

St Ephrem the Syrian: The Unifying Vision

St Ephrem the Syrian, also known as “The Harp of the Spirit,” was born around 306, near Nisibis in modern Turkey, and he died on 9 June 373, in Edessa, also in Turkey. This means that around the time of his birth the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity; and during Ephrem’s lifetime, almost all of Syria had also become Christian, not least because of the work of St Maroun, who died around the year 410. St Ephrem was known and revered for two main reasons: the holiness of his life, and the quality of his hymns and poetry, all of which were written in the Syriac language. So extensive and appreciated has his influence been, even in translation, that in 1920 the Catholic Church declared him a Doctor or teacher of the Universal Church. In the Maronite Church, **his feast is celebrated on 28 January.**



St Ephrem was ordained a deacon, and was certainly celibate. He may have been one of the “Sons of the Covenant.” He introduced women’s choirs, chosen from the “Daughters of the Covenant.” Those “children of the Covenant” lived like monks and nuns, but remained in their own private homes. They embraced poverty, worked for the church as much as possible, and set examples of discipline and asceticism. In addition to his hymns and music, he wrote commentaries on the Bible.

St Ephrem’s Vision of Creation

St Ephrem’s poetry is one of the foundations of the Maronite liturgy. The longer you read him, the more you come across examples of where the liturgy is drawn directly from him. The hymn sung in the Maronite Divine Office each morning, “The Light Has Arisen,” is by him.

Ephrem lived in an age when Christianity was coming out of hiding. It was spreading, and people who had been born Christian were now growing up, trying to apply their faith as a *philosophy*, that is, as a way of making sense of everything in heaven, earth, and in human society. They were looking to answer hard questions about what is valuable in a Christian life, and how people could live and worship together. St Augustine, who was about ten years old when St Ephrem died, also tried to answer these questions. In the Maronite Church we are fortunate to have available to us the work of both of these saints.

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. (St Ephrem, Nisibene Hymn 69)

St Ephrem is one of the most valuable of saints to us, because he has retained a very full and extensive teaching which goes right back to the

Semitic roots of Christianity. To be able to grasp that strange ancient outlook is a real challenge, yet it is the outlook of the Lord Himself.

Especially today, in an age dominated by secular science, St Ephrem’s vision of the unity of creation is a much needed complement to modern views. His vision is not anti-scientific, but rather, I suggest, begins where science leaves off, and works by the operation not of the intellect but of a higher faculty, what was once called the “nous,” the “mind” which thinks not through our ordinary brains, but through our souls.

Let light dwell in the body’s eyes, let sound pass through its ears, let its senses, that had grown waste and useless, be filled with utterance (of truth) and peace. (St Ephrem, Nisibene Hymn 69)

The vision is something like this:

First, all of creation is an organic whole, just as a human body is an organic whole. Each of the parts contributes to the health of the other, while having different roles. For example, the head houses the brain, and the organs of sight, hearing, smell and taste, and other important functions.

In our universe, God is not so much the head as He is its soul. He is the invisible power which gives life to the whole, and which all the members of the body serve by helping to keep the body healthy and mobile. Now, in our universe, all

the different elements, the planets, the suns, the spaces and the forces all have a role in holding the cosmos together. But, important as they are, by themselves they would just be a series of things. The life and the purpose of the whole and its parts are based in and on God, who created them.

This means that the relationship between the soul and the body is part of God's pattern in creation. They are made to go together and to work together, with the reason leading and guiding the entire person in harmony with the will of God.

Another very important aspect of this is that, in the teaching recorded by St Ephrem, not only man, but also the entire cosmos was created in the image and likeness of God.

As we know from the Maronite liturgy (see for example, the Anaphora of St John the Apostle), that image was distorted by sin, and so the Lord was incarnated in order to clean and renew that divine image.

Today the Deity imprinted itself on humanity, so that humanity might also be cut into the seal of Deity. (St Ephrem, Hymn on the Nativity 1)

Let us now turn from the universe, and take the body itself. If we think of the soul as being within the body, and giving it life, this will help us understand the most important concept in St Ephrem's vision, that of *typology*. Typology is the use of an *original* and a *copy made on the pattern of the original*. If the soul imparts its life to the body, then we can take the soul as the *type* or *archetype* of the body, and the body as the *antetype* or *copy* of the soul. Another example is a stencil. If I have a stencil in the shape of a bird, then the stencil is the type and the bird I draw using the stencil is its copy antetype. By using the one stencil, I can draw as many birds as I like. By using the one *type*, God makes as many antetypes as he likes.

What St Ephrem is saying is that everything on earth is like the bird I draw by using a stencil. Clearly, not all copies are perfect reproductions of the original pattern.

See, Fire and Spirit in the womb that bore You, see, Fire and Spirit in the river in which you were baptised. Fire and Spirit in our Baptism, in the Bread and the Cup, Fire and Holy Spirit.

It takes a long time to understand this idea, and to be able to make it practical in our lives, because the logic of types and patterns is a different logic from the one we have become used to. Yet, although it was St Ephrem's teaching, it was not his

invention. It is found in the New Testament, although it is often hard to see this because the vocabulary of types and patterns is often misinterpreted. Translators can only put into their work what they understand, and where they do not understand the New Testament they cannot translate it well.

Not only is the thought of the New Testament not understood, but neither is that of St Ephrem fully grasped. People think that he is speaking only of symbols. Now he does sometimes speak of symbols. But he also speaks of types.

Here are some examples: in typological thought holy water is not only *like* the water of creation, or a *symbol* of the water of creation. No. In typology, holy water *is* the water of creation. How can this be? Even intelligent people say to me that this is impossible. But is possible, and it is what St Ephrem means, because the true and full reality is the *unchanging and eternal* reality of heaven. Holy water here on earth is united to the eternal waters of creation.

When we are seeking direction in life, we should look to the divine types or patterns. Fathers should look to God the Father and to St Joseph, and pray to be united with them, and to become more like them. Mothers should look to Our Lady. Children to the Child Jesus in Nazareth.

To know that there are divine patterns everywhere and behind all of nature, is to take the first step to becoming able to feel this. It is a way of educating our feelings.

Perhaps this is why typology is so hard to grasp and why St Ephrem seems a little remote from us today: we need an instructed heart to be able to understand them in their fullness

In other words, *in the teaching of St Ephrem, we have a philosophical and theological system in which thought and feeling combine.*

Finally, a treatment of this great saint would not be complete without mentioning the Prayer of St Ephrem which is used to this day in the Orthodox Churches:

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, meddling, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to thy servant. Yes, O Lord and King! Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother; for You are blessed unto ages of ages. Amen

In the teaching recorded by St Ephrem, body and soul are made to go together and to work together, with the reason leading and guiding the entire person in harmony with the will of God. Further, not only man but also the entire creation is made in the image and likeness of God.