

PART



I

How and How Not to Think Theologically about the Body

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Embodiment in Time and Eternity: A Syriac Perspective

Susan A. Harvey

This article provides a context for the entire anthology, in that it challenges the common assumption that Christianity's concern with the body is reducible to Christianity's concern with sexuality. Rather, the body is the place in which alone Christians perceive and reflect the glory of God. Thus Christianity constructs the body liturgically, that is, as a place of prayer and praise.

For some years now, scholarship has been heavily preoccupied with discussion of the “the body.”¹ What constitutes our body, what it means to be embodied, and what the body contributes to our human or individual identities are topics that receive frequent and lengthy discussion in every kind of scholarly forum. Needless to say, religionists and theologians have been active participants in this area of interest.² For those who study ancient Christianity, discussion has been dominated by a focus on sexuality, with emphasis on asceticism as a devotional practice of sexual renunciation or control of the body as a sexual body.³ While ancient Christians were surely concerned about these issues, such overriding emphases may owe more to our contemporary social debates than to the primary interests of those who pursued the Christian life in its formative centuries. For if they, too, worried about the body as an essential component of human identity, they also developed a Christian devotional life strikingly dependent on the direct engagement of bodily experience as its context.

In a basic sense, the ancients shared our questions. Why do we have a body? Having one, what are we to do with it? How are we to understand the purpose of embodied existence in the human relationship with God? Early Syriac Christianity maintained consensus on these matters: we have a body because

God created us with one. Moreover, God created the body to be a means of knowing God and of being in God's presence. Syriac writers further present the body with this epistemological goal as the point of continuity between the present world and the hereafter. In their eyes, the body held an ontologically locative significance across time and eternity. An essential and inextricable component of *who* we are, both here and in the world to come, it was also seen to be *where* we are, both now and in eternity. Bodily experience and bodily expression become primary epistemological tools in both realms of existence, as we seek relation to God; the knowledge they convey is a knowledge that cannot be gained in any other way. Therein lies the purpose of the body: it provides the context for how and what we can and will know of God, now and in the life to come.

Before considering these matters, however, some orientation to early Syriac Christianity may be helpful.

Another History

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, itself a dialect of Hebrew. Syriac arose in the region of Edessa (Urfa, in modern southeastern Turkey) in the first century AD and became the primary Christian language throughout the Middle East and beyond. To this day, the Syriac-speaking churches pride themselves on using "the language of Our Lord," "the language Jesus spoke." Syriac Christianity was long neglected by western scholars, for whom Christian discourse has been dominated by Greek and Latin traditions. In recent years, by contrast, historians have increasingly acknowledged that the Greek and Latin church Fathers do not present the whole story of Christianity's emergence; nor, indeed, do the confines of the Roman Empire adequately allow us to map "the mission and expansion of Christianity" during its early centuries.⁴ As scholars have considered afresh the ancient patterns, Syriac Christianity has been an area of particular interest because of its distinctive modes of devotional piety, its rich and profound theological writings, and its presence sometimes within, sometimes far beyond the eastern Roman frontier.

Still, misrepresentations have been plentiful. Among modern scholars of ancient Christianity, the Syrian Orient is notorious as a hotbed of dualism:⁵ gnosticism, Marcionism, and Manichaeism flourished widely in this region (Manichaeism was born there, after all). Nicene orthodoxy did not dominate until the fifth century; Ephrem complained bitterly that the Nicene "party" of his day (mid-fourth century) was a minority group called "Palutians" after the late second century bishop Palut, while the more numerous Marcionites (among others) claimed the name "Christian."⁶ Modern scholarship has also tended to see a direct continuity between these early, widespread dualistic movements

and the particularly harsh ascetic forms that characterized Syrian monasticism during late antiquity, perhaps best known in the exotic figure of Simeon the Stylite, the fifth century holy man who lived 40 years in the Syrian wilderness atop a 60-foot pillar, standing midway between heaven and earth, a living icon of prayer ascending.⁷

However, the simplistic terms “dualistic” or “extreme” do little to illumine Syrian tradition, especially with regard to embodiment. Indeed, one of the most striking characteristics of ancient Syriac Christianity in all its forms is its intense physicality. Across a broad spectrum of beliefs, for good and for ill, the body provided a central focus of concern for religion in this region, and the primary instrument of religious expression. This is not discordant with the developments of Greco-Latin traditions. Nonetheless, in the Syrian Orient we find it often demonstrated in more vivid terms, and not only in the popularity of religious movements like gnosticism or Manichaeism, or an ascetic tradition infamous for its sometimes extravagant self-mortifications. Throughout the spirituality of the Syrian Orient – in its liturgical forms, its monasticism, its devotional piety, its exquisite hymnography, even its startling use of gendered God language – one finds a heightened awareness of sensory experience, of physical expression, of bodily knowing, of embodiment as the medium in which and by which the encounter between human and divine takes place.

In the present discussion I draw upon Syriac writers from the second through sixth centuries, with primary attention to Ephrem Syrus (304–373 AD), whose ancient title “the Harp of the Holy Spirit” bespeaks his status in Syriac tradition as a theologian of unparalleled brilliance and a writer of astonishing beauty. Early Syriac theology was most often presented in poetic form. Hymnography and metrical homilies comprise our major sources rather than the philosophical treatises such as Greek and Latin writers often produced, although such prose treatises do come to predominate in the later patristic period as Syriac theological discourse became increasingly hellenized. Following the dictates of their form, Syriac poetical works employ religious language in terms that differ significantly from the language of philosophical discourse. Consequently, early Syriac theology is rendered in richly textured images that utilize metaphor to explore and convey meaning rather than to define it. Early Syriac writers are self-conscious in their role as poet-theologians, and are wary of the dangers in any intellectual effort to explain, define, or delimit God through the use of rational language.⁸

Ephrem admonished that all religious language is metaphorical because no language is adequate to convey God; rather, it is a sign of God’s loving compassion for us that the incarnation took place not only into the body, but into language as well. Just as God put on the “garment of flesh,” so, too, did God put on the “garment of names,” entering into human language as into the body so that we might approach and in our limited way know about God.⁹ In

the course of their metaphorical explorations, early Syriac theologians engaged bodily experience as a deliberate strategy in the task of understanding God.¹⁰

Embodiment: A Way of Living

Early Syriac Christianity displayed a profoundly physical sensibility. Physical experience was seen to reveal both the good and the bad of life in its total cosmic reality, and physical action was seen to be the appropriate response to that reality. A clear eye and a limpid heart¹¹ were necessary to discern the Truth contained in experience and activity. But at the core of early Syriac Christianity lies an unequivocal understanding of the “oneness” of the human person, a oneness of body and soul, in which the physical and the spiritual are essential to one another in relation to God, for neither has meaning without the other. As Ephrem marveled, “The soul is Your bride, the body Your bridal chamber.”¹² Even in its expectation of the eternal life that awaits when this world will pass away, Syriac writers present an eschatological vision of concretely physical nature, experienced in bodily terms.

From earliest Syriac tradition, the body is the location of Christianity. It is so in the first place as part of God’s creation, a creation lovingly conceived and fashioned by God as God’s own, marked indelibly by its Maker, and hence revelatory. In harmony with the written revelation of scripture, the created world of nature proclaims this God, God’s self, and God’s presence. Ephrem explains:

In every place, if you look, [God’s] symbol is there,
and when you read, you will find His types.
For by Him were created all creatures,
and He engraved His symbols upon His possessions.
When He created the world,
He gazed at it and adorned it with His images.
Streams of His symbols opened, flowed and poured forth
His symbols on His members.¹³

The whole of creation is marked as God’s work, yet the human person is the summit of that work as God’s own image: “According to the greatness of His beauty He made me.”¹⁴ Earliest Syriac tradition speaks of humanity’s creation as an act of love surpassing our understanding but profoundly known by us. The creation of our bodies was the creation of our very selves, and the enormity of this realization evoked stark bodily imagery in the effort to glimpse the impulse that compelled God’s effort. The second-century *Odes of Solomon* portray God’s voice describing this human creation:

I fashioned their members,
and my own breasts I prepared for them,
That they might drink my holy milk and live by it.
I am pleased by them,
And am not ashamed by them.
For my workmanship are they,
and the strength of my thoughts.
...
I willed and fashioned mind and heart,
And they are my own.¹⁵

Here as elsewhere in early Syriac literature, God's own self can be imaged in bodily terms, not as a literal representation but to convey a truth that defies the confines of rational language and to express knowledge of God through the play of metaphor. Ephrem marveled at the thought of Mary nursing the infant Christ through a similar use of gendered imagery for God's activity, setting in parallel the first creation in which we were given life, and our new creation into eternal life at the final resurrection:

He [Christ] was lofty but He sucked Mary's milk,
and from His blessings all creation sucks.
He is the Living Breast of living breath;
by His life the dead were suckled, and they revived.
Without the breath of air no one can live;
without the power of the Son no one can rise.
Upon the living breath of the One Who vivifies all
depend the living beings above and below.
As indeed He sucked Mary's milk,
He has given suck – life to the universe.
As again He dwelt in His mother's womb,
in His womb dwells all creation.¹⁶

In God's creation the human person is fashioned complete, body and soul, just as the whole of God performs the fashioning. The *Odes of Solomon* describe a relationship between believer and God in which the believer is wholly given to God: "I will call out to Him with all my heart / I will praise and exalt Him with all my limbs."¹⁷ In these Odes, the right relationship between Creator and created must, in turn, demonstrate the same oneness of being as that between body and soul: "As the wind moves through the harp / and the strings speak, / So the Spirit of the Lord speaks through my members / and I speak through His love."¹⁸ Worship requires the whole person, body and soul, even as it enacts the intimate love that binds the believer to God:

My heart bursts forth the praise of the Lord,
And my lips bring forth praise to Him.
And my tongue becomes sweet with His anthems,
and my limbs are anointed with His psalms.
And my face rejoices in His exaltation,
and my spirit rejoices in His love,
And my being shines in Him.¹⁹

The oneness of the believer is God's intention. The separation, or disharmony, of body and soul that we know as mortality is consequently how we experience and know our fallen condition. Ephrem addresses God from the midst of this tragic division:

You looked upon the body, as it mourned,
and on the soul in its grief,
for You had joined them together in love,
but they had parted and separated in pain.
...
Body and soul go to court to see
which caused the other to sin;
but the wrong belongs to both,
for free will belongs to both.²⁰

Thus the body is at fault, but is not in itself the cause of our fallen condition. Rather, its state reveals (or expresses) our soul or the inward disposition of the heart. Although separated in the fall, body and soul remain an entity for Syriac writers in which the distinctions between the two matter far less than the single person both comprise. In the *Odes of Solomon*, the believer who is not wholly devoted to God is utterly given to the corrupt and corrupting falsehood of the Evil One.²¹ A late fourth-century cycle of hymns on baptism provides a vivid image of the failure of even sacramental action if the interior and exterior conditions of the human person are not mutually expressive of true faith: the sacramental anointing at baptism – the physical act of consecration – can only be effective if the “odor of the heart” exuded by the one anointed accords with the holy fragrance of the chrism.²²

To be sure, the body remains central because of Christianity's insistence that the salvation process is worked by Christ's physical incarnation and physical resurrection. In Syriac the same term is used to mean both “salvation” and “life” (*hayye*). We know our fallen condition through the corruptibility and mortality of the body; we will know salvation through its incorruptibility and immortality as revealed in original creation. The most prevalent image for salvation in early Syriac literature is that of healing. Christ is the Treasury of Healing²³ and the Medicine of Life, a title also commonly employed for the

eucharist. Again, Christ is the Good or Wise Physician.²⁴ Syriac legend attributes the conversion of Edessa to Christ's healing of King Abgar the Great and his nobles, through the apostle Addai (identified with Thaddeus, one of the 70 sent out in Luke 10:1).²⁵ In the *Odes of Solomon*, the Odist describes his worship or contemplation of God as a dynamic state in which he is created anew in the presence of God, with new limbs "for my very self, / And there was no pain in them, / nor affliction, nor suffering."²⁶

For early Syriac writers, then, Christianity was located in the body because the body, in the most literal sense, was what God had fashioned in the beginning and where God had chosen to find us in our fallenness. This was why God acted through the incarnation. Ephrem declares, "Glory to You who clothed Yourself with the body of mortal Adam, and made it a fountain of life for all mortals!"²⁷ This, too, explains the ritual process of the liturgy, as one enacted in and with the body. Ephrem evokes the liturgy as that which teaches us not only how to experience with our bodies, but further, what to experience.

His body was newly mixed with our bodies,
and His pure blood has been poured out into our veins,
And His voice into our ears, and His brightness into our eyes.
All of Him has been mixed with all of us by His compassion.²⁸

Our bodies have received His body, our blood His blood; our ears have heard the Word through scripture readings; our eyes, through the eyes of the apostles, beheld divine glory in the Theophany.²⁹ Christ fills us, our bodies, our senses.

The healing of the sacraments restores our oneness of being and our appropriate sensory experience. Yet there is more to be done. In the body of Christ, the cosmic war between good and evil was fought in earnest. Our bodies are the battleground in which the struggle between God and Satan, good and evil, life and death continues. The fallen order in which we live, Death's dominion, is one we know because of bodily suffering at the level of the individual (who suffers sickness, hunger, weariness, despair) and at the level of society (which suffers poverty, injustice, tyranny, and war). Just as Christ defeated Satan in and by his body, so, too, must the victory be rendered in the whole body of Christ: the body of the believer, the body of the church. Thus, what one does with the body, how one lives in the body, what one knows with the body are all matters vital to the process of salvation – a process in which God's ultimate triumph will grant us eternal life. The oneness of the believer, body and soul, keeps the body at the center of the process throughout its long duration.

Here is the point from which to assess the pervasive presence of ascetic practice early Syriac Christianity. At the far end of the spectrum (Marcionites, Manichaeans, encratites), asceticism represented renunciation of a body and a

world produced by an evil power. By contrast, at the heart of “mainstream” Syriac tradition the ascetic mode of life renounced not the physical world, but a world gone awry. Celibacy or chastity in marriage; simplicity of food, clothing, and possessions; care for the poor, sick, and suffering – such were the requisite features of the Christian mode of life from Christianity’s inception. In earliest Syriac literature, the body of the true believer is a body rendered chaste, healed and holy in marriage to its Heavenly Bridegroom by living a Christian life. In turn, the condition of the believer’s body must be mirrored in the community as a whole body. Caring for others, and especially for the suffering, not only fulfilled the command to love one another, but also forged into existence a community whose life as a healed and consecrated community literally reflected Paradise regained – the image by which Edessa recalled the experience of its conversion to Christianity.³⁰ Even when a distinct monastic movement was set in motion during the fourth century, Syriac monasticism was characterized by its location in or near to villages and cities, and by its active ministry to the larger community, especially the poor and the suffering. Monasticism continued to represent a dedicated life of service within the body of the church, not a turning away or withdrawal from the world.³¹ Simeon the Stylite was as noted for the extraordinary extent of his works of service as he was for his mortifications: from the pillar he devoted hours each day to preaching, counseling, healing, exorcising, and mediating disputes (personal, civic, and ecclesiastical) among the hordes of pilgrims who flocked to his pillar in endless streams. His body imaged the defeat of Satan’s wiles through his conquest of hunger, sickness, and despair in himself by means of his ascetic practices. As a result, in his presence the sick were healed, the hungry were fed, the weary received their rest. Where Simeon’s body was, there, too, the whole body knew its healing.

The body is the place in which salvation happens and the instrument by which it is done. The body is more than the physicality of our existence; it provides the activity, or external expression, by which the salvific process takes place. Bodily acts express the believer’s interior condition even as they display the living image of the body, individual and collective, redeemed. Thus in his treatise *On Prayer*, Aphrahat can admonish that care for the weary, the sick and the poor is also the activity of prayer.³² Ephrem describes an eschatological vision in which virgins who perform no ministry will be shut out of Paradise, while married women who have done good works for the needy will be let in.³³ More pointedly, Ephrem’s call for the life of faith is one in which the believer will manifest the image of God by literally enacting God’s saving, healing activity:

Let charity be portrayed in your eyes
and in your ears the sound of truth.
Imprint your tongue with the word of life

and upon your hands [imprint] all alms.
Stamp your footsteps with visiting the sick,
and let the image of your Lord be portrayed in your heart.
Tablets are honored because of the image of Kings.
How much [more will] one [be honored] who portrayed his
Lord in all his senses.³⁴

The sometimes extreme idiosyncrasies of Syrian ascetic practice have their purpose from just this iconic understanding of the body. If one considers the literary imagery by which it is conveyed, and not merely the physical actions described, Syrian asceticism shines forth as physical metaphor. The stylite on the pillar was incense on an altar, the embodiment of prayer rising heavenward (as Ps. 141:2); he was Ezekiel in his flaming chariot; he was the new Moses atop the new Mount Sinai, dispensing the New Law; he was a living crucifix.³⁵ The ascetic who lived naked in the wilderness, grazing on wild food and living among wild beasts, held two dichotomized images in tension: the penance of Adam expelled from Paradise, fulfilled as by Nebuchadnezzar, struck with divine madness and wandering in the wild, grazing like an animal, his hair like eagles' feathers, his nails like claws (Dar. 118. 4:28–33); and the life of Adam and Eve in Paradise before the fall, who lived naked without shame, who ate the food of the earth without toil, who lived in harmony among the animals (Gen. 2). In an anonymous hymn describing these “grazers,” the ascetic’s body is imaged as the ecclesial body in microcosm, the body serving as sanctuary, the mind as altar, tears as the incense on that altar.³⁶

What in the earliest Syriac tradition can best be characterized as the experience of “realized eschatology” (seen in the descriptions of the worship experience in the *Odes of Solomon*, for example), over time becomes the more profound consciousness that although we live in historical time, our religious life allows us to participate in the sacred time which is God’s eternal reality. The iconic activity of the body is symbolic in our time and place, while participating in an existence where past, present, and future are brought together in the single outworking of God’s salvation drama. The body thereby offers continuity even now, into the life we will only fully know in the world to come. Such, for example, is the sense regarding worship as described in the fifth-century *Book of Steps*:

by starting from these visible things [church, altar, and baptism], and provided our bodies become temples and our hearts altars, we might find ourselves in their heavenly counterparts which cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh, migrating there and entering in while we are still in this visible church with its priesthood and its ministry acting as fair examples for all those who imitate there the vigils, fasting and endurance of our Lord and of those who have preached him.³⁷

In the oneness of the human person that Syriac writers portray, the only real separation of body and soul is at death. Although a tragic severance, death is but a temporary suspension of their union: in the resurrected life they will again be joined. To live now and here as one person, body and soul, is to declare what we will be then and there. This is realized eschatology, yes, but also a process understood to bring into actuality that saved condition we seek. As Ephrem presents it, now we inhabit two times, chronological and sacred; but we await a life when we will know only one.³⁸

Embodiment: A Way of Knowing

What was the separation of body and soul at death, that Syriac writers should hold embodiment as our essential condition even in eternity?

After many years in ascetic practice atop his pillar, Simeon the Stylite (d. 459) suffered a life-threatening outbreak of gangrene in his foot. In most accounts of the episode, Simeon suffered grievously for months until at last he was healed by a miracle. Jacob of Serug, in a homily written some decades later, tells the story rather differently: Simeon refused to succumb to this affliction sent by Satan, and finally amputated the diseased foot. Simeon then bid a poignant farewell to his severed limb, which had labored so valiantly in God's service:

Why are you shaken and grieved since your hope is kept (quoting from Ps 42:5)? For again onto that tree from which you have been cut off you will be grafted. Go, wait for me until I come and do not grieve. For without you I will not rise up on the last day. Whether to the bridal chamber or to Gehenna I will walk on you. And whether to heaven or to the abyss, our way is one. We will be one when we are resurrected just as we have been, for death or life, for judgement or fire, or for the kingdom . . .³⁹

More than a vehicle of suffering, the body was also the loyal companion, the steadfast comrade in the cosmic battle between good and evil. Physical torment, whether caused by ascetic mortification or by illness, was understood to be an affliction from Satan, a test such as Job endured or Christ during the forty days in the wilderness. Devotion to God required extreme endurance because to be *with God* was to be *at battle against Satan*. The believer's body was the battleground, as Christ's had been. And just as his body was the place in which Christ defeated hunger, thirst, weariness, and death, so, too, must the believer also defeat Satan by refusing Satan victory in these assaults on the weaknesses of the mortal body. While scholars have interpreted Syrian asceticism as manifesting hatred of the body, the texts often display the opposite view (as

Ephrem: “We love our bodies, which are akin to us, of the same origin: / for our roots are dust”⁴⁰). Hence the sorrow that afflicts where the dead repose, as the soul yearns for its faithful partner.

Ephrem spoke of the souls of the dead camped at the gates of Paradise, awaiting their reunion with their bodies so that they might enter therein, together to praise their Savior.⁴¹ For Jacob of Serug, the period of separation was rather more harrowing. He vividly describes the souls of the dead huddled around the eucharistic offering at the memorial masses offered on their behalf. There they drink the “fragrance of life” (*riha d-hayye*) emanating from the holy oblation, for sustenance until the eschaton when they will be rejoined to their bodies for eternity.⁴²

Syriac writers shared the Pauline vision that in the final resurrection “we shall all be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51); the resurrected body will not be this same body we now inhabit.⁴³ Yet nowhere does the physicality of Syriac tradition resound more clearly than in its vision of our existence in eternity, where the oneness of the believer, body and soul, will find its true life and indeed its true meaning.⁴⁴ For the body changed in the eschaton will remain the body in which and through which we know God – and in the eschaton, knowing God will be the sum total of our life. Freed of the earthly uses and weaknesses of the body, we will find the continuity from our mortal life to our immortal life through the body’s continuation as our instrument of knowledge. Indeed, the body will continue its existential role: it will be the location in which we receive God’s revelation. It will continue its expressive role: it will enact and manifest our relationship with our Creator. And, it will at last fulfill its epistemological role: if, in this life, the body provides us limited knowledge of God, there, in the world to come, the body will be unlimited in what it can convey of the divine. In a very real sense, all that we have considered thus far as expressions of what embodiment means in early Syriac tradition rests on the conviction that whatever the changes in our resurrected body, it is the continuity of our bodily existence in time and eternity that matters.

Syriac tradition finds its most distinctive articulation of this understanding in Ephrem’s writings, especially in his *Hymns on Paradise*.⁴⁵ The relation between sense perception and religious epistemology is a major concern for Ephrem, for whom, as noted earlier, all of creation is marked with the imprint of its Maker.⁴⁶ Ephrem insists that sense perception and bodily experience are necessary for our knowledge of and encounter with God in eternity no less than in the present dispensation.

In Ephrem’s view, soul and body require each other for existence even in the world to come. Without the body, the soul would not be able to perceive or be conscious of Paradise (the root here is *rgsh*, to feel, perceive, be conscious or aware of). Ephrem discusses this in *Hymns on Paradise* 8, from which I quote at length:

. . . I considered
how the soul cannot
 have perception of Paradise
without its mate, the body,
 its instrument and lyre.
. . .
That the soul cannot see
 without the body's frame,
the body itself persuades,
 since if the body becomes blind
the soul is blind in it
 groping about with it;
see how each looks
 and attests to the other,
how the body has need of the soul
 in order to live,
and the soul too requires the body
 in order to see and to hear.
. . .
Though the soul exists
 of itself and for itself,
yet without its companion
 it lacks true existence;
. . .
If the soul, while in the body,
 resembles an embryo
and is unable to know
 either itself or its companion,
how much more feeble will it then be
 once it has left the body,
no longer possessing on its own
 the senses
which are able to serve
 as tools for its use.
For it is through the senses of its companion
 that it shine forth and becomes evident.⁴⁷

Ephrem then notes that God did not place Adam in Paradise until he was fully made, body and soul: "The soul could not enter there [into Paradise] / of itself and for itself." Together body and soul entered Paradise, together they left after the Fall, together they will enter again in the resurrection.⁴⁸ Ephrem is positing two important points here. First, knowledge has a sensory, noncognitive base. Gaining access to knowledge requires the body's active receptivity to what lies outside it. Sensory experience is not the whole content of what is to be known, but without its contribution nothing can be fully

encountered or comprehended. Second, the soul itself has no real existence without the body to render it present and active. Ephrem bypasses the problem of a mind/body split, and leaves aside the problematic of rationality as a basis for knowledge. Instead, he posits sense perception as an essential method of knowing, particularly crucial to that which defies the limitations of human understanding – God.

There is a recognition here that we know first by encounter, by bodily experience, before we can process understanding. This epistemological function of the body is what makes the body crucial to human existence. It is for this purpose, it seems, that God created the body in the first place. God's consistent activity in relation to humanity, whether in creation or in redemption, has been the revelation of God's being. As we have noted, Ephrem declares that all that God has wrought is stamped with God's mark. For Ephrem this is true in this world and in Paradise: "In Eden and in the inhabited earth are parables of our Lord. / Who is able to gather the likeness of the symbols of Him, / all of Whom is portrayed in all? / In scripture He is written, in nature He is engraved."⁴⁹ The *raison d'être* for Paradise, then, no less than for this world, is to manifest God's revelation.

What is the nature of Paradise that we should need our bodies to perceive it? Why should we need to experience it in bodily terms? Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* are a *tour-de-force* for the senses, reminiscent of the *Song of Songs* in their lush sensuality. Paradise here is a place of breathtaking, sumptuous beauty: shimmering in resplendent light, billowing with myriad exquisite scents, its colors gleaming, its tastes and sounds a marvel. Flowers, fountains, perfumes, blossoms, trees laden with fruits abound "in endless variety." The body, healed and glorified in its resurrected state, is robed now in "garments of glory" that replace its former "garments of shame." In this condition the body, no longer hindered, receives utterly the sensory onslaught that Paradise pours forth on every side. "Being unburdened, / the senses stand in awe and delight / before the divine Majesty."⁵⁰ In Paradise one's entire being will be permeated by the encounter with the divine. Living there will be the absolute experience of God's presence.

Cognitivity, or rational thought, positions a person apart from the object of consideration. What Ephrem describes is an encounter between subject and object in which the person will be saturated at every level of awareness and being by the object sought, to the point where the subjective encounter is swallowed up by the immensity of presence in the midst of what is divine. Significantly, however, the human self is not lost in this event, nor obliterated by the power of God's Being. Rather, here is a relationship between creature and Creator of completion, of full realization of self within Self. The resurrected life is that condition in which nothing separates us from God. Bathed in divinity from without, we will radiate divinity from within, aglow from our inmost heart to

our outermost limbs. Those who enter Paradise will be astonished at what they become:

People behold themselves
in glory
and wonder at themselves,
discovering where they are.
The nature of their bodies,
once troubled and troublesome,
is now tranquil and quiet,
resplendent
from without in beauty,
and from within with purity,
the body in evident ways,
the soul in hidden ways.⁵¹

Ephrem describes Paradise as a “total encounter.” Yet he admonishes that his description is itself a didactic metaphor: ultimately, the instrument of the body, or the medium of sense perception, provides a pale analogy for what will be.

Do not let your intellect
be disturbed by mere names,
for Paradise has simply clothed itself
in terms that are akin to you;
it is not because it is impoverished
that it has put on your imagery;
rather, your nature is far too weak
to be able
to attain to its greatness,
and its beauties are much diminished
by being depicted in the pale colors
with which you are familiar.⁵²

For Ephrem, the incarnation is not only an action of redemption, it is also an action of revelation in terms of exactly this epistemological quality of bodily experience. “That unreachable power came down and put on limbs that could be touched so that the needy could approach Him and, embracing His humanity, become aware of His divinity.”⁵³ In our fallen condition, the revelation of nature and indeed of scripture proved insufficient for returning us to God. Christ incarnate brought a directness of encounter that we could not experience in any other way, ironically so since it was Christ’s incarnate body that seemed to deny his divinity: “[Scribes and Pharisees] spoke ill of our Lord because of His body and thought that He was not God. They threw Him

down, yet it was because of His body – the body they experienced as passing among them – that they recognized that He is God.”⁵⁴ Ephrem depicts Death as shocked when the risen Christ returned to Sheol for His body, paradoxically that which separates us from God and that by which God would join us again to Godself: “Death was amazed at You in Sheol, / that You sought Your garment and found [it]. / O Wise One Who lost what was found / in order to find the lost!”⁵⁵

God’s activity is revelation; the means by which we ourselves know that revelation is the sensory experience of the body in which we encounter it. In the incarnation God poured Godself into the body, the instrument of our knowing. In sacrament, Christ enters into each of our bodies, so that nothing separates our bodies from His. “Ears even heard Him, eyes saw Him, / hands even touched Him, the mouth ate Him. / Limbs and senses gave thanks to / the One Who came and revived all that is corporeal.”⁵⁶

Ephrem insists that sense perception is the foundational experience of the human–divine encounter, while he repeatedly admonishes that the senses are insufficient for the task.⁵⁷ Inadequate at best, the senses are a feeble medium through which to receive knowledge of God. Nonetheless, in Ephrem’s view it is precisely their inadequacy that renders them crucial. When open to God, the senses receive God’s revelation at every turn; they take it in, they convey it, they mediate, they actively encounter and transmit. What they do *not* do is intentionally, willfully, or consciously manipulate what they receive; they do not function as does the rational mind. For Ephrem, rationality is the process of “investigation.” The autonomous effort of the mind to investigate God is where humanity falls astray, since God cannot be fathomed by the human intellect. Investigation is, in Ephrem’s formulation, the source of all error, all heresy, precisely because it depends on the radical separation of subject from object. It takes place when the mind attempts to be the source of its own knowledge. Investigation is, so to speak, the seeking of *disembodied* knowledge: therein it fails.

For all its weaknesses, the body remains our constant epistemological source in relation to God. When its experiences are received by us in our whole selves – when body and mind function as the unity they were created to be – then the hubristic dangers of intellectual autonomy are averted. We cannot know God by separating ourselves from God. We can only know God by allowing God’s revelation to permeate the whole of our being.

Our Lord has become our living bread,
and we shall delight in our new cup.
Come, let us eat it without investigation,
and without scrutiny let us drink His cup.
Who disdains blessings and fruits

and sits down to investigate their nature?
A human being needs to live. Come let us live and not die
in the depth of investigation.⁵⁸

Ancient Christianity defined God as ineffable and inconceivable. It thereby heightened the significance of sense perception specifically as a noncognitive process of knowing. From such a view, the body becomes the instrument by which God is known in relation to the believer and the believer in relation to God. In existential terms the body is where we experience God; it is where we receive divine initiative. Further, the body expresses our response to what we receive: it provides the activity by which we articulate our relationship to the divine. Above all, the body fulfills an epistemological role: it is the medium through which we first encounter the divine and it offers a knowledge of God through that encounter that cannot be gained in any other way. In early Syriac tradition, embodiment is the condition that defines our existence in time, as it will also define it in eternity. For these writers, the existential, expressive, and epistemological qualities of life in the body are seamlessly interwoven, right across the divide between this world and the eschaton. This is why Ephrem can say that the works we do now will be the healing we experience there, in Paradise:

Whoever has washed the feet of the saints
will himself be cleansed in that dew;
to the hand that had stretched out
to give to the poor
will the fruits of the trees
themselves stretch out;
the very footsteps of him
who visited the sick in their affliction
do the flowers make haste
to crown with blooms,
jostling to see
which can be first to kiss his steps.⁵⁹

Here, for these writers, is our healing and our hope: salvation is a life we will live. And because we know this now in our limited, temporary, mortal body, we will know it there in a fullness that defies our rational understanding but brings to completion the nature of our embodiment. We will be at home, and we will know it.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the American Theological Society, Princeton Theological Seminary, April, 1997. I am grateful to the Society for fruitful discussion, and also to Dr. Flora Keshgegian. This paper is dedicated to my father, Professor James B. Ashbrook, in the presence of whose long dying it was originally conceived and with whose passing it has finally been completed.
- 2 For an excellent entry into some primary points of debate, see now Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 3 Again, the bibliography is massive. Arguably the most influential work has been Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), a study itself much influenced by Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (History of Sexuality, vol. 2), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), and *idem, The Care of the Self* (History of Sexuality, vol. 3), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986). See also Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire: The Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (New York: Blackwell, 1988); and Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 4 I deliberately refer to the classic work of Adolph von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. Moffatt (New York: Harper, 1962). For a survey of the story beyond Roman borders, see now Samuel H. Moffert, *A History of Christianity in Asia: vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).
- 5 The characterization owes much to the pervasive influence of Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, which first appeared in 1934; revised with supplements by Georg Strecker in 1964; first English translation, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, eds. R. A. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). Chapter 1 is devoted to Edessa. A similar view, though argued from a different perspective, has been vigorously put forward by H. J. W. Drijvers, *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (London: Variorum, 1984) and *idem, History and Religion in Late Antique Syria* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1994).
- 6 Ephrem, *H Contra Haer.* 22.5–6. Ephrem's polemical battles are especially clear in this cycle of hymns, ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium [hereafter CSCO] 169–70/Scr.Syr. 76–7 (Louvain, 1957); and C. W. Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan* (London and Oxford, 1912, 1921) 2 vols. To be fair, Nicene orthodoxy was not the predominant theological stance anywhere in the Roman Empire much before the fifth century. Consider the doctrinal battles fought by the Cappadocian Fathers contemporaneously with those of Ephrem, and in the decades following.
- 7 See the well-known but deeply flawed study by Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, CSCO 184/Sub. 14, 197/Sub. 17 (Louvain 1958), and CSCO 500/Sub. 81 (Louvain, 1988).
- 8 E.g., Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1992);

- Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de Saint Ephrem le Syrien* (Kaslik, Lebanon 1988).
- 9 Ephrem, *H Fid* 31, ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrerers Hymnen de Fide*. CSCO 154–5/Scr. Syr. 73–4 (Louvain, 1955). Cf. Brock, *Luminous Eye*, pp. 43–8; and see also Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique*, 160–87 on Ephrem’s understanding of the divine names.
- 10 For most of the twentieth century, the view prevailed that Syriac Christianity prior to the late fourth century represented a purely Semitic Christianity, untainted by Hellenic thought or culture, which therefore was either insignificant or extremely important (depending on one’s view) as representing an entirely autonomous form of earliest Christianity. In recent years, our understanding of the complex multilingual, multicultural society that comprised the eastern Mediterranean world in antiquity has improved tremendously. We have come to appreciate that Hellenic, Semitic, and west Asian traditions were deeply intermingled in this region, and that the resulting cultural matrix was far more cosmopolitan and sophisticated than we had previously recognized.
- 11 Brilliantly conveyed in Brock, *The Luminous Eye*.
- 12 *H Fid* 14.5.
- 13 *H Virg* 20.12; here translated by Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 348–9. Ephrem elsewhere speaks of God or Christ playing three harps – the Old and New Testaments, and nature – in a perfect harmony of revelation. E.g., *H Virg* 29.1,30.1; ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrerers Hymnen de Virginitate*, CSCO 223–4/Scr.Syr. 94–5 (Louvain, 1962).
- 14 *Odes Sol.* 15.7b; ed. and trans. James H. Charlesworth. *The Odes of Solomon*, 2nd edn. (Missoula, MT, 1977; repr. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982). Translations from the *Odes* are my own throughout.
- 15 *Odes Sol.* 8:14–18. For the gendered God language of the *Odes of Solomon*, cf. S. A. Harvey, “Feminine Imagery for the Divine. The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 111–39.
- 16 *H Nat* 4: 149–54; here trans. McVey, *Ephrem*, 100. Text ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrerers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*. CSCO 186–7/Ser. Syr. 82–3 (Louvain, 1959).
- 17 *Odes Sol.* 26:4.
- 18 *Odes Sol.* 6:1–2.
- 19 *Odes Sol.* 40:2–4.
- 20 *H Nis* 69.3.5; here trans. Sebastian P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, 2nd edn. (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), 77. Text ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrerers Carmina Nisibena*, CSCO 218–19/Scr. Syr. 92–3 (Louvain, 1961).
- 21 E.g. *Odes Sol.* 33, 38.
- 22 *H Epiph.* 3; for the text, see above n. 14. Although attributed to Ephrem, the cycle is clearly by his disciples.
- 23 Ephrem, *Hom. on Our Lord*, 18.2; ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrerers Sermo de Domino Nostro*, CSCO 270–1/Scr. Syr. 116–17 (Louvain, 1966).
- 24 Cf. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 40, 99–114.
- 25 As preserved in the *Doctrina Addai*, ed. G. Phillips (1876) and trans. George Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1981).

- 26 *Odes Sol.* 21:4.
- 27 *Hom on Our Lord*, 9.1: here trans. Joseph P. Amar and Edward G. Mathews, Jr., *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, Fathers of the Church 91 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 284.
- 28 *H Virg.* 37.2; trans. McVey, *Ephrem*, 425.
- 29 The Syriac term here translated “brightness” is *denha*, “shining forth,” “manifestation,” “epiphany,” “theophany.”
- 30 In the *Doctrina Addai*, Howard, at p. 100. The same imagery is used to characterize what happened to Edessa during the episcopate of its great bishop Rabbula (in office 411/12–435/6AD). Cf. the *Vita S. Rabbulae*, ed. Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* 4 (Paris/Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968) 396–450.
- 31 It is absolutely crucial to understand the origins of Syrian monasticism within the service of the church. See now the superb study by Sidney H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220–45; and *idem*, “Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire,” in *Diakonia: Studies in Honor of Robert T. Meyer*, ed. T. Halton and J. P. Williman (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 22–52. See S. A. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the ‘Lives of the Eastern Saints’* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and Andrew Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur ‘Abdin* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990), for discussions of the continuing Syriac tradition.
- 32 Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.14; ed. J. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca* 1 (1894) cols. 37–82. There is an English translation in Sebastian P. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 1–28.
- 33 Ephrem, *Letter to Publius*, 15. The text is edited with translation by Sebastian P. Brock in *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 261–305. There is also a translation in Mathews and Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, 335–55.
- 34 *H Virg.* 2.15; trans. McVey, *Ephrem*, 270.
- 35 Most vividly seen in the Syriac *Vita S. Simeonis Stylitae*, ed. P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* 4 (Paris 1894): 507–644; the imagery is even more powerful in the Greek vita of Simeon the Younger, ed. and trans. P. Van den Ven, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le jeune* (521–92), *Subsidia Hagiographica* 32 (Bruxelles, 1962–70), 2 vols. See the discussion in S. A. Harvey, “The Sense of a Stylite: Perspective on Simeon the Elder,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 42 (1988): 376–94.
- 36 The anonymous hymn, wrongly attributed to Ephrem, “On Hermits and Desert Dwellers,” ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones* IV, CSCO 334–5/Scr. Syr. 148–9 (Louvain, 1973); and trans. J. P. Amar, in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 66–80. I am indebted to Gary Anderson for sharing with me his work on Nebuchadnezzar and Syriac penitential tradition.
- 37 *Book of Steps*, Discourse 12.2; here trans. Brock, *Syriac Fathers on Prayer*, p. 46. Text ed. M. Kmosko, *Patrologia Syriaca* 3 (1926).
- 38 Cf. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 29–30.

- 39 Jacob of Serug, "Homily on Simeon the Stylite," ed. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* 4, 650–65; here trans. S. A. Harvey, in Wimbush, *Asceticism in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, 15–28, at p. 22.
- 40 *H Nis.* 50.3; trans. Brock, *Harp of the Holy Spirit*, p. 56.
- 41 *H Par* 8.10. Ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, CSCO 174–5/Scr. Syr. 78–9 (Louvain, 1957).
- 42 Jacob of Serug, *Homily* 22, ed. P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris/Leipzig: Otto Harrasowitz, 1905) at I: 546. Cf. Michael Guinan, *The Eschatology of James of Serug* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1972). On the phrase, "fragrance of life" in Syriac tradition, see S. A. Harvey, "St. Ephrem on the Scent of Salvation," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 49 (1998): 109–28.
- 43 E.g., Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 6.14, 18: 8: 22. Ephrem, *H Par* 5:8–10. See the fine study by Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), including her interesting discussion of Aphrahat and Ephrem, at pp. 71–8.
- 44 Cf J. Daniélou, "Terre et Paradis chez les Pères de l'Église," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 22 (1953): 433–72, where the Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* are his case study for the physicality of the afterlife. For a striking example of patristic diversity on this matter, however, compare the totality of sensory experience evoked in Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, with Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 22.30. In Augustine's presentation, the bodily dimension of the resurrected life is dominated by the experience of perfect sight, to the virtual exclusion of the other senses.
- 45 I will use the translation by Sebastian P. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990). This book includes an excellent introduction and commentary on these hymns.
- 46 See the discussion in Harvey, "St. Ephrem on the Scent of Salvation."
- 47 *H Par* 8.2b, 4, 5b, 6. Trans. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 132–3.
- 48 *H Par* 8.9.
- 49 *H Virg* 8.2–3; trans. McVey, *Ephrem*, 298.
- 50 *H Par* 9.6, 17; Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 138, 142.
- 51 *H Par.* 7.12; trans. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 123.
- 52 *H Par* 11.6; trans. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 156.
- 53 *Hom on Our Lord*, 10.2; trans. Mathews and Amar, *Ephrem: Prose*, p. 286.
- 54 *Hom on Our Lord*, 21.5; trans. Amar, *Ephrem: Prose*, p. 297.
- 55 *H Virg* 30. 12; trans. McVey, *Ephrem*, 397.
- 56 *H Nat* 4.144–5; trans. McVey, *Ephrem*, 100.
- 57 E.g., *H Nat* 3.16, 21; *H Nat* 25.14–15; *H Par* 9.27; *H Par* 11.6–8.
- 58 *H Virg* 16.5; McVey, *Ephrem*, 330.
- 59 *H Par* 7.17; trans. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 125.