

JAROSŁAW KUREK OSB  
University of Oxford

## SAINT EPHREM THE SYRIAN: SACRED TIME AND HISTORICAL TIME SEEN FROM A CROSSROADS OF CULTURES<sup>1</sup>

### ŚWIĘTY EFREM SYRYJCZYK: CZASY ŚWIĘTY I HISTORYCZNY WIDZIANE Z PERSPEKTYWY SKRZYŻOWANIA KULTUR

#### ABSTRACT:

The paper focuses on the subject of time in the writings of the 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Ephrem the Syrian, regarded as the most remarkable poet-theologian of the patristic era. After introducing Ephrem's basic distinction between historical and sacred time, it examines some examples of the theologian's understanding time in terms of God's activity towards humanity, where its different levels apparently located in a long span of time strikingly converge into single unit. In the later part it embarks upon exploration of the possibility of entering into sacred time by any human being. In Ephrem's conception this presupposes a constant co-operation between God and human being that is a real human engagement. Within the framework of this attempt it specifically takes into consideration the mystery of Christ's Passion through which humanity can acquire access to a different epistemic level. It argues using a technical term *key* as a useful device allowing the goal to be attained. As a conclusion it claims the sacramental life of the Church, notably the Eucharist, to be a *re-presentation* of what happened historically at Golgotha, thus standing for a visible element of sacred time which may be experienced whilst living within historical time.

Poniższy artykuł koncentruje się na koncepcji czasu w pismach Efrema Syryjczyka, teologa z IV wieku, uważanego za najbardziej niezwykłego poetę-teologa epoki Ojców Kościoła. Po wprowadzeniu podstawowego rozróżnienia na czas historyczny i czas święty, rozważania skupiają się na analizie przykładów obrazujących, jak Efrema pojmuje czas w kontekście Bożej aktywności wobec człowieka w sytuacji, gdy wydarzenia rozłożone w długim okresie zbiegają się w pojedyncze (wydarzenie). W dalszej części artykułu podejmuje się próbę analizy możliwości wejścia przez człowieka w rzeczywistość czasu świętego. Wedle wizji Efrema taki koncept zakłada stałą synergię pomiędzy Bogiem a człowiekiem, czyli, co za tym idzie, prawdziwe zaangażowanie tego drugiego. W ramach takowej próby rozważa się szczególnie misterium Męki Chrystusa, dzięki której ludzkość może uzyskać dostęp do innego poziomu poznawczego. W dalszych rozważaniach techniczny termin *klucz* staje się użytecznym narzędziem umożliwiającym spełnienie założonego celu. Konkluzją artykułu jest twierdzenie, że sakramentalne życie Kościoła, zwłaszcza Eucharystia, jest uobecnieniem tego, co wydarzyło się na Golgocie, stając się tym samym widzialnym elementem czasu świętego, który może być doświadczany w życiu, w ramach czasu historycznego.

<sup>1</sup> The paper was delivered in Tel Aviv on March 19, 2017 during the academic workshop entitled "Secular and Sacred Time in the Ancient World".

## Introduction

In this paper I would like to present the 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Ephrem the Syrian and his thought regarding sacred and historical time. On hearing the origin of Ephrem and trying to contextualise it within the world of Early Christianity, we may locate it on the very outskirts of proper theological debate. Yet, as the foremost scholar in this field, Sebastian Brock, has conclusively put it, one should not be easily misled as far as Syria at the time was concerned. Not only did the theologians of that country play an important role in theological discussions, but also we can claim that the Syriac Orient (a label coined by Brock) constituted the third essential component of the early Christian world, next to the Latin West and the Greek East. All this is very evident in St Ephrem as far as his theological importance is concerned (this sadly went unnoticed for many centuries) and in regard to the sources he uses in his theology.

Ephrem was brought up in what is today the south-eastern part of Turkey and combines in himself three different cultural heritages: that of Ancient Mesopotamia with its use of Sumerian literature, a Jewish heritage (which is apparent in his familiarity with both the biblical and also post-biblical tradition) and ultimately, the heritage of the Greek world. Regarding the latter, even though in all probability he did not know Greek, he must have been acutely aware of what was happening in the more hellenised milieu (particularly noteworthy is his abhorrence of definitions).

As for his theological language, the reader of his writings is introduced to a very rich web of symbols, metaphors and paradoxes. This may be partly explained by the fact that along with many patristic writers he shares a rather apophatic theological approach: the hiddenness of God, however much it may be revealed through the Incarnation, is, undoubtedly, central to his thought. But what is much more surprising is the means he uses in articulating his ideas: poetry. Most of his works are delivered through this medium and he is now said to be “the greatest poet of the patristic age and perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante”<sup>2</sup>.

What is conspicuous in all his works is how skilful an exegete he is and yet this is not merely a scholarly approach towards an academic discipline. What the 20<sup>th</sup> century French scholar, Pierre Hadot, in his revisionist approach said of ancient philosophers can likewise be applied to St Ephrem: his biblical exegesis “has become a way of life”<sup>3</sup>. It is a continuous reflection on the Bible and on the material world. It is important to note that Ephrem does not recognise the Scriptures as the only source of God’s presence. Interestingly, Ephrem turns out to be a highly ecologically-oriented theologian. In one of his hymns on Paradise we read:

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<sup>2</sup> R. Murray, *Ephrem Syrus*, in *Catholic Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J. H. Crehan, London, 1967, II, 220-3.

<sup>3</sup> S. Brock, *The Poet as Theologian*, “Sobornost” 4 (1977), 244. As the reader will note, I draw mainly on the theses of Sebastian Brock. I am not aware of more recent scholarship on the subject.

In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world,  
 So that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator:  
 Nature through [man's] use of it, Scripture, through his reading of it.  
 These are the witnesses which reach everywhere;  
 They are to be found at all times, present at every hour,  
 Confuting the unbeliever who defames the Creator<sup>4</sup>.

With this as an introduction let us attempt a general description of Ephrem's notion of time. It can be seen throughout his writings, even though it is not formulated *expressis verbis*, that he operates on or, to put it better, between two tiers of time: a sacred one and a historical one. To contemporary people who are rather historically-minded, this may sound virtually unacceptable, yet Ephrem looks at the world from a totally different perspective. As his view is definitely symbolic-sacramental, he employs all possible means to convey what is beyond human experience and understanding. Considering the discoveries made by such phenomenologists of religion as Gerardus van der Leeuw or Mircea Eliade<sup>5</sup> in relation to "primitive" populations and their attitude to sacred time this should not surprise at all. Ephrem, within the framework of his theological vision, cares, above all, about *sacred time*, which is synonymous with the liturgical *hodie* and which is in direct contrast to our usual sense of ordinary, linear time.

In dealing with some of Ephrem's texts that concern more specifically the concept of time, it will be important to grasp a little of his understanding of the history of salvation. In all his writings it is manifest how much Ephrem cares for human beings. Yet the focal point of his theological reflection is located somewhere else, at the point of an encounter between God and the human being. God, for his part, is continuously inviting us to enter his Kingdom and to share the delights of Paradise, offering us the divine gifts from his treasury. But in order that this invitation might successfully come to pass, he needs real human involvement, our co-operation, which on the whole makes Ephrem's theology very synergistic. I shall attempt to show below how human beings can look into and transport themselves to what might be described as sacred time.

Before looking at some specific texts, a few remarks should be made regarding the required human disposition to attain an appropriate level of understanding of what is transmitted through the Scriptures. What I want to set forth are the prerequisites for the proper absorption of what is being said to us. Scholars have already put some of these forward as, for example, the famous *luminous eye*<sup>6</sup>, or a need for real engagement. It might be added that Ephrem offers a very subtle concept of wisdom, understood as a reconciliation of love for God and awe before him (that is

<sup>4</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, 5:2, trans. S. Brock, Crestwood 1990.

<sup>5</sup> See their works: G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner, Princeton 1986, esp. 384-387; M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed, Lincoln 1996, esp. 388-409.

<sup>6</sup> Such is the title of Brock's book on Ephrem: *The Luminous Eye. The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo 1992.

a yearning for him and a respect towards him, respectively)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, this should be grounded upon profound simplicity. Last but not least, attentiveness, so dear to the Greeks and not only to them, is a key requirement in each hearer of the Word. An attentive ear (in striking parallel to a luminous eye) seems to be a critical element of our human perception. It can be seen in the following passage:

The ear loves  
 The word of life, just as it loves you.  
 In the ear is the word, and outside of it  
 The pearl. When [the ear] is attentive to you,  
 It becomes wise [through you]. It will be illumined  
 By the word of truth<sup>8</sup>.

The importance of the above mentioned lies in the fact that whilst sacred time exists objectively, human beings can approach it only subjectively, that is to say, through spiritual experience. That is why according to Ephrem all these spiritual tools are indispensable in the human approach to divine reality.

## God comes to save us

Having made all these preparatory remarks, let us now look at the situation of Adam, who, in accordance with the collective sense of an individual in Semitic thought, is representative of the whole human race. God acted thus towards him:

[God] first opened the treasure of his mercy  
 And fashioned Adam, when he did not exist,  
 From dust.  
 He hastened to open the gate of Sheol,  
 And raised up Adam's body,  
 Which was dust.  
 He hastened too, to open the gate of Paradise,  
 On account of the promise, and made Adam to dwell  
 By the tree of life.  
 Glory to the One who forged this key  
 Though it is one, it has opened  
 Every treasury<sup>9</sup>.

Reflecting on the above text, one can, together with Ephrem, marvel at God's love towards Adam, a love which is grounded upon and interwoven with his will (*sebyono*). These are elements which we experience as God's activities and which are unchanging by nature, thus belonging to the other sphere of reality. Sacred time is one aspect of this reality. We can see God's will in these exemplary verses taken from the *Hymn on the Unleavened Bread* no. 16:

<sup>7</sup> *Par.* 1:2.

<sup>8</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith*, 83:9-10, trans. J. T. Wickes, Washington 2015.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 67:19-22.

The firstborn willed [it] and enclosed the small grave,  
For nothing that he willed could be prevented.

*Response: Praise be to the creator of all who, because of his love for us,  
Submitted his power to the cross!*

Concerning everything that he wills: it is not possible  
To prevent his will from whatever he wills.

For he willed it, and everything came into being,  
[And] because he willed it, created things came to be.

He willed it, and he enclosed himself in the belly of hell,  
And because he willed it, he enclosed himself in the womb of Mary.

His life-giving fragrance drifted into Sheol,  
Which vomited and threw him out because it could not bear him<sup>10</sup>.

In another place we read:

The will of the son is his treasure from which  
He distributed his wealth wherever he wanted.

For his word is the treasure of treasures;  
Wherever he opens it, he enriches creation.

His gift is the source of good things,  
And when he opens it, he exalts creation.

His will is the great key  
By which the treasures of mercies are opened<sup>11</sup>.

It is precisely through God's love and will that he incessantly pours out love from the fountain of his mercy. It is also through his mercy that God sent his Son so that he might save Adam. As we shall see, the mystery of the Incarnation and three other so-called "staging posts" of Christ's mission<sup>12</sup>, which followed the birth from Mary shall have a decisive impact upon what we understand as sacred and historical time.

Let us first focus on the day of Jesus' coming to the earth. Ephrem describes this mystery as follows (*raza*: one of the favourite theological terms of the author), by addressing the Lord in a fervent way:

<sup>10</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, 16:1.4-7, trans. J. E. Walters, Piscataway 2012.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 20:12-15.

<sup>12</sup> This refers to Ephrem's *Homily on Our Lord* 1.2.

Blessed is Your day, my Lord that first one  
By which Your feastday is appointed.

*Refrain: Blessed is He Who gave You to us without our asking,  
So that by You we might thank Your Father for His gift.*

Your day resembles You, for it is a lover of human beings.  
It is handed down and comes with all generations.

It is a day that renews itself by love,  
So that its strength will renew our old age.

It knows that humanity is needy.  
The entire [day] resembles You in its concern for humanity.

The power of Your day is like your own;  
It extends over the generations that have come and will come.

Your day resembles You for although it is one,  
It branches out and becomes many in order to be like You.

It is Your day that reconciled heaven and earth,  
For on it the Heavenly One descends to the earthly ones<sup>13</sup>.

As we can see, reading carefully into the chosen verses from this hymn, there is a plethora of theological themes, which point to many consequences. We shall, however, concentrate on the notion of “Your day (*yawmak*)”, which apparently possesses a surprisingly extensive character. From the historical point of view the birth of Christ came about in a very concrete place and at a very precise time, yet Ephrem sketches some far-reaching allusions, even pointing to a diametrical other-dimensionality of the putting on the human body by the Son of God. This day, just one day in the history of the world, in the theological vision of our Syriac theologian, renders all aspects of God’s attributes, since “Your day, like You, will remain forever”<sup>14</sup>.

In the same hymn there is another formula which is used every now and then by Ephrem. As shown convincingly by Brock, notably in regard to Jesus’ Baptism<sup>15</sup>, all the events from the life of Christ which constituted his salvific action towards humanity can be converged into one single point in sacred time, regardless of however many years they were apart. What is more, as Brock claims, the course

<sup>13</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Nativity*, 4:1-2.4.6.10-12.14, trans. K. E. McVey, New York 1989.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 4:71.

<sup>15</sup> See S. Brock, *St Ephrem on Christ as Light in Mary and in the Jordan: Hymni De Ecclesia* 36, *Eastern Churches Review* 7 (1975), 137-144.

of action may be reversed, which means that the Baptism, which, of course, anticipated in time the Death and Resurrection of Jesus against all the logic of the usual categories of time, already combined in itself the later salvific events.

The same model may be applied to other verses of the already cited hymn, where the Nativity (along with the Epiphany), Passion, and Ascension are gathered in the same way into one single unit:

My Lord, on Your day, give all [kinds of] joys;  
With blossoms of peace may we celebrate Your Pasch.

On the day of Your ascension may we be lifted up;  
With the new bread may we be His remembrance.

Our Lord, increase peace for us that we may celebrate  
The three feasts of Deity.

My Lord, great is Your day; let it not be mocked.  
Every one honours his birthday.<sup>16</sup>

We cannot, however, lose sight of the goal of this paper, which is the detection of “a bridge”, which would enable human beings to get to what is beyond time. The question is, whether this is at all possible? I shall argue that it is, calling our attention to that moment which is “greater than all other moments”<sup>17</sup> of Jesus’ life, namely his Passion.

## Key to open Paradise

All through Ephrem’s writings we encounter an overwhelming set of symbols and types which have caused scholars to call his theology a symbolic theology. In Christ all those symbols find their consummation and in his earthly mission all types foreshadowed throughout the Old Testament and later on creatively explored by St Ephrem achieve their fulfilment. In reference to the Passion, which is to be a critical point of the argument, “it is Christ [as Ephrem has it] who perfects [its]<sup>18</sup> symbols by His cross”<sup>19</sup>. For this very Cross (synonymously understood also as either Wood or Tree) turns out to be a gate which may lead to another dimension of the epistemic level. For “the suffering of the Gracious One is the key of his treasures”<sup>20</sup>. What is more, “that Wood, which is Tree of Knowledge [that symbolises

<sup>16</sup> *Nat.* 4:57-60.

<sup>17</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Armenian Hymns*, 49:3, trans. S. P. Brock and G. A. Kiraz, Provo 2009.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Its’ in this verse refers to the imagery of the sea, which stands for a receptacle where all the symbols and types find, as in Christ, their explanation.

<sup>19</sup> *Nat.* 9:15.

<sup>20</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Virginity*, 11:20, trans. K. E. McVey, New York 1989.

the gate of Paradise], can, with its fruit, roll back the cloud of ignorance”<sup>21</sup>. Here in this linguistic context we encounter a dynamic theological interplay between the Fall of Adam in Paradise and Christ’s salvific action which may be clarified by another passage: “He came to us in His love, the blessed Tree. Wood dissolved wood. Fruit was annihilated by fruit, the murderer [annihilated] by the Living One”<sup>22</sup>. The tool of Christ’s humiliating death is, therefore, a key to understanding a paradox (to use another favourite stylistic device of Ephrem) of the Christian life.

I would argue that the word *key* (*klida*) can serve as the best technical term to fathom a theo-logic of Ephrem and the way we can acquire spiritual insight into the heavenly reality. The word *key* plays an important role in the writings of Ephrem, as we have seen before in relation to God’s will (p. 4), where His will is described as “the great key by which the treasures of mercies are opened”, and slightly earlier (p. 3) in reference to God’s determined salvific action. How, then, might it help us in better understanding the notion of sacred time? Let us look at another passage, this time from the *Hymns on Paradise*:

Your Cross has been to me the *key*  
Which opened up this Paradise<sup>23</sup>.

Thanks to the reference to Paradise – having its etymological roots in the Median word *paridaeza*, which means a walled enclosure – we reach once again the theological level of sacred time, even in a different context. Paradise in Ephrem’s writings – as it was present in the religious climate of Semitic Christianity – serves as an indication of two dimensions of sacred time: the primordial one, which was supposed to exist before the Fall of Adam and the eschatological one, which is the destiny of Adam. Paradise, in other words, the Kingdom of Heaven, was thus reopened by Christ’s Death on the Cross, as we learn from Ephrem’s teaching<sup>24</sup>. However intriguing it may sound, the first person who received *the* key to Paradise was the Thief, who had hung next to Jesus and afterwards was “brought immediately into his Garden”<sup>25</sup>. Regardless of our attitude, these events concerning the Thief, were a source of joy and solace to Ephrem himself, as he exclaims in another place: “Blessed is the Thief who has freely received the keys to Paradise”<sup>26</sup>.

Each human being willing to follow the repentant path of the Thief may look for the *key*, yet diligence is always required: “Your key manifests itself to the one

<sup>21</sup> *Par.* 15:5.

<sup>22</sup> *Virg.* 8:1.

<sup>23</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Resurrection*, 2:1, trans. S. P. Brock and G. A. Kiraz, Provo 2009.

<sup>24</sup> I shall leave untouched in this paper the whole issue of the Descent into Sheol (mentioned fragmentarily in some passages above) which is an extremely intriguing example of God’s activity beyond all space and time and subsequently had an enormous impact on Adam’s situation, who, previously imprisoned in Sheol, might return to Paradise; see S. Brock, *Luminous eye*, 30; T. Buchan, *Blessed is Who Brought Adam from Sheol*, Piscataway 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 20.24, trans. C. McCarthy, Oxford 1993.

<sup>26</sup> *Par.* 8:2.

who seeks it. Your treasure rejoices in the thief who captures it”<sup>27</sup>. Having expressed his wonder over the salvific work of Christ (“Glory to the One who forged this *key*”), Ephrem encourages his readers to take the initiative and act so that they may acquire access to the heavenly reality: “Forge here on earth and take the *key* to Paradise”<sup>28</sup>. Primarily, it can be accomplished through attentive listening to the Word of God, “for the Scriptures are a treasure house of divinity. With that holy voice as the *key* they are opened up before those who listen”<sup>29</sup>. Nevertheless, one can experience this reality more fully within the sacramental life, particularly in the Eucharist. For “it was through the mystery of the water and blood issuing forth from [the Lord’s] side that the robber received the sprinkling which gave him the remission of sins. *You shall be with me in this Garden of Delights*”<sup>30</sup>. In the same way, through the Sacrament of the Eucharist, one may truly *see* a re-presentation of what happened on Golgotha. This is poignantly depicted in one of the *Armenian Hymns*:

With feeling let us approach, my brethren,  
That Body which the priest offers up;  
Let trembling reside on our lips  
As we receive the Medicine of Salvation

At the moment when the holy Body is broken  
We make memory of His sacrifice  
The body’s every limb should tremble  
At the moment when the Only-Begotten is sacrificed

Let us look with our inner eye,  
Beholding Him as He hangs from the Tree;  
Let our eyes gaze upon that blood  
Which flowed from His side<sup>31</sup>.

Having the possibility of experiencing the mystery, which belongs irreversibly to sacred time, it might not be unreasonable to mention an exciting category of *potentiality*. Brock neatly introduces this issue: “Throughout the Christian life is seen [to Ephrem] essentially as a process of regaining the heavenly Paradise, made accessible once more to humanity thanks to Christ’s death on the Cross”<sup>32</sup>. This means that we are potentially able to come into contact with the other order of reality, still living in the earthly dimension. Yet in order to attain this aim one who through Baptism is “already” and “not yet” is summoned to undertake a real

<sup>27</sup> *Faith* 12:11.

<sup>28</sup> *Par.* 2:2.

<sup>29</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Fasting*, 6:1, trans. S. P. Brock and G. A. Kiraz, Provo 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Diat.* 20.24.

<sup>31</sup> *Arm.* 49:1-2.4.

<sup>32</sup> S. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit, Poems of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cambridge 2013, 20.

spiritual toil. This, as I said before, is particularly valid within the sacramental life in its Eucharistic dimension. In this instance it could be seen as an “anticipation of the eschatological Paradise here on Earth”<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, we can conclude with Ephrem:

Through the spiritual bread everyone becomes  
An eagle that reaches up to Paradise<sup>34</sup>.

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Słowa kluczowe: czas, synergia, misterium, klucz, raj, męka Chrystusa

<sup>33</sup> Idem, *Luminous Eye*, 96.

<sup>34</sup> *Unl.* 17:12.