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**THE SYMBOL AND THE MYSTERY IN THE POETIC THEOLOGY  
OF SAINT EPHREM THE SYRIAN**  
PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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## Keywords:

Symbol, mystery, poetic theology (*theopoetics*), language, name, metaphor; contemplation, nourishment, mystagogy, typology, sacramental/liturgical vision; nature, Scripture, Incarnation, *oeconomy*; birth, conception, womb, clothing, garment; (ontological and epistemological) abyps,

Revelation, apophatism; *homo symbolicus*, (universal, anthropological, cosmological, Christological, Christian and religious) symbolism; human body and corporeality; polarity, antithesis, paradox, parallelism, chiasm; complementarity, structures, configurations and correspondences (symbolic and rhetorical); logical/analogical thought; the scrutinizing, inquisitive, analytical gaze / symbolic-contemplative gaze; catechesis, initiation, interpretation, audience, receptivity / sensitivity / sensory; sight / feeling; femininity, ascetic purification, inner resonance, transmission / communication; transforming / transfiguring power (of the mysteries).

## Structure of the work

Our thesis is organized in four chapters.

**Chapter 1: "The discovery of Saint Ephrem and his symbolic-poetic theology"** begins by pointing out the unusual case of the author, for whom there are two literary works, two biographies and two distinct spiritual profiles. This confusing reality calls for a sharper positioning in the sense of a "parting of the waters". The cumulative process, adopted by most orthodox commentators to date, is counterproductive because it fails to bring to light the grandiose work of genuine poetic and theological work. A comparison of the titles and content of the two works attributed to Saint Ephrem, the Syriac and the Byzantine, abundantly shows their incompatibility.

The poetic work with Syriac original, which we are dealing with in this thesis, includes a language and terminology for which initiation is needed. For orientation in the subject, I summarize the most important approaches to Ephremian symbolic theology carried out by Syriac scholars such as Sebastian Brock, Robert Murray, Tanios Bou Mansour, and Kees den Biesen, to which I add the works of Kim Jung and Mathai Kadavil, regarding mystagogy and the Ephremian sacramental vision of creation. Thus, a series of major themes are outlined: the fundamental images and concepts, the symbolic method, the theological work (the attitude and orientation of the theologian in his research work); conceptual and analogical terminology; the characteristics of symbolic thought (polarity and polysemy, symbolic categories and configurations, complexity and their associative logic); typological symbolism and Ephremian mystagogy; sacred time and space, the sacramental worldview; Nature and Scripture as witnesses

of God in the world; polar structures and rhetorical devices; the significance of the dramatic and musical interpretation of poems.

The explanation of the choice of the theme of symbol and mystery in the theology of Saint Ephrem starts from the observation of an *asymmetry of acceptance* in the Orthodox tradition: the term "mystery" is a privileged one, while the symbol appears as marginalized or excluded. In the use of St. Ephrem, the two terms become the ends of a *revealed dynamism*, in which the symbol represents the visible part, and the mystery, the invisible one. For him, the invisible and mysterious divine truths are revealed in veils or visible garments.

The Syriac term *rāzā* used by St. Ephrem includes both terms of the fundamental *symbol-mystery* polarity. In his case, there is a shift in meaning from that of the hidden mystery of the Syriac Scriptures to that of a visible symbol. The change is due to the Incarnation's effect on the ontological and temporal distance between symbol/foreshadowing and truth/fulfilment. First in Christ and then in the Holy Sacraments of the Church, symbol and mystery are unmistakably united, like humanity and divinity, the visible and the hidden, the revealed and the secret in the Incarnation.

In the work of St. Ephrem, *symbolic* and *logical-rational thinking* are in a relationship of distinction and complementarity, determined by the context of use. The author's opposition to the analytical approach is aimed at rationalism, the undue and excessive application of logical inquiry in the privileged space of the mysteries. The indispensable condition in approaching the divine mystery is epistemological humility, the attitude full of faith and wonder that accompany the symbolic-contemplative gaze. In this sense, natural reasons and those highlighted by modern science are not an obstacle, but an opportunity to make the mystagogy of an ever broader and more complex rationality. Their articulation in an integral vision, in which natural reason and the spiritual-symbolic meaning of things coexist, makes possible the transition between them. Saint Ephrem proves to be an indisputable and timeless master in guiding the realization of such a desired, which seems so far removed from the quests of the contemporary world, although its premises are within our reach more than ever.

Man is a "hungry being" (of mysteries and deep meanings). The united universe of the mysteries of Nature, of Scripture and of the Liturgy, which the Christian faith opens up to us, makes up a Eucharist of cosmic proportions that we can ignore only at the risk of losing something essential. Saint Ephrem teaches us that the mysteries make up our essential

nourishment on the journey towards the Kingdom of God. In this sense he is a mystagogue. But he is also a poet of a special nature, a *theopoet*, for whom the artistic and literary form becomes the "garment" in which he dresses his theological thought. As a *mystagogue* and *theopoet*, he transposes into his work the paths followed by God in Revelation. Thus, *the visible and temporary garment of the mystery is the symbol*<sup>1</sup>.

St. Ephrem's poetic theology is a doxological and poetic form of celebration of Revelation, which takes on the appearance of a major metaphor that I have called a „theology of the garment”. Characteristic to the highest degree for the theopoetics of St. Ephrem, we appropriate it as a *method* of approaching his work. We first encounter two major categories of „garments”: some, in which God puts on his mysteries to reveal them to man, others, in which St. Ephrem clothes his theological thought.

And the "garments" of Revelation are three in number: the symbolic one of nature, the linguistic one of Scripture and the human body of the Lord. All of them guide us to the Mystery of Christ, the God-Man. Similarly, in his poetic and theological work, St. Ephrem uses three „garments” and three languages (of the symbols of nature, the words of Scripture, and the receptive-expressive humanity of the members of ascetic groups) to effectively and convincingly convey the mysteries of salvation to the members of the faith community.

Here we have the essential elements of an *ars poetica, theologica et symbolica* through which I believe that the spiritual heritage of Saint Ephrem can be fully characterized. It also becomes the outline of our thesis. *Poetica* investigates the poetic-interpretative garment, the artistic and mystagogical dimension of human expressiveness in the Ephremian *madrāšē*. *Theologica* analyzes the „garment of words”, that is, theological language, the question of its limits and powers to articulate an adequate response to the revelation of God. And *Symbolica* develops the correspondence between Ephremian symbolism and the „garment of symbols” in which God clothes his mysteries in Revelation. We'll take them one at a time.

**Chapter 2 Poetics:** "The poetic and interpretative garment of the *madrāšē*; Ephremian conceptual and analogical terminology" is dedicated to the poetic, rhetorical and expressive "garment" in which Saint Ephrem "dresses" his mysteries in order to transmit them to the target audience. I first make a presentation of the poetic genre of *madrāšē* in terms of literary form,

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<sup>1</sup> Or, in other words, if "the symbol is the flesh of biblical language" then the mystery hidden in it is its spirit (cf. Maurice COCAGNAC, *Simbolurile biblice. Lexic teologic*, trans. from French by Michaela Slăvescu, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1997).

elements of prosody, rhetoric and style, but also of the relationship between content and form. The pertinent analyses of a multitude of researchers such as Sebastian Brock, Andrew Palmer, Philip Botha, Kees den Biesen, Alfonso Rodrigues Pereira, Paul Stevenson, Jeffrey Wickes or Andrew Hayes, carried out on entire poems or groups of Ephremian poems, highlight the complexity and sophistication of these compositions. Saint Ephrem proves to be a refined jeweler and an architect of words, his craft being able to be traced at the level of verse, stanza, group of stanzas, poem, group of poems or even a collection. The cited authors discuss different aspects of *madrāšē*: the complexity and rigor of prosodic structures, the consistent use of polarities, antitheses and paradoxes, the progress of circular argumentation, the majestic symmetries of poems, the "logic" of symbols, the meaning of graphic silences, the intentional omissions in acrostic series and other semiotic devices. The texts of the poems together with the schemes of these analyses are reproduced in the appendices at the end of the thesis.

The second major dimension of Ephrem's poems is their destination. *Madrāšē* were not designed so much for solitary reading, which they do not exclude, but for public and musical performance before the liturgical synaxis or the theological circles of Nisibis and Edessa. Those who performed these poetic-liturgical and mystagogic representations were, not by chance, the members of the ascetic choirs of the Syriac Church. This interpretative reality gives a new and original dimension to the catechetical and mystagogical work of Saint Ephrem.

Imitating the work of the Creator, he „clothes” his mysteries in images, symbols and words, whose evocative power is enhanced by the stylistics contrasts. The „sounding box” of all these elements together is the receptive, resonant and expressive "instrument" of the ascetic's pure feeling. Purified through prayer and asceticism, the human body becomes the finest organ of the Spirit, according to the personal experience of St. Ephrem. Corresponding to this is the metaphor of the harp - or, more correctly, the lyre - an image very relevant to the Ephremian vision of Revelation. We first encounter it in the form of the three lyres - of Nature, of Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament- on which God sings the harmonious melody of Truth. But St. Ephrem also applies it to himself:

„Sing, Lord, on my lyre, every helpful thing;  
With strong words, let us sing for perfection,  
With pure [words], for the virgins,

And with simple [words], let us sing for the simple" (*Fid.21.1*).<sup>2</sup>

The sacramentally renewed, ascetically purified and gracefully transfigured humanity of Saint Ephrem, perceives itself as a „musical organ” expressing the mysteries, which sings to the divine touch. The song produced by the lyre of Nature and that of Scripture, the instruments and mediums of transmission of Revelation, reverberates and amplifies in the lyre of the graceful humanity of the theologian-poet. Along with the metaphor of the garment, that of the lyre allows us to glimpse a second mystagogical scheme; it allows us to follow the journey of the mysteries planted by God in creatures (in the form of reasons and their symbolic potential), transmitted in the Scriptures (in the prophetic words and foreshadowings of the Old Testament), fulfilled in the deified humanity of Christ and given to the Church as an inheritance and pledge to eternal life. The three major sections of our work - *Poetica*, *Theologica* and *Symbolica* - relate precisely to the domains of the three "harps": Nature, Scripture and graceful humanity.

Under the three aspects of receptive sensitivity, inner resonance and symbolic-poetic expressiveness, the metaphor of the lyre corresponds to the path of the mystery at the anthropological level. And the ritual and artistic framework of the performance of *madrāšē* acquires a special significance and transformative powers. The poetic *catharsis* and the *symbolic-mystagogical* illumination aim at transmitting the mysteries of salvation and enlivening the members of the community in the work of the Gospel. The baptismal and eucharistic memory stored in the text of *madrāšē* accompanies them in their daily lives, urging them to fulfill the promises contained in their initiation.

The last part contains an overview of Ephremian analogical and conceptual terminology. An initiation into the author's "technical" language is necessary, without which many meanings could escape us. Saint Ephrem chose the path of analogical language to express his theological thought. But it also uses a conceptual language of Syriac origin, semantically close to that of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. The terminology is circumscribed to the theological issues of the time, concerning the divinity of Christ, His equality with the Father, the reality of the divine names and their significance.

The dynamic conception of Revelation constitutes the premise of a specific Ephremian in theological terminology. It is evident in the frequent use of polar pairs, such as: Creator-creature,

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<sup>2</sup> ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *The Hymns on Faith*, translated by Jeffrey T. Wickes, Saint Louis University, *The Fathers of the Church*, A New Translation, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 2015, p. 157.

seen-unseen, revealed-hidden, word-silence. Arranged and used in this way, they become capable of simultaneously expressing both the ontological distance between the created and the uncreated, and their intersection in the act of Revelation.

**Chapter 3** *Theologica „The garment of words“ of the mystery – between the language of Scripture and that of theology* is dedicated to St. Ephrem's conception of the theological word as a human response to Revelation. To this end, I develop his profile as a theologian by following the main Ephremian themes on the subject and his correspondences with the Cappadocian Fathers, with Saints Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor.

We understand the concern for Orthodoxy of these Fathers in terms of a correct reception and transmission of Christian truth, which is of a revealed and mysterious nature. For this, several conditions must be fulfilled at the same time: openness through faith, a humble intellectual attitude and commitment to a pure life, lived according to the principles of the Gospel. The intellectual arrogance and cheeky snooping of those above comprehension must be condemned from the beginning. In Saint Ephrem and his Cappadocian contemporaries, we encounter a "proto-apophatism", which imperiously demands the silent veneration of the divine mysteries of those that have remained hidden. But the revealed mysteries must also be approached with reverence and gratitude, with discernment and using appropriate language. The fundamental premise of the responsible theologian is the living awareness of the ontological abyss that separates him from the Creator, according to St. Ephrem.

The „over-luminous darkness“ of St. Gregory of Nyssa corresponds to the Ephremian ontological chasm. Despite the apparent contrast, the two images are the expression of the insurmountable distance between man and God. The ontological abyss also shapes the attitude in knowledge: we can only know about God what He Himself has revealed to us about Himself, and only to the extent that we humbly dispose ourselves in a relationship of receptivity and adequacy to the divine mystery.

Secondly, regarding the method used in theology, St. Ephrem differs considerably from the Cappadocian Fathers. Beyond the indisputable methodical and formal differences, we discover the common ground of their teaching on *preserving the mysterious character of Revelation in the very act of revelation*. The *conceptual-dogmatic* method of St. Basil, respectively the *symbolic-poetic* method of St. Ephrem, are in a relationship of complementarity, which leads us to reconsider the importance of the symbolic method in theology. If we want to

appreciate St. Ephrem for what he really is, i.e. the exponential representative of a symbolic theological tradition, then we must bow with all seriousness and openness to his unique poetic and symbolic way of doing theology. This is exactly what we propose in the present thesis, which deals in turn with Ephremian poetics, symbolism and theology.

The proto-apophatism of Saints Basil and Ephrem is evident in their relationship to another fundamental polarity present in Revelation but also in theology, that between word and silence. The enigmatic Basilian phrase "dogmas are silent" reveals an important connotation of the term: dogma does not mean the emphatic proclamation of a binding definition but refers to the living and hidden mystery located beyond the "garment of words". It means, of course, the delimitation of the truth of the Church from heretical teachings, as the first and urgent goal. But the often paradoxical and apophatic formulation of dogma is in itself an indication of its true purpose, that of drawing us into the mystery. In this sense, we can speak of a *symbolic function of dogma* and of a *symbol-mystery relationship* between the formulation in words and the transcendent truth to which it points.

The correspondences of St. Ephrem with St. Gregory the Theologian, the similarities and differences between them are innumerable and open to research for a long time to come. A first systematic comparison of the two, about countering the Arian method in theology, was made by Paul Russell. Themes of the utmost importance and particularly topical appear in the foreground, such as that concerning the nature of theological language, the attitude of the theologian before the divine mystery and the value of the work of theological research<sup>3</sup>.

As we have seen, the language of Scripture is for St. Ephrem the "garment of words" in which God "clothes" Himself in Revelation. That is why he does not easily admit in theology terms derived from profane language or other languages, such as the philosophical one. Unlike him, St. Gregory appreciates philosophical language, superior to profane language, even if it is not illuminated by grace. For both, the theological language must be based on that of Scripture, and the understanding of difficult places must be achieved through reference to its body as a whole.

Of great significance in the broader context of our argument is *the symbolic character of the language of Scripture*. The two condemn literalism and show that the text of Scripture has depths of meaning, impossible to exhaust by a single interpreter. Between the concrete and the

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<sup>3</sup> The analyses of Thomas Koonammakkall, Tanios Bou Mansour and Kees den Biesen, to which I refer in this section, prove to be very useful for this purpose.

figurative or spiritual meaning there is a relationship similar to that between the humanity and the divinity of Christ: they are not to be separated but must be distinguished. The key to interpreting Scripture is Christological and often involves the application of the method of double attribution.

The power and limits of human language, respectively the plurality of languages and kingdoms, is another interesting theological theme. For St. Ephrem, each earthly or heavenly kingdom has its own language, which gives meaning to things within its own world. Therefore, the languages of other realms must be treated with all care: either we honor them in silence, because they refer to the realities of other worlds, for which we have no representation, or we express them in human language but in a symbolic-analogical form. In this case it becomes evident that the realities of the Kingdom of God and the angelic worlds can only be expressed in an analogous and symbolic way.

In the following, the assessments of the two Fathers regarding the possibility and the purpose of theological activity hold our attention. Man has been endowed by God from creation with the "gift of the speech", he has been given the privilege of ruling over all living things and naming them. But the ontological distance from Creator, on the one hand, and the fall and confusion installed in human being and knowledge, on the other, invite caution and sacred fear in relation to the discourse of the divine mysteries. It is only the Incarnation of the Word and His speaking as Man about the mysteries of the Kingdom of God that establishes, beyond the inherent limits and possibilities of human language, the possibility that it becomes the bearer of divine mysteries. In the context of our discussion of the capacity of human language and the possibility of theology, this is one of the most important consequences of the Incarnation. By becoming flesh, Christ deified the whole of human existence, both the body and the human thought, feeling and capacity for expression. The possibility of the theological speech derives from this reality transferred by Christ to the Church as the charism of speaking about God.

The second part of chapter 3 *Theologica* deals with the correspondences of St. Ephrem with Saints Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. In connection with our theme of symbol and mystery, the most interesting aspect of approaching the Areopagite author is *the complementarity between apophatism, symbolism and the theology of divine names*<sup>4</sup>. St. Ephrem distinguishes between proper divine names and those borrowed from the human condition. The

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<sup>4</sup> In comparison with the Areopagitic author, we refer to the erudite research of Father Alexander Golitzin on the theology of divine names and the hidden-revealed pair.

former are „boundaries” of Revelation that cannot be crossed, while the borrowed names have an analogical and figurative character. Although not confused with designated reality, names are necessary in the knowledge of God, according to St. Ephrem: they cannot be renounced even on the highest stages of apophatism, as St. Dionysius suggests in *The Mystical Theology*. Human language retains an iconic, pictorial function in describing the Divine and must be content with that. The mystical valences of words, names and letters, specific to a Semitic and Aramaic culture, make Saint Ephrem speak to us about the power of the Name of the Lord that makes His presence felt in the most real way. Ephremian and Dionysian theology must ultimately be seen as sacred arts, as icon suites, and as sacraments.

The theme of the theological correspondences between St. Ephrem and St. Maximus the Confessor, which I dealt with in a previous study, I summarize and deepen here. The most important aspects of the parallel between the two are: the threefold incarnation/revelation of God, the equality in dignity of natural and scriptural revelation; the similar view of the stages of salvation history and the correspondence between the Maximian *logoi* and the Ephremian *rāzē*. Finally, I develop the scheme of the Ephremian theological vision<sup>5</sup>. The vertical path (of *anagogy*) looks to the "canvas" of creation to discern beyond its texture the face of the divine Artist. The horizontal path (of *typology*) follows the temporal axis, of the realities of sacred history, the progressive unfolding of the divine plan for the salvation of the world, fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

**Chapter 4 *Symbolica***, entitled "*The Symbolic Garment of Revelation and of Ephremian Poetic Theology*," is entirely devoted to Ephremian symbolism proper.

To understand Saint Ephrem, we must think symbolically. Symbolic thinking represents a „consubstantial dimension of the human mind”, which "precedes language and discursive thought"<sup>6</sup>. It is rooted in primary, archetypal human experiences, prior to the emergence of self-awareness and articulate language. In the first instance it has to do with the unconscious perception, colored affectively and exposed to the direct experience of reality. It is characterized by the spontaneous tendency towards association, meaning and ordering of sensory-affective and cognitive experiences. Symbolic thought plays a decisive role not only in all the world's

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<sup>5</sup> The Ephemian theological vision to which I refer here is related in the interpretations of R. Murray and Th. Koonammakkal

<sup>6</sup> Mircea ELIADE, *Images and Symbols. Essay on Magical-Religious Symbolism*, translated by Alexandra Beldescu, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 15.

religions, but also in the beginnings and structuring of any human culture and civilization. Wherever man exists, symbolic thinking accompanies him and constitutes itself a language, distinct from the verbal one, although often associated with it. The symbolic dimension represents a significant part in the configuration of our cognitive function. That is why modern philosophers and psychologists speak of *homo symbolicus* as the best definition of man.

In the terms of St. Ephrem, God uses symbolic language as another "garment" of his mysteries, precisely because it is perfectly adapted to the human powers of understanding. The lyre of nature is a silent one, but it speaks to the human spirit orients by faith on the surrounding world through the language of symbols.

In the first part of this chapter, I identify the categories of symbols used especially by St. Ephrem and to what extent it is relevant to his theological thought. For this purpose, I refer to the various classifications made by Syriac scholars. Dividing them according to the criterion of provenance, Edmund Beck distinguishes between biblical, natural, and sacramental Ephremian symbols<sup>7</sup>. Significantly, Robert Murray adds to Beck's classification the „garment of names”, which represents another dimension of Ephremian symbolism. Sebastian Brock chooses the Jacob's ladder model: from God it appears as descending love that welcomes man on all stages of creation, and from man, as a response to faith that accesses through symbols the higher meanings of the mysteries. The table of Christ's symbolic titles made by R. Murray becomes significant in the context of highlighting the role that the "garment of names" holds in Syriac theology and in that of St. Ephrem in particular<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, a wide range of Ephremian symbols includes an anthropological-Christological dimension<sup>9</sup>. The basic human needs for shelter, clothing and food are seen both in their concrete aspects and in their symbolic and spiritual aspects. In the Incarnation of the Lord, they are sanctified and turned from the violence and abuses of human

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<sup>7</sup> Useful in terms of simplicity, the classification has the disadvantage of the impossibility of distinguishing between biblical and natural symbolism. Biblical symbolism is made up, to a large extent, of elements of the natural world. In this case, the "natural" one could refer to an extra-biblical symbolism, which makes sense, but requires further clarification. I have dealt with this subject in part in my study T. D. PARASCHIV, „Mărgăritarul de mare preț», *Euharistia cosmologică a poetului sau botezul unui simbolism uitat în Imnalele Sfântului Efrem Sirul*, *Glasul Bisericii*, LXXXI, n. 1-3, January – March, 2022, pp. 131-133.

<sup>8</sup> In the analysis of typological configurations I rely to a large extent on Robert MURRAY'S RESEARCH in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Christian Tradition*, published by T&T Clark, London, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Costion NICOLESCU, *Hristos, Adăpostul, Veșmântul, Hrana, Doctorul și Leacul omului și al omenirii pe calea măntuirii* (doctoral thesis defended in 2006 at the Saint Serge Institute in Paris), Renașterea Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2011.

nature corrupted by sin to their dignified and noble status, becoming the means of communion with God and with fellow men in need.

The metaphor of the "exchange of garments" between God and man, through which Saint Ephrem describes God's self-discovery and His assumption of the human condition in all its dimensions, helps us decisively in this case as well: God "borrows" from the human condition an anthropological-cosmological symbolism, and man receives from God a messianic-eschatological one. In the divine-human Person of Christ all these dimensions are perfectly united impressively vast, Ephremian symbolism includes virtually all categories of religious symbolism. If it comes to a specific aspect of his treatment, the most important aspect is the Christological orientation. An original and prolific author, St. Ephrem is difficult to fit into the hermeneutic school, asking us to see in him the representative of a Syro-Aramaic cultural milieu.

For orientation amid the myriad of Ephremian images and symbols, the most useful is R. Murray's scheme, which we use as a coordinate system and compass. Symbolism, mystagogy and theopoetics constitute the most important object of study in this last chapter. For this I refer to two representative Ephremian images, through which he describes the drama of our salvation in Christ, projected vertically and horizontally: *"From the bosom of the Father to the depths of hell"* and *"from Paradise to Paradise"*. The two axes meet in Christ, the center of reference and the supreme goal of these symbolic unfoldings.

In St. Ephrem's vision, the two axes are first traversed by Christ: vertically – through the Son who descends from the bosom of the Father into the Virgin's, then into that of Jordan and into that of Sheol, to return back to the Father; and horizontally, revealing Himself as the original Word of God, who accompanies and guides humanity from the first Paradise to the eschatological one, assuming the condition of our fellow man, but also that of Way, Truth and Life.

The multiple analyses and classifications allow us to approach the idea of a characterization of the Ephremian symbolism. We encounter a *cosmological* symbolism, an *elemental* one and an *archetypal* one, but also a series of *synthetic-cosmological* and *Christological* symbols (such as the pearl, the olive tree and the oil). Despite what some prominent contemporary Orthodox and Western theologians claim about the irrelevance of natural symbolism in Christianity, St. Ephrem makes the most of the meaningful potential of natural properties and human uses of these symbols. Even when they have acquired strong pagan connotations, he takes them and passes

them through the baptismal bath, cleanses them of idolatrous dross and restores them to their rightful place as symbols of transcendence and divine work in the world. His positive attitude in capitalizing on the natural symbolic potential opens the perspective of a new relationship between Christian and universal (or pre-Christian) religious symbolism. This natural sacramentality of the world and its symbolic potential are directly linked to man's primordial vocation as priest and hermeneut of all creation. This natural symbolic potential becomes the argument that God himself chooses to speak to us through them.

The Ephremian synthetic-cosmological symbols become in turn images of creation and revelation, but also of Christ, the God-Man. The created universe has a symbolic structure unfolded on the ontological scale. *Typologic and sacramental symbolism* is also strongly represented in the poems of St. Ephrem; combined with the natural one, it gives a special beauty and charm to his writings. Typology invests people and events with the meaning of future fulfillment, transforms them into *temporal symbols* bearing mysteries. Such "horizontal" symbols are innumerable in the writings of St. Ephrem, and modern commentators define them in relation to the Ephrem understanding of time and history, shaped, as we have previously stated, by the consequences of the Incarnation.

Paradise is the "homeland of all symbols", a theme intensely exploited by Saint Ephrem. It appears as a threefold tiered mountain and corresponds to the composition of the Ark of the Flood, the "hierarchy" of Sinai (the arrangement of Moses, the priests and the people on the Mountain), the structure of the Temple, the division of the Church and the composition of the human being. The ternary structures open the line of typological and mystagogical correspondences between the different temporary prototypes of salvation and lead from stage to stage, from the original Paradise to the end.

At the same time, Ephrem's typology and sacramental symbolism take the form of a mystagogy and theopoetics of the Holy Mysteries unparalleled in patristic literature. In his reflections on the triptych of Christian initiation in the Syriac Church, the symbol and the mystery are found and twinned, working synergistically for the purification, illumination and sanctification of man. Mystagogy becomes the interpretation of the journey of the Mystery: from Nature and Scripture, through Christ to the Holy Mysteries of the Church; from here on, in the souls of Christians who live in anticipation in them the Mystery of the future Kingdom. Just as typology is a projection of the *oiconomy* of salvation on the axis of time, mystagogy reflects the

same in the spiritual materiality of liturgical-sacramental symbolism. It gathers in its representations the archetypal symbols of the original Paradise, the Old Testament prefigurations and their fulfillment in Christ. And the grace of the Church transforms material symbols into working mysteries in the being of every believer and of the community of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Saint Ephrem contemplated and interpreted the mysteries of salvation in the symbols of Nature, Scripture and the Church, and then shared them with the faithful in his wonderful poems. We ourselves partake of them today and, filled with the strong nourishment of his words, we humbly place ourselves in the same blessed yoke of Christ's service in the Church of our day.

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