

Approval:

This Dissertation, entitled  
NARSAI'S HOMILIES ON THE OLD TESTAMENT  
AS A SOURCE FOR HIS EXEGESIS

by

David George

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

has been read and approved by

Walter B. Smith

Leon Nemoy

Charles T. Fritsch

February 17, 1972

NARSAI'S HOMILIES ON THE OLD TESTAMENT  
AS A SOURCE FOR HIS EXEGESIS

by  
David George

A Dissertation  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The Dropsie University  
Philadelphia  
1972



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction . . . . .	1 - 55
 I. NARSAI'S HOMILIES: PUBLISHED TEXTS:	
1. The Philosophical Conception of Creation Creation in General . . . . .	56 - 95
2. The Philosophical Conception of Creation Creation of Angels and their Function . . . .	96 - 136
3. The Philosophical Conception of Creation Soul and Body . . . . .	137 - 161
4. God's Manifestation to the Men of the Bible . .	162 - 193
5. God's New Dispensation to Abraham . . . . .	194 - 209
6. The Story of Joseph . . . . .	210 - 234
7. The Ascension of Elijah to the Land of Eden . .	235 - 241
8. The Divine Message to the City of Nineveh as a Symbol of the Salvation of the Gentile World . .	242 - 254
9. Narsai's Peculiar Explanation of the Nature and Ministry of the Seraphim . . . . .	255 - 265
 II. NARSAI'S HOMILIES: Manuscript Texts:	
1. The Benediction of Noah . . . . .	266 - 284
2. The Tower of Babel . . . . .	285 - 305
3. The Brazen Serpent . . . . .	306 - 322
4. David and Saul . . . . .	323 - 343
5. Solomon's Wisdom . . . . .	344 - 360
6. The Ascension of Enoch and Elijah . . . . .	361 - 383
CONCLUSION . . . . .	384 - 393
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	394 - 395

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### APPENDIX:

#### PHOTOCOPY OF MANUSCRIPTS:

	Page
The Brazen Serpent . . . . .	396 - 410
The Ascension of Enoch and Elijah . . . . .	411 - 431
The Benediction of Noah . . . . .	432 - 440
The Tower of Babel . . . . .	440 - 450
David and Saul . . . . .	451 - 462
Solomon's Wisdom . . . . .	462 - 469



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My profound thanks are due to Professor Moshe Goshen-Gottstein who first suggested the subject of this dissertation to me and helped me to plan the preliminary outline of it. He did not, however, see the finished product, since he returned to Israel long before its completion, but I have followed the method outlined by him throughout my work.

I am most grateful to Professor Morton S. Enslin, who replaced Professor Goshen-Gottstein as chairman of the advisory faculty committee in charge of my work. Dr. Enslin gave me valuable advice on many matters, especially in regard to the planning of my introduction. I am particularly grateful to him for suggesting at the outset that I include as much material as possible in my analysis of Narsai's Homilies, and thus make it more extensive than I had originally planned.

Professor Charles T. Fritsch also helped me with numerous and useful suggestions, especially in regard to the inclusion of references to Jewish traditional sources, as well as exact translation of certain outstanding passages from Narsai's Homilies.

Dr. Leon Nemoy read my transcript and offered many corrections and suggestions, mainly intended to overcome my insufficient command of literary English.

Finally, I am indebted to President Abraham I. Katsh of Dropsie University, for permission to consult the necessary books in the Rare Book Room of the University Library.



## INTRODUCTION

We shall discuss here very briefly the life and the history of the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis, since the chief purpose of this investigation is limited to an analysis of Narsai's Homilies as compared with Ephraem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Jewish tradition; we shall deal with some outstanding matters in his Homilies, such as some outstanding passages in his Homilies of importance to the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology. We shall discuss in detail some of Narsai's theological doctrines, and point out that Narsai's Homilies do not contain allegorical elements in the true sense of the word; that they reveal that exegesis and theology were highly developed in the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis; that Narsai's exegesis and theology were highly developed and acutely speculative; that the most significant element of Narsai's Old Testament exegesis and theology is his mind; that Narsai was well versed in contemporary scientific knowledge, especially Greek science; that while Narsai's exegesis and theology are highly speculative, they remain in harmony with traditional truth and Christian doctrine; that his Homilies contain hundreds of direct quotations, both nonbiblical and biblical. And finally, we shall point out Narsai's original contributions to Old Testament exegesis and theology. For a detailed account of Narsai and of the two Persian Schools the reader is advised to consult A. Vööbus' book History of the School of Nisibis, published at Louvain and incorporated in the Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium.



Narsai was one of the greatest of the Syriac Church Fathers of the 5th century, and is second only to Ephraem. Narsai is also the most prominent Father among the Nestorians, and is the founder of the Nestorian liturgy. His writings are therefore of paramount significance for the study of the rise and growth of Nestorianism among the Eastern Syrians (or Assyrians). He was a profound expositor of both the Old and the New Testament, as well as a keen student of Christian theology. Abhdisho Bar-Brikha calls him "the harp of the (Holy) Spirit,"<sup>1</sup> and the Nestorians regard him as the pillar and one of the pioneers of the Eastern Syriac Church. He had a remarkable command of the Syriac language, so that his writings are reckoned among the classics of Syriac literature. Mingana says that Narsai is an outstanding figure for the lucidity of his thought and the elegance of his style.<sup>2</sup> He was also one of the most brilliant teachers of the Schools of Nisibis, and he and Ephraem are the most quoted authorities on Nestorian theology.

Vööbus tells us that

Besides his poetic gifts, Narsai must have had other talents. His learning was regarded by his contemporaries as being unique. To his merit, let it be said that he amalgamated Hellenistic scholarship as cultivated in the Antiochian School with theological thinking in the indigenous Syrian milieu. The bearing of this combination is enhanced by the fact that this took place at a time which was the most important epoch in Christianity under the rule of Sassanides, namely when the

---

<sup>1</sup>E. Y. Joseph, Marganeetha, (Mosul: The Assyrian School and Press, 1924), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>A. Mingana, Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina, (Mosul: 1905), p. 50.



foundations for the nascent church among the Eastern Syrians were laid. Narsai's importance in this epoch of consolidation has found expression in a very contemporary way. His learning and knowledge were esteemed so singular that his grateful admirers, in their amazement and veneration, believed that they saw angels hovering around his chair as he taught. In the tradition, Narsai lives on as the "doctor and tongue of the Orient" or "the admirable doctor."<sup>3</sup>

Narsai was born in the first half of the 5th century in Ain Dulba in the province of Maalta. When he was seven years old, he began his studies at school, and Voobus tells us that even as a boy he was an outstanding student and manifested amazing qualities and talents. He is said, however, to have had to leave the school soon thereafter, having completed his preliminary studies in the Book of Psalms within nine months, because of the loss of his parents and was taken in charge by his uncle Emmanuel, abbot of Kephari Mari Monastery, who was a graduate of the School of Edessa. Narsai continued his studies with his uncle at the monastery, and Emanuel hoped that Narsai would remain at this school permanently,<sup>4</sup> but Narsai went to Edessa instead.

Mingana says that Narsai remained at the School of Edessa both as student and as teacher for twenty years,<sup>5</sup> while Voobus informs us that Narsai spent ten years there. Be that as it may, his uncle finally lost patience with him and forced him

---

<sup>3</sup>Voobus, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-59.

<sup>5</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 42.



to come back to Kephari Mari, where he was soon joined by three hundred brothers who gathered around him. Once more, however, Narsai's sojourn at Kephari Mari was of short duration, and he departed again to spend another ten years at the School of Edessa. When Emanuel felt that his life was nearing its end, he once again used his authority to make Narsai return to Kephari Mari, whereupon the dying abbot committed the monastic community into his keeping.<sup>6</sup>

Again, this new responsibility hardly lasted longer than a year. The voice of Narsai's heart drew him back to the place of learning in Edessa. "After he had been there (at Kephari Mari) for one year, he handed over the work of instruction to one of the brothers there whose name was Gabriel, and he turned again to the School of Edessa."<sup>7</sup>

Tradition as recorded in the Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba has it that Ephraem was the founder of the School of Edessa, and that originally Ephraem's commentaries were used there while Narsai acted as leading teacher, before they were replaced by the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia.<sup>8</sup> Narsai himself tells us, in his Homily on the three doctors (Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius), that all his proficiency in Scripture was derived from the study of Theodore's commentaries, most of which, unfortunately, are no longer extant.<sup>9</sup> According to Vööbus

---

<sup>6</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Mingana, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup>F. Martin, "Homilies de Narses sur les Trois Docteurs Nestoriens," (Journal Asiatique, Ser. 9, Tom. 14-15, 1899), pp. 446-499.



the School of Edessa became the center of Antiochian theology and exegesis after Theodore's commentaries were introduced into the curriculum.<sup>10</sup> Vööbus tells us that the Edessene population used to refer to the School of Edessa as "the School of the Persians," or "the Christian Didascaleion for the Persians."<sup>11</sup>

Vööbus concludes that the tradition which regards Ephraem as the founder of the School of Edessa is only partly based on fact.

Ephraem is reported to have been a teacher at an earlier time in Nisibis. Certain hints by Ephraem himself substantiate the report. The only conclusion possible for us, in view of these considerations and from a critical viewpoint, is that Ephraem was among those who laid the foundation for that undertaking which grew into an important school. But it is certain that the honor of being its founder cannot be given to him. No one would have deprived him of that merit had it rightfully been his.<sup>12</sup>

The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba tells us further that after the death of Ephraem his disciples continued the work of the School of Edessa and spread its fame far and wide, until the time when Narsai took over the leadership of it.<sup>13</sup>

The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba informs us also that the first director of the School of Edessa was Kyore, a man of God, who took

---

<sup>10</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 32.



the responsibility of interpretation, reading, and syllabification.<sup>14</sup> After his death the entire brotherhood unanimously asked Narsai to assume the leadership, since there was no one else like him to take charge of the School. Narsai thereupon agreed to the brotherhood's request, on condition that they would help him, especially in the work of reading and interpretation. The community accepted this condition, and Narsai forthwith began administering the school. He continued in this duty for twenty years, serving also as an interpreter.<sup>15</sup>

We have already stated that Theodore's commentaries replaced Ephraem's in the School of Edessa, thus introducing the Antiochian theology and exegesis into that school. According to Voobus, it was Ibas who undertook the task of translating the works of Theodore and others into Syriac. The translation of Theodore's works was a very extensive and voluminous project, and required a number of hands to execute it, but before Theodore's death in 428 almost all of his writings became available to the Syrians in Edessa.<sup>16</sup>

The twenty-second of June, 431 A.D., (says Vööbus), marks a very important event in the history of Christianity in the Orient. This was an arsis encompassing an era of tragedies befalling Christianity in these areas, leading finally to a definite cleavage between the Syrian Christians. On that day, a condemnatory verdict was brought against Nestorius at a hastily arranged session of the Council of Ephesus. There was no waiting for the arrival of other members of the Council. But those who cherished great expectations towards the settling of the

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 19.



questions by way of this anathema were to find their hopes dashed to the ground. The Diophysite movement, having been inaugurated and having had some time for growth was not to be stopped in this arbitrary fashion. The situation was far too advanced to admit so simple a solution. In consequence, despite official steps enforcing the decrees of the Council, the movement began to infiltrate the Syrian Orient.<sup>17</sup>

Vööbus tells us further that the school of Edessa, an outstanding center of learning, became a hotbed of Diophysite belief, influenced by the spirit of the Antiochian biblical exegesis and of the theology of Diodorus and Theodore. It thus became a center for the dissemination of Diophysite propaganda.<sup>18</sup>

Rabbula, then bishop of Edessa, first sided with the Antiochians under the leadership of John, patriarch of Antioch, but later changed his position and turned against his former friends, thus placing the Christians in Osrhoene under severe strain by his impulsive action, and by his campaign to destroy the Diophysite group<sup>19</sup> and to wipe out the literature of the Antiochian theologians. The writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia under indictment by patriarch Cyril of Alexandria to whom Rabbula now gave his allegiance. Rabbula translated and introduced the works of Cyril in Edessa, thus laying the foundation of the Monophysite literature in Syria.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 26.



When Rabbula died in 435, a new situation developed favorable to the adherents of the Antiochian theology. The pro-Antiochian clergy in Edessa elected Ibas to the Metropolitan seat, and the School of Edessa got back to its feet and began once more to spread its Diophysite doctrines, but this did not last long. Doninus, John's nephew, succeeded his uncle in the patriarchial seat in Antioch, and two years later, Dioscorus was elevated to Cyril's seat in Alexandria but Dioscorus, like Cyril, remained a shrewd, ruthless, and aggressive rival.<sup>21</sup>

At the ninth session at Chalcedon in 451, after the decision was taken to give the bishopric back to Theodoret, Ibas began to fight for his rights. He was declared orthodox and empowered to oust Nuna, but his restitution and his subsequent activities could not change the course of affairs running against the adherents of Antiochian theology and exegesis which were gradually crumbling. The Monophysites, on the other hand, were encouraged and moved forward rapidly. Their movement had already penetrated Egypt, Palestine, and Western Syria, and was soon to engulf the rest of Syria and Osrhoene. It was thus a losing battle for the Antiochian tradition.<sup>22</sup>

During these struggles and strifes, (says Vööbus), the School of Edessa had increasingly become the center of operations for the Antiochian theology. As such, it had become the target for the adversaries. The hatred and contempt its enemies felt was quite understandable, since they perceived that the School of Edessa was the real heart of the Antiochian conviction and propaganda.

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 29-30.



It provided the movement with the theological ammunition in thought as well as in literature, furnished men to spread this propaganda, and supplied the inspiration and stimuli the battle needed.<sup>23</sup>

Bishop Ibas, the great champion of the Diophysite cause, died on October 28, 457, and his death placed the Diophysites in Osrhoene, and particularly the School of Edessa, in a dangerous position. It also incited the Monophysite group, and the episcopal seat of Edessa was finally taken over by the Monophysites. The School of Edessa was then practically destroyed by Qura, bishop of Edessa, who is remembered with contempt in the traditions of the Nestorians and is referred to as a "deceitful worker," a "rabid dog," and "doctor of falsehood." Qura first secured a decree from the Emperor Zenon, and then, armed with this decree, proceeded in 489 to strangle the School. Even its building was eventually demolished, and on its site a basilica dedicated to the Virgin Mary was erected.<sup>24</sup>

As for the School of Nisibis, the date of its foundation is shrouded in impenetrable darkness. The departure of Narsai from Edessa in consequence of Monophysite persecution presumably had something to do with the founding of this school. Scholars are divided about the precise date of the exodus of teachers, students, and other adherents of Antiochian tradition from Edessa, but the majority of them are inclined to think that Narsai and his followers left Edessa for Nisibis in 457.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 33-34.



Connolly tells us that

The expulsion of the followers of Ibas from Edessa in 457 was followed immediately by the foundation of the New School at Nisibis by Narsai and his friend, Barsauma, the bishop of the city. With the foundation of this School began, undoubtedly, the definite formation of what is now known as the Nestorian Church, severed from the communion of the Churches of the Roman Empire. The members of the new school professed to follow the doctrines of Diodorus, Theodore, and Nestorius; and the commentaries of Theodore were taken as the standard and foundation of their exegesis of Scripture. From Nisibis other Schools were founded, and the writings of Theodore, now finally banished from Edessa, began to be propagated throughout the Persian Empire: "Edessa was darkened, but Nisibis shone forth; and the dominions of the Romans were filled with error, but those of Persians with the knowledge."<sup>26</sup>

Vööbus comes to the same conclusion that the departure of Narsai and his followers from Edessa took place in 457. There was certainly a period of difficulty and hardship for the teachers there, who nevertheless continued the work of the school, and for a while under Qura, the bishop who eventually destroyed the School in 489, it was still in existence.<sup>27</sup>

The final blow which terminated the activities of the School came in 457 after Ibas' death. The fate of the School was then sealed: Narsai and his friends were expelled, and Nuna immediately moved back to Edessa and took action against the School.<sup>28</sup>

The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba states that Barsauma went to Nisibis before Narsai came there to become the bishop of that city.<sup>29</sup> According to Vööbus, Narsai's departure was sudden and

---

<sup>26</sup>R. H. Connolly, The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai Translated into English with an Introduction. (Cambridge: 1909), p. lxx.

<sup>27</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>29</sup>Mingana, op. cit., pp. 33-34.



unexpected, and he left Edessa alone, without his colleagues.

This is confirmed by another source that stems from the Edessene School's tradition.

The narrative continues in regard to Narsai's escape, that on the same night he was notified of imminent danger, he acted without delay. This report contains some very vivid traits, particularly about the manner in which he found helpers, and how he also managed to salvage his manuscripts: "As he arrived at the church of the town, he found there Persians; he asked them whether it would be possible for them to carry for him his books--for this was his entire treasure; as they learned about the matter of this affair, they were very glad and taking care carried all his books as far as Nisibis."<sup>30</sup>

The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba tells us further that when Narsai came to Nisibis, he stayed at the monastery of the Persians. When Barsauma heard of it, he sent an archdeacon to escort Narsai into the city with great honor. As the two met, they bade each other peace but otherwise conversed very little with each other; nevertheless, Barsauma offered Narsai living quarters at his residence, allowed him to start a school in the city, and helped him in all his personal necessities. To console Narsai in his grievous plight, Barsauma said to him, "Do not think of your departure from Edessa and of the dispersal of the School as all black, O my brother,--it was the will of God."<sup>31</sup>

Pressure and hardship, (says Vööbus), were the lot of the teachers of the Diophysite penchant at the School of Edessa during the last period of its history. This may have led to an intermittent withdrawal of some teachers before the final exodus. Throughout the time of crisis and trial this center of learning, which had fructified spiritual life for generations, proved to be a blessing. Even the

---

<sup>30</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>31</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 34.



expulsion had an after-effect, for its light was able to create life elsewhere. The dispersion of the teachers and students, and their return to their home-country, initiated a real stimulus that revitalized extant schools, and brought new schools into being in the Persian territory where the expelled teachers and students had found homes and new opportunities for their activities.<sup>32</sup>

In general the School of Nisibis followed the principles of the School of Edessa and adopted the Antiochian exegesis and theology. All the traditions in both teaching and administration which were followed by the School of Edessa were utilized at the School of Nisibis. The hegemony of the new school was placed on the shoulders of Narsai. Barsauma did his best to help Narsai to organize the School, and took steps to set up the rules of discipline and other regulations for it.<sup>33</sup>

The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba tells us that within a short time the Persian brothers and the local Syrians were joined by great multitudes from the School of Edessa who came over to the School of Nisibis, which Narsai continued to administer for another 45 years.<sup>34</sup>

The establishment of the new School, (concludes Vööbus), had far-reaching consequence for Nisibis. Owing to this event, light flared in this venerable center of Christianity in such a way that it created a nimbus of reputation for the town known henceforth as "the intellectual town" and "the mother of scholarship."<sup>35</sup>

Narsai's works, as enumerated by Abhdisho Bar-Brikha, consist of commentaries on the first four books of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, and Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and the twelve Minor

---

<sup>32</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>34</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>35</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 56.



Prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, twelve volumes of metrical discourses (360 in number), a liturgy exposition of the order of celebrating the Eucharist and of baptism, paraenetic and funeral sermons, hymns of several sorts, and a book entitled On the Corruption of Morals.<sup>36</sup>

According to the bibliography of Abhdisho Bar-Brikha, Narsai wrote 360 Homilies but, unfortunately, most of them were lost in the course of a century.<sup>37</sup> Vööbus lists the following extant collections of Narsai's Homilies and their locations:

The collections of the memre are of various sizes. The largest collection in Ms. Alqosh 160 and 161 contains 70 memre (or 28 and 42 respectively). Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463 has the same number. Next to this is Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 9367 and 9368 with 64 memre (36 and 28 respectively). After these come: Ms. Bagd. 603, Part I-IV; 51 memre; Ms. Bagd. 605: 38 memre; Ms. Ming. Syr. 55: 37 memre; Ms. Borg. Syr. 79: 33 memre; Ms. Borg. Syr. 83: 23 memre; Ms. Bagd. 601: 31 memre; Ms. Bagd. 602: 25 memre; Ms. Berl. Sach. 174-176: 25 memre; Ms. Vat. Syr. 588: 20 memre; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594: 17 memre.<sup>38</sup>

In 1905 A. Mingana, of the Dominican Mission in Mosul, published two volumes of Narsai's Homilies, containing 47 Homilies in all. To these are added ten short poems called Soghyatha, of which only the first one is considered by Mingana as authentic: it is, in fact, the only one that bears any resemblance to Narsai's style.<sup>39</sup>

In his introduction Mingana included also a fragment of the Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba, which is of prime importance for the

---

<sup>36</sup>Wright, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

<sup>37</sup>E. Y. Joseph, Marganeetha by Mar Abhdisho Bar-Brikha, (Mosul: 1924), pp. 69-70.

<sup>38</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>39</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. ix.



history of the two Schools, and deals with the establishment of the Edessene and Nisibean Schools by Narsai, and with its successors.<sup>40</sup>

According to Mingana, the text of the two volumes of Homilies is based on the manuscripts in Berlin, Rome, and Urmia, in the office of the Chaldean Patriarch in Mosul (the seat of the Patriarch is now in Baghdad), and in the Monastery of Rabban Hormzid near Mosul.<sup>41</sup> Of the 47 Homilies only Nos. I, II, IV, V, X, XVIII, XX, XXI, XXIV, and XXVII are found in the Berlin manuscript, which contains only 24 Homilies.<sup>42</sup>

F. Martin has edited and translated into French the Homily on the three doctors--Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius. Although this Homily is considered by scholars to be authentic, Mingana did not include it in his edition.<sup>43</sup>

Both A. Scher and Voobus believe that the commentaries on the individual books of the Bible enumerated above never existed separately, but are included in the 360 Homilies. Voobus tells us that

Barhadbeshabba of Holwan--who does not neglect data about the literary creation--says that Narsai produced many homilies and other works, but he is silent about any commentaries. The same is true of (the other) Barhadbeshabba, though he is more talkative and tells us more about Narsai's works. This silence is most conspicuous. The more so, because both authors in discussing the literary creation of

---

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>42</sup>Connolly, op. cit., p. xi.

<sup>43</sup>Martin, op. cit., pp. 446-499.



Narsai's successors, explicitly name the commentaries on the biblical books. Consequently no other explanation is possible than this--these earliest witnesses had not heard anything about the existence of such commentaries and these were men certainly who possessed knowledge about these things.<sup>44</sup>

The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba also states that Narsai composed 300 Homilies and other works, but does not tell us about the commentaries on the individual books of the Bible as separate from the 360 Homilies.<sup>45</sup> The most convincing proof that Narsai never wrote such commentaries separately from his Homilies is the fact that no trace of them is extant. We may assume therefore that the list given by Abhdisho Bar-Brikha of Narsai's Biblical commentaries is identical with (or is included in) the 360 Homilies, and had not existed separately. On the other hand, Mingana interprets Abhdisho's list to mean that Narsai had composed commentaries separately from his Homilies, but they were then lost in the course of a century.<sup>46</sup>

R. H. Connolly has translated into English four liturgical Homilies of Narsai's with an introduction, and with an appendix by Edmund Bishop. The Homilies are:

1. Homily XVII--Exposition of the Mysteries.
2. Homily XXII--Baptism.
3. Homily XXI--The Mysteries of the Church and Baptism.
4. Homily XXXII--The Church and the Priesthood.

---

<sup>44</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., p. 69-70.

<sup>45</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

Two dissertations have been written on Homily XLI--The story of Joseph--the first by V. Grabowski in 1889, and the second by M. Weyl in 1901. Homily XXXVIII--The Function of the Angels--was translated into German by P. Kruger in 1952.

The following Homilies from Mingana's Edition are analyzed here:

1. Narsai's Philosophical Conception of Creation: Part I:
  - a. Homily XXIX--Creation of Adam and Eve and Their Transgression of the Commandment.<sup>47</sup>
  - b. Homily XXXIV--Creation and the Eternity of God.<sup>48</sup>
  - c. Homily XXXV--Preparation of the Creation.<sup>49</sup>
  - d. Homily XXXVI--The same<sup>50</sup>
2. Narsai's Philosophical Conception of Creation: Part II:
  - a. Homily XXXVII--Creation of the Angels.<sup>51</sup>
  - b. Homily XXXVIII--Function of the Angels.<sup>52</sup>
3. Narsai's Philosophical Conception of Creation: Part III:
  - a. Homily XXXIX--Soul and Body.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 100-113.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 168-180.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 180-192.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 193-207.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 207-222.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 222-237.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 238-254.



4. Homily II--God's Manifestations to the Men of the Bible.<sup>54</sup>
5. Homily I--God's New Dispensation to Abraham.<sup>55</sup>
6. Homily XLI--Story of Joseph.<sup>56</sup>
7. Homily XI--Ascension of Elijah to the Land of Eden.<sup>57</sup>
8. Homily VIII--God's Message to the City of Nineveh as a Symbol of the Salvation of the Gentile World.<sup>58</sup>
9. Homily XXXI--Explanation of the Nature and Ministry of the Seraphim.<sup>59</sup>

The following printed Homilies are excluded here, first because they are of a general nature, and second in order not to exceed the limits of this dissertation:

1. Homily XL--Job the Righteous and His Temptation.<sup>60</sup>
2. Homily XLII--The Election of Moses, the Fire in the Bush, and the Deliverance of the Children of Israel.<sup>61</sup>
3. Homily XLIII--Samson the Mighty.<sup>62</sup>
4. Homily XLIV--Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.<sup>63</sup>
5. Homily III--God's Manifestations to Abraham.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., I, pp. 29-56.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., I, pp. 1-28.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 265-288.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., I, pp. 188-194.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 134-149.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 131-144.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 254-264.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 288-302.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 303-314.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 314-328.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., I, pp. 57-68.

The following Homilies whose text is still unpublished are analyzed here on the basis of manuscripts:

1. Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 253a-257a, Homily on the Benediction of Noah--obtained in microfilm from the Museum. It is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 339a-347b; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 300a-308b; Ms. Vat. Syr. 588, fol. 86a-90a.<sup>65</sup>

2. Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 257a-262a, Homily on the Tower of Babel--obtained in microfilm from the Museum. It is also found in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 347b-357b; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 308b-318b; Ms. Vat. Syr. 588, fol. 90a-95a.<sup>66</sup>

3. Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 204a-211a, Homily on the Brazen Serpent in the Desert--obtained in photocopy from Selly Oak College Library. It is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 603, part II, fol. 78a-86a; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 52a-56a; Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 199b-203b.<sup>67</sup>

4. Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 270a-275b, Homily on David and Saul--obtained in microfilm from the Museum. It is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 365a-375b; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 326a-336b; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 1b-7a.<sup>68</sup>

5. Ms. Brit. Orient. 5463, fol. 275b-279a, Homily on the Wisdom of Solomon--obtained in microfilm from the Museum.

---

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 74.



It is also found in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 375b-383a; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 336b-344a; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 7a-10b.<sup>69</sup>

6. Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 48a-58a, Homily on the Elevation of Enoch and Elijah--obtained in photocopy from Selly Oak College Library, Birmingham, England. It is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 603, part II, fol. 55a-66a; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 55a-66a; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 23b-29a; Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 247b-253a.<sup>70</sup>

The following analysis of Narsai's Homilies is based directly on the original Syriac text; none of these Homilies has ever been translated into English, although a few were translated into German and French. We have dealt here with thirteen Homilies which have been printed and six Homilies which are still in manuscript.

We shall attempt in the following analysis of the Homilies to demonstrate that there are numerous materials in Narsai's Homilies on the Old Testament which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology. We have already indicated that Narsai was one of the leading Syriac Fathers, and was a skilled expositor of the Old Testament as well as a profound student of New Testament theology; therefore, he is of the highest importance and a suitable subject for a doctorate investigation.

We shall point out the instances where Narsai drew upon Ephraem's works for his Old Testament interpretation and theology

---

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 74.



and we shall also show with numerous examples how Narsai drew upon the Jewish tradition of his time for his Old Testament exegesis and theology, especially in the Homily on the Story of Joseph. We shall show that there are close similarities between Narsai and Theodore of Mopsuestia in the interpretation of the Book of Jonah. We shall analyze some outstanding passages in his Homilies of importance to the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology, such as his lengthy interpretation of the phrase "Let Us go down" as referring to the Trinity, his interpretation of the four beasts of Daniel as representing the four world empires, etc. We shall discuss in detail some of Narsai's theological doctrines, such as his view of the Trinity, his concept of soul and body, etc. We shall point out that Narsai's Homilies do not contain allegorical elements in the true sense of the word, since he followed the Antiochian exegesis and theology of the Old Testament which held close to grammatical-historical interpretation. We shall point out that Narsai's Homilies reveal that exegesis and theology were highly developed in the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis, that Old Testament exegesis, theology, the science of homiletics, and theological terminology were well established in the Eastern Church in the 4th century, and that these were taken over by the subsequent generations. We shall indicate that Narsai's exegesis and theology were not elementary, but rather highly developed and acutely speculative, even though the Homilies were meant to serve the didactic interest of his audience. We shall repeatedly call



attention to the fact that the most significant element of Narsai's Old Testament exegesis and theology is his mind, because it was his mind that made him great, made his exegesis and theology complex and speculative, and made his exegesis of the Old Testament more extensive than that of Ephraem. We shall show that Narsai was well versed in matters other than the Bible and Christian doctrines, especially Greek science. We shall demonstrate that Narsai was a staunch defender of traditional truth, and followed the traditional interpretation of the Old Testament. We shall indicate that Narsai's Homilies contain hundreds of direct quotations, both nonbiblical and Biblical; the latter often vary from the scriptural text, and therefore cannot be utilized for the textual criticism of the Peshitta. And finally, we shall indicate Narsai's original contributions to Old Testament exegesis and theology; these are so numerous that they cannot be detailed in this introduction, and the reader must refer to each individual Homily.

At the outset of this investigation we would like to explain that the investigation does not attempt to translate the Homilies completely and literally excepting some outstanding passages, but merely to analyze them for their exegetical content. In many places we simply summarize (or reproduce) Narsai's ideas in English, since they are self-explanatory, although the reader must be cautioned that it is often difficult to find English equivalents for



particular Syriac idioms. It is likewise to be understood that our investigation is not meant to be a running commentary on the Homilies, nor a glossary of their terminology; if, occasionally we leaned in that direction, it was merely in order to concentrate on some significant matter which contributes to the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology. We are thus interested only in the total aspect of Narsai's interpretation of the Old Testament, and we leave minor matters to the commentators. Nor have we dealt with the linguistic aspect of the Homilies, since the Syriac language has already been scientifically and grammatically investigated by native scholars such as Thomas Audo. Narsai himself never dealt with linguistic matters in the Old Testament, because his Homilies are really not commentaries like those of Ephraem but rather sermons or lectures, even though they often deal with exegetical matters, and in many places follow the form of a commentary.

In evaluating Narsai's Homilies we shall consider most of the points which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology, excluding only matters which are unimportant or repetitious. We shall constantly endeavor to indicate the similarities between Narsai and other Syriac Fathers, as well as Jewish tradition, and where some detail of a Homily is not compared with Ephraem or someone else, it is to be understood that Narsai stands alone. It is also to be understood that these similarities refer only to original contributions to Old Testament exegesis and theology, and not to mere repetitions of the same biblical traditions; they deal only with aspects that are important



for the investigation of the sources of Narsai's exegesis and theology. Our purpose is to point out, not each and every similarity, but only the more important ones, since complete comparison of Narsai with others is of secondary interest to our main subject; only such similarities are dealt with as serve to show that Narsai had utilized the works of other authors in his Old Testament interpretation.

All Narsai's Homilies were written in the form of sermons or lectures delivered at the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis before his students. They were written with the obvious intention of preserving them for future generations, for Narsai had devoted considerable time to each one of them both stylistically and linguistically, as his system of seven-syllable and twelve-syllable meters shows. We have already stated that Narsai never wrote any commentaries, that is, verse-by-verse treatments of individual biblical books, like those of Ephraem, but we may assume that his 360 Homilies had covered most of the biblical material, for though composed in the form of sermons, they nevertheless contain much exegetical material. As a matter of fact, in some places Narsai explains biblical passages by way of formal commentary, especially in the Homilies devoted to the creation story, where he discusses the biblical narrative more systematically. In this connection Vööbus suggests that Narsai took no satisfaction in mere exegesis:

It is highly interesting to find a cycle among the many memre which deals more or less freely with the biblical episodes and narratives. This is a genre which attracts our special attention. Its most



interesting exponent is a memra entitled: "On the Creation of Adam and Eve and on the Transgression of the Commandment." It actually presents a commentary of a section of Genesis. Through using poetic form, Narsai here enters the terrain of biblical exegesis, giving an interpretation of the running text step by step.<sup>71</sup>

Another memra under the title, "On the Creation of the World," further illustrates Narsai's method of biblical exegesis. The greater part of the text embedded in this memra is actually a commentary upon the third chapter of Genesis.<sup>72</sup>

It is obvious that Narsai's Homilies contain many repetitions, but these are sometimes significant in clarifying his ideas more fully.

In the following analysis we have treated each Homily separately, except the four Homilies on creation, XXIX and XXIV-XXXVI, which we combined into one chapter covering the first three chapters of Genesis, and the two Homilies, XXXVII-XXXVIII, which have been here merged into one chapter devoted to the creation and function of the angels. These two combinations seemed desirable, since Narsai sometimes discusses material pertinent to the same subject in more than one Homily. The remaining Homilies have been treated more or less consecutively, and as fully as possible, often including almost every sentence, especially in the case of the unpublished Homilies, except for the exclusion of repetition and otherwise unimportant matters.

As already stated, Narsai's exegesis and theology followed the Antiochian School, in consequence of the introduction of the translated works of Theodore of Mopsuestia into the Schools of

---

<sup>71</sup>Vöðbus, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.



Edessa and Nisibis, and Narsai himself acknowledges his debt to Theodore's commentaries. We shall also repeatedly point out in each Homily the similarities between Narsai and Ephraem, similarities so striking that in many places Narsai's interpretation and Ephraem's are almost identical. According to the Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba, Ephraem's commentaries were used in the School of Edessa before they were replaced by Theodore's commentaries. Narsai thus drew upon Ephraem's material for his Old Testament exegesis and theology, but he treats the subject more extensively than Ephraem and has his own ideas, especially on the way the subject is presented and on the details of the interpretation. There are, however, also occasional dissimilarities between Narsai and Ephraem. In many places in the Bible Ephraem merely follows the biblical tradition with general comments, without offering any original ideas, while Narsai treats these same passages very extensively and offers many original ideas. Some Homilies are in fact wholly original, for example, the Homilies on the creation and function of angels, on soul and body, on the brazen serpent, etc.

We shall now briefly summarize some of the similarities between Narsai and Ephraem which will be explained in greater detail in the individual Homilies. For instance, concerning the "Let us go down" (Gen. 11:7) Ephraem says merely that it refers to the Trinity; Narsai not only says the same thing, but also discusses it at great length.



According to Narsai, matter is not eternal but was created by God; only the three persons of the Trinity are eternal. He repeatedly emphasizes that all creation was created out of nothing, and so does Ephraem.

All three persons of the Trinity took part in the creation of man, and were made known to mankind through the creation of Adam. Ephraem agrees with Narsai in that the Trinity was made known to mankind in this manner.

God created the world in the evening, and in the morning revealed the atmospheric veil over it; Ephraem agrees in that heaven and earth were created in the evening. Let us remember that the Bible does not precisely tell us at what time of the day the world was created.

The phrase "the spirit of God" (Gen. 1:2) signifies the wind rather than the actual divine spirit; this agrees with Ephraem.

The firmament is a solid mass created by God. Ephraem too states that the firmament is a created object.

The serpent tempted Adam and Eve to draw near the tree and to eat of its fruit, that they might see the light and immediately attain to the power of wisdom, the same as gods. Eve was finally induced by the devil to eat of that fruit, and gave it to her husband. She pressed her mouth to the fruit, intending thereby to take hold of the Ineffable Name, so as to acquire a rank above her husband and thus become head of the family. Ephraem agrees with Narsai on this latter point.



In the Homily on soul and body there are several striking similarities between Narsai and Ephraem, especially as to the unconscious state of the soul after it is separated from the body, and the righteous souls' abiding in Paradise in the land of Eden. Both Narsai and Ephraem, as well as the other prominent Syriac Fathers, believe that the soul cannot remain in a conscious state outside the body, nor can the body endure without the soul; the souls of the righteous are kept in Paradise in an unconscious state until the Day of Resurrection, when the soul will again be united with the body, so that man will become conscious once more. It is thus evident that Narsai had followed Ephraem and the other Syriac Fathers in these doctrines, although he introduces some new ideas of his own, and treats the subject more extensively.

Not only does Narsai make some original contributions to the concepts of soul and body, but the way in which he approaches them is also different from Ephraem's even though his basic idea is the same. Narsai also discusses some aspects of soul and body which do not concern Ephraem, especially the details of the functioning of the soul in the human body while it is living.

According to Narsai and Ephraem, the soul, even though created by God, is mortal. It came into existence only at the time of the creation of man. Unlike many theologians and philosophers who believed in the immortality of the soul, Narsai and Ephraem hold that only God is immortal.



The teaching of Narsai, Ephraem, and other Syriac Fathers regarding the unconsciousness of the soul after its separation from the body is in accord with the Old Testament, since the Bible plainly states that the dead in their graves have no consciousness. The idea of the souls of the righteous being kept in Paradise, however, is contrary to the biblical concept. The Book of Ecclesiastes, for example, tells us that man's body returns to the dust of the earth, while his spirit returns to God. Other Old Testament passages tell us accordingly that the dead in their graves cannot praise the Lord.

The soul of Christ and the soul of the thief who was crucified with him were the first to enter Paradise in the land of Eden, and thus prepared the way for all the other souls. Narsai does not tell us, however, where the souls of the dead were kept before the day of the Crucifixion, when Christ opened the gate of Paradise for all souls.

Job was "the son" of Esau, but Narsai does not tell us whether he was a direct son or distant descendant. Jewish tradition holds that Job was Esau's grandson, while Ephraem says that he was his descendant. The likelihood is that both Narsai and Ephraem had drawn here upon rabbinic sources.<sup>73</sup>

Narsai does not tell us exactly who the man was who met Joshua with the heavenly army (Josh. 5:13-15), but he believes that he was a heavenly being; Ephraem says that he was an angel.

---

<sup>73</sup>The apocryphal appendix to Job in the LXX. clearly states that Job was Esau's grandson.



Narsai marvels at the strange revelation received by Hosea, commanding him to marry two adulterous women, whose misconduct would symbolize the iniquity of two generations of Israelites. Ephraem agrees with Narsai in regarding the two women as symbols of Israelites who had wrought evil against the Lord.

Joel saw not real grasshoppers, locusts, and cankerworms, but only the destruction wrought by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Grasshoppers and locusts represent the Assyrian Empire, and cankerworms the Babylonian Empire, both of which smote and devastated the land of Israel. Ephraem too interprets the three species of insects as representing the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires. We may assume that here Narsai followed Ephraem.

Zechariah included all kinds of revelations in his prophecies, and saw the image of these visions in his mind. He spiritually saw the chariots with their riders, sent down to destroy the nations who had subjugated the children of Israel. Ephraem too thinks that the chariots were aimed at these nations. By the two olive branches Zechariah meant priesthood and kingship, standing to the right and to the left, and here too Ephraem agrees with Narsai. The flying scroll manifests the decree of judgment upon all the nations of the world, and the horns signify the abolition of the primacy of the Hebrew royal line. Ephraem agrees with Narsai in that the flying scroll symbolizes the destruction of the world.

Traditionally both Christians and Jews interpreted the four beasts in Daniel 7 as representing the four world empires, in this



order: the lion symbolizes the Babylonian Empire, the bear the Persian Empire, the leopard the Greek Empire, and the fourth beast the Roman Empire. According to Narsai, however, the lion represents the Babylonian Empire, the leopard symbolizes Cyrus, the head of the Persian Empire, the bear signifies the Median Empire, and the fourth beast is the Greek Empire. Ephraem's interpretation is almost identical with Narsai's in that the lion represents the Kingdom of Babylon, the bear the Kingdom of Darius, the ruler of the Medians, the leopard the Kingdom of the Persians, and the fourth beast the Kingdom of Alexander the Great, ruler of the Greeks. Ephraem, however, compares these four beasts with the great image in Daniel 2, whereas Narsai does not. Narsai thus follows Ephraem in his identification of the four world empires, but differs from him in the order of two of the beasts, inasmuch as he places the Median Empire represented by the bear after the Persian Empire symbolized by the bear.

Narsai offers some interesting interpretations of the two archangels Michael and Gabriel. Both Narsai and Ephraem identify these two heavenly beings as angels. Let us recall here that in the Old Testament Michael and Gabriel are mentioned only in the Book of Daniel. We may therefore assume that both Narsai and Ephraem were influenced by Jewish tradition in identifying Michael as an angel, although Narsai has his own ideas about these two angels.

In the Homily on God's new dispensation to Abraham there are noticeable similarities between Narsai and Ephraem in the



interpretation of Abraham's sacrifices--the three cut-up animals and the undivided birds mentioned in Genesis 15. According to Narsai and Ephraem, these animals represent the 400 years of the Hebrew bondage in Egypt and Israel's deliverance by the mighty hand of God. Here again, however, Narsai offers some ideas of his own and treats the subject more extensively than Ephraem.

Through the sacrifice of the three animals the Lord made known to Abraham the mark of His love, and through these animals He revealed to him His future plans for his seed. Abraham was bidden to take three animals--a calf three years old, a ram three years old, and a she-goat three years old--to fulfill the promise of His words. Ephraem too thinks that God revealed the future of Abraham's seed by way of these sacrificial animals.

By means of these animals the Lord let Abraham know the future subjection of his seed in Egypt and their ultimate division into twelve tribes, symbolized by the cutting of the three animals. Ephraem too thinks that the three animals represent the Hebrew bondage in Egypt, that the cutting of the animals into pieces signifies the division of Abraham's seed into twelve tribes, and that the undivided birds indicate the national unity of these tribes.

Narsai offers a strange description of the sacrifice miraculously provided by God as a substitute for Isaac, drastically differing from the way the Bible describes this sacrifice. Ephraem agrees here with Narsai, and we may assume that Narsai followed him; but here once more Narsai has some ideas of his own. Both Narsai



and Ephraem agree that Isaac and his substitute sacrifice symbolize Christ and his death.

The divine message to the city of Nineveh is a symbol of the salvation of the Gentile world, climaxed in Christ, both Narsai and Ephraem agree. We may assume that Narsai was influenced by Ephraem in his interpretation of the Book of Jonah, but as we have repeatedly stated before, Narsai has a remarkable ability to create original ideas of his own.

Both Narsai and Ephraem gave two reasons why Jonah was reluctant to undertake the mission to Nineveh: first, he did not want to be considered a false prophet; second, he was afraid that the nation of Israel would be deprived of its special inheritance.

There are striking similarities between Narsai and Ephraem in their interpretation of the expression "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3), which signifies, according to both of them, the mystery of the Trinity. We may assume that Narsai borrowed this fundamental idea from Ephraem, but was again able to develop it further. Ephraem also agrees with Narsai in that the revelation received by Isaiah was seen by him only in his mind.

In the verse "come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:7) "us" is interpreted by Narsai as referring to the Trinity, and not to the heavenly beings. Ephraem agrees here with Narsai, but is very brief, while Narsai discusses the matter at length. Most of the early Christian commentators likewise interpret this pronoun as referring to the Trinity.



Ephraem agrees with Narsai in that the brazen serpent symbolizes Christ, but he is again quite brief, while Narsai discusses the episode at some length and offers some original ideas not found in the Bible, in Ephraem, or in Jewish tradition.

Both Narsai and Ephraem believe that Enoch and Elijah were taken to the land of Eden, but Narsai connects their ascension with theology, especially with the doctrine of resurrection, whereas Ephraem does not.

Narsai's borrowings from Jewish tradition seem to have remained unnoticed heretofore, even by Vööbus, who wrote in detail on the life and works of Narsai and on the two Schools. These possible borrowings are indicated in our analysis of each Homily, especially the Homily on the story of Joseph, and in particular the episode of the wife of Potiphar and her infatuation with Joseph. We shall now sum up some of the outstanding similarities between Narsai and Jewish tradition, and here again the reader is advised to refer to each individual Homily for a fuller discussion of the subject.

It is evident from Narsai's Homilies that he had a profound knowledge not only of both the Old and the New Testament but also of Jewish life in his time. Indeed one of his Homilies is devoted entirely to polemics against the Jews, and argues that all of the Old Testament prophets had prophesied about the Christ who was to fulfill by his death the divine plan of the redemption of the whole world.



Narsai offers some interesting explanations of the exaltation of man above all other creatures, and we may assume that for this he drew upon rabbinic sources. On the other hand, he discusses this matter in a philosophical vein, whereas Jewish tradition is here more or less legendary.

Narsai tells us that the angels are not mentioned in the first two chapters of Genesis, but he believes that they were created simultaneously with the rest of creation. It is true that the creation of the heavenly beings is not mentioned either in the creation account or in the rest of the Old Testament, but the Bible occasionally does speak of their ministry in human affairs, and mentions them for the first time in the story of Hagar, when she was cast out by her mistress Sarah. According to Narsai, Moses knew about the creation of the heavenly beings, but was instructed to omit them from the creation story, and the reason why God did not include them in it was that they were created more glorious than all other creatures; God therefore concealed them, so that man should not be led astray by their glory. Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that the angels were created at the same time as the earth.

Where did Narsai and the other Syriac Fathers get the idea that the souls of the righteous, after their separation from their bodies, are kept in Paradise in the land of Eden? One may suggest that they got this idea from the Jewish tradition which has it that all righteous souls pass through the Garden of Eden



where Paradise is located. On the other hand, Ginzberg argues for the possibility that this idea is of Christian origin.

With regard to the visit of the three men to Abraham's tent, the similarities between Narsai and Ephraem are few; on the other hand, there are striking similarities here between Narsai and Jewish tradition, especially as to their being heavenly beings who had assumed human bodies, and the immateriality of the food which Abraham provided for them.

The most puzzling aspect of the Homilies is the question of Narsai's source for his elaborate study of the creation and functions of the angels, since such material is not found in the biblical tradition, even though the Bible occasionally mentions angels as acting in human affairs. We have carefully checked all of Ephraem's Homilies as edited by E. Beck, but found none devoted to this subject. There are, however, some similarities between Narsai and Jewish tradition in regard to angels, and it would seem that Narsai drew upon the Jewish tradition of his time but fitted it into his own Christian and philosophical framework. It is possible, of course, that Narsai had utilized also other sources which are no longer extant or are at least not yet known to us.

Homily XLI is devoted to the story of Joseph, from his childhood to the removal of his father and his brothers to Egypt. Narsai presents some original legends which are not found in the biblical account of Joseph. There are more noticeable similarities here between Narsai and Jewish tradition than between



Narsai and Ephraem, and we shall point them out in our analysis, especially in the episode of the wife of Potiphar and her infatuation with Joseph.

Obviously Narsai did not invent these nonbiblical details, since they are found also in Jewish tradition. It is also plain that both Narsai and Ephraem had drawn upon rabbinic sources in their Old Testament exegesis. Nevertheless, their retellings of these legends are not identical in every point, presumably because legends are not always transmitted in exactly the same form, especially when the transmission is still in its oral stage. We may also assume that some Jewish legends were lost in the course of centuries, and Ginzberg calls our attention to the fact that a number of Jewish works repudiated by the rabbinic Sages were accepted by the Church, so that some Jewish legends were preserved only by the Church Fathers. This Homily likewise contains legends which are not included in the legendary material collected by Ginzberg from rabbinic literature. It seems probable therefore that Narsai had utilized Jewish legends which in his time were still transmitted orally, but were later lost to the Jews themselves.

The story of the wife of Potiphar and her infatuation with Joseph is related by Narsai in great detail, and is not found in the same form in the Bible, but it shows some similarities to Jewish tradition.

Potiphar's wife, we are told by both Narsai and Jewish tradition, painted her eyes with kohl, making them evil with



great brightness, skillfully braided her hair, anointed her body with perfume, and put on golden jewelry, before she came into his presence, shameless in her lasciviousness, clothed in fine white linen and silk, and wearing three necklaces. Placing herself in front of him, she said, "Look at me, Joseph! How beautiful am I, how fair, and how desirable! Take me with you to the house of your father." Thereupon she began to speak without shame, even though her lust would not have been restrained by the presence of others. She said, "Joseph, Joseph, do not despise me because I am your mistress, and do not resent the fact that you are our bonded slave. If you will be persuaded to do my will, as I ask you, I will make you lord over all my riches and all my possessions." Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that the wife of Potiphar promised Joseph to put him in charge of her wealth, just so he would submit to her demands.

According to the legend as related by Narsai, the wife of Potiphar was planning to murder her husband in order to marry Joseph, and so she said to him further:

If you fear Potiphar, the lord of this house,  
I will do it another way, so that you need not fear.  
I will administer poison to him, and kill him where  
he is, and you will then become my husband, lord,  
and heir. I will also tell you another secret, to  
remain between you and me: I have with me a great  
treasure.<sup>74</sup>

Jewish tradition, too, tells us that she was plotting the death of her husband in order to marry Joseph.

Joseph then lifted up his eyes and looked toward heaven, and prayed to God beseeching Him earnestly, saying, "You have

---

<sup>74</sup>See p. 236.



lifted me up from the pit into which Reuben had cast me, and you have delivered me from the sharp sword. You brought me by Your great might to the house of the Egyptian. Arise now and save me from this Egyptian woman." Jewish tradition too tells us that Joseph prayed to God to deliver him from the Egyptian temptress. The phrase "the sharp sword" used by Narsai can be explained only by reference to the Jewish legend, in which we are told that the wife of Potiphar threatened Joseph with a sword to force him to submit to her demands, and that he was miraculously delivered by God from it.

One detail of Narsai's legend varies from Jewish tradition. Narsai states that when Joseph entered his chamber to pray, the wife of Potiphar followed him there. Closing the door, she embraced and kissed him, and weeping implored him, saying,

I love you. See that you do not despise me,  
O son of the Hebrews. But if you will not be per-  
suaded, and will not do my will as I ask you, I  
will confine you in the great dungeon of the  
prison. On the other hand, if you will be per-  
suaded, and will incline your head to my words  
and my entreaty, I will make you chief and lord  
over all the land of Egypt.

Jewish tradition tells us that she took Joseph to her own chamber, where an idol was suspended over her bed, and "this she covered, so that it might not witness what she was about to do." Ephraem is closer here to the Jewish tradition when he says that the wife of Potiphar caused Joseph to enter her bedchamber in order to subdue him. The Bible, let us remember, says merely that



Joseph went into the house to do his work, whereupon she tried to force him to lie with her.

According to Narsai, the ship's sailors acknowledged the true God after they had cast Jonah into the sea, for they saw the sea become calm immediately. Greatly astonished at the power of the Creator, they avowed Him accordingly, and thus unanimously became God's servants. The Bible, on the other hand, says merely that the sailors were terrified by the presence of the Lord, offered sacrifices to Him, and made vows; we are not told that they became His followers. Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in holding that "these miracles induced the ship's crew to abandon idolatry, and they all became pious proselytes in Jerusalem." Possibly Narsai borrowed the detail of the sailors having become servants of God from Jewish tradition, although he greatly differs from it in other aspects of the story of Jonah.

The Jewish tradition concerning the wings of the seraphim in Isaiah 6 differs from Narsai's in that it holds that the wings were used also to utter praise to God, although on the Sabbath they were silent, for on that day God is praised by the inhabitants of the earth. Both Narsai and Jewish tradition agree, however, in that the faces of the seraphim were covered by their wings so that they would not look at the Shekinah.

The only traceable similarities between Narsai and Theodore of Mopsuestia concern likewise the story of Jonah, because most of Theodore's commentaries are lost, and his only extant complete



work in Greek is his commentary on the Minor Prophets. Of his other exegetical writings, we possess only the greater part of his commentary on the Psalms, and a fragment of his commentary on Genesis.

As for Nineveh, when the proper time arrived, Narsai tell us God began to manifest His mysteries in extending the plan of redemption to all the inhabitants of the world. In the beginning God chose one nation to make it the bearer of it, in order that through this nation He might open the treasure house of His mercy to the Gentile world. Ephraem agrees here with Narsai in that the city of Nineveh served as an example for the entire world, and so does Theodore of Mopsuestia.

Jonah, however, chose flight, in order not to be sent to the Ninevites, thinking that his whereabouts would remain unknown, for he wanted to remain in the only land where he thought the voice of revelation is heard, that is the land of Judah. In reality he knew that he could not hide from God. Theodore here agrees with Narsai in that Jonah went off foolishly thinking that he could escape God's attention.

God thereupon buried Jonah in the belly of the great fish in the likeness of the mystery of our Savior. Ephraem says that the episode of the great fish swallowing Jonah forecasts the death of Jesus and symbolizes Christ's burial in the tomb for three days. Theodore agrees with Narsai and Ephraem in regarding Jonah as a forerunner of Christ.

We shall now sum up some of the characteristics of Narsai's exegesis and theology and indicate some of his outstanding



interpretations. For further details the reader is once more referred to our analysis of individual Homilies.

As stated before, Narsai knew the Old Testament to its most minute detail, and seldom erred in his use of the biblical tradition. All Homilies reveal that Old Testament exegesis and theology were highly developed in the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis, and Christian exegesis, theology, and theological terminology were well established in the Eastern Church in the 4th century. We have already stated that Narsai's Homilies were written in the form of sermons or lectures and that these Homilies reveal that the science of homiletics was highly developed. Similar to today's homiletics--they consist of introduction, body, and conclusion. Narsai's own mind is the most significant aspect of his work, a highly developed and highly speculative mind. His imagination delves into the impenetrable mysteries of God and of His creation, the mysterious interrelationship between soul and body, the supernatural nature of the heavenly beings, and the awesome functions of the angels. His speculative mind rises to its highest potential in his treatment of the brazen serpent, in his description of the tempest which seized hold of Jonah, in the dramatic way in which he describes the building and collapse of the tower of Babel, the contest between the two mothers over the living and dead infants, and the tragic moral lapse of David in the affair of Uriah and Bathsheba.

The Homilies reveal that Narsai was well versed not only in biblical tradition and in Christian doctrine but also in the



contemporary scientific knowledge, especially Greek science. Vööbus tells us that at that time many Greek philosophical works were translated into Syriac, such as the works of Aristotle and Porphyry. "This is not all we are allowed to see. The impact of the translation of the Greek philosophical works was commensurate to the significance of this event. It was strong enough to fructify studies in a new sphere of thought, making Aristotelian philosophy the lasting foundation of the theological thought of the Syrians."<sup>75</sup>

Yet while Narsai's exegesis and theology are highly speculative, they remain in harmony with traditional truth and Christian doctrine. As a matter of fact, both Ephraem and Narsai defended this truth and doctrine and engaged in copious controversies with contemporary heretics. For example, in his Homily on the creation of angels Narsai injects a reference to the Manichaeans and the sect of Dezanai, because the Manichaeans believed in two creators, while Dezanai believed in seven creators of the elements; Narsai himself believed of course that creation is the sole prerogative of God. A similar case is the introduction of the heretics into the Homily on the ascension of Enoch and Elijah, which seems somewhat irrelevant to the content of it, although it is possible that these heretics did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Unfortunately Narsai does not mention them by name, and therefore we cannot identify them more clearly. To him these heretics

---

<sup>75</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., pp. 20-21.



were not following the true faith, and he must therefore endeavor to set them aright.

Narsai's Homilies contain hundreds of direct quotations, both biblical ones which vary from the text of the Bible, and others. These quotations cannot, however, be utilized for the textual criticism of the Peshitta, because most of them are borrowed directly from Jewish legends and other sources which do not adhere strictly to the biblical text, while others have been modified by Narsai himself to fit his twelve-syllable and seven-syllable meters. We have included many such direct quotations in our analysis of the Homilies, especially of the Homily on the story of Joseph. These direct quotations were evidently employed by Narsai to influence his readers more effectively. For example, in the Homily on the benediction of Noah, Narsai, strangely enough, suddenly introduces Christ addressing his heavenly Father. To be sure, Narsai does not mention Christ by name, but the style of the address can apply only to Christ, since it refers to the act of creation. Such a device is very common in Narsai's Homilies, however, irrelevant as it may be to them in the particular Homily.

As previously stated in this analysis Narsai's Homilies do not contain allegorical elements in the true sense of the word because he followed the Antiochian exegesis and theology, and all his strange Old Testament interpretations--such as Abraham's sacrifices of the three cut-up animals and the undivided birds mentioned in Genesis 15 representing the 400 years of the Hebrew bondage in



Egypt and Israel's deliverance by God; the phrase "let us go down" which according to him must refer to the Trinity and not to the heavenly beings; Jacob's love for Joseph resembles greatly the love which Christ had for John whom he loved more than all his other disciples; the divine mission to the city of Nineveh is a symbol of the salvation of the Gentile world; his interpretation of the expression "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3) which signifies the mystery of the Trinity; the brazen serpent symbolizes Christ; the translation of Enoch and Elijah symbolizes the final resurrection, etc.--are not necessarily the product of Narsai's own fanciful thinking because some of the early commentators had interpreted the above passages just as did Narsai. In short, our analysis of Narsai's Homilies reveal that his exegesis and theology are in harmony with grammatical-historical interpretation of the Old Testament and Christian teaching.

We have already stated that Narsai followed the principles of the Antiochian exegesis and theology after the works of Theodore were translated and introduced into the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis. It is also evident that the Antiochian exegesis was grammatical-historical (in accordance with grammatical structure of the text and historical context) in contrast to the Alexandrian exegesis which was more or less allegorical as taught by Clement and Origen who were influenced by Philo. Furthermore, Voöbus tells us in the following paragraphs what type of exegesis was employed in the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis, especially during the leadership of Narsai:



Already during the last period of the School of Edessa, the work in biblical exegesis was based on the Antiochian traditions, namely on the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia which were translated into Syriac. Thus the spirit of the exegesis of Theodore became normative for the School of Edessa. Under the directorship of Narsai the Antiochian exegetical tradition was the model. It also was carried over into the School of Nisibis. This tradition was cultivated with love and affection.<sup>76</sup>

This fact can tell us a lot about the nature of the exegetical work as it was carried out in the School of Nisibis. In every way it bore the stamp of the principles of Theodore. In his hermeneutics he felt the need for security and saw the answer for this in a practical, and matter-of-fact method of exegesis. His sense of history and discipline in thinking had compelled him to reject the allegorical method completely. With unusual clarity he has seen the fallacy of that approach: "They, indeed, turn everything backwards, since they wish to make no distinction in the divine Scripture between what the text says (historical) and dream in the night." Thus he substituted a realistic method of exegesis for the highly speculative approach. This was determined by pure grammatical and literary-historical analysis. Theodore carried out his work strictly, methodically and consistently and to the effect that the tropic speech, welcomed by those who want "to fly but do not wish to go on the road," was reduced to the literal meaning, making no allowance for any other meaning of the Scripture. However, he admitted typology as a valid hermeneutical principle.<sup>77</sup>

What has been said just now takes care of the opinion which has been forwarded, namely that the mehageians refers to an office of interpretation of the sacred texts in the spiritual sense. This is not tangible. While in the Hellenistic schools, the exegetical tradition operated on the principle that the literal and historical sense of the sacred texts is only a crust which conceals a spiritual sense, which has to be uncovered, the exegetical traditions of the Antiochian provenance have kept close to the historical and literal sense. The spiritual sense was regarded as legitimate only in the texts which were considered allegorical.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup>Voßbus, History of the School of Nisibis, pp. 105-106.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 107.



According to Narsai, God is invisible not only to men but also to the heavenly beings; He manifests Himself only through His works. The universe and its creatures are administered by the heavenly beings under God's overall hegemony. Yet there are laws which govern God's creation. The act itself of creation is God's prerogative, as is His grant to man of freedom of the will.

This angel, (Narsai tells us), does not determine the length of life or the shortness of time; he has power neither to add an hour nor to subtract an hour. He does not administer man's life by compulsion, for he is unable to compel him, to make him good, or to make him evil. Man, like angels, possesses freedom of the will; he is free to sin or to be justified as a discerner. The freedom of man's soul is unlimited, and the soul is not subjected to compulsion while the man is living.<sup>79</sup>

Narsai tells us once more in the episode of Jacob's love for his children: man, as a rational being, has a free will, and through his free will may choose or reject whomsoever he wishes. Truly nature is one, but there is no oneness of will. The will of Jacob's soul made him change the oneness of his will, and it was the power of his will which made him hate the one son and love the other. God gave man's nature great power of discernment, and this discernment, like a charioteer, guides man wherever he wishes to go. The power of our will should compel us through the power of God's will, and guide us to the haven of peace.

According to Narsai, Enoch and Elijah were taken bodily into Paradise in the land of Eden, and they will remain there until

---

<sup>79</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 229.



they receive their final reward when God establishes His eternal kingdom.

Both God and the heavenly beings are incorporeal; the three men who visited Abraham in his tent did not have a physical appearance, for they were incorporeal, even though the Bible clearly describes them as physical beings. Accordingly the food which Abraham prepared for them was also immaterial. According to Narsai, the seraphim in Isaiah 6 likewise were incorporeal, and the entire scene was immaterial; Isaiah saw the vision in his mind, not with his eyes, and so the fire, the glowing coal, and the tongs of fire were also immaterial.

So also the chariot and the horses which carried Elijah to the land of Eden were incorporeal. The chariot itself was not made of fire, nor were the horses material beings possessed of senses, since the whole vision was immaterial. The sight of the fire and the appearance of the horses were incorporeal, just as God and all heavenly beings are incorporeal, and therefore invisible to the sight of man. Thus the taking of Elijah by the tempest was revealed to Elisha only in a vision, and not in actual fact.

Jacob did not actually see the ladder with his eyes, for it is impossible for a human being to see the Lord and His spiritual beings. It was a vision which showed only the ways of action and the implications of the descending and ascending. God's being is invisible to spectators, and they cannot behold the invisibility of God.



The chariot seen by Ezekiel (chap. 1) was likewise immaterial, and so were its wheels and the animals which drew it. Ezekiel saw it all spiritually. God's voice too is inaudible not only to earthly men but also to heavenly beings. Although God's voice is thus imperceptible, He manifests the power of His mystery through His actions. Through His actions the heavenly beings saw the hidden God and were relieved of fear and of inquiry into His mystery.

Narsai raises the significant point that Noah's prophecy of Ham becoming the servant of Shem and Japheth was in fact not fulfilled, since Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, was granted primacy and kingdom and called "a mighty hunter before the Lord." The Egyptians and the Canaanites, likewise descendants of Ham, were also not subjugated, indeed they subjugated other nations, including even the Israelites, both in the land of Egypt and in Canaan.

According to Narsai's interpretation, after the flood the people built the tower of Babel in the hope that no future flood could rise high enough to submerge it. They armed themselves with this opinion as with a weapon in order to wage war in heaven against the Creator. These stupid men thus thought three things which led them to the belief that they would be victorious. First, they thought that they would escape future floods. Secondly, they thought that they would hold an armed contest in heaven with the Creator. Thirdly, they thought that in this contest they would triumph, thereby proving pride victorious on earth.

Narsai's Homilies reveal that he did not believe in the doctrine of predestination, on the ground that God had given the



power of choice to all His creatures, as illustrated by the case of Saul and David, whose fate was determined by their own freely chosen conduct.

Narsai presents to us a new method of atonement different from that prescribed in Mosaic law, through the mystery of the coal of fire. Narsai thus stands alone in his interpretation of the coal of fire. He raises some questions regarding the new order that God manifested through one of the seraphim to Isaiah, in which he differs drastically from the expositions offered by others of the purpose of the coal of fire.

Narsai asks, Why did the watcher grasp the fire with the tongs, and not with his hand? Why did he take fire from the altar of the sacrifices? Narsai reminds us that sacrifices were used for purification. Fire was never used for purification in the Mosaic law. The Israelites were purified through animal sacrifices. Why did not the watcher also take some of the sacrifice and bring it near to Isaiah? Since blood of calves was used in atoning for defilement of the soul, why did not the watcher sprinkle blood on Isaiah's mouth, and thus expiate his iniquities? We never hear of fire being sprinkled upon members of the human body. Such atonement was not prescribed in the law, and there is nothing in it which resembles the procedure transmitted by Moses. Moses and Aaron used to sprinkle blood not on the sinner's mouth but on his ears and thumbs.

It was thus a new thing that the seraph performed upon Isaiah; and there is no thing like it in all order of the law. Let the



priests among the people who always ministered with blood come and explain to us what is this which the watcher performed upon this son of our race. Let the Israelites come and show us what is the power that is hidden in the vision seen by the prophet. Let the priest come and make known to us how iniquity is atoned for through the blood of sacrificial animals. Why did not the spiritual being blot out the iniquity of your brother with blood? Why did he not sprinkle it on his ear or on his thumb, as Moses and Aaron had taught for those who were to offer atonement?

Why did God change the great order which you Jews had observed heretofore? The watcher is teaching you to journey in the way which is invisible to you. There is something hidden in the vision which your prophet saw; or perhaps it is not a mystery, but rather God's way of making a transition from one mystery to another. He preached the mystery through the change of the order; and He marked a straight way for action. God thus manifested the abolition of the sacrifices enjoined in the law, as the mystery of the coal of fire indicates.

Narsai considers the Holy Trinity, strictly from the standpoint of creation, and not of theology. He asks, How can the three persons of the Trinity be equal? Let man ponder the eternal nature of the Trinity--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Can he do it? The answer is no. The Trinity is incomprehensible to man, and it is proper for human beings to think of it only in the spirit of love. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one



substance or essence. The attribute of time does not apply to the Trinity, nor are the three persons of it separated from one another by any difference. It is only given to creatures to comprehend the extent of their equality. The Persons of the Trinity are one in nature, one in power, and one in will. The Father is not prior to the Son or to the Holy Spirit. They are one because of the order of their names; they are not separated by any cut-off or separation, but only in name and number. The Son and the Holy Spirit are without beginning. The Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father. Although the Holy Spirit flows from the Father, He is not named His Son. All three persons of the Trinity are manifested metaphorically in our soul. The Son and the Holy Spirit stem from the Father, just as word and life stem from the soul. With the soul are born power and life, and in the same way the other two persons of the Trinity are with the Father.

God's Being is without beginning, His Lordship is without end. God's creatures are limited in time, but there is no time with God. God's Being cannot be comprehended by His creatures. His eternal Being is immeasurable; He antecedes creation. According to Narsai, matter is not eternal, but was created by God, only the three persons of the Trinity are eternal. Narsai repeatedly asserts in his Homilies on creation that all creation was created out of nothing and so does Ephraem.

Narsai continues to explain that God is eternal; there never was any time when He was not. The three persons of the Trinity are



one in power. The Father is perfect; He begot the Son without suffering. The Son is from Him and like Him. There is no interval of time between Him and the Father. The Son was with His Father from the days of eternity. Because He was with the Father, there is no thought of time to the Son. He is with the Father, just as brightness is with fire, for there is no fire without brightness.

The Son is in the Father; there is no Father without Son, nor Son without Father. The Son has no substance without the Father. The image of the Son resembles the image of the Father. The Father did not name the Son, nor did the Son name the Father. The difference in their names is because they manifest the several persons of the essence. The Holy Spirit is such a person stemming from the Father; he is equal with Him in all things, just like the Son. The three persons of the Trinity are thus equal in essence.

A. Mingana, the editor of this Homily, notes at this point that the Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son, but from the same beginning; Ephraem formulates this idea in a different way; the Father begot the Son who is begotten, while the Holy Spirit proceeded from both Father and Son.

Narsai utilizes the example of the sun to prove the unity of the Trinity. Although the three persons of the Trinity are three in name, they are, like the sphere of the sun, inseparable in essence. The sun's light and heat are likewise inseparable, even



though they perform different functions. In their nature the sphere of the sun and its rays are one. Thus, the sphere of the sun, its light and its heat are known to be three, yet are inseparable. The sphere of the sun is never seen without its rays, and its rays do not cease issuing from its bosom without its heat. The sun's radiance emerges out of its bosom, like a child out of its mother's womb, yet so also its heat dwells in the sun, yet goes out of it without change.

In the four Homilies on the story of Creation Narsai offers us some ideas regarding the heavenly beings. The Bible itself has little to say about the spiritual beings, but Narsai's philosophical frame of mind leads him to speculate upon the nature of these beings, who serve God's purpose in administering His creation and His creatures, and he refers to them again elsewhere. Although he was influenced by Jewish tradition and other sources in respect to these heavenly beings, his general treatment of them is his own.

By creating Adam first God indicated that he was to be head of the family, and that Eve was to be second and completely subservient to him. She was equal to Adam in nature, but inferior in creation as well as in power; therefore, Adam was the head, whereas she was the feet.

Through the tree the veil was uncovered from man's mind, and through the desire for the fruit the freedom of man's will was made known. According to Narsai, man's discernment or freedom of will



had been dormant, but when he ate of the fruit, his discernment and free will were realized.

According to Narsai, Adam and Eve dwelt in the Garden of Eden no longer than approximately one day. On the selfsame day they sinned by eating of the fruit of the tree and were expelled from the Garden. They were created in the morning, and nine hours later they were rebuked by the Creator. Let us remember at this point that the Bible does not tell us how long Adam and Eve had remained in their state of innocence.

Narsai goes on to say that before their sin both Adam and Eve were the heirs to the dwelling place of Paradise, but in the cool of the day they were removed to another place. On the day they were created they ate, sinned, and were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Abel was a herder of sheep, and Cain was a tiller of the soil. Both of them offered the first fruits of their labor to God. Abel offered a lamb to the Lord, and his will was with his offering, while Cain offered the Lord grass of the earth, and did not mingle his will with it.

Narsai tells us that on Mount Sinai it was an angel who ministered and not the Lord Himself and revealed an astonishing sight to the spectators. Everything which was disclosed on Mount Sinai was God's manifestations--there was nothing which was not His. St. Paul testifies that it was an angel who handed down the law of Moses, whereupon Moses expounded the ways of the law in the ears of the people of Israel.



Narsai goes on to tell us that God transmitted His message to His people in every generation by appointing as His messenger an angel variously called Michael or Azazel. Michael occurs only in the Book of Daniel (10:13, 21; 12:1) as a spiritual being. Azazel is mentioned in the Book of Leviticus as the name of the scapegoat which was sent away into the wilderness. Azazel was thus not considered an angel in the Bible; Jewish tradition, on the other hand, has it that Azazel was one of the fallen angels.



## I. PUBLISHED TEXTS

### CHAPTER I

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTION OF CREATION Creation in General

Narsai devotes five of his Homilies to creation: XXXIV, Creation and the eternity of God; XXV-XXXVI, Preparation of creation; XXIX, Creation of Adam and Eve and their transgression of the commandment; XXXVII, Creation of the angels. Homily XXXVIII, Function of angels, has some connection with Homily XXXVII. We shall endeavor to combine the four aforementioned Homilies of Narsai--XXIX and XXXIV-XXXVI--into one chapter devoted to the story of Creation as set forth in the first chapters of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> Narsai discusses material pertinent to the same subject or aspect in different places in these four Homilies; we shall, therefore, try to put all such material together, in order to supply the reader with a full discussion of that subject, rather than deal with it piecemeal. For example, we shall put together in logical order all material dealing with the Serpent (or Satan), gathered from different places in these four Homilies.

Homilies XXXVII-XXXVIII, on the creation and function of angels, will be discussed here in a separate chapter, because they are not a part of the creation story, even though Narsai includes them in it. In this connection it should be recalled that the Bible does not mention the creation of angels, although

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*, II, Homily XXIX, pp. 100-113; Homilies XXXIV-XXXVI, pp. 168-207.



it does give us occasionally an account of their ministry in human affairs.

In these four Homilies on creation, Narsai not only offers us interesting interpretations of many aspects of creation--such as the fall of Satan and his assuming the form of the Serpent in order to tempt Adam and Eve, the concept of the material nature of the firmament, the exaltation of man, etc.--but takes us also into the metaphysical world, where he tells us about the mystery of the Trinity and of the heavenly beings. As we have repeatedly stated in the course of our analysis of Narsai's Homilies, his philosophical speculations are of great interest. We may assume that Narsai frequently utilized Ephraem's exegesis as well as Rabbinic sources in his interpretation of the Old Testament, but he also has the ability to create his own ideas.

We will thus endeavor to include in the discussion of these four Homilies most of the facts which pertain to the history of Old Testament exegesis, and to exclude unimportant points and repetitions. We shall exclude also the last part of Homily XXIX, in which Narsai discusses the battle between Cain and Abel, because this event is not an integral part of the creation story,<sup>2</sup> and shall instead place it with Homily II where Narsai discusses it once more.

As we shall see later on, there are in these Homilies on creation striking similarities between Narsai and Ephraem, and

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., II, XXIX, pp. 110-113.



he also often drew upon Rabbinic sources for his exegesis, especially in his interpretation of the solid mass of the firmament, the exaltation of man, etc. Where possible we have consistently endeavored to indicate such similarities in Narsai, Ephraem, and Jewish tradition as are evident from the texts; wherever any passage in the Homilies is not compared with Ephraem or Jewish tradition, it is to be understood that there, so far as we can ascertain, Narsai stands alone in his interpretation. It is also to be understood that these similarities refer only to original contributions to Old Testament exegesis, not to mere repetitions of the same biblical traditions, as well as to aspects that are important for the investigation of the sources of Narsai's exegesis. Our purpose is to point out not each and every similarity but only important matters, since comparison between Narsai and other Syriac Fathers is of secondary interest to our main subject. It is likewise to be understood that this investigation does not attempt to translate Narsai's Homilies literally, but merely to evaluate them for their exegetical significance. In many places we simply reproduce Narsai's ideas in English because they are self-explanatory, although the reader must be cautioned that it is often difficult to find equivalents for Syriac idioms. And finally, our investigation is not a running commentary on the Homilies of Narsai, but merely concentrates on significant matters in the Homilies which contribute to the history of Old Testament exegesis.



Narsai says that he was told that Moses had written the Book of Genesis first, before the rest of the five books of the Pentateuch. Ephraem also believes that Moses wrote the Book of Genesis first.<sup>3</sup> Moses' authorship is marked by the five initial letters of the first verse in each book of the Pentateuch. We may thus deduce that Narsai followed Jewish tradition in regard to the authorship and the names of the individual Books of the Pentateuch. These five letters were hewed out by the spirit, just as an iron chisel hews stone. God built upon them a house great in both height and depth, and prepared the words which Moses wrote in his five books as carefully as a physician compounds a healing medicine.

Narsai comments that Moses opened to us a treasure house in his prophecy. Creation is the prerogative of God; it is a mystery. The Creator desired to make known only the work of creation to His creatures. When Moses was on Mount Sinai, he longed to see the nature of God, but God told him plainly that mortal man could not see Him. God's nature is thus beyond the sight of spectators.

Moses was summoned by God to reveal to him some aspects of His mystery. Through Moses God desired to manifest His eternal Being and His creation. Immediately, Moses began to preach the power of the Creator.

God created all creation in due time. God created heaven and earth not for His own satisfaction, but in consequence of His

---

<sup>3</sup>R. M. Tonneau, Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et Exodum Commentarii, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Tom. 71-72), (Louvain: 1955), p. 9.



great love. The Creator is good in His very nature; it is full of good things. The Lord is pleased with the fruits of His goodness. Through His works God manifested His power to His creatures, and the creatures learned of the Creator through the act of creation.

God created many creatures which were invisible to Moses. He created the image of the world, and placed it before the spectators, so that they might examine it. Having formed the creatures, He shaped the image of the Creator's name, and then manifested the King's order to the King's servants, and lifted up the veil of the gate to the kingdom. As a foundation of creation, God established the word "beginning," the initial word of the Book of Genesis. Narsai raises here the question whether the Creator became before creation, or creation before the Creator, and answers it by maintaining the priority of God, for we know the origin of creation as described in Genesis, while it has been well established that the Creator is without beginning or end, and remains forever in the order of His perpetuity.

Narsai goes on to say that man's mind can only perceive the fact of God's existence--man cannot project his mind into God's impenetrable mystery. Did God close the door against His creatures as far as the investigation of His eternal Being is concerned? The nature of God is invisible to the eyes of His creatures, and in this Theodore of Mopsuestia agrees with Narsai.<sup>4</sup> God's servants should not search for God in satisfaction of man's desire, since

---

<sup>4</sup>E. Sachau, Theodori Mopsuesteni Fragmenta Commentarii in Genesim, (Lipsiae: 1869), p. 3.



they cannot find God by way of rational inquiry, the only way available to them.

God is incorporeal, infinite, invisible, and immutable. God's nature is beyond change. Mere creatures cannot define the immeasurable greatness of God. All things are in Him, by Him, and for Him. Creation is metaphorically full of Him who had created it out of nothing.

God's power upholds the vast universe as it is suspended in space--there is nothing to hold it up there except the power of God. God causes both rational beings and inanimate things to live. The greatness of His power is manifested in His creatures' nature. The creatures proclaim constantly His incomprehensible greatness, and the works of His hands manifest His creative power.

God's work is inconceivable to human creatures, and whenever inquiry into God is undertaken, He remains far the greater. If man endeavors to seek God, he will only grow weary, for God is beyond the human range of understanding. Therefore, let the searcher remain silent, lest he should find himself perplexed in his search for the hidden mystery of God. Let him do no more than acknowledge God's greatness.

Narsai considers the Holy Trinity strictly from the standpoint of creation, and not of theology. He asks, how can the three persons of the Trinity be equal? Let man ponder the eternal nature of the Trinity--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Can he do it? The answer is no. The Trinity is incomprehensible to man, and it is proper for human beings to think of it only in the spirit



of love. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one substance or essence. The attribute of time does not apply to the Trinity, nor are the three persons of it separated from one another by any difference. It is only given to creatures to comprehend the extent of their equality. The Persons of the Trinity are one in nature, one in power, and one in will. The Father is not prior to the Son or to the Holy Spirit. They are one because of the order of their names; they are not separated by any cut-off or separation, but only in name and number.

Narsai goes on to say about the mystery of the Trinity that the Son and the Holy Spirit are without beginning. The Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father. Although the Holy Spirit flows from the Father, He is not named His Son. All three persons of the Trinity are manifested metaphorically in our soul. The Son and the Holy Spirit stem from the Father, just as word and life stem from the soul. With the soul are born power and life, and in the same way the other two persons of the Trinity are with the Father.

God's Being is without beginning, His Lordship is without end. God's creatures are limited in time, but there is no time with God. God's Being cannot be comprehended by His creatures. His eternal Being is immeasurable; He antecedes creation. According to Narsai, matter is not eternal, but was created by God; only the three persons of the Trinity are eternal. Narsai repeatedly asserts in his Homilies on creation that all creation was created out of nothing, so does Ephraem.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., Tom. 71-72, p. 9.



Narsai continues to explain that God is eternal; there never was any time when He was not. The three persons of the Trinity are one in power. The Son is from the Father and like Him. There is no time between Him and the Father. The Son was with His Father from the days of eternity. Because He was with the Father, there is no thought of time to the Son. He is with the Father, just as brightness is with fire, for there is no fire without brightness.

The Son is in the Father; there is no Father without Son, nor Son without Father. The Son has no resemblance without the Father. The image of the Son resembles the image of the Father. The Father did not name the Son, nor did the Son name the Father. The difference in their names is inasmuch as they manifest the several persons of the essence. The Holy Spirit is such a person stemming from the Father; he is equal with Him in all things, just like the Son. The three persons of the Trinity are thus equal in essence.

Eve was made out of Adam; she was not his daughter or sister. Although she was thus part of her husband, she was called woman. God formed in us an example of His Being.

A. Mingana, the editor of this Homily, notes at this point that the Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son, but from the same beginning; Ephraem formulates this idea in a different way: the Father begot the Son who is begotten, while the Holy Spirit proceeded from both.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>T. J. Lamy, Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones, III, (Mechliniae: 1886), p. 229.



Narsai utilizes the example of the sun to prove the unity of the Trinity. Although the three persons of the Trinity are three in name, they are, like the sphere of the sun, inseparable in essence. The sun's light and heat are likewise inseparable, even though they perform different functions. In their nature the sphere of the sun and its rays are one. Thus the sphere of the sun, its light, and its heat are known to be three, yet are inseparable. The sphere of the sun is never seen without its rays, and its rays do not cease issuing from its bosom without its heat. The sun's radiance emerges out of its bosom, like a child out of its mother's womb; so also its heat dwells in the sun, yet goes out of it without change.

So also is it evident that the soul dwells in the members of the body, and is hidden from the sight of man; yet its functions are noticeable in his body. The soul possesses two powers in its nature, which are both in it and outside of it without definite separation. The soul's power spreads over all the senses of the body. The soul's swiftness is not hindered by the body's thickness. Who has ever seen the senses? Who has ever grasped the soul, and successfully inquired into it? In a similar manner, it is an error to inquire into the nature of God. It is by faith alone that we can try to comprehend the nature of the eternal God, guided by our love of Him.

Narsai goes on to comment that the three persons of the Trinity took part in the creation of man--through the creation of



Adam the three persons of the Trinity were made known to us. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that the Trinity was made known to us through the creation of man.<sup>7</sup> The words, "Let us make man in our image," were spoken not to the angels but to the persons of the Trinity. Through the creation of Adam a clear distinction was made concerning the three persons of the Trinity and the equality of their natures. There is affinity between the Trinity and us. God did not create us like animals.

God manifested His creative power in His handiwork and created all things in His wisdom. The Creator's wisdom is inconceivable to man. God created the world full of knowledge; yet no human tongue is able to describe God's workmanship in creation.

Narsai offers us interesting ideas regarding the heavenly beings in these four Homilies on the story of creation. It is evident that the Bible has little to say about the spiritual beings, but Narsai's philosophical speculation travels into the impenetrable mystery of these heavenly beings who serve the purpose of God in administering God's creation and creatures.

God created the heavenly multitudes first, before creation; and created them possessed of power without number; and then numbered them although they are difficult to number by the measurement of man. God taught them that He is the Creator of all. The heavenly multitudes were created in the beginning,

---

<sup>7</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., Tom. 71-72, p. 45.



and for the sake of their instruction God caused His voice to be heard, "Let there be light!" He gathered the heavenly beings to witness the wonders of the creation of the earth.

Narsai tells us that suddenly the trumpet of the Creator's voice was sounded and His sweet voice inspired the spiritual beings with awe. The ranks of the heavenly multitudes proclaimed and blessed the Creator who created beautified light; it gladdened everyone. Through the creation of light they gained understanding of His Being. The Creator caused His voice to be heard in order to teach the spiritual beings the power of His mystery. The Creator's voice which was heard in the beginning was great to them, and taught them that there is only one Creator who has created all things out of nothing. The spiritual beings bowed their necks in perfect order, worshiped the Creator, and sang the praises of the King of heaven. They acknowledged Him for His greatness and goodness.

The multitudes of the spiritual beings stood by to behold the beauty of God's virtues, and could not sufficiently extol the Creator who created light. The occasion of the creation of light was sweet to their minds, but the Creator himself was even sweeter to them than the light. They could not satisfactorily explore the beauty of God's virtues, although God had His handiwork praised through them.

God created light out of nothing according to His pleasure. The heavenly multitudes praised light, as was proper for them to



do; and confessed, worshiped, believed in, and confirmed the power of the Self-Existent. The spiritual beings learned of the power of God's Being through light, and concluded that all things were created by one power.

Narsai goes on to tell us that the ranks of the heavenly beings cried out when they saw this great miracle, and learned of God's creative power through creation. They believed then that the Creator was the only one without beginning. Through the divine command they acquired the power to perform all things, as they were commanded by the Lord, and their multitudes stood over the works of earthly people. God entrusted them with great wealth, and appointed them guardians of mortality. They possessed spiritual power over all things. The Creator strengthened them so that they would give glory to Him and to His works.

When God stretched the power of light over twelve hours, darkness fled. The spiritual beings were amazed in the evening and in the morning, as light moved from one place to another in the same manner as darkness. The rational beings and inanimate things saw an astonishing sight, and perceived a great order through these silent things. They bowed down their necks to carry the yoke of the Creator's name.

The spiritual beings saw a great miracle in the fact that the garment of water carries waters in space and goes up swiftly. They marveled and were astonished at God's workmanship. How did God stretch it over all the corners?



Multitudes of spiritual beings were greatly distressed when they saw the disgrace of Adam, and clothed themselves with sadness that the son of the free had become a son of bondage. In the beginning they rejoiced in his creation, and were glad that their nature was figuratively united with his soul. Now they mourned because death was to rule over Adam and Eve, and were disappointed when they saw his soul separated from his body.

The entire creation mourned at the fallen image of Adam, for the spiritual beings were yoked to him in love, but sin now destroyed the unity between them and Adam. The spiritual beings turned their faces away from him like strangers, and would no longer shake the elements for the maintenance of his life. Even animals rebelled against him, and the creeping things fled and hid themselves in the earth; they despised all his possessions because he had disregarded the word of his Lord. He became in his mind a stranger to the lordship which was granted him by the Creator. Both mute elements and rational beings clothed themselves with mourning because of his fall; the devil alone rejoiced at it.

Through revealed things God taught them the power of His Being, so that they would not grow weary of searching for His mystery. God is hidden from them, and they do not know the greatness of His power. Like a guide, God's command went forth before their multitudes, and drew them to the teaching of the mystery of His love. God revealed His love to them, for He loves His handiwork.



In love He created both the hidden and the revealed things, and without labor God fulfilled His will and manifested His love. God caused His power to dwell in the heavenly power, and strengthened them to keep the order of His creative power.

Narsai offers us some interpretations of the functions of these heavenly powers over His creation, but does not tell us exactly who these powers are, whether they are inanimate powers or heavenly beings.

Narsai goes on to say that God appointed them rulers over His creation, so that they would know how to administer heaven and earth. In great love they fulfilled the will of His love. Willingly they yoked their necks together under His command. God commanded them like a king and arranged them in order by the rank of their powers, and everyone of them stood over the work revealed to him. God commanded one of them to shake up the air, like a commander who orders his army about, so that the air would move the waters above the wind. God desired one of them to cause lightning to flash swiftly, and cause the crash of thunders to be heard loudly. God entrusted to another one the sphere of the sun, to govern through the faculties of his mind, so that night and day run constantly without delay. He committed to a third one the moon with its phases. The stars make men who are possessed of the word wise. Like the rulers of nations, these powers need establish their authority anew every hour.

There are some powers which incite war against the guilty on earth, and there are those which subdue rebellious nations through their allies. There are some which abate the power of evil before



the humble ones. There are some which journey vigorously (vehemently and intensively) through thunder and lightning, and there are some which bring down gentle rain and shadow. And finally, there are some which keep carnal men from deceit.

Narsai goes on to explain that in the evening God created the world, and in the morning revealed the veil over it, and Ephraem agrees with him in that God created heaven and earth in the evening.<sup>8</sup> Let us remember here that the Bible does not tell us the time of the day when the world was created. God created the image of heaven and earth, and exhibited to the rational beings the beauty of creation and of God. Throughout the night the beauty of God's work was uncovered. Both rational beings and inanimate things were silent for twelve hours when the Creator threw stillness over all things. God caused His voice to be heard like a trumpet in all the inhabited world, and the spiritual beings gathered to listen to it. For their sake God caused His voice to be heard, although His voice is otherwise imperceptible. God taught His creatures that He had created all things out of nothing, and invited them to behold the creation of light.

In the beginning the Self-Existent's power adorned heaven and earth. Through His voice God wished to make known His creation, and just as a body is covered with a garment, so did He cover the earth's surface with darkness. Through causality He wished to make known His creation, and for the sake of rationality He deferred His works so that man could understand the work of creation.

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., T. 71-72, p. 11.



The will of His love has first priority for His creatures, and the works of His hands are yoked to Him through His will. God completed and created heaven and earth, a great house, and filled it with great wealth for those who dwell in it. He gathered the waters into seas, a great reservoir, and the waters begot creeping things. The seas were thus the result of the gathering in of the waters by the Creator.

God made a double habitation for His creatures; He created the earth for mortal man, heaped it up, and filled it with goodly fruit useful for the people of the earth; and He also created heaven as a beautiful habitation full of goodly things for the spiritual beings to enjoy spiritually. He created earthly possessions for man, and also promised goodly things to the heavenly beings.

Narsai continues to comment that in the beginning God created heaven, earth, fire, water, darkness, angels, rational beings, and inanimate things. He thus includes the creation of the angels, and we must remember that the Bible does not tell us anything about the creation of the angels. The earth was covered by the waters before it was formed by God into shape for habitation. In the beginning the earth was without form and construction, and was not adorned with vegetation. The wind blew over the waters of the abyss. The phrase "the spirit of God" (Gen. 1:2), according to Narsai, signifies the wind rather than the actual spirit of God, and in this he agrees with Ephraem.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 8.



It was not difficult for God to create; He could have created all creation in one day, but did it in six days for man's sake. He set a definite order for creation. After He created the luminaries--sun, moon, and stars--out of the original light, the multitudes of angels blew their trumpets to give glory to the power of the Creator. It was for this agreement on their part that the Creator looked as He created all things, and that is why He deferred His handiwork, in order to teach His power to all rational beings.

In the beginning God created heaven, earth, angels, waters, darkness, light, and air. In the morning God created light out of nothing. On the second day God created the firmament out of the waters, and made plain that it is easy for God to create out of nothing. On the third day He gathered the waters into seas and made known to them that He is ruler over His creation. On the fourth day He made the light of the sun and of the moon, and showed them how to keep the order of His creative power. On the fifth day God gathered the waters of the earth and caused to grow in them creeping things, and made known that inanimate things also listen to His word. On the sixth day He created the various species of living creatures of the earth, and inspired them to investigate their variations.

God stretched out the heavens in the likeness of a garment above everything, and spread forth the earth as a foundation beneath all things. God made the multitudes of the air with their swiftness of wings which overspread the world. God caused the waters to flow in different directions, and to extinguish fire.



He spread forth darkness over all the world, then made light to replace it.

Light pursued darkness as a mighty man pursues a weaker man, and darkness fled and hid itself in caves in the uttermost parts of the earth. Theodore of Mopsuestia says that light caused the thickness of darkness to be loosed.<sup>10</sup> The watchers marveled at the power of God, who enabled light to drive out darkness. God fortified darkness and drove it away swiftly. When darkness fled from the inhabited world, light reigned in its place upon the earth. Like a bridegroom, darkness lies down in the chamber of height and depth, but it is God who causes the world to be decorated with the beautiful colors of His brightness.

God created the light of the luminaries out of the original light, and divided it into several parts--moon, stars, and sun. He did not fix them immovably in the firmament, in order that their courses should not be hindered. He suspended them like lamps in space, and set the course of their hours in order.

God created luminaries out of the original light, and divided them into sun and moon. God set a boundary of twelve hours to the course of the sun and the moon, and directed the journey of the sun into two corners, in order that the course of the small moon should not be disordered.

God provided a place for the small moon to travel in its course. In the morning the sun shines over us like a bridegroom, and its light gladdens the earth. In the evening the moon changes

---

<sup>10</sup>Sachau, op. cit., p. 3.



its course and journeys like a commander over the darkness which obeys it; it changes its course, enters, and rules. The small moon changes its course once a month about 12 degrees; it ascends and descends, in order that its light should not hinder the great sun.

The firmament, Narsai tells us, is a solid mass created by God. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that the firmament is a created object.<sup>11</sup> Jewish tradition also agrees with Narsai that "This firmament saves the earth from being engulfed by the waters of the heavens; it forms the partition between the waters above and the waters below. It was made to crystallize into the solid it is by the heavenly fire, which broke its bounds, and condensed the surface of the firmament."<sup>12</sup> We may assume that Narsai is influenced here by both Ephraem and Jewish tradition.

Narsai goes on to explain that God commanded that there be a firmament of heaven in the midst of waters, to stand in their midst like a roof above the earth. God created it out of the element of water, and made it solid and able to carry waters above its firmament.

God divided the waters equally--half for the earth, and the other half for the firmament. The elements of fire also are in the firmament, and God gathered the waters above it in order that it should not be burned by the fire. The Creator planned the

---

<sup>11</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., T. 71-72, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, I, p. 13.



creation of the earth long before its actual creation, as a dwelling place for His rational creatures to the end of time; therefore, He created the firmament to serve as a roof over it, so that it would be suitable for people to dwell in.

The Creator built a great house--the firmament--for man to live under, and laid its foundations in the liquid waters, and converted it into a solid mass. God formed it in the likeness of a white garment and suspended two luminaries of brilliant light above it, so that this light would gladden the earth for the sustenance of man.

God commanded the earth to beget nations, races, beasts of peace and beasts of prey, and other varieties of species. God also cultivated the earth, and planted seeds in it. Varieties of plants sprouted, the trees rose up straight, and fruits flourished.

God commanded that the waters beget different kinds of such animals, without number--creeping creatures, fish, sea-monsters, and predatory animals. God created fowl out of water which fly through the air. Narsai believes that God created both creeping creatures and fowl out of the water, although the first chapter of the Book of Genesis states that God commanded the water to bring forth swarms of living creatures and bade fowl fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.<sup>13</sup> Narsai tells us also that God created predatory animals, whereas the first chapter of Genesis implies that everything created by God was good, from which one would

---

<sup>13</sup>Gen. 1:20.



conclude that predatory animals were the result of the entrance of sin into this planet.

Although the Creator is far from, He is near to us through the image of Adam. In the beginning God wished to make a wise rational being, and set up Adam's image in the world; and through this visible image He made known the power of His mystery. Through the image of Adam God bound together all creation. Both Adam and Eve were to exemplify God's love, for God made men to have an affinity with the angels through man's spiritual soul, and caused the mute elements to cleave to him in the construction of his body. Adam saw a new miracle when woman, Eve, was formed out of him; she was complete in both soul and body like him.

Finally, God said, "Let us make man in our image after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26) that he might rule over all other creatures. It was for his sake that the world was created. God created man for His inheritance. He built him an earthly house and filled it with good things. Both rational and inanimate things were put under the power of man. In all these things God honored man in his creation and his power. Through the creation of Adam God manifested His mystery and Lordship. Adam is thus the crowning act of creation.

Narsai tells us that through the creation of the image of Adam God changed His voice when He said, "Come let us make rational man in our image," and through the affinity of man's soul and body, He bound the two together. Through the creation of man God manifested His mystery, and by this appointed him ruler over His



creatures and thus He taught him His lordship. Through the creation of Adam God also taught the spiritual beings His power. God honored Adam more than all creation, and promoted him to high rank.

God formed man out of the dust of the earth and made him possessed of voice and counsel. God created the heavenly multitudes--fire and spirit--but did not reveal the mystery of His Being, the other two persons of the Trinity. He made Adam know the heavenly multitudes. Adam was also appointed ruler over all creatures, the same as a king over them. Through the creation of Adam God made known the equality of the Trinity, but concealed the mystery of the three persons of the Trinity, lest the spiritual beings should think of other powers.

God made Adam out of the dust of mortality. At the beginning He created the structure of his body so that it would journey in the way of mortality to ask for life. God did not pronounce the judgments of curse and sickness upon Adam and Eve because of His wrath, nor did He deny them immortality because of His disappointment. God knew beforehand that death would weaken and destroy the structure of man's body. Adam was plainly told of the consequences of his eating of the fruit of the tree.

By creating Adam first God indicated that he was to be head of the family, and that Eve was to be second, and completely subservient to him. She was equal to Adam in nature, but inferior in creation as well as in power; therefore, Adam was the head, whereas Eve was the feet. The Creator created them outside of



the dwelling place of Paradise; and then placed them in the Garden of Eden, where the luminaries shone. Narsai does not tell us whether the luminaries in the Garden of Eden were the sun, the moon, and the stars, or whether God had placed separate luminaries in it. God settled Adam and Eve in Paradise as His inheritance, but at the same time He set down a command that was proper for that time, in order that they should know and learn the power of the Creator, by placing a boundary around the tree, so that through this command they would know the discernment of their nature. The fruit of all trees in Paradise was for the enjoyment of both of them, except that they were commanded not to eat of the fruit of the one tree which would bring death to them. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that most trees in Paradise were for the enjoyment of Adam and Eve.<sup>14</sup>

A spring went forth from Paradise to water it, so abundant that it formed four rivers flowing to all the corners of Paradise. The first river, called Pishon, encircles the land of Havilah where there is gold, bdellium, and onyx; the second river, called Gihon, encompasses the land of the Cushites, and by its overflow makes both the Egyptians and Midianites to survive; the third river, called Tigris, goes toward Assyria, and by its sweetness makes all the nations around it enjoy its blessing; and the fourth river is the Euphrates, which passes in the midst of the land and gives life to farmers and irrigates many countries.

---

<sup>14</sup>Overbeck, J. J., Ephraemi Syri Opera Selecta, (Oxonii: 1865), p. 82.



The bountiful spring of Paradise irrigated the four corners of the earth and like a sea channel it passed on without mixing its waters with the waters of the sea. God kept the waters separated, as if they had been placed in separate vessels, so that the spring of Eden did not mix with the pool of the great sea. The spring of Eden itself did not possess the power to keep apart from the waters of the sea, and it was only the power of the Creator which kept it apart. The Creator commanded that the water of the Garden of Eden should not mix with the waters of the sea.

In this way God divided the waters of Eden to be a witness to the greatness of His power, and sent them out to the four corners to proclaim aloud His greatness even though they themselves are silent. Pishon proclaimed the greatness of the Creator's power in India (or Ethiopia), and God caused that land to be rich in beryllium and pearls. Gihon spoke to the Cushites through the voice of its overflow; although it was silent, it lifted its voice and irrigated the land. Tigris sounded like a trumpet to the Assyrians. Thus, the rational beings heard the Creator who was in the midst of the silent things. Euphrates raised its voice like thunder through its overflow, and like a trumpet caused the crops to grow through its irrigation. Moses praised the greatness of rivers.

God placed man in a glorious land--Paradise--and caused to grow in it trees suitable for food. One tree He placed in the center of Paradise, and called it the tree of life, in order that Adam might prolong his life by eating it. God placed also other trees.



God called Adam and Eve, and traced a boundary line which was to hold them away from the tree of knowledge, for God had placed two trees in the Garden of Eden in order to test them. God placed two mysterious qualities in the two trees, the quality of the dwelling place of the earth, and the quality of the kingdom of heaven, and the command of the Lord warned them against taking of the fruit of these trees. God, knowing beforehand that Adam would sin, made known to him that he should not sin. Through this command God chastised Adam and brought him to the knowledge of his discernment, by way of this test. God's command was in the likeness of a furnace to test man, and Adam's desire for the fruit was in the likeness of the dross bubbling above the gold, for God had created precious gold for Adam. God commanded Adam and Eve in such a manner that the heavenly multitudes did not hear the voice of the command, so that the mystery of the sin of Adam and Eve was not told to the heavenly beings.

God provided ways through His command to teach Adam and Eve that it was their obligation to obey the Lord's command. Through the tree God removed the veil from his discernment, and through the fruit of the tree He wished to establish the power of his rationality. The tree itself did not possess the power of discernment, for God did not make the inanimate things like rational beings who would know these things. Death was not hidden in the tree which caused the fall of Adam.

Through the tree of knowledge God yoked Adam to the wealth of the earth, and through the tree of life He made known to him the



heavenly riches. Adam was not able to learn these things by himself because he was young at that time; he was captivated by the tree, and as a consequence was able to come to the knowledge of his discernment. Ephraem is similar to Narsai in characterizing Adam as "like a child at his mother's nursing breast, young, fair, and joyful."<sup>15</sup>

Through the creation of mortal man, God wished to make known His wisdom. God forbade him one of the trees, but let him be captivated by the lust for the other. The choice of eating or not eating was left to Adam's will, for God gave man the power of choice. God placed Adam and Eve in the dwelling place of Eden and honored them, and subjugated all creation to the power of Adam's image.

Narsai offers some interesting explanations of the exaltation of man, and we may assume that for this he drew upon Rabbinic sources, because there are striking similarities between him and Jewish tradition regarding the elevation of man. On the other hand, he discusses this matter in a philosophical vein, whereas Jewish tradition is here more or less legendary, for example, in stating that "Israel is preferred to the angels,"<sup>16</sup> or "the superiority of man to the other creatures is apparent in the very manner of his creation, altogether different from theirs. He is the only one who was created by the hand of God."<sup>17</sup>

Narsai proceeds to deal at length with man's exaltation above all other creatures and his relationship to the heavenly beings.

---

<sup>15</sup>H. Burgess, Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies of Ephraem Syrus, (London: 1854), p. 113.

<sup>16</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., I, p. 49.



God created both wild beasts and domestic animals and passed them before Adam, so that he could give them names and make them his possession. The Creator gave him the power to name inasmuch as he was able to do so, and at the same time God taught him through the naming of the animals that He had appointed him ruler over all the creatures of the earth. Adam's overlordship was extended over all, and all were subjugated to him. In him is bound equally the life of both rational and mute beings, and through their affinity to Adam they glorified him like a king. Both height and depth are his dwelling place, and both sea and dry land are for his sustenance. Both wind and breath are for his life, and summer and winter are for his repose.

All creatures rejoiced in him and obeyed him, just as they obeyed the Lord himself. Both rational beings and inanimate beings gathered to him in love, and rejoiced that the nature of all of them participated in his exaltation. The devil alone was not yoked to Adam's soul, and was displeased by the unity between Adam and the other creatures. Satan, who was against both the Creator and Adam, was created perfect in the beginning, just like the angels, his companions in rank. Adam's greatness increased Satan's envy and bitterness. When he saw Adam honored more than all, he became envious, and was wroth with the Creator because He had honored the image of Adam. The devil burned in his thoughts with the evil lust which was kindled in him, and devised many ways to bring the revelation of his contrivances into focus. While the devil was



angry because Adam was honored, rational and inanimate beings were metaphorically yoked to him.

Narsai tells us that the devil was head of the air and of all the ranks of spiritual beings. God appointed Adam lord over the earth, and called him the image of His mystery, so that Adam was honored more than anyone else, almost like the Creator himself in his creation. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that God appointed Adam lord of all creatures.<sup>18</sup> God figuratively subjected to his soul both heavenly beings and earthly people. Although mortal Adam was created out of the dust of the earth, as despised in his nature as the earth, yet God caused the power of his word to rule metaphorically over heavenly beings and mortal men.

God gathered all the species of the earth before Adam in order to throw upon them the seal of His word, so that they would become Adam's. Adam was enabled to name them, and realized the power of the Creator who had subdued them before him. God created Adam and Eve on ordinary land, and then placed them in the Garden of Eden, full of beautiful and desirable things for them to enjoy. The human inheritors entered Paradise to possess it as their eternal home, and God wrote for them the bill of His lordship through His command by giving into their hands the power of the desirable fruits of Eden, and by forbidding them the tree which brought death.

Then God took a rib from Adam's body, made it into woman, and filled in the place whence the rib was taken. Woman was created in

---

<sup>18</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 128.



the likeness of man, both in body and soul. Adam did not feel it when the rib was taken out of him, for he was asleep. When he woke up, he saw the woman in the likeness of his body and soul. Through the spirit of the Creator, revelation touched the harp of his soul, and he spoke in a new voice of prophecy.

Narsai presents us with some interesting interpretations regarding the fall of Satan from his heavenly rank, and his temptation of man in the Garden of Eden. Narsai, like the other eminent Syriac Fathers, believed that the devil had fallen from his heavenly rank before the creation of Adam, and that it was pride which had caused his fall. On the other hand, Jewish tradition holds that "in particular, Satan was jealous of the first man, and his evil thoughts finally led to his fall."<sup>19</sup>

Narsai goes on to say that envy marred Satan's beauty, and his color suddenly darkened when he saw Adam appointed to rule over God's creatures. Jealousy kindled the devil, just as one kindles fire, and for this reason Adam was appointed king of the earth. Not only was man created in the image of God, but he was also appointed ruler over the earth under God's overlordship. God yoked the heavenly beings to the work of Adam's life. The devil was not permitted at the beginning of time to change his being in order to lead man astray through his devices. The devil chose the Serpent in order to conceal his own bitterness, and through him he planted deceit. When the devil approached man, Adam accepted the

---

<sup>19</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 62. (referring to Targum Job 28:7, 31).



devil's counsel. The deceiver sang to Adam and Eve in a deceitful voice, saying, "God forbade you to eat of these trees in order that you should not enjoy their fruits as do the animals." Whereupon Eve said to the corporeal Serpent in a perceptible voice that God permitted them to enjoy all the trees in the Garden, except the two trees in the center of the Garden.<sup>20</sup> The cause of death was concealed from the spiritual beings, and Satan was happy to find a place where he could inject his deceit.

The devil cast his seed in the mind of man, and suggested to him that there was no death hidden in the tree. "The tree," he said, "possesses a great power through its fruit to change you and make you divine." Satan suggested that a bountiful spring of divinity was hidden in the tree, and that if Adam and Eve would drink of its sweetness, they would spontaneously acquire a high rank, which was why God had forbidden it to them, in order that they should not come to resemble Him, lest they should taste of His divinity. The devil in reply proposed that God was jealous of their becoming His inheritance and being called by the name of His divinity.

The Serpent thereupon tempted Adam and Eve to draw near the tree and eat of its fruit, in order that they might see the light, and immediately attain the power of wisdom the same as gods. Finally, Eve was induced by the devil to eat of the fruit of the tree, and gave it to her husband. She pressed her mouth to the

---

<sup>20</sup>Gen. 3:3.



fruit, in order that she might become like a god. Through the fruit she wished to take hold of the Ineffable Name, and thus attain a rank above her husband and become the head of the family. Ephraem agrees with Narsai on this latter point.<sup>21</sup> Through their lust for the fruit of the tree they both thought that they would reach the height of their ambition, but instead they were brought down into the abyss of Sheol.

It was not the Serpent himself who deceived Adam and Eve, but the devil who had hidden himself within him. The Creator imposed a harsh judgment upon the cruel Serpent, and bound him, whereby He abolished his ability to run swiftly, in order that he should not lead others astray again. The Creator decreed that the Serpent was not to enjoy the fruits of the earth.

The Creator did not wish to reveal the angels at the beginning of time, in order that deception should not be increased upon the earth by the multiplication of beings called "god." For this purpose God concealed the action of the devil, in order that the power of Satan should not seem like that of the Creator. The devil was one of the spiritual beings, and dwelt with the saints outside of heaven. He had been the principal power of the air, and was jealous of Adam when he fell from this rank as if struck by a bolt of lightning. He could then no longer ascend toward heaven in his swiftness.

The devil deceived Adam through the latter's lust for the fruit of the tree, and so Adam lost his innocence. When Adam lost

---

<sup>21</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 31.



his innocence, God felt greatly grieved. Through the fall of Adam the Rebel thought to snatch the honored name of God's Being, and regain his rank through the deception of Adam. But the Creator cast him down from his power as if with a bolt of lightning. Envy made Satan fall from his greatness, and he was stripped of his glory.

Narsai tells that God made the devil the prime mover of the air, and committed into his hands the command of companions, but his pride consequently stripped him of his power. The devil wished to exalt himself through the pride of his heart so as to become equal to the Creator, but he was not able to diminish the power of His Being. Satan strove to revile the image of the Creator rather than the Creator himself. By deceiving Adam, the Rebel assailed the Creator, and thought to harm the image of His Being.

The fire of Satan's envy was set alight, and the rage of his jealousy was kindled. He sought to appear to Adam and reveal to him his wicked thoughts. Satan, in his usual way, did not reveal to Adam and Eve his devices, since he was not able to assume at that time the form of a man. Instead the Serpent made for himself a tunic, clothed himself in it, and thus covered up his hateful aspect, in order that they should not be agitated at the sudden sight to which they were not accustomed.

Both Adam and Eve were at that time at rest and dwelt in peace, observing the command of the Creator, and their appearance was beautiful to each other in the chastity of their minds. So



thereupon the devil began to speak deceit with the voice of the harp of the flesh, and asked them why they held back from the fruit of the tree. He asked them first in order to learn the truth, for though he was persuasive in his nature, he was not able to know secrets. The command which was given to Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree was not heard by the devil; he, therefore, asked them in order to learn this secret, and then lead them astray. Shrewd Satan asked innocent Eve, "Did the Creator forbid you the desirable fruit of the Garden of Eden?"<sup>22</sup> In her innocence, Eve replied, "He did not deny us any of the trees except the one He surrounded with a boundary."<sup>23</sup>

Death was hidden in this tree's fruit. Satan thus found a place where he could cast his deceit and plant his evil seed, so as to grow the fruit of his falsehood. Finally, the devil succeeded in deceiving Eve and enticed both Adam and her with the promise that they would become like gods. Satan, the hater of the human race, thus disturbed the peace of creation. By incriminating Adam and his children, Satan also incriminated himself. He suggested to them that there was more than one God, and assured them that God forbade them the tree by falsely calling it the tree of death.

God did not ask the deceitful Serpent in the persons of Adam and Eve, because He was not moved by envy to say that He was deceived by them. Since the Serpent was the originator of evil, God began His determined judgment with the Serpent. God deposed

---

<sup>22</sup>Gen. 3:1.

<sup>23</sup>Gen. 3:3.



the devil from his power in the heavenly ranks of the angels, and Satan, who had been head of the air and commander-in-chief of the heavenly beings before He sinned, was now, after his fall, cast down to the earth and greatly humiliated.

Adam was created and provided simultaneously with both body and soul, but his discernment was hidden until he transgressed the command of the Lord by eating of the fruit of the tree in the Garden of Eden. The command acted like a trying furnace and brought Adam to the test, and thus his discernment was disclosed, in order that he should not be lacking in his nature. God called it the tree of knowledge, for although it was mute in its nature, the knowledge hidden in man was revealed through its fruit. Adam was like gold ore before he ate of the fruit of the tree. After he ate of it, the beauty of his image was uncovered. The fruit of the tree served as a furnace, and Adam was refined in it like gold. The power of the fruit was breathed into him, and he received the discernment of knowledge.

Narsai goes on to tell us that God was about to make known to us two worlds through the tree of life, as reward for the virtue of our obedience to His will. But lust for the fruit captivated Adam's folly when his soul partook of it, and it revived him. God illustrated two worlds to us through the story of the two trees, and made known to us His mystery.

The devil then told them to draw near and enjoy the fruit of the tree, and after they partook of the fruit their eyes were opened.



Life was hidden in the fruit which would make men like gods. When Eve saw that the tree was desirable to look at, she partook of its fruit and gave of it to her husband. She ate of it first, in order that she might obtain the nature of a god. Narsai tells us that she gave of it to her husband last because she wanted to become a god first, but her hope was not fulfilled, and indeed she was greatly disappointed. Their eyes were opened through the fruit of the tree, and they found fault with themselves, a sight full of blackness. They felt no shame before eating of the fruit, but when they transgressed the command, they realized that they were naked. Immediately they made for themselves veils out of fig tree leaves, because of the shame they felt before each other, as a result of their sin. Their nakedness and their disgrace were sudden. Discernment was hidden in their minds, but when they ate of the fruit, they became discerners; God called it, therefore, the tree of knowledge. The tree of itself did not possess knowledge, but through it they learned of their transgression of the command.

After they had eaten of the fruit, they made for themselves veils to cover their bodies, out of leaves. God, who knows all mysteries, did not turn from his creation. Although He had issued His command to Adam and Eve, He knew beforehand that they would sin. In the cool of the day the Creator caused the sound of His footsteps to be heard, at the same time as He took vengeance for the transgression of His command.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Gen. 3:8.



Narsai tells us that God is incorporeal and limitless in the works of His hands, yet He caused the sound of His footsteps to be heard when He came to rebuke Adam and Eve. Although God is the fountainhead of all wisdom, He asked Adam and Eve where they were, as if He did not know where the sons of His household had hidden themselves. God caused the sound of His footsteps to be heard in order to fill them with dread of their sin.

God has His ways with His creatures, and made some of them serve as a warning to Adam, the image of His honor. After Adam had sinned, the Creator cursed him with His determined judgment. All the judgments which the Lord determined were for the benefit of Adam and his wife, and God made man hate sin.

Through the tree the veil was uncovered from man's mind, and through the desire for the fruit the freedom of man's will was made known. According to Narsai, man's discernment or freedom of will had been dormant, but when he ate of the fruit, his discernment and free will were realized. Adam began to prophesy through the power which the Creator had given him, and spoke openly about the secrets which were in his nature. Adam called the name of his wife, and she was to be called the mother of the human race, and would bear children in genealogical succession. The Lord had made tunics for them, and roused their thoughts to cover their secret parts. The Creator clothed them with tunics of leaves, by causing the knowledge of filling their needs to dwell in them.



All things which God decreed and established were performed in order to teach them for the sake of their comfort and the needs of their bodies. God commanded them to leave the beautiful dwelling of Eden, in order that they might not eat also of the fruit of the tree of life, for if man should partake of the fruit of the tree of life, he would go to where he was created and cultivate the ground of the curses. Perhaps Narsai means here to say that if Adam and Eve had eaten of the fruit of the tree of life after their sin, they would have remained in their sin forever.

According to Narsai, Adam and Eve dwelt in the Garden of Eden no longer than approximately one day. On the selfsame day they sinned by eating of the fruit of the tree and were expelled from the Garden. They were created in the morning, and nine hours later they were rebuked by the Creator. Let us remember at this point that the Bible does not tell us how long Adam and Eve had remained in their state of innocence.

Narsai goes on to say that before their sin both Adam and Eve were the heirs of the dwelling place of Paradise, but in the cool of the day they were removed to another place. On the day they were created they ate, sinned, and were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Adam became mortal after his sin, and Eve was filled with suffering. Adam acquired wisdom by eating of the fruit of the tree, but was not able to reach perfection, or he did not listen to the voice of the kingdom of God. Through things weak as milk



he learned discipline, and God made known to him through the tree two prepared things: his dwelling place on earth, and the kingdom of heaven. God promised Paradise as reward for labors on earth, and the enjoyment of its fruits, through the warning voice of His command.

In the end death began to weaken man's body, but Adam did not die immediately after eating of the fruit of the tree, as first thought. Rather his life was extended for 930 years, and caused his body to be fruitful like a spring of life for the sake of the continuity of his race. God chastised him like an infant through a determined judgment, and through God's warning he came to hate sin, the cause of his death.

Mortal Adam did not acquire anything new through his determined judgment. The Creator placed in Adam's nature these things which eventually happened. The command of his Lord was great to him, and made him wise, so that he inscribed it in his mind as a warning. He hated sin which was the cause of his mortality, and felt love for the Creator who had chastised him. For Adam's sake God spoke these new things, and through this test Adam learned the will of his Lord.

By breaking this command our first progenitor made our race mortal, and through his transgression both he and his children became tainted with sin. Why then did God create creatures that are subject to death? According to Narsai, it was not the Creator's will that man should be mortal. There are some who might say that



the Creator had not foreknown man's sin, and that His anger changed His will, but Narsai maintains that on the contrary, God knows everything in advance; He made us mortal at the outset, and His creation witnesses to His foreknowledge. God made us rational beings possessed of discernment, and filled us with His wisdom for He wished to bring us to the revelation of our discernment through this test.

Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise and dwelt in the land surrounding it. At that time they were greatly distressed, because their new dwelling place was strange to them. God shut Paradise against them with the sharp sword of flame, and appointed cherubim to watch it, in order that Adam and Eve should know their transgression and the fountainhead of their honor should return to them. God made them realize their sin, in order that they should honor the command of their Lord. When Adam would till the ground with all his strength, he would remember the day of his fall. When Adam was expelled from Paradise, sorrow was yoked to him, and the devil was extremely happy and proud that man had become his servant.

God gave Adam a dwelling place that was in the vicinity of Paradise, in order that both his inheritance and his transgression should be remembered. In this way the Creator planned to chastise Adam and Eve, and through the harshness of the warning, God pulled him towards knowledge. God had created the mortal Adam and Eve and made a dwelling place fit for them; the transgression of His



command was the cause of their mortality. Since sin has caused death, let us hate that which has killed us. God pronounced a determined judgment upon Adam and Eve, and showed them that sin brought death, to teach them that which would make them live. The command made them wise to know their nature, so that they would not magnify themselves and deceive their weak nature. The Creator filled them with wisdom when He created them and made them lords of their free will, so that they would be led thereby to His will. God planted in them pleasant emotions, desire and love.



## CHAPTER II

### THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTION OF CREATION Creation of Angels and their Function

Homilies XXXVII-XXXVIII, on the creation and functions of angels, are treated together because they are related to each other. In fact, Narsai discusses material pertinent to the same subject in different places in these two Homilies; we shall, therefore, try to combine them into one chapter, in order to supply the reader with a full discussion of the creation and functions of angels, rather than separate them into two different chapters. These two Homilies are most difficult to deal with, and confront us with the problem of understanding some of Narsai's ideas and obscure phrases, especially in identifying some of the pronominal suffixes when he discusses several persons at the same time; the pronominal suffix may refer to any of these persons. Our analysis of these two Homilies is consequently as sound as we could make it, but there are some problems, because it is inevitable that difficulties in understanding the meaning may occur in any ancient text, especially so in the case of the Syriac Fathers who wrote in a complex literary style on matters of intricate exegesis and theology.

Narsai presents to us a very comprehensive treatment of the creation and functions of the heavenly beings, discusses the most involved mysteries of creation, and the mystery of the heavenly beings as well as the mystery of God. We have repeatedly stated



that Narsai's philosophical speculation ventures into the most impenetrable of God's mysteries. Indeed his speculations reach their zenith in these two Homilies. Narsai believes that the heavenly beings were created simultaneously with this world, although they are not mentioned in the creation story; they are, however, mentioned for the first time in the episode of Hagar, when she was cast out of her home by her mistress, Sarah. According to Narsai, God is invisible not only to us but also to the heavenly beings; He manifests Himself only through His actions. The entire universe and its creatures are administered by the heavenly beings under God's hegemony. On the other hand, there are laws which govern God's creation. Only the act of creation is God's prerogative, as well as His grant of freedom of will to man.

The most puzzling problem in these Homilies is the question where did Narsai get the material for his elaborate study of the creation and of the functions of the angels, since such material is not found in the biblical tradition, even though the Bible occasionally mentions angels as acting in human affairs. We have carefully checked all of Ephraem's Homilies as edited by E. Beck and printed at Louvain but found no Homily devoted to this same subject. There are, however, some similarities between Narsai and Jewish tradition in the matter of angels, and it seems evident that Narsai thus drew upon the Jewish tradition of his time, but fitted it into his own Christian and philosophical framework.



It is possible, of course, that Narsai utilized also other sources which are no longer known to us.

These two Homilies reveal that Narsai was not only well versed in biblical tradition and in Christian doctrines, but was also familiar with the contemporary scientific knowledge of his time, especially Greek science. Indeed Narsai was a versatile writer. These two Homilies as well as the rest of Narsai's Homilies reveal that Christian exegesis, theology, and theological terminology were well established in the fourth century in the Eastern Church, and were inherited by the subsequent generations. The most significant element of Narsai's interpretation is his mind, because it was his mind that made him great and marked his exegesis and theology as highly developed and highly speculative.

Narsai tells us that God's creation is full of wonders, and the inexpressible power of understanding is hidden in His work. The power of the Creator is hidden in the search for His workmanship, but He is always willing and ready to interpret it to those who endeavor to seek Him. Search for Him is beyond human comprehension, inquiry into Him is hidden, and finding Him is difficult for creatures. The wealth of His wisdom is deeper than all depths. The order of His creative power is limitless; there is no end to Him. His divine command is swift, His power is great, and His strength is mighty; the human mouth is unable to declare God's magnanimity. Swiftly His command runs over His entire creation, and He causes the work of the divine will of His command to prevail.



The work does not wait for the divine command; nor is it in subsumed divine command. The Creator does not delay manifesting the power of His greatness. Symbolically He indicated the creation which He then commanded to come into being. Creation was created suddenly, and did not know how it was created. God suddenly commanded both mute and rational beings to come into existence, and they wondered and marveled at their nature which had so suddenly come into existence.

Indeed, the rational beings not only marveled at their nature as it came into existence, but also wondered to what extent it would control the free will which dwells in it. The heavenly beings stood in wonder and astonishment when they were created, and wondered infinitely at the divine word which was in them. They marveled at their rationality, inasmuch as they were rational beings, and keenly investigated themselves and all other creatures. Who appointed them, they asked, and all other things which originally were not? Thus they stood, thinking in their minds, perhaps another power had created them.

The spiritual beings offered hints to each other, and there was a great investigation among them in the beginning, as amazed as they were at their creation and the creation of all other things. They examined the immensity of both heaven and abyss, and marveled at the greatness of the command which made them great. The heavenly beings marveled also at the darkness of the outer world, although it did not affect them, because the spiritual beings can travel



through darkness. They wondered how the outer world could run without being hindered by its thick darkness. They saw an astonishing sight in its gloominess, and were eager to examine its function and know its cause; they earnestly desired to learn this cause which wearied them in their search for the wonders of God's creation. By the law governing their orbits, the worlds are continuously moving in their courses in space.

Narsai goes on to state that the Creator is invisible also to the heavenly beings, although this contradicts the Bible where it is suggested that the spiritual beings sit around God's throne.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, repeatedly he asserts in his Homilies that God is incorporeal, invisible, and His voice imperceptible.

The spiritual beings sought the investigation of this mystery. God is hidden from them just as He is hidden from all creatures, and this is an astonishing thing, since He is hidden from them at the same time as He is revealed to them. By faith they see His invisible sight, by faith they listen to His imperceptible voice, and without sight their minds contemplate all this, and they accept Him without sensing Him. By faith they fulfill the course of faith and believe in the name of the Creator. By faith they stand to set in order the power of the elements, and by faith they confirm the harsh power of the elements' perturbation. By faith they assume the ministry to mankind, and do not doubt the voice which called man's affinity to them, and through faith they examine the mystery

---

<sup>1</sup>Rev. 4:1-11; Dan. 7:10; Isa. 6:2.



of his spiritual soul. They believe that the soul is immortal, just as they are spiritual and immortal. The soul is incorporeal and invisible; the soul of man and the soul of spiritual beings possess immortal life like their Creator.

Narsai continues by saying that the spiritual beings do not cease in their effort to investigate the hidden God. They earnestly desire to see the Creator revealed. When they seek God, the weariness of their minds is abated, and their thoughts are intent on hearing the word which would terminate their wearisome search.

The heavenly beings stood in fear, facing each other like women in travail, terrified of bearing that which they sought. All night they labored in their investigation until they heard a voice crying that there will be light. In the morning they heard an imperceptible voice which spoke according to the ability of their minds to hear. The divine command which had created them spoke to them in spirit, and they heard it in spirit--they did not hear an actual audible voice. Although they heard Him, they were not able to hear Him as He was actually speaking.

They heard God's voice when He spoke to them, but in reality He did not speak for God's voice does not resemble a perceptible voice. The spiritual beings were both amazed and terrified at the voice of God. How then did God cause the voice of His will to be heard even though His nature is hidden from His creatures? Narsai does not answer this question. The heavenly beings marveled at the revelation of His voice and the mystery of His Being; they



feared greatly to seek His mystery. Their fear paralyzed them before they saw the light, but after it was created, they rested in the haven of its brightness and its peace. They rejoiced and extolled the Creator who had made it, cried Hallelujah to God's voice which had created light, and gave glory to God's majesty which caused His voice to be heard. Although God's voice is imperceptible, He manifested the power of His mystery through action. Through His action the heavenly beings saw the hidden God and were relieved of fear and of inquiry into His mystery. Through the creation of light they could now look at their own beings. Narsai believes that both spiritual beings and light were created out of nothing.

Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that the angels cannot see the glory of God. Yet Moses did see it.

Not without greater danger, however, did Moses earn this distinction; for as soon as the angels heard Moses request God to show him His glory, they were greatly incensed against him, and said to God: "We, who serve Thee night and day, may not see Thy glory, and he, who is born of woman, asks to see it."<sup>2</sup>

Narsai tells us that through the creation of light the heavenly beings marveled at their own ranks. In their ranks they stood before the divine order which ordered them, and their voices were yoked to His glory to give Him the glory due to Him. When their multitudes proclaimed it lovingly, the Creator was glorified. He revealed His Being through His creatures. The Creator is

---

<sup>2</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., III, p. 137.



worshipped by all, and through the revealed things He has taught us the power of His divinity. The heavenly beings cry "Holy, holy, holy" in His presence, and according to His glory render Him the glory due Him, just as they are duty bound to render Him thanksgiving, and to praise and magnify His creative power.

God's creative power greatly pleased the heavenly beings, who were amazed at His creating all creation and keeping it in a perpetual state of motion. They looked at the wisdom of the Creator as He was ready to create and keep creation in motion. Through His wisdom they learned the spiritual nature of God, and through their understanding of it they gained the knowledge to seek God's secret things. God brought the heavenly beings, like infants, to the house of wisdom, in order that they might study the Creator's name and His creative power. They meditated on the name of the Creator and on His creative power, and were astonished at the change in His voice when He announced to them that He would create light, for they thought that they had come into existence through the power of that voice. They sought and learned the beauty of it. We, too, should seek together with the heavenly beings that which they sought, and learn with them the cause of the voice and the power of its understanding, through the same power of discernment which made the heavenly beings understand. How and by what kind of voice did God make them wise? God's voice is imperceptible, invisible, and cannot be apprehended like the human voice, for God is incorporeal. Through His voice the Creator taught the



spiritual beings, for both heaven and earth, as well as all things in them, are God's.

God confined all of His creation in two vessels--heaven and earth--so that no man would think that there is any other creation. First, God created heaven, earth, waters, air, and at the same time created the spiritual beings. According to Narsai, the heavenly beings were created simultaneously with our planet, even though the creation story in the first chapters of Genesis does not mention the creation of the angels. God created earth like a wall, and spread out the earth, and included heaven and earth in everything, both rational and mute. God created a great city (the earth) as a dwelling place, and filled it with goodly things useful for the needs of his creatures. He fed the rationality of His creatures with His good things, and disclosed the power of His being and of His creative power. God revealed His creation to the rational beings gradually, and for the sake of their understanding extended the work of creation over six days. He could have created all creation in one day, but did it in six days instead, in order to make them understand it better. In six days He taught them the order of His power and made them skilled scribes of His handiwork. Creation was thus like a book to His creatures.

Narsai tells us that the heavenly beings began to set themselves in order through their skill and through their discernment they acquired understanding. Although mute things have



no senses, they know that there is a Creator. Through the rational beings the mute things learned to keep the order of the Creator, and conversely through the mute things the rational beings marveled at the power of the Creator. Both ranks gained from each other and from the Lord, and acknowledged God's Lordship together. A good cause was set up for both rational beings and inanimate things, and they grew in their fear of the Lord who had created them.

The spiritual beings learned that there was one creation and one power, and believed without doubt that there was no other power to rule them except the power of the Creator. Their creation strengthened them in the power of the Creator, and by their actions they fulfilled the duties of their ministry. Both rational beings and inanimate things acknowledge the power of the Creator alone. Narsai invites us to investigate the power of the Creator which made them wise. Although God is one, His power is manifested in many visible things in creation, and we must investigate the Holy Books for the mystery of creation.

Narsai admits that the creation of the angels is not mentioned in Genesis, but he firmly believes that they were created simultaneously with the rest of creation. It is true that the heavenly beings are not mentioned in the creation account or in the rest of the Bible, but the Bible occasionally does speak of their ministry in human affairs, and Moses mentions them for the first time in the story of Hagar, when she was cast out by her mistress, Sarah.



According to Narsai, Moses knew about the creation of the heavenly beings, but was instructed to omit them from the creation story, and the reason why God did not include them in the account of the creation was that they were more glorious than all other things; therefore, God concealed them, in order that men should not be led astray by their glory. Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that the angels were created at the same time with the earth: "On the second day God brought forth four creations, the firmament, hell, fire, and the angels."<sup>3</sup> "The third creation of the second day was the angel hosts, both the ministering angels and the angels of praise. The reason they had not been called into being on the first day was, lest men believe that the angels assisted God in the creation of the heavens and the earth."<sup>4</sup>

Narsai proceeds to tell us in detail why God did not manifest the creation of the angels in the beginning. The Bible sets forth our creation and the creation of all other things, but not the creation of the spiritual things. Moses did not refer to their creation until the time of Abraham, when he mentioned them in the episode of Hagar. Moses did not make known to us their investigation, nor did he tell us that they were our kin and our friends, until they manifested their guardianship of Sarah's maid. By his silence Moses passed over the great story of their ministry, as if they were not in existence; he neglected to mention them in his book, and said nothing about their creation or their ministry.

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., I, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., I, p. 16.



Narsai raises several questions about this omission of the heavenly beings from the creation account: Why did Moses neglect to mention them in his book while he mentioned all other things? Why did he conceal the story of their creation, while revealing our own creation? Why did he not say that they were created with all the other things, or after them, just as he said about man that he was created at the end of the week of creation? Why did not God reveal the angels to Moses, just as He revealed to him all the other things in His creation? God's creation is immune from destruction, and so is the nature of the spiritual beings; indeed so is man, who is above all earthly creatures. Why did not God reveal the power of the word which was in them, and make known to Moses the freedom of their will?

Narsai raises further questions: Why did not God teach Moses that the spiritual beings were spirits and incorporeal? We find that their nature and the nature of our soul are alike. God, who created them, looked at their nature, and saw that it was beautiful; therefore, He concealed them from spectators. The Creator saw that their glory was greater than the glory of all things which He had created, and He knew that if their glory should be revealed, men would be led astray by it.

Narsai tells us that God foretold that the heavenly beings would not be revealed to men when God created the earth before they were created. God saw the inclination of man to long for desirable things, and for this reason He concealed the desirable



story of the creation of the angels in silence. God threw silence over this desire of the sons of Adam, in order that it should not be lurking in their minds. He threw a bridle over their unknowing minds, for He knew that when they came to know, they would not acknowledge the course of God's creative power. God saw His divine command confused in their thoughts, and knew beforehand that they would rebel. He erected a fence of silence around the faces of those who acted like brutel beasts, in order that they should not violate God's handiwork through their blasphemy. Through His foreknowledge, God heard the voice of their blasphemy before they existed, and when they were created, He silenced their blasphemy through the stillness covering the heavenly beings. God silenced men's deception and let it not agitate and lead men to act like brute beasts. God knew the cruelty of this deception which led men to death. Therefore, He bound it with silence as if it were a prisoner of war, and imprisoned it in the prison of oblivion, in order that its evil should not be remembered among the people of the earth. God blotted its evil from the Holy Books through the hand of Moses, in order that men should not meditate on its wickedness.

Through the power of the angels the weak in power were strengthened, and through their beauty the foulness of the deception (or evil) was hidden. "The beings (or demiurges) which brought creation to revelation created them (or gave them nature)." This sentence is ambiguous, because it seems to indicate that the



beings (or demiurges) created all creation, including the angels, but this is definitely contrary to Narsai's theology, because he firmly holds that creation is God's prerogative. With the help of the heavenly beings creation is suspended in space, and is kept in motion by them. They were promoted to a high rank of divinity.

The will of the demons and the inclination of men desired the same advantages, but God held back their evil through the heavenly beings. God looked at the evil of the demons, and concealed the goodness which was in the spiritual beings in order that it should not be reviled. God held back their creation, just as one would hide something in a chest, and clothed their creation in silence in order that it should not be investigated by demons and men. With the seal of silence God sealed the treasure of the sons of His household, in order that the evil servants should not destroy it. The ranks of the devils rebelled against His Being. God built a stronghold of silence for the spiritual beings, and placed their creation in it with great care. God, who makes His creatures wise, acted wisely in these things, and hid goodness from the evil of the demons.

"O evil," exclaims Narsai, "how great is the wicked inclination of your boldness, that the Creator had to conceal the goodness of His blessing from you! O deception, how presumptuous you are!"<sup>5</sup> He who created all things secures His work from all evil reproach.

---

<sup>5</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 214.



God concealed goodness from evil, and abhorred evil from the beginning of the creation of this world. In the beginning the Lord saw the evil, and turned His face so as not to look at it by the creation of the spiritual beings. If the Creator did not wish to see the hideousness of evil, what loving person will venture to examine it? It is, therefore, not proper for us to look at evil, lest we ourselves might become likened to it. God concealed the likeness of the evil from our minds, in the same way as He concealed the likeness of the heavenly beings.

Thus, if evil looks at evil, the result is evil. Who will not turn the sight of his heart from its embrace? Let men, therefore, flee from the embrace of evil, in order that they should not be deprived of the embrace of goodness. They can see what evil had done at the beginning of time, so that it was not given to see the creation of the heavenly beings, which was more beautiful than the creation of all the creatures which were brought into being with them and after them. Their appearance was desirable and the course of their ministry was swift. The order of their ministry was witness to their beauty. Who can look at their brilliant ranks?

God organized them in the proper order, and through their ranks He organized the brutal world. God organized the spiritual beings with rationality toward the order of the world, so that creation should not be in confusion and without order. God, who is perfect in all things, organized them perfectly, and at



the same time made known His creation through the organization of the heavenly beings. He created the mute things together with His rational creatures, in order that they should not exalt themselves and forget the order of His creative power. He did not bring the mute things with the rational beings to the house of teaching, lest they should grow haughty and think that they were not in need of discipline. God manifested the power of His mystery to them with a revealed voice, so that they would know His Being, even though it is hidden from them. He made them wise through His creative power, in order that they should not be agitated by the excellence and glory of their own persons.

Through His will God commanded and all things came into existence, and God made them fully worthy of His creation. The heavenly beings are servants of God as well as spirits; by this power they possess the ability to fly through the air. The power of the Creator strengthened them to perform their own powers, and appointed them good servants of His government. God gave them immortal life and endowed them bountifully with freedom of the will. He placed life and freedom of the will in their nature, and quickened them and turned them loose. God honored the heavenly beings, for they are beyond deceit. Through freedom of will He made them rich.

Narsai goes on to tell us that

God placed great riches of discernment in their hands, in order that they should not need to borrow anything from the silent elements. God



caused them to dwell without need in the needy world, and to sing without weariness of the needs of our lives. King David named them fire and wind, they are much more than these two things; they are swift watchmen of their minds. Like fire and wind they fly through the air, and are not hindered by fire and wind. They stand in the midst of the adverse elements of nature, and are not harmed by cold or heat. They are confined to the number of days and months like everyone else.<sup>6</sup>

God gave the heavenly beings power to uphold and administer the world, and they have indeed performed things beyond their power. The heavenly beings were astonished at God's creation as they administered it, for their nature is small compared with the greatness of the solid mass of the world, and is not equal to the earth's wide plains and high mountains.

Narsai believes that the spiritual beings were created out of the spheres of the sun and the moon, although these spheres cannot move in space without the heavenly beings. On the other hand, A. Mingana, the editor of this Homily, thinks that this idea is senseless, even though King David has said that the angels are fire.<sup>7</sup> The heavenly bodies can fly through the air with their light undimmed by darkness. "O fliers (or heavenly beings)," he exclaims, "possessed of wings without construction, who fly through the air unwearied by their functions!"

Narsai introduces here the Manichaeans and the sect of Dezanai, and injects them into his discussion of creation, because the Manichaeans believed in two creators, while Dezanai believed in seven creators of the elements; Narsai himself, of course, believed that creation is the sole prerogative of God.

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 215-216.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., II, p. 216.



Narsai goes on to speak of

the false visions of the Manichaeans concerning the dual powers, and the daring teaching of the house of Dezanai which propounded the belief in seven planets (seven heavens full of mediators of various kinds created out of one). O Manichaeans, it was not two who created all creation in the beginning, and O Dezanai, it was not seven who created all the elements! There is no evil one, O Manes, of whom you talk so foolishly, nor is there any prince of falsehood, your companion, possessed of power. Cease, O audacious one, your contending with the Creator. Do not revile His truth in the name of false people. You are false, and your hearts are filled with falsehood, and the beings (or demiurges) which begot your minds are not genuine. The Self-Existent is one; He created all creation in the beginning out of nothing. He is not in need of help from His creation, and His creation cannot be elevated to His Being. He is without beginning, and both heaven and earth and all things in them were created by Him. The might of His power is limitless in the works of His hands. The matter of the Manichaeans is included in His creation, and the beings (or demiurges) of the house of Dezanai served His command.<sup>8</sup>

God created the spiritual beings to be spiritual, and appointed them to minister to His will. The Creator organized and appointed them, and caused them to grow weary in the order of His toil, so that when they grew weary, they would realize that they are created beings. God preached at their creation of the toil in which they must labor, and God showed them that they were not beings (or demiurges).

The course of the heavenly beings' ministry proclaims itself as with a trumpet. Let the earthly people observe how greatly the ranks of the heavenly beings are wearied. The heavenly beings were not creators, for creation is the sole prerogative of God. God manifested His divine will to them; they are counted out by Him.

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 218-219.



All creation was first created in His will, then created a second time through action when He so wished. This will was contained in eternity within His Being, and was brought forth into revelation at a time which pleased the wisdom of His love. God fulfilled His will with great love, and wisely set in order the order which was marked out for Him, for both heaven and earth were marked out in the palm of His hand. On the other hand, Narsai asserts that they were marked out not in His hand but in His divine will. The words were written out in the book of His perpetuity, and both earth and its dust were delineated for Him in the palm of His hand. Narsai believed that the Creator has neither palm nor hand, even though the prophet has told us otherwise. All the mountains and the rocks in them are weighed by God. They are weighed by Him on the scale without hands. Both wind and breath are held metaphorically in the palm of His hand and in His power; also the pools of water are bound for Him by the vestment of His divine will. The revealed boundary of the house of the elements was stretched forth by Him, and it was commanded by Him that they should flow without committing any wrong. The path of the journey of the sun and of the moon is predetermined by Him. The course of the hours of light and of darkness is also determined by Him. The stars are numbered and set in order with His knowledge and every one of them is assigned to his own course.

The actions of both heavenly beings and men are examined by Him, and so are the goodness and evil of their actions. The ranks



of the devils were separated from the good angels by Him, and He persuaded the latter through the heavenly beings to separate from their evil companions. His creatures manifest the power of His might. His creation is not limited by our mind, and no one should foolishly associate another power with Him. The heavenly beings are also the work of His hand, and King David witnessed to their spiritual nature.

God named them His own angels, not in order to teach everyone through them that they were His, for they were created by Him and were for Him. They are His creatures and are yoked under His divine command every hour, in order that His creative power and His supervision should not be forgotten by them.

Only the devils rejoiced, although they did not rejoice in reality, for even though they rejoiced for a little while, they returned to their former state of distress. Only for a little while did the devils rejoice and lead men astray, and then inevitably came regret.

Narsai goes on to tell us that the angels of the Creator were greatly distressed when men were led astray in their name, and rejoiced greatly when the name of the Creator was made holy. The name of the Creator was loved in the emotions of their minds, and they desired more of the name of His holiness which sanctified men. With holy solemnity they cried, "Holy, holy, holy," with one voice.



The heavenly beings remember their creation every hour, even though they have no instruments to give glory to their Creator. They are ever vigilant and do not sleep, and through their vigilance they arouse men to their teaching. They stand forth like masters in the school house, and make the infancy of man wise through their teaching. They possess wisdom given them by the Creator who is all-wise, and they aim to hit the mark of His greatness every hour.

The heavenly beings answer and labor night and day in the meditation on His word; they journey with time, and seek to inquire into His toil. The toil of His divine love is loved by them. They minister to the will of the hidden God every day without cease. Come and let us persist in the perpetuity of our Creator. For the sake of our salvation the heavenly beings grow weary and tired. Let us help them, even though they take but little part in the toil of our lives. For our sake they move the air at all changes of seasons. Let us stir our thoughts to know the order of their changes. For our sake they run in spiritual battles. Let us extol them so that we may be worthy of the reward of their crowns. For the sake of our souls they are thrown into battle with their evil companions. Let us make them prevail for our own victory. Through their battles they shield us from the war of the devils. Let us render thanks to the Lord who has armed them. They drive the devils from our dwelling place so that they would not harm us. Let us praise the Name that yoked them to the love of our souls.



The following paragraphs will show how Narsai utilized his mind in pursuing God's mysteries, especially the mystery of creation.

I saw, (says Narsai), the world of time traveling in the course of perpetuity, and I wished to learn who directs its silence. I saw its course and its silence set in order wisely, and I said, Who has made it wise to journey in this order? I wondered at the change of seasons, and at the change of time as it was agitated, and I sought to learn who agitates the world and yet keeps it? I entered among its changes and stood there as if I were in the midst of a battle, so that I might look well into how each change of time overcomes its predecessor and is in turn overcome by its successor. My thoughts wished to follow along the course of its journey, so that I might learn which is the beginning of its way and which is the end of its course.<sup>9</sup>

Both the world's course and its order made me eager to investigate them, so that I might know them and make them known to those who would seek them (after me). This inquiry wearied me, just as famine wearies one through the desire to eat bread, and I longed to fill my mind with a morsel of it. Its beauty pulled me to draw near to it and investigate it, so that perhaps the ugliness of my word which is full of suffering might be reduced (or polished) by it. Its words made me desire to be a companion of its beauty, and inspired me to come to the revelation of the desire of my mind. The desire for the world vexed my mind exceedingly, and behold, it compels me to give birth to words just as a woman gives birth to an infant. Like a travailing woman's mind, my mind was affected by the world, causing me to produce babes of Homilies before my hearers. The cause of the world is the cause which begot my mind.<sup>10</sup>

Narsai goes on to raise several questions in respect to the power which is behind nature: Who moves the world and changes

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 222-223.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., II, p. 223.



it, a mute element? Who changes summer into winter and winter into summer? Who causes the sphere of the sun to rise in the morning, and hides the beauty of its light in the evening? Who moves the sun swiftly toward its zenith and holds it up so that it does not tear loose and fall upon the earth? Who makes the nascent moon the child of the first day of the month, and causes it to rise in the middle of the month in its adult fullness? Who invests its stillness with the bridle of order, so that the succession of night and day is not violated? Who turns cold into heat? Who moves the stars in order one after another, and shows them the path of their journey, so that it is not cut off? Who moves mute air for our service and causes its stillness to make perceptible sounds? Who renders air solid and makes its thinness thick? Who carries the flow of waters in it to sprinkle the earth? Who lifts it like a rod above the sea, and brings down its moist inclination through its whirlwind? Who causes its fierce rage to cease, and turns and searches it when it is becalmed? Where is its cold breath when it does not blow, and whence does it come up suddenly in its severe violence? Who kindles the fire of lightning in the air's softness, and causes the sounds of thunder to be heard out of its stillness? Who tempers its coldness with heat so that its watering is pleasant to the fruits of the earth? Who keeps the air when it is mixed with solid matter, so that it is not destroyed by strange elements?

All these questions made Narsai seek the investigation of the changes that occur in nature, in order to find out whether the



power behind those changes was within those elements or outside of them. Narsai concludes that the elements are mute, but possess the word of their natures, or perhaps rational beings move them without a word. The possessors of the word (or the heavenly beings) possess the power to perform these changes, or perhaps they were enabled to do so through the power of the Creator. The thought of these things was thrown into the mind of Narsai, and he concluded that one power performed these things through the power of God's will.

Narsai comes to the conclusion that one power performed God's will through the spiritual beings, and it was God who set in order the works of His hands through the heavenly beings. Through the heavenly beings God moves the mute elements, and through them He fulfills His love for His creatures. In the beginning God entrusted the world to the rationality of the spiritual beings, so that they might keep the change of seasons clear of confusion. God made the angels the treasurers of His goodness, so that they might divide the treasure of His mercy among the people of the earth. God appointed them guardians of His work, so that they might give timely sustenance to the sons of His household.

God entrusted Adam to the spiritual beings as the elder, in order to make him wise from his infancy to his perfection. God committed the course of Adam's impetuosity to their greatness, in order to keep him from an act of licentiousness. God



appointed the angels as pedagogues to teach simple Adam that he must not walk wholly according to his will. Adam was simple and short of understanding, and therefore acted foolishly, which is why God appointed the heavenly beings over his work.

God entrusted wealth to the hands of the heavenly beings for Adam's benefit, so that they might take care of his daily needs. Intemperately the greedy Adam would have eaten himself to death, but God appointed food for him through the hand of His spiritual beings to nourish him. Thus, through the hand of His created beings, God wished to set in order Adam's intemperance, for if he were to eat intemperately, he would die wickedly. God wisely made him wise through the word which was in the heavenly beings. God appointed the heavenly beings over Adam's service to make his ignorance wise through their sagacity. Through the heavenly beings God administers all things, and all God's creatures are entrusted to their hands.

The Creator entrusted to the heavenly beings the course of the mute elements and of the rational beings, and according to their word He spoke to His creatures. Through their mediation God manifested His love as well as His warning, good things as well as scourgings, to those who were being scourged. Through the ambassadorship of the heavenly beings God performed all things, and sent them on a mission to the earthly people, and they in turn showed man as much as he was able to learn. God charged some of them with the number of men and the change of seasons, and they



diligently endeavored to keep the order placed in their charge. Through them God performed the supervision of His operations.

Through the heavenly beings God delivered the earthly friends of His love when they were oppressed, and through them God chastised those who were engaged in idle amusement and behaved arrogantly. Through them God administers the powers of kings and the divisions of the nations of the world, and through their steadfastness He marshals and conducts wars. Like a charioteer God's command directs the emotions of the heavenly beings, and like horses they are yoked to His command as they fly through the air. The spiritual horses are tied to God's spiritual chariot with bands of spirit. The Charioteer (God) upholds the world without hands, and directs the heavenly beings toward heaven. The two-horsed chariot of God is incorporeal, and runs its course without visible parts.

Who will not say that He who created all things runs the world, and His power strengthens the heavenly beings? God's power also strengthens the weakness of the works of His hands, and runs the heavenly beings under His command; and through His command He runs the world under the hegemony of His servants. It is amazing how the world is yoked to the Creator and to His servants. The heavenly beings are yoked to the Creator who created them in the beginning, and the world is yoked to the power which was entrusted to the heavenly beings by the Creator. Through the yoke of His love creation is yoked under the leadership



of the heavenly beings, and their powers stand above creation's loins like a charioteer standing above his chariot's horses. The heavenly beings hold up the immaterial air with bands of spirit, and administer creation in accordance with the will which administers everything. Everything in God's creation is subjugated to their powers, and they keep everything in order without being subjected to any harm. Through the ranks of their powers God divided the world, and everyone of them watches over the work which is entrusted to his hands.

There are heavenly beings who hold up the sun without hands, and mark the sun's journey without taking footsteps. The heavenly watcher runs swiftly with the movement of the sun, and sets it in order so that the path of its journey is not agitated. In spite of its fluidity, the sun flies through space, and circumscribes the globe of the earth night and day. Another heavenly being carries the smaller moon on his immaterial shoulder, and administers it through the change of seasons as if it were an infant, in order that it should not be carried roughly, and puts orders and directions before it so that it might learn how to ascend and descend. There are some heavenly beings who hold up the brightness of the stars like lamps, to banish the darkness of the night.

Jewish tradition is similar to Narsai in that the angels are said to administer the activities of the sun:



The sun runs his course like a bridegroom. He sits upon a throne with a garland on his head. Ninety-six angels accompany him on his daily journey, in relays of eight every hour, two to the left of him, and two to the right, two before him, and two behind. Strong as he is, he could complete his course from south to north in a single instant, but three hundred and sixty-five angels restrain him by means of as many grappling-irons. Every day one looses his hold, and the sun must thus spend three hundred sixty-five days on his course. The progress of the sun in his circuit is an uninterrupted song of praise to God. And this song alone makes his motion possible. Therefore, when Joshua wanted to bid the sun stand still, he had to command him to be silent. His song of praise hushed; the sun stood still.<sup>11</sup>

The angels took him (Enoch) then to the fourth heaven, and showed him all the comings in and goings forth, and all the rays of the light of the sun and moon. He saw the fifteen myriads of angels who go out with the sun, and attend him during the day, and the thousand angels who attend him by night. Each angel has six wings, and they go before the chariot of the sun, while one hundred angels keep the sun warm, and light it up. He saw also the wonderful and strange creatures named phoenixes and chalkidri, who attend the chariot of the sun, and go with him, bringing heat and dew. They showed him also the six gates in the east of the fourth heaven, by which the sun goes forth, and the six gates in the west where he sets, and also the gates by which the moon goes out, and those by which she enters. In the middle of the fourth heaven he saw an armed host, serving the Lord with cymbals and organs and unceasing voices.<sup>12</sup>

Narsai offers us some interesting laws which govern weather, clouds, thunder, and lightning that finally cause the rain to fall on earth to supply the needs of man. According to him, the heavenly beings not only control the weather, but also administer the entire universe through the power committed to their

---

<sup>11</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., I, p. 132.



hands by the Creator. Narsai was thus versed in the contemporary theories of weather, but while he believed that the spiritual beings administer the universe, he maintains at the same time that there are laws by which the universe is controlled.

Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that God appointed angels over clouds, winds, and rains: "Metatron explained to Moses, that these were the angels set over the clouds, the winds, and the rains, who return speedily, as soon as they have executed the will of their Creator, to their stations in the second of the heavens, there to proclaim the praise of God."<sup>13</sup>

Narsai goes on to say that the heavenly beings make a level road in the air for the mute elements, which are continually on it, so as not to be fatigued by their journey. Ranks upon ranks journey on this way without being endowed with senses, and the heavenly beings are in the vanguard of their ranks like guides. There are heavenly beings who are appointed over the movement of the air, and move it through the hidden faculties of their minds. The air is immaterial, but the heavenly beings who are incorporeal convert it into material, and break it up into many parts likewise material. They make material air out of immaterial air, so that through its materiality it might carry material waters. The heavenly beings weave the thinness of the air into strong woven substance dense enough to hold the material waters.

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 306-307.



The clouds were spread in the midst of the sphere of the heavens, and above them waters were gathered together like a roof. Waters and wind overshadow the house of our life needs, and from its cloud roof the waters come down to sprinkle the earth. There are thunders which make dreadful sounds, and shake the earth with the noise of the air's swiftness. They make wells of water through the air, and make sounds when waters are mixed with waters. The sound of the wind passes suddenly through the pools of waters and scatters the gathering of waters which is in the clouds. The cloud is full of liquid waters confined in the waterskin of the wind, and as the sound of thunder passes through the air, it rends the waterskin asunder and the rain pours out in a rushing stream.

The heavenly beings teach war metaphorically to the mute things for the cause of peace, so that inequality might not destroy the peace of fruits and seeds. Artfully the heavenly beings teach war metaphorically to both rational beings and mute things, and from the air they metaphorically devise the weapon with which to arm them. They metaphorically make arrows of fire out of the air when it is solid, and figuratively send them impetuously toward heaven.

When the heavenly beings smite with an iron the air's impetuosity, they bring bright sparks out of it. The air lights up suddenly, shows its light swiftly, and then hides it again. The sight of the air is amazing to those who look at it from



its beginning to its end, without pause. The air does not leave anyone blind who looks intently at it as he looks at it, rather it restrains its light from the pupils of his eyes. Although the air is swift, it does not see its swiftness. "Let us, O mute air, look at the beauty of your stillness, and do not bring us down by your swiftness since it is not yours." It is not by the power of the air that lightning runs along swiftly; a heavenly being moves the mute air although it does not feel it. It is an angel who swiftly lowers the clouds to the sea, and carries waters that do not sink by their heaviness. Like a ship the cloud carries the treasury of waters, ascends toward heaven, and is then opened.

The spiritual being controls (or grasps) the oars of the wind and administers air in order that it should not sink because of the heaviness of the waters which are gathered in the air. The heavenly being runs the ship of the air through the air, and carries it along by the faculties of his mind, so that when the air is moved, it makes a sound which shakes the earth. Like a garment the spiritual being envelops the wings of the air's swiftness, and lowers it toward the earth against its wish. "O swift air, without moisture, which remains on earth by reason of its weight, even though it travels continuously toward heaven! God, who cares for us, compels nature to go beyond its normal way for our sake. The air possesses the art of flying, and it is indeed an amazing thing that it always ascends and descends only toward us."



Narsai continues to tell us that the power of the angel directs the air's flight and lowers its course toward us. One of the angels was appointed to be the chief over the air's dwelling place, and administers it through its various changes. It is he who has primary authority over its changes, while there are with him subordinates who obey him--perhaps he is the angel who superseded Satan. In place of Satan who went astray and fell, God appointed one of the angels to take his place; and there are helpers with him in place of the legions of tyrant devils. The chief angels, with the other heavenly beings, control the fierce air, and other heavenly multitudes administer matters as commanded by the chief angel; and through his order they divide their powers, and they travel in the order of their ministry.

Narsai proceeds to set forth the functions of the heavenly beings in great detail, and while he borrows material from Jewish tradition, he discusses their ministry in his own Christian philosophical fashion.

The powers of the angels are derived from God. Sometimes God causes an angel to rule over something, at other times He strips him of power. There is the power of war which He divided and gave to warrior angels; and accordingly, He causes good servants to triumph over and chastise the wicked. There are angels who keep men from deceit every day, and defend them against the powers of the tyrant devils.



One angel accompanies every man as an escort of love, and is with him from the day of his birth to the day of his death; he sits constantly beside his bed and stands by on the day of his departure from life. This angel separates man's God-given soul from his body and carries it away to the place designated by the Creator. This guardian angel is yoked and subjugated under the command of the creative power of God; and it is not his to perform his task except by the power of the Creator.

This angel does not determine the length of life or the shortness of time; he has no power to add an hour or to subtract an hour. He does not administer man's life by compulsion; for he is unable to compel him, to make him good, or to make him evil. Man, like angels, possesses freedom of will; he is free to sin or to be justified as a discernor. The freedom of man's soul is not limited, and his soul is not subject to compulsion while he is living.<sup>14</sup>

Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that there is a guardian angel for every individual.<sup>15</sup>

The nature of the soul of man and of the soul of the spiritual beings is the same. The soul is perfect from the beginning, just as the creation of the heavenly beings is perfect. The soul of man has an affinity with the spiritual beings; it comes from their family; and the heavenly beings cherish its affinity every hour in their ministry.

Because of that voice which called man by the name of His being, the heavenly beings honor man's soul by paying honor to man. Through man they manifest their great love for the Creator;

---

<sup>14</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, pp. 229-230.

<sup>15</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., VI, p. 8; see VII, p. 197f.



therefore, they are not wearied in the sustenance of our lives and in our service. For our sake they labor greatly and do not rest until they repose in the haven of love. Because of us they are thrown into the battle of the changes of seasons, so that through these changes God might remember life without end.

For our sake they move the air through the faculties of their minds, so that by its breath seeds are made to grow for the maintenance of our lives. For the sake of our lives they organize the course of the months of the year, so that it will not be disordered and lead astray the order of our discernment. Because of us they show the way to the sun and to the moon, in order that the path of our journey should not lead us astray from the Creator. For our sake the heavenly beings divide the hours into light and darkness, in order that men should not be doubtful of the Creator who had created them. Because of His rank they possess the power of their ranks and orders, and show that they command and are commanded, so that His rank might be exalted.

The ranks of the angels are governed by a great order, and they command and are commanded by the Creator. The great Preacher (God) looked at their command and named them by the name of their powers. The entire creation will travail with them, and they with it, when the day of travail and resurrection from the grave arrives. The heavenly beings attend and labor with the silent creatures in the expectation that there is hope in man's perdition.



Both creation and the heavenly beings are interested in man's hope of resurrection.

The heavenly beings wait and serve for the sake of our salvation; they minister to man through action. Because of man's hope the heavenly beings are subjugated to many difficulties. In silence the mute elements cried to mankind, "Behold, O man, for your sake the heavenly beings are wearied; and for your sake both rational beings and mute things are thrown into weariness," yet man does not realize how much the heavenly beings are wearied for his sake. Let man look at his labor, little as it is, and cause his soul to labor in careful study of the watchers, his companions.

Behold, for your sake the spiritual beings are greatly exhausted, and for the sake of your growth they cause fruits to grow to fill your need; for the growth of fruits and the flourishing of seeds are caused by the heavenly beings, and by their word the course of the months of the year is set in order. They fly swiftly through the air by the faculties of their minds, and the heaviness of their labor is sweet to them. Willingly they perform everything and keep everything; and through their ministry they render glory to the Creator. They proclaim His glory when they are sent out on their ministry, and this is the marvel and the glory of their actions. Two things are fulfilled simultaneously every hour without delay--ministry to man and glory to the Creator.

The heavenly beings are the directors of the divine supervision; they are not hindered in fulfilling these two things at the same time.



The heavenly beings minister to the Lord, so that their love is fulfilled with both the Creator and His creatures. Through their ambassadorship they keep up the life of mortality. These angels are lovers of peace, so that they encourage the peace of man through the love which is in them. The preachers of the power of the Creator over His creatures listen without voice to the voice of the mute creatures, and the silent creatures in turn listen to the voice of their speech. Without voice the heavenly beings speak with the silent ones, although no word is spoken, for they fulfill words through action.

In secret they speak to mute elements and utter perceptible voice like those endowed with speech, and they hold up, as if with their hands, the air at the four corners of the earth, and spread the rush of its swiftness. Both men and animals rest in its breath, and its moisture moistens the earth and causes it to produce fruits.

Skillfully the heavenly beings overcome the diseases of the sick world through cold and heat--two opposite elements. The spiritual beings carefully compound cold with heat every hour, and then apply it like a remedy to conquer disease. The immaterial healing is prepared by the heavenly beings with care to fit our bodies. The Lord of the world turned the world over to their skill, for God saw that they knew how to control the pains of Adam's weakness.

God placed the power of His will in their nature in the beginning, so that they might be able to treat the sick world which is in sin. From His power they learned their skill, and



then the triumph and the power of His help runs with them until the end. The power of the Creator runs with them swiftly and they journey with Him with immeasurable steps. His divine command instructed them minutely without voice, and they listened imperceptibly to His voice. According to the hearing which God caused them to possess, He spoke to them, so that they might be able to listen to the voice of the hidden God in their own minds. Through the channels of their minds they listened to the voice of God, and through their understanding they understood it at the same time at which they were amazed.

Narsai goes on to tell us about the deception in heaven which occurred as the result of Satan's rebellion against the Creator, a deception which produced deception through the sons of deception, and which resembles the deception that took place in Paradise. The aim of both deceptions, in heaven and in the Garden of Eden, was the same. The deception caused by Satan in heaven led the angels astray, and led man astray from the Creator. This deception of mortality resembles the deception of envy and evil. Man was forbidden to eat of the fruit of the tree, but through his craving for the fruit he became mortal. Behold, deception full of deceit and beyond measure.

The enormity of this deception compels me to turn my words from it, and I left the word concerning the angels for only a moment to speak of it. I saw its enormity agitate the peace of man, wherefore I joined its story with the story of the heavenly beings. I saw the heavenly beings, who are elevated beyond all suffering, suffer greatly from the fact



that fools sadden their Creator. I suffered in the suffering of the deception, and am filled with suffering, and I left the right way, and journeyed in the way of the obstinate ones.<sup>16</sup>

Turn your soul to my word, the word concerning the spiritual beings, so that it will not be weighed in the path of deceit followed by the lovers of suffering. Journey mightily in the story of the possessors of the heavenly mind, and seek well the proper investigation of their ministry. Search out how they move mute nature and by what power they subdue the power of the elements, and how they make immaterial air solid, and turn and make its spiritual body.<sup>17</sup>

How do the heavenly beings mix the air's coldness with heat, and then separate them once more? How do the heavenly beings fly from place to place around the earth, and in the evening reach another sphere? How do they weigh the hours of night and day, and do not wander from the order received in the beginning? What is the number of their legions and of all things with them, and of everything that is governed through their minds? Who is able to number the stars and the multitudes of mankind? Behold, there is an angel with every star and with every man. Who knows how to look well at every change, for behold, there is no change without spiritual beings?

Narsai raises some further questions: Who can understand the power of the kings to whose ministry God entrusted the administration of the nations? Who has heard the word of King David that they proclaim "Holy, holy, holy," and utter praise to God? Through one word the Holy Spirit showed them that they are able to praise through that which they praise. Who can comprehend

---

<sup>16</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., II, p. 234.



the order of their ministry or count the number of the regions they govern? Only one can number them, God. Narsai's discussion in the last part of Homily XXXVIII, on the functions of the angels, is rather difficult because Narsai does not differentiate between God and Gabriel; therefore, the description may be applicable to both of them. According to their number God (or Gabriel) delimited their ministry. God (or Gabriel) knows how many they are and where they are; they set themselves in order for God (or Gabriel) before they rise to power. They examine Him (or Gabriel) through the furnace of His (or Gabriel's) proving before they come, and the truth or sham which is in them is revealed to Him (or Gabriel). It was manifested to His divine will how many of them would remain with Him (or Gabriel), and how many of them will go out beyond the mark of His (or Gabriel's) command.

The heavenly beings drove out for Gabriel (or God) the tyrant demons before they were led astray. The devil, the chief of the air, was stripped of his power, and the heavenly beings appointed Gabriel to supersede him, and honored him in their orders and ranks in due time, and there was no order which was inferior to Gabriel's. Through the angels God taught the world concerning His (or Gabriel's) lordship, and through them God will chastise and make wise the world until the end of time. With the world's (or man's) life God creates life which shortens life, and does not make the world (or man) too weak to perform



anything without the heavenly beings. There is nothing in the world hidden from the angels; and there is no power in the angels apart from His (or Gabriel's) course.

The heavenly beings run a course for Him (or Gabriel) which is the crown of victory; they long to set the world in order without a magistrate. For the sake of man's need they filled the need of his life every hour, and gave to him (or to the world) by taking from him (or from it, or from Gabriel) like those who are in need. They do not fill the need of God through Gabriel's (or man's) hands, so that the world is not the course of Gabriel (or man) to his Creator. To be sure, the power which created all creation is not too inferior to administer the works of His hands without the heavenly beings. They honor Him (or Gabriel) and His servants through Gabriel's hands, and the works which God performed through the hands of the heavenly beings.

The heavenly beings render goodness through their ministry, although they are not able to render complete goodness in reality; for the rendering of their goodness is small compared with the goodness of God. No man could describe the beauty of the heavenly beings, for their beauty has made them the lords of beauty. The greatness of their love brought them near to the gate of the King, and the King was pleased to exalt them. It is passing strange that these servants of God possess the power of creative energy. Through the power of the Creator they move all things, and His power does not lead them astray; at the same time, they do not



forget the name of the Creator by which they are strengthened, unlike mankind which went astray and was agitated in their minds. He named those who were led astray by the Creator, and the heavenly beings gave the power of doing to them.

Narsai believes that there is only one Creator; creation is God's sole prerogative, and He alone has the right to the name of Being. The name of the Creator is not proper for the created beings who went astray, and the Creator does not lend His rank to the works of His hands. The spiritual beings were not involved in the deception which was created by Satan in heaven. Through ministry they show the power of the creative power, and they knew the one Creator when they were created, and did not acknowledge any other power. Through that toil He led them to rejoice all the time, and at no time did their thoughts fail to meditate upon Him. They meditate upon Him without cease.

In good hope they are yoked to the goodness of God, and however much they move, they are not weakened. The Creator has promised good things to both heavenly beings and men, and He keeps our memory in His mind. He invites our race with its multitudes to the kingdom of heaven. Come, O mortals, be the companions of the immortal heavenly beings, and be with them as the sons of the inheritance of good things promised.



CHAPTER III  
THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTION OF CREATION  
Soul and Body

Narsai's Homily XXXIX is devoted to the philosophical discussion of the relationship between the soul and the body. This relationship is a fascinating theme which has puzzled theologians and philosophers for centuries, and involves an Old Testament doctrine that goes back to the creation of man as set forth in the second chapter of the Book of Genesis--man was made of the dust of the earth and the soul was breathed into the body by the Creator. The problem is one of great interest and significance not only in Christianity and Judaism, but also in all the dead and living religions of the world. It is a theme that is of great concern to every individual as he is faced with the mystery of life and death. The majority of the people of the world believe in some sort of life after death, and only a minority are persuaded that death is the end of man's hope.

This Homily, the most difficult one of all the extant Homilies of Narsai, is also the most important one. A herculean task confronts us in evaluating it, because of the ambiguous and difficult phrases and concepts contained in it. In it Narsai's skill in philosophical speculation reaches its zenith, as his imagination travels into the impenetrable mystery of the soul.

In this Homily, too, there are striking similarities between Narsai and Ephraem, especially in their belief in the unconscious



state of the soul after it is separated from the body, and that righteous souls are kept in Paradise in the land of Eden. Both Narsai and Ephraem, as well as the rest of the prominent Syriac Fathers, believe that the soul cannot exist in a conscious state outside the body, nor can the body exist without the soul, and that the souls of the righteous are kept in an unconscious state until the day of resurrection, when the soul will again unite with the body in order that man might become conscious once more.

It is evident that Narsai had followed Ephraem and the other Syriac Fathers in these two doctrines. On the other hand, Narsai introduces some new ideas of his own, and treats the subject more extensively than Ephraem.

Not only does Narsai make original contributions to the comprehension of soul and body, but the way in which he approaches them is also different from that of Ephraem, even though the basic ideas on the subject are the same. Narsai discusses some aspects of soul and body which do not concern Ephraem, especially the details of the functioning of the soul in the human body while it is alive. We have carefully endeavored to indicate such similarities between Narsai and Ephraem as are evident from the available material, but it is important to keep in mind that where some aspect of the Homily is not compared with Ephraem and the other Syriac Fathers, it is to be understood that there Narsai stands alone. There are also some similarities between Narsai and the Jewish tradition, especially in the belief of the soul's abode in Paradise.



Before discussing the relationship between the soul and the body, Narsai offers some preliminary remarks. The beginning of wisdom and truth is to know the power of the Creator who created all things, both hidden and revealed, out of nothing. The beginning of understanding is to realize the purpose of God's creative power. God created all creatures not for His own satisfaction but in consequence of His love. He constantly takes care of the universe and administers it according to His will.

The beginning of knowledge is to know His love for His creatures. God does not seek revenge against those who oppose him. The beginning of justice is to vindicate or justify the proof of His law (or judgment). The beginning of goodness is to walk faithfully in His kindness, for even the harshness of his scourging is tempered by His mercy.

The beginning of discernment is to perceive the goodness which is proper for rational man. The beginning<sup>17a</sup> of all things is to keep the law (the natural law which is placed in man). The beginning of law is to meditate on the law of the spirit, in order to fulfill the word of God. The beginning of reward (retribution) is to love the Creator. Everyone is duty bound to love His Creator, who gave the law and made man master over His possessions. Man is thus under obligation to pay homage to His God. God named Christ alone to be exalted above all men. It is necessary for man to know the power of God who created him and appointed him to reign over His handiwork ever since the beginning of creation. It is

---

<sup>17a</sup>The word "beginning" is repeated by Narsai several times in the introduction to his Homily on the soul and the body because he wants to emphasize it as a key word.



also proper to vindicate (or justify) the power of the Creator.

After these preliminary remarks, Narsai proceeds to analyze the relationship between the soul and the body. Man was created by the hand of God on the sixth day of the creation of the earth, and God breathed into him the breath of life, so that man became a living being.<sup>1</sup> According to Narsai, man consists of the visible body and the hidden soul. In the likeness of His own image God formed him. Man becomes a rational being only when his soul and his body are united together.

In the body of man God metaphorically confined the nature of all visible things, just as heavenly multitudes, who are incorporeal, are confined in man's soul. God thus formed a unity between heavenly beings and earthly men. Just as one places something in a shrine, so did God cause the power of speaking to dwell in man. God wisely set up a tabernacle of love on earth. God filled man with the power of wisdom.

Narsai goes on to say that God put in the soul of man the great treasure of His creative power. Man, created, is in the need of God as long as he lives. Man's soul is a hidden treasure in which the power of the Creator is figuratively confined, even though God himself is infinite.

Secret mysteries are hidden in the soul's structure. The mysteries of the soul cannot be made known except through the power of soul's creation. The mystery of the revelation of

---

<sup>1</sup>Gen. 2:7.



the Self-Existent's name is manifested in the action of the soul within the body of man. The soul was formed by the power of the Trinity. The soul's nature resembles somewhat the nature of the three persons--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; on the other hand, Narsai maintains that the soul's nature really resembles the nature of the Hidden God only in the manifestation of its dignity (or honor). The soul is indeed much inferior to the immeasurable greatness of God, just as the body's shadow is inferior to the body itself.

The power of the Creator instilled in man the power of speech in order to give life to the lifeless body in which the soul dwells. In the likeness of a spring flowing with life, God poured the soul into the body; man's dormant senses come to life in the soul and bear fruit during his life. By means of the channel of its power of speech, man's body is made to voice its thanksgiving to the Creator.

By the power of his soul's vitality man lives and walks around during his life-span. Through his soul man hopes to attain immortality. By the light of his soul man beholds the beautiful light of the Creator's name, and with its help he journeys to the knowledge of the Self-Existent. By the discernment of the soul, he is enabled to distinguish what is good from what is evil. The soul is the second sun in the heaven of the corruptible (or destructive) body. Since man is rational, God implanted in him the power of speech. By the light of the soul, man works on earth



and journeys on his way. The soul's discernment is salt to his dull desires, and seasons them. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai that the soul is as salt to the body.<sup>2</sup>

The endowment of the soul is rich compared with the poverty of the despised body of man made of dust, and by the soul's wisdom man manages his life just as a rich man manages his life by the power of his wealth. Man's dominion is extended over everything with the help of his soul, and by means of the soul's understanding, he listens to the heavenly beings. By the soul's swiftness he crosses the sea as if it were dry land, and the dead weight of his body does not sink among the tempests of life as long as his soul is with him.

Like an anchor, the soul is suspended on the ship of his body, and keeps him from deceit. Man travels guided by his soul just as a sailor sails by the light of the stars. The soul makes straight the path of man's journey to the haven of peace.

Narsai goes on to say that through the soul's art God taught dumb creatures to minister to man, and by means of the soul's sagacity He made man wise over mute things. By its skill the soul through God throws a restraining bridle over men who act like animals. Like a charioteer, God drives mankind when they act like animals, and He set man in order so that he would not go astray under God's guidance.

---

<sup>2</sup>E. Beck, Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum. (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 78-79, Louvain: 1957), p. 24.



The soul subjugates all creation to man's power, and sits on a throne in the likeness of a king. By the faculties of the soul man metaphorically takes hold of the hands of heaven and earth, wherever he wishes the will of his primacy to be acknowledged.

God places the power of His wisdom in man's meager nature, so that it causes the stream of words to flow out of man's mouth in the likeness of God. The treasure of God's words is implanted in the soul. God carefully prepared the structure of the soul when He created it, and hid it in the garment of the visible body. God created the temple of the body according to His will; He also formed the soul. The soul entered and settled in the body of man in the likeness of a king settled in his palace.

According to Narsai, the soul, while created by God, is mortal. It came into existence only at the time of the creation of man. Unlike many theologians and philosophers who believed in the immortality of the soul, Narsai believed that only God is immortal.

Just as the strings serve the harp, so the visible senses of man serve the soul and it executes the will of its skillfulness through speech and hearing. Man's mouth serves the soul for a reed flute to sing beautiful melodies every hour of the day. His soul thus makes him happy by its vitality. The body, by itself, is like a reed flute deprived of sound; when the soul sings in him, man possesses life. His soul is his life; it keeps him alive during his life-span.



Once his soul leaves him, man's body returns to clay, or in the words of Ecclesiastes, "and the dust returneth to the earth as it was; and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it."<sup>3</sup> The body without the soul is dead, it cannot stand alone without the power of the soul's functioning. Ephraem agrees with Narsai, in a somewhat different way, that the soul is the pillar and support of the body. "It is our bread, and by it our field is fattened."<sup>4</sup> We will analyze in greater detail Narsai's concept of the state of the soul after it has separated from the body, and, later on in this Homily, show the close similarity between him and Ephraem.

Like a mistress, man's soul dwells in him, but he cannot see it. He ministers to it like a servant, and he holds his peace (keeps silent) before its will (or freedom). The Creator made man's body a house for the soul, to dwell therein like a king.

Narsai goes on to comment that God first made the human body when He created man; afterwards He formed the soul, and caused it to dwell in him. God places the seed in the womb of the human body. The seed is the nucleus of another body, and thus from one body there flows another which resembles the first body.

Narsai offers us some interesting and strange ideas regarding the contrast between soul and body with respect to the

---

<sup>3</sup>Ecc1. 12:7.

<sup>4</sup>J. Manna, Morceaux Choisis de Littérature Araméenne, I, (Mossoul: 1901), p. 84.



planting of the seed and the growth of another soul. He maintains that no seed is needed for the soul to grow another soul, whereas a seed is needed for the body to give birth to another body. Nor does the new soul grow in the members of the body. God forms the new soul out of nothing by the spirit of His will.

According to Narsai, there is some affinity between the soul and the watchers and other spiritual beings who are incorporeal. In the beginning the spiritual beings were made out of nothing; so also does the soul flow out of nothing in each generation.

After God made the body of Adam, He formed his soul in a similar manner. First God formed the image of the members of man's body; then He breathed into it the spirit of life, and man became a living soul. The garment of the flesh was made by a spiritual hand. Narsai states that soul and body were created in darkness, but the Bible does not mention this detail.

Narsai tells us that creation rejoices every hour in our own creation; creation makes the soul happy just as a woman is happy on the day of her delivery. The natures of both dumb creatures and rational beings are examined (or made known) in us. By the power of the Creator the soul endeavors to make happy the natures of both rational beings and dumb creatures that are in us. A great miracle is seen every hour in our creation, for, as is well-known, a man grows out of the seed which a man plants in a woman's body, yet out of this despised and contemptible seed he attains the state of a vessel of glory when he reaches the age of maturity.



We continually see one human body grown out of another just as the soul which dwells in man goes back to that of Adam. On the sixth day God created man, and breathed into his nostrils the spirit of life; the being of his soul was created at the same time; and life grows without death despite man's mortality. It is evident that a child remains for nine months in the womb of its mother, in complete darkness; then it emerges to behold the beauty of God's creation. Man emerges from the darkness of the womb and sees the light; he speaks aloud and utters words. The heavenly multitudes are amazed at the newborn child as it is thus greatly honored, just as they marveled at the light which God created on the first day of the creation of the earth. Just as the light gladdened the mournful earth, so did newborn man gladden it; and so also does the newly delivered child banish the darkness of suffering from its travailing mother.

Repeatedly Narsai asserts that man is made of soul and body, united together by God's love. Body and soul constitute the whole man. The Divine will preserves the continuity of the human race. God forms new bodies from the original body, but all souls come from one man, Adam. It is plain that one human body resembles another, and so does one soul resemble another. God does not create a new man as He did the first man, for one man begets another man. At the beginning God created one man, and the rest of mankind stem from him.

Like a preacher, the soul cries to the members of man's body, and the light of its voice is more useful to man's eyes than the



light of the sun. The sight of its dignity is hidden in his body, and makes him endeavor not to be despised in the sight of spectators. The soul dwells in him, but it is hidden from him; on the other hand, the soul sees him, although, according to Narsai, not in actuality.

Although the soul is in man's body, the body is distinct from it; also, it can leave him. The soul is hidden in one place among the members of the body, and the power of its life is spread over the body's senses.

Narsai tells us that the soul dwells in the heart of man as in a shrine; it dwells in the midst of the house of man's body, so that all the senses of the body can listen to the intimacy of its love. The senses of the body are clustered around it like infants. The faculties of its mind nurse the infant body just as an infant nurses at its mother's breast. The body is reared by the soul without blemish. Like a wet-nurse, it bears the burden of the body's infancy, and, according to its need, it supplies it with food, so that it may be nourished.

The soul grows with the body's dimension, yet it does not actually grow. Its love stammers like an infant during man's infancy. The soul's structure is complete from the beginning, when it is created; nevertheless it is not perfect without the body. The power of speech was placed in it from the day it was created, but the course of its fluency is in need of the members of the body. It sings with a beautiful voice in the body as long



as it is sound. It possesses the power of discernment, and does not need the senses of the body to help it to grow properly.

Wisely it keeps its treasures beyond the reach of the silent infant while his body is developing and his flesh grows; like a parent, the soul guides the members of the child's body as long as they are growing. The soul, too, grows according to the growth of the youth; and with his old age it goes down to the state of infirmity. As long as the body is in sound condition, the soul also retains the soundness of its discernment; and when the body is sick, its understanding likewise becomes sick. While the body remains in good condition, the mind of the soul is at rest, and its voice is illuminated; but on the day of man's mourning his soul's thoughts also are sad, and its voice is diminished. It is satisfied when man's belly is full, although its nature has no need of food. It acts like a watchman when man is exhausted by his toil. It sleeps when he sleeps, although the mind of the soul is ever vigilant. It rejoices in his life, although his body has no life of its own. It grieves on the day of his departure, although it continues to live in an unconscious state. It loves what he loves, although he lacks understanding and love. It hates his sufferings, although it does not suffer in its own sensitiveness.

In love it suffers with his beloved body, though not in its nature, because it is beyond bodily suffering. In love it bears the burden of the sorrow of his death; and its voice suffers



severe pain on the day of his illness. In love it is yoked to his senses, just as an object is yoked to the fire in which it is burned. The toil of his lust does not please it. Because of his love it goes down to an unworthy place with him.

The soul has no desire to participate in the body's pleasures. It does not eat material food as does the body, but if the body hungers, it hungers with it--in this Ephraem agrees with Narsai.<sup>5</sup> When the senses of man are asleep, the soul's thoughts roam far away. The voice of the soul sleeps, but its mind is vigilant, and vibrates. Sleep, food, and sexual pleasure are material desires, and are not shared by the soul. The suffering of its nature is different from that of the body.

Envy, pride, and murmuring are the fruits of the soul. Killing, wrath, anger are also the products of the soul. It acts skillfully to punish those who displease it. Suffering and compunction are also the products of the soul. It earnestly entreats God for mercy towards its debts. The body needs food, sleep, and fellowship; the soul too is bound to earthly things according to man's needs. Although the body is joined with the soul, it does not mix with it. The soul dwells in the body, but does not assume the body's structure. The body bears it within itself, but does not sense where exactly the soul is located. The soul carries the body, but the body does not know it because of the soul's swiftness. Like a horse, the body's senses are governed by the power of the soul; the body does not understand the cause of its joining with the soul.

---

<sup>5</sup>Beck, op. cit., 78-79, p. 39.



Like a charioteer, the soul's will rides behind man's body, and drives it wherever the soul wishes; it steers the ship of man's human nature.

Like a band, the soul takes hold by the faculties of the mind and rules the path to man's actions; it regulates him, in order that he should not stumble in his lust. The soul stifles words in the mouth of man, in the likeness of a muzzle, and prevents him and his friends from falling victim to guile. The soul exalts the staff of judgment every hour after his infancy. The soul reminds him of the threat of punishment that may be beyond man's endurance. Act of good and evil are under the power of the soul, and it enables man to meditate over invisible mysteries. The soul lovingly encourages his personality and fellowship.

The soul banishes the sleep of iniquity from both itself and the body, in order that they both should gather the fruits of reason. The faculty of speech is its study day and night; and the faculties of its mind flow endlessly; the Lord of nature has placed in the soul the spring of life, and the flow of life out of its life does not cease. The leaven of life without death is hidden in its creation. Narsai evidently teaches here not the immortality of the soul, but only its continuity as long as it is united with the body, and it remains alive, like a baby in mother's womb, in Paradise after it is separated from the body. As we have seen, Narsai repeatedly states that the soul was created by God at the beginning of the creation of man.



God pulls the lifeless body toward life. The power of the soul's life flows in the stream of its mortality, and it causes strange words to flow for man. The mute body speaks, even though the power of speech is not its own, and it bears the fruits of speech in its senses. The fruits of the soul are borne by silent channels in man's head, the chief member of his body. Sweetness of life breathes from the soul, although it is invisible to him. The soul sets up the finger of life every hour in the structure of the body.

Although the body is a corruptible harp, spiritual voices sing in it. The body is a broken reed held by bands. In it simple words are transmitted without impediment. The body is like a garment eaten by the moths of man's sufferings. The soul clothes itself with the life of vigilant affinity.

Narsai goes on to state that metaphorically both heavenly beings and carnal beings are represented in man. By way of body and soul God formed and adorned man in his own image. God fashioned his structure with greater care than all other creatures. God set him up as a tabernacle of love on earth held up by two ropes--the body and the soul--in order that both heavenly beings and carnal beings should figuratively dwell in him. God formed and completed him for the temple of life, in order that the rational and mute elements should appear in him joined together.

God sealed the soul possessed of life in him. By the soul's light man travels to the heaven of peace. Like a lamp, the soul



hangs in the temple of the body, and shines with the anointment of rational life without life. When the soul is separated from the body, darkness reigns in its members. The soul's word is a lamp for the body, and shows man the light of life; its voice shines like a lamp on his head.

By the light of the soul, man sees and hears, and by the soul's word he is able to interpret things. By its skillfulness he works on earth in all manner of workmanship. By the power of the soul, man makes war when he succumbs to the allurements of his lust. With its help, he triumphs over the sufferings of his mortality. By means of the soul he triumphs over the discipline of the labors of righteousness; it gives him the crown of victory for his endurance. The soul teaches him to view his struggle spiritually, and encourages him, in order that he should not be weakened before his enemy. The soul possesses in its mind the crown of life without death, and guides him like an infant who draws near to receive direction. With him it brings down all the conflicts of lust; like a warrior, it anoints his senses, in order that they should not be deceived. Only death can separate the soul from its labors, and it is unable to conquer it with its sting.

So far Narsai has described the relationship between the soul and the body while man is living. He then proceeds to analyze the state of the soul after it is separated from the body, which returns to the dust of the earth.



As we have already stated, Narsai, Ephraem, and the other leading Syriac Fathers teach that the souls of righteous people are kept in Paradise, in the land of Eden, in an unconscious state, until the day of resurrection, when they will again be united with the bodies. They also believed that man can exist in a conscious state only when body and soul are united--they cannot live apart from each other. The majority of Christian churches, on the other hand, believe that the souls of the righteous dwell in joy in the presence of God, while the souls of the wicked are burning in hell fire.

A. Mingana, the editor of this Homily, has noted (at the end of the Homily) that it was the belief of many Syriac Fathers that the souls of the righteous are kept in Paradise while they await the day of resurrection. This idea occurs, for example, in the Homilies of Jacob Aphraates, Ephraem (On Paradise), Marutha, and Isaac of Antioch. At the same time, Mingana points out that the Catholic Church teaches that the souls of the righteous already dwell in the presence of God, while the souls of the wicked are being chastised in the unquenchable fire of Hell.<sup>6</sup>

Mingana notes also that according to Narsai and other notable Syriac Fathers, including Ephraem (in the eighth Homily on Paradise), the souls, after departure from their bodies, cease to function but rest in somewhat the same way as a man rests when he is asleep,

---

<sup>6</sup>A. Mingana, Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina, II, (Mosul: 1905), p. 250.



Narsai calls our attention to some very interesting details regarding the time when the soul is separated from the body. God's executioner appears before it suddenly, and terrifies it, so that it trembles like a woman laboring in childbirth. The pangs of fear smite it at the time of death, when it is expelled like an infant out of the body. Like a captor, death enters the temple of its life. The soul goes out of the body naked, and like an exile departs from the body to another land. Its mind is seized with deep mourning on the day of its departure, and it sees its life destroyed by premature death. Sighing, it cries out for its beloved body, but after the body is destroyed, its voice ceases. Mournfully the soul weeps in silence over what has happened. After its departure, the soul no longer sings to the harp of its love.

The soul grieves deeply when its strings are snapped asunder, and worms begin to devour the members of its body. It grieves over its separation from its love, although it knows full well that it will return to it on the day of resurrection. Ephraem thus agrees with Narsai that on the day of resurrection the soul will re-enter the body.<sup>11</sup>

Narsai states that God who created the soul gave it the power to know these things, and caused the power of discernment to dwell in it. The same commandment which brought it forth and imprisoned it in the body, brings it out of the body, since it entered without deceit.

---

<sup>11</sup>Beck, op. cit., 78-79, p. 35.



whereas the Catholic Church teaches that the soul can exist in a conscious state without the body.<sup>7</sup>

The teaching of Narsai and of the other Syriac Fathers regarding the unconsciousness of the soul after its separation from the body is in harmony with the Old Testament, since the Bible plainly states that the dead in their graves have no consciousness,<sup>8</sup> while the idea of the souls of the righteous being kept in Paradise is contrary to it. The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that man's body returns to the dust of the earth, while his spirit returns to God.<sup>9</sup> The other Old Testament references listed below affirm accordingly that the dead in their graves cannot praise the Lord.

Where did Narsai and the other Syriac Fathers get the idea that the souls of the righteous are kept in Paradise in the land of Eden after their separation from their bodies? One may suggest the possibility that the Syriac Fathers who influenced Narsai got this idea from Jewish tradition which teaches that all righteous souls must pass through the Garden of Eden where Paradise is located. On the other hand, L. Ginzberg argues for the possibility that this idea is of Christian origin.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>8</sup>Job 10:21-22; 3:17-19; Ps. 6:5; 30:9; 88:10; 115:17; 146:4; Eccl. 9:5, 6; Isa. 38:18, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Eccl. 12:7.

<sup>10</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., V, p. 75 (referring to I Cor. 15:22, and Rom. 5:14, as well as Tertullian, De Anima, 40). This view plays a great part in the Kabbalah, which speaks of the sparks of Adam's soul forming the souls of later generations; cf. I, pp. 55-62.



The soul is not destroyed when it is separated from the body, while the body decays in its grave in due time. The soul is above death and deceit; it is invisible; it cannot be taken hold of bodily. The soul is a living spirit, and has swift wings with which to fly through the air. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai that the soul can fly through the air,<sup>12</sup> and so does Jewish tradition, since Talmud and Midrash often speak of the soul's flight.<sup>13</sup> Narsai adds that the soul, unlike the body, is not caught in the snare of death.

One of the watchers comes down to take the soul on the day of its departure, and to translate it where it was commanded to go by the Creator. Like a guide, the heavenly spirit directs the soul until it reaches its prepared mansion in Paradise with the rest of the souls. The angel who keeps it alive there, shows it where it is to dwell until the day of resurrection. Narsai goes on to say that Paradise is located in the vicinity of the earth, although he does not specify the exact location, nor does Ephraem.<sup>14</sup>

Narsai maintains that while they are yet on earth, all souls are commanded where they are to dwell. Some of them get to the land of Eden, and some to other lands where they are sent. The souls of the wicked, according to Narsai, do not get to Paradise, but are sent to a different place in the vicinity of the earth, but

---

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>13</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., V, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup>Beck, op. cit., 78-79, p. 35.



again Narsai does not provide us with the exact location of this place. In Paradise the righteous people dwell in spirit, not in body, while they await preparation of the kingdom of heaven. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai that the souls of the righteous are kept in Paradise in the land of Eden, waiting there for the gate of Paradise to be opened on the day of resurrection; then the souls will be re-united with their bodies to make man conscious in the same way as Adam was made conscious when he was created.<sup>15</sup>

Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai that the Garden of Eden was the abode of the first man and woman, and that the souls of all men must pass through it after death, before they reach their final destination.<sup>16</sup> Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai also in that the souls are needed for the resurrection of the human bodies.<sup>17</sup>

According to Narsai, Enoch and Elijah were taken bodily to Paradise in the land of Eden; and they will be there in the mystery of the kingdom until they receive their final reward when God establishes His eternal kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

Narsai continues that the sons of the kingdom will dwell in a beautiful land, it being God's desire that everyone should know that there is hope for those who are waiting anxiously for it. The righteous people will not yet receive their reward for

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>16</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>18</sup>Mingana, op. cit., I, p. 193.



their labors in Paradise, but God will some day reveal the distinction between the wicked and the righteous which will be realized only at the end of the world. The wicked will depart to the outerland, and will not be lifted up toward heaven. This was pledged by God in confirmation of His words, that while man goes through his lowly existence on earth, God will assure the power of his glory on the day of resurrection. God buries jealousy in the grave. God urges men and women to desire the immortal life which God has prepared for those who obey Him.

According to Narsai, the soul of Christ and the soul of the thief who was crucified with him entered Paradise in the land of Eden first; thus the way was prepared for all other people. Narsai does not tell us, however, where the souls of people were kept before the day of crucifixion, when Christ opened the gate of Paradise for the entrance of the souls. Narsai asserts that all souls of the righteous who entered the land of Eden, where Paradise is located, endured many sufferings; there they will rest as if in the bed of sweetness. The soul ceases its actions when it is disembodied, just as if it were asleep. Ephraem thus agrees with Narsai that in this state the soul resembles an infant in the womb of its mother, and is unconscious when it is taken to Paradise.<sup>19</sup> Similarly its power of speech is dormant while it is in Paradise.

---

<sup>19</sup>Beck, op. cit., 78-79, p. 34.



The souls no longer struggle in the toil of righteousness while they are in Paradise; on the other hand, the power of life which is in them does not cease, but the souls are in an unconscious state, similar to that of an infant in the womb of its mother who is a living substance, yet without consciousness. As long as there is no body the soul cannot transmit words, but its flow of discernment is not dried up or parched.

While the soul is in an unconscious state in Paradise, the body is dead; it will remain dead until God's voice will call the dead from their graves. Narsai has repeatedly stated that the soul cannot do anything without the body, nor can the body do anything without the help of the soul. Ephraem says the same thing.<sup>20</sup> Narsai raises the question how can the soul take action without the body? Ephraem agrees with Narsai in asking, if the soul can see and hear without the body, why did God imprison it in the body of man at the beginning of creation? Ephraem argues that the soul cannot see without the body.<sup>21</sup>

God placed the soul in the body of man to show the power of its wisdom; He does not persuade it, not even in man's sleep, to do anything. While the body is asleep, the soul sleeps with it; although the soul does not really sleep. Until man awakens, the soul does not awake to perform its actions. As long as man is in his sleep, the soul can do nothing; how then can the soul do

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 33.



anything when man sinks into the sleep of death? Narsai argues that the body of man is sound while he is asleep, but the soul does not sing in him. As long as man is asleep, the functions of the soul are inactive.

Narsai says that the soul ceases its actions, but not its life, after its departure, and offers some illustrations to prove that the soul cannot exist in a conscious state without the body. No carpenter can work without an axe; nor can a blacksmith use his hands for a hammer. No sailor can sail upon the sea without a ship; and no fisherman can catch fish without a net. In the same manner, the soul cannot sail upon the sea of speech while it is separated from the body. Both soul and body are waiting for the ultimate reward, which will be realized at the end of the world, when soul and body will be re-united to make the complete man.

Wisely the soul keeps its own order and the order of the body while it is disembodied in Paradise. The soul cannot sin and be justified unless it is united with the body. If the soul could be justified, the iniquity of the first generation, that is, of the people who died before the death of Christ would have been already paid, for if the soul of Adam could pay for its sin, there would be no action for any transgression at all in Paradise before the crucifixion. According to Narsai, salvation for those who died before Jesus was ratified only when Christ died on the cross. As a matter of fact, Nestorians believe that Christ preached to the



dead in their graves while He himself was in the grave for three days. If the bill of guilt were already paid by those who had departed before Christ, there would be no judgment and no vengeance for them.

Soul and body are therefore in debt and must pay for their sins before they are separated from each other. It is necessary for everyone to be justified before death comes and swallows him. Let the dead who are living in sins come and do good works, and give alms to those who are in need, while they are still alive, for after death there is no longer any doing of good works.



## CHAPTER IV

### GOD'S MANIFESTATIONS TO THE MEN OF THE BIBLE

Narsai's Homily II is devoted to God's manifestations to the major men of the Bible. Some of them Narsai discusses at length, others very briefly. A gigantic task confronts us in evaluating this Homily, because the scope of its subject is very extensive, and because we are confronted with the difficulty of identifying some of the biblical persons on account of the difference in the spelling of their names in Syriac and in Hebrew. Moreover, there is the arduous task of going through the commentaries of Ephraem in order to find similar facts ascribed to the same biblical person. Still, this Homily is of considerable importance for the interesting matters contained in it, especially Narsai's characterization of Michael and Gabriel, and his account of their ministry on earth.

Not only are there in this Homily striking similarities between Narsai and Ephraem, but in many places both use identical interpretations. There are also noticeable similarities between Narsai and Jewish tradition. It is possible that Narsai followed the exegesis of Ephraem and that in many places both Narsai and Ephraem drew upon rabbinic sources for their interpretations. We shall point out such similarities in the course of the Homily.

It is of some importance to notice the chronological order of the men of the Bible in this Homily, especially the classification



of Job as "the son" of Esau, and the placing of Jeremiah and Ezekiel after the minor prophets.

We shall endeavor to include in this Homily most of the facts which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis, but we shall exclude unimportant points and repetitions. We shall also exclude the last two pages of this Homily, in which Narsai discusses the men of the New Testament, which does not concern us in this investigation; the facts about Abraham are also excluded because we have evaluated them in Narsai's Homily I.

While we have carefully endeavored to indicate such similarities between Narsai and Ephraem as are evident from the available material, it is important to keep in mind the fact that when some aspect of the Homily is not compared with Ephraem and others, it is to be understood that there Narsai stands alone. It is to be understood also that these similarities refer to original contributions to Old Testament exegesis as well as to aspects significant for the investigation of the source of Narsai's exegesis. This investigation endeavors to indicate not minute similarities but only important matters in the Homilies of Narsai, since comparison between Narsai and others is of secondary interest to the main subject.

According to Narsai, God implanted the image of His revelation in man's mind and men began to form spiritual images. The Creator imparted life to man, and thus men came to possess immortal life in their minds. God spoke to their minds, and taught them to meditate



in His mysteries. The Creator manifested the ways of His will to them so that they might see invisibly by means of revelation. In the beginning the Creator did not manifest His revelation of himself to them, but made them wise to understand the power of His greatness.

Narsai goes on to say that the Creator revealed the power of His greatness in the creation of man, and taught him to manifest his creation; Adam was created out of fine dust. The Creator breathed into him a spiritual soul, and spoke to Adam's soul about the rib which was to be taken out of him to form Eve. Adam said that part of Eve was taken out of him, but it was not for him to know the cause of the secret of God's taking the rib out of him in order to form Eve.<sup>1</sup> The mystery of salvation of body and soul was hidden from Adam. When he was created, he possessed the understanding to see God's nature. He looked physically at the Creator's nature which is all good, and praised and magnified Him.

At the beginning of spiritual revelation, the Lord revealed His love to the earthly people, and taught them that the human race was very dear to Him. Because of His love, He manifested His revelation to man. God spoke to men both in body and spirit according to their nature, which was both spiritual and carnal.

God physically rebuked Adam's transgression when Adam heard the sound of God walking in the cool of the day in Paradise.<sup>2</sup> In men's language God made them to rejoice, and taught them to

---

<sup>1</sup>Gen. 2:23.

<sup>2</sup>Gen. 3:8.



bring offerings of love. He taught them to offer sacrifices of love to Him through which He examined the inclination of the secrets of their minds.

In his retelling of the battle between Cain and Abel Narsai once more offers some original ideas which are found neither in the Bible, nor in the commentary of Ephraem, nor in Jewish tradition. He tells us that Adam went into his wife, and Eve conceived and bore a son whom she called Cain, that is "possession from the Lord." Eve rejoiced in the possession of Cain, her first-born, and later bore another son whom she called Abel. She called him Abel, "vanity," because his life ended in vanity. She and Adam saw that they possessed rational offspring, even though they were in sin. They thus possessed life through their children.

Abel was a herder of sheep, and Cain was a tiller of the soil. Both of them offered the first fruits of their labor to God. Abel offered a lamb to the Lord, and his will was with his offering, while Cain offered to the Lord grass of the earth, and did not mingle his will with it. Ephraem tells us that Cain offered dry spikes.<sup>3</sup> Jewish tradition says that "Abel selected the best of his flocks for his sacrifice, but Cain ate his meal first, and after he had satisfied his appetite, he offered unto God what was left over a few grains of flax seed."<sup>4</sup> Narsai goes on to tell us that through their offerings the wills of their thoughts were manifested, and

---

<sup>3</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 107.



therefore God exposed and rebuked the deceitful Cain by rejecting his offering. The Creator had rebuked both Adam and Eve when they acted foolishly, and even so now He exposed the wills of Cain and his brother. God's knowledge, like a scale, weighed both of them, and preferred the love of Abel, the innocent, but despised the willfulness of the deceitful Cain. The Lord accepted Abel's offering in love, but despised and rejected Cain's offering because his mind was not pure.

Through fire the Creator examined the offerings which were presented to Him, to determine their acceptability in the sight of God. Abel's offering was consumed by the fire, but the fire did not even draw near to Cain's offering, whereupon Cain clothed himself with great mourning, caused his face to be sad, and was bitter against the Creator because his offering was despised by Him. The Lord said to Cain with a soft and distinct voice, "If you will only incline your will, I will accept your offering. If the bitterness of your thoughts would not turn to sweetness, behold, your sin lies at the gate, and will not be removed from your bodily members. Here is your envy-filled offering, given back to you. Why are you sad? You have power over your own self. Go and make known your will through the work of your hands."

But Cain did not change his will after he was rebuked by the Lord, and did not accept correction through the admonition that was presented to him. He was condemned by his pride like the devil, heaped anger upon anger, and conceived murder in his mind. For the



audacious Cain thought that when he would kill the innocent Abel, he would mock the Creator who had despised his offering.

Narsai goes on to say that through Abel Cain wanted to take vengeance of the Creator, like his master Satan who through Adam reviled the Creator. Cain said to his brother--the envious one to the innocent one--"Come, let us go down to the field and see the beauty of the earth." While pretending love Cain schemed against Abel, and burning with envy he said, "Let us go," in order to fulfill his wrath upon the innocent Abel. The innocent Abel believed the cunning Cain just as Eve believed the deceitful devil in the Garden of Eden. Abel went with Cain to the plain, not knowing the secret of his brother, and Cain repressed the mercy which originally was placed in his nature, and slew his brother, in the spirit of his envious hope that through this killing he would weary God.

Woe to the heart which conceived murder! A new deed was done on earth. Woe to the will of the audacious one who prepared the way to Sheol! Through Abel the way was prepared, and death began to flow along it, and Adam learned from this deed that he was mortal. The devil fulfilled the desire of his envy through Cain, and was comforted when he saw death rule. Satan taught Cain falsehood and pretense, and he hid Abel's corpse in the earth, so that he would not have to confess his crime when asked by the Lord; for the killer thought that the blood of Abel would remain hidden and the Lord would not know of it.

Cain hid Abel and hid his own will with him; he sought to cover his will from the Creator who knows all secrets. Suddenly the



Creator spoke and loudly called to the murderer, "O envious and deceitful one, what wrong did Abel do to you? Where is your brother?" But as the Lord spoke to Cain, Cain replied presumptuously, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Lord who knows all things beforehand asked Cain as if He did not know what had happened to Abel, just as He asked Adam in Paradise. For God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden, "Where are you?" even though the Lord saw him. So here too He asked Cain concerning Abel, his brother, "Where is your brother?" even though the Creator knew where Abel was. For the Lord asked Cain as if He did not know in the hope that the audacious Cain would perchance repent and confess his transgression, so that God could pardon and forgive him. Cain was the first disciple of the devil, and both the devil and Cain spoke falsely, and so justice overtook them. When the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother?", cruel Cain did not want to confess his sin, but replied wickedly, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He replied to his Lord with bold daring, and the murderer was not ashamed. Even if Your beloved has perished, he meant, why should I plead guilty to his murder? Yet justice bound Abel with dreadful ropes to the voice of Cain, even though Cain did not wish to confess his evil will. The Lord said to Cain, "The blood of your brother is crying out to Me as it contends with its murderer. Therefore, cursed are you from the earth, for the earth under you, which was not prepared to receive the innocent blood, will receive it with curses because of you. Through the emotion



of your body Abel has suffered pain in his body which your hands have destroyed; and you will be in fear of spectators, even though your heart did not tremble at killing." The Lord said, "I will take vengeance of seven generations for the blood of the innocent, for which you prepared the way to Sheol that multitudes of men shall now travel. Upon you I place the mark of the blood which I shall avenge." The warnings were put into action, and Cain was clothed with fear, and his body trembled on earth.

Through compunction and against his will he earnestly entreated the Creator and demanded death for his own life, so that he would be delivered from such terrible punishment. Cain said to the Lord,

Behold, You have caused me to go out from the earth. You have clothed me with trembling and guilt that seem dreadful to spectators. I ask of You one thing, that it may please You to do for me according to Your mercies, namely that through death Your curse may be removed from my bodily members. And the Lord replied, "Not only by death will your transgression be avenged, for I shall extend the harsh scourge of your evil over seven generations, and the vengeance for your killing will be spoken in all the world."<sup>4a</sup>

The Lord put a sign upon Cain so that he would not die by man's death. The Creator kept him alive as a warning for future generations so that when vengeance for murder is made known men would avoid killing. Adam and Eve were comforted by these words at that time, and begot other children.

Adam and Eve mourned the slain Abel saying that death had destroyed his image and mourned Cain saying that fear was introduced in creation. The Creator bound them in their natural love of mercy,

---

<sup>4a</sup>Mingana, op. cit., p. 113.



so that the sweetness which was placed in their nature would temper the distress caused to them by these sad events.

It was for the sake of mankind that God translated Enoch and kept him alive, and in this way Enoch saved them from the punishment earned in Paradise, as a consequence of Adam's sin. God made men hear the voice of resurrection, and showed them manifestations without causing thereby the destruction of mankind. Lamech wondered about the hope of the renewal of man, and God revealed to him through the birth of his son that peace will come to mankind.

Through Noah God modified the calamity of the flood, and the curse which was brought about by Adam in Paradise was cancelled. He made the antediluvians hear the forecast of their destruction through a revealed voice, but they made light of this voice which rebuked them. Only Noah heard the voice and understood its meaning, for he acknowledged and confirmed the ways of God's punishment. In fear of God's chastisement, Noah built an ark to save the surviving remnant of the world. A small contingent of mute creatures and rational beings was saved by means of Noah's ark. In a perceptible voice God taught Noah how to enter and leave the ark. In the same voice He spoke to him to teach him the order of eating animal flesh.

In the same perceptible voice God blessed Noah's son, Shem, and bound his other two sons under Shem's overlordship. Through Shem God manifested the hope which shone to them, and Shem's son followed the godly life of his father.



Through both body and spirit Isaac heard a spiritual voice which reminded him of God's promise to his father. Immediately, he began to make known this promise, and endeavored diligently to fulfill it for his sons. Like an athlete, he trained his soul to receive his father's blessing and wished to give it to his son, Esau, as the first-born, but God restrained him.

In attempting to combine three visions--Jacob's vision of the heavenly ladder, his vision of Penuel, and his vision of God, it seems that Narsai confused them; therefore, we shall endeavor to separate them in order to put them in their proper setting according to the biblical tradition.

Narsai tells us that Jacob saw the will of God, who chose him before his birth to keep the treasure house of the promise of life, which was carried in his soul. When he set out to journey on his way, he saw in a vision a ladder set upon the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and God above it.<sup>5</sup> He saw the angels of God swiftly ascending and descending upon it and fulfilling the will of the Lord who sent them. This vision which Jacob saw was not a waking vision, nor something seen when half-awake. When he fell asleep, he saw an invisible sight.

He did not actually see the ladder with his eyes, for it is impossible for human beings to see the Lord and His spiritual beings. It was a vision which showed only the ways of actions, and the implications of the descending and ascending. As the

---

<sup>5</sup>Gen. 28:10-22.



spiritual beings ascended and descended, God taught Jacob that he must not grow weary of his journey. Even though the spiritual beings might grow weary of their actions, he should not weaken in the face of anxiety; he must be patient until he receives the wages of his labor.

By faith, hope, and love God confirmed him, and because of this God called him to the land of God. The place where he saw the vision and vowed to pay the tithes to God was called Bethel ("House of God").<sup>6</sup> The vision resembled the one at the end of his labors, and God taught him in the same way as He taught him at the beginning of his journey. His flight from the house of Laban resembles his going down to Padan-Aram.

In his flight Jacob saw a camp of heavenly beings who reminded him of the vision seen at Bethel.<sup>7</sup> He saw an awesome sight of the heavenly beings who ministered and drew near to him. One of the spiritual beings got hold of him in intense wrestling, and Jacob wrestled with him until he received from him the power of the blessing. The angel blessed him, and when Jacob asked his name, the angel did not answer. Through his senses he saw the vision of a man, and got hold of the hand of the spiritual being. The angel of the Lord taught him to wrestle, and when Jacob prevailed over him, ~~it was an indication~~ that he would prevail also over his brother, Esau.

---

<sup>6</sup>Gen. 28:19-22.

<sup>7</sup>Gen. 32:24-32.



Jacob's name was subsequently changed to Israel, which, according to Narsai, means "he who saw God."<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Narsai asserts that on this occasion Jacob did not see God bodily, but saw only a vision which spoke in God's name.

Narsai tells us that God's Being is invisible to spectators, and they cannot behold the invisibility of God. In every generation God taught the righteous people the name of His Being by way of visions. Jacob was a righteous person, and the manner of his life was beloved and admired by others. God gave him a good name, "beholder of the Divinity." Through the spirit God showed him an incorporeal sight, and taught him how to fashion forms before spectators. Jacob blessed his sons in spirit as he was commanded, and made known to them the end of their actions.

Narsai then tells us that Joseph looked spiritually into future things, and interpreted the dreams of the sheaves and luminaries.<sup>9</sup> The exaltation of Joseph and the humiliation of his brothers were foretold in his dreams, so that Joseph was promoted to a high position, while his brothers were demoted to the rank of servants. The Lord made His servants wise so that they might be witnesses to the ways of Divine Providence with men.

Narsai believes that Job was "the son" of Esau, but he does not tell us whether he was his direct son or only a descendant of his. Jewish tradition tells us that Job was Esau's grandson,<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Gen. 35:9-15.

<sup>9</sup>Gen. 37:7, 9-10.

<sup>10</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 225.



while Ephraem says that he was his descendant.<sup>11</sup> It is thus evident that there is a similarity between Narsai, Ephraem, and Jewish tradition, and the likelihood is that both Narsai and Ephraem drew upon Rabbinic sources.

Narsai goes on to say that Job was one of the witnesses to God's Divine Providence and that he was greater than all men of his time and bore a name proper for him, the name of His witness. This son of Esau was a skilled witness and through him God demonstrated that sons of iniquity can become righteous through the power of God. Job was just and true in his faith, and it was proper that the prophet should place his name in the book of righteous people. Narsai does not tell us who this prophet was who inscribed Job's name in that book; Ephraem, on the other hand, explicitly states that Moses wrote the Book of Job.<sup>12</sup>

God manifested the image of His justice through Moses, and appointed him to be a skilled scribe of His mysteries. More than to any other man, God revealed to him the mysteries of His secrets and raised him to a rank above all his contemporaries. God appointed him chief of the beholders of His secrets on earth, and taught him to turn invisible revelation into visible revelation.

The sight of fire on Mount Sinai was also manifested by God to Moses. Out of this fire God transmitted His name to Moses, revealed His power to him, and through him taught man that He had

---

<sup>11</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., II, p. 1.



created all creation out of nothing. Through a lowly bush God showed him an astonishing sight--the bush burning in fire without being consumed. Sight and voice were made known to him out of the fire.

Narsai proceeds to explain that God's dealings with Moses were executed through the senses. Through a corporeal vision God taught him the power of His Lordship, by changing the rod into a snake. By means of the rod Moses smote the Egyptians with the ten plagues, and divided the sea, so that the people of Israel could cross it walking upon dry land. It was not the rod itself which possessed the power of the name of His Lordship but rather the power of God which performed these miracles through it. With it Moses made the bitter water sweet; he caused quail to descend and manna to come down. With it he smote the rock and made water flow from it in order to supply the needs of the people in fulfillment of God's love for them. God manifested the power of His greatness through all these miracles.

God spoke to His people through Moses--a man hesitant of speech and tongue-tied. God chose such a man from among all mortals and revealed through him the power of His Being over all creation. God appointed Moses his viceroy on earth, and gave him the power to declare the order of the creation of the world. God spiritually revealed to him on Mount Sinai the creation of the world. Moses marveled at the mystery of creation and asked God to show him the glory of His Godhead. Being a man, Moses desired to see



God, not knowing that the mystery of God is invisible to him; yet like a friend God revealed to him His glory in the place of His mystery. God manifested the greatness of His glory in the brightness of Moses' countenance. The sight of His glory made the tongue-tied Moses more glorious than all men. But since corporeal man cannot look at God, Moses did not see God in the flesh and so all men must acknowledge that the Divinity of God is incomprehensible to them.

Narsai tells us that on Mount Sinai it was an angel who ministered and not the Lord Himself and revealed an astonishing sight to the spectators. Everything which was disclosed on Mount Sinai was God's manifestation--there was nothing which was not His. St. Paul testifies that it was an angel who handed down the law of Moses, whereupon Moses expounded the ways of the law in the ears of the people of Israel. He interpreted it and spoke to them by way of spiritual revelation. The spirit acted like a musical instrument in his mouth and Moses spoke in a glorious voice to the ears of the people. Three times God performed his actions--with the spiritual beings, with Moses, and with the children of Israel. The past utterances of people were transmitted to Moses in the same manner as a king transmits his commands to his subjects.

The spiritual beings transmitted God's words to the earthly people. The imprint of God's feet was marked on Mount Sinai as if He were a carnal man, even though God is incorporeal. Moses



meditated in the study of God's words. The same command which created all creatures out of nothing also wrote, not by hands, for the Creator has no hands in any shape or form, even though we are told that the commandments were written by the hand of God for the benefit of man.

Narsai goes on to tell us that God transmitted His message to His people in every generation by appointing as His messenger an angel variously called Michael or Azazel. Michael occurs only in the Book of Daniel (10:13, 21; 12:1) as a spiritual being and more will be said about him later on in this Homily. Azazel is mentioned in the Book of Leviticus<sup>13</sup> as the name of the scapegoat which was sent away into the wilderness. Azazel was thus not considered as an angel in the Bible; Jewish tradition, on the other hand, has it that Azazel was one of the fallen angels.<sup>14</sup> It was Michael of whom Moses said in God's name on Mount Sinai, "Behold, I will send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you into the land which I have prepared."<sup>15</sup> And it was in Michael's name that God appointed ministers of His Divinity and commanded Moses to fear him just as he feared the Lord himself. It is difficult, however, to agree with Narsai's view that the angel who guided the children of Israel in the wilderness was Michael, since his name, as stated previously, is mentioned only in the Book of Daniel.

---

<sup>13</sup>Lev. 16:8-10.

<sup>14</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, pp. 149-151; III, 472; V, 152, 171.

<sup>15</sup>Exod. 23:20.



Narsai does not tell us exactly who the man was who met Joshua with the heavenly army as mentioned in the Book of Joshua (Josh. 5:13-15). Narsai believes that he was a heavenly being while Ephraem asserts that he was an angel.<sup>16</sup> Some Christian commentators identify this man with Christ in His theophany for two reasons: first, he accepted the homage offered by Joshua, thus proving himself to be more than an angel; and, secondly, he commanded Joshua to take his shoes off his feet, on the ground that the spot where he stood was holy, and an angel cannot claim the attribute of holiness, which is the sole prerogative of God Himself.

It was Michael who showed Joshua the sight of the man armed with the visible instruments of war. Actually, the man was invisible and it was only a likeness which resembled a man. This man was the commander of the heavenly forces which came to Joshua to teach him God's hegemony. God performed all these things by the hands of Moses and Joshua. This was the same man who had fought the Canaanite wars, conquered the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, and gave it to the children of Israel. He completed and fulfilled the promise made to Abraham. This same man showed Gideon the sign in fleece and dew, in order to assure him that he would destroy the Midianites without human weapons. Thus, God taught him to fight without arms; even though he would triumph, he must not take pride in the instruments of war.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 297.



It was again the same man who authorized Deborah to summon Barak to go forth and humiliate the pride of Sisera, the mighty warrior.<sup>17</sup> This same man taught Jael various sorts of devices, and in her zeal she hunted down Sisera who had humiliated the people of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by the hand of a woman God humiliated the pride of the kings of Hazor.<sup>19</sup> It was again this man who revealed to the wife of Manoah that she was to give birth to Samson who would control the Philistines by the sign of his long hair.<sup>20</sup> The secret of Samson's vigor was hidden in his head, and the power of his greatness was not human but divine. This same man made the air solid and caused rain to come down as Samuel had asked. By the clap of the thunder God rebuked the people who demanded a king, in order to teach them that, although their desire was to be fulfilled, it was not just.<sup>21</sup>

The Creator performed all these things through spiritual beings, while spiritual beings themselves cannot perform anything except that which they are commanded to do by the Creator. Through spiritual beings God manifested His power over His creatures. The power of God is in no need of the help of His creatures in such matters as the act of creation, which is the sole prerogative of

---

<sup>17</sup>Judges 4:1-24.

<sup>18</sup>Judges 4:22.

<sup>19</sup>Judges 4:17.

<sup>20</sup>Judges 13:1-25.

<sup>21</sup>I Sam. 12:17-18.



God, and numerous things were performed by the Creator alone, without any help from His creatures.

Narsai tells us that all the Psalms of David, king of Israel, were uttered by the power of the spirit. David's prophecy was uttered by the spirit, and he sang it by the spirit; he did not offer it in the manner of an officiating priest. When the power of the spirit spoke to his soul, he composed spiritual songs. He did not hear the utterance of the spirit through his senses, but listened directly to it. David sang spiritually and there was nothing in his songs that was not due to the help of the spirit; it was not an angel who spoke to him to help him compose the Psalms. The power of the spirit played through him on the harp of his soul. The senses of his body told him the order of the music. Just as sound is placed in the reed flute, so the spirit took hold of his tongue and composed by it all kinds of spiritual melodies. In this respect his words are different from those of the prophets and cannot be read in the same way as words of prophecy.

Through simple speech Ahijah heard the command of his Lord, rent asunder the cloak which symbolized the tribes, and gave to Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, ten of the pieces.<sup>22</sup> This action was commanded through revelation but not in mystery. Through the same revelation Jeroboam accepted the ten pieces symbolizing the Ten Tribes over which he was to reign.

Narsai goes on to relate the activities of Elijah when he arrived at Zarephath. Through revelation he increased the flour

---

<sup>22</sup>I Kings 11:30-43.



and oil in the widow's house, and likewise through revelation he snatched the dead from the mouth of death and before all men caused the sacrifices to ascend and the fire to come down. He journeyed from Judah to Horeb and heard a voice and saw a vision. He saw earthquake, fire, and wind. All these things he received through revelation and journeyed to the mark shown to him by the Lord.

The same is true of Elisha. Through revelation he journeyed and received the divine spirit. He performed miracles before spectators, healing the waters with salt in an earthen vessel and turning iron into wood, making it rise to the surface of the water, toward heaven. Through a revealed word he cursed the children who openly scorned him and caused bears to come out and tear them without pity. Elisha did not give the veil of immunity to the child of the Shunamite woman, and so the child suddenly died but in the end Elisha raised him from the dead.

In this same manner he increased the waters in a desolate land and gave nourishment to three kings who were in need. He abated the bitterness of the water in the vessel, and increased bread and caused plenty in contravention of the natural order of things. He physically saw the spiritual beings who encompassed him and smote the Arameans by surprise, blinding them. Through revelation of the spirit Elisha saw the messenger who came to summon him to his death. A corporeal being handed a bow to the king and showed him that he would triumph three times over the Arameans. An incorporeal spirit gave Elisha power to raise the



dead who had suddenly turned to skeletons. The Lord performed all kinds of miracles through the hand of Elisha.

Narsai tells us that Isaiah saw the glory of God in the heavenly Temple, as indicated in Chapter 6 of Isaiah. When he beheld this glory in the heavenly sanctuary, he sighed in sorrow because of the wretchedness of man. Spiritually he saw the sight which was shown to him and marveled at the greatness of the vision and the low estate of man. Isaiah saw the divine throne in his mind and heard in his mind the THREE HOLIES uttered by the seraph. For the vision was incorporeal and only the name of God was formed in it and not God himself. For God does not sit in the Temple like a human being, nor do the spiritual beings have wings like the fowl of the air. The fiery coal which was brought close to Isaiah was immaterial but was part of the mystery of our salvation climaxed by the death of Christ.

In the mystery of salvation the seraph brought the fiery coal to Isaiah's lips and prepared the way for the salvation of the nations of the world. An incorporeal angel grasped the tongs of fire. The fiery coal was immeasurably inferior to the angel. Here, let us learn the greatness of the mystery of our salvation. The proud Jews read the Scripture, but do not understand the meaning thereof. Narsai asserts that the Jews were blind to the mystery which the fiery coal signified.

A group of heretics will arise who will not acknowledge the reality of the body of Christ in human flesh. Without victory



they will arise to prevent Narsai from journeying in the path of God's words, and in the paths of divine visions.

Narsai marvels at the revelation given to Hosea, who was commanded by the Lord to marry two adulterous women, by whose misconduct God revealed the iniquity of two generations. Ephraem here resembles Narsai in stating that the two women symbolize the Israelites who had wrought evil against the Lord.<sup>23</sup> Narsai goes on to say that Hosea married these two women without shame, demonstrating to the people how much their actions were abhorred by God. Through these two immoral women God manifested their own immorality, and through their children God manifested the warning concerning their iniquity. The sons of these two adulterous women represent the scourging administered by the cruel (probably the Assyrian nation). Through these women and their sons God led the Israelites to recognize their own iniquity and made them know that there was justice and forgiveness for them.

There is a similarity between the prophecies of Hosea and Joel. God caused the children of Joel's people to hear a dreadful admonition and made them marvel at the ways of the verbal scourging issuing from his mouth. Their elders also heard it, and the inhabitants of the land trembled when they heard him proclaim, "Behold the time is approaching when the nation of Israel will be destroyed by the foe."

---

<sup>23</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, p. 234.



Narsai tells us that Joel did not see real grasshoppers, locusts, and cankerworms, but only the destruction wrought by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Grasshoppers and locusts represent the Assyrian Empire, and cankerworms the Babylonian Empire, which smote and devastated the land. But Joel prophesied also concerning the return of the captivity. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai in interpreting the three species of insects as representing the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires.<sup>24</sup> We may assume that Narsai followed here the exegesis of Ephraem.

Amos, a herder of sheep, lifted up his voice, and called together both the Israelite nation and the Gentile nations. He included both in one warning and taught them that his words would be fulfilled through actions.

Obadiah, with a voice of warning, confirmed God's words, and humiliated the pride of the Edomites through His determined judgment.

Jonah combined two elements in his prophecy: the overthrow of the city of Nineveh and the repentance of all the Gentile nations. He foresaw the conversion of the nations of the world through the scourging of Nineveh. He was terrified and discouraged when he heard that God was considering the inclusion of the Gentiles in His household, in disregard of his own people as the chosen nation. He, therefore, fled in fear that he should be considered a false prophet who preached alienation. Immediately, God sent down a tempest over the sea to prevent him from flight

---

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., II, p. 249.



and imprisoned him in the belly of the great fish. His Lord thus bound him with manacles of the fish's flesh, in order that he should not condemn the peace of mankind. Jonah going down into the sea is a mystery signifying that the plan of salvation will be extended at the end to all the world through Christ. Through the mystery of salvation by the death of Christ, Jonah temporarily died, and through the conversion of the Ninevites all the nations of the world will be saved by the death of Christ. By preaching to the Ninevites, Jonah prepared the way to include the Gentiles in the household of God, and it is for this reason that he changed the order of his words from that of the prophets, as he did not want the children of his nation to participate in his prophecy.

Micah followed in the way of the prophets of his time and spoke in the same allegory as Amos. He caused dreadful voices to be heard by the children of his people and forewarned them concerning their captivity and return. He received a spiritual revelation from his Lord and made known the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of the Gentiles through Christ.<sup>25</sup>

Nahum foretold the fall of the Assyrian Empire, when God will humiliate it, and God's people will be freed from its domination.

Habakkuk was aroused by the Lord concerning iniquity and believed that God would confirm his zeal.

Zephaniah sealed the scourging of his contemporaries in the captivity of his people; then turned about and made known the abolition of the yoke of the Babylonian Empire.

---

<sup>25</sup>Micah 7:19.



Haggai encouraged the people to rebuild the Temple and spoke to the people concerning the coming of Ascotayi.<sup>26</sup> Let us recollect that the Book of Haggai does not tell us anything about these people. Ascotayi cannot refer to Cyrus or Zerubbabel because it is in the plural form; therefore, Ascotayi are a group of people which we cannot identify. The word is not found in Syriac dictionaries.

Zechariah included all kinds of revelations in his prophecy and saw the glorious image of awesome visions in his mind. He saw spiritually the chariots with their riders, which were sent down to destroy the nations who had subjugated the children of Israel. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that the chariots symbolize these nations.<sup>27</sup>

He made known the prosperity of his people through different kinds of visions to the effect that the primacy of kings and priests will be returned to them. Through the two olive branches he illustrated both priesthood and kingship and saw them standing to the right and to the left. Ephraem agrees with Narsai in thinking that the two olive branches symbolize the priesthood and the kingship.<sup>28</sup>

Through the flying scroll he manifested the decree of judgment concerning all the nations of the world,<sup>29</sup> and through the horns

---

<sup>26</sup>Ephraem's commentary on the Book of Haggai is no longer extant.

<sup>27</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, p. 292.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., II, p. 288.

<sup>29</sup>Zech. 5:1-4.



the abolition of the primacy of the Hebrew line of kings. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that the flying scroll symbolizes the destruction of the world.<sup>30</sup> Narsai says further that God revealed to the prophet the coming of the wars of the son of the Greeks. Let us remember that the Book of Zechariah does not tell us about the coming of the wars of the sons of the Greeks.

Malachi sealed the mysteries and in the likeness of a seal his words were sealed in his prophecy. The spirit showed him the coming of Antichrist. Narsai tells us also that the son of the sojourners will come and bring Antichrist to an end, but does not tell us who this son of the sojourners is. "The son of the sojourners" may refer to Christ, whose parents sojourned in Egypt. The sentence, "The prophet made an end to hard wars of furious devils and exposed their error before spectators" is not cited in the Book of Malachi in this form; so it is ambiguous. This investigation is unable to offer any explanation. In this agreement the Lord kept him alive to manifest through him the power of His greatness to the worlds to come. God revealed the greatness of His power to the prophet, and taught His people that through a prophet He will make them wise.

Through Jeremiah God made wise the world which acted like animals and yoked it to the words of His mouth.

In Babylon Ezekiel received the revelation declaring how the nation of Israel and the nations of the world thought. The

---

<sup>30</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, p. 290.



divine command revealed to him a chariot to which all creation was yoked, both rational beings and inanimate things. Both rational beings and inanimate things thus saw that they were yoked to the Creator.

Narsai goes on to say that the chariot seen by the prophet was immaterial and the wheels underneath it were also immaterial, as were the animals which drew it.<sup>31</sup> Ezekiel saw the chariot spiritually. He symbolized both Israelites and Babylonians by the chariot and accused them both of thinking that there was no God anywhere. The vision of the chariot banished this idea from their minds. Ezekiel thus learned this divine workmanship and began to show forth the truth of God's revelation before the spectators. He manifested the vision to the people and witnessed to them that they must not doubt the things which they had heard from him.

Daniel interpreted dreams and rebuked kings to their faces. The spiritual beings taught him through dreams different kinds of mysteries. The dreams ministered the order of prophecy.

Through the spirit of prophecy Daniel saw all things, and there was nothing in his predictions that was not of the spirit. The spirit of God showed him the dream of the great Image, and in awe of his predictions the Babylonians bowed down and worshipped him. Through the spirit he revealed to the tyrant king his future humiliation, and foresaw the disintegration of the

---

<sup>31</sup>Ezek. 1:1-28.



Babylonian Empire, while the incorporeal hand of the spirit was writing on the wall. God illustrated the vision which was shown to him through the great sea and the four heavenly winds. He saw four beasts ascending from the sea and differing from each other.

Daniel identified three of the beasts representing the world empires--the lion, the leopard, and the black bear, but the fourth dreadful beast he did not name. The beasts were incorporeal and symbolized the governments of the nations of the earth. By the great sea God illustrated all the inhabited world, and by the four winds the heavenly beings. The spiritual beings divided the world among the governments, and the governments administered to the four corners of the earth. The spirit of God made Daniel wise in his visions, taught him the vainglory of the Babylonian Empire, and assured him that the people of Israel would return to settle once more in the land of Israel.

In a night vision Daniel saw an astonishing sight, although his dream fulfilled the order of prophecy. God disclosed the death of Christ in one of the visions, to the effect that Christ will come and seal all the mysteries. The prophet himself affixed a seal to his revelations and sealed them until the incarnation of Christ.

Narsai now proceeds to interpret the four beasts which represent the four world empires. Here the interpretations of Narsai and Ephraem are quite similar, and a case can be made for the assumption that Narsai followed Ephraem. Their interpretation of the



four world empires is significant for the history of the exegesis of the Book of Daniel because it differs from the traditional interpretation and, in fact, agrees with the conclusions of some modern scholars.

Traditionally, both Christians and Jews have explained the four beasts in Daniel 7 as representing the four world empires, as follows: the lion symbolizes the Babylonian Empire, the bear the Persian Empire, the leopard the Greek Empire, and the fourth beast the Roman Empire. According to Narsai's interpretation, however, the lion represents the Babylonian Empire, the leopard symbolizes Cyrus, the head of the Persian Empire, the bear signifies the Median Empire, and the fourth beast is the Greek Empire. The interpretation of Ephraem is almost identical with Narsai's in that the lion represents the Kingdom of Babylon, the bear the Kingdom of Darius, ruler of the Medians, the leopard the Kingdom of the Persians, and the fourth beast the Kingdom of Alexander the Great, ruler of the Greeks.<sup>32</sup> Ephraem, however, compares these four beasts with the Great Image in Daniel 2, whereas Narsai does not.

It is evident that Narsai follows Ephraem in identifying the four world empires, but differs from him in the order of two of the beasts, inasmuch as he places the Median Empire, represented by the bear, after the Persian Empire which is symbolized by the leopard.

---

<sup>32</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, p. 214.



The Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba states that originally the commentaries of Ephraem were used in the School of Edessa and Nisibis, where Narsai served as a leading teacher, before they were replaced by the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Narsai tells us also in his Homily on the three doctors, Diodore, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Nestorius, that his proficiency in Scripture was derived from the study of Theodore's commentaries on the Bible; unfortunately, most of these commentaries are no longer extant.<sup>33</sup>

Narsai offers us also some interesting interpretations regarding the two archangels, Michael and Gabriel. Both Narsai and Ephraem identify these two heavenly beings as angels,<sup>34</sup> whereas other Bible commentators identify Michael with Christ, because of the mention in the New Testament Apocalypse to Michael who fought with his angels against the dragon (Satan).<sup>35</sup> Let us remember here that both Michael and Gabriel are mentioned only in the Book of Daniel and in the New Testament. We may, therefore, assume that both Narsai and Ephraem were influenced by Jewish tradition in identifying Michael as an angel,<sup>37</sup> although Narsai has also his own ideas about these two angels.

---

<sup>33</sup>F. Martin, "Homelie de Narses sur les Trois Docteurs Nestoriens," (*Journal Asiatique*, Ser. 9, Tom. 14-15, 1899), pp. 446-499.

<sup>34</sup>*Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia*, II, pp. 224-25, 226, 231.

<sup>35</sup>Rev. 12:7.

<sup>36</sup>Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; Dan. 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26.

<sup>37</sup>Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, V, p. 71.



Narsai goes on to tell us that Gabriel, the man inspired by the spirit, preached the incarnation of Christ, and that this was the reason why he was sent to Daniel. Daniel also heard the name of Gabriel from spiritual beings and wondered greatly at it.

The name of Michael is found in the Mosaic law but not as the name of an angel. It is this angel who fulfills the administration of the law from the time of the election of the people of God until the end. His ministry extended from the time of Hagar to the announcement of the incarnation of Christ. This limit was set for him by the Creator, and he saw that it was approaching and that his primacy was about to be replaced by that of his colleague, Gabriel.

Gabriel was not responsible for guiding Israel, and so it was given to the nations to rule over the chosen people, as the meaning of prophecy indicates. Through prophecy God showed Daniel that name of the human messenger, so that he would not consider it strange that he was sent as ambassador to him to proclaim the Gospel of the incarnation of Christ. The name of Gabriel is not found in the archives of prophecy and the Israelites did not receive his preaching.

Daniel placed Gabriel in his prophecy at the end of his book and prepared the way through Gabriel, who was about to replace the ministry of Michael. Thus, Michael is an angel who was a spiritual being, whereas Gabriel was the name of a man who was sent by God. Why were these two beings chosen from among the spiritual beings?



The birth of Christ was proclaimed by Gabriel to Mary the mother of Christ, who conceived without sexual union. Gabriel banished anxiety from her mind by telling her that with God everything is possible. Gabriel was greater in rank than all the spiritual beings, just as his preaching was greater than all other preaching, but the name of the Messiah is greater than all. Through the greatness of God's power, the heavenly multitudes marveled at those who ministered in the ways of His revelations.



The birth of Christ was proclaimed by Gabriel to Mary the mother of Christ, who conceived without sexual union. Gabriel banished anxiety from her mind by telling her that with God everything is possible. Gabriel was greater in rank than all the spiritual beings, just as his preaching was greater than all other preaching, but the name of the Messiah is greater than all. Through the greatness of God's power, the heavenly multitudes marveled at those who ministered in the ways of His revelations.



CHAPTER V  
GOD'S NEW DISPENSATION TO ABRAHAM

Narsai's Homily I is one of the longest Homilies, and in it Narsai covers the major part of Abraham's life. According to Narsai, Abraham is the most important person in the entire Old Testament. With him God reversed His purpose for man and the will of God was consummated in Abraham's household. Narsai gives us an illuminating insight into Abraham's life which the reader should highly appreciate.

As we shall see later on, in this Homily there are noticeable similarities between Narsai and Ephraem in the interpretation of Abraham's sacrifices--the three animals cut into pieces, and the undivided birds--mentioned in Genesis 15; according to them, these animals represent the bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt for 400 years, and their deliverance by the mighty hand of God. However, Narsai also creates new ideas and he treats the subject more extensively than Ephraem.

With respect to the visit of the three men to Abraham's tent, the similarities between Narsai and Ephraem are few; on the other hand, there are striking similarities between Narsai and Jewish tradition, especially in respect to the heavenly beings assuming human bodies, and the immateriality of the food which Abraham provided for his heavenly visitants. There are, however,



some conspicuous similarities between Narsai and Ephraem in regard to God's provision of the substitute sacrifice for Isaac, and their exposition of this episode is drastically different from the one in Genesis 22.

In evaluating this Homily we shall concentrate on its major points, which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis, and we shall exclude matters of homiletic nature as well as repetitions, especially at the end of the Homily, since the chief purpose of our investigation is to evaluate primarily the exegetical aspect of Narsai's Homilies. It is important to remember that we have constantly endeavored to point out the similarities between him and other Syriac fathers. Where some phase of the Homily is not compared with that of Ephraem and others, it is to be understood that there Narsai stands alone.<sup>1</sup>

According to Narsai, God appointed Adam the foundation from which the human race would originate, and made him the head of all mankind. This order was maintained until He reached Abraham, when God changed the course of His Word. Through the calling of Abraham, God completely reversed His purpose for man, and began to manifest the ways of revelation to him.

When the spiritual revelation was communicated to Abraham, he began to make known the Creator and His ministers to others. Through him God consummated His will for the Adamic race; and it

---

<sup>1</sup>Theodore's commentary on the Book of Genesis is only fragmentary.



was revealed to him that the nations of the earth would be blessed abundantly through his seed.

When the proper time arrived, God summoned the "father of the multitudes" from the pagan world to teach him the ways of His will; and God confirmed the profession of his faith before the spectators. God gave him the treasure of His words, so that he might prepare the way to lead those who believe in His eternal Being. As the Bible says, by faith he knew God over all; and it was accounted to him for righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

Faithfully Abraham fulfilled the promise of his Lord, but on the other hand, he was in a state of doubt, for he asked his Lord how He would fulfill His purpose for him, and when He would vouchsafe him the inheritance of the land of Palestine, as God had promised him when He called him from the land of the Chaldees.

Narsai offers us some peculiar interpretations of the three animals which Abraham was commanded to cut into pieces (Gen. 15). Narsai and Ephraem are here not only similar but almost identical in their exposition of these three animals, which symbolize according to them the oppression of the Hebrews by the Egyptians, and their deliverance by the mighty hand of God. On the other hand, Narsai amplifies the subject and creates new ideas; nevertheless, the likelihood is that Narsai had here followed Ephraem.

---

<sup>2</sup>Gen. 15:6.



Let us remember that the Bible does not tell us what these three animals are supposed to represent; but, at the same time, it plainly says that the seed of Abraham will be subjugated for 400 years, and that at the end of this period of bondage the Hebrews would be delivered by the mighty hand of God.

Jewish tradition concerning the covenant of the animals cut into pieces is completely different from Narsai and Ephraem in that it takes the three-year-old heifer to indicate the dominion of Babylon, the three-year-old she-goat the empire of the Greeks, and the three-year-old ram the Medo-Persian realm.<sup>3</sup>

Narsai goes on to say that by the sacrifice of the three animals the Lord made known to His servant, Abraham, the mark of His love, and through these animals He revealed to him God's future plan for his seed. He was bidden to take three animals-- a calf three years old, a ram three years old, and a she-goat three years old, to fulfill the promise of His words. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai in that God revealed the future of Abraham's seed by way of these three sacrificial animals.<sup>4</sup>

He was bidden to divide the carcasses of the three animals, and to put them one against the other; and by the division of

---

<sup>3</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 235.

<sup>4</sup>R. M. Tonneau, Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentari (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 71-72. Louvain: 1955), pp. 70-71.



these animals God revealed to him the future. He put the undivided birds together as if they were parts of one, and by the intact state of the carcasses of these two birds he was directed to project his mind to the end of time. The Lord taught him the ways of His will by means of these animals and birds.

Abraham faithfully fulfilled the will of his Lord, prepared the sacrifices, and divided them into parts. Narsai asserts that the cutting of the three animals symbolizes the division of Israel into twelve tribes. Abraham also prepared the turtle-dove and the young pigeon without dividing them, and anxiously awaited the manifestation of the fire to consume his sacrifices. In this connection let us recollect that the Bible says that "It came to pass that when the sun had set and it was dark, behold there appeared a smoking furnace and a burning torch that passed between these pieces."<sup>5</sup>

Abraham watched over the sacrifices to his Lord, and did not let birds eat of his sacrifices, just as he kept them from deceit. Suddenly, he saw a furnace from which a flame was ascending, and a lamp of fire passed by, consuming the divided parts of his sacrifices. Abraham was amazed at this manifestation of fire which was consuming his sacrifices, and wondered how well God would receive them.

---

<sup>5</sup>Gen. 15:17.



The power of the Creator made him wise to realize the mystery of the revelation that the fulfillment of the time of the sacrificial animals and birds had not yet arrived, but he was commanded to examine the meaning hidden in the manifestations which had just been revealed to him.

Narsai concludes that by means of the three animals the Lord taught Abraham to know the subjection of his seed for 400 years by the Egyptians; and through the oppression of his seed God revealed to him the division of his seed into twelve tribes. God foretold the division of the twelve tribes as the symbol of the cutting of the three animals indicates. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai in that the three animals represent the subjection of the Hebrews by the Egyptians. The cutting of the animals into pieces signifies the division of Abraham's seed into twelve tribes, and the undivided birds indicate the unity of these tribes.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that here Narsai had followed Ephraem.

Narsai goes on to say that Abraham's seed was to be subjugated for three generations by strangers, and God revealed to Abraham the oppression of his seed through these silent sacrificial animals. According to Narsai, their age of three years symbolizes three generations of oppression. Through these animals the name of the Creator was about to be honored; and

---

<sup>6</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., p. 71.



Abraham made these sacrifices a major principle for his future children.

Through the three animals God taught Abraham the ways of mercy, and taught him by example that he would see the mark of the Lord's love. The entire order of the Mosaic law was revealed to him by means of these sacrificial animals.

Narsai goes on to state that God revealed to Abraham that the three sacrificial animals represent the Egyptian bondage, the birds the emancipation from the Egyptian oppression; the turtledove the wandering in the wilderness for forty years, and the young pigeon the final settlement in the land of Canaan.

By the birds God indicated the Egyptian malice, and showed to Abraham that the power of His help is greater than that of the Egyptians. God revealed to him the length of the Hebrew servitude; and, therefore, God commanded him to put one cut-off piece against another as a sign that the Egyptians would be unable to help another when they should attack the children of Israel while crossing the Red Sea.

God foretold and illustrated by examples that the three animals signify three generations, and that at the end of these three generations the seed of Abraham is to be delivered. As we have already stated, Ephraem agrees with Narsai that the three animals symbolize the deliverance of the Hebrews from the Egyptian bondage at the end of 400 years.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 71.



As the fire was consuming Abraham's sacrifices in mark of approval, the ultimate deliverance of his seed was made known to him. The consumption of Abraham's sacrifices symbolizes the deliverance of his seed by the mighty hand of God. The liberation from the Egyptian bondage was seen by the Egyptian people and other nations. Narsai comments that the appearance of the flame signifies the deliverance of Abraham's people and the severe chastisement of the Egyptians. Thus, through their oppression the Hebrews learned of His sole Lordship.

Narsai offers us some interesting and unusual explanations of the visit of the three men, mentioned in Gen. 18, to the tent of Abraham. This visit was not a physical appearance, for they were incorporeal, even though the Bible clearly describes these three men as physical beings.

In this section of the Homily, Ephraem mostly follows the biblical tradition except that he raises the question whether or not the visit of the three men constituted a revelation, without offering us any further explanation. There are, however, some similarities between Narsai and Jewish tradition, especially in regard to the three men assuming human form, and the immateriality of the food which Abraham provided for his heavenly visitors. On the other hand, Narsai differs from Jewish tradition in stating that one of these visitors was the Lord himself, and so does Ephraem. The Bible also says that one of these visitors was the Lord himself (Gen. 18:13).



According to Narsai, Abraham saw three forms walking in the likeness of clothed men. He took them to be no more than men, not knowing that the sight was not an actual appearance. Narsai explicitly affirms that the nature of these spiritual beings was incorporeal, even though they appeared in actual human form when they visited Abraham's tent. The sight of them was only a likeness in the air.

These three men possessed the power of the hidden God in their creation (the creation of their nature), and through the divine power which was in them, they revealed the power of His Godhead. The power of God was walking along with the appearance of these three men, as He wished.

Suddenly, as Abraham saw these men approaching, he greatly desired to receive them in his tent, as he would any other men. With great love he went forward to meet them in accordance with their station. At first, he received them just as if they were men, but later on he realized they were not men but spirits.

Thus, when the three men came to preach a new gospel to Abraham, they assumed the garb of a human body, and Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that these angels had assumed the form of human beings.<sup>8</sup>

Both the Master and His servants came to Abraham's tent, and they were clothed in the likeness of two servants and the

---

<sup>8</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 243.



Creator, respectively, for Narsai maintains, just as does the Bible, that one of these three men was the Lord himself in theophany; on the other hand, Jewish tradition identifies them with the three principal angels--Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael.<sup>9</sup> God, ruler over all, was about to assume the likeness of a servant, and through Abraham He foretold the future. God was preparing the way for Christ's incarnation, so that Christ would be called the Son of God--both King and Lord. God made known to him his culpable seed, and predicted the cause of this seed's inclination to sin by way of His entrance with Abraham into the tent.

When Abraham saw the three men, who were clothed in the same garb, he left two of them behind, and spoke to the Lord. The Lord named Abraham a righteous person. When Abraham invited the Lord to enter his house, He willingly accepted his invitation. The Lord, with His two servants, came to Abraham's tent in order to show an example of a bodily form. By means of theophany God reconciled everyone to His greatness.

By visiting Abraham's house, the Lord now nullified the threat of punishment which hung over mankind as a consequence of Adam's sin. Metaphorically all creation came with the Lord to the house of Abraham, and He inspired them to participate in the supper of His greatness. Both heaven and earth were invited and

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 241.



called to Abraham's house in order that God might manifest the greatness of His love for mankind. God manifested the greatness of His love for both spiritual beings and carnal men by way of His visit, with His two servants, to the house of Abraham. By visiting the tent of Abraham, God removed the fence of wrath that had stood between Him and man, and called the heavenly witnesses to testify to His reconciliation with men. Through this reconciliation with man, the heavenly beings spontaneously became friends of the human race, and rejoiced in the fact that there was now equality between themselves and man.

Narsai goes on to say that all God's creatures are equal in His sight, and He gave them rest in the supper which Abraham provided for his three guests. Both heaven and earth were amazed at the miracle which God performed in Abraham's tent. Both rational and inanimate things marveled at the voice and the silence, as they saw the Infinite sustained on earth.

Narsai calls our attention to the fact that the presence of the Lord and of His two servants was never seen before, for we are not told before this time that the Self-Existent had manifested His Being to His servants. Before His visit to Abraham's tent, the mystery of the greatness of His love was not made known to us, and only at that time did God disclose the secret of His supreme love for mankind by visiting Abraham.

Narsai goes on to say that created beings cannot see God's Divinity; therefore, it was in this likeness of a man that God

revealed Himself to ten generations; in the tenth generation, He condemned their wickedness and destroyed them by the flood. Beginning with Noah God began dealing with man in a merciful way. From Noah to Abraham there are ten generations, and through Abraham God thus brought to an end ten generations of man; then, He began dealing with man with clemency and kindness. God spoke kindly to the mind of Abraham. Moreover, by way of visiting Abraham, God abolished the three judgments decreed heretofore-- punishment of Adam for his transgression of God's command, the destruction of the world by the flood waters, and the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel.

Narsai goes on to say that God revealed man's life to all creation through Abraham, and all creation was made known by His visiting Abraham. All creation was longing to behold the invisible sight which God offered in Abraham's tent. Why was all the world gathered in the house of Abraham? Because God's mystery was heretofore hidden from all creatures, but now He revealed it to His spiritual beings as well as to Abraham. The mystery of His secret was thus made known to all through Abraham.

The spiritual beings did not fully understand the purpose of the mystery of the Lord's visit to the house of Abraham. The visit was also a mystery to Abraham himself. The spiritual beings who came with the Lord made known the mystery of the Lord's visit to the tent of Abraham, but they were not able to explain its meaning fully. The hidden will of God made them wise, and they



were not weary of searching for the Hidden God. They kept zealously inquiring into the power of His will. The pains of love drew Abraham to the minds of the spiritual beings when God made known to him the power of His mystery. Both the watchers and Abraham earnestly desired to understand the meaning of His words, and were waiting to see it.

Narsai states that the food and drink which Abraham prepared for his guests was not material. The three men were not actually swallowing the various kinds of food; rather the food was dissolving in the air. Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that the angels did not eat in reality, and only Abraham and his friends actually partook of the banquet, while the portions set before the angels were consumed by a heavenly fire.<sup>10</sup>

God's love was manifested in the Garden of Eden, but Adam was led astray from God's love. Adam died in sin and his children grew wicked. God came to redeem the guilt of Adam in the house of Abraham. He clothed himself in the same likeness as He did in the Garden of Eden. Adam transgressed God's command by eating of the fruits of the trees of knowledge of good and evil. The power of death was weakened through the birth of Isaac.

Narsai tells us that two persons, Adam and Eve, died from their innocence in the Garden of Eden because they ate the forbidden fruit; and two persons were raised from the dead--Abraham

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

and his wife, Sarah, on the day of the revelation in his house. For Abraham and Sarah were as dead in their mere bodies as Adam and Eve were dead after eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

Both Abraham and Sarah heard a new gospel of resurrection through the birth of Isaac. Just as God had determined that Adam must return to the dust from which he was taken, so did He fulfill His promise to Abraham through the birth of Isaac. All the children of Adam will be saved through Abraham's seed, and the Gentiles too will return to the Creator. The conversion of the Gentiles was made known through the appearance of the three men in Abraham's tent; and there was a great peace between the Creator and His creatures.

Thus, the house of Abraham was filled with peace, and both heaven and earth attended metaphorically the meal which he prepared for his heavenly guests. The Lord of creation was sustained by His own creatures and there was reconciliation between the heavenly beings and earthly people. All partook symbolically of the meal provided by Abraham for his heavenly visitors, while the earthly creatures sang hallelujah to the name of the Creator, God, like a beggar, asked for alms from the son of His house.

Narsai offers a strange description of the sacrifice which God miraculously provided as a substitute for Isaac, thus differing drastically from the way the Bible describes this sacrifice.



Ephraem is here similar to Narsai, and we may assume that Narsai followed Ephraem; on the other hand, Narsai often has his own new ideas. Jewish tradition is entirely different from both Narsai and Ephraem.

Narsai tells us that Abraham was guided by the spirit of God to look up at the top of the tree, and there he saw a lamb hanging on in the likeness of the cross. All the sheep in the land were feeding in their normal manner, but Abraham's lamb was browsing off the top of the tree. The lamb which was revealed to him was thus suspended at the top of the tree, and the body of the lamb was attached to the branches of the tree without the use of nails. Ephraem is like Narsai; he tells us that Abraham saw a ram at the top of the tree, and took it and offered it as a sacrifice in place of his beloved son, but there was no actual ram and no real tree. The wood on Isaac's shoulder was consumed. Ephraem says that the mountain vomited the tree, and the tree vomited the ram which was suspended at its top.<sup>11</sup>

As we have already stated, Jewish tradition differs from Narsai and Ephraem in that Abraham saw a ram caught in the thicket which God had created during twilight of Sabbath eve in the week of creation, and prepared it as a burnt offering in place of Isaac. The ram had been running toward Abraham, when Satan

---

<sup>11</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., pp. 83-84.

caught hold of him and entangled his horns in the thicket, so that he might not advance towards Abraham.<sup>12</sup>

Narsai goes on to say that the lives of all mankind were hidden in the birth of Isaac. Narsai believes that it was Jesus who spoke to Abraham, and that the lamb suspended in the tree was a symbol of Christ's death. God suspended it in the tree in the mystery of the truth. The mystery of our Savior was foretold through the symbol of the lamb which was offered as a sacrifice in place of Isaac. The human race was to be saved through the death of Jesus; and Christ's death was foreshadowed by the sacrificial lamb offered in place of Isaac. The lamb is the symbol of Christ. John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God by whose death the world was to be saved. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that Isaac is the symbol of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

The death of Jesus was thus revealed symbolically to Abraham, and he rejoiced in it. God chose Abraham and made him the head of the new life; and the new life was to be fulfilled through his son. Abraham was convinced that life would be made possible for men through the sacrificial death of Isaac. Isaac was considered as if he were dead from the time his father bound him. The future was thus mysteriously disclosed through Isaac's sacrificial passion.

---

<sup>12</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., I, p. 282.

<sup>13</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., pp. 83-84.



CHAPTER VI  
THE STORY OF JOSEPH

Narsai's Homily XLI<sup>1</sup> is devoted to the story of Joseph from his childhood to the removal of his father and his brothers to the land of Egypt. As the story is related by Narsai, many original legends are presented which are not found in the account of Joseph as recorded in the Book of Genesis. There are more noticeable similarities in this Homily between Narsai and Jewish tradition than between Narsai and Ephraem. We shall point out such similarities, especially in the episode of the wife of Potiphar and her passion for Joseph.

It is evident that Narsai did not invent these nonbiblical details of the story of Joseph, since they are found also in Jewish tradition. It is also plain that both Narsai and Ephraem had drawn upon rabbinic sources in their Old Testament exegesis. Obviously, their retellings of the legends are not identical in every point, presumably because legends are not always transmitted in exactly the same form, especially when the transmission is still in its oral stage. We may assume that many Jewish legends were lost in the course of centuries, and Ginzberg calls our attention to the fact that a number of Jewish works repudiated by the Sages

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Mingana, Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina, II, Homily XLI, pp. 265-279.



of the synagogues were accepted by the church, so that many Jewish legends were preserved only by the church fathers.<sup>2</sup> This Homily also contains legends which are not included in the legendary material collected by Ginzberg from Rabbinical literature. It seems probable therefore that Narsai had utilized Jewish legends which were still transmitted orally in his time, but were later lost to the Jews themselves. We may assume also that he used some material on the story of Joseph from Ephraem's Homilies.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident from our analysis of Narsai's several Homilies that he had a profound knowledge of both the Old and the New Testament, as well as of Jewish life in his time. In fact, Narsai devotes one of his Homilies to polemics against the Jews, and argues that all the Old Testament prophets had prophesied about Christ who was to fulfill by His death the divine plan of the redemption of the entire world.<sup>4</sup>

As we have stated before, we shall endeavor to include in our discussion of this Homily most of the facts which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis and shall exclude extraneous matters and repetitions. We shall also exclude the episode of Joseph's imprisonment and his interpretation of the dreams of his two fellow prisoners and of Pharaoh, because here Narsai merely repeats the biblical tradition with very brief comments. On the other hand, the reader must be cautioned not to

---

<sup>2</sup>L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, I, p. XII.

<sup>3</sup>Ephraem, Histoire De Joseph, (Paris: 1887), pp. 1-263.

<sup>4</sup>A. Mingana, Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina, I, pp. 299-312.



misinterpret the direct biblical quotations in this Homily. These quotations cannot be utilized for the textual criticism of the Peshitta text, because most of them are directly borrowed from Jewish legends which do not adhere strictly to the biblical text, while others have been modified by Narsai himself to fit his twelve-syllable and seven-syllable meters.

According to Narsai, God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's son, Joseph, that they would work spiritually in the vineyard of His love. The Creator chose these three laborers to work in His vineyard, thus manifesting through their number the name of His Being. God taught them to work jointly with Him according to His will, and they placed "His silver" on the table of the human faculties. The phrase "His silver" may refer to talents that God bestowed upon men. They gathered spiritual fruit through their words, gave their labors to their sons, and died, but their good works still live and speak to later generations.

Abraham passed his course to Isaac to follow in it, and Isaac plainly showed the path of his work to his chosen son, Jacob. Jacob begot twelve sons, and offered them like the first-born to the Lord of the vineyard. Jacob begot these twelve sons and though he was worthy, he was divided in his heart about the fruits of his loins--Narsai maintains that he did not treat his sons equally, because he loved Joseph more than all the others. Jewish tradition has it that "Jacob was not exempt from the lot that falls to the share of all the pious,"<sup>5</sup> and only some of his sons resembled him and journeyed in the way of the work of his labors.

---

<sup>5</sup>L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, II, p. 3.



Joseph followed spiritually the example of his father, and engraved himself upon the seal of the spirit in order to struggle against the snares of the devil. He strove to minister through the spirit, resembling his forefathers in his love for the Creator, in the course of his way toward righteousness, and in his search for faith. Love made a straight way for his spiritual labors, and he hit the mark through his hope and expectation of the things to come. He girded himself with faith, as if with tools of war, and grasped the Lord's word in his mind. His father, Jacob, saw him thus armed, and poured his love over him by anointing him with mercy, so that he would be mighty throughout the course of his life. Jacob anointed him with mercy as with oil, to make him understand the struggle of human life; similarly, Jacob overcame the suffering of the lust of his body through the love he felt for his Lord.

Narsai raises several questions regarding Jacob's divided love: Why did Jacob divide his love for his sons, by anointing one of them with more love than the others? Why did he divide the unity of the love that was placed in his nature, and provoke a quarrel among the twelve fruits of his loins? Why did he honor only one of his sons, and call only him his? All his sons were equally his, and should have been treated equally in his sight. Why did he divide the unity of the love he felt for them, by causing one of them to possess all the inheritance of love, to the disadvantage of his brothers? It was the same nature, the



righteousness, and the same Lord who formed his children in his loins in the substance of his seed.

Narsai's answers to these questions are all his own. According to him, it was Jacob's will which divided his love, and there is no evenness of will. Man is even in his nature, just as God who created man is one in His nature, but God divided the soul's will by making it free. Man, as a rational being, has freedom of will, and through his free will may choose or reject whomsoever he wishes. Truly there was only one nature, but there was no evenness of his will, and it was the power of his will which made him hate the one and love the other. God gave man's nature great power of discernment, and this discernment, like a charioteer, guided man wherever he wishes to go. The power of our will should compel us through the power of God's will, and guide us to the haven of peace.

The love which Jacob felt for his children was revealed through the discernment by which man is able to control his emotions. It was the power of his will that pulled him toward love, not his own selfishness (or preparation, promptitude). It was not the evenness of his will toward his children that divided his love, for one hates or loves through the discernment of the will of one's soul. On the other hand, Jacob implanted in the mind of his children an ardent desire for righteousness, so that they might be justified and loved in the likeness of Joseph. It was the love of Joseph that made him delightful to his father. Because Joseph loved the truth, his father loved him more than his brothers. Love raised him above



his brothers and promoted him to the rank hidden in the future reward when he was promoted to the position of governor of Egypt. The love which Joseph manifested for the Creator and for his father, earned him the wreath of victory which was woven for him when he became the vice-ruler of Egypt. Nature directed him to love both his Creator and his father.

Narsai goes on to compare Jacob's love for Joseph with Christ's love for His favorite disciple, John. With the evenness of his love Jacob divided equally the love placed in his nature, and love of his soul inclined him to love the many; yet his love for Joseph resembles greatly the love which Christ had for John, whom He loved more than all his other disciples. Our Saviour spiritually chose twelve disciples, but honored one of them with His love more than the others. Through the example of Jacob who begot twelve tribes corresponding to the number of the months, our Lord also chose twelve disciples to teach man, organized so as to resemble the mystery of the people of Israel, for the salvation of the nations of the world. Conversely, in the mystery of our Saviour Jacob begot twelve tribes, so as to show forth the parable of the twelve disciples chosen by Christ. Jacob's love for Joseph thus resembled our Christian beginning, for through his love for Joseph Jacob marked the manifestation of the friend (John) of the bridegroom (Christ), in that he loved one of his children in the mystery of John.

Love made Joseph modest and beloved by his father, and similarly Jesus exalted John above His other disciples. It was



Jacob's love that pulled Joseph toward his father to meet Jacob's love, and revealed that love rendered love for love. Let, therefore, those who seek love look at Joseph and his father, who increased his love further when he saw Joseph's love bound to the Creator. Because Jacob loved Joseph more than his brothers, he caused them to become jealous in order that they might turn to the hidden gate to find love. The term "hidden gate" is somewhat obscure, but seems to refer to God.<sup>6</sup> Although there is but one Father, the Creator of soul and body, Jacob gave preference to one of his issue, and slighted all the others. Joseph was diligent and persistent at all times in seeking the hidden gate, who, therefore, bestowed upon him the reward of his labors--love and mercy. Through love and mercy Joseph's love was yoked to his Lord, and through his father he glorified the word of the Hidden God.

Narsai tells us that the law was instituted for the sake of the wicked, not of the righteous, and the inclination to discernment was prior to all law. According to Narsai, there was no written law in the time of Joseph, but Joseph had the law of conscience to guide him in distinguishing between good and evil. He subordinated his own will to the law. Therefore, it is evident that God did not teach law to the righteous; rather the righteous were the law to the work of truth. The preacher of the word thus spoke truthfully when he said that the law was instituted

---

<sup>6</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 268.

for the sake of the wicked, not of the righteous.<sup>7</sup> The righteous people laid down the law to their own minds, and demonstrated the path of the law in the manner of their own lives. The inclination of the discernment was prior to all law. This inclination wrote a book for Joseph in his own mind, and he read and interpreted in his mind the book of the worship of the Hidden God. Joseph learned two things from the law of discernment, that man is duty-bound to love both his Creator and his own father, and turned to two things in his love as a discerner, the worship of love for both the Lord who had created him and for his own father. His father saw that Joseph was diligent in repaying his love like a debtor, and so Jacob paid him the wage of the love of his will. Jacob loved him secretly, because he saw that the Hidden God was hidden in his love, and honored him openly, in order to enjoin his senses with his will.

Through his handsome garments Joseph adorned his body according to God's will and in his thoughts he praised his soul which was full of love. The Creator increased his love above that of his brothers, so that he saw his own soul's love yoked to His mystery. God gave him the power of His mystery to seek secrets, and strengthened his faculty of mind to inquire into future things. Jewish tradition tells us that "in spite of his scholarship there was something boyish about Joseph. He painted his eyes, dressed his hair carefully, and walked with a mincing step."<sup>8</sup> God

---

<sup>7</sup>I Timothy 1:9.

<sup>8</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 5.



communicated to him the divine command of His power through the faculties of his soul, and manifested openly to him His mystery.

Through Joseph's dreams God revealed to him his future exaltation and the humiliation of his brothers, and showed him in secret that his tribe would be exalted over his enemies. What Joseph dreamed in secret, however, he disclosed openly to his brothers, and told them about this power which would chastise and judge when he would have become the ruler of Egypt.

Joseph said, "I saw myself and you working in the field, binding the sheaves, for our sustenance. And I saw my sheaves stand erect and straight, while your sheaves bowed down to me."<sup>9</sup> Through these sheaves God showed him the famine which was to chastise and oppress everyone, and through the bowing down of the sheaves He indicated the subjugation of his brothers, who were to bow down to Joseph when he became the ruler of Egypt. Eleven sheaves bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before one sheaf, and a hand was stretched out to chastise them, and triumphed over them. Through these sheaves a miracle was manifested of famine and plenty. Joseph's brothers were helplessly impoverished, and God caused them to be in need of Joseph's help.

Through these sheaves his eleven brothers entreated Joseph earnestly, and God, through the will of Joseph's discernment, caused plenty to flow from him like a spring of water, so that while the eleven were destitute of food, Joseph was abundantly supplied with it through the flow of his love.

---

<sup>9</sup>Gen. 37:5-8.



In the likeness of Gihon (the Nile) which irrigated the land of Egypt, God manifested and enriched the overflow of his rationality more than could the mute elements. Gihon receded in time to stop the damage that would be caused by its overflow; at the same time, Joseph caused a sweet overflow of food. Through the dream of the sheaves which Joseph had seen and made known to his brothers, he indicated to them that when the time came for them to ask for food from him, they would be ashamed to search among the sheaves for the gleanings.

Joseph's brothers, however, responded with a revelation of the mysteries of their evil inclination, and reacted unjustly to the secret things which Joseph revealed to them through the dream of the sheaves. Instead of helping to interpret his dreams, they added bitterness of soul against him. Increasingly they regarded him with ill will, and bitterly resented both his good looks and his keen mind. And as they increasingly envied him because of his exaltation, at the same time His Lord made him the spring from which flowed the power of mysteries.

Narsai tells us that God revealed to Joseph also a second mystery which indicated his future power. Joseph saw another dream which foretold the future humiliation of his father and his brothers: Behold the two luminaries, sun and moon, bowed down before Joseph. Through the parable of the great sun and the small moon Joseph saw his brothers bowing down to him. His father perceived that his dream indicated the sign of the name of his power,



and marveled greatly.<sup>10</sup> He, therefore, revealed to Joseph the power hidden in the parable, by saying to him, "I, your mother, and your brothers will prostrate ourselves before you."<sup>11</sup>

Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai that Jacob understood the implication of the dream of the luminaries, and realized that his interpretation of it would be realized.<sup>12</sup> The Bible, on the other hand, does not tell us that Jacob understood Joseph's dream or gave any interpretation to it--rather he reproved him.<sup>13</sup> In great astonishment Jacob marveled at the things which he heard, and thought deeply that envy might hinder love.

Through the will of Joseph's brothers, Jacob, as the one who knew beforehand, made known that bitterness and deceit could destroy his dreams. Thus, Jacob made known the inclination of his sons, even though their deceit was plotted in secret. His brothers envied and hated Joseph when they saw him exalted through spiritual revelation. Joseph's life was yoked to the love of his father and his brothers, but the brothers uprooted the building of his love. Joseph and his father were girded in harmony with their needs, but his brothers put aside Joseph's and their father's love. Envy blinded them, so that they could not see the light of righteousness hidden in Joseph's dreams. Envy was like a veil before their eyes, and kept them from investigating the cause of the dreams which would

---

<sup>10</sup>Gen. 37:9-10.

<sup>11</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 271.

<sup>12</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, pp. 8-9 (referring to Josephus, Antt. II, 2,3).

<sup>13</sup>Gen. 37:10-11.



help them in the future. Envy meant death; yet in the end it did not cause death. For a while only, truth died, and sin became alive.

Narsai offers us some original ideas concerning the sending of Joseph by his father to meet his envious brothers in Shechem, and the sale of Joseph to the merchants who took him to Egypt and resold him to Potiphar. There are striking similarities between Narsai, Jewish tradition, and Ephraem in this section of the Homily. Particularly noteworthy are the direct quotations translated here as well as the ideas and legends which are not found in either Jewish tradition or Ephraem.

Jacob bade Joseph find out how his brothers fared and how the pasture was in Shechem,<sup>14</sup> and Joseph, in the innocence of his mind, set out as he was commanded by his father. When his brothers saw him coming towards them, cheerful in his generous love for them, they sharpened the swords of their minds to murder him. They said, "Behold, here comes the dreamer! Let us throw him to the beasts and thus annul his dreams. Let us end his life, so that he will never again dream of glory--perchance he might indeed come to rule over us and subjugate us, as he had seen in his dreams."<sup>15</sup>

His brothers thus schemed to end his life, in order that he should not strive after future glory. As Joseph drew near and bade peace to his brothers, they did not reply to him in the proper

---

<sup>14</sup>Gen. 37:12-24.

<sup>15</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 272.



manner of brotherly love, yet they willingly received from him the food which he brought for them to supply their needs. In return they dipped his body in fatal deceit, in order to put him to death. Joseph bade them peace in his love and mercy, and kissed them, but they did not return peace to him as was seemly for them to do.

Having eaten the food which was sent to them by their father, they began to devise ways to destroy Joseph, saying,

Behold, here comes the dreamer who makes known mysteries! This is the heir who makes himself sweet smelling before his father! He kept his mourning in our palace (or in our walled enclosure) and before his father. This is the one who is about to be lord over us and subjugate us, and in the likeness of a lord we are to prostrate ourselves before him and be subjugated to him!<sup>16</sup>

The sentence, "He kept his mourning in our palace (or in our walled enclosure) and before his father," is obscure.

As they plotted to find ways to cast him out from the house of his father, Joseph saw that his brothers were in a surly mood; so he drew near to them and asked them why they were distressed. He said,

Perhaps a lion has fallen among the flock and snatched some, or wolves have cut off the pregnant ewes and torn them to pieces. Perhaps a band of robbers have cut off some sheep and carried them away. If it is because of this that you are disturbed today, do not distress yourselves on this account, for there is limitless wealth in our father's house.<sup>17</sup>

In their lustful rage his brothers replied to him with words of iniquity, saying, "O thief's son, why do you speak in a meek

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., II, p. 272.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., II, p. 272.



voice? Behold, because of you ten men are in distress. Call upon the dreams which you have dreamed all your days, and let them shake you free from the troubles that have now come to you."<sup>18</sup> Then, Judah ran up and drew his sword as if to put Joseph to death, while Reuben dug a pit to cast him in it. Thereupon, Joseph's brothers threw him into the pit, while he, weeping, lifted up his voice and said, "What have I done, and what is my sin, that you take such vengeance upon me?"<sup>19</sup> Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in citing Joseph's cry, "O my brethren, what have I done unto you, and what is my transgression?"<sup>20</sup>

Narsai tells us further that Joseph prayed while he was in the pit, and Ephraem agrees with him in that detail.<sup>21</sup> And as Joseph prayed at the bottom of the pit, he called to his Lord to judge him in truth, "Judge justly, O Lord, between me and my brothers."<sup>22</sup> Joseph looked high and low, but there was no one to help him and deliver him from the pit; yet at that very moment crowns were being prepared for him by the Lord. Justice guided the merchants towards the pit, to find coolness there at noon time, for his sake. Jewish tradition, too, tells us that the merchants came to the pit in order to refresh themselves.<sup>23</sup> And as the merchants drew near to the pit, Joseph's brothers ran back to the

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., II, p. 272.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., II, p. 273.

<sup>20</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup>Histoire de Joseph Par Saint Ephraem, (Paris: 1887), pp. 24-25.

<sup>22</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 273.

<sup>23</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 15.



pit to observe the merchants. The merchants thereupon lifted Joseph up from the pit, and took him along, urging him to be their companion on their journey, but his cruel brothers accosted the merchants and said to them, "If you are looking for a slave to buy, here is one with us."<sup>24</sup> Joseph was handsome and desirable; he was wise and knew how to please both man and beast. His brothers said further, "We have brought him here so that you might look at him. Estimate his price. Give us that price, and you may take him and go in peace."<sup>25</sup>

The wicked brothers ran back to the distressed Joseph to see him, just as the Jews ran to our Saviour. Narsai tells us that the story of Joseph resembles closely the story of our Saviour. Just as the Jews, who did not understand, caused Jesus to be nailed to the cross, so also the wicked brothers acted cruelly toward Joseph, and without pity hunted him down and brought him to the merchants. When the merchants saw Joseph's beauty, they earnestly desired him, even though they anticipated that his brothers would demand a high price for him. They were relieved, however, when his brothers asked only twenty pieces of silver.

When Joseph saw that he had been sold, he became alienated from the house of his father, and from the house of his brothers. Here Jewish tradition is similar to Narsai in telling us that Joseph wept at the thought of being taken away from Canaan and from his father.<sup>26</sup> Weeping, he bowed and prostrated himself before his

---

<sup>24</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 273.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., II, p. 273.

<sup>26</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 19.



brothers, and the tears flowed from his eyes onto the shoulders of his brothers. He said to them,

I would rather die here at your hands at this time than be sold into slavery in the house of strangers that I am not prepared for. For the sake of Jacob, whom I am distressed to leave, and for the sake of both his old age and my youth, I implore you to desist.<sup>27</sup>

Joseph then addressed each one of his brothers, describing his characteristics and imploring him not to sell him to the Midianites. To Reuben, the first-born and a noble heir, Joseph said, "Have pity on your brother, and bring not our father's hoary age down to Sheol in evil."<sup>28</sup>

To Simeon, he said, "Hear me, have compassion on your brother at this time, and cause me not to be sold into slavery in the house of strangers."<sup>29</sup> To Judah, tight of hand and a lion's whelp, "Let your mercy be moved with compassion, and do not distress our aged father with harsh evil."<sup>30</sup> But Judah overruled Reuben, and rejected Simeon and found fault with him.

To Naphtali Judah said, "Let us not multiply words. Bind the boy, entrust him, and leave him off."<sup>31</sup>

Jewish tradition parallels Narsai in respect to Joseph's imploring his brothers to have pity on him:

Simon and Gad set about slaying Joseph, and he fell upon his face, and entreated them: "Have mercy with me, my brethern, have pity on the heart

---

<sup>27</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, pp. 273-274.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., II, p. 274.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., II, p. 274.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., II, p. 274.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., II, p. 274.



of my father Jacob. Lay not your hands upon me, to spill innocent blood, for I have done no evil unto you. But if I have done evil unto you, then chastise me with a chastisement, but your hands lay not upon me, for the sake of our father Jacob."<sup>32</sup>

When Joseph saw that words were of no avail, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said,

Would that He made me like a fowl of swift wing, so I might fly away in freedom and see the image of my father's old age. Would that He gave me the voice of thunder mightiest of all, so that I might cry out suddenly, and so our father might hear my cry! Who will go and speak in that ear of old age, saying, Behold, the son of your vows is sorely afflicted in faraway lands? Who will draw near to this height of wickedness and display my tunic before Jacob?<sup>33</sup>

His wicked brothers took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a he-goat, sprinkled its blood upon the tunic and sent it to his father. When the tunic was brought before Jacob, he was asked if he could recognize it. He did recognize it, and when he saw that it was dipped in blood, he was seized with grief, and lamented bitterly. He said,

Who has broken the staff of my old age? Now that it supports me no longer, there is no one to hold me up and help me. Who has extinguished the lamp of Joseph's father that provided him with bright light? Now in my distress I stumble about as if I were in darkness. Who has cut off the lovely blossom of his sweet fragrance, and has woven and given me a crown of thistles for all the days of my life? Who has cast me into a chamber of mourning at this time? Instead of dancing with joy, behold, I am mourning and weeping.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 11 (referring to XII Testaments, Zebulun II).

<sup>33</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 274.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., II, p. 275.



Narsai goes on to say that Jacob tore off his clothes and donned sackcloth, and sat in mourning, spreading Joseph's tunic before him and gazing at it. Jacob said,

I do not know how I can believe your departure, or know in what ways you were separated, O son of my vows, from the house of your father. If a lion has ravaged you on the way, that is not confirmed. If a band of robbers has separated my beloved from the house of his father, no band of robbers was ever known to come to this country. Perhaps envy has separated my beloved from the house of his father. Howbeit, I have trust in justice which in the end takes its own vengeance.<sup>35</sup>

Jacob then sent for his sons and asked them what had happened to Joseph. He rent his white clothes before their eyes, while he wept and entreated them earnestly. He said, "I entreat you in God's name to tell me without falsehood what happened to Joseph when he came to the pastures."<sup>36</sup> They replied by shedding false tears, and swore to him that they could not tell him where Joseph was. Iniquitously they wept before their father, and he believed them that they could not tell him what happened to Joseph.

Finally, Jacob lifted up his eyes to heaven, praying to God and seeking Him earnestly, and said,

You are the God who answers righteous people according to His goodness. Hear me, and keep my beloved safe wherever he may be. Spread Your wing over him that he might be hidden from harm, and make me worthy of living long enough to see his beautiful face once more. Before I go down among the people of the grave, make me worthy of seeing him again, so that I might press my lips to his lips, and then let me die.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., II, p. 275.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., II, p. 275.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., II, pp. 275-276.



As the merchants entered Egypt, Joseph was with them, while they rejoiced and wondered because of him. They said,

A great peace has gone with us on our way from the day this slave joined us. The work of the Lord has accompanied this slave and kept us from harm because of him. Now we know that he is not truly a slave, and that it is not proper for us to treat him like a slave.<sup>38</sup>

The merchants thereupon entered in Joseph's presence and addressed him, saying, "Eat and drink with us, and let your mourning thus pass away. Do not be distressed because of what has happened to you this time. You are a nobleman's son, and we are in no doubt about it."<sup>39</sup>

Narsai tells us that when Potiphar went forth and saw Joseph with the merchants, he was captivated by his beauty, and said to them, "Is this boy perchance a slave? Sell him then to me."<sup>40</sup> I will pay his price, however high it may be, with great joy."<sup>41</sup> The merchants said, "If he wishes to go with you, who is to hinder him? Give us the twenty pieces of silver, and he will go with you."<sup>42</sup> The merchants received his price from Potiphar, then drew near to Joseph, kissed him, and besought him earnestly, saying, "Do not be distressed, O Joseph, because of this, and do not wax angry with us for accepting your price, for we were in need of the money."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., II, p. 276.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., II, p. 276.

<sup>40</sup>Gen. 37:36, 39:1-6.

<sup>41</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 276.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., II, p. 276.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., II, p. 276.



Joseph replied, "Go in peace, O merchants. The Lord will bless the course of your lives even unto the end."<sup>44</sup> Ephraem here is similar to Narsai in telling us that the merchants were distressed and wept after they had sold Joseph to Potiphar.<sup>45</sup> Narsai says that justice summoned Potiphar from his house to come and buy a slave who was to rule over the Egyptians. He took Joseph along and left the market, and later entrusted Joseph with everything he had in his house, and later left him to manage it and guard all his treasures, bidding him administer wisely, according to his own will. Thereupon, Potiphar hastened to inform the sons of his house, saying to them, "Come and see this slave, handsome in appearance and skill, like roses and lilies in April (Nisan)."<sup>46</sup>

The story of the wife of Potiphar and her infatuation with Joseph is related in detail by Narsai; it is not found in the same form in the Bible, but it has some similarities with Jewish tradition.<sup>47</sup> When Potiphar's foolish wife saw the beauty of Joseph, she became infatuated with it; and like fire, the desire for his body burned in her. Like a lioness, she aspired to leap upon the innocent Joseph and bite his body and soul with her lasciviousness.

---

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., II, p. 276.

<sup>45</sup>Histoire de Joseph par Saint Ephraem, p. 64.

<sup>46</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, pp. 276-277.

<sup>47</sup>Gen. 39:7-18.



Finally, she painted her eyes with kohl, making them evil with great brightness, skillfully braided her hair, and then stood in his presence. Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that she adorned herself with all kinds of perfumes and jewelry, and then stood in his presence.<sup>48</sup> Narsai goes on to say that she rubbed her body with perfume, put on golden jewelry, and then came into his presence without shame in her lasciviousness. She clothed herself with fine white linens and silks, and donned three necklaces. Directing herself in front of him, she coaxed him, saying, "Look at me, O Joseph! How beautiful am I, fair, and desirable! Take me with you to the house of your father."<sup>49</sup> Here, too, Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that she tempted Joseph with her beauty.<sup>50</sup>

She summoned him to eat with her, but Joseph refused. She mixed the wine, displayed herself, and tried to cast her lasciviousness upon him. But when she called him, he did not answer her; whereupon she wailed. When she looked at him, he lifted his eyes to heaven, and when she pointed at him, he shook his head and went off to his work. He went in and out, or remained in the same room, in her companionship; he did not ask her to leave him, not even for a moment.

Thereupon, she began to speak without shame, although her lasciviousness would not have been shamed by the presence of others. She said, "Joseph, Joseph! Do not despise me because I

---

<sup>48</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 277.

<sup>50</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 52.



am your mistress, and do not resent the fact that you are our slave beyond doubt. If you will be persuaded and do my will as I have told you, I will make you lord over all my riches and possessions."<sup>51</sup> Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai that the wife of Potiphar promised Joseph to put him in charge of her possessions, if he would submit to her demands.<sup>52</sup> According to the legend related to Narsai the wife of Potiphar was planning to murder her husband in order to marry Joseph:

If you fear Potiphar, the lord of this house, I will make it another way, so that you need not fear. I will administer poison to him, and kill him where he is, and you will become my husband, lord, and heir. I will also tell you another secret, to remain between you and me: I have with me a great treasure.<sup>53</sup>

Jewish tradition, too, tells us that she was plotting the death of her husband in order to marry Joseph: "If thou wilt not do my desire, I will murder the Egyptian and wed thee according to the law."<sup>54</sup> On this aspect of the legend Ephraem is silent, but in other respects he conforms to the Jewish legend.

When Joseph heard this, his soul trembled, and he shook in his clothes and cried,

I do not want riches, for there is no advantage in riches for which blood is shed, and riches gained by way of iniquity do not last. I reject riches of iniquity which merely gratify the eye, for treasure which is won by bloodshed cannot last. I will not devise deceitful iniquity against the innocent, and I will not defile the purity of the marriage bed.

---

<sup>51</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 277.

<sup>52</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 46.

<sup>53</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 277.

<sup>54</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 46.



I have with me the glorious King who dwells in heaven; should He see me do such a thing, He will surely despise me.<sup>55</sup>

Joseph lifted up his eyes and looked to heaven, and prayed to God, beseeching Him earnestly, saying, "You have lifted me from the sharp sword. You brought me by great power to the house of the Egyptian. Arise now and save me from this Egyptian woman."<sup>56</sup> Jewish tradition agrees with Narsai in that Joseph prayed to God to deliver him from the Egyptian woman.<sup>57</sup> The phrase "the sharp sword" can be explained only by comparison with the Jewish tradition concerning Joseph, where we are told that the wife of Potiphar used a sword in her attempt to force Joseph to submit to her demands, and that he was miraculously delivered by God from it.<sup>58</sup>

One phase of Narsai's legend is dissimilar from Jewish tradition. Narsai states that once, when Joseph entered his room to pray, the wife of Potiphar entered after him. Closing the door, she embraced and kissed him, and weeping, implored him, saying,

I love you; see that you do not despise me,  
O son of the Hebrews. But if you will not be persuaded, and will not do my will as I shall tell you, I will confine you in the great dungeon of the prison. On the other hand, if you will be persuaded, and will bend your head to my words and my entreaty, I will make you chief and lord over all the land of Egypt.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, pp. 277-278.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., II, p. 278.

<sup>57</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 45.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., II, p. 54.

<sup>59</sup>Mingana, op. cit., II, p. 278.



Jewish tradition, however, tells us that she took Joseph to her own chamber, where an idol was suspended over her bed, and "this she covered, so that it might not be a witness of what she was about to do."<sup>60</sup> Ephraem is closer here to the Jewish tradition when he says that the wife of Potiphar caused Joseph to enter the bedchamber in order to subdue him.<sup>61</sup> The Bible, let us remember, says merely that Joseph went into the house to do his work, whereupon she tried to force him to lie with her.<sup>62</sup>

Joseph looked about far and wide, but though there was no one to help him, behold, help was prepared for him by God. He cast her away by the power of his own body; he left her alone, cast her off, opened the door, and escaped. When she saw that he was escaping from her, she cut off a piece of his cloak, and began screaming in a sighing voice in her inner chamber. When the servants and the nobles' sons heard her loud screaming, all of them ran up, asking her what had happened to her.

The foolish wife then began to speak without shame, for she was ashamed to admit her lasciviousness to her friends. She said,

This would-be servant whom my husband had purchased and made lord of this house, he considered me an adulterous woman, and wished to make sport of me. Like a modest woman I was sitting in my chamber, and he opened the door intending to disgrace me. When I saw him opening the door to enter, I began

---

<sup>60</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., II, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup>Tonneau, R.M., Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesum et in Exodum Commentari, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, T. 71-72), p. 98.

<sup>62</sup>Gen. 39:12.



screaming, and I went out to meet him as if he were a jackal. When the deceitful slave saw that he was caught, he resumed his clothes, opened the door, and went out, pretending innocence.<sup>63</sup>

There is one detail in the commentary of Ephraem that is not found either in Narsai or in Jewish tradition. Ephraem states that, after the false accusation, Joseph was planning to flee to his father's house, but was thrown into prison stripped of his clothes, just as he was stripped of his tunic before he was cast into the pit in the wilderness.<sup>64</sup>

We have limited our discussion of Narsai's Homily on the story of Joseph to the end of the episode of the wife of Potiphar and her passion for Joseph, and we have excluded the episode of Joseph's imprisonment and his interpretation of the dreams of his two fellow prisoners and of Pharaoh because here Narsai merely repeats the biblical tradition with very brief comments.

---

<sup>63</sup>Mingana, op. cit., pp. 278-279.

<sup>64</sup>Tonneau, op. cit., T. 71-72, p. 98.



## CHAPTER VII

### THE ASCENSION OF ELIJAH TO THE LAND OF EDEN

Narsai's Homily XI is devoted to the prophetic ministry of Elijah, but we are going to examine only the last part of the Homily, in which Narsai discusses the translation of Elijah to the land of Eden. The first part of the Homily deals with the ministry of Elijah while he was on earth, and merely repeats the biblical tradition, and he comments on it in a general way; therefore, we have excluded it from our evaluation.

In this Homily Narsai describes the ascension of Elijah in a dramatic way which draws the reader's attention to this impressive and exciting scene. He tells us of the mysterious voyage of the heavenly multitudes traveling in space for the purpose of translating him to the land of Eden. The most unusual detail of this Homily is that, contrary to the Bible, Narsai states that Elijah was taken, not to heaven, but to the land of Eden in the vicinity of earth, although Narsai does not specify the exact location of this land of Eden.

Ephraem, unlike Narsai, maintains that the Bible does not mention the place where Elijah was taken, but he agrees with Narsai that Enoch was taken to Paradise, although he does not specify the exact location of it.<sup>1</sup> Jewish tradition concerning

---

<sup>1</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, (Rome: 1735), p. 47.



the ascension of Elijah is dissimilar to Narsai's in that it holds not only that Elijah went up to heaven, but also that he is to be considered an angel.<sup>2</sup>

According to the interpretation of Narsai, when the time arrived for God to speak to Elijah by way of spiritual revelation, concerning his translation, God invited him to come to the haven of life beyond the power of death, to come and enjoy the mystery of the immortal resurrection (or restitution) and to abide alive in the new order of the kingdom of heaven. The ascension of Elijah to the land of Eden is not the ultimate reward; God will keep him alive in the mystery of the kingdom in Eden until He has fulfilled His final purpose for His people at the end of the world. Elijah was directed by God to summon all the people to the kingdom of God. Clearly, God was manifesting through the translation of Elijah, the resurrection (restoration) of life which He has prepared for both spiritual beings and carnal men.

God was thus promising through the translation of Elijah that all mankind will be saved with him at the consummation of God's will for His people; and through his ascension He was placing His seal upon His promise to the entire human race. Through Elijah God was preparing the way to eternal life, and enlarging the expected hope in order that God's people should

---

<sup>2</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., IV, pp. 201-202.



not be weakened in their emancipation. God was thus demonstrating to Elijah that He does not despise the dust of Adam. As a matter of fact, God was raising the low estate of the seed of Adam through the ascension of Elijah.

When the time came, God made known Elijah's translation to mankind, and revealed it to Elisha before all men. God also revealed the cause of Elijah's way to the prophets of his time, and they went out to meet him in order to accompany him in the spirit of revelation. The prophets also told Elisha that he would know the day when the Lord would take his master, and the disciple of Elijah replied in the spirit of revelation, as one who already knows. The mystery of the ascension of Elijah was disclosed to him, but he told the prophets to keep silent. The prophets also went out in spirit to meet the righteous Elijah. Afterwards they began to prophesy about his translation from this world.

The mystery of the translation was made known to him by the spirit of God. The Lord bade him to go to Jordan and return, so that his fervent zeal would not be weakened through the cause. The spirit bade Elijah return and see a great miracle, when the dust of Adam would be carried with pomp and solemnity by the spiritual beings.

As Elijah journeyed in a new way, he smote the waters, and nature trembled before him. He lifted his cloak and smote the river, and divided it into two. The river, which is not

rational, was not difficult for him to command, because he did this through Divine power. As Narsai attempts to personify nature, he says that nature feared the Divine Will hidden in the garment of Elijah. Elijah crossed the river with his disciple as if on the dry land; and the river then returned to its previous course.

Elijah went on to expound the preparation of his translation to his disciple, but when he saw that Elisha asked for more than was required, he refused to explain it until he was translated; only then would he tell him what he demanded. It was not out of jealousy that he denied this favor to his disciple. Elijah told Elisha that he should take the gift he asked for, and should honor his prophetic rank after Elijah had been taken by the heavenly beings.

When Elijah completed his admonition to his disciple, the heavenly multitudes arrived to take him up. They drove the team of fiery horses which were yoked together, and the chariot also was girded by bands of fire. Wheels of fire were under the chariot, and the horses likewise had birdlike wings of fire. The chariot itself was, however, not made of fire, nor were the horses material beings possessed of senses, since the whole vision was incorporeal. The sight of fire and appearance of horses were incorporeal, just as God and all heavenly beings are incorporeal; therefore, invisible to the sight of man. Thus, the taking of Elijah by the whirlwind was revealed to him



only in the vision, and not in the actual appearance of a fiery chariot or fiery horses.

Immediately God commanded the heavenly beings to direct the chariot and horses to take Elijah up to the high estate of happiness. Through the translation of Elijah by the chariot, God indicated that He would honor him to the end with understanding between him and God. Through the ascension of Elijah without his first tasting death, God manifested to us the mystery of eternal life; and through him God made known to us that He would translate His people also to the eternal kingdom at the end of the world.

As the chariot was carrying Elijah up toward heaven, God was guiding him to the beautiful land of Eden. Elijah acted just as if he was a skilled charioteer immune to the force of wind; in fact, he was fastened to the bands of fire. However, since the fire was not in fact existent, Elijah's flesh was not burned by the flame. The honored Elijah was supplied with wings for flying, and the power of God put him above the horses by way of the spiritual beings, as he was traveling toward his destination in Eden; and his cloak was left with his disciple as a pledge. By leaving his mantle to his disciple, Elijah assured Elisha of the thing he asked; and Elisha received in double measure the rank of his prophetic calling.

Narsai offers us an interesting and strange interpretation of the place where Elijah was taken. He differs from the Bible

in that Elijah was taken not into heaven but to the land of Eden, whereas the Bible says plainly that he was taken up by the whirlwind into heaven.<sup>3</sup> As stated in the introduction to this Homily, Ephraem asserts that the Bible does not mention the place where Elijah was taken, but he does believe that Enoch was translated to Paradise, though he does not provide us with the exact site of it.<sup>4</sup>

Let us remember that heaven is used in the Bible in a general sense; it does not necessarily refer to any specific place, and may mean any place of supreme happiness. The most difficult problem is that Narsai does not tell us where the land of Eden is situated in relation to the earth, although he suggests that it does not extend beyond the atmospheric heaven.

As Elijah rode the fiery chariot and flew in the air,

The divine command directed him to the end of his road near Eden. God translated the son of sojourners to Eden, not to heaven; and the Divine Will keeps him alive on earth, not in the firmament. For the feet of flesh were not prepared for the road of heaven; and the entrance to it was not opened to mortality. Only One (Jesus) out of the dead went up to heaven. To him only, as the chief of the priests, who ministers in the Holy of Holies for the dead (in sin) was the firmament opened.

God's will led Elijah toward heaven; and He placed him in a beautiful land. God kept him with Enoch, who was translated before him; and they will ever be beyond suffering in the mystery

---

<sup>3</sup>II Kings 2:11.

<sup>4</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, (Rome, 1735), p. 520.



of the kingdom. Through them God had demonstrated that He will establish peace with the human race. As long as they are in the land of Eden, the hope of God's people on earth is confirmed that at the consummation of God's purpose, the righteous people will receive their ultimate reward.

God has made known to us through them that He would emancipate the human soul from the scars of sin; and He has given us the assurance of the resurrection of the body at the end of the world. God divided the course of history into stages in order to implant the hope of the raising of the dead in every generation. He translated Enoch in the tenth generation which ~~corrupted~~ corrupted the law of God; and God taught them through his ascension that He would soften His wrath. In the midst of his generation He took Elijah, and He kept him alive; and through his exaltation in the land of Eden He manifested to us the immortal glory of heaven.

Repeatedly, Narsai affirms that Enoch and Elijah are kept on earth in the land of Eden; and He who is in heaven reigns over all with His recipient (Christ). He caused these two good servants to dwell in Paradise as a pledge of that incorruptible restitution; they did not yet receive their ultimate reward, and their crowns are still kept in the kingdom of heaven. Narsai believes that both Enoch and Elijah, together with all righteous people, will receive their final reward when God establishes His eternal kingdom.



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE DIVINE MESSAGE TO THE CITY OF NINEVEH AS A SYMBOL OF THE SALVATION OF THE GENTILE WORLD

Narsai's Homily VIII is devoted to the Book of Jonah, and in it Narsai accentuates the divine message to the City of Nineveh as an indication that God was inaugurating the extension of the plan of salvation to the entire world. At the same time Narsai presents to us some interesting interpretations, especially of the tempestuous sea, the swallowing of Jonah by the great fish, etc.

In this Homily there are important points of similarity between Narsai, Ephraem, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, especially in their explanation of the divine message to the great city of Nineveh as a symbol of salvation for all the nations of the world climaxed in Christ. Both the Book of Jonah itself and Jewish tradition differ from Narsai, Ephraem, and Theodore in that they limit salvation to the Ninevites. We may assume that Narsai was influenced by both Ephraem and Theodore in his interpretation of the Book of Jonah, but as we have repeatedly stated, Narsai has a remarkable ability to create his own original ideas.

In evaluating this Homily we shall consider most of the points which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis, excluding only matters which are unimportant or repetitious. It is important to remember that we have constantly



endeavored to indicate similarities between Narsai and other Syriac Fathers. Where some phase of the Homily is not compared with Ephraem and the others, it is to be understood that there Narsai stands alone.

When the proper time arrived, Narsai tells us, God began to manifest His mysteries in extending the plan of redemption to all the inhabitants of the world. At the beginning God chose one nation in His name to make it His special inheritance, in order that He might open the treasure house of His mercy to the Gentile world through the hand of His chosen people. Ephraem here agrees with Narsai that the city of Nineveh served as an example of the entire world,<sup>1</sup> and so does Theodore of Mopsuestia.<sup>2</sup>

Both Narsai and Ephraem state that the divine message given to the Ninevites through Jonah was meant as a symbol that God was about to disclose the message of salvation to the Gentile world, and so does Theodore.<sup>3</sup> Narsai calls it a "new Gospel." Jonah was reluctant to obey the divine commission, and the seeming impossibility of the task made him shrink from undertaking it. Jonah therefore fled and hid himself from God, in order to avoid witnessing to Nineveh, for he thought that salvation was limited to the Hebrew nation. The Israelites took pride in their status

---

<sup>1</sup>T. J. Lamy, Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni Et Sermones, Tomus II, (Mechliniae: 1886), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup>Novae Patrum Bibliothecae Tomus 7 Continens in Parte I Theodori Mopsuesteni in XII Prophetas Commentarium et Alia (Rome: 1854), p. 154.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 156.



as God's beloved people and had no desire to see the uncircumcised included in the household of God.

Narsai goes on to say that God was about to spread the net of His love over the entire world. The message of salvation preached by Jonah in Nineveh was tangible proof that God was about to open the door of redemption to all mankind. God, through Jonah, was thus opening the worship of His Lordship to the Ninevites.

Both Narsai and Ephraem give two reasons why Jonah refused the divine mission to Nineveh: First, Jonah did not want to be considered a false prophet; second, he was afraid that the nation of Israel would be deprived of its special inheritance.<sup>4</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia agrees with Narsai and Ephraem that Jonah rejected the mission to Nineveh out of fear that he would be considered a false prophet.<sup>5</sup> Narsai adds that Jonah did not want to break the fence of the law by his mission to the Ninevites.

Jonah was commanded to press his rebuke and was bidden to take medicine from the treasure house of the mystery of God's Lordship and press the Ninevites to repentance. He was told to wash the Ninevites clean from their iniquity, to take the lamp of God's knowledge and place it before the eyes of the Assyrians, and to prepare them for the knowledge of God, so that they might acknowledge

---

<sup>4</sup>Lamy, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>5</sup>Novae Patrum Bibliothecae, T. VII, p. 168.



the one Creator. He was enjoined to uproot all evil from among the people of Nineveh through the power of God, and to take the sword of the word of the spirit upon his tongue in order to destroy the iniquity of the tyrant Assyria, who had rebelled against justice. He was commanded to destroy the gods of Assyria, who had led the people to falsehood, and to establish monotheism in the minds of the Ninevites. He was charged to spread the words of the voice of warning throughout Nineveh, that God was about to shake the very ground upon which the city was built.

Narsai tells that Jonah chose flight in order not to be sent among the Ninevites, thinking that his whereabouts would remain unknown to everyone. He wanted to remain in a land where the voice of revelation is heard. In reality, Jonah knew that he could not hide from God, but he reasoned that only in the land of Judah does revelation take place. Theodore of Mopsuestia here agrees with Narsai in that Jonah went off foolishly thinking he should be free from divine molestation.<sup>6</sup>

The way in which Narsai describes the whirlwind which took hold of Jonah as he fled from the presence of the Lord is most interesting. In this Narsai stands alone, because both Ephraem and Theodore follow the biblical tradition in the Book of Jonah, without offering us any original ideas, as does Narsai.

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

Narsai tells us that Jonah preferred to flee to Tarshish rather than to have the Ninevites share God's inheritance. He went aboard the ship and fell asleep in his mood of disappointment, but the divine command began to agitate the sea. The whirlwind, like a hunter, cast its net to catch him, and Jonah as well as the sailors fell into the snare of the sea.

Narsai gives two reasons why God caused the tempest upon the sea: first, God wanted the seamen to be led to the knowledge of Him; second, God intended to teach Jonah his responsibility toward the Gentiles.

The sea was calm for all other sailors while they were voyaging upon the sea, and was raging only around the ship which carried Jonah. Everywhere the weather was quiet, the waves were calm, and everyone was sailing safely, except for Jonah's ship, which was breaking up in the midst of the storm which surrounded it. The divine command thus divided the sea into parts, so that the sailors saw a great miracle, in that the sea was calm for them, but was raging for Jonah. According to Narsai, it was the raging of the sea around Jonah that terrified the sailors, even though this did not necessarily affect them directly. God kept lowering the ship to the bottom without breaking it, and lifting it up to the surface without turning it over.

Nevertheless, the intensity of the whirlwind struck the sailors with a great fear, and they gave up hope of being



delivered from the tempest. The captain then endeavored to awaken Jonah from his sleep, in order that he might make supplication to God to save their lives. Jonah's slumber was so deep that he had no feeling of the turbulence of the sea, but as he awoke, he realized that he was the cause of the tempest. He, therefore, did not proceed to pray with the sailors that the sea might grow calm, for he knew that even if he made supplication to God it would not be accepted.

The sailors thereupon took counsel among themselves to investigate the iniquities of which they might be guilty. Through the raging of the sea they were enabled to understand that it was iniquity which caused the storm, and the violent breath of the wind made them wise. They took counsel among themselves how they might find out the hidden sin in their minds. They decided to examine each other through the "furnace of lots," in order to find out the hidden deceit. So they cast lots to make known who had sinned against God and to pass judgment on the transgression which had made the sea tempestuous. The lot fell on Jonah.

The uncircumcised sailors therefore learned from Jonah that he had fled from the presence of the Lord in order to hide himself. In their terror at the miracles performed upon the sea, they sought to return to dry land, but the storm would not let them do so, and their ship remained stationary at sea. The force

of the wind tossed them about in every direction; the waves, the riders, pulled them hither and thither; the tempest, like a besieging army, kept encircling them; and the wind was so violent that it blocked their progress as if it were a wall. As the sailors kept debating what they should do with Jonah, he confessed to them that the whirlwind was the consequence of his own sin, and asked them to cast him into the sea if they wanted the sea to quiet down.

According to Narsai, the sailors acknowledged the true God after they cast Jonah into the sea, for they saw the sea become calm immediately. Greatly astonished at the power of the Creator, they made vows accordingly, and in this agreement became the servants of God. The Book of Jonah, on the other hand, says merely that the sailors were greatly terrified by the presence of the Lord, offered sacrifices to Him and made vows;<sup>7</sup> we are not told there that they became followers of the one God. Jewish tradition is similar to Narsai in holding that "these miracles induced the ship's crew to abandon idolatry, and they all became pious proselytes in Jerusalem."<sup>8</sup> Possibly Narsai borrowed the detail of the sailors having become servants of God from Jewish tradition, although he differs greatly from it in other aspects of the Book of Jonah.

---

<sup>7</sup>Jonah 1:16.

<sup>8</sup>L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, IV, p. 250 (referring to Midrash Jonah 99).



Narsai stands alone also in regard to the swallowing of Jonah by the fish. Here, both Ephraem and Theodore follow closely the Book of Jonah, without offering us anything original. Narsai tells us that Jonah fell into the snare of the waters, which held him fast. The silent waves passed silent judgment upon his spirit of separation and, like a judge, rendered a decision as to his punishment, although it was God who had determined that Jonah should go down to the fish's belly. Narsai thinks that Jonah's descent into the bowels of the fish had the same effect as if he had been in his grave. A grave was thus figuratively dug for him in the belly of the living fish, yet he was miraculously kept alive. The divine command closed the door of the fish's belly after Jonah, and the fugitive went down into a prison full of darkness. Jonah's feet were fastened in the soft stocks inside the bowels of the fish. He fled from dry land, but the sea caught him, and handed him over to the fish.

Jonah thus went down into a double grave without undergoing corruption, and remained clad in the vestment of his body. His life was kept safe by the divine power just as the life of a baby is kept safe in its mother's womb. Narsai explicitly reminds us that although normally man cannot be sustained without air, nevertheless, the body of Jonah survived in the belly of the fish without air as if he were a spiritual being.

Narsai goes on to comment that it was not Jonah's choice that he fled from the presence of the Lord; on the contrary, the

burial of Jonah in the belly of the fish represents a great mystery whereby God foretold the future: Jonah's burial in the belly of the fish signifies two resurrections--one freeing man from his iniquity and the other bringing him back from the dead. Through man (Christ) God was thus about to emancipate mankind from the bondage of sin.

God buried Jonah in the belly of the fish in the mystery of our Savior. Ephraem says that the great fish's swallowing Jonah is the prototype of the death of Jesus, and symbolizes Christ's burial in the grave for three days.<sup>9</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia agrees with Narsai and Ephraem in regarding Jonah as a prototype of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Narsai goes on to say that Jonah was buried in the bowels of the fish so that he might serve as an example to the truth hidden in what God makes known. The living fish became his grave, so that it (the fish) might show forth and fulfill mysteries. A new mystery was performed with Jonah, whereby he marked a new way by his burial in the belly of the fish. Jonah's burial without death represents in reality the salvation of the Gentiles.

Narsai raises a significant question concerning the mystery performed by God with Jonah. Both the circumcised and the

---

<sup>9</sup>Lamy, op. cit., II, p. 233.

<sup>10</sup>Novae Patrum Bibliothecae Tomus 7, p. 252.



uncircumcised might ask: What is the power which is hidden in the mystery ministered by Jonah? What was the necessity for the three days of Jonah's burial in the belly of the fish? Why should he have lived a life so far from the ordinary? Why was he so foolish as to reject the command of his Lord? Why did not God punish him in any other manner than by casting him into the belly of the fish? When did God ever scourge a son of His household as He did Jonah? Why did God imprison him alive in the belly of the fish? When in the past did God ever send His preachers to the house of strangers--when did He send a prophet to the Gentiles instead of to His chosen people? Why did Jonah not prophesy in the land of Judah that he would go to Nineveh? The answer is, God buried Jonah alive in the belly of the fish for the sake of Jonah, in order that the door of salvation should be opened to the strangers, so that they might enter into the presence of God. The vomiting of Jonah by the fish symbolizes the resurrection of the dead. Jonah understood that God called the Gentiles through the natural order of the house of Abraham.

Narsai appeals to the Hebrew people to investigate the mystery whereby God extended His mercy to the Gentiles, as He demonstrated it through Jonah. The son of Abraham is counseled to uncover the veil thrown over his face. The Hebrews should look at the truth hidden in the mystery which Jonah ministered to the Ninevites. They are commanded to read and understand the

holy spiritual books. They should learn the mysteries fulfilled in regard to the Gentiles. Let the Israelites fix their minds upon the new mystery which Jonah had manifested. Let the Ninevites be an example to the eye of your heart that the voice of salvation had gone forth to the four corners of the earth. The uncircumcised must be an essential part of God's inheritance.

While Jonah was in the belly of the fish, he fully realized that he had disregarded his divine mission to the Gentile world. After he was ejected by the fish onto dry land, he heard once more the divine command that he go to the Ninevites to preach the new Gospel. Thereupon, Jonah set out on his journey to the house of the strangers, going by way of Assyria as he was commanded. God taught him the greatness of Nineveh. He remained three days in the city, preaching the message of salvation. God taught him that the greatness and wealth of the city belong to God. Jonah preached in the streets, giving full voice to his warning to everyone that the City of Nineveh is to be overthrown together with its inhabitants.

Narsai offers us some interesting explanations concerning Jonah's preaching in the streets of Nineveh. Jonah set forth a limit of forty days for the confirmation of his words. He preached the overthrow of the city but tempered it with mercy. He so overawed the hardhearted (Assyrians) that they were moved from pride to humility. He endeavored to uproot their iniquity which made them liable to death. Jonah cried out like a



trumpet in Nineveh. The waves of the voice of his words stirred up the city filled with magnificence. He blew at it the vehement words which filled his mouth, and made it shudder at its approaching overthrow. His voice terrified kings, nobles, and lower ranks, and made them gather to hear his preaching. Both people and kings heard his words, trembled, and were astonished at his preaching.

According to Narsai, the multitudes of people in Nineveh were prepared to hear his words, and were subdued by them. Both young and old listened to him, and his action ensnared all classes in its swiftness. The voice of his preaching reached even the king of Assyria, who abandoned his crown, forsook his power, and honored the word of Jonah. Jonah turned the full voice of his suffering to the people, urging them to turn back from their evil actions. Having heard Jonah's preaching, the Ninevites repented and confessed their sins, in order that Nineveh should not be destroyed. He made them hate their iniquity, although they, at first, had no desire to do so. Through the Ninevites Jonah marked the allegory of the things to come; namely, that God will save the Gentiles at the end of time through the second Adam, Jesus.

After the Ninevites repented, Jonah was greatly grieved because the destruction foretold by him was not fulfilled. He then resumed his original journey, saying that it was God who had made him flee. He complained that God is merciful and always

willing to forgive those who repent. He said that he preferred death to life so that he should not be considered a false prophet. He was unhappy that the unclean Gentiles had been saved from their iniquity.

Jonah then went forth to dwell in solitude, although he still hoped that the decree which he proclaimed might be fulfilled. He made for himself a shelter to dwell there temporarily. In this way, through experience, the Lord taught him the lesson of mercy.

The divine will caused a tender shoot of gourd to grow swiftly, so that it spread its leaves over Jonah, and he rejoiced in its leaves and fruit and marveled at its quick growth. He forgot his anxiety in the sweetness of the fruit, though he could not understand the cause of the gourd's blossoming.

Just as suddenly the leaves and fruit of the gourd faded away, and the sun began to beat upon the head of Jonah with unusual intensity, for God kindled the sun beyond its ordinary heat. Just as God had enraged the sea, so did He kindle the intensity of the sun beyond its natural range. God taught him by means of the sea that he must not resist the divine commission to the Gentiles; He taught him by means of the gourd that he must prefer the life of man to his death. Thus did Jonah understand through the silent gourd that he must love the sinners even though he had no desire so to do.



## CHAPTER IX

### NARSAI'S PECULIAR EXPLANATION OF THE NATURE AND MINISTRY OF THE SERAPHIM

Narsai's Homily XXXI concerning the seraphim who are mentioned in Chapter 6 of Isaiah is the most fascinating of all his Homilies. Narsai takes us into a metaphysical world, and describes to us the supernatural beings who are mysteriously traveling in it.

The genius of Narsai in the sphere of speculation is remarkable. His imagination travels into impenetrable mysteries. He draws conclusions from abstract principles, and offers us some very peculiar interpretations regarding the nature and ministry of the seraphim which lead the reader into a supernatural realm. He acts as if inspired by a superhuman power. Narsai's ability to create new ideas is unique.

In this Homily there are striking similarities between Narsai and Ephraem, especially in their interpretation of the expression, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3), which signifies, according to them, the mystery of the Trinity. We may assume that Narsai borrowed the idea of the THREE HOLIES as representing the Trinity from Ephraem; but, on the other hand, Narsai is capable of originating new conceptions as well, as he treats the subject more extensively.

In discussing this Homily we will concentrate on its salient

points which are indispensable for the history of Old Testament exegesis, and will disregard some of the extraneous points and repetitions. It is important to keep in mind that where some phase of the Homily is not compared with Ephraem and others, it is to be understood that there Narsai stands alone.<sup>1</sup>

Narsai develops the idea that there is a heavenly sanctuary, and that it was there that the greatness of God was manifested to Isaiah and the heavenly beings. In this heavenly Temple, God has appointed seraphim to cry, "Holy, holy, holy." Narsai asserts that the presence of God is everywhere. Narsai believes that God is incorporeal, and invisible to the eye of man. He gathered the watchers, He called the angels, and He pointed out the cherubim and clothed them with a visible appearance that is doubly amazing. After God had commissioned them, they flew down to earth to announce the message of consolation to Isaiah.

The seraphim journeyed through space without walking; and as they were traveling through the vast space, the power of the Self-existent was directing their ranks in an immutable way so that they might not wander from the direction which was leading them to earth.

When the heavenly beings came down to earth, they were not perceived by men, except for one man who saw a tambourine. Isaiah saw the invisible in the heavenly Temple by means of his mind; and by means of his mind he entered with the watchers into the heavenly sanctuary.

---

<sup>1</sup>Theodore's commentary on the Book of Isaiah is no longer extant.



Narsai presents to us the functions of the seraphim in the heavenly Temple. They ministered to God in holy awe. They set up a throne of majesty for Him as for a king; and they paid homage to Him. They threw a fiery veil between Him and themselves in order that they should not see the face of the King who dwells in majesty, and their wings formed this veil before their faces. Just like clothes, their wings were wrapped over their faces, so that they did not need to turn away from the flame of the vision's majesty. The heavenly beings spread a veil of glory before their eyes. A majestic sight was before their eyes, and they were afraid to look straight at it. It was a dreadful sight, and an incomparable one. Their wings thus acted as mediators between Him and themselves, and by means of them they brought the gifts of THREE HOLIES which were in their minds.

Narsai goes on to say that six wings were suddenly and spontaneously grown on them; and they divided them into pairs according to their functions; with one pair they covered their formless faces, with another pair they covered their incorporeal feet, and the remaining pair they used to fly swiftly. When they cried the THREE HOLIES, the foundations of the Temple were shaken.

The Jewish tradition concerning the wings of the seraphim differs from Narsai's in that the wings were used also to praise God, although on the Sabbath they were silent, for on the seventh day God is praised by the inhabitants of the earth.



Both Narsai and Jewish tradition agree that the faces of the seraphim were covered by their wings in order that they should not look at the Shekinah.<sup>2</sup>

A number of things seen by Isaiah in the vision perplexed him. He was greatly astonished at the appearance of the heavenly beings, although he had concentrated his mind upon the appointed time of the vision. He trembled as the voice of revelation was speaking to him. At the dreadful sight of the seraphim, his thoughts were dismayed, seeing that they, too, even though they were spiritual beings, also stood in dread of the spiritual God.

Isaiah wondered why the seraphim hid their faces from the majesty of the Omnipotent God. He wondered who appointed them in groups, and why God threw upon them the yoke and the fear with which they were dismayed. He wondered why they cried the THREE HOLIES while they were in such a fearful state, and why they were not able to fix their appearance before the appointed time of the vision. Why were they hiding their faces under their wings, and why did they cry the THREE HOLIES only once? In this state of doubt, the prophet was uncertain whether he was actually seeing the vision or whether it was more hallucination. The whole vision was a mystery to him, and he wondered whether he actually had entered the Temple and stood in it. Perhaps he saw an invisible sight only in his mind.

---

<sup>2</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., VI, pp. 359f; cf. II, p. 309.



When Isaiah heard the THREE HOLIES, he began to remember his sin and the iniquity of his people. He asked God to cut him off from life because he was no longer able to bear the iniquity of his people after he had tasted of the holiness of God. While he was engaged in this mental struggle, he longed to hear the voice of forgiveness. Sorrow for his sin and the iniquity of his people urged him on, and as he was groaning in his mind, the watcher brought him a new gospel of forgiveness of sin.

This exposition of the THREE HOLIES in fact might be considered entirely improbable by some modern commentators, because the THREE HOLIES in fact refer to the holiness of God in the heavenly Temple. In making it apply to the Trinity, however, Narsai must be given credit for his intellectual acuity, because he presents an elaborate explanation of the THREE HOLIES as symbol of the Trinity which we will analyze presently.

According to the interpretation of Narsai, the Trinity was hidden in mystery even from the heavenly beings. One person of the Trinity was manifested to the heavenly beings at the beginning of the creation of our planet; and, afterwards they possessed the understanding for the investigation of all three persons. God revealed to them the hidden mystery--it was not hidden in the revelation, but they would seek it every hour.

When the seraphim commenced to reveal the mystery of the Trinity by crying the THREE HOLIES, the foundations of the Temple were shaken. They cried then with one power; and



through three of them, in one Lordship. They made known the Trinity, possessing the same Essence. They preached the Trinity on earth through their THREE HOLIES; and according to the order of crying of the THREE HOLIES, they paid it due acknowledgment. Three times they repeated the glory in a beautiful voice; and they marked the way for man to call the three names. The three names were shrouded in mystery in the name of that cry.

Narsai raises a significant question that was puzzling him: Why did the seraphim cry "holy" only three times, neither adding to nor subtracting from that number, even though their ministry of holiness was continual? He replies that the threefold crying of HOLY is, in its limitation, in no way commensurate with the immeasurable holiness of God. Heaven and earth also made a joyful sound with the seraphim, and all creation joined their choir.

Mysteriously the seraphim repeated the glory of the Trinity three times, though they did not understand the power which was hidden in their words. They spoke words, but their meanings they did not understand. In the way of peace they marked the creation with the Creator, so that men might travel to the appointed time of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They set up the THREE HOLIES in order, and they put them in the likeness of the milestone, in order that anyone who would journey in THREE HOLIES would not be disturbed. The seraphim taught the order of the limitless power of the Self-Existent.

It was the first time in history that the seraphim revealed the Trinity to a human being when they revealed it to Isaiah.



The crying of the THREE HOLIES was never heard before Isaiah. Until the time of Isaiah the mystery of the Trinity was not revealed; and the prophet himself concealed it from the spectators. The mystery of the Trinity was revealed only through the mouth of the spiritual beings; and they showed Isaiah how to keep it secret to the end of time.

In this agreement also the spiritual beings cried THREE HOLIES and they kept silent so that every man might meditate on the cause of these three times. God was about to reveal the mystery of the Trinity; and He put it as a pledge in the Holy Books. The seraphim taught the order which was in the Essence--three in one. They preached three persons in their crying THREE HOLIES; and they taught them through the mouth of Isaiah. Mysteriorously, they revealed the truth which was in them to the prophet; and he took it and put it in the Holy Books like that which is deposited in the treasure house. In the treasure house of Books he put the mystery which was made known to him; and he sealed it in silence, until such time as it would be explained through action. He threw silence over the THREE HOLIES in the likeness of a seal, in order that eyes of flesh should not look into it, and despise it.

This section of the Homily is most interesting because Narsai sets forth some unusual explanations regarding the nature of incorporeal beings. In this section also there are noticeable similarities between him and Ephraem as we shall see later on. It may be that Narsai took the idea of incorporeal

existence from Ephraem, but Narsai has an exceptional ability to amplify the subject as well as to create new concepts.

Narsai asserts that it was not actual fire which the Watcher grasped with the tongs of fire; nor was it an actual coal of fire that was brought to the mouth of Isaiah. The vision which was revealed to Isaiah was incorporeal. Here Ephraem agrees with Narsai in that the fire was immaterial.<sup>3</sup> Narsai says further that the Creator did not limit His Being to the sanctuary, nor did the seraphim grow natural wings. The spiritual beings cried in an imperceptible voice; and Isaiah heard that imperceptible voice. The revelation was imposed in spirit on the mortal man; and he saw the vision in his mind, not with his eyes.

The prophet was purged of his scars of sin through the mystery of the coal. The seraph pointed out to him the coal of fire and bid him to draw near, while he took it with the tongs of fire, and brought it near to him. Fire in fire, he commanded him to grasp the fiery coal, so that Isaiah would destroy with it the briar of iniquity which grew in man. It grew in the yoke of the sins of Adam; and God sent and purged him through the hand of the heavenly being.

The coal of fire was put on the altar; and the seraph drew near and grasped it with the hand of fire as he was commanded. With the tongs of fire he grasped the fiery fire; and

---

<sup>3</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, (Rome: 1735), p. 31.



he drew near, and put it on Isaiah's lips of flesh; nevertheless, his lips did not burn. He was unable to grasp fire mixed with fire without some tool; yet his despised flesh grasped it in his mouth without being burned. Isaiah did not suffer from the touch of the coal's intense heat; though he was full of suffering, his body did not suffer when the coal of fire was brought near to him. The seraph himself was not able to stand the sight of the fire; yet the flesh of the man was not hurt by the flame.

Ephraem here also agrees with Narsai in that the revelation which God disclosed to Isaiah was seen by him in his mind.<sup>4</sup> With the eyes of the mind Isaiah saw the invisible sight, and with his mind he heard the imperceptible voice. The hidden divine command spoke to his hidden emotions, and the revelation expressed itself with his thoughts.

The spiritual beings, with the faculties of their mind, brought the coal of fire near to the faculties of Isaiah's mind. The coal of fire, too, was incorporeal. Nevertheless, the vision was genuine, and not a hallucination. It was not material, but visionary and without physical construction. Without hands the spiritual being grasped the immaterial coal of fire; and, with the immaterial tongs of fire he brought it near to the mouth of Isaiah, even though the latter was corporeal.

Narsai presents to us a new method of atonement, different from that prescribed in the Mosaic law, through the mystery of

---

<sup>4</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, II, (Rome: 1735), p. 31.



the coal of fire. He thus stands alone in his interpretation of the coal of fire. He raises some questions regarding the new order that God manifested through one of the seraphim to Isaiah, in which he drastically differs from the expositions offered by others of the purpose of the coal of fire.

Narsai goes on to ask why did the Watcher grasp the fire with the tongs, and not with his hand? Why did he take the fire from the altar of the sacrifices? Narsai reminds us that sacrifices were used for purification and people were not purified by fire. The Israelites were purified through animal sacrifices. Why then did not the Watcher take some of the sacrifice and bring it near to Isaiah? Since blood of calves was used in atoning for defilement of the soul, why did not the Watcher sprinkle blood on Isaiah's mouth, and thus expiate his iniquities? We never hear of fire being sprinkled upon members of the human body. Such atonement was not prescribed in the law, and there is nothing in it which resembles the procedure transmitted by Moses. Moses and Aaron used to sprinkle blood not on the sinner's mouth, but on his ears and thumbs.

It was thus a new thing that the seraph performed upon Isaiah; and there is nothing like it in all the order of the law. Let the priest among the people who always ministered come and explain to us what is this which the Watcher performed upon this son of our race. Let the Israelites come and show us what is the power which is hidden in the vision seen by the prophet. Let



the priest come and make known to us how iniquity is atoned for through the blood of sacrificial animals. Why did not the spiritual being blot out the iniquity of your brother with blood? Why did he not sprinkle it upon his ear or his thumb, as Moses and Aaron had taught for those who were to offer atonement?

Why did God now change the great order which you Hebrews had observed heretofore? The Watcher is teaching you to journey in the way which is invisible to you. There is something hidden in the vision which your prophet saw; or perhaps it is not a mystery, but rather God's way of making a transition from one mystery to another, as the Watcher had manifested to Isaiah through the mystery of the coal that God was about to change the Mosaic method of atonement to a new one. God preached the mystery through the change of the Mosaic order; and He marked off a straight way for action. God thus manifested the abolition of the sacrifices enjoined in the Mosaic law, as the mystery of the coal of fire indicates.

Both Narsai and Ephraem explain that the live coal represents the mystery of the Wine and Bread, or a type of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Narsai probably borrowed the idea of the coal signifying the body and blood of Christ from Ephraem. Narsai maintains that the body and blood of man cannot atone for man's sin, but God atones for all the sins through the Bread and Wine, which are the symbol of Christ's body.

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., II, p. 31.

## II. UNPUBLISHED TEXTS

### CHAPTER 1

#### THE BENEDICTION OF NOAH

Narsai's Homily on the benediction of Noah, Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 253a-257a, was obtained in microfilm from the British Museum. The Homily is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 339a-347b; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 300a-308b; Ms. Vat. Syr. 588, fol. 86a-90a.<sup>1</sup> It is written in twelve-syllable meter, which is one of the evidences that it was composed by Narsai himself, and A. Vööbus comes to the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup> The theology and the tone of the Homily are undoubtedly Narsai's, and the introduction to the Homily points the same way, because all such characteristics are common to most of Narsai's Homilies. His personal testimony in the Homily indicates that it was composed by him, because such testimony is equally characteristic of all his Homilies,<sup>3</sup> and so does the introduction of certain direct quotations, for the same reason. As a matter of fact, Narsai's Homilies contain hundreds of such direct quotations, both biblical and other, which are Narsai's own invention.<sup>4</sup> This Homily, not included in Mingana's two-volume edition of 47 of Narsai's Homilies printed in Mosul in 1905, is written in the

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Vööbus, History of the School of Nisibis, (CSCO, 26), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 253a.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., fol. 253a-253b.



Eastern or Nestorian script and is vocalized with Eastern vowels. It was copied not by a professional scribe, as were Narsai's Homilies on the brazen serpent and on the elevation of Enoch and Elijah, which were obtained in photocopy from Selly Oak College Library in Birmingham, but it is possible that the British Museum had employed a private scribe who copied the Homily from the original manuscript.

The Book of Genesis devotes only three verses to the benediction of Noah,<sup>5</sup> whereas Narsai discusses it at length and offers many original ideas which are found neither in the Bible, nor in the commentary of Ephraem, nor in Jewish tradition. There are hardly any noticeable similarities among Narsai, Ephraem, and Jewish tradition in this respect. Ephraem merely repeats the biblical tradition with brief comments, and Jewish tradition is also quite brief here. Narsai, on the other hand, treats it very extensively.

Narsai tells us that he saw a favorable mystery for man in the Holy Books which God mysteriously made known to the prophet Moses by the way of the spirit. God spiritually manifested the revelation to the son of Amram, in order to reveal to men the mystery of life which was hidden in their bodily members. The mystery of their emancipation also was hidden in their members, and through their posterity this mystery was handed down from one generation to another. The treasury of life for their needs

---

<sup>5</sup>Gen. 9:25-27.



was placed in them, and through life, the life which was in them was preserved. The Creator mingled life with His help to Adam, so that after Adam perished God saved his mortality through the life which helped him, and which flowed from his bodily members to form a spring of immortal life. It flowed mysteriously before spectators, so that while they saw it, they did not in reality see it.

Thus, the concealed light of life was manifested through Adam and Seth, afterwards through Enoch, Lamech, and Noah. Through Noah the power of life was made known, although it had been placed in the nature of man in the beginning, and through him the determined judgment introduced in Paradise in consequence of Adam's sin was tempered. Lamech prophesied through his son Noah that God would save the weary world, and that through his purity God would purify the earth from its curse. The word of Noah's father was fulfilled through Noah's action, for God did cause the earth to rest through the benediction bestowed upon his sons.

Noah's bodily members were a tabernacle of peace for man, whereby he preserved the life of the sons of his race from destruction. Through the haven of his body the transmission of the treasury of life was assured, and he handed it over to his sons to transmit it in their turn to their progeny. Wisely Noah kept the treasury of the house of his fathers, and through understanding opened its mystery to his children. The spirit made him wise to tend his wealth with great care, and taught him to appoint his



sons to continue the course of his life. God's power strengthened the weakness of the faculties of his soul, and caused a discourse of righteousness to flow from his mind. His bodily members served as a channel for the flow of his spirit.

Noah divided the hundreds of his benedictions into streams, so that streams of words flowed through his mouth out of the mouth of his spirit; and instead of being received by the earth, these streams were received by the hearing of the sons of his loins. The righteous Noah planted a good seed in the field of his son who was diligent in accepting him in the purity of his soul. His heart was pure and the word of his mouth was forthright, and with joy he lifted up his voice to bless them. Noah cried, "Let the Creator be blessed," for he feared to bless his children in God's name.<sup>6</sup>

It is rather strange that Narsai suddenly introduces Christ addressing his Father. To be sure, Narsai does not mention Christ by name, but the description of the address is applicable only to Christ, since it includes the act of creation. Such a device is very common in his Homilies, the address in fact seems irrelevant to Narsai's theme.

Christ address his Father thus:

Blessed be the One who has piled up through me wealth which sustains the works of His hands, and has made me a spring of flowing life for man. Blessed be the One who has demolished through me the fence of wrath that stood between Him and His servants, and has thus saved through life the nature of both rational beings and inanimate things. Blessed be the One who has revealed through me the goodness of His love for man, and has made known through the hands of truth that His name was God who is over all. Blessed be the One who has appointed me a sign of peace before spectators

---

<sup>6</sup>Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 253a.



and has taught them through me to call His name in purity of soul. Blessed be the One who has caused to dwell in me the power of the wisdom of His divinity, and caused to flow a discourse from my mouth that causes men to possess life. Blessed be the One who has made me the second Adam for the Adamites, and has rendered me equal to the order which He had performed through me in the beginning. Blessed be the One who has created all creation through me, to follow that which was already, so that the world would travel in the order of His creative power. Blessed be the One who has raised me to the high rank of His image, and has stretched forth my power over creatures in the likeness of His own power. My tongue is too feeble to bless the name of His being, He who has caused my mind to possess the power of understanding future things.<sup>7</sup>

In blessing the sons of his loins, Noah blessed first the name of his God, and then blessed his sons. Noah said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem."<sup>8</sup> Narsai raises the question, why the God of Shem, "why was it not your God, O Noah? You are older than your children. Upon you the name of your God was placed first, and only then upon your children. It is a new thing that you have done, O son of Lamech, through the mystery of your blessing, and perhaps the investigation of a new matter has been made known through it."

The prophet of truth (Noah) declared, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem," and thus made his other sons partake in the greatness of wealth which he caused his son Shem to inherit; he enlarged and caused Japheth to dwell in the tents of Shem, the elder son, and made Ham a servant to his brothers, bound to serve

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., fol. 253a-253b.

<sup>8</sup>Gen. 9:26.



them. The Lord blessed Shem and Japheth, as well as Ham, the servant, three ways (three sons) distinct from one another and yet at the same time equal. One is the name of the Lord, one is the superabundance (of His blessing), and one is servitude, and the three of them were blessed out of one mouth in three words-- Shem, Japheth, and Ham, and yoked them equally by the yoke of one word. He gave three "rods" (or tribes) into the hands of his three sons, and caused one of them (Shem) to be enlarged (by God), and the other (Japheth) by his companion (Shem); and he made both Japheth and Ham to be under Shem, the eldest brother.

Narsai proceeds to tell us that Noah caused both Japheth and Ham to be in need of Shem's inheritance in two ways. Through his choice of words he concealed the power which was in them, and he directed his blessing to the eldest son, Shem, although he did not bless him in reality, for Noah said, "Blessed be the Lord." Thus Shem himself was not actually blessed, nor was there any curse directed to the other, Japheth, but Noah did curse Canaan, the son of Ham. Here Narsai agrees with the Bible that Noah blessed not Shem but only the Lord: "And he said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be their servant."<sup>9</sup>

Noah gave Shem his blessing by way of blessing the name of the Creator, and cursed Ham for his iniquity by way of cursing Canaan, his first-born.

The difficulty of your words, O Noah, and the obscurity of your tale! There is no man who understands

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.



the meaning of your blessing. Your meaning is hidden and puzzles greatly those who are seekers; it is not easy for him who seeks to investigate your words. Your blessing does not adhere to the name of the one who is to receive it, and your curse does not strike the soul of him who is to be cursed. I wished that you had blessed Shem who is named after the name of God, and when the blessing was set up for its appointed time, had given it to its recipient. I wished further that you had cursed Ham, the violent one who was living in sin, yet while you suffered, you caused his son to suffer in his stead. No one knows how to explain your actions.<sup>10</sup>

There is indeed no one who can bless nor one who can curse, because in this respect both seem to be like you, in that you had no power over your will, for it was really not you who spoke, but someone else (God). God turned your inclination in the direction He wished, and of necessity, your mind turned to where it might rest. Remember, O righteous one, that the words which you uttered were higher than you, and when you sought to reveal them, they were difficult for you. They were difficult for you, not because of their real difficulty, but because of their concealment. It is a miracle that you gave utterance to a matter which was hidden from you. A great mystery is hidden in your words, O righteous one, and perhaps the lowliness of your race was about to be exalted. Your words are full of sweet life, O son of mortals, perhaps their sweetness will extirpate death from humanity. The speech which your heart caused to flow is wonderful, O dust of Adam, and perhaps even the heavenly multitudes marvel at it. There is no man who can bless like you, by mingling your blessings with hidden curses.<sup>11</sup>

One meaning is hidden in the words of the son of Lamech, and they are aimed at one mark. The mark of truth made him straight, contrary to the crookedness of him who fears the truth. God pointed out to him a revealed truth and caused him to reveal

---

<sup>10</sup> Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 253b-254a.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., fol. 254a.



the truth of His name, so that men might see His truth through the mouth of man. Through the mouth of Noah the word of truth came down, and through his lips the voice of reconciliation of man with God was uttered. Truth traveled with mankind from Adam, the founder of humanity, and its course did not rest until it reached the haven of Noah's body. God placed life in his body and in his soul, and like a spring of water Noah caused life to flow over the heads of his children. The Messiah dwelt mysteriously in him, and he gave him to his sons through hundreds of blessings. He transmitted the treasure of life hidden in him to his first-born, Shem, for Noah saw that he knew how to keep this treasure safe from destruction.

Narsai goes on to tell us that Noah subjugated Shem's brothers to the power of Shem's primacy, so that through this subjugation they might partake of the treasury of life. He apportioned life from his own life to the sons of his loins and taught them to keep the mystery of life which was planted in them. Mysteriously he showed them the life which he had passed to them. In this agreement he yoked Ham and Japheth to Shem, the eldest, although they did not wish to honor the mystery represented by their elder brother. Noah honored the eldest brother, not in order to honor his nature, but in order to extol Him who renews nature.

Noah divided his words into three measures--three sons--not in order to differentiate them but in order to make the minds of his children alike (or equal) in one word. Noah transmitted and



kept the word through his truth. The Creator caused to be revealed to him everything that he needed, and manifested to him the great mystery of man's salvation. He saw the trial of his soul confirmed by faith, and gave man through him the power to speak words of faith. By faith he received the word of his Lord, exalted His word, and preached the truth which was made known to him. In love he received the mystery of making known the things which were made known to him, and wondered greatly at the greatness of God's goodness toward man. With great amazement Noah stood before the beginning of His word, so that man might be able to see mankind. So also did the son of Jesse, David, marvel at the high rank to which the despised nature of man may ascend.

Narsai goes on to say that Noah stood up at the time of the mystery which was made known to him. David, in his wonderment, composed words with the harp of words; Noah, in like wonderment, begot discourses on the flow of life; he wondered at the lives of his sons, and was amazed at the difference in the lives of the sons of his flesh. Noah first wished to vary his word from the way it was given to him by God; he opened his lips meaning to say, "Blessed be my first-born," but instead turned back and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem." He was prepared to bless Shem, but the wonder compelled him to bless the Name which is full of blessings. Noah said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord," and then added the name of his son to the blessing of His Lord, thus combining the blessing of his God with the blessing of his son,



for he believed that every name of God confers a blessing. Noah said, "Blessed be the God of my son who wished for him, and called him by His name, and may my son also be hidden in the Lord and in His son." Noah wondered further, and said, "Blessed be the Lord who is about to reveal His Lordship through my son," and his Lord revealed to him the future, not openly but mysteriously, to the effect that through his children God was about to emancipate man. Whereupon Noah wondered which one of his sons was meant. It was Shem, out of whom God was to raise a king who would rule over all.

Narsai raises the significant point that Noah's prophecy of Ham being the servant of Shem and Japheth was in fact not fulfilled, since Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, had primacy and kingdom, and was called a mighty hunter before the Lord.<sup>12</sup> The Egyptians and the Canaanites, likewise descendants of Ham, were also not subjugated, but rather subjugated other nations. As a matter of fact, they subjugated also the Israelites, both in the land of Egypt and in Canaan.

Narsai goes on to say that Noah yoked Shem's brothers to him in the yoke of his name, but why did Noah not give a separate blessing to Japheth whom he had enlarged, and why did he not make Ham the servant of his brothers who were God's servants? Why did he not give a separate inheritance to Japheth who was a righteous man, instead of enlarging him in the inheritance of his brother? Why did he not curse Ham and banish him to a far country, but

---

<sup>12</sup>Gen. 10:8-9.



instead included him in the inheritance of his blessed brothers? Why did he not separate him through a determined judgment, like Cain, and bar him from mingling with his contemporaries? Why did he not confirm the curse as it was pronounced upon him, seeing that in the end he did not serve his brothers as it was written that he should? Surely Scripture tells us clearly that the seed of Ham did not in fact serve in bondage.

Narsai concludes that Noah did not bless the sons of Shem, his first-born, nor the sons of Japheth, but rather the sons of Ham who ruled first in primacy, since Nimrod was a true son of Ham. Nimrod received the primacy and the kingdom of his time, and the Lord foretold, and the Book testifies, to his might. Since Nimrod was a mighty hunter before the Lord, the Lord evidently gave him this primacy and made him mighty; therefore, the curse which was pronounced upon Ham by Noah was obviously not fulfilled according as it was spoken. The Egyptians and the Canaanites also are the sons of Ham, and were, as Scripture testifies, not subjugated, but rather subjugated other nations.

The sons of Shem are the Israelites, the sons of Abraham, and contrary to the law they served in bondage to the sons of the cursed Ham, and therefore outwardly the word as it was written in Scripture is contrary to the event as recorded in Scripture. According to what was written it is indeed contrary, but not so in truth; for the outward meaning of it has hidden the true meaning and the truthfulness of the speaker. A revealed truth dwells in the story told by Noah, and to understand its meaning



it must be read with the eyes of the mind. Without understanding its true meaning its beauty is invisible, and without labor its truth cannot be examined. The story demands labor in comprehending its secret, and if man thus labors, it will be easier for him to see it clearly. It will be far clearer to anyone who labors in it lovingly, and not clear at all to anyone who does not labor in the duty of his love. With love the story of Noah is easily understood, and with understanding it is easily told to others. "With love I heard it, and through my labor I desire to tell it, so that lovers of love would understand it and themselves love it." Noah spoke the beloved story to his beloved sons, and everyone is in duty bound to examine it lovingly.

Narsai goes on to tell us that Noah himself wondered how much others would profit by his words. He looked and spoke in wisdom, in order that his honor should not be despised in the eyes of ignorant people, who are eager to despise anything that is revealed, and that is why he threw the veil of words over all blessing. The divine will looked at the foolish men who spoke against Noah, and covered the utterance of his mouth with the garment of words. The hidden God revealed the mystery to His servant, Noah, and interpreted it to him so that he manifested His love liberally.

Noah saw the shadow of truth through the corporeality of his son, and acknowledged it to his Lord, who showed him the mystery by action. God fastened for him an example like a mirror before



his mind, and Noah earnestly desired to embrace it lovingly and eagerly. Eagerly he repeated, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem," who is blessed by His name, and he called the other brothers to come and investigate the blessings and the curses which he bestowed upon the sons of his loins, so as to fix the sight of their minds upon the mystery which he had seen. Noah taught Japheth to enlarge his mind and the emotions of his soul, so that he might be able to comprehend the wealth which flowed from Shem.

By benediction and curse Noah was encouraging his sons to keep his word, so that when it is fulfilled through action, they might possess its wealth. Noah encouraged his sons to form the mystery before their eyes which he saw himself. With the eye of his mind the spectator (Noah) saw the beautiful mystery, and desired to see it revealed without a veil. Through the body of his son Noah was comforted, and believed that comfort was hidden in Shem. He put it like a mirror against the pupils of Shem's eyes, and looked long and eagerly, fixing the sight of his eyes and of his mind upon him. Through the love of his son Noah performed this amazing feat.

Noah twice made Canaan servant of God's servants, and this was the sign of the reward given by the father's love to his sons. Through the love of his son he yoked his sons to the lordship of God and of his son (Shem). The world was subjugated to his Lord and to his son through Ham and Japheth. All were to serve his son (Shem); therefore, he yoked the neck of his sons to Shem's



yoke, just as subjects are yoked to the service of their king and of his descendants. Noah caused his sons to serve, and sealed them with two seals by the change of words.

Noah threw a seal of words over Ham and Japheth, and changed the words according to the order of the decision. He gave a stipend of blessing and curse, respectively, to the two of them, although they were distinct in name and in worth. One is the power which was in both of them, and one is the meaning thereof; therefore, also one is he who divided two in one. Noah divided two in one and one in two--goodness from Shem in lascivious Ham and modest Japheth. He felt pity for the servant as a servant of the house of his Lord, and for the sons of nobles as one who is in need of sustenance; from the treasure house of Shem, the rich one, he made both Ham and Japheth rich, and they were subjugated to Shem both by love and by necessity. Japheth received the seal of service to his brother in love, while Noah compelled Ham to serve his brother by force. In the name of freedom Noah gave freedom of will to the humble of soul (Shem), and yoked the proud (Ham) in servitude to the freedom of will, just as Paul did in his Epistles, by subduing both servants and sons of nobles to Christ. Every servant was emancipated in that he was redeemed from his error, and every noble also was made the servant to Christ; thus Paul yoked all classes under one Lord. Who can doubt the word of Noah and say that it was not thus? So it was as it was written, as the Holy Book witnesses.



Narsai continues to tell us that after Noah Abraham received the promise of life, and sealed the book of the Old Covenant through his two sons. He begot two sons out of his loins, which were the fountain of blessings, and he watered them with the flow of his words which resembles the words of Noah. He entrusted to Isaac the primacy which he received from Shem, and yoked the son of Hagar with the yoke of servitude, just as Ham had served his brothers. Like Noah, Abraham blessed one of his sons and subjugated the other, and fulfilled his words through action.

Isaac, the son of promise, aimed at that same mark, using accurately similar words which were also fulfilled in actions. Like both Noah and Abraham, Isaac did the same with his sons; he begot words, and through them expressed the blessings which were full of marvelous things. Isaac honored Jacob with primogeniture, although he was not the eldest son, and placed the eldest brother (Esau) in the same rank as Ham. He said to Esau, "If you repent, you will be emancipated," from which Narsai concludes that Esau was not subjugated to Jacob all his life, nor did his seed serve in bondage to the Israelites.

Narsai goes on to tell us about other righteous people who followed the Lord and whose lives and actions are recorded in Scripture: The words of the righteous as recorded in the Holy Books are amazing, and no one knows their full meaning. The power of understanding strengthened them in forming the meaning of words on the table of words. Like a painter, they formed images of future things, and shaped likenesses which were invisible through visible things.



O guides (righteous people) who have prepared the way for the coming of the King (Christ), and placed in it myriads of words full of songs of peace! Their words were words of peace, and after the day's journey through the multitude of their words, those who made this journey were rested. They (the righteous people) built a hostelry of love in Scripture for the instruction of man, so that men would not be wearied by the cutting of the hope for the ultimate submission to the will of the one Creator; they fulfilled this hope equally, and they were not doubtful of the expectation of the hope which they heard. They heard the good hope which was spoken by their tongues, and they possessed the hope to anticipate the future hope.<sup>13</sup>

First, Noah prepared the way before the eyes of his sons, and all his sons walked in the steps of the word of his mouth. Through his mouth Noah walked in the way of hope, and through his tongue he journeyed in the path of the promise of life.

O one who goes on foot (Noah), his mouth walked, instead of his feet; although he did not actually walk, he anointed the earth with the tip of his tongue. O guide (Noah) who showed the way without footsteps, and put in it miles that could not be measured with footsteps! It was to you, O man (Noah), who journeyed well in the way of life, that the word came, to the house of knowledge which gives life. God gave the life that is mysteriously hidden in your seed, and foretold the power of His life through one of your children.<sup>14</sup>

Through your benedictions the resting place of immortal life was bestowed, and your mind wondrously examined the life of your son. Your thought stood in great amazement at the fruit of your loins which you saw through the branches of the life of man. With your mind you looked at the life which caused many to live, and called your sons to look willingly at it. Willingly your word looked at the mystery of Shem. At the virtue of Shem's beauty you caused the sons of your loins to marvel, and although they did not wish to do so, they formed images before

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., fol. 256b.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.



their eyes. Like an image, they were made known through the word of your mouth, while the image of their lives was formed in the name of God. Like a reed your mind grasped the name of your God, and expressed in Him the voice which said, "Blessed be the Lord."<sup>15</sup>

Blessed be the Lord who has formed in you that which you were to show forth through your sons; namely, the image of thanksgiving which is due to Him. Through the debt of love for your Lord, you yoked your sons to the duty of rendering goodness to God who had created them. God hid the good leaven of His goodness in you, and you placed it in the bodies of your sons so that it would keep them. Wisely you performed with your sons, in that you provided wealth for their needs through their own members. God made your emotions wise to perform this, so that your sons would journey with your posterity in the life of your race. God loved your race, and hid it in your land to be kept to the end of time. Like merchants the senses carried it, and carried it in love from one to another until Mary the mother of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

There is a miracle from the Creator to mankind, in that, though man is mortal, God is the keeper of his life. God's knowledge is deep in that He placed in His creation wealth which is useful for its needs. O Creator, who had created all things out of nothing! He piled up and filled his workmanship out of His wisdom. God placed the wisdom of truth out of His wisdom in our nature, and that wisdom of truth made the infancy of our race wise to know Him. Wisdom was granted to Adam to make him understand the mystery which was made known to him by revelation, that there is for him a Lord of all things. Wisdom bound pure Abel to the love of His Lord, and openly he rendered proper thanksgiving to the hidden God.

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., fol. 256b-257a.



Through wisdom Enoch was made wise to beautify his soul, and he greatly pleased the Lord and remained in his immortal virtue.. Wisdom was made known to Lamech concerning his child who was born to him, to comfort the world and remove the mourning of the distress of man. It uttered in Lamech and also in his son (Noah) a new utterance, and Noah's mouth spoke in new voices of the renewal of man. Whatever wisdom said was knowledge from God; it made wise everyone, and made wise everyone until the end of days. The ancient people became wise through His wisdom, and wisdom also perfected others afterwards. Noah was made more wise by wisdom than anyone else, to make known mysteries, and wisdom called Noah to draw near to her intimacy. Like a friend, wisdom revealed to him the mystery of its secrets; he kept its command of truth in love. Wisdom gave Noah, who worked with it, a good reward, and gave it also to his sons, that they might be wrapped in it.

Wisdom placed the necessity of immortal life in Noah's hands; he placed it also in the hands of his sons, so that they might be nourished by wisdom's food. Noah ate of the food of life and caused his sons to eat of it, and placed his life, which was diffused, in our nature to keep us alive. Life out of Noah traveled with our race from his time and henceforth, and will continue until the course of time is completed. For us life began to flow in the beginning, and it has remained in nearness with us without end. The power which created us created life in us and hid it. God



hid life out of His life in our creation, and afterwards He manifested His will which was hidden in us. Both secretly and openly He manifested His love for our humanity, and wisely He fulfilled His will through our hands and through the hands of all creatures. Through our hands He fulfilled His actions with all and through all. Come and let us acknowledge Him, more than all who have loved us, more than all.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE TOWER OF BABEL

Narsai's Homily on the tower of Babel, Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 257a-262a, was likewise obtained in microfilm from the British Museum. This Homily is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagh. 605, fol. 347b-357b; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 308b-318b; Ms. Vat. Syr. 588, fol. 90a-95a.<sup>1</sup> It is written in twelve-syllable meter, which is one of the evidences that it, too, was composed by Narsai himself, and A. Vööbus comes to the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup> The theology and the tone of the Homily are undoubtedly Narsai's. His personal testimony in the Homily also indicates that it was composed by him, because such testimony is equally characteristic of all his Homilies,<sup>3</sup> and so does the introduction of certain direct quotations, for the same reason. As a matter of fact, Narsai's Homilies contain hundreds of such direct quotations, both biblical which differ from the text of the Bible, and other, which are Narsai's own invention to fit his seven-syllable and twelve-syllable meter. This Homily, not included in Mingana's two-volume edition of 47 Narsai's Homilies printed in Mosul in 1905, is written in the Eastern or Nestorian script and is vocalized with Eastern vowels. It was copied by a nonprofessional scribe,

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Vööbus, History of the School of Nisibis, (CSCO, 26), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 259b.



but it is possible that the British Museum had employed a private scribe who copied the Homily from the original manuscript.

The Book of Genesis devotes only 9 verses to the Tower of Babel,<sup>4</sup> whereas Narsai discusses it in detail, and offers many original ideas which are found neither in the Bible, nor in the commentary of Ephraem, nor in Jewish tradition. Ephraem simply repeats the biblical tradition with general comments, except that he agrees with Narsai that the phrase "Let Us go down" refers to the Trinity. Jewish tradition is also quite brief in respect to the Tower of Babel.

Let us now observe Narsai's interpretation in regard to the various aspects of the story, particularly to the phrase "Let Us go down" in the setting of the Trinity, and to the purpose of dividing the people after the flood. It is obvious that this Homily contains many repetitions, but repetitions have some value in aiding to understand some of Narsai's ideas as well as in the extensive scope of the treatment of the subject.

The Creator made the sign of peace to the nature of man, so that he might not be terrified by the flood which destroyed man. The Lord established a covenant of love with men, the sons of the flesh, that He would never again use His wrath to chastise their actions with flooding waters. Through a revealed sign He showed them the greatness of His love, how much He loves the sons of His household, and how greatly He hates the iniquity which destroyed them.

---

<sup>4</sup>Gen. 11:1-9.



Narsai tells us that God stretched out the sign of the rainbow in the clouds before men's eyes, so that they might look at it and hate the iniquity which destroyed them. Through the rainbow God revealed to them both His harshness and His goodness. God showed them a bow that bent, but without a string in it, to teach them that He will not again shoot at them arrows of water. Without hand and without string He showed them the bow, to make them know that He did not desire to shoot watery arrows at the sons of men. He did not stretch the bow in the air nor magnify its appearance, except to throw fear and love into the mind of man. God fixed fear and love in the clouds like a mirror for men, to look at it, hate iniquity, and choose love.

The sight of blood and the brightness of fire were bound in the bow, so that when examining it men would feel the heat against the wicked. Peace, scourging, and power were hidden in the sight of the bow, indicating not only the bow but also its keeper and its arrows of wrath. As a man shows a ring on his finger, so God was showing them by this harsh sign, as if to say:

This have I grasped in My lofty arm on the day of the flood; in this agreement I have stretched My divine will in the likeness of bow string and aimed and shot My arrows against the tyrant iniquity which is in you. This have I grasped mightily with the hand of My will, and have shot the arrows of agitated waters among the orders of men. In this agreement have I harvested the field of the wicked that was full of briars, and the water waves bound the sheaves for Me, and fulfilled My will. I am the one who has harvested humanity and animals, and made them a bridge of corruptible clay. I am also the one who has left a spiritual gift with Noah, My friend, and caused to dwell with Noah the mute creatures to serve man. I am the one who has kept



intact the life of all creatures through the trees, which were not sunk in the raging tempest and in the surging waves. I deposited My will like salt in the ark, like an oar I steered it to the haven of peace. I pulled My hidden will like a rope toward peace, and brought it out and placed it in the midst of the earth without hurt.<sup>5</sup>

Behold, I have brought you out to the haven of peace as it was foretold. See that you do not despise My commandments as you did in former times. Behold, I have shown you the harshness of the scourging which the wicked will swallow. Desist from iniquity, so that you will not be scourged like the wicked. Behold, I have taught you the ways of righteousness and the name of goodness. See that you act wisely with both of them. Behold, I have established a covenant of peace between Me and you, so that you will not be weakened through the weakness of the iniquity and cause Me to return and rekindle my wrath. Behold the bow which is stretched by Me toward heaven--there is no string to it nor hand to administer it. Look at it and examine it--it is a tool of war, but I have made it a sign of peace between Me and man. I desire peace with humanity and not war, and because of this I did not fit a string to the bow which I showed you. Behold, I have shown you that the desire of My will is to love man--see that you do not compel Me against My will to exercise My wrath. Both heaven and earth are witnesses between Me and you that I do not desire to kill a man who is not guilty of transgression.<sup>6</sup>

The hidden God preached all these things to man in secret, and wrote them down in the covenant of the sign of the rainbow. Through them Noah examined his members like a book, but afterwards his children went astray in their error. Peace remained with the earthly people, but after a while contention once more ruled the earth. The residue which was left alive by the flood waters

---

<sup>5</sup>Ms. Brit. Orient. 5463, fol. 257a.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., fol. 257a-257b.



turned to its own destruction and began to journey on its way to a pathless desert, like their predecessors before the flood. They forsook the inheritance of the command of peace which they had received from Noah, and perverted the sign which the Creator had given between Him and themselves. They went out from the vicinity of the ark and began to wander about and choose separate countries.

Narsai continues to tell us that after the flood the people journeyed from Qardo (or Ararat), the haven of peace, to Babel, the place of confusion. They departed from the peace of the Creator's name and from the richness of His love, and went out to seek the inheritance of the earth. Because of their desire to possess the earth the earthly people went out from the haven of peace to seize territories in cultivated countries. All of them were the same while they were journeying toward Babel--the people were one, one language and one opinion. One will guided them until they reached Babel, and once in Babel they lusted for labor and iniquity. The audacious lusted boldly for their hateful desire, like Adam who lusted for the fruit of the tree. Stupid pride incited the sons of Adam, and in that self-deception they went astray like their father (Adam).

Narsai tells us that the thought which was with Adam to be like God was transmitted to his sons who aspired to acquire divine rank. The sons of Adam traveled the same way presumptuously, and hatched a rebellion of iniquity against the Creator. The sons of Adam rebelled against the Creator, and prepared weapons to fight



Him. The wicked sons of Adam iniquitously armed themselves with weapons of iniquity, and began to shoot off arrows of pride against truth. These stupid sons of Adam armed themselves with stupid pride as a weapon, and put pride like a cap upon the head of their mind.

They thought that height and depth were subject to the work of their hands, and that they could ascend by themselves to the high rank of divinity. Ignorantly, they thought that their hands were supreme, and failed to foresee the outcome of their actions. Without understanding they journeyed from the land in which they dwelt, and without order sought to dwell in the building of iniquity. What was the desire which was kindled in their thoughts, and who had thought that they would expend labor beyond measure? Why did they lift their minds toward heaven, and why did they journey on a difficult way? An evil lust seized them, and they sought iniquity in order to obtain wings to carry them to heaven.

The inclination which was in them stirred them up, as one is stirred up from sleep, and began to rule their thoughts which were not proper to begin with. As in sleep their senses sank away from their proper course, and like diligent people they devoted themselves entirely to the work upon the earth. They left the work of God which makes one possess life, to pursue labor that is without profit to both body and soul. They forsook God's oaths.

They did falsify the sign full of peace which God showed them. They thought that God had falsified His word and did not establish it when it was made known, at the time when He turned and brought dreadful water upon us and destroyed us. They did not think



truthfully; therefore, they began to hatch rebellion against the Creator. In this agreement they made common cause with each other, and set out to pursue labor that could never come to completion. Behold, the stupid fellows begot an idea without understanding to build a tower so that they would be saved by it from another flood. Thus, according to Narsai, the people after the flood built the tower of Babel in the hope that no future flood would rise high enough to submerge it.

With this opinion they armed themselves as with a weapon to wage a war against the Creator in heaven. These stupid fellows thought that they would be victorious. First, they thought that they would be delivered from future floods. Secondly, they thought that they would hold a contest in heaven with the Creator. Thirdly, they thought that in this contest they would triumph and prove pride victorious on earth. They would fight for victory, not knowing that they were as guilty as their father (Adam). They desired and thought to triumph through the weapon of pride, and brought the deceit hidden in their minds out into the open.

They began to plan:

Come, let us make bricks of clay and fire them, and let us build a tower whose top would reach up to heaven above. Let us make a great effort and labor hard to deliver our lives. Let us make for ourselves a name in creation greater than that of any other man, so that the coming generations may be told of the victory of our power. Let us strive mightily in contesting the name of the Creator, and let us wage a dreadful war against Him in heaven. Let us arm ourselves with weapons proper for warriors, and let us shoot arrows at God who had destroyed our race. Let us take vengeance for the blood of our companions whom He had destroyed



with the sword of water without pity. Let us treat Him as if He were a man guilty of causing the death of the sons of our people, and let us take vengeance upon His hands for the blood which He had shed freely. Let us say to Him when we triumph over Him, as a judge would say to Him in court, Why did you destroy mute creatures together with humanity?<sup>7</sup>

With judgment and weapon let us draw near mightily to Him, and as we seize His rank and the name of His power, they will be ours. Let us make bricks and fire them in a flame so that they will not crumble when water is poured upon them. Let us build a stronghold firmly tamped down, and let us fill it with weapons and power sufficient for the day of battle which He has prepared for us. Let us enlarge its walls and magnify them according to its greatness, in order that the waves of water and the blowing of the wind may not move it. Let us be steadfast and build it skillfully as is proper for us, in order that our lack of skill might not be blamed afterwards.<sup>8</sup>

Let us build all of this stronghold out of fired earthen vessels instead of stones, and in place of clay use lime to fill the cracks. Let us thus mix the lime with the earthen vessels in order to prevent damage due to the change of season of cold and heat. Let us keep our minds together in our building so that it will not be weakened before He comes to wage war with us. Let no man among us neglect his companion in time of war, lest He who is against us should succeed in scattering us over all the earth.<sup>9</sup>

Although the proud people did not wish to be divided, they foretold and made known their future dispersion. Although the blind people did not wish to see, they saw straight, they looked and understood the future as it was to be. They were united in the thought of building the tower of iniquity, just as they were united in their language. They preached, although not by their

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., fol. 258b.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., fol. 258b.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., fol. 258b-259a.



own will, concerning their destruction, and forecast and made known their dispersion to all the corners of the earth. They agreed and wrote down, and confirmed that they will be scattered; they did not realize the determined judgment which caused their mouths to publish these things.

Narsai goes on to say that they wrote down their grievance against God with the loose reed pen of their language, and did not desist and turn away from the stupid thought which they begot. They dug deep in the earth and lay down the foundations according to the custom of the world, not knowing that the time was approaching when these foundations would be overthrown. They fired bricks and burned lime, and began to build; and as their building rose up, they lifted up their thoughts. As their building was going up toward heaven, their hearts kept swelling up with pride. And as they added from day to day to their building's dimensions, the iniquity which was in them kept multiplying immeasurably. Their hearts were awake and did not sleep night and day. Although they did tire, they did not feel how tired they were. They eagerly awaited the moment when the tower would reach the zenith of their desire, so they might see the end of their labor, and the desire which was in them did not have enough of building, and so did not turn their senses and their emotions away from work.

The Creator had foreknowledge of their plans before they started the building of the tower. He knew beforehand that they would not be able to build as they thought, and He restrained them, in order that they should not be completely overwhelmed by labor



and iniquity. The Creator, always loving and compassionate, had pity and mercy upon them, and began to speak to them with a voice of both love and warning. His love seasoned the people after the flood through His determined judgment, and with His pity God moderated the pain of their minds. For God had pity on that labor performed without understanding, and through threat of His wrath He caused them to rest from their fear of the flood. The threat of His wrath was full of sound which He caused them to hear, yet within it His unspeakable love was hidden. God caused a revealed voice to be heard suddenly that was at the same time imperceptible. He who knows all counsel called the sons of His council (or the heavenly beings, or the other persons of the Trinity) to come with Him and help Him.

God spoke thus:

Behold, all men spoke one language and were one people; they gathered together to rebel against My will. The sons of Adam, like their father, assailed My Lordship and sought to ascend to the high rank of divinity. The mortals, afraid of the death caused by the flooding waters, resolved to build a tower in which to hide from future floods. The earthly people prepared weapons and took secret counsel to ascend heavenward in order to hold a contest in heaven between themselves and Me. They came to an agreement in this matter, so that they might not become divided one against another, but would triumph and both heaven and the deep would be theirs. Behold, they prophesied, even though they did not wish to do so, concerning their dispersion, and it is now proper that their word should be fulfilled as they spoke it, through actions.<sup>10</sup>

The verse, "Come, let Us go down, and there divide their language so that they may not understand one another's speech"<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., fol. 259a-259b.

<sup>11</sup>Gen. 11:7.



is interpreted by Narsai as referring to the Trinity, in particular the phrase "let Us go down," which according to him must refer to the Trinity, and not to the heavenly beings. Ephraem<sup>12</sup> agrees with Narsai, but is very brief, whereas Narsai discusses the matter at length. Most of the early Christian commentators likewise interpret this expression as referring to the Trinity.

Narsai proceeds to amplify this phrase:

Come and let Us go down and divide them one from another, in order that they should not understand the speech and utterance of each other. Come and let Us throw a silent dispute among them, without their being aware of it, and let Us take away from them the sword of the word, of which they are so proud. Come and let Us go down immediately to the earth, and let Us wage war against the earthly people with our hands. Come and let Us give each one of them a distinct utterance in a separate language, and behold, they will be divided and cease their thoughts of war. Come and let Us cry to them in a new voice with which they are not conversant, and let Us loose upon them exile into separate lands.<sup>13</sup>

Narsai goes on to address the Creator:

O Creator, what is this that You are saying, that Your divine command caused to be heard concerning Your Being? Why did You call to come with You the heavenly beings (or the other two persons of the Trinity) and why do You seek that they should be of help to Your might? Of what counsel with You can the speech of man be, and why did You say, "Come with Me and let Us go down and divide them?" Who counseled You in the beginning when You created all creation, and why do You make known the hidden mystery of Your divinity? Who helped You when You created heaven and earth, and what is the power that You employed in the work of Your hands? To whom did You ever call or draw near with the speech which is with You? Your voice resembled the voice of the first day of the six, when You formed the

---

<sup>12</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, pp. 58-59.

<sup>13</sup>Ms. Brit. Orient. 5463, fol. 259b.



image of Adam by the finger of your divine command. Now you caused the voice to be heard which resembled the voice that spoke, saying, "Come and let Us make man in our image and in our likeness."<sup>14</sup>

One is the voice and one is the meaning of that speech and this speech, "Let Us make" and "Let Us go down." One is the divine command which uttered that speech, and this speech, and one is the nature which created there and divided here. God called the sons of counsel (the other two persons of the Trinity) in "Let Us go down" and Let Us make;" they (the Trinity) are the ones who make man and divide men. It is the Father who called the Son and the Holy Spirit in the creation of Adam, and called them also in the division of the people after the flood. Through the creation of man and the division of nations the Creator wished to reveal the mystery of the investigation of the three persons of the Trinity that are hidden in Him. It is plain therefore that there is no created being greater than man, through whom invisible mysteries were revealed.

Let us investigate now the proposition that the invitation "Come" in the creation of man and in the division of nations is addressed to the Trinity. If He did not call the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are both of Him, on these occasions--creation and division of man--who else is then equal to Him and fit to counsel Him? That voice was not proper for the heavenly beings, which said "Come with Me and Let Us make" and "Come with Me and let Us go down" since they are not His partners. On the other

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., fol. 259b.



hand, both creation and division are proper for the Son and the Holy Spirit, who with the Father, the other person of the Trinity, would have created everything and divided nations. They created and divided wisely, for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of equal nature. It is they who came down now without change to receive speech and to give speech to the nature of man. Through the division of man they marked the mystery of their persons, and interpreted them in the end through the gift of languages. The persons of the Trinity called each other for the purpose of creation and division, to teach all men that the nature of the three persons of the Trinity is one.

They came down to divide, but the impending change was inherent not in their descent but in the divine command uttered without the speech. The divine command was sent like an ambassador to the audacious, and cried suddenly and agitated them. It was the divine will which came down and took from them the weapon of common speech, and clothed them with another speech. Through a harsh sword the divine will cut off the speech of their language, and placed in them speech differing from the original one. The divine command took away their first speech to teach them that He had created all things, and gave them the second speech to make known to them that He rules over everything. Wisely He drew near to them according to their desire, but instead of a contest with their bodies which were weary with toil, He artfully seized upon a contest with their emotions and bound them with harsh ropes to their separate languages. The war which the Creator waged against the earthly people was



powerful, and the human mind stood in astonishment before it. What kind of sword was it that He grasped in His hand, destroying speech instead of bodily members, and leaving the body intact?

In what manner did the divine will overcome their thoughts, and take away by force the treasure of speech contained in them without their feeling it? How did He confuse the words of their mouths, making them tongue-tied stammerers pitted one against the other? How did the Creator dry up the first spring of their speech, so that words did not flow out of their mouths like streams flowing out of caves? In what manner did God cut off the flow of one language, and prepare the human mind to express itself in new voices? In what manner can it be said that the Creator cut off the word and yet caused it to grow thereafter through a change of language?

The finger of His divine will suddenly plucked at the harp of the human soul and made it sing in a new voice hitherto unfamiliar to the soul. That command had breathed the soul into the human body in the beginning, and thus the soul became possessed of voice; the same command uttered in it a new speech, and the soul listened to His new speech. God did not change the soul's nature.

Narsai goes on to say that a voice came down which said, "Let Us go down," and agitated the companies of men who were at rest. The command came down, but it did not come down in reality, for there is no land for it to walk down. Yet His command came down



and fulfilled His word. The command of the Creator came down as it was, with all, without end, and through its coming down, it humbled men's pride. The command of the Creator came down and disturbed the pride of their minds, taking from them the weapon of pride with which they had clothed themselves. Great astonishment fell suddenly upon the audacious, and they were agitated, and sat down while they were wondering at the miracle which happened to them. They looked at each other in amazement, wondering if they were seeing things right. They spoke to one another with a strange speech unlike their former familiar speech, and their ears were unable to hear the sense of this new and various speech. Their ears heard the voice without understanding it, and their eyes saw the movements of the lips of the mouth without comprehending it. They stood beset by doubts, and cried and searched in the vain hope that what they saw had not actually happened.

The sight of the body was familiar to the eyes of the body, but the sound of the word was strange to the hearing of the ear. Both eyes and ears were amazed at each other, in the belief that one was seeing aright, while the other was bereft of understanding. The mouth was marveling in silence at its companions which uttered disparate utterances unfamiliar to it. The Creator cast astonishment and wonder into the emotions and the bodily members of those people; they wondered, the soul wondered at the body and the body wondered at the soul. The soul was amazed at what it heard from the body, and the body was amazed at the strangeness of the soul's utterance. The soul was even more amazed at itself, asking who could have changed the pleasant voice of its speech.



"Am I the soul or am I not?" asked the soul, "Or has perhaps my person perished first, and I now stand among others?" O the great wonder that the soul heard the voice of His melodies without understanding it! New things were performed with mortals, in that they were the same in soul and body, yet they were now different. New voices were sounded among the earthly people, and they marveled at each other but no one listened; the former word was no longer word to beings endowed with the power of speech.

Narsai continues to tell us more about the confusion of languages among the people who were building the tower of Babel. The Assyrian cried to the Greek expecting an answer, but there was no verbal reply, mouth to mouth, to his companion. The Roman spoke to the Egyptian in the language of the flesh, but the flesh was unable to comprehend the speech of the flesh of his companions. The Median beckoned to the Alan, "Draw near to me," but the Alan remained silent and disregarded the command as if he did not hear it--he did not in reality hear it. An Ethiopian drew near to the Hun to speak to him, but his words sounded strange to the Hun and were not acknowledged by him.

They exhausted and enfeebled themselves in thus vainly crying to each other, and suffered pain in their affliction like a woman in travail, except that their souls were unable to give birth to words. Like an unborn infant, speech was turned back to the soul, shutting the gates of the mouth before its utterance. The same command, which begot the word in the mind of the soul, also closed



the door in its face in order to prevent it from going out. The command of the Lord silenced the word in the thoughts of men and caused another word to grow. The one former word was divided into separate parts, and from that one word God caused to break forth the languages of the various nations.

Like a creeping vine, the word spread its branches into all the lands, but the word remained as it originally was in the root of the soul. Like a root, the word remained with one people, and that nation alone was fit for it from the first. As if casting lots, the command of the hidden God divided the nations, and each man spoke that portion of the word which fell to his name. Love and mercy were united in this division, for although the Creator divided men, His love placed in the nature of man was not divided. For the same lot fell to both fathers and children, and husband, wife, and children spoke the same words. He who created all things created this word in His wisdom and love, in order that the nature and order of the fellowship between God and man should not suffer harm. Through His great order He divided them, but caused them to be equal, like a father who divides his possessions equally among his sons.

Outwardly in a wrathful manner God gave man the wealth of His goodness, in order to throw fear into His inheritors that they should never again conspire to seize the power of His wisdom; although His voice was full of wrath when He said, "Let Us go down and divide," the peace of man was assured through His coming



down. The sign of peace was made known to Noah and his seed; His voice was clothed with the manner of the sword of the executioner, but He bade it withdrawn and restrained it with His mercy. God did not lift His sword to kill, but He showed it to men to make known to them that it is not sweet to Him to see iniquity planted in their lives.

Narsai goes on to say that God did not divide men because of the building of the tower, but only to drive out the iniquity which was in them through this division. From the beginning it was set up for Him to perform this, and He performed it with wisdom as one who is accustomed to perform well. The Creator knew before He created the word in man's soul that He would cause to flow from it the future stream of words. The division was known to Him before everything, and He looked at it before the creation of heaven and earth. He did not conceive a new thought of this division, and it was not wrath that caused Him to come down and divide the languages.

God was accustomed to threaten the son of His household with His wrath, as he did with the house of Adam in the beginning, when by eating of the fruit Adam brought death upon mankind to punish them when they succumb to their desires, and forecast the flood as the consequence of their iniquity. He threw a bridle over the nature of man, in order that he should not act like a brute beast. He cursed Canaan for his iniquity and made him a servant, in order that no man should presumptuously mock his father.

In this agreement He now came down to the earthly people, so that through the manner of the voice of the division of men He



might give them peace. For the sake of peace His will came down, as He himself came down to give peace to men who were gathered in rebellion. God saw that they were diligent in building a tower of arrogant rebellion, and He came down and overthrew this building of iniquity before it could prevail. God saw that they were swift to assail heaven and ascend to Him, and caused a voice to be heard to scatter them, in order that they should not be misled again.

Like a king, He decreed judgment upon the wicked and banished them in exile to the various countries. The command of the hidden God went out to bind them with the harsh weapon of their languages, and threw a variant word like a bit into their mouths, imprisoning them in the prison of their languages. He scattered them like fortresses in different lands, in order that they should not set up another rebellion of iniquity against His Lordship. The divine will held up a new speech like a rod, and banished them from Babel according to His wrath. The command executed upon these audacious men resembles greatly the command which banished Adam from Paradise. In accordance with His wrath He brought them out metaphorically with Adam, so that through Adam and through them He might give peace to the life of man.

In this agreement God scattered them in the various countries, in order that the population of the earth should not be reduced by indiscriminate killing. If they had remained in one place, as they had planned in the beginning, they would have multiplied exceedingly and would have assailed each other in their desire for



land. If they had remained in the land of Babel, they would have set up another rebellion, and would have rebelled against righteousness according to their desire. If God had not decreed their dispersion, a double iniquity would have come to pass in their dwelling place. It is right therefore that God divided them and scattered them, so that their gathering together should not multiply iniquity and disturb the peace.

They went out of Babel to work the earth in the countries to which they were sent, and every one of them was taken to the land to which the divine command had assigned him. The divine command acted like a guide for them, and showed them the way to journey to every corner of the earth. The same command that divided them accompanied them to the countries of their habitation. This command was to them like a master to an infant, and made them wise to dwell in the lands to which they were sent. The command wrote a skilled book upon the tables of their minds, and taught them to read well the words inscribed in it. They read and meditated upon the book of their thoughts, and interpreted the power hidden in the speech of their languages. They became masters of the new speech begotten in their hearts, and composed rules for the administration of the life of the earthly people. With their speech they acquired the means to live in order, and began to study good things of the body and of the soul.

All of God's performance was full of love and mercy, although no man knew it; and the cause of peace was upheld for both men and



spiritual beings. The division of the languages gave to all the fullness of peace, and both heavenly beings and earthly people were enriched by the division of languages. The spiritual beings saw the love which the Creator had shown to our race, and realized that there is hope for our salvation from perishing. They saw the voice of threat changed to the voice of clemency, and the scourge turned into enjoyment for those who were being scourged. The voice which came down was full of harsh scourging. God, the lover of man, divided the peace through the manner of wrath, so that perhaps the sons of contention might bethink themselves. Life was mingled with voice, and God watered them both to form the mystery of the future at the end of time. He showed forth through the division in the manner of wrath the mystery which He gave to the Apostles in the manner of fire. God foretold that future, and made known that when it should be revealed, it would not be alienated in the eyes of the spectators.

God was about to reveal the three persons that are in Him through the languages of man, and gave these languages as His pledge. The voice which divided them prepared the way of peace for us in which to journey to the appointed time in the haven of divine peace. The investigation of the divine persons--the Son and the Holy Spirit--was revealed and taught to us, to the effect that the Son and the Holy Spirit, together with the Father, divided the nations and gave them their separate languages. They performed that division in the manner of wrath, and exhibited their power



through the sight of fire. Mortal men learned the Supreme power of Being from both of them, that those of former times and those of later times are in His hands. They are duty bound to render Him acknowledgment, because He had created all things and has showed them His love and made them wise in His mysteries.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE BRAZEN SERPENT

Narsai's Homily, Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 204a-211a, on the brazen serpent in the desert, was obtained in photocopy from Selly Oak College Library, Birmingham, England. It is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 603, part II, fol. 78a-86a; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 52a-56a; Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient, 5463, fol. 199b-203b.<sup>1</sup> This Homily is written in twelve-syllable meter, one of the evidences that it was composed by Narsai, and A. Vööbus arrives at the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup> The theology and the tone of the Homily are definitely Narsai's, and the introduction to the Homily indicates that it was composed by Narsai himself because such characteristics are common in most of Narsai's Homilies. Narsai's personal testimony in the Homily also indicates that it was composed by him because such testimony is very common in all his Homilies.<sup>3</sup> This Homily, not included in Mingana's two-volume edition of 47 Homilies of Narsai printed in 1905 in Mosul, is written in the Eastern (Nestorian) script and is as easily legible as the printed text. It is well vocalized with Eastern vowels. It was copied in the form of a codex from the original copy by a professional scribe for use in church service and was carefully bound to last for a long period of time.

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Vööbus, History of the School of Nisibis, T. 26 (CSCO, 266), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 208b.



In this Homily Narsai, Ephraem, and Jewish tradition show a few similarities but Narsai stands alone in his interpretation of the brazen serpent. The Bible devotes only five verses to it, whereas Narsai discusses it at some length and offers many original ideas which are not found in the Bible, in the commentary of Ephraem, or in Jewish tradition. Ephraem merely repeats the biblical tradition, except that he agrees with Narsai in that the serpent symbolizes Christ. Jewish tradition itself is here brief and offers few similarities to Narsai. It is possible that Narsai had borrowed material from other sources unknown to us for his interpretation of the brazen serpent; on the other hand, it is evident that Narsai had a remarkable ability to create new ideas about the serpent and to build a theology around it, out of his wide background in the Bible, in contemporary theology, and in the Christian teachings of his time.

✓ This Homily can be easily divided into four parts: in the first, before discussing the poisonous serpent which stung the people in punishment for their gross sin, and the bronze serpent which was raised upon the tree and at which the people were commanded by Moses to look for healing, Narsai discusses briefly the promise made to Abraham that his seed will be delivered from the house of bondage at the end of time, and tells us of the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness, as a preliminary to his main theme. In the second part, Narsai describes the fiery serpents which stung the people in the wilderness. In the third part, the brazen serpent to which the people were commanded by Moses to look



for healing, a mute serpent with its healing power, causes Narsai to raise several questions concerning its mystery. The fourth and last part is the most significant one, because Narsai not only offers original and interesting ideas, but also builds an entire theology around the symbol and the healing power of the serpent. Both Narsai and Ephraem agree that the serpent represents Christ to whom all the nations were invited to look for spiritual and physical healing. According to Narsai, the serpent prepared the way for Christ. Narsai draws a comparison between Christ and the metal serpent, but concludes that Christ was greater, because the serpent was able to heal only the physical pain caused by the poisonous serpents, whereas Christ was able to heal both the pain and the hidden iniquities of the people.

This Homily is similar to the one on the Ascension of Enoch and Elijah, in that it shows that Old and New Testament exegesis and theology were highly developed in the School of Edessa and Nisibis, since all of Narsai's Homilies exhibit a highly developed sense of interpretation and theology.

Narsai goes on to tell us that the Lord established a covenant of love with Abraham, and made known to him that his seed will be delivered from the house of bondage. His seed was then about to be enslaved in the land of Canaan, and God told him that He would emancipate his seed by the power of His greatness. Subsequently, He manifested the power of His greatness to the Egyptians when He delivered the children of Israel from the Egyptian bondage. God did not wish to execute His purpose fully in Abraham's time, and it was



only in the time of Moses that He fulfilled His will. God caused Abraham's seed to go out of Egypt with power and wealth, and caused them to dwell without fear in the fearsome desert, a desolated place, so that through the desolation of the desert He might give peace to the desolation of their minds.

For the sake of peace He caused them to dwell in the desert of desolation, so that they should become alienated from the toils of their former disgrace. When God saw that they were not completely purged of the abominable things to which they had become addicted, He drove them to the land that was remote from humanity, in the hope that through the change of place they would change their evil actions, although He was not unmindful of the contention between desert and peace. God had let them become habituated to evil customs because their evil actions were not pleasing to Him, and they did not resemble the beautiful likeness which He had showed them. God desired to lead their minds to good things and increasing miracles, so that in this way they might perhaps change their evil habits.

God fed the Israelites with manna and quails although they were not hungry, and caused water to flow out of the rock to make them happy. He stretched a cloud of dew like a tabernacle over their heads, and fixed a pillar of cloud in the likeness of a lampstand full of light to guide them. Their dwelling place was filled with light night and day, and the light of truth was shining along with the material light. The Israelites enjoyed the light which guided them. They thought that they were good, but they were not



so in the eyes of the Lord. The material light which guided them was beautiful to the eyes of the body, but the light of truth was more beautiful to the eyes of the soul.

Both body and soul were examined by these two lights--the light of truth and the physical light--and although the Israelites saw, they did not see truthfully. They dwelt there (in the camp) in great peace, but the desolation of their surroundings was less harsh than the desolation of their minds. God was willing to reconcile them to Himself, but they were not willing to repent of their evil ways. The people were evil before they dwelt in the camp, and through the people God caused peace to reign over the camp's evil. The peace of the camp was desirable to the people, and there was no one to distress or to diminish its peace.

Narsai proceeds to tell us how the fiery serpents stung the people: the venom of the creeping things which dwelt at the camp was wild, and while it hurt the people, it did not seriously harm them. According to Narsai, there were fiery serpents in the camp before this but they did not harm the people as long as the people obeyed the voice of the Lord. The seed of Abraham dwelt in the camp without harm from the creeping things, and God did not make any distinction between those who later would be stung and those who would not.

The people's voice of blasphemy stirred up the creeping things which dwelt in the camp, and the hateful murmuring of the people opened their mouths to sting. The bitterness of the people's evil inclination broke open the pool of venom in the creeping things.



The fiery serpents assailed the people to subjugate their evil rationality. Sin opened the gate of God's command before the silent serpents, and God taught them to prevail over the rational beings. The sin of the people was written down by Moses in his book.

Narsai tells us that the Lord

provoked the fiery serpents to sting the people. Moses wrote a book about the harm of the creeping things, to make known the power of God's Lordship to those who were being scourged. His power made the serpents wise without being discerners, and kept them still or stirred them up, as it pleased Him. It pleased Him to throw a seal of silence over their mouths.<sup>4</sup>

Narsai maintains that although it pleased God to let loose the serpents to sting the people, it was not God's original purpose to permit them to sting the people in the camp; they were let loose to attack in consequence of the people's sin. The will of the people did not compel God to change His mind. The Divine command saw the disgrace of the people, and was not pleased to perceive it. God saw the ulcer of iniquity in the camp.

Narsai goes on to say that the people became like food to the fiery serpents, and the fiery serpents clothed themselves with the weapon of wrath over the discerners, and began to shoot the arrows of their venom into the company of the people. The audacious serpents drew their teeth like swords, and without pity stung the dwellers of the camp. They waged bitter war against body and mind,

---

<sup>4</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 205b.



killing the one and driving the other from the dwelling place of the camp. The mute serpents took vengeance for the iniquity of the rational beings and silenced their blasphemy against the Creator. The Creator taught the mute snakes, who were not discerners, to take vengeance for the wrongdoing of those who were discerners.

Through the discernment of the fiery serpents God made wise the people who were hard of understanding, and through their venom He purified the bitterness of their thoughts. The people's hearts were filled with the bitterness of idolatry, and their goodness was overcome by the venom of the evil of their bitterness. God's power tempered wisely the bitterness of the people, and the venom of the fiery serpents triumphed over the bitterness of the people.

God manifested a great order in the matter which was without order, and through its disorder he put aright the order which confused the people's inclination. God kindled the scourge of wrath in the mouths of the mute serpents, and instead of by His hand He scourged the people by the mouths of these serpents. God brought hard scourging to the Israelites who were hard of understanding, and made the fiery serpents, who were formerly condemned by Him, His scourge. He committed the dwellers of the camp to the executioners (the serpents), so that through their ferocity God softened the stiff-necked people. Like avengers they encircled the camp and rooted out the iniquity of the Israelites wherever it was hidden.

Narsai goes on to say that the guilty ones, the doers of iniquity, hid themselves, and were enraged when the fiery serpents took vengeance for their iniquity. The Israelites were powerless



and unable to stand up before the avengers (the serpents), and so they implored "the finger of the Lord" to have pity on them, so that they would not perish. The compassionate God took pity on them, not out of persuasion but out of love.

God called His servant (Moses) and taught him to prepare a medicine for his people, whereupon Moses made an artificial serpent and placed it as a sign of remembrance to heal the Israelites who had sinned against the Lord. He made the brazen serpent in the likeness of a living serpent, resembling it in all details. He made an inanimate snake in a form resembling a live serpent, through whose inanimateness God determined to destroy the venom of the living serpents. Moses fulfilled the voice of the command which was given to him, and made a metal serpent. After he had made it, he lifted it up and suspended it in the camp where the twelve tribes of the children of Israel were located. He suspended it in the midst of the people, in order that they might look at it and seek its purpose (or cause). The word, "cause," is used by Narsai in a special way, in the same way as the word, "word." According to Narsai, there is nothing without a cause or purpose in God's dealings. God caused everyone to look at the serpent in order that they might be examined by it.

Moses affixed it to a tree like a mirror before their eyes, so that it might be visible to both body and mind. "Moses showed a new sight to the sons of his people, and through that sight he showed them how to be healed." Moses commanded the Israelites, "Look and be healed--this was announced by a voice--and they



wondered and marveled how the mere sight of it could heal. At first, in their doubts, they stood by examining it, until they learned by experience, and then they believed."<sup>5</sup>

Through this experience they gained understanding to make them wise, and came to believe that the mute serpent could rebuke the venom of the creeping things. Through action they learned the power of the handmade serpent, and began to stamp out the poisonous snakes through that power. They beheld the sight of it, which stilled the war of their affliction. The bitter stings of the poisonous serpents became as nothing, because the sight of the fiery serpent soothed their venom.

When a living serpent stung a man, he looked at the fiery serpent, and the venom of the poisonous reptile was cast out of the members of his body. When these serpents grew ferocious, the metal serpent stilled them immediately, they became weary, and were torn asunder, shedding the venom which was in them. The venom of the live fiery serpent was not felt by the senses of the body as long as the man's eye was cast at the artificial serpent. The Israelites were continually looking at this serpent, and were not satisfied to examine the mystery of its cause. The only similarity here between Narsai and Jewish tradition is in the matter of looking at it without turning away, for a considerable length of time.<sup>6</sup>

Narsai continues to tell us that the serpent frightened the people and pulled the Israelites to its sight through the power

---

<sup>5</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 207a.

<sup>6</sup>L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, III, p. 336.



which was hidden in its appearance. The artificial serpent, deprived of all life, protected the people at the camp from the poison of the live fiery serpents. Although the metal serpent was without voice and senses, it was the source of the voice which rebuked the fiery serpents and stilled them from fighting. The metal serpent's sight banished both suffering and pain from man, for God breathed into it the power of greatness in order to restrain the venom of the poisonous reptiles. This serpent did not know that it existed; yet it led man to investigate the power of the Creator.

Although the serpent made by Moses was not a real one, it was sufficient to heal man, especially those who looked at it, and the sight of it tempered the wiles of the fiery serpents. Some might say that there was also another, invisible, sight--that of mercy flowing from the serpent for the healing of the people. Moreover, was its healing accidental, or was there a mystery hidden in it-- the true physician who performed the healing? Narsai repeatedly asserts that the serpent formed by Moses was without life, but at the same time he asks by what power did it give healing to those who were stung by the fiery serpents.

Narsai says

The investigation of you (the serpent) led me to search for you, and encouraged me to journey in the words of the path of your story. It wearied me to tell your story before the hearers, and behold, I crave to reveal the power hidden in your silence. Come, O hearers, pursue with me the inquiry by means of which I sought to know. Let us know well how to search for secret things. Let us find how the serpent was made, who made it, and by what means it performed these things.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 207b-208a.



Narsai thus raises the question: By what power did a person triumph over the venom of the poisonous snakes and temper the vehemence of them?

Narsai goes on to raise further questions regarding the serpent: How was the sight of the artificial serpent sufficient to banish suffering from the destructible members of the human body? How could a man be healed by merely looking at it? How was the mercy which flowed from it shared by all who looked at it, and why was its body not brought near to the wounds of the victim? If the power which repelled the poisonous serpents was its own, why were those who had been stung not brought near to it? If it did possess the power to restore life to man, why was it lifeless? Who fitted the insensible serpent to the sensible beings?

Narsai raises another significant question: Why could not the holy vessels in the sanctuary perform the things which were performed by the metal serpent? The Holy Books were proper and the ark was glorious, why was not the healing done through the sight of them? One of these two could have taken the place of the serpent. Or was there a mystery hidden in its sight? Narsai asserts that the serpent was greater than all the things prescribed in the Mosaic law. The Holy Books, the sacrifices, and the offerings could not do what the serpent did, nor could blood of the sacrificial calves. Indeed the serpent was greater than its maker, Moses.

How then was it greater than Moses and his book so that it did some things that both Moses and his law were unable to do? Those who were scourged endeavored first to treat themselves through Moses



and his book, but were not healed thereby from the hurt of the fiery serpents. The sight of Moses was awesome and greater than the sight of everything else, but the fiery serpents were dreaded (or despised) more than anything else. There was no healing except by looking at the brazen serpent. The sight of it overpowered the poisonous snakes; it was greater than that of Moses and the divine law. It is good, therefore, to seek out its cause, and why it was greater and more honored than Moses.

I wondered greatly, (says Narsai), at the greatness of its rank, and at how it spread its healing of life although it was lifeless. Its lifelessness compelled me to discuss it. Behold, here I stand like a woman in travail by reason of its story, or like an infant, and its story compels my mind to go out and preach the necessity of investigating what was hidden in it.<sup>8</sup>

This inquiry led to the conclusion that God was about to perform a new thing on earth through Christ, just as He had performed it through the serpent. Through the serpent the way was mysteriously prepared before the people so that it might be easier for men to continue the journey of life. The life of man was hidden in its sight and in its healing. The mystery of the serpent's healing power was about to shine forth through Christ. Healing power flowed spiritually from its lifelessness; thus, it prepared the way for the salvation of man through man (Christ).

Narsai goes on to tell us that God was about to redeem man through Christ, and foretold this through the affair of the serpent which healed the people by their looking at it. God manifested

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., fol. 208b.



through its sight a future mystery, that when Christ comes, he will not be alienated from men, for man will be redeemed through the newness of his power, and God gave strength to the serpent, in order that men should not doubt the coming one (Christ). God gave healing power through the sight of the serpent only to those who wanted to live, so that no one might seek only the sight of the offerings of the sanctuary. The Hebrews were healed by faith, and not by visible medicine or by something one can grasp. By faith God was about to save man through Christ.

Through the death of Christ God was about to destroy the power of death, and man learned to ask life from Christ. God was about to nail Christ to the cross at the top of Golgotha, in the same way He taught Moses to suspend the mystery of the serpent in the midst of the people. The multiplicity of the iniquity of the nations was told to Moses in due time. Because of the Hebrews' iniquity the poisonous snakes assailed them, but through the lifeless serpent God emancipated them from their sufferings, so that when God should save men through Christ, they would be blameless.

If a lifeless serpent could heal the people, how much more so would they be healed through Christ, endowed with the power of speech.

O you circumcised ones, (Narsai exclaims), why do you not fulfill the investigation of your mystery, so that through you there might be manifested that which was manifested through the uncircumcised nations? The true serpent had healed you freely, yet you do not accept Christ through whom God saved all mankind. The sight of the serpent had saved you from the mouths of the creeping things, yet you do not accept salvation through Christ. O you Hebrews, reveal to me the cause



of the serpent, that you were healed only through it. Since it had healed your pains, do you doubt the healing power of Christ, which is even greater?<sup>9</sup>

Salvation through Christ was greater than the healing through the serpent, just as the greatness of man is higher than that of the serpents.

Be silent, therefore, O Israelite, blind in your zeal, and do not falsify the truth which is revealed through your falsehood. Cease, O heretic, next in blindness, and do not disturb the journey of our word by your contentious objections. The presumption of your striving is equal to that of the Jews, which is why I applied the name of your evil state to such as you. The belief of your faith and the belief of the Jews are alike in that you pervert the mystery of our Lord's incarnation, just as the Jew does not accept the salvation of man through man (Christ); and you also do not acknowledge that God has saved humanity through man (Christ).<sup>10</sup>

Moses witnessed by erecting the serpent in the wilderness. So also the Son of man (Christ) was about to be exalted. The same command which healed the people through the brazen serpent saved man through Christ. The same will which lifted the lifeless serpent through Moses exalted also the rational man above all. Through the mystery of the exaltation of Christ, the serpent, too, was exalted, and through God's power it possessed the power to cast out the pain of the people. In this agreement the making and the exaltation of the serpent prepared the way for the exaltation of Christ.

The power of the Creator exalted man through the serpent and through Christ, and men's pain was healed through both Christ

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., fol. 209b.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., fol. 209b.



and the serpent. Through the serpent God healed the venom of the fiery serpents which became visible in human bodies, but through Christ both visible pain and hidden iniquities were healed. The brazen serpent's power was inferior to Christ's because Christ was able to blot out both iniquities and bodily spots.

Narsai goes on to tell us that the serpent was to purify only the marks of the fiery serpents on human bodies, but was not able to atone for the people's iniquities. The lifeless physician (the serpent) thus healed only one half of man--only his physical aspect; it was not for it to perfect the whole man, because that was Christ's prerogative. Man was to be perfected by the power of the Creator as manifested through Christ. God sent the brazen serpent like a guide ahead of Christ's coming, so that through injury God might heal the pain of those who were harmed by the poisonous serpents. The Creator performed all this through both the serpent and Christ, in order to shame the demons.

God banished the venom of the poisonous serpents through the healing mystery of the serpent, in order to make known to the people that the time was near for them to be governed by Christ. The people may have suffered some unease when the serpent cast out the pain of the fiery serpents. So also did the people wail while Christ was casting out the legions (of demons); they cried out when they saw the healing power of the serpent, just as they did when they were contumacious toward Christ. They persisted in the hateful exercise of their minds. What was the new thing



which was performed among the dead (those who were living in sin)? How did it happen that the serpent first brought death by its hand, and then saved the mortality of man through the sight of its face? They (meaning probably the demons) clothed themselves in mourning against the serpent and against Our Lord.

Narsai raises the question how could the pain of the fiery serpents and the people's iniquities be healed without medicines? They (meaning probably the demons) mourned even more against Our Lord because both body and soul were healed through the word of His mouth.

"Desist, then, O Jews and heretics beyond the gate," Narsai exclaims. The obstinate ones (Jews and heretics) stand beyond the gate of faith because they do not wish to enter with us into the religion of truth. The word "gate" may refer to Christ or to Christian faith. Mystery and truth despise the audacious (Jews and heretics), and would shut the gate of His truth in their faces.

Christ's rank is greater than that of the lifeless serpent, O sons of contention (Jews and heretics), yet you belittle the greatness of his rank and of His double suffering. Through the mystery of His rank the feeble serpent was exalted. The serpent would have been nothing except for the mystery hidden in it; its healing could not have been believed without something else. Paul witnessed that all Mosaic law is but a shadow, and that Christ was the fulfillment of it.<sup>11</sup> Christ was true and perfect in both

---

<sup>11</sup>Col. 2:16, 17.



body and soul. The shadow of the fiery serpent ministered to the mystery of Christ's salvation, and ministered to the mystery of His salvation for the Hebrews; like an eloquent preacher the stillness of the serpent proclaimed the coming of Christ. The mystery of Christ's crucifixion symbolizes the serpent suspended from the tree.

Preacher, (continues Narsai addressing the serpent), you are not a discernor, yet without speech you announced the news of man's renewal on earth. O ambassador, denied the ability to speak and walk granted to the possessors of the word (the Israelites) in all its swiftness. O that the power of the Creator had been uttered in it (to heal the pain of the people)! Yet God did not utter it in reality.<sup>12</sup>

Men listened to the serpent although they never heard its voice. The story of the serpent is beautiful, yet the name of the serpent is despised among men. Although the serpent is despised, men were healed through it. The serpent was hated by men in the beginning as stated in the account of the Garden of Eden. The goodness which flowed from it was not its own, but the goodness of God made the sight of the brazen thing beautiful, as a reproach to the hateful live thing which hated men. Therefore, the serpent itself was not praised, but only the power which was manifested through it. The power of the Creator saved the people through the mystery of the serpent, and saved the nations through the living truth of Christ. Those of former times and those of latter times are Christ's. Through His cross He prepared the way for us to the kingdom of heaven, and through Him saved us from the bondage of sin and death.

---

<sup>12</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 211a.



## CHAPTER 4

### DAVID AND SAUL

Narsai's Homily on David and Saul, Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, 270a-275b, was obtained in microfilm from the British Museum. The Homily is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 365a-375b; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 326a-336b; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 1b-7a.<sup>1</sup> It is written in twelve-syllable meter, which is one of the evidences that it was composed by Narsai himself, and A. Vööbus comes to the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup> It resembles closely Narsai's Homily on the wisdom of Solomon, in that the theology and the tone are undoubtedly Narsai's. His personal testimony in the Homily also indicates that it was composed by him, because such testimony is characteristic of all his Homilies.<sup>3</sup> This Homily, not included in Mingana's two-volume edition of 47 Narsai's Homilies printed in Mosul, is written in the Eastern or Nestorian script and is vocalized with Eastern vowels. It was copied not by a professional scribe, but it is possible that the British Museum had employed a private scribe to copy the Homily from the original manuscript.

This Homily is somewhat different from all the other Homilies dealt with so far, in that Narsai has selected only one aspect of the

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Vööbus, History of the School of Nisibis, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 270a.



lives of David and Saul--their evil inclination--and while he discusses Saul's inclination very briefly, he treats of David's evil inclination in greater detail, especially the episode of Uriah and his wife. According to Narsai, David committed the double sins of murder and adultery, and Narsai goes on to discuss the Lord's rebuke of David and his repentance at the hand of Nathan the prophet. In this account Narsai presents a number of original ideas which are found neither in the Bible, nor in the commentary of Ephraem, nor in Jewish tradition. In fact, it is rather difficult to point out any similarities among Narsai, Ephraem, and Jewish tradition, because Narsai dwells entirely upon the evil inclination of Saul and David and ignores all other aspects of their lives. Evidently, to Narsai's mind, therein lies the chief lesson intended by the biblical author.

It appears clearly from this Homily that Narsai did not believe in predestination, and thought that God had granted the power of choice to all His creatures. According to Narsai, God anointed equally both Saul and David, but Saul chose to disobey his Lord, while David chose to follow the Lord, even though he fell from grace in the affair of Uriah.

Narsai tells us that God had sworn that the throne of David would be established forever, even as God's power moves eternally with the light of the sun and the moon. Although the kingdom of David was temporarily destroyed by the Babylonians, it would, through Christ, be restored and stand in eternity.



At the beginning of David's kingdom, he followed the Lord, and endeavored to uproot evil among his people, and to bring all the other nations to the worship of the one Creator, but unfortunately Satan used his devices to lead David astray from the path of righteousness, until David's sin culminated in the killing of Uriah and the marrying of his wife.

Even though David's sin was beyond forgiveness, God sent Nathan the prophet to heal his iniquity, just so he would repent. In the end David acknowledged his sin before God, and the Lord in His mercy was willing to forgive him, in order that the devil should not triumph at his death. According to Narsai, the Creator was preparing through David a new repentance, to be climaxed by the death of Christ.

Narsai tells us that

My thoughts journeyed in the love of the wealth of their conduct, and made me see the beauty of their heroic deeds. The voice of their perseverance stirred up my mind as from sleep, and I awoke so that I might see how men triumphed over sufferings. Their love stimulated me like an infant towards their labors, and I sought to form an image of their virtuous deeds to serve as ointment for my word. I sought the books of Kings so that I might meditate therein, and I saw a line marked in their history; I saw king upon king marked in this line, differentiating the fate of the one from that of the other.<sup>4</sup>

King Saul was marked in the Holy Scriptures as a stranger to virtuous deeds, and the divine command returned and recalled him straightforwardly, blotting out his name. God marked him thus in

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., fol. 270a.



order to teach through his name that no one should go astray, placing a sign along the ways of the line of the spirit, so that men might see it and not be tempted to follow in the wanderings of his way. God marked the image of the weak king on the tablet of the Holy Book to show through him the hideousness of iniquity and its hatefulness to God. Saul is marked at the beginning of the line of the election of kings, so that anyone who reads might first look straightforwardly and only then read. Secondly, God marked the election of David, the modest one, who performed heroic deeds through the purity of his soul before the spectators. The divine command had anointed both of them before they went astray, and elected David and despised Saul according to His proving of their deeds. He elected them both although He knew their actions beforehand, and thus showed His love in that He caused it to flow also over the wicked one, if only he had wished to accept it. It thus seems that Narsai does not believe in predestination, for according to him God has bestowed the power of free will upon men, to choose good or evil. Narsai does believe, however, that God through foreknowledge foresees everything before it happens.

Through Saul God showed how much He hates the evil inclination, and through the son of Jesse He revealed His love for the righteous. He despised the iniquity of Saul and deposed him from the kingdom, while His love of David's righteousness gained for him the crown of primacy. The command of the Lord blotted out Saul's name from



the archives, and wrote instead that David substituted judgment for iniquity. The divine command inscribed David's power, and by his oath sealed the rank of his primacy. God over all swore and confirmed without falsifying that David's throne would be established forever, without end. As surely as His arm moves with the light of the sun and the moon, He will not restrict David's line from the succession to the kingdom.

I swear by My holy name, and I am not falsifying, that David and his seed shall rule in perpetuity. I give him temporal kingdom as a pledge, and by action I am sealing for him the kingdoms to the end of time. I render him a good reward for his endurance: the temporal kingdom and the imperishable kingdom of heaven, just so he would not become proud and despise My commandments like Saul. I exalted him before the eyes of the spectators through his son. I did not give him heaven and earth to administer, but his tribe will rule metaphorically over heavenly beings and earthly people. I made him to partake of the name of My being in the beginning, and I established for him an inheritance, and appointed him master over all the things which I created.<sup>5</sup>

Narsai informs us that David received the promise of life at the beginning of his kingdom, and believed and confirmed distant things through near things. He saw invisible things through revelation, and he marked parables of future things by way of earthly things. For the sake of the reward of future things he endured heavy labors, and out of his love for the Creator's name he kept the commandments. David knew that God is God over all and Creator of all things, and he did not do anything that did not acknowledge

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., fol. 270b.



Him. David learned of His being from the divine command, and confirmed through his emotions that there was no beginning to His perpetuity. He meditated on the law of the divine spirit night and day, and meditated upon its mysteries evening and morning. He was nourished by the milk of His words like an infant, and by comprehending their meaning he was raised to perfection.

Like a mirror God's word was fixed every hour before David's mind, and he saw in Him the beautiful image of virtuous things. Through his physical senses he saw Him in earthly things, and through his mind he was making Him known without end. Through his love he formed an image of the incorporeality of God's Being, and even though that Being is hidden, it was revealed to him by his faith. By faith he made it known, although it was not revealed and was set up for him only through action. As clearly as something that is put upon the finger, God made known to him the power of the Creator, so that men saw God over all through His creatures.

David taught rational beings through mute things, so as to make discerners look at the course of mute things and give glory to the beauty of His voice which moves the heavenly multitudes to render glory to the power which strengthens them. God invited and called both rational beings and mute things to render acknowledgment to His hidden self as they were duty bound, to take life and acknowledge God. Through the voice of this acknowledgment David realized the helplessness of man, and from a humble condition he



was exalted to the high position of king. Through songs David first enticed men as if with bait, and then threw the net of life over them.

Through the net of the spirit David captivated the obstinate people and imprisoned them in the fortress of the word of life. He threw bridles of love over those who acted like brute beasts, and set the course of the people's emotions away from abominable things. Like a charioteer, his voice drove every mouth and guided them along the straight way to the name of the Creator. His voice was beautiful as he preached to everyone, so that all nations heard him and listened to his words. Through the yoke of love David desired to bind all nations to work under the lordship of the one Creator.

With the weapon of the spirit David fought against deception, and at the same time overthrew the name of idolatry and established truth. In his zeal he clothed himself with the coat of mail of the one Creator, and fought with the false gods who prepared man for evil. Through the voice of God's words David exposed those who were without the true God. In every contest David triumphed through the name of the Creator. The power of his victory was spoken of in every country, and the heroic deeds of his labors were told among all the nations of the world.

At this point Narsai suddenly injects the evil devices of Satan who led David astray from the true path of righteousness, particularly in the episode of Uriah and Bathsheba, and he



compares this episode with two other instances of Satan's evil activities, the fall of Adam and Eve who broke the Creator's command because of their lust for forbidden fruit, and Satan's affliction of Job with sores. Although Narsai does not mention Satan by name, the description of these events is applicable only to Satan.

Narsai proceeds to describe Satan's evil devices against David: Satan was saddened and grieved by David's victories, and clothed himself with suffering against the beauty of the chosen king, as he saw David's love triumph over everyone. The rebellious Satan clothed himself with envy of wrath against David, and plotted to devise cunning contrivances, like those he used against Job.

There was thus a hidden war every hour against the righteous David, and Satan increased the snares and hid them deeply, hoping to triumph. He devised evil deceit against the son of Jesse, and pursued him with a proper snare in the shape of beauty like that of Adam. He showed desirable bait to the swift-winged eagle, who dropped from his height and came down to earth to take the bait. The lust of the body captivated the king as it had captivated the nations; like an exile, he was led forth to licentiousness, so that Satan's power might not be humbled by the voice of David's victory. Through a weak rib (the woman Bathsheba) he bound him, threw him down as with a weapon, and shut in his face the gate of modesty, so that he could not escape.

Narsai goes on to compare David with Adam in the Garden of Eden. With the same chain that Satan threw over Adam he bound



David. Just as he tempted Adam with the beautiful fruit, so did he tempt David with the beauty of face. Through the lust for the fruit Satan slew the king (Adam) who reigned on earth in the beginning, and through enticement he cast David into the abyss of iniquity. Adam was desirable, and David was glorious before they sinned; but Satan made them repulsive through his deceit. Satan clothed the desirable kings with garments of iniquity and contaminated them with the desire for forbidden food and the lust of the body. Satan carefully prepared his deadly weapon of desire for forbidden food and illicit lust, and enveloped them in the curling smoke of his venom.

Satan disguised licentiousness, mixed it with sin, gave it to David, and caused him to drink of it, thus causing David to go astray. Satan enticed and pulled him like an infant toward pleasure, lay snares before the pupils of his eyes, and cast an evil eye upon him. David's weak eye saw the sensuous beauty of the woman's body, and his carnal eye gazed at the flesh of his companion Bathsheba; he was like a famished man longing for luscious fruit.

The famine of his eyes wearied the modest David, and made known to him how to satisfy the desire of his inclination. His inner inclination caused his outer eye to see how pleasant the carnal food was. The inner eye in the outer eye was gazing insatiably, and found it sweet to fulfill its sight. Carnal lust captivated the eye as Eve was captivated, and was eager to look at Bathsheba's face as Eve looked at the forbidden fruit. Eve remained innocent with the fruit as long as it was sweet only to



her eye, and so did the eye of David so long as Bathsheba's body was desirable only to his sight. But then the fruit blotted out from Eve the command of the hidden God, and the beauty of Bathsheba's face blinded David's understanding. There was no thing for Eve as beautiful as that fruit, and there was before the son of Jesse no beauty that could compare with that of Eve. The same snare captivated both of them--lust for forbidden fruit and lust for the forbidden face.

The son of Jesse went up to investigate beauty on earth, and the rebel (Satan) placed before his eyes a weakening sight. Satan endeavored to weaken his inclination toward firmness for the love of truth, and to bind his mind through a woman's face. David did not reflect while he looked at that which he was beholding, and did not remember the voice which spoke saying, "Thou shalt not lust." David's wisdom went astray, and he began to pluck at the strings of sensuality. The spirit changed the pleasant melodies of his voice into carnal voices full of sadness. He lusted for that which was not his, and succumbed to iniquity, which loosed the fence that the law had set up against covetousness.

Narsai goes on to tell us how David planned to kill Uriah in order to marry his wife--the culmination of David's sin. Uriah heard David command him to go and rejoice in his household, but disdained his own pleasure because of his love for his royal master. Uriah said, "By your life, O good and righteous king, I will not exchange your great love for my fleeting pleasure."



The son of Jesse now saw that he had triumphed, and schemed in his thought to compound iniquity. He grasped the reed of death in his hand and began to write his order from Aleph to Tau. As if the Holy Spirit was writing through him, his line was straight. Did anyone restrain the writing finger of evil or disturb its order? The deadly poison sank into the letter, and David gave it to Uriah and bade him go to Joab without knowing the king's secret.

The innocent Uriah took the sword formed by David's deceitful inclination and carried it to the executioner to cut off his own head therewith. "O envoy who carried death on his shoulders, escorting it like a gift for the destruction of his own life!"

Uriah was proud to go off with the king's seal in his hands, not knowing that death was hidden beneath the seal. He journeyed on the king's mission, carrying his death with him, and as he returned to his executioner, he rejoiced and was glad. When he arrived and entered the camp of the servants of his master, he delivered the royal message to the commander-in-chief who governed the camp for the king, and gave him peace and the king's seal, in which his own death was prescribed. All the while Uriah rejoiced, thinking that he was deemed worthy to carry the king's word.

In his simplicity Uriah thought that he was carrying gifts in his ambassadorship, not knowing that his own life was being given as forfeit. The commander-in-chief broke the king's seal which was placed in his hands, and marveled greatly how the righteous king could turn from the way of the Lord. He read the letter and saw



the deceit hidden in it, and then returned the seal to Uriah but hid the deceit in his thoughts. He saw death roaring in the line of written characters, and his heart knew the decree of the king and understood it.

King David framed his wicked message in the writing and sent it to Joab, so that he might see it and destroy Uriah wisely. The order in the king's letter read thus: "Summon the people and set the companies of warriors in order in a warlike manner. Assign Uriah to the head of the army in an innocent manner, but turn your face from helping him, so that he might die." And Joab fulfilled the will of the king as he was commanded, and Uriah died; yet in the end David's iniquity was exposed.

The commander-in-chief wrote to David making known to him everything that happened, saying, "Behold, your servant is dead, and the desire of your soul is fulfilled." The son of Jesse heard of Uriah's death and was relieved of his fear, not knowing that Uriah's death would add fear to his own life. The will of the righteous king was thus fulfilled through murder and adultery, and he sent to fetch the wife of his friend as if that were a righteous thing to do. David thought that he had executed his plot wisely, not knowing that he was unable to hide his sin before the God who knows all things by His foreknowledge. David thought in his heart, "Who will expose the secrets of the king, and who will find fault in the death of Uriah?"

David's thoughts covered his cunning devices like a garment and concealed his iniquity from the spectators and, he thought, also



from God. Narsai goes on here to raise some questions: Who has covered in David's mind the image of the hidden God which He who sees everything had formed before his memory? Who has stilled the voice of the trumpet of his prophecy given to him by Him who said that He is hidden in heaven and in the abyss? Who has cut off the harp from him--cut the strings of the harp of the spirit--and stilled the song of the voice of pleasant melodies? Who has impeded the course of his way which he had run well, and caused him to abandon the work of spiritual things? Who has captured the swift gazelle with nets of iniquity and gave it food to satisfy its carnal appetite? Who has imprisoned the dreaded lion in a cage, so that the despised foxes could return to mock and laugh at his humiliation?

The Heavenly Physician saw the son of His household thrown into iniquity, and sent to him a prophet to heal him. The Spiritual Physician sent to him the prophet of spirit to drive out iniquity and to return the spirit to the temple of David's soul. Through the voice of prophecy God wished to awaken him from the sleep in which he had sunk into the heaviness of iniquity. The divine command gave the spiritual medicine to the spiritual physician, to go and heal the body which was run wildly into sin by abominable iniquity. Nathan came to the son of Jesse, as he was commanded by the Lord, and laid on his hand and touched the sickness, and saw that it was grave. Nathan saw that it was not wise to bring the harsh decree directly to David, lest his resultant suffering should reach his soul and overwhelm it.



Nathan therefore decided to prepare with care the healing medicine in the shape of a parable, so that perhaps the thickness of David's iniquity would be softened by the spiritual medicine. Nathan compounded words as medicine, and David was so sunk in iniquity, as if in sleep, that he did not at first understand their purpose. Nathan's parable spoke of two men living in the same town, one rich and the other poor. The rich one had plenty of sheep and cattle, but the poor one had only one ewe lamb. One day a wayfarer came to the one who had many sheep, who thereupon slaughtered for him not one of his own sheep but the poor man's ewe lamb.

Judge now righteously, (said Nathan to David), with the trial of your discernment, to condemn iniquity and to declare the truth, as is your custom. See that you are not hypocritical in the judgment which is presented to you, in the promise of your righteous judgment. The hidden divine command has sent me to you by way of a sign, to learn from you the defeat of iniquity and the victory of truth.<sup>5a</sup>

After the son of Jesse had heard this parable of injustice committed by men on earth, he was deeply moved by the realization of the iniquity which he had inflicted upon his companion by killing him and taking his wife. He forthwith made a righteous judgment concerning his own soul, not remembering that the Lord loves life and condemns death. He passed a righteous sentence upon his own soul according to law, and sealed it with his seal bearing the living name of the Creator.

What will you do now, O son of Jesse, (said Nathan), for according to your words you yourself are condemned by the determined judgment decreed by your mouth? Behold, you have decreed death in your decision and have recorded it in the Holy Scriptures, and thus you have laid your hand to the indictment of your own iniquity which makes you liable to death.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5a</sup>Ibid., fol. 273b.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., fol. 273b.



The spiritual prophet (Nathan) saw that the king was condemned by his own words, and his heart sank, for he did not know how to judge him. So Nathan lifted up his voice and said, out of the mouth of the hidden God:

You are the man who has done this iniquity, O prophet-king. You are the one who has acted unjustly, although you did not realize it, while it seemed great to you. You have shed innocent blood through your evil devices. You already have women possessed of beauty and crown; yet your inclination was not satisfied until you snatched away your companion's wife. The desire of the flesh has captivated you, O David, beyond the normal way, and the covetousness of your eye as well. Your will desired and your inclination killed. Why did you break that commandment in the Holy Scriptures by lusting secretly after your friend's wife? Why did you blot out from your mind the commandment that he who sheds blood, his own blood shall be shed likewise? Why did you try to hide the cruelty of your soul from the God who knows all things, and did not remember that you had caused to be written that which proved your evil heart?<sup>7</sup>

Are you not the one who has said that God is in all things, both in heaven and in the deep, and that the works of His hands cannot be hidden from Him? Where is your voice which spoke in the ears of men, saying, Blessed is he who does not have a share in the works of the wicked? I did choose you to be righteous, and I despise iniquity; why did you not remain in the election of your anointment? You sinned and hid yourself from justice like a fugitive. You are ashamed before men, but you are not ashamed before My holy name; you have covered your iniquity with the double garments of unjustly spilled blood. You hid yourself like a fugitive from admonition. Behold, I am revealing before the spectators the contrivances of your iniquity. You have acted wickedly and lasciviously

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., fol. 273b-274a.



toward your friend's wife; therefore, behold, I shall subject the women of your own bed to lasciviousness. You have killed an innocent man and shed innocent blood, in order that he should not act in anger against you; therefore, you will not remove the sword of death from your own children. You have humiliated truth, and lifted up the reed of licentiousness; therefore, your seed will not lift up its head before its enemy.<sup>8</sup>

The son of Jesse saw the divine command gaze at him, rebuke his iniquity, and expose his sin against his will. He saw the justice which fitted him exactly, and he lowered his voice acknowledging his guilt and pledging himself to submit to it. He saw that his deceit devised in his thoughts was exposed, and that he was found guilty. David affirmed his iniquity in a loud voice before the Creator:

I am the one who lusted and committed adultery. I have slain, and hid my iniquity. I am the one who came as the bearer of iniquity, which took hold of my mind and enticed and pulled me to the pleasure of licentiousness. I am the one who disdained the joy of lawful intercourse, and polluted my bed with perversity, in defiance of the law. I am the one who had concealed the snares of deceit from the innocent of heart, and I am the one who has shed innocent blood in order that Uriah should not act in anger against me. Evil inclination was instilled into me by my outer senses, and iniquity captivated me with the snare of the face of a weak woman. Iniquity has blinded me to the understanding of discernment, and I did not examine myself while I traveled on a deceitful path. Therefore, I am guilty, and no retribution of any kind is too great for my sin, and no increase of my labors can be compared with the grievousness of my transgression. The waters of the great sea are insufficient to cleanse me, and the iniquity of my person cannot be atoned for among the earthly people. My transgression is great and my sin immeasurable, and the sea is too small to wash away the defilement of the iniquity of my person.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., fol. 273b.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., fol. 274.



The will of God saw David's sin which pulled him like a judge to the condemnation of his own soul. The Creator saw that he had humbled himself and that his heart fell away from his own conceit; so God helped him, lest he should be cut off from the hope of his life. The divine command appointed for him a physician to heal his disease and prescribe for him a medicine of words to apply to the scars of his sin. God said to Nathan,

Speak to him gently through your words, and cause to fall in his ears freely the gospel of life and mercy. Reveal and say to him, "There is a medicine which will heal your iniquity, if you will only pay the price of compunction and suffering of the soul."

The spirit spoke through Nathan's harp to the son of Jesse, saying,

Behold, I shall persuade the mercy of the hidden God to be reconciled with you. Behold, He has mysteriously made known through me that He has forgiven your iniquity and you will not die because of your iniquity as you thought you would. Behold, the divine command has compelled the lawful executioner to put away his sword, because of the divine mercy. God had prepared a dreadful death for you according to the law, but snatched you from it betimes, in order that the hateful devil should not boast of your death.

It is the devil who captivated you with his allurements, in order that he might rejoice at your humiliation, so that if you die, presumptuousness would increase against righteous people. I will not give opportunity to his boldness to magnify itself, lest it be accustomed to shed blood in the cause of iniquity. Through you I am preparing a new way to repentance to shame the evil one. Through you I am forming a beautiful image of the name of goodness, to be an advocate of virtue in place of sin to the end of time. Through you I shall cause good hope to increase mercy for the iniquity of men and offer pity freely. I know the evil inclination



of man's nature which is too weak to move strongly against allurements. Through you I shall apply the leaven of life to make man live, and through your succession I shall establish the fruit which will blot out iniquity.<sup>10</sup>

The Lord goes on to speak to David:

In this agreement I have blotted out your transgression with the medicine of mercy, so that I may prepare the way before him (Christ) who is to come and forgive the iniquity of men. Through you the one (Christ) who will cancel the debt of the guilty ones will rest, and I shall thus show the mystery of his (Christ's) coming. Through the law of his words he will be able to abolish the voice of ritual and will glorify and write mercy and compassion in his books. With his blood he will write the bill of the freedom of will for the sons of his race, and blot out the covenant of man's bondage. Because of this I did not give death leave to take your life for the sake of the iniquity of the bondage of death's servants, for it is iniquity that makes mortals mere slaves to death.<sup>11</sup>

Behold, I am canceling the debt of the guilty ones through the deliverance of your life. See, O son of Jesse, how much I love you, in that I have weakened My law so that you might not be a servant of death. Even though I did not deprive My law of its demands, I paid mercy as blood money for your sake and gave its pasture to you. Justice did not lead astray its own memory of your sin. Rather I have blotted out the name of your transgression from the record of the law, but not from that hidden book which records My own knowledge. Behold, your iniquity is forgiven through the words now spoken, according to law. Go now and prepare for yourself the sacrifice of love for the life in the beyond.<sup>12</sup>

Behold, I have showed you the path of atonement prepared by mercy. Journey therefore in its travail and teach men to journey with you. Behold, I have given you the hand of hope that you might return to life. Support those who are perishing and encourage them with the voice of forgiveness. Behold, I have

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., fol. 274b.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., fol. 274b.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., fol. 274b.



delivered you from the law which was fitting for you. Deliver therefore the oppressed from the oppressors and exercise pity and mercy.<sup>13</sup>

When the sinner (David) heard that he had almost died in his sin, he awakened suddenly from death as if from sleep and returned to life. He saw that there were advocates in his behalf throughout the judgment of his transgression, and he began to be persuaded to return to his kingdom, but he was afraid that perchance the bill of forgiveness was not yet sealed, and so he implored the Lord to help him. He turned to compose sighing voices with the harp of his words, that he might regain his confidence in his Lord. By his fear he was weakened, even though he received the forgiveness of his iniquity, and he did not cease to gather advocates to plead for him.

It was revealed to him that while he had received absolution from his transgression, he might not yet be worthy of turning and walking in spirituality. Therefore, he entreated earnestly with a sighing voice, pitching his spirit upon the harp of his soul as heretofore. The Creator saw that his good inclination desired to speak through him, and gave him back the power of investigation of secret things and the gift which was placed in him before his transgression. Thus, David began to sing with voices sighing spiritually.

David said,

How long, O Lord, will You lead me astray like the evil one, and how long will You turn Your face away from the son of Your household? How long will You place sorrow in my thoughts, while I see the reproach of the wicked who mock me? My God, my God,

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., fol. 274b.



why did You forsake me before my adversaries, and cause my memory to be lost through the hateful speech of my lips? I know that iniquity took my victory away from my head; therefore, the enemy pursued my life without pity. I realize that because of my transgression my troubles have increased, and it is true that my transgression has stirred up war against me. There was no help to accompany me, small and inferior as I am. I am small in the preparation for the love of truth, and I am persuaded that I have sinned, and that because of my transgression I am being scourged. I am entreating earnestly not against my scourging, but for absolution from iniquity. I am persuaded concerning the divine will which has scourged me, that my chastisement will not be harsh, in view of my atonement and Your mercy.<sup>14</sup>

The Lord did not rebuke me with His vehement wrath, and will not show me the face of wrath devoid of conciliation. Chastise me with a peaceful scourge, O Lord, as befits Your goodness, so that the suffering of my chastisement may still the hateful murmuring of sin.<sup>15</sup>

Narsai concludes that David continued to suffer grievously in his mind, even though he had heard that voice which said, "Your iniquity is forgiven," and he goes on to address David:

O righteous one, for whom the divine will canceled the debt of his iniquity, and turned to him under righteousness even though he was guilty. O mighty one, who was guilty in the battle (with his sin) yet the divine command sustained him, not wishing to place upon him the crown of forgiveness without victory (over his sin). O watchful one, who sank swiftly in the sleep of iniquity without marshaling the labor of his songs against iniquity. Come, O sinners, and see the sinner who has sinned and repented, and fall down like him at the gate of the mercy of the divine will. Come, O righteous people, and see the righteous David who was guilty of sin, and turn the treasures of your minds away from theft. Come, O discerners, and see the spectator who looked but did not see, and close the eyes of your thoughts against abominable things. If the spectator of

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., fol. 275a.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., fol. 275a.



secret things (David) was misled by his eyesight, who then will not throw a garment of modesty over the pupils of his eyes? If the holy one defiled his soul by the sight of a pretty face, who then will not order the course of his eyes away from stumbling blocks?<sup>16</sup>

If the mighty one was overthrown by a weak woman, who then will not see the emotions of his soul caused by Eve? David should be like a mirror before the spectators, so that in him the companies of the righteous and sinners should see themselves. Let no one boast that he is as righteous as the one who had reigned (David), and let no one who has sinned be weakened as was the one who nearly perished (David). The righteous David kept the treasure of his soul from pride; so should the sinner plant his sin in the soil of repentance. Let every man aim at the mark of truth with his emotions and senses, so that he might be worthy of taking on the imperishable crown of victory.



CHAPTER 5  
SOLOMON'S WISDOM

Narsai's Homily on the wisdom of Solomon, Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 275b-279a, was obtained in microfilm from the British Museum. The Homily is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagd. 605, fol. 375b-383a; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 336b-344a; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 7a-10b.<sup>1</sup> It is written in twelve-syllable meter, which is one of the evidences that it was composed by Narsai himself, and A. Vööbus comes to the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup> As in the case of Narsai's Homily on the benediction of Noah, the theology and the tone here are certainly Narsai's. The introduction to the Homily points the same way, because such introductory remarks are common to most of Narsai's Homilies. His personal testimony in the Homily also indicates that it was composed by him, because such testimony, too, is characteristic of all his Homilies.<sup>3</sup> This Homily, not included in Mingana's two-volume edition of 47 Narsai's Homilies printed in Mosul in 1905, is written in the Eastern or Nestorian script and is vocalized with Eastern vowels. It was copied by a nonprofessional scribe, and it is possible that the British Museum had employed a private scribe to copy the Homily from the original manuscript.

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Vööbus, History of the School of Nisibis, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 279a.



There are no similarities in this Homily between Narsai and Ephraem, for Ephraem merely repeats the biblical tradition with brief comments. The only similarity between Narsai and Jewish tradition is that in both "the quarrel (between the two women) had of set purpose been brought on by God to the end that Solomon's wisdom might be made known."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Narsai discusses Solomon's wisdom as revealed particularly in the episode of the two mothers who quarreled over the living child and the dead child,<sup>5</sup> in a remarkable way, offering many original ideas which are found neither in the Bible, nor in the commentary of Ephraem, nor in Jewish tradition.

According to Narsai, king David passed the rank and primacy of the kingship which he received from the Lord to Solomon, and this kingship was to be transmitted through the line of kings down to Christ, the final heir to the kingdom which will stand forever. Solomon's name symbolizes the peace of mankind, and in the beginning of his kingdom Solomon resembled his father in that he demanded justice and righteousness and suppressed such iniquity as was found among his people. We have already stated that Narsai concentrates on the story of the two mothers, and in fact this episode is the heart of the Homily, wherein Solomon demonstrates his wisdom and his judgment to both his own people and the nations of the world, and in consequence his own people honor him more than before, and

---

<sup>4</sup>L. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, IV, p. 131.

<sup>5</sup>I Kings 3:16-28.



the nations marvel at the greatness of his wisdom. The news of his wise judgment spread to the ends of the earth, and the nations feared him and brought him gifts.

According to Narsai, the devil led Solomon astray through the love of women; thus Narsai marvels greatly how Solomon, the wisest man on earth, could have been captivated by the devices of Satan, who used women to turn him from the path of righteousness. Narsai therefore calls the reader's attention to the circumstances of Solomon's failure.

According to Narsai, King David received his royal power from God forever, and handed it over to his son, in order that God's promise should not be falsified. The son of Jesse saw that the promise of the continuity of the kingship was hidden in his succession, and he admonished his son not to weaken and destroy his rank. David heard from God that his primacy was to be extended forever, and was told to give his crown to his son (Solomon) for the future. The King who is over all gave the crown to David during his life, although He foresaw that evil was about to overtake the greatness of his rank. God sealed David's crown with the seal of holy oil, in order that it should not change, even though evil would rejoice in mocking the promise of His Lord.

With the holy oil of the Sanctuary the prophet sealed the king's crown, in order that the cunning devices of deceitful men should not harm his son. The righteous king was convinced that his son would stand up in the contest with evil, and anointed him, so that the evil hand might slip away from him.



Narsai tells us that David gave Solomon the crown and rank of primacy, so that he might fulfill his name in action for the peace of mankind. Great peace was hidden in the name given to Solomon, as David revealed to him through the crown and rank which he entrusted to his hands. His first name, Jedidiah, means "he who loves God"; and his second, Solomon, means "lover of peace of mankind." In accordance with the law they gave him rightful names, to signify that he must love his God first, and then God's servants. Solomon's names are thus full of the love of truth and of the love of peace, and with these names David wished to render his son perfect.

David wisely acted at the end of his life in causing his son to reign in his place, and taught him the power which was hidden in his name. David committed his crown and his rank to his son, so that he might continue with the transmission of the promise of his words. The faithful David loved the promise of his Lord more than anything else, and his Lord rendered him love for love. Through his actions David sealed his words to the son of his household, and honored him through the wisdom of truth which resided in his son's father.

The son of wisdom (Solomon) resembled his father at the beginning of his kingdom, and like his father demanded justice and suppressed iniquity. Solomon armed himself mightily against the iniquity of the sons of his people, and the wicked who were among the nations feared his harshness. The harshness of his scourging



astonished the wicked, and the righteous marveled at how much the speech of his mouth resembled that of his father David.

The people heard the wisdom of truth, which was his father's, come forth out of Solomon's mouth, and both good men and wicked men feared him and obeyed his commands. The divine command which chose him cast fear into their minds, against their own will; and they yielded to his election and honored his royal rank. The divine command strengthened his heart through the power of wisdom, and made him a treasure house of mysterious proverbs. God opened his mind like a treasure house to the thirsty people, and Solomon caused them to be rich in judgment between good and evil.

The people were lacking in discernment of his judgment, but Solomon drove the darkness of hypocrisy out of them. The divine command first tried Solomon's judgment in a case of murder, and found him pure, thus showing forth his beauty before the spectators.

It was through two harlots that God tested Solomon's truth, and through action caused him to justify his name, which means "lover of peace." Both of these mothers dwelt together equally, although they were not equal in worth, and they conceived and bore equally worthy babes. The unworthy one of the two conceived equally in equal time, and completed her carrying term as ordained by nature. In spite of their inequality in worth, the veil of their actions was uncovered and they were brought to the proving furnace of Solomon's righteous judgment.

The simple-minded mothers slept sweetly as they were accustomed to do, and the heaviness of their sleep fortified them;



they did not toss in their sleep, nor did they feel anything. One of them unknowingly smothered her child, while the other was sunk so deeply in sleep that she did not awaken when her child was stolen from her. Sleep overcame the slothful mother beyond the normal way, and she did not awaken to the cry of her child as he was being smothered to death. The weight of the mothers' iniquity fell upon her child and stilled his life, and when she awoke from her sleep, her wickedness had already done its deadly work.

Narsai tells us that while the mother's body tossed in sleep, her soul sank immeasurably into the heaviness of iniquity. She wished to perpetrate a harsh iniquity through the death of her son, but instead conceived and begot a double iniquity. This weak-minded mother foresaw that she would be ridiculed because of her weakness, and she conceived and begot deceit and iniquity to heal her disgrace. Finding herself deprived of the growth of her rational offspring, she wove a garment of theft to hide herself in it. Like a band of robbers, she fell suddenly upon her companion, snatched the living child from her, and replaced him with the dead child, exchanging child for child. Wickedly she took the living child and replaced him with the dead child.

Through the stolen living child she wished to please the viciousness of her soul, and through her own dead child she wished to disgrace the beauty of her companion's mercy. She presumptuously denied her child, as if he were not hers. The living child was thus considered to be hers, and embraced her bosom until the



morning; she did not know that the morning's light would make her secret known to others. The morning caused these two women to awaken, and stood forth to show them that the children were theirs. Theft reversed the order of their children, and although they were theirs, Narsai tells us that in reality they were not theirs. Each one of them mistakenly carried the other's child, until the morning rebuked this falsehood. Morning showed forth the falsehood in the persons of the babes, and through their forms made known and revealed the deception. The mother of the living child looked at the face of the child in her bosom, and saw that the dead child was not hers. Terror took hold of her as she realized that lawlessly her child was stolen and another child was thrown into her bed.

It was the cruel mother who had acted so lawlessly toward her companion, and had cruelly stolen from her her living child. The mind of this shameless mother was clothed with the weapon of boldness, and she began asserting publicly that the dead child was not hers. Both of them, the one in suffering and the other in boldness, fought each other for the victory of taking the living child. The mother of the living child fought with the weapon of love, whereas the mother of the dead child fought with the deceitful weapon of foolish speech. Mercy compelled the mother of the living child to demand him back, but boldness moved the shameless mother of the dead child to take the living child by force. These silly women made a great commotion about their babes, and their quarrel did not cease until the king and the people heard of it.



Narsai proceeds to tell us how Solomon used his wisdom to reveal the secret of the stolen child. The son of David heard the news of the child's death and was strongly moved to prove his name in action. The divine command had chosen him for the peace of mankind, and Solomon immediately began to give peace to mankind in his name. Through his actions he wished to prove the peace of his name, and he summoned the tribes of the people to hear his judgment. All the tribes gathered to listen to the new judgment, so that through its newness they might see the power of the son of David. Through the power of his wisdom Solomon gathered the people, that through the revealed things they might see the power of the secret things. Multitude upon multitude and company upon company stood by to listen to him, and waited for the gate of his mind to be opened. Like famished men, all of them, old and young, desired to hear the word from the mouth of young Solomon, who was so suddenly elevated to kingship over them.

Bound together by this desire, all ranks stood by at the time of judgment, waiting for the heart of the king to beget the judgment concerning the child. The bonds of truth were also compelling the king to reveal the secret of the child before the spectators. Like a woman in travail, his mind was about to give birth to proverbs and to destroy the birth of any word that did not accord with the evidence of the flesh.

Thereupon Solomon summoned the two silly mothers and in the house of judgment began to examine the one from the standpoint of



love, and the other from the standpoint of boldness. The mother of the living child told her story courteously, while the mother of the dead child boldly slapped her face. The mother of the living child loved her child and demanded it lovingly, while the mother of the dead child cried harshly without shame. The son of David marveled at the boldness of the mother of the dead child. Solomon saw the bold mother, and her falsehood was made known to him, even though there were no witnesses to testify to it.

Solomon foresaw that if he said to her that the dead child was hers, she would bring a false accusation against him. He therefore commanded that the live child be given to the cruel mother, whereat the people thought that he was hypocritical in his judgment. He then saw that if he settled the contention of the two mothers without a trial, the wisdom of truth which dwelt in him would not be revealed. Wisely he looked at the judgment which was presented to him, and he made it known through a trial before the spectators. For this trial Solomon commanded to bring a sword to decide the quarrel between the two mothers. The king thus brought them to the testing furnace of the sword, in order to find out which one was the mother of the living child and which one was the mother of the dead child. The sword would thus serve as witness to the hidden iniquity, and would make known to whom the living child belonged. It would reveal to us the secret of deceitful inclination, and tell us how the one child was exchanged for the other.

The Hebrews were greatly astonished at the king's command and marveled at the new and unusual judgment. They were seized with



doubt as to whether his judgment was upright or not. He sought the fairness of their minds, by testing it with the case of these harlots. Like the two mothers, he brought them, too, to the furnace of trial and purged them from the abominable deceit of unfairness. The sign of the king's sword and the executioner stood by in judgment, and the king commanded the executioner to cut the living child in two, and his members to be given to the two mothers--one half to the mother of the living child and the other half to the mother of the dead child. Since these two women were striving over the life of the child, if his life were to end, they would end their contest.

When the mother of the living child heard the urgent command of the king, she thought that the king really sought to kill her child. She saw the executioner lift his keen sword, and her mercy ran over and restrained his hand from killing. Nature urged her to seek the love inherent in her nature, and led her to prevent the child's hasty death at the king's command. She cried in the judgment hall,

O son of David, do not pervert your judgment; you have commanded unjustly to put the living child to death. Investigate well, O good king, before you kill, and do not be in haste to shed blood without trial. Look, O son of the righteous, at your righteous father, and seek to resemble him and honor the truth hidden in your name, as did your father. See that you do not trespass the righteous boundary which limited your father, and do not learn to impose premature death unjustly in a hypocritical spirit. Do not give opportunity to iniquity to be multiplied, and take care not to travel in the way of deceit. Do not destroy the living who is free of sin, and do not cunningly defile the innocent blood which is untainted by guilt. Give him rather to the



audacious one here, and let him be hers, and do not cut him into pieces to no advantage. I cannot bear to see his death as he is cut off; if I am to see it, I would rather die than go on living.<sup>6</sup>

The mercy of the mother of the living child was revealed in the way in which she was willing to give the child to the audacious mother in order to keep it alive. The mother of the dead child had no compassion, for she would rather have the living child die than have her sins exposed to the public. Her heart was a heart of stone, and was not softened while the sword was pointed at the child. She cried in the presence of the son of David, thinking that the living child would not be hers, and determined that his real mother should not have him either, and demanded that the child should be put to death as Solomon had determined. Solomon was struck by the boldness of this cruel mother, and learned from it the secret of the deceit which was hidden in her heart. On the other hand, he marveled at the mercy and love displayed by the real mother. The love of the mother of the living child witnessed that the child was truly hers, and Solomon immediately commanded the child to be given to her; and she rejoiced in his life as she had asked for it. The mother of the living child triumphed, and the king awarded her the crown of victory, while the audacious mother was sent off naked and covered with shame.

The spectators wove a crown of praises for the king who was wise and just in his judgment. Through his hidden judgment the king revealed the justice which was in his mind, and the people witnessed that he was true in his judgment and just in his trial. Through judgment they learned that he had the power to perform

---

<sup>6</sup>Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 277b.



judgment, and therefore feared him and honored the rank of his primacy. As in a furnace he tested his person through the trial of the two women, and showed the beauty of the purity of his soul to the sons of his people. The Creator also saw that he was free of carnal lust and adorned him through the vision which spoke to him of the power of his wisdom.

In the vision of the night the Lord spoke to him to awaken his mind, and commanded him to ask for the wisdom of truth and just judgment. Solomon said, "Give me heart and also understanding." He demanded truth and rejected deceit. Solomon asked for just judgment from the Creator, and the Creator filled him with understanding and confirmed his words. First, the Lord gave him the wisdom of the heart to hear judgment, and then added to it wealth of time and prosperity. Through these two kinds of wealth God thus adorned the rank of his primacy, with the wisdom of the soul and the beauty of the flesh. The son of David became rich both spiritually and materially; spiritually and materially he was pleasing and adorned. He pleased God and man through both his body and his soul, and built and decorated the Sanctuary for the worship of his Lord.

Solomon built a house for his Lord, even though both heaven and earth are full of His glory; although He does not dwell in the works of His hand, He dwelt in love in the Sanctuary, for according to Narsai, God is incorporeal. Through revelation He manifested His love for His creatures, and even though He dwells metaphorically in all of His creation, He chose for Himself a



dwelling place in a temporal house (Solomon's Temple). The Creator did not physically dwell in the Temple of Solomon, but His glory was manifested in it. He revealed the greatness of His love to the son of David, and fulfilled the promise of His words through action, as it had been foretold. The everlasting kingdom that was made known to the son of Jesse (David) caused his son to rule and gave him wealth and wisdom of heart. All the nations of known world marveled at the greatness of his wealth and the wisdom of his soul, and the news of his judgment spread to the ends of the earth. The news of his judgment went out to all the countries, and the decrees of his judgments were spoken of in all the nations.

The kings of the nations earnestly desired to hear his judgments, and sent gifts to persuade him to let them see his face. The marvel of his name agitated them; they trembled and were terrified at the greatness which was hidden in his name. The name hidden in him threw fear into the possessors of power, and although they did not wish it, they bent their necks to the yoke of his name.

Narsai tells us that the Egyptians were seized with fear, the Cushites marveled, and the Ethiopians wondered; they brought beautiful carved ivories to offer him as gifts. The people who lived in distant lands willingly gathered, and the people of his household (the Israelites) crowded together, to hear the wisdom of truth which was given to him. Revealed truth was victorious at the gate of his house, and the name of the Creator was glorified through his primacy. God, who is over all was praised by every mouth, and heathen gods were condemned by all tongues. Through



the gifts of the kings the King who is over all was honored, and the idolatry of the fear of devils was rejected.

All the nations proclaimed, "Blessed be the God who dwells among His people," but the rebel (Satan) trembled to see that the name of his gods was abolished. All the nations rendered their debt of glory through the son of David, and the awe of this glory seized every man through the son of man (Solomon) who influenced the nations by his wisdom. The name of the Creator triumphed through this son of man, but kindled Satan's wrath because a man of dust (Solomon) was exalted. The devil clothed himself with great mourning because of the honor paid to the Lord, and began to scheme cunning devices to besmirch God's name. The heart of the deceitful Satan prepared weapons of deceit to make war against the Creator through man. The rebel (Satan) employed every weapon of his venom to incite rebellion against the righteousness of the son of David. He summoned and called all his forces to war, in order to beat down with every device the height of the fear of truth. He gathered his devils, mobilized his legions, and called his ministers to help him in the cruel war which he was about to initiate. He dug deep for his snares and his deceptions, and spread his devices to show that man is not honored through the name of the Creator.

The deceitful devil wove a net of iniquity to entangle Solomon in it, lead his mind astray, and destroy his rank. Through the cunning bonds of the sons of Eve, he formed and cast the evil eye upon Solomon, so that he would not escape from the deceit of the devil's



venom. Like a band of robbers, the envious devil lay in wait upon the path of women, since he saw that here king Solomon transgressed continually. The hunter and the sons of his mystery lay in wait in the path of the king, and rose suddenly to cast the evil eye upon the king and strip him of his adoration of the Lord. The devil snatched all the adorations of the name of the Creator out of his head, and left him naked without the veil of the fear of truth.

Narsai continues to tell us about the evil devices which the devil used to lead Solomon astray through the love of women. The devil spread for him the snare used by Solomon's father against the lion which agitated the nations, and like David he cast an evil eye upon him through the love of women. Through this love of women the devil captivated Solomon, and through their influence he hindered his quest for righteousness. With the bonds of women the devil bound Solomon's might, carried him off, and imprisoned him in prison without his being aware of it. Thus unbeknownst to Solomon the deceitful devil bound the wisest man of all, and it was not easy to fight against his deceits. The devil sent women like spies to search out Solomon's free will, and had the women persuade him to go astray through his mysterious wiles. The cruel devil smote his sound soul with an evil scourge, and the bitterness of his cruelty flew into Solomon's senses. Like a dragon, the devil caused deceit to appear from among these women and bite Solomon's soul, so that the hair upon the head of his mind fell out.

Like a viper, the devil vomited his bitterness over the members of Solomon's body until it reached the emotions hidden in his soul. The rebel (devil) scattered cunning bait before the



pupils of Solomon's eyes, and drew him toward it as if he were a bird. The devil spread out snares of licentiousness, and through these women cast his swift hand to destroy Solomon. The devil cast an evil eye upon Solomon, and carried him off into imprisonment in the cruel territory of idolatry. These women watched over him and took away from his mind the weapon of the name of the Creator. Solomon, who was beautiful in soul and body, caused his beauty to be hated in his hateful exercise of licentiousness, and his soul to be led astray by the silly women, who made him silly like them.

O learned one (Solomon), who made known the mystery of secret things, while the tyrant devils derided and mocked his wisdom! O wise man, who healed the sick of soul with his words, yet himself was caught in the abominable toils of idolatry! O true one, who stilled godless deception, yet himself forsook the way of the word of truth and went astray! O straightforward one, who lifted the head of righteousness, yet bowed the head of his truth before those who were false! O (divine) trumpet, who caused the nations to wonder at the sound of his melodies which stilled the voice of the beauty of mute idols! O (divine) harp, through which the wisdom of truth was spoken, cutting off the cunning devils from the strings of his soul! O (divine) reed, with which the will of his Lord was sung to break off the devils, yet which was not able to receive the spirit of revelation! It was you, O king, more glorious than all the kings who were in the past and who will be in the future, who have caused your rank to be despised before the heavenly beings and the earthly people.

Who can fail to wonder at your error, in that you, who were more honored than all others, have caused your honor to be despised? Who can fail to be pleased with your humiliation, in that your knowledge, high as it was, caused you to weaken the study of spiritual things and to speak foolishly? Who will not feel pain because the great sea of your wisdom was struck dry and the spring of your discernment was dried up? Who will not



marvel at one who was so skillful that he composed proverbs and himself became a proverb, and yet in the end his absurdity was told everywhere? Who does not fear faults acquired unknowingly? Yet unknowingly Solomon stumbled and fell into disgraceful things. Who will not shrink from the secrets of his soul? Yet although Solomon did not realize it, his sufferings assailed him and plundered his wealth. Who will not be careful in his war with his deceitful actions of the snares multiplied and deeply hidden in his mind? Who will not guard the treasure of his soul against the captor night and day, and continuously watch the door of his treasure house? If sufferings have overtaken wise Solomon, who else can keep his treasures from deceivers? If swift Solomon was caught in the snares of the devilish women, who else can flee from the toils of the daughters of Eve? If mighty Solomon fell into the net of their allurements, who else can flee from the desolation caused by their devices?<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., fol. 279a.



## CHAPTER 6

### THE ASCENSION OF ENOCH AND ELIJAH

Narsai's Homily, Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 48a-58a--on the Elevation of Enoch and Elijah--was obtained in photocopy from Selly Oak College Library, Birmingham, England. It is found also in the following manuscripts: Ms. Bagh. 603, part II, fol. 55a-66a; Ms. Alqosh 161, fol. 55a-66a; Ms. Vat. Syr. 594, fol. 23b-29a; Ms. Brit. Mus. Orient. 5463, fol. 247b-253a.<sup>1</sup> This Homily is written in twelve-syllable meter, one of the evidences that it was composed by Narsai, and A. Voobus, the author of the history of the School of Nisibis, comes to the same conclusion.<sup>2</sup> All the Homilies of Narsai were written either in seven-syllable or twelve-syllable meter. The tone and the theology of it are also apparently Narsai's, and it resembles Narsai's Homily XII, devoted to the prophetic ministry of Elijah, especially the last part of it, containing Narsai's discussion of Elijah's translation to the land of Eden.<sup>3</sup> Narsai's personal testimony in the Homily itself is found in all his other Homilies.<sup>4</sup> This Homily is not included in Mingana's two-volume edition of 47 Homilies of Narsai. It is written in Eastern script, is easily legible, though slightly smeared without affecting the legibility. It was copied by a professional scribe

---

<sup>1</sup>A. Voobus, History of the School of Nisibis, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, T. 26). (Louvain: 1965), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>A. Mingana, Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina, I, pp. 189-194.

<sup>4</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 56b-57a.



for use in church service, and was securely bound to last for a long period of time. It is well known that Nestorian scribes were very careful in copying from original manuscripts.

This Homily is of vital importance because in it Narsai not only discusses the ascension of Enoch and Elijah to the land of Eden, but also connects it with theology, especially the doctrine of resurrection. According to Narsai, the translation of these two men symbolizes the final resurrection, climaxed by the second coming of Christ to take His people to their eternal home. This Homily reveals Narsai's profound knowledge of both the Old and the New Testament, as well as his remarkable experience in other matters. Narsai was a prolific writer, and his Homilies reveal that Old and New Testament exegesis as well as theology were highly developed in the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis. It will be evident from our analysis of Narsai's Homilies that he was a staunch defender of traditional truth.

In this Homily the similarities between Narsai and Ephraem are few. To be sure, both Narsai and Ephraem believed that Enoch and Elijah had been taken to the land of Eden. On the other hand, Narsai connects their ascension with theology, especially with the doctrine of resurrection, whereas Ephraem does not. Jewish tradition concerning the translation of the two men differs completely from Narsai.

Before discussing the ascension of Enoch and Elijah, Narsai tells us about the entrance of sin and the subsequent expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and about how the heavenly



beings felt when Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from Paradise.

Both sin and death, like a band of robbers, took hold of Adam and Eve, and stripped them bare--left them without a veil. They went out from Paradise naked, and the heavenly beings sat in mourning over their departure. The spiritual beings mourned greatly when they heard that death was about to destroy the structure of Adam and Eve's bodies. The spiritual beings inquired with predetermined judgment into their transgression, and were distressed to find that the image of man, created in the image of the Creator, was to be destroyed.

When the spiritual beings heard the news that Adam and Eve would return to the earth from which they had been created, they bowed down and uttered a sigh. Their return to earth made the heavenly beings very sad, and made them lose hope that Adam and Eve would ever return to life. The spiritual beings were yoked to the life of man when he was created, and were greatly distressed when man was separated from them. The destruction of his body made them exceedingly sad, and they were separated from the labors (or toil) of Adam. They marveled at the rationality of man, and how glorious it was that the soul spoke to the senses of his body in a rational voice. The voice of Adam's songs before his transgression was pleasant to the spiritual beings, but when he acted foolishly and sinned, they were shocked and amazed at his fall. Sin destroyed the image of affinity between man and heavenly beings, made an opening for insatiable death, and tore his body



asunder. The heavenly beings looked at man when he broke the command of the Lord as if he were already dead, and did not cease from grieving over his mortality. They considered him dead from the moment he ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, especially when they heard that Adam and Eve would return to earth.

The command of the Lord made Adam and Eve return to earth and dwell in the vicinity of Paradise, and caused a wall of fire to roll down before their faces, so that they would not enter Paradise again. The spiritual beings examined this wall of fire and marvelled at what the desire for the fruit had done to Adam and Eve.

Narsai goes on to say that this desire was the cause of the banishment of Eve from Paradise, whereat the demons rejoiced, but the heavenly beings were saddened. All creation mourned when Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, and deplored the fatal consequences of their iniquity. All the world mourned because of the fall of man, and the voice of his lamentation was uttered by every mouth. Both rational beings and inanimate things cried out over his mortality, and did not cease from sighing over his destruction.

Though Adam desired to re-enter Paradise, he was not permitted to do so. The command of the Lord cast him into exile, and like a criminal he was returned to the earth of thorns. Adam, the king of the earth, was fed with thorns and thistles, and Adam groaned doubly in his humiliation. His toil was wearisome, his course was disturbed, his food was scarce, and "the change of times was agitated in his days." The sentence, "The change of times was agitated



in his days," is obscure. It may refer to the seasons of the year.

Both rational beings and inanimate things mourned the sufferings of his soul, and grieved both loudly and in silence. Through both voice and silence his sorrows were spoken, and the sadness of his life was transmitted from generation to generation; and through this action God taught him the name of mortality. Death began to destroy his children without pity. Through the son of Adam death began to bring an accusation against Adam, by swallowing Abel, the first-born, lover of righteousness. Through the death of Abel, death began to rule over mortals; and men became slaves to death and the devil. The predetermined judgments were fulfilled in action against the guilty ones, and the nature of mortal was given in pledge through mortality. Like a tabernacle, sin took over Adam's body and gave him to death, to be nourished in it intemperately. He had eaten intemperately the food which was not in reality food, and without pity cruel death tore Adam; death thus affected every man, and no one was left without the finger of death to strike him. Both heavenly beings and earthly creatures mourned man's destruction, and bemoaned the pangs of death which smote all creation; creation waited for Adam's return to life.

Narsai goes on to tell us some interesting things about the first man, Enoch, who was taken without death to the land of Eden.<sup>5</sup> The most significant aspect of this story is the theology which

---

<sup>5</sup>Gen. 5:24.



Narsai connects with it, especially the doctrine of resurrection. According to Narsai, the translation of Enoch is a confirmation of the hope of resurrection which will be realized fully when God has fulfilled His purpose on earth. Ephraem agrees with Narsai that Enoch was taken to the land of Eden to enjoy life, but he does not connect any theology with it.<sup>6</sup>

Narsai proceeds to tell us that the Creator saw all the sufferings which had come to man in consequence of Adam's sin, and forthwith sounded the good hope to replace in the ears of mankind the hope lost through Adam's transgression. God did not subjugate Enoch to the bondage of death, but kept him free from destruction under His watchful care, thus comforting the world through his translation. For the sake of man's understanding God took him to Himself, and preserved him alive, in order that his hope should be kept up in him. Through the ascension of Enoch God preached the good hope of future life. Because Enoch pleased God, He made him virtuous for the sake of man's hope. The name of Enoch was written in the book of Moses because he pleased God. God kept his virtue in the treasury of life. God formed the image of his virtues and anointed him with immortal life, in order that he should not be destroyed by death. Sufferings had blotted out the beautiful image of man.

Through Enoch God revived creation which death had destroyed, and destroyed the destruction of death through the life of Enoch.

---

<sup>6</sup>E. Beck, Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymne De Ecclesia, (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, T. 84). (Louvain: 1960), pp. 128-129.



He consoled man in order that he should not again be alienated by the thought of destruction. The sons of Adam mourned their destruction from the days of Adam until the time when Enoch pleased God.

As mortals were scourged with the scourging of death, there was no hope for man. For six generations this scourging continued, and in the seventh generation men heard the voice of the preaching of life. In the seventh generation mortals heard the gospel of life, and though they heard it, they were unable to understand it accurately. They heard about the translation of Enoch, and wondered why he was kept alive forever. All of them heard the good news of the translation of Enoch, but they did not realize the importance of the resurrection of the dead. They did not clearly learn the cause of the abolition of death through the translation of Enoch.

Narsai goes on to say that the spiritual beings mysteriously heard this and mysteriously meditated on the investigation of it. In this mystery they, the lovers of man, stripped off their sadness and began to rejoice in the gospel of the resurrection of man. They greatly mourned the fall of man, but when they heard the news of Enoch's translation, they rejoiced and were consoled. The life of Enoch comforted the heavenly beings and encouraged them to serve man. The transgression of the divine command in the Garden of Eden weakened their love for man, and the heavenly beings did not wish to change the movements of the air so that the air would be suitable for man to live. The heavenly beings found it difficult to journey on the way of man's action because man was



evil. The Hidden God subjugated them to weariness (or to toil), but at the same time they accepted and fulfilled the command which subjugated them. The spiritual beings fulfilled the command of God, especially at the time of the ascension of Enoch and from that time on.

Enoch was set up by God to determine the judgment of mortals and gave peace to man and heavenly beings through his ascension. His life mysteriously determined the way of death. God took Enoch to Himself as a pledge of peace and kept him alive to confirm the hope of life for the sons of his race.

The sons of the rebellious ones rose in rebellion against the Lord of all, but the Creator subdued them through the harsh scourging of mortality. Through death God harshly scourged the wickedness of this rebellion but tempered it by mercy through the ascension of Enoch. God chose him out of the interval of ten generations and took him to Himself like a pledge in place of the guilty ones. The whole Adamic race was guilty and acknowledged its guilt, but did not repay the debt of its transgression.

In this agreement God took Enoch as a pledge that men would remember to render love to the Creator. But they were condemned from the beginning and did not repay the debt of their transgression through Enoch, because they did not wish to do so. Enoch was surety for the sons of his race that they would pay the bill for the guilt of their actions. Through causes God taught them to render love and made an agreement out of His goodness with the righteous. The word êlta is used by Narsai in a special meaning.



It has the following meanings: cause, pretext, occasion, necessity, affair, thing, article, fault, accusation, and argument.<sup>7</sup>

God foresaw the de<sup>e</sup>ci<sup>t</sup> of Adam and his sons before they were led astray, and prepared to destroy death and to remove the deception which was introduced by the devil into the Garden of Eden. Through causes God revealed His will and interest in our life, and gave us the hope of life through the translation of Enoch. God took Enoch up and kept him alive, and thus enabled the ten generations to win hope. The people of old acquired good hope through the life of Enoch, and his translation served as a guide to the people who lived after him. Enoch's children journeyed in the way of life in the hope of life and began to tell the mystery of their lives from generation to generation. When God had interpreted this mystery to Enoch, Enoch clearly understood it and he understood when God related the ways of His goodness to man.

All the voices of the bearers of hope were fulfilled through Abraham, and through the haven of his love the expectation of ten generations was fulfilled. Ten generations passed from Adam to Abraham, and the course of their actions rested in the haven of peace through Abraham. Abraham was one, and his love for his Lord was one. Because of his love for the Creator, God made him a vessel for his companions. Abraham was the vessel of peace for

---

<sup>7</sup>J. P. Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 416.



the sons of his race, and through him God made the vessels of the divine manifestation rest. Beginning with Abraham, men began to love truth. The will of God was one, which He had for man, and through righteous people He made known through causes all manner of His revelations.

Through Jesse, the father of David, and his successors, one after the other, God established the kingdom and transmitted to them the promise of His will. God revealed the love of His goodness to the righteous so that they would plant good in the ears of men. In all ages God planted the seed of man's salvation. Through revelation God made wise both heavenly beings and earthly people, so that they would know how to journey in the way of the name of the Eternal Being. God prepared a wide highway through the prophets to journey to Him thereby and manifested it through the son of sojourners (Elijah), as well as through the prophets and the priests. The phrase "the son of sojourners" is commonly used for Elijah. God chose prophets and priests in each division of time so that they might show the way of His will to mankind. All the power of His care He entrusted into their hands, so that they might journey and persuade (or possess) the sons of His people by the fear of His truth.

Narsai offers similar details about the translation of Elijah, and connects it with the doctrine of resurrection. According to Narsai, the ascension of Enoch and Elijah foretells the final resurrection. Narsai compares the time of Enoch with the time of



Elijah, but the period in which Elijah lived was more highly developed in matters of God's revelation. Ephraem again agrees with Narsai that Elijah was also taken to the land of Eden, but unlike Narsai he does not connect any theology with it.<sup>8</sup>

God appointed His divine guardianship (Elijah) on earth, so that he might prepare the servants of his Lord for the house of his Lord. He was able to manage God's servants and wisely supplied them with food in both famine and plenty. Through the scourge of famine he punished the rebellious ones who rose up against the Lord and taught them that they could not be exalted above the Creator. The rebellious sons of Abraham were stiff-necked, but the son of sojourners (Elijah) subdued them through the power of the Lord, just as metal is softened by being placed in the fire.

Elijah's voice, like a harsh yoke, subdued those who acted like brutish beasts, although they had no desire to submit. Although they had no desire to do so, they chose the lordship of the name of God; although they were not content to do so, they, abhorred the works of the demons. Because of their need for the name of the Creator, they loved Him. Because of the defilement of idolatry, they hated its works.

A flood of scourging was let loose by the mouth of Elijah and deluged them with all manner of severe afflictions. Just as one holds up a staff, the command of his Lord took hold of him, and Elijah chastened the obstinate people of his time who loved

---

<sup>8</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 520.



dissipation with it. Elijah utilized every means to subdue the stubborn people, yet cunningly they broke the yoke of his words. Elijah skillfully subdued them by the fear of the truth.

Narsai goes on to tell us that Elijah was taken to the haven of peace, beyond the power of death, and prepared the way for those who will follow him. He journeyed in space without stumbling. God took Elijah because of the beauty and purity of his soul, and in the beauty of his soul he saw his Creator. God kept him alive in order that the virtues of his soul should not be destroyed. Elijah pleased the Lord and the Lord performed miracles with him in the same way as with Enoch.

Narsai stresses the importance of the translation of these two men to the land of Eden, and includes Christ in the same category, but states that Christ's ascension was the culminating point. Insatiable death did not affect their bodies. God lifted these two good servants beyond the power of death, so as to implant zeal in the mind of men to be as good servants as were Enoch and Elijah. God taught men through these two men by taking them up to himself in order that man should not be doubtful of the pledge of resurrection.

God foretold the treasury of life through these two men, and they became guides to man, so that men might journey in the way of immortal life.

God translated Enoch in the tenth generation and the son of sojourners (Elijah) in the middle of the period in which Elijah lived. In the middle of the period God took Elijah so that he



might remind those of former times and those of later times. The Lord of the world divided the world into three periods and in each generation He took one man and kept him alive.

In the first generation He translated Enoch, in the second generation He took Elijah, and in the third generation He took Christ. The period in which Enoch was translated was inferior to Elijah's, and the period in which Elijah was taken was inferior to Christ's. Of Enoch it was said only that he was taken up, for God did not make known to us where he was taken and where he was placed. Moses pointed mysteriously to his having been taken and did not explain what was the cause of his ascension in the first generation, for God told us about Enoch in the simplest terms as one tells things to infants. The period in which Enoch lived was the beginning of God's administration of human affairs, whereas the period of Elijah was highly developed in matters of God's revelation. The translation of Enoch and Elijah was inferior to that of Christ. The first generation heard God's simple voice in the story of Enoch, but the second generation heard the more advanced voice of prophecy. Many voices of prophecy were heard about the translation of Elijah. Each prophet related to his companion the words which he had received from the Lord, and they transmitted their revelations to one another. From one to another they transmitted the day of his ascension while they plaited for him a crown of praise in their revelations.

The champion of spirit was praised with revealed voice, and the prophets of spirit glorified Elijah's courage. Bravely he



moved from place to place. Although he knew the day of his translation, he kept it secret and did not wish to reveal his glory, in order that the cunning snare of vainglory should not trap him. Wisely he managed that which he performed until God made known to him the spirit of revelation through the preachers of his time. The spirit of revelation also compelled him to manifest the secret things of God but he did not wish to reveal the exact time of his translation. He composed causes before his disciple (Elisha) to the effect that the Lord had sent him on a mysterious embassy. God mysteriously showed him the mystery of his translation as was proper for the sons of the divine mysteries.

God made Elijah wise so that he could perform the order for his translation to immortal life. By taking them to the land of Eden, God honored these two men above mortals. Elijah was about to journey in space and projected his mind into it. With the eye of his spirit Elijah saw the enjoyment of Paradise, and this world appeared before his mind as if it was not, because he saw a better world into which he was about to be taken. He saw with immaterial sight another world, despised everything here below, and loved immortality. He saw the greatness of the administration of God which translated him and marveled and wondered at the love of his Lord who loved him so deeply. He saw the greatness of the love of his Lord, who causes the sons of His household to triumph over glorious things. The day in which Elijah was praised was indeed glorious.

The ways of revelation were glorious in the course of his journey. He saw an astonishing sight although it was formed beyond

the earth. As the fiery chariot was traveling through the air, he saw the horses of fire yoked to the wheels of fire, above them the charioteer of fire. He saw "fire bound with bands of fire" and wondered at the greatness of the glory which was shown to him. He marveled at the greatness of the glory of his ascension. He saw that man was able to see spiritual things and turning from the astonishing sight, spoke to his disciple (Elisha). Elijah revealed himself to his disciple openly, related everything to him truthfully, and commanded him to ask of him only that which was proper for Elijah to grant.

Narsai tells us that when Elijah commanded his disciple to ask of him, he at the same time enjoined him to ask that which would be with him and make him triumph. When Elisha asked, Elijah gave him two in one. Then, Elijah began to journey on his invisible way, sat in the spiritual chariot, and grasped the bands of fire, but was not burned. Spiritually the spirit was yoked to Elijah, the body guiding the spirit, and the spirit guiding the body. Through the spirit the prophet flew in space to where he was to go.

The most unusual detail of this Homily is that Narsai states, contrary to the Bible, that Elijah was taken not to heaven but to the land of Eden, in the vicinity of the earth, although he does not specify the exact location of this land of Eden. Ephraem, unlike Narsai, notes that the Bible does not mention the place where Elijah was taken, but agrees with Narsai that Enoch was



taken to Paradise, although he, too, does not specify the exact location of it.<sup>11</sup> Jewish tradition concerning the ascension of Elijah differs from Narsai in that it holds not only that Elijah went up to heaven, but also that he is to be considered an angel.<sup>12</sup>

Narsai goes on to say that Elijah was lifted heavenward:

The divine command pulled him heavenward, to go not to heaven, but to the land beyond the earth. Elijah was not taken to heaven on the day of his translation, but was taken to the place where Enoch, the son of his race, had been taken. The same divine command which took Enoch took him; and God took them both to the same land, so that they might be together. For the same cause were they taken from mankind, and in the same place and the same toil was it proper that they should be, but there was a difference in the way in which they were translated.<sup>13</sup>

The period in which Enoch was translated was more simple, and the way of his ascension was therefore inferior to Elijah's. The period of the son of sojourners (Elijah) was more developed than that of Enoch, and the sight of the day of his ascension was therefore more glorious. In spiritual ways God separated them so as to reveal to man the distinction which will be made at the end of the world.

God manifested the final day (the day of resurrection) through the sight of the translation of these two men, especially through the day of the taking up of the son of sojourners (Elijah).

---

<sup>11</sup>Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia, I, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup>Ginzberg, op. cit., IV, pp. 201-202--referring to R. Moses De Leon quoted by Cordovero, Pardes, 24, 4, whence Yalkut Reubeni, Gen. 1:26, 9d (Amsterdam edition).

<sup>13</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 54a-54b.

In this agreement God manifested that He had taken Elijah only in order to reveal the mystery of resurrection. The mystery of ascension was manifested at the sight of his translation. Thus, mortal natures were taken up in the mystery of His (Christ's) ascension. Enoch and Elijah prepared the way of life and rested in the haven of peace at the end of their journey.<sup>14</sup>

Narsai tells us that they were kept on the earth of the earthly by the power of His command but were not affected by the difficulties of the earthly. In the land of Eden they are not dismayed by deceit. It is astounding how they could live the life of earthly man without being wearied by the enticements of man's troublesome ways. They were not affected by the ways of allurements which agitate men, and the divine command brought them safely to the end of their journey, and the same command shielded them from human enticements, in order that they should not be weakened by their glorious toil. Their toil was glorious and the course of their ministry was beautiful.

The spiritual voices walked with incorporeal beings. The earthly people were about to be like the spiritual beings, and God took these two human beings for the confirmation of all those who will be raised at the end of the world. Through their translation God confirmed man for future things. The Creator received the hostages of peace, assuring the establishment of peace between man and the Creator. The nature of mortals was weak from the beginning, and without superior order they were accustomed to being absorbed in the pleasures of this world. The Creator saw the hateful wandering

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., fol. 54b.



of their mind, and took from them two hostages to be with Him. He took them from mankind in sign of peace, that they would keep the love of His mystery. These men confirmed every hour the peace of man and made him victorious through the good musings of their minds.

The Creator loved the image of man, and in all matters He sought that men should live; and for the sake of man He saved two mortals from death, so that through their lives they would remind men concerning their future lives. Immortal life is promised to all creatures. The translation of both Enoch and Elijah witnessed that their lives were surety to mortality, in order that man should not be weakened by his trust in the promised life. These two men prepared immortal life for man, and God wrote them down in two books witnessed by three witnesses. In the first book the hands of Enoch and Elijah were subscribed, and the second book was subscribed by the sure and renowned witness, Christ. The Creator assured through one proved witness (Christ) from among mortals, that He would witness concerning the good things to come to the sons of His race.

The Creator wrote the bill of iniquity between Him and man, and sealed it in the order both earthly and heavenly. God appointed three witnesses to witness the bill of our lives, Enoch, Elijah, and Christ, who was from among us. God sealed Christ who was from among us in the blood of the bill of our lives, to confirm that He would keep the promise of life for his race. Through Christ's death He emancipated us from the bondage of evil and death, and through his resurrection He promised us immortal life. Christ was

immortal in his nature after his death, so that his life might be a sure witness for the human race. For the sake of the life of man the Creator chose him and raised his rank to the rank of His divinity. It was not in the order of His divinity that He named Christ's rank but in the order of that in which there is no equality to Him. Christ is equal to the Father. There is no equality to him who is the beginning of our race and his primacy cannot be compared with creatures.

He made him to be exalted, not like a servant in the various ranks, and He made his translation unlike that of Elijah and Enoch. He took them from among men and caused them to dwell in another land which was on earth. They were kept on earth by the nature of their mortality. They entered the land of Eden to dwell in it, just as the first Adam and the second Adam (Christ) broke the wall which was erected against man and caused them to enter the land which was hedged by the predetermined judgment. By the predetermined judgment men were kept out of the land of Eden until Christ died on the cross.

According to Narsai, the soul of Christ and the soul of the thief who was crucified with Him entered Paradise in the land of Eden first; thus, the way was prepared for all other souls. Narsai does not tell us, however, where the souls of the people were kept before the day of crucifixion, when Christ opened the gate of Paradise for the entrance of the souls.<sup>15</sup> The soul of Christ was returned to him when He was raised from the grave.

---

<sup>15</sup>A. Mingana, Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina, II, p. 250.



Narsai goes on to say that God caused Christ to enter first and gave his entrance to all men through the entrance of righteous souls into the land of Eden to be kept in unconscious state until the day of the final resurrection. "Only Enoch and Elijah entered it in both body and spirit."<sup>16</sup> Enoch and Elijah were taken bodily to Paradise in the land of Eden; they will be there in the mystery of the kingdom until they receive their final reward when God establishes His eternal kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

"After the passing of some time Christ entered it first in spirit and not in body; then, went out of it and ascended to a land more beautiful than it--the land of heaven, the most holy place where man's lust did not enter."<sup>18</sup> Christ entered in the presence of his Father to minister to us. He went to the land which was free from deceit and mischief. Through the blood of his soul He was appointed to minister to men, and His sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for all creatures. The Creator chose him from among His creatures to be offered in the place of all creatures and received his death as the salvation of all mortals.

The iniquity of man contaminated the world with disgrace, and God turned and purified it through the death of Christ, so that through Him men were able to obtain life, for he abolished death among humanity. Adam prepared the way for death through his lust

---

<sup>16</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 56a.

<sup>17</sup>Mingana, op. cit., I, p. 193.

<sup>18</sup>Ms. Ming. Syr. 55, fol. 56a.

for the fruit, and so death passed to all the Adamic race. By transgression of the command he subjugated man to the bondage of death, and men became so weak that the human race could not live again. For the sake of man's hope the Creator chose three men and appointed them witnesses to witness to the life of man. Enoch and Elijah witnessed on earth to the life of man; and the renewer of our life, who is now in heaven, confirmed our lives on the cross. These two men witnessed on earth to our resurrection; the one in heaven witnessed and sealed the words above and below-- both on earth and in heaven.

Both Enoch and Elijah, like servants, persuaded men on earth; the one who dwells in heaven commanded them on earth like a king. Christ's portion is not like that of a servant, and his power is not like the power of the sons of the earth. God did not call him an ordinary man, and his translation is not like the ascension of the sons of men.

The introduction at this point of the heretics with whom Narsai disputes in this Homily seems somewhat irrelevant to the content of it, although it is possible that these heretics did not believe in resurrection. Unfortunately, Narsai does not mention them by name, and we cannot therefore identify them more closely. To him, these heretics were not following the true faith, and he therefore endeavored to lead them aright.

These heretics composed arguments like hunters, but were unable to lead Narsai astray from the truth, however sagaciously they tried. They hunted for words of faith, but when they caught



them, these words flew like winged creatures out of their minds. Our faith was not caught by the hands of these stupid heretics, because they were unable to grasp its power with their minds and were too weak to contest us openly; the force of their argument was deficient of understanding.

They were unable to capture words in words, as they thought, or to offer open persuasion concerning secret things. The sound word of faith was hidden from them, and when it was revealed by the mouths of learned men, they were amazed and astonished. Narsai spoke to these heretics true words of faith, and they were unable to lead him astray; instead, they stumbled ignorantly over true faith.

O you heretics, you are not disciplined in the true faith, because you do not know how to travel in the way of faith. You were not anointed by the words of faith which was placed in its true meaning. Without understanding you stumble as if over stones, and you do not differentiate between the hateful thing and the honored one.<sup>19</sup>

Christ, who is now in heaven, came to this earth in human form. Through Him God prepared hope for the sons of men, and Christ confirmed the voices which Enoch and Elijah had planted on earth. Christ, who came in human flesh, ascended to heaven, and now rules in heaven, prepared the way for men to be considered equal to the heavenly beings. Christ in human form witnessed to the bill of our lives and put his hand to it and sealed it by his blood, in order that it should not be falsified. Christ was human,

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., fol. 57a.

and at the same time divine. If heretics rage, let them rage. Let them cry bitterly until their leader (the devil) hears them and wails with them with one voice before our Lord.

Bitterly the leader (Satan) wailed when he fell from his heavenly rank, and his human disciples greatly resemble him. The stupid heretics resemble their leader and do not understand that they were condemned by the voice of their own words.

They resembled the mole, digging hour upon hour in the dust of evil, and when they hear the voice of the word of truth, they become furious and burn with wicked desire. Narsai counters them with words of truth but they persist against him.

The heretics finally desisted from Narsai when he cried to them with every manner of words of truth, but they were enraged and became cruel in their actions. Narsai endeavored to put a stop to their actions by exposing the words of their blasphemies and rebuked the obstinate ones with words of faith. He has revealed the causes of the translation of Enoch and Elijah, not to teach the perfect, but to enlighten the ignorant. Why were these two men taken from among us to the land of Eden? Because through their ascension, God manifested our resurrection at the end of the world and made known the new life through these two men who were taken to the land of Paradise.



## CONCLUSION

As stated before, Narsai was one of the greatest of the Syriac Church Fathers of the 5th century, and is second only to Ephraem. He is also the most prominent Father among the Nestorians, and is the founder of the Nestorian liturgy. He was a profound expositor of both the Old and the New Testaments, as well as a keen student of Christian theology. He had a remarkable command of the Syriac language, so that his writings are reckoned among the classics of Syriac literature. He was also one of the most brilliant teachers of the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis and was the founder of the School of Nisibis. In the tradition, Narsai lives on as the "doctor and tongue of the Orient" or "the admirable doctor." His writings are therefore of paramount significance for the study of the rise and growth of Nestorianism among the Eastern Syrians (or Assyrians), and he and Ephraem are the most quoted authorities on Nestorian theology; he is therefore of the highest importance and a suitable subject for a doctoral investigation.

According to the bibliography of Abhdisho Bar-Brikha, Narsai wrote 360 Homilies and commentaries on several books of the Bible, but unfortunately most of them were lost in the course of a century. Mingana interpreted Abhdisho's list to mean that he had composed also commentaries, in addition to his Homilies, but that they were lost. On the other hand, both A. Scher and Vööbus believe that his commentaries on the individual books of the Bible never existed

separately, but are included in the 360 Homilies. The most convincing proof that Narsai never wrote such separate commentaries is the fact that no trace of them remains anywhere.

Vööbus lists in his book, History of the School of Nisibis, approximately 70 extant Homilies of Narsai. Out of these 70, 24 are on the Old Testament, the rest are on the New Testament or of general nature. In 1905 A. Mingana, of the Dominican Mission in Mosul, published two volumes of Narsai's Homilies, containing 47 Homilies in all. We have analyzed here 19 Old Testament Homilies, directly on the basis of the original Syriac text; none of these Homilies has ever been translated into English, although a few were translated into German and French. Of these 19 Homilies, 13 were printed in Mingana's edition, the other six Homilies, still unpublished, are analyzed here on the basis of photo-copies of manuscripts, obtained, four in microfilm from the British Museum, and the other two in photo-copy from Selly Oak College Library, Birmingham, England. We have, however, excluded five other Old Testament Homilies, first because they are of a general nature, and second in order not to exceed the limits of this investigation.

We have not attempted to translate Narsai's Homilies in full, except for some outstanding passages, but merely to analyze them for their exegetical content. In many places we simply summarized Narsai's ideas in English, since they are self-explanatory, although the reader must be cautioned that it is often difficult to find English equivalents for particular Syriac idioms. It is likewise to be understood that our investigation is not meant to be a running



commentary on the Homilies, nor a glossary of their terminology; if occasionally we leaned in that direction, it was merely in order to concentrate on some significant matter which contributed to the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology. We are thus interested only in the total aspect of Narsai's interpretation of the Old Testament, and we leave minor matters to the commentators. Nor have we dealt with the linguistic aspect of the Homilies, since the Syriac language has already been scientifically and grammatically investigated by native scholars such as Thomas Audo. Narsai himself never dealt with linguistic matters in the Old Testament, because his Homilies are really not commentaries like those of Ephraem but rather sermons or lectures, even though they often deal with exegetical matters, and in many places follow the form of a commentary.

In evaluating Narsai's Homilies we have considered most of the points which are significant for the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology, excluding only matters which were unimportant or repetitious. We have constantly endeavored to indicate the similarities between Narsai and other Syriac Fathers, as well as Jewish tradition, and where some detail of a homily is not compared with Ephraem or someone else, it is to be understood that in this particular Narsai stands alone. It is also to be understood that such similarities refer only to the original contributions to Old Testament exegesis and theology, and not to mere repetitions of the same biblical traditions; they deal with aspects that are important for the investigation of the sources of Narsai's exegesis and

theology. Our purpose was to point out, not each and every similarity, but only the more important ones, since complete comparison of Narsai with others is of secondary interest to our main subject; only such similarities are dealt with as serve to show that Narsai had utilized the works of other authors in his Old Testament interpretations.

In our analysis of Narsia's Homilies we have treated each Homily separately, except the four Homilies on creation, XXIX and XXXIV-XXXVI, which we have combined into one chapter covering the first three chapters of Genesis, and the two Homilies XXXVII-XXXVIII, which have been merged here into one chapter devoted to the creation and function of the angels. These two combinations seemed desirable, since Narsai sometimes discusses material pertinent to the same subject in more than one Homily. The remaining Homilies have been treated more or less consecutively, and as fully as possible, often including every sentence, especially in the case of the unpublished Homilies, except for the exclusion of repetitious and other wise unimportant matters.

We may summarize some of the outstanding conclusions which this investigation has reached in the course of our analysis of Narsai's Homilies:

1. The entire investigation is an original contribution to Syriac studies, because we have dealt with some Homilies which have not been treated before.
2. We have pointed out the instances where Narsai drew upon Ephraem's works for his Old Testament interpretation and theology.



However, he treats the subject more extensively than Ephraem and has his own ideas, especially on the way the subject is presented and on the details of the interpretation. According to the Chronicle of Barhadbeshabba, Ephraem's commentaries were used in the School of Edessa before they were replaced by Theodore's commentaries. In many places Narsai's interpretation and Ephraem's are almost identical. There are, however, also occasional dissimilarities between Narsai and Ephraem. In many places in the Bible Ephraem merely follows the biblical tradition with general comments, without offering any original ideas, while Narsai treats these same passages very extensively and offers many original ideas.

3. We have indicated that Narsai's borrowings from Jewish tradition seem to have remained unnoticed heretofore, even by Voobus, who wrote in detail on the life and works of Narsai and on the two Schools. These possible borrowings are pointed out in our analysis of each Homily, especially in the story of Joseph, and in particular the episode of the wife of Potiphar and her infatuation with Joseph. It is evident from Narsai's Homilies that he had a profound knowledge not only of both the Old and the New Testament but also of Jewish life in his time. Indeed one of his Homilies is devoted entirely to polemics against the Jews, and argues that all the Old Testament prophets had prophesied about the Christ who was to fulfill by his death the divine plan of the redemption of the whole world.

Obviously Narsai did not invent these nonbiblical details, since they are found also in Jewish tradition. It is also plain that both Narsai and Ephraem had drawn upon rabbinic sources in their

Old Testament exegesis. Nevertheless, their retellings of these legends are not identical in every point, presumably because legends are not always transmitted in exactly the same form, especially when the transmission is still in its oral stage. We may also assume that some Jewish legends were lost in the course of centuries, and Ginzberg calls our attention to the fact that a number of Jewish works repudiated by the rabbinic Sages were accepted by the Church Fathers. It seems probable therefore that Narsai had utilized some Jewish legends which in his time were still transmitted orally, but were later lost to the Jews themselves.

4. We have shown that the only traceable similarities between Narsai and Theodore of Mopsuestia concern the story of Jonah, because most of Theodore's works are lost, and his only extant complete work in Greek is his commentary on the Minor Prophets. Of his other exegetical writings, we possess only the greater part of his commentary on the Psalms, and a fragment of his commentary on Genesis.

5. We have analyzed some outstanding passages and theological doctrines in Narsai's Homilies of importance to the history of Old Testament exegesis and theology, such as his lengthy interpretation of the phrase "Let us go down" as referring to the Trinity, his interpretation of the four beasts of Daniel as representing the four world empires, his view of the Trinity, and his concept of soul and body.

6. As previously stated in this analysis, Narsai's Homilies do not contain allegorical elements in the true sense of the word, because he followed the Antiochian method of exegesis and theology, after



the works of Theodore were translated and introduced into the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis. It is also evident that the Antiochian exegesis was grammatical-historical (in accordance with the grammatical structure of the text and the historical context), in contrast to the Alexandrian exegesis which was more or less allegorical, as taught by Clement and Origen who were influenced by Philo. Furthermore, Vööbus tells us that

Under the directorship of Narsai the Antiochian exegetical tradition was the model. It also was carried over into the School of Nisibis. This tradition was cultivated with love and affection . . .<sup>1</sup> This fact can tell us a lot about the nature of the exegetical work as it was carried out in the School of Nisibis. In every way it bore the stamp of the principles of Theodore's (hermeneutics).<sup>2</sup>

Vööbus goes on to say that Henana, the last director of the Schools of Nisibis, departed from Theodore's hermeneutics:

Up to this point the whole exegetical work of the School of Nisibis had rested upon the hermeneutical legacy of Theodore of Mopsuestia. The undertaking of Abraham had substantially contributed to the accensibility of Theodore's thoughtworld. This in turn set an example and pattern for other schools and centers of study in the entire church. Thus, strict Antiochian method, controlled by pure grammatical-historical exegesis, dominated the entire field. Biblical studies were carried out with the conviction that no allowance could be made for any meaning in the biblical writings other than the literary meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Henana's different spirit and taste compelled him to depart from the foundation upheld by Theodore's immense authority. He took a position against him which caused much concern and worry and led finally to the

---

<sup>1</sup>Vööbus, op. cit., pp. 105-106.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

rejection of most of his works in this field. His mind was intoxicated by something entirely different. He was charmed by Origen, or more exactly by what Origen had borrowed from Philo, namely the curious idea that every detail in the Scriptures has a spiritual meaning and the application of interpretation by means of the artificial theory of allegory.<sup>4</sup>

Although Narsai followed the principles of the hermeneutics of the Antiochian School after Theodore's works were translated into Syriac and introduced into the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis, some of Narsai's interpretations are definitely fanciful or highly speculative. As a matter of fact, several aspects of this Old Testament exegesis and theology depart somewhat from the literal interpretation of the Bible as it was taught at the Antiochian School. First, it is important to keep in mind that Narsai wrote Homilies, not verse-by-verse commentaries like those of Ephraem; consequently in some respects his Old Testament exegesis and theology seems not to adhere strictly to the grammatical-historical interpretation of the Bible which follows the literal meaning of the Scriptures. It is also important to recognize that the Antiochian School and the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis did not follow the extreme allegorical methods of the Alexandrian School as taught by Clement and Origen. It is thus evident that while the works of both Theodore and Narsai contain some elements that seem to be allegorical in the eyes of modern scholars, they did seem so in the eyes of the Alexandrian School. While Narsai borrowed material from other sources for his Old Testament exegesis and theology,

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



most of his detailed interpretations of the Bible are the product of his own mind based on his wide background in the Bible, as well as his remarkable experience in other matters.

7. We have pointed out that Narsai's Homilies reveal that exegesis and theology were highly developed in the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis; that Old Testament exegesis, theology, homiletics, and theological terminology were well established in the Eastern Church in the 4th century; and that these were taken over by the subsequent generations.

8. We have repeatedly shown that Narsai's exegesis and theology were not elementary, but rather highly developed and acutely speculative, even though the Homilies were meant to serve the didactic interest of his audience.

9. We have repeatedly called attention to the fact that the most significant element of Narsai's Old Testament exegesis and theology is his mind, because it was his mind that made him great, and made his exegesis and theology complex and speculative, and his exegesis of the Old Testament more extensive than that of Ephraem. His imagination delves into the impenetrable mysteries of God and of His creation, the mysterious interrelationship between soul and body, the supernatural nature of the heavenly beings, and the awesome functions of the angels. His speculative mind rises to its highest potential in his treatment of the brazen serpent, in his description of the tempest which seized hold of Jonah, in the dramatic way in which he describes the building and collapse of the tower of Babel, the contest between the two mothers over the living and dead

infants, and the tragic moral lapse of David in the affair of Uriah and Bathsheba.

10. We have demonstrated that the Homilies reveal that Narsai was well versed not only in biblical tradition and Christian doctrine but also in contemporary scientific knowledge, especially Greek science.

11. We have shown that while Narsai's exegesis and theology are highly speculative, they remain in harmony with traditional truth and Christian doctrine. As a matter of fact, both Ephraem and Narsai defended this truth and doctrine and engaged in copious controversies with contemporary heretics.

12. We have pointed out that Narsai's Homilies contain hundreds of direct quotations, both biblical ones which vary from the text of the Bible, and others. These quotations cannot, however, be utilized for the textual criticism of the Peshitta, because most of them are borrowed, possibly from Jewish legends and other sources which do not adhere strictly to the biblical text, while others must have been modified by Narsai himself to fit his twelve-syllable and seven-syllable meters.

13. And finally, we have indicated Narsai's original contributions to Old Testament exegesis and theology. These are so numerous that they cannot be detailed here, and the reader must therefore refer to each individual Homily.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altaner, B. Patrologie, Freiburg: 1950<sup>2</sup>
- Assemani, J. C. Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae Codicum Manuscriptorum Catalogus. Romae: 1758.
- Audo, Thomas Dictionnaire de la Langue Chaldeene. Mossoul: 1897.
- Baumstark, A. Geschichte der Syrischen Literatur. Bonn: 1922.
- Beck, E. Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen Contra Haereses. (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Tome 76). Louvain: 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Paradiso und Contra Julianum. (CSCO, T. 78). Louvain: 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Fide. (CSCO, T. 73). Louvain: 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Ecclesia. (CSCO, T. 84). Louvain: 1960.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones De Fide. (CSCO, T. 88). Louvain: 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena. (CSCO, T. 92, 102). Louvain: 1961-1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen De Virginitate. (CSCO, T. 94). Louvain: 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ieiunio. (CSCO, T. 106). Louvain: 1964.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Paschaymnenn. (CSCO, T. 108). Louvain: 1964.
- Burgess, H. Hymns and Homilies of Ephraem Syrus. London: 1853.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Selected Metrical Hymns and Homilies of Ephraem Syrus. London: 1854.
- Connolly, R. H. The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai Translated into English with an Introduction. With an Appendix by Edmund Bishop. Cambridge: 1909.
- Duval, R. La Litterature Syriacque. Paris: 1900.

Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia. Romae: 1735.

Feldman, F. Narsai: Syrische Weschsellieder. Leipzig: 1896.

Ginzberg, L. The Legends of the Jews. 7 volumes. Philadelphia: 1909-1928.

Histoire de Joseph par Saint Ephraem. Paris: 1887.

Joseph, E. Y. Marganeetha by Mar Abhdisho Bar-Brikha Metropolitan of Nisibis and Armenia (1291-1318), edited by E. Y. Joseph. Mosul: 1924.

Manna, J. E. Morceaux Choisis de Litterature Arameene. Mossul: 1901.

Mingana, A. Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts. Cambridge: 1939.

\_\_\_\_\_ Narsai Doctoris Syri Homilae et Carmina. Mosul: 1905.

Moss, C. Catalogue of Syriac Printed Books and Related Literature in the British Museum. London: 1962.

Patrologia Orientalis. Vol. 9. Paris: 1913.

Quasten, J. Patrology. 3 volumes. Westminster, Md.,: The Newman Press, 1950-1960.

Tonneau, R. M. Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii. (CSCO, T. 71). Louvain: 1965.

Vööbus, A. History of the School of Nisibis. (CSCO, T. 26). Louvain: 1965.

Wright, A. Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum. London: 1870.

\_\_\_\_\_ A Short History of Syriac Literature. London: 1894.















205b







[illegible]







[illegible]







١٢٠  
 ١٢١  
 ١٢٢  
 ١٢٣  
 ١٢٤  
 ١٢٥  
 ١٢٦  
 ١٢٧  
 ١٢٨  
 ١٢٩  
 ١٣٠  
 ١٣١  
 ١٣٢  
 ١٣٣  
 ١٣٤  
 ١٣٥  
 ١٣٦  
 ١٣٧  
 ١٣٨  
 ١٣٩  
 ١٤٠  
 ١٤١  
 ١٤٢  
 ١٤٣  
 ١٤٤  
 ١٤٥  
 ١٤٦  
 ١٤٧  
 ١٤٨  
 ١٤٩  
 ١٥٠  
 ١٥١  
 ١٥٢  
 ١٥٣  
 ١٥٤  
 ١٥٥  
 ١٥٦  
 ١٥٧  
 ١٥٨  
 ١٥٩  
 ١٦٠  
 ١٦١  
 ١٦٢  
 ١٦٣  
 ١٦٤  
 ١٦٥  
 ١٦٦  
 ١٦٧  
 ١٦٨  
 ١٦٩  
 ١٧٠  
 ١٧١  
 ١٧٢  
 ١٧٣  
 ١٧٤  
 ١٧٥  
 ١٧٦  
 ١٧٧  
 ١٧٨  
 ١٧٩  
 ١٨٠  
 ١٨١  
 ١٨٢  
 ١٨٣  
 ١٨٤  
 ١٨٥  
 ١٨٦  
 ١٨٧  
 ١٨٨  
 ١٨٩  
 ١٩٠  
 ١٩١  
 ١٩٢  
 ١٩٣  
 ١٩٤  
 ١٩٥  
 ١٩٦  
 ١٩٧  
 ١٩٨  
 ١٩٩  
 ٢٠٠







[illegible]







[illegible]











[illegible]







[illegible]







[illegible]



[illegible]



[illegible]



五



[illegible]







[illegible]











[illegible]











[illegible]



[illegible]



929



[illegible]



















۴۸

[illegible]











































































فہم

[illegible]















သို့

مجلد

[illegible]







































