

REVIEWS

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Buchan, Thomas (2004) *"Blessed is He who has brought Adam from Sheol": Christ's descent to the dead in the theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press. (*Gorgias dissertations*; 13. *Early Christian studies*; 2.) VII, 397 p. ISBN 1-59333-228-9.

Shemunkasho, Aho (2004) *Healing in the theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press. (*Gorgias dissertations*; 1. *Near Eastern studies*; 1.) XXII, 480 p. ISBN 1-59333-156-8.

These two recent books from Gorgias Press' *Dissertations* series discuss some important aspects in theological thinking of Saint Ephrem (303–373). Buchan's book comes from the intellectual atmospheres of the Drew University and Princeton Theological Seminary, while Shemunkasho's dissertation is a product of Oxford Syriology. The books under review are the first monographic treatments of corresponding aspects in Ephrem's voluminous theological writings, mostly written in poetry. Both books are new, innovative and important, while the second of the two is a result of much more meticulous philological work than the first. Buchan's book is important in that it collects the evidence for theological images of Christ's descent to the Dead in Ephrem's writings, but it does it in a rather loose way – quotations from Ephrem's writings often follow each other page after page, and some passages repeat themselves many times in the book. There are no indexes in either books and consequently none of the passages quoted, so the reader is forced to go through all the material to find what interests him or her. Shemunkasho's book is much better structured: the headings guide the reader quite well and there is much good philological work invested in it. In Buchan's book there is not much philology – original texts in Syriac are not represented and only a few Syriac terms are discussed. Accordingly, Buchan's book seems to fit best for undergraduate students as a chrestomatic course-book, 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 historians of religion and the historians of Christian doctrines. Shemunkasho's book stands on a much higher philological level, and it can be seen as a definitive treatment of the corresponding issue.

The rest of the current review will discuss images that Ephrem uses in his theological thinking in respect to their origin. The material is culled from these two recent books on Ephrem. The theological images he used did not come from a vacuum and are not only creations of the mind of the 4th century Church Father. It was my suspicion – and it grew into a deep conviction after studying these two books – that in the poetic images of the writings of early Syrian Christianity one can detect many traces of the ancient Near Eastern spirituality, either of Syrian or Mesopotamian origin. The modern scholars of ancient Near Eastern religion and religious iconography (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 on the symbolic worlds of ancient Syria and Mesopotamia which pre-date Christianity in their essences and have a new application in the Christian spiritual world. That is to say, it demonstrates that some building blocks of St. Ephrem's symbolic world have their origin in ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian "paganism."

During my studies of the monographs under review, some very clear parallels became evident between Ephrem's treatment of Christ's dealings with Death and the Ugaritic Baal cycle. In Ephrem, as in the Ugaritic Baal cycle, Death is a person acting against Christ, as Motu fights Baal correspondingly in the Ugaritic texts. Christ is often called "(our) Lord" in Ephrem, which 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. Some other ancient Near Eastern mythological images have apparently found their place in Ephrem's theology. The common origin for both Ugaritic epic tales and Ephrem's poetic images lays 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.

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, p. 89). In those words we can hear the echoes of 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, p. 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*), and he is giver of abundance and called the epithet *Bēl* – "Lord" (Lambert 1985: 436). The storm god had been for millennia the principal god of Syrian city-states, and he still survives 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, p. 65). In the Ugaritic Baal cycle, Baal appoints his season of rains after El has granted permission for 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). In Ephrem's *Hymns on Nativity* 3.20, Christ takes a residence in Mary's womb as the Lord of Thunder in Nisan: "Blessed is he who took up residence in the womb and built there a temple wherein to dwell, a shrine in which to be, a garment in which He might shine out" (Buchan, p. 266). By means of identifying the earth and Sheol with Mary's womb, it is possible for Ephrem to enlarge the circle of his agricultural images. Mary confesses to Christ in *Hymns on Nativity* 15.1: "I am for you the earth and You are the Farmer. Sow in me Your voice, You who are the sower of Himself in His mother's womb" (Buchan, p. 91). "Farmer" is the epithet of the Mesopotamian god Ninurta (see Annus 2002: 152–56), and the sowing voice clearly derives from the imagery of the Syrian storm-god. The mythological complex of beneficent thunder building a palace inside Mary's womb is entirely comparable to the building of Baal's palace in the Ugaritic cycle, which is completed exactly in the beginning of the rainy season.

Ancient storm gods Baal or Adad were still known in Late Antique Syrian cities as Bēl (see Dalley 1995). It is perhaps a paradox, but not an unexpected one, that Ephrem, who fought so ardently against paganism, did not recognize some of his own poetical images as such. He also identified, by means of metaphoric language, the birth and resurrection of the Saviour. The same 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).

Both the resurrection of Baal and Christ bring about an overflow and abundance to nature. 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 Babylonian mystical texts various deities, who in 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 Motu fully in terms of grain processing – that 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 thing to Death in *Nisibene Hymns* 65.6: "There is coming a reaping, O Death, that will leave thee bare" (Buchan,

p. 310). The death of Dumuzi in Mesopotamia was soon followed by his resurrection, and even Motu emerged after seven years of his treatment as ripe corn to challenge Baal again (KTU 1.6.v). 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, p. 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, p. 66, 79).

Ephrem uses paradoxes of agricultural images quite in the same way as the ancient Mesopotamian scholars. 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 many up with it” (Buchan, p. 66, 102). 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 has the comment that the king representing Marduk in the ritual defeated Tiamat “with his penis.” Here the metaphor of the male organ is that of a seed plough. Comparably, the Ugaritic Motu is sown into 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. In Ephrem’s thinking, death becomes a salvific event because it anticipates resurrection.

As the Ugaritic Motu, 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^c*) who feeds on mortal fruit (Buchan, p. 57). Personifying metaphor is also used for Sheol, who is feminine and also described in images of hungriness – she is “hungry,” “all-consuming” (*bl^t kl*), “eater,” “devourer” (*blw^c*), “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.” Sheol is his throne, his stronghold, his den (Buchan, p. 57). As Shemunkasho points out (p. 107), Death is more an “eater” (*kl*), Sheol more a “devourer” (*bl^c*).

Motu’s hungriness is also commonplace in the Ugaritic Baal cycle. When Baal sends his couriers to Motu, 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). Motu 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 that 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, p. 161).

Motu’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 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, p. 141, 176–77).

As Buchan observes (p. 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 enemies of humanity who are defeated by Christ. This again makes the connection to Near Eastern deities who battle against forces of chaos and enemies of civilization in the conflict myths, such as Baal, Ninurta or Marduk. In Ephrem’s *Hymns on Faith* 82.10, Death is once symbolized as Leviathan, the monster of the deep: “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, p. 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 his allies is often called “the King.” For example, in *Carmina Nisibena* 36.18:

“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, p. 180, 309).

Death as the conquered enemy of humanity is also a penitent servant of the Lord, who vows allegiance to "Jesus King" or alternatively to the "Son of the King." The repentance of Death signals a parting of the ways between Satan, who remains impenitent and rebellious against God, and Death, whose pride is humbled by the realization of his limitations (Buchan, pp. 182–83). In the Ugaritic Baal cycle, it is Baal's arch-enemy and rival Motu himself who is finally the official announcer of Baal's rule and throne. Ephrem still uses ancient *Chaoskampf* tradition, which as narrative had an intimate relationship with rituals of kingship (see Wyatt 2005), and only ascribes the role of the King 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, p. 181, my emphasis).

The symbolism of the Tree of Life is also very 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 and "the son of its stock" (Buchan, pp. 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, p. 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* 3.2), with the following explanation: "Death killed natural life, but supernatural Life killed Death" (Buchan, p. 87).

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. Tree imagery in ancient Near Eastern iconography was considerably varied, 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). 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" (Buchan, p. 173).

Finally, the myth of Christ's descent to the Dead and his victorious ascent shows remarkable affinities with the ancient Mesopotamian myths of Ishtar and Dumuzi. The Sumerian 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, 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" (Buchan, p. 76).

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, 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 so that they 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. In Ephrem's understanding, Christ in his mortal clothing enters Sheol as the conquered and pallid corpse, engages in no combat, finally breaks the gate of Sheol upon his exit, and secures Death's allegiance while Satan still remains defiant (Buchan, p. 152).

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 or 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, p. 307).

In *Hymns on Virginit*y 12.30, Christ "fell in the contest with Death to conquer Satan and Death" (Buchan, p. 135), 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" (p. 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, the 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'*), and gloom, darkness and night have taken power over it (Shemunkasho, p. 299). It is the work of Dragon and Satan, and it can only be healed by salvation brought by Christ, "who killed Death by his dying" (*Hymns on Nativity* 3.18; Buchan, p. 162). There is a perfect correspondence with the 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 60 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 Geštinanna to release him by taking his place after six months. In 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.

It is thus the descent and death of the goddess or god and his or 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. The imagery in *Hymns on Virginitiy* 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" (Buchan, p. 171).

In *Hymns on Virginitiy* 37.5–6, 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 reminiscent of the Mesopotamian myth of the Goddess' descent, where Dumuzi and the Goddess replace each other in the Netherworld. In addition, Ephrem also uses a motif of the Saviour being consumed by Death, which is attested in the Ugaritic 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" (Buchan, p. 231).

As the reviver of the dead, Christ 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, p. 157). The term "Medicine of Life" comes from ancient Mesopotamian religion: Syrian *sam hayyē* derives from *šammu ša balāti* in Akkadian. The title Medicine of Life 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, p. 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; or the same Fruit can be the 'poison of death' (*sm mwōt'*; Shemunkasho, p. 152). Christ as the source of physical and mental well-being likens the ancient oriental king, or the god Ninurta. Medicine of Life as a royal epithet is clearly attested in an inscription of 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). In *Homily on Our Lord* 3.3, Ephrem offers an allegorical depiction of Christ's death and resurrection cycle 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" (Buchan, p. 206).

The entire salvation history in Ephrem and other early Syrian church fathers is very often depicted in clothing symbolism. The clothing metaphors are mostly combined with descent and ascent motifs, which makes it probable that the myth of the Mesopotamian Goddess' descent made much impact on the theology of Syrian church. The salvation history is described by the early Syrian Christian writers as consisting of four main scenes. All four scenes 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.

In the second scene the Fall takes place, and Adam and Eve are stripped of their "robes of glory/light." 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." The Nativity, the Baptism, the Descent or 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).

Ephrem saw Christ's baptism in Jordan (< *yrd* "to descend") as an analogue of his death and descent to Sheol (Buchan, p. 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 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). Baptism is the process by which the sinner's soul is washed in Christ's blood and re clothed in a "garment of light." 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, p. 230). This complex compares favourably with the role of life-giving water in resurrecting the fallen goddess from the Netherworld in the Mesopotamian myth.

In baptismal sacrament the Christian himself goes down into the Jordan waters and thence picks up and puts on the "robe of glory" which Christ left there. Baptism is a re-entry to Paradise, but this final stage of mankind 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: XI 11–13). 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 the 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. There are no exact correspondencies in Ephremic images and Mesopotamian myths, but the continuity of motifs and themes is clearly discernible. For example, the rejuvenation gained from baptism 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 does in Genesis 2, and in the interpretation of Syrian church fathers it is the "garment of glory" that is forfeited because of the snake. 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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