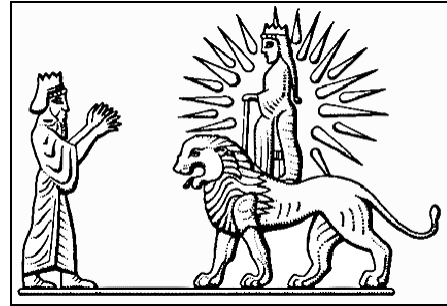


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“The Survivals of the Ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian Intellectual Traditions in the Writings of Ephrem Syrus”

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The Survivals of the Ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian Intellectual Traditions in the Writings of Ephrem Syrus

*Amar Annus, Tartu*¹

Two last decades have witnessed a major growth of interest in studies on Ephrem, the Syrian Church Father of the fourth century (303–373). Before that, the writings of Ephrem were mostly a business exclusively for Syriologists, and Ephrem's texts seldom reached to outside world, for example to the historians of comparative religion. It is true that the writings of Ephrem and other early Syrian Church fathers are of much potential interest to modern scholars of the Ancient Near Eastern religion and religious iconography. The Assyriologists or Ugaritologists, who study such important spiritual symbols as the Medicine of Life, the Tree of Life, the images of clothing, the motifs of divine descent and ascent, or the weather images such as thunder, rain and springs, may be surprised to find that in the writings of Ephrem all these symbols are wrought together into many theological systems and sub-systems, where one symbol may easily become a part of another. Accordingly, following Ephrem's thinking may cast light to the symbolic worlds of ancient Syria and Mesopotamia that pre-date Christianity in their essences, and have a new application in the Christian spiritual world. It is to say that some building blocks of Saint Ephrem's symbolic world can be demonstrated to have their origin in ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian "paganism".

The English translations of some of Ephrem's more important poetic works have become available thanks to the work done by K. McVey and S. Brock (McVey 1989; Brock 1990). Brock also wrote the general introduction to Ephrem's poetic world of symbols, a synthetic description of his world-view (1992). E. Mathews and J. Amar made about two-thirds of Ephrem's prose works available in English in 1994. In addition, now there are available some specialized monographic studies on Saint Ephrem, for example two recent books from Gorgias Press' *Dissertations* series, which discuss important aspects of his theological thinking (Buchan 2004; Shemunkasho 2004). T. Buchan's book is important in that it collects the evidence for theological images of Christ's descent to the Dead, and Shemunkasho's dissertation studies Christ's imagery as healer in Ephrem's writings.

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For the readers without much experience in Ephrem, Brock's book (1992) is the best to begin with; and the two Gorgias Dissertations mentioned go into details with specific aspects. It should be mentioned that Shemunkasho's book is a result of much more meticulous philological work than Buchan's, and the former can be seen as the definite treatment of corresponding issues. Buchan is industrious in gathering the evidence for his topic, but he presents it in a form fit for a chrestomatic course-book for undergraduates, illustrating the history of a Christian dogma. Such achievement is a little off the mark if we bear in mind that Christ's descent to the Dead is a very interesting subject both to the historians of religion and the historians of Christian doctrines. The rest of the present paper will discuss some images that Ephrem uses in his theological thinking in respect to their origin in the intellectual traditions of the Ancient Near East. The material is culled from those recent translations and studies in Ephrem which are mentioned above.

History of comparative research

The theological images Ephrem used did not come from a vacuum and are not new creations of the fourth-century Church Father's mind. Poetic images in the writings of early Syrian Christianity often reveal many traces of ancient Near Eastern spirituality, of either Syrian or Mesopotamian origin. R. Murray in his path-breaking study on the religious symbols of early Syrian Christianity, first published in 1975 (reprint: Murray 2006), occasionally refers to Mesopotamian antecedents. Murray rightly notes that Early Syriac literature is particularly rich in poetic and symbolic titles of Christ, "which often suggest a litany or responsorial form, as is in fact already found in ancient Sumerian and Akkadian hymns" (2006, 28). He also quoted concrete examples, for example comparing a passage in the *Acts of Thomas* 10 with a *Hymn to Enlil*, noting "an extraordinary continuity of feeling" between the two (Murray 2006, 160–61).

More recently, S. Parpola has convincingly put the *Hymn of the Pearl* into the context of Mesopotamian history of religions and mythology (Parpola 2001). He reviewed the numerous structural, thematic and functional parallels between the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the earlier Mesopotamian myths, which suggest that the former was rooted in the latter's tradition and inspired by it. Rather than being a literal rendering or adaptation of any single Mesopotamian myth, the *Hymn of the Pearl* is an amalgam of several interrelated myths making use of a religious theme common to all of them and picking up details from all of them (Parpola 2001, 190). As will be shown below, this is also the case with Ephrem's writings.

The epithets of God, Christ, Apostles and Church in the early Syrian Church writings are frequently derived from divine epithets of ancient Mesopotamia, sometimes the same Akkadian words are used in Syriac as loanwords. The comparison of Christ with the Sun in Ephrem is as common as in the Mesopotamian sources, where kings are compared to the sun. Ephrem was well aware that the

most ancient sun-worship was at home in Babylonia, as he says of the emperor in *Hymns against Julian* 4.11: “If, then, while honoring the sun, he determined to march (to Persia), it escaped his notice that it was worshipped especially there. If, moreover, the Chaldeans’ home is in Babylon, should he, a stranger, be exalted?” (McVey 1989, 253) In another place, *Hymns on Nativity* 27, Ephrem himself was capable of combining Christian belief with the imagery of Sol Invictus. The epithets of Christ as the Sun in Ephrem correspond in all aspects with those of Šamaš in Mesopotamian religion, especially that of “the Sun of justice” (*šemša dʒaddiqūā*, Tubach 1986, 92–93). The sun imagery that Ephrem used was of necessity from syncretic origins (see Tubach 1986, 83–107).

The common imagery of rulers as “shepherds” was shared by Mesopotamian writers and the Syrian Church fathers. The pastoral symbolism in Mesopotamia, which described both the deities and heroes as “shepherds” and the cities like Ur or Uruk as “sheepfolds”, were also used in Syrian Christian literature in regard to Christ, his apostles and their people (see Murray 2006, 187–88).

The title “Farmer” (Sumerian *engar*, Akkadian *ikkaru*) was the epithet of Mesopotamian gods, mostly of Ninurta and Enlil, and also of kings (see Annus 2002, 155–56). The same title occurs in the Christian writings in Syriac as the loan word *akkārā*, applied to Christ, the Apostles and bishops. In *Carmina Nisibena* 29.35, the church is the Farmer’s field, which cries to him: “My Farmer, plough my lands, and again and a third time, Lord!”; and in 33.3 Ephrem says: “The Farmer came down to earth for the sake of mankind that they might turn to wheat (from thorns)” (Murray 2006, 196–97). The epithet “Farmer” is not attested with Ugaritic Baal, but he had the same duty of moistening the furrows of the ploughland (KTU 1.6 iv 3–5, 14–16).

The apostles filling their missions are called sometimes “merchants” (*taggārā*), either seeking the pearl which is Christ, or trading with talents. The apostle Judas Thomas travelled with a merchant in the *Acts of Thomas*, the imagery of merchandise is important in the *Hymn of the Pearl* and in the Manichaean psalms, where Thomas himself is a “Merchant that finds gain in the land of India” (see Widengren 1946, 82–95). The “merchant” (Sumerian *dam-gar*, Akkadian *tamkāru*) was a title of the divine merchant Enlil, who deals in merchandise of souls and their merits, which will be subjected to scrutiny by the heavenly customs officers (Murray 2006, 174–75). The Sumerian canonical lamentation *Zibum Zibum* sings (lines 7–11):

“Enlil, the merchant of the Kiur, the lord whose scales . . . , the lord whose weights (are all) the sums, the lord to whose seat the city brings (its wares), at whose resting place (his) orders are made known, (arise!)” (Cohen 1988, I 366)

The title “mariner” is used of Christ by Ephrem in *Hymns on Virginité* 31.15: “Skilled Sailor Who has conquered the raging sea, Your glorious wood is a standard; it has become the rudder of life” (McVey 1989, 401). The Syriac word for ‘mariner’ is *mallāḥā*, which comes through Akkadian *malāḥu* from Sumerian *má-laḥ* “the one who pulls the ship”. In Babylonian mythology, *malāḥu* is

applied to the underworld gods and to Marduk, who conquered the sea monster Tiamat and is called Malah in the *Creation Epic* 7.76–7: “Sirsir they named secondly Malah, let it remain so, Tiamat is his vessel and he the boatman” (Murray 2006, 168).

A major title of Christ in all Syriac tradition is “physician”, shared with the Apostles and bishops, and its origins are easily traceable. The Syriac word *âsyâ* is inherited from Akkadian, in which it was a loan-word from Sumerian. Originally this word in Sumerian meant “the knower of water” (a-zu), and the Akkadian *asû* was an epithet of healing deities. “Physician” was Ephrem’s favourite title of all for Christ, describing him in his actual work of physical healing, and as healer and restorer of human nature, and as the conqueror of death. Ephrem says in *Carmina Nisibena* 34.9, that before Christ the whole world was sick and could not be perfectly healed of its illness. Christ the Physician saw and took pity, and healed us through his own body and blood, through the ‘Medicine of Life’, in 34.10 (Murray 2006, 199–200).

As the reviver of the dead, Christ himself is identified as the Medicine of Life, who entered Sheol and restored life to its dead, whereby the cold and dark womb of Sheol was loosed by the living fire (Buchan 2004, 157). The term Medicine of Life comes from ancient Mesopotamian religion, Syrian *samm hayyê* derives from *šammu ša balāṭi* in Akkadian (see Widengren 1946, 129–38). The term has a long history in Mesopotamia, being the object of the arduous quest of Gilgamesh. It is mentioned in the Assyrian letter SAA 10 166.2’, where the Assyrian king revives people by placing “the medicine of life in their nostrils” (see Parpola 1993). The title “Medicine of Life” in Syriac literature is related to Christ who is the Tree of Life. Besides Christ and the Tree of Life, it is used by Ephrem for Paradise’s fragrance and for other terms that represent and symbolize the Son of God (Shemunkasho 2004, 147). According to *Hymns on Faith* 5.16, the heavenly Fruit is the Medicine of Life for those who are faithful and possess good deeds, such as fasting, praying and being generous towards fellow human beings; otherwise the same Fruit can be the “poison of death” (*sm mwt*’; Shemunkasho 2004, 152). Christ as the source of physical and mental well-being resembles the ancient oriental king, or the god Ninurta, the patron of kingship. “Medicine of Life” as a royal epithet is clearly attested in an inscription of the Assyrian king Adad-Narari III, where the god Assur made the king’s “shepherdship pleasing like a medicine of life to the people of Assyria” (see Annus 2002, 139). This is conceptually very similar to what Ephrem wrote in the *Commentary on Genesis* 43:7–8: “This is the Church, which gives the absolution with the Medicine of Life, not only to kings but also to all the hosts that follow the kings.” (Murray 2006, 48)

The title “architect” is a shared title, in Syriac *Acts of Thomas* it is applied to the Creator, to Christ, and to Judas Thomas, and it is also used in Manichaean Psalms. The Syriac term *ardēklâ* or *ardēkal* derives from Akkadian *arad ekalli*, “slave of the palace”, which was in Neo-Babylonian times a special profession, carpenter and builder (Murray 2006, 223–24). Christ is both the architect and the

Tower that is built by contrast to the Tower of Babel. In *Commentary on Diatesaron* 14.2, Ephrem wrote that despite mankind's loss of every refuge and expedient, "the lifegiver gave them from himself a Tower which leads up to the heights, and a Tree whose fruit is Medicine of Life." The passage designates the Tower as Christ's gift and even as himself (Murray 2006, 223). In *Hymns on Nativity* 1.44, the Tower is evidently the Church: "The symbol of the tower that many built envisages One Who would come down and build upon the earth a Tower that goes up to heaven" (McVey 1989, 69). In the same collection of hymns 3.15, Ephrem juxtaposes the images of Christ as the Farmer and the Architect, who makes himself the Tower: "Blessed also is the Ploughman (*akkārâ*) Who Himself became the grain of wheat that was sown and the sheaf that was reaped. He is the Master Builder Who became a tower for our refuge." (McVey 1989, 86.)

The imagery of Tower, a name of Christ in Ephrem and Aphrahat most probably derives from the image of ziggurat in Mesopotamian religion. The image of ziggurat was also behind Ephrem's description of Paradise as the mountain with terraced levels, which he related to different states of life in the Church, in his *Hymns on Paradise* 2.10–11 (Murray 2006, 306–9). In *Hymns against Heresies* 55 Ephrem criticised Bardaisan, whose view of Paradise was even more Mesopotamian, because according to him, "on the top of the building" took place a sexual intercourse between the Father and Mother. This is comparable to data given by Herodotus that only the god-chosen women could spend the night with the deity on the top of the Babylonian ziggurat (see Annus 2006). In the hymn preserved in *Acts of Thomas* 6–7, the Church is depicted as a feminine being with hierarchic structure, on whose top dwells the King, and who is waiting for her Bridegroom to receive his glory. In ancient Mesopotamia, the ziggurat was also a feminine being and associated with goddesses (see Lapinkivi 2004, 146–47). In *Acts of Thomas* 6–7 one again finds the Syrian remnants of ziggurat imagery associated with that of sacred marriage (lines 1–10, 17–24, 30–38):

"My Church is the daughter of light; the splendour of kings is hers. Charming and winsome is her aspect, fair and adorned with every good work. Her garments are like unto flowers, the smell thereof is fragrant and pleasant. On her head dwelleth the King, and he feedeth those who dwell with him beneath. Truth is placed on her head, joy moves in her feet. ... Her neck is the lofty flight of steps, which the first architect did build. Her hands, both of them, proclaim the place of life; and her ten fingers have opened the gate of Heaven. Her bridal chamber is lighted up, and full of sweet odour of salvation. ... Her groomsmen surround her, all whom she hath invited; and her pure bridesmaids (go) before her, uttering praise. The living are in attendance upon her, and they look to their Bridegroom who shall come, and they shall shine with His glory, and shall be with Him in the kingdom which never passeth away." (Klijn 1962, 67–68.)

The images of beneficent thunder and rain

During my studies of recent publications on Ephrem, some parallels became evident between Ephrem's poetic images and Ugaritic myths. Especially Ephrem's treatment of Christ's battle with Death is comparable to the Ugaritic Baal cycle. In Ephrem, as in the Ugaritic Baal cycle, Death is a person acting against Christ, as Mot fights Baal correspondingly in the Ugaritic texts. Christ is very often called "(our) Lord" in Ephrem that is also the meaning of Ugaritic Baal's name, and the names for Death are derived from the common Semitic root, **mwt* both in Syriac and Ugaritic. The common source for both Ugaritic epic tales and Ephrem's poetic images lies in the oral traditions of the ancient Near Eastern, and more specifically in Syrian folklore. Religious folk beliefs and customs are of a conservative nature, and the same or similar concepts may reappear millennia later. A more detailed comparison can show where the ancient material is used and where there is a point of divergency that is dependent on a new application of the old material. In the following discussion, I will leave aside the philological problems of translation from Ugaritic and Syrian, concentrating on content alone, where it is clearly enough established.

The best issue to begin with is the image of beneficent thunder that is found in the writings of Ephrem. The voice of Christ or God in Ephrem is often identified with that of thunder and spring storms, like the voice of Baal in Ugaritic texts. In *Hymns on the Resurrection* 4.10, Ephrem sings: "In You, tranquil Nisan, the Most High thunders for our hearing. In Nisan again, the Lord of thunder softened his strength with his mercy and descended and dwelt in the womb of Mary" (Buchan 2004, 89). In those words we can hear echoes of the ancient spring festival in Nisan, when the Syrian thunder god Baal was celebrated as the head of the pantheon. In *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 7.3 Ephrem states: "And by the thunder of your Voice the flowers sprouted up, in the month of Nisan there was Nisan in Sheol." (Buchan 2004, 66) The voice of Baal is similarly heard during the spring storms in the Ugaritic texts, when Baal has received his palace from Ilu, and begins to dwell there (KTU 1.4 vii 28–35):

"Baal opened a rift in the clouds; his holy voice Baal gave forth; Baal repeated the is[sue of] his lips. At his h[oly] voice the earth quaked; at the issue of his [lips] the [mountains] were afraid; the hills of the ear[th] tottered." (Wyatt 1998, 109)

Also in the Akkadian lexica, Adad's voice is thunder (*rigim Adad*), he is giver of abundance and called with the epithet *Bēl*—"Lord" (Lambert 1985, 436). Ancient storm gods Baal or Adad were still worshipped in late antique Syrian cities as Bēl. As S. Dalley has pointed out, "the epithet Bel could be applied to various national gods or patron deities of major cities, but only to deities whose ancestry was Mesopotamian" (Dalley 1995, 145). The storm god had been for millennia the principal god of Syrian city-states, and his voice is still heard in Ephrem's descriptions.

In his *Hymns on the Resurrection* 2.3, Ephrem symbolically relates the Church's celebration of Christ's resurrection to images of thunder, lightning, and rain drawn from the experience of seasonal spring storms (Buchan 2004, 65). In the Ugaritic Baal cycle, Baal appoints his season of rains after El has granted permission for building his house (KTU 1.4 v 6–10): “For now Baal (can) send his rain in due season, send the season of driving showers; (can) Baal shout aloud in the clouds, shoot (his) lightning-bolts to the earth” (Pardee 1997, 260). After building his palace, Baal is in his full power. Similarly, in Ephrem's *Hymns on the Resurrection* 4.10, Christ descends and takes up residence in Mary's womb as the Lord of Thunder in Nisan (see Brock 1992, 111). In *Hymns on Nativity* 3.20, he descends as the Physician and the Medicine: “Blessed is the One Who dwelt in the womb, and in it He built a palace (*hykl*) in which to live, a temple (*nws*) in which to be, a garment in which to be radiant, and armor by which to conquer” (McVey 1989, 87–88). In *Hymns on Virginity* 24.11, Mary is called “castle (*byrt*) of the King” (McVey 1989, 368). The mythological complex of beneficent thunder building a palace inside Mary's womb is strikingly comparable to the building of Baal's palace in the Ugaritic cycle that is completed exactly in the beginning of the rainy season.

The rain “from our Lord” is an image Ephrem uses in *Homily to Our Lord* 22 and in *Letter to Publius* 11:

“Our Lord gave most of His assistance with persuasion rather than with admonition. Gentle showers soften the earth and thoroughly penetrate it, but a beating rain hardens and compresses the surface of the earth so that it will not be absorbed.” (Mathews/Amar 1994, 298)

“Then, as if from a deep sleep, the mercy of the Most High, poured out like pure rain, was sprinkled on our drowsiness and from our sleep we were roused and boldly took up this mirror (of our soul) to see our self (= soul) in it.” (Mathews/Amar 1994, 348)

It is perhaps a paradox, but not an unexpected one that Ephrem, who fought so ardently against paganism of his time, did not recognize some of his own poetical images as such. Sometimes he may have used pagan symbolism deliberately in order to battle against these traditions with its own weapons. J. Tubach explains: “Die Konkurrenzreligion wird, indem man ihre Terminologie übernimmt, in den Dienst der eigenen Religion gestellt und somit unschädlich gemacht” (1986, 104). This circumstance does not, naturally, make the fact of borrowing non-existent.

Ephrem also identified, by means of metaphoric language, the birth and resurrection of the Saviour. The difficult problem of Baal's death and resurrection in the Ugaritic myths is recently resolved by Mettinger (2001, 55–81), with whom I agree. Both the resurrection of Baal and that of Christ bring about an overflow and abundance to nature. The image of rain announcing the resurrection of Baal is used in the Ugaritic Baal cycle, in the dream of El (KTU 1.6 iii 2–7):

“And if Mighty [Baal] is alive, if the Prince, lord of [the earth], exists (again), in a dream of the Gracious One, the kindly god, in a vision of the Creator of creatures, the heavens will rain down oil, the wadis will run with honey” (Pardee 1997, 271).

In Ephrem, Christ’s death and resurrection are sometimes seen as conception and rebirth, and by play of paradox, the nativity and Easter are made interchangeable (*Hymns on Nativity* 4.31–33):

“In Kanun when seed hides in the earth, the Staff of Life sprang up from the womb. In Nisan when the seed springs up into the air, the Sheaf propagated itself in the earth. In Sheol Death mowed it down and consumed it, but the Medicine of Life hidden in it burst through” (McVey 1989, 92).

This passage can be read as the example of continuity of the “agrarian mysticism” in the ancient Near East. In some Babylonian mystical texts various deities, who in the mythological texts were conceived of as defeated and sent to the underworld, were equated with specific types of grain. The death of Dumuzi in these texts was not only understood as a metaphor for the death of vegetation, but it was extended to apply to the ripening of corn, when the grains fall from the husk, and the vanishing of the grains into the earth as seed (see Annus 2002, 155–56). It was a common intellectual tradition of the region—a passage in the Ugaritic Baal cycle describes Anat’s punishment of Mot fully in terms of grain processing: he is treated as corn, treshed, winnowed, burned, and ground without any direct positive purpose with regard to fertility (KTU 1.6. ii 30–37). Ephrem foretells a very similar fate to Death in *Nisibene Hymns* 65.6: “There is coming a reaping, O Death, that will leave thee bare” (Buchan 2004, 310). Dumuzi and Osiris, the Mesopotamian and Egyptian dying gods, were both identified with grain (see Livingstone 1986, 161–63; Mettinger 2001, 169–72).

Death of Dumuzi in Mesopotamia was soon followed by his resurrection, and this is referred to by mentions of his going down and coming up from the Netherworld in mythological explanatory works (Livingstone 1986, 164). Motu, who was treated by Anat as ripe corn, also returned to challenge Baal again (KTU 1.6.v). The death of the god identified with grain was described either in terms of grain processing or in terms of going down to earth, which is synonymous with Netherworld. In both cases the resurrection follows, as is the case in Ephrem also. In a prose work, *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Ephrem braids the complex agricultural image on the resurrection of Lazarus by Christ in John 11:34–35:

“His tears were like the rain, and Lazarus like a grain of wheat, and the tomb like the earth. He gave forth a cry like that of thunder, and death trembled at his voice. Lazarus burst forth like a grain of wheat. He came forth and adored his Lord who had raised him.” (Buchan 2004, 144)

Elsewhere, in *Hymns on Resurrection* 1.3, Christ is compared to “grain of wheat” and his resurrection to the sprouting of seeds lying dormant in the earth,

in conformity to John 12:24: “He poured forth dew and living rain upon Mary, the thirsty earth. Also like a grain of wheat he fell into Sheol, he ascended like a sheaf and new bread” (Buchan 2004, 66, 79).

Ephrem uses paradoxes of agricultural images quite in the same way as the ancient Mesopotamian scholars did. In *Homily on Our Lord* 9.1, he says of Christ: “You are the Living One whose killers became the sowers of your life: like a grain of wheat, they sowed it in the depths, so that it would sprout and raise up many with it.” (Mathews/Amar 1994, 284–85) In the mystical texts of Mesopotamian scholars, the gods defeated in the myths are sent to the earth as various types of grain, and one text once has the comment that the king representing Marduk in the ritual defeated the sea monster Tiamat “with his penis”. Here the metaphor of the male organ is that of a seeder plough, in the same time the instrument for killing. Comparably, the Ugaritic Mot is sown into the sea after his treatment as ripe corn by Anat (see Annus 2002, 155–56). The agricultural images of sowing and sprouting are used by both Ephrem and more ancient scholars to express the mysteries of life and death—if there were no “killers”, there would be no resurrection either. In Ephrem’s thinking, death becomes a salvific event, because it anticipates resurrection.

Oracles of the Thunder-God

By means of identifying the earth and Sheol with Mary’s womb, it was possible for Ephrem to enlarge the circle of his agricultural images. In doing so, Ephrem combines the language of fertility religion with prophetic language. Mary confesses to Christ in *Hymns on Nativity* 15.1:

“With You I shall begin, and I trust that with You I shall end. I shall open my mouth, and You fill my mouth (with the prophetic word). I am for You the earth and You are the farmer. Sow in me Your voice (*ql²*), You who are the sower of Himself in His mother’s womb” (McVey 1989, 145).

The sowing voice clearly derives from the imagery of the Syrian storm-god as the fertilizer and the giver of oracles. The Syrian storm-god is attested as a patron of ‘enthusiastic divination’ or prophecy already in the Old Babylonian archives of Mari. In the city of Mari, the name of the storm-god was Adad or Ḫaddu, whose epithet in Mesopotamian literature was “lord of oracles”. Besides being the god of thunder, Adad was also the god of oracles and extispicy. He was tightly associated with omen sciences probably because thunder, lightning and rain were interpreted from the earliest times as ominous phenomena. Adad was also the master of winds that could transport and bring along both good and bad influences (Schwemer 2001, 225–226).

The sound of thunder was carefully interpreted by the Babylonian priests as a sign from the storm-god, a prophetic word indicating future events. The “signs of Adad” were listed in the celestial omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil* on tablets 37–49. Among his “signs” were the shapes and sounds of clouds and lightning, also

earthquakes, storms and winds. The observation of stars was not systematically separated from that of the weather, and the two together sometimes formed a “sign” (Schwemer 2001, 690). The compendia which consisted of such kind of data and forecasts were later called *brontologia*. A fragment of one such compendium is found among the Qumran texts (4Q318), and several survive in Greek and Latin, and all these are composed in Babylonian style (see Greenfield and Sokoloff 1995).

It is only natural that the storm god himself is the best advisor in brontological research. In the Ugaritic Baal cycle, the storm god reports to Anat that only he is a competent interpreter of thunder. Probably here lies the local priestly etiology of this science in Ugarit (KTU 1.3 iii 26–32):

“I understand the thunder which the heavens do not know, a word unknown to men, and which the multitudes of the earth do not understand. Come, and I shall reveal it in the midst of my divine mountain, Saphon, in the sanctuary, on the mountain of my inheritance, in Paradise, on the height of victory.” (Wyatt 1998, 78, also 81)

In this Ugaritic passage we already find the concept of thunder as prophetic word of the storm-god that needs to be competently interpreted and understood as message. In Hellenistic times, under the continuing influence of Babylonian religious culture to Syria, the priests and sages capable of such arts were called by the technical term “Chaldeans”. Besides wandering diviners, the term denoted a local priestly caste involved with the cult of Bel. The huge monuments to Bel in the territories of Palmyra and Apamea indicate that the ‘Chaldeans’ perpetuated a venerable tradition firmly rooted in pre-Seleucid Babylon, and it is within this context that the inscription KLDY from Roman Palmyra should be read as ‘Chaldeans’ (Athanassiadi 1999, 154). The title of Apamean priests of Bel is not known, but their involvement with the intellectual life of the town is epigraphically attested. A caste of hereditary priests continued the Babylonian tradition of enthusiastic divination, through which the oracles of the Apamean Bel enjoyed high credence in the Roman Empire (see Cassius Dio 79.8.5–6), until the priest Julian the Theurgist produced a collection of *Chaldean Oracles*, a revelation in the theological idiom of the region and of the times and yet firmly rooted in the millennial Babylonian tradition (Athanassiadi 1999, 155). Proclus, the Neo-Platonist of 5th century, in his *Commentary to Plato’s Parmenides* 7, strongly associated the god Adad with “the voice of the true theologians”, by which he had the *Chaldean Oracles* in mind:

“There are many, saying a variety of other things, but they all try to direct the thought of the soul towards the One. The gods, knowing what concerns them, tend upwards towards the One by means of the One in themselves. And this precisely is their theological teaching: *through the voice of the true theologians* they have handed down to us this hint regarding the first principle. They call it by a name of their own, ‘Ad’, which is their word for ‘one’; so it is translated by people who know their lan-

guage. And they duplicate them in order to name the demiurgic intellect of the world, which they call ‘Adad, worthy of all praise.’ They do not say that it comes immediately next to the One, but only that it is comparable to the One by way of proportion: for as that intellect is to the intelligible, so the One is to the whole invisible world, and for that reason the latter is simply called ‘Ad,’ but the other which duplicates it is called ‘Adad’” (Talon 2001, 274).

Here we have an exegesis on the name of Adad, as meaning “one-one”, thus equating the ancient storm-god with the neo-Platonic Twice-Beyond (Greek *dis epekeina*), the creator of the intelligible world (Talon 2001, 274). The interesting fact is that *ad* does not mean “one” neither in Syriac nor in Greek, but it means “father” both in Sumerian and in sumerographically written Akkadian. The “Father” is also an appellation of the highest god in the *Chaldean Oracles*, thus the interpretation of *ad* as “one” derives from the notion of oneness of the Father.

The crucial piece of evidence linking the Apamean Bel with the *Chaldean Oracles* is found in the lines of a Greek inscription on an altar dedicated to the god by a certain Sextus in far away Vaison-la-Romaine (Vasio): “To the ruler of fortune Belus, Sextus dedicated an altar in remembrance of the Apamean oracles” (IG XIV 2482). Whether the dedicator of the inscription is Sextus Varius Marcellus of Apamea, the father of Elagabalus, or some soldier, it is extremely likely that the phrase “the *logia* at Apamea” refers to a collection of oracles which was to become universally known as the *Chaldean Oracles* (Athanasiasi 1999, 155).

It would not be right to claim that the Neo-Platonic school of Apamea and the collection of the *Chaldean Oracles* were still directly dependent on the ancient kind of divination that was practiced in Ugarit and Babylonia. It is rather the connection of the storm god’s traditional imagery with divination, omens and prophecy that is still recognizable in the prophecy schools of late antiquity. Thus, occasionally, the *Chaldean Oracles* speak of thunder and lightning-bolts as means for the transcendent Father to manifest himself, and to communicate his messages to the lower realms. For example, the fragment no. 35 says (Majercik 1989, 60–61):

“Indeed, the First Once Transcendent communicates the hebdomad to the gods themselves; but to others, it is communicated by him through participation: ‘For Implacable Thunders leap from him and the lightning-receiving womb of the shining ray of Hecate, who is generated from the Father. From him leap the girdling flower of fire and the powerful breath (situated) beyond the fiery poles.’”

The thunderbolts (*keranos*) and the lightning-bolts (*prēstēr*) of Paternal Intellect convey the messages and protect the world also in the *Chaldean Oracles*’ fragments nos. 34, 81, 82 (Majercik 1989, 61, 81). Sometimes the lightning-bolts are counted under the cosmic entities called “connectors”, which issue

from the Father and whose function is to harmonize and protect various parts of the Universe (Majercik 1989, 10, 173).

The thunder oracle is quite often found in religious texts of late antiquity. Among the Nag Hammadi writings there is a text *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, where a female speaker, “the Thunder” (*he Brontē*), is a saviour, a manifestation of wisdom, who makes “I am” statements in cryptic language (Stroumsa 2005, 46–48). The text probably represents the gnostic salvation myth of the descent and ascent of the feminine soul, and the female Thunder is probably a deliberate blending of many important female figures and goddesses—Isis, Eve, Ishtar, and Wisdom. The role played by the image of thunder in these texts derives from traditional imagery of the thunder gods in the Ancient Near East. Another Egyptian text that can be mentioned in this context is Shenoute’s sermon “The Lord Thundered” from the fifth century AD.

The revelation disclosed by thunder is also present in the New Testament *Book of Revelation* 6.1 and 10.3–4. The last passage refers to unwritten, but sealed words of divine origin, an oral revelation of divine secrets (Stroumsa 2005, 49):

“And when (the mighty angel) had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices. And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not.’”

The “seven thunders” are comparable to Baal’s “seven divine assistants”, who are mentioned in the context of his clouds, winds, lightnings and rains (KTU 1.5.v 6–8). In Mark 3:16–17, some of Jesus apostles are called “the sons of thunder”, *hyioi brontēs*. The voice of thunder in Patristic literature is sometimes specifically related to esoteric teachings. According to Origen, thunder reveals secret teachings, directly from heaven, which should not be committed to writing (*Contra Celsum* 6.6). Eusebius understood thunder as a veiled reference to the evangelical *kerygma*, since Christ’s messengers were called “sons of thunder” (*In Psalmos* 76.18). Some church fathers thought that the seven thunders were the thunders of the seven planetary spheres (Stroumsa 2005, 50). A similar idea is found in the *Chaldean Oracles*, fragment 34, where “the hollows of the worlds” refers to the planetary spheres (Majercik 1989, 60–61):

“Thus, the *Oracles* also call this very great god ‘Source of Sources,’ and say that he alone generated the All: ‘From there, the birth of variegated matter leaps forth. From there, a lightning-bolt, sweeping along, obscures the flower of fire as it leaps into the hollows of the worlds. For from there, all things begin to extend wonderful rays down below.’”

Greediness of Death

As the Ugaritic Mot, Death in Ephrem’s images is regarded as greedy, ravenous, hungry (*kpn*), and gluttonous (*ggrtn*), he is an “eater of humanity”, a “devourer”

and “swallower” (*bl*ˁ) who feeds on mortal fruit (see Buchan 2004, 57). Personifying metaphor is also used for Sheol, who is feminine and also described in images of hungriness—she is “hungry”, “all-consuming” (*bl*ˁ *t kl*), “eater”, “devourer” (*blw*ˁ), “a pit that swallows and closes on all movements”. Sheol is referred to as the stomach of personified Death, within Sheol he reigns as “the king of silence”, in Sheol is his throne, his stronghold, his den (Buchan 2004, 57). Death is more an “eater” (*ˁkl*), Sheol more a “devourer” (*bl*ˁ), as Shemunkasho points out (2004, 107).

The Ugaritic Baal is killed according to the text KTU 1.12 by two monsters during a hunt, who are denoted as “eaters” and “rippers/devourers” (I 25ff.), which strikingly recalls the Adonis myth (Mettinger 2001, 68). Mot does not figure in this fragment, but his hungriness is also a commonplace in the Ugaritic Baal cycle. When Baal sends his couriers to Mot, he warns them (KTU 1.4 viii 15–20):

“But be careful, couriers of the gods: Don’t get near Mot, son of El, lest he take you as (he would) a lamb in his mouth, lest you be destroyed as (would be) a kid in his crushing jaws” (Pardee 1997, 264).

Mot himself explains to Anat why he swallowed Baal (KTU 1.6. ii 15–19):

“I went out myself, and searched every mountain in the midst of the earth, every hill in the midst of the steppe. My appetite felt the want of human beings, my appetite the multitudes of the earth” (Wyatt 1998, 134).

In Ephrem’s *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* 15, 5–6, Death swallows Christ, but later the Living One escapes, as in the Baal cycle:

“Gluttonous Death swallowed Him because He willed it. He swallowed Him then He escaped because He willed it. He hid His Life so that Death found Him (as) one dead that he might swallow the Living One.” (Buchan 2004, 161)

Mot’s gluttonous nature is most explicitly expressed in his address to Baal in KTU 1.5 i 15–25, where he admonishes his adversary for not having summoned him to Baal’s inauguration party:

“My appetite is the appetite of the lion in the wasteland, as the desire of the shark is in the sea; as wild bulls yearn for pools, or the hind longs for the spring. Look, in truth does my throat devour clay, and with both my hands I devour them. My seven portions are on the plate, and Nahar has mixed my cup. For Baal did not invite me with my brothers, (nor) did Hadd summon me with my kinsmen, but he ate food with my brothers, and drank wine with my kinsmen!” (Wyatt 1998, 116–19)

Ephrem has a similar description, how his gluttonous Death and Sheol learned how to fast because of the happenings in Cana’s wedding, in *Carmina Nisibena* 35.6. While the Saviour is having the party, Death is left empty-handed:

“Gluttonous Death lamented and said, ‘I have learned fasting which I used not to know. Behold! Jesus gathers multitudes, but to me in his feast a fast is proclaimed to me. One man has closed my mouth which closed the mouths of many.’ Sheol said, ‘I will restrain my greed; hunger therefore is mine. Behold! He triumphed at the marriage. As he changed the water into wine (John 2:9) so he changes the vesture of the dead into life.’” (Buchan 2004, 141, 176–77)

The battle against Death as conflict myth

As Buchan observes (2004, 174), Ephrem often describes the effect of Christ’s death and descent to Sheol as victory over four enemies of humanity: Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death. These four are variously related to one another, Satan is masculine and Sin is feminine, and they constitute one particularly synergetic and symbiotic pair, another such pair is Death and Sheol (fem.). It is evident that these two pairs are constructed on the basis of ancient pairs of the Netherworld deities, such as Nergal and Ereškigal in the Mesopotamian pantheon. All four in Ephrem are portrayed as the enemies of humanity who are defeated by Christ. This again makes the connection to Near Eastern deities who battle against the forces of chaos and the enemies of civilization in the conflict myths, such as Baal, Ninurta or Marduk. In Early Syriac literature, Christ and the apostles are frequently described as military figures. The military figure occurs in the title of “general” (*rab ḥaylā*), which the *Acts of Thomas* 39 applies to Christ side-by-side with the term ‘Athlete’, one of the oldest loan-words from Greek in Syriac. Christ and the apostles are called “leaders”, “rulers”, “generals”, and “mighty men of war” (see Murray 2006, 192–93). These Syriac divine titles coincide with ancient Babylonian usage, where such divine titles are most frequently applied to the god Ninurta and to the king as the personification of Ninurta. The corresponding Babylonian epithets are *qarrādu*, ‘hero’ (Sumerian *ur-saĝ*) and *ašarēdu*, ‘foremost one, champion’ (Murray 2006, 193). The passage most resembling a Ninurta epic in Syrian Christian literature is in the Cyrillona’s memra *On the Crucifixion*, where it is said of Christ:

“Our Lord arose like a Warrior, he trampled his place like a Champion. He gathered him fruit as a Labourer, he prayed to his Father as Heir. He looked into heaven as its Creator; he opened the treasures as a Ruler. His person shone like the sun and his limbs became like rays.” (lines 291–306)

Compare the Sumerian Ninurta epic *Lugal-e*, lines 1–16, according to the translation of the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL):

“O king, storm of majestic splendour, peerless Ninurta, possessing superior strength; who pillages the mountains all alone; deluge, indefatigable serpent hurling yourself at the rebel land, hero striding formidably into battle; lord whose powerful arm is fit to bear the mace, reaping like bar-

ley the necks of the insubordinate; Ninurta, king, son in whose strength his father rejoices; hero whose awesomeness covers the mountains like a south storm ... Ninurta, king, whom Enlil has exalted above himself; hero, great battle-net flung over the foe; Ninurta, with the awesomeness of your shadow extending over the Land; releasing fury on the rebel lands, overwhelming their assemblies! Ninurta, king, son who has forced homage to his father far and wide!"

In Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* 82.10, Death is once symbolized by the snake Leviathan, the common sea-monster against whom Baal and Marduk battled:

"In symbol and truth Leviathan is trodden down by mortals: the baptized, like divers, strip and put on oil, as a symbol of Christ they snatched you and came up: stripped, they seized the soul from its embittered mouth."
(Buchan 2004, 245)

The ancient Babylonian myths which tell the stories of god's battle against the forces of chaos, such as the *Creation Epic* or the *Anzu Myth*, have their application in the ideology of kingship (see Annus 2002). It is important to observe that Ephrem's Jesus as the vanquisher of Death and other rebels is often called "the King". For example, in *Homily on our Lord* 25.1:

"The King of heaven armed Himself with the weapon of humility and conquered an obstinate man, eliciting a good response from him as proof" (Mathews/Amar 1994, 300).

In Ephrem's *Letter to Publius* 8, Christ is called "King of kings" (Mathews/Amar 1994, 346), and in *Carmina Nisibena* 36.18, the King is the Conqueror:

"Our Living King has gone forth and gone up out of Sheol as Conqueror. Woe he has doubled to them that are of the left hand. To evil spirits and demons He is sorrow, to Satan and Death He is pain, to Sin and Sheol mourning. Joy to them that are of the right hand has come today. On this great day, therefore, great glory let us give to him who died and is alive that unto all he may give life and resurrection." (Buchan 2004, 180, 309)

Death as conquered enemy of humanity is also a penitent servant of the Lord, who vows allegiance to "Jesus King" or alternatively to "Son of the King". Note that the speaker in *Hymn of the Pearl* also identifies himself as "son of the King of Kings, the great king of the East" (Parpola 2001, 181–82). The repentance of Death signals a parting of the ways between Satan and Death, since the first remains impenitent and rebellious against God, and Death's pride is humbled by the realization of his limitations (Buchan 2004, 182–83). Death sought to make sense of what occurred in Christ's descent to Sheol, and finally remarked in *Nisibene Hymns* 37.3: "... it is a vain shadow that I thought I am a king. I knew not it was but a deposit I was keeping" (Buchan 2004, 253). Baal also suspected that Mot held himself to be king (KTU 1.4 vii 47–52):

“Mot may mutter to himself, the Beloved may scheme in his heart; (but) I alone it is who will rule over the gods, who will fill gods and men, who will satisfy the multitudes of earth!” (Wyatt 1998, 111.)

In the Baal cycle, it is Mot himself who is finally the official announcer of Baal’s rule and throne (see KTU 1.6.vi 34–35). Death announces rule to Christ in *Nisibene Hymns* 36.17:

“O Jesus King, ... Go thou up, therefore, and reign over all, and when I shall hear thy trumpet, I with mine own hand will lead forth the dead at thy coming” (Buchan 2004, 182).

Among the many contest poems that Ephrem wrote was also a lengthy disputation between Death and Satan, in *Nisibene Hymns* 52–59. This literary genre is first attested in Sumerian and Akkadian literature whence it is taken over by Syrians (see Murray 2006, 338–40). In addition, Ephrem used the ancient literary genre of *Chaoskampf* tradition, which narratives had functional relationship with the rituals of kingship (see Wyatt 2005). Ephrem only ascribes the role of the King in these narratives to Christ. For example, Ephrem depicts Death as the vanquished foe, who complains (*Carmina Nisibena* 39.6):

“The cross causes me to fear more exceedingly which has rent open the graves of Sheol. The crucified whom on it I slew, now by him am I slain. Not very great is his reproach who is overcome by a warrior in arms. Worse to me is my reproach than my torment that by a crucified man my strength has been overcome.” (Buchan 2004, 181)

The cross by which Christ slew Death was also identified with the Tree of Life. In later Syrian literature this connection is even stronger—the 7th century *Soghita on the Finding of the Cross* tells the story of discovery (lines 25,33–34):

“From the ground there wafted of a sudden the scent of sweet incense, and the Cross revealed its power, whereupon the People and the Peoples received strength. ... Tidings of the discovery flew to the four corners of creation; kings did obeisance in its honour, honouring it with praise and glory. Fitting was the praise at its manifestation, as it came up from out of the ground; and through the nails fixed in it the Evil One’s bitterness, too, was dissipated” (Brock 1999, XI 67–68).

The symbolism of the Tree of Life is expectedly complex in Ephrem. On the one hand, Jesus was the plant that sprouted from the earth as a flower and grew into the Tree of Life of cosmic proportions. Jesus himself is the Tree of Life, and his cross is akin to it, “the son of its stock” (Buchan 2004, 66–67). On the other hand, the Tree of Life in Genesis 3:6ff. is symbolically compared to the cross, where Christ died: “And just as one tree was the cause of death, so another Tree was the cause of life. For by one Death conquered; by one Life triumphed” (*Hymns on the Church* 49.8; Buchan 2004, 110). Finally, the cross is the weapon by which Christ is killed and by which he kills Death: “With the very weapon that Death had used to kill Him, He gained the victory over Death”

(*Homily on our Lord* 3.1) with the following explanation: “Death killed natural life, but supernatural Life killed Death” (Mathews/Amar 1994, 278).

The chain of symbolic associations of these three “trees”—the Tree of Life, the Cross, and the Weapon used to kill Death in Ephrem’s thinking may be an ancient one. The tree imagery in Ancient Near Eastern iconography had considerable variation, and among the depictions is also the famous Baal stele from Ugarit, where the storm-god holds in his hands two weapons, among them a trimmed tree or branch. It is an iconographical variant of the Syrian storm god, who usually holds in the same hand the forked lightning or tree as a weapon (Lambert 1985, 441). According to texts, Baal smites his enemies with the cedar tree in his right hand (see Wyatt 1998, 111). In *Hymns on the Crucifixion* 9.2, Ephrem says explicitly that Christ used wood of the cross to slay Death:

“Happy are you, living wood of the cross, for you proved to be a hidden sword to Death; for with that sword which smote Him the Son slew Death, when He Himself was struck by it” (Brock 1992, 81).

Descent to the Dead and clothing metaphors

Finally, the myth of Christ’s descent to the Dead and his victorious ascent shows remarkable affinities with the ancient Mesopotamian circle of myths concerning Ishtar and Dumuzi. The entire salvation history in Ephrem and other early Syrian church fathers is very often depicted in clothing symbolism. The clothing metaphors are often combined with descent and ascent motifs, which makes very probable that the myth of the Mesopotamian Goddess’ descent to the Netherworld made much impact on the theology of the Syrian church. The theologoumenon of Christ’s incarnation and his descent to the dead combines in itself ancient descent myth and conflict myth. Both are implicitly associated already in the Sumerian myths, where the word *kur* can both mean the dark realm of Netherworld, where the goddess descends, and the realm of monsters fought against by the heroes of conflict myths. The Sumerian-Akkadian myth of *Ishtar’s descent to the Netherworld*, where the goddess puts on the seven items of clothing before her journey, is remarkably similar to Ephrem’s description of Christ’s incarnation, for example in *Hymns on the Nativity* 21.5:

“But let us sing the birth of the First-born—how Divinity in the womb wove herself a garment. She put it on and emerged in birth; in death she stripped it off again. Once she stripped it off; twice she put it on. When the left hand snatched it, she wrested it from her, and she placed it on the right hand” (McVey 1989, 174).

The feminine pronoun in Ephrem’s text refers to “Divinity”, grammatically feminine in Syriac. Divinity’s putting on and off the body as a garment refers to the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ (McVey 1989, 174). The symbolism of clothing is very rich in Ephrem’s theology, and it clearly derives from more ancient speculations of the Mesopotamian scholars and poets. On each of

the seven gates of the Netherworld, the Mesopotamian goddess is stripped of her ornaments, equated with the seven divine powers in the Sumerian version, from top to bottom. When she arrives at her sister Ereškigal's throne, she is completely naked and dead. After Ishtar has spent three days in the Netherworld, her minister goes to her father Enki, who creates the two helpers, who might sneak into the Netherworld and make the goddess alive by sprinkling the life-giving plant and water over her. In her ascent, the goddess is given back her clothing, thus making her complete and able to return to heaven (see Lapinkivi 2004, 189–190).

In Ephrem's understanding, Christ in his clothing of mortality entered Sheol as the conquered and pallid corpse, did not engage in any combat, but finally broke the gate of Sheol upon his exit (Buchan 2004, 152). Breaking the Netherworld's gate is the motif that appears both in Syrian sources (see Murray 2006, 234–36) and in the myth of *Ishtar's Descent*. The goddess says to the gatekeeper the following words before her entry (ll. 12–20):

“Here gatekeeper, open your gate for me, open your gate for me to come in! If you do not open the gate for me to come in, I shall smash the door and shatter the bolt, I shall smash the doorpost and overturn the doors, I shall raise up the dead and they shall eat the living: the dead shall outnumber the living!” (Dalley 1998, 155)

The death of the goddess in the Mesopotamian myth anticipated her resurrection, as was also the case with Ugaritic Baal. Ephrem combined in Christ's descent two ancient themes—descent and defeat of the hero(ine) with his/her ultimate ascent and victory over the enemy. In the following passage from *Nisibene Hymns* 39.21, Sheol becomes scared upon Christ's visit like Ereshkigal in the Mesopotamian myth, whose face loses complexion upon hearing the news of her sister's visit:

“But Sheol when her graves were rent, what saw she in Jesus? Instead of splendour He put on the paleness of the dead and made her tremble. And if His paleness when slain slew her, how shall she be able to endure when He comes to raise the dead in His Glory?” (Buchan 2004, 307)

In *Hymns on Virginity* 12.30, Christ “fell in the contest with death to conquer Satan and Death” (McVey 1989, 315), but his utter abasement was the source of his ascent. In Buchan's words:

“Christ's descent to Sheol ... is the center of the center of the mystery of redemption, the point of convergence where the downward movement of the Divine identification with humanity is carried to its most profound abasement and, rebounding against its uttermost limit, is transformed into the upward movement of the Divine regeneration of humanity” (2004, 126).

As in Mesopotamian mythology, the word “earth” can mean both “our world” and the “Netherworld”. There is no big difference between “our world” without

Divinity and the Netherworld, it is only the Descent of the Divinity that brings life into it. In Ephrem's theology, mankind after Adam's fall is lost and perished, it is prisoner on earth, a captive in confinement. Earth is the place of suffocation and humanity is drowned in it. Earth is also "the house of darkness" (*byt hšwk*²), and gloom, darkness and night have taken power over it (She-munkasho 2004, 299). It is the work of Dragon and Satan, and can only be healed by salvation brought by Christ, "who killed Death by his dying" according to *Hymns on Nativity* 3.18 (McVey 1989, 87). There is a perfect correspondence with Mesopotamian depictions of the Netherworld, where its inhabitants are deprived of light, they eat dust and clay, and the Netherworld mistress imposes upon the fallen goddess sixty diseases.

According to the myth of *Ishtar's descent*, the drawback of the goddess' release from the Netherworld is that she must give someone as her substitute, and she proceeds to Dumuzi. She gives him as her substitute but regrets his fate and begins to weep. Finally she allows his sister Geshtinanna to release him by taking his place after six months. In the corresponding episode of the Ugaritic Baal cycle, the goddess Anat weeps for Baal, buries him and places him down amongst the gods of the underworld (Pardee 1997, 268). All this is in preparation of Baal's blissful resurrection that brings life back to nature. In *Homily on Our Lord* 3.3, Ephrem offers an allegorical depiction of Christ's death and resurrection as the Medicine of Life. The description can be equally applicable to Ugaritic Baal cycle:

"So the Medicine of Life flew down from above and joined himself to that mortal fruit, the body. And when death came as usual to feed, life swallowed death instead. This is the food that hungered to eat the one who eats it. Therefore, death vomited up the many lives which it had greedily swallowed because of a single fruit which it had ravenously swallowed. The hunger that drove it after one was the undoing of the voraciousness that had driven it after many. Death succeeded in eating the one (fruit), but it quickly vomited out the many. As the one (fruit) was dying on the cross, many of the buried came forth from Sheol at (the sound of) His voice." (Mathews/Amar 1994, 279)

It is thus the descent and death of the goddess or god and his/her following resurrection that brings life to earth, without such an intervention "our world" would be in status equal to the Netherworld. Ephrem also uses the symbolism of stripping off the clothing in speaking of the Saviour's death, and the imagery in *Hymns on Virginity* 30.12 is remarkably similar to Mesopotamian myths:

"The result of Your death is full of life. You released the captives of Your captivity. Your body You stripped off, my Lord, and, as you lost it, among the dead You descended and sought it. Death was amazed at You in Sheol, that You sought Your garment and found (it). O Wise One Who lost what was found in order to find the lost" (McVey 1989, 397).

Another aspect of the fallen humanity and descending divinity both in Mesopotamia and Syria was the soul, also feminine in gender. In *Hymns on the Nativity* 22.33, Ephrem depicts the state of mankind before the Saviour's birth as "the soul that had been captured in the depth", which after the incarnation "flew out to the height" (McVey 1989, 184). The redemption of the fallen soul had wide currency in Gnostic texts, where the heavenly liberator was sent to the world to reveal the esoteric knowledge. Thus in the Naassene Hymn, preserved by Hippolytus (5.10.2), Jesus asked his Father to send him to earth in order to save the Soul, who is unable by herself to escape 'the bitter Chaos' (Stroumsa 2005, 57). The role of Jesus in this hymn corresponds exactly to that of Dumuzi or Tammuz in the Mesopotamian myth of goddess' descent.

In Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity* 37.5–6 quoted below, there appears a thankful feminine Soul, whose stained garment was wiped clean by Christ. The soul's garment and the redemptory role of Christ are certainly reminiscences of the Mesopotamian myth of Goddess' descent, where Dumuzi and the Goddess replace each other in the Netherworld. In addition, Ephrem also uses here the motif of the Saviour being consumed by Death, which is attested in the Ugritic Baal cycle:

"Instead of our body You gave Your body to that Death that consumed us but was not sated. By You alone it was sated and burst. Let the soul (fem.) thank You—that filthy thing that You wiped clean of the stains and debts she incurred by her freedom. For her whose will wove her a stained garment, the Merciful One wove a garment of light, and he clothed her" (McVey 1989, 425–26).

The whole salvation history was covered in clothing metaphors, as described by the early Syrian Christian writers. It consists of four main scenes, which are rarely presented together, but there is no doubt that the entire scenario was familiar to all Christian Syriac writers during the 4th to 7th centuries. In the first scene, Adam and Eve are together in Paradise, viewed as a mountain, and clothed in "robes of glory/light". This Paradise mountain is most probably a legacy of the Mesopotamian ziggurat, and the Goddess' descent through the seven gates of the Netherworld was envisaged as going down through the successive steps of the ziggurat. Ephrem describes this primordial situation in *Commentary on Genesis* II, 14 in connection with Genesis 2:25, "the two of them were naked, but they were not ashamed":

"It was because of the glory in which they were wrapped that they were not ashamed. Once this had been taken away from them, after the transgression of the commandment, they were ashamed because they had been stripped of it, and the two of them rushed to the leaves in order to cover not so much their bodies as their shameful members." (Brock 1990, 206)

In the second scene the Fall takes place, Adam and Eve are stripped of their "robes of glory/light" as a result of their transgression. In order to remedy the naked state of Adam and mankind, brought about by the Fall, in the third scene

the Divinity himself “puts on Adam” when he “puts on a body”, and the whole aim of incarnation is to “re clothe mankind in the robe of glory” (Brock 1992, 87–90). The Nativity, the Baptism, and the Descent with Resurrection are the three central “staging posts” of the Incarnation that are separate in profane time, but intimately linked in sacred time. All three are seen as descents of the Divinity into successive wombs, the womb of Mary, the womb of the Jordan, and the womb of Sheol (Brock 1992, 90–94).

Ephrem saw Christ’s baptism in Jordan (< *yrd* “to descend”) as an analogue of his death and descent to Sheol (Buchan 2004, 97). Divinity’s descent into the Jordan is of central importance, for it is then that Christ deposits the “robe of glory/light” in the water, thus making it available to the mankind for the second time to be put on in baptism. In the fourth scene the baptism of Christ is the foundation and source of Christian baptism: by descending into Jordan, Christ sanctified in sacred time all baptismal water; at Christian baptism it is the invocation to the Holy Spirit in the prayer of consecration of the water which effectually makes the water of the individual source identical in sacred time and space with the Jordan waters (Brock 1992, 90–92). Baptism is the process by which the sinner’s soul is washed in Christ’s blood and re clothed in a “garment of light”, it is reentry to Paradise. Such arrangement of the interrelated themes places the Christian sacraments and Christ’s victory over Death during his descent to Sheol in close and mutually illuminating contact (Buchan 2004, 230). This complex compares favourably with the role of life-giving water in resurrecting the fallen goddess from the Netherworld in the Mesopotamian myth. By joining the motif of Christ’s victory over Death into the same complex, Ephrem regards the descent of the divinity and the conflict myth as referring to the same spiritual reality, the two myths only convey the different aspects of the same message (see Parpola 2001, 187–89).

The final stage of mankind after the Baptism is seen as far more glorious than the primordial Paradise, and God will bestow mankind with divinity that Adam and Eve tried to assume by eating from the Tree of Life (Brock 1992, 90–94). It is important to note here that the descent or fall in the schemes of Syrian Church Fathers is not associated with putting on the garments, as in Genesis 3:7, but with loss of the original “robe of glory”. In Ephrem’s texts, baptism purifies the bodies and souls from filthiness, the rite “gives birth to royal sons”, in *Hymns on Virginity* 7.7:

“... bodies full of stains, and they are whitened, without being beaten. They descended in debts as filthy ones and ascended pure as babes since they have baptism, another womb. (Baptism’s) giving birth rejuvenates the old just as the river rejuvenated Na’man. O to the womb that gives birth to royal sons every day without birthpangs” (McVey 1989, 294).

It is easy to see that the Mesopotamian myth of Goddess’ Descent to the Netherworld is reworked into a Christian narrative. Ephrem effectively blends the themes and motifs used in the ancient Near East over millennia before him in formulating his Christian doctrines. The correspondences between Ephremic

images and Mesopotamian myths are fluid, but the continuity of motifs and themes is clearly discernible. Ephrem occasionally picks up various motifs from traditional myths. For example, the ending of Ishtar's descent to the Netherworld (ll. 136–38) describes mourning rites and music as accompanying Dumuzi's ascension,

“On the day when Dumuzi comes back up, (and) the lapis lazuli pipe and the carnelian ring come up with him, (when) male and female mourners come up with him, the dead shall come up and smell the smoke offering” (Dalley 1998, 160).

Compare here the music accompanying Christ's parousia in *Hymns on Virginity* 27.5–6:

“You have baptized me in the faithful names, and you have handed me the glorious harps. By them I have been made worthy of you coming, O Bridegroom, You Who have been revealed ... The dead who came out of their graves will sing glory on their kitharas. The living who fly up in their chariots will sing glory with their harps. The watchers will blow their horns. The evil ones will inherit a shutting of the mouth. Since I have no (more) voice, sing in me that I may sing for you. Glory to your advent.” (McVey 1989, 384.)

As another example, the rejuvenation gained from baptism in Ephrem may be compared to the episode in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where the hero first finds his magic plant of rejuvenation by diving into Apsu, and then loses it to a snake while swimming in a pool. The snake steals his magic plant like it harms Adam in Genesis 2, and in the interpretation of Syrian church fathers it is the “garment of glory” that is forfeited because of the snake in Paradise. Ephrem's speculations about Adam in *Hymns on Paradise* 3.12 can equally apply to the fate of Gilgamesh:

“Had Adam conquered (= acquired divinity), he would have acquired glory upon his limbs, and discernment of what suffering is, so that he might be radiant in his limbs and grow in his discernment. But serpent reversed all this and made him taste abasement in reality, and glory in recollection only, so that he might feel shame at what he had found and weep at what he had lost” (Brock 1990, 94–95).

While the interpretation of the same motifs differs, the same themes are still used to convey the ideas about life, death and salvation. The last quotation that I would like to present is a remarkable one that speaks about the Branch of Truth (*swkt'*), a feminine entity, which represents both the Tree of Life and the Church. The image that she combines in herself, in *Hymns against Julian* 1.2–3,8 is *in toto* that of the Ancient Near Eastern goddess, both descending to us and ascending to above, both the lover of mankind and the conqueror of its enemies:

“If, indeed, she is mightier than Sheol, who among mortals can frighten her? Blessed is he who made her great yet has tested her that she might be greater! Reach out, indeed, your hands toward the Branch of Truth that has torn asunder the arms of warriors without being bent. She bent down from her height and came down to the contest. She tested the true, who hung on her, but those hanging with an (ulterior) motive withered and fell. Blessed is he who brought her down to go up in triumphs! ... Jesus, bend down to us your love that we may grasp this Branch that bent down her fruits for the ungrateful; they ate and were satisfied, yet they demeaned her who had bent down as far as Adam in Sheol. She ascended and lifted him up and with him returned to Eden. Blessed is he who bent her down toward us that we might seize her and ascend on her” (McVey 1989, 222–23).

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