TEXT 2

On Human Language about God (Fid. 31)

This madrasha is of particular importance for the light it sheds on Ephrem's understanding of how the biblical text is to be understood. for it sets out to describe how God speaks to humanity through the biblical text, allowing himself, as it were, to become incarnated into human language. The starting point is the dilemma: how can human beings speak about the Godhead, seeing that the human mind is not capable of crossing the ontological gap (or "chasm," as Ephrem often calls it) which exists between Creation and its Creator? This might suggest that a holy silence is all that is possible. Ephrem, however, has a solution to the problem: God, stirred by love for his creation, has himself crossed this gap and entered the created world, allowing himself to be described in human terms and in human language in the Bible. Thus, before becoming incarnate in the human body, he first became incarnate in human language, or, in Ephrem's own homely metaphor of clothing, "God put on names," or metaphors, in the Old Testament, just as subsequently he "put on a body" at the incarnation. Of great importance for Ephrem in all this is the fact that God is not forcing himself on humanity; rather, he is deliberately encouraging the use of his gift to humanity of free will (stanza 5). Ephrem then goes on, with a delightful sense of humor, to compare God's action, in teaching humanity about himself, to that of a man teaching a parrot how to talk, using a mirror to deceive the parrot into thinking that it is a fellow parrot talking to it.

Humanity, on its part, must not abuse this divine condescension by taking literally these "names" or metaphors with which God has clothed himself; to understand these terms literally would be a total misunderstanding of biblical language. The very fact that the biblical text moves from one metaphor for God to another should be a sufficient warning against any such misconception. Thus, instead of fixing one's mind on the literal meaning of the metaphors, one should allow these metaphors to act as pointers upwards, as it were, towards the hiddenness of God, whose true nature cannot be described by, let alone contained in, human language.

As usual, Ephrem employs many subtle verbal allusions to a variety of different biblical passages; amongst these it is interesting to find the "sapphire brick," which is a reference to Exod 24:10, a passage which gave rise to a great deal of mystical speculation among both Christian and Jewish writers.

An excellent study of Ephrem's approach to reading the biblical text is provided by Griffith 1997.

Meter

The qala is given as bayya o(w) b-mulkane, the opening words of Par. 7. This is the widely used pardaisa meter, for which see on Text 1 [pp. 2-3].

Text

The cycle On Faith is preserved in four sixth-century manuscripts: British Library Add. 12176 (Beck's A), Vatican Syr. 111 (dated 522; Beck's B), Vatican Syr. 113 (Beck's C), and British Library Add. 14571 (dated 519; Beck's D). The opening of the present madrasha is lost in C (which begins at stanza 9), and the whole poem is absent from D.

حُد مُلًا وحُمَّاه حقة حُمْلًا

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رلْقُعْدُ اللَّهُ وَقُورُ مُقَارًا لِكُمْ اللَّهُ الللَّهُ اللَّهُ الل

1. Let us give thanks to [God] who has clothed Himself in the names of the [body's] various parts:

[Scripture] refers to His "ears," to teach us that He listens to us;

it speaks of His "eyes," to show that He sees us.

Ps 34:15

Ps 34:15

It was just the names of such things that He put on,

and—although in His true Being there is no wrath or regret—

Gen 6:6; 1 Sam 15:29

yet He put on these terms because of our weakness.

Refrain: Blessed is He who has appeared to our human race under so many metaphors.

2. We should realize that, had He not put on the names of such things, it would not have been possible for Him to speak with us humans. By means of what belongs to us did He draw close to us:

He clothed Himself in our language, so that He might clothe us in His mode of life. He asked for our form and put this on, and then, as a father with his children,

He spoke with our childish state.

4. ماه حبقر أب هك مكم مكتك المحكما مكل مكل المقت أب كيكنا سكيل المعند المكرك حبيد المكرك مكرك مكرك مكرك مكرك المكرك حبائك المكرك ال

3. It is our terms that He has put on—
though He did not literally do so;

He then took them off—without actually doing so: when wearing them, He was at the same time stripped of them.

He puts on one when it is beneficial, then strips it off in exchange for another;

the fact that He strips off and puts on all sorts of metaphors

tells us that the metaphor does not apply to His true Being:

because that Being is hidden,

He has depicted it by means of what is visible.

4. In one place He was like an Old Man and the Ancient of Days,1

Dan 7:9

then again, He became like a Hero, a Valiant Warrior.

Exod 15:3

For the purpose of judgment, He was an Old Man, but for conflict He was valiant.

In one place He was delaying; elsewhere, having run,

He became weary. In one place He was asleep,

Isa 7:13; Ps 44:23; 78:66

in another, in need: by every means did He weary Himself so as to gain us.

^{1.} Ancient of Days: In Ephrem the Ancient of Days designates the Father (Nis. 4.7; Haer. 32.5), whereas in later Syriac (and Greek) poetry it more frequently refers to the Son: this is due to the indirect influence of the Old Greek text of Dan 7:13, where "a son of man" does not come to the Ancient of Days (so the Aramaic, Peshitta, and standard Greek Text ["Theodotion"]), but is "like" him.

- واُه وَه وَمُكُوه كُن مُصِكِلًا حَفُرُسِمُّا لَهُمْا هَمُكُوه كُن مُصَكِّلًا حُفْرُسُمُّا لَهُمْا هَمُكُوه كُن وَجْرِبَ مُلا وُقِيْمُ حَفْرُه وِهُه مُصِكِلًا وَمِقَانُهُ مَوْمِ كَتَنْهُ شَمِّعِيْلًا وَهُمُنَا وَسِمَّنَاهُ وَه شَعِيْلًا وَهُمَانُ أَنْهُ مَوْرِشِينَ وَحُن مُصِيِّلًا وَمِقَانُهُ أَنْهُم مَقَوْشِينَ وَحُن مُصِيِّكُه أَنْكُوه

- 5. For this is the Good One, who could have forced us to please Him, without any trouble to Himself; but instead He toiled by every means so that we might act pleasingly to Him of our own volition, that we might depict our beauty with the colors that our own free will² had gathered; whereas, if He had adorned us, then we would have resembled a portrait that someone else had painted, adorning it with his own colors.
- 6. A person who is teaching a parrot to speak
 hides behind a mirror and teaches it in this way:
 when the bird turns in the direction of the voice speaking,
 it finds in front of its eyes its own resemblance reflected;
 it imagines that it is another parrot, conversing with itself.

 [The man] puts [the bird's] image in front of it,
 so that thereby it might learn how to speak.
- 7. This bird is related to man,³
 but although this relationship exists, the man beguiles and teaches
 [the parrot] something alien to itself by means of itself; in this way he speaks with it.
 The divine Being that in all things is exalted above all things
 in Its love Its height bent down and

 It acquired from us our own customs;

 It has labored by every means so as to turn all to Itself.

^{2.} free will (he ruta): Lit. "freedom." Ephrem always gives great emphasis to the importance of the gift to humanity of free will.

^{3.} related to man: That is, as a fellow creature.

8. His likeness is that of an Old Man, or of a Hero;

of Him it is written that He slept, or again, that He slumbers not;

Ps 120 (121):3-4

of Him it is written that He was weary, or again, that He wearies not.

Isa 40:28

By binding and loosing He has helped [us] in order to teach us:

in the case of the sapphire brick,

He contracted Himself and stood above it,

Exod 24:10

then He extended Himself and filled the heaven, everything being in the palm of His hand.

Isa 40:12

9. He manifested Himself somewhere,
He manifested Himself everywhere;

we imagined He was somewhere, but everything is filled with Him.

He becomes small⁴ that He might make us sufficient; He became great in order to enrich us.

He becomes small, and then again great, in order to magnify us.

Had He become small and not become again great, He would have been small and abused by us,

because He would have been thought to be weak.

Therefore He became small and then again great.

^{4.} becomes small: "The Great One who became small" is a phrase to designate the incarnation that is quite frequently found in Ephrem and other Syriac poets; cf. Text 8 (*Res.* 1), stanza 22.

ا تَهْمُه بِعُل أِنكَ أَهْزَد احَةُوهُ لَى هُالًا هَفُو هُنْد أَاحِنُه حَلَّوْتُلَا بِهُدِنًا بِسُكُمَّا هِه هَادِنُا حَعُل بِهُدِنَا أَهْمُنَا هِه بُحَرِّحَهُ أَه لُا هِفُع أُولًا كَلِحَةُوهُ أَه يُزْد فِهُ مِنْ كَي اُولًا كَلِحَةُوهُ أَه يُزْد فِهُ مِنْ كَي هُاكُذ النَّدِيُ كَي حَقًا هِهُ حَعَلًا كَعَلِي كَيْ هُاكُذ النَّدِيُ كَي حَقًا هِهُ حَعَلًا كَعَلَى عَمْلِ كَعَلَى عَمْلًا كَعَلَى الْكَافِي الْكَافِي الْكَافِي الْكُوبُ الْكُلْمُ الْكُوبُ الْكُوبُ الْكُوبُ الْكُوبُ الْكُوبُ الْكُوبُ الْكُو

اا، وَكَنْ وَلَمْ الْمُ اللَّهِ اللَّهِ الْمُ الْمُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ الْمُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللَّهُ اللّلْمُ اللَّهُ اللّهُ اللّ

10. Let us wonder at how, when He became small, He made our own small state great.

Had He not reverted and become great, He would have made our opinion of Him small,

imagining Him to be weak—and by thus imagining, our conception [of God] would be diminished.

He is an Essence whose greatness we are not capable of grasping—

no, not even in His smallness.

He grew great—when we had gone astray;

He grew small—when we had grown feeble. In every way did He labor over us.

11. He wished to teach us two things: that He became [flesh], yet He did not come into being.

John 1:14

In His love He made for Himself a countenance, so that His servants might behold Him;

but, lest we be harmed by imagining He was really like this,

He moved from one likeness to another, to teach us

that He has no likeness. And though He did not depart

from the form of humanity, yet by His changes⁵ He did depart.

^{5.} changes: For a discussion of this term in Ephrem, see McVey 1988.