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A SINGLE HUMAN BEING DIVIDED IN HIMSELF: EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN, THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

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[1] Much of western Syria had been fluent in Greek for six centuries by the time of Ephraim's birth (usually given as *ca* A.D. 306). Mesopotamia, in the northern, Roman, part of which he made his career (at first in Nisibis; after 363, for a short time, in Amida[1] and

[1] Amar 1988: section 10. This *Life* is considered unhistorical (*e.g.* Brock 1990:8 and even Barsaum 1967:220[6]), but his otherwise insignificant brief presence in Amida is likely to have been remembered by the Christian community in that city. In fact, this is probably where he wrote his *VHF [Verse-Homilies on Faith]*. Their editor says they were composed 'between 350 and 363' (Beck 1953: 122, reading '350'—as the context demands—for '330') in Nisibis (Beck 1961); but this cannot be right, because they speak of a Roman defeat and allude to the loss of Roman territory (6:15f; 347ff; 379ff; 427ff; 443ff), so must be dated after the humiliating treaty of 363. The walls which were, not just breached (as Beck 1953: 122 understands, treating the unambiguous text as a poetic exaggeration), but 'thoroughly demolished' (6:444) must be those of Amida, taken by the Persians in 359. The mounds of earth (*VHF* 6:448) piled up against the walls were the means by which the Amida was eventually captured (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum liber XIX*, 8, 1–2); there is no record of mounds raised against the walls of Nisibis. Amida was besieged for seventy-three days at the height of summer (*ibid.*, 9, 9; 5,4 describes subterranean stairs leading down to the Tigris, but they

finally, until his death in 373, in Edessa), was less hellenised, it is true. Yet Ephraim might certainly have learned Greek, had he wished to do so. There are distinct traces of Stoicism and of Platonism in his work, yet, as a theologian, he professed to have little time for Greek philosophy (*TSF* [*Teaching-Songs (Madroshe) on Faith* = Beck 1955] 2:24: 'Blessed he that neither tastes / bitter wisdom from the Greeks, / nor spits out the simple words / of the men of Galilee!').[2] It made the Transcendent a subject for a debate which had more to do with proving the virility of the participants, he thought, than with ascertaining the truth (*TSF* 87:1 and 4—translated below). All the same, he seems able enough to engage in complex philosophico-theological argument, even though he does so in order to demonstrate its limitations. A good example is *TSF* 45, which I quote in full:[3]

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were very difficult to negotiate), which would explain the 'thirst' of *VHF* 6:450, though Ammianus (who was there) does not mention this. The baleful twang of bowstrings and the terrifying strength of the elephants (*VHF* 6:501–3) might have been observed at either siege (Ammianus, *ibid.*, 2, 8 and 7, 6; *TSN* 2:18). In the *VHF* E. never mentions breaches in the walls, caused by the force of the river's water released against them, which is what fills his songs about the siege of Nisibis in 350 (*TSN* 1 and 2). It seems unlikely that he was in Amida during the siege of 359, since he composed *TSN* 5 in that year at Nisibis. Arriving at Amida in 363 (the Romans had soon restored that city) after the Persians had taken possession (by treaty, not by aggression) of Nisibis and the five Transtigritane Provinces, E. felt the sufferings of the Amidenes as his own (6:443–504), partly because his mother was from Amida (Amar 1988: section 1) and partly because he had personally endured three sieges and the status of a refugee. Indeed, 6:355f ('Is any city big enough for us to write in her about our arguments?') suggests that he did not feel welcome even in Amida, which would explain his subsequent migration to Edessa).

[2] Bowersock 1990:29–40; Drijvers 1984; Millar 1993. There has been some discussion of E.'s debt to Greek philosophy, notably in Beck 1980.

[3] Like the other translations in this paper, this one is my own; in translating the teaching-songs, I have generally conserved the syllable-count and the line-divisions of the original and have attempted to imitate some of Ephraim's tricks as a wordwright. In the present translation, the word 'Isness' is likely to bother some readers; but only 'there-is-ness' could be a more exact rendering of *ituto*, which consists of *it*, 'there is', plus *-uto*, '-ness'. 'Being' or 'existence' are synonyms, perhaps, but they are used in many senses by philosophers. To coin a new term makes it easier to remain open to E.'s distinctive notion, which seems to be that of a

TSF 45 (unpublished translation: Andrew Palmer)

1. Sight and thought can teach; each can learn from each.
   If you have an itch underneath a lid,
   then you cannot see clearly. So with thought.
   Scripture's sunlight makes you wise.
   Sunlight helps your eyes, Truth your mind; so choose
   sunlight for your sight, Scripture for your thought.

R. Praise your hiddenness, Offspring of the High!

2. How the eye detests that which makes it itch!
   Curiosity irritates the mind,
   as a crumb the eye, spoiling everything
   and perverting thought, always.
   Poking fingers hurt eyes and help them not.
   Probing thinkers, too, harm their powers of thought.
3. Which is harder? God's Fatherhood, or God's
   sheer Existence? Can Isness be produced
   out of any place, out of any thing?
   This is hard. But thing from thing,
   like begetting like: that is easier.
   Present in them all, Isness holds all things.
4. If it occupies space, then it is small;
   great though Isness be, space outgrows it then.
   Space is finite, though; Isness, infinite.
   There's a breadth no space can span!
   Isness cannot be fully occupied.
   How can mind contain all its fullness, then?
5. If his Knowledge can coextend with space,
   while his Isness can't coextend with space,
   then his Knowledge is greater than his Being,
   meaning He's conjoined from two.
   Is He one in both? No, it seems, not so!
   Greatness can't be one with its opposite.

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quality shared by everything in both parallel universes, visible and invisible, by virtue of their having been created by its source. And the property of that absolute Isness is to create an abundance of things possessing Isness derived from Him.

6. Is it not unknown whether space contains
endless beings, worlds and created things?
That is why the fools stray in blasphemies.
Now it's time they said: 'He is
of Himself one God; of Himself the Sire;
fully self-possessed; perfect and entire.'
7. Greatness would be small, were the Great contained;
Fatherhood a fraud, were He barren, too;
Isness impotent, could He not create.
He is whole in all respects:
bearing with no pain; making with no work;
dwelling in no space; wealthy with no gold.
8. Space does not exist great enough to enclose
Him, nor intellect sharp enough to probe.
Great in Isness, He; great in Fatherhood.
Space and mind accept defeat.
As there is no space equal to his Being,
so there is no mind equal to that Birth.
9. How He made a thing, when there was no thing,
intellect cannot fathom, but it's true.
How to demonstrate that it can be done?
Logic has no space for this.
Give your mind repose! Say: 'This is the way
I, by Faith, have stormed sharp Inquiry's hill.'
10. And because your mind could not concentrate
on the problem of sheer Reality,
find another path; reconcile your soul:
'To All Things' Lord All Things Are Plain.'
Gird yourself with this argument to still
probing of the mind, questions on the birth!

[2] In one poem (*TSF* 47) he portrays Moses, Daniel and Paul as having enjoyed the best education that Egypt, Babylon and Athens, respectively, had to offer, only to find true wisdom in the simplicity of God's self-revelation; compare *TSF* 47:6 ('Moses, who threw off Egypt's knowledge, wrote, / with simplicity, revelation's truth') with the autobiographical confession in *TSF* 64:11 ('Forsaking all else, / I applied my mind / to Holy Scripture, / lest I forfeit this / for words not written'). Ephraim may have been more educated than he admits. But, insofar as he wrote for the educated, he wrote

to show them the way back to simple faith; and, insofar as he sang for the simple, he attempted (not always, perhaps, with complete success) to reduce complex arguments to simple terms.[4]

[3] Certainly he was well-versed in the Scriptures. *TSF* 59:1 has a description of the memorisation of the Scriptures and fruitful meditation upon them which, taken together with the extraordinary scriptural resonance of Ephraim's writings (Brock speaks somewhere of their being 'drenched' with Scripture, Van Rompay uses the Dutch word *wemelen*—'swarming' with allusions), may be understood as a description of the Judaic side of his education:

> Which man, groping blind,
> has explored his mind?
> Oh how and oh where
> is gathered and stored
> the grain of God's Word,
> which he gets by heart
> and guards like a hoard?
> Memory harvests,
> mulling multiplies
> and neglect depletes
> that marvellous crop.
> The mind amazes.

[4] Much of Ephraim's output was concerned with the interpretation of the Scriptures. There can be little doubt that he must have been recognised in his lifetime, though no doubt grudgingly by some, as one of the leading authorities in this field. Certainly after his death, once the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) had vindicated his dissident theology and declared it Orthodox, he became *the* great interpreter of Scripture, at least for some at Edessa. In his contribution to the next issue of *Hugoye* (Vol. 2, No. 1), Bernard Outtier informs us that the Armenians, having invented a script for their language in the early fifth century at Edessa, translated first the Scriptures and then Saint Ephraim's commentaries on them. No other Syriac commentator existed, apparently, who was worthy to be set beside him. There was a school of thought in fifth-century Edessa which came to prefer a different style of scriptural exegesis; but it had to import this from another linguistic milieu, by translating the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia (died 428) from Greek into Syriac. This corpus became

[4] See Palmer 1993a; Palmer 1993b.

the basic teaching tool of the Church of the East (often, though misleadingly, called 'Nestorian'), which, while revering Saint Ephraim as 'the Great Teacher', uses 'the Interpreter' (*par excellence*) to refer to Theodore.

[5] Considering how central the Scriptures were to the life of the Church, this expertise as an exegete ought to have given Ephraim an important place during his lifetime in the increasingly Christian society of the fourth-century Roman Empire. He ought to have been a Bishop, like most of the other Fathers of the Church, expounding the Scriptures from his Throne. There are indications, however, that he forfeited the episcopacy because he was too otherworldly and did not curry favour with the rich and powerful. The *TSN* [*Teaching-Songs Concerning Nisibis*; also known as *Carmina Nisibena* = Beck 1961] 13 and 14 contain high praises of James, the famous bishop of Nisibis (308/9 – *ca.* 338), and of his two successors, Babu and Vologeses, written shortly before the death of this last (around 359), which do not neglect to mention that the author has been the disciple of all three. *TSN* 15 and 16 defend the aged Vologeses against his detractors. At a later date Ephraim may have regretted his defence of this bishop, which was apparently as insincere as it was unprofitable. He is a scathing critic of 'spinelessness' in a leader—precisely the fault of which Vologeses was accused (*TSN* 19:14; *VHF [Verse-Homilies on Faith]* 6:195–8).

[6] The praises (*TSN* 17–21) of Abraham, who succeeded Vologeses, are mixed with claims that the 'fat ones of the herd' (wealthy laymen) were gratified by his appointment, which changed nothing in their selfish (*cf. Ezekiel* 34:21) 'grazing' arrangements, while the 'community of the under-shepherds' (the clergy) were pleased, because their dignity was enhanced by promotion (*TSN* 17:3). Describing himself as 'the dregs of the flock' (the diocese), who has 'not withheld what is due' (a song of praise for Abraham), Ephraim finds consolation in the fact that he still has an influential platform: God, he says, 'has made me his harp' (*TSN* 17:13). In fact, he was now able to exploit the prophetic potential of his liminal status, on the fringes of the sacred area, in the midst of the people, representing the social conscience which was so sadly lacking in the higher echelons. *TSN* 17:8 suggests that Abraham's appointment excited envy. It looks as though Ephraim may have hoped to be the successor to Vologeses (Abraham, though also a disciple of all three of his predecessors, was a younger man), if only

in order to delegate management and jurisdiction and consecrate himself to a life of prayer, as he recommends (with more idealism than realism) to Abraham. His later writings (*e.g. TSF* 87) contain satirical passages on the ambition of the priests of his time. Ephraim, it would seem, was marginalised. Having toadied to bishops and Christian emperors while (we may surmise) he cherished the hope of office for himself, he now became a dissident. His new stance was more honest and more pessimistic (or rather, since pessimism is a sin, more eschatological): his poetry gained power and a bitter edge. He decided that the pride of the worldly was of a piece with the arrogance of the rationalistic theology (Arianism) taught by many of the most favoured exegetes of the time.

> Be not dismayed, you catechumen, if
> the one initiated is confused!
> Be not infected, all you novices,
> if he that's versed in language is adrift!
> If your instructor goes astray, then go
> and meditate upon the Books yourself!
> Enquiring minds have gone astray, but your
> discerning mind need not be tangled, too.
> The teachers are mistaken; all the same,
> the catechumens need not be dismayed.
>
> (*VHF* 6:163–72)

He had not spoken a word against the Arian Emperor Constantius, whom he praises fulsomely in his *Teaching-Songs Against Julian*, composed in the early 360s; but he became an outspoken, though necessarily guarded, critic of the Arian Emperor Valens in the *TSF*, composed in the early 370s.[5]

[7] The kind of training in public speaking he received can only be investigated through his works. We hear of the 'School of Nisibis', which is said to have been founded by Bishop James before 338; but it is only from the late fifth century that we begin to know something of its curriculum.[6] He lived in an age which set a high value on the ability to speak well and to persuade. The sons of wealthy houses received many years of training in this art, which involved learning how to use body-language as well as words. The

[5] See Palmer, forthcoming.

[6] See Brock 1996: 239.

Church could not afford to ignore rhetoric, though it must have been wary of the danger to the truth inherent in a skill developed for use by both the prosecution and the defence in a court of law and by opposed parties in the political arena. Like Isocrates and Cato, the Church will have stressed the necessity for the speaker to be a good man as well as a fine stylist. But it will have had no scruples about taking over the existing arsenal of verbal and gestural techniques and adapting them to its purpose. Ephraim, 'God's harp', evidently benefited from a considerable training in rhetoric, one which was certainly acquired, in part, from reading the close study of the Scriptures; and which owed a great deal to the traditions of Aramaic-speaking Mesopotamia, Jewish and Christian; but which may also have been enhanced by a certain acquaintance with Cappadocian Christianity. Basil of Caesarea studied rhetoric at Athens and recommended a discriminating use of classical Greek literature in a Christian education.

[8] It is legitimate to reserve judgment as to the historicity of Ephraim's reported personal acquaintance with Basil of Caesarea;[7] certainly, the *Vita* is no work of sober history. Yet David Taylor's contribution to this issue of *Hugoye* will argue for a very considerable link between Ephraim and the Cappadocians, one which involved learning on the part of Basil and the Gregories, as well as Ephraim. And Caesarea is not so very far away from Amida. The mountains are something of an obstacle; but if Ephraim had traversed them, that would explain the vivid mountain-imagery in his poetry, where he evokes the image of of higher mountains, swathed in mists, beyond the foothills (*TSF* 42:12f; 47:4 *etc.*). If he had seen Mount Argaeus, the extinct volcano which threw up the extraordinary tufa landscape of western Cappadocia, that would explain his use of the image of the high mountain with the hidden summit for the unity of God, communicating through a hierarchy of heavenly command with the multiplicity of the low-lying physical creation (*VHF* 1:1ff; compare *TSF* 1:3; 6:1 *etc.*). There is no sky-scraping mountain in Mesopotamia. This imagery enters his poetry, if I am not mistaken, with the *VHF*, which would mean around 360. Now in 358 the city of Nicomedia, capital of Bithynia, was devastated by an earthquake Ammianus XVII 7). Ephraim

[7] Amar 1988: sections 25–8, esp. 25.; See Brock 1990: 8 ('unhistorical').

wrote a series of verse-homilies about that catastrophe, which are preserved in an Armenian translation. Why should he have done that? Perhaps because he went there.[8] In 359, Bishop Vologeses completed a splendid new building in stone at Nisibis. It still stands, with a Greek inscription naming the bishop and giving the date. This was a mausoleum for Bishop Jacob and at the same time, as the inscription tells us, a baptistery. When bishops added to the public buildings of their city, they commonly appealed to the Emperor for a subsidy. In order to do so they travelled to the Imperial Court and presented a petition. Such, at least, is the picture we get from sixth-century sources, such as Procopius of Caesarea and the Syriac chronicle written at Edessa in 506. It may be that the aged Bishop Vologeses took his best orator, Ephraim, with him to Nicomedia, which was frequently the imperial residence in time of war with Persia. If Ephraim accompanied his bishop in the capacity of orator, he may have travelled a great deal. There is nothing inherently unlikely, to my mind, about his having sailed, as well. To judge from his poetry, he had an intimate acquaintance with at least one of the great seas, with waves so big that they could wreck a boat, with sailors so skilled that they could yield to such forces and survive, with swimming, buoyed up against all expectation by the mass of the water in which one fears to drown, with divers coming up, fighting for breath, after only a few moments of exploration under water (*TSF* 25:8f; 81:11f; *etc.*). He might have acquired second-hand knowledge of these things from literature or from the close questioning of travellers who passed through his city; but if so, he had a remarkable capacity for making other people's experiences vividly his own.

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[8] Renoux 1975: xxxv assumes, perhaps more realistically, that E.'s description of liturgical life at Nicomedia is a projection of that he knows in Nisibis; yet his geographical description of Nicomedia is exact. It is true that E. refers to messengers, but these brought the news of the earthquake; it is still an open question whether E. acquired all his knowledge of Nicomedia before the earthquake from hearsay or from personal observation. With regard to the question as to why E. should have written about Nicomedia, the right answer is probably that the fall of such a great city affected the entire empire and provided E. with an opportunity to warn the Nisibenes, in 359, a time of great danger, the year when Amida fell to the Persians, of the punishment which threatened them if they did not improve their Christian lives (Renoux 1975: xxxiv).

[9] Later in this paper I shall give some examples of Ephraim's skills. But before doing that, I want to say something about the performance of his musical works.[9] A teaching-song, or *madrosho*, consists of a series of verses, or stanzas, each followed by a response, which is usually the same throughout. The singer would stand on a platform set squarely in the middle of the nave and intone the stanzas, addressing himself sometimes, as the people's teacher, to the congregation and sometimes, as the people's representative, to God. After each stanza, the congregation would sing the response, almost always consisting of praises to Christ and, through Him, to his Father. For example, *TSC* [*Teaching-Songs on Christmas* = Beck 1959] 1 consists of ninety-nine two-line stanzas (to be sung to a melody known as 'The Confessors') designed for the vigil of the Feast of the Nativity, beginning with scriptural teaching about the anticipation of Christ in the Old Testament (*TSC* 1:1–60), continuing with specific admonitions about the proper way to keep vigil (*TSC* 1:61–83), and ending with general exhortations to behave in a christian way, at Christmas ('On this day'), of all times (*TSC* 1:84–99). After each stanza was repeated the response: 'Glory to You, Son of our Creator!' In one of the verse-homilies transmitted in an Armenian translation, Ephraim describes how this worked in the church of Nicomedia, destroyed in the earthquake of 358. (The passage is translated from the Armenian by Renoux 1975 and by Renhart 1995; when it is translated from the French or the German into Syriac, it falls naturally into Ephraim's favourite verse-homily couplets consisting of twice times seven syllables.)

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[9] An extract from a performance of Ephraim's *TSC [Teaching-Songs on Christmas (or the Nativity)]* 15 to the accompaniment of the Celtic Harp, which took place at the Conference which gave rise to this special issue, accompanies this paper. The melody is of my own invention and has no claim to authenticity; but it is true to the form of the metre, which consists of a central section of sixteen syllables, framed by symmetrical opening and closing sections of twelve syllables each. This *Madrosho* (like *TSF* 49 and many others) lends itself to an imaginative range of gesture. The comparison of the singer with a lyre, in particular, suggests that the arms should be held like the horns of a lyre, with the throat and mouth in the place of the strings and the thorax as the sound-box (compare *TSP* 8:8; Brock 1990:134; Palmer 1993b:380).

In the middle of the church
    stood the platform, like a source:
thirsty ears would flock to it,
    drinking life eternal there;
drinking thence instruction, too;
    taking, giving in return.
Scripture was explained for ears;
    mouth repaid the debt with praise.
(*VHN* 8:619–26 = Renoux 1975: 150f)

The 'instruction' and the 'explanation' should be understood as descriptions of the content of a teaching-song and the 'giving in return' of praise describes the alternation of the teacher's stanzas and the congregation's responses. There is a perfect match between this description and *TSC* 1.

[10] Ephraim seems to have taken the revolutionary step of forming a women's choir to lead the congregation in these responses; but he is also reported, by Jacob of Serugh, to have made women *mallponyoto*, 'teachers', in the church. This would mean that they had actually gone up on the platform and sung the stanzas which contain the teaching. Since the platform was in the middle of the nave, they could do this without going up into the sanctuary, where only males could go, and even, if the nave was already divided into a women's section at the west and a men's section at the east, without leaving the women's half of the church-building. This could be the explanation of Ephraim's custom of sometimes writing the stanzas as if they were spoken by the City (of Nisibis, or of Bethlehem), personified as a woman, by Mother Church, or by Mary. These Teaching-Songs were perhaps designed to be sung by a woman 'teacher' (not by a man, as in the performance of *TSC* 15 accompanying this paper); in some cases a male teacher may have alternated with a female teacher (*e.g. TSC* 2), the response giving them time to change places.[10] A good example

[10] This alternation may have been a part of traditional Mesopotamian performance-art, which loved the disputation-poem. Disputation literature is known from ancient Babylonia; Syriac poets use it as well (Earth and Heaven, Mary and the Gardener, the Soul and the Body are all examples of male/female alternation; see Brock 1996: 179–81; Brock, 1991); and as late as the nineteenth century, a mime representing the altercation between the Penitent Thief and the Cherub with the Burning Sword was performed in the Assyrian Liturgy in Northern Iraq (Wigram 1929: 198).

of a teaching-song which was most probably designed for performance by a female singer is *TSN* 4. The eleventh stanza seems to refer to the high voices of the women, mingled with the low voices of the men in the bleating refrain: *savra-a-a-n hwi shura-a-a-n* ('Our Hope, be our Wall!')—here very freely translated to achieve the same effect. I quote stanzas 1, 3–4, 7–8, 10–2, 23 and 27–28, as the parts most clearly suited to be sung by a woman. The first stanza recalls the persistent woman of Luke 18:1–8; the last evokes the City of Nisibis and Mother Church, and suggests that the person who speaks the words of the teaching-song may be identified with both of these:

1. Worn your doorstep, un-
wearying your heart!
Shamelessly, I come,
not deserving help,
yet demanding it!

R. Spare us, by your care!

3. Open up your door,
pitying the cries
of my children, Lord!
Hear their groans, so sad!
Make their sackcloth glad!

4. After You were weaned,
Firstborn Child, You joined
other boys—the cursed
sons of Nazareth.
Hear my bleating lambs!

7. Hear my babies' cry!
They're so innocent!
You were once a child:
you can reconcile
Him of Ancient Days.

8. On the day when You
landed in the Crib,
Wakeful Ones came down
and proclaimed that peace
which my children need.

10. Pity, Lord, my babes,
who remind You that
You became a Child!
Let them live by Grace,
for that likeness' sake!

11. Bleating innocents
cry, and ewes reply:
voices low and high
call for rescue by
Him that shepherds all.

12. I shall make a crown
woven of them all,
voices high and low,
and shall offer this
to your Father, Lord.

23. Lord, my chicks have flown,
left their nest, alarmed
by the Eagle. Look,
where they hide in dread!
Bring them back in peace!

26. Peace outside my wall:
peasants bantering!
Peace inside my wall:
city-dwellers' din!
These shall be my thanks.

28. Church and those who serve,
Town and those who dwell
in her, Lord, shout 'Thanks!'
Let the sound of peace
be their noise's wage!

[11] The teaching remained a male product, however, and these 'female voices' teach that the man is head of the woman (*TSC* 16:16), that women are weak and immoderate (*TSN* 6:16), that male jealousy is a necessary defence of women's virtue and a proof of love (*TSN* 6:13, 15), even, perhaps, that God's punishments are like the blows her lovers, compelled by her husband, inflict upon an unfaithful woman in front of her children (*TSN* 5:4), *etc.* The repeated references, placed by the poet in the female singer's

mouth, to the nakedness and the victimisation of the protagonist (whether the city of Nisibis, as in *TSN* 6, or the pearl, as in *TSF* 83) seem to pander to the imagination of the male spectators in a way that is never reciprocated with reference to a male protagonist. Impotence, with Ephraim, is a favourite metaphor for the intellectual limitations of human beings (*e.g. TSF* 75) and sexual potency is a metaphor for faith (*e.g. TSF* 21 and 25). This entails imagining God, for the moment, in the role of a female (which Ephraim frequently does) and thus endowing the feminine sex with an aura of power and mystery. I am neither saying that Ephraim underestimated the power and the mystery of women, nor that he hated women for this power. He seems to have been extraordinarily open about his interest for the *risqué* episodes involving women which are found in Sacred Scripture.[11] His strong sexual longings were redirected into an ardent aspiration to union with God (*e.g. TSF* 11:18f; 85:11ff) and, on a human plane, to the restoration of openness between the sexes through the espousal of continence. That this ardour embarrassed later generations of Syrian Christians will be shown by Sebastian Brock in his contribution to the next issue of *Hugoye* (Vol. 2, No. 1). For modern western readers, the powerful sexuality of his poetry, combined with its unswerving restraint, is a great part of its charm. All the same, outside the cloister, Ephraim was no social reformer. Jacob of Serugh, a noted woman-hater, celebrated Ephraim more than a century after his death, saying that 'the whole aim of his teaching was a new world in which men and women would be equal'.[12] For all that Ephraim, unlike Jacob, appears to empathise with women (often presenting himself, as poet, under the guise of a woman, as in *TSF* 10), this is a distortion of the facts. In fact, Ephraim co-opted women into a teaching establishment designed to reinforce the patriarchal *status quo*, rather than to reform it; which explains why Jacob was able to use him, cynically, to praise the mere shadow of equality—the promotion of women from absolute silence to the dignity of 'teacher', whereby they become

[11] Brock 1992: 168–72.

[12] Amar 1995. That Jacob was a woman-hater can be inferred, not only from his projection onto Eve and all her sex of the contamination caused by the sin of disobedience (Ephraim's *Commentary on Genesis* gives at least equal blame to Adam), but also from his authorship of the misogynistic *Life* of Daniel of Glosh, on which see Palmer 1990.

the mouthpieces, after Ephraim, of male poets such as Jacob—as if it were real equality between the sexes.

[12] The *Teaching-Songs on Nisibis* show that some, at least, of Ephraim's compositions were intended for the ears of married people, not only for the celibate section of the community to which he himself certainly belonged. The *qaddishe*, that is those consecrated to a life of celibacy in the service of God, numbered 'a quarter and a third' (that is, either between a quarter and a third, or—as Beck thinks—a quarter of the males and a third of the females) of the Christian community in Nisibis (*TSN* 19:6). They included both those who had never lost their virginity and others who had subsequently consecrated themselves to celibacy, whether because their spouses had died or for another reason.[13] How exactly the celibate members of the community lived is hard to ascertain. Ephraim does mention *dayroto*, which might mean 'monasteries' (*e.g.* at *TSN* 17:3; *TSF* 79:9).

[13] It may well be that some of his works were intended only for these dedicated religious. The biblical commentaries, for example. The introduction to the *Commentary on Genesis* (Tonneau 1965: 3) suggests that there was a school in which the teaching-songs and the verse-homilies were studied and that the commentaries were intended as a brief guide to the fuller teaching of the songs:

> I did not at first wish to write a commentary on the first book, the Book of the Creation, for fear of having to repeat here what we have set out in the verse-homilies and teaching-songs; but under the pressure of the love of friends, we write briefly here, after all, that which has been written by us at length in the verse-homilies and teaching-songs.

[14] These 'friends' are likely to be the 'Sons and Daughters of the Covenant'. These *qaddishe* would certainly have used the church more often than the lay-people. Brock infers from one passage of Ephraim (*TSP [Teaching-Songs on Paradise]* 6:8) that some of the faithful (probably this inner circle) took Holy Communion daily. Some of the teaching-songs were probably designed for use in these services. The *Teaching-Songs on Virginity*, for example. The

[13] Much has been written on celibacy in the Syriac tradition. For orientation in recent, though not the most recent literature, see Brock 1996: 229–35.

other teaching-songs were probably collected into *codices* and deposited in a library where the members of this community could study them. The *Fifteen Teaching-Songs on Paradise* (*TSP* = Beck 1957; Brock 1990) were composed as a sequence and these must be among those referred to in the introduction to the *Commentary on Genesis*. And there is one much longer sequence of teaching-songs cast in its entirety from a single mould, displaying overarching structures which unite the individual songs by symmetry and contrast, by number and by pattern, by logical progression and by scriptural allusion. This is the *Eighty-Seven Teaching-Songs on Faith*,[14] which mirrors in some aspects of its overall composition the *Six Verse-Homilies on Faith*; for example, both begin with the image of God as a mountain unconquerable by Man and both end with the image of a city encircled by a wall. The last of the *Eighty-Seven* is translated below.

[15] The verse-homilies were probably intended for recitation during long vigils in the church, in between the prescribed offices of the Liturgy. It is difficult to think of another context. They are composed of heptasyllabic lines (rendered by me into English iambic pentameters), paired as couplets and end-stopped, with irregular sections marked only by caesurae in the progression of the argument. The rhythmic monotony of the end-stopped couplets presumably corresponds to the repetition of a melodic line, with or without instrumental accompaniment, as in many balladic compositions around the world. But, although the verse-homilies imitate some of the characteristics of oral poetry (such as the threefold repetition of an idea with variations), they are much too intricate to have been composed in this way, nor are they genuinely formulaic. The *Six Verse-Homilies on Faith* were probably composed in Amida, as I said in the first note; but that does not mean Beck's project to infer from them something about the curriculum of the School at Nisibis is a pointless endeavour (Beck 1953: 59–63). The fifth almost certainly recalls that School (which may well have travelled to Amida, and so on to Edessa) and takes issue with some of the opinions formulated there. In the following translation words added to fill out the English metre are printed in italics:

[14] See Palmer 1995b and Palmer, in preparation.

VHF 5 (unpublished translation by Andrew Palmer)

Far senior *to those with whom he dwells*—
to those who teach him and to those who learn
is Learning, yet he would become the friend
of youth and 'be all things to all' as well.
Together with the teachers he would teach;
together with the students he would learn.
If Learning teaches, Learning learns as well;
unlike a river, Learning flows both ways.
In masters of the art of rhetoric
he's praised; through scholars he gets better known.
He dwells in both the simple and the sly,
in all amounts in all their different souls.
For Learning gives himself to everything,
just like the One who's Lord of everything.
He makes himself the same as each amount,
though greater than his measurers himself.
The students cannot measure him, because
their faculties as yet are still unformed.
No teacher yet has gauged his full extent,
because no teacher could exhaust his springs.
and yet, though greater than the ones who learn
and greater than the ones who teach, as well,
he's less by far than Him that made him still,
because he can't explore Him thoroughly.
No one who learns can put his finger on
the quantity of his Creator's power,
or get his mind around what God has made,
or all that He is able to create.
For this creation—all that He has made; 31
this *history*—the things that He has done; 32
this *world*—is not the sum of all his power, 29
the only thing the Maker *could have done.* 30
For not because He was not able to,
did He refrain from making *more than this.*
His will can never be encompassed. If
He wished, He could make *new things* every day.
But that would cause confusion, if the sum
of what He made continued to increase.

The things He has created would not know
each other, if their number were too great.
Though He Himself knew each one very well,
the whole would never comprehend itself
and what would be the use of making things
which would not know the other things He made?
The reason He created things at all
was not at all to magnify Himself.
He was no less before He made those things,
nor greater after He created them.
He wanted what He made to grow; that's why
He limited his creativity.
He could have gone on making great the world
created *by His will* without an end.
But then the ones who lived in it would range;
and ranging would be dangerous to them.
For then they would not hear about the Men
of Righteousness, nor learn their prophecies.
Suppose the world were bigger than it is—
a hundred times as spacious, let us say—
his heralds, *the Apostles,* would have been
unable to evangelize it all.
He made Jerusalem the central point,
that all the world might know *that city well.*
For when He brought *them* up from Egypt, or
redeemed them out of Babylon again,
because He sent them down and brought them up,
the whole of his creation heard her name.
But if the world were larger than it is,
it could not have perceived her as it did.
The Lord Himself encapsulates the world,
since He extends on all sides far beyond,
but how could it have benefited from
Jerusalem the way that it has done?
If now, although it's small, *the world He made*
is troubled by the voice of ignorance,
how much more *badly* would it be disturbed,
if it were far more spacious than it is?
The sun would not have time to cross the sky

from one horizon to the other edge.
The time it*s journey* took would be too long;
a *single* day would take *at least* a year.

Just think of all the damage that would cause,
if nature lost its regularity!
The summers and the winters would be stretched;
the fall of night, the dawn of day, postponed.
And when would all the corn be ready? When
would all the apples ripen *on the trees*?
All this would not be difficult for Him,
but think how hard for us such things would be!
This shows the Maker never makes a thing
according to the measure of his power.

No: everything that He creates and does,
He measures in proportion to our good.
From this *great* Womb which does not have a wall
emerged the Child who cannot be explored.
If you're determined, nonetheless, to probe,
then let me be a counsellor to you.
Go, first of all, explore his Genitor
and test your strength against his Father*'s own*!
Begin and finish penetrating Him
and measure all his length and all his breadth!

If you succeed in measuring THE ONE-
WHO-IS, you've measured HIM-THAT-IS-OF-HIM.
If you can get the measure of the Sire,
why, then you'll have the measure of his Son.
How could you measure HIM-THAT-IS? So don't
explore his only Child: it can't be done!
You feeble *diver*! Surface from the sea!
Come, let's get back to what we posited!
Let's not relinquish what is known , *'the land'*
and thrash about in what's unknown, *'the sea'*!

So, then, the One who makes does not create
as much as He is able to create.
He does not make as much as He can make:
He makes as much as it is right to make.
If He just went on making things and set
no limit to his creativity,

then nature would be boring, *all the same,*
undifferentiated, *on and on,*
just like a spring, which always flows the same
and keeps on *pouring water* boringly.
The Maker would become an open tap,
with no control of his own will at all,
a source constrained by nature so to flow,
unable to prevent its flowing so.
For just as, if He did not flow at all,
He'd never show his will to us at all,
so also, if He never used restraint,
He could not show us that He has control.
He starts, in order that He may create.
He finishes, to order what is made.
If, every day, He made a heaven and earth
and creatures *which inhabited them both,*
his creativity would *simply* be
confusion with no regularity.
His creativity would not be great,
because its understanding would be small.
A mouth which has the gift of speaking well
should speak with moderation, all the same,
and just because it's able to speak well,
that does not mean its speech should not be short.
But words are not so easy for the mouth
as making things for Him that made the world.
Though words come easily to orators,
yet works come much more easily to Him.
And even so, He does not just go on
for ever making things, although He could.
He gave the human race the power of speech,
but also that of regulating speech,
so surely He can regulate Himself,
though able to create at every hour.
So therefore He refrained from making more,
that He might put in order what He made.
Just how much more He could have made, who *knows?*
For who can calculate *such quantities*?
What He created is *a* vast *amount.*

What He left *uncreated*, *too*, is vast.
The things He made could never be enclosed.
What He abstained from can't be ascertained.
For someone who creates, by one small sign,
all things from nothing, is entirely veiled.

from those who look for Him, not only in
his hidden parts, but also in his shown.
You neither know how much He made, *my son*,
nor yet how much He could have made *besides*.
There is one Child concealed within his Womb
who knows his quality and quantity.
For only He that is both veiled and shown
can know both what is veiled and what is shown.
The sources run too forcefully for him
that tries to study: how, then, can he cope?

By Learning we are able to be helped,
however weak and feeble we may be.
For Learning helps the slowest to achieve
the greatest speed by *easy leaps and* bounds.
By multiplying ten by ten he gains
the number of a hundred with one bound.
By multiplying this again by ten,
the number of a thousand can be reached.
From one to many thousands and from ten
to millions he jumps *with perfect ease*.

By this example you should be convinced
that all things are as quick for him as this.
For he's the unseen bridge whereby the soul
can cross to *study* that which is unseen.
With him, as with a key, our poverty
can open up a vault where treasure lies.
He is the gravity whereby old age
imparts to youthful minds a *pleasant* taste.
He is the wall around virginity,
which keeps her safe from pillagers *and rape*.

By him were sea and land subdued to those
who plough the waves and navigate the fields.
He harnessed ships *and reined them in with ropes*
and made them canter over oceans *green*

and, like these chariots upon the sea,
prepared those ships which travel over land.
To Weakness he makes love and renders her
that was bereft of power powerful.
He touches Levity and renders her
that was bereft of savour savoury.

He touches Uselessness and teaches her
that was bereft of skills all kinds of skill.
He touches Wordlessness and brings to her
that was bereft of speech all eloquence.
He shares the judge's indignation and
the guilty man's humiliation, too;
teaches the one enforcement *of the Law*,
the other how to plead *for clemency*.
He reasons out with those who reason out;
he seeks to know with those who *seek to* know.

On one side he is that: the quest to know;
and, on the other, he is what is found.
Both this and that are linked to him, because
he ministers to both sides equally.
Although he forces no one, all the same,
his lordship is imposed on one and all.
The craftsman learns from him the way to *work*
and fabricate from one thing something else
enabling him to learn that this is God:
the One who makes all things from nothing else.

For so he shows to one created One
Creator who is greater than himself.
The made one makes from other things a thing;
the Maker makes from no thing every thing.

[16] This relatively short verse-homily gives a convincing picture of a school with an integrated programme of learning, which incorporates natural science, geography, history, mathematics, philosophy, logic, rhetoric, theology and more. It is well worth going through it line by line. 'Those who teach and those who learn' (1f) presupposes a school with more than one teacher. This school has room for 'masters of the art of rhetoric' and for 'scholars' (9f), for students of widely different intellectual strength, 'the simple and the sly' (11f). In some sense the aim of all involved

is to 'measure' things (17ff), to 'put one's finger on them', to 'get one's mind around' them, though they should not imagine that they can do this to God (25ff). The syllabus includes 'this creation—all that He has made' and 'the things that He has done' (31f), that is to say, natural science, in relation to theology, and history, understood as the sequence and the meaning of God's dealings with his world. The sources will consequently be Nature and Scripture, elsewhere referred to by Ephraim as the 'Two Books', both of which are studied in a christocentric way (hence the play on *mshih*, 'measured', and *mshiho*, 'Messiah'; compare also the number of the poem, five—in Syriac *hamsho*, almost an anagram of *mshiho*). The school encourages speculation. This has given rise to certain arguably false opinions, which Ephraim opposes with logic and rhetoric (the two cannot be quite disentangled and were called by the same name in Syriac: *mliluto*), as: That the Creator never stops creating. Having argued against this, Ephraim, after an artful digression, refers back to 'what we posited' (*mo d-armin*: note the use of the first person plural): 'The Creator does not make as much as He is able to create.' This, too, is speculative. The sentence 'Let us return to what we posited' (108) suggests a certain habit of disciplined logical debate, whereas the specious claim to be leaving 'what's unknown' and returning to 'what is known' suggests that the course of debates at this school is often swayed by rhetoric (109f). There is a tendency to derive morals from such speculation, but the moral derived in this case is only applicable to those who have learned the art of public speaking: from the idea that God does not create as much as He is able to create Ephraim derives the lesson that: 'A mouth which has the gift of speaking well should speak in moderation, all the same' (137f). The idea of moderation and self-regulation is related to the idea of measuring. Not only the quality of things, but also their quantity is of interest, though only Christ knows the quality and the quantity of God (166). Mathematical knowledge is the model for all other kinds of knowledge (173–82). The overall aim is to progress from the knowledge of things revealed (Nature and Scripture) to that of invisible things; mathematics is the prime example of how this can be done and of the unchanging truth which exists in the invisible realm and which can be extracted from that which is visible (183f). To learn this is to acquire great spiritual wealth (185f). The old should teach the young (187f). 'Virginity' is valued in this community as well, as a

safeguard against the intrusion of a perverted mentality, which lacks self-discipline, repentance and humility (189f, interpreted in the light of the following verse-homily, *VHF* 6). But the knowledge pursued in this school is not without practical applications to the domination, by human beings, of their natural environment (191ff). Knowledge is power (197f), good taste (199f), skill (201f), eloquence (203f), good judgment (206f), persuasiveness (207f) and reason (209f). The model of the Man of Knowledge is the craftsman, himself the image of the Creator (217ff), with one crucial difference, which should always make him humble:

> The made one makes from other things a thing;
> the Maker makes from no thing every thing. (223f)

[17] Ephraim wrote his works entirely for the Christian community. He never wrote for Jews or pagans, although he wrote about them. Having said that, there seems to have been a section of the Christian community that had not yet severed its connection with Judaism. They practised the circumcision of male children, respected the Sabbath as a day of rest and abstained from the foods described in the *Book of Leviticus* as unclean (once again, italics are used for words added by the translator for the sake of the English metre):

> One illness is defunct, another thrives;
> one cure is out of date and one survives.
> The illnesses are gone; so are their cures:
> the holocausts, the Sabbath Days, the tithes.
> But there remain those other ills and cures:
> 'Don't swear!' 'Don't steal!' 'Don't be adulterous!' 220
>
> So don't resort to *any* ordinance
> which has no use, because its ill is gone.
> Pay great attention to the ordinance
> which promises to cure your own disease.
> Beware of salving *spiritual* wounds
> with dressings inappropriate to you,
> thus making pain more painful *than before*
> and adding to the evil greater wrong.
> The One who gave the Law is angered *now*,
> because you ban what He declares allowed. 230
>
> The ordinance He gave you is ignored;
> the one He cancelled, you observe *instead*.

You idiot! Refrain a little from
the *all-too-keen* observance of the Law!
Can circumcision be effective *as*
a cure for sin which lodges *deep* within?
The sin has settled *deep* inside your heart—
and you cut off your foreskin as a cure!

(*VHF* 3:215–38)

The ancestors of these people, to whom in particular, it seems, Ephraim addressed this verse-homily, may have been converted by missionaries from Jerusalem before the Gentile-friendly version of Christianity pioneered by St. Paul reached Mesopotamia. The epitaph of Bishop Aberkios of Hierapolis, who died late in the second century, suggests that he was one of the first Pauline missionaries to arrive in Nisibis: 'Having Paul as a companion, everywhere faith led the way'.[15] It was about the same time that the historical Addai probably came to Edessa and shortly afterwards that Palut was ordained in Antioch as the leader of the Church which afterwards became that of Nicaea (McCullough 1982: 24). Another group of Christians at Edessa said their apostle was Thomas, one of the twelve; even in Ephraim's time, they still referred to the 'Pauline' Christians as 'Palutians', as if they were a sect created by that man (Segal 1970: 81).[16] This would explain why, in Eusebius' version of the Legend of King Abgar (*Church History* I 13), Thaddaeus (Addai, transformed into one of the Twelve) is the apostle of Edessa, whereas, when Egeria visited the city eleven years after Ephraim's death, she did so partly because she had heard that the apostle of Edessa was Thomas (Palmer 1982: 5f). The Greek inscription of Kirkmagara, outside Edessa, harmonises these conflicting traditions by saying that Thomas and Thaddaeus are the same (Segal 1970: plate 31b). All this fits the

[15] McVey 1989: 6.

[16] Without attacking Saint Thomas directly, Ephraim perhaps aimed a blow at this party when he used the metaphor of 'poking with the finger', everywhere in *TSF*, to describe a wrong attitude in religion: certainly he was so understood by the interpolator of *TSF* 7:11 (originally, surely, a five-stanza poem on the letters of Ephraim's name: see Palmer 1995a; Palmer 1995b; Palmer 1997b), which compares 'Judas [= the Jew?] Thomas' unfavourably with the centurion of Matthew 8, Mark 15 and Luke 7, 'because he wanted to touch and to probe'.

thesis put forward by Ferdinand Baur in 1831 and so ably defended, with many new arguments, by Michael Goulder (Goulder 1994): that Jerusalem Christianity, including all of the Twelve, was responsible for one mission, compatible with a kind of Judaism, and Pauline Christianity for another mission, drastically at odds with it.

[18] In the middle of the fourth century there seems to have been a resurgence of confidence among the Jews of Mesopotamia. They perceived that the Christian community was disappointed in the record of the Christian emperors. The Cross had been vaunted as the new amulet of the Empire, guaranteeing security against the enemy. Yet there had been a long and damaging war with Persia, during which the city of Amida had been sacked. After the death of Julian, a Christian emperor had unnecessarily ceded Ephraim's own city, Nisibis, with all the territory to the south and east of it, to the Persians. This meant that the Jews in that area were not now prevented from making converts among the Christians (McVey 1989: 14f). The reign of Constantius had been marred by corruption in high places and many hasty executions of people whom informers had induced the Emperor to fear. Constantius himself had gone back on the policy of Constantine and endorsed Arianism, a doctrine, which, by compromising the divinity of Jesus, narrowed the gap between Christianity and Judaism. It was possible for the Jews to persuade some Christians that the whole religion of Jesus had been an aberrance. It was a tug-o'-war between the Jews and the Christian clergy, with the Jewish Christians as the handkerchief in the middle of the rope. As McVey says: 'Under the circumstances, relations between the two religious communities were bound to be strained.' In addressing the people on behalf of the clergy, for example in his *Six Verse-Homilies on Faith*, Ephraim vilified the Jews and demonised them. He wanted to make them as unattractive as possible to his congregation, whom he urged to abandon any persisting Jewish practices. In his triumphalist idea of the progress of Christianity towards the point at which the Church would be coterminous with the world, the Jews had no place. They should rightly have shrivelled up and died. They did not and their presence was a standing rebuke to Ephraim's triumphalism. Judaism could not be allowed to appear a viable option. (In the following translation, words added for the sake of the English metre are printed in italics.)

Let Sabbath Day and circumcision go,
as they have let you go and passed away!
Your guilt is due to your internal *thoughts*;
but you observe external *disciplines*.
The soul within you might have perished; but
the Sabbath Day, outside you, is observed!
The Jew, although he did not keep the *laws*
and ordinances while they were in force,
would press us hard to keep the Law today,
although its time is past, the infidel!

He wants to make *us* healthy ones contract
that illness which he suffered from of old.
The cutting and the cauterising *irons*,
the drugs, as well, prepared to cure his pains,
he wants to use for mutilating *us,*
for cutting off the limbs of *perfect* health.
The fetters, shackles, manacles prepared
to *keep him captive in* his servitude,
he cunningly attempts to use to clap
the freedom of the love of God in irons.

The ravening slave is prompting *us* to clamp
his fetters, *shackles, irons* on the free.
By flattering the pride of freedom, he
subjects her to the yoke of slavery.
He makes pretence of honouring the free,
but really all he feels for us is scorn.
Attracting us to Moses is his way
of fleecing the Messiah of his flock.
If one is proud to stand beside the Slave,
how much more proud to stand beside his Lord!

He doesn't even stand beside the Slave,
denying, as he does, that Servant's Lord.
And Moses, who was scorned *of old* by them,
was always held in honour by ourselves.
The Lord is honoured as a Lord; and slaves
are honoured as the servants *of their Lord.*
He persecuted Moses in his time
and, in his time, he crucified his Lord.
The nations, at that time, were off the track;

but, all the same, he ran away to them.
Today, when, by denial, he has strayed,
he calls the nations off the beaten track.
The Gentile Church preserves her chastity;
by Egypt, though, pollution was embraced.
He would have hurried back to Egypt's arms,
had *deep* sea-water not prevented him.
He will not enter this Girl, full of truth;
he longed to run to that Girl, full of lies.
Because he's tasted blood on such a scale,
he cannot stop himself from murdering.
In former times he murdered openly;
but now he murders secretly *instead*.
He tramps around the ocean and the land
to find companions for the road to Hell.
He has no Prophets whom he might destroy
in public, as his lust would make him do,
Among the kings he was dispersed, that they
might hold in check *his lust for blood* by force.
He saw that mediums could no longer hold
the pagans spellbound, while the Prophets could.
So then he dressed himself in prophecies,
the prophecies of those whom he had killed;
he put them on and took them off at will,
the more to kill by reasoning with them.
He kills the bodies of the prophets, then
he takes the prophets' voices for a cloak.
Avoid *the Jew*, you vulnerable man!
Your death and blood is nothing much to him!
He took upon himself the blood of God;
and will he be afraid of shedding yours?
He has no fear of leading you astray;
he had no fear of wandering himself!
Beneath the *very* Pillar of the Cloud
he made the Calf and did not even blush.
He placed the idol with the fourfold cheeks,
bereft of dread, within the Holy Place.
He hanged the Maker on a piece of wood
and all Creation shuddered at the sight.

The Spirit rent the curtain of the door,
to make the disbeliever rend his heart.
The stones above the tombs were rent as well,
but still that heart of stone felt no remorse.
The Spirit saw that he was undismayed;
She fled his rabid, *predatory* lust.
The accursed one then snorted through his nose
in front of his most honourable God.
The Prophet was too modest to relate
his filthy deed exactly as it was;
Ezekiel found modest words to tell
what filthy acts *the Jew committed then*.
Because those *acts* were told by modest *lips*,
they were articulated modestly.
For just as what is sanctified has passed
through *Jewish* lips and so has been outraged,
so filthy acts committed by *the Jew*
have passed through modest lips and been improved.
He slaughters *all* the prophets *sent by God*,
like *newborn* lambs, so innocent *and pure*.
Physicians came to visit him, but he
became *his doctors'* executioner.
So get away from him, because he's mad!
Run for your life! Take refuge in the Christ!
Don't come to Him with curiosity!
Approach Him, rather, as a worshipper!
If he, the disbeliever, crucifies,
and you, the one who worships, penetrate,
discerning men will shed great tears, because
the one blasphemes, the other penetrates.
He visited the seed of Abraham:
the heirs turned into murderers; *and then*
he visited the nations, immature
as yet: the innocent began to probe.

(*VHF* 3:281–394)

In considering the influence of Saint Ephraim, we cannot speak only of his influence for the good. We have to say, also, that he was largely responsible for the virulent anti-Jewish language which has ever since characterised the Syriac Liturgy. Understanding the

historical context helps to explain why he used such inflammatory language against the Jews; it does not excuse him. Nor does the fact that this language had not yet led to large-scale physical violence against the Jews, tolerated or even ordered by a Christian State. Line 305 shows that the Jews gave the appearance, at least, of honouring their Christian neighbours, which makes Ephraim's ungentle behaviour even more culpable.[17]

[19] Things became even worse for Ephraim's party when the Emperor was not only an Arian (as Constantius had been), but began (as Valens did) to enforce Arianism, sending recalcitrant bishops into exile and replacing them with Arians. Ephraim's best policy was then to identify the Jews and the Arians as equally dangerous enemies of the true faith and to call the remnant of true believers to resistance and possible martyrdom. This is what he does in his *Eighty-Seven Teaching-Songs on Faith*, which must have been composed not long before his death at Edessa in 373. It will be helpful, I think, to quote and translate the last of these in full at this point. We can then use it to discuss Ephraim's skill with words.

Teaching-Songs on Faith 87
(unpublished translation by Andrew Palmer)

1. I watched them,
strutting peacocks
on a circus floor:
philosophers,
at utmost pains
to taste fire, see
breath, feel the light;
to split the very
beam which made
them partisans.

R. Praise Father,
Son and Holy, Vestal
Breath of God!

2. The Son, too fine
for mind to see,
they thought to feel.

[17] Compare Cerbelaud 1995b and the introduction to Cerbelaud 1995a.

That Vestal Breath,
untouchable,
they thought to touch
by questioning.
The Father's ways,
unfathomed, they
interpreted.

3. The model for
our faith in God
is Abraham.
For penitence,
the Ninevites
and Rahab for
expectancy.
Both Old and New
belong to us -
and Satan glares!

4. Egyptians gave
that wicked vice,
the wicked Calf.
The Hittites gave
that evil god,
with the evil stare
and double face.
But Athens gave
that creeping worm:
philosophy.

5. Embittered, Satan
overturned
the good He saw
and propagated
hateful things
and axed and felled
the hope He saw.
Philosophy,
his apple, sets
our teeth on edge.

6. For when He saw
that Truth had choked

his weeds, and Him,
He shut Himself
away and made
a fiendish trap
to catch the Faith.
He shot at priests
with arrows tipped
with lust for power.

7. For precedence
upon that chair
they duelled then,
some hiding their
desire for it,
some wrestling for
it openly;
some shameless,
others cunning—all
the same at last.

8. The young man never
even thinks
to wait his turn.
The old man is
oblivious of
his imminent
decrepitude.
Old, young, yes,
even children, want
promotion—now!

9. The clerks of old
were once His cloaks;
now clerics are.
First, worm and weevil
gnawed the Jews
to rags, then left
them, moving on
to newer cloth
and newer races,
hungry still.

10. The ones who
crucified are scorned
outsiders now.
When Satan saw
this, He resolved
to make insiders
probe their Lord.
The Cloth itself
now breeds the Worm:
its poison spreads.

11. The Granary
is weevil-ridden:
Satan gloats.
The Winnowed Wheat
begins to rot;
the Worm devours
the shining robes.
Abused by Him,
we drunkards now
abuse ourselves.

12. He sowed his tares
and thorns attacked
the Weeded Vine.
Infection flew
from sheep to sheep;
all ewes, diseased,
now flock to Him.
The Jews were his;
but now He wants
the Gentiles, too.

13. The former gave
the Son a reed
and mocked their King.
The latter dared
to use the reed
to write that He
was human, too.
So Satan traded

reed for reed
to wage his war.

14. Instead of robes
of purple and
of other hues,
He used a dye
to stain his name
and dressed Him up
in other names,
like 'Creature', or
'The Made', although
He made the world.

15. To hurt Him then
He plaited thorns
which could not speak.
But now He twists
a crown of thoughts
and music, like
a teaching-song,
so thick, that all
his barbs can be
concealed within.

16. The methods which
had failed Him were
too obvious;
the spittle, too
unsubtle; thorns
and acid; nails
and wood; robe, reed
and piercing spear,
too loathsome; so
He's changed his ploys.

17. No brutal slap,
but brittle
speculation, now!
No spitting, now:
disputes instead!
No robes, but rifts
which no one sees!

No reeds, but feuds
with which He hopes
to thrash us all!

18. Pride summons Rage,
her sister. Envy
comes, and Scorn.
Anger and Lies
deliberate
against the King
who liberates,
as once they took
his liberty,
when He was down.

19. A subtle form
of torture is
controversy.
Enquiry pierces,
like the nails.
Denial is
a living death.
For Satan seeks
new ways in which
to crucify.

20. The sponge which dripped
with gall is out.
His darts are in:
invasive thoughts,
which drip with death.
Our Lord spat out
the bitter gall;
the Bitter One
makes wild-goose-chases
sweet to fools.

21. The Governor
opposed them then—
his placard stood.
Now Governors
implacably
oppose our stand

with their decrees.
The Crown is free
from censure. Priests
mislead the Kings.

22. Instead of prayers
for Royalty,
which Priesthood owes,
that wars might leave
mankind in peace,
they taught the Kings
inverted war:
a struggle with
their cities blessed
with circuit-walls.

23. O soothe, our Lord,
both Crooks and Crowns
and, in one Church,
let Bishops pray
for Kings they serve;
and Kings relieve
the Towns they love;
and inner peace,
in You, surround
us like a Wall!

[20] In these skilfully composed stanzas we see Ephraim, the orator, manipulating the minds of his hearers through the varied use of the pronouns 'us' and 'them'. In the first stanza he creates a complicity between himself, the 'spectator', and those to whom he is relating what he has 'seen' (presumably the congregation in the church). Over against this 'us' stand the 'philosophers', like gladiators in the arena, at a distance. But when he says 'they were forced to make schisms' ('of the beam', or 'by the beam': my free translation renders the ambiguity: 'to split the very beam which made them partisans'), his hearers are likely to have thought of the circus factions, especially since the context (which at first suggests the refraction of a beam of light) makes one think of the colours of the rainbow and the factions were the Blues and the Greens (in living memory there had been Golds and Reds as well). The whole amphitheatre was divided in its allegiance to one or other of the

teams of gladiators. So, in a sense, the 'us' includes the men in the ring and the 'them' includes the people on the spectators' benches. This ambivalence continues throughout the poem.

[21] There follows the response, an acclamation of the Holy Trinity by the congregation; then stanza 2, in which the philosophers, now distinctly 'they', are depicted as trying to probe the mystery of the Trinity, instead of being content, like the congregation, to praise It. In stanza 3 the opposition is between the virtues with which 'we' (unspecified) are associated—faith, repentance and hope—and the envy of 'the Evil One', excited by the fact that 'we' possess the Jewish Scriptures, as well as to the writings of the apostles. 'We' evidently identify with the righteous figures in the Old Testament. In stanza 4 there is no explicit 'we', but 'they' are various foreign peoples—Egyptians, Hittites, Greeks—who have infected the Chosen People (the implicit 'us') with their blasphemous habits, ever since the Golden Calf. The latest of these bad habits is philosophy, which has infected the Church.

[22] 'They' were always the instruments of Satan (stanza 5), who is envious of everything that is good (implicitly, of 'us'). He attacks the faith ('us') by shooting arrows at the priests ('them', although they belong to 'us') and thus infecting them with the love of power (stanza 6). It is common for those members of a community who share in power to be regarded as 'them' by the majority who lack power. Stanza 7 recalls the amphitheatre from stanza 1, only now it is the priests, not the philosophers, who are competing, and the object of their competition is 'that chair' (the episcopal throne). The suggestion is that these priests are the philosophers of stanza 1 and that ambition, not the love of the truth, is their true motivation.

[23] There follows a satirical passage (stanza 8) on the many forms of ambition in young and old. All these, since the congregation is invited to laugh at them, are to be regarded as 'them', not 'us'. But in stanza 9 the 'new peoples' (Gentiles) take the place of the young, as against 'the old', who are the Jews. The majority among Ephraim's congregation would appear to have identified with the Gentiles. In stanza 10, the Jews are called 'foreigners', reversing the opposition of stanza 4, where the Gentiles were the foreigners and the Jews were the Chosen People, admittedly perpetuated as such in the Church, which is supposed to have inherited this status. 'God's own people' are now the Christians, but Satan now makes

of them 'probers' of the Mystery of their faith. Ephraim is obliging his congregation to take a share of the blame for the arrogant rationalism which has swept through the Church. In stanza 11 he depicts the whole community of the baptised as infected; the stanza ends with three rhyming lines with the *-an* ending which indicates 'us': 'He has abused us; indeed, we have abused ourselves, because drink had intoxicated us.'

[24] The winnowed wheat and the robes of glory of stanza 11 are followed by the weeded vineyard and the gathered sheep of stanza 12, all images of the saved. But the rot has established itself inside these protected areas. Thorns are growing among the vines; vast numbers of ewes (lay-people) are now infected and have gone over to the enemy. The 'we' of the Christian community has now been split again, into the 'them' of the traitors and the 'us' of the faithful remnant. 'We', the faithful remnant, are again present in the name 'our Saviour', given to Christ in stanzas 13 and 14. The way that 'they', the modern theologians, talk about Jesus is to be compared with the way that other 'they', the Jews, treated Him when He was on earth. By this polarisation, the theologians are equated with the Jews as tools of Satan, the enemy of all that is good, and 'we' are identified with Christ, his intended victim.

[25] In another context (*TSF* 12:2) it suits Ephraim to count himself as one among a number of teachers: 'all we who form our fellow-men'—so some of them must have been among his hearers. In stanza 15 of the present teaching-song he paints a picture of 'their' poetic activity as the creation of Satan himself, who plaits a 'Crown of Thorny Thoughts' with the help of rhetoric and beguiling music, 'like teaching-songs'. He is describing poet-teachers like himself, but he does not identify with them. He is like an academic who curries favour with an audience drawn from the general public by saying 'Beware of academics!'. It is a risky strategy, but it can work. The public believes that the speaker, being a professional, knows the techniques of professionals well enough to see through them.

[26] In stanza 16, doubt, inquiry and disagreements, which are characteristic of the intellectual community, are depicted as subtle modern instruments with which to torture Christ. In stanza 18 argument, questions and denial are added to the list, suggesting that to question Christ's status is to deny Christ. In the intervening stanza 17, Arrogance and 'her sister', Aggressiveness,

are personified, along with other negative emotions, Envy, Haughtiness and Deviousness, and take part in a conspiracy against 'our' Saviour, which is compared with the ambush of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. (There is a pun on *melko shqalw*, 'they deliberated', and *shqalw malko*, 'they arrested the King', which Beck's German translation does not notice.) The way that this is placed between two stanzas which demonize the tools of the intellectual trade means that these negative emotions are also projected onto the philosophers. Stanza 20 adds that 'fools' (the word is derived from the same root as the verb 'to understand') find scientific inquiry full of sweetness, whereas in fact it is a dead end of falsehood and as bitter as the gall which Jesus refused to drink on the Cross. Ephraim pretends not to be an intellectual himself and writes like a rabble-rouser, encouraging popular prejudice against academics.

[27] In stanza 21, 'we', whom the Roman State opposes in Ephraim's time, are placed on a par with 'them', the Jewish priests whose request, that the title on Jesus' Cross be altered, Pilate refused. But the mind does not accept this parallel as an identification. Instead, it associates the Christian priests mentioned at the end of the stanza with the Jews. The obstinacy of the civil authority is misdirected, the poet is saying; the Emperor should be like Pilate and oppose 'them', the priests, not 'us'. In stanza 22, the priests are depicted as acting in a way which is damaging to humanity itself in turning the Emperor's armed force against his 'walled cities'. This description fits Edessa, where Ephraim was writing, and invites the audience to identify their city with the faithful remnant of the Church which is still opposed to the Emperor's Arianism. The effect of this, especially when Edessa is multiplied into a number of 'walled cities', is to make those who attack that remnant look like enemies of the Church and of the Roman Empire itself, even if one of them is the Emperor. The solidarity which a country feels in the face of a threat to its security becomes the 'we', the Emperor and the Bishops—but especially the Bishops—the 'they'.

[28] The last stanza evokes the healing of the wound which has opposed 'them' to 'us' in the Church and Empire. The poet calls upon 'our Lord' in the name of all, including the Bishops, the Emperors and the Walled Cities, and asks that, in one Church, the Bishops should support each other and the Emperors (turning the

third person plural into a part of 'us'), and that internal concord should become, in Christ, an external wall of defence for 'us'.

[29] It is a regular feature of Ephraim's rhetoric that he moves the boundaries in this way. It is very effective and must have been acquired by taking many pains. One would think that the art had been passed on to Ephraim by others who had already mastered it. I am suggesting that there was a school of rhetoric in Nisibis, where also such techniques as satire, innuendo, and allegory were taught. The style is highly mannered and crafted. I have taken trouble in my translation to try to replicate the effect of the ever-present assonance and wordplay which is part of this traditional art.

[30] If one looks closely at the structure of the poem, one finds that the first stanza is strongly linked to the last and that themes are enunciated or hinted at in the first stanza which recur throughout the poem, now one of them, now another coming to the surface. One begins to see that Ephraim's description of his opponents' poetic art can also be applied to Ephraim's own art (including the 'hidden thorns', which are his uncharitable innuendoes about his fellow-intellectuals, his fellow-clergy and his fellow-poets). This compositional technique must also be a traditional art, for Ephraim's opponents are unlikely to have learned it from him.

[31] In this poem, Ephraim attacks philosophy. Elsewhere he undermines science, saying that it is impossible to know everything about the natural world and so better just to praise the superior knowledge and power of God. He confuses the excitement of scientific discovery with the excitement of sexual discovery and condemns the first in terms designed by a repressive society for the condemnation of the second. Both kinds of excitement are, for him, dangerously undisciplined. He tries to divert the disapproval which his audience would have felt for a lack of discipline in sexual relations against the *risquŭ* theology of the moderns, by suggesting that both have the same psychological roots.

[32] Yet Ephraim was also caught up into the youthful 'spirit of the age' which the stern patriarch in him condemned. It is no wonder that he felt himself to be 'divided' (*TSF* 20:17—the passage quoted in the title of this paper). If he had been undivided in his patriarchal disapproval, his work would have been boring in the extreme. As it is, it is relieved and even made attractive by his daring and his love of new discoveries, things which he must have learned from the lively students at the School of Nisibis, of whom

he professed to disapprove. It is because he is neither one thing nor the other that he sometimes short-circuits himself, claiming, for example, that the only reason why he has tried (again and again!) to paint pictures of God by comparisons with nature (which he now says cannot be done!) is 'to disorient arrogance' (*TSF* 41). He wants to have his cake and eat it. Subconsciously, perhaps, he saw himself as that Janus-faced idol placed by Manasseh in the middle of the Temple.[18] His station in the middle of the nave gave him a platform of intermediate status in the hierarchy of society. Standing amongst the people, while the rest of the clergy congregated in the Sanctuary in readiness for the Liturgy of the Faithful, he might seem to be a tribune of the people; but in fact he was a member of the clergy and consciously functioned as the official spokesman of the Church. There is an unresolved political ambiguity in his role, which infected all his attitudes. He seems to be a great manipulator of symbols; in fact, he was probably manipulated by them, subject to the conflicting influences of the two poles between which, as deacon on the *bema*, he took his stand.[19] The irony is that his work was and still is used to try to stifle, in the Syriac Churches, the very liveliness which makes him so stimulating and the very independence of mind which so often made him go against the stream of his time. His influence throughout the Middle Ages was very great, but by the processes of selection and edited dissemination, his ambiguity was removed. What remained was an unattractive Ephraim, a killjoy, whose perverted passion incited to kill Jews, an opponent of rationalism and of science, in short, an enemy of youth, tolerance, reason, truthfulness and progress. Fortunately, thanks to the bibliophilia of a certain abbot Moses, to the conservatory powers of the Egyptian climate and to the labours of modern editors, we can recover

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[18] *VHF* 3:357f; *TSF* 87:4; *2 Chronicles* 33:7 (Peshitta), where *d-arba' appin* should be understood as 'four-cheeked' and thus 'two-faced', like Izzummi, a Hittite god (see H. Otten, art. 'Izzummi', in D. O. Edzard, ed., *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 5 (Berlin, 1976–80), 228), of whom Ephraim must have known. (My thanks, for this intelligence, to Professor David Hawkins, who denied any knowledge of 'four-faced', as opposed to 'two-faced', gods among the Hittites.)

[19] On the *bema*, see Tchalenko/Baccache 1979–1990; Renhart 1995; Palmer 1997a. Emma Loosley is preparing a doctoral dissertation on the subject at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

another Ephraim, life and laughter-loving, compassionate, philosophically minded, remarkably honest, delighting in invention. The real Ephraim was a mixture of the two, something which baffles comprehension, if we assume that, as a person, he must have had a fixed and consistent character. But it becomes quite easy to understand, when we see him as subject to conflicting forces by virtue of the pivotal position which he occupied in society, as symbolically ordered in the church.

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