

ōClothing oneself in Beautyö
in the songs of Ephrem the Syrian¹

version 20.X.11

This Syriac Christian (303-373) was both a deacon and a poet. Ephrem was truly a Semitic bard using the Aramaic dialect of the ancient city of Edessa (the modern Urkay). He composed more than four hundred hymns, songs (*madrâshé*) in a dozen thematic cycles using some fifty syllabic stanza patterns. Ephrem grew up in Nisibis, lying between the Tigris and the Euphrates, which he was forced to leave when in his late fifties it was ceded to the Persians after the death and defeat of the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate's army in 363. Ephrem and his fellow Syriac Christians then fled to Edessa some one hundred and fifty km. to the west (see map *in finé*). In prose Ephrem wrote polemical works and in rhythmed prose commentaries on the Bible. In poetry he wrote versified homilies (*memré* in 7+7 syllables) as well as the *madrâshé* examined below. We will briefly examine his ascetical theology: his experience of beauty; the putting on of the robe of glory; the heart as a nuptial chamber and the depths of silence as prayer.

The experience of Beauty in the poetry of St Ephrem:

His purely Semitic mindset was structured neither by the Neo-Platonic opposition of form and matter, and of course by the much later epistemological opposition of subject and object. For Ephrem poetry, when sung on the lyre of the Spirit, permitted an experience of participation. For Ephrem the Christian's experience of beauty is that of light and brilliance of God's truth. In this respect Ephrem was in direct continuity with the ethos of the Psalter. In psalm 26:8 we read, "Lord I love the beauty of your house and the place of your glory dwells." And in psalm 50:2 : "God shines forth out of Sion, more beautiful than all."

But where does the beauty of God shine forth? The image in which man was created reflects deepest mystery, hidden in the foundation of his soul: (Genesis 1:26) answers this question: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image after our likeness' - So the grace of

¹ - This paper contains no original research. It simply presents recent translations of Ephrem the Syrian, primarily those of Sebastian Brock, *L'œil de lumière* (Spiritualité Orientale, no. 50 ; Bellefontaine, 1991; St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*. St. Vladimir's Press, Crestwood (N.Y.) 1990; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Cistercian Publication, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1987. All the translations from French back to English are my own.

His Spirit shines inside a man invisibly, without any objective dimension, nonetheless revealing to him the unsurpassed beauty of his creator. This is only possible if the mirror of the soul is polished through repentance to a high gloss. While this experience is certainly an ascetic one, requiring purity and humility, it becomes an aesthetic or spiritual one. In Hebrew, the word glory (*kubôd*) designates both the weight and the beauty of holiness. God's cosmos, his creation, also articulates an order of beauty that returns to the light and life that infused it. And ultimately, finally, the finest of God's creatures, man, whose nature is assumed by Christ, becomes the true sanctuary (Rom 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10)

If a man acquires such an eye of light, he can find his way back to Paradise. (Brock 1991:81) For the oriental tradition the proper use of free will was from the beginning destined to make gods of humanity, so not only does God attempt to bring mankind back to Paradise, but also to restore in him a divine beauty (Brock 1991:179) (Carmina Nisibena 69,12)

The Most High, knowing that Adam
Wished to become God,
Sent his Son to him
So that he might be capable
Of fulfilling his desire. Liberty rendered
Ugly the beauty of Adam:
He wanted to become god
While he was nothing more than a man.
But grace, nonetheless
Embellished his ugliness
When God descended
a man he became .
The Son rendered beautiful
The ugliness of the servant:
Here he is become god
Just as he desired.

While the first Adam belonged to the beginning or primordial time, the second Adam, the Man-God, belongs to history, such that divinisation is the consequence of the restoration of Adam realized through the descent of God and the ascension of Adam. (Brock 1991:179): Hymns on Virginité 48,15-18

Nevertheless Ephrem clearly states that man cannot bridge the gap between the Creator and the creature. Only nature, the created world surrounding us and the words of God revealed by an incarnate Word lead on to mysteries of truth. Christ is the luminous one who guides us: (Ecc. 29,1)

How can I sing you

O Luminous one, the only Holy one?

For the mouth is pure and clear

who, Lord, resembles you,

Only could sing you:

She is clear for the Clear,

she is pure for the Pure,

and it is her voice that pleases you.

For Ephrem one way, the only way, to approach the limit between the Creator and the created is through baptism, by putting on the garment of words, by clothing oneself with the robe of glory that Christ puts on when becoming incarnate. Without prior embeddedness in any philosophy or culture, man responds to the invisible, hidden God. For Ephrem we are all created in the beauty of His image and thus, as he is approaching us in the flesh, we see him through the luminous eye in our souls..

To replace our clothes the dead animal skins with which Adam was dressed as he was expelled from Paradise (Genesis 3:21), Christ offers us back our garment of light. This is called our marriage robe which illumines as a lamp, the marriage room which we are entering forí : (Hymn on Virginité 48: 17-18)

The Son made more beautiful the servants deformity,
and he has become just as he desired.

More than just presenting the possibility of individual salvation, re-entrance into paradise offers divinisation for all of mankind. Paradise, presented as a nuptial chamber, contains a tree of knowledge which is the veil of its sanctuary while the tree of life found therein is the holy of holies (*qdush qudshe*). As Sebastian Brock tells us (1990:54), for Ephrem paradise is a conical mountain that both transcends but also envelops our world. Brock reminds us that Gregory of Nyssa (On the Beatitudes 2,?) held a similar vision. The threefold sections of the person (intellectual spirit (*taratha*), soul (*naphsha*) and body (*gushma*) are reflected in the threefold division of paradise.

Beauty of the garden of paradise (Brock 1990:53)

	<u>Parasise</u>	<u>Noah's Ark with 3 levels</u>	<u>Sinai</u>	<u>Human person</u>
summit (risha)	Shekina/tree of life (<i>qdush qudshe</i>)	X	the glorious one	divinity
heights (rawma)	The glorious/ tree of knowledge acting as sanctuary veil)	level of mankind	Moses	Intellectual spirit
slopes (gabbe)	the just/ barrier (<i>syaga</i>) guarded by a cherub	level of the Birds	Aaron the priests	Soul (<i>naphsha</i>)
lower slopes (shphule)	the repentent	Level of the Animals	people	body

The tree of life found in paradise is evoked by Ephrem (Hymn on virginity XVI, 10):

Greatly sadden was the Tree of Life

When it beheld Adam stolen away from it;
It sank down into the virgin ground and was hidden
_ to burst forth and reappear on Golgotha;
humanity life birds that are chased,
took refuge in it
so that it might return them to their proper home.
The chaser was chased away, while the doves
That had been chased
Now hop with joy in Paradise.

3) The robe of glory laid by Christ in the Jourdain river :

For Ephrem salvation history falls into four episodes:

(1) the Fall

(2) Christ laying the robe of glory in the Jourdain river at his baptism

(3) Humanity's baptism one by one

(4) the resurrection of the dead when the just re-enter Paradise.

These four episodes are all related to clothing, by the robe of glory, In Genesis 3:21 Adam and Eve, after they are expelled from Paradise, are given animals skins in guise of clothing. Brock tells us that the Hebrew the word for skin resembles that of *light*² and that the Aramaic Targum and certain first century rabbi interpreted the text of Genesis to mean that God gave Adam and Eve robes of light and glory before they were expelled. Afterwards when the incarnate Christ puts on Adam's body: Christ puts on our weakness (#2) and again clothing is the symbol of the experience of those demanding baptism put on Christ (#3; Romans 13:14; Gal 3:27). So in the Hymns of Nativity (23:13), Ephrem sings

All these changes did the Merciful One make
Stripping off glory and putting on a body
He was wrapped in swaddling clothes
corresponding to Adam's leaves,

² - Skin is "or , with an ayin at the beginning, and light is 'or with an aleph.

**He put on clothes in the place of Adam's skins;
He was baptized for Adam's sin,
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.**

The lost robe recovered at Epiphany, called Theophany in the Oriental rites, reveals an eschatological dimension for the robe of glory is the clothing one wears in Paradise as in the Hymn on the Church, (36:6)

**The brightness which Moses put on
Was wrapped on him from without,
Whereas the river in which Christ was baptized
Put on Light from within,
And so did Mary's body, in which he resided, gleam
from within.**

The pearl is the symbol of clothed nakedness of the baptized (Hymn on Faith 83:2)

**You are like Eve
Who though naked was still clothed.
Cursed is he who deceived and left her stripped
The serpent cannot strip off your glory;
In Eden women shall be clothed in light, resembling
you.**

So the baptismal robe is a wedding garment (parable of Matthew 22:12) which must be kept spotless for the marriage banquet at the end of time for (Carmina Nisibena 43:21):

**The Firstborn wrapped himself in a body
as a veil to hide His glory.**

The immortal Bride shines out in that robe;
let the guest in their robes resemble Him in His.

Ephrem the Syrian describes the re-entry into the paradise lost as a divinisation (*theosis*), but where one's wedding garment acts as a light for otherwise a lack of beauty excludes one from the nuptial chamber (Letter to Publius, 12):

“I saw these beautiful people, and I was desirous of their beauty, and I saw the place of good where they were standing, and I was eager for their position. I saw their bridal chamber opposite, which no one who has not a lamp may enter; I saw their joy, and I sat down in mourning, not possessing works worthy of the bridal chamber. I saw them clothed with the Robe of Light, and I was grieved that I had prepared no virtuous raiment.”

In two Hymns on Virginity (48:17-18; & 23,13; cf. Brock 1990:73 and 1991:99), this divinization (*theosis*) is described succinctly:

The Son made more beautiful the servant's deformity
And he has become a god, just as he desired.

The Merciful One/ made all the changes :
He took off his glory / to put on a body,
For thus he conceived / away to cloth
Adam in the glory once discarded.

Clothing oneself with this robe is both the work of an ascetic's life and the instantaneous gift of God (Hymn on Virginity 16,19; Brock 1991 :102)

He came to recover
Adam gone astray
And to lead him to Eden
With the robe of light.

The instaneous return to paradise of a man robed in beauty is captured in the image of a ðleapö. (Hymns on Heresies 26,6 ; Brock 1991 :103)

He clothed Adam
and thus made him leap,
as well as penetrate
the entrance into Paradise.

The robe of glory is hardly an external vestment. Ephrem considers that the presence of Jesus in the womb of constitutes here baptism, in which as to everyone baptized is given a robe of glory. (Hymn on the Nativity 17, 4 ; Brock 1991 : 104-105) :

Eve in her virginity
was clothed in leaves of shame.
Lord, in her virginity,
Your mother put on
A robe of glory that enveloped mankind.
Whereas for He who envelopes
The universe, she offers her body
To be His humble vestment.

For Ephrem there are three milestones in slavation history: the womb of Mary; the womb of the Jordan river; the womb of Shéol. In sacred time Christø's death and resurrection are anticipated while he resided in the wombs of His Mother and the Jordan. This explains the inner experience of baptism: (Ecc. 36, 3-6; Brock 1991 :107).

The splendour that clothed Moses
Had struck him from outside
But the river where one is baptized
Illumines one from inside.
So the body where he resides
Shines entirely from inside itself.

And in a more concise strophe (Hymn on the Nativity 22,39 ; Borck 1991:108) :

**Our body was your garment
And Your Spirit was our robe.**

The wedding garment (parabole, Mt. 22 :1-4) is still mentioned today at the end of the service of baptism in the Eastern Churches. The newly illuminated (in Greek *photismenoi*) are requested to keep their robe of glory spotless for if the baptismal robes are given them in a moment of historical time, their robes of light will be inserted in the end of time. (Hymn on Paradise 6,9 ; Brock 1991 : 110-112)

**None of the saints are naked
Glory clothes them
None are covered with leaves
Nor do they stand embarrassed.
Our Lord himself
Allowed them to recover
Adam's tunic.**

4) The heart's nuptial chamber:

Since the Syrian tradition does not separate the intellect from the heart as does the Greek, the body and its centre the heart may be envisioned as a room. : (Arm 47,46-47):

**Leaving the heavens, He descended;
Sanctifying for himself the chamber of the heart.**

And since for the Syrians baptism has replaced circumcision, it becomes an engagement where the bride is awaited in one's heart: (Fid 20, 6-7)

**Virgin in the chamber,; a purified prayer
Love is its crown and truth its chamber.
Outside the door, she goes astray.**

To remain alert and waiting in the chamber of the heart is to be *õsimpleö* (*ihidaya*) ready to meet the only Bridegroomö (*hathna ihidaya*).

The bride is both singular and collective since she is the Church :
(Jej 5,1)

Blessed is he who sent
and who accompanied the bride
Of his first-born Son.
So that she can reach
The threshold of the bridal chamber
(the chamber) of his light

And again in the Hymn on Virginité 16,2:

Blessed are you Cana,
For it is the Bridegroom from above
Who invited your bride
Who was lacking wine.

Divinisation is the Greek term (“ ”) used to describe man’s elevation and salvation. In paradise at the end of time the tripartite structure of man, spirit (*tarātha*), soul (*nafsha*) and body (*gushma*) are conjointly elevated: For Ephrem ugliness, beauty and freedom are both quality but also analogous to spiritual states. (Hymns on Paradise 9,20; Brock 1991: 179-180)

Much more so that the body
The soul is glorious
And much more so than the soul
Glorious (is) the spirit.
And much more than the spirit,
there is hidden
divinity
The beauty of the soul ,

in the end, the body
is clothed
and the soul, in its turn
will be clothed with that of the spirit;
and as more the spirit
it will put on
that resemblance
of the Majesty.

The famous Patristic adage that while the first Adam was a god by grace, the second Adam is God by nature is Ephrem reading of the Biblical account of Paradise in Genesis; (Hymn on Faith 5, 17)

He gave us divinity
We gave him humanity.

The moment during which this beauty is restored to a man is hidden in his solitary silence which has been serving as his cry to the One who remembers the beauty with which he was clothed in paradise lost and the beauty of the trees lying therein.

Hymn on Faith, no. 20 (Brock 1987: 33-35)

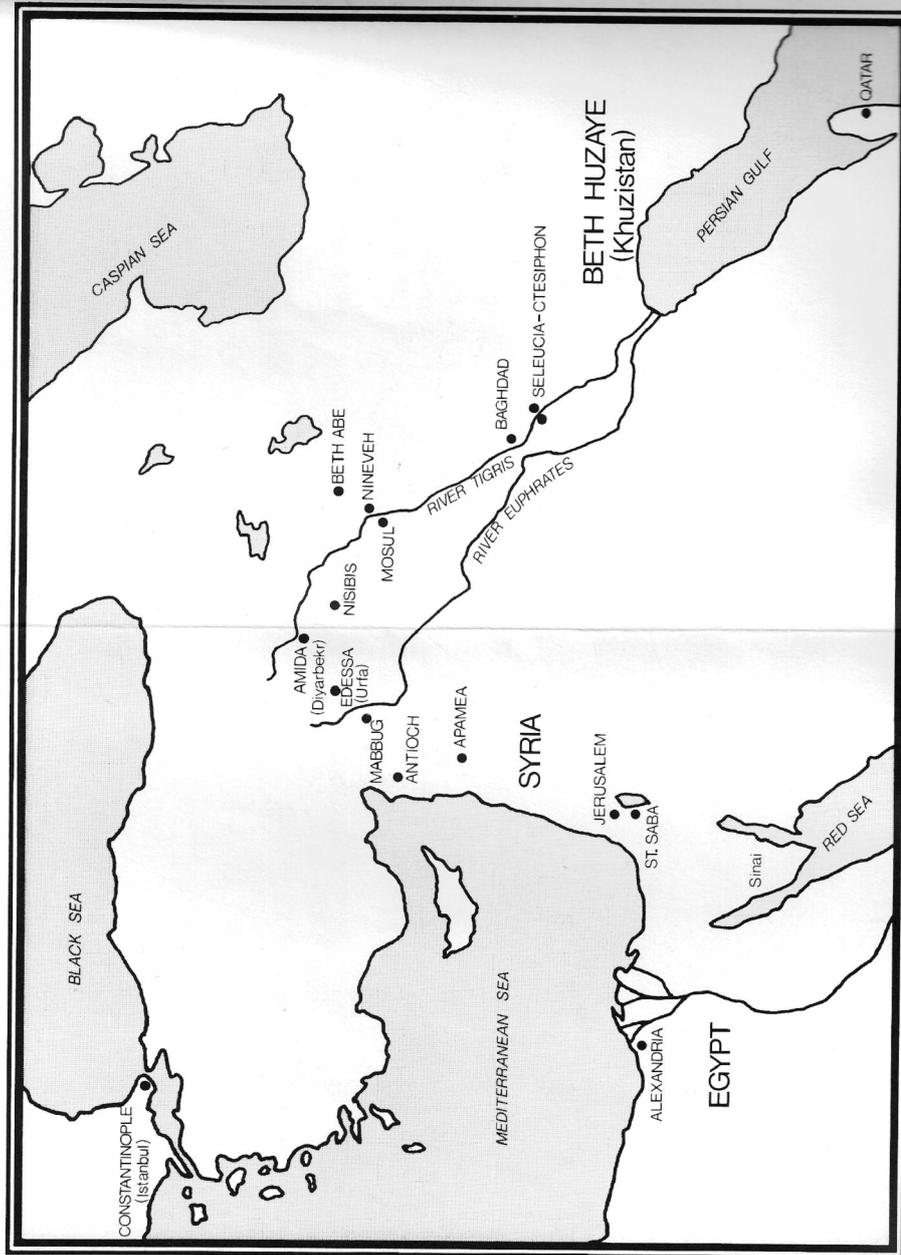
(1) To You, Lord, do I offer my faith with my voice, for prayer and petition can be conceived in the mind and brought forth in silence, without using the voice.

(5) In luminous silence within the mind let prayer recollect itself, so as not to stray.

(6) Petition that has been refined is the virgin of the inner chamber (Mt. 6:6); if she passes the door of the mouth, she is like one astray. Truth is her bridal chamber, love her crown, stillness and silence are the trusty eunuchs at her door.

(9) Jonah prayed a prayer that had no sound for his silence served as a cry.

(10) In a single body are both Prayer and Faith to be found, the one hidden, the other revealed; the one for the Hidden One, the other to be seen. Hidden prayer is for the hidden ear of God, while faith is for the visible ear of humanity.



Nisibis and Edessa between the Euphrates and the Tigris: