

HAIL, MOTHER OF CHRIST, BULWARK OF THE FAITHFUL!¹

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TREASURED MEMORIES of my having visited and prayed at Christian places of pilgrimage in Syria, and of having had the joy of celebrating Mass at the House of St Ananias in Damascus, have prompted this reflection. It is offered as a prayer for peace and as a symbolic gesture of our Australian solidarity with those ethnic minority groups and Christians suffering persecution and martyrdom from their being caught in the cross-fire of escalating political violence and bloodshed in Syria.²

Since the early 1960s, both the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Syriac Catholic Church have established communities in Melbourne and Sydney respectively. Earlier this year Australia was honoured by the visit of Mor Ignatius Youssif III Youman, Patriarch of the Syriac Catholic Church. This event heightened our consciousness of the plight of the Church in Syria; it has set in motion a national sense of urgency for our Orthodox and Catholic Churches to unite in calling upon the intercession of Mary on behalf of the Syrian people.

Such a concerted effort for union in prayer provides opportunity for recalling some of the theological contributions of St Ephraem and Jacob of Serug concerning the role of the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Refuge of the Afflicted, hear our prayer...

In calling upon Mary to hear and respond to our prayer in the present crisis, it is important to recognize the theological significance of ‘hearing’ in the biblical and early Syriac traditions. From Moses onwards the prophetic

imperative to *Hear O Israel!*... (Dt. 6:4-9) reverberates throughout the Old Testament. Having been heard, the Word of the Lord had to be ‘taken to heart’ by the people of Israel and passed on ‘by word’ to succeeding generations. St Paul’s motif that ‘faith comes by hearing’ (Rom. 10:10) in order to be ‘received’ in the heart by the grace of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:1-3), is essential for one’s dedication and ‘obedience’ to a Christian way of life (Rom 1:5; 16:25).³

The *Gospel of Luke* (ca. 62 A.D.), associated as it is with the early Christian community of Antioch, presents Mary as the exemplar of hearing and obeying the Word. We are mindful of how the Lukan account of the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus demonstrates the actual process of Mary’s ‘hearing’—of her profound perplexity at Gabriel’s greeting along with that extraordinary message that cut across all her normal reference points and evoked judicious questioning as to how a seemingly impossible virginal conception of a child could occur.

Assured by the angel that ‘*the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*’, Mary was empowered to give her unconditional *Fiat* to the implications of her decision to obey the Word of God (Lk 1:26-38). The nuance of ‘obeying’ as a response to ‘hearing’ is often overlooked in English translation when the derivation from the Latin, *ob audire*, is forgotten.⁴

Luke’s insight so evident in the Annunciation narrative is reiterated, when in acknowledging the blessedness of his mother, Jesus declared that for all who would follow him, true blessedness consists of both ‘hearing’ and

‘obeying’ the Word (Lk 11: 27-28).

As we will see below, Ephraem favoured the patristic metaphor suggestive of Mary’s conception of Jesus through her ear. The idea emerged in connection with typological parallels made between Eve’s deception from following the poisonous ‘word’ of the Serpent (Gen 3:1-7) and Mary’s fidelity in following the ‘word’ of the angel Gabriel. It has been argued (see note 2 above) that Patristic reflection in conjunction with St Paul’s ‘faith by hearing’ motif, extended an understanding of how the mystery of Mary’s experience of *conceptio per aurem* has, in some way, become paradigmatic for all Christians, insofar as the Word of God fruitfully ‘enters’ every believer by auricular means. Images of Mary’s ‘conception by ear’ became popular in the mediæval Annunciation art of the West; we think of works by Fra Angelico and Fra Lippi *et al.*

St Ephraem the Syrian, ‘Harp of the Spirit’

Little is known about Ephraem’s life. He was born *ca.* 306 A.D. in the region of Nisibis and died at Edessa on the 9th of June, 373 as a result of caring for victims of the plague. He was baptized as a young man and later, as an ordained deacon, served Bishop St James of Nisibis and some of his successors during sieges under the Persian King, Shapur II.

In recognition of his defense of truth against Arianism and for his theological and mythopoetic insight into the mysteries of the Incarnation, Ephraem was declared a Doctor of the Church by Benedict XV in 1920.

Of particular interest here is how we remember Ephraem for his ardent devotion to Mary so frequently expressed in his remarkable poem-hymns on Faith, on Mary and on the Nativity, the latter entitled by him as ‘lullabies’ to be sung by Mary to Jesus. It is thought that Ephraem may have founded a school at Nisibis to train choirs of women for the singing of his hymns.⁵

Ephraem’s astounding paradoxical depiction of the Virgin Mary who gave birth to the



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‘uncontainable’ Incarnate One gives cause for our continuous pondering:

Your mother is a cause for wonder: the Lord entered into her and became a servant; He who is the Word entered —and became silent within her; thunder entered her —and made no sound; there entered the Shepherd of all, and in her He became the Lamb, bleating as He comes forth.

Your mother’s womb has reversed the roles: the Establisher of all entered in His richness, but came forth poor: the Exalted one entered her, but came forth meek; the Splendrous one entered her, but came forth having put on a lowly hew.⁶

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 there came forth from her He who clothes all!⁷

Ephraem’s endearingly quaint way of representing Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus ‘through the womb of her ear’ so that, ‘of his

love He came down to renew the image of Adam grown old', inspires hope that she will indeed hear us and respond to our present cries for help. We too acclaim:

*Who will dare to speak to her son
as in prayer, to the hope of his mother
as God, to her beloved [child] and her
son
as man. In fear and love
it is right for Your mother to stand before
You.*⁸

In keeping with the patristic theology of Irenaeus and Tertullian, Ephraem interpreted Mary as the 'Second Eve' born from the side of the 'Second Adam' as he slept in death on the Cross; likewise, he contrasted her with the Virgin Mother-earth from which the first Adam was formed but was subsequently cursed for his sin (Gen 3:17-19):

*The virgin earth brought forth
Adam the head of the earth:
today the Virgin brought forth
Adam the head of heaven.*⁹

Ephraem clearly identified Mary's two-fold relationship to the Church—as the new 'Mother of all the living' and as 'type of the Church' who begets all into eternal life in the sacrament of Baptism. Concerning Ephraem's perception of the Mary-Church mystery, Murray comments aptly on how: 'She [Mary] is *in* it [the Church], the first of the redeemed; but also since the Church is Christ's body, Mary, the mother of Christ's individual body, is mystical mother of all Christ's members in the mystical Body.'¹⁰

We note that in Ephraem's time, Christ's birth and baptism in the Jordan were celebrated simultaneously on the Feast of Epiphany, and how theological parallelism was drawn between Christ's presence in his mother's womb and the 'womb' of the Jordan. Thus, Ephraem regarded the conception of Christ in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit as signifying her baptism:

The Light settled on Mary, as on an eye; it purified her mind, it cleansed her understanding, it washed her thought, it made her virginity shine.

The river in which Christ was baptized conceived him again symbolically, the damp womb of the water conceived him in purity, and bore him in holiness, made him rise up in glory. In the pure womb of the river you should recognize the daughter of man, who gave birth as a virgin, and who brought up, through a gift, the Lord of that gift (H. Eccles. 36, 2-4).¹¹

In typifying her as New Eve, Ephraem also appreciated how Mary was related to the sacrament of the Eucharist:

*The Church gave us the living bread
for that unleavened bread which Egypt
gave.*

*Mary gave us the bread of refreshment
for the bread of weariness which Eve
gave.*¹²

And again:

*There is fire and Spirit in Mary's womb,
there is fire and Spirit in the river in
which you were baptized.*

*Fire and Spirit in our own baptism,
in the bread and in the cup, fire and the
Holy Spirit.*

*In your bread is hidden the Spirit who is
not eaten;*

*in your wine dwells the Fire that cannot
be drunk.*

*The Spirit in your bread, the Fire in your
wine,
a remarkable miracle that our lips have
received.*¹³

We conclude this section of our reflection, by making our own this prayer of Ephraem calling upon Mary on behalf of those in need:

*Hail, song of the cherubs and angels'
praises.*

Hail, peace and joy of the human race...

Hail, bulwark of the faithful...

*Hail, reminder of Adam, hail, ransom of
Eve...*

*Hail, O chaste one, who have crushed the
serpent's head*

hurling him into the abyss.

Hail, refuge of the afflicted,

hail, ransom of the curse.

*Hail, O Mother of Christ, Son of the
Living God,
to whom shall be glory, honour,
adoration and praise
both now and for ever and every
where
And for ever, Amen.*¹⁴

Jacob of Serug, 'Flute of the Spirit'

Jacob of Serug (431–521 A.D.) was born at Curtam, a small village on the Euphrates River. As a three-year old he exhibited extraordinary piety. He probably studied at the school of Edessa, was ordained as a priest in his twenties and was consecrated as Bishop at age sixty-seven but died just two and a half years later. Like Ephraem, Jacob had a passionate love for the Mother of God, who had been officially declared *Theotókos* at the Council of Chalcedon, 451. Jacob of Serug is remembered as a prolific writer of prose expositions, numerous letters encouraging Christians during the war waged by Kavadh of Persia, for his hymns and for over 700 metrical homilies.

While reflection on the following excerpts chosen from his homilies on the Mother of God addresses themes already developed in the writings of Ephraem, they carried their own 'imprint' of Jacob's sublime appreciation of Mary's grace and calling within the divine *economia*. Each homily on Mary is prefaced with a fervent prayer to her Son.

The mystery of Mary expressed in the first Homily of Jacob of Serug sets the tone found in all his subsequent homilies that continue to extol her blessedness¹⁵:

*A wonderful discourse has now moved
me to speak;
you who are discerning, lovingly
incline the ear of the soul!*

*The story of Mary stirs in me, to show
itself in wonder;
you wisely prepare your minds! ...*

*Second heaven, in whose womb the Lord
of Heaven dwelt*

*and shone forth from her to expel
darkness from the lands.*

*Blessed of women, by whom the curse of
the land was eradicated,
and the sentence henceforth has
come to an end...*

*Daughter of poor ones, who became
mother of the Lord of Kings
and gave riches to a needy world that
it might live from Him!*

*Ship which bore treasure and blessings
from the house of the Father
and came and poured out riches on
the destitute earth!*

*Good field which, without seed, gave a
sheaf
and grew a great yield while being
unploughed.*

*Second Eve who generated Life among
mortals
and paid and rent asunder that bill of
Eve her mother...*

*Virgin who without marital union
marvelously became a mother,
a mother who remained without
change in her virginity...*

*Bride who conceived although the
bridegroom had never been seen by her
she gave birth to a baby without
coming to the place of his Father...*

The homily continues to marvel at the mystery of Mary. No words will ever succeed in exalting the 'image of the fair one' nor can they adequately recount her 'story' for the perfection of Mary's humility is indescribable. Even the sun itself fails to radiate the glory of Mary; no mixture of earth's pigments can capture her beauty.

Exceeding jubilation marks the moment when 'a pure virgin and a fiery Watcher (the angel Gabriel) spoke with wonder and conversed with argument until they abolished the conflict between the Lord and Adam'. Great

wonder accompanies the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Mary gracing her with purity, limpidity¹⁶ and blessedness. The image of the ‘sealed letter’ of Isaiah 29:11-12 elicits meditation on how Mary was ‘sent by the Father’:

*Mary appeared to us as a sealed letter
in which were the mysteries of the
Son and his depth.*

*She gave her body as a clean sheet;
the Word wrote his essence on it,
corporeally...*

*With her the Father sent us tidings full of
good things
and through her, forgiveness to all
condemned for their bonds of sin...*

*Because of her, the way to Eden which had
been blocked was opened...*

*Because of her, the Cherub had removed
his lance that he might no longer guard
the Tree of Life which offered itself to
those who ate it.¹⁷*

*She gave us a sweet fruit, full of life,
that we might eat from it and live
forever with God.*

Homily 1 concludes with an extended litany of praise and thanksgiving for Mary ‘the blessed one whose blessing is truly more sublime than the praises of the whole world’.

Homily V *On the Mother of God*, commemorates the death, burial and glorification of Mary. An opening prayer is addressed to the ‘Son, who in your love inclined heaven and descended to earth, [who] put on a body and became man from a daughter of David.’ It reminds Jesus of the joys and sorrows endured during Mary’s experiences of motherhood and it situates her history within the ‘Way of all generations’ leading to the death and burial of Jesus himself. In keeping with apocryphal tradition so beautifully enhanced with echoes from rabbinical mysticism and psalmody, Mary is laid to rest amid the swelling sounds of ‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’

*In heaven, the Watchers; in the depths,
man; in the air, glory:
when the Virgin Mary was buried as
one deceased.*

*Fiery seraphim surrounded the soul of
the departed
and raised the loud sound of their
joyful shouts.*

*They shouted and said: ‘Lift up, O gates,
all your heads,
because the Mother of the King seeks
to enter the bridal chamber of light.’*

As Mary is crowned, the homilist reminds us that Christ the King, crucified on Golgotha is the source of the mercy that we are calling upon her to request on our behalf.

As we have done earlier when considering Ephraem’s prayer for Mary’s intercession, we conclude by making our own, this prayer of Jacob of Serug with which he ended his discourse on the Mother of God:

*The name of Christ the King who was
crucified on Golgotha,
grants life and sheds forth mercy on
the one who invokes him.*

*And also on me a sinner who is not
capable of praising her,
the Mother of mercy, who brought
You forth in the flesh.*

*O Son of God, by her prayers make your
peace to dwell
in heaven, in the depths, and among
the counsels of her [people].*

*Make wars to cease and remove trials
and plagues;
bestow calm and tranquility and
calm on seafarers.*

*In your pity, drive out devils who harass
mankind.
and exalt your Church to the four
quarters of the globe,
that it may sing your praise...¹⁸*

Amen

NOTES

1. An Ephraem title for Mary; cf. reference 14 below
2. Prayerful thoughts are with Syria's ethnic religious minorities including Circassians, Kurds, Turks and Druze, Ishmailis, all Orthodox, Eastern and Latin Catholics.
3. Adam. G. Cooper, 'Faith Comes by Hearing: A Pauline Motif in Theological Tradition', http://catholic-dic.org/hk/AC_Faith_comes_by_Hearing.pdf
4. Latin, 'ob' an intensifier of 'audire', 'to hear'.
5. Cf. Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit (California: The Borgo Press, 1990)*, Introduction, 5-17 & to English translations of selected hymns. See also Kathleen E. McVey trans. *Ephrem the Syrian* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1989), 28-35, Luigi Gambero S.M., trans. Thomas Buffer, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 108-119 & Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 131-150. All English translations cited here are from these sources.
6. Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem, The Syrian. Re 'hew' & expression of the mystery of the union of Christ's divinity and humanity in terms of a painter's blending of pigments, Hymns on the Nativity (H. Nat) 8:22; 21:12.*
7. Sebastian Brock, *Harp of the Spirit* citing *H. Nat*, 11: 6-8, 34.
8. Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian* citing *H. Nat.*, 9, 125.
9. Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, citing *H. Nat*, 1: 16.
10. *Ibid.*, 144. Note that questions in the Church of the West concerning 'Original Sin' & the 'Immaculate Conception' of Mary did not pertain in the Syrian tradition.
11. Cited, Sebastian Brock cf. Mary Hansbury trans., *Jacob of Serug; On the Mother of God* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 145; *H. Faith* 6:17, 10:8.
13. Sebastian Brock, Introduction, *Jacob of Serug: On the Mother of God*, citing Ephraem, *H. Faith* 6: 17; 10:8.
14. Ephraem Syrus, cited *In Praise of Mary* (Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul's Publ., 1981), 28. Emphases mine.
15. Mary Hansbury trans. 'Homily concerning the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, Mary' in *Jacob of Serug: On the Mother of God*, 17-28.
16. 'Limpidity', *shafyuta*, indicates receptivity to revelation in early Syriac writers. Cf. Sebastian Brock, 'The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition', *Sobornost*, 4 (1982). 135-136.
17. 'Lance' in Syriac is the same as found in Jn 19:34 suggesting theological connections with the piercing of the side of Christ, the flow of blood and water and the sacraments of Baptism & Eucharist. Cf. Note 36, *Jacob of Serug, On the Mother of God*, 40.
18. Mary Hansbury trans., *Jacob of Serug*: 99, #719. Emphases mine.

After a two-hour meeting (21/11/13) with ten patriarchs of Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin-rite patriarch of Jerusalem, Pope Francis prayed for peace and religious freedom throughout the Middle East.

Referring to himself, he said the 'the Bishop of Rome will not be at peace as long as there are men and women—of any religion—harmed of their dignity, deprived of what is necessary for their survival, robbed of their future or forced to become refugees.' He added: 'Let us make an appeal so that the right of everyone to a dignified life and to freely profess their faith is respected.'

Pope Francis listened to the patriarch of Jerusalem and the Coptic, Syrian, Melkite, Maronite, Chaldean and Armenian patriarchs testify to the perseverance of their faithful in the Middle East where often they are small minorities 'in environments marked by hostility, conflict and even hidden persecution. At times, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and other areas of the Holy Land flow with tears...I will not resign myself to a Middle East without Christians'.

... (See CN Cath News 24/11/13)