



*Beyond apophatic and cataphatic polarities and tension in theologizing about God, symbolism as understood by Ephrem the Syrian might help to mediate this tension.*



## “Blessed is He who compared the kingdom on high to a pearl”

*Ephrem finds the most appropriate language to convey a theological vision of God*

The *Hymns on the Pearl*, Syr., *Madrāšê ‘al Marganītâ*, are a small subset of the collection of 87 *Hymns on Faith* by Ephrem the Syrian in the last decade of his life (ca.363-73). These hymns deserve our attention for several reasons. First, they are representative of the writings of Ephrem from his most mature period, because “[i]t was probably only in Edessa that Ephrem first encountered the full force of the fierce theological controversies that were raging at the time.”<sup>1</sup> Second, Ephrem’s writings are together with Aphrahat’s *Demonstration* and *The Book of Steps* (anonymous) “the best evidence we have for the character of Syriac literary culture at a period when it was still comparatively unhellenized.”<sup>2</sup> Third and probably most important, these five hymns provide us with a totally different approach to orthodoxy and heresies (in this case Arian Christology) than Westerners are apt think as customary. Ephrem uses a form of knowledge different from rational thought and logical demonstration. We need not, however, be limited to beautiful expressions of contemplative hymns. Recently, Kees den Biesen pointed out that one should make “a clear distinction between ‘theological poetry’ and ‘symbolical theology’.”<sup>3</sup> In these five hymns one is able to recognize Ephrem’s specific form of theology that considers symbolism to be the only appropriate linguistic and intellectual means for a theological vision of God, humanity, and the world. Ephrem’s starting point is the ontological chasm between the Creator and the created.<sup>4</sup> God, however, has bridged the chasm by making himself intelligible to our minds in many ways. Ephrem perceived the pearl to be one of such symbols given to human beings as a pointer to God. To give a foretaste, the following stanza’s from hymn 4 on the pearl shows how Ephrem is balancing the pearl over against Christ.

On the one hand the pearl fails as a counterweight to Christ, but at the same time it validates the potential of this natural symbol as a successful counterweight to Christ:

*Thy scale cannot be weighed against the scale of Christ;  
the deep sea’s womb gave birth to thee,  
His Origin is in the Highest:  
like thee, yet not like thee, but like His Father, He!*

*Yet story tells that thou, too, from the twin wombs art sprung!  
From heaven dropped a nature free,  
a body fixed rose from the sea:  
thy second birth revealed that thou for men dost long!*

*Embodied to be grasped by us, thy light was drilled,  
affixed to brows of royalty  
(for ‘crown’, like ‘cross’, spells ‘victory’),  
and spread, like words, in people’s ears across the world!<sup>5</sup>*

The eye of faith is able to see these symbols as gifts of God to us by which we are able to approach the divine mystery, but at the same time respects the total transcendence of God. Instead of convincing his listeners by trying to encapsulate Christ in univocal terms, Ephrem overwhelms them with analogies which reveal and hide at the same time in order to bring about the following reaction:

*To You, Lord, do I offer my faith as an offering.  
I have offered it all naked, without any good deeds;  
it belongs to You, Lord, so let it be enriched by You,  
then I, for my part, who am so needy, will be enriched by it.*

*A merchant offers a pearl to a king,  
he receives it all naked, but he enhances it:  
the king enhances it by placing it on his crown  
—so how much more, Lord, will my faith be enhanced in You?<sup>6</sup>*

—Maria Verhoeff,  
*Teaching Assist., Historical Theology*

<sup>1</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye. The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*. Cistercian Studies Series 124. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1992), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, “Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. F. Young et al., (Cambridge 2004), 362.

<sup>3</sup> Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem’s Art of Symbolic Thought*. Early Christian Studies 6. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006). This quotation is from his dissertation *Eenvoudig en stoutmoedig*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> See Charis Vleugels, “Chasm, Bridge, and Response: Ephrem the Syrian’s View on the Human Approach and Attitude towards God as Seen in his Hymns on Faith,” *RCECR*, no. 2 (April 2007).

<sup>5</sup> 4.13-15; trans., Andrew Palmer, “The Merchant of Nisbis. Saint Ephrem and his Faithful Quest for Union in Numbers,” in *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. den Boeft & A. Hilhorst, *VC* Supplement 22 (Leiden, 1993): 179-80.

<sup>6</sup> *HdF* 16:6-7; trans, Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 78.

## Reviews & Annotations

*Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church.* By James W. Aageson. Library of Pauline Studies, ed. Stanley E. Porter. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008; 235 pp., paperback. ISBN: 978-1598560411.

Scholarship on the Pastoral Epistles is flourishing, and Aageson's study of their reception history within a developing Pauline tradition is a welcome addition. The study's breadth of coverage of the first two centuries A.D. deserves admiration, although the study's historical reconstruction fails to convince.

The first chapter offers the usual methodological introduction. Aageson studies the patterns of convictions and behaviors in the Pastorals and then compares them with earlier and later documents. This will highlight various dissimilarities, which can signal a change in historical context. This movement from theological conviction to historical reconstruction allows Aageson to defer the question of authorship to a secondary place in the discussion. He identifies his main contributions as: that he takes the literary and conceptual world of each individual letter seriously, that he limits himself to the developing *Pauline* tradition, and that he "takes seriously the developmental character of Paul's transformation from a Jew and an apostle of Christ into a saint of the church, as well as the transformation of his epistles from occasional letters into authoritative texts that continued to inform the life and theology of the early church" (p. 3).

Chapter 2 contains the core analysis of theological patterns in the Pastorals, where 1 Timothy and Titus are seen to be relatively similar, and 2 Timothy quite distinct. Notice that Aageson begins his survey by simply discussing various themes, without any hint of how he arrives at his selection of themes. His footnotes merely refer to other

exegetes and commentaries as support for or illustration of the point made without much further discussion.

Chapters 3 through 7 compare these theological patterns with other documents of the Pauline tradition: a comparison of the Pastorals with Paul (selecting Philippians, Galatians and 1 Corinthians); a comparison of images of Paul and authority in the Pastorals, Acts, and the Deutero-Paulines; comparison with some Apostolic Fathers, with later writers like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and then with the *Acts of Paul*. The breadth of coverage is admirable, but space limitations make these comparisons selective and superficial, with almost exclusive reliance on Aageson summaries of his personal selection of secondary literature.

Chapter 8 summarizes the oft-repeated suggestion that "the theological patterns generated by this discussion converge in support of the claim that the Pastoral Epistles were written most likely after Paul's death but before Ignatius" (207), even though the author reassures us here and throughout that he did not intend to focus on authorship. Evidently it proves impossible to locate the Pastorals in the Pauline tradition without interacting in depth with proposals about authorship. His final conclusion is roundly disconcerting: "lines of development, conflicts, and ideas of Christian truth are not isolated from each other in the early church. They intersect in complex ways. . . . Not until the consolidations of the fourth century and beyond do we see an effort to establish correct Christian belief and practice on a grand scale" (210). It is disappointing that we end up with another version of Bauer's reconstruction of orthodoxy and heresy.

In spite of helpful insights into the Pastorals and their connections with other Pauline traditions, the overall

presentation fails to convince. It is questionable whether Aageson's method, moving directly from theological patterns to historical reconstruction, is legitimate. Patterns of theology tell very little about possible lines of historical development, unless they are anchored by external evidence. Without such an anchor, proposals for historical development are likely determined by unexamined presuppositions about religious development of early Christian communities. This appears to be the case in Aageson's conclusion, since he focuses exclusively on theological analysis. Thus, he only has chronological development or authorship as mechanisms to explain his observations.

The question of authorship will remain prominent in this discussion. If the Pastorals were written towards the end of the first century as Aageson proposes, then it took one or two generations beyond Paul to arrive at a settled package of 'true doctrine' that most likely had competitors. However, if Paul wrote the Pastorals in the early 60's, this implies a very early awareness of a settled state of doctrinal content. Add to this the observation that even Paul's letters, our earliest NT documents, appear to contain doctrinal summaries of preformed traditions, and we have here evidence of doctrinal formation that is traceable to the 40's, undercutting any argument for early and widespread variation of doctrinal content. Authorship of the Pastorals thus deserves careful attention, and Aageson's contribution sharpens our focus on some of the issues involved, although perhaps leading in another direction than he himself envisioned.

-Jack Barentsen,  
*Teaching Assist., NT*