

## THE TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH OF SYRIAC SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

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*[For the early Syriac writers, the universe, having been created by the Word, is by nature symbolic and finds completion in the Incarnation. Salvation history is a succession of types and antitypes that await realization in Christ. His theandric actions on earth bring forth new types, the Church and the mysteries/sacraments. The mysteries in turn are types foreshadowing the heavenly fulfillment. The author proposes that a theology of sacrament can be developed recognizing type and symbol as the proper vehicles of the divine presence in Creation.]*

Early Syriac theology, greatly influenced by the thought patterns of Scripture, emphasized the role of the imagination in arriving at truth. An example of this approach is found in its sacramental theology. A reading of the works of St. Ephrem, James of Saroug, and others of the early centuries indicates that typology was used not just as a method to interpret Scripture, but as the main vehicle of doing theology. For these writers, types and antitypes were not only indicators of the plan of salvation but became the means by which to understand how salvation and divinization would be achieved.

Coming out of a world view that considered Creation, revelation, and Incarnation as elements of one process, the Syriac<sup>1</sup> tradition regarded the typology found in Scripture as a particular manifestation of the nature of things. Types, symbols, and mysteries are at the core of Creation itself. The Syriac world view affirms that the world was created by the Word of God

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<sup>1</sup> The term Syriac is used here to refer to the teachings of the early Syriac Church writers and to the Eastern churches that were influenced by them in their liturgy and theology.

and thus is revelatory by nature. It further claims that the Incarnation is the summit of Creation, and was prepared for throughout history. Therefore, the typology found in nature and in Scripture is not just an interpretive tool, but is of the very essence of things. The Incarnation, which is the fulfillment of type and symbol, sets in motion the work of divinization which will reach its maturation only at the end of time.

Here I develop the thesis that Syriac sacramental theology combines an entitative view of typology with the biblical idea of mystery, that type and symbol are embodiments of the divine presence in Creation, and that the sacraments are understood as antitypes of the salvific actions of Christ extending the work of divinization through time.

### THE SYRIAC VIEW OF TYPOLOGY

To appreciate the significance of typology for Syriac theology, one must consider its understanding of Creation and revelation. Syriac thought considers Creation to be revelatory because it was engendered by the *Word* or *Voice* of the Father. Ephrem offers the following interpretation of Genesis: “In the beginning, however, the works have been created through the First-Born. For [it is written:] God said: ‘Let there be light—and it was created.’ Whom, now did he command, when there was nothing? Fully revealed is the truth to him who wants to see it: the six days that were created give testimony . . . that [the Creator] did not give commands to the [created] works that they should make themselves. Nay, through the One from the One were they created. The Father commanded through his Voice, the Son carried out the work. . . . In the creation of man, finally, the Omniscient took heed . . . to reveal his First-Born abundantly.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the Word of God leaves his imprint on what he has created. The traces of God are found throughout Creation. Created things are by their very nature revelatory.

Syriac tradition viewed the Incarnation of Christ as the highest work of Creation, an event that would have occurred whether or not humans had sinned. Since the Incarnation was intended from the beginning of Creation, and since it is the fulfillment and apex of Creation, all things, and especially humanity, are created in the image of Christ and point to Christ. In his *Hymn on Virginity* 20.12, Ephrem observes: “In every place, if you look, his [Christ’s] symbol is there, and wherever you read, you will find his types.

<sup>2</sup> *Hymn on the Faith* 6.6–16 in *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum syri* (hereafter abbreviated as CSCO) 154 (Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1955) 26–30. See Tryggve Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1978) 40–41.

For in him all creatures were created and he traced his symbols on his property. When he was creating the world, he looked to adorn it with icons of himself. The springs of his symbols were opened up to run down and pour forth his symbols into his members.”<sup>3</sup> For Ephrem, Christ is the active “Artist” who has not only depicted himself in the entire Creation and in the Holy Scriptures, but has even depicted the Father in himself.<sup>4</sup>

Douglas Fox observes that the Syriac writer Philoxenus of Mabboug sees God the Father as the “Archetype,” enshrouded in the mystery of his being, whose self-revelations were in types and shadows until the full revelation was made when the Word became flesh in Jesus. The divine likeness in humans is a “type” of him who is the Archetype, while possessing the divine likeness in itself, it points beyond itself. This is the attitude behind Philoxenus’s typological interpretation of Scripture. It is to be distinguished from a purely allegorical interpretation where the factual content of a passage is irrelevant to the hidden or spiritual meaning it is said to indicate.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Word created the world and since Christ preexisted eternally in the divine plan, Adam and his followers were created in the image of Christ. The Syriac writer James of Saroug concludes that humanity was created with a double image. It is in the image of the Word who is the image of the Father, but also in the image of the future Word made flesh. The humanity of Christ, therefore, is in a primordial relationship to the human race. Adam is in a very special sense the image of God. James of Saroug explains: “The image of the Son, the only one, he gave to Adam, while he was its creator, he took it from him when he visited him. . . . While he was its creator, he was related to him who gave him the image. . . . To his own he came; in his image he dwelt in the daughter of Adam, who was formed in his image, and because of this he was related to him.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, CSCO 223 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1962) 70–71. English translation: Sidney Griffith, “A Spiritual Father for the Whole Church: St. Ephrem the Syrian,” *Sobornost* 20 (1998) 21–40, at 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> “The scattered symbols you have gathered from the Torah toward your beauty and you set forth the prototypes of Your gospel and powers and signs from nature. You mixed pigments for Your portrait. You were observed by Yourself and You portray Yourself, O Painter, Who also portrayed His Father in Himself! The Two portray One Another. Prophets, kings and priests, all of them created, have portrayed You, though they are unlike You” (*Hymn on Virginitate* 28.2 ff. in CSCO 223.101–5). English translation in Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist, 1989) 386–87.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Fox, *The “Matthew-Luke Commentary” of Philoxenus* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1979) 252.

<sup>6</sup> *Homily 94 in Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* ed. Paul Bedjan, 3 (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1907) 590. English translation in Roberta C. Chesnut,

The Syriac writers go a step further and reason that the universe is an immense christological symbol, having for its end to reveal the Son of God and to prepare a human nature for his coming. Ephrem declares: “[T]he creation conceived His symbols; Mary conceived His limbs. Therefore many wombs brought forth the Only-begotten. The belly brought Him forth by travail, and the creation also brought Him forth by symbols.”<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, for the Syriac writers, image eventually leads to reality. The types of Christ in the Old Testament coalesce in the human nature taken up by Christ. The term “truth” or “reality” is used to express this fulfillment. In contrasting the Passover lamb with Christ, Ephrem proclaims: “Let us weigh and compare their achievements—of the lamb that was the symbol, and of the Lamb that is the Truth. Let us look upon the symbol as a shadow, let us look upon the Truth as fulfillment.”<sup>8</sup>

To summarize, Ephrem sees the world as a symbolic whole. Images, words, and names, in particular, retain something of the essence of the beings they signify. For Ephrem, the elements of matter are visual means that express the work of God. Enlightened by faith, Ephrem sees in nature a symbol that speaks of God, of his works and his mysteries, for God has left traces in the universe.<sup>9</sup>

In my view, Ephrem and the Syriac writers regarded typology as the very nature of created reality itself. It is not only that God chose types as a means of revelation. Rather, Creation is by its very nature revelatory and christological. This is why the Syriac tradition finds types not only in Scripture but in all of nature.

### THE MEANING OF “MYSTERY” AS APPLIED TO SACRAMENT

Syriac writers often combine their typological view of the plan of salvation with the idea of mystery. In fact, the Syriac word for mystery, *raz*, is used often to describe types found in Creation and in Scripture. The word *raz* is of Persian origin and referred to private and secret counsels held by court officials. Its Hebrew counterpart in the Old Testament was used to

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*Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabboug, and Jacob of Sarug* (London: Oxford University, 1976) 127, n. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Hymn on Virginity* 6, 7–8 in CSCO 223.22–23; trans. McVey, 290. See George Saber, “La typologie sacramentaire et baptismale de saint Ephrem,” *Parole de l’Orient* 4 (1973) 73–91, at 76–79.

<sup>8</sup> *Hymn on the Unleavened Bread* 3.3–4 in *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschahymnen*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, CSCO 248 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1964) 6. See Sebastian Brock, “The Poetic Artistry of St. Ephrem: An analysis of H. Azym. III,” *Parole de l’Orient* 6/7 (1975/6) 21–28, at 24.

<sup>9</sup> See Pierre Yousif, “Symbolisme christologique dans la Bible et dans la nature chez S. Ephrem de Nisibe,” *Parole de l’Orient* 8 (1977–8) 5–66, at 48.

signify heavenly secrets. The Hebrew term in Daniel was translated in the Septuagint by the Greek *mysterion* and used to describe a vision of the future given to humans by God in symbols.<sup>10</sup> In the New Testament, the term “mystery” was used in the sense of Jesus’ teaching regarding the “secrets of the kingdom,” and St. Paul’s teaching regarding the dispensation of God’s plan throughout the course of history.<sup>11</sup>

The Syriac writers, as we shall see, were influenced by the Pauline understanding of “mystery,” especially by the teaching in Ephesians 5:32. In that passage, Paul taught that the fundamental union of Adam and Eve in marriage established by God long ago in Genesis was a prefigured “type” of the union of Christ and his Church already part of the salvific plan of God. Paul stated, “This is a profound mystery, and I interpret it as referring to Christ and his Church.”<sup>12</sup>

While the types emphasize the revelatory aspect of salvation, mystery focuses on the apophatic character of the divine and the elusive nature of the holy, present in the type and its fulfillment. Mystery is the accomplishment in Christ of a plan of God hidden at first, but subsequently manifested to humans. It is characterized by the two opposing aspects of “hidden, then manifest,” or “enveloped in silence, then announced and unveiled.”<sup>13</sup> According to Hugo Rahner, mystery signifies both the manifesting and concealment of the divine act of salvation. While mystery manifests truth communicated in the revelation of Christ, still even after the communication, the unfathomable nature of the divine utterance remains concealed and cannot be fully understood, but is apprehended by faith.<sup>14</sup>

Hugo Rahner summarized the Christian use of mystery as follows: “The great drama of the revelation of God in Christ, and in particular the whole Old Testament story of salvation conceived as a single parable finding its key and explanation in Christ; Christ’s acts, particularly his death on the

<sup>10</sup> Irénée-Henri Dalmais, “Raza et Sacrement,” in *Rituels: Mélanges offerts à Pierre-Marie Gy*, ed. Paul DeClerck and Eric Palazzo (Paris: Cerf, 1990) 173–82, at 174.

<sup>11</sup> This biblical treatment of mystery is taken from Raymond Brown, “Mystery (in the Bible),” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* vol. 10 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967) 148–50, and Joseph Fitzmyer, “Pauline Theology,” *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 82:33. See also: Raymond Brown, *The Semitic Background of “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> While Syriac thought arose from a culture which was familiar with mystery cults, it would seem that Ephrem and the early Syriac writers understood mystery almost exclusively in its biblical sense and not in its use by pagan sources. In fact, the development of mystery terminology by the Greco-Roman world had no impact on fourth-century Syriac theology which by that time was already using the term in reference to Christian initiation and the Eucharist.

<sup>13</sup> Aimé Solignac, “Mystère,” *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, col. 1861.

<sup>14</sup> Hugo Rahner, “The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries,” in *Pagan and Christian Mysteries*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. Ralph Manheim and R. F. C. Hull (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 146–210, at 165.

Cross; the Church, and within the Church the sacraments and formulations of the truths embodied in the symbol of faith—all these are called *mysterion*, because they are acts and rites and words that flow from God's unfathomable plan and that themselves in turn, in their visible, modest, unpretentious cloak conceal and intimate and communicate God's unfathomable depths."<sup>15</sup>

Sebastian Brock believes that for Ephrem the ideas of the "hidden" and "revealed" aspect of mystery apply. Symbols in nature and in Scripture represent a hidden state to be revealed in Christ. In the sacraments, the idea of mystery represents the hidden way that will be fully revealed at the end of time in paradise.<sup>16</sup>

Robert Murray claims that Syriac writers saw in the Old Testament "not merely records of Israel's past experience of God and expectation of the future, but 'mysteries' of God's purposes, now revealed to the eye of enlightened faith."<sup>17</sup> Ephrem's vision depended on the belief that the entire Old Testament pointed to Christ. Types, symbols, sacramental mysteries are all elements of his theology of revelation. *Raza* or mystery became the word for the "Christ-bearing" sense concealed in Old Testament figures, and which could also be conveyed by the idea of "type." Christ being the fulfillment is the "truth" or "reality."<sup>18</sup>

Ephrem and the other Syriac writers use type, symbol, and mystery to express the reality of God in Creation. They use the term "mystery" for any religious symbol (especially Old Testament "types"), for sacramental rites, and in the plural for the Eucharist.<sup>19</sup> A vivid example of the Syriac understanding of mystery, type, and sacrament is seen in their view of the mystery reflected in the Divine Liturgy. With the beginning of the *anaphora*, the eucharistic prayer, the faithful believe that beyond the sensible appearances and the terrestrial signs of the Divine Liturgy, there is an invisible and celestial reality that is being accomplished. The celebration of the earthly sacrifice is a participation in the unending heavenly liturgy.

#### THE INCARNATION AS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE TYPES AND MYSTERIES

For Ephrem, Christ is the term of all mysteries. Creatures are viewed as symbols tending toward and being drawn toward Christ who is their object.

<sup>15</sup> H. Rahner, "The Christian Mystery" 167.

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Brock, "Introduction," *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's, 1990) 42–43.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975) 290–91.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1966–67) 1–20, at 3 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, *Symbols* 21.

He declares: "In the garden of Eden and the terrestrial universe, the symbols of our Lord are multiplied. Who is able to gather the similitudes of his Mystery? In each of them, Christ is painted entirely. Visible things await you, allegories search for you, symbols prefigure you and parables take refuge in you."<sup>20</sup>

Christ is presented by Ephrem as one who comes to fulfill the expectation of all symbols. He is imprinted upon nature and the Scriptures. "In the Scriptures He is written of; on Nature He is impressed; His crown is figured in kings, in prophets His truth, His atonement in priests. . . . Lo! the prophets have poured out on Him, their glorious mysteries; the priests and kings have poured out upon Him, their wonderful types: they all have poured them out on all of Him. Christ overcame and surpassed, by His teachings the mysteries, by His interpretations the parables; as the sea into its midst receives all streams."<sup>21</sup>

The ancient economy of salvation ceases at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Jesus in receiving the baptism of John receives the justice of the Old Testament. The baptism preached by Jesus represents the new dispensation.<sup>22</sup>

### THE INCARNATION AS THE VEHICLE OF DIVINIZATION

While type and mystery provide the context to understand the work of salvation, it is the Incarnation, the fullness of the types and the ultimate mystery, which is the vehicle by which divinization occurs. Our sanctification by means of our sharing a common humanity with Christ is explicitly stated by Ephrem in the *Homily on our Lord* 10: "Glory to the One who took from us in order to give to us, so that we should all the more abundantly receive what is His by means of what is ours."<sup>23</sup> And, in the *Hymn on the Nativity* 1.98–99, Ephrem announces: "Today the Deity imprinted

<sup>20</sup> *Hymn on Virginity*, 8.2,6 in Beck, *Virginitate* 223.29.

<sup>21</sup> *Hymn on the Epiphany* 4.19–24 in *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, CSCO 186 (Louvain: Secrétariat de CorpusSCO, 1959) 154–58. English translation in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Second Series) vol. 13, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 272.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Leloir, *Doctrines et méthodes de S. Ephrem d'après son commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant*, CSCO 220 (Subsidia 18) 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, CSCO 270 (Louvain: Secrétariat de CorpusSCO, 1966) 8–9. English translation in St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*, trans. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., and Joseph P. Amar (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1994) 285.



itself on humanity, so that humanity might also be cut into the seal of Deity.”<sup>24</sup>

Ephrem summarizes the meaning of the Incarnation by relating the second birth of the Word to our second birth of baptism. In the *Homily on Our Lord* 1.4, he observes: “The Firstborn, who was begotten according to His nature, underwent yet another birth outside His nature, so that we too would understand that after our natural birth, we must undergo another (birth) outside our nature. As a spiritual being, He was unable to become physical until the time of physical birth. And so too physical beings, unless they undergo another birth, cannot become spiritual.”<sup>25</sup>

Robert Murray notes that Syriac writer Aphraat reflecting on the reference to “sons of God” in the Beatitudes teaches that the Word of God entered and joined the human race and enabled us to be what he is.<sup>26</sup> In the *Homily on Our Lord* 1.2, Ephrem declares that “The Only-Begotten journeyed from the God-head and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many. And he journeyed from Sheol and resided in the kingdom, to tread a path from Sheol, which cheats everyone, to the kingdom, which rewards everyone.”<sup>27</sup>

The sanctification of human beings through incorporation in the divinity of Christ is accomplished through the mysteries [sacraments]. Thus, Jesus receives the Spirit in baptism that we may also be born of the Spirit. In the *Homily on Our Lord* 55, Ephrem declares: “Because John also was the treasurer of baptism, the Lord of stewardship came to him to take the keys of the house of forgiveness from him. John had been whitening the stains of debt with common water so that bodies would be fit for the robe of the Spirit imparted by the Lord. Therefore, since the Spirit was with the Son, he came to receive baptism from John to mix the Spirit, which cannot be seen, with water, which can be seen, so that those whose bodies feel the wetness of the water should be aware of the gift of the Spirit in their souls, and that as the outside of the body becomes aware of the water flowing over it, the inside of the soul should become aware of the Spirit flowing over it.”<sup>28</sup>

Ephrem sees in the mysteries of Christian initiation the fulfillment of the types of the past: “The figure has passed; the truth is realized, with oil you have been signed, by baptism you have been rendered perfect, you have been mingled in the flock, you have been nourished with his body.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Beck, *Nativitate* 186.12; McVey, *Hymns* 74.

<sup>25</sup> Beck, *Sermo* 270.1–2; St. Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works* 275.

<sup>26</sup> Murray, *Symbols* 70.

<sup>27</sup> Beck, *Sermo* 270.1; St. Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works* 273–74.

<sup>28</sup> Beck, *Sermo* 270.51–52; St. Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works* 330–31.

<sup>29</sup> *Hymn on the Epiphany* 3.17 in Beck, *Nativitate (Epiphania)* 186.150.



### THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE FUTURE PARADISE

Just as Christ and the events in his life are the antitypes of the types of the past, so Christ's salvific actions are in turn types of the sacraments that extend the work of divinization through time. These actions of Christ constitute the paradigm for the coming to be of the sacraments.

Robert Murray observes that for the Syriac writers the sacred history of the past was the stage of "mysteries" (that is, types) pointing to the "time of the Church" which began with Christ. This stage fulfills the types and is contrasted with them as "truth" or "reality" (*srara* in Syriac); but this stage itself typologically awaits final fulfillment in the eschatological kingdom. "The type was in Egypt, the reality in the Church; the sealing of the reward [will be] in the kingdom."<sup>30</sup> Ephrem also views salvation history as a journey. In his *Hymn Against Heresies* 26.4 he explains: "For the sake of the fruit he laid the Way which [runs] from the Tree right to the Cross; it extended from the Wood to the Wood and from Eden to Zion, from Zion to the Holy Church and from the Church to the kingdom."<sup>31</sup>

According to Murray, Ephrem develops this theme further. The first stage is from Eden to Moses, the second from Moses to Christ, and the third is the age of the Church. Before Christ salvation was achieved through types and symbols foreshadowing Christ, found in nature and the Old Testament. The last stage begins with John the Baptist and is the "Way" of the Son. He [the Son] made for his disciples a way, again full of symbols through the sea of this world. Through his death and the destruction of Sheol, he establishes the Royal Way to paradise on which the King's Son goes ahead, following John the Baptist. In this stage, the milestones are the sacraments and the divine names used in baptism.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, for the Syriac writers the figures of the Old Testament, realized in Christ, point to the future mysteries or sacraments. Ephrem sees in the Old Testament the establishment of a tradition that continues on in the engendering of the sacraments as a natural prolongation of the economy of salvation in history.

### THE BODY OF CHRIST AS THE SOURCE OF SALVATION

In the mind of Ephrem, the work of divinization and salvation continues as an extension of the Body of Christ. Ephrem observes in the *Homily on*

<sup>30</sup> *Hymn on the Unleavened Bread* 5.23 in Beck, *Paschahymnen* 248.12; Murray, *Symbols* 53. See also Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism" 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen Contra Haereses*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, CSCO 169 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1957)104–5; Murray, *Symbols* 247.

<sup>32</sup> Murray, *Symbols* 246–49.

*our Lord* 11.2: “He spat on his fingers and put them in the deaf-mute’s ears. And he made mud with his saliva, and applied it to the blind man’s eyes, so we would know that just as there was a deficiency in the pupils of that blind man from his mother’s womb, so too, there was a deficiency in the ears of this deaf man. So, with yeast from the body of the one who completes, the deficiency of our creation was filled up. It would not have been appropriate for our Lord to sever a part of His body to fill up the deficiency of other bodies. He filled up the deficiency of the deficient with something He was able to separate from Himself. Just as mortals consume Him by means of something edible, in the same way He filled up deficiency and gave life to mortality. So we should learn that the deficiency of the deficient was filled up from a body in which fullness resided. And life was given to mortals from a body in which life resided.”<sup>33</sup>

Robert Murray observes: “[Ephrem] provides material for us to find an implicit ecclesiological argument which could be summed up by saying that the whole dispensation of salvation has its source in the human body of Christ; that same body in which he healed men and rose again, he gave us in sacramental form (in “mystery”) to heal us, to incorporate us in him in the Church, and to give us a pledge of his Resurrection.”<sup>34</sup>

## THE KENOTIC ACTIONS OF CHRIST AS TYPES OF THE SACRAMENTS

### The Mysteries of Christian Initiation

In the divine plan of salvation, the Word not only descended into flesh, but also into the Jordan. A favorite theme among the Syriac writers is that the Word of God in redeeming us passed through three way-stations: the womb of Mary, the womb of the Jordan River, and the womb of Sheol. The divine not only humbles itself in becoming human, but also in establishing itself in material creation, such as water. Syriac tradition believes that through his baptism in the Jordan, Christ consecrated all the rivers of the world. James of Saroug declares: “the entire nature of the waters perceived that you had visited them—seas, deeps, rivers, springs and pools all thronged together to receive the blessing from your footsteps.”<sup>35</sup>

The fulfillment of Christ’s baptismal action takes place on the Cross, when blood and water flow from the side of Christ. The earliest Syriac tradition did not stress the idea of “dying and rising” concerning baptism, but rather, baptism as a new womb giving birth to new children bearing the

<sup>33</sup> Beck, *Sermo* 270.9–10. St. Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works* 287.

<sup>34</sup> Murray, *Symbols* 70.

<sup>35</sup> Bedjan, *Homiliae* 1.188; Sebastian Brock, “Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh,” *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205 (1978) 325–47, at 327.

image of the New Adam and their being vested again in the “robe of glory.” Baptism reverses the sad events of Eden.

Ephrem claims that God in his mercy limited himself so as to sanctify us through the waters of the Jordan, just as he did in the Incarnation, and in the Old Testament when he came to Moses. In his *Hymn on the Epiphany* no. 8, he observes:

God in his mercy stooped and came down,  
to mingle his compassion with the water,  
and to blend the nature of His majesty  
with the wretched bodies of men.  
He made occasion by the water  
to come down and to dwell in us;  
like the occasion of mercy  
when He came down and dwelt in the womb . . .  
To the cave in Horeb He stooped and came down,  
and on Moses He caused his majesty to dwell;  
He imparted his glorious splendor to mortals.  
There was therein a figure of baptism:  
He who came down and dwelt in it,  
tempers with the water  
the might of his majesty,  
that He may dwell in the feeble  
That might then none could endure;  
not Moses chief of deliverers  
nor Elijah chief of zealots;  
and the Seraphim too veil their faces,  
for it is the might that subdues all.  
His mercy mingled gentleness  
in the water and by the oil;  
that mankind in its weakness  
might be able to stand before Him  
when covered by the water and the oil.<sup>36</sup>

The Syriac writer Philoxenus of Mabboug sees in the baptism of Jesus “a type of the [world’s] consummation in that when He was baptized Jesus fulfilled his Father’s will, and created all things new both visible and invisible.”<sup>37</sup>

The same process of divine *kenosis* applies to the Eucharist. James of Saroug relates God’s revelation to creatures to the establishment of the Eucharist. He describes revelation as a process of descent, wherein God manifests himself first to the angels but then “he made the Secret descend; he arranged by it that his account should come to the world. And in the midst of the world, he established the altar for bodily creatures, and he

<sup>36</sup> Beck, *Nativitate (Epiphania)* 186.168–75; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 13.276–77.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas J. Fox, “*The Matthew-Luke Commentary*” of *Philoxenus* 253.

became a body from whom they should eat, their dwelling place.”<sup>38</sup> Ephrem teaches: “In the Church he implanted the Word which causes rejoicing with its promises, which causes fear with its warnings. . . . The assembly of saints bears resemblance to Paradise. In it each day is plucked the fruit of him who gives life to all; in it, my brethren, is trodden the cluster of grapes, to be the Medicine of Life.”<sup>39</sup>

For the Syriac writers, “anointing” is the very name of Christ. Ephrem declares that Christ accompanied his disciples when they were sent out and healed by anointing with oil. “The name of oil indeed is His symbol and the shadow of the name, the Anointed. The shadow of His name indeed fell upon their sick, and they were cured, as the shadow of Simon fell upon the ailing, and they recovered.”<sup>40</sup>

In his *Hymn on the Faith* 6, Ephrem summarizes the kenosis involved in the mysteries, in the Incarnation, and in revelation: “For in the Bread is eaten a strength not to be eaten and in the Wine is drunk a might not to be drunk; in the Oil we have anointing with a power not for ointment. He has softened his appearance for the eyes and his might in words, that the ear may hear him.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Cross, Antitype of the “Tree of Life”**

For the Syriac writers the Cross, while being the climax of redemption, represents the antitype of the Edenic “tree of life.” It thus becomes the source of the sacraments. Baptism, Eucharist, marriage, and the establishment of the Church are the fruits of the Cross. In the Syriac mind the Garden of Eden was the paradigm of the perfection of Creation. It is the type of the future paradise. Specifically, the “tree of life” in the garden is the type of future divinization. The Cross of Christ as the antitype of the “tree of life” is the source of divine life and nourishment. According to legend, the Cross was the descendant of the ancient “tree of life” because it arose from its seeds.<sup>42</sup> Ephrem declares: “He has come among us in his

<sup>38</sup> *Homily* 125 in Bedjan, *Homiliae* 4 (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1908) 602. See Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* 139–40.

<sup>39</sup> *Hymn on Paradise* 6 in *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und contra Julianum*, ed. and trans. Edmund Beck, CSCO 174 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1957) 21. English translation in St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s, 1990) 111.

<sup>40</sup> *Hymn on Viriginity* 4.7–8 in Beck, *Virginitate* 223.14–15; McVey, *Hymns* 277–78.

<sup>41</sup> Beck, *Hymnen de Fide* 154.25. English translation in Robert Murray, “A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ on the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the Sacraments,” *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1970–71) 142–50, at 147.

<sup>42</sup> Murray, *Symbols* 323–24.

love, he, the blessed tree! The wood [of the Cross] has abolished the wood, the fruit has been suppressed by the fruit and the tormentor by the Living One!”<sup>43</sup>

Ephrem contrasts the Old Testament reference to water coming forth from the rock to nourish the Jews, to the Cross as a font of life and nourishment for the Gentiles, who are now the “Church of the Nations.” He explains that just as the water from the rock strengthened the Jewish people, so the Cross is a fountain of life for the Gentiles. While the sword had guarded the tree of life, now the “Lord of the Tree” has given himself as food for the Gentiles. As Adam had food from the trees of paradise, so the “Planter of Eden” has become food for us. While we departed from paradise with Adam, now that Christ has removed the lance, we are able to reenter.<sup>44</sup>

For James of Saroug: “Christ came and opened up baptism on his cross . . . water and blood, for the fashioning of spiritual children flowed, and Baptism became the mother of the living,” thus, the new Eve.<sup>45</sup>

Robert Murray is of the opinion that the use of oil or chrism in Christian initiation, and other rites of anointing might be connected to the idea that consecrated oil comes from the “tree of life.”<sup>46</sup>

In the view of Ephrem, since Adam died because of sin, it was necessary that Christ remove sin and thereby also remove death; his Eucharistic body replaces now the fruit of the tree, and the Eucharistic table has become for us the garden of Eden.<sup>47</sup>

### The Church and the Mystery of Marriage

The Cross is the site of the birth of the Church as the Bride of Christ. The reality of the Church in turn becomes the type of the sacrament of Christian marriage. For the Syriac writers, the Church is the bride of Christ betrothed at the Jordan, but wedded to him on the Cross where her dowry is written in the blood which flowed from his side. The blood and water, symbols of baptism and the Eucharist, make humans children of the Father and part of the saved assembly. James of Saroug asserts: “The Bridegroom’s side has been pierced, and from it the Bride has come forth,

<sup>43</sup> *Hymn on Virginity* 8.1 in Beck, *Virginitate* 223.28. See Pierre Yousif, “La Croix de Jesus et le paradis d’Eden dans la typologie biblique de Saint Ephrem,” *Parole de l’Orient* 6/7 (1975–6) 29–48, at 41–42.

<sup>44</sup> *Armenian Hymn* 49 in *Patrologia Orientalis* 30.229. See Sebastian Brock, “The Mysteries Hidden in the Side of Christ,” *Sobornost* no. 7 (1978) 462–72, at 471.

<sup>45</sup> Bedjan, *Homiliae* 1.162. See Brock, “Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh” 329–33.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, *Symbols* 323–24.

<sup>47</sup> Leloir, *Doctrines et Méthodes* 43.

fulfilling the type provided by Adam and Eve. For from the beginning God knew and depicted Adam and Eve in the likeness of the image of his only-begotten; He slept on the cross as Adam had slept his deep sleep, his side was pierced and from it there came forth the Daughter of light,—water and blood as the image of divine children to be heirs to the Father who love his Only-begotten. . . . The stillness of the sleep of death fell upon him on the cross and from him came forth the Mother who gives birth to all spiritual beings.”<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps the most explicit articulation of type and antitype, foreshadowing and reality, is found in the reflections of James of Saroug on the fifth chapter of Ephesians. God’s plan for the relationship of the Church to Christ and the meaning of the sacrament of marriage were established from the beginning of Creation. James of Saroug sees in every marriage of man and woman, a reflection of the mystery of the wedding of the Church to Christ. However, this mystery was not unveiled until the crucifixion and the subsequent teaching of St. Paul. James of Saroug in his *Homily on the Veil of Moses* explains:

The hidden Father betrothed a bride to his only-begotten having instructed her through prophecy in a symbolic way.  
 In his love he built a great palace for the bride of light and depicted the bridegroom in various ways in her royal home.  
 Moses entered in and, like a skilled artist, delineated the bridegroom and the bride, and then covered the great picture with a veil.  
 He put in his writings that “a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, so that the two of them might be one completely.”  
 . . . He covered up his words by various means, hiding them from outsiders.  
 And so he painted a picture inside the chamber of the royal bridegroom; he called them “man and woman,” although he knew the truth, that the one was Christ and the other the Church, both being veiled. . .  
 After the wedding feast [that is, the redemptive mysteries] Paul entered in and beheld the veil lying there; he seized and removed it from the fair couple . . . and began to show what the covered picture was: “in those called man and wife in the prophetic writings I recognize Christ and his Church, the two being one.”<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Bedjan, *Homiliae* 3.299–300; 2.589. See Brock, “The Mysteries Hidden” 463–65.

<sup>49</sup> Bedjan, *Homiliae* 3.287–89. See Sebastian Brock, “Jacob of Serugh on the Veil of Moses,” *Sobornost* no. 3 (1981) 70–85, at 74–75.

In summary, the marriages of the old dispensation were types of the marriage of Christ with his Church. The salvific actions of Christ in turn become the type and divinizing principle of Christian sacramental marriage.

### The Priesthood

According to James of Saroug, God, in fashioning Adam, imposed hands on him and in breathing on him rendered him a sanctuary. Ephrem explains that God on Mt. Sinai imposed his hand on Moses, and Moses in turn imposed his hand on Aaron. The priestly line of the Old Covenant was ultimately transmitted to Christ through John the Baptist.<sup>50</sup>

Christ, in descending to Sheol, restored to Adam the grace he had lost. As the Father had breathed the Spirit on the face of Adam, so Christ breathed the Spirit on the face of the Apostles. And by the imposition of His hand on the Apostles, He gave them the priesthood. In the Church, which is the Eden of God, the priests come to give glory and distribute the fruits of the “tree of life” to the whole world. From the waters of this new Eden, they quench those who thirst.<sup>51</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Early Syriac writers sought to reflect theologically by way of the imagination rather than through discursive reasoning. With the Scriptures as their prime theological source, they viewed Creation as entitatively symbolic and christological in purpose. The divine is immanent in Creation and through its *kenosis* manifests itself in type, symbol, and mystery. Thus, in their understanding, the paradigmatic participates in the real. Type, symbol, and mystery embody divine realities. The economy of salvation extends from paradise to paradise. It is a series of foreshadowings and fulfillments, of types and realizations. In each historical stage, the symbols and mysteries shadow forth what they signify. The Word of God through the Incarnation and his earthly actions establishes new types and mysteries. The Church and the sacraments represent the penultimate manifestation of divine presence, eschatologically pointing to and awaiting the final heavenly realization.

<sup>50</sup> See *Hymn on the Nativity* 4.210 in Beck, *Nativitate* 186.44; McVey, *Hymns* 104. Ephrem also speaks of Christ receiving the priesthood from Simeon when he offered him in the Temple.

<sup>51</sup> Micheline Albert, “Mimro inédit de Jacques de Saroug, sur le sacerdoce et sur l’autel,” *Parole de l’Orient* 10 (1981–82) 51–77, at 72–74 (Syriac text); 61–62 (English translation).