

The Paradox of God's Hiddenness and Accessibility in St Ephrem

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This paradox is already rooted in Scripture. When Solomon dedicated the first temple, on seeing the cloud enter the Holy of Holies, he said 'YHWH has said he will dwell in thick darkness (1 Kgs 8:12). Second Isaiah says 'Truly you are a self-hiding God, O God of Israel, Saviour' (Is 45:15). Yet both testaments testify that God has made himself both known and accessible. He revealed his Name (the very condition of access to a person) to Moses (Ex 3:14), and the Deuteronomic theology affirmed that God had 'made his Name dwell in the temple' (1 Kgs 8:27–30), meaning that He would be accessible to all who came to pray there. After its destruction, Jeremiah promised to the exiles 'You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart' (Jer 29:12–13).

The early Church interpreted all the theophanies in the Old Testament, whether ascribed to YHWH or to angels, as anticipatory revelations of Christ. In the Incarnation, of course, theophany is total and concrete: 'the Word became flesh'. Jesus is God visible, tangible, audible and communicating mutually with his human creatures. But since he withdrew from the reach of our senses, faith and prayer again face God's hiddenness, which constantly tests us, sometimes to a point near to despair; and yet faithful prayer leads to a deepening conviction of God's reality and even nearness.

In all this, theology has tried to help. The dialectic of the apophatic and the cataphatic ways developed from Origen through Gregory of Nyssa to the Pseudo-Dionysius and beyond. Less well known in the west, but no less important in that chain, is St Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373). Some twenty-five years older than Gregory, he taught and preached not so very far from him, but in Syriac. He was the chief teacher, both of Bible and of doctrine, in the Christian schools first of Nisibis and then of Edessa. His exegetical and apologetic works are in prose, but he often preached in metrical couplets, while for popular teaching he preferred a catchier medium, songs in vivid poetry which he accompanied on the harp, with refrains for his hearers to join in.

In the fourth century the Christians in Syria and Mesopotamia were a prey to powerful attacks on authentic apostolic tradition: by

Marcion from the second century, Manichaeism from the third, and Arianism in the fourth, not to mention the home-grown semi-Christian gnosticism of Bardaisan. Ephrem combated all these, some in prose but more by his teaching songs (*madrashe* in Syriac). In his last ten years, spent in Edessa, he was preoccupied by Arianism, especially in its later and theologically more sophisticated form; this is the main target of his last collection of 87 songs, usually referred to as the 'Hymns on [the] Faith', and it was this challenge which led him to develop his dialectical theology of God, hidden and revealed.¹

Ephrem saw the neo-Arians as not merely perverting orthodox faith in the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, but as suffering from basic errors of thinking about spiritual realities. In modern terms we can say he charges them with rationalistic and univocal thinking about God and human nature, and a too literal, even fundamentalist way of arguing from Scripture. His accusations, however, are expressed especially by means of a rich vocabulary of *hubris*, presumption, inquisitiveness and trespassing beyond proper limits.

Ephrem does not reject the technical terms developed by Athanasius and adopted in the Nicene creed, but he regards even orthodox theologizing, if restricted to such terms, as sterile and even dangerous. He prefers by far the way of symbolic language used analogously, both (one suspects) because he is a poet, but also because he realizes that all human words applied to God are drawn from and limited by this-worldly experience. Limited, because between creatures and the Creator there is 'a great gulf', an infinite ontological chasm (*pehta*) which cannot be crossed (physically or mentally) from this side by the will or choice of any creature. Even the spiritual orders of angels are on the creaturely side of this chasm. Only one person has ever bridged it – indeed, *is* the bridge over it: Christ the incarnate Word. At the end of an acrostic on the name Jesus, which in Syriac, as in Hebrew, begins with *yod*, Ephrem sings:

Jesus, glorious name, secret bridge/leading across from death to life,
to you I have come and stopped,/at *yod* your letter I am held.
Be a bridge for my speech,/that it may cross to the truth.
Make your love a bridge for your servant;/by you let me cross to your
Father.
Let me cross and say 'Blessed be He/who made his might gentle in his Child!
(*Hymns on Faith* 6, 17)

¹ I first explored this theme in 'The Theory of Symbolism in St Ephrem's Theology', *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (Kaslik, Lebanon: 1975–6), 1–20. The best treatment of the theme is by S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992; ISBN [pbk] 0 87907 604 0), esp. chs. 1 and 2.

Ephrem attacks the Arians for imagining that finite human minds can leap the chasm and mentally grasp and control the nature of God and the interrelations in the Trinity. His answer is to accept the chasm and humbly acknowledge that God's nature is beyond our reach; yet he does not give up the possibility of speaking about God, the nature of Christ and the mystery of the Trinity. God has in fact bridged the chasm in a different way; not merely by the personal incarnation of the Son, but by making himself and his ways intelligible to human minds. Ephrem sees this as an 'incarnation in language' parallel to the personal incarnation. (This was to become a major theme for the Antiochene theologian St John Chrysostom in the next generation.)²

Syriac tradition calls this the way of 'Names'. The second-century Valentinian *Gospel of Philip* says 'The Truth brought forth names in the world for our sakes, since it is not possible to learn it without names'. 'Judas Thomas' in his third-century *Acts*, says in a prayer 'For our sake You were named with names'. Ephrem expands this idea of 'Names' as means of access to God in many of his teaching songs. Inconveniently for us, his use of the one word 'name' covers a wide range of senses, according to context. Besides the ordinary English personal sense, we need to translate the Syriac *shemā* variously by 'term', 'title', 'predicate', 'epithet' or perhaps even more words. The only distinction Ephrem makes is between 'proper names' (*shemāhē hattīhē*) and 'borrowed names' (*shemahe sh'īlē*). The former are intrinsically predicable of God, but include both metaphysical transcendentals and terms such as 'Creator', 'Almighty' or 'Holy One', while 'borrowed names' include metaphors, analogues, scriptural figures and symbols that Ephrem finds in created nature. He insists that 'father' and 'son' applied to God are not metaphors but 'proper names'.

The very inclusiveness of meaning in Ephrem's imprecise use of 'names' is what makes it easy for him to use the term, and many applications of it, both to God and to humankind and other this-worldly realities, in speaking of God's self-humbling and 'condescension', analogous to the Incarnation, in submitting to description by words and images developed by his finite human creatures. God has made this bridge across the infinite chasm, but it can be trodden only by the humble, never by the presumptuous such as the Arians. We must always affirm the absolute transcendence of God, but as we know God through Christ, so can we also know him through his incarnation in language.

Ephrem frequently uses a pair of complementary terms formed from the Syriac verbs *k'sā*, 'to veil or hide' and *g'lā*, 'to unveil or reveal'. The passive participles *kasyā*, 'hidden' and *galyā*, 'revealed'

² Taken up to good effect by Vatican II in *Dei Verbum*, 13.

or 'manifest', can also be used as nouns, *Kasya* for the Hidden God and *Galyā* for all that is visible. But the terms are more complex, for the *kasyā* God is *galyā* in Christ, while apparently clear and obvious things, on deeper inspection, reveal mysteries still *kasyatha*, 'hidden' to our understanding. These 'mysteries' lead us back to God; they are the traces and the signatures of the hidden Creator. 'Mystery' (Syriac *raz*, borrowed by earlier Aramaic from Persian) first denoted secret counsels of a king shared only with his confidants; already in Daniel it refers to God's secret plans and purposes. St Paul develops this, especially in *Romans*. *Musterion* was borrowed from Greek secret cults and baptized into Christian use for the sacraments, but a broader sense of *raz* and *musterion* continued as terms for typological interpretations of Scripture and for symbols or parables drawn by Christian imagination from almost anything in the created world.

Ephrem is tireless in inventing and using every kind of types and symbols, and this method is his weapon against the Arian claims to encapsulate God by rational analysis. I have suggested elsewhere that his method curiously foreshadows that of Paul Ricoeur,³ but Ephrem could never have reduced it to a philosophy of language, if only because philosophy and rhetoric were kept quite distinct in ancient education. I have proposed a scheme to contrast Ephrem's position over against the Arians:⁴

Wrong (Arians)	Right (Ephrem)
1. Mistaken confidence in reason as all-competent: leads to presumption .	1. Acknowledge inadequacy of reason and of all concepts: humility .
2. Literalism and rationalism: failure to distinguish levels of thought and find the mean between equivocal and univocal; subjects God to limited human concepts; tends to determinism .	2. Prefer use of symbols, because of their power to encourage heuristic experience, in which free will is in play. Prefer contemplation of God's Mystery.
3. Over-confidence in argument leads to quarrels and schisms .	3. Result: preservation of charity and union .

Some Texts

1. Creature with Creator/cannot be compared for their very names/are incommensurate, and even more than the names/are the essences different. Yet the Lord willed in his love/to give his names to his servants;

³ R. Murray, 'The Theory of Symbolism in St Ephrem's Theology', p. 3.

⁴ In R. Murray, 'St Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love', *Sobornost, incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 2, 2 (1980), 26–40; this contains a translation of a teaching song (*Hymns on the Church* 9) in the genre of a dramatic contest which Ephrem imagines he overheard in his head, between the apophatic way (Reason) and the cataphatic (Love), disputing which is the right way of speaking about God. Love wins, appropriately, as it is the way of poetry.

By [your] grace, priests and kings/have put on your titles,
Moses and Joshua/your very names.

The Lord, the Merciful One,/when he put on our names,
humbled himself by parables,/even to the mustard-seed.
He gave us his names/and accepted our names from us.
His names made us great/while our names made him small.
Happy is he who has spread/your good name over his own
And has made his names/beautiful through yours! (*H. on Faith 5, 6–7*).

2. Since He has other names,/gentle and suited to creatures,
which bend down so as to raise up/his servants by his own titles,
in these He came down and clothed/his own possessions with them.

The heavenly King/called his servants kings,
and since he is God,/he called them gods;
since he is Judge,/see, his servants are judges;
because they must journey/he called himself weary;
because of their riding/he got himself a mount
so that in all things/he might be like us.

Who could ever be/so foolish and simple
as to think for a moment/that just because humans
are called by his names,/there is but one nature
of man and of God?/or, because the Lord
was called by the names/of his servants,
that we can compare/creature and creator?

For when he called us 'kings'/by a name that is his own,
the reality is his,/the likeness ours;
but when he called himself/by the names of his servants,
the nature is ours,/his is but a metaphor.
Both in our case and in his/it is clear
which is the true name,/which the borrowed (*H. on Faith 63, 7–10*).