



Eastern Christianity in Interfaith Contexts

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EPHREM THE SYRIAN AND A NEW BEGINNING IN SYRIAC POETRY

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T1 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise* 5 (trans. Brock 1990)

1 I considered the Word of the Creator [ie Scripture] and likened it to the rock that marched with the people of Israel in the wilderness; (1Cor 4)

it was not from the reservoir of water contained within it

that it poured forth for them glorious streams:

there was no water in the rock, **yet oceans sprang forth from it;**

just so did the Word fashioned created things out of nothing.

[...]

3 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 his 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 [NB: this collection of

hymns is about Paradise]

T2 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 64 (trans. Wickes 2015)

11 I have never wandered after people [such as the Anomoeans] saying, as they say, “I have seen that they call our Saviour other names, unwritten.”

I have left what is unwritten and turned to what is written,
lest on account of those unwritten things,
someone destroys what is written.

T3 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 49 (trans. Wickes 2015)

6. Look: my mind has wandered, for it has fallen into the terrible flood of our Saviour! Blessed is Noah: though his ship – his Ark – sailed through the flood, he himself was calm. Lord, may my faith become a ship for my weakness. Look: fools are drowning in the depth of your disputation! Praises to your Child!

T4 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 14 (trans. Wickes 2015)

1. **I invited you, Lord, to a feast of hymns!**

The wine – a discourse of praise – has run out in our feast! (John 2.3)

The one whose vessels are full of good wine is invited! (John 2.10)

May your song fill my mouth!

[...]

3. It was indeed right that at someone else’s feast,

You filled six vessels with good wine.

**In this feast, instead of vessels,
Lord, fill a myriad of ears with delight!**

T5 Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Exodus* 15 (trans. Salvesen 2011)

1. *Moses and the Israelites sang this hymn of praise (šabbaḥ tešbuḥto) to the Lord* Moses sang the hymn (*mšabbaḥ hwo*), and **all the people responded antiphonally (botreh)**. “Sing to the glorious Lord” means ...

[...]

3. So that day **the people were divided into two groups to sing** a wonderful hymn of praise (*d-tešbuḥto zhīto nšabḥun*) to the One who had parted the sea and submerged their pursuers that very day. **Moses led the men in the singing (m’ane hwo l-gabre), and Miriam the women: praise the glorious Lord, who acted gloriously** in that he destroyed them effortlessly by bringing on them all these plagues while he was at rest.

Contrast *Exodus 15* (Peshitta version, trans. Meyer, Kiraz, Bali 2015)

1. Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this hymn of praise (*šabbah tešbuḥto*) to the Lord and said: [...]

20. And then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand, and then all the women went out after her with tambourines and with timbrels.

21. And Miriam was singing to them (*wa-m'anyo hwot l-hen*): [...]

T6 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 23 “On the Lyre” (trans. Wickes 2015)

7 For you, lyre, are living and speech-endowed!

Your strings and your words have freedom!

O lyre, which by itself,

according to its will, sings to its God!

[...]

11 [...] **Sing like David** to the Son of David:

Call Him “Lord” and “Son,” like David.

T7 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 21-23 “On the Lyre” (trans. Wickes 2015)

21.1 Sing, Lord, **on my lyre**, every helpful thing: [...]

22.1 Give thanks to the Lord of all, who formed and fashioned for himself

Two lyres – of the Prophets and of the Apostles.

But one finger has played both:

Different voices, two testaments.

22.2 And whenever a lyre changes sounds,

The lyre and its player stay the same.

And the lyres of truth, my son,

Change sounds, while the truth is one.

23.1 **Speak, lyre**, you whose enemy is silence,

But speak something that can be spoken, [...]

T8 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies* 53 (trans. Sprengling 1916, adapted)

5 [Bardaisan] wrote *madraše* and provided them with music;

he composed songs and put them into metrical form;

by means of measures and balances he distributed the words;

he offered to the guileless bitter things in sweet guise,

in order that, though feeble, they might not choose the food that heals.

6 **He sought to emulate David**, to deck himself out in his graces,

that like him he might be extolled, one hundred and fifty psalms did he too compose.

His truth he repudiated, my brothers, and imitated his number,

For David did not sing the song of the renegades, whose harp is slander.

T9 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies* 55.6 (my translation)

6 Their occult *madrāša* is enough to shame them,
“she who said ‘God, my Prince,
you left me alone!’” and as [Bardaisan] was ashamed of his own hideousness,
**he wrapped (‘*albšeh*) his *madrāša* in the beauty of the psalm, solemn and holy,
from which our Lord took the words:**
“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22)

T10 Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies* 1 (trans. Griffith 2006)

11 Bardaisan’s wording
outwardly displays chastity;
inwardly it is perverted
into the very emblem of blasphemy.
It is a stealthy woman;
she commits adultery in the inner room.

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