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Ephraem the Syrian on the Utility of Language and the Place of Silence

PAUL S. RUSSELL

This paper attempts to trace the outlines of Ephraem the Syrian's ideas about the extent to which theological language can be usefully applied to the description of God. Centering on the *Hymns on Faith* and *Sermons on Faith*, the paper describes Ephraem's ideas about the usefulness of all languages used by created beings and how each of them is limited to dealing with realities close to it on the ontological scale. Ephraem is shown to believe that each language has its own range of usefulness but that no language is universally useful and that no verbal language suffices for the expression of the highest truths. Since all verbal languages function by defining what they describe, the highest realities, which cannot be subjected to definition because of their infinite natures, can be expressed only through the medium of silence. Silence is shown to be, in Ephraem's mind, the highest form of communication and to be used among the persons of the Trinity for their own communication.

Christians were still a persecuted group when Ephraem was born around the year 307 in or near the border city of Nisibis in the Syriac-speaking Eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. By the time he died in Edessa in June of 373, emperors involved themselves in matters of church discipline and doctrine, and Nisibis had been lost to Roman rule forever. Though we know very little of Ephraem's life,¹ his writings reflect this age of rapid

1. Paul S. Russell, "St. Ephraem, the Syrian Theologian," *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (1998): 79–90, provides a brief introductory overview of his life and thought. The introductions to some recent collections of his works in English are convenient helps for those beginning to read Ephraem: Edward G. Mathews, Jr., and Joseph P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian Selected Prose Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994) has a general introduction that is particularly full and useful. Sebastian Brock's introduction to *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990) and Kathleen McVey's to *Ephrem the Syrian:*

change and religious vibrancy and provide a window into the life and mind of a prolific, thoughtful Christian writer whose years were spent in Mesopotamia, a region with a very different cultural mix and set of religious and social forces at work than most early Christian writers knew.

It is representative of Ephraem's cultural *milieu* that his most characteristic writings should be the more than 400 hymns and verse homilies that have survived to our day. Though he seems to have been known during his lifetime as an interpreter of Scripture,² virtually all of his work seems to be pastoral in nature, intended to be heard and read by the wider membership of the Church, rather than for the delectation of a small group of intellectuals.³ Ephraem seems, in fact, to have functioned as a choir director and hymn writer for most of his active life, designing the vast majority of his works for inclusion in the community's liturgy. This use of Ephraem's work has never ceased in the East, where Ephraem's hymns are still sung from southern India to the Arctic Circle.⁴

The cultural gulf between Ephraem's environment and that of modern Western scholars has made proper understanding of his work difficult. Westerners, raised with ideas of serious theology being framed in dry academic prose, have been unwilling to recognize the theological content of Ephraem's metrical writings.⁵ As Griffith puts it:⁶

His style of religious discourse was not academic; it was deeply contemplative, based on a close reading of the scriptures.

This contemplative tone has led modern scholars to think of Ephraem as a man apart from the pull and push of the fourth-century theological

Hymns (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989) are good, clear, and accessible. Koonammakkal Thoma Kathanar, "Changing Views on Ephrem," *Christian Orient* 14.3 (1993): 113–20, contains discussions of many basic points about Ephraem's life, works, and their proper understanding. Brock's *The Luminous Eye* (rev. ed.) (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992) is the only book-length treatment of Ephraem that deals with his work for nonspecialists.

2. Sidney H. Griffith, "*Faith Adoring the Mystery*": *Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997) addresses this aspect of Ephraem's work, pp. 6–17 discuss his life and what survives of his exegetical writings.

3. Cf. Griffith, "*Faith Adoring the Mystery*," 8ff., and Kathanar, "Changing Views," esp. 121–22.

4. Cf. Sidney H. Griffith, "A Spiritual Father for the Whole Church: St Ephraem the Syrian," *Sobornost* 20.2 (1998): 21–40.

5. Kathanar, "Changing Views," provides quotations of some notorious examples of this.

6. "*Faith Adoring the Mystery*," 8.

debates that consumed the Christians of his day and take center stage in modern accounts of the era. There has been no place for him in their minds or in their reconstructions of his age.⁷

Regular readers of Ephraem's works will find, however, that his mind is clearly fixed on what he is trying to say more than on how to say it beautifully (his intent is to engage the theological questions of the day fully in an entirely theological manner) and that he has a completely coherent theological understanding that rests on a foundation that has been carefully considered and constructed.

The theological debates sparked by the confrontation between Arius and his bishop Alexander in Alexandria consumed much of the attention of the theologically active portion of the Christian Church for the whole of Ephraem's adolescent and adult life. His works contain quotations from Arius and Arian writings⁸ and show a deep interest, not only in the push and pull of the argument, but in the theological issues that the argument brought to the fore.

However one might choose to characterize the distinction between Arius and the later figures who were stigmatized as his followers,⁹ it is

7. A very striking example of this neglect is found in R. P. C. Hanson's 875-page treatment of the Arian debates: *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), which manages to avoid mentioning Ephraem in either text or footnote, despite the fact that he produced hundreds of pages of works directly addressing these debates and the concerns they raise. Peter Bruns, "Arius Hellenizans? Ephraem der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit," *ZKG* 101 (1990/91): 21–57, addresses this involvement directly. Cf. Paul S. Russell, *St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians* (Kottayam: Saint Ephrem Ecumenical Research Center, 1994) for an attempt to demonstrate some aspects of this involvement.

8. E.g., *Hymns on Faith* 21.7 (cf. Eunomius, *Apology* 28.19–24, in Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987], 74), *Hymns on Faith* 52.13 (cf. Eunomius, *Apology* 8 and 9; Vaggione, *Eunomius*, 40–44) and *Hymns on Faith* 61.9 (cf. Arius' *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, sec. 2, in Athanasius, *De synodis* 19 [PG 26:709]). (All translations of Ephraem's words in this paper are my own. "H" signals a quotation from the *Hymns on Faith* and "S" one from the *Sermons on Faith*.)

9. Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1–51, provides the best theological account of the "Arian" strain of thought in the ancient period. Hanson, *Search*, is good for the history of the period. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987) is important for a clear picture of Arius and his background, and Thomas A. Kopecek, *A History of Neo-Arianism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979) and Michel R. Barnes and Daniel H. Williams, eds., *Arianism after Arius* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Ltd., 1993) are important for the later stages of the quarrel. The collection of articles published by Robert C. Gregg, ed., *Arianism: Historical and Theological Reassessments* (Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1985) is also important.

clear that the central points at issue during the decades from the 320s to the 380s did not remain frozen, but rather developed and moved as the interests of the participants changed or the cast of characters turned over, whether from natural mortality or exile ordered by the civil authority. The extreme concern shown by Ephraem in the works now found in the two collections called the *Hymns on Faith* and the *Sermons on Faith* is directed so clearly against opponents who seem to him to claim too much knowledge of God and is so frequently repeated in these writings that we can be certain that many of them spring from the phase of the controversy involving the “Neo-Arian” writers.¹⁰

A difficulty attaching to the study of Ephraem’s writings is found in the fact that, though much of the material in these two collections deals with the question of the proper approach to theology and the incomprehensibility of God, that does not mean that all the works in those collections address these topics or even date from the same period of Ephraem’s life. It is generally held, following the work of A. de Halleux,¹¹ that, though the collections of Ephraem’s works are very stable in the manuscript tradition and have very early roots, they do not represent the intent of the author but rather the convenience and interests of later readers. The modern reader of Ephraem, with few exceptions, should regard the works before him as individual entities that cannot be securely dated or linked with each other. The *Hymns on Faith* and the *Sermons on Faith* are not polished cycles of work in the manner of Vergil’s *Eclogues* or *Georgics*, but are large collections of pieces that seemed to later readers to be similar to each other in content, tone, or meter. These two collections, despite the tendency of the hymns to be gathered in subcollections by meter, seem, to me, to be chosen because of the topics the individual works address.

10. Knowledge of God does not appear to have been a topic of discussion in the early stages of the Arian Controversy. Michael E. Butler, “Neo-Arianism: Its Antecedents and Tenets,” *Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Theological Quarterly* 36 (1994): 355–71, makes this distinction on 365ff., offering the following quotation from Arius’ *Thalia*, found at Athanasius, *De synodis* 15 (PG 26:708c) in support: “It is clear that it is impossible for that which has a beginning to conceive of how the Unoriginate is, or to grasp the idea.” Since both sides of the argument at that early stage agreed on the incomprehensibility of God, there was no need for the topic to be discussed. Ephraem’s defense of the incomprehensibility of God against the Neo-Arians is discussed in Paul S. Russell, *St. Ephraem and St. Gregory*, 121–45.

11. “Une clé pour les Hymnes d’Éphrem dans les MS. Sinai Syr. 10,” *Mus* 85 (1972): 171–99 and “La transmission des Hymnes d’Éphrem d’après le MS Sinai Syr. 10. F. 165v–178r,” *OCA* 197 (1974): 21–63.

II

Acquiring a grasp of the basic elements in an author's theological framework is not often an easy matter. Unless he should happen to write a treatise directly addressing fundamental questions of philosophy and theology, the reader will be forced to try to construct an organized picture by collecting stray comments or by reading between the lines in an effort to catch a glimpse of the underlying pattern of assumptions. Ephraem the Syrian, for all his prolific output, seems never to have set down a clear statement of his guiding principles, this sort of writing being foreign to his environment and not obviously useful or interesting to his audience. As an author who is renowned for arguing on behalf of the mystery of God and the need for reverent reticence in theological matters, he is often thought of as a thinker who is happier on a cloudy day than on a clear one. I think, however, that this is a misunderstanding, both of his position and of the convictions that impel him to hold it. By examining two of his most theologically rich collections of works, the *Hymns on Faith* and the *Sermons on Faith*, I hope to be able to show that Ephraem had a carefully considered idea of the extent of the usefulness of theological reflection as well as a careful sense of the place of silence in the enterprise.¹² Although he was caught up in a very tumultuous period in the development of the Christian theological voice, Ephraem shows clear signs of holding to a position that springs from personal conviction rather than from running to extremes either in reaction to, or in support of, other theologians engaged in controversy during his lifetime.

12. A number of scholars have addressed the topic of Ephraem's theological language and his ideas about the theological enterprise: Sebastian Brock, "The Poet as Theologian," *Sobornost* 7.4 (1977): 243–50, David D. Bundy, "Language and the Knowledge of God in Ephrem Syrus," *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 5 (1986): 91–103; Sidney H. Griffith, "Faith Seeking Understanding in the Thought of St. Ephraem the Syrian," in George Berthold, ed., *Faith Seeking Understanding: Learning and the Catholic Tradition* (Manchester, NH: Saint Anselm College Press, 1991), 35–55, Andre de Halleux, O.F.M., "Mar Éphrem Théologien," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 35–54; N. El-Khoury, "The Use of Language by Ephraim the Syrian," *SP* 16 (1985): 93–99, Thomas Koonammakkal, "Divine Names and Theological Language in Ephrem," *SP* 25 (1993): 318–23 (as well as his "Changing Views on Ephrem" cited in n. 1 above); Robert Murray, S.J., "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6–7 (1975–76): 1–20 are all useful studies but, with the exception of brief mentions by Griffith and de Halleux, neglect treating the topic of silence and its relationship to the use of theological speech. Because of this, it is difficult to see in them Ephraem's complete understanding of the limits of the theological project. This paper attempts, through the examination of Ephraem's ideas of the limits of both speech and silence in theology, to present his position on this question in a more rounded form than has been attempted before.

As a brief glance toward the *milieu* in which Ephraem was working, and as an important reminder of how fundamental the issues discussed in the brouhaha we commonly call the Arian Controversy had become toward the end of his life, I would like to set before you the following quotation, which is taken from that bogie man of the fourth century, Eunomius of Cyzicus:¹³

God does not know more about his own essence than we do, nor is that essence better known to him and less to us; rather, whatever we ourselves know about it is exactly what he knows, and, conversely, that which he knows is what you will find without change in us.

Ephraem's great concern with basic theological and philosophical issues is only comprehensible when the strength and clarity of the voices of those holding other views is appreciated.

It is important to remind ourselves of how active these questions of the nature and use of theological language and the possible extent of its competence were in the last twenty years of his life (353–73). The tone of Ephraem's considerable involvement with these matters makes them appear to be topics that were discussed among his audience, as he refers to them without introduction, in the manner of one commenting on common concerns. The focus of the pieces in both the collections we will consider supports the conclusion that Ephraem's concern and his manner of expressing his views spring from the soil of the Aëtian and Eunomian stages of the Arian Controversy.¹⁴ Ephraem is not, however, a captive of his surroundings. As we proceed with this study, he will be revealed as having a very positive view of language, though one more limited and nuanced than Eunomius seems to have had.

The first aspect of his ideas on language to notice is how active he envisions human engagement with it to be. Ephraem has great reverence for Scripture and the trustworthiness of the information it contains, but he never idolizes it in a way that would put it outside the normal realm of language as he sees it. Just like any communication expressed in human language, Scripture provides the hearer with an object with which he can grapple.

Once the revelation is cloaked in human language, it has entered the realm of human activity and is accessible to our minds. It can be investi-

13. Fragment ii in Vaggione, *Eunomius*, 178.

14. This is discussed in Paul S. Russell, *St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory*, esp. 121–45.

gated and ruminated on by human beings in their attempt to glean from it all the good they can extract. In *Hymn 38* Ephraem says:¹⁵

Let us be husbandmen of the Word of Truth.
Come, let us work it like the earth.

Our language as found in Scripture, then, is not only available to us, it also has productive capabilities inherent in it, as the earth has in it the power to support the growth of plants, and working it well can bring forth more and better fruits than would be available if it were left to produce on its own. Not only do humans have the power to recognize this productivity, in Ephraem's eyes, but they also have the ability to increase it by their effective actions. Ephraem thus, in the face of the apparently complete confidence of Eunomius, does not respond by denying any power and value to human reflection and language and does not try to lift language (even scriptural language) beyond the reach of human beings to keep it inviolable. Instead, he argues for our involvement with it and even describes humans as increasing the usefulness of scriptural language through intelligent action, but he does *not* see in this process an endless vista of possible progress in knowledge, nor does he think that its reach can extend as far as Eunomius envisions. For Ephraem, language is a tool that is fit for some tasks, but not for others.¹⁶ So, in the same hymn cited above, he says to God:

- 8 Your scale weighed [and] gave out silence and speaking
and granted that we might do the same to You.
My brothers, doesn't nature teach that with one pan [of a scale]
without its counterpart we cannot weigh anything?
- 9 We will use silence and speaking.
Our speaking will be like the daytime
and our silence will be like the night
so that both the hearing and the tongue may seek rest.
- 10 They resemble their similitudes
in that our teaching of Truth is like an open light,
and silence and stillness are like the night,
and a restful sleep is very sweet.
- 13 Blessed is the Good One Who has given us speech
and blessed is the Righteous One Who has increased silence.
He gave us directions in which we could dispute

15. H 38.11.1–2.

16. H 38.8–10 and 13.

and held [us] back [from] others so that we could keep silence about them, just like the Teacher of All.¹⁷

There is a natural balance in the way that God provides his creatures with tools for this sort of project. The speaking, from our point of view, is the active part of the operation, as the day is the time in which we accomplish whatever we will of our work. In the night we find our strength to use our powers during the day, and in the night we find the silence that is appropriate when certain matters are addressed.¹⁸ As Ephraem says in *Hymn* 39.5,

The mouth is akin to, and describes as members of its own family,
whatever is spoken and can be translated
and be easily investigated
and can be discovered and explained.
But silence is the limit of whatever cannot possibly be discovered and
explained.
For our mind is not akin to its hiddenness.

The boundary between silence and speaking is as natural as that between light and darkness.

The second of the *Sermons on Faith*¹⁹ has a passage in which Peter's reticence in addressing Christ at the Last Supper, portrayed in John 13, is praised. Instead of presuming to speak directly to Christ, Peter makes use of the Beloved Disciple as an intermediary.²⁰ This humility and unwillingness to use his speech beyond the appropriate bounds is praised by Ephraem as evidence of Peter's grasp of the proper place of speech and silence. Lines 55 and 56 say:

He was talkative in every place; in this place, alone, was he still.

which shows clearly Ephraem's conviction that an important requirement for the proper use of human speech is knowing when not to use it. This success is contrasted a few lines later in the same sermon with the inappropriate behavior of his opponents who refrain from what would be acceptable speech only to engage in the unacceptable:²¹

17. Cf. H 56.1–6, where the simple beliefs (and silence) of Noah and Abraham are praised as examples to be followed. They were “those fathers who believed simply” (56.1.1).

18. Cf. H 67.5 on silence as limiting inquiry.

19. ll. 41–64.

20. Abraham is given as a similar example in S 3.69–88 of one who avoids speech and responds to God's presence with action.

21. 2.119–26.

Every creature is lovely to you	without searching and without investigation.
You have disregarded the finite,	but you meditate on grasping the extent [of the infinite].
You are in the presence of the Creation, peacefully,	but in the presence of the Creator, with disputation.
You are completely simple and still in the presence of everything	but you are disorderly in the presence of the Lord of Everything.

Ephraem, however, does not value human silence *more* than human speech, but rather sees it as necessary and appropriate with regard to certain subjects in certain circumstances. *Hymn 57.10* is indicative of this, in that it shows that each of these has its place and each *must* be used when appropriate for the best result to be obtained:²²

You may learn admirably from your own lowly word
a glorious word: the Word of God.
If your own word ever does not know what to say,
honor with your silence the Word of your Creator,
Whose silence cannot be inquired into.

We must not allow ourselves to see Ephraem as an Eastern obscurantist. He *never* argues against the use of speech in theology, only against the *inappropriate* use of speech.²³

There are, then, real virtues in human language that Ephraem not only recognizes but encourages his listeners to take full advantage of. The working of the word of truth like the earth of a field is an image of intense effort and activity. It presumes intelligent involvement on the part of those who undertake it and credits them with sufficient mastery of the medium to draw from it more than lies exposed on the surface. It does not, however, envision language as a tool with unlimited applicability or see human beings as able reasonably to apply language to all objects in all situations. The final religious approach to God, like the yearly entrance of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies,²⁴ is a time for silence. Therein lies

22. Cf. 1.19.

23. Thus, H 2.4 and 6 are clearly comments on silence as protection from *presumptuous* speech, and H 5.13 a warning to avoid self-destructive presumption in talking about God beyond the limits of what we can sensibly undertake. In this way, H 7.4–6 provides two Gospel examples of appropriate reticence: the disciples witnessing Christ walking on the water and the Magi in the stable at Bethlehem.

24. Cf. H 8.7.

the great difference between Eunomius and Ephraem and therein lies Ephraem's idea of the utility of silence in reflection.

Speech, for Ephraem, is seen as a part of the equipment needed for successful theological reflection and communication of the knowledge gained by reflection. While useful in and of itself, the range and power of language is increased when it is accompanied by its counterpart: silence. Proper use of these two tools in balance with each other allows humans to respond to any topic that confronts them in an appropriate and reverent manner, while still engaging with it actively as far as their ability allows. Such is the outline of Ephraem's ideas on the applicability of human language to theological matters, when used by human beings. However, in Ephraem's mind, human beings are not the only ones who can make use of human speech, and exploration of his discussions of language *per se*, shows that he views it as not limited to the words of created human speech used by humans, but as extending far beyond the level on which we, ourselves, function. We will now turn to examine how human language can succeed when used by other beings and how other forms of speech might fare when applied to theological matters.

III

Besides the balance Ephraem sees in the use of human silence as a counterpoint to human speech, he also holds that a language exists on a higher plane than the one involving speech and words that we know. One result of this is that the limits circumscribing human language can be pushed back if they are approached by words wielded with wisdom and skill from beyond the human realm. The success of those who hold to the words of Scripture as opposed to the error of those who think they can do better is an illustration of this:²⁵

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| 165 | O learner, you must not fall sick
If he has departed from your
Lord, | if the disputer goes astray.
come, consider the Scriptures. |
| 169 | Because, where the disputers have
turned aside,
and where the teachers ²⁶
have erred, | the discerning have not been
ensnared,
the hearers have not been
disturbed. |

25. S 6.165–80.

26. The word used here is cognate with “Rabbi.”

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| 173 | It was not human speech
human speech is divisible | carrying the proclamation;
and falls every time something
depends on it. |
| 177 | The Proclamation of the Truth
Everything is borne by this
Word; | depends on the Word of God.
your learning depends on it,
learner. |

Does this mean that all we need do is cling to words that come from God in order to have dependable knowledge? If this were true, it would seem that *language* would be an instrument with universal competence that would succeed or fail depending on the hand that wields it. Further investigation, however, shows us that this is not Ephraem's idea at all. Ephraem's point here is that *human* language, when used as a tool by God, as it is in the Scriptures, is a more dependable and fertile medium than it can ever be on the tongue of a human being. Still, while the limits may be expanded by this divine intervention, they are not entirely erased. Each kind of language seems to be envisioned by Ephraem as having inherent in it a certain range of applicability beyond which no one can push it. If we look beyond his comments on human language to find remarks that address the question of language *per se*, we can see this principle at work, though it is never stated in the abstract.²⁷

Ephraem's view of language and its usefulness for the expression of truth and the enabling of communication makes clear that, the farther down the ontological scale of existence *any* language is directed, the more fully that language will inherently be able to address the task for which it is intended. As one climbs this scale, however, one finds that language diminishes in usefulness as one approaches the presence of God and fails entirely once one arrives in the presence. This pattern can only be brought out by collecting its constituent parts and viewing them side by side. Let us begin at the top of the scale.

For example, when Ephraem describes the angelic hosts as they are in Heaven, they are seen as standing in the presence of God in a state of awe:²⁸

The angels witness with silence; the Seraphim bless with applause.

The silent attendance of the angels is cast into sharper focus by the fact that, when the seraphim wish to express their approval and loyalty to the

27. See H 11.5–9 quoted below.

28. S 1.109–10. Cf. H 3.9–11 and 4.1 and 17 where silence greets any hint of inquiry and praise is the heavenly norm.

Son, they dare not try to cloak that message in words but resort to a wordless gesture that serves their purpose more fully. Ephraem elsewhere expresses at greater length this conviction that silence can, at times, achieve more than speech, when a creature approaches the creator.²⁹

This is suitable for the mouth:
 that it might praise and be still and,
 if it should be asked to run on,
 it would entirely resist, in silence.
 Then it will be able to comprehend,
 unless it runs on³⁰ in order to comprehend.
 Stillness is able to comprehend
 more than the insolent [person] who runs on.

It may be that Ephraem's idea of the nature of the gulf between the created and the creator is of a kind that makes him think reverent, silent contemplation a more effective approach than any kind of outright address. Perhaps the principle of "like being attracted to like" is present here in Ephraem's mind, since earlier in the same hymn³¹ he had declared to God:

Although You are more frightening than thunder,
 You are stillness which cannot be sensed
 and silence which cannot be heard.

If God is truly beyond the reach of the senses, then those who try to reach out to him with the tools they depend on in their daily lives will surely be at a loss. Approach to the divine can best be pursued by making oneself as much like it as possible, in the hopes of finding in that likeness some

29. H 4.13, cf. H 15.2 and 5. The reader should notice that neither of these two quotations advances the very un-biblical idea that Heaven is a silent place. The "prais[ing] and be[ing] still" of H 4 allows for all the "Holy, Holy, Holy"s that the Bible describes (e.g., Rev 4.8) but wishes to make a distinction between that kind of speech and speech that attempts description and definition. Description and definition require real knowledge of their object, which is exactly what Ephraem denies is possible for humans where God is concerned. Praise assumes no knowledge, only reverence. Thus, descriptions elsewhere in Ephraem's writings of the heavenly hosts in full tongue (e.g. *Letter to Publius* 21—text and Eng. trans. in Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Mus* 89.3–4 (1976): 261–305, at 291) should not be thought of as inconsistent with his position in these pieces, but rather as examples of appropriate, reverent praise.

30. "Running on," either in speaking too much or trying to proceed too far, is a way to lose what progress *can* be legitimately expected.

31. Stanza 5, lines 5–7.

common ground on which to proceed, or at least of gaining a closeness based on the resulting spiritual sympathy. The first step that Ephraem envisions in that likening process seems to be to keep quiet.

After all, in Ephraem's eyes, silence is not only a metaphor for God, it also wraps itself around the few true things we are able to know about God. Silence serves as the boundary separating our area of active engagement from the area in which we should not act. There is a sphere in which human beings can operate *vis à vis* God and not overstep the boundaries of reverence and propriety, but there are also firmly fixed boundaries beyond which we are not meant to go. In one hymn, while discussing the fact that there is a certain natural order among the persons of the Trinity, Ephraem says:³²

But, "How" and "Why," this is [wrapped] in the midst of silence.
Apart from the silence, and outside of it, speak praise.

Not only are the "How" and "Why" wrapped in silence, but even when we stand beyond the silence looking into it, Ephraem does not permit us to address these forbidden topics. We are to "speak praise"; that is, we are to give our assent to and declare our adherence to whatever the truth is that lies within the silence, but we are not to address our comments or thoughts to it. What is beyond the reach of our language to express is also beyond the bounds of what we are permitted to address. Most aspects of God, then, are shrouded strictly from our view, but outside that veil there are ways that we can actively engage with the divine. The contrast of speaking, and refraining from speech, about and to the divine that Ephraem has in mind is well described in *Hymn* 11, stanzas 5–9:

Behold, his ear is not able to hear great noise
and it also cannot hear still silence.
How can it hear the voice of the Son and the silence of the Father, for His
silence is eloquent, too?

"The heavens declare the glory of God."³³
Behold, the silence which whispers it all through every tongue.
Behold, this firmament which whispers proclaims to every tongue the glory
of its Maker.

32. H 23.15.1–2; cf. H 22.10–12, where silence is the seal on the door that protects knowledge of the Son and Father and H 40.4, where the unity of Three in One and the distinctions of each person are met with a similar silence.

33. Ps 19.1.

A person is too little to hear all the tongues.
 If he were capable of hearing the tongue of angels and the Spirit
 then would he be lifted up to hear the silence which the Father utters to the
 Son.

The speech of animals is foreign to our tongue.
 The speech of angels is foreign to every tongue.³⁴
 The silence by which the Father speaks to His Beloved is foreign to the
 angels.

It is good that, in the same way that He put on every likeness for us [to be
 able] to see,
 so He put on every voice in order to persuade us.
 [Only] One is able to see His nature and [only] One is able to hear His
 silence.

All the elements of the distinctions we have been sketching are found here: silence is found to speak (stanza 5), animals as well as angels are said to speak (stanza 8), the speech of God is clearly said to be foreign to the angels (stanza 8), and this speech of God is *silence*. The highest level of communication, that of God the Father to God the Son, is found not to take place in any special exalted language, but rather to be too special and exalted to involve any language at all: when a person of the Godhead really wishes to commune and to communicate with another, he keeps still. A variety of languages is depicted here with each one operating in its own sphere and according to its own abilities and pattern, and the divine silence has its place in that collection.

Now that we have reviewed Ephraem's statements on language and silence, we must take a moment to organize what we have seen in order to assess its character. Drawing out the implications of Ephraem's words should take two steps:

- 1) we must consider Ephraem's view of human language as a tool, and;
- 2) we must consider his view of silence as communication and how it relates to language.

1) Human words, when used as tools of communication, are finite things that serve to delineate and describe our thoughts by placing limits upon them. That is, they *define*, they draw the outlines of our meaning as the pen does in a pen and ink drawing.

Their usefulness can be enhanced in two ways: by increasingly skillful

34. Presumably because angels, being spiritual, speak their language without the use of tongues.

and knowledgeable wielding (the scale of possibilities begins with an uninstructed human speaker and extends all the way to the use of words by God in Scripture), and by the combination of speech with silence.

The former allows for ever better sketching of the outlines involved in the picture.

The latter avoids the introduction of incorrect elements in the picture and provides proper contrast (white against black) to cast into high relief the lines that *are* drawn so their significance can be ascertained and synthesized. Realizing one's limits and avoiding misleading false steps is a critical part of the successful use of the mix of speech and silence for humans. As Ephraem says of those who stray beyond these bounds:³⁵

His Son Who is from Him
 is also the [only] one Who is capable of Him,
 for whoever is foreign to His nature
 is also foreign to investigation of Him.
 He has gone badly wrong
 because there is no path that will lead [one] to the Hidden One.

It is important to see that Ephraem presents these erring steps as not only unhelpful to those who make them, but as actually carrying those people farther and farther away from the goal they seek. Trying to step beyond the limitations imposed by one's nature leads not only to failure, it also causes one to fail to make full use of the powers one actually, and rightfully, possesses.

The "speech" of animals and angels mentioned in the quotation from *Hymn* 11 above should be thought of as foreign languages we humans cannot understand that have varied suitability for discussing elevated topics but are still inherently limited by their nature as languages. The limits they labor under are shown by the line we read from *Sermons on Faith* 1.101–10 where the angelic hosts stand in the presence of God in awed silence. The principle is declared in *Hymn* 4.13 where "the mouth," *any* mouth, that is, is told to praise and then be still, rather than to try to advance beyond the proper sphere of its speech.

So, the outline of the complementary use of speech and silence in Ephraem's picture seems to be that, because speech is a positive action, its utility is limited to the realm in which its subject lies within its reach. In order for speech to succeed in addressing a topic, it must be properly directed, contain the necessary words in the proper combination, and not attempt to address what is beyond its power. Sufficient knowledge and

35. H 11.10.

intelligence can safeguard the first two of these criteria, but the third is controlled by the match between the nature of the speech and the nature of its target. If these two do not fit, the speaker must make use of silence to avoid misleading error. This is, however, not the only possible use of silence in communication, in Ephraem's opinion.

2) Silence is described by Ephraem not only as an absence, but also as a positive means of communicating: *Hymn* 11.6 states clearly that the way in which "the heavens declare the glory of God" is by a silence that "whispers through every tongue," that is, a silence that causes the whole of creation to speak of the glory of God. Ephraem envisions the heavens "declar[ing] the glory of God" without language, but this declaration is universal in its reception and not less effective for being wordless. Creatures, even subangelic creatures, can make use of silence as a means of communication, both on the giving and the receiving ends. Stanzas 6–10 in *Hymn* 11, though, make it even clearer that Ephraem thinks of silence as a multilevel means of communication in the same way he thinks of its counterpart, language.

It is interesting to note, however, that the silence of God, especially that which exists between Father and Son, is of an entirely different nature. Though the silence of creatures can be genuinely communicative, as we have seen with the heavens just above, and though silence (at least as far as I can imagine) is not obviously differentiated in one instance from another, Ephraem does, at times, seem to think of it as a positive rather than a negative thing: that is, as a presence rather than as an absence. This presence, like language, seems to be keyed to the user's ontological level. *Hymn* 11.8.3 says specifically:

The silence by which the Father speaks to His beloved is foreign to the angels.

Thus, at least in the mouth of God, silence is a *language*. This is clear,

- 1) because it is "foreign," as a language is "foreign," to the angels;
- 2) it is something that is *spoken*;
- 3) it is clearly a means of communication.

In this line we find, I think, the key for which we have searched and are ready to fill in the rest of the pattern of Ephraem's thought.

I understand Ephraem's position on language and silence to be as follows:

Language is the means by which truth, that is, correct ideas and facts, are communicated. However, a language that consists of words is one that is inherently self-limiting. Since it depends on drawing outlines and

establishing limits, it is capable of expressing only those things which *have* limits and is capable of operating only on the ontological level for which it has been designed. It is, by nature, incapable of expressing the truth about something that exists without limits. Thus, if the infinite divine is to express itself fully and accurately, without limits and without distortion due to selectivity, it cannot do so by means of verbal speech. The only speech that could carry the fullness of divine communication would be the unlimited speech of silence. This is precisely the speech with which Ephraem credits the Father and the Son. The result of this is that the silence that had been a negative entity on the lower rungs of the ladder of theological reflection becomes a positive, indeed the *only* positive, participant at the top of the scale. As the nature of the subject has changed, so has the appropriate means of approaching it.

The final line of *Sermon 4* is a fitting summation of Ephraem's advice to the person who wishes to draw close to God:³⁶

Stretch out toward silence, weak one.

The practical goal of human reflection on the divine is to reach the point at which silence is the appropriate posture: at that point human language fails and we cast ourselves forward into the silence that ends our rational struggles and begins to liken us to, and draw us toward, God our goal. Beyond that point, however, inside the silence into which we cannot move, real communication does not cease, but, rather, flourishes in perfection. It is communication, however, on a level we can never hope to reach because it requires an infinite nature to engage in it. According to Ephraem's model, the speech and silence of every rung of the ontological ladder is appropriate to the level of its inhabitants and the subjects they should concern themselves with. When the rungs of the ladder give out and there is nowhere higher for the climber to set his foot, the climb is still not over, but only those who can move on without a ladder can move forward into the silence of perfect communion.

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