

SEERI CORRESPONDENCE COURSE (SCC)  
ON SYRIAN CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

5

Dr. MAR APREM

**Mar Aprem**  
**Theologian & Poet**



ST. EPHREM ECUMENICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
(SEERI)

BAKER HILL, KOTTAYAM-686 001  
KERALA, INDIA

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# MAR APREM, THEOLOGIAN & POET

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TRICHUR

1990

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Most Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem (formerly George Mookan) was born in Trichur, Kerala, India, in June 1940. Educated in India, England and America, he specialised in the field of Church History. He was the president of the Church History Association of India.

Since 1968 he is the head of the Church of the East in India with his headquarters in Trichur. He is active in several religious and social organizations, all over India.

The author has read papers in academic conferences such as Symposium Syriacum in Goslar, West Germany in September 1980 and Holland in September 1984, and International Congress on Oriental Canon Law in Freiburg, West Germany in September, 1983.

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25 Feb. 1990

Dear S. C. C. Participant,

We have great pleasure to forward to you the 4th manual of the SEERI Correspondence Course. This study book entitled "Mar Aprem, Theologian and Poet" is written by Dr. Mar Aprem, Metropolitan of the Chaldean Syrian Church in Trichur who has played an active role since the very inception of St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam.

Since SEERI is named after Saint Ephrem of the 4th Century it is fitting that we all study about this great poet and saint. As a matter of fact we should study about some other Syrian Fathers too in order to get a basic knowledge on the Syrian culture and heritage which we boast of.

I would like to suggest to go through the present course as fast as you can and to reply to the answers, say within 2 months. Here I would like to add for the future, whatever be the delay



in getting the manuals, kindly see to it that you send the answers of each course within 2 months from the reception of each course.

There are a few participants who have not answered the questions of the previous three lessons already sent to you during the past one year. Please don't postpone the 4th lesson until you get time to complete the first three lessons. You start reading this lesson right away. After you post the answers to the questions of this lesson, you can go back to the earlier missing lessons. Otherwise you will not be able to study the fourth lesson in the same way you failed to answer your previous lesson or lessons.

Most of you are busy people. Therefore it is natural that you cannot meet the deadline. But don't be discouraged. Some of the writers of the lessons also are in the same predicament! But let us struggle together to learn the rich heritage of the Syrian tradition and the symbolic and the spiritual insights which our forefathers had. Please send your lessons soon after Easter, if not earlier.

God's blessings in your resolution to study our tradition.

Yours in Maran Esho Mshiha,

Director

S. C. C.

## QUESTIONS

1. What are the songs and prayers of Mar Aprem used in your denomination. Mention the page numbers where these prayers or hymns are found.
2. Write short notes on the following.
  - a) The luminous eye
  - b) Feminist theology
  - c) Nisibis
  - d) Edessa
3. List the main cycle of poems of Mar Aprem already edited in Syriac language
4. What are the three main models of divine self revelation in the thought of Mar Aprem?
5. Have you come across any of the thoughts or ideas of Mar Aprem in other poems, religious or secular.? If so, cite examples.
6. Write an essay (approximately thousand words) on “Mar Aprem, the man and his writings.”

This essay can be in English or in Malayalam. Selected essays can be published in Church magazines for the benefit of both clergy and laity.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Mar Aprem or St. Ephrem is well known to East Syrian and West Syrian Christians, whether Catholic or Orthodox. In Kerala also he is well known through his poems used in the worship services of the Syro - Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Orthodox, Mar Thoma Syrian, the Independent Syrian and the Chaldean Syrian Churches. Most of these Churches are using Malayalam translation for their liturgical services.

As a matter of fact the Syrian Christians of Kerala, belonging to the various Christian denominations mentioned above, have not studied the theological aspects of the poems of Mar Aprem. The theologians belonging to these Churches delight in referring to Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich etc. They ignore Mar Aprem not because his theological insights are inferior to the western theologians, but because the theologians from Kerala have never attempted to study Mar Aprem's writings seriously.



Credit goes to the late Professor Arthur Voobus of Chicago and Dr. Sebastian Brock of Oxford and some such Syriac scholars, not belonging to the Syrian or Indian Churches, who have done some serious study on this subject and attracted our attention to the theological depth of the poems of Mar Aprem. This should be challenge for Asian theologians, especially belonging to the Syrian Churches, to explore further the writings of Mar Aprem and refer to his thoughts in our theological debates.

The following study is a very brief one. The lectures given by Dr. Sebastian Brock in the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome on April 30-May 5, 1984 have been published under the title *The Luminous Eve: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem* published from C. I. I. S. Rome. The present writer has made vigorous use of this book, as evident from the footnotes.

The present work is meant for ordinary readers in India interested in having an initiation into theological and spiritual world of St. Ephrem who lived in the fourth century. Those who do not know Syriac language will also find this study useful. Some Syriac words are transliterated into English providing English translations for the benefit of those who are not familiar

with the words such as *madrashe* (instructions), *Memrae* (homilies) *Sogiatha* (songs) *Thisbhatha* (praises) etc. The readers of this book are urged to study the Syriac language so that they can delve deeper into the poetic beauty and theological insights of the greatest of the Syriac writers often referred to as *Aprem Rabba*, *Aprem the Great*.

Mar Aprem is important to us in the Indian Church because his poems refer to the Apostle Thomas having become martyr in India. As evidence on the tradition of St. Thomas founding Church in India is being questioned by some doubting Thomases, St. Ephrem comes to bear testimony to the fact that the St. Thomas tradition is at least as old as the 4th century when Mar Aprem lived and wrote. How early was such tradition in vogue in the Middle East, is not known.

In Nisibis (modern Nuseybin in Turkey close to the border of NorthEast Syria) there is a baptistry, still standing, which was erected during the time of St. Ephrem in that Church. Bishop Vologeses was his bishop at that time (359 - 60).

St. Ephrem lived in Nisibis until 363 when town was ceded to the Persians by the peace this



treaty following the death of the emperor Julian in battle in Mesopotamia. St. Ephrem moved to Edessa (Urhay) and lived there for ten years.

There is a tradition which states that St. Ephrem went to Cappodocia and met St. Basil. According to some sources St. Ephrem went to Egypt also to visit Mar Bishoi. These traditions are of later origin and probably not historical. This study is an effort to provide some basic information on the life and teachings of Mar Aprem.

In the famous book of *Sharba d Sah'de u Qaddishe (Acta Martyrium et Sanctorum)* Vol III printed in Paris in 1892, pages 621 - 665 deal with the "history of the miracles of the holy Mar Aprem from the beginning till the end of his life in Urhai city of Beth Nahrain". Pages 665 - 679 contain "a *Memra* on the blessed Aprem, Malpana, compiled by Mar Jacob of Sarugh.

## CHAPTER 2

### LIFE & WORK

Mar Aprem (known as "Ephrem the Syrian") lived in the 4th century of the Christian era, acquired great renown among his contemporaries, and has since been esteemed as one of the most celebrated fathers of the Church. Though he was only a deacon, his name was always used with a prefix "Mar" meaning "my Lord", which is usually used for the members of the hierarchy.

Mar Aprem was born about 306 A. D. at Nisibis, in the eastern-most province of the Roman Empire. His father was of Nisibis and mother, of the city Amida. Aprem left his parents in his childhood and received his early education under an old anchorite and he became a hermit. He was called to the episcopal house at Nisibis where he received further instruction from the holy Mar Yacob, the bishop of Nisibis. In 325 A. D. Aprem accompanied Mar Yacob to Nicea to attend the first Ecumenical Council. Later Aprem achieved fame as a theologian of great eloquence.

The authenticity of the sources for the early life of St. Ephrem, is being questioned by scholars. Dr. Sebastian Brock of Oxford University who has done considerable study on the life and teachings of St. Ephrem writes:

“Although we have quite a lot of sources claiming to tell about his life, most of these are late and full of legendary additions; this applies above all to the Life of St. Ephrem, which must belong to the mid sixth century two hundred years after his actual lifetime. As a result there is in fact not very much that one can say with real certainty about his life, though it is quite likely that we do have the exact date of his death preserved, the 9th of June, 373.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the *life* of Aprem written in the 6th century his father was a pagan priest. He threw out his son when he heard that he had consorted with Christians. But Dr. Sebastian Brock thinks that his parents seem to have been Christians, basing his conclusion on “internal evidence.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, Placid Lectures, Rome, P. 3
  2. Sebastian Brock, “*The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*” 1987, P. 30



When he was a boy he had a dream. There was a vine shoot which sprung up bigger and bigger and finally filled all the space under the heavens. Bunches of grapes hung on its branches. Birds of the sky came and ate the grapes. While they were eating, the bunches of grapes began to multiply.

While he was young monk a revered old monk saw a dream about Aprem. The Syriac translator of the Lausiatic History of Palladius has inserted the following paragraph

“One of the holy fathers saw in a dream a band of holy angels come down from heaven at God’s behest. One of them was holding in his hand a scroll written both on the inside and on the outside. They were asking each other, ‘To whom should this be entrusted?’ Some of them said to one particular person, and others to another; yet others, however, said ‘All these people are indeed saints and upright, but they are not capable of being entrusted with it’. Having mentioned the names of many other saints, they finally said, ‘No one can be entrusted with this apart from Ephrem’. Whereupon they gave it to him. When the father arose

in the morning he heard people saying, 'Ephrem teaches as if a fountain was flowing from his mouth.' Then the elder who had seen the dream recognized that what issued from his lips was from the Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup>

Although he led a holy life, there were jealous people who wanted to belittle Mar Aprem. Once a woman claimed that Mar Aprem was the father of her child. Aprem accepted the baby boy and began to take care of him. One day he took the baby to the Church. Many people blamed Aprem, as he was taking care of this baby. He brought the baby to the altar and prayed in the presence of the people to reveal the truth. When he asked the baby to open his mouth and testify who his real father was, the baby opened his mouth and said "Aprem the sexton." Then the people realised that Aprem was a holy man and father of the illegitimate child was Aprem the sexton and not Aprem the deacon. From then on people were scared of bringing any complaints against Mar Aprem the holy deacon.

There is a humorous story about this holy man. When he was walking one day a lady came in

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3. Quoted from *The Luminous Eye*, pp. 145, 146



the opposite direction. As Aprem saw that lady come close to him, he did not look up. He fixed his eyes on the ground. The lady asked "hey; holy man, why can't you look up. Why do you bow your head down and look at the mud on the earth?" Without looking up, the holy man replied "Lady you have the right to look at your place of origin (man's rib). But I can look at my origin which is the dust of the ground."

Palladius writing about half a century after the death of St. Ephrem writes chapter on St. Ephrem in his *Lausiatic History*. There he speaks of the cell where St. Ephrem lived. He was considered to be a monk. It is in this spirit that the sixth century *Life* of St. Ephrem speaks of his visit to Egypt and a meeting with Mar Bishoi. Although many modern scholars consider this visit not historical, Sebastian Brock records, "The memory of this supposed visit is still very much alive in the Wadi Natroun in modern Egypt today."

In 363 A. D. Jovian the Roman emperor had to make a disadvantageous treaty with Sapor II, King of Persia. As a result, Nisibis again became a part of the Persian Empire. So the Christian population left Nisibis to Edessa, the capital of the Roman province of Western

Mesopotamia. At Edessa, Mar Aprem became a famous theologian and one of the greatest biblical exegetes which the world has never known.

During his ten years at Edessa, he wrote commentaries on the books of the Holy Bible. He preached many sermons against the heretics. His eloquence kept his audience spell-bound and often moved them to tears. As a participant in the Council of Nicea, he defended Nicene Orthodoxy against Arians, Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani. His poems and sermons are great authority for theologians of the Church of the East as well as of the Universal Church. His teachings about the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist and Virgin Mary, were strong barriers against contemporary and later heresies.

Mar Aprem is famous for the austerity he practised, the sanctity of his life as also for his learning. The inspiration behind his writing is scriptural throughout. His style, characterised by repetitions and profusion of metaphors, was much appreciated. He is the pioneer, genius, the master, often imitated but never equalled. Among his many varied literary productions are his hymns and his refutations of heretics. One of his favourite subjects was the last judgement,



which he had pictured in terrifying colours. His prose writings are limited to the commentaries on the Bible and polemic literature.

Syriac poetry reached its zenith during the time of Mar Aprem. Scholars are of opinion that the twelve syllabled (dodeca syllabic) metre was introduced into Syriac poetry by Mar Aprem. However the most favourite of Mar Aprem, is hepta syllabic (seven syllabled), which is consequently named after him. The four syllabled and five syllabled meters are also often found in his poetry.

Mar Aprem introduced acrostics into Syriac poetry, in imitation of some Hebrew poems, each strophe of which began with a letter of the alphabet. He used acrostics not only with the letters of his name and of some other names like Jesus. On Sunday mornings we sing *Thisbohtah* (hymn) composed by Mar Aprem. There are ten strophes for this praise which begins with the words “*Isho Maran Mshikha.*” The initial letters of these ten strophes spell the name ‘*Isho Mshikha*’<sup>4</sup>

The metrical works of Mar Aprem are grouped *Memrae* (homilies or discourses),

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4. Khudra, Vol., i., Mar Narsai Press, Trichur. p. 104.

*Madrashae* (dissertations or instructions), *Sogiatha* (songs), *Bautha* (rogations) *Oniatha* (responsories), *Seblatha* (Stairs or scales) and *Thisbhatha* (glorifications or praises). The *memrae* are hymns consisting generally of equal strophes of seven syllabled verses.

St. Ephrem did not write in Greek language. Perhaps he did not know that language at all. Sebastian Brock observes:

Ephrem probably did not know Greek or at most only a little; he is, however, quite aware of the general tenor of theological discussion in the Greek-speaking world. He was not hostile to Greek culture as such, and he even has a couple of allusions in his poems to classical mythology. In this context it is important to remember that when he speaks of the need to reject 'the poison of the *yawnaye*' the term *yawnaye* should not simply be translated 'Greeks', for it refers primarily to Pagan Greeks. Ephrem in fact uses the term *yawnaye* in exactly the same sense that Greek-speaking Christians of his time used the term *Hellenes*, meaning 'pagans', rather than 'Greeks'.<sup>5</sup>

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5. Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye, op. cit.*, p. 5



Between the years 350 and 370 Mar Aprem composed a book of great historical interest entitled "Hymns relating to the city of Nisibis" edited by Bickell in 1866. These poems deal largely with the history of Nisibis and its bishop and of adjacent cities such as Hanzit, Edessa and Harran. His hymns on *Dinkha* (Epiphany), *Yalda* (Christmas), Lent etc., are examples of his literary genius.

"Prophet of the Syrians" is another title given to this holy man. The Holy Apostolic Church of the East and the other Syrian Churches, since ancient times, honour him as their common Doctor and father. He is also known as "the Pillar of the Church" "the Orator of the Syrians" the "Sun of the Syrians," "the Beacon of Learning" "the Great Malpan", and "Aprem the Great".

Mar Aprem wrote exclusively in Syriac, but his works were translated into Armenian and Greek, at a very early date, and via the latter into Latin and Slavonic. Now Mar Aprem's writings are found in Syriac, Latin, Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Slavonic, Ethiopic, Coptic French, English, and many other languages. Today the scholars extol in very high terms the sublimity of Mar Aprem's poetic genius, rhetorical talent and theological erudition.

The great libraries of the world have bought many of the Syriac manuscripts of Mar Aprem.



The Vatican Library (Rome), the British Museum (London), the Bodleian Library (Oxford), University Library (Cambridge) the Bibliotheque Nationale (Paris) etc. , contain some of these rare Syriac manuscripts.

There is no satisfactory edition of the writings of Mar Aprem. The standard collection is said to be the 3 Volumes of Syriac texts edited by J.S. Assemani, S.E. Assemani and P.B. Mobarrek in Rome (1732 - 1746). J. J. Overbeck published an incomplete Syriac edition in 1865 at Oxford. Among the English translations available at present, we have "Metrical Hymns and Homilies" translated by H. Burgess in 2 volumes (1835) "Select Works of St. Ephraem the Syrian" by J.B. Morris (1847), "The Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan" in 2 volumes edited by C. W. Mitchell (1912 - 1921) and "The Commentary on Acts" edited by F. C. Conybeare (1926).

The details connected with the life and work of Mar Aprem are shrouded in obscurity and uncertainty. The greatest difficulty relates to the period prior to the time he left Nisibis. Professor Arthur Voobus of America (died 1988) admits: "It is impossible to separate truth from fiction".<sup>6</sup> A critical sifting of source materials made Professor Voobus to conclude thus.

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6. A. Voobus; "Aphrem and the school of Urhai"

Ephrem-Hunayn Festival, 1974, p. 216

All the stories about his trips from Orhai to Egypt, his stay among the Egyptian monks and the contacts he made with the leading authorities there, his journey to Caesarea in Cappadocia, and his travels in the Mesopotamian communities, are valueless for historical study. This is the retouched picture of Aphrem of legend.<sup>7</sup>

During the commemoration of the sixteenth hundredth anniversary of the death of MarAprem Professor Voobus paid glorious tributes to the literary achievements of this great Syrian saint. Calling Mar Aprem a pioneer in the literary field Professor Voobus substantiates his observation as follows:

He set an example in many areas of literary creation: exegetical, theological, ethical, paraenetical, homeletic and ascetic, prose as well as poetry. An enormous outburst of literary works like this must have an epochmaking effect. An incalculable incentive was engendered by this giant among the Syrian authors, a man who stands without a rival in the rank of the most outstanding authors the Syrians can call their own.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Ibid. pp. 215, 216

8. Ibid. p. 212



It is generally believed that Aprem had an important hand in the founding of the school of Urhai (Edessa). But the tradition about the founding of the school of Urhai is contradictory. According to Bar Hadbeshabha of Holwan, Aprem opened a school in Urhai "and he made there a great assembly of the school". This tradition is rejected by some scholars. Before Bar Hadbeshabba the Church historian Sozomenus in the middle of the 5th century had mentioned about the literary activities and the hymnology of Aprem. But he did not record anything about Aprem founding the school of Nisibis.

T. J. Lamy who edited Aprem's *Vita* in Syriac in 1890 seems to support Sozomen in his silence in the founding of the school of Urhai. Professor Voobus remarks:

"Thus, in the light of the traditions, the questions regarding the origin and early development of the School of Urhai are veiled in a haze. Being faced with such a situation we have no other way than to investigate every cue, tip and hint with care and circumspection with the hope that we can move on without losing our directions in this labyrinth of traditions which mingle history and hagiography."<sup>9</sup>

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9. Ibid; p. 214

After various considerations Professor Voobus reaches the conclusion that Aprem is "the leading spirit" in founding the School of Urhai. He concludes his discussion on the leading role of Aprem in founding the School of Urhai thus:

"In order to understand the magnitude of Aphrem's role in all these stimuli, it is necessary to put these observations into a wider historical perspective. All these stimuli grew into a School which first in Urhai and then in Nisibis, where the torch of learning was carried by Narsai, the founder of the School of Nisibis, was destined to attain extraordinary elan, profoundly affecting the spiritual and intellectual culture of the Christianity in the lands of the Euphrates and Tigris."<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately for us, the last will, the Testament of Mar Aprem, has come down to us. It is a great help to us to know a lot of details and some names of his disciples of renown such as Aba, Zeninob, Mara, Abraham, Paulona and others. Professor Voobus comments about the importance of this document as follows:

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10. Ibid; p.209



The purpose of such a document in itself seems to be quite natural, when we consider his intentions. Not only his wish growing out of his humility to have the simplest possible funeral, but several other things lay on his heart. It is so natural that he was concerned about his spiritual legacy and the bearers of it — his disciples and adherents. Thus, as far the quintessence is concerned, it fits in well with everything we know of Aphrem. The poetical form, the seven syllable metre of which Aphrem was particularly fond, and the whole cast of the lyrics are in the vein of Aphrem.<sup>11</sup>

Referring to the possibility of St. Ephrem having access to three distinct traditions, Sebastian Brock concludes:<sup>12</sup>

These three very different cultural traditions, ancient Mesopotamian, Jewish and Greek, find a meeting point in Ephrem to an extent that cannot be paralleled in any other early Christian writer. Once again Ephrem can be seen to provide a bridge between East and West, between Asia and Europe.

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11. *Ibid*; p. 211

12. Sebastian Brock, *op. cit.*, p. 9



All the enormous writings attributed to St. Ephrem may not be his authentic works. Sebastian Brock has classified Ephrem's poetic and prose writings as follows:<sup>13</sup>

These works fall into four categories, two in prose and two in verse. A few works are preserved only in an Armenian translation.

1. Straight prose:

-polemical works;

-prose commentaries on biblical books the most important of which are those on Genesis and on the Diatessaron (or Gospel harmony).

2. Artistic, or rhythmic, prose:

-the 'Discourse on our Lord';

-Letter to Publius (mainly on the Last Judgement).

3. Verse homilies (*memre*), in 7+7 syllable couplets:

-Six *memre* on Faith;

(AD 358).

The majority of the other *memre* attributed to Ephrem are of very doubtful authenticity.

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13. *Ibid*, pp 5, 6.

#### 4. Hymns (*madrashe*):

-A dozen or so cycles, containing varied numbers of hymns, are preserved. These *madrashe* are stanzaic poems, employing over fifty different syllabic patterns; they were meant to be sung, and the names of the melodies survive but not the original collected music. The *madrashe* were collected together into hymn cycles some time after Ephrem's death, and these took their titles from the first group of hymns that they contained. The cycles come down to us in a number of sixth century manuscripts, and these form the basis of Dom Edmund Beck's editions in the Louvain Corpus of Oriental Christian Writers. We know the names of some cycles which are no longer extant or which only survive in an incomplete form.

It is on the *madrashe* or hymns (of which we have well over 400) that Ephrem's reputation as a poet hangs, and it is in these hymns that some of his most profound spiritual insights are to be found.

## CHAPTER 3

# MAR APREM AS THEOLOGIAN

The well known eastern theologians of the 4th century are St. Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers (St. Gregory of Nizianzus, St. Basil and Gregory of Nyssa). St. Ephrem is not mentioned among them.

Two reasons are attributed to this neglect of St. Ephrem: The first is that he wrote in Syriac and not in Latin or Greek. The second is that Mar Aprem wrote in verse form and not in prose. Sebastian Brock comments.

Since we do not expect to find serious theology expressed in poetic form, we tend not to take seriously as a theological thinker someone who does happen to put forward his theological vision through the medium of poetry. Ironically, it is precisely these two reasons which have led to the comparative neglect of St. Ephrem that make him a writer of particular significance to-day.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sebastian Brock, *op. cit.*, p. 1



Brock further elaborates the second point stating:

Anyone who has gone through a western educational system is likely to think of theology as being above all, connected with dogmatic 'definitions'. Ephrem's approach to theology, however, avoids—indeed abhors—definitions, which he regards as boundaries (Latin *fines*) that impose limits; his own method, by contrast, is to proceed by way of paradox and symbol. This difference of approach, it should be emphasized at the outset, does not prevent Ephrem from being a theologian with a very profound sense of orthodox belief.<sup>2</sup>

Mar Aprem is not only the subject of study of the students of history, he is a theologian of significance. Even students from India ape theological writings of the European and American writers and now some "liberation theology" people look upto Latin America for theological wisdom. But Mar Aprem, can serve as a link between Western theology and Asian theology. Brock explains it beautifully in the following statement.

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2. Ibid, p. 2

For those whose Christian tradition is of European background, Ephrem provides a refreshing counter balance to an excessively cerebral tradition of conducting theological enquiry, while for Asian and African Christians Ephrem is the one great Church Father and theologian whose poetic writings will be readily accessible, without requiring any prior knowledge of Greek philosophical terminology and tradition.<sup>3</sup>

It is very difficult to condense his poems to define his theological stand on various topics. although he did not know greek, he was familiar with the theological climate of Greek-speaking Christianity and the theologians like the Cappadocians.

Sebastian Brock, who tried to analyse the poems of Mar Aprem to sift theology out of it, admits that his attempt "to present something of his thought in a more or less systematized form, is like forcing someone into a strait jacket."<sup>4</sup> He nevertheless admits that "St. Ephrem has a very coherent and well thought out theological vision."<sup>5</sup>

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3. *Ibid* p. 3

4. *Ibid* p. 9

5. *Ibid*



We have to be very selective in the choice of topics to be covered because of the volume of his poetical writing and the immensity of his imagery.

Commenting on the statement of Ephrem's younger contemporary Evagrius that 'If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; if you pray in *truth, you will be a theologian*', Sebastian Brock remarks:

“Accordingly we should not be surprised to find good theology in a poet like Ephrem who clearly “prayed in truth”<sup>6</sup>

St. Ephrem lived at a time when Arianism was a great threat to the Church. It is believed that St. Ephrem as a young deacon must have accompanied his great theologian bishop to the Synod of Nicea in 325 A. D. where Arianism was condemned. But in the following years Arianism continued to spread. Ephrem's approach to theology was not by definitions as Arians were doing. Brock elaborates it as follows.

St. Ephrem's approach serves as a much needed antidote to that tradition of theologizing which seeks to provide

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6. *Ibid*, p. 10



theological definitions, Greek *horoi*, or boundaries. To Ephrem, theological definitions are not only potentially dangerous, but they can also be actually blasphemous. They can be dangerous because, by 'providing boundaries,' they are likely to have a deadening and fossilizing effect on people's conception of the subject of enquiry, which is, after all, none other than the human experience of God. Dogmatic 'definitions' can moreover, in Ephrem's eyes, be actually blasphemous when these definitions touch upon some aspect of God's being: for by trying to 'define' God one is in effect attempting to contain the uncontainable, to limit the Limitless.<sup>7</sup>

The search for theological definitions is a Greek method. Ephrem did not bother to imitate such a theological approach.

Ephrem's radically different approach is by way of paradox and symbolism, and for this purpose poetry proves a far more suitable vehicle than prose, seeing that poetry is much better capable of sustaining the essential and dynamism fluidity

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7. *Ibid*, P. 10



The Mighty One entered, and put on  
insecurity  
from her womb; the Provisioner of all  
entered  
—and experienced hunger; He who gives  
drink to all entered  
—and experienced thirst: naked and  
stripped  
the recame fourth from her He who clothes  
all.<sup>9</sup>  
(Nativity 11:6-8)

### Basic concepts and themes

Since it is difficult to discuss in detail the various aspects and emphases of the theology of St. Ephrem we can only briefly touch upon the important topics.

#### 1. Creator-creation

The Hymns on Faith (69 : 11) speaks of the ontological gap as a 'chasm'. The Parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:26). The gap between the creator and the creation was a matter of discussion in the fourth century Christian circles. The human intellect is incapable of containing God, the uncontainable.

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8. *Ibid*, p. 12





that his attitude is anti-intellectual. Far from it, for the human intellect, as he see sit' has plenty of scope with in creation, where its role is to search out the types and symbols available there to provide it with glimpses of understanding of divine reality. It is only when the intellect seeks to cross the ontological 'chasm' that it becomes reprehensible. The proper area for intellectual enquiry lies in the places where God has revealed himself in creation, the *galyata*, 'revealed things'.

## 2. The hidden and the revealed

God is hidden. But at the Incarnation God's hiddenness became fully revealed. In Faith 19:7 Ephrem writes:

Who will not give thanks to the Hidden  
 One, most hidden of all,  
 who came to open revelation, most open  
 of all,  
 for He put on a body, and other bodies  
 felt Him  
 -though minds never grasped Him.<sup>12</sup>

*Shrara* and *qushta* which mean truth is the divine reality. The starting point is *ituta* (Being)

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12. *Ibid*, p. 14

which exists objectively; but can be experienced only in a subjective way. Sebastian Brock puts it succinctly.

“In his poetry Ephrem interweaves these two perspectives of what is hidden and what is revealed in a highly creative manner. The tension which he maintains between the two poles, hidden and revealed, is none other than the tension between the transcendence and the immanence of God.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The primacy of faith

Faith is inevitable to understand God. In *Faith* 72:2 Ephrem clearly states, “Through faith God reveals Himself to you.” In Orthodox tradition in general, an enquiry into divine matters is incomplete without the element of faith. Sebastian Brock is right when he observes that “Ephrem would heartily subscribe to Anselm’s words *credo ut intellegam*.”

### 4. The two times

Ephrem does not discuss directly the concept of two times. But the concept of sacred time is important to his hymns. In the second half of

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13. *Ibid*, p. 15



the cycle of the Nisibene hymns is a case in point. Brock explains :

Ordinary time is a linear and each point in time knows a 'before' and an 'after'. Sacred time, on the other hand, knows no 'before' and 'after', only the 'eternal now': what is important for sacred time is its content, and not a particular place in the sequence of linear time. This means that events situated at different points in historical time, which participate in the same salvific content—such as Christ's nativity, baptism, crucifixion, descent into Sheol, and resurrection—all run together in sacred time, with the result that their total salvific content can be focussed at will on any single one of these successive points in linear time.<sup>14</sup>

## 5. The one and the many

In Semitic thought, the individual can merge into the collective and *vice versa*. Ephrem refers to Adam sometimes as the person who was the husband of Eve, but on other times by Adam he means human race in general. In his poem Crucifixion (5:11) he refers to 'the body of Adam

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14. *Ibid*, P. 16.

which proves victorious in Christ.' In the same way he talks about the tension between an individual Christian and the Church.

## 6. The pattern of salvation

The pattern of salvation as Ephrem sees it has been summarised by Dr. Brock in the following manner. As it is not possible to improve in content and diction upon that of this scholar from Oxford, the present writer must be excused for quoting from him at length and often.

Adam and Eve (humanity) had been created in an intermediary state, neither mortal: it was the exercise of their free will (*heruta*, 'freedom') over the instruction not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge which would decide the matter: if they kept the command (Ephrem emphasizes how small it was), God would have rewarded them, not only with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but also with the fruit of the Tree of Life, and they would have become immortal and been divinized. As it was, of course, they failed to obey the commandment, and as a result were both expelled from Paradise and became subject to death (which

Ephrem sees at a merciful deliverance from the terrible consequences of their disobedience).

The entire aim of God henceforth has been to effect the means for Adam/humanity to return to Paradise, while still respecting the awesome gift of freewill with which humanity has been endowed. But it is not just to the intermediary state of primordial Paradise that God wishes humanity to return: in the eschatological Paradise humanity is to receive the gift of divinity from the Tree of Life that God had originally intended for the primordial Adam and Eve.

Primordial and eschatological Paradise belong to sacred time and space, and so they are ever present and directly connected with the pattern of salvation for every individual human being. The expulsion from Paradise on the other hand represents the transition from sacred to historical time and, space; it is the entry into the fallen world of geographical space and historical time with which we are all too familiar.<sup>15</sup>

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15. *Ibid*, p. 18





the human body, Ephrem had a positive approach. He did not encourage the platonizing or dualistic tendency. He believed that the human body is part of God's creation. He had the following significant considerations.

In his commentary on the Pauline Epistles he refers to the honour which God himself pays to the body by making it a dwelling place and habitation of the Trinity. Commenting on II Corinthians 5, he writes just as our bodies became worthy to be the dwelling of His Spirit, so He makes them worthy at the end to put on eternal glory. In another book he speaks of the human body as having become God's new temple, replacing the Temple on mount Sion (Heresies 42:4).

## **9. Divine self Revelation**

In the thought of Mar Aprem we see three main models of divine self revelation namely:

- a) Types and symbols in both Nature and in Scripture
- b) the garment of names.
- c) the incarnation when He actually 'put on our body.'

### **a) Types and symbols**

God gives us free will. God wants the humanity to be restored to the early status of

Adam and Eve which they enjoyed in paradise before the Fall. In his hymn on Nisbis 16:11 Aprem sings:

“Any kind of adornment that is the result  
of force  
is not genuine, for it is merely imposed.  
Herein lies the greatness of God’s gift,  
that someone can adorn himself of his own  
accord,  
in that God has removed all compul-  
sion”<sup>17</sup>

We find several instances in the poems of Mar Aprem to his use of types of symbols to explain the divine descent, Dr. Sebastian Brock remarks:

When Ephrem explores the infinite number of symbols and types in Nature and Scripture we must be constantly aware that, although human understanding of them is essentially fluid and variable, what they all point to is an objective reality that Ephrem calls ‘Truth’. Furthermore, the presence in the types and symbols of what he calls the ‘hidden power’, or ‘meaning’ lends to them some

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17. *Ibid*, P. 37



sort of inner objective significance or reality, which is different from that outer reality which the scientific observer would call objective.<sup>18</sup>

In his hymn on Faith (4:9) Mar Aprem explains:

“Lord, your symbols are everywhere,  
yet You are hidden from everywhere.  
Though Your symbol is on high,  
yet the height does not perceive that You  
are;

though Your symbol is in the depth,  
it does not comprehend who You are;  
though Your symbol is in the sea,  
You are hidden from the sea;  
though Your symbol is on dry land,  
It is not aware what You are.

Blessed is the Hidden One shining out.”<sup>19</sup>

The Syriac word used for symbol is *Raza*. The plural of this word, *raze* is used to mean sacraments. As Brock reminds us the use of symbols is “a dynamic and exciting way of looking at the world—and one that is profoundly

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18. *Ibid* P. 39

19. *Ibid* P. 39

ecological.”<sup>20</sup> Instead of a single meaning the symbols have multi-faceted meanings. In his poem on the ‘pearl’, Mar Aprem engages that symbol to mean the Kingdom, the Faith, the Christ, His virgin birth, His crucifixion and so on. He writes in his hymn on Faith, (4:10). “Even though Your symbol may be small yet it is a fountain of further mysteries.”<sup>21</sup>

In the same hymn Mar Aprem refers to the dialectic between the divine reality and its many symbols (Faith 10:3).

“Single is Your nature, but many are the ways of interpreting it.”<sup>22</sup>

Mar Aprem uses many types and symbols already latent in the Old Testament which point to the advent of Christ. In his poem *Unleavened Bread* 3:5 - 8, he compares and contrasts the passover lamb (Exodus 12) with Christ the True Paschal lamb.

“Listen to the simple symbols that concern  
that Passover,  
and to the double achievements of this  
our Passover.

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20. *Ibid*, P. 40

21. *Ibid*, P. 40

22. *Ibid*, p. 40





the air will not carry the bird  
unless its wings confess the Cross.”<sup>24</sup>

Mar Aprem believes that humanity too requires to open his wings of faith, in its attempt to fly in the upward direction in the process of divinization.

### b) The garment of names

There are many hymns of Mar Aprem which are devoted to this theme. Hymn 31 of the cycle of *Faith* is the best example. In it the poet compares God trying to teach humanity about God to somebody attempting to teach a parrot to talk with the aid of a mirror.

“A person who is teaching a parrot to  
speak  
hides behind a mirror and teaches it in  
this way;  
When the bird turns in the direction of  
the voice which is speaking  
it finds in front of its eyes its own  
resemblance reflected;  
it imagines that it is another parrot,  
conversing with itself.

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24. *Faith* 18:6

The man puts the bird's image in front of  
it, so that thereby it might learn  
how to speak.

This bird is a fellow creature with the man,  
but although this relationship exists, the  
man beguiles and teaches  
the parrot something alien to itself by  
means of itself in this way he  
speaks with it.

The Divine Being that in all things is  
exalted above all things  
in His love bent down from on high and  
acquired from us our own habits:  
He laboured by every means so as to turn  
all to Himself."<sup>25</sup>

Through this humorous narration of the parrot, Mar Aprem explains that the humanity cannot easily approach God crossing the ontological chasm. Therefore God crossed it in the opposite direction. He descended to the humanity's lowly level, in order to draw humanity upto God.

There are two different kinds of names; namely exact names and 'borrowed names'. These are the metaphors borrowed from ordinary human experience. He explains:

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25. *Faith* 31:7





just meditate on their names.

If you investigate the person of God, you  
will perish,  
but if you believe in the name, you will  
live.

Let the name of the Father be a boundary  
to you,  
do not cross it and investigate His nature;  
let the name of the Son be a wall to you,  
do not cross it and investigate His birth  
from the Father,  
let the name of the Spirit be a fence for you,  
don't enter inside for the purpose of  
prying into Him"<sup>28</sup>

There is a warning from the poet that we should not confuse that the Created and the Creator have anything in common because some names are shared by God and man:

“Who is so stupid and stubborn as to  
suppose, even just a little,  
that because human beings have been  
called by names that belong to God,  
that the nature of man and of God is  
consequently one,

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28. *Memra* on Faith, 4:129-140.

or that, because the Lord has also been  
 called by a name appropriate to his  
 servants,  
 that we should weigh with a single  
 comparison both what is made and its  
 Maker”<sup>29</sup>

We should not misunderstand God as equal with us. God condescends only to draw us upwards. It is only our human arrogance and folly that drag God down to the human level. In his work on *Heresies*, Aprem explains that God has not completely disclosed His majesty. We have seen only a tiny part. God has given us only a single spark. He has shown us “only what your eyes can take of the multitude of His powerful rays.” In the following poem we get a glimpse of the salvation history according to Mar Aprem

“Loving is the Lord who himself put on  
 our names —  
 right down to the mustard seed was He  
 abased in the parable.  
 He gave us His names, He received from  
 us our names;  
 His names did not make Him any the  
 greater





with which God's Majesty had previously  
 clothed Himself,  
 clothed Himself with real limbs, as the  
 First-born,  
 and was mingled with humanity:  
 He gave what belonged to Him and took  
 what belonged to us,  
 so that this mingling of His might give life  
 our dead state"<sup>31</sup>

## 10. Wonder

An oft repeated word in the writings of Mar Aprem is *tehra* which means wonder. In the case of Balaam he failed to 'wonder' when his donkey spoke. If we want to attain the knowledge of God, we should have faith. Faith comes to us when we wonder at God's doings. when we fail to have this faith or 'wonder' we become "a mere corpse." <sup>32</sup>

Prayer is a pre requisite to reach Christ through faith. Aprem addresses Christ,

You are entirely a source of amazement,  
 from what ever side we may seek You:  
 You are close at hand, yet distant-  
 who shall reach you?

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31. Heresies 32:9

32. Faith, 80:1

Searching is quite unable  
 to extend its reach to you:  
 when it is fully extended trying to attain  
 to You  
 then it is cut off and stops short,  
 being too short to reach Your mountain.  
 But faith gets there,  
 and so does love with prayer.”<sup>33</sup>

God’s love must be matched by human love,  
 although presumptuous.

“I want to be impudent in showing my  
 love,  
 but I shrink from being over bold.  
 Which of these two attitudes do You  
 choose, Lord?  
 The impudence of our love is pleasing to  
 You,  
 just as it pleased you we should steal from  
 Your treasure.”<sup>34</sup>

## 11. The luminous eye

Faith can be succeeded by the help of the  
 eye. The inner eyes of the mind or of the soul  
 function by means of faith, just as the physical  
 eyes function by the means of the light. Sin can

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<sup>33</sup>. Faith 4:11

<sup>34</sup>Faith 5:5

eclipse the inner eye. It has to be kept lucid and clear in order to function properly. In his hymn on the Church, Aprem sings:

“Illumine with Your teaching  
the voice of the speaker  
and the ear of the hearer:  
like the pupil of the eye  
let the ears be illumined,  
for the voice provides the rays of light.

Refrain: Praise to You, O Light.

It is through the eye  
that the body, with its members,  
is light in its different parts,  
is fair in all its conduct,  
is adorned in all its senses,  
is glorious in its various limbs.

It is clear that Mary  
is the ‘land’ that receives the Source of  
light:  
through it has illumined  
the whole world with its inhabitants,  
which had grown dark through Eve,  
the source of all evils.

Mary and Eve in their symbols  
resemble a body, one of whose eyes  
is blind and darkened,



while the other  
is clear and bright,  
providing light for the whole.”<sup>35</sup>

He continues the same hymn to state that the left eye has to be illumined by the other eye, the heavenly Light. We should not lose sight of the significance of the role of Mary in the theological vision of Mar Aprem, as it is evident in the above hymn.

Mary's eye is described by the adjective *shapya*. Sebastian Brock believes that there is no single word that can satisfactorily translate the adjective *shapya*. It includes “clear, pure, limpid, lucid, luminous”. He further explains:

In the Gospels the adjective is used both of a path, clear of stones (i.e. smooth; Luke 3:5), and of the heart. This latter usage is of particular interest; it already occurs in the Old Syriac Gospels where it renders Greek *kalos*, ‘fair, beautiful.’ The translator's choice of *shapya* here may well have been dictated by the background of the phrase *lebba shaphya*, ‘pure, or luminous heart’, in Jewish Aramaic; in the Palestinian Targum

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35. Church:37

to Genesis 22, for example, we learn that Abraham and Isaac proceed to Mount Moriah with 'a luminous heart'. Ephrem himself uses this phrase (Church 34:3), but it is in connection with the inner eye that he normally employs the term *shaphya*: a luminous eye, 'ayna shaphita, is what the prophet Ezekiel has (Church 11:4), and elsewhere Ephrem exclaims:

Blessed is the person who has acquired a luminous eye with which he will see how much the angels stand in awe of You, Lord, and how audacious is man."<sup>36</sup> (Faith 3:5)

In his hymn on the Church Aprem asks:

"How can I sing to You, O Luminous and Holy One? For it is only the mouth that is pure and luminous, and which resembles You Lord, that shall sing to you — the luminous to the Luminous One, the pure to the Pure One, for it is his voice that is pleasing to You."<sup>37</sup>

The image of the mirror is used. The mirror has to be *shapitha* luminous in order to

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36. Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye* pp 54,55

37. Church 29:1

reflect the image properly. Aprem says Jephtha's daughter is a mirror in which the resurrection is Reflected."<sup>38</sup> The mirror has to be properly polished. Aprem argues:

“One complains about a mirror if its  
 luminosity is darkened,  
 because it has become spotted, or dirt has  
 built up,  
 covering it over for those who look into  
 it.

Refrain: Blessed is He who has polished  
 our mirror.

Beauty is no longer adorned in that mirror,  
 blemishes are no longer reprov'd in its  
 reflection.

It is a cause for offence as far as anyone  
 beautiful is concerned,  
 seeing that their beauty gets no advantage  
 from it,  
 in the form of adornments as profit.

Blemishes can no longer be rooted out  
 with its aid,  
 adornments can no longer be added with  
 its help;

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38. Nisibis, 63:5





The mirror conceives the image of everyone who encounters it. Let not all sorts of thoughts be imprinted on our prayer, Let the movements of Your face, Lord, settle upon it, so that, like a mirror, it may be filled with Your beauty.”<sup>40</sup>

Gospel is a polished mirror always capable of reflecting divine reality. If our eyes are luminous, then only we can see reality in the Scripture.<sup>41</sup> In his letter to Publius, Mar Aprem writes:

“you do well not to let drop from your hands the polished mirror of the holy Gospel of your Lord, for it provides the likeness of everyone who looks into it, and it shows the resemblance of all who peer into it. And while it preserves its own nature and undergoes no change, having no spots and being quite free from any dirt, yet when coloured objects are placed in front of it, it changes its aspect, though it itself undergoes no change: when white objects are put in front of it, it turns

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D). Church 29:9-10

. Faith 67:8

white; when black ones, it takes on their hue: when red, it becomes red like them; and with beautiful objects, it reflects their beauty; with ugly, it becomes unsightly like them. It depicts in itself every limb of the body: it rebukes the defects of the ugly, so that they may remedy themselves..."<sup>42</sup>

## 12. Feminist theology

In theological circles, "feminist theology" is a new phrase. It means a theology that gives special attention to the increased place of importance for women in the Church. It is interesting to discover the prominence St. Aprem gave to women in the Church. The younger contemporary, of St. Aprem, Jacob of Sarugh (d. 521), writes in his poem.

"The wise Moses caused the Virgins not to hold back from the praise that was requisite : so too Ephrem, who proved a second Moses to the women folk, taught them to sing praise with the sweetest of songs." In the same song we read:

"The blessed Ephrem saw that the women  
were silent from praise  
and in his wisdom he decided it was right  
that they should sing out;

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42. Letter to Publius 1.





“Just how remarkable Ephrem’s comment here is, best stands out when one compares it with the standard exegetical tradition, which is often blatantly anti-feminist on this point. It is worth mentioning in passing that Ephrem’s very positive attitude to Sarah is developed further in an anonymous fifth-century poem on the sacrifice of Isaac, and probably from thence it was picked up in the second half of the kontakion, or hymn, on the same subject by Romanos, the sixth-century Greek poet from Emesa (Homs) in Syria.”<sup>44</sup>

The episode of Rachel stealing the idols of her father, Tamar having a child from her father-in-law Judah, Lot’s two daughters sleeping with their father, Potiphar’s wife trying to seduce Joseph, the women anointing Jesus, are some of the several feminist themes, this celibate deacon has dealt with. The images of conceiving and birth-giving are repeatedly used. The womb and bosom are so common expression in Aprem’s writings. In John 1:18 for the bosom of the Father, the Syriac word is *ubba*. The Greek word *Kolpos* means bosom in the sense of ‘lap’.

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44. Ibid, p. 142.







## CHAPTER 4

### MAR APREM AS A POET

St. Aprem wrote theology through the medium of poetry. In western theology today we have forgotten the usefulness of poetry in conveying great theological truths. St. Aprem has proved that many of his poems have conveyed theological dogmas. In his hymn on the Church he writes rightly :

“It is not at the clothing of the words that one should gaze,  
but at the power hidden in the words.”<sup>1</sup>

Translating and digesting a lot of poetry of St. Aprem, Dr. Brock remarks:

“As a consequence Ephrem’s writings still retain a great freshness and immediacy for the modern reader, all the more so seeing that his profound and powerful theological vision is not described within the framework of a particular

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1. *Church*, 28:17

European philosophical tradition; rather, he presents it by means of images that are drawn both from the Bible and from perennial human experience, eating and drinking, dressing and undressing, birth and death, thus lending to his poetry a timeless character. Furthermore, the Syriac poetic medium through which Ephrem works has the added advantage of being completely free from the somewhat deadening literary conventions of the Greco-Latin rhetorical tradition of late antiquity, conventions that can often seem tiresome to the modern reader.”<sup>2</sup>

In his poetry St. Ephrem has taken an approach of enquiry to the spiritual reality. While western theologians are primarily interested in ascertaining historical truths, Mar Aprem does not show much such interest.

Both approaches are valid. Mar Aprem considers his search for spiritual reality brings out truth. Aprem’s approach operates solely on the starting point of faith.

About the exegetical treatment of the scriptures by Aprem, Dr. Brock evaluates:

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2. S. Brock, *op cit.*, pp 133-4



“Scripture possesses two levels of meaning, the outer historical meaning, and the inner spiritual meaning, ‘the hidden power’ as Ephrem sometimes calls it. These two co-exist as intimately as do the humanity and the divinity in the incarnate Christ. Ephrem’s belief in the presence of the ‘hidden power’ could be said to correspond to the traditional doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup>

About the poetic genius of Mar Aprem, Dr.

3. Brock comments:

“Coming from the time of the undivided Church, Ephrem belongs to the heritage of all Christian traditions. He speaks to unlearned and learned alike, to both lay and religious; and precisely because his thought and imagery are so deeply rooted in the Bible, his poetry is thereby enabled to participate in something of the perennial freshness of the biblical text itself, upon which it so often directly meditates.”<sup>4</sup>

From the Roman Catholic side, the Syriac scholar from England, Fr. Robert Murray

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3. Ibid, P. 134

4. Ibid, P. 145

describes Mar Aprem as “the greatest poet of the patristic age, and perhaps the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante”.

Persuing through the selections of Mar Aprem’s poetry, although in English translation, the readers can agree with the conclusion of Dr. Sebastian Brock, who is foremost not only in English speaking world, but also even in a homeland of syriac speaking Christianity, in paying the deserving attention to that theologian-poet who died more than sixteen centuries ago:

“St. Ephrem is not only a poet to be read, he is also one by whom one is continually rewarded each time one re-reads him: like the types and symbols upon which he rejoices to ponder, his own poems are vehicles of an immense wealth of spiritual insight, the variety of whose treasures never cease to give rise to astonishment in the reader who approaches them with sympathy.”<sup>5</sup>

When European theologians such as Barth, Bultman, Bonhoeffer, Cullman and others are often quoted by the Indian Syrian theological students one often wonders why St. Ephrem is not included among these.

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5. Ibid, P. 145

About the importance of hymns of Mar Aprem, Dr. Sebastine Brock writes,

“It is upon the hymns, collected together into separate cycles in the early fifth century, that Ephrem’s reputation as a theologian and poet primarily rests. Interestingly enough, many of them were specifically written for women’s choirs.”<sup>6</sup>

Concerning the contents of the hymns of Mar Aprem the same author states:

“The hymns, which are soaked in Scripture, cover a very wide range of topics. Particularly fine are a group of fifteen on Paradise (envisaged as a mountain); in these Ephrem explores the significance of the Genesis narrative and at the same time considers some of Paradise’s eschatological aspects.”<sup>7</sup>

Many hymns in Greek attributed to Aprem are not his. They must have been written by his admirers who wanted reputation for their works by attributing them to the greatest of poets known to them.

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. Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, p, 31

. *ibid.*



The main poems of Mar Aprem are the following

1. On Faith	87	hymns
2. On Nisibis	77	„
3. Against Heresies	56	„
4. On Virginity	52	„
5. On the Church	52	„
6. On the Nativity	28	„
7. On Unleavened Bread	21	„
8. On the Crucifixion	5	„
9. On the Resurrection	9	„
10. On Paradise	15	„
11. On the Fast	10	„
12. Armenian hymns	51	„

The first 412 hymns are preserved in its original Syriac. The last 51 hymns are preserved only in the Armenian language.

Apart from these 463 hymns there are six homilies on Faith and sixteen homilies on Nicomedia, all in verse attributed to Mar Aprem. But some of them are not likely to be genuine.

In the next pages we can have a look at one each of these twelve cycles of poems in English translation.

1. In the first section of 87 hymns on *Faith*, let us look at one example.

“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>8</sup>

2. Let us look at one example from the hymns *On Nisibis* which has a total of 77 hymns.

“The first-born wrapped Himself in a body  
as a veil to hide His glory.  
The immortal Bridegroom shines out in that robe:  
let the guests in their clothing resemble Him in His.

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8. Faith 16:6-7

let your bodies—which are your clothing—  
 shine out, for they bound in fetters  
 that man whose body was stained.  
 Lord, do you whiten my stains at Your  
 banquet with Your radiance,”<sup>9</sup>

3. Among the hymns “*Against Heresies*”, the following selection dealt with John the Baptist.

“John the betrother became aware  
 that the bride of his Lord was looking to  
 him  
 as if he—a mere servant—was himself that  
 Lord,  
 so he revealed that he was but the servant;  
 he showed his mortal nature,  
 he showed his humble role,  
 he showed her both the glory and his own  
 lowly estate,  
 when he told her that he was not even  
 worthy  
 to loosen the strap of the Bridegroom’s  
 sandal.  
 Blessed is He who instructed John thus to  
 teachher.”<sup>10</sup>

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9. Nisibis 43:21

10. Heresies 24:6



4. The hymns *on Virginity* are examples of the rich imagery which Mar Aprem uses in his poetry. A simple sample is cited below.

“Christ, though immortal by nature,  
 clothed Himself in a mortal body;  
 He was baptized (or He dived down) - and  
 raised up from the water  
 the treasure of salvation for the race of  
 Adam.”<sup>11</sup>

5. The cycle of 52 hymns *on the Church* is equally remarkable. The following sample taken from his 36th hymn on the Church shows how Aprem compares the river Jordan with the womb of Mary.

“The river in which Christ was baptized  
 conceived Him again symbolically;  
 the moist womb of the water  
 conceived Him in purity,  
 bore Him in chastity,  
 made Him go up in glory.

In the pure womb of the river  
 you should recognize Mary, the daughter  
 of man,

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11. Virginity 7:10

who conceived having known no man,  
 who gave birth without intercourse,  
 who brought up, through a gift,

As the Daystar in the river,  
 the Bright one in the tomb,  
 He shone forth on the mountain top  
 and gave brightness too in the womb;  
 He dazzled as He went up from the river,  
 gave illumination at His ascent.

The brightness which Moses put on  
 was wrapped on him from without,  
 whereas the river in which Christ was  
 baptized  
 was clothed in light from within;  
 so too did Mary's body, in which He  
 resided,  
 gleam from within."<sup>12</sup>

6. Among his 28 hymns on the Nativity, let us look at one section where Aprem connects the coal of fire like Isaiah to Anna the prophetess also.

“The prophetess Anna embraced Him  
 and put her mouth to His lips.

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12. Church 36:3-6

The Spirit rested on her lips, as on Isaiah's;  
his mouth was silent, but the Coal of Fire  
opened up his mouth by touching his lips.

Anna's mouth too became fervent with  
the Spirit (or breath) from His mouth  
And she sang to Him: 'O royal Son,  
O lowly Son,  
You listen in stillness, You see but are  
hidden,  
You know but are unknown;  
O God Man, praise to Your Name'." <sup>13</sup>

The hymns *on the unleavened bread* are  
twenty one. In the following example Christ is  
described as Second Adam and receiving holy  
Eucharist is a "must" for those of us who wish  
to meet Him in the clouds.

"Earthly creatures consumed the heavenly  
Manna  
- and they became dust on the earth,  
because of their sins.  
The spiritual Bread of the Eucharist  
Makes light and causes to fly:  
the Peoples have been wafted up  
and have settled in Paradise.



Through the Second Adam who entered  
Paradise

everyone has entered it,  
for through the First Adam who left it  
everyone left it.

By means of the Spiritual Bread  
everyone becomes  
an eagle who reaches  
as far as paradise.

Whoever eats the Living Bread of the son  
flies to meet Him in the very clouds."<sup>14</sup>

8. *On Crucifixion* there are only nine hymns. In the following example, Aprem's, choice of phrases reminds us of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins with the rejection of Israel, the betrothed Bride by Messiah the intended Bridegroom.

“The passover feast and Nisan, the two  
brothers,  
were joyful messengers of good tidings:  
they ran and proclaimed to the daughter:  
just as they had done earlier to her mother,  
‘Behold, the Bridegroom is at the door,  
come out to meet Him’.

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14. Unleavened Bread 17:8 – 12

She beheld Him, and He did not please her:  
 she was irritated because He was holy,  
 she trembled because He was the Saviour,  
 she was astonished because He was so  
 lowly.”<sup>15</sup>

9. There are just five hymns on the resurrection. In the third one we can see how Aprem depicts the betrothal of Israel on Mount Sinai

“Nisan the victorious month, which was  
 sent by the victorious one  
 was resplendent and victorious in Egypt,  
 delivering and escorting out the Royal  
 Bride.

It sprinkled the ground before her with  
 its abundance  
 filling it with flowers scattered everywhere  
 lightening served as torches that gave  
 illumination

while thunder roared its acclaim;  
 the mountains skipped before her.

Blessed is the Exalted One who escorted  
 the despised girl.

A chaste wedding feast took place in the  
 wilderness,

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15. Crucifixion 1:2

with the bridal chamber set on Mount  
 Sinai,  
 The Holy One descended and took in  
 betrothal  
 the daughter of Abraham His beloved  
 friend.”<sup>16</sup>

10. Among his hymns on the *Paradise*, the following portion deals with the tree of knowledge.

“Whoever has eaten of that fruit is granted  
 a perception  
 which either delights him or fills him with  
 abhorrence.  
 The serpent incited them to eat in sin, so  
 that they might sorrow:  
 although they had glimpsed the blessed  
 state, they could not partake of it.  
 Like that hero of old (Tantalus), whose  
 torment was doubled  
 because, although ravenous, he could not  
 taste the delights he beheld.”<sup>17</sup>

11. As an austere monk Aprem gave prominence to fast in his poems. He believed in the efficacy

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16. Resurrection 3:1—2

17. *Paradise* 3:1—2



of fast which sometimes modern believers choose to ignore. Let us look at the following poem.

“Assiduous fasts have stirred themselves  
to become companions to guide the Bride  
of the King  
so that she might be escorted and come  
to the wedding feast all in white,  
that she might be baptized there, and so  
shine out:  
her crowns will come her companions,  
her adornment will come from her fasts.  
She shall proceed amidst shouts of  
Hosanna,  
before her shall shine a lamp with endur-  
ing oil.  
Blessed is He who sent and escorted the  
Bride  
of His First-Born Son, so that she might  
come  
to the Bridal Chamber of His Light.”<sup>18</sup>

12. The hymns preserved in Armenian language are 51. The first one of these Armenian hymns deals with prayer. As we glance through this Poem on prayer we cannot but take note of the

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18. Faith 5:1

plethora of biblical examples. In the words of Sebastian Brock, this poem is “an enumeration of the biblical examples of the potency of prayer.” Since the space does not permit to reproduce the whole poem (eight stanzas) only the first three stanzas are cited as specimen.

1. “Open up the treasury door for us, Lord, at the prayers of our supplications; let our prayers serve as our ambassador, reconciling us with Your Divinity. Listen, all who are wise, pay attention, all who are learned acquire understanding and knowledge, seeing that you are instructed and wise; I will relate before you the accomplishments of holy prayer.
2. Prayer divided the Red Sea, allowing the people to cross through its midst; by the same prayer the sea was reunited once more, swallowing up Pharaoh, the rebellious and impious. Prayer brought down manna from heaven, prayer brought the quails from the sea, prayer struck the rock in the desert, causing water to gush forth for the thirsty.
3. Blessed is the person who has consented to become the close friend of faith and of prayer: he lives in singlemindedness and:

makes prayer and faith stop by with him. Prayer that rises up in someone's heart serves to open up for us the door of heaven: that person stands in converse with the Divinity and gives pleasure to the Son of God, Prayer makes peace with the Lord's anger and with the vehemence of his wrath, In this way too, tears that well up in the eyes can open the door of compassion."<sup>19</sup>

A hymn sung by our Church on all sundays except festivals while believers communicate was written by Mar Aprem. It is as follows:

Our Lord Jesus, the adorable King, Who by Thy passion didst conquer death the tyrant\*

Son of God who didst promise us new life in the kingdom on high\*

Cause all adversities to cease from us; and make Thy tranquillity and mercies to dwell in our country\*

That in the day of Thy shining forth we may live before Thee; and may go forth to meet Thee according to Thy will\*

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19. *Armenian Hymns* No. 1, stanzas 1—3.

Quoted from Sebastian Brock; *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, P. 36



With hosannas we will confess Thy name for  
Thy grace towards our race\*

For Thy mercies are multiplied towards our  
humanity and Thy love hath shined forth  
upon our mortality\*

Thou hast blotted out our debts through  
Thine absolution; Glory be to Thy name for  
Thy gift\*

Blessed be Thy glory in Thy place, who forgi-  
vest our debts because of Thy mercies\*

In Thy grace make us all worthy to confess  
and adore Thy divinity\*

And at every season let us lift up glory to  
Thy sovereignty Amen, Amen\*

The poetic genius of Mar Aprem lurks behind the wealth of his imagery. A few of the favourite images often used by him are the following:

1. *The divinity as fire.* Divinity is often described as fire. In his poem *Faith* 4:2 we read "Fire entered Mary's womb, put on a body and came forth." In *Faith* 10:8 Aprem sings: "the Spirit is in the Bread, the Fire in the Wine!" We

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20. The Liturgy of the Holy Apostles Adai and Mari. Trichur, 1967, P.58

also read, “the Fire of Mercies has become a living sacrifice for us!” Faith 10:13

“This divine Fire has a double aspect, for it can both sanctify and destroy:

Blessed are you, my brethren,  
for the Fire of Mercy has come down  
utterly devouring your sins  
and purifying and sanctifying your bodies  
(Epiphany 3:10)

## 2. *The Incarnation*

In one of his poems on Nativity Mar Aprem sings about the whole span of salvation history. Here he uses the imagery of ‘putting on’ and ‘taking off.’

All these changes did the Merciful One  
make;  
stripping off glory and putting on a body,  
for He had divised a way to re clothe  
Adam  
in that glory which Adam had stripped off.  
Christ was wrapped in swaddling clothes,  
corresponding to Adam’s leaves,

Christ put on clothes, instead of Adam's  
skin.

He baptized for Adam's death,  
He rose and raised up Adam in his glory.  
Blessed is He who descended, put Adam  
on and ascended  
(Nativity 23:13)

### 3. *Medicine of Life*

In many of the poems of Mar Aprem Christ is considered as a medicine of life that has descended from above.

Let Eve to-day rejoice in sheol  
for her daughter's Son  
has come down as the Medicine of Life  
to revive His mother's mother  
(Nativity 13:2)

It is above all Christ's hidden presence in the Eucharistic Bread and Cup that is for Mar Aprem the Medicine of Life;

The Grape of Mercy was pressed  
and gave the Medicine of Life to the  
peoples.  
(Virginity 31:3)



Our Lord baptized human kind with the  
 Holy Spirit,  
 He nourished it with the Medicine of Life.  
 (Nisibis 46:8)

Mar Aprem's poetry is a vehicle for his theological teachings. Most theologians in the Christian Church used prose for theological treatises. But Mar Aprem believe that by writing songs he could reach more people with his views. As Mar Aprem himself states, "It is not at the clothing of the words that one should gaze, but at the Power hidden in the words." (Church 28:17)

I shall conclude this study on a lighter note, As a writer of humour it is difficult for me to resist the temptation of ignoring the sense of humour evident in some of St. Ephrem's poems. A simple example is the final stanza of a poem on the Eucharist.

Look, Lord, my lap is now filled with the  
 crumbs from your table (Matthew 15:27),  
 there is no more room in the folds of my  
 garment,  
 so hold back your gift as I worship before  
 you;  
 keep it in Your treasure house in readiness  
 to give it us on another occasion."<sup>21</sup>

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21. Faith 10:22

## CHAPTER 5

### STUDIES ON APREM

It is astounding to realise that several articles have been written on Saint Aprem by scholars in European languages such as German, French and English. Though these articles are of interest to orientalists or Syriac scholars, many Christians are not still aware of the importance of Mar Aprem.

After the Ephrem-Hunayn Festival was conducted in Bagdad, Iraq on 4 to 7 February 1974 a book was published in Al-MaArif Press in Bagdad with papers read in that festival. The essay on the bibliography on Saint Ephrem prepared by Martiniano pellegrino Roncaglia appears in pp 229-277 of the volume. The important titles are reproduced below in order to give the readers some idea as to the extent of the importance given by scholars, although a few, to this great theologian poet of the fourth century..

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## CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

In 1920 Pope Benedict XV proclaimed Aprem a Doctor of the Church. Since Saint Aprem lived in the fourth century before the Christological controversies of the 5th century, he is acceptable to all the christian denominations, even to the churches which refuse to recognize the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D) or the Council of Chalcedon (451 A. D).

The Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Mar Ignatius Ephraem II Rahmani, published some articles on Saint Ephrem in the period 1904 to 1920. Some European scholars published articles in Latin, German, French and several other European languages.

The Syriac Symposium held in Goslar, Germany (1980), Groningen, Holland (1984), Louvain, Belgium (1988) had some papers on Mar Aprem. A portrait of Mar Aprem was included in one of the papers presented in Louvain Conference. A re-sketching of that



portrait was made in colour in Trichur and placed in the Mar Aprem Church, Nellikunnu on 8th February 1990 on the eve of the Memorial of the Syriac Malpans, Mar Aprem being the most luminous among those luminaries. This was done in connection with the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of this church in Trichur.

The first International Syriac Conference was held in St. Ephrem's Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam on 7 to 12 September 1987. Several papers were on Saint Ephrem. Fr. E.R. Hambye read a paper on "St. Ephrem and his prayers", Prof. Kathleen E. Mcvey's paper was on "St. Ephrem's understanding of Spiritual Progress : some points of comparison with Origen of Alexandria." The paper which Fr. Louis Sako from Iraq read was on "Ephrem's Teaching : A Source for Updating Catechism." Fr. Louis Sako, a Catholic Chaldean, states:

In my opinion, the great Work of Ephrem is admirably fitted to our oriental mentality because it is indeed a pure echo of the Gospel. Ofcourse, this patristical teaching needs to be developed and enriched with our own experience, problems and wishes instead of importing liturgical, theological and canonical models from abroad. This operation should be



done with openness to other ecclesial traditions. We must benefit from the experiences of Christians all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

He suggests several themes for updating Catechism such as : God, Jesus, Mary, Church, Man: good and evil, Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist

About the unity of God, Fr. Louis Sako argues :

To define the unity of God, Ephrem uses a technical expression "Had Itya" i.e. the Absolute Being, the Only One. Against the Gnostics he says: "Absolute Being is the Only One, Eternal and Unchangeable, who created everything from nothing (Haer 53/7)<sup>2</sup>

Jesus Christ is explained as a Perfect Being, never divided. The body of Jesus was real. This teaching is to safeguard the faith from the teachings of Docetists who taught that his body was only an appearance. Of course, Aprem did

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1. Louis Sako, "Ephraem's Teaching : A Source for updating Catechism," in *Harp*, Vol , I No. 2 & 3, July 1988, P. 65

2. *Ibid* P. 65

not use the technical terms of the Chalcedonian Christology.

The expression such as the Greek *Theotokos* (Bearer of God) or the Syriac *imme d' alaha* (mother of God) are not used by Aprem. Louis Sako states:

“We do not find in Ephrem’s writings the expression “Mother of God—Theotokos,” he uses rather the simple appellation “Jesus’s Mother” or “The Mother of Christ” which we find in the Gospel and which is appropriate to her contribution to the realisation of Salvation. However, Ephrem confirms that Mary’s child is Son of God. “Being virgin—she replies to the Magi—I gave birth to a child, who is Son of God. Thus go (back) and announce that”. (Nat10).<sup>3</sup>

From the collection of the hymns called “Hymns on Virginité”, there is a translation of a hymn made by Fr. Robert Murray, entitled “On the Birth of our Lord”, published in 1979 in *Sobornost*. Out of the 17 stanzas in the *Sobornost* the first stanza is reproduced below.

By your birth, O Christ/you brought  
creation to life,

3. Ibid, P. 67







plays on words and other ingenuities almost without limit.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the melody of the music, Fr. Robert Murray's remarks throw some light on the songs of Mar Aprem as they were sung in the 4th century.

The melody is named as 'I fear to utter praise'. The melodic rubrics in the manuscripts remind us that, as in the case of most ancient Greek lyric poetry, we possess only halves of the unified works of poetic and musical art on which the fame of a songwriter was based. The traditional hymn melodies used for hymns of St Ephrem by Syrian Christians of the various traditions include some (in melodic scales not far from some Jewish, Byzantine or even Gregorian modes) which may help us imagine what some of Ephrem's songs may have sounded like as he sang them to his harp, and the audience (led by the 'Daughters of the Covenant' or consecrated sisterhood) responded with the refrain.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt, an interest in Aprem is evinced in recent years among some scholars. With the increased availability of Aprem's teachings in English translation, his thinking is going to be influenced not only in updating catechism in Eastern Churches but also giving prominent place in teaching theology today in both East and West.

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5. Ibid, 39.

6. Ibid, P. 40

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**MAR APREM (306 - 373 A. D.)**