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The Transfiguration of Moses

A Survey and Analysis of St. Ephrem's Interpretation of Exodus 34,29

Ex. 34,27–35 describes Moses' appearance after receiving the law on Sinai. We read there that his face shone with brightness after having been in the Lord's presence. The passage seems to have held a special fascination for Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373), an interest whose analysis is the subject of the present essay. The following translation of the passage follows the Peshitta version, the form in which Ephrem would have known it:

And the Lord said to Moses: 'Write down these statements, for because of these statements, I have established a covenant with you and with all of Israel'. And [Moses] was present with the Lord for forty days and forty nights. He did not eat bread, nor did he drink water. And he wrote on tablets of stone the words of the covenant, the ten decrees. Thus two tablets of testimony were in the hand of Moses as he descended from the mountain of Sinai. As he descended from the mountain, Moses was also unaware that the skin of his face had become radiant (ܡܫܝܝܢ) while God was speaking with him. Then Aaron and all of Israel saw that the skin of Moses' face had become radiant (ܡܫܝܝܢ). As a result, they were afraid to approach him. Moses called them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the assembly came to him, and Moses spoke to them. After that, all the Israelites approached him. Then he commanded them everything that the Lord had spoken with him on the mountain of Sinai. Once Moses had finished speaking with them, he placed a veil over his face. Thus, whenever Moses would enter in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take off the veil until he came out. Upon coming out he would tell to the members of the community of Israel that which had been commanded. And the Israelites would observe Moses' face—that the skin of Moses' face was radiant (ܡܫܝܝܢ). And Moses would remove the veil from his face whenever he went in to speak with him¹.

On its face, the passage describes the luminous effect of Moses' encounter with God, a seemingly episodic but lingering effect associated with God's oracular pronouncements through Moses. Clearly for the people of Israel, according to the text, it lost none of its strangeness.

The Septuagint, rather than emphasizing Moses' radiant face, described him as δεδόξασται, a word that contains no obvious reference to light. This rendering of the passage may account for the relatively sparse treatment of the episode in the writings of Greek fathers in the Alexandrian tradition, such as Origen, Cyril, and Gregory of Nyssa. Philo too says little about it². When Origen and Cyril, for in-

1 *Genesis-Exodus* (Leiden, 1977), pp. 201–202.

2 Both Gregory and Philo authored philosophical biographies of Moses, according to the conventions of their day. Neither addressed the radiance on Moses' face. Brock notes this fact with justi-

stance, do treat the text³, they seem to rely on II Cor. 3,18, which focused on Moses' veil as a metaphor or allegory for alleged Jewish incomprehension of the scriptures.

The Syrian tradition, and Ephrem in particular, found more to appreciate. Unlike the Alexandrians, Ephrem focuses on Moses' brightness, in a way that is frequent, often extensive, and central. He treats Moses' transfiguration, as we may conveniently call it, a total of thirteen times, of which about three quarters span more than one stanza in his poems, or several lines of prose, as the case may be. Likewise, in most of those passages, Ephrem's argument depends substantially on the episode. Neither is his interest in the passage limited to a particular phase of his career. Rather, it appears in both his early and his late writings, and his treatment of the episode appears to develop over the course of his career, as he puts it to different uses. In short, the image of Moses transfigured often caught Ephrem's eye. It is the goal of this study to answer the question whether any consistent pattern appears in Ephrem's use of the text. Does it seem to play an important role in his overall vision of the spiritual life?

Thus, our task is to analyze all thirteen of the passages in which Ephrem treats Moses' transfiguration. Ephrem, it turns out, offers five main interpretations of the story, singly or in combination. Chief among them is to view the glory-light given to Moses as a kind of spiritual nourishment, often presented in terms of metaphors for eating, drinking, smelling, etc. Contextual clues suggest that the Eucharist, in such cases, is never far from Ephrem's mind. A second common interpretation is to take the transfiguration as a divinization, that is, some kind of transformative sharing in God that nevertheless preserves intact the distinction between creature and creator. In addition to these two most fundamental themes, three others appear derivative. That is, Ephrem treats the transfiguration of Moses as an anticipation of the glorious vision enjoyed by the saints in Paradise, as a model for appropriate theological contemplation, and as a paradigm to which ascetics should aspire. These five interconnected interpretations, which we will number 1–5, respectively, show first that Ephrem takes the transfiguration of

liable surprise in his translation *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on the Veil on Moses' Face* (Piscataway, New Jersey, 2009), p. 4. The assertion of a link between Gregory and Ephrem on this point is mistaken, *pace* Kathleen McVey (trans.), *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1989), pp. 67, n. 28. Brock does note, also on p. 4, that Jacob of Serugh's *Homily* depends directly on Ephrem's eighth poem in the collection *Hymni de Fide*.

3 Cyril of Alexandria's Letter 41 is devoted to explaining the scapegoat, and particularly the seemingly scandalous reference to sacrificing to Azazel. In section 7, it refers to Ex. 34,29 in order to justify a spiritual interpretation of the passage. See, for the Greek, Schwartz, *A.C.O.* 1.1.4, pp. 15–20. For a translation, see John I. McEnerney (trans.), *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Letters 1–50* (Washington, D.C., 1987), p. 172. Origen's twelfth homily on Exodus takes a similar perspective (For the Greek, see *P.G.*12, 382B–387B. For a translation, see Ronald E. Heine (trans.), *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (Washington, D.C., 1982), pp. 367–374.). *On First Principles* 1.1.2 (*P.G.*11, 122B–C) is similar.

Moses as a paradigm for his thought on the spiritual life as the pursuit of wisdom, and second, in a way that accords the Eucharist a central role in spiritual transformation, contemplation, and the quest for that wisdom.

To show this twofold thesis, we will first survey, in section 1, all the instances where Ephrem discusses Ex. 34,29, in order to identify, in section 2, his most extensive considerations, his characteristic vocabulary, and his favorite metaphors. Detailed literary analysis of each passage follows in section 3, in a plausible chronological order⁴. Section 4 summarizes Ephrem's interpretations in a synoptic way.

Ephrem's interest in Moses' transfiguration is doubtless another example of his special familiarity with Jewish traditions. In particular, the tradition that Adam and Eve were clothed with robes of glory-light in Paradise presents an obvious parallel to the story of Moses' transfiguration by glory-light, for which Ephrem does indeed employ the clothing metaphor. Yet investigating this parallel and others like them and possible interdependencies would take us too far from our present purpose, which is simply to analyze Ephrem's use of Moses' transfiguration⁵. In any case, Ephrem's interest in traditions about the garments of light is hardly unique to him among Syriac authors. There is a wealth of scholarship on related themes in the spiritual writings of both inter-testamental Judaism and early Syriac Christianity. Nevertheless, scholarship to date on such traditions in Christian guise, in which Moses does figure prominently, has tended to overlook the extent and depth of Ephrem's interest in Moses' transfiguration⁶.

4 Based on Beck's classifications of works as Nisibene or Edessene. See Edward Matthews, "General Introduction", in Kathleen McVey, (ed.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works* (Washington, D.C.; 1994), p. 30. See also Edmund Beck (ed. & trans.), *Lobgesang aus der Wüste* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1967), pp. 14–17. Beyond that classification, the order offered is only a conjecture.

5 In a future article, I hope to investigate the Ephrem's links and similarities with other Syrian authors, in particular, pseudo-Macarius. It proved impossible to do the question justice in this article.

6 Much of the research on Moses' transfiguration in patristic literature has been pursued by Alexander Golitzin, especially with reference to the work of pseudo-Macarius. His works include "Temple and Throne of the Divine Glory: 'Pseudo-Macarius' and Purity of Heart, Together With Some Remarks on the Limitations and Usefulness of Scholarship", in *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature* (Collegeville, Minnesota; 1999), pp. 107–129; "Earthly Angels and Heavenly Men": The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Niketas Stethatos, and the Tradition of 'Interiorized Apocalyptic' in Eastern Christian Ascetical and Mystical Literature", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001), pp. 125–153; "Recovering the Glory of Adam: 'Divine Light' Traditions in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Ascetical Literature of Fourth Century Syro Mesopotamia", in *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity: Papers from an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001* (Leiden; 2003), pp. 275–308; "The image and glory of God in Jacob of Serug's homily, 'On that chariot that Ezekiel the prophet saw'", *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47 (2003), pp. 323–364; "The Vision of God and the Form of Glory: More Reflections on the Anthropomorphic Controversy of AD 399", in *Abba* (Crestwood, N.Y.; 2003), pp. 273–297; and "Heavenly Mysteries: Themes from Apocalyptic Literature in the Macarian Homilies and Selected Other Fourth-century Ascetical Writers", in

The method of literary analysis employed here, in addition to relying on the relative predominance of terms and imagery within each immediate context, also classifies *polarities*, an approach that has proven fruitful in the works of the South African scholar, Phil Botha⁷. Such polarities are pairs of terms or pairs of ideas in some kind of opposing balance. They serve various rhetorical functions, typically one or more of the following: (1) to contrast two groups, realities, or ideas; (2) to associate two groups, realities, or ideas; or (3) to designate a totality by reference to an encompassing pair of groups, realities, or ideas. Despite the structuralist pedigree of Botha's method, polarities are analyzed here purely as a literary device that Ephrem seems to have found useful, rather than as a social or anthropological construct.

1. The References to Ex. 34,29 in the authentic works of St. Ephrem

Ephrem's authentic writings fall into two groups: the works of his time in Nisibis (ca. A. D. 306–363) and the works of his exile in Edessa (ca. 363–373). The reader may refer to the following tables, which present the thirteen instances in Ephrem's works where Ex. 34,29 appears. **Table 1** below summarizes the four brief treatments. **Table 2** catalogues the nine lengthier treatments. A brief discussion of the shorter treatments described in the first table will serve as a suitable introduction.

Table 1: Ephrem's references to Ex.34,29: treatments of only a single stanza or a few lines

passage	provenance	summary
<i>Hymni de Azymis</i> 8.9	Nisibene	E. treats M.' radiance as evidence of a god-like power over both Pharaoh and nature, which he sees as grounded in Christ.
<i>Semones de Fide</i> 1.85	Nisibene (ca. 350)	According to E., M.' unbearable brightness is a pale reflection of Christ's divinity. It illustrates the incomprehensibility of the divine nature.
<i>Hymni de Ecclesia</i> 11.8	Edessene	According to E., desire for salvation clothed M. in brightness. M. is one among several examples of this personified desire.
<i>Hymni de Nativitate</i> 1.28	Edessene	According to E., M.' quasi divine brightness anticipates Christ's work of divinizing mortals via the incarnation.

Apocalyptic thought in early Christianity (Grand Rapids; 2009), pp. 174–192. Also significant is Andrei Orlov, "Vested with Adam's Glory: Moses as the Luminous Counterpart of Adam in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Macarian Homilies", *Xristianskij Vostok* 10 (2002), pp. 498–513, and the joint publication, Andrei A. Orlov – Alexander Golitzin, "Many Lamps Are Lightened From the One": Paradigms of the Transformational Vision in Macarian Homilies", *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001), pp. 281–298. Golitzin's student went on to study related themes in Aphrahat especially: Stephanie K. Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God: A Study of Early Syriac Theological Anthropology* (Ph. D. diss., Marquette University, 2005).

7 A complete bibliography would be out of place here, but the work of his student contains an excellent orientation: Kees Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought*, (Piscataway, New Jersey, 2006), pp. 47–90. I follow Botha's approach only in its general outlines, not in every particular.

In the Edessene works mentioned above, the reference to Moses appears as one among many in a list of seemingly traditional *testimonia*. For instance, Moses is remembered for his transfiguration, just as Elijah is remembered for his power over the rain (I Kgs. 17,1) or Ezekiel for his vision of God’s chariot (Ez. 1,4–28). In all four instances, like other righteous forefathers and prophets, Moses is in some sense a type of Christ. In *HdAzym* 8, Ephrem identifies the power which Moses had over Pharaoh and the natural elements in the course of the Exodus story, as ultimately rooted in Christ:

Moses, who became radiant (ܡܫܝܚ) was magnified (ܐܝܬܐ) by means of the blood [of the Egyptians⁸] and he who became a ‘god’ (ܡܠܐܚ) [to Pharaoh] prospered by means of his rod.

Ephrem argues in the next stanza that “Moses, pride of the sons of the [Jewish] People / was triumphant by means of the symbols of the Son [of God]”. For Ephrem, Moses’ “blood” and “rod” were types (ܬܝܡܝܢܐ) of the blood and cross of Christ.

The brief reference in *SdF* 1.85 takes Moses’ transfiguration in a different direction: to prove the incomprehensibility of Christ’s true divine nature. Thus, we may infer that Moses’ brightness, in this context, is implicitly a pale reflection of Christ’s divine character.

The Watchers cannot look on Him. Moses who became radiant (ܡܫܝܚ) will persuade you:
If the people could not look on Moses though he was human,
Who can look on His Essence?⁹ Only One Who is of Him can look on Him.

In this case, Ephrem emphasizes the unbearable character of Moses’ transfiguration in order to show *a fortiori* the unbearable brightness of the Son of God. The logic of the explanation depends on the analogy between Moses and Christ.

In *HdN* 1.28, Moses is one among many types that anticipate Christ’s nativity. In particular, Moses’ transfiguration points to Christ’s work of divinizing mortals:

Moses saw that he alone received the brightness of God (ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ). And he looked forward to the One who was to come who would make many more godlike (ܡܫܝܚܐ) by his teaching.

Ephrem takes up again the notion that Moses’ share in the divine brightness expresses the mystery of partaking divinity. A similar expression (albeit without the explicit comparison to God) occurs in *HdE* 11.8, where Moses is identified as the one whom longing for salvation “clothed with splendor (ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ)”. The common thread in these interpretations is their Christological character. Moses’ brightness anticipates the brightness or power of Christ’s divine nature, which Moses shares in some sense. On the whole, these brief treatments illustrate Ephrem’s second major interpretation: Moses’ transfiguration as divinization.

8 In context, the most likely referent of the blood is that of the Egyptians slain in the Red Sea, since that is the immediate passage of Exodus under discussion. One should not, however, rule out the possibility that Ephrem has also in mind the blood of the passover lamb.

9 I. e., the *Father’s* essence (ܡܫܝܚܐ), as the subsequent half-line makes clear.

Since the remaining works will be discussed in detail in their own subsections, it is simplest to offer the overview in the form of the following chart¹⁰. Included is the biblical detail of the episode of the transfiguration that seems to inspire Ephrem's overall approach in each case.

Table 2: Ephrem's Longer References to Ex.34,29—Nisibene and Edessene

no.	passage	provenance	biblical detail(s) focused on
1	<i>Hymni de Ieiunio</i> 9.1–2 <i>et passim</i> (In particular, the refrain refers to the transfiguration.) [subsequent abbreviation: <i>HdI</i>]	Nisibene	the fasting of Moses on Sinai, compared to the fasting of Daniel in Babylon
2	<i>Hymni de Ieiunio</i> 10.1–3	Nisibene	idem
3	<i>Hymni de Paradiso</i> 7.3–19 [subsequent abbreviation: <i>HdP</i>]	Nisibene	the fasting of Moses on Sinai; the fear of the Israelites
4	<i>Hymni de Paradiso</i> 9.22–29	Nisibene	the fasting of Moses
5	<i>Hymni de Ecclesia</i> 36.6–9 [subsequent abbreviation: <i>HdE</i>]	Edessene	the light of Moses and its temporary character, compared to the light at Christ's baptism in the Jordan
6	<i>Hymni de Fide</i> 8.1–6 [subsequent abbreviation: <i>HdF</i>]	Edessene	the overpowering character of the transfiguration; the veil worn by Moses
7	<i>Hymni de Fide</i> 33	Edessene	the overpowering brightness; the impossibility of representing it to human sight
8	<i>Sermo de Domino Nostro</i> , 29 [subsequent abbreviation: <i>SdDN</i>]	Edessene	the veil and the associated theological problem of how a mortal can see God
9	<i>Hymnen auf Abraham Kidunaya</i> 5.22–26 [subsequent abbreviation, by analogy to the rest: <i>HdAQ</i>]	Edessene (post 367)	the fasting of Moses; the derivative character of his glory-light

Ephrem's prose commentary on Exodus is absent from the tables above. This is because the commentary omits the passage entirely. This fact may be accounted for by the brief and cursory nature of the Exodus commentary itself, which indeed skips over the whole section of Exodus in which the story of Moses' transfiguration occurs. Other than a possible faint allusion to the story in Ephrem's first dis-

10 References to Ephrem's works point to the following critical editions: Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen de Fide* (CSCO 154 and 155; Louvain, 1955). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (CSCO 174 and 175; Louvain, 1957). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)* (CSCO 186 and 187; Louvain, 1959). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen de Ecclesia* (CSCO 198 and 199; Louvain, 1960). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Sermones de Fide* (CSCO 212 and 213; Louvain, 1961). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Paschahymnen (De Azymis, De Crucifixione, De Resurrectione)* (CSCO 248 and 249; Louvain, 1964). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen de Ieiunio* (CSCO 246 and 247; Louvain, 1964). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Sermo de Domino Nostro* (CSCO 270 and 271; Louvain, 1966). *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syers Hymnen auf Abraham Kidunaya und Julianos Saba* (CSCO 322 and 323; Louvain, 1972).

course to Hypatius¹¹, he seems not to treat the topic anywhere else. Contrary to expectation, Ephrem ignores Moses' transfiguration in his *Diatessaron* commentary when he discusses the transfiguration of Jesus¹². Instead, the focus there is on Jesus' transfiguration as a sign of his divinity and on refuting the Marcionite reading of the passage (as is also the case in the *Prose Refutations*). But this absence only confirms that even though the transfiguration of Moses may have been a traditional Christological type in the Syriac tradition, Ephrem was interested in it for his own interrelated purposes, which are not primarily about defending Christ's divinity. The image of Moses transfigured seems to draw Ephrem's mind in other directions, which we can now investigate by looking at his vocabulary and imagery.

2. Ephrem's vocabulary and imagery

Ephrem's lengthier treatments of Moses' transfiguration display a sophisticated use of imagery and rely on subtle links between words or ideas in the biblical text. For this reason, it is helpful to offer a rough classification of Ephrem's vocabulary and imagery. Images of light and radiance predominate, of course, in texts of both periods. Apart from light imagery, four main categories appear as ways of interpreting the meaning of the light. These include terms and images (A) for nourishment, (B) for physical beauty and contentment, (C) for sense perception, and (D) for exterior adornment.

As for the light language itself, Ephrem prefers the nominal form ܠܐܝܬܐ, meaning "brightness" or "splendor" (with 27 occurrences) when describing Moses' transfiguration, a fact that calls for some consideration, inasmuch as neither the lexeme ܠܐܝܬܐ, nor its root, appears in the Peshitta of Ex. 34,29. Why then, is it so prominent in Ephrem's descriptions of the event, such that it outpaces all other key words for light, splendor, or brightness? In part, it may be because the term often appears with other terms for glory and splendor in the Peshitta, especially in the psalms, to describe the splendor in which the almighty God is arrayed or clothed. For example, Ps. 104,1–2 exclaims: "My soul, bless the Lord! The Lord, my God, has been magnified exceedingly: splendor and adornment he has put on (ܠܐܝܬܐ ܕܠܗܝܐ ܠܐܝܬܐ). He is hidden in light, as in a cloak (ܠܐܝܬܐ ܕܠܗܝܐ ܠܐܝܬܐ ܕܠܗܝܐ ܠܐܝܬܐ)". Perhaps because he was already pre-disposed to view Moses' transfiguration in terms of a clothing metaphor¹³, the language of this passage may

11 J. J. Overbeck (ed.), *S. Ephraemi syri, Rabulae episcopi edesseni, Balaei aliorumque opera selecta* (Oxford, 1865), pp. 23–24. It is, however, more likely, that Ephrem is alluding to Ex.19, 10–15, which describes how the Israelites were prevented from going near Sinai.

12 Louis Leloir (ed.), *Commentaire de l'évangile concordant* (Dublin, 1963), pp. 116–122.

13 Such metaphors are, after all, one of his favorite means of theological expression. See Sebastian Brock, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition", in

have been the first to occur to him. Yet, since this is not the only Peshitta term that would naturally have a place in this context, the question remains: why has Ephrem singled out this term in preference to other 'glory' words used in the Peshitta?

The term's etymology suggests a clue. The word ܠܡܝ entered into Aramaic from Akkadian *zīmu*¹⁴, whose primary referent seems to have been the appearance of the face, particularly the face of the gods. Yet a range of other nuances for *zīmu* is possible. It could also refer to an appearance *assumed* by some person, and it seems this nuance has carried over into Ephrem's Syriac: the ܠܡܝ of God is something that Moses, although mortal, can nevertheless take on himself. The term's etymology also suggests the kind of 'bloom' of the countenance that derives from being well-fed, as well as, derivatively, the splendid appearance of royal garments. Thus, the word, already frequently used by Aphrahat in descriptions of divine throne visions¹⁵, becomes a flexible point of departure for Ephrem. He develops the imagery of the divine brightness in the direction of God's incomprehensibility, spiritual nourishment, and clothing imagery. In other words, the etymology shows an organic connection between the term and the four metaphoric categories previously identified: (A) light as nourishment, (B) light as physical beauty and sign of contentment, (C) light as dazzling, and (D) light as clothing.

General vocabulary for light and brightness is, of course, ubiquitous. More specifically, most prominent are "becoming radiant (ܠܡܝܢ)" and "brightness (ܠܡܝ)", nearly every time Ephrem discusses the episode. Yet these are not the only terms. Other prominent language in the same semantic field often appears, including the word light itself: ܠܡܝܬ, and its cognate verbal forms, as well as the word glory: ܠܡܝܬܐ, conceived more as radiance than as fame. These four words and their cognates constitute the bulk of Ephrem's vocabulary for light and brightness¹⁶.

Examples of the most prominent words and images in each category will appear in the appropriate places below. Nevertheless, the criteria for inclusion in each category were as follows. Category A, for nourishment, includes roots that pertain to food, drink, fragrance, or their antonyms. Category B, for physical beauty and contentment, includes roots for words like beauty itself (root ܠܡܝܬ) and those that suggest a joyful disposition or healthy physical appearance, such as ܠܡܝܬܐ or ܠܡܝܬܐ. Category C includes roots of words that pertain to perception, both of the mind

Margot Schmidt – Carl Friedrich Geyer, (eds.), *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter* (Regensburg; 1982), pp. 11–39.

14 *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 22.119b–122b. See also Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, 377b.

15 Skoyles Jarkins, *Aphrahat and the Temple of God*, pp. 185–190.

16 Other roots in this semantic field, which appear in varying frequencies, include ܠܡܝܬܐ (to shine), ܠܡܝܬܐ (breath, emanating brilliance), ܠܡܝܬܐ (ray), ܠܡܝܬܐ (splendor), ܠܡܝܬܐ (sun), ܠܡܝܬܐ (daylight), ܠܡܝܬܐ (to triumph), ܠܡܝܬܐ (ray), ܠܡܝܬܐ (to illuminate), ܠܡܝܬܐ (to be resplendent), ܠܡܝܬܐ (lamp, candelabra).

and of the senses. Category D includes roots of words that pertain to clothing, such as **לבו**, or adornment, such as **לבוש**. It should be obvious that these divisions are hardly meant to be ironclad. Rather, they appear here as working categories that seem to have heuristic value.

3. A detailed survey of Ephrem's extended treatments

3.1. Extended treatments of the Nisibene period

Four extensive treatments appear in Ephrem's Nisibene¹⁷ works: poems 9 and 10 from the cycle *de Ieiunio*, and poems 7 and 9 from the cycle *de Paradiso*. In these poems, Ephrem's use of Moses' transfiguration seems to follow from a particular biblical detail: namely, that Moses "did not eat bread, nor did he drink water (**לֹא אָכַל לֶחֶם וְלֹא שָׁתָה מַיִם**)". Ephrem's line of thinking appears above all in the way the metaphor of spiritual nourishment tends to color his interpretation of Moses' transfiguration: Moses in a sense 'feeds' on or derives nourishment in connection with the glory that he beheld. Thus, language and imagery from categories A (nourishment) and B (contentment and beauty) predominate.

Text 1: De Ieiunio 9: spiritual nourishment and beauty as rewards of fasting

Ephrem introduces and concludes *HdI 9* with references to Moses, to whom he appeals as an ascetical paradigm. According to Ephrem, Moses' fasting and transfiguration inspired Daniel and his three youthful companions exiled in Babylon:

The youths in their fasting became even more sleek and beautiful (**וְהַיְתָּוּ מִן הַיָּפְיּוּת וְהַיָּשָׁר**).

They contemplated Moses, because of whose fasting,

his brightness descended and illuminated the greedy (**וְהַיָּשָׁר מִן הַיָּפְיּוּת וְהַיָּשָׁר מִן הַיָּשָׁר**).

Two aspects of the poem as a whole illustrate how Ephrem takes Moses' transfiguration as a paradigm. The first point to note is the ascetical exhortation implied in the passage above. By presenting Moses as an example for the youths to contemplate, he invites his audience to do the same, and to follow their lead by fasting. Moses' heavenly brightness, which Ephrem takes to be the reward of his fasting, both motivates the practice of fasting and expresses its value. He sees that brightness reflected in the healthy, glowing countenance of the youths (Dn. 1,15). The contrastive polarity between *Moses* and the *greedy Israelites* at the foot of the mountain reinforces the point by encouraging dissociation from greed and darkness. In the next four stanzas Ephrem begins to imply that fasting itself paradoxically

¹⁷ A period, it should be pointed out, during which he seems to have served as the liturgical poet, choir director, and pastoral advisor for his successive bishops. See Sidney H. Griffith, *Faith Adorning the Mystery: Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, 1997), pp. 7–13. During his exile in Edessa, his works become more polemical.

youths modeling their actions on those of Moses. As the “sheep of the right hand, [they] hastened to quell the wrath. / In fear, they quickly clothed themselves in fasting, like the armor / of the victorious houses of Moses and Elijah”²². Moses’ example as a faster joins that of Elijah as the underlying reason why the fasting of Daniel and his companions succeeded in procuring divine wisdom and defeating spiritual foes. More to the point, Ephrem describes both Moses and Elijah as ones who “opened (ܐܦܬܚ—note the plural) the heavens”. In the case of Elijah, of course, this opening refers to his power to end a drought and obtain divine mercy by his prayer (see I Kgs. 17,1). But, given the “treasure” and “key” language in context, how else does Moses open the heavens but by opening heaven’s treasury of divine wisdom, out of which he received the Torah?²³

Throughout, Ephrem’s goal is to commend the spiritual beauty, wisdom, and triumph that result from fasting. Ephrem associates fasting with beauty, and with God’s elect, whereas he associates gluttony with the Babylonians and Egyptians. In this way he polarizes the issue of the choice between fasting and indulgence as one between spiritual growth and spiritual destruction.

Overall, nourishment metaphors dominate, at 70% of the imagery, the immediate context of his appeal to Moses’ transfiguration. The next largest semantic group consists of language for beauty or contentment, at about 20%. Ephrem’s language for spiritual nourishment ranges over a wide territory. Aside from ubiquitous references to fasting (the root ܦܥܝ in both nominal and verbal forms), Ephrem typically speaks of hungering (ܡܥܝܢ), being fattened (ܡܦܬܝܚ), and taste (ܡܚܝܚܐ). Most noteworthy in this poem, however, is his use of the root ܬܠܝܢ (a total of eight times) to emphasize the desirability of fasting and the desirability of those who practice it. At this point, Ephrem employs such language chiefly to encourage fasting.

In this poem, Moses’ transfiguration, and the glowing countenance of the youths, *results* from fasting, as a reward for their self-denial. Here, Ephrem does not, as he later will, treat the light of God as a kind of nourishment in its own right, but as *evidence* of an association with things heavenly, arising at least in part because of ascetical effort. In the end, in *De Ieiunio* 9, Moses’ transfiguration serves as a moral example or paradigm to motivate ascetic practice in the pursuit of wisdom. Ephrem’s other readings of the episode delve more deeply.

Text 2: De Ieiunio 10: the divine pasturage of wisdom

In his tenth hymn *De Ieiunio*, Ephrem opens directly with Moses’ fasting and transfiguration. Our poet addresses more directly the narrative of Exodus itself,

²² HdJ9.13.

²³ A reference to the plague of hail (Ex. 9,22ff.) is possible, but I think it unlikely because, in context, the opening of the heavens is meant to illustrate divine mercy rather than divine punishment.

rather than the story of the youths in Babylon. Moses' Sinai ascent and transfiguration set the stage for Ephrem's reading of the whole narrative. This is because he perceives a pervasive contrastive polarity between *Moses* and the *Egyptians*. "Moses", he writes, the "greatest of the fasters (ܠܬܝܬܝܬܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ)" rejected "the full table of the daughter of pharaoh ... / and longed ardently (ܠܥܡ ܕܥܝܪܐ) for the fast of the mountain". Thus, he "fasted and became radiant (ܡܝܬܝܠܐ); he prayed and was victorious"²⁴. Because Moses' heavenly radiance represents the heavenly realm, this polarity between Moses and the Egyptians also becomes a contrast between *earthly* and *heavenly*.

He ascended with an earthly countenance (ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܐܪܥܐ)

but then put on (ܠܒܝܫ) and descended with that heavenly brightness²⁵ (ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܫܡܝܐ)²⁶.

Moses' association with things heavenly via transfiguration empowers him to perform the god-like, function of revealing "mysteries (ܠܫܝܬܝܬܐ)"²⁷. Moses, the heavenly figure, contrasts with the Egyptians, and implicitly also the idolatrous Israelites, who preferred revelry and Pharaoh's "full table (ܠܥܡ ܕܥܝܪܐ)" (cf. Nm. 11,1–10)²⁸ to fasting.

Yet Ephrem goes further, interpreting Moses' vision as a kind of divine pasturage. In stanza 3, brightness is not merely the token of divinization as a reward of fasting, it seems to become the very nourishment of the divine life:

Moses, who ascended, grazed and grew fat (²⁹ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ):

his fasting became for him like a banquet (ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ)

and his prayer was a spring of living water (ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ).

He was a man of discernment (ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ), and his fasting was for expiation.

Ephrem proceeds to characterize Moses as the "hard-working bull" in contrast to the "worthless and sinful calf" set up by the Israelites. Continuing to draw his metaphors from the sphere of animal husbandry, our poet describes spiritual nourishment as grazing, or more literally "being pastured". Yet Ephrem plays on another meaning of the root for pasturing (ܠܥܝܢܐ), which also appears in the words for mind (ܠܥܝܢܐ) and thought (ܠܥܝܢܐ). The root used in this sense conveys mental activity. The double reference to pasturing and mental process leads Ephrem to describe Moses as a discerning man (ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝ) or sage. At the same time, it also suggests to him a comparison with Daniel, whom the Peshitta

²⁴ HdJ 10.2.

²⁵ In context, the translation 'appearance' for ܠܥܝܢܐ would also make excellent sense.

²⁶ HdJ 10.2.

²⁷ HdJ 10.5.

²⁸ Ephrem's seeming allusion to this passage about the manna constitutes another eucharistic reference, since the manna was traditionally viewed as a type of the Eucharist. Indeed, its sparkling appearance, described as being like "crystal (ܠܥܝܢܐ)", may have evoked, Ephrem's mind, the brilliance of Moses' face, but one can only speculate.

²⁹ Metrically, the passive vocalization is to be preferred, but this does not particularly impact the sense of the metaphor.

describes in similar terms. In Daniel's response to the king's fury over the incapacity of his sages to interpret his dream (Dn. 2,14), the Hebrew youth "took thought and counsel (ܐܬܚܬܐܝܢ ܕܢܕܐܝܢ)" and fasted for the sake of expiation. The implicit imagery of the heavenly treasury begins to become a little clearer. That is, Ephrem presents both Moses and Daniel as sages opening up the heavenly treasury of wisdom: in *HdJ* 9.10 Daniel, opens the "great treasury of the Holy Spirit" to withdraw, as it were, the understanding of dreams, and in *HdJ* 10.1 Moses stripped off the "riches of Pharaoh, / because he perceived the Treasure that enriches all", a treasure which, the context suggests, he received in the theophany on Sinai. In this way, Ephrem closely links their practice of fasting with their access to heavenly knowledge, which, Ephrem implies, is like a divine pasturage, or food for the one who makes the ascent to heavenly status by scorning earthly nourishment. Indeed, the remainder of the poem presents Moses, now nourished by God, as a divinely wise teacher who can "demonstrate hidden things by manifest ones (ܕܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ)"³⁰. This is a perspective that informs Ephrem's hymns *De Paradiso* generally, where Moses is described as the "master" or "teacher of the Hebrews (ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܝܗܘܕܐ)" via the "treasury of revelations (ܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ)"³¹.

Yet why has Ephrem linked Daniel and Moses, spiritual vision and spiritual nourishment in the way just described? The answer seems to depend on another biblical detail, in the text of Dn. 2 itself, where, in thanksgiving for his enlightenment, Daniel prays as follows:

[God] gives wisdom to the wise (ܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ), and intelligence to the sensible. It is he who reveals the depths and their secrets. He knows what is in the darkness (ܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ), and the light is in his presence (ܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ ܕܡܬܬܝܠܟܢ).

Ephrem connects the "light" in the divine presence mentioned in Dn. 2,20–23 to the light that shines as a reflection in Moses' face (Ex. 34,29). Thus, Ephrem's comparison amounts to this: the intimacy with God, vision, and knowledge of hidden mysteries that Daniel enjoyed *as a result of prayer and fasting*, compare to the light that Moses experienced *as a result of prayer and fasting*. This implied link also accounts for why Ephrem, in the previous hymn from the same cycle, treated Moses as the model on which Daniel and his companions based their ascetical practice³². In both cases, their refusal of food naturally suggests to Ephrem that the divine vision each received took its place. Dn. 2,20–23 and Ex. 34,27–29, with links to the problem of obtaining wisdom from God, seem to come together in Ephrem's thought, as twin sources for his ever-deepening reflection on the mystery of human ascent to a kind of divinized status, which fasting facilitates. His hymns *de Paradiso* develop this perspective by explicitly treating the divine light as the food of the wise.

30 *HdJ* 10.5.

31 *HdP* 1.1.

32 *HdJ* 9.1.

Text 3: De Paradiso 7.3–19: the nourishing breath and the garments of light

In *HdP*7, Ephrem purports to take his audience on a heavenly journey to Paradise, and as we might expect from a text that leans heavily on Moses' transfiguration, Ephrem begins with the now familiar image of opening the heavenly treasury:

[The Father] has entrusted his Son to us that we might have assurance in him.

His body (ܡܝܬܐ) is with us, his assurance (ܡܝܬܐ), likewise, is with us.

He gave to us his keys (ܡܠܝܬܐ), for his treasures (ܡܠܝܬܐ) are stored up for us³³.

This time, however, the keys belong to Christ. At the same time, Ephrem also hints that the Eucharist constitutes the “keys” to heavenly wisdom. Speaking of Christ's body as “with us” only makes sense if the intended reference be sacramental. Moreover, stanza 3 connects the image to wisdom explicitly, since Paradise offers “a heavenly drink that renders its drinkers wise (ܡܫܝܚܐ ܠܗܝܟܝܢ)”. After this introduction, Ephrem proceeds to, as it were, withdraw and appraise the various ‘treasures’ in the heavenly treasury, listing them according to the state in life or ascetical practice to which they belong. Since the refrain makes reference to the “keys” of Christ, the emphasis always returns implicitly to the Eucharistic connotations of the first stanza. Over the course of stanzas 3 through 19, Ephrem deals with the ‘treasures’ belonging to poverty, the married life, youth, virginity, etc. In stanza 10, Moses' transfiguration becomes the treasure proper to the status of a revered elder (ܡܪܝܬܐ).

Bind together your [wandering] thoughts, old age (ܡܪܝܬܐ), in Paradise,

for its fragrance wafts toward you, and it rejuvenates (ܡܫܝܚܐ) you with its breath.

Your old stains are swallowed up in the beauty with which it clothes you.

In Moses, he draws you a picture as an example (ܡܫܝܚܐ ܠܗܝܟܝܢ),³⁴

for his cheeks, which had become ashen with age

by means of it (i.e., the fragrance) became radiantly beautiful (ܡܫܝܚܐ ܡܫܝܚܐ).

A token of old age, that grows young once more (ܡܫܝܚܐ) in Eden.

Ephrem takes Moses' transfiguration as an illustration, indeed, a paradigm (ܡܫܝܚܐ) of the ‘garments of light’ imagery appearing just before, in stanzas 5 and 6, and which he will continue to develop in stanzas 12–19. Although food and drink are not mentioned, it is the *fragrance* (ܡܫܝܚܐ) of Paradise that refreshes and glorifies Moses, a fragrance which Ephrem elsewhere explicitly treats as nourishing (*HdP* 10.4–12; see also below). Moreover, the image of spiritual nourishment is prominent throughout the section—25% of its metaphors relate to nourishment. One might be so bold as to see the “heavenly drink” of stanza 3 as parallel to the “fragrance (ܡܫܝܚܐ)” that makes Moses young.

Unique to this poem is the special prominence of language of physical beauty, purity, and contentment (category B) in the surrounding context. Indeed, as

³³ *HdP*7.1.

³⁴ The feminine pronoun refers back to ܡܪܝܬܐ, which is grammatically feminine.

Ephrem sees it, the gift of light indicates the restoration of the beauty of youth. In using this imagery, Ephrem seems to rely on another aspect of the story of Moses’ transfiguration: namely, the contrast between his calm familiarity with God and the distress of the Israelites, who “were afraid (ارسله) to approach” Moses. As in the *Hymni de Ieiunio*, Ephrem discerns a contrastive polarity between Moses and the Israelites, but his point here is a positive one: that Moses’ familiarity in the divine presence gives others hope to enjoy the same. Moreover, the Eucharistic allusions with which Ephrem began hymn 7 suggest that in his mind, the way to paradise’s contentment, peace, and rejuvenation is through the Eucharistic liturgy.

But why is Moses’ transfiguration especially significant in this passage, since it seems to have only one explicit mention? On the one hand, Moses’ example is one among many others (e.g., Joseph the patriarch in stanza 7 or the martyr brothers from Maccabees in stanza 19). On the other hand, it is Moses who plays a cardinal role in the poem as a whole. Ephrem uses his transfiguration between two extensive descriptions of how the denizens of Paradise are clothed in light and glory. In the 8 stanzas following the account of Moses, all the denizens of paradise “behold themselves in glory” and marvel at how “the clouded and turbulent nature of their bodies (حلتهم احوالهم الغائمة) has become clear, still, and resplendent with joy (نعم مغلبه صفو حليم)”³⁵. Given that it introduces a lengthy presentation of the garments of light, one may conclude that Ephrem viewed Moses’ transfiguration as a key scriptural basis for the theme. Other examples in the surrounding context illustrate other features of the paradisiacal state, but our poet develops no feature so extensively as the robe of glory. Indeed, it seems that Ephrem’s confidence that the righteous will enjoy garments of glory derives precisely from Moses’ example.

Text 4: De Paradiso 9.22–29: fattening on waves of glory

The ninth hymn *De Paradiso* demonstrates best of all Ephrem’s proclivity for nourishment imagery as an interpretation of Moses’ transfiguration. Here, Ephrem draws together the themes of fasting as a means of illumination and of nourishment. The poem’s rhetorical purpose is to draw others to participate in the heavenly eucharistic feast. Although the eucharistic meaning of the poem does not come to full view until its conclusion, nevertheless, the poem’s main theme, the spiritual nourishment of paradise, appears at once. Picking up a theme first introduced in *HdP*7.10, the poem treats the breezes or breath of paradise as nourishing its inhabitants. In a typical couplet, for instance, Ephrem writes “Different breezes nurture the discerning / [their] breath fattens you, captivates, and delights you”³⁶. A diverse panoply of nourishment language appears in the poem: for

35 *HdP*7.12.

36 *HdP*9.11. This particular line is filled with word-play.

according to his capacity: “To each one, according to his strength, he cracks open the door and shows (ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ) / the beauty of his hiddenness, and the radiance of his majesty (ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ)”. *HdP* 7.1 (see page 80 above) confirms that this “treasury” language too is eucharistic in connotation, for it describes the way the Father has given his Son’s “body (ܡܠܟܐ)” to us as the “keys (ܡܠܟܐ)” to his heavenly “treasures”. It is likely that, even back in the *Hymni de Ieiunio*, Ephrem wanted us to connect the heavenly treasures of wisdom with the Eucharist. The Eucharist itself, that is, seems to be the treasury’s key.

Up to this point in *HdP* 9, the liturgical context of this nourishment language has remained obscure, but at the end a variety of eucharistic descriptions appears, now that the treasury door has been cracked open a bit, so to speak. Ephrem speaks of the Father’s “gift (ܡܠܟܐ), teeming with blessings”, including “taste (ܡܠܟܐ)”, “fragrance (ܡܠܟܐ)”, “color (ܡܠܟܐ)”, and “transformative power (ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ⁴¹)”. Indeed, “assemblies” whose “nourishment is glory (ܡܠܟܐ)”, whose “face is brightness (ܡܠܟܐ) ... chew on and recall the satisfaction of his gift (ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ)”. *HdF* 10, Ephrem’s signature poem on the Eucharist, confirms that such ‘gift’ language can be eucharistic, for it describes the sacrament precisely in the same terms, as the ‘gift’ of the Father⁴². Moreover, in the last stanza of *HdP* 9, the poet pleads to partake of the ‘crusts’ (ܡܠܟܐ⁴³) of the divine gift, borrowing the phrase “crusts” or “leftovers” from Mark 8,8, the miracle of the feeding of the four-thousand, itself a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. The language of eating the ‘gift’, together with the communal character of the meal enjoyed by the seers, illustrates that, like pseudo-Macarius⁴⁴, Ephrem applies the story of Moses’ transfiguration to a liturgical and ecclesial context. That is to say, he associates the *liturgy* of the eucharistic mystery with the revelation of the mysteries of divine wisdom.

Operative throughout the passages we have considered is the assumption, typical of Ephrem, that physical and exterior realities manifest divine and hidden ones. For instance, the heavenly countenance of Moses betokens his interior disposition. Thus also, physical food and drink represent, in his sacramental vision, the heavenly wisdom which refreshes Moses. The physical senses, such as taste

41 Literally, the “gift” is described as “transformed by power”, which I take, admittedly somewhat speculatively, to be a reference to the sanctification of the eucharistic elements.

42 *HdF* 10.22.

43 Literally, “that which remains in excess” or “left-overs”. The word is that of the Peshitta of Mk. 8,8 for the remainder of the food from the miracle of feeding the 4000. It is also the same root (though not the identical lexeme) used in the story in Jn. 6,12–13, whose Eucharistic overtones are even more explicit.

44 For example, see Golitzin, “Recovering the Glory of Adam,” p. 294. Much of what Golitzin describes in regard to pseudo-Macarius appears to hold true for the Ephremian texts we are considering. Golitzin acknowledges this parallel, though without further investigation, on pp. 304–305. His assertion on p. 303 that Ephrem has little to say on this topic is, as the present essay shows, mistaken.

and hearing, represent the powers or vital movements (ܐܘܪܐ) of the soul. There is no body/soul dualism in Ephrem's vision.

Yet, neither the senses, nor even the highest powers of the soul are fully adequate for the divine mystery. Thus, Ephrem deliberately joins different senses together in contradictory and confusing ways. The clash of sensations suggests the mental confusion faced by the soul in its mystical ascent from the human realm to the divine. For instance, in stanza 22, Ephrem first associates *vision* with *eating* and *hearing* with *drinking*. In Ephrem's metaphor, one seems to 'eat' a vision and 'drink' a sound. In the same vein, he associates *hunger* with *fatness* and *thirst* with *beauty*, in the sense that fatness arises from the satisfaction of hunger and (one supposes) beauty arises from the satisfaction of thirst. Subsequently, however, he inverts the imagery just described by associating *thirst* with *fatness*—as if one could grow fat on a liquid diet. In stanza 24, he links "devouring" and "vision" (i. e., *eating* and *seeing*) on the one hand, and "fattening" and the "waves of glory", on the other. This amounts to being fattened, not on solid food, as one might expect, but on drink. It is almost as if Ephrem cannot decide how to describe the indescribable nourishment of Paradise: does one 'eat' or 'drink' the vision of glory? Is it best described as a solid food or as a drink? Of course, as Ephrem makes clear elsewhere, no descriptions of Paradise are adequate⁴⁵. Ephrem's refusal to settle on a consistent set of terms for such descriptions highlights his implicit concern to counteract a crassly literal reading of the scriptures.

The clash of sensation images highlights the incomprehensibility of the 'food' of paradise and implies that all the powers or activities (ܐܘܪܐ) of the soul must be marshaled to attain the divine glory. Thus, in stanza 26, Ephrem describes the person as an "eye (ܥܝܢ)", as an "ear (ܐܘܪܐ)", and as a "womb" or perhaps "stomach (ܚܕܐ)"⁴⁶ for the divine glory, wisdom, and treasures. In stanza 27, he emphasizes God's adaptability to various human faculties: to the eye, to the hearing (ܐܘܪܐ), and to the tongue (ܠܫܢ): that is, to seeing, hearing, and speaking. Finally, in stanza 29, Ephrem gives some sense of what all these images that he sees implied in Moses' transfiguration ultimately mean for him: they identify the several faculties of the soul and their properties in the divinized person. The contemplatives or "seers" manifest "peace in their thoughts (ܥܡܬܐ)", truth in their knowledge (ܥܡܬܐ), fear in their inquiry (ܥܡܬܐ), and love in their praise (ܥܡܬܐ)". These four faculties of thought, knowledge, investigation, and praise seem to identify more precisely what the denizens of Paradise actually do. For them, the divine vision is both peaceful and dynamic. Ephrem even envisions the seers as reverently *inquiring* into divine mystery, with the same verb used by the Peshitta of I Cor. 2,10 to describe how the Spirit plumbs (ܥܡܬܐ) the secrets

45 HdP10.1 & 11.6–8.

46 The more normal word for "stomach" in Syriac is ܚܕܐ. The word ܚܕܐ possesses a more general sense that includes any sort of body cavity, including the womb, or bosom.

of God the Father. Ephrem himself has investigated this mystery to the extent of his capacity by using Moses' ascent, transfiguration, and vision as the starting point. Moses' example gives Ephrem hope that (as he puts it in the final words of his poem): "Everyone who gazes upon you / fattens on your beauty"⁴⁷.

3.2. Extended Treatments of the Edessene Period

The intertwined imagery of wisdom, Eucharist, and sacramental contemplation that we saw Ephrem connecting to Moses' transfiguration in the works of his Nisibene period gives way to more epistemological and polemical themes in his later works, with one exception. Five Edessene works deal extensively with the transfiguration of Moses. Of these, the two selections from the *Hymni de Fide*, and one from the *Sermo de Domino Nostro*, are most alike. The other two passages, one in *Hymnus de Ecclesia* 36 and one from the *Hymnen auf Abraham Kidunaya*, are more unique. Nevertheless, it is clear that the interest in wisdom and contemplation in the earlier poems has been focused more narrowly on the problems associated with any human claim to see God's glory or essence.

Text 5: HdE 36: Moses' transfiguration, precursor of Christ's baptism

The fifteen stanzas of the thirty-sixth *Hymnus de Ecclesia* amount to one of the most remarkable and focused uses of light imagery in all of Ephrem's corpus. As no description of human participation in divine light, it seems, would be complete without Moses' transfiguration, the story features quite prominently in this poem, which is also replete with the language of clothing and exterior adornment typical of the 'robe of glory' theme.

The poem focuses on the effects of Christ, as light of the world, in his Church. It pursues this idea by comparing Christ's nativity in Mary with his baptism in the Jordan river, which, according to a tradition widespread in the Syrian Orient, was transformed by divine light and fire at the moment of Jesus' baptism⁴⁸. Moses' transfiguration serves as an Old Testament type of the illumination of Mary, and of the illumination of the river.

Most of Ephrem's metaphors in this poem directly involve light, which he prefers to treat as clothing or exterior adornment; thus, 'light' language aside, adornment imagery comprises over 40% of his vocabulary. Nourishment language, so prominent in previous interpretations, yields to words for adornment (category D) and for beauty (category B—about 30% of the remainder).

⁴⁷ HdP9.29.

⁴⁸ W. L. Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship* (Suppl. to Vigiliae Christianae, 25), (Leiden, 1994), pp. 14–20.

Two things deserve particular notice in this poem: first, that Ephrem appeals to the conception of Christ and his baptism to argue for an ebb and flow in the way Christ, as light, relates to humanity. The pattern appears at first to lack scriptural foundation. Yet, and this is the second point, Ephrem appeals to Moses' example to support the pattern he argues for in Mary and the Jordan. Let us first turn to the pattern.

An eye is purified by its association (ܡܥܡܐ) with the source of light.

It becomes resplendent by its outer furnishing (ܡܠܐ) and limpid (ܠܡܕܐ) by its ray, pure, by its brightness, and adorned by its beauty (ܡܝܬܐܐ ܠܚܒܐܐ)⁴⁹.

In Ephrem's example of the eye, there is an inner/outer polarity, an ebb and flow: outward to inward and back again. There is first union, as the light joins the eye, then light shining through the eye rendered transparent. Finally, having purified the eye, the light shines out of the eye, making its beauty apparent outwardly. Or, in other words, light shines in, purifies, and thus shines out. The eye, having been rendered transparent, takes on the characteristics of the light.

In Mary, the same pattern of indwelling, purification, and shining is posited:

Mary is like an eye: the light dwelt in her

it polished her mind (ܡܝܬܐܐ ܡܠܚܝܬܐ) and rendered her thought transparent (ܠܡܕܐ ܡܠܚܝܬܐ).

It purified her concerns (ܡܥܡܐ ܡܠܚܝܬܐ), and 'filtered' her virginity (ܠܡܕܐ ܡܠܚܝܬܐ)⁵⁰.

In the case of Mary, union takes place with Christ, the Light, and the aspects of her interior life are first "polished" and "cleared up", an interior state which then becomes manifest in her demeanor and her body (i.e., her virginity). The outward adornment by brightness is the finishing touch of the interplay of grace and ascetical practice (which, in this case, is Mary's virginity). Some of Ephrem's language, playing on the word "eye", which also means "spring", evokes the image of clear drink and filtered wine.

Ephrem moves from the womb of Mary to the "womb" of the Jordan river, where he perceives the same pattern:

The river in which he was baptized, symbolically re-conceived him:

The moist 'womb' of the waters conceived him in purity (ܠܡܕܐ ܡܠܚܝܬܐ),

gave birth to him in splendid innocence (ܠܡܕܐ ܡܠܚܝܬܐ), and brought him up in glory (ܡܡܠܟܐ ܠܚܒܐܐ)⁵¹.

In Ephrem's balanced rhymes, Jesus, the Light, is taken into the river, manifested within it, and brought forth. With this comparison, the *liturgical* context of the inner/outer polarity identified above emerges. The Christian, conformed to Christ, enters into the water of baptism, is transformed, and emerges. Mary her-

49 HdE36.1.

50 HdE36.2.

51 HdE36.3.

self, the Jordan river, and implicitly the individual Christian, are conformed to the unique Christ, just as the eye is transformed by and conformed to the light.

To support his reading, Ephrem turns to Moses' transfiguration in stanzas 6–9 as a key text.

Moses donned brightness (ܠܐܝܬܐ), arrayed from without (ܡܢ ܕܢܗܝܬܐ);
the river, in which Christ was baptized, donned light (ܠܐܝܬܐ) from within (ܡܢ ܕܒܝܬܐ).
And [Mary's] body, in which he dwelt was made radiant (ܠܐܝܬܐ) from within (ܡܢ ܕܒܝܬܐ).

Just as Moses became radiant with glory (ܠܐܝܬܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܐ),
because he saw briefly a glimmer (ܠܐܝܬܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܐ), how much more
does the body in which Christ dwelt become radiant (ܠܐܝܬܐ), as well as the river in which he was
baptized?

The brightness (ܠܐܝܬܐ) which the silent Moses donned in the wilderness
did not permit darkness to darken his fold.
For the light that shed from his face, served to guide his feet

Like the celestial beings (ܠܐܝܬܐ), who have no need of another light
for their eyes, because light already streams (ܠܐܝܬܐ) from their pupils,
and they are arrayed in flashes of glory (ܠܐܝܬܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܐ .. ܠܐܝܬܐ).⁵²

In imagining Moses' experience, Ephrem observes a contrastive polarity between Mary and the river Jordan on the one hand, and Moses on the other. Both shared in the light of Christ, but the latter in a way far less perfect than the former. To explain the difference, Ephrem employs an inner/outer polarity in stanzas 6 and 7 with contrasts between “from within” and “from without” and between *indwelling* and a *brief glimpse*. The pattern of light entering in, purifying, and shining forth is the same for Moses as it is for Mary and for the Jordan river. Indeed, as we have seen in previous interpretations, Ephrem clearly associates Moses with the “celestial beings” who inhabit the heavenly realm. The difference lies in the nature and duration of the association of an earthly being with heavenly light. In the case of Moses, the association is brief and exterior. He ascends to the light of divinity. In Mary and the Jordan, the association is extended and interior. The light of divinity descends to them.

Thus, in this reading of Moses' transfiguration, Ephrem, seemingly inspired by the liturgy of baptism, emphasizes *clothing* with light. Light as nourishment finds no particular place in this reading. Nevertheless, the pattern of associating Moses with the heavenly realm and of using Moses' transfiguration as an icon of a divinized life continues. Theologically, what distinguishes this treatment from the rest is Ephrem's emphasis on Moses' receptivity to the light of Christ, rather than on ascetical practices. One might see also in his presentation a special interest in the interior disposition of those baptized. Ephrem encourages Christians to sur-

52 HdE 36.6–9.

pass even the radiant Moses by imitating Mary's receptive disposition toward Christ. Overall, the image is a passive one. Ephrem's insistence on the superiority of Christ, his defense of Mary's purity, and the reference to Moses' stammering, seeks to exalt Christianity in the face of Jewish (or perhaps judaizing) points of view.

*Texts 6 & 7: HdF 8.1–6 & HdF 33: indescribable glory,
both hidden and manifest*

By contrast, a different interest animates Ephrem's interpretations of Moses' transfiguration in the *Hymni de Fide*. Many of these compositions defend or commend the right attitude toward theological investigation. While such concern was not entirely absent before (see *HdP*9.28), now it becomes central. In contemporary theological controversies, Ephrem found it necessary to insist on the incomprehensibility of the divine nature, and thus he focuses on the *overpowering character* of Moses' transfiguration. His intense brightness admonishes those who would investigate the divine brightness of which it is merely a reflection.

The epistemological interest means that language of spiritual perception (category C) naturally dominates these poems. In *HdF* 8.1–6, for instance, it amounts to nearly 70% of Ephrem's language for interpreting the light imagery. In *HdF* 33, which discusses the indescribable character of the Word of God, it comprises more than half of his metaphoric vocabulary. Of these, the most frequent in *HdF* 8, by far, are the words ܐܝܢܐ "to see" and ܢܝܐ (root ܢܝܐ) "to gaze upon". Imagery of clothing and exterior adornment (other than Moses' veil itself) is almost completely absent. In *HdF* 33, the vocabulary is much more varied, and includes words like ܐܡܠܐܢܐ (mind), ܐܡܠܐܢܐ (thought), and ܐܡܠܐܢܐ (intelligence).

In the eighth hymn *De Fide*, Moses' transfiguration is the foremost biblical example with which Ephrem introduces a series of admonitions against attempting to "stare at the brightness" of God himself. In this passage, unique among his interpretations, the veil on Moses' face becomes a key element for his argument. Ephrem makes his point clear without delay:

Behold the brightness (ܐܝܢܐ) of Moses
which could not be beheld (ܐܝܢܐ ܢܝܐ) by those who saw him.
They were incapable of gazing (ܐܝܢܐ) upon a mortal:
who would dare to gaze (ܐܝܢܐ)
upon the terrible, all-wounding [God]?
If the brightness (ܐܝܢܐ) of a servant
had such intensity (ܐܝܢܐ),
who can stand with uplifted eyes before his Master⁵³?

Ephrem’s contrastive polarities between *servant* and *master*, *mortal* and *God*, establish his theme with crystal-clarity. The subsequent stanzas highlight various aspects of the story: Ephrem compares Moses’ veil (ܠܥܬܐ) to the veil of the “brightness of living fire (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝ)” that hides God’s essence from the Cherubim. Given this comparison, it is almost as if the light itself is a veil. Ephrem encourages his audience to adopt “peace and silence (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ)” as a “sanctuary veil (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ)”⁵⁴. In this way, Ephrem proposes Moses as an example for contemporary Christians, an example of the proper approach to divine mystery, modeled on the heavenly realm itself. The overall strategy is associative—linking Moses, the Cherubim, and the Church. Ephrem encourages his flock to join their company.

The incomprehensibility of the divine essence is a commonplace of Ephrem’s thought (indeed a commonplace of fourth-century pro-Nicene thinkers in general)⁵⁵. Of more interest is what exactly Moses’ veil *veils*. The story of Moses itself is like a veil hiding another mystery: “How terrifying”, says Ephrem, “is the depth in which your story (ܠܥܬܐ) is concealed!”⁵⁶ These words reveal that it is the *story* or *account* of the Son of God that is veiled from human inquiry just as the divine brightness is veiled from the Israelites. Indeed, says Ephrem,

Within Moses’ veil lay hidden
your radiant truth (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ).
Within his slow speech lay hidden
your mellifluous explanation (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝ).
Beneath these two types of covering is hidden
your truth and your proclamation (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝ).
You rolled back the covering;
you clarified the stammering.
Now your truth rolls off the tongue (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝ),
and your reality is obvious to the eye (ܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܝܡܝ).

The veil on his face,
and the stammering in his mouth,
were two types of covering.
You were hidden from the blinded People,
and apparent before the righteous.
For they earnestly desired your day.
Even now, the infidels of our own time
are blinded by a veil.

54 HdF8.2.

55 Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, (Oxford, 2006), p. 282.

56 HdF 8.3. One could also translate ܠܥܬܐ in a more technical sense as “your generation” (in reference to the Son’s being begotten by the Father). It seems likely that Ephrem intends to allude both to the Word’s birth and narrative in time as well as to whatever the eternal counterpart of that temporal path might be.

They are both blind and stammering:

blinded to your beauty (ܚܡܬܝܢ ܕܚܝܒܐ)

and tongue-tied for your explanation (ܕܠܝܠܝܢ ܕܚܝܒܐ)⁵⁷.

According to Ephrem, the beautiful and inexplicable mystery of Christ himself is the object the biblical story veils. To express this mystery, Ephrem develops a polarity between sight, which is receptive, and speech, which is expressive. Linked together, sight and speech form a merism expressing just how mysterious the mystery of Christ is: difficult both to receive in the understanding and to express with the tongue. They also convey the inability of certain contemporary Christians, like those of the Jews who had disbelieved in the time of Christ, to approach the real meaning of Christ. Yet while he emphasizes the real meaning of Christ's divine identity, Ephrem suggests something more. By treating the *brightness* as a veil, he acknowledges that the revealed truth enjoyed by the Church is manifest and radiant, yet ultimately incomprehensible. In this way, Ephrem's interpretation here resembles the image of "bright darkness" that St. Gregory of Nyssa loves to employ⁵⁸. At the end of the poem (stanzas 15 and 16), Ephrem returns to the familiar story of Daniel's vision.

HdF 33 takes a similar approach, but focuses our attention on the opening words of the Gospel of John, using the transfiguration of Moses to interpret them. John, like the visionaries Moses and Daniel before him, perceived the "truth (ܡܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܒܐ)" and in "gazing" upon Christ, "depicted [him] as both Word and God (ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܒܐ ܕܚܝܒܐ)"⁵⁹. Indeed, employing a distinction between *what* a thing is and *how* it exists⁶⁰, Ephrem refines the position adopted in *HdF* 8 about the truth manifest in the church, yet ultimately incomprehensible:

While he is completely hidden, his nature (ܚܡܬܝܢ) is both known and unknown.

On the one hand, it is clear that he exists (ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܚܝܒܐ) on the other, 'how' he is, is hidden (ܕܚܡܬܝܢ ܕܚܝܒܐ).

Let us forego that which goes beyond us but let us entrust to others what he has entrusted to us⁶¹.

In other words, we should be content with what the scriptures convey to us: the 'facts' of revelation regarding the Son. We cannot hope to understand the *mode* of the Son's existence. In this way, what is radiantly manifest (known) is also hidden (not fully comprehended).

To illustrate this point, the poem deploys a single extended image: that of painting and iconography⁶². Ephrem argues that John, in calling him "Word" has

57 *HdF* 8.4-5.

58 For example, in Herbert Musurillo (ed. & trans.), *De Vita Moysis* (Leiden, 1964) 2.163.

59 *HdF* 33.1.

60 This same distinction appears earlier in his corpus in *SdF* 4.57-64.

61 *HdF* 33.3.

62 This is an image much-beloved of St. Ephrem. It has been studied by Sidney H. Griffith, "The Image of the Image Maker in the Poetry of St. Ephraem the Syrian", *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993), pp. 258-269.

What iconographer (مصور) can fix his gaze upon that brightness (نور) with which Moses was arrayed? For no one could adequately represent him: neither the painters of murals on walls nor the dyers of garments (صانعة لثياب) ⁶⁴.

An important concern appears for the first time⁶⁸ in this poem: the error of anthropomorphism⁶⁹. Ephrem's precise and explicit protestations about the incapacity of human thought and artistry to depict the divine form, together with his epistemologically refined distinction between essence and existence, indicate a polemic directed against those who would take the apocalyptic visions described in scripture too literally⁷⁰. His argument seems to be that the tradition of heavenly

70 Ibid., pp. 286–297.

visions in the OT, particularly those represented by Moses and Daniel, reveals human capacity *overpowered* by the transcendent divine mystery, and therefore *all* representations of the divine nature do not express the divine essence, but only “the form in which he arrayed himself (ܐܦܚܝܢ ܠܡܝܬܐ)”⁷¹. Ephrem’s choice of the word ܠܡܝܬܐ recalls the condescension language of Ph. 2,8. It suggests that each vision of God in the Old Testament thus prefigures the condescension of the incarnate Christ, who humbled himself to put on a form (ܠܡܝܬܐ) that was not his own, in order to allow us to put on a countenance (ܠܡܝܐ) that is not our own. At stake here is a proper understanding of divinization: the boundary between the creator and creature is crossed only by the creator. Man does not see God in a properly divine form. Ephrem’s insistence on this doctrinal point is as trenchant as that of his contemporary Athanasius⁷².

Text 8: SdDN 29: mercy of God, mercy of Moses

The capacity to see God becomes the explicit focus of the twenty-ninth section of Ephrem’s *Sermo de Domino Nostro*⁷³, the only prose work (to the present author’s knowledge) in which he treats the transfiguration of Moses. Despite its different form, its thematic content is entirely familiar. Nearly all of Ephrem’s language in this section focuses either on some way of characterizing the divine brightness (most often described as ܠܡܝܐ or ܠܡܝܐ) or some way of speaking about the perception of God (typically the root ܠܡܝܐ for “vision”). Ephrem’s goal is to explain why it is that God said to Moses, “Man cannot see me, and live” (Ex. 33,20). Ephrem asks: “Is it because of the fury of his anger (ܡܚܝܐ ܠܡܝܐ) that the one who sees him dies, or is it because of the brightness of his essence (ܡܚܝܐ ܠܡܝܐ)?” Probably Ephrem wishes to exclude a Marcionite reading of the passage, which would incline to the former interpretation, thus making the God of the Pentateuch vengeful and evil.

Instead, Ephrem argues for the latter interpretation, taking Moses’ transfiguration as evidence. In fact, he presents Moses as the first visionary to realize that the divine essence is fundamentally incomprehensible. The imagery of a sea or flood, first introduced in the *Hymni de Paradiso* to describe God’s glory as an inexhaustible drink, appears once again:

For this reason, the same God who, in his love, wished that Moses’ sight should be set in a pleasant and beneficial ray of his glory (ܠܡܝܐ ܠܡܝܐ ܠܡܝܐ), by the same token, did not wish that

71 HdF33.13.

72 My primary point of reference for Athanasius is the fine study Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology), (Oxford, 2005), in particular, his second chapter.

73 Beck’s edition, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermo de Domino Nostro* (CSCO 270 and 271; Louvain, 1966), does not sub-divide the chapters into sections. All quotations from the 29th chapter of the work can be found on pp. 26–27 of his edition.

Moses' sight should be drowned (ܡܫܬܚܝܬܐ) in the midst of powerful flashes of his radiant glory (ܡܫܬܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ).

God's granting Moses some sort of vision of his glory Ephrem takes as evidence for God's love. Likewise, God's affording Moses some sort of protection (Ex. 33,22) from the "violent waves of his glory (ܡܫܬܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ)" manifests the same love.

Moses' decision, in turn, to veil his face from the people of Israel follows the example of this very love. Moses, Ephrem argues,

discovered from God himself, who covered him over with his hand ... lest he be harmed, that he also should spread a veil over himself and protect the weaklings from the vehement splendor, lest it injure them⁷⁴.

The incapacity of the people of Israel to bear the "reflected brightness (ܡܫܬܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ)" on Moses' face persuades Moses of the boldness required "to gaze upon the glory of the divine essence (ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ)". The glory on Moses' face is, as we have seen in previous interpretations, an earthly icon of what it is like in the heavenly realm: "The fact is", Ephrem says, "that in the waves of the divine essence (ܡܫܬܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ) both celestial and terrestrial creatures are submerged and then emerge (ܡܫܬܠܥܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ), and that they cannot 'touch bottom' nor reach its shores, nor find its end or limit"⁷⁵.

Ephrem turns his customary interpretation that *brightness* is a mark of the heavenly realm, a badge of membership among the denizens of Paradise, into a reminder that God's *essence* is incomprehensible. What associates Moses with the angels also dissociates him from God. The veil on Moses' face becomes the key element that Ephrem employs throughout these interpretations in the *Hymns on Faith* and the *Sermo de Domino Nostro* to emphasize the transcendence of God in himself, a concern that seems not to have informed his earlier treatments.

Text 9: The Hymns on Abraham Qidunaya—Ephrem's Farewell Compositions

For our last example, we turn to one of the last works of Ephrem's life: the final section of the fifth *Hymn on Abraham Qidunaya*. Abraham was one of the first Christian ascetics of fourth-century Mesopotamia to attract considerable fame. One might call him the Anthony of the Syrian Orient⁷⁶. The treatment of Moses'

74 SdDN29.

75 Ibid.

76 Many scholars, following Beck's doubts on the matter, reject the authenticity of these poems, so the inclusion of this passage in our survey calls for some explanation. A distinction must be made between the first five poems of the cycle and the latter ten. Theological anachronisms, similarities to a known pseudo-Ephremian account of Abraham Qidunaya, and garishly inexperienced use of Ephrem's typical metaphors make it certain that Ephrem did not author the final ten poems of the cycle. On the other hand, the absence of such anachronisms, the impressive rhetorical sophistication, and the marked rhetorical and thematic similarity to the authentic *Hymns on Para-*

transfiguration in *HdAQ5* fits the pattern we have already seen in Ephrem's other works. It combines some of the classic clothing language of *HdE* 36 (p. 85 above) with a concern for authentically motivated asceticism like that of the *HdJ* and *HdP*, together with the same emphasis on the borrowed, derivative character of Moses' glory so noticeable in the *SdDN*. Ephrem also describes the angels numbering Abraham among the "wise (سُتَحْكَم)"⁷⁷, in keeping with the wisdom motifs we have seen throughout.

In this case, Ephrem employs Moses as a paradigm of ascetically cultivated virtue, as he had in the hymns *de Ieiunio* and *de Paradiso*, to show that an authentic ascetic depends upon Christ in order to be conformed to him. In the end, Ephrem's point is simple: that just as Christ "lent his brightness to Moses (ܡܘܨܝ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ)"⁷⁸, so too the ascetic borrows his glory from Christ. It seems that Ephrem treats the ascetical practice itself as a form of adornment⁷⁹.

Nourishment metaphors⁸⁰ recede into the background of Ephrem's presentation of the transfiguration. One related example, however, deserves special note: when Christ "receives" our adornments, he "grafts them into his truth (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ)" / in order that they might have the power to adorn us"⁸¹. As with Moses' "borrowed glory", whatever adornment we have derives its power only from Christ. Whence this horticultural image of 'grafting'? Perhaps from the NT image of Christ as the vine (Jn. 15,5), together with the tree of life traditions beloved of early Syriac authors⁸². Yet the word 'graft' also derives from the same root as "taste (ܡܠܟܐ)", and in this context suggests 'partaking of' or 'having a taste of' that which ultimately supplies the source of life and strength. Our ascetical practices, Ephrem implies, such as prayer, fasting, and vigil, have strength and value only insofar as they are *nourished* by Christ the vine, just as branches draw

disse make it all but certain that the first five poems in the cycle are indeed Ephrem's. A few scholars (Sebastian Brock, "Saints in Syriac: A Little-Tapped Resource", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008), p. 187, following Sidney H. Griffith, "Abraham Qidūnāyā, St. Ephraem the Syrian, and Early Monasticism in the Syriac-speaking World", in Daniel Hombergen – Maciej Bielawski, (eds.), (Rome; 2004), pp. 239–264) have recently inclined to accept them as works of Ephrem. If their authenticity be accepted, the dating of the first five hymns is relatively certain, because they presuppose the death of Abraham. The year of his death, 367, thus provides a *terminus post quem*. Since Ephrem himself died in June of 373, his compositions on Abraham could only have been written in the last five or so years of his life.

77 *HdAQ* 5.16.

78 *HdAQ* 5.23.

79 The imagery of the ascetical practices themselves as an adornment appears in *HdP*, *passim*, and most clearly in *HdAQ* 5.16–17.

80 As an aside, it is interesting it is worth noting that in *HdAQ* 1.3 and 1.16, Ephrem loves to emphasize the contrast between Abraham's old age and youthfulness. Perhaps Ephrem uses the image of Moses transfigured because, as in *HdP* 7.10, he wishes to see argue that ascetical exercises ultimately rejuvenate their practitioner.

81 *HdAQ* 5.24.

82 Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, revised ed., (Piscataway, New Jersey, 2004), pp. 95–130.

adornments into that brightness which brightened his face (പ്രകാശം ആക്കി ഉപദേശം, താമര, പൂവ്, പൂക്കൾ, പൂക്കൾ, പൂക്കൾ, പൂക്കൾ)⁸⁵.

4. A Synoptic View of Ephrem's Five Uses of Moses' Transfiguration

Our survey has shown that indeed a certain pattern appears in Ephrem's uses of Moses' transfiguration, described in Ex. 34,29. Ephrem employs the story of Moses' transfiguration as a paradigm, a point of appeal for five major themes, each typically associated with a particular group of images. In summary, these five themes or interpretations are the following:

1. Moses' transfiguration shows us nourishment by divine glory and wisdom, sometimes (that is, in texts 1–4, especially text 4) as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. Metaphors for nourishment and contentment (categories A & B) tend to predominate in such contexts.
2. Moses' transfiguration also portends the god-like status Christians may hope to enjoy (clearest in the briefer treatments).
 1. Such god-like status appears to make possible and perhaps to result from the action of heavenly contemplation (especially in texts 3 & 4),
 2. it offers a paradigm for reverent theological inquiry and pursuit of wisdom (particularly in texts 6 & 8), and
 3. it also furnishes the paradigm for the practice of asceticism, by revealing its spirit and goal (as in texts 1, 2, & 9).

83 *HdAQ5.27.*

⁸⁴ The best sources note this aspect of his career. The most recent introduction to Abraham's life can be found in the present author's dissertation, 'The Rhetoric and Themes of the Madrasâ Cycle in Praise of Abraham Qidūnāyâ attributed to Ephrem the Syrian' (The Catholic University of America, 2012). For most readers, however, the most accessible recent introduction is Griffith, "Abraham Qidūnāyâ," pp. 239–264. Griffith's article identifies all the known sources for Abraham's life.

85 *HdAQ*5.26.

Summation

As we observed in the beginning, Ephrem shows a special interest in the light that shines on Moses' face in Ex. 34,29. Focusing at different times in his career on different aspects of the episode, Ephrem ponders the significance of that light. Despite differences between the five interpretations offered above, they nevertheless tend to follow a consistent pattern, namely, that Moses appears as the paradigm of the ascetic wisdom-seeker, and the light that he received was either a mark of his heavenly wisdom or the 'food' of wisdom itself. In particular, the imagery and vocabulary suggest that Ephrem sees the pattern of Moses' ascent to heavenly wisdom revisited in the Eucharistic liturgy of the Church. It is for this reason that Moses served Ephrem as an icon of spiritual transformation through appropriate asceticism, heavenly contemplation, and the appropriately moderated quest for wisdom (sub-themes 1-3). What makes asceticism and the search for wisdom appropriate, Ephrem implies, is that it be motivated by the desire for heavenly good things rather than any dualistic rejection of the body (as is especially clear in *HdP* 9), and that it rely, in all humility, on the sacramental revelation of the Church. Ephrem focuses on what he takes to be the ascetical and sacramental dimensions of the episode.

In the short references, Ephrem treats the transfiguration of Moses as a Christological testimonium passage, though this is not his primary interest. In the longer passages, we find Ephrem's wisdom-oriented reading of the passage coming to the fore. Throughout, especially in the longer passages, Ephrem's light vocabulary hinges on a keyword, *ܠܗܝܬܐ*, which his predecessor Aphrahat had already used for throne-visions and whose etymology was flexible enough to suggest the range of metaphors and vocabulary that Ephrem chose to use to interpret the light. These patterns of imagery were (A) the light as spiritual nourishment; (B) the light as mark of spiritual health, beauty, and contentment; (C) the light as enabling spiritual perception; and (D) the light as an exterior adornment.

Imagery of categories A and B predominated in texts 1-4. Text 1 gives us two interpretations of the beauty of Moses: that it was a reward of fasting and that it also implies earthly food was replaced with some sort of heavenly nourishment. The image of wisdom's treasury is introduced obscurely, but not developed. Text 2 offers a more direct focus on Moses' transfiguration as a sign of heavenly status, but also as a nourishment by divine wisdom. Comparison to the details of Dn. 2 helps clarify this point. In this way, both texts present the paradigm of the ascetic wisdom-seeker. Text 3 interprets Moses' transfiguration as a paradigm for the protological robe of glory restored and implicitly presents the Eucharist as parallel to Moses' experience. Finally, text 4 draws together all these threads: Ephrem interprets the episode as a case of spiritual nourishment by the light of divine wisdom. Moses feeds on the glory-light itself. The whole context is Eucharistic and

sacramental, which in turn suggests that Ephrem also views the sacramental ascent as the proper way to access divine wisdom. Moses' transfiguration also led Ephrem to speculate on the transformation of human thinking, understanding, inquiry, and praise in Paradise.

In texts 1–4, Ephrem's goal is often to associate Moses with the Christian pursuit of wisdom via asceticism and the sacraments. In texts 5–8, Ephrem sounds a new note: the contrast between Christ's divine status and Moses' humanity. Thus text 5, although in some ways an outlier in the group because of its baptismal themes, focuses on divinization and association with heavenly status, but also considers the temporary character of Moses' illumination and the contrast between Moses and Christ. The context remains sacramental and still offers a pattern of divine illumination that depends on divine initiative. Texts 6 & 7 focus on the veil of Moses and on the overwhelming character of the vision to make a different set of points. On the one hand, the veiling of Moses' transfiguration is a warning. On the other hand, Ephrem also takes it as an image of the paradox of Christ. He considers Moses' experience as a vision of Christ's generation, and he adds Moses' stammering to the picture to show us the paradox of the mystery of Christ that is difficult both to comprehend and to express. Despite the mystery's hiddenness, it remains evident. Text 7 sharpens the point by focusing once again on the brevity of Moses' transfiguration as well as the veil, in order to refute anthropomorphism. Finally, text 8 develops the point about divine vision in *HdF*33 by focusing on the biblical characterization of Moses' intimacy with God and yet his inability to bear the full divine brightness. In this way he sees the transfiguration of Moses as an argument for divine incomprehensibility and as a mark of association with God: Moses' experience teaches both the inaccessibility and accessibility of God.

Finally, text 9 combines many of these elements to argue for the wisdom-seeker's complete dependence on Christ for access to the heavenly treasury. Eucharistic allusions seem to resurface, but now with a much stronger sense of the distinction between God and man.

If we turn to consider the question of rhetorical strategy, then throughout the poems of the Nisibene period, Ephrem tends to view Moses' transfiguration in an *associative* way: it bespeaks Moses' ascent to the heavenly realm and to wisdom. From the more associative texts, one gathers that, in our poet's mind, a key aspect of the ascetical life is the pursuit of wisdom, for which earthly things are rejected. Moses' transfiguration appears as the motivating principle of Daniel's pursuit of wisdom through prayer and fasting, the paradigm of heavenly ascent, and the biblical basis for descriptions of feeding on and reverently investigating the eschatological vision of the divine glory. Ephrem's habitual imagery suggests that the place where the Christian encounters the same kind of transformative theophany that Moses experienced is, prior to the eschatological Paradise itself, the sacramental liturgy of the Church. Ephrem expects that the ascetic pursuit of wisdom

takes place in an ecclesial and sacramental way, not separated from the Church. Thus, the spirit and goal of the ascetic life come into clearer focus. What the ascetic seeks is the vision of the divine glory, with a confidence in his prayer and fasting, but an awareness of his complete dependence on divine initiative.

Yet Moses' transfiguration, particularly the need to veil it from the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, also served a *dissociative* purpose for Ephrem. It reminded his flock of the great distance that remains between creature and the Creator. Thus, in the *Sermones de Fide*, the *Hymni de Fide*, and other kindred texts, Ephrem tends to focus more on the problem of how it is possible to see God's glory. Language of vision and adornment replaces his previous focus on nourishment and contentment imagery. He uses details from the story of Moses' transfiguration: the veil (as in *HdF* 8.1–6, *HdF* 33, and *SdDN* 29), its temporary or periodic character (as in *HdE* 36), and its derivative nature (*HdAQ* 5.22ff), to emphasize the distance between Christ, the Firstborn of the Father, and created beings. Moses' transfiguration thus permits him to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate search for wisdom. The former relies on that insight which is given or revealed in prayer and sacramental intimacy. The latter eschews divinely given illumination in an impossible quest to unveil God's essence, before the audacious and immodest eye of the inquirer. Such is the focus of Ephrem's later works, but it is clear that he understood, even early in his career, the balance between the associative and dissociative aspects of the mystery of Christ, prefigured in Moses' transfiguration. For he employs the story in a dissociative way in one of his first works against immoderate theological discourse: the first *Sermo de Fide*.

The poems on Abraham Qidunaya unite the two poles, the associative and dissociative. In them, Ephrem praises a contemporary who succeeded in the pursuit of wisdom and in the teaching and pastoral care of the Church. It is no accident, therefore, that at the end, Ephrem recalls the example of Moses that had been the basis of both loving association with God and a humble understanding that the ascetic's robe of glory is merely borrowed, not possessed outright.

In all of these instances, the transfiguration of Moses seems to play an important mediating role that balances out Ephrem's typical polarity between reverence and audacity⁸⁶. In the mind of Ephrem, Moses' experience both guarantees the possibility of man's approaching God and reminds him of the impossibility of transcending creaturely limitation. Thus, the transfiguration of Moses serves Ephrem as a balancing point between extremes. Upon reflection, therefore, it is not too surprising that Ephrem should implicitly connect the paradigm of Moses' transfiguration to the Eucharist. For the Eucharist itself is a sacrament that ex-

86 *HdP* 1.1–3 typifies this polarity 'ܚܕܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ'. For a complete recent study, see Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, pp. 235–246.

presses above all the mediation between God and man achieved in the incarnation, on God's initiative.

Abstract — This article examines the thirteen passages in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian that treat the episode of Moses' transfiguration, described in Ex. 34,27–35. Analysis of Ephrem's vocabulary and imagery reveals that he uses the passage in several inter-related ways throughout the course of his literary career. Despite their differences, his interpretations tend to follow a consistent pattern, namely, that Moses appears as the paradigm of the ascetic wisdom-seeker, and that the light that he received was either a mark of his heavenly wisdom or the 'food' of wisdom itself. In his earlier writings, Ephrem focuses on the detail of Moses' fasting and tends to see Moses' transfiguration as evidence of his association with the divine realm in the pursuit of wisdom. He takes the glory-light as the food of divine wisdom, often presented in seemingly Eucharistic language. His later writings, while not denying Moses' quasi-divine status, tend to focus on other aspects of the story: the fear of the Israelites and the veil on Moses' face. In this connection, Moses' experience appears not only as a paradigm for the ascetic pursuit of wisdom, but also for an appropriate epistemological distance from God. Thus, while Moses' transfiguration remains a paradigm for the ascetic pursuit of wisdom and heavenly contemplation, it also serves as a model for appropriate theological inquiry. At the end of his life, Ephrem unites many of these themes in a final treatment of the episode.