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Source: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 69 (2015), pp. 1-14

Published by: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26497707>

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Mapping the Literary Landscape of Ephrem's Theology of Divine Names

JEFFREY WICKES

In the scholarship of the last sixty years there has been an increased interest in the literary corpus of Ephrem the Syrian and concomitant efforts to situate it culturally. Following Ephrem's death in 373, the context of his literary corpus was obscured through the development of a biographical tradition and a body of spiritual literature that was largely inauthentic. The uncovering of a genuinely fourth-century Ephrem emerged through two processes. On the one hand, scholars such as André de Halleux, Bernard Outtier, and Joseph Amar produced critical studies of Ephrem's biographical tradition, identifying it as almost entirely anachronistic.¹ On the other hand, during the second half of the twentieth century, Edmund Beck produced critical editions of Ephrem's authentic works and in the process identified many inauthentic ones.² Alongside

and in light of these critical studies, there has been an attempt to connect Ephrem anew to the larger (usually Greek-speaking) late ancient world. Already in 1949, Beck had produced a short study of Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* (hereafter, *HF*), in which he pointed out parallels between the *HF* and fourth-century writers such as Athanasios and Gregory of Nyssa.³ Following Beck, Sidney Griffith, Kathleen McVey, Ute Possek, and Christine Shepardson have all pointed to aspects of Ephrem's thought that parallel other (in these cases, Greek) sources of the third and fourth centuries.⁴

1 A. de Halleux, "Saint Éphrem le Syrien," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 14 (1983): 328–55; B. Outtier, "Saint Éphrem d'après ses biographies et ses oeuvres," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 11–33; and J. P. Amar, ed. and trans., *The Syriac Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, CSCO 629–30 (Leuven, 2011). *The Syriac Vita* portrays Ephrem visiting Egyptian hermits, meeting Basil the Great in Cappadocia, miraculously learning Greek, and fleeing from women in disgust. For a discussion of these scenes, and an identification of the *Vita*'s other anachronisms, see Amar, *Vita*, v–x.

2 In addition to works that displayed obvious anachronisms, Beck was especially distrustful of works that suggested later ascetic ideals. On this, see E. Beck, "Asketentum und Monchtum bei Ephraem," in *Il monachesimo orientale*, OCA 153 (Rome, 1958); and idem, "Ein Beitrag zur Terminologie des ältesten syrischen Monchtums," *Studia Anselmiana* 38 (Rome, 1956), 254–67.

3 E. Beck, *Die Theologie des hl. Ephraem in seinen Hymnen über den Glauben*, *Studia Anselmiana* 21 (Rome, 1949).

4 S. Griffith, "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, 1986), 22–52; idem, "Faith Seeking Understanding in the Thought of Saint Ephrem the Syrian," in *Faith Seeking Understanding: Learning and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. G. C. Berthold (Manchester, NH, 1991), 35–55; idem, "The Marks of the 'True Church' according to Ephraem's *Hymns Against Heresies*," in *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity, in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers*, ed. G. J. Reinink and A. C. Klugkist (Leuven, 1999), 125–40; idem, "Setting Right the Church of Syria: Saint Ephraem's *Hymns Against Heresies*," in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus*, ed. R. A. Markus, W. E. Klingshim, and M. Vessey, *Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta* 89 (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), 97–114. K. McVey, "Saint Ephrem's Understanding of Spiritual Progress: Some Points of Comparison with Origen of Alexandria," *The Harp* 1 (1988): 117–28. U. Possek, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*, CSCO 580, Subs. 102 (Leuven,

One aspect of Ephrem's thought that has clear parallels to late ancient sources, but that has rarely been studied from that perspective, is his understanding of divine names.⁵ Throughout late antiquity, Greek- and Aramaic-speaking authors struggled with the question of whether language could adequately convey the reality of divine life.⁶ On the one hand, Christians and Jews both held sacred a written text, and certainly by the Second Temple period venerated the divine name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14.⁷ On the other hand, during the late antique period, these same authors sought to situate the scriptural tradition within a Hellenistic philosophical tradition that, beginning with Plato, had articulated general theories about the

1999). C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC, 2008).

5 The few studies that discuss parallels do so only in passing. C. Molenberg ("An Invincible Weapon: Names in the Christological Passages in Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* XLIX–LXV," *Symposium Syriacum V* [1990]: 136) notes parallels to Plato's *Cratylus*, Albinos's *Didaskalion*, and the Stoics. R. Murray ("The Theory of Symbolism in St Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6–7 [1975–76]: 10–11) briefly references the *Gospel of Philip*. Beck notes parallels with Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and Clement of Alexandria (on Gregory, see Beck, *Die Theologie*, 66n1 and 77n5; on Gregory, Basil, and Clement, see idem, *Ephräms des Syrers: Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre* [Leuven, 1980], 105–17). P. Tanios Bou Mansour (*La pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le Syrien* [Kaslik, 1988], 160) distinguishes Ephrem generally from "la théologie cappadocienne." M. Weedman points out parallels with Eunomios, though he ultimately finds Ephrem to have more in common with Hilary of Poitiers ("Ephrem's Opponents in the 'Hymns on Faith,'" presented at the annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society, May, 1997; I am grateful to Professor Weedman for providing me with a copy of this paper.).

6 There is no comprehensive study of theories of divine names in late antiquity. The closest is R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2, *The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn, 1986). More narrowly focused but still helpful are M. DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea's Anti-Eunomian Theory of Names: Christian Theology and Late-Antique Philosophy in the Fourth Century Trinitarian Controversy*, Supplement to *VChr* 103 (Leiden, 2010); and V. Izmirlieva, *All the Names of the Lord: Lists, Mysticism, and Magic* (Chicago, 2008).

7 That is, YHWH. See J. M. Baumgarten, "A New Qumran Substitute for the Divine Name and Mishnah Sukkah 4.5," *JQR* 83 (1992): 1–5; D. M. Pike, "The 'Congregation of YHWH' in the Bible and in Qumran," *Revue de Qumrân* (1996): 233–40; and P. W. Skehan, "The Divine Name at Qumran, in the Masada Scroll, and in the Septuagint," *BIOCS* 13 (1980): 14–44. For later Jewish literature, see N. A. Dahl and A. F. Segal, "Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 9 (1978): 1–28.

relationship between words and the realities they signified.⁸ By Ephrem's time, there already existed a tradition of Greek Christian reflection upon the problems of divine names.⁹ There is piecemeal evidence that Syriac Christian authors participated in this discourse as well, though this literary tradition has remained absent from broader histories of the issue.

Though Ephrem refers to and reflects upon language in a number of his authentic works, it is especially in his *HF* and *Sermons on Faith* (hereafter, *SF*) that he pursues a concentrated and sustained focus on the divine names present in scripture.¹⁰ No comprehensive account of Ephrem's view of language exists, and even on the specific issue of his understanding of divine names, scholars tend to fall into two groups: some focus on the metaphorical sense (which Ephrem calls *borrowed names*)¹¹ and others, on the literal (which he calls *true names*).¹²

In this article, I would like first to give a thorough account of Ephrem's view of divine names in the *HF* and *SF*, and then to situate this view within its late ancient literary context.¹³ The *HF* and *SF* were written

8 For the reception of this tradition in Eunomios, see DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea*, 51–95.

9 *Ibid.*, 97–134.

10 As DelCogliano has recently noted, in ancient Greek sources, the term *ὀνόμα* would have referred to "proper names, common nouns, and adjectives" (*Basil of Caesarea*, 25). Within Ephrem's corpus, the Syriac *šmā* ("name") conveys the same range of meanings.

11 S. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY, 1990), 45; D. Bundy, "Language and the Knowledge of God in Ephrem Syrus," *PBR* 5 (1986): 91–103; T. Koonammakkal, "Divine Names and Theological Language in Ephrem," in *StP 30: Biblica et Apocrypha, Orientalia, Ascetica*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven, 1993), 318–23; and Murray, "Theory of Symbolism," 1–20.

12 Beck, *Die Theologie* (n. 3 above), 62–80; idem, *Ephräms des Syrers* (n. 5 above), 105–17; S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, 1985), 62–63; Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique* (n. 5 above), 160–87; K. den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ, 2006), 301; Molenberg, "Invincible Weapon" (n. 5 above), 135–42.

13 Ephrem also reflects upon names in his polemic with Bardaisan in *Contra haereses* 53–57 (*Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra haereses*, 2 vols., ed. E. Beck, *CSCO* 169–70, SS 76–77 [Louvain, 1957]), which have been much less tended to than the passages in the *HF* and *SF* (for *SF*, see *Sermones de Fide*, 2 vols., ed. E. Beck, *CSCO* 212–13, SS 88–80 [Louvain, 1961]). See, however, S. Griffith, "St. Ephraem, Bar Dayšān and the Clash of *Madrašē* in Aram: Readings in St. Ephraem's *Hymni contra Haereses*," *The*

between the late 350s and 373 CE (the year of Ephrem's death), in Nisibis and Edessa, as a series of poetic responses to the Arian controversies that emerged in the wake of the Council of Nicaea.¹⁴ Christological titles played a prominent role in the debates that followed the Council of Nicaea.¹⁵ There is still no consensus on the exact nature of Ephrem's relationship to these debates, but for the study of the view of divine names within his anti-Arian works, the writings of Aetios and Eunomios stand out in a particular way. These heterousians have frequently been identified as the polemical target of Ephrem's *HF*, based on the hymns' forceful condemnations of excessive theological debate.¹⁶ Though this view has been challenged as it

relates to the hymns as a whole, the writings of Aetios and Eunomios still stand as the closest temporal, geographical, and theological antecedent to Ephrem's view of divine names.¹⁷ Recently, in fact, Possekkel has suggested that "Ephrem's theory of names . . . does not differ so much from that of his opponent Eunomios," but the connection between Ephrem and these figures has not yet been developed.¹⁸

At the same time, Ephrem undoubtedly occupied a different intellectual tradition than that within which Aetios and Eunomios had developed their ideas, and he would have received these ideas within his own northern Mesopotamian context. Thus, while I argue that Ephrem's reflections upon language emerged immediately in response to Aetios and Eunomios, I suggest that this connection must be balanced with an examination of sources deriving from northern Mesopotamia, which also reflect upon scriptural language. Two sources in particular provide this balance: the *Gospel of Philip* and Aphrahat's *Demonstration 17 (On Christ, Who Is the Son of God)*. By placing Ephrem's thought alongside four sources—the *Gospel of Philip*, Aphrahat's *Demonstration 17*, Aetios's *Syntagmation*, and Eunomios's *Apology*—I aim to sketch a more textured picture of the world within which Ephrem's thought emerged, and the ways this thought resonated within that world.

Divine Names in Ephrem

Throughout the *HF*, Ephrem identifies scriptural names according to two categories: names that apply to God in an essential way that he terms *true* (*šrārā*), *accurate* (*ḥat-tītā*), *perfect* (*gmīrā*), or *holy* (*qaddišā*), and sometimes

Harp 21 (2006): 447–72; and I. Hausherr, *The Name of Jesus*, trans. C. Cummings, OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI, 1978), 42–44.

14 Beck dated the *SF* to a period earlier than the *HF*, based on the attention to the Holy Spirit in the latter, and the relative absence in the former (Ephrem, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, trans. E. Beck, CSCO 155, *Scriptores Syri* 74 [Leuven, 1955], I). I am less inclined to accept this strict chronology, given that the Spirit figures prominently in *SF* 4 and is muted in much of the *HF*, and that the collections, as we have them, were compiled after their initial composition. Rather than arguing for the chronological priority of one collection over the other, it is more likely that the different parts of the *SF* and *HF* derive from a large time span (late 350s to early 370s). In general, dating Ephrem's hymn collections is notoriously difficult, because the hymns were collected only after his death. This means that different parts of individual collections could derive from different periods. Lewis Ayres suggests that the Trinitarian theology expressed in the *HF* "appears to possess features that clearly locate it as a pro-Nicene theology of the 360's and 370's" (Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* [Oxford, 2004], 229). I would suggest, instead, that *parts* of the theology fit well within the 360s and 370s, but other parts could well be earlier.

15 Khaled K. Anatolios identifies a common belief shared by fourth-century writers that "[t]he Lordship of Christ was verbalized through the exalted titles scripturally applied to him, such as God, Lord, Word (*Logos*), Wisdom, Power, Light, Life. . . . Regardless of how they were designated, any serious participant in the fourth-century debates was compelled to explain how these titles applied to Christ" (K. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids, 2011], 37).

16 See Peter P. Bruns, "Arius—hellenizans?—Ephrām der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit," *ZKircheng* 101 (1990): 47–52; Griffith, "Faith Seeking Understanding," (n. 4 above), 40–43; U. Possekkel, "Ephrem's Doctrine of God," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. A. B. McGowan, et al. (Leiden, 2010), 202; P. Russell, "An Anti-neo-Arian Interpolation in Ephraem of Nisibis' Hymn 46 on *Faith*," *StP* 33, ed. E. Livingstone (Louvain, 1997): 568–72. Recently, exception has been taken to this by Lewis Ayres (*Nicaea* [n. 14 above], 230–31).

For an assessment of the literature, see Wickes, *St. Ephrem* (n. 23 above) *the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith*.

17 For a critical assessment of how Ephrem has been situated within these controversies, see J. T. Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: The Hymns on Faith* (Washington, DC, 2015). In his treatment of speech and silence in Ephrem, Paul Russell does explicitly connect Ephrem's views on language to his rebuttal of Eunomian ideas ("Ephraem the Syrian on the Utility of Language and the Place of Silence" *JECrSt* 8, no. 1 [2000]: 26). However, Russell's goal is not to trace the connections between Ephrem and Eunomios, but to articulate the theological role of speech and silence within Ephrem's corpus on its own terms.

18 Possekkel, "Ephrem's Doctrine of God," 214–15.

simply by the noun *name* (*šmā*);¹⁹ and names that apply to God in a metaphorical and temporary way that he terms *borrowed* (*š'īlā*) or *transitory* (*'ābūrā*), and sometimes simply by the noun *title* (*kūnāyā*).²⁰

Ephrem initially addresses divine names in *HF* 5.5–6. From Ephrem's perspective, divine naming involves a fundamental crossing of a categorical border—between that which makes and that which is made—and so he begins his treatment with a general statement of the necessary distinction between the Maker (*'ābūdā*) and what he has made (*'bādeh*): “The Maker cannot / be compared to what he has made (*lā māšē / d-nepḥam leh 'bādeh*).”²¹ Nevertheless, the Maker has accepted precisely this impossible comparison, and the distance between the two has been overcome by love: “The Lord, in his love, wanted / to confer his names upon that which he had made” (*šbā b-ḥūbeh / nqannē šmāhaw[hy] l-'bādaw[hy]*).²² Thus, humans have been given names that, in reality, belong to God alone: “Priests and kings, according to grace, / Put on your titles (*kūnāyēk*), / and Moses and Joshua, your names (*šmāhēk*).”²³ Such a gift inevitably invites the comparison that Ephrem has already deemed impossible, which he then articulates fully in *HF* 5.7:

Merciful is the Lord,
Who has put on our names
To the point that he was humbled
And depicted himself as a mustard seed.
He has given to us his names;
He has taken from us our names.
His names have made us great;
Our names have made him small.

19 *šrārā*: *HF* 22.6; 29.3; 44.2; 46.4; 61.14; 62.11; 63.1.10. *ḥattītā*: *HF* 53.13 and 62.12. *gmīrā*: *HF* 44.2–3. *qaddīšā*: *HF* 44.3. *šmā*: *HF* 53.13.

20 *š'īlā*: *HF* 22.7; 44.2; 46.4, 12; 52.2; 62.7, 13; and 63.10. *'ābūrā*: *HF* 44.2. *kūnāyā*: *HF* 63.10. See, though, 63.6, where *kūnāyā* and *šmā* are synonymous.

21 See here also Possekkel, “Ephrem's Doctrine of God,” 212. All translations are from the author unless stated otherwise.

22 Brock offers the classic explication of Ephrem's linguistic understanding of the incarnation in *Hymns on Paradise* (n. 11 above), 45–49; and *Luminous Eye* (n. 12 above), 60–66.

23 Regarding Ephrem's point in the last stich, the names Jesus and Joshua are identical in Syriac (both are *yešū*). The reference to Moses is likely based upon Ex. 4:16, where the Lord tells Moses that he will be Aaron's God.

Thus, there is an exchange: God grants humans the ability to use his names, and these names exalt humanity. At the same time, God accepts names that “make him small” and render him comprehensible to humanity. While in this passage Ephrem does not use terminology from the true/borrowed dichotomy, the distinction is reflected in such comments as “[the Lord] has given to us his names” and “has taken from us our names.”

Ephrem's understanding of scriptural names as borrowed stands within a theological tradition that can be called *accommodationist*, according to which scriptural language represents God's accommodation of himself to human ideas.²⁴ Moreover, his view of scriptural language as borrowed—by which he means, for the most part, anthropomorphic terms applied to God—is relatively easy to understand: God uses terms that are ill-fitted if taken literally, but that, if understood correctly, are pedagogically sound. Thus, scripture's reference to God's ears show that he hears us; references to his eyes show that he sees us: “And though in his essence he has neither anger nor regret, / he has put on their names on account of our weakness.”²⁵ God's borrowing of human language arises from his desire to communicate himself to humanity. As a result of this desire, he diminishes himself to the level of human tongues.²⁶

Not all of God's names, however, fall within this category of borrowed; some names Ephrem calls true. With this category, he indicates names that move in the opposite direction from borrowed: rather than God taking a human phenomenon upon himself, true names

24 Within the Christian tradition, the classical exposition of this can be found in Origen's *On First Principles*, bk. 4. S. D. Benin (*The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* [Albany, 1993], chaps. 1–3, 5–6) surveys the development of an accommodationist theology from Justin through the Rabbis. Though he does address Ephrem, he deals only with what he calls the “negative” side of accommodation, namely, the idea that Jewish law arose in order to accommodate Jewish propensity toward disobedience.

25 *HF* 31.1. The place of accommodation within Rabbinic thought is outside the scope of this article, but there are interesting parallels between Ephrem's understanding of accommodation and that attested in Rabbinic sources. See Benin, *Footprints*, 129–31.

26 Interestingly, Ephrem uses the language of borrowing only when addressing the issue of anthropomorphisms in Scripture. When he treats scriptural language that is obviously metaphorical, he does not seem concerned with explaining or defending this language (e.g., *HF* 62.3).

descend from above and rest upon humans. Ephrem explicitly articulates this distinction in *HF* 44.2:

He has names perfect and true (*gmîrê w-battîtê*),
 And he has names borrowed and transient (*s'îlê
 w-'âbûrê*).
 He has quickly put them on and quickly taken
 them off.
 He has regretted, forgotten, and remembered.
 And as you have affirmed that he is both just
 and good,
 Affirm that he is Begetter, and believe that he is
 Creator.

In his construction of the category of true names, Ephrem echoes late ancient linguistic theories that saw language as natural. According to this view, a name and the thing to which it refers possess a natural relationship to one another, rather than one born of mere convention. The classic exposition of this view comes from Plato's *Cratylus*. In it, one of Socrates' interlocutors, Cratylus, argues for a formal, innate relationship between names and the content they convey.²⁷ For both Plato and, later, the Stoics, this natural fit between names and their meanings can be attributed to the work of certain primordial name-givers who correctly intuited the nature of that which they named.²⁸ Ephrem does once present Adam in the role of ancient name-giver,²⁹ but for the most part the figure of a primordial

name-giver is absent from his thought. More often than not he bases his argument for the truth of particular names on the linguistic connection between a term and its meaning. Within the *HF*, he focuses especially on the shared root of certain terms, and on overall semantic connotations. Within the *SF*, however, he bases the similarity of the terms *father* and *son* on their shared substance (*qnômâ*).

Ephrem summarizes his stance in *HF* 62.4: "By the name alone, [a name's] meaning can be perceived." That is, the root of the linguistic sign itself implies what it signifies: "'Thing-made' [suggests] its maker,³⁰ 'created' its creator, / 'fashioned' its fashioner, 'begotten' its begetter." Each pair of nouns have a single verbal root and a shared meaning. For example, *thing-made* (*'bādâ*) and *maker* (*'ābūdâ*) are nouns based on the verb *'bad*, "to make," and the meanings of both can be derived from their shared root.³¹

Ephrem also draws on the semantic connotations of various names to further his Christological arguments. While this view of language is not obviously related to natural theories of names, it still assumes that names applied to Christ can tell us concrete things about him. For example, in several places, he says that the term *Lord* indicates that Christ's nature is exalted.³² Likewise, while the names *father* (*'abbâ*), *begotten* (*yaldâ*), and *son* (*brâ*) are not cognates, Ephrem suggests that *father* implies the other two: if something is father, it means it has begotten, and that thing it has begotten can be called its son.³³

While Ephrem identifies a variety of names as true—*good*, *just*, *creator*, *king*, *priest*³⁴—his hymns

27 See *Cratylus* 383a–90a. For a concise treatment of this, especially as it develops in Philo's works, see J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 BC to AD 220*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 181; and DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea* (n. 6 above), 58–62. It should be pointed out, however, that Ephrem does not himself draw on *Cratylus*.

28 On Plato, see D. Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus* (Cambridge, 2003), 23; and A. Silverman, "Plato's *Cratylus*: The Naming of Nature and the Nature of Naming," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1992): 25–71. On the Stoics, see Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 181–82; and A. A. Long, "Stoic Reactions to Plato's *Cratylus*," in *Le style de pensée: Recueil de textes en hommage à Jacques Brunschwig*, ed. M. Canto-Sperber and P. Pellegrin (Paris, 2002), 395–411.

29 On Adam, in *HF* 62.2, Ephrem writes, "Who has failed to understand that Adam gave names / Even to the animals, and it seemed good to the Lord of all— / The names which the servant gave—and they were written and believed." Yet, the three final lines of the stanza make clear that Ephrem is drawing on shared notions of the Adamic origins of language simply as a polemical tool against his opponents: "But the sons of Adam feel no fear when their debating

battles / Against the name of the Son which the mouth of God / Proclaimed in their ears."

30 *'bādâ* ("thing-made") and *'ābūdâ* ("maker"), both of which derive from *'bad*, "to make."

31 The others are *brîtâ* ("created") and *bārūyâ* ("creator"), both of which derive from *brâ*, "to create"; *gbilâ* ("fashioned") and *gābūlâ* ("fashioner"), from *gbal*, "to fashion"; and *yaldâ* ("begotten") and *yālūdâ* ("begetter"), from *iled*, "to beget." See also *HF* 60.7 and 9, where Ephrem uses human (albeit scriptural) examples to demonstrate this phenomenon.

32 See *HF* 4.3; 23.4; 27.1; and 51.12.

33 See *HF* 5.14; 52.1; 60.2, 4, 9, 10; 62.3–12. Somewhat related to this view of language is Ephrem's emphasis on the grouping together of certain terms in Scripture: at *HF* 59.5, he argues that because *father*, *son*, and *spirit* are grouped together in Scripture, it tells us something about their relationship to one another.

34 See *HF* 44.1, 2; and 63.8.

repeatedly privilege the names *father* and *son* and, connected to these, *begotten* and *begetter*. We can explain Ephrem's emphasis on these particular names by pointing to three different aspects of his thought. Most fundamentally, Ephrem repeatedly assigns special status to the words spoken in the New Testament scenes of Christ's baptism, transfiguration, and crucifixion. The fact that the father utters the name *son* in the baptism and transfiguration scenes, and that Christ calls out to the *father* in the crucifixion scene establishes these names as unique within scripture.³⁵

The second reason for Ephrem's valuing of the names *father* and *son*, as well as, in this case, *spirit*, derives from their central role in baptism. Throughout the *HF*, Ephrem draws on shared baptismal practices to undercut his opponents' theological arguments. These arguments run throughout the *HF*,³⁶ demonstrated by 51.8:

Who can deny the three names
Whose hovering first ministered at the Jordan?
Truly, in the names into which your body was
baptized,
Look: bodies have been baptized. And though
the names
Of the Lord of all are many, we clearly baptize in
the Father, and the Son,
And the Holy Spirit. Praises to your greatness!

The final reason for Ephrem's valuing of *father* and *son* relates to polemics surrounding the Syriac version of Proverbs 8:22, a verse that, in the debates that followed the Council of Nicaea, formed a crucial Arian proof-text. From an Arian perspective, the verse showed unambiguously that the Son was a created being. Athanasios, in his *Orations against the Arians* (ca. 345), dealt with the verse at length, and argued that it referred to Christ's humanity. This interpretation of the verse would become standard in pro-Nicene literature.³⁷

In Syriac, Proverbs 8:22 reads, *māryā brān(y) b-rīš baryātā w-men qdām 'abdaw(hy) kulhôn*, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his creation, before all

his works." The Syriac version of the verse contains a linguistic ambiguity that is absent from the Greek and Hebrew versions. The noun *creation* (*baryātā*, lexeme *brītā*)³⁸ derives from the verb *he created* (*brā*),³⁹ and the noun *son* (*brā*) is likewise cognate to both terms.⁴⁰ These three terms—"creation," "created," and "son"—all share the same Syriac root. Yet, in the controversies of the fourth-century, they carried contradictory meanings. The identification of the Son as "created" sat at the heart of Arius's theology. Athanasios responded to Arius by arguing for the full divinity of Christ on the basis of the names "Father" and "Son": as neither father nor son could exist without the other, the divine names Father and Son must necessarily imply an eternal existence.⁴¹ Though Ephrem never states it outright, the relationship between these key terms seems to be formative for his repeated emphasis on root *brā* and its theologically contradictory derivatives.⁴²

These true names stand at the heart of Ephrem's view of language in the *HF*. As he understands it, they provide the glue necessary to hold together the rest of scripture's names, and denying them would result in the inability to comprehend any of God's names. Ephrem states this unambiguously in *HF* 4.4.3: "Be mindful of his perfect and holy names. / If you deny one of them, they all fly off and away. / They are bound one {to one another},⁴³ and they bear everything."

Within the *HF*, Ephrem's primary defense of the existence of true names is through a rhetorical appeal to their place in scripture and ritual. On this point, Ephrem's articulation of true names within the *HF* is as noticeable for what it lacks: Ephrem never posits a metaphysical grounding for the truth of these true

38 Syr., *brītā* (ἄδων in Greek, בְּרִית in Hebrew), can also be rendered "creature," which would result in a verse that reads, "The Lord created me as the first of creatures."

39 When the first person singular direct object is added, it becomes *brān(y)*. In Greek, this is ἐκτίσέν με and in Hebrew, קָנִי.

40 Again, this is not something that would feature in Greek-speaking polemics surrounding Prov. 8:22.

41 The argument recurs throughout Athanasios's *Orations against the Arians* (K. Metzler and K. Savvidis, eds., *Athanasius Werke*, vol. 1, pt. 1, fasc. 2 [Berlin and New York, 1998]). See especially *Orations* 1, chapters 2–34.

42 This comes out especially in *HF* 61–62.

43 Syr., *ḥad b-ḥad*, supplied by Beck's manuscript C. (The alternate reading is indicated here with brackets.) Manuscripts A and B have *ḥad ḥad* "they are each."

35 See *HF* 51.7; 63.2–4.

36 See *HF* 28.12; 49.4; 52.3; 62.13; 63.1–5; 65.5; 66.6; 67.10.

37 See Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 109 and Ayres, *Nicaea* (n. 14 above), 110.

names. This absence is even more surprising given the prominence of such explanations within his *SF*.

It is in the second and fourth *SF* that Ephrem speaks about names at length. His thought in these sermons is not radically different from what we have seen in the *HF*, but there are important divergences. For example, in the *SF*, Ephrem never references borrowed names,⁴⁴ but is concerned solely with those that are true, and, more specifically, with the names *father*, *son*, and *spirit* (as opposed, for instance, to *good*, *creator*, and similar names that Ephrem references in the *HF*). Moreover, in these sermons, Ephrem never specifically uses *true* as an adjectival modifier of *name*, though he does use phrases such as “in name and in truth.”⁴⁵ Finally, and most significantly, in the *SF*, Ephrem bases the truth of the names *father* and *son* on their shared substance (*qnômâ*).⁴⁶

Reflecting on the names *father* and *son* through the metaphor of a tree and its fruit, Ephrem writes in *SF* 2.585: “The root of the name is the substance (*qnômâ*). By it names are bound. / Who would place a name on a thing whose substance does not exist?”⁴⁷ And again at 4.53: “Where there is nothing in substance, the name placed in the middle is vain. / That which has not substance, its title too is empty.”⁴⁸ While this substance exists, and must be affirmed, it cannot be investigated or understood: “Father, Son, and Spirit are understood in their names. / Do not muse upon their substances (*qnômāyḥôn*): meditate upon their names.”⁴⁹

This way of explaining the relationship between the names *father* and the *son* is unique to the *SF*. This is evident when comparing the second and fourth *SF* to *HF* 76.1–9 and 77.14–23. The latter hymns are in many ways akin to the *SF*: both have similar meters (the meter of the *SF* is two lines of 7 + 7, whereas *HF* 76 and 77 are three lines of 4 + 4), and both use the

image of a tree and its fruit as a metaphor for the relationship between the names *father* and *son*. Yet, in the *HF* passages, there is not a single occurrence of the word *qnômâ*.⁵⁰ It is hard to interpret this difference as simply accidental. Rather, it seems that either the *HF* has abandoned the linguistic framework of the *SF*, or the *SF* has added something that was lacking in the *HF*. Examining the literary context of Ephrem's hymns can help us understand this discrepancy.

The Literary Landscape

Tracing influences in Ephrem's corpus is notoriously difficult. Outside of scripture, Ephrem rarely quotes other sources or alludes to known authors. Moreover, while the *HF* and *SF* are clearly written in response to specific, well-known controversies, he never once refers to an opponent by name in those works.⁵¹ An interpreter must therefore place Ephrem's texts and ideas alongside those of his predecessors or contemporaries, and discern whether any compelling parallels emerge. In what follows, I will trace a network of texts that help to broaden our understanding of Ephrem's view of divine names, and, in some cases, explain difficulties within his view of language. Nevertheless, the texts cited here are earlier or contemporary with him, written within a region proximate to him,⁵² and each discusses language in polemical contexts that bear similarities to Ephrem's own. Two of the sources—the *Gospel of Philip* and Aphrahat's *Demonstration 17*—derive from a Syriac-speaking milieu, while the two others—Aetios's *Syntagmation* and Eunomios's *Apology*—are Greek texts central to the fourth-century Christological debates.

The Syriac Milieu

References to the name of God abound in Syriac and Aramaic literature prior to Ephrem, mostly as simple

44 Based on my reading, he only twice uses the adjective *s'îlâ*, “borrowed” (*SF* 2.289, 4.49), and only in reference to angelic appearance.

45 See *SF* 2.581, 6.41.

46 In later Syriac, *qnômâ* will translate to the Greek ὑπόστασις, while *kyânâ* will translate to οὐσία. In Ephrem, however, *qnômâ* and *kyânâ* are often synonymous. See Possekkel, *Evidence* (n. 4 above), 69–74.

47 More colloquially, “Who would give a name to something whose substance does not match that name?” Ephrem also posits their unity on the level of will (2.601), love (2.625), and power (2.629).

48 See also *SF* 4.41, 45, and 49.

49 *SF* 4.129.

50 Or *kyânâ*, which can function as a synonym of *qnômâ*. See n. 46 above. *Qnômâ* does appear elsewhere in the *HF*, and once in a context of naming. At 36.14, Ephrem writes, “Each and every thing / is named (meštammah) as a single thing: / each body, each substance (*ḥad ḥad pagrâ ḥad ḥad qnômâ*).” Here, *qnômâ* refers simply to a thing that exists. At 72.12, Ephrem uses it to suggest the substance of God, but absent any discussion of names.

51 *Contra haereses* (n. 13 above), 22.20.

52 Aetios and Eunomios worked primarily in Antioch, which was accessible to both Edessa and Nisibis.

citations of the name as an uncontroversial object of devotion.⁵³ Ephrem stood within a religious tradition that showed particular veneration for the name of God, and this doubtless shaped his own emphasis and reflection upon divine names. However, the concern with divine names displayed in the *HF* and *SF* goes beyond simple devotion. In these works, Ephrem builds a polemical theology on the basis of the relationship between divine names. It thus makes sense to seek the backdrop of Ephrem's view of divine names within polemical treatises in which the issue of divine names plays a prominent role. If we limit our investigation to works created prior to Ephrem, and within his general vicinity, two rise to the fore: the *Gospel of Philip* and Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 17.⁵⁴

The *Gospel of Philip* survives only as a Coptic translation of a Greek work. Nevertheless, it almost certainly originates within the late second- or early third-century context of close Greek-Syriac interaction,⁵⁵ and many of its theological metaphors had a vigorous afterlife in Syriac religious thought.⁵⁶ While disjointed

in its overall structure, references to the names of God form one of the *Gospel's* most consistent features.⁵⁷ Murray has suggested that the *Gospel* provides the "clearest antecedents for Ephrem's doctrine" of names, but the resonances between the two works have not been explored.⁵⁸ The *Gospel* never specifically identifies divine names as true or borrowed, but, like Ephrem, the *Gospel* addresses names such as *father* and *son*, and in a clearly polemical context. In its defense of these names, the *Gospel* provides insight into the northern Mesopotamian background against which Ephrem's thought comes into view.

The *Gospel* places the names *god*, *father*, *son*, and *holy spirit* at the center of its understanding of divine names. According to the author, humans misinterpret these names when viewing them from a worldly, rather than heavenly, perspective.⁵⁹ Putting this in Ephremic terms, we could say that humans mistakenly interpret these names as borrowed, when they are, in fact, true. Within this array of divine names, the *Gospel* especially privileges the name *father*. At 54.5–10, the author writes, "One single name is not uttered in the world, the name which the father gave to the son; it is the name above all things: the name of the father. For the son would not become father unless he wore the name of the father. Those who have this name know it, but they do not speak it." Within the text's understanding of salvation, the son's exaltation is a linguistic one: he sheds the name *son*, and is clothed in the name *father*. While Ephrem would of course equally exalt the name *son*, he shares the *Gospel's* high valuation of divine names, and understands there to be a linguistic component to salvation, one that both sources articulate using

53 For example, *Odes of Solomon* 20.10 concludes: "Praise and glory to his name" (text in *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, vol. 1, *The Text*, ed. R. Harris and A. Mingana [London, 1916], 33). Here, the reference is, most likely, simply a Semitic circumlocution for God, as in the Hebrew *ha-shem*.

54 Other early Syriac texts also help to flesh out Ephrem's own background. For example, in the Syriac *Acts of Thomas* 117.2, the author, addressing God, states, "For our sake you were named with names" (Syriac text in W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, Edited from Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries, with English Translations and Notes* [Amsterdam, 1968]). Clearly, this parallels Ephrem, and forms a piece of the religious culture within which he was shaped. However, within the *Acts*, references to names are not sustained.

55 See the references to the meaning of Syriac terms in 56.7 and 63.22. On the religious culture of this Greek-Syriac borderland, see H. J. W. Drijvers, "East of Antioch: Forces and Structures in the Development of Early Syriac Theology," in *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (London, 1984), 1–27.

56 For example, its emphasis on the bridal chamber as a divine meeting place, its reference to the acquisition of the pearl, and its repeated allusions to baptism. I do not mean to imply that the *Gospel* directly influenced the use of these metaphors in later Syriac Christianity. Rather, their presence in this work suggests that these metaphors were common in an early Syrian context. On the dating of the work, see W. W. Isenberg, "Introduction," in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7, Together With XIII, 2**, *Brit. Lib. Or. 4926 (1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, vol. 1, *Gospel According to Thomas, Gospel According to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indexes*, ed. B. Layton (Leiden, 1989), 131–39. All translations of the *Gospel of Philip* are

taken from this volume. On the Syriac milieu of the *Gospel*, see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, 2nd ed. (London and New York, 2004), 25–26, and the literature cited there. Murray has also briefly noted the importance of the *Gospel* as an antecedent to Ephrem's view of names ("Theory of Symbolism" [n. 5 above], 10). M. L. Turner (*The Gospel According to Philip: The Sources and Coherences of an Early Christian Collection* [Leiden, 1996], 158–66) is skeptical of a Syrian provenance for the work, though she addresses only the passages where the author references Syriac terms.

57 See *Gospel of Philip*, 53.1–54.30; 56.1–15; 58.25–30; 59.10–15; 62.5–20, 27–30; 64.20–30; and 76.5–15.

58 Murray, "Theory of Symbolism," 10.

59 *Gospel of Philip*, 53.23–54.5.

the language of clothing.⁶⁰ The *Gospel of Philip* further envisions linguistic condescension in a way similar to that of Ephrem. Still in reference to the names *father* and *son*, the author writes: "But truth brought names into existence in the world for our sakes because it is not possible to learn it without these names."⁶¹ Similarly to Ephrem, the *Gospel* envisions language as a necessary component of divine revelation: God could not be comprehended by humans without a linguistic revelation.

While Ephrem never quotes the *Gospel of Philip*, the resonances between the two are striking: both privilege the names *father*, *son*, and *spirit*; both see salvation as having a linguistic component; and both defend divine names as necessary for human comprehension of God. On a more general level, the *Gospel of Philip* provides evidence of a concern with divine names in a Syriac-Greek milieu roughly a century before that of Ephrem's writing. Without claiming that Ephrem knew the *Gospel of Philip*, this work nevertheless helps us to sketch the religious and cultural background of Ephrem's thought. Read against the data of the *Gospel*, we can see Ephrem's reflections on divine language not just as responding to immediate Christological issues but as shaped within a particular tradition of reflection upon divine names.⁶²

This tradition is fleshed out further by Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 17. This particular text was written in Syriac sometime between 343 and 344 within the Persian Empire, to the east of Ephrem.⁶³ Aside from a possible parallel in Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron*,⁶⁴ these two fourth-century Syriac authors appear not to have known one another. Nevertheless, as with the *Gospel*, Aphrahat provides evidence of a

concern for divine names within a Syriac milieu, especially the name *son*. Aphrahat directs *Demonstration* 17 against "the Jews," who have accused his audience of calling "a human being 'God'" and "son of God." In response, Aphrahat sets out to defend the Christian practice of naming Christ "son of God."

Like the *Gospel of Philip*, Aphrahat never strictly makes a true/borrowed distinction among divine titles, though he appears to assume such a distinction. His method of argumentation in *Demonstration* is scripturally based, and he directs scriptural narratives toward an argument *a minore ad maius*. Pointing out that, within scripture, the names *son* and *god* have been applied to particularly righteous figures, he rhetorically asks: if they can be applied to righteous figures, why not to Christ?

While on some level Aphrahat's argument might seem to betray an adoptionist Christology, he clearly takes these names to refer properly to God, and to humans only by extension.⁶⁵ Thus, at §5, he states, "Though the name of divinity is great and honored, however, he did not withhold it from his righteous ones." Elsewhere, noting that Nebuchadnezzar was called "king of kings," Aphrahat writes, "Though he is the great King, he did not withhold a kingly name from human beings" (*w-kad hū malkā rabbā 'itaw[hy] šām malkūtā men bnay 'nāšā lā ḥsak*).⁶⁶ Both of these passages seek to articulate what Ephrem would call a true/borrowed distinction: the names *god* and *king* apply properly to God, but God mercifully lets humans use these divine names. Moreover, as with Ephrem (here, both he and Aphrahat diverge from the *Gospel*), Aphrahat seeks to interpret solely scriptural names and, toward the end, to defend the Christian practice of calling Christ *son*. Though their polemical contexts are different—Ephrem writes against Arians and Aphrahat against Jews—both evince a need to defend the Christological title *son*, and, to aid this polemic, to develop a hermeneutic for reading divine titles within scripture. In Aphrahat, this hermeneutic is still inchoate; in Ephrem it is much more refined.

60 On Ephrem's use of clothing language, see S. P. Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter*, ed. M. Schmidt (Regensburg, 1982), 11–40.

61 *Gospel of Philip*, 54.13–15.

62 To put this in sociological terms, the *Gospel of Philip* is part of the "web of significance" within which Ephrem's linguistic thought is suspended (C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York, 1973], 5).

63 The author's precise location cannot be known. See A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ, 2010), 2. All translations of Aphrahat are taken from this volume, with slight modifications.

64 *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 16.25 draws on Aphrahat's *Demonstration* 23:9. It is not clear, however, whether this portion of the *Commentary* is authentically Ephrem. See *ibid.*, 23.

65 On Aphrahat's Christology, with a particular emphasis on *Demonstration* 17, see J. E. Walters, "Son of Man, Son of God: Aphrahat's Biblical Christology," in *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East*, ed. V. S. Hovhannessian (New York, 2010), 9–17.

66 *Demonstration* 17.6.

The *Gospel of Philip* and Aphrahat's *Demonstration 17* both offer insight into the religious context within which Ephrem's understanding of divine names developed. Both of these texts indicate a broader Syriac milieu engaged in polemical treatments of divine names, especially, as explored by Ephrem, the names *father* and *son*. In rudimentary ways, moreover, both texts hint at Ephrem's distinction between true and borrowed names, but neither articulates it explicitly. The more speculative reflections found in the *Gospel of Philip* give way to a specific reflection on divine names found in scripture in *Demonstration 17*. In these two authors, we find the basic components of Ephrem's polemical defense of the names *father* and *son*. These basic components, however, were refracted by Ephrem specifically through the lens of the fourth-century Christological controversies.

Language in the Christological Controversies

Aetios (d. ca. 367) was a controversial philosopher and theologian in and around Antioch in the 340s to 360s; Eunomios was his disciple and interpreter.⁶⁷ Aetios wrote his main work, the *Syntagmation*, in 359.⁶⁸ The work contains thirty-seven theological statements on the subject of the "unbegotten deity" (περὶ ἀγεννήτου θεοῦ), which argue for unbegottenness as the definitive characteristic of divinity.⁶⁹ The thought expressed in this work is elliptical and, without the lens of Eunomios's *Apology*, difficult to interpret.⁷⁰ I will briefly address the view of language in the *Syntagmation*, along with its overlap with Ephrem, before turning to Eunomios's fuller explication of these issues.

67 See T. A. Kopeck, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1979); R. P. Vaggione, trans., *Eunomios: The Extant Works* (Oxford, 1987); and idem, *Eunomios of Cuzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford, 2000).

68 For text and translation, see L. Wickham, "The *Syntagmation* of Aetios the Anomean," *JTS* 19 (1968): 532–69. I have used this translation, with some modifications.

69 Wickham notes that the numbering of these sections probably does not go back to Aetios himself and that, though these statements are sometimes referred to as syllogisms, they do not consist in a logical conclusion following from two premises. Nevertheless, "[i]n the broader sense of 'deductive proof,' all are syllogistic" (ibid., 534).

70 Eunomios wrote his *Apology* ca. 360–61, soon after Aetios wrote the *Syntagmation* (see Vaggione, *Extant Works*, 5–9). I will not be dealing with his *Apology for the Apology* (Vaggione, ed. and trans., *Extant Works*), as it was written ca. 378–81, after Ephrem's death.

Theological language forms a central feature of Aetios's overall argument.⁷¹ On a basic level, Aetios sees divine names as functioning in one of two ways. Either they convey truth—that is, they accurately communicate the substance (οὐσία) of the deity they signify—or they represent the product of human invention, with no innate connection to what they signify. While theological discourse can allow the latter type of names—what Ephrem would call *borrowed*—one must know which names derive from human invention, and which are true. At the heart of this understanding of language sits the term *unbegotten*: for Aetios, it represents God's definitive name, and the name through which all other divine titles must be interpreted. If its true meaning is denied, then any potential for representing God with linguistic accuracy disappears: "If *unbegotten* has no meaning, a fortiori *begotten* reveals nothing."⁷² That is, if *unbegotten* is not taken to reveal the essence of what it signifies, then *begotten* likewise forfeits all semantic content, and theological language becomes meaningless. On the other hand, acceptance of the term *unbegotten* as constitutive of divinity demands that the name *son* be understood as "a mere expression" (ψιλῆς προσηγορίας), that is, a product of human convention.

Aetios's writing is dense, and his reasoning is not always clear. It is Eunomios's *Apology* (written only a year or two after the *Syntagmation*) to which we must look to flesh out Aetios's elliptical thought. Before turning to Eunomios, however, let us note some basic parallels between Aetios and Ephrem. First, and most simply, both Ephrem and Aetios assume that some divine names are true, while others are metaphorical. Second, both see the establishment of a fundamental name (or names) as central to the whole semantic project of divine naming: if a key name (or names) is not identified, then theological language descends into meaninglessness.⁷³ Third, at least as Ephrem articulates it in the *SF*, both assume the truth of a name to depend

71 DelCogliano points out the specifically theological character of heterousian reflections on language. That is, Aetios and Eunomios do not seek to formulate a general theory of names (much less whole linguistic systems) in the *Syntagmation* and the *Apology*, but, rather, to articulate a specific "theory of divine names" (DelCogliano, *Basil of Caesarea* [n. 6 above], 25–26).

72 *Syntagmation* 16.

73 On Ephrem's articulation of this principle, see *HF* 4.4.3, quoted above.

on its connection to a substance (οὐσία, for Aetios; *gnômâ*, for Ephrem). At the same time, while they agree in broad ways, they differ significantly in detail. Aetios identifies one true name, *unbegotten*, and he takes this as the sine qua non of meaningful theological speech. The term appears nowhere in the *HF* or *SF*; in those works it is precisely the term that Aetios identifies as a “mere name”—*son*—that Ephrem identifies, along with *father*, as true.⁷⁴

The *Apology* expands and clarifies the thought of the *Syntagmation*. Like the latter, the term *unbegotten* sits at the heart of Eunomios's project. After a general defense and dismissal of his opponents' claims, in *Apology* 8, Eunomios situates the title *unbegotten* (ἀγέννητον) at the center of his inquiry, and immediately broaches the topic of language: if we call God *unbegotten*, he avers, “we do not imagine that we ought to honor God only in name, in conformity with human invention (οὐκ ὀνόματι μόνον κατ' ἐπίνοιαν ἀνθρωπίνην σεμνύνειν οἰόμεθα δεῖν); rather, in conformity with truth (κατ' ἀλήθειαν), we ought to repay him the debt, which above all others is most due God: the acknowledgment that he is what he is.”⁷⁵ Eunomios's thought is clear: the name *unbegotten*, which he takes as definitive, represents either a human invention (which may or may not have any relationship to reality) or it represents truth (it accurately signifies God).

Unlike Aetios, Eunomios does not identify the name *son* as a “mere name,” born of human convention. Both *unbegotten* and *son* reveal natures truthfully; they simply reveal different natures. Therefore, when scripture calls the son *offspring* (γέννημα), it reveals him to be of a fundamentally different nature than the Unbegotten: “[W]e take it that his substance (τὴν ὑπόστασιν) is the very same as that which is signified by his name,” and that the name applies properly “to the substance” (οὐσία).⁷⁶

At the same time, Eunomios does take certain divine titles metaphorically. He accepts, for example, that scripture applies the term *father* to God. Unlike Ephrem, however, who takes this as a true name that God allows humans to borrow, Eunomios takes it as

a fundamentally human term that can apply to God only metaphorically. Here, Eunomios points out that some words sound the same, but have different meanings depending on the object to which they refer. The word *eye*, for example, means one thing when applied to humans; when scripture applies it to God, however, its meaning is clearly metaphorical (referencing, as Eunomios sees it, “God's care and protection”).⁷⁷ Language is thus slippery and, in establishing the things to which words genuinely refer, humans must “direct [their] attention to the concepts inherent in the underlying objects and accommodate the designations accordingly.”⁷⁸ That is, rather than warping reality to match linguistic habits, humans must match linguistic usage with the objects to which they refer. In the case of divine names, we can assume that where there are different names, there are concomitant differences in essence.⁷⁹

For the purposes of comparison with Ephrem, we can note three aspects of Eunomios's overall understanding of language. First of all, Eunomios insists that divine names cannot be seen as merely conventional, but must be true—they must represent reality. Second, names communicate the substance of what they signify: *unbegotten* signifies divinity, whereas *begotten* signifies a creature (of some sort). Third, when terms cannot apply to God literally, they must be taken metaphorically. *Father* is such a term. The parallels with Ephrem are clear: like Eunomios, Ephrem insists that certain divine names must be true, and he appears to distinguish these from names arrived at through mere convention. Further, at least in the *SF*, he seems to connect the ability for a name to be true to its relationship to a substance. Finally, he insists that certain anthropomorphic terms must be understood metaphorically. As with Aetios, what differs between Eunomios and Ephrem are the details of these shared views of language: for Ephrem, the names *father* and *son* are true names, and this truth is demonstrated by their presence in scripture.

74 While Ephrem frequently refers to God as *begetter*, he never refers to him as *unbegotten*.

75 *Apology* 8.1–3. All translations of Eunomios are from Vaggione, *Extant Works*, with slight modifications.

76 *Apology* 12.

77 DelCogliano (*Basil of Caesarea*, 38–39) refers to this aspect of Eunomios's thought as *homonymy*.

78 *Apology* 18.5–7.

79 *Ibid.*, 18.13–14.

Contextualizing Ephrem's Theology of Divine Names

When tracing the origins of Syriac literature, the corpora of Aphrahat and Ephrem dominate the available sources. Nevertheless, there is still much about these authors that is mysterious: How were they trained? What did they read? Outside of scripture, what did they know of earlier Syriac, Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew literature? To whom were they responding, within their own immediate context? The contents of these authors' writings shed little light on these vexing questions: for the most part they do not quote other sources, and rarely do they refer to historical figures or events by name. While the allusions that do exist provide invaluable evidence for how to situate their corpora within the late ancient world, there is much that is still hidden from us.

Ephrem's understanding of divine names is one aspect of his thought that was shaped in concert with other late ancient authors. Nevertheless, as is so often the case, he provides few clues as to who these authors might be. In the present article, I have tried to trace a literary context within which his understanding of divine names can be placed. While other parallels could inevitably be found,⁸⁰ by focusing on the *Gospel of Philip*, Aphrahat's *Demonstration 17*, the *Syntagmation* of Aetios, and the *Apology* of Eunomios, I have tried to sketch a plausible setting for the emergence of Ephrem's understanding of divine names.

The *Gospel of Philip* and Aphrahat's *Demonstration 17* provide evidence of sustained reflections upon divine names within Ephrem's proximate geographical and religious context. His reflections on

language do not literally parallel theirs; he never quotes or alludes to them in an identifiable way. Nevertheless, the *Gospel of Philip* and *Demonstration 17* both evidence concerns that sit at the heart of Ephrem's understanding of divine names—how can apparently human terms apply to an infinite God—and both form their reflections in polemical settings. While it appears very likely that Ephrem's understanding of names developed more immediately in response to the ideas of Aetios and Eunomios, their words would have reverberated for Ephrem within the context of the *Gospel of Philip* and *Demonstration 17*, and within the religious cultures they represent.

Nevertheless, as Ephrem uttered his reflections on divine names in the Northern Mesopotamian cities of the mid- to late fourth century, there is good reason to believe that the terse theological stylings of Aetios and Eunomios were at the center of his mind. While circumstantial evidence supports this—he mentions Aetios by name in another work and both Nisibis and Edessa were on major roads extending to and from Antioch—the evidence found within the works is all the more compelling. Aetios and Eunomios contributed to the fourth-century Christological debates by focusing on how divine titles convey meaning. These authors made some basic assertions about divine names: (1) God has a definitive name—*unbegotten*; (2) The term *unbegotten* (ἀγέννητος) signifies the divine substance (οὐσία) truthfully, just as *begotten* (γέννημα) signifies a created essence truthfully; and (3) other scriptural titles—for example, *eye, father*—convey various metaphorical senses, but cannot be applied to the essence of the deity itself.

Read as a polemical response to this basic linguistic framework, Ephrem posits the names *father, son, and spirit*, rather than *unbegotten*, as true. His emphasis on these names' scriptural origins is directed against the patently unscriptural character of *unbegotten*. Ephrem takes other scriptural titles as metaphorical, particularly anthropomorphic descriptions of divinity. His emphasis on the *qnômâ*, in the *SF*, that underlies these true names is redolent of the Aetian and Eunomian insistence that divine titles truthfully convey the οὐσία. It is thus striking that this use of *qnômâ* is absent from the *HF*. It could well be the case that the portions of the *SF* that refer to *qnômâ* represent an earlier stage of Ephrem's thought, one that he later abandoned in light of critiques of this aspect of Eunomian ideas about

80 C. Shepardson has noted similarities between the anti-Jewish and anti-Arian rhetoric of Ephrem and Athanasios (Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism* [n. 4 above], ch. 4). There are similarities, as well, in their reflections upon names in their anti-Arian works. In addition to the parallels found in Athanasios's *Orations against the Arians* (n. 41, above), in his *De decretis* 22, Athanasios insists that the name *father* must signify the substance of God. (I am grateful to an anonymous reader for pointing out the passage in *De decretis*.) In an earlier context, the so-called Second Creed of Antioch insisted upon the "truth" of the names *father, son, and spirit*: "And [we believe] . . . a Father Who is truly Father, and a Son who is truly Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Who is truly Holy Spirit, the names not being given without meaning or effect, but denoting accurately the peculiar subsistence, rank, and glory of each that is named, so that they are three in subsistence, and one in agreement" (quoted in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. [New York, 2006], 268–70).

language. Within the *HF*, while Ephrem still identifies these names as true, the assertion has become devotional, with an apophatic bent: they do not reveal an essence, rather, their use protects traditional Christian practice and assures an intimate relationship between father and son.

Ephrem's ideas, moreover, were embedded in works of poetry, and it is through these poetic works that they are mediated to us. By the term *poetry*, I do not mean to suggest only that these works are metered, but, more specifically, that they use language in an allusive, non-pragmatic way, and in an explicitly performative context. Though we can map out a literary background for Ephrem's understanding of divine names, this understanding is always refracted through a poetic and performative lens. Within the context of the works themselves, Ephrem's reflections on divine names need not be philosophically rigorous or logical,

and we cannot hope to find one-to-one correspondences between his thoughts and those of the thinkers of whose ideas he was aware. Yet exploring the complex intellectual fabric of the world Ephrem inhabited can help us to situate him within that world, and to better understand how his literary works communicated within it. Ephrem shows himself deeply immersed in the late ancient world. He refracts the nuances of earlier northern Mesopotamian debates about language, and poetically transforms debates taking place in the west.

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