

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

- 206 He made water into wine as Maker,
but, on the other hand, He drank some of it as a poor man.
- 207 From His own He mixed it at the wedding feast—
His [own] wine He mixed and gave [it] to drink where He was
invited.¹⁹³
- 208 By his love the old man Simeon became great,
so that a mortal offered the One who saved all.
- 209 It was by the power from Him that Simeon carried Him;
he who offered Him was offered by Him.¹⁹⁴
- 210 He gave the laying-on of hands to Moses on the mountain,¹⁹⁵
and He received it in the midst of the river from John.¹⁹⁶
- 211 By the power of His gift, John was competent,
and the earthly one baptized the Heavenly One.
- 212 By the power that came from Him, the earth bore Him;
it was beginning to collapse, but His power bound it together.
- 213 From what is His, Martha gave Him food to eat;¹⁹⁷
she placed before Him the foods created by Him.
- 214 All who gave have vowed from what is His;
from His treasury they have placed [gifts] on His table.

193. John 2.

194. Luke 2.22-32.

195. Cf. Lev. 8.

196. Cf. Mark 1. 9-11 et par.

197. Luke 10. 38-42.

5

This hymn is the first from Ephrem's original collection of Nativity Hymns, which forms the core of the full collection of the manuscript tradition. All thirteen hymns in this original group have the same strophic pattern and are to be sung to the same melody. Further, most contain strophes attributed to the *dramatis personae* of the nativity story, especially Mary. They also share the same subject matter: the paradox of the incarnation and the defense of the virgin birth.

This hymn begins with a celebration of the joys and triumphs of the month of Conun (December-January), in which the incarnation of the Lord of the universe made possible the exaltation and divinization of humankind. After twice enumerating three classes of people—slave, free and royal—in ascending order of dignity, Ephrem strikingly contrasts the exaltation of humans with the *kenosis* of Christ (str. 1-4). The humble righteousness of Christ conquers the rebellious disobedience of Adam (str. 5). After a brief exhortation to chase away boredom (str. 6), Ephrem sets out a series of images for the feast of the Nativity: it is a treasure-house full of spiritual riches (str. 7-9); the garlanding of doorways (str. 1) represents the garlanding of the believer's heart to welcome the Holy Spirit (str. 10); in contrast to earthly kings who collect taxes, God has paid our debt and promised even more (str. 12); the conquering sun of the winter equinox is an appropriate symbol for the victory of Christ the Light (str. 12-15).

The final third of the hymn is a meditation on the paradox of the incarnation put into the mouths of Joseph (str. 16-18) and Mary (str. 19-24). Joseph first ponders his initial misunderstanding of the virgin birth. Then he turns to the implications of his humble trade, on the one hand, and his Davidic descent, on the other. Mary meditates on the incarnation in more theological and philosophical terms: How can she be the mother of an infant who is the Director of all creation and Commander of the universe?

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

5

To the melody "Who is able to speak?"

- 1 This is the month that bears utterly
all joys: for slaves—liberation,
for the free—pride, for doors—garlanding,
for bodies—dainties. And purple [garments]
it showers in its love as if for a king.

Refrain: Praise to You, fair Child of the Virgin!

- 2 This is the month that bears entirely
all victories: it frees the spirit;
it subdues the body; it brings forth life
among mortals. Divinity
it showers in its love upon humanity.
- 3 In this month slaves recline
upon rugs, and the free recline
upon carpets, and kings recline
upon tapestries. In a manger
the Lord of the universe reclined for the sake of the universe.
- 4 Behold, O Bethlehem, David the king
clothes himself in fine white linen. The Lord of David
and Son of David hid His glory
in swaddling clothes. His swaddling clothes gave
a robe of glory to human beings.¹⁹⁸
- 5 On this day our Lord exchanged
radiance for shame, as the Humble One.
For Adam exchanged truth for evil
as a rebel. The Gracious One took pity;
His upright [deeds] conquered those of the perverse.
- 6 Let everyone chase away his boredom
because it was not boring for that Majesty
to be in the womb nine months
for our sake and to be thirty
years in Sodom among madmen.

198. The garment of glory, originally bestowed on Adam and Eve but lost through sin, is restored by Christ; cf. Nat. 17.4 and Kronholm, *Motifs*, 216, 223.

HYMN 5

- 7 Because the Gracious One saw that the human race
was poor and humble, He made feastdays
as treasure-houses, and He opened them
for the lazy, so that the feast would stir up
the lazy one to rise up and become rich.
- 8 Behold, the First-born has opened His feastday for us
like a treasure-house. This one day,
the [most] perfect in the year, alone opens
this treasure-house. Come, let us prosper
and become rich from it before it is closed.
- 9 Blessed are the vigilant who plunder from it
the spoils of life. It is a great disgrace
if one sees his neighbor
carrying away treasures, yet he in the treasure-house
reposes and sleeps to come out empty-handed.
- 10 On this feast let everyone garland
the door of his heart. May the Holy Spirit
desire to enter in its door to dwell
and sanctify. For behold, She moves about
to all the doors [to see] where She may dwell.
- 11 On this feast the openings in the curtains
are joyous, and the Holy One rejoices¹⁹⁹
in the holy Temple, and a voice thunders
in the mouth of babes, and the Messiah rejoices
in His feast as Commander of the host.
- 12 On the birth of the Son, the king²⁰⁰ was enrolling
the people in the census,
so that they would be indebted to him. To us the King came out
to cancel our debts, and He wrote in His name
another debt, so that He would be indebted to us.
- 13 The sun conquered and engraved a symbol
on the degrees that it ascended. Since it ascended
it is twelve days, and today this is
the thirteenth:²⁰¹ a perfect symbol

199. Or, as Beck suggests, "the holy [altar] rejoices."

200. Caesar Augustus, cf. Luke 2.1.

201. January 6, the thirteenth day since December 25, the day of the Conquering Sun. Further on this theme, cf. Nat. 27.16–22, esp. 27.21.

HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY

- of the birth of the Son and of His Twelve.
- 14 Moses shut in the lamb in April
on the tenth day²⁰²—a symbol of the Son
Who came into the womb and closed Himself up
on the tenth day. He came out from the womb
in this month when the light conquers.
- 15 Darkness is defeated to signify
that Satan is defeated, and light conquers
to shout out that the First-born is victorious.
The Dark One is defeated with the darkness,
and our Light conquers with the sun.
- 16 Joseph caressed the Son
as a babe. He served Him
as God. He rejoiced in Him
as in a blessing, and he was attentive to Him
as to the Just One—a great paradox!
- 17 “Who has given me the Son of the Most High
to be a son to me? I was jealous of Your mother
and wanted to divorce her.²⁰³ I did not know
that in her womb was a great treasure
that would suddenly enrich my poverty.
- 18 “David the king arose from my race
and put on a crown.²⁰⁴ Great ignominy
have I attained, for instead of a king
I am a carpenter.²⁰⁵ A crown has found me
for in my bosom is the Lord of crowns.”
- 19 With rival tones Mary was aglow.
She, too, sang: “Who has granted
to the barren one to conceive and give birth
to the One [Who is also] many, to the small [Who is also] great,
Who is fully present in me yet fully present in the universe.²⁰⁶”
- 20 “The day when Gabriel entered

202. On the tenth of Nisan (April–May), in preparation for its slaughter four days later for Passover, cf. Ex. 12.3–6.

203. Matt. 1.19.

204. Matt. 1.1–16, 20.

205. Matt. 13.55; cf. Mark 6.3, Luke 6.23.

206. Cf. Nat. 4.11.

HYMN 5

- my poor presence,²⁰⁷ he made me immediately
a free woman and a servant; for I am servant
of Your divinity, but I am also mother
of Your humanity, [my] Lord and [my] son.²⁰⁸
- 21 “Suddenly a handmaiden has become daughter of the King
by You, Son of the King. Behold, the lowly one [is]
in the House of David because of You!
O Son of David, behold, the daughter of the earth
has reached heaven by the Heavenly One.
- 22 “Indeed, how much I am amazed that an aged Babe
is set before me—One Who lifts His gaze
entirely to heaven without ceasing.
The murmuring of His mouth—how it seems to me
as if His silence were speaking with God!
- 23 “Indeed, who has seen a Babe who gazes
entirely everywhere? He gazes
as the Director of all creation
above and below. He looks as
the Commander of the universe.
- 24 “How shall I open the fount of milk
for You, the Fount? How shall I give
sustenance to You, the All-sustaining,
from Your [own] table? How shall I approach
with swaddling clothes the One arrayed in streams [of light]?”

207. Luke 1.26.

208. Although Ephrem's specification that Mary is servant of the divinity and mother of the humanity of Christ has a strongly Nestorian ring, it would be anachronistic to judge his orthodoxy by the standards of the fifth century. In fact, his statement is not even Nestorian, since Nestorius used the term *χριστότοκος*, “Christ-bearer,” not simply *ἀνθρωπότηκος*, “human-bearer,” for Mary. Further, in the next strophe, she refers to herself as “the daughter of the earth [who] has reached heaven by the Heavenly One.” Ephrem's concern is with the paradox of the incarnation, not with the precise delineation of the two “natures” of Christ. (But cf. Nat. 6.7–11).