogy by associating symbolic languages with liturgical celebration in his madrashe. Don E. Saliers illuminates the relationship between liturgical action and symbol, stating that “symbol without human subjectivity will be empty; human faith without the symbols of liturgical action will be blind.”

Ephrem’s symbolic languages through liturgical celebration catechize the congregation as well as people beyond his time and place. When he made use of symbols, Ephrem solicited God, “the Reservoir of all symbols,” for help, since His symbol is omnipresent, and He is “omniscient.”

In every place, if you look, His symbol is there, and when you read, you will find His types. For by Him were created all creatures, and He engraved His symbols upon His possessions. When He created the world, He gazed at it and adorned it with His images. Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth His symbols on His members.

Profoundly filled with symbol and image, Ephrem’s madrashe played a great role in nurturing the congregation. His reflective and re-selective texts on the rites of baptism touched the faithful (weak or strong) and the catechumens with baptismal theology and life. This is his mystagogy, reverberating in liturgy and in ordinary life.

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16 Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 143.


19 Ibid.

Considering the pastoral and liturgical deminmutations of mystagogy, Ephrem ultimately intended to praise God through his *madrashe*. Kathleen McVey writes about the purpose of Ephrem’s *madrashe*:

The entire aim of Ephrem’s poetry (*madrashe*) is not to explain the system of the universe nor to impose any rigid ideas of his own about the Christian message on others, but rather to give birth in God’s creatures to that true worship of the Creator of all, to instill a desire to live the mystery of God’s love toward humanity. Type and symbols are but a simple invitation to the one who perceives them to participate in the divine life offered to all; they are not proof texts to coerce the unbeliever. Grace is never forceful. The believer should follow the Apostles and Prophets, who serve as the inns and milestones on the path of life, to see the inner sense of Scripture.\(^{21}\)

As seen in her statement, Ephrem’s ultimate goal was to worship God through his *madrashe*. By catechizing the congregation through the liturgy—singing (probably refrains) and listening to his *madrashe*—Ephrem might have hoped to foster faith community to praise God with all their hearts and remember the mysteries of God over time, since “grace is never forceful.”\(^{22}\)

Ephrem’s Ongoing Mystagogy

Ephrem perceived that ritual action was an essential component of faith formation, thus undergirding the rites of baptism as fundamental elements of the nature and practice of the Church, through which we are related to the Triune God and by which we live the faithful life. In this regard, I approach the baptismal catechesis embedded in Ephrem’s *madrashe* from the perspective of mystagogy—there are both catechetical and mystagogical implications to Ephrem’s *madrashe*. It is true that there is no evidence that Ephrem delivered mystagogical homilies as Baby Varghese asserts: “Fourth-century Syriac writers like Aphrahat or Ephrem have

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\(^{22}\) Ibid.
not left us any commentary on the sacraments.” Ephrem, however, offers a lyrical or hymnic mystagogy, thereby expanding previous considerations of the genre of mystagogy. He also extended the time of doing mystagogy to provide an ongoing mystagogy, and enlarged the space of doing mystagogy to the whole liturgical setting—to wherever his madrashe was sung. He even increased the participants of mystagogy to the whole congregation. In this respect, Ephrem performed as a unique and creative mystagogue, somewhat different from his contemporaries—by practicing ongoing mystagogy.

The crucial feature of Ephrem’s mystagogy, when practiced, is that catechesis and mystagogy took place in the liturgical setting, thus appearing as a ritualized catechesis and mystagogy. It is hard to invent poetry, music, and symbol to deepen theological reflection on the baptismal experience, and then to use them in the liturgical settings; however, the early church did the task successfully, singing with Psalms, odes and other praises. When those liturgical poems and hymns were used in a catechetical setting or a liturgical setting, they enabled people to re-initiate the memory of the “night of baptism,” thereby living into an ongoing baptismal life.

Although Ephrem did not deliver mystagogy in the form of preaching, his madrashe did articulate Christian belief and theology for the liturgical setting. For example, Hymns on Nativity and Hymns on Epiphany were composed to be sung in the feast of Epiphany; Hymns on Fasting was to be sung in the liturgy of Lent; Hymns on the Unleavened Bread, Hymns on the Crucifixion, and Hymns on the Resurrection were written for use in the liturgy of Easter. In addition, Sermons on the Lord and the Commentary on Diatessaron conveyed reflective teaching on sacraments. Ephrem did not provide mystagogical interpretation according to the chronological order of the liturgy of baptism. Brock states that “Ephrem is not concerned with

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history; rather, following the example of all peoples and cultures in the history of mankind, he uses mythology as a means of expressing something of a reality, the full comprehension of which lies beyond the bounds of human experience and understanding.”

Frequently using biblical history and related narratives, Ephrem explained the meaning of the sacraments, thus illuminating the mysteries of God—hence, mystagogy. Even if he did not present his mystagogy in a ritual sequence, his mystagogy can be accessed in liturgical order—mystagogy on the removal of clothing, anointing, immersion, whitening (baptismal garment), and the Eucharist.

**Ephrem’s Mystagogy on Removal of Clothing**

Since the Syriac-speaking community viewed adult baptism as normative, baptismal candidates had already been instructed for some period of time within the catechumenate. Ephrem’s use of biblical typologies in his madrashe suggests that catechumens received significant biblical instruction so as to understand the content of the teaching songs. After enrollment, when the baptismal candidates practiced the intensive instruction of fasting, they repented their old sins on sackcloth as the baptismal day drew near. Then, on the baptismal day, they went to the baptismal font and prepared for the immersion with the “stripping off the old man.”

**Moral Implications of the Clothing Metaphor**

Ephrem raised his voice to exhort the participants in the liturgy to live a moral life, without sins and stains. Figuratively describing the rite of removal of clothes and nakedness, Ephrem instructed his congregation to abandon the old habits and sins that they had committed before baptism:

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O body, strip off the utterly hateful old man,
Lest he wear out again the new [garment] you put on when you were baptized.
For it would be the inverse of paying his due
That he, if renewed, should wear you out again.
O body, obey my advice; strip him (old man) off by [your] way of life,
Lest he put you on by [his] habits.

For by baptism our Lord made new your old age—
He, the Carpenter of life, Who by His blood formed and built a temple for His dwelling.
Do not allow that old man
to dwell in the renewed temple.
O body, if you have God live in your Temple,
you will also become His royal palace.²⁵

His mystagogy of the removal of clothes is deeply associated with the renewal of life. Ephrem challenged the singers and listeners to take off the “utterly hateful old man” since they received the new clothing at their baptism and lived in the renewed temple where God dwells. Therefore, the faithful should become “His royal palace,” Ephrem instructed.

Use of the metaphor of the garment for moral admonition was a widespread practice in the ancient world. The psalmist said, “You have clothed yourself with light as with a garment” (Psalm 103:2). Chrysostom made use of the metaphor of the old garment: “We put off the old garment, which has been made filthy with the abundance of our sins; we put on the new one, which is free from every stains.”²⁶ Ephrem pressed his congregation to live a moral and ethical life, urging, “Do not allow that old man to dwell in the renewed temple.”²⁷ He warned against postbaptismal sins such as drunkenness (Hymns on Virginity 1) and adultery (Hymns on Virginity 2), but promoted a life of chastity (Hymns on Virginity 3).

²⁵ Hymns on Virginity 1:1-2; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 261-262.


²⁷ Hymns on Virginity 1:2; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 262.
Eschatological Implications of the Robe of Glory

In addition to its moral dimensions, the Syriac-speaking community connected the daily practice of putting on and taking off clothing with the meaning of salvation history.

Chrysostom’s “royal robe” and Ephrem’s “robe of glory” contain eschatological implications, for the imagery of the robe of glory is one of the most essential elements of salvation history in the Syrian baptismal tradition:

Based on the everyday experience of taking off and putting on clothes, this image serves the function of linking together in a pictorial fashion all the main stages of humanity’s place in salvation history. Following Jewish tradition, the Syriac Fathers held that Adam and Eve originally possessed this robe of glory in Paradise, but were stripped of this robe. God’s purpose was to provide the means for humanity to regain this robe, while at the same time respecting his gift to humanity of freewill. To achieve this end, God the Word himself “put on” a human body at the Incarnation, and at the Baptism Christ places the robe of glory in the Jordan, ready for humanity to pick up and put on at baptism.

Ephrem deplored that human beings lost their “garment of glory” when they were banished from Paradise, thus it was necessary to pray for salvation:

Save me, Lord, on that day
when the wicked put on
the garment of all their sins,
clothing full of stains,
whence spring for them
darkness and torment.

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28 Chrysostom describes the newly-baptized person as one “who has wiped away all the filth of his sins, who has put off the old garment of sin and put on the royal robe” (Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions* 2:25; translation from *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, trans. Harkins, 52).


30 Ibid.

However, at the baptismal font, the clothing of sins and stains was taken off, and when the new garment, the “robe of glory” was donned, the newly baptized entered the potentiality of the eschatological Paradise.

**Ephrem’s Mystagogy on Anointing**

Ephrem taught his congregation to understand the deep meaning of the rite of anointing, stating, “let my mouth have Your teaching…let my tongue do business with its riches, let my word be a snare for it, let me enclose his hidden symbols in it… let me gather them for nourishment.”\(^{32}\) His statement reveals the aim of his mystagogy, that is, the nourishment of his congregation, by teaching the richness of the symbols and images contained in the rites. For this reason, he mentions the role and function of oil in ordinary life, thus to remind them of the rite of anointing that they experienced at baptism:

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Oil filled the place of lineage for strangers whom it accompanied.
On the road it gave rest to their weariness; in vexation it bandaged their heads,
As our Lord refreshed in every place the afflicted who accompanied Him.
In sleep oil stole the fatigue of sleeping bodies,
And while it anointed, in baptism it stole sin.
The weariness of sleeping bodies it stole; the sins of waking bodies it stole.\(^{33}\)
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According to Ephrem’s poetic description, the oil took away the candidates’ sins when they were anointed at baptism. Ephrem raises his voice of mystagogy to people who have “the ear that hungers for secrets” and “the mouth that hungers for revelations,”\(^{34}\) and then addresses further roles and functions of oil and anointing based on the biblical scriptures.

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\(^{32}\) *Hymns on Virginity* 4:2; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 276.

\(^{33}\) *Hymns on Virginity*, 4:9; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 278.

\(^{34}\) *Hymns on Virginity*, 4:2; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 276.
Oil and Anointing

Everything can be holy as long as it is related to God. In particular, the smelling and touching of oil, in the baptismal context, evoke an intense impression and emotion. Even after baptism, the scent of oil is everywhere, thus making sense of holiness and grace in daily life and then touching people’s profound memory of their baptismal day:

Experience in this sense is an affective relatedness to life over a period of time. The whole of one’s life may be said to be an experience of grace, whether the dark night of the desert way or intimacy with God. We need to recover the sense of baptismal experience that refers to the whole of our life wherein certain emotions and dispositions are central.35

Anointing is a very sensual and common instrument for stimulating the remembrance of experiences. Anointing is related to wind; wind carries and spreads the scent of oil. The words “wind” and “spirit” in Syriac, as in Hebrew and Greek, are the same. People may imagine the Holy Spirit as wind blowing with the scent of oil.

Baptismal oil is deeply related to the forgiveness of sins. Ephrem sings about the forgiving and healing power of oil that is associated with the Anointed, Christ:

An abundance is oil with which sinners do business: the forgiveness of sins.
By oil the Anointed forgave the sins of the sinner who anointed [his] feet.
With [oil] Mary poured out her sin upon the head of the Lord of her sins
It wafted its scent; it tested the reclining as in a furnace:
it exposed the theft clothed in the care of the poor.
It became the bridge to the remembrance of Mary to pass on her glory from generation to generation.36

Moreover, he names oil the “Healing Spirit”37 since the disciples carried oil when they visited the sick, thus representing the healing image of oil:

35 Saliers, Worship and Spirituality, 69.

36 Hymns on Virginity 4:11; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 278-279.
The name of oil (mesha), therefore, is like a symbol, and in it is portrayed the name of the Anointed (Meshha).
The name of oil was crowned for it is the shadow of the name of the Anointed One. For also that Master of the disciples accompanied them when they were sent out, and when they anointed and healed by oil, the Anointed was portrayed in secret, and He persecuted all ills, as on the hem of the garment the flow of blood saw Him and dried up.\textsuperscript{38}

Ephrem concludes that oil resembled Christ, in that “oil gave itself to the sick that they might gain by it all helps”; because the Anointed One gave Himself to the sick, the sinners, therefore, “the Anointed” became one of His names.\textsuperscript{39} Although He has many names, He is “One, the Only-begotten.”\textsuperscript{40} Therefore, Ephrem interwined the image of Christ with the role and function of oil and anointing—forgiving and healing the sick and the sinners.

In addition, Ephrem’s beautiful expression of oil and olive tree reveals the messianic and charismatic meaning of the rite of anointing.\textsuperscript{41} Ephrem made the faithful remember the rite as an enriching ceremony, for “oil became the key of the hidden treasure-house of symbols,” and the “olive tree stripped off and gave to the Anointed the comeliness of the symbols upon it.”\textsuperscript{42} For Ephrem, oil also has been used in various places, for soothing bodies and exorcising demons.\textsuperscript{43} Unlike other mystagogues, he did not ritualize the role of oil from the view of exorcism. All the mystagogues mentioned the prebaptismal anointing placed after the removal of clothing and

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 4:4; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 276-277.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 4:7; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 277.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 4:5; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 277.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} For details, see chapter four the meaning of prebaptismal anointing.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 5:16; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 286.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 4:13; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 279.
prior to immersion. As the previous chapter has shown, the meaning of the anointing given by Cyril, Chrysostom, Ambrose and Theodore was different from Ephrem’s understanding of oil. In their mystagogical catecheses, there was a lack of messianic and charismatic features given to the use of oil. Instead, they related the use of oil to the rite of renunciation. Cyril of Jerusalem spoke of “exorcised oil.”

Chrysostom and Ambrose attributed strengthening to the application of oil, as would have been known to soldiers and athletes.

Theodore of Mopsuestia looked at oil as the “covering of immortality.”

However, Ephrem focused upon the symbolic meanings of oil as “the giver of kingship,” with messianic and charismatic interpretations. He intertwined words and images such as oil, olive tree, lamp, light, and the Anointed, even saying, “our body resembles a lamp; our oil resembles our Anointed; our world resembles our lamp,” thus evoking that night believers were baptized. The early Syrian baptismal rites recognized easily the “olive-

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45 “The priest leads you into the spiritual arena as athletes of Christ by virtue of this anointing” (Chrysostom, Baptismal Instructions 2:23; translation from St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions, trans. Harkins, 52); “Thou was anointed as Christ’s athlete; as about to wrestle in the fight of this world” (Ambrose, De Sacramentis 1:4, St. Ambrose “On the Mysteries” and the Treatise “On the Sacraments” [London: SPCK, 1919, 1950], 49).


47 Hymns on Virginity 6:1; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 287-288.

48 Hymns on Virginity 5:12; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 285.
symbolism” of Christ, the “source of the sacraments”.⁴⁹ “Just as the oil of the olive gives life to the body through its healing properties, it gives life to the mind by its symbolism.”⁵⁰

Oil in the likeness of the Heavenly One became the giver of kingship.
From the horn [of oil] a pure cloud descended upon the head of a body,
As God descended upon the top of the mountain and gave brightness to Moses,
And Solomon received brightness symbolically
From the horn of messiahship. From the People to the people it went out.
Instead of the few, many will be anointed and cleansed.⁵¹ Ephrem connected the role of oil as a giver of “messiahship” and “kingship” to the role of the Holy Spirit, stating that “oil is the friend of the Holy Spirit and Her minister, as a disciple it accompanies Her, since by it the Holy Spirit singed priests and anointed ones, for the Holy Spirit with the Anointed brands Her sheep.”⁵³ In this respect, Ephrem clearly manifested the meaning of the prebaptismal anointing, which connected the baptized with the offices of Christ as king, priest, and prophet.

**Ephrem’s Mystagogy on Baptism**

In order to deepen the meaning of what was said and what was done on their baptismal day, Ephrem unfolded his understanding of baptism, in particular, baptism as birth, Christ’s baptism in the Jordan, and the baptismal connection with the water and blood that flowed from the side of Christ pierced by the lance.

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⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² In the early Syrian tradition, “Holy Spirit” is treated as a feminine noun.

Baptism as Birth

Juxtaposed images display the ambivalent nature of baptism—birth and death, womb and tomb, based on the traditions of the Johannine symbol (birth) and the Pauline symbol (death). For Ephrem, the interpretation of baptism as birth and womb was modeled on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan.

“Baptism is a Second Womb”

Ephrem referred frequently to baptism as birth, rebirth, or a womb to give birth, associating the baptismal unction with the forgiveness of sins:

With the oil of discernment bodies are anointed for forgiveness, bodies that were filled with stains are made white without effort: they go down sordid with sin, they go up pure like infants, for baptism is a second womb for them. Rebirth [in the font] rejuvenates the old, as the river rejuvenated Naaman. O womb that gives birth every day without pangs to the children of the Kingdom!

Baptismal water and its container is like a womb, and “once this womb has given birth, the altar suckles and nurtures them”:

It is the priesthood which ministers to this womb as it gives birth; Anointing precedes it, the Holy Spirit hovers over its streams, A crown of Levites surrounds it, the chief priest is its minister, The Watchers rejoice at the lost who in it are found. Once this womb has given birth, the altar suckles and nurtures them: Her children eat straight away, not milk, but perfect Bread!

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54 Jn. 3:3-5: “I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

55 Rm 6:4: “as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life.”


57 Ibid.
The concept of the font as a womb appeared also in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, who looked at the font as becoming a womb for the second birth: “You descend into the water, which has been consecrated by the benediction of the priest, as you are not baptized with ordinary water only, but with the water of the second birth, which cannot become so except through the coming of the Holy Spirit.” 58 In the fifth century, Narsai described more vividly the newly baptized as a baby, “peering out from the water as a baby from inside the womb:… he resembles a baby as he is lifted up from the midst of the water, and like a baby everyone embraces and kisses him.” 59

Christ in Mary’s Womb

Some passages by Ephrem speak of Christ’s presence in Mary’s womb, in that the “residing of the Divinity in Mary’s womb resulted in her giving birth”: 60

The Holy One took up residence in the womb in bodily fashion,
Now He takes up residence in the mind, in spiritual fashion. 61

His remarkable figurative language shows the influence of the tradition of the Gospel of John (1:18): “the only Begotten Son (Ihidaya) who was in the bosom (ubba) of the Father.” According to Brock, the translation of “bosom” in the Gospel of John is ubba in Syriac, which included the

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58 Theodore of Mopsuestia, Baptismal Homily III:9; translation from Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia, 55.


61 Hymns on the Nativity 4:130, translation from Brock, The Luminous Eye, 113. The fourth hymn is a long poem in 214 stanzas.
meaning of womb more than kenpa, though both words indicate the meaning of bosom.\textsuperscript{62} Here the only Begotten Son is also translated in Syriac as Ihidaya, which also appears in Ephrem’s writing as the previous chapter has shown.\textsuperscript{63}

Furthermore, Ephrem heightened the feminine image more intensively with the expression of “Father’s womb,” where the same Syriac ubba is used:

\begin{quote}
The Word of the Father came from the Father’s womb.  
He put on the body in another womb:  
From one womb to another did He proceed,  
and chaste wombs are filled with Him:  
blessed is He who has resided in us.\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

Ephrem referred to the residence of Christ first in the Father’s womb, then in “another womb,” namely Mary’s womb in a bodily fashion, and finally, “He has resided in us.” Brock analyzed the verb “reside” (shra in Syriac) as “the usage of the first oral kerygma in Syriac,” since other documents (Syriac Diatessaron, Peshitta, Harkean) made use of a different verb (aggen).\textsuperscript{65}

Presumably, Ephrem preserved the tradition of the first oral kerygma, which has affinities with John 1:18. Ephrem understood that Christ, who has resided in the “Father’s womb,” for the sake of salvation came as a servant “from within the womb of Mary.”

\textbf{Christ in the Baptismal Womb of the Jordan}

Kilian McDonnell describes the baptism of Jesus at Jordan as the “messianic manifestation,” or a “messianic sign”:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{63} The capital Ihidaya represents Christ.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Hymns on the Resurrection} 1:7; translation from \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems}, 85.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Poems}, 85.
\end{quote}
For Justin… the baptism of Jesus is the messianic manifestation of who this person is, a messianic sign given to the Church. Also unmistakably clear is the relationship between Christ receiving the Spirit at his baptism and Christians receiving the Spirit at theirs… However, in the mysteries that reveal the identity of the Christ, the baptism has certain precedence because it was at the Jordan that humankind “first realized who he was,” more precisely, the Messiah. The Jordan event is the first sign. 

In the Syrian baptismal tradition, however, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan is treated as “a prototype of Christian baptism” and “the foundation of the institution itself.”67 As Thomas Finn observes, the descent into the Jordan appeared as an “axial event” of salvation history:

Ephrem finds it [the institution of baptism] in Christ’s descent into the Jordan. It is an axial event on which all the events of salvation turn—those of the covenant as well as the new. And John the Baptist stands as the link between the covenants, because he transmits the ancient priesthood, which brings justification, makes expiation, and initiates sanctification. Thus for Ephrem baptism is a high-priestly act celebrated by the bishop. 68

Ephrem typically depicted Christ’s baptism in the Jordan as the “moist womb of the water conceived Him in purity,”69 integrating his baptismal theology with the womb imagery: baptism as birth.

**Baptismal Womb of the Jordan**

Ephrem’s *madrashe* show that the Christ who was born from Mary’s womb was baptized in the baptismal womb of the Jordan.

The river in which He was baptized conceived Him again symbolically;  
The moist womb of the water conceived Him in purity,

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69 *Hymns on the Church* 36:3; translation from Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Poems*, 71.
Bore Him in chastity, made Him ascend in glory.\textsuperscript{70}

Ephrem did not think of Mary’s womb separately from the baptismal womb of the Jordan:

In the pure womb of the river you should recognize the Daughter of man who conceived without any man, who gave birth without intercourse, who brought up, through a gift, the Lord of that gift.\textsuperscript{71}
In addition to the wombs of Mary and the Jordan, Ephrem spoke of the womb of Sheol to which Christ willingly descended: “For it was he that willed it, and the womb of Sheol contained him; And again, because he willed it, the womb of Mary contained him.”\textsuperscript{72} In meditating the descent to Sheol, Ephrem implied the baptismal imagery of death:

Again in this same Nisan, the Lord of Thunder
In his mercy, moderated his fervor
And he descended to dwell in the womb of Mary
Unsealed this womb of Sheol and ascended.\textsuperscript{73}

The three wombs that Ephrem mentioned have been associated with salvation history:

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 single point along its main “staging points” (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.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Hymns on the Church}, 36:4; translation from \textit{Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Poems}, 73.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Hymns on the Unleavened Bread} 16:4; translation from Richard E. McCarron, “The Appropriation of the Theme of Christ’s Descent to Hell in the Early Syriac Liturgical Tradition” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2000), 140.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Hymns on the Resurrection} 4:10; translation from McCarron, “The Appropriation of the Theme of Christ’s Descent to Hell in the Early Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” 140.

\textsuperscript{74} Brock, \textit{The Luminous Eye}, 92. In addition, Ephrem mentioned two wombs—the “womb (or bosom) of the Father” as seen above, and the “womb of the holy church”; “But it did not bring all of them, so that the womb of Bethlehem could not suffice for them, so that the womb of the holy church opened wide and enclosed her children” (\textit{Hymns on the Nativity} 24:16; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 196).
Another passage from Ephrem shows that Jesus’ baptism purified the water and opened up the institution of Christian baptism:

Blessed are you, too, 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.  

Ephrem instructed that by Jesus’ descent into the Jordan and his baptism there, water has been purified; thus the Christian baptism that has been instituted by His baptism results in pardoning sins and whitening stains. Jesus, “who dwelt in the womb” and then “descended,” eventually took away our sins and healed our sores, causing Ephrem to extol Him as the “Physician” and the “Medicine that takes pity on sinners”:

Blessed is the Physician who descended and cut painlessly and healed the sores with a mild Medicine. His Child was the Medicine that takes pity on sinners. Blessed is the One Who dwelt in the womb, and in it He built a palace in which to live, a temple in which to be, a garment in which to be radiant, and armor by which to conquer.

By explaining that Christ, who “made Himself in the womb, made our weakness put on glory,” Ephrem offered a mystagogical interpretation of the robe of glory.

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75 *Hymns on Virginity* 15:3; translation from McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 326.

76 Ephrem frequently mentioned these phrases in his *madrashe*.


The Robe of Glory in the Baptismal Water

As seen briefly in the clothing metaphor, Ephrem depicted the robe of glory in relation to salvation history.Ascending from the baptismal water, the baptizands put on the robe of glory disclosed in the baptismal water, thus to re-enter Paradise. Sebastian Brock succinctly summarizes Ephrem’s terms related to the salvation history, commenting that “the robe of glory, which is conferred in potential at baptism, is the pledge of the Paradise which will only be experienced fully at the end of time.” 79 Brock also lays out “four main episodes” that constitute Ephrem’s salvation history:

(1) At the Fall, Adam and Eve lose the “Robe of Glory” with which they had originally been clothed in Paradise; (2) in order to re-clothe the naked Adam and Eve (in other words, humanity), God himself “puts on the body” from Mary, and at the Baptism Christ laid the Robe of Glory in the river of Jordan, making it available once again for humanity to put on at baptism; then, (3) at his or her baptism, the individual Christian, in “putting on Christ,” puts on the Robe of Glory, thus re-entering the terrestrial anticipation of the eschatological Paradise, in other words, the Church; finally (4) at the Resurrection of the Dead, the just will in all reality re-enter the celestial Paradise, clothed in their Robes of Glory. 80

Ephrem illustrated the narrative about paradise in Genesis 1-3, which is full of imagery and symbols, such as the glory of paradise, the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Life, and God’s clothing Adam in glory. In order to explain salvation history, the narrative proceeds to the story of the Fall, including the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the transgression of the commandment and falling into sin, the stripping of the “Robe of Glory,” and God’s placement of a “living fence.”

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80 Sebastian Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 67. Numberings are mine.
Ephrem argued that Christ had put the robe of glory in the Jordan at His baptism; thus the baptizands descended to pick it up and ascended to put it on at their baptism.\textsuperscript{81} According to Brock, the robe of glory at baptism is only “in potential,” for “while the robe of glory is indeed put on by Christians at baptism, there is the requirement that it be preserved unsullied by sin, and so it could be said that at this stage it is only theirs in potential: the robe only becomes reality at the resurrection.”\textsuperscript{82}

In terms of salvation history, however, the robe of glory plays a great role. Several of the \textit{Hymns on Epiphany} attributed to Ephrem mentioned it in conjunction with the actual baptismal rites:

In baptism Adam has found
that glory which he had possessed among the trees (of Paradise):
he went down and took it up from the water,
he put it on, went up and was held in honour thanks to it.\textsuperscript{83}

Ephrem emphasized the purity of the robe of glory, from the baptismal candidates’ wearing it by ascending out of the baptismal water, until their entering the eschatological Paradise:

O children of the font, infants without spot,
clothed in Fire and Spirit, you must preserve the glorious robe
which you have put on from the water.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{81} Brock, “Some Important Baptismal Themes in the Syriac Tradition,” 202.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Hymns on Epiphany} 4:19; translation from Johnston, “Fifteen Hymns: For the Feast of the Epiphany,” 271.
Frequently, this robe of glory is expressed figuratively as the wedding garment modeled on Matthew 22:11-12, and then associated with the wedding feast of Christ and His bride (the Church and the individual Christian).

Baptism as Betrothal to Christ

Ephrem’s mystagogical interpretation continued the marital theme with the image of the bridal chamber: “You [Christ] are our bread, and You are our bridal chamber and the robe of glory.” Ephrem identified the baptized as the bride of Christ:

Blessed are you, O bride, espoused to the Living One,
You who do not for a mortal man
Foolish is the bride who is proud
of the ephemeral crown that will be gone tomorrow.
Blessed is your heart, captivated by the love
of a beauty portrayed in your mind.
You have exchanged the transitory bridal couch for the bridal couch
whose blessings are unceasing.

The Firstborn wrapped himself in a body
As a veil to hide His glory.
The immortal Bride shines out in that robe;
Let the guests in their robes resemble Him in His.
Let your bodies—which are your clothing—shine out,
For they bound in fetters that man whose body was stained
O whiten my stains at Your banquet with your radiance.

Ephrem also compared baptism to the marriage feast, as if the baptized were brides in their shining wedding garments. The baptized in the robe of glory shined out, since their sins were forgiven and their stains were whitened.

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85 Hymns on the Nativity 17:6; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 155.
86 Hymns on Virginity 24:5; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 366.
87 Nisebene Hymn 43: 21; translation from Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 71-72.
Ephrem’s Mystagogy on the Incarnation

Ephrem explained the mystery of the Incarnation in a similar way to his mystagogy on removal of clothing and the robe of glory—in terms of salvation history. Christ put on the garment (the physical body), so as to restore Adam’s original garment (the robe of glory), ultimately for the purpose of the humanity’s re-entering Paradise in the robe of glory.

Christ’s Putting on the Garment

Ephrem made use of the image of putting on the garment to denote the Incarnation in a manner similar to other Syriac writers (e.g., “Christ put on the body,”88 or “put on our visible body”):

You put on our visible body; let us put on your hidden power.
Our body became Your garment; Your spirit became our robe.89

Ephrem instructed his listeners, through Mary’s voice, that Christ put on the physical body, and we put on His hidden power of spirit. Christ put on our body, therefore, we put on glory—the robe of glory—by the mercy of God:

You are the Son of the Creator, Who resembles His Father.
As Maker, He made Himself in the womb;
He put on a pure body and emerged;
He made our weakness put on glory
By the mercy that He brought from His Father’s presence.

Ephrem alluded to the effect of the Incarnation—we may stand in God’s presence, putting on the glory.

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88 Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 69. Murray notes that it occurred constantly in the Acts of Judas Thomas, the Didascalia, and Aphrahat. Especially Aphrahat mentioned “the body which he put on from us is the origin of our resurrection” (ibid., 70).

89 Hymns on the Nativity 22:39; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 185.
Putting on the Robe of Glory

Ephrem stated, “Adam was stripped of glory,” alluding to Adam’s loss of his original robe of glory. However, this robe is restored by virtue of the Incarnation: “[I]n the Hymns on Virginity 16:9 the whole purpose of the Incarnation is seen as the restoration of Adam’s original garment.” Not in a temporal event, but in an eschatological aspect, God made a way—through the Incarnation—to restore Adam (through baptism) who had been stripped at the Fall:

Instead of leaves from the trees
He clothed them with glory in the water.

Furthermore, Ephrem understood that the Son put on humanity (Incarnation) in order to raise up Adam, as he desired:

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

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90 Hymns on Paradise 15:8: “The priest put on sanctification, but Adam was stripped of glory...in reality he (Adam) stripped.” Translation from Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 184-185.

91 “Christ came to find Adam who had gone astray, to return him to Eden in the garment of light” (Hymns on Virginity 16: 9; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 331).

92 Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 68.

93 Hymns on Epiphany 12:4; translation from Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 71.

94 Hymns on the Nativity 23:13; translation from Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 69.
Adam’s deformity was cured by Christ’s descending and putting on humanity (Incarnation), thus raising Adam in His glory—everything that Adam and Eve lost has been restored, including Adam’s original garment: “Christ came to find Adam who had gone astray, to return him to Eden in the garment of light.” Ephrem thus taught his congregation the whole purpose of the Incarnation:

Divinity flew down and descended  
To raise and draw up humanity.  
The Son has made beautiful the servant’s deformity,  
And he has become a god, just as he desired.

Ephrem stated that humanity’s salvation was completed by the Incarnation, for “the Most High knew that Adam wanted to become a god, so He sent His Son who put him on in order to grant him his desire.”

Re-entering Paradise in the Robe of Glory

The clothing metaphor is deeply associated with re-entering the eschatological Paradise. Ephrem utilized the clothing metaphor in his prose Discourses on our Lord (section 9), where he writes: “who clothed yourself in the body of mortal Adam, thereby making it a fountain of salvation for all mortals.” Elsewhere Ephrem says that Jesus “put on the garments of youth, put

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95 Hymns on Virginity 16:9; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 331.

96 Hymns on Virginity 48:17-18; translation from Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 73. McVey translates the hymn: “Divinity flew down to rescue and lift up humanity. Behold the Son adorned the servant’s flaw, so that he became god as he had desired” (McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 455).

97 Nisibene Hymns 69:12; translation from Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise, 73. Here Ephrem revealed the concept of divinization, theosis, which is characteristic of Eastern Christianity, signifying a transformative process for union with God.

98 Ephrem, Discourses on our Lord; translation from Brock, “A Hymn of St. Ephrem on the Eucharist,” 63.
on the water of baptism, and put on linen garments in death.” Through Christ’s *kenosis*, human beings may regain the robe of glory and re-enter Paradise “in potential” at baptism. Brock articulates a consequence of the Incarnation, stating that “God makes himself available to humanity in the Mysteries, or Sacraments, of Baptism and the Eucharist, for with their assistance humanity can respond to the movement of God’s love.” In order for human beings to have the potential to re-enter Paradise, God himself made a way to enter the mysteries, the sacraments. Ephrem exhorted the faithful to enter into the mystery of the Eucharist, to live the baptismal life, and finally to enter the eschatological Paradise.

**Ephrem’s Mystagogy on the Eucharist**

In Ephrem’s view, the Eucharist was nourishment for growth of faith and the medicine of life for the sacramental life, received in anticipation of the eschatological life in Paradise. Ephrem pondered how the faithful continuously might enhance their faith after baptism. The following hymn shows his meditation upon the growth of faith, started with the baptismal image of picking up the pearl from the bottom of the baptismal water:

A merchant offers a pearl to a king,
he receives it all naked, but he enhances it:
the king enhances it by placing it on his crown
—so how much more, Lord, will my faith be enhanced in You?

As a king enhances the beauty of the pearl by decorating his crown with it, so Ephrem taught his congregation to cultivate their faith through church life, to search for the way of enhancing the

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101 *Hymns on Faith* 16:6-7; translation from Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 78.
dynamic power of faith, and especially to participate in the Eucharist—the nourishment for their spiritual growth. According to Ephrem, baptized Christians need to grow by the nourishment of the Eucharist: “[O]ur Lord baptized human kind with the Holy Spirit; he nourished it with the Medicine of Life”,\textsuperscript{102} the “food became the Medicine of Life for those who ate it.”\textsuperscript{103}

The Eucharist as the Medicine of Life

Ephrem used medical imagery to refer to Christ himself, as mentioned previously, and to the Eucharist, since in his view the Eucharist is one of many ways of explaining Christ’s nature.\textsuperscript{104} In particular, the medical imagery is a crucial feature of Ephrem’s mystagogical interpretations of the Eucharist. Ephrem treated significantly the healing aspect of the Eucharist as the medicine of life. His \textit{Hymns on Faith} 10 speaks about the Eucharistic mysteries by drawing upon a biblical analogy, with the implication that what was true then still functions now. Ephrem employs the biblical narrative of the woman who touched Jesus’ garment and then was cured by the power hidden in the garment (Mt. 9:21, Lk 8:47):

\begin{quote}
And as she was affrighted, but took courage because she was healed, so do You heal my fear and fright, and so I may take courage in You and be conveyed from Your garment to Your own Body, so that I may tell of it according to my ability.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

Since the hidden power healed the woman, Ephrem requested the power to be “conveyed from Your garment to Your own Body.” As Brock claims, Christ’s body is in another sense the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{102} \textit{Nisibene Hymns} 46:8; translation from Brock, “St. Ephrem: A Hymn on the Eucharist,” 63.
\item \textsuperscript{103} \textit{Hymn on the Unleavened} 14:16; translation from Brock, \textit{The Luminous Eye}, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{104} \textit{Hymns on Faith} 10:3: “Your nature is single, but there are many ways of explaining it; our descriptions may be exalted, or in moderated terms, or lowly”; translation from Brock, “St. Ephrem: A Hymn on the Eucharist,” 66.
\item \textsuperscript{105} \textit{Hymns on Faith} 10:6; translation from Brock, “St. Ephrem: A Hymn on the Eucharist,” 66.
\end{itemize}
“garment of his divinity.” Ephrem found the analogy between the woman and the participants in the Eucharist by means of the garment. The woman sensed the healing power of the Lord’s garment; Ephrem envisioned the hidden power in the Eucharist to heal his “fear and fright.”

Being aware of the power of the Eucharist, Ephrem proclaimed, “[Y]our garment, Lord, is a fountain of medicines.”

Ephrem explained the paradoxical nature of the power that was manifested yet hidden.

There is hidden Spirit in the visible Bread, and there is hidden Fire in the visible Wine:

In Your Bread there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed, in Your Wine there is dwells the Fire that is not drunk: the Spirit is in Your Bread, the Fire in Your Wine— a manifest wonder, that our lips have received.

Brock elucidates the ambivalent nature of the power, observing that “the Hidden Power that lay in Christ’s garment is also present in the Bread and the Wine, consecrated by the fire of the Spirit.” Ephrem revealed clearly that fire and spirit existed not only in baptism but also in the Eucharist, in a manifest wonder.

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106 Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 200.


109 Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 200. “The Seraph could not touch the fire’s coal with his fingers, the coal only just touched Isaiah’s mouth… Fire descended in wrath and consumed the sinners; the fire of mercy has not descended and dwelt in the Bread… Fire descended and consumed Elijah’s sacrifices; the Fire of mercies has become a living sacrifice for us” (Hymns on Faith 10:10-13; translation from Brock, “St. Ephrem: A Hymn on the Eucharist,” 66-67.

110 Ephrem, Hymns on Faith 10:17:
See, Fire and Spirit were in the womb of her who bore you,
See, Fire and Spirit were in the river in which you were baptized.
Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font;
In the Bread and Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit.
Spiritual Instruction in the Eucharistic Celebration

Ephrem was aware of the catechetical role of the Eucharistic celebration, emphasizing in a spiritual instruction that the “bread is spiritual like its Giver; it revives spiritual ones in a spiritual manner” and “wine teaches us.” Ephrem designates Christ, whose image is portrayed on the bread “with the blood of the grapes,” as the initiator of the spiritual teaching:

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.

Ephrem taught his listeners the love of Christ—a sacrificial love, a self-giving love:

He broke the bread with his own hands in token of the sacrifice of his body.
He mixed the cup with his own hands, in token of the sacrifice of his blood.
He offered up himself in sacrifice, the priest of our atonement.

Ephrem insisted that the sacrifice of Jesus is for all humanity, for “the one True Ear (of wheat) gave bread, heavenly bread, without limit.” Furthermore, he emphasized the infinite power of Christ: “although small was the drink of the cup that He gave, very great was its power—infinitesimal.” In fact, Christ gave “the whole of himself”—his body, his blood, his voice, and even his splendor—for the Church; correspondently, the Eucharist that we receive is absorbed in our bodies, veins, ears, and eyes:

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111 Hymns on the Nativity 4:97, 104; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 97.

112 Hymns on the Nativity 16:7; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 150.


115 Ibid.
In a new way his body has been fused with our bodies,
And his pure blood has been poured into our veins.
His voice, too, is in [our] ears. And his splendor is [our] eyes.
The whole of him with the whole of us is fused by his mercy.
And because he loved his church greatly, he did not give her the manna of her rival;
He became the Bread of Life for her (the Church) to eat him.\footnote{116}

By the mercy of Christ, his body and our bodies fuse in a new way; his blood mixes in our veins;
his voice resonates in our ears; and his splendor dazzles our eyes. Ephrem instructed the
participants in the Eucharist that Christ became the bread and the wine for us to eat and drink
because Christ loved us.

However, the whole liturgical celebration that Ephrem mentioned in his \textit{madrashe} is
deeply linked to the Holy Spirit, continuously affecting faithful and ethical life after baptism.
Ephrem noticed that “God’s initial inspiration” undergirded the spiritual nourishment. “[A]t the
outset, Ephrem acknowledges that any treatment that is to be worthy of the subject requires
God’s initial inspiration.”\footnote{117} On God’s own initiative, ordinary bread could become the medicine
of life—the eternal bread—for us, “if, again, You broke ordinary bread, for us it would be the
medicine of life.”\footnote{118}

Therefore, most of Ephrem’s hymns contain instruction on how to live a sacramental life
after baptism, namely, how to stand, act, and live before God in church life, especially in the
mysteries of the Eucharist. Furthermore, his \textit{madrashe} expect the baptized to make clear the
place of the sacramental life in ordinary life; that is, to live transformational lives in a wider

\footnote{116} \textit{Hymns on Virginity} 37:2; translation from Murray, \textit{Symbols of Church and Kingdom}, 77.

\footnote{117} Brock, \textit{The Luminous Eye}, 20.

\footnote{118} \textit{Hymns on the Nativity} 19:16; translation from McVey, \textit{Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns}, 169. Ephrem put his
thoughts in Mary’s voice in this stanza.
cultural context, and to participate in God’s future for the world with ongoing sacramental life. Brock affirms that “the hymns offer an essentially sacramental view of the Christian life, with great emphasis on baptism as the point of entry.”  

It is indeed the characteristic of mystagogical catechesis. What Ephrem tried to establish through his composing and singing madrashe in the liturgy was more than catechizing his congregations. In addition to shaping and nourishing the baptismal faith, Ephrem through his madrashe ultimately aims to encourage more attentive worship and, consequently, to enliven life with a baptismal faith—an ongoing baptismal life. 

It is also important to mention Ephrem’s love for the youth who would encourage the next generation’s participation in the baptismal liturgy and in church life as a whole. Ephrem projected his ideal image of the youth on John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, and seemingly recommended that the youth resemble the disciple, as if the disciple resembled Christ:

The youth who loved our Lord very much,  
who portrayed [and] put Him on and resembled Him,  
was zealous in all these matters to resemble Him,  
in his speech, his aspect and his ways.  
The creature put on his Creator,  
and he resembled Him although indeed he did not resemble what He was!  
it was amazing how much the clay is able to be imprinted  
with the beauty of its Sculptor.  

Here we can see Ephrem’s ethical concern; his liturgy is deeply associated with the ethical dimension. Ephrem noted that youth were “full of strifes, a fountain of contentions and of fightings, which intoxicateth and maddeneth the humble, so that they should keep changing

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120 Hymns on Virginity 25:4; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 371.
themselves at every word [they speak].”121 Presumably, Ephrem invites his listeners—especially the youths—to be like John, by intentionally calling him “the youth,” evoking their identity as the disciples of Jesus. Therefore, it seems that Ephrem intentionally named John “the youth,” who resembled Christ in speech, deed, life style, and all matters. The madrashe evokes fully the beautiful behavior of the beloved disciple, flowing in the phrase, “Blessed are you, Ephrata!”122

Based on the study of the mystagogical implications above, I expose in the following chapter the methodology for faith formation that Ephrem demonstrated in his madrashe—its key features and rhetorical strategies, with an emphasis on symbol, paradox, and typological juxtaposition.

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121 Sermons on Faith 3:15; translation from J. B. Morris, Select Works of S. Ephrem the Syrian: Translated out of the Original Syriac, with Notes and Indices (London and Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847), 412.

122 The phrase “Blessed are you, Ephrata!” is frequently used in his madrashe. Especially Hymns on Virginity chapters 13 to 30 use this lyric.
CHAPTER SIX

EPHREM’S FAITH FORMATIONAL METHODOLOGY

In order for his faith community to accept his *madrashe* unobtrusively, Ephrem utilized a famous pedagogic method of his times—the usage of melodies of Bar Daisan\(^1\) that the youth especially enjoyed. Because he recognized the life-transforming power of songs, Ephrem borrowed the form and melodies of Bar Daisan in order to compose his own poetic-catechetical *madrashe*. According to Theodoret (c. 393-457),

Some time ago, Harmonius, the son of Bardesanes,\(^2\) composed several songs, and by uniting his impious teaching to these pleasant melodies he afforded his listeners great enjoyment as he led them to perdition. Ephraem therefore borrowed their melody but joined it to his own orthodox doctrine and in this way he provided his listeners with instruction that was as enjoyable as it was useful.\(^3\)

But Ephrem creatively incorporated his pious instructions into the well-known melodies with new lyrics, therefore making a unique style of mystagogy.

When he applied the pedagogic method of Bar Daisan to his own *madrashe*, he was aware that not only did the content of the hymns need to be orthodox (unlike those of Bar Daisan and his son Harmonius), the form also had to be accessible and enjoyable to people. Through his *madrashe*, Ephrem strove to help people attune themselves to the faithful life. Consequently, he produced spiritually enriching liturgical poetry, which was pleasant and attractive to his contemporaries, especially the youths, thus making both faithful and catechumens easily yet


\(^2\) Bar Daisan is also written as Bardesanes or Bardaisan.

consciously participate in worship. Quite possibly he recognized that the liturgical poetry, especially when it took a familiar rhythm, had a spiritual dynamic to encompass all the hours, days, weeks, months, and years of church life, therefore filling people’s everyday lives with the sacred catechetical lyrics. His madrashe are reminders of God and what God wants from his people within and outside liturgy. What features of his madrashe made this possible? I now determine the key features of his methodology, and then I examine his rhetorical strategies that inspired the listeners with religious sensitivity.

**Key Features of Faith Formation in Ephrem’s Madrashe**

*Imitate in your life what you sing and listen to in liturgy*: this is probably the premise of faith formation manifested in Ephrem’s madrashe, since the lyrics of the madrashe are rooted in the Bible. For growing, maturing, and leading the faithful (weak or strong) into an ongoing sacramental life, Ephrem’s madrashe has several key features. *Scriptural formation* is a basic feature of faith formation underlying his madrashe; as has been seen, the catechetical songs are rich with scriptural references, allusions and interpretations. A madrasha in itself is a ritual form, not delivered in a written style, but sung in the liturgical context. *Song-actions and body-learning*—sensual and bodily participation in and through the liturgy—keenly impacts faith formation. *Mystagogical reflection* augments faith in everyday life, inculcating people with the lyrics conserved and transmitted in the madrashe, together with poetic meditations. *Continual reaffirmation through liturgical participation* persistently turns people toward God, thereby enabling the living of a sacramental life over a lifetime.

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4 This signifies the transformative life, glorifying God and sanctifying humanity. People who have been baptized are expected to live the sacramental life—the life to make them holy and the whole creation holy.
In this section I will examine these four key features of faith formation found with Ephrem’s *madrashe*. Even though the features are seemingly not unified in a logical synthesis, they make it possible that the (somewhat repetitive) *madrashe* have the capacity—kerygmatically and pastorally—to establish faith formation.

**Scriptural Formation**

Ephrem instructed his listeners to “arm the tongue with [God’s] word,” since the scriptures could transform “deceit” into “wisdom,” similar to the way light defeats darkness, life defeats death, and love conquers envy. Ephrem composed his *madrashe* on the basis of the biblical narratives; thus, scriptural formation plays a fundamental role in developing baptismal faith, by evoking biblical imagery. Interestingly, Ephrem described his own joy of reading the Bible and witnessed to his faith formation in reading the scriptures:

> 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 on 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.

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.

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The madrashe show Ephrem’s excitement while reading the Bible (possibly Genesis 2-3), and engaging himself in the liturgy through the reading.

In speaking of Ephrem’s scriptural formation, Adam Becker states, “Ephrem’s meditation on both the text of Gen 2-3 and the very experience of reading that text provides a clear delineation of his notion of nature and scripture and the parallel function of the two as ways of revealing the divine.”\(^8\) Sebastian Brock notes, “St. Ephrem emphasized that the Biblical narrative concerning Paradise in Genesis 2-3 contains much more profound teaching than any literal reading of the text would suggest.”\(^9\) Ephrem’s view of salvation history was deeply associated with Paradise where Adam and Eve wore the robe of glory; the baptized were re-clothed with the robe of glory at baptism, and then humankind would enter the eschatological Paradise.

Fundamentally, Ephrem’s understanding of the Bible was influenced by the Johannine tradition: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf…If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?” (John 5:39, 46-47).\(^10\) Ephrem opened this madrasa with reference to “Moses”’ instructions:

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—
described by things visible, but glorious for what lies hidden,
spoken of in few words, yet wondrous with its many plants.\(^11\)


\(^10\) Translation from the New Revised Standard Version.

\(^11\) *Hymns on Paradise* 1:1; translation from Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 77-78.
For Ephrem, the Bible was a treasure house of revelation, in which the story of the Garden (Eden, the eschatological Paradise) in Genesis manifested the glory of God. Ephrem continued:

I took my stand halfway between awe and love; a yearning for Paradise invited me to explore it, but awe at its majesty restrained me from my search. With wisdom, however, I reconciled the two; I revered what lay hidden and meditated on what was revealed. The aim of my search was to gain profit, the aim of my silence was to find succor.¹²

In reading the Bible, Ephrem employed two agents—awe and love. The religious affection of awe and love could evoke spiritual companionship, strengthening faith. Scriptural formation is a key methodology to shape faith.

**Song-actions and Body-learning: Madrasha as a Ritual Form**

Alexander Schmemann teaches that knowledge of God comes through liturgical experience.¹³ According to Susan Harvey, “human beings’ knowledge of God comes through what people experience and what they come to know, in their lives, in their minds and hearts, and in their bodies.”¹⁴ It is frequently ignored that Ephrem’s madrasha is in itself a ritual form, requiring oral and performatory pedagogy since song-actions and body-learning affect participants consciously and unconsciously.

Kees den Biessen presents the characteristics of Ephrem’s madrasha as a “teaching device” and a “ritual form”:

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¹² *Hymns on Paradise*, 1:2; translation from Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 78.


Ephrem achieves two remarkable things. First, he raises his Teaching Songs above their strictly instructional purpose and makes them full participations in the symbolic nature of the liturgical *hodie*, which is within and outside of linear time. In a ritual context, a *madrashe* (singular form of *madrashe*) is not just a teaching device, but in itself a ritual form of full status that brings about what it teaches. And secondly, though contradictory this may seem, this highly artistic procedure enables Ephrem to apply the transforming power of the ritual world to the world of everyday life. Since ritual oscillated between the present and the eschatological Kingdom, its transformative power is actually fully symbolical, that is, it expresses the symbolic nature of reality and effectively initiates into its mystery.\(^{15}\)

In analyzing Ephrem’s composition, den Biessen praises the transformative power of the *madrashe* and their ritual performance which encourages bodily engagement and sensory participation. Our body remembers and learns throughout the experience and the grace that have been built on our body and soul on the baptismal day. Ephrem understood that baptism is an act of God; yet baptism as God’s action can be explained meaningfully and mystagogically. While his *madrashe* ssng in depth the mystery of God, the listeners possibly encountered God through recalling the sensory participations that they had experienced at the place of baptism—the sound, smell, color, touch, and taste.

For Ephrem, body and soul go together; “the soul could not enter Paradise of itself and for itself, but together they entered, body and soul.”\(^{16}\)

The body was fashioned in wisdom, the soul was breathed in through grace, love was infused in perfection—but the serpent separated it in wickedness. Body and soul go to court to see which caused the other to sin; but the wrong belongs to both, for free will belongs to both.\(^{17}\)


\(^{16}\) *Hymns on Paradise* 8:8; translation from Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 134.

In his view, the Fall resulted in the separation of body and soul. However, body and soul are reconciled in the Incarnation: “The soul is Your bride; the body is Your bridal chamber”;\textsuperscript{18} and “Make glad the body with the soul; return the soul to the body; let them have joy at each other, for they were separated but are returned and joined once more.”\textsuperscript{19}

Ephrem furthermore propagated his baptismal thought through the liturgy. Although Ephrem’s baptismal language has been transmitted in written documents, it had been performed in the public liturgy and not contained in a literary form. As Jesus and his followers predominantly delivered their kerygma orally, Ephrem also practiced oral catechesis since he belonged to the same Semitic culture of Jesus and the disciples. Ephrem’s madrashe were to proclaim Christian doctrines; the congregation heard the madrashe and confessed their faith inwardly and outwardly. This is a key function of song-action and body-learning in sacramental performance.

Mystagogical Reflection through Baptismal Language

Language can be an epiphanic sign to manifest God. Baptismal imagery and symbolic language undergirding Ephrem’s madrashe evoke the image and memory of what took place during baptism, thereby enabling a countinous encounter with the mystery of God—the mystagogical reflection through baptismal language. Ephrem’s madrashe reiterate baptismal language causing a recollection of the baptismal ceremonies, such as taking off clothing,


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Nisibene Hymns} 69:14; translation from Sebastian Brock, \textit{Harp of the Spirit}, 79.
anointing, immersing, putting on a white garment, and receiving the Eucharist. Presumably Ephrem’s madrashe served the liturgy as a device of mystagogical reflection, enabling the listeners to perceive the mystery of God in everyday life.

Continual Reaffirmation in the Liturgy

Continuous participation in the liturgy embodies faith in the ordinary life. Although the frequency of the performance of the madrashe is not clear, we can assume that the church practiced madrashe regularly at least on Sundays. Henry Burgess cites an anonymous Syrian author:

Ephrem established Bnat Qyama and taught them odes and scales and responses; and conveyed in the odes intelligent sentiments in a sententious form, and things of spiritual wisdom concerning the nativity, and baptism, and fasting, and concerning the whole Christian dispensation, and the sufferings, and resurrection, and ascension of Christ; he wrote also concerning the martyrs, and penitence, and departed saints. And everyday these daughters of the covenant [Bnat Qyama] were assembled in the Churches; on the solemn days of our Lord, and on Sundays, and on the commemoration of the martyrs.

According to the anonymous author, madrashe were practiced in the liturgy not only on Sundays but also on other days. The author also reports that female liturgical choirs (Bnat Qyama) took catechetical and kerygmatic roles in the liturgy by singing Ephrem’s madrashe. Continual

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20 Regarding the explanation of mystagogy on the sacraments, see chapter five.

21 “St. Jerome says that in some churches they were recited after the scripture lessons in the divine liturgy. And they have had a place in the liturgy of the hours in the Syriac-speaking churches from the earliest periods for which textual witnesses remain” (Sidney Griffith, “Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine’: The Eucharist as ‘Living Medicine’ in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian,” Modern Theology 15:5 (1999): 225-246.


23 In third century Antioch, Paul of Samosata also organized women’s choirs, but they were different from Ephrem’s in that Paul reformed the chant and trained women to sing only psalms on the Pascha, but did not allow the women’s choir to sing other hymnody. See Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., “The Formation and Influence of the Antiochene Liturgy,” Dumbarton Oaks Papers 15 (1961): 36-37. But, unlike Paul of Samosata, Ephrem taught the
reaffirmation must have encouraged the listeners to live a sacramental life by engaging themselves in the liturgy, thus building up the faith community as the Body of Christ.

Cultural anthropologist Paul Connerton asserts the significance of continual reaffirmation, as he states that Christian societies remember through “calendrical repetition,” “verbal repetition,” and “ritual repetition.”24 The Church gathers together according to the calendar, celebrating the liturgy verbally and ritually. Connerton speaks of the significance, especially of verbal repetition itself: “[T]he question as to whether the participants in the rite understand the words is then secondary and is not considered to affect the efficacy of the ritual. What matters is that rites must manifest the gift of tongues... Their efficacy is in their uttered repetition.”25

Ephrem understood the efficacy of uttered repetition. His madrashe exhibit even euphonic utterance when read in the original Syriac language. What he intended in the verbal repetition—through the continual reaffirmation in the liturgy—was to plant the image of God in listeners’ hearts and all senses.

Let the image of your Lord be portrayed in your heart.
Tablets are honored because of the image of kings.
How much [more will] one [be honored] who portrayed his Lord in all his senses.26

Considering these four key features, Ephrem comosed his madrashe with rhetorical strategies, in order to carve vividly the image of God in their senses, therefore to help people perceive fully the mystery of God.

women’s choir various chants with kerygmatic and catechetical contents so that “the party of the adversary was put to shame and defeated” (Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies of Ephraem Syrus, xxxix).


25 Ibid.

26 Hymns on Virginity 2:15; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 270.
Rhetorical Strategies of Ephrem’s Methodology

Ephrem’s rhetoric has its origins in Mesopotamia where rhetoric was developed. Better understanding of Ephrem’s madrashe requires the study of his rhetorical strategies of inclusio, symbol, paradox, and typological juxtaposition, all of which became integral to his system of writing. Ephrem orchestrated rhetorically these instruments in his madrashe. His rhetoric is aphoristic yet epiphanic in nature, therefore inviting “the luminous eye” to perceive how his revelatory language operates in his madrashe.

Inclusio

David Aune defines inclusio as “a modern literary term referring to two very similar phrases or clauses placed at the beginning and end of a relatively short unit of text as a framing device.” Since inclusio is the repetition of key words or key phrases, critical appraisal occurs. J. B. Segal claims that “[Ephrem’s] work, it must be confessed, shows little profundity or originality of thought, and his metaphors are laboured. His poems are turgid, humourless, and repetitive.” However, it is necessary to notice that Ephrem’s rhetoric is culturally situated and embedded. In early Syriac literature, inclusio was a significant framing structure. For a proper understanding, one should read Ephrem’s madrashe in consideration of the rhetoric of inclusio.

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31 Robert Murray remarks that almost all writers in fourth century Syriac-speaking society used the rhetorical device of inclusio. See *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 2.
Michael Lattke, in his commentary of the *Odes of Solomon* 26, provides a helpful guideline to interpret the rhetoric of *inclusio*: “1a and 13a form the *inclusio* for the Ode by the repetition of the root *nba’*. The repetition indicates that the image of 13 is implicit in 1a”:

1a  I let a hymn to the Lord well forth (*nba’*)
1b  because I am his.
13a  like a river that has an abundant spring (*nba’*)
13b  and flows for the help of those who seek it.\(^{32}\)

The *inclusio* in Ephrem’s *madrashe* is to be similarly interpreted. For example, his *Hymns on Faith* 82 contains *inclusio* with 82:1, 3, and 11:

82:1  What is it you resemble (*dmā*)? Let your silence speak to one who listens to you; with silent mouth speak with us, for to him who hears the whisper of your silence your symbol proclaims in silence our Savior.

82:3  You of all gems are the only one whose begetting resembles (*dmā*) that of the Word on high, whom, in unique fashion, the Most High begot, while other engraved gems symbolically resemble (*dmā*) the supernal beings, themselves created.

82:11 Your nature resembles (*dmā*) the Silent Lamb with his gentleness: even though a man pierces it, takes it and hangs it on his ear, as it were on Golgotha, all the more does it throw out all its bright rays on those who behold it!\(^{33}\)

Based on the interpretation of Lattke, 82:1, 3, and 11 form the *inclusio*, in which the author holds back the answer to the question in the first stanza until the *inclusio* in the third and eleventh stanzas: “You resemble symbolically the supernal beings” (82:3); “Your nature resembles the Silent Lamb” (82:11). Without understanding the function of *inclusio*, there is no


proper interpretation of Ephrem’s madrashe. The inclusio is not a repetition, but an augmentative in adding more meaning to the word. Jack R. Lunndom notes that the “inclusio must therefore not be defined too narrowly. It is necessary only that the end show continuity with the beginning, and that this continuity be taken as a deliberate attempt by the author to effect closure.”34

Robert Murray advises that the relationship between the inclusio be made clear: “[T]he interpreter must try to expound his subject-matter and show the relationship within it, not merely present an anthology.”35 Murray explains figuratively the function of inclusio in Ephrem: inclusio starts by making a circle around the rim of what he really wanted to say, yet his argument proceeds to spiral into the central meaning of his purpose, “gradually advancing and going deeper.”36 This assessment causes Murray to say that Ephrem is “a source of new inspiration for creative liturgy and literature” and “a great theological poet.”37 A. S. Rodrigues Pereira also praises Ephrem for his madrashe that are “mature and sophisticated in form and content.”38

Ephrem’s madrashe frequently shows inclusio. When citing one biblical theme, he talks continuously of various related biblical names and events. At first glance, he seems to diverge; however, he finally concludes by wrapping all his narratives with inclusio, when he reaches the

34 Jack R. Lunndom, Jeremiah: A Study in Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 29. Lunndom explores the inclusio used in First and Second Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Psalms, the poetry of Job and Hosea, and Jeremiah.

35 Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, 3.

36 Ibid., 2.


pinnacle that he originally purposed. The pinnacle that he usually intends to reach is, for example, Paradise (in relation to the salvation history). Ephrem has never directly mentioned Paradise in terms of the salvation story of Genesis; rather, after interweaving associated names and events with symbol, paradox, and typology, Ephrem concludes the theme with inclusio.

Symbol

Ephrem’s madrashe communicate multiple levels of meaning through symbol, thus conveying the mystery of God at various levels. In his symbolic rhetoric, biblical images and ordinary life images fuse into an integrative purpose of the madrashe—praising God. Through the symbolic imagination, biblical narratives are embodied in his madrashe and embedded in human lives. According to Ephrem, “[I]magining is easier for us than speaking in words; the mind is able to extend itself to every place”;39 “no searching is able to extend and reach unto Thee.”40 In order to reach God, “the inmost imagination” is required,41 since everywhere God’s “symbol” exists:

In every place, if you look, His symbol is there, and when you read, you will find His types.
For by him were created all creatures, and he engraved his symbols upon his possessions.
When he created the world, He gazed at it and adorned it with His images.
Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth
His symbols on His members.42

39 Hymns on Faith 4:5; translation from J. B. Morris, Select Works of S. Ephrem the Syrian: Translated out of the Original Syriac, with Notes and Indices (London and Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847), 118.

40 Ibid.

41 Hymns on Faith 4:3; translation from Morris, Select Works of S. Ephrem the Syrian, 116-117.

42 Hymns on Virginity 20:12; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 348-349.
In Ephrem’s view, a symbol (rāzā in Syriac)\textsuperscript{43} is associated with the meaning of the revelation of God. According to Joseph Alencherry, rāzā in the Syrian tradition has “the eschatological sense”\textsuperscript{44} to denote revelation. On the other hand, Günther Bornkamm, examining a theological nuance of “mystery,”\textsuperscript{45} states that “mystery is not itself revelation; it is the object of revelation. This belongs constitutively to the term.”\textsuperscript{46} “Mystery” refers to \textit{mysterion} in Greek and rāzā in Syriac. Alencherry addresses Bornkamm’s concept of the mystery as “the sense of an eschatological mystery” by stating that “it is a veiled announcement of future events (divinely) predetermined, whose unveiling and real meaning is reserved to God alone and mediated through one inspired by his Spirit.”\textsuperscript{47}

For Ephrem, everything is revealed in Christ, who is “the reservoir of all symbols”:

\begin{quote}
See: He, being omniscient, served
all of them in their seasons.
Even the laborers pluck fruits
in their seasons and their months.
The symbols of the Wise Laborer, too,
go with His seasons.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} Whereas sacramentum is the Latin counterpart of the Greek \textit{mysterion}, rāzā is the equivalent in Syriac. According to \textit{A Compendious Syriac Dictionary}, rāzā is defined: “(a) a secret, mystery, mystical signification; a symbol, sign; (b) a sacrament, the Eucharist, the mystical elements; (c) conspiracy” (J. Payne Smith, \textit{A Compendious Syriac Dictionary} [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999], 524) Joseph Alencherry states that in the Peshitta tradition and later in Ephrem, rāzā could refer to the Revelation of God. This understanding of the revelatory notion of rāzā makes our understanding of sacrament much richer (Joseph Alencherry, “Notion of Rāzā in Syriac Biblical Tradition,” in \textit{Ephrem’s Theological Journal} [2006], 164). The Peshitta, meaning “simple, common, straight” in Syriac, is the standard version of the Syriac Bible, accepted from the end of the third century. The Old Testament of the Peshitta was probably translated in the second century and the New Testament by the early fifth century.


\textsuperscript{45} Mystery is an English translation of rāzā in Syriac, and \textit{mysterion} in Greek.


O Laborer Whose symbols were gathered,
Who is a reservoir of all symbols!\(^{48}\)

Sebastian Brock notes that “some aspects of a mystery cannot be fully comprehended by the human intellect”;\(^ {49}\) however, through and in Christ, the “key to authentic theology”\(^ {50}\) can be found since Christ, the reservoir of all symbols, is omniscient and manifests God.

It is significant that “symbols are multi-faceted: they have no one single meaning.”\(^ {51}\) For example, the “pearl is a symbol of the Kingdom, of faith, of Christ, his virgin birth, his crucifixion, and so on.”\(^ {52}\) One meaning of a symbol invites another meaning, therefore augmenting the meaning of the symbol. Brock points out clearly the function of the usage: “the pearl simply serves as a window opening into all sorts of different aspects of ‘Truth,’ it is an invitation to, and starting point for meditation”.\(^ {53}\)

Even though Your symbol may be small,
Yet it is a fountain of further mysteries.\(^ {54}\)

Ephrem explained why God uses symbol, image, and metaphor, humorously comparing divine pedagogy to a human being teaching a parrot:

A person who is teaching a parrot to speak
Hides behind a mirror and teaches it in this way:
when the bird turns in the direction of the voice speaking,
it finds in front of its eyes its own resemblance reflected;

\(^{48}\) Hymns on Virginity 20:11; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 348.


\(^{50}\) den Biesen, Simple and Bold, 19.

\(^{51}\) Brock, The Luminous Eye, 56.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Hymns on Faith 4:10; translation from Brock, The Luminous Eye, 56.
it imagines that it is another parrot, conversing with itself. [The man] put [the bird’s] image in front of it, so that there by it might learn how to speak.  

In this stanza, Ephrem demonstrated how God communicates with human beings: God put on a garment of metaphors (names), a human body (Incarnation), and materials (the bread and wine, the Eucharist). Ephrem understood the reason in the following way:

Your nature is single, but there are many ways of explaining it
our description may be exalted, or in moderate terms, or lowly
Make me worthy of the lowest part, that I may gather up, as crumbs, the gleanings from Your wisdom’s [table].

In addition, God chose names or metaphors to communicate with human beings:

Let us give thanks to God Who clothes Himself
in the names of the body’s various parts:
Scripture refers to His “ears,” to teach us that He listens to us;
it speaks of His “eyes,” to show that He sees us,
and, although in His true Being there is no wrath or regret,
yet He put on these names too because of our weakness.

55 Hymns on Faith 31:6; translation from Ephrem the Syrian, Select Poems, 23.

56 Brock and Kiraz’s Ephrem the Syrian, Select Poems gives examples of Ephrem’s understanding on “human language about God”: (1) putting on names (incarnation into human language) in Hymns on Faith 31, (2) putting on the body (Incarnation) in Sermon on our Lord 9—“who clothed yourself in the body of mortal Adam, thereby making it a fountain of salvation for all mortals,” (3) putting on materials—bread and wine, “as a consequence of the incarnation, God makes himself available to humanity in the Mysteries, or Sacraments, of Baptism and the Eucharist, for with their assistance humanity can respond to the movement of God’s love, and so, as a result of that response, become clothed in that luminous garment of glory which God had originally intended for humanity, had the Fall never taken place” (Ephrem the Syrian, Select Poems, 16). It also explains the imagery of the garment, noting, “how could Christ have despised the body yet put on the Bread (Hymns against Heresies 47:2),” and “Christ regarded the body as the garment of His divinity” (Hymns on Faith 19:2); see Sebastian Brock, “A Hymn of St. Ephrem on the Eucharist,” The Harp 1:1 (1987): 66. Finally Ephrem’s madrashe concludes in Hymns on Faith 19:3 (translation from Brock, The Luminous Eye, 108):

Who will not be amazed at Your various garments? The body has hidden Your radiance—the awesome divine nature; Ordinary clothes hid the feeble human nature; The Bread has hidden the Fire that resides within it.


58 Ibid., 31:1; translation from Ephrem the Syrian, Select Poems, 19.
His refrain is more impressive: “[B]lessed is He who has appeared to our human race under so many metaphors.” Ephrem continued that if God would not put on names, we could not communicate with God:

We should realize that, had He not put on the names of such things, it would not have been possible for Him to speak with us humans. By means of what belongs to us did He draw close to us: he clothed Himself in our language, so that He might clothe us in His mode of life. He asked for our form and put this on, and then, as a father with his children, He spoke with our childish state. Ephrem also imitated the way God communicates with human beings. He chose various modes of rhetoric in order to reach people who want to know God and themselves, as well as to reach God—who in turn wants to reveal who He is and what He did for creation. Ephrem inculcated his listeners with symbol, image, metaphor, and typology; moreover, he strongly admonished them “not to die in the depth of investigation.” It is because:

He is He Who Himself constructed the senses of our minds so that we might sing on our lyre something that the mouth of the bird is unable to sing in its melodies. Glory to the One Who saw that we had been pleased to resemble the animals in our rage and greed, and [so] He descended and became one of us that we might become heavenly. God is to be praised unceasingly with all the human senses, since God became human so that humans might become heavenly—a paradox.

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59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 31:2; translation from Ephrem the Syrian, Select Poems, 19.

61 Hymns on Virginity 16:5; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 330.

Paradox

Ephrem exclaimed the paradox, “Let our weakness return [to God] a song of thanksgiving.” Paradox is characterized by awakening the cognitive senses by transforming a cursory attention into an attentive awareness. Ephrem’s use of paradox is deeply associated with the divine mysteries. Edmund Beck observes: “Ephrem uses the Greek word paradoxon not in its rhetorical sense but in the sense of divine mysteries revealed only to faith.” By Christ’s kenosis, a great paradox has appeared:

Mary bore a mute Babe
   Though in Him were hidden all our tongues.

Furthermore, Ephrem used the rhetoric of paradox in order to reveal the meaning of kenosis:

    Joseph caressed the Son
    as a babe. He served Him
    as God. He rejoiced in Him
    as in a blessing, and he was attentive to Him
    as to the Just One—a great paradox!

Similarly Ephrem reiterated:

    Babe in the womb, since the seal of virginity
    abides, the womb was for You
    the royal palace, and the curtain.
    Evidence of virginity upon it, evidence of virginity outside,
    a fetus inside—a great paradox!

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63 Hymns on Nativity 3:21; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 88.


65 Hymns on the Nativity 4:146; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 100.

66 Hymns on the Nativity 5:16; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 113.

67 Hymns on the Nativity 12:3; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 134.
The reversal value found in paradox may touch listeners’ dull senses, and so impact their lives in such a way as to transform their transitoriness into eternalness. Seely Beggiani offers an insight of the dynamism of paradox to “embody divine realities”:

Perhaps the most striking literary form used by Ephrem and the Syriac fathers is paradox. In this approach, God’s mysteriousness is preserved while events from human experience are juxtaposed antithetically as vehicles of meaning. Paradox is the imagination’s counterpart to the intellect’s use of analogy. It is one way in which human speech can embody divine realities.⁶⁸

For instance, Ephrem used paradox to express the relationship between Mary and Jesus:

“Mary bore a mute Babe” who contains “all our tongues.”⁶⁹ Kathleen McVey observes the kenotic theme in two respects:

First with respect to Mary: She cared for her Son because He willed to become in need of care (str. 5). Second with respect to all creation: By entering Mary’s womb he is transformed from Lord, Establishe, Ruler, Nourisher of all into a needy and helpless infant (str. 6-8). Alluding to the Magnificat of the Lucan infancy narrative, Ephrem gives the latter theme a prophetic note of social transformation (str. 7).⁷⁰

Ephrem illustrated copiously such paradoxical relations: for example, Jesus “the Lord” became “a servant”; Jesus “the Shepherd of all” became “a lamb”; Jesus “the Radiant One” became “a despised hue”; Jesus “the Mighty warrior” became “a baby in her womb”; Jesus “the Nourisher of all” became “a hunger”; Jesus “the One who gives drink” became “a thirst.”⁷¹ More

⁶⁸ Seely J. Beggiani, Early Syriac Theology: With Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 30.

⁶⁹ Hymns on the Nativity 4:146; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 100.

⁷⁰ McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 131. McVey (p. 132) quotes Hymns on the Nativity 11: 5 (“If she carried You, Your great mountain lightened its burden. If she fed You [it was] because You hungered. If she gave you a drink [it was] because you willed to thirst. If she embraced You, the coal of mercy preserved her bosom”); 11:6-8 (“A wonder is Your mother: The Lord entered her and became a servant…He acquired hunger… He acquired thirst”); and 11:7 (“The womb of Your mother overthrew the orders”).

⁷¹ Hymns on the Nativity 11:6-8; translation from McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 132.
paradoxical reversal took place in the last stanza of the Hymns on the Nativity 11, stating that Jesus given birth bare, effectively, clothed our mortal body, the Incarnation, for the purpose of our salvation. Sebastian Brock also identifies Ephrem’s favorite paradox as “the Great One who became small,” “the Rich One who became poor,” and “the Hidden One who revealed himself.”

In terms of the Incarnation, what Ephrem intended to tell his listeners is not a mere miracle story that the transcendent God became a baby, but the paradoxical truth that the “Logos indwelling the entire creation should confine himself to a tiny part of it.” In Hymns on the Nativity 23, Ephrem wrote in regard to the paradoxical situation of the Incarnation: it took place because of the “grace of God, the gift of hope for humankind, and the return of life to Adam and to us all.”

Additionally, Ephrem exposed the theme of Christ as the True Lamb by developing whole narratives paradoxically: “the Sacrifice instructed the sacrifice how he should roast, and how he should eat; how to slaughter, and how to sprinkle [the blood].”

O Hidden Lamb who slaughtered the visible lamb in the midst of Egypt, who gave the staff to Moses with which the aged man might shepherd the flock; the aged [Moses] shepherd that aged flock, but the Lamb shepherded them both. The Lamb was both shepherded, and saw to the shepherding: He shepherds His shepherds, for they shepherded Him, and He shepherds them.

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72 Hymns on the Nativity 11:6-8; translation from Brock, The Luminous Eye, 25.
73 McVey, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, 187.
74 Ibid.
75 Hymns on the Crucifixion 2:2; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 125.
76 Hymns on the Crucifixion, 2:1; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 125.
Ephrem narrated the paradoxical situation with the refrain, “[B]lessed is the Lamb which shepherds His own flocks!”

Sebastian Brock’s explanation is helpful to understand the whole series of paradoxes:

It was the preexistent True Lamb, that is, the divine Word, which gave Moses instructions for the slaughter of the Passover lamb. The True Lamb was at the same time a Shepherd to Moses, the shepherd of Israel. Thus it was that the True Lamb gave instructions about his own sacrifice to Moses, and so paradoxically the Sacrifice was the giver of instructions to the sacrifice.

The story of Issac and Abel is found in Ephrem’s paradoxical rhetoric, in which Isaac the lamb (Gen 22:8) was rescued by the ram (Gen 22:13), and Abel the shepherd offered a lamb as a sacrifice, and at the same time he was sacrificed (Gen 4):

Come and behold the Living Lamb who has chosen shepherds for Himself, Choosing, too, slaughters—who made Abraham hold the knife to kill His symbol, the sheep. He both killed and delivered His symbol He saved [Isaac] the lamb, but slew the ram: by His symbol He delivered His symbol, so that He might become the summation of all symbols. Blessed is He who came and summed up all symbols!

This primordial Lamb chose for Himself [Abel] the first shepherd; the firstborn [then chose] the firstling, and He poured into him something of His likenesses, imprinting in him something to portray Him, spreading over him a parable of His own slaughter; For Abel was both shepherd and sacrifice, and so our Shepherd and our Sacrifice has depicted in him His own role as both Shepherd and Sacrifice. Praise be to You, Depicter of symbols!

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77 Ibid.
78 Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 122.
79 Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 131.
80 Hymns on the Crucifixion 2:7-8; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 131.
Ephrem as a poet treated the indescribable with paradox: “I stand amazed at Your mercies which You have poured on wicked men: you have made poor Your honorable state in order to enrich our impoverishment.”

Ephrem frequently expressed that “paradox gives birth to wonder, and wonder to praise.”

His birth gives us purification,  
His baptism gives us forgiveness,  
His death is life to us,  
His ascension is our exaltation.  
How we should thank Him!

Ephrem enlightened listeners’ senses by presenting God’s mysteriousness in his paradoxical rhetoric.

Typological Juxtaposition

The typological method flourished within fourth-century Syriac Christianity as a means to “explain the meaning of an event in the salvation history by relating it to another event whose inner meaning is fundamentally similar.” Certain writings from Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Jacob of Serugh demonstrate the use of the typological method. Baby Varghese claims that, unlike

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83 Hymns on the Resurrection 1: 16; translation from Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Poems, 91.


85 Ibid. According to Varghese, Cyril of Jerusalem’s method is primarily typological, however, “he had a preference for the allegory.” Additionally, Varghese argues that Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia used typology in their exegesis of Scripture, but all the West Syrian Fathers followed the allegorical method in explaining baptism and the Eucharist (ibid., 17-19).
allegory, typology considers events as “entities.” Ephrem interpreted baptism and the Eucharist in the relation to the prefiguration of the Old Testament. Ephrem’s use of typology is another crucial component of the rhetoric that prevails in his *madrashe*.

Ephrem used typology to juxtapose the salvation history of the Cross with another event to expose the deep meaning. For example, in narrating the crucifixion of Jesus in St. John’s Gospel (“One of the soldiers pierced the side of Jesus with a lance and from it there immediately came forth blood and water” [Jn. 19:34]), Ephrem did not show the commentator’s style; rather, he illustrated the biblical narrative with his articulated typology:

> 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. The sword that pierced Christ removed the sword guarding Paradise; His forgiveness tore up our document of debt.

Ephrem juxtaposed the sword that pierced Christ with the sword that guards Paradise.

This chart shows the interweaving relationship of the events:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Water and blood from the pierced side of Christ</th>
<th>Baptism and the Eucharist: the Sacrament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The liturgical celebration of the Church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam was baptized with the water and blood from the pierced side of Christ, since Adam was buried under the Cross</td>
<td>The sword that guards Paradise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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86 Varghese shows that allegory concerns the details of events, and “its interpretation of them can be unrelated to any fundamental similarity of meaning” (ibid., 18).

87 *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 9:2; translation from Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 81.
The lance that opens Paradise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The side of Christ</th>
<th>Eve’s birth from the side of Adam, Christ as second Adam: Mary as second Eve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eve: the side of Adam :: the Church: the side of Christ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the chart shows, Ephrem juxtaposed the pierced side of Jesus (birth of the Church) with the side of Adam (birth of Eve); the water and blood from the side of Jesus were related to baptism (the water in the Jordan) and the Eucharist (the bread and the wine), thereby adding deeper connections to the Church’s celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. The typological pair that Ephrem juxtaposed, in reversal, returned to the pierced side of Christ: humanity could re-enter or regain Paradise through the pierced side of Christ.

Ephrem also identified another typological pair—the lance that pierced the side of Christ and the sword that guards Paradise. The lance is more directly related to the salvation event: the lance of John made a new way to re-enter Paradise by opening the side of Christ; correspondingly the sword of Genesis has not barred up the way:

Blessed is the Merciful One who saw the sword
Beside Paradise, barring the way
to the Tree of Life. 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.⁸⁸

The pierced side of Christ made possible the eschatological Paradise; eventually the pierced side of Christ gives a way to re-enter Paradise.

⁸⁸ *Hymns on the Nativity* 8:4; translation from Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 82.
Another typology is associated with Eve, Mary, Adam and Christ. Eve’s birth from Adam’s side is juxtaposed with the Church’s birth from the side of Christ:

Adam’s side gave birth to Eve… the primordial pair were stripped of their original “robe of glory” and banished from Paradise, kept by the revolving sword of fire. A second weapon undoes this damage, by piercing another side, from which “flow forth” the two sacraments that wash away sin and effect the potential re-entry of the baptized into Paradise, enabling them to feed on Christ the Three of Life, Baptism having clothed them once again in that “robe of glory” which Adam and Eve had lost at the Fall.89

In commenting on how humankind is blessed with the pierced side of Jesus, Ephrem described Christ as the second Adam:

I ran to all your limbs, and from them all I received every kind of gift. Through the side I pierced with the sword I entered the garden fenced in with the sword. Let us enter in through that side which was pierced, since we were stripped naked by the counsel of the rib that was extracted. The fire that burnt in Adam, burnt him in that rib of his. For this reason the side of the second Adam has been pierced, and from it comes a flow of water to quench the fire of the first Adam.90

Sebastian Brock commends Ephrem’s excellent use of typology by stating that “perhaps no other writer has ever put typological exegesis to such creative use, employing it to provide an intricate network of links between the two Testaments, between this world and the heavenly world.”91 Varghese claims that Ephrem’s typology gave cohesion to the meaning of the pierced side of Jesus in light of the salvation story, by relating it to the biblical narrative of the birth of Eve from the side of Adam. Ephrem, furthermore, developed his typology into the sacramental narrative of baptism and the Eucharist. Their intrinsic meanings fundamentally merge with salvation history—Paradise regained. Ephrem’s typology tells us that the water and blood from

89 Brock, The Harp of the Spirit: Twelve Poems of Saint Ephrem, 12.


the side of Jesus instituted baptism and the Eucharist; his typology remarks that the Church was given birth from the side of Jesus, as Eve was give birth from the side of Adam. In this respect, Ephrem’s typology conveys his sacramental theology and ecclesiology, beyond a mere rhetoric.

Ephrem’s madrashe requires a fresh reading from the perspective of mystagogy.

“[Ephrem] teaches a way of seeing, reading, imagining, thinking, and contemplating—trying to inspire others to set out on their own voyage of discovery.”92 My argument is not to prove that Ephrem was a mystagogue; rather, to show, from the evidence of his writings, that Ephrem practiced a mystagogical methodology. Ephrem’s madrashe—his poetry and song which show several rhetorical tools—elucidate the mystery of God effectively and affectively thereby providing a means of transform for singer and listener.

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92 den Biesen, Simple and Bold, 26.
CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

Robert Murray describes Ephrem as “the greatest poet of the patristic age, and perhaps the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”¹ Ephrem’s elaborate rhetoric in his poetry prevailed in his madrashe, thus to revive liturgy catechetically and mystagogically like a refreshing fountain, on Sunday and in other festal liturgies.² I have read Ephrem’s madrashe from the perspective of liturgy, in particular, from the perspective of mystagogy—a crucial method of faith formation in the fourth century. Despite worries about all the possible inaccuracies and the inadequacies of my presentation here, a remark by Sebastian Brock has goaded me to re-read Ephrem:

Saint Ephrem is not only a poet to be read, he is also one by whom one is continually rewarded each time one re-reads him: like the types and symbols upon which he rejoices to ponder, his own poems are vehicles of an immense wealth of spiritual insight, the variety of whose treasures never ceases to give rise to astonishment in the reader who approaches them with sympathy.³

In order to consider a catechetical and mystagogical approach to Ephrem’s work, it was important to understand better the pastoral and liturgical dimensions in his madrash. I studied, therefore, Ephrem and his world, the catechumenate, the liturgy of baptism, his mystagogy, and his mystagogical methodology and rhetorical strategies engaged to explain his symbolic words


² Edmund Beck writes in the introductions of *Hymns on Fasting* (Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Jejunino, CSCO 246, Syri 106 [Louvain: Peeters, 1964]) and *Hymns on Unleavened Bread, Hymns on the Crucifixion, and Hymns on the Resurrection* (Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschahymnen, CSCO 248, Syri 108 [Louvain: Peeters, 1964]), that these hymns especially reveal their liturgical characteristic, in which we could conclude its liturgical purpose according the liturgical year.

and the gestures used at baptism (of course, the Eucharist). Through the study of Ephrem’s *madrashe*, we gained an awareness of how the fourth-century Syrian community interpreted their faith, and how Ephrem enabled his listeners to understand and deepen their experience of the mystery of God.

Ephrem’s *madrashe* provided baptismal language (based on the biblical interpretation) to contain and express the faith of his community, which entailed a proper symbolization of their religious experience, and therefore moved their experience into animated everyday language. This form allowed religious experience to be illuminated and elucidated in everyday life by evoking the memory of the people’s experience of the mystery of God. What I discovered through my fresh reading was an ongoing baptismal faith and life—that is, I found the meaning of what was done in Ephrem’s *madrashe*. Furthermore, I could meet the liturgical community in their praise of God, in their singing and listening to the *madrashe* in “worship as the public act of the church.”

The Syriac-speaking church expressed herself, according to Ephrem, as that which originated from the side of Jesus, like Eve was given birth from the side of Adam. One of the crucial tasks of the church was, therefore, to celebrate baptism and the Eucharist, since the water and the blood together issued forth from the pierced side of Jesus. Correspondently, the lance that pierced the side of Jesus re-opened the entrance of Paradise by which humankind could re-enter Paradise, wearing the robe of glory received at baptism. The church celebrated the sacraments in the midst of the eschatological anticipation of re-entering Paradise, therefore keeping their robes of glory in purity, and reviving their faith and life.

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Ephrem “envisaged Paradise as a mountain,” consonant with what was written in Ezekiel (28:13-14). But Ephrem did not intend to describe Paradise in detail:

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 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.

Ephrem’s thought was culturally embedded and embodied in his madrashe, which helped to establish the conspicuous peculiarity of Syriac-speaking Christianity. Its distinctive characteristics were manifested in the liturgy of baptism—the ascetic vows at baptism and the ascetic community. The Bnat Qyama represented the ascetic community in the service of the liturgy by singing the madrashe. As an ihidayta Ephrem instructed the Bnat Qyama in their service. Through the acknowledgement of the relationship between his madrashe and culture, we see evidence of inculturation in the church. Furthermore, we rediscover one of the oldest liturgies, thus to be a “student of the Church’s faith” as well as “its witness.”

From an examination of what Ephrem did with his madrashe in the liturgy, I conclude that the role and function of madrashe is to praise God, though they are intrinsically catechetical, liturgical, and mystagogical. Ephrem was said to have had a dream when he was a boy, in which “a vine shoot sprang up from his tongue; it grew, and everywhere under the heaven was filled by it. It bore bunches of grapes in proliferation, and all the birds of the sky came and ate of its fruits;

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6 Ibid., 48.

the more they ate, the more the bunches multiplied and grew.”

Ephrem, in fact, provided multiple “fruits” for praising God, and we harvest an understanding of God’s grace from his insightful symbol and images. Ephrem would inculcate his church with his madrashe; at the same time, he was also praising God by composing, teaching, and singing the madrashe. As the allana (herdsman) for his community, he prayed for a “fertile” poet’s mind, so that he would not be “barren”:

Lord, my mind is barren from giving birth to anything new;
Grant to my mind fertility and a child, just as you did to Hannah,
So that the utterance of the child that shall issue from my mouth
May be offered up to You as was that barren woman’s child (Samuel).

At least five hundred madrashe survive, which were collected as separate cycles in the early fifth century. Throughout the whole series of madrashe, Ephrem invited the Christian community to thank God and to glorify God without ceasing:

Let us thank Him Who was beaten and Who saved us by His wound.
Let us thank Him Who took away the curse by His thorns.
Let us thank Him Who killed death by his dying.
Let us thank Him Who was silent and vindicated us.
Let us thank Him Who cried out in death that had devoured us.

... 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].

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8 Sebastian Brock introduces a famous story of Ephrem, citing Palladius’ *Lausiac History* (419/20) chapter 40, in his *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 14.

9 *Hymns on the Church* 30:1; translation from Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 172.


I have been amazed with Ephrem’s profoundly unfolding poetic imagination. While reading his madrashe, we might have been consciously and unconsciously initiated into his world of madrashe, and followed his direction for scriptural formation, ritual formation, and catechetical formation, and finally mystagogical formation. His treasure house of madrashe invites us into a world of shining, multivalent colors. The treasure house still waits for our entering to pick up the profound meanings of symbol, image, metaphor, and typology. The elaborately articulated rhetoric of Ephrem can be restored and practiced today, with a proper adaptation for our wider culture; an irresistible task is to animate yesterday’s poetic imagery and hymnic catechesis in the liturgy, thereby to activate and enliven our worship today. The effectiveness of poem, symbol, and image can make our senses awake and alive to the performance and content of the liturgy. More obviously, Ephrem’s writings remind us that our baptized life requires a deep sense of the mystery of God time and time again, since for baptized Christians everything is an epiphanic sign, every day is an epiphanic day.
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