



St Ephrem: A Great Poet

St Ephrem the Syrian, is known as the “greatest poet of the patristic age.” He was born in or near Nisibis (modern Nusaybin, on the border between Syria and Turkey), and he spent most of his life in that town, serving local bishops in his role as deacon and teacher.

St Ephrem came to Natrun (Deir El-Sourian: The Monastery of the Holy Virgin and St John Kame). When he arrived, he was very weak and used a staff to lean upon. Some monks thought **St Ephrem** carried the staff desiring distinction. When he spiritually perceived their inner thoughts, he planted his staff into the ground a few meters from St Bishoy’s Hermitage. God, wanting **St Ephrem** to appear righteous in the eyes of the monks, made his staff bud out and develop until it became the famous tamarind tree.

In 373, when Nisibis was handed over to the Persian Empire, **St Ephrem** was forced to move about one hundred miles west, to Edessa (modern Urfa), the



St Ephrem the Syrian holding in his right hand a censer and with the other one, the trunk of a Tamarind, “St Ephrem’s tree.”

cradle of the Syriac-speaking Christianity, and it was there he spent the last ten years of his life. He died on June 9, 373.

Several collections of hymns by **St Ephrem** survive. The hymns were intended for liturgical use. He expected his hearers to be very familiar with the contents of the Holy Bible, both New and Old Testaments, and his hymns are full of allusions to Biblical passages.

In the **St Ephrem’s Hymn on Faith no. 40**, he compares the mystery of the Holy Trinity to the sun and to fire. In both of these familiar features of the created world there lies an indissoluble relationship between the fire itself, and the light, and the heat which it provides: each of these is separate yet they all combine as a single entity, each being a concomitant

of the others; they thus can serve as an analogy, within the created world, to the mystery of the Holy Trinity—the fire corresponding to the Father, the light to the Son, and the heat to the Holy Spirit. His poetry is marked by a sense of profound wonder.



St Ephrem's Hymn on Faith No. 40:

On the Trinity

The sun serves as our source of illumination and none can grasp what it is like;

How much more is this the case if we are talking about human kind and even more so,

If about God.

The light of the sun is not subsequent to the sun, nor is there any time when it was not;

The sun's light may be considered as second, and its heat as third:

They are neither separate from it or identical with it.

**REFRAIN: PRAISE TO HIM WHO SENT YOU
FROM ALL WHO BELIEVE IN YOU.**

Look at the sun in the sky: it is thought of as one; lower you gaze and see its light,

A second element; then try it out, experience and feel its warmth, a third.

They resemble one another, and at the same time, they do not: the second element is commingled in the sun, yet it is distinct from it; the third element is mixed with it,

Yet separate at the same time as being commingled and mixed.

Fire and the sun are individual entities, they consist each of three things,

Mingled in three-fold fashion: fire itself, then heat, and third, light.

One resides in the other in a balanced way, ungrudgingly, mixed together,

But not confused, commingled, yet not bound, joined together, but not under constraint, at the same time free, but not divergent.

Let dictatorial people be silenced by what is quite patent, for here we have one in three

And three in one, commingled, but not fixedly so, distinct, yet not totally separate.

There is marvel in all this which makes us keep silent.

The human person too, is established in threefold form, and arise at the Resurrection entirely perfect.

The sun is but one, a single entity, yet three things are therein commingled, separate,

But not divided; each individually is entirely perfect, and all of them are perfect as one;

The glory is one, yet it is not one. It is a wondrous entity which generates all by itself,

Which gathers itself in collectively, and spreads itself out in threefold form.

If someone rashly supposed that fire too is not threefold, who would be led into error by him and attach himself to stupidity, agreeing with his obtuseness?

For he denies the three elements which can be seen to be both equal and distinct,

One glorious and full of awe, another hidden and potent, another joyful and serene.

The first is entirely self-contained, the next is separate, coming of its own will, while the third is abundantly sent forth; in the fire there reigns a quality whereby each element is neither commanded nor gives a command, for they are all entirely in accord,

Acting in a unison of love.

Three names are thus to be seen in the fire, each has its own authority, each exists individually, each



acts by itself and appears distinct:

Individual qualities which are commingled together—fire wondrously, heat distinctly, and light gloriously, each dwelling in harmony with the others.

If fire then has that wonderful nature, generating and not diminishing, in a state of

Balance and not becoming cold, with its heat quite distinct, but not cut off from it,

Passing through all things in ungrudging fashion, winging itself into bread,

Mingling with water, residing in all things, while all things reside in it.

Then in it is a symbol of the Spirit, a type of the Holy Spirit, who is mingled in the baptism water so that it may bring forgiveness, who is commingled in

The Eucharistic Bread so that it becomes the Offering.

The Spirit seems to be entirely in all of them, yet He is also quite removed,

For it is not possible to depict the threefold mysteries which have never been depicted.

If fire overwhelms us when we try to examine it, to see how it is both one and at the same time three, now the three elements live in one another, how its heat is distinct,

But not cut off; if fire has this effect, when fire is just a natural entity which we have lovingly received in threefold form, and with which we have no divisive dispute-

How much more, then, is it right that we should accept in simplicity those Three Persons, receiving them with love, and not with questions. Their nature should

Not have to chase after us and become like unto us—for they are like only themselves in all respects.

Created beings are distinct and unlike one another, so how much more is that Being,

Great beyond all, distinct from everything else.

(Translated by Sebastian P. Brock, 1989, p. 70-75)



The Lord Jesus Christ