

## THEOLOGICAL REALISM IN ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN AND T. F. TORRANCE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This article examines continuities between St. Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373) and T. F. Torrance with respect to the latter's bedrock concept of theological realism. Notwithstanding the vast differences between the two theologians' historical and ecclesial contexts and the idioms of their theological discourse, there are several points of deep connection between them in terms of their understanding of divine revelation, theological knowing, a proper method of theological inquiry, and the centrality of the Nicene confession of faith in Christ for all right theological thinking.*

There can be no doubt about who the chief patristic figures were that shaped T. F. Torrance's theology. That Torrance's theological contributions lean heavily on the "Athanasius-Cyril axis" is, of course, well known;<sup>2</sup> to theirs one would quickly add the names of Hilary of Poitiers and Irenaeus of Lyons.<sup>3</sup> This article, however, brings Torrance into conversation with a figure less known to many of his readers: Ephrem the Syrian, the masterful poet-theologian of fourth-century Mesopotamia. What Torrance has written about theological method and epistemology bears striking resemblance in several respects to the methodological and epistemological framework of the Syrian Father's conception of symbolic knowing and divine revelation. With respect to Torrance, the aim of this article

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1 This article is adapted from a chapter from the author's PhD dissertation, "Human Freedom in the Context of the Theological Anthropology of St. Ephrem the Syrian" (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2012).

2 T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 9.

3 See, e.g., Torrance's essays on those two Fathers in his *Divine Meaning* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) and Matthew Baker, "The Place of St. Irenaeus of Lyons in Historical and Dogmatic Theology according to Thomas F. Torrance," *Participatio* 2 (2010): 5-43.



is to broaden, if only a little, the patristic basis on which his articulation of theological realism rests; for readers of Ephrem, the aim is to offer further evidence that he can be of service to contemporary theological endeavors and of interest outside the realm of strictly historical or literary studies, to which some may wish to relegate him. Indeed, examining the continuities that obtain between Ephrem and Torrance is enriching for readers of both, and the normative status of Nicene theology for all Christian thought is reaffirmed by drawing attention to the unqualifiedly Christocentric nature of both theologians' conceptions of theological knowing and the demands it entails.<sup>4</sup>

The present study first examines Ephrem's working conception of revelation and of the knowledge of God offered to us by means of it. Ephrem's theological epistemology then comes into sharper focus by way of contrast with the method and presuppositions entailed in "investigation,"<sup>5</sup> the theological epistemology exemplified first and foremost by Arianizing Christians. Ephrem remains the major focus throughout this article, since he is the unknown quantity here – readers of this journal are, no doubt, very well acquainted with Torrance's writings. Nevertheless, affinities and continuities are drawn out where I, in my limited knowledge of Torrance's works, have found them most striking.

## I. Media of Divine Revelation

If you look anywhere, His symbol is there,  
and wherever you read, you will discover His types.  
For all creatures were created by Him,  
and He inscribed his symbols upon His possessions.

4 For some relatively recent discussions of Ephrem as "Nicene" or "anti-Arian" see, e.g., Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 229-35; Christine Shepardson, "Ephrem, Athanasius, and the 'Arian' Threat," in *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 106-56; and Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006), 77-85, and 293-307, where the author examines Paul S. Russell's *St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994).

5 There are at least three semantically related terms relevant here: *ʿuqqābā*, *bṣātā*, and *bʿātā* (all nouns, but their related verb forms are implicated here as well). They share a common notion of "investigation" or "inquiry." Den Biesen states that while the first two often have negative connotations in Ephrem's works, there are passages in which they have a positive sense (*Simple and Bold*, 194n147). The last term, he says, is neutral in itself; its shades of meaning are determined by the contexts in which it is used (*ibid.*, 135n82).

Behold, when He created the world,  
 He looked upon it and adorned it with His images.  
 Fountains of His symbols were opened; they flowed and poured forth  
 His symbols upon its members.<sup>6</sup>

So ends one of Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity*. In stanzas like this one we find evidence of the way images, types, and symbols function in Ephrem's theology. The Syriac term most frequently and intimately connected with this foundational aspect of Ephrem's thought is *rāzē*, mystery-bearing symbols laden with divine meaning.<sup>7</sup> In the verses quoted above we read of a two-fold act of creation: God does not merely constitute created things in being as such, but stamps upon them the distinctive marks of their divine Craftsman. The fountains of symbols that gushed forth upon the creation recall the fountain of waters in Genesis 2:6, which "on the day that God made heaven and earth...rose up and watered all the face of the earth."<sup>8</sup> Those twin aspects, bringing into being and stamping, jointly constitute God's act of creation. For Ephrem, God does not create anonymously, nor would he. It is inconceivable that the loving Creator would so withhold his goodness and grace from his creatures by de-personalizing his creative act. The very act of creating, from which the act of inscribing in creation chosen symbols of himself is inseparable, betokens God's establishment of a relation with that which is other than himself. That holds true above all with respect to human persons. It is the living God who creates, and his act of creating human persons flows from his personal subjectivity, which could not be rendered impersonal or anonymous.

So the fact that God impresses his seal upon all that he brings into being in no way implies a bifurcation in the nature or meaning of creatures, as

6 Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* (hereinafter *Virg*) 20.12. Edmund Beck, the editor of the Syriac text, refers the reader to Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* (hereinafter *HdF*) 76.12 and *Virg* 21.10 for parallels. All translations of Ephrem's works in this article, unless otherwise noted, are the author's and are based on the Syriac text of the CSCO editions. Available modern language translations were consulted: Beck's German translations in the CSCO volumes; Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989); and Paul S. Russell, *Ephraem the Syrian: Eighty Hymns on Faith* (unpublished, 1995).

7 For a discussion of *rāzē* and other terms involved in Ephrem's symbolic theology, see Tanios Bou Mansour, *La pensée symbolique de saint Ephrem le Syrien* (Kaslik, Lebanon: Université Saint-Esprit, 1988), 23-71.

8 As quoted in Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* 26:12-15. If Ephrem intends to echo Genesis 2:6 in *Virg* 20.12, then the latter is just one example of the rich poetic exegesis, whose symbolic repertoire ranges far and wide, that Ephrem applies to the same scriptural passages he interprets in his prose according to the "plain sense" of literal, historical meaning.

though the divine imprint were something added to them over and above some independently coherent and complete meaning they might otherwise enjoy or had previously enjoyed. In bringing them into being, God constitutes his creatures as objectively meaningful with ultimate reference to himself, and this is so for a specific reason. Creation is endowed by God with symbolic significance precisely in order to reveal something of himself to mankind. Torrance makes much the same point, based on Barth's distinction between God's primary and his secondary form of objectivity.<sup>9</sup> According to the latter:

God objectifies Himself for us within the world of our natural objects, and so clothes His ultimate and divine objectivity with the kind of objectivity with which we are familiar in creation, in Israel, among men, in history, in our common human life – that is to say, within the space and time of this world.<sup>10</sup>

The loving relationship that God establishes with his human creatures is one in which he invites them to discover him through the whole panoply of created realities. And those created media of divine revelation do not impose their symbolic meaning on their observers by sheer force. Human persons are urged to discover their ultimate meaning in freedom, by an effort of the will and mind on the ground of faith.<sup>11</sup>

Of immeasurable importance among those created realities, the two biblical testaments together occupy a unique place in Ephrem's understanding of the way God reveals himself to humanity. The Bible is unique among the *loci* of God's self-revelation in that there divine truth is conveyed by means of the human word, whereas nature, of itself, is silent and can only come to verbal expression by way of human interaction with it, reflection upon it, and articulation of it.<sup>12</sup>

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9 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 2:1.16-18.

10 T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 43.

11 See *ibid.*, 36, where Torrance illuminates the paradoxical relationship between freedom and the demands of objectivity in a manner consonant with Ephrem's thought.

12 Perhaps Ephrem would have considered this task part of the priestly function of human persons – he certainly saw it as part of his own work as a theologian and poet. Torrance viewed the task of the scientist along similar lines. For him, "the pursuit of science is one of the ways in which man exercises the dominion in the earth which he was given at his creation." T. F. Torrance, "Newton, Einstein and Scientific Theology," *Religious Studies* 8 (1972): 233. Explaining Bacon's understanding of the work of natural science and the natural scientist, Torrance continues: "Science is a religious duty, while man as scientist can be spoken of as *the priest of creation*, whose task it is to interpret the books of nature, to understand the universe in its wonderful structures and harmonies, and to bring it all into orderly articulation, so that it fulfils its proper end as the vast theatre of glory in which the creator is worshipped and praised. Nature itself is dumb, but it is man's part to bring

One must make the effort to engage mute nature so that, as the whole of Ephrem's literary corpus exemplifies, one can grasp its divine meaning and be able to give it a material voice by way of the written or spoken word, to the glory of God and for the benefit of others.

While they are distinct in that regard, the Bible and the natural world are nevertheless coordinated such that they confirm and shed light upon one another. Recall the opening of *Virg* 20.12: "If you look anywhere, His symbol is there, / and wherever you read, you will discover His types." As den Biesen rightly points out, the "anywhere" may refer to the whole creation, and the "wherever" to the whole Bible.<sup>13</sup> It is telling that Ephrem places the two side by side in his presentation of the way God manifests himself, since, as Robert Murray notes, biblical types do not constitute an entirely independent mode of revelation: "[Ephrem] never treats the biblical text as a world on its own: rather, the Bible, as a work of God in human imagery and language, is a part, as well as a special interpreter, of the whole world and its history."<sup>14</sup> Murray identifies in Ephrem's thought the mutual influence and consonance of the Bible and the natural world. They help to interpret and confirm each other, all under the watchful eye enlightened by faith. And as we will see in the course of this study, the fact that both nature and the Bible are *created* means of God's self-revelation is essential to Ephrem's polemic against those who are guilty of the sin of investigation. Working in tandem, nature and Scripture are unified in their purpose: to bear witness to God in order to glorify him and to facilitate our knowledge of him who is the Truth, should we engage them appropriately and follow where they lead us.

Though we engage them differently – "using" nature, but "reading" Scripture, as Ephrem says<sup>15</sup> – the two witnesses are harmonized with one another. A beloved image of Ephrem's for that harmony is that of the harp, which serves two basic purposes. On the one hand, the harp, as an image of the vehicles of

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it to word, to be its mouth through which the whole universe gives voice to the glory and majesty of the living God" (ibid.).

13 den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 25.

14 Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6/7 (1975-76): 5. If nature and Scripture help to interpret each other more fully, that function is secondary to their primary function of witnessing to the Lord of them both. According to Bou Mansour, Ephrem was not of the opinion that the witness of nature has the Bible or its truth as its proper object: "Bien au contraire, nature et Ecriture sont orientées toutes les deux vers l'attestation de la vérité du Créateur" (*Pensée*, 125).

15 Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* (hereinafter *Parad*) 5.2.

divine revelation, is that which God uses to communicate himself to us;<sup>16</sup> on the other hand, the three harps are the God-given instruments on which believers freely play to him in response.<sup>17</sup> Ephrem's harps are the created means for man's encounter with his Creator – an encounter initiated by God (in the act of creating in the first place) and taken up and reciprocated by human persons in their free response of faith and love.<sup>18</sup>

Up to this point, our discussion of Ephrem's understanding of divine revelation has focused on the manifest things of God, that which he has planted in the midst of creation voicelessly, and that which he has conveyed through the Bible by means of human language. It is necessary, though, to appreciate the correlate to Ephrem's emphasis on God's self-manifestation: his stress on God's hiddenness. In one of his *Hymns on Faith* Ephrem writes:

Indeed, who is able to comprehend the Lord of natures,  
to inquire into His Being and to investigate His Fatherhood,  
and to explore His Greatness and to say how It is?  
For, behold, in all those respects He is hidden from all,  
and unless He wants to make Himself plain to us  
there is nothing in Creation that is able to interpret Him.<sup>19</sup>

The core assumption at work here – indeed, everywhere in Ephrem's theology – is that between the Creator and the creation there yawns a gaping chasm, a "great, boundless gulf" over which no created thing may cross.<sup>20</sup> Any and all knowledge of God is fundamentally dependent upon God's good pleasure in revealing himself as he sees fit. Note the last two verses in the stanza quoted above: God is altogether hidden, and no created thing can interpret him, *unless* he wills it do so. He has so willed, and his very act of creating the natural world and taking on human language is sufficient evidence of that claim's truth. Yet as near as God may draw, through the created means he chooses for his self-revelation, he nevertheless remains infinitely transcendent. He is at once very close and immeasurably far.<sup>21</sup>

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16 *Virg* 30.1.

17 *Virg* 27.4.

18 See Bou Mansour's comments (*Pensée*, 125-26) on the *taxis* Ephrem maintains between Scripture and nature as means of God's self-revelation (*pace* Beck, who, Bou Mansour says, thought that Ephrem placed the witness of nature and that of Scripture on the same level).

19 *HdF* 44.7.

20 *HdF* 15.5. It should be noted that the chasm is not the result of man's disobedience and sin; it exists simply by virtue of the Creator-creation distinction.

21 See *HdF* 72.23-24.

Sebastian Brock uses the category of perspective to explain this example of Ephrem's habit of thinking through polarities.<sup>22</sup> From our perspective, all created things are of revelatory significance, and we understand them as just that, God's self-revelations in and through his handiwork. But from the perspective of divine reality itself, God has *hidden* something of himself in created things, pointing "to something that will one day be revealed: what is 'hidden' in the symbols of Nature and of Scripture is revealed in Christ at the Incarnation; what lies hidden in the Sacraments will be revealed at the eschaton, in Paradise."<sup>23</sup> Even when we come to see the symbolic significance of all that God has imprinted of himself in created realities, he yet remains hidden, which fact is all the more apparent in view of the ontological divide between God and creation: nothing finite could ever manifest completely the infinite, inimitable majesty of God as he is in himself.

While Brock's explanation of the polarity between the hidden and the revealed is helpful, there is one point on which his language is potentially misleading. He speaks of the human perspective as "subjective," while the divine perspective enjoys objectivity.<sup>24</sup> By "subjective" he means that "every individual will approach God's hiddenness by way of a different set of *galyata*, or points of revelation."<sup>25</sup> That is so because all the instances of God's self-revelation are differentiated, and that to which they all point in their manifold ways, God himself, is infinitely greater than the sum of revelation's parts: "the revelation is always partial."<sup>26</sup> His explanation of what he deems the "subjective" character of the human perspective is certainly true to Ephrem, but his choice of the term "subjective," in contrast to "objective," is open to misinterpretation. To the modern ear those terms typically register in ways that are contrary to Ephrem's thinking and are commonly understood against the background of a dualist framework in which *subjectivism* is pit against claims to an accessible objective reality—not with reference to *subjectivity*.

Brock surely does not foist on Ephrem some radical disconnect between knower and known, or between the content of one's thought and the reality it appears to intend, such as a dualist epistemology would entail. His exposition of Ephrem shows no marks of that kind of crippling of the human capacity for real

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22 See his discussion in his *Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 27-29.

23 Ibid., 28-29.

24 Ibid., 27-28.

25 Ibid., 27.

26 Ibid.

knowledge. But it bears repeating that, for Ephrem, it is God who implanted in creation reliable indications and symbols of himself, constituting them to function as the faithful mind of the believer understands them to function. In that respect, both the divine and the human perspective are objective: they are grounded in and intend the objective reality that God is, albeit in radically different ways. God makes created symbols to correspond in a contingent, creaturely way to the truth that he himself is in a non-contingent, uncreated way.

It is better to consider the terms "subjective" and "objective," as applied to Ephrem's theology, from within the realist framework that Torrance so clearly articulated. In Torrance's description, realism is:

the orientation in thought that obtains in semantics, science, or theology on the basis of a nondualist or unitary relation between the empirical and theoretical ingredients in the structure of the real world and in our knowledge of it. This is an epistemic orientation of the two-way relation between the subject and object poles of thought and speech, in which ontological primacy and control are naturally accorded to reality over all our conceiving and speaking of it.<sup>27</sup>

It is critical to appreciate how much a realist Ephrem actually is. In no way whatsoever does Ephrem allow for a theory of meaning as subjectively constructed out of whole cloth and totally dependent on the idiosyncrasies and fantasies of the mind unmoored from objective reality. The media through which God reveals himself to us, and the specific content of those manifestations, are objectively determined by God to be what they are and to function as they do. When we exert the effort to engage those media and discern their function and their hidden, divinely bestowed content, that experience yields results that are real yet, as Brock rightly notes, always and necessarily partial – partial in each individual instance and in the aggregate. What that fact implies is that the revelation of God is always and everywhere new, and the particulars of its manifestations are unexpected. As Michael Polanyi avers:

To hold knowledge is indeed always a commitment to indeterminate implications, for human knowledge is but an intimation of reality, and we can never quite tell in what new way reality may yet manifest itself. It is external to us; it is objective; and so its future manifestations can never be completely under our intellectual control.<sup>28</sup>

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27 T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 60. See also Torrance's essay "Theological Realism," in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 173.

28 Michael Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 244. See also



While we are free to discover the coherence and meaning of divine revelation through created things, we are not free to construct it. In other words, the fundamental structure, manner, and content of divine revelation are not subject to human control and determination: the structure, because the Creator orders all things; the manner, because he reveals himself *as he wills*; and the content, because the real, ultimate content of his self-revelation is the person of the incarnate Word, who reconciles us with the Father and gives us his Spirit to guide us “into all truth.”<sup>29</sup>

## II. Jesus Christ, “the Lord of Symbols”<sup>30</sup>

Since God wishes to reveal himself to us, he has both endowed created things with revelatory significance and enabled us to discover their meaning. He is unceasing in his efforts to win mankind over, and so from the beginning he has offered us, as an invitation, pathways to knowledge of him in the created world. Extending the invitation further, and making it more fully revelatory of himself, God communicates with his word-endowed creatures by means of Scripture:

He drew near to us by means of what belongs to us.

He put on names that belong to us so that He might clothe us with the manner of life that belongs to Him. He borrowed our form and put it on, and as a father with his infants, so He spoke with our childishness.<sup>31</sup>

In condescending to the level of the written and spoken word, God sanctified the use of human language to refer to himself. The events related in the Old Testament, his dealings with his beloved Israel, as well as the written biblical testimonies themselves, manifest divine *kenosis* already before the Incarnation – the verses quoted just above make that plain. One could even say that God’s gracious condescension was begun with the act of creation itself, since he has woven tell-tale signs of his truth into the very fabric of creation.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the ultimate revelation of God at the center of all created realities comes in the Incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ, when, no

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Torrance’s discussion of open concepts (*Theological Science*, 15), with respect to which “the reality conceived keeps on disclosing itself to us in such a way that it continually overflows all our statements about it.”

29 John 16:13.

30 *HdF* 9.11.

31 *HdF* 31.2.

32 See *Virg* 20.12.

longer putting on names and metaphors only, the Lord "put on the body," "put on Adam."<sup>33</sup> In taking on our flesh, the Son made himself the sole bridge over the chasm separating God and creation. If any creature is to have access to the Father, it is only in and through the incarnate Lord. Ephrem hymns the glorious name of Jesus, calling it "the hidden bridge that leads / from death to life."<sup>34</sup> He prays:

Be the bridge for my speech;  
may it cross over to Your truth.  
Make Your love a bridge for Your servant;  
let me cross over You to Your Father.<sup>35</sup>

The perfect visible image of the invisible God, Christ is both the source and the fulfillment of all types, images, and symbols, the fountainhead of all the streams of created manifestations of God – most clearly those found in the Bible – and the vast sea where they all converge:

Christ conquered and surmounted the symbols by His interpretations,  
the parables by His explanations. Just like the sea, He receives within Himself  
all the rushing streams . . .  
For Christ is the one who perfects [the Scriptures'] symbols by His cross,  
their types by His body, their adornments by His beauty,  
and all of them by all of Himself.<sup>36</sup>

Ephrem's entirely Christocentric understanding of biblical revelation brings to mind Torrance's own scriptural hermeneutic, according to which Christ is God's Word addressed to man, as well as man's word of response to God.<sup>37</sup> Torrance writes:

*The real text of New Testament revelation is the humanity of Jesus. As we read the Old Testament and read the New Testament and listen to the Word of God, the real text is not documents of the Pentateuch, the Psalms or the Prophets or the documents of the Gospels and the Epistles, but in and through them all the Word of God struggling with rebellious human existence in Israel on the way to becoming incarnate, and then that Word translated into the flesh and*

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33 See Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* (hereinafter *Nat*) 9.2, 23.13.

34 *HdF* 6.17.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Virg* 9.10, 15. See Murray, "Theory of Symbolism," 7-9, where he offers an explanation and schematic illustration of the network of symbolic relations at work in Ephrem's theology, in which Christ is "the term of all symbols, towards whom they home in from every side" (Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 1.1, quoted in *ibid.*, 7).

37 See *HdF* 6.17, quoted above, and Torrance, *Theological Science*, 45.

blood and mind and life of a human being in Jesus, in whom we have both the Word of God become man and the perfect response of man to God offered on our behalf. As the real text of God's Word addressed to us, Jesus is also the real text of our address to God. We have no speech or language with which to address God but the speech and language called Jesus Christ. In him our humanity, our human understanding, our human word are taken up, purified and sanctified, and addressed to God the Father for us as our very own – and that is the word of man with which God is well pleased.<sup>38</sup>

In both Ephrem and Torrance we find the two-fold meaning of God's *self-revelation* at work: both theologians stress, first, the fact that it is with God himself that all revelation originates and, second, the all-important truth of the Incarnation, whereby God himself, in the person of the Word, reveals himself.<sup>39</sup> In the latter respect the strongly Nicene thrust of both theologians' concepts of revelation is clearly at the fore.

### III. "Everything depends on faith"<sup>40</sup>

The pervasive emphasis in Ephrem's works on the concrete reality of God's self-revelation in the midst of the world he created may incline some of his readers to consider him a natural theologian of sorts.<sup>41</sup> The corrective to that misreading is Ephrem's equally persistent stress on the priority of faith in Christ as that which enables human persons to read nature and Scripture rightly, to find in them what God has veiled. The notion that natural knowledge serves as the necessary propaedeutic for the reception of divine revelation given in Christ and in the biblical testimonies to him is certainly alien to Ephrem's way of thinking.

Faith is the requisite lens through which the human person is able to perceive the truth of God to which all the natural world and all the Bible bear witness in

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38 T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 78-79 (emphasis original). See also Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 93-94; and *ibid.*, *Theological Science*, 45, where Torrance states that since Christ "is the concrete embodiment of knowledge of God within our humanity," then "it is by positive and concrete reference of all our theological knowledge to Him ... that we have genuine knowledge of God."

39 See, e.g., Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 23.

40 HdF 7.9.

41 That is, according to a conception of natural theology as an antecedent and completely independent field of inquiry that requires the bracketing of faith, not altogether unlike the kind that, according to Torrance, Barth strongly rejected: see his *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), ix.

symbolic fashion. It is faith that transforms the believer's eye into the instrument by which the opacity of created realities is changed to a transparency opening out onto God. More accurately, it is faith in the incarnate Word and the life-giving relation into which he draws the believer that make proper vision, perceptive hearing, and true knowledge possible: "With faith gaze upon Him, / upon the Lord of symbols, who gives you life."<sup>42</sup>

Since truth, for Ephrem, is ultimately hypostatized in the person of the Word,<sup>43</sup> our relation to the truth consists in our relation to him. The source of all true knowledge and that of life are one and the same, the person of the incarnate Lord, and our relation to him is given life by way of faith in him – Ephrem considers faith a "second soul," enlivening our soul which, in turn, enlivens our body.<sup>44</sup> All theological knowing is actualized in relation to Christ and through the dynamism of faith in him. The mind possessed of faith is enabled by God to bear the fruit of a godly life in freedom on the basis of knowledge of truth.<sup>45</sup> Torrance points to the same interpenetration of faith, true knowledge, and life lived according to the truth:

The very passion of faith is the opening up of the knowing subject to the most objective of all realities, God Himself as He actively communicates Himself to us in Jesus Christ. To know the truth is to be in a right relation to Him, to be in the truth with the Truth. To know this Truth in a medium appropriate to Him is to do the truth and to live the truth, to be true.<sup>46</sup>

For Ephrem, the process of coming to know the truth (coming to know God), and living in accordance with the truth (leading a godly life according to the pattern of Christ, who is the Truth) are the flowering of God's bestowal of his divine image in the creation of human persons.<sup>47</sup> Being formed in the image of God is partly what we are already, and partly what we are to become; it is at once a gift and a calling. Both the epistemic and ascetical dimensions of the

42 *HdF* 9.11.

43 See, e.g., Ephrem, *Hymns against Heresies* (hereinafter *HcH*) 2.18.

44 *HdF* 80.1. See also *HdF* 80.2-3.

45 *HdF* 80.7-8.

46 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 6. His comments there stem from his reading of Kierkegaard. See also T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2000), 38, where he discusses the connection between knowledge of God and a godly life in the thought of Origen.

47 See Ephrem's *First Discourse to Hypatius* (hereinafter *Hyp* 1), 22.8-11 (J. Josephus Overbeck's edition, 1865, using his page and line numbers): "If Adam was the image of God by virtue of his authority (*ṣulṭānā*), it is very praiseworthy when, by means of knowledge of the truth and true conduct, a man becomes the image of God, for indeed, that authority consists in these [two]."

human vocation are radically dependent upon the free, loving, and obedient activity of a faithful mind whose limpid eye is able to discover God where and how he reveals himself – ultimately in the person of his incarnate Son.

#### **IV. The Nature of Investigation**

The preceding sections of this study have laid the groundwork for a discussion of Ephrem's polemic against the Arians, his chief adversaries within the Church.<sup>48</sup> It is not so much the content of their doctrine as such that is of most interest here as much as their theological method and epistemology – that is, the way in which they believed, according to Ephrem, that they could arrive at the knowledge of God, and what theological knowledge they assumed was open to them and was subject to their inquiry.

Ephrem's most frequently repeated charge against the Arians is that of the sin of "investigation."<sup>49</sup> In his examination and rejection of that epistemological method, Ephrem decries the rationalistic hubris that arrogates to itself the power to penetrate into the hidden things of God "behind the back of Jesus Christ"<sup>50</sup> and to speak plainly of that which is in fact immeasurably beyond the capacities of the creaturely mind and of the language used to express what it knows. Ephrem insists on thinking and speaking through God's chosen symbols and names, taking them as trustworthy signs of divine truth, but the investigators refuse to be content with that mode of thought and speech: symbolic and metaphoric expression gives way to univocal speech. As Ephrem sees it, they blindly attempt to circumvent God's chosen means of self-revelation in preference for an allegedly direct (i.e., unmediated) apprehension of God as he is in his essence and apart from his self-revelation. As Torrance so keenly put it:

We find and know God where He has sought us and condescended to communicate Himself, in His objectivity in Jesus Christ. We cannot seek to know

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48 Problems related to a proper taxonomy of the various groups and movements commonly collected under the label "Arian" are beyond the scope of this study. Neither does this study assess the accuracy of Ephrem's estimation of Arian doctrine and theological method. What is important here is the profile of what Ephrem deems a threat to orthodox faith and life, not whether he properly understands his opponents' ways of thinking.

49 See footnote 5 above for the relevant Syriac terms.

50 The phrase is Torrance's. See his *The Trinitarian Faith*, 135. The phrase is there set, aptly enough for the present discussion, in the context of arguing for the indispensability of the Nicene confession and its significance for a proper understanding of divine revelation: "The *homoousion* asserts that God *is* eternally in himself what he *is* in Jesus Christ, and, therefore, that there is no dark unknown God behind the back of Jesus Christ, but only he who is made known to us in Jesus Christ."

Him by transcending His condescension or objectivity, or by going behind it, for that would be to go where God has not given Himself to be the object of our knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

Ephrem characterizes the investigator's attempt at totally unmediated knowledge as the vain effort to "pry into" (*bṣā*)<sup>52</sup> the things of God. In Torrance's language, the investigator violates one of the fundamental principles of realism, that one's "method of knowledge must correspond to the nature of the object."<sup>53</sup> Torrance writes:

[God] does not give Himself to us as a mere object subjected to our knowing, but as Subject who maintains Himself in implacable objectivity over against us, objecting to any attempt on our part to subject Him to our knowing. This is an objectivity that is the antithesis of all objectivism, for objectivism treats the object merely as an object and prescind the relation of the knowing subject to the object in such a way that the relation of the subject to the object becomes purely theoretical or logical, i.e. an abstraction.<sup>54</sup>

For Ephrem, the way of investigation is not, however, only a lamentable error of the intellect that tries to subjugate the truth of God to the dictates of its own logic. In the Arians it is a mutation of the same fatal disease that so plagued the Greeks at Athens that they rejected both Paul's preaching and the medicine of life.<sup>55</sup> Ephrem's case against the investigators marshals a vast array of arguments against their many ills and vices. Among its other faults, investigation constitutes a sure sign of bad faith; willful disregard for the limitations inherent in human nature, and the neglect of an appropriately measured search for the knowledge of God; a complete distortion of the character of appropriate speech and appropriate silence; profound ignorance of the nature of God's self-revelation and of the proper response to it; and evidence of a divisive and contentious spirit that wreaks havoc in the churches. In all those respects, investigation and the cognate sin of "inquiry" (*bṣātā*) stem directly from the free choices made by the guilty parties. In no way whatsoever are they compelled to seek after the knowledge of God in the way they do. God freely and lovingly reveals himself to his human creatures for their own good, and he bids them to use the reason and freedom he gave them to apply themselves to the task of discovering his truth and of allowing themselves to be formed by it in turn. That task is, for Ephrem,

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51 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 51.

52 This is a verb form of *bṣātā* mentioned in footnote 5 above.

53 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 38.

54 *Ibid.*, 38-39.

55 *HdF* 47.11.

an ascetic discipline to which the mind and will must commit themselves in faith and in freedom. Knowledge of God cannot be gained in any other way.

#### **IV. Investigation as a Sign of Bad Faith**

One of the most damning accusations that Ephrem brings against the investigators is that in seeking knowledge of God in the way they do they have chosen the way of unbelief. The following stanza is typical of Ephrem's manner of taking them to task:

Seal our mouth, O Lord! For, if even Your revelation  
bewildered the cunning, since they were unable to comprehend  
Your birth from Mary, the bookish called Your generation into doubt  
by their contentions. And if men do not grasp even Your humanity,  
who indeed can comprehend Your divine birth? Glory to Your Begetter!<sup>56</sup>

Time and again Ephrem argues that it is futile to engage in investigation and that such a theological method could only spring from insolence and presumption.<sup>57</sup> The "bookish" Arians, unable to wrap their minds around the divine generation of the Son, reject God's self-revelation as untrustworthy and look for names other than "Son" by which to refer to Christ.<sup>58</sup> Yet God himself revealed that name; the faithful, who believe in the name, find their way to the knowledge of God unobstructed:

Vouchsafe to me also, O Lord, that I may walk in that fear,<sup>59</sup>  
and that I may dread lest I cross the boundary of my faith.  
Your truth is level and straight. To the faithful it is even,  
and to the perverse it is rough.  
The simple go straight and proceed;  
the bookish go astray and fall into the abyss of investigation.  
May our Lord draw them out! Glory to Him who can do all things!<sup>60</sup>

All that the investigator has to offer as the fruit of his labors is something alien to the true faith, an innovation, to which the believer must respond, "My faith is

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56 *HdF* 51.4.

57 See, e.g., *HdF* 1.16, 3.14, 7.1, 28.9-11, 28.13.

58 See *HdF* 51.7-8. See also *HdF* 44.1.

59 I.e., of death, mentioned in the preceding stanza.

60 *HdF* 51.11.

complete, my pearl is perfect; your embellishment is not accepted.”<sup>61</sup> Ephrem can urge us to rebuke, not merely to correct, the presumptuous innovator because the latter’s own bad faith and his attempt to pervert the faith of others are the results of his preference for the path that leads to ruin. The possibility for praise or blame rests on the recognition that we are accountable for the ways in which we exercise our freedom.<sup>62</sup> Ephrem’s reproach only makes sense in the context of that recognition. Likewise, his exhortation to his readers that they “abide with [the Lord] in faith”<sup>63</sup> only has meaning if he understands the choice to preserve faith or to engage in investigation to be just that – a free choice.

We have already seen how crucial the medium of the natural world and that of the Bible are to Ephrem’s doctrine of divine revelation. In his infinite freedom, God made the world as he did and condescended to the level of human language in order to invite his human creatures into a life-giving relationship with him. They have every means and ability to respond and to engage him, but they cannot approach him by any means other than those he provides. They cannot disregard his “hidden manifestations” in created nature and spurn the Scriptures<sup>64</sup> and still expect to come to know him. Ephrem’s emphasis is on God’s *self*-revelation, actualized and made sufficient by him alone and through the instruments that he chooses: “Without Him you would not even be able to know / that He exists”<sup>65</sup> – as Torrance put it, “We cannot know God against His will, but only as He wills to reveal Himself.”<sup>66</sup> So when Ephrem interprets one of the symbols in the natural world – in *HdF* 73, for example, Ephrem writes of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as imaged, respectively, in the sun, its light, and its heat – his conviction is that the likeness is real and is intended by God to be an aid for coming to know him, but that that is God’s doing. We are not free to construct any path to divine truth that God did not establish as such.<sup>67</sup>

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61 *HdF* 51.13.

62 See *HcH* 5.8.

63 *HdF* 72.4.

64 It is important to note that for Ephrem, receiving God’s self-revelation through the Scriptures is always an ecclesial act. When he talks about the Bible, it is the Bible as proclaimed and preached in the true Church that he has in mind. There is private reading of Scripture, but the results of any reading must be assayed in the crucible of Christ in his Church.

65 *HdF* 72.5.

66 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 41. See *ibid.*, 31-32, where, in his discussion of Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, and anthropologizing approaches to theology, Torrance cites Camfield, saying that God’s Word “declares to us what we are utterly incapable of learning and declaring to ourselves.”

67 See Torrance’s plea (*Theological Science*, 33-32) for testing every claim to theological



It takes concerted effort to learn what nature has to teach us, and everyone learns in proportion to their abilities and to the measure of their labors. But if one does not so apply himself and does not submit himself to the One who teaches all things, he is duly called “one who is led astray by his freedom,” as Ephrem says.<sup>68</sup> Submission to the divine Teacher necessitates submission to the ways and means he has chosen to teach us, nature being the most ubiquitous means of instruction.

Ephrem also urges his readers not to neglect the other harp (or *harps*) of revelation beside that of nature. He urges them to stay close by the Scriptures and not to wander where they do not lead – unlike the investigators, who by choice “have gone forth outside the Scriptures, / to wander around in a pathless desert waste, and have deserted the [New] Testament, the path to the Kingdom.”<sup>69</sup> The faithful and obedient mind seeking the knowledge of God must hold fast to the Scriptures as both complete and trustworthy. If we readily place our confidence in our physicians, Ephrem wonders, and submit to their remedies without any questioning or reluctance, however painful they may be, why is it that “the books of God are not sufficient to convince / about His Son that He is His Begotten?”<sup>70</sup> Who are we to judge the “words of Him who judges all” or to “reproach the voice of Him who reproaches all?”<sup>71</sup>

For Ephrem, the Bible, along with the symbolic meaning inherent in nature (properly interpreted), is the criterion by which all our language referring to God is judged. He calls Scripture a “furnace” for testing the “names and distinctions” that we would ascribe to God.<sup>72</sup> Ephrem’s reverence for Scripture both binds him to what it contains and preserves him from straying outside its scope.<sup>73</sup> The

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knowledge “by referring it to the concrete reality of the object known” on the conviction that theological thinking is positive, *a posteriori*, and empirical: it is “verifiable by reference to its divine ground in the actual region of experience in which knowledge of Him has arisen.”

68 *HdF* 48.5.

69 *HdF* 65.1.

70 *HdF* 56.12.

71 *HdF* 56.11. See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 121, where he notes the effrontery of any kind of questioning that tries to drag the truth of God “down within our dividing and compounding dialectic in order to be controlled by us.” He concludes: “In the last resort it is we who are questioned by the Truth, and it is only as we allow ourselves to be questioned by it that it stands forth before us for our recognition and acknowledgment.”

72 *HdF* 44.1.

73 It is worth noting that Ephrem nevertheless feels free to expand on the biblical text – in targumic fashion, one could say – wherever he deems it necessary or helpful.

following stanzas, worth quoting in full, give expression to some of the issues at the heart of Ephrem's polemic and bring much of the foregoing exposition into sharper focus:

Is anyone able to tell me whence you know  
the nature of the Lord of all? God forbid that I should ever profess  
to know! His books proclaim Him,  
and because it is fitting that we should firmly believe in God,  
I listened and firmly believed Him, and by my faith I restrained  
the inquiry of my audacity.

For I have never drifted along after [other] people  
that I might speak as they speak, for I have seen that  
by other names that are not written do they call our Savior.  
I have forsaken what is not written, and I have instructed [others]  
in that which is written,  
lest on account of these things that are not written  
I should bring to naught the things that are written.

He created water and gave [it] to the fish for [their] benefit;  
He set down the books and gave [them] to men for [their] benefit.  
And they bear witness to one another, for if fish cross  
the boundary of their course, their leaping is also [their] suffering,  
and if men cross the boundary of the books,  
their investigation is [their] death.<sup>74</sup>

These stanzas show Ephrem keen to root his own manner of speech about God firmly in the Scriptures, to strictly observe their measure, and to avoid at all costs the deadly presumption he finds in the investigators: their trust in their own intellectual resources to the extent that they attempt to bypass God's self-revelation and acquire knowledge of him on their own terms. Ephrem credits his faith with sparing him from the death that comes in the wake of investigation beyond or behind the God-given biblical medium.

It is worth noting, too, that the passage ends with an illustration of nature's cooperation with Scripture. Here it is not the various books of the Bible that bear witness to one another, although Ephrem would surely affirm that. Rather, it is the natural fact that the life-sustaining environment for a fish has its boundaries that bears witness to the presence of boundaries no seeker of knowledge may cross and live. For Ephrem, faith rooted in biblical revelation is what keeps

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74 *HdF* 64.10-12.

us from killing the spirit by trying to know what is not given us to know. In other words, Ephrem insists that we must choose biblical faith over the ruinous attempt at intellectual mastery over the truth of God. Whether one chooses to trust in the veracity of Scripture is central to Ephrem's anti-Arian polemic, since it is Scripture that, over and above the testimony of nature, offers knowledge of both Christ's humanity and his divinity.<sup>75</sup> Notwithstanding the preeminence of Scripture over nature, Ephrem urges his audience to trust not in themselves, as the investigators do, but in the testimony given by both harps of revelation, or more precisely, in the one to whom they all testify.

The material presented in the preceding several pages has shown that the Arians' epistemological method is, in Ephrem's view, inimical to the way of faith in God's self-revelation delivered through nature and Scripture and safeguarded in the Church that adheres to the Nicene confession. Only by the faith that Ephrem commends to his audience does God draw near to the one who seeks to know him; if we scrutinize him, we stray far from him.<sup>76</sup> Because the sin of investigation does not merely weaken or injure the faithful mind but kills it, accusing the investigators of "bad faith" turns out to be too imprecise. If we follow Ephrem's train of thought, we recognize that inasmuch as his opponents engage in investigation, to that same extent they reject faith – not only the true faith, but the very category of faith.<sup>77</sup> Investigation is the willful attempt to ground belief on something other than that which we are given to believe, which amounts to the rejection of the possibility of faith altogether.<sup>78</sup>

## VI. Measure and Limits

Part and parcel of the investigator's rejection of faith as the only way to knowledge of God is his willful disregard for the proper measures, limits, and order inherent

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75 HdF 65.2. This passage lends weight to Bou Mansour's argument, mentioned in footnote 18 above, that Ephrem maintains a *taxis* between nature and Scripture.

76 HdF 72.2.

77 Shepardson (*Anti-Judaism*, 116n34) cites two passages relevant here: Ephrem's *Homilies on Faith* 2.501-4, 3.69-70.

78 Torrance wrote that faith is, at least in part, "the orientation of the reason towards God's self-revelation, the rational response of man to the Word of God.... faith is a 'condition of rationality'" (*Theological Science*, 33). While Torrance's manner of expression is not Ephremian, the substance of his statement is surely of a piece with Ephrem's theological epistemology. Ephrem pits faith against audacious investigation; but faith, as he understands it, is anything but irrational or antirational. Right theological knowing and thinking, using our God-given reason for which it was created, is of the very substance of faith. These comments anticipate the discussion of a positive form of inquiry below.

in the natures of things. At the heart of Ephrem's polemic against investigation, as well as his positive doctrine of divine revelation through created realities, is his conviction that God, and he alone, is the author of all order, measure, and limit.<sup>79</sup> The Lord and Maker of all things, God sets the boundaries and measures of created realities, and he orders them to the good. Only when the mind and the will work in harmony with the structures of created reality do they act to the benefit of the whole person and in a godly manner.

Yet the order that God establishes is not only that which obtains within creation but also the order of its relation, as a whole, to him. Freedom is oriented not only toward the order evident in creation; its proper exercise is predicated on the proper relation between it, a created reality, and its Maker. In terms of human knowledge, that means that we are free to inquire only into that which God gives us to know. We must recognize and abide by the limits inherent in our nature and in the natures of all created things. The investigator acts otherwise. He foolishly yet freely commits himself to a hopeless quest for that which lies infinitely beyond his creaturely measure. Underlying this aspect of Ephrem's polemic is, of course, the fact of the ontological chasm separating the created from the uncreated, and the fact that no created thing can comprehend the uncreated. Investigation entails the presumption that a creature can cross the chasm by some means other than the bridge that Christ is, and that a created vessel, by an exercise of intellectual mastery, can contain (conceptually) the infinitely transcendent God.<sup>80</sup> The Arians' presumption is, in Beck's words, "eine Erbschaft der Verwegenheit Adams":<sup>81</sup> as Adam tried to arrogate the status

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79 *HdF* 28.4.

80 See, e.g., *HdF* 50.3. See also Torrance's distinction between closed and open concepts (*Theological Science*, 15) and his closely related discussion of cataleptic apprehension and cataphatic comprehension. T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 22-23. Ephrem's different ways of conceiving and speaking of God span the whole spectrum of natural and biblical symbols, and yet he takes none of them as comprehensive – only apprehensive. The elasticity and great variety of images and metaphors in his theological discourse are not simply poetic niceties but evidence of his rejection of univocal speech about God. A further connection obtains here with what Torrance has to say about images in *Theological Science*, 20. There Torrance apparently sides with the patristic concept that "images have to be taken, not in a descriptive but in a *paradeigmatic* sense, that is, as aids to our human weakness in apprehending the indescribable God, to point him out in such a way that we may have some hold in our thought upon His objective reality, but without actually imaging Him. As Hilary expressed it, the likeness or comparison the images entail is to be regarded *as helpful to man rather than as fitted to God*, since they suggest or indicate and do not exhaust Him." When Torrance agrees with Hilary, he agrees with Ephrem as well.

81 Edmund Beck, *Ephräms Reden über den Glauben, ihr theologischer Lehrgehalt und*

of divinity, so the Arians try to seize divine knowledge beyond their measure, grossly exaggerating the strength and reach of their own intellectual resources. Arguing the point that the “the begetting of the Son is above and beyond man’s query,”<sup>82</sup> Ephrem uses the image of a clumsy archer: if he cannot hit even a target “large, obvious, and near” (comprehending Christ’s humanity), how could he be so foolish as to think he could hit one far off (comprehending Christ’s hidden divinity)?<sup>83</sup> Since his choice for unmeasured inquiry was freely made, it stands to reason that things could have been different for him and, perhaps, still could: “If he had shaken off his wine and recognized that he is mortal, / he would have kept silence and observed the measure of mortals.”<sup>84</sup>

The specifically Nicene dimension of Ephrem’s polemic against investigation emerges by way of his contrast between what we can know of God – that is, the measure of theological knowing proper to human nature – and what the Son knows. The chasm provides the framework for the contrast:

Behold, all eyes and all minds  
are far too weak in comparison with that strength  
of the Godhead.

That Ray that shines forth from It  
comprehends It; the Light that It begets  
knows It.<sup>85</sup>

Only the uncreated Word of God, whose revealed name “Son” betokens his divine generation, can know fully and directly the uncreated Father,<sup>86</sup> for it is in the

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*ihr geschichtliche Rahmen* (Rome: Herder, 1953), 70. See Torrance, *Theological Science*, 53: “God is present to us, and gives Himself to our knowing, only in such a way that He remains the Lord who has ascendancy over us, who distinguishes Himself from us, and makes Himself known in His divine otherness even when He draws us into communion with Himself. He is present to us in such a way that He never resigns knowledge of Himself to our mastery, but remains the One who is Master over us, who resists, and objects to, every attempt on our part to subdue or redact the possibility of knowledge grounded in His divine freedom to an immanent and latent possibility which we deem ourselves to possess apart from Him in virtue of our own being.”

82 *HdF* 1.3.

83 *HdF* 7.2. See also *HdF* 27.8.

84 *HdF* 47.9.

85 *HdF* 71.19-20.

86 See, e.g., *HdF* 26.12, 27.3. Matt 11:27 and Lk 10:22 obviously come to mind here. See Paul D. Molnar’s comments on the importance of those Gospel passages in Torrance’s thought, along with relevant citations from Torrance’s works, in his *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 60. The fact that those passages

hiddenness of God that the Son's generation is grounded. All creaturely knowing falls infinitely short of that mark and must freely, humbly, and obediently keep to its own measure.

An essential part of keeping to our own measure is the recognition that the criterion for the truth or falsity of our thoughts lies not in us but in God. We are not the crucible for trying the metal of our own or others' teachings, says Ephrem; God alone is.<sup>87</sup> Christ is the crucible. Torrance likewise called for this kind of critical assessment, affirming that:

we are really able to put false objectivities to a decisive test – in Jesus Christ. It will be through the ruthless and relentless Christological criticism of all our knowledge of God that we may be able to distinguish, as far as possible, between genuine and false objectivity.<sup>88</sup>

For Ephrem, God is the balance in which we must weigh our thoughts and our wills; he employs just the right weight for each thing according to its nature.<sup>89</sup> The inquirers are found wanting, and yet God may have mercy on them for their being too light in the balance.<sup>90</sup>

Elsewhere Ephrem points to scriptural examples of limits not to be crossed – the cherub with the flaming sword guarding the boundary of Paradise, and God's command that no one but Moses ascend Sinai – as metaphors for the limits of theological inquiry.<sup>91</sup> God set a boundary around the mountain for a day, but the height of his hiddenness is bounded off forever; death by stoning was the sentence for the one who crosses the limit imposed around Sinai, Gehenna for the one who tries to cross the limit of God's hiddenness.<sup>92</sup>

Ephrem's convictions about the injurious effects of unmeasured inquiry are all predicated on his belief that the investigator freely chooses his path. The same holds true for Ephrem's exhortations to know our proper measure and observe its limits,<sup>93</sup> to not lead ourselves astray and scrutinize our God:

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connect so strongly with the *homoousion* and that they root our knowledge of God in the person of his Word makes it clear why Torrance thought them so important. Likewise for Ephrem, while only the Son can know the Father in the depths of his hiddenness, we are brought to a nevertheless real knowledge of God in and through his Word.

87 *HdF* 12.2, 48.2-3.

88 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 43.

89 *HdF* 12.3.

90 See *HdF* 12.5.

91 *HdF* 28.8.

92 *Ibid.*

93 See, e.g., *HdF* 72.1.

Let us temper our minds and measure our thoughts as well,  
and let us recognize [about] our knowing that  
it is far too small and wretched to inquire into the One who knows all.<sup>94</sup>

Ephrem's plea for self-restraint and sober reflection on the limits of human knowing is charged, through and through, with moral urgency. One who chooses to step over the limit and exceed his God-given measure does so at his own peril. His choice does not lead him to the deep truth of God but traps him within the circuit of his own feeble mind and the absurd fictions it takes for theological knowledge. He hems himself in by his own ignorance and perversion and cuts himself off from the gift of God's self-revelation, refracting all that he is actually given to know of God through the prism of his own investigation, the structure of which he alone determines:

O blind congregation of inquirers,  
they stand in the midst of the light and seek it . . .  
Each one, as he imagined,  
took and depicted the light in his mind.

The investigator so deludes himself that he thinks he actually strikes his external, objective target while his vain inquiry, in point of fact, has only turned his mind back upon itself.<sup>95</sup> He generates a mental image and takes it for the Light itself. Indeed, the link between investigation and idolatry is a strong one, as Ephrem sternly warns:

Rebuke your thought, lest it commit adultery and beget for us  
a Messiah that does not exist and deny the one that does exist!  
Beware not to make an idol by your investigation.  
Beware not to fashion with your intellect  
an omen of your mind and an offspring of your thought.  
Let the Offspring of the True One be depicted in your thought!<sup>96</sup>

Torrance makes a similar connection between the cardinal sin of idolatry and what is essentially a projection into God of our own ideas. If God did not speak his Word to us (or if we reject the Word he did speak, as the investigators do),

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94 *HdF* 25.3.

95 See Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 125, where he states that because of our empty theologizing, "the questions we direct come bouncing inexorably back upon us to reveal that they are but empty and deceptive moments of inquiry."

96 *HdF* 44.10. See also *HdF* 42.6, where Ephrem makes the related yet more basic point that natures are not what they are because of the working of our will: they are what they are independent of our knowing or acting, and we must accept reality as it is.

then:

we are thrown back upon ourselves to authenticate His existence and to make Him talk by putting our own words into His mouth and by clothing Him with our own ideas. That kind of God is only a dumb idol which we have fashioned in our own image and into whose mouth we have projected our own soliloquies ... In other words, we have no genuine knowledge of God at all, for we are left alone with our own thoughts and self-deceptions.<sup>97</sup>

Binding himself, by his abuse of freedom, to the idols fashioned by his own intellect, the investigator cuts himself off from the revealed truth of God and sows controversy and division among others. The alternative to investigation that Ephrem offers is one that works toward the reintegration of the person, both as a whole person and as a member of the Church.

## VII. Right Theological Inquiry in and with the Church

One of the most pernicious effects of unmeasured investigation is the disturbance and confusion it engenders in the churches. For Ephrem, this is not only a matter of right doctrinal profession over against error; it has direct bearing on the very life of the body of believers and troubles its peace.<sup>98</sup> Investigation and contentious disputation go hand in hand, and together they wreak havoc on the life of faith lived in ecclesial unity which Ephrem so ardently commends to his audience. Several passages in the *Hymns on Faith* speak about the scourge of controversy, offer prayers for peace and unity among believers, or tout the advantage that Ephrem's own undivided congregation enjoys.<sup>99</sup>

And yet it is important to recognize that Ephrem, while he castigates the insolent investigators and their divisiveness, nevertheless concedes a proper method of inquiry for believers. Much more than a concession, in fact, the right way of questioning reality is the path to the knowledge of God about which Ephrem speaks so eloquently. Essential to this healthy type of inquiry is the humble recognition of natural limits and the strict observance of measure. The faithful inquirer is careful to discern the right balance between questioning and

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97 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 31. See also his comments in *ibid.*, 42, about the need "to distinguish divine objectivity from all idolatry."

98 This is not to imply that Ephrem would separate those two concerns at any great distance. Quite the contrary, Ephrem's thought evinces a strong and intimate connection between what one thinks or professes, on the one hand, and the character of one's moral and ecclesial life as a whole, on the other hand.

99 See, e.g., *HdF* 47.12, 48 refrain, 52.15, 53.2-3.



silence, between pressing on to a deeper knowledge of God through God's chosen media of self-revelation and restraining himself, all through faith, obedience, and trust in God. Numerous passages talk of right speech and right silence, the proper use of the mind and tongue, and even an appropriate form of disputation for the sake of edification.<sup>100</sup> The necessary condition for such healthy inquiry and debate is faith firmly rooted in the life of the Church, which presupposes a trusting obedience to the specific means God has chosen to reveal himself. The limits of those means provide the framework within which Ephrem encourages believers to exert their efforts in coming to know God more deeply. Only by the right use of freedom in accepting as the foundation of one's inquiry and debate what the true faith presents can one rightly exercise one's freedom in forging ahead with any theological investigation. It would be better to say, rather, that the life of faith is not only the foundation of proper theological investigation but also its abiding guide and standard. Healthy inquiry can only be carried on by one whose whole disposition is oriented by the orthodox faith, which comes to expression in the Church's worship. As faith and love are intimately bound up with each other,<sup>101</sup> so love and truth are yokefellows who jointly prepare the way for concord and peace.<sup>102</sup> The orthodox believer engages in theological inquiry within the strict compass of the faith-love-truth nexus preserved whole and entire in the Church, and only there. So when Ephrem writes that "the faithful never debate or investigate / for, they have faith in God,"<sup>103</sup> the reader must balance that statement with the following:

*In the Church* there is  
inquiry such that you may investigate things revealed –  
not such that you may pry into things hidden.<sup>104</sup>

Several polarities have already been brought together, all in relation to theological inquiry: the revealed and the hidden, faith and unbelief, humility and presumption, measure and excess. To those we should now add, in connection

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100 See, e.g., *HdF* 2 passim, 4.1, 4.13-14, 23 passim, 24.6-7, 38.8-10, 50.2-4, 58.7, 67.25.

101 See *HdF* 80.3.

102 See *HdF* 20.12. See also Torrance, *Theological Science*, 12n4, where he quotes J. Macmurray: "The capacity to love objectively is the capacity which makes us persons. It is the ultimate source of our capacity to behave in terms of the object. It is the core of rationality." J. Macmurray *Reason and Emotion* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1937), 32.

103 *HdF* 56.8.

104 *HdF* 8.9.

with the quotation just above, the polarity between rationality and rationalism, since that pairing takes account of much of what Ephrem puts his finger on in his contrast between proper and improper investigation. Clearly Ephrem does not repudiate the exercise of reason, the God-given "word" (*melltā*), but exhorts his audience to recognize and observe the limits of human reason dictated by human nature and ultimately by God himself. The difference between rationalism (exemplified by excessive, presumptuous investigation) and rationality (exemplified by measured, humble inquiry) is not merely one of degree; they are entirely different in their foundation, orientation, and end.<sup>105</sup> The former is an abuse of freedom and, in effect, the frustration of the human desire to know, since it does not terminate upon any objective reality at all but generates mental fictions that supplant the truth of God: it ends in irrationality and idolatry. The latter, however, is exercised in accord with the *telos* of human freedom, exercising the authoritative mind according to its given nature, and in accord with the nature and means of God's self-revelation.

It is also exercised in accordance with the nature of its object, which is not revelation itself as such, but God, whom we know in and through his self-revelation.<sup>106</sup> One of the pillars of Torrance's realist epistemology is the principle that "reason is the capacity to behave in terms of the nature of the object."<sup>107</sup> In Ephrem's thought we see that principle at work insofar as the kind of theological inquiry he advocates and exemplifies is one that measures the knowing subject's limitations against the infinite excess of the object's reality and rationality and behaves accordingly. In other words, to behave in terms of the object's nature is the only reasonable thing to do in light of the chasm that separates them, taking jointly into account the nature of the subjective pole and of the objective pole in all theological thinking. The correspondence between human rationality, the event and means of revelation, and the object of theological inquiry accounts for the real progress that the faithful inquirer achieves on his path to the knowledge of God: they are all attuned to one another, since God, in his grace, structures the first two and *is* the last. It is

105 In at least one passage, however, Ephrem presents the notion of intelligent discernment as a middle way: "It is right for us to cultivate neither simple-mindedness nor deep investigation, but discernment between-these-two-extremes, sound and true," *Hyp* 1, 29.26-30.1, translated by den Biesen in *Simple and Bold*, 228.

106 See Torrance, *Theological Science*, 54: "Knowledge of God does not entail any diminishing of our rational powers, but the very reverse, for in requiring of us sober and critical judgements of our own powers and possibilities, it does so through requiring us to be obedient to the rational Word of God and to acknowledge that we are face to face with a Reality which we cannot rationally reduce to our own creaturely dimensions."

107 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 11-12.

clear, then, how Ephrem can condemn one type of investigation and, at the same time, advocate another.

The way of theological knowing that Ephrem describes – sometimes positively and explicitly, other times implicitly and negatively, by way of his polemic against unhealthy investigation – has a three-fold nature. First, it takes on the character of ascetic discipline. The humble, obedient mind and tongue learn to control themselves as they should, restraining the insolence of their inquiry by faith.<sup>108</sup> They curb the wayward and overbold tendencies of their thoughts and words and achieve a disciplined balance of action and rest.

Second, it is inherently dialogical. It seeks converse with God, not theft of his hidden mysteries.<sup>109</sup> Unlike presumptuous investigation, faithful inquiry does not try to bypass the given content and structure of God’s self-revelation in order to discover what in fact cannot be discovered. Rather, it responds to God’s invitation according to the terms in which it was delivered, taking up the harps that God has ordained for that purpose, and meeting him where he approaches us – this encounter is most fully realized in the Church.

Finally, and closely related to the second point, it is doxological by nature. Inquiry is no end in itself but only a means to a more profound knowledge of God. One who inquires rightly will take up Ephrem’s prayer that the Lord make his tongue a pen for God’s glory and that he should sing what is right with his harp.<sup>110</sup>

That last point about the character of proper inquiry raises the issue of Ephrem’s preferred idiom for theological discourse. By far, his most frequently chosen literary form is the *madrāšā* (hymn, or teaching song) – second to that is

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108 See *HdF* 64.10. To this Torrance would add the related ideas of conversion and repentance, pointing out the need “for radical change even in the inner slant of our mind, and in the structural capacities of our reason” (*Theological Science*, 49).

109 See Torrance, *Theological Science*, 39: “But God gives Himself to be known as personal Subject, as the one Lordly Subject who approaches us and assumes us into personal relation with Him as subjects over against His own divine majestic Subjectivity. Apart from being a primary element in the objectivity of theological knowledge, this means that our cognitive relation to the object is essentially and unceasingly dialogical. At no point can theological knowledge step outside this dialogical relation, without abstracting itself from the object, without falsifying itself, or without retreating into unreality. Thus theological knowledge is ... reflection upon the object of faith in direct dialogical relation with that object, and therefore in faith – i.e. in conversation and communion with the living God who communicates Himself to us in acts of revelation and reconciliation and who requires of us an answering relation in receiving, acknowledging, understanding, and in active personal participation in the relationship He establishes between us.”

110 *HdF* 51.5-6.

the *mēmrā* (metrical homily).<sup>111</sup> These are liturgical compositions, intended for public performance in the context of his community's worship. So, for Ephrem, speech about the mysteries of God finds its proper place in the liturgical life of the Church because that is the context in which the truth of God, knowledge of which is grounded on the *terra firma* of orthodox faith in the eternal Word of God become man in Jesus, is most fully appropriated and celebrated. Right belief, freely appropriated and nurtured, issues forth in right worship freely offered; right worship is the fullest exercise of rational faith and freedom, the only fitting human response to God's self-revelation in nature, in Scripture, and, above all, in Jesus Christ. There is a strong connection here with Torrance's stress on the communal dimension of theological knowing. As he so eloquently states:

The implication of this is that we know God and interpret his self-revelation only in the attitude and context of worship and within the fellowship of the church, where to the godly reason God is more to be adored than expressed. It is only as we allow ourselves, within the fellowship of the faith and through constant meditation on the Holy Scriptures, to come under the creative impact of God's self-revelation that we may acquire the disciplined spiritual perception or insight which enables us to discriminate between our conceptions of the Truth and the Truth itself. This is not a gift which we can acquire and operate for ourselves alone but one which we may have only as we share it with others in common listening to God's Word and in common adoration and worship of God through the Son and in the one Spirit.<sup>112</sup>

All knowing is oriented toward the worship of God, and when we discover the truth of God, as he makes himself accessible to faithful and discerning minds, our response of worship gathers up and presents to him the best that we can offer in the best way we can offer it: in rational faith and obedience; according to the measure appropriate to us, recognizing our creaturely limits; using fitting speech sanctified by God, while observing proper silence; from within the context of a life lived according to the truth of God revealed in Christ; avoiding all divisiveness; and as the most profound expression of human freedom. For Ephrem, human freedom is ultimately the freedom given by God to know and worship him rightly and, in so doing, to become fully a human person. Rational freedom, in other words, enables us to fulfill our shared priestly vocation and so to become saints gathered in Christ in his Church, an image of Paradise.<sup>113</sup>

111 See Sidney Griffith's remarks in his essay "Ephraem, the Deacon of Edessa, and the Church of the Empire," in *Diakonia: Essays in Honor of Robert T. Meyer*, ed. T. Halton and J. P. Williams (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 45.

112 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 119-20.

113 *Parad* 6.8, 10.

### **VIII. Concluding Remarks**

It goes without saying that Ephrem and Torrance worked in radically different contexts and idioms. The liturgical compositions of a fourth-century Mesopotamian poet would not immediately appear to be fit companions for the philosophical and systematic works of a twentieth-century Reformed theologian with a heavy interest in the hard sciences. And yet there are strong continuities between them that attest both to the perennial status of the theological vision they share, and to their contributions to what Fr. Georges Florovsky called an "ecumenism in time." If one reads deeply in Ephrem, it takes only a cursory reading of Torrance's *Theological Science*, for example, to discover deep affinities between those two realist theologians. The tie that binds them in perhaps the most fundamental way is the Nicene confession and its implications for all theological thinking. The status of the incarnate divine Word and Son as the inimitable self-revelation of God, in whom all theological knowing is actualized, and with reference to whom all that claims to be theological knowing is tested, is paramount in the thought of both theologians.

Their realism is an incarnational realism that, in different yet consonant ways, takes full account of the Logos as the basis of all rationality. Torrance, of course, is impacted by and responds to many of the developments in science, philosophy, and theology that occurred in the centuries that separate him from Ephrem. It stands to reason, then, that the conceptual and linguistic equipment that Torrance employs would be markedly different than Ephrem's. Behind and beneath all such differences, though, there lies enough agreement in substance to consider them strong allies and co-workers in the Church's mission to help all men acquire "the mind of Christ."<sup>114</sup>

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114 1 Cor. 2:16.