



Discovering the hidden beauty of ancient hymns...

St. Ephraim Hymns on Faith No. 81

“The Pearl”

ΠΙΣΤΥΜΟΣ ἸΝΤΕ ΕΦΡΕΜ: ΠΙΜΑΡΣΑΡΙΤΗΣ



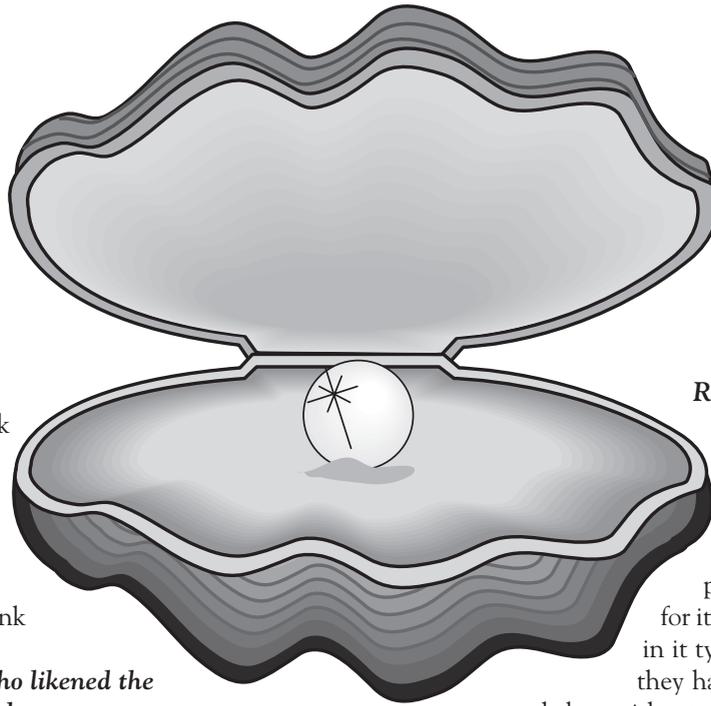
Introduction:

While Noah’s Ark is laden with symbols, the more so symbolic is the “pearl.” At the end of St. Ephraim’s cycle of hymns on faith come a small but famous group of poems on the subject of the oyster pearl and its varied symbols.

In the opening hymn, translated to follow, St. Ephraim surveys the rich symbolic content of the pearl, brought up from the depth of the sea by divers. The symbolism is all the richer to St. Ephraim who was familiar with the popular idea that the pearl was “born” as a result of lightning striking the watery body of the pearl oyster (hinted at in

verses 6 and 10 to follow), thus providing a suitable analogy to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ from the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin Mary. It is clear too that the term “pearl” was already in use in St. Ephraim’s day for the consecrated Host at the Eucharist.

In the second half of the poem, the pearl itself addresses St. Ephraim and warns him against prying into the hiddenness of God’s being: the tongue can serve as an instrument of this activity—or as a vehicle for praise and prayer; to which of these uses did God intend the tongue to be put when he created it?



First Verse:

One day, my brethren, I took a pearl into my hands; in it I saw symbols which told of the Kingdom, images and figures of God's majesty. It became a fountain from which I drank in the symbols of the Son.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Second Verse:

I placed it, my brethren, in the palm of my hand in order to contemplate it. I turned to look at it from one side, but it had facets on every side: so it is with enquiry in to the Son it cannot be done, for He is entirely light.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Third Verse:

In the luminosity of the pearl I beheld the Luminous One Who cannot be perturbed; in its purity is a wonderful symbol - the Body of our Lord wholly unsullied. In the individual nature of the pearl I beheld the Truth, which is not divided.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Fourth Verse:

There was Mary, whose pure conception I beheld was there; there was the Church with the Son within her. Like a cloud is she who carried Him, and like the Heaven is she from whom flashed the glorious Ray.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Fifth Verse:

I saw in the pearl the trophies of His victories and of His triumphs; I saw His help with all its benefits, both hidden and manifest. To me it was greater than the Ark, absorbed as I was with it.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Sixth Verse:

I saw in the pearl hidden places, that had no shadows, for it is the Luminary's daughter. in it types are eloquent, although they have no tongue; symbols are

uttered, but without the help of lips the silent lyre, although it has no sound, gives forth its song.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Seventh Verse:

The trumpet murmurs, the thunder whispers low; "Do not make bold, leave the hidden things, take only what is manifest." I have seen in the clear sky the latter rains; the stream bed of my ears is filled with expositions, as though after the rain clouds.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Eighth Verse:

Like the Manna which of its own sufficed to fill the people, in place of other foods, thanks to its tastiness, so too has the pearl filled me, replacing books and the reading and commenting on them.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Ninth Verse:

In order that I might ask if there were any further symbols, no mouth was available to the pearl to give me answer, not ears to hear my questioning. O pearl without organs of sense, it is from you that I have acquired new senses.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*



Tenth Verse:

The pearl replied and spoke to me: I am the daughter of the immeasurable sea, and the treasures of symbols that I carry in my bosom are greater than those of the sea whence I have come up. You may examine the sea, but do not examine the Lord of the sea.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Eleventh Verse:

I saw the divers who went down in search of me out of breath and eager to return from the sea to the dry land: they could not endure it even a short while; who then can examine for long the depths of the Divinity?

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Twelfth Verse:

The waves of the Son are full of benefits as well as danger. Have you not observed how the waves of the sea, when a boat struggles against them, break it up, but if the boat yields, without resisting, then it is saved?

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Thirteenth Verse:

In the sea all the Egyptians drowned without their having made any examination, any likewise prying on their part; some Hebrew too was swallowed up on dry land. How then will you survive? The men of Sodom too were licked up by fire; how then will you succeed?

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Fourteenth Verse: At these uproars the fish in the sea quaked, as did the Leviathan. Have you a heart of stone that you can read about such things and yet forget them? It is something greatly to be feared that Justice herself has kept silence so long.

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

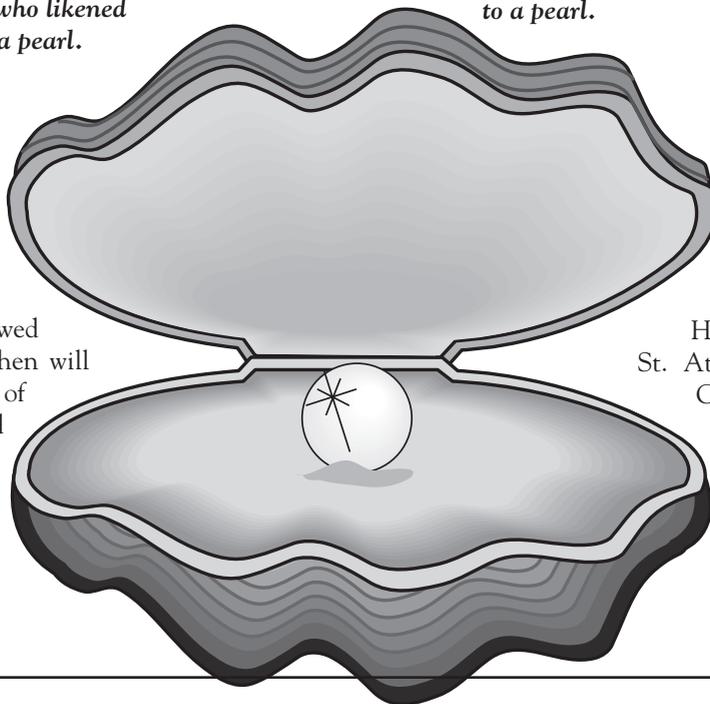
Fifteenth Verse: Enquiry is joined in contest with thanksgiving: which will win? Praise rises up, like incense, and so does the prying word, both from the same tongue. Which will God listen to? Prying and prayer comes from one and the same mouth. Which will he hear?

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*

Sixteenth Verse:

Jonah was a neighbor of ours for three days in the sea. The creatures of the sea quaked and said: "Who can flee from God?" Jonah actually fled from God, and here you are presuming to grasp Him by means of investigation!

Refrain: *Blessed is He who likened the Kingdom on high to a pearl.*



Reference: Brock, S. P. (1989). *A Garland of Hymns from the Early Church*. St. Athanasius Coptic Publishing Center: McLean, Virginia.