

In this hymn Ephrem explores the paradoxical relationship of Mary to Jesus as the basis for the paradox of *kenosis*. Inverting the reasoning of the previous hymn, the unnatural conception of Jesus provides a kind of proof of his divinity. If one cannot understand how Mary is both virgin and mother, how much less is it possible to comprehend her Son! (str. 1). Moreover, Mary is mother, sister and betrothed of Jesus (str. 2–4). Finally, the kenotic theme is developed in two respects: First with respect to Mary: She cared for her Son because He willed to become in need of care (str. 5). Second with respect to all creation: By entering Mary's womb he is transformed from Lord, Establisher, Ruler, Nourisher of all into a needy and helpless infant (str. 6–8). Alluding to the Magnificat of the Lucan infancy narrative, Ephrem gives the latter theme a prophetic note of social transformation (str. 7).

The same melody

- 1 Our Lord, no one knows  
how to address Your mother. [If] one calls her "virgin,"  
her child stands up, and "married"—  
no one knew her [sexually]. But if Your mother is  
incomprehensible, who is capable of [comprehending] You?

*Refrain: Praise to You for Whom, as Lord of all, everything is easy.*

- 2 For she is Your mother—she alone—  
and Your sister with all. She was to You mother;  
she was to You sister.<sup>285</sup> Moreover, she is Your betrothed  
with the chaste women.<sup>286</sup> In everything,  
behold, You adorned her, Beauty of Your mother.

<sup>285</sup>. Cf. Nat. 16.1.

<sup>286</sup>. Cf. Nat. 4.132, Virg. 25.16, CH 17.5.

## HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

- 3 For she was betrothed according to nature  
before You came; yet she conceived  
outside of nature after You came,  
O Holy One, and she was a virgin  
although she gave birth to You chastely.<sup>287</sup>
- 4 Mary acquired by You all the attributes<sup>288</sup>  
of married women: conception within her  
without sexual union, milk in her breasts  
not in the usual way. You have suddenly made  
the parched earth into a source of milk.
- 5 If she carried You, Your great mountain  
lightened its burden. If she fed You  
[it was] because You hungered. If she gave you a drink  
[it was] because you willed to thirst. If she embraced You,  
the coal of mercy<sup>289</sup> preserved her bosom.
- 6 A wonder is Your mother: The Lord entered her  
and became a servant; He entered able to speak  
and He became silent in her; He entered her thundering  
and His voice grew silent; He entered Shepherd of all;  
a lamb he became in her; He emerged bleating.
- 7 The womb of Your mother overthrew the orders:<sup>290</sup>  
The Establisher of all entered a Rich One;  
He emerged poor. He entered her a Lofty One;  
He emerged humble. He entered her a Radiant One,  
and He put on a despised hue and emerged.
- 8 He entered, a mighty warrior, and put on fear  
inside her womb. He entered, Nourisher of all,  
and He acquired hunger. He entered, the One who gives drink to  
all,  
and He acquired thirst. Stripped and laid bare,  
He emerged from [her womb], the One who clothes all.

287. This line seems to imply *virginitas in partu*; for a discussion, cf. Beck, *Reden*, 104. It is more clearly implied at *Nat.* 12.3.

288. The word is more usually translated "generation," "story," "matter," "subject," or *ὑπόστασις*. Beck translates "Eigenschaft."

289. *Isa.* 6.6-7; the implication is that Mary's role is a prophetic one; cf. str. 7, below, and *HdF* 10.10.

290. *Luke* 1.46-55.