

*Ephrem the Syrian: A Syriac Poet in Armenian Verse**By Edward G. Mathews, Jr.*

The name Ephrem the Syrian is certainly well known among specialists of eastern Christian literature; it has today also attained a fairly widespread notoriety among scholars in related fields as well. However, this name is less known to scholars in other fields, and perhaps not well known at all to readers of this journal.¹ It might be somewhat perplexing then to offer in this journal an essay that focuses not on Ephrem, but only on translations of his works—and then only on those works that were translated into one language—and which are, for the most part, not even genuine! My reasons for doing so are two-fold: first, to introduce to a wider audience—even in this limited way—a remarkable poet who is now generally considered by specialists to be “the only poet-theologian to rank beside Dante”; and secondly, to establish the scope and limits of translations of Ephrem’s corpus to date and to establish certain methods and/or guidelines for going forward with translation and commentary. Although the particulars of these translations of the works of Ephrem may or may not be of interest to everyone, the general situation may nonetheless be paradigmatic of the translations of other authors, and this attempt here may, therefore, be of some help in dealing with them as well. Yet before venturing into the subject of these translations, it will no doubt be useful to outline in broadest strokes just who this Ephrem was, and in what circumstances he lived and wrote.

LIFE

Very little is known of Ephrem’s life, and most of the later traditions about him are simply unsupported legends told by later hagiographers. What we do know is that he was born in Nisibis sometime between 305 and 310 (306 is now the generally accepted date). Contrary to the embellishments found in those later traditions, Ephrem seems to have been raised by Christian parents. When he was nearly twenty years old he became a disciple of Jacob of Nisibis, who is remembered in Armenian tradition both as the founder of Noah’s Ark and as a relative of Gregory the Illuminator, who brought Christianity to Armenia. A later Syriac tradition claims that Ephrem accompanied Jacob to the Council of Nicea, but there is no such indication in either Ephrem’s genuine works or in any of the other biographical notices. We do know that Ephrem became a deacon, and was clearly someone who was deeply involved in the day-to-day ministry of the church.

In 363, when Ephrem was already more than fifty years old, the Roman Emperor Valens ceded Nisibis, along with other border territories, to the Persians after they had defeated and killed the apostate Emperor Julian. According to the terms of the ensuing peace treaty, all the Christian inhabitants of Nisibis and the surrounding territories were forced to depart from Persian territory. Ephrem, therefore, along with his fellow Christians in Nisibis, packed up his belongings and emigrated to the nearby city of Amid. From there, he eventually made his way to Edessa, which was then the center of Syrian Christianity.

Although he was in Edessa for less than a decade, it seems to have been the most productive literary period of his life as he wrote on various aspects of the Christian faith, and against the heretical groups whose teachings were holding sway over the population of Edessa. What may have been the very last event of Ephrem’s life is remembered in a number of sources. First reported in Palladius, *Lausiatic History* (trans. Robert T. Meyer; Westminster: Newman

¹ This essay was prepared in conjunction with compiling a complete bibliography of the works and secondary studies of the works attributed to Ephrem the Syrian that survive in Armenian. This full bibliography is scheduled to appear in a future issue of *Revue des études arméniennes*, published in Paris.

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Press, 1965), ch. 40, it was solely through the efforts of Ephrem that the citizens of Edessa were saved from a severe famine in 373. Ephrem secured the aid of the rich townspeople, getting them to agree to provide sufficient funding to procure space as well as food and drink for those many citizens who were afflicted by the famine. It must have been very shortly after this act of mercy that, according to the *Chronicle of Edessa* (ed. Ludwig Hallier; Leipzig, 1892), Ephrem departed this life on 9 June 373.

WORKS

There is no clear evidence that Ephrem knew any other language than his native Syriac tongue, which is an Aramaic dialect closely related to Hebrew. He certainly wrote only in Syriac. He was a prolific author, and the precise extent of his literary productions has yet to be determined. He composed a number of biblical commentaries and some apologetic treatises; several spurious letters have also survived. But he was most famous for his poetry, which the church historian Sozomen, *History of the Church*, III.16 (trans. C.D. Hartranft; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) numbered at over three million verses. Ephrem wrote these poems in two styles: *mêmrê* and *madrâšê*, generally translated as “metrical homilies” and “hymns,” respectively. Jacob of Sarug (d. 508), another of Syria’s great poets, tells us that Ephrem taught his hymns to women for them to sing, though Jacob unfortunately is more than a little vague on the precise context in which these hymns were sung. The poems that have survived have come down to us in over fifteen collections later assembled by his disciples and successors. These include hymns *On Faith*, *Against Heresies*, *On the Church*, *On Paradise*, *On Virginity*, *On the Nativity*, *On Fasting*, *On Unleavened Bread*, *On Holy Week*, *On the Crucifixion*, *On the Resurrection*, *On Nisibis*, *Against Julian*, *On Abraham Qidunaya*, and *On Julian Saba*, most of which are authentic and all of which have now been edited, with accompanying German translations, by Edmund Beck, OSB, in the series *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, published by Peeters Press in Louvain.

The prose works that have survived can be organized into three general categories: biblical commentaries, of which there survive a complete *Commentary on Genesis*, a nearly complete *Commentary on Exodus*, and a nearly complete *Commentary on the Diatessaron*; two artistic compositions, *On Our Lord* and the *Letter to Publius*; and several philosophical works, collected under the title *Prose Refutations*.

Although Ephrem never left his native Syria himself, his writings did—and they left very quickly!—, so cherished were they by his contemporaries. While the chronology cannot be established with any certainty, it is not unlikely that even while he was still alive, but certainly within two generations after his death, certain of his works had already been translated, or were being translated, into Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, Latin, Syro-Palestinian, and Ethiopic. Later, they were also translated into Arabic and Russian, among others. Today his works have been translated into nearly all the European languages, as well as Korean, Japanese, and Malayalam, to mention but a few of the non-western languages.

Two factors about the early translations are remarkable and worth noting here. The first is their sheer volume. The translations of Ephrem’s works into Greek amount to more than every native Greek writer except John Chrysostom, while those translated into Armenian amount to more than six large volumes. (The translations into the other mentioned languages are fewer and seem to be mostly dependent on the Greek translations.) Even more startling is that there is so very little correspondence between these two collections of translations and his genuine Syriac works; they are essentially three distinct collections of works! There are various possible reasons for this, but what does seem clear is that, apart from a few exceptions among the Armenian collection, these works that scholars have

been labeling translations are in fact works composed by others, presumably students or associates of Ephrem, but questions about precisely when and by whom they were translated are not easily answerable.

EDITIONS

The precise extent of the Armenian corpus (the Greek corpus is little studied and not our concern here) remains to be determined. Study of these writings is still in its infancy stage, particularly as catalogues of a number of the major collections of Armenian manuscripts are still in the process of production. Consequently, it is quite possible that additional works may be discovered in the future. Modern study of the Armenian works of Ephrem essentially began only in the early nineteenth century, when the Mekhitarist Fathers, an order of Armenian monks who inhabit the Island of San Lazzaro off the coast of Venice and who have dedicated themselves to the preservation of the Armenian heritage, published a four-volume set of *The Collected Works of St. Ephrem* (Venice: St. Lazarus Press, 1836 [in Armenian]). The contents of those four volumes, each of about 350 pages, can be briefly described as follows:

- I: Commentaries on Old Testament Books
Genesis – II Chronicles (does not include Ruth)
- II: *Commentary on the Diatessaron, An Exposition of the Gospel*
- III: Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul
- IV: Assorted Homilies, Prayers and Poetic Works

The publication of these volumes was a monumental event in the history of the corpus of Ephrem's writings. Although they do not meet the criteria for modern critical texts, these volumes are still essential for the study of the Armenian corpus of Ephrem's works. Just three years later these same Mekhitarist fathers supplemented the four-volume edition by publishing a short *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Venice: St. Lazarus Press, 1839 [in Armenian]), also attributed to Ephrem. Unfortunately, this edition, like its predecessor, essentially printed the text as was found in a single manuscript, and the one chosen here also contained passages from John Chrysostom's own *Commentary on Acts*. Nearly a century later, Fr. Nerses Akinian, another of the Mekhitarist fathers, published a new text of this *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1921 [in Armenian]), based on his collation of a number of manuscripts. This edition again advanced the study of this corpus of Armenian works attributed to Ephrem even further as it not only presented an integral text of Ephrem's *Commentary* without the Chrysostom additions but was the first attempt at compiling a truly critical text.

This corpus took another giant leap forward, some decades later, with the publication of two collections of poetical works in the prestigious series *Patrologia Orientalis*. These two volumes are both noteworthy for printing texts in modern critical editions, but even more importantly as they both provided for scholars two new collections of Ephrem's works with an accompanying translation into a modern language.

The first collection, titled simply *Armenian Hymns*, is a collection of fifty-one poetical works on various subjects. This corpus actually had an interesting three-fold history. The text alone of a selection of these hymns was initially published in two separate places. Grigor Sarkissian, "St. Ephrem, Hymns—Texts" (*Bazmavep* 92 [1934]: 149-155 [in Armenian]), published an Armenian text of *Hymns* 18-20, 22, 26, 25, 27, 17, 38-40, 43, 47-50, and in *The Hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Sop'erk' Haykakank', 24; Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1934 [in Armenian]) the same scholar published the text of *Hymns* 11-22, 16-29, 38, 31-51. But it fell to the same Fr. Nerses Akinian mentioned above to publish a complete critical text, first in serial format, "The Hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian"

(*Handès Amsoreay* 67 [1953]: 481-522; 68 [1954] 257-284, 449-470; 69 [1955] 1-18, 97-116, 289-310, 449-470; 70 [1956] 1-16, 97-122 [in Armenian]); reprinted in a separate monograph, *The Hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian/ Ephräm des Syrers 51 Madrasche in Armenischer Übersetzung* (Texte und Untersuchungen der Altarmenischen Literature, Bd.1, Heft 3; Vienna: Mekhitharist Publishing House, 1957). Just a few years later, Louis Mariès and Charles Mercier, *Hymnes de Saint Éphrem conservées en version arménienne* (Patrologia Orientalis XXX.1/n.143; Turnhout: Brepols, 1961) published the text of Akinian, with Latin translation and extensive annotations. The works contained in this volume, unlike all the previously published texts of Armenian Ephrem, seem to be genuine though no corresponding Syriac version has survived; they clearly reflect the Syriac *madrāšâ*, a poetic form of various meters that was used by Ephrem for most of his genuine poetic works and, even in translation, exhibit the same theological and literary features of Ephrem's genuine Syriac poetry.

Less than a decade and half after this publication, Charles Renoux, *Ephrem de Nisibe, Mêmre sur Nicomédie: édition des fragments de l'original syriaque et de la version arménienne* (Patrologia Orientalis XXXVII 2-3/n.172-173; Turnhout: Brepols, 1975) published a collection of sixteen pieces that all deal with the destruction of the city of Nicomedia by a tremendous earthquake in 358, an event already known from the monody delivered by Libanius, the great orator of Late Antiquity. Renoux included the few Syriac fragments that have survived, and also provided an annotated French translation. These pieces clearly reflect the Syriac *mêmra*, a form of equal syllable count; in this case, 7 x 7 syllables per line, known as the "meter of Mar Ephrem." Again, scholars generally consider these *Hymns on Nicomedia* as genuine, and thus they constitute the largest collection of Ephrem's *mêmre* that have survived.

With a slight chronological overlap, there is a second stage of editions of these Armenian works attributed to Ephrem which is characterized by new, critical editions of a number of those works that had previously been edited by the Mekhitarists on the basis of only single available manuscripts from their own library. The first such work was Louis Leloir, *Saint Éphrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant: Version arménienne* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 137; Louvain: Peeters, 1953). Louis Leloir, *Saint Éphrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile concordant: Version arménienne* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 145; Louvain: Peeters, 1954), provided a Latin translation of the almost certainly genuine text. Fifteen years later, George Egan, *Saint Ephrem, An Exposition of the Gospel* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 291-292; Louvain: Peeters, 1968) produced a critical edition, with accompanying English translation, of the work entitled *An Exposition of the Gospel*, though no scholar today follows his passionate argument for authenticity. With these two editions, volume two of the four-volume Mekhitarist edition had now been redone.

Beginning at the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, new editions of the Old Testament commentaries also began to appear. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., *The Armenian Commentary on the Book of Genesis attributed to Ephrem the Syrian* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 572-573; Louvain: Peeters, 1998) produced a new edition utilizing three manuscripts, with accompanying annotated English translation. He was able to demonstrate that while it was a translation from Syriac, the author of the *Commentary* had used ninth-century texts and that it was therefore impossible that the *Commentary* could have been written by the fourth-century Ephrem. Following shortly upon this edition, Edward G. Mathews, Jr., in *The Armenian Commentaries on Exodus-Deuteronomy attributed to Ephrem the Syrian* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 587-588; Louvain: Peeters, 2001) completed new, critical editions of the commentaries of the Pentateuch. The rest of the Mekhitarist vol. I, which includes the historical books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, and 1-2 Chronicles, is

currently in preparation. A new edition of the commentaries on the Epistles of Paul (vol. 3) is a great desideratum as the few studies done on them seem to indicate an underlying Greek, and not a Syriac, text. A few additional pieces have been edited and/or translated by scholars, but the contents of volume four as well as a large number of additional pieces have, for all intents and purposes, received no attention. Still, while a number of these texts await modern, critical editions, a number of others are well under way and may, it is to be hoped, even be completed within the next decade.

SECONDARY STUDIES

The same cannot, however, be said for secondary study on this large corpus. The very earliest forays into this vast corpus were generally short pieces of either a “cataloguing” nature, that is, they simply provided a list (always incomplete) of the various works in Armenian that were attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, a brief resume of his life which usually conveyed only the most meager—and usually heavily dependent on the later embellished hagiographical—details of his life, or some sort of combination of the two. These short works, all written in Armenian, are of almost no value today. When more serious work did finally begin, it would be no exaggeration to say that, despite the great variety of literary styles in this corpus, nearly all research was focused on the biblical commentaries. Even more specifically, early studies of this corpus concentrated very heavily on reconstructing the biblical text as found in the New Testament commentary materials. Dom Louis Leloir, *Le temoignage d'Ephrem sur le Diatessaron* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 227; Louvain: Peeters, 1962) was the culmination of a number of studies trying to reconstruct the original text of the *Diatessaron*, which was originally composed by Tatian in the mid-second century but is now lost, surviving otherwise only in late oriental translations. George Egan, *An Analysis of the Biblical Quotations of Ephrem in “An Exposition of the Gospel” (Armenian version)* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 443, Subsidia 66; Louvain: Peeters, 1983), provided an in-depth study of the quotations from this spurious work. As part of a large project on the canonical Acts of the Apostles, the witness of the *Commentary on Acts*, published by Akinian, was scrutinized for its textual witness. The Letters of Paul were also examined. Subsequent to the study of Joseph Schäfers, *Evangelienzitate in Ephräms des Syrers Kommentar zu den Paulinischen Schriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herders Verlag, 1917), Joseph Molitor, *Der Paulustext des hl. Ephräms aus seinem armenisch erhaltenen Paulinenkommentar untersucht und rekonstruiert* (Monumenta biblica et ecclesiastica, 4; Rome: Päpstliches Bibelinstitut, 1938) even published an entire monograph with the portions of the text of Paul's Epistles as found in Ephrem's commentaries retroverted into Greek. Another scholarly obsession at the time was the text as found in the Commentary on the apocryphal Third Corinthians; this particular line of research culminated in Peter Vetter, *Der apokryphe dritte Korintherbrief* (Vienna: Mechitharisten Buchdruckerei, 1894), esp. pp. 4-7, 70-97. The few other secondary studies on these materials concerned various issues; some even began to address the general contents of individual texts or to assess certain sections in order to discern sources or authorial purpose. Yet these studies were marred by an uncritical presumption that the tradition had correctly preserved this collection as genuine works of the fourth-century Syrian poet.

Edward G. Mathews, Jr., in “The Armenian Literary Corpus Attributed to St. Ephrem the Syrian: Prolegomena to a Project” (*St. Nersess Theological Review* 1 [1996]: 145-168), was the first attempt to sift through this corpus with a view to determining whether these works were actually genuine works of Ephrem or not. It began with the study of the Old Testament commentaries, particularly the *Commentary on Genesis*, where we have complete texts in both Syriac and Armenian. Earlier scholars had noticed some differences, but simply attributed them to scribal transmission and/or the addition of student material. The more careful reading of Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “The

Armenian *Commentary on Genesis* attributed to Ephrem the Syrian: General Characteristics and Considerations” (*St. Nersess Theological Review* 2 [1997], 199-232), however, showed that the Armenian *Commentary on Genesis* was not only a completely different commentary from the Syriac, but that it clearly utilized Syriac exegetical materials from the eighth and ninth centuries; the same has proven to be true of the other Armenian Old Testament commentaries as well. More recently, Christian M.W. Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 616, Subsidia 118; Louvain: Peeters, 2005) has also demonstrated that, while the core of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* may go back to Ephrem, the text as we have it betrays the activity of a school system subsequent to the genuine Ephrem, and can no longer be counted among his works. As noted above, the editor of the *Exposition of the Gospel* was the only scholar to maintain the genuineness of this text. Thus, none of the commentary material, which comprised three of the original four Mekhitarist volumes, can any longer be counted among the genuine works of Ephrem, the fourth-century Syrian poet. Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “A First Glance at the Armenian *Prayers* attributed to Surb Ep’rem Xorin Asorwoy” (in *Worship Traditions in Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East*, ed. Roberta R. Ervine; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006: 161-173), has demonstrated that the collection of the Armenian *Prayers* attributed to Ephrem is also a later composition that contradicts the spirit of the genuine Syriac Ephrem. As already noted, most of the homiletic material remains unstudied, but Gérard Garitte, “La version arménienne du sermon de saint Éphrem sur Jonas” (*Revue des études arméniennes* 6 [1969]: 23-43), one of only two modern studies on this part of the corpus, considers that the *Sermon on Jonas* is indeed a genuine composition of Ephrem, while Bernard Outtier, “Un discours sur les ruses de Satan attribué à Éphrem (texte arménien inédit)” (*Revue des études arméniennes* 13 [1978-1979], 165-174), demonstrates that this work is not genuine Ephrem; the style is certainly not that of the genuine Ephrem, and is even likely to have been translated from an Arabic exemplar. Further study here is a great *desideratum*.

In summary then, scholars can no longer maintain the traditional attribution to Ephrem of most of this very large collection of Armenian texts. Only the two collections of hymns published in the series *Patrologia Orientalis* seem to have been genuine compositions of Ephrem the Syrian; and these are all the more important as the original Syriac of these has, apart from a few fragments, been entirely lost. This necessary conclusion, however, is in no way to be understood to mean that these texts are now of no importance or that they should be cast into oblivion. These Armenian texts may not be genuine Ephrem, but they can, for the most part at least, be assigned to his students or to traditions associated with Ephrem and, even more importantly, they constitute a corpus that was of extreme importance for the development and systematization of an Armenian theological and commentary tradition and, for these reasons, are of no less importance. But this is material for another essay and perhaps a more specialized audience.

