Cairo Journal of Theology Published by the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo



Section from Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" (c. 1512)

Volume 6 2019

CJT 6 (2019) http://journal.etsc.org

The *Cairo Journal of Theology* (CJT) is an online academic journal published by the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo. The web address of the journal is: http://journal.etsc.org. An Arabic version is published under the title المجلة اللاهوتية المصرية.

General editor: Michael Parker (Mike.Parker@etsc.org)

Translators for this issue are Rita Bahig Sorial, Mariana Katkout, and Sameh Raheef.

The views expressed in this journal are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or of ETSC.

Contents

Message from the Editor	
Michael Parker	4
The 50 th Anniversary of the Moon Landing: A Reflection on Cosmology, Evolution, and Humanity in the Space Age Michael Parker	Ĵ
Evangelism and Postmodernism: Presenting the Christian Gospel in a Postmodern World Maher Samuel	3
Book Review: An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story, by Jeremy L. Sabella Michael Parker	20
A History of Early Syriac Christianity: A.D. 200 to 700, Part I Heleen Murre-van den Berg	23

Message from the Editor

Michael Parker

(mike.parker@etsc.org) Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo

Previous issues of the Cairo Journal of Theology have been organized around a single theme: the translation of the Bible into Arabic, the five *solas* of the Reformation, and other matters. The first three of the articles in this issue, broadly conceived, are concerned with the nature of human beings as seen in the book of Genesis and through the lenses of the modern fields of science, postmodern philosophy, and politics. The fourth article concerns Syriac Christianity.

The first article, written by myself, is a reflection piece inspired by the fiftieth anniversary of the Moon landing. I was only twelve years old at time, but I remember watching the television with my family as Neil Armstrong stepped out onto the lunar surface. A tremendous milestone in human history, the moment was breathtaking and unforgettable. It has been interpreted in many ways: an accomplishment inspired by the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, an engineering feat made possible by the V-2 rocket program of the Nazis during World War II, the fulfillment of a millennia-old human dream to reach the Moon and then beyond. These various slants are true as far as they go, but what concerns me here is what the accomplishments and insights of modern science have to say to people of faith. My reflection begins with the Moon landing but soon moves on to other scientific insights having to do with the modern understanding of cosmology and human evolution. For Christians these new scientific paradigms have been highly contested because they have often been seen as a threat to Christian faith. Mv reflection presents one way that many faithful Christians have come to merge science and religion into a single harmonious vision.

Dr. Maher Samuel, who wrote the second article for this issue, is a professional psychiatrist, public speaker, apologist, lecturer, and author of eight books. He is also the founder of Credologos ministry, the representative ministry of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM) in the Middle East. As an Arabic-speaking apologist, his primary mission is to train Middle Eastern Christian leaders in apologetics and spiritual formation in order to equip them to share Christ with non-Christian communities. Maher has taught numerous weekend and summer schools courses in Egypt and Lebanon, is a frequent guest on television programs, and regularly speaks at Christian Arabic conferences all over the world. Maher's article, which was first delivered as a talk on November 20, 2018, at ETSC Scholars' Seminar series, is concerned with how to present the gospel to the postmodern generation.

The third article, a book review of Jeremy L Sabella's *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, fits nicely with the broad theme of this issue in that it concerns a theologian who was interested in how the fundamental nature of human beings as presented in the Scriptures should inform our understanding of politics. Niebuhr, who lived through two world wars and the Cold War, famously wrote, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

The fourth article, admittedly, does not mesh with the theme of this issue but is intended as the first of three (and possibly four) installments by Dr. Heleen Murrevan den Berg, who visited ETSC, January 16-19, 2019, to present a series of lectures on the history of early Syriac Christianity. A professor of Eastern Christianity at Raboud University, Nijmegen, Holland, Dr. Murre-van den Berg has given other lectures at ETSC and has also written for this journal before. Her lectures, which were given in English and with translation, were of such interest in the seminary that we decided to publish them in this journal. This issue contains about a quarter of her presentation, and subsequent issues will include the remainder. I transcribed the lectures from video recordings and edited them lightly for purposes of clarity. After reviewing my manuscript and performing some editing of her own, Dr. Murre-van den Berg returned the text to me for publication. We hope that readers will enjoy the conversational style of her delivery.

The 50th Anniversary of the Moon Landing A Reflection on Cosmology, Evolution, and Humanity in the Space Age

By Michael Parker

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's landing on the Moon, which occurred on July 20, 1969. Six hours after the landing of the lunar module *Eagle*, on July 21, Armstrong became the first man to walk on the Moon. Armstrong's words upon first stepping on the lunar surface were triumphal but oddly innocuous: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Fortunately, there was no nationalistic braggadocio in his words. For him, landing on the Moon was a triumph for all humankind. But surely one misses a spiritual note in his words. Didn't humanity's first arrival on a celestial body give pause to human beings to consider their place in the grand scheme of things? In fact, it did.

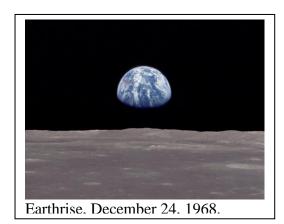
On the fifth anniversary of the lunar landing, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Michael Collins

- who orbited the Moon in the command module while his colleagues walked on the surface below – presented a 7.18-gram lunar rock to the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. At the presentation, Armstrong said that "this fragment of creation from beyond the Earth" is to be "imbedded in the fabric of this house of prayer for all people." It is now permanently lodged in a stain glass panel in the Cathedral known as the "Space Window," which shows majestic stars and planets in the heavens above.

The spiritual awe that many felt at the time of the lunar landing was anticipated seven months earlier when human beings first orbited the Moon. NASA launched Apollo 8 on December 21, 1968, and the fragile craft took the three-man crew of Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders to the far side of the Moon after a three-day trip through space. They became the first human beings to voyage to another celestial body, entering into lunar orbit on December 24 and circling the Moon ten times. On their fourth time around they witnessed something no one had ever seen before, Earthrise. They saw the Earth rise up from the lunar surface as they came from the dark side of the Moon. Anders took the famous photograph of it. On their ninth orbit they made a television



The space Window in the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. the small white circle in the center contains a fragment of a Moon rock, which Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin collected at the time of the first Moon landing.



transmission back to Earth, which was watched in real time or shortly after by one of every four people on the planet. Each of the astronauts took turns describing the Moon, and then on this Christmas Eve they read the first ten verses of the book of Genesis, the story of creation. Borman finished the broadcast wishing a merry Christmas to "all of you on the good Earth."

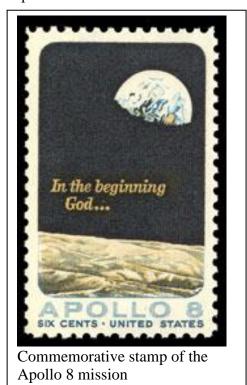
The success of the space program at this time could not have been better timed for Americans as this year was one of the most

tumultuous in the nation's history. The year 1968 saw the height of the Vietnam War, during which there were often violent protests in the streets of our cities. Following the poor results of the New Hampshire primary election, the sitting president, Lyndon Johnson, withdrew from the presidential race. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated that year, a tragedy that was immediately followed by urban riots across the country. Bobby Kennedy, the leading Democratic presidential candidate, was assassinated just two months later; and the Democrats had what was probably their most tempestuous convention on record, with Chicago police greatly over-reacting to street protests around the convention. The Republicans nominated Richard Nixon for president, who later won, ironically, on a "law and order" ticket and with a promise to end the war.

When the three astronauts returned from their successful orbiting of the Moon, a stranger sent Borman a telegram, reading, "Thank you Apollo 8. You saved 1968." *Time*

Magazine named the three astronauts the "men of the year." In the following year the "Earthrise" photo was turned into a postage stamp, with the words "In the beginning God…" printed at the center. Some say that this stamp marks the beginning of the Environmental movement – the first Earth Day occurred in 1970. When Borman went on a world tour that year, he met Pope Paul VI, who said, "I have spent my entire life trying to say to the world what you did on Christmas Eve."

That trip around the Moon, the photograph of the Earth, and the words of Genesis seemed to strike a chord with many people at that time. Somehow the planet seemed more fragile and special that it ever had before. And the religious note struck by reading the opening verses of Genesis reminded everyone that the Earth didn't just happen. It wasn't an accident emerging out of the chaos of the universe. Rather it was the careful work of a loving God – a God who created a beautiful home for his children.



Not everyone, of course, agreed. The famous atheist Madelyn Murry O'Hair brought a lawsuit against NASA for allowing the reading of Genesis because the astronauts were government employees and, therefore, should be banned from performing religiously inspired acts in space. The Supreme Court rejected the case, but in July of 1969 when Apollo 11 landed on the Moon, Buzz Aldrin quietly took Holy Communion but didn't mention it until several years later so as not to fuel the controversy.

The Message of Genesis

The biblical verses that the three astronauts read that Christmas Eve are among the most inspiring and controversial of the Bible. The doctrine of creation out of nothing is not clearly taught in the first two verses, but later biblical authors interpreted it that way. The author of Hebrews said, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Heb 11:3) – the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Later Christian theologians – especially Augustine – interpreted it that way too.

In the biblical account, the world is not presented as being created all at once but rather in stages over a period of seven days. From the earliest centuries these seven days were not always considered to be literal days. It was also recognized that the Genesis text on creation was more a poetic than a scientific account. The acts of creation are presented in three pairs, the first three days with the second three days – a beautiful example of Hebrew poetic parallelism. Hence on the first day there is light, and on the fourth there are Sun and Moon. On the second day there are water and air, and on the fifth day there are fish and birds. On the third day there are land and vegetation, and on the sixth day there are animals and people on the land. The whole creative process is capped off on the seventh day when God rested.

The Jews thought of the number seven as a perfect number, the number of God himself. The theological truth to be grasped here is that God is the creator, that all came about by his plan and his power. A second point is that after each day of creation God said, "It is good"; and after the creation of human beings at the end of the creative process, he declared, "It is very good."

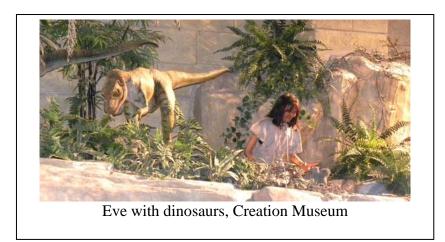
There is also a special message here for human beings. God created man (humanity) as male and female. He created them in his own image – so that we are in some way a reflection of the divine. Finally, these creatures were directed to fill the Earth with their progeny and to rule over the planet.

This is a controversial passage because there are many things to stumble over. In what way are we made in the image of God? What is the nature of man as male and female? In what sense are we to be rulers (or stewards) of the planet? What exactly was the process of creation? Should we interpret this passage poetically so that we come away with a sense of wonder and awe, or are we to take it more literally than that?

Creation Science

One answer to that last question can be found at the Creation Museum, which opened in 2007 in Petersburg, Kentucky – about four miles west of Cincinnati. This is a \$27 million facility

organized by the Australian born Ken Ham. It purports to present the creation of the Earth from a literal interpretation of Genesis. In what is called the "young Earth" interpretation of creationism, the Earth was created only 6000 years ago; Adam and Eve are historical characters; and all the animals that ever lived on the planet were created in the same brief period – seven days. Hence the Museum includes a display that shows human beings living at the same time as dinosaurs.



Roughly 50 percent of all Americans believe in some form of creationism; and, though there are no statistics on this issue for all Christians on the planet, I suspect most would also say that they affirm creationism as opposed to evolution. In addition to the "young Earth" version of creationism, there is also an "old Earth" version that interprets the "days" of Genesis as being potentially long epochs of time.

There is also the school of thought called "intelligent design," which should not be confused with creationism. Intelligent design, or ID, began in 1991 with a book by Philip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*. This takes a very sophisticated look at the modern science of Evolution and points out all of the logical and technical problems with it. Johnson's central view is that scientists are trapped in the scientific paradigm of evolution and are therefore incapable of seeing its flaws; or, if they see its flaws, they cannot admit them without committing professional suicide. These flaws, therefore, are not given the attention that scientists would normally devote to such problems. This is a very interesting view. It made a big splash in the 1990s, and it continues to present a challenge to the details of the theory of evolution. But the weak point in Johnson's approach is that he is not able to present a credible scientific and naturalistic alternative to evolution – and neither is anyone else.

Science and Creation

Although many Christians reject the modern scientific understanding of cosmology and the evolution of life on this planet, scientists have undeniably given the world plausible, richly fact-based, and truly thrilling accounts of how the universe began and developed, and how life on earth evolved.

If a modern scientist were to rewrite the first chapter of Genesis, the passage might read something like the following. The universe began with a singularity – or Big Bang – 14.7 billion years ago, and the Earth was formed about 4.5 billion years later. During its first 500 million years, our planet was under constant bombardment from asteroids and meteorites. It was at this time that the Moon was born, probably being a huge chunk of the Earth dislodged due to a giant asteroid strike. Then about 150 million years later microbial life appeared in the oceans. Scientists have yet to discover how this life came about, but it continued for several billion years. Then suddenly 550 million years ago a large number of new life forms appeared in what is called the Cambrian explosion. Four hundred million years ago plants appeared on the dry land, and 30 million years later animals appeared on the land. The dinosaurs appeared 230 million years ago, and then suddenly disappeared about 65 million years ago when scientists believe the Earth was struck by a large asteroid on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. The mass extinction that followed cleared the way for the rise of mammals on the planet. A number of humanoid types appeared over the last few hundred thousand years. All of them have died out except homo sapiens (ourselves), who date from about 195,000 years ago.

Even more contentious than modern cosmology for many Christians is the theory of evolution. Charles Darwin was the first one to teach us, in a well-reasoned, scientifically plausible way, that life on this planet evolved from single-celled life to more complex life forms. From fish came reptiles, and from reptiles sprung both birds and mammals. Darwin expressed various views on religion over the course of his life. At one time or another he was an evangelical Christian, a theist, an agnostic, and an atheist. But he writes at the end of *The Origin of Species* (1859) of his wonder over God's work of creation: "There is grandeur in this view of life [that is, evolution], with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that...from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved."¹

Francis Collins

Similarly, Francis Collins, the man who headed the human genome project (1990-2003), writes, "The elegance behind life's complexity is indeed reason for awe, and for belief in God – but not in the simple, straightforward way that many found so compelling before Darwin came along." Scientists, in working on the human genome project, have discovered that the alphabet that makes up the script of our DNA has only four letters but that each gene is made up of hundreds or thousands of letters of code. In fact the text of our DNA is 3.1 billion letters long. Collins writes that if you print "these letters out in regular font size on normal bond paper and bind them all together... [the result would be] a tower the height of the Washington Monument."² The amazing thing is that all that information is packed into each one of the tiny cells that make up our bodies. Collins writes of the beauty and eloquence of this system of genetic coding. It's also astonishingly versatile for the same type of coding that produces a human being also yields soil bacteria, mustard weed, and alligators. We human beings may look different from one another because of race and background, but we are all 99.9 percent the same on the genetic level, which of course suggests that we all share

¹ Cited in Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 98-99.

² Ibid., 1-2, 86.

the same origin, that we all emerged from the same small family of people – perhaps even from the same mother.

The evidence of the human genome has virtually clinched the argument for human evolution because it has revealed that the genetic similarly between human beings and chimps is about 96 percent.



Francis Collins, physician-geneticist who headed the Human Genome Project

Moreover, about 45 percent of our genetic coding is inoperative. These are "junk genes," genes that are left over from earlier stages of evolution that our bodies no longer use. If God created human beings independently from other life on this planet, then why would he include the defunct DNA of other animals in our cells? The only reasonable explanation is that we are not a separate creation but have evolved from lower forms of life.

Scientists looking at this naturalistic, complex, intricate, and – yes – beautiful means by which life on this planet has evolved and human beings have been produced are not inclined to lose their faith, but to have it affirmed. Francis Collins when he was asked to direct the Human Genome Project in 1992 spent an afternoon in a chapel in North Carolina praying to God for direction. He doesn't say why, but I suspect that perhaps he was concerned that he was going to undermine the Christian faith, undermine the cause of God in this world. But he found a peace that afternoon, which led him a few days later to agree to direct the project. When the project was complete in 2003, he wrote, "For those who believe in God, there are reasons now to be more in awe, not less."³

Conclusion

The science of our time has taught us that not only do the heavens declare the glory of God but so too does life on this planet – especially the climax of God's creation on the sixth day, the appearance of human beings. Though lowly creatures formed from earth, we have been given life from the very breath of God. Shakespeare caught the paradox of the baseness and glory of humanity in the famous lines of Hamlet:

What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (Hamlet, Act 2, Sc 2:327-332).



Buzz Alrin on the Moon with Neil Armstrong reflected in his visor

The Genesis creation narrative and the discoveries of modern science together remind us of how exquisitely wrought this world is and, even more important, how inestimably precious we human beings are. We are neither, simply, the happy product of the collision of random particles over billions of years, nor are we the result of a fairytale-like creation event. Rather, as the Genesis account relates, we are part of this planet, for we emerged from it; and, as modern science teaches, we are also the direct result of a long, complex process of evolution – a process, Christians will add, guided at every step by a loving and all-powerful God. Human beings may be the "quintessence of dust," but we are also the very purpose for which God made this world. How very appropriate, then, that the first astronauts to orbit the Moon should read the opening words of Genesis: "In the beginning God…"

There is reason, indeed, for awe and faith.

Michael Parker Professor of Church History ETSC

Evangelism and Postmodernism

Presenting the Christian Gospel in a Postmodern World

By Maher Samuel

Many of the greatest Christian apologists of our time have a strong negative attitude towards postmodernism. Seeing it as a threat to Christianity, they may value modernism instead with its emphasis on reason and objective truth. This essay, however, will aim to show that both modernism and postmodernism, as different philosophies, create different challenges as well as different opportunities for the evangelist to present the gospel. This essay will focus on how postmodernism, in particular, creates an opportunity for evangelism, in spite of all of the challenges it presents.

This is important, first, because it shows that the Christian gospel is cross-cultural – that is, there is no one specific culture that is a necessary pre-condition for the gospel to be effective. If there were, that would greatly weaken the gospel. The second reason it is important is because it encourages a kind of Christian maturity that helps the Christian to contextualize the message of the gospel in any culture. In effect, it begins, as Jesus did, from where the person stands intellectually and not from a set of ideas believed by the evangelist. The gospel is person-centered in this way. It does not seek to convince people of ideas but to transform their lives.

The essay will discuss Genesis 1-11, highlighting how scripture draws a connection between culture and the human identity as the image of God (*Imago-Dei*), and it proceeds to show the scatteredness and deep sense of loss of the human condition as a result of rejecting God. Moreover, the essay will outline some of the basic claims of postmodernism and the kind of challenges it poses to Christianity. Finally, it will be argued that the things postmodernists emphasize – the lack of a fixed human nature, the imperfection of reason, the absence of objective truth and reality, and the limitation of language – draw a deep parallel with the biblical story found in Genesis 1-11. Bearing in mind this philosophical parallel between scripture and postmodernism, practical advice on how the Christian gospel can be presented in a postmodern world will be discussed in the remaining part of the essay.

The *Imago-Dei* and the culture mandate¹

In Genesis 1:26-27, we reach the apex of the creation story, man's creation in the image of God. God has brought order out of chaos. He has prepared everything to make the earth ready for his new project, the man project – while in verse 28, we find the culture mandate. Man is created in God's image:

¹ "The term 'culture' stems from the Latin term *colere*, meaning 'to cultivate, till, tend,' thus the feminine *cultura* meaning 'tilling, culture, cultivation.''' Over time *culture* has come to refer to individuals of refinement and education. Laura Thompson, *The Secret of Culture*, consulting ed. Anthony F. C. Wallace (New York: Random House, 1969), 4.

- Constitutionally humans are embodied spirits; they are in the likeness of God, who is himself spirit.
- Relationally, they are male and female, i.e. they are capable of entering into a free, conscious, and intimate relationship with each other because they are created in the likeness of the relational triune God.
- Functionally, they are created in God's image to be his vice-regents on earth, to have dominion, and to create civilization.

The ultimate goal of the creation of man is for him to live in an intimate relationship with God in his presence, transferring the invisible spiritual and moral nature of God, which is love and light, to the visible material world through culture and civilization. As a result, human potential is actualized as man is free to create culture through expressions of creativity, intellect, and art. Yet, God's glory is also manifested as these cultural expressions are a mere reflection of God's moral nature. The idea in Genesis that man is tasked with creating culture and civilization is discussed by Emil Brunner:

Because man, and man alone, has been created in the image of God, and for communion with the Creator, therefore he may and should make the earth subject to himself, and should have dominion over all other creatures. The call to create civilization which this involves, is not indeed the essence of real humanity, but it is its necessary presupposition.²

The fall occurs in Genesis 3 when man, against his design and finitude, chooses to claim for himself God's own role to define and determine good and evil. It then culminates in Cain who rejects God's redemptive plan, which is based on animal sacrifice. Cain goes out of God's presence and immediately begins to establish a civilization without God. He builds a city, naming it Enoch after his son. This city reflects the distortion of human nature as shown in the violence of Lamech. By introducing polygamy, Lamech rejects marriage as intended by God and attempts the overthrow of the original social structure. While the city has inventions such as music and poetry, it has no altar, no temple, and no God. Civilization without God becomes unbearable as the earth is filled with violence and corruption, and ultimately man loses his very humanity. Bruner observes:

When man seeks his supreme end in culture and civilization, and puts this in place of God, and turns it into an absolute, the germ of inhumanity has been introduced into his life. True civilization and true culture can only develop where the cultural creation and activity is directed and ordered from a center which transcends culture.³

Eventually, God, out of necessity, interferes by bringing judgment through the flood, demolishing man and his civilization. He re-sets the man project, creating a new Adam, namely Noah. God renews the cultural mandate in Genesis 9:1. Unfortunately, Noah repeats the pattern set by Adam and Eve, and by the end of chapter 9 we encounter the familiar themes of man's fall: a tree, nakedness, and a curse. As Adam's fall culminated in Cain,

² Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 67.

³Ibid., 68.

Noah's culminates in Nimrod who, like Cain, builds a city.⁴ This time, however, the city is characterized by the tower of Babel. Possibly one of the earliest examples of a skyscraper in antiquity, the tower supposedly represents strength and unity, despite separation from God. It is meant as an act of rebellion against God, attempting to affirm both unity and division – that is, it seeks unity between one man and another, but division between man and God. In Genesis 11:7, God disrupts man's plans to build the tower by giving the builders different tongues. Thus, through a linguistic barrier, they become unable to communicate or unite, eventually becoming entirely scattered. By this sort of judgment, it can be argued that God was revealing the future of humanity. In human beings' failed attempt to unite with each other while being separate from God, they become scattered and confused.

Postmodernism vs. Modernism

Alister McGrath highlights in *Mere Apologetics* the period in history in which modernism had its greatest influence, and he explains some of modernism's basic claims:

The dominant culture environment of the west from about 1750 to 1960, is usually defined as modernity. This outlook was shaped by a belief in a universal human reason, common to all people and times, capable of gaining access to the deeper structures of the world. Reason was the key that unlocked the mysteries of life and argument was its tool of persuasion. Rational argument became the trusted tool of this cultural age.⁵

McGrath's explanation thus serves to show how reason has somewhat replaced God in the post-enlightenment age. Man not only believes that truth exists but that it can be fully accessed and understood through reason. All of man's problems can thus be overcome through unified and objective rationality, with particular emphasis on the scientific method as the epitome of rational thinking. In contrast, in postmodernism objective truth simply does not exist. J.P. Moreland explains it this way:

[Postmodernism] represents a form of cultural relativism about such things as reality, truth, reason, value, linguistic meaning, the self and other notions. On a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason and so forth. All these are social constructions, creations of linguistic practices and, as such, are relative not to individuals, but to social groups that share a narrative.... For the postmodernist, if one claims to have the truth in the correspondence sense, this assertion is a power move that victimizes those judged not to have the truth.⁶

Postmodernism thus disregards the idea that as humans we have access to objective truth. Moreover, it argues not only that we simply cannot have access to truth but that any claim to being able to do so is an act of oppression and a power play. Kevin Vanhoozer describes the pessimistic stance of postmodernists as they ridicule the optimism of modernism. In this

⁴ It can be inferred from Genesis 10 that Nimrod has an essential role in building the city, and thus, the tower.

⁵Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2016), 27.

⁶ J.P. Moreland, "Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no.1 (March 2005): 77-88. The correspondence theory of truth holds that there is an objective reality that human beings can state as propositions.

view, what used to give hope to modernists as the ultimate solution to the human predicament, namely reason, is found to be deeply limiting:

If the modern world was characterized by an optimistic belief in reason to solve our problems, the postmodern world is marked by a loss of faith. Postmodern thinkers see modernism, and everything for that matter, as myths – human creations. Modernism relied on the myths of the omnicompetence of Reason, human progress, and human perfectibility. Postmodern philosophy questions all these assumptions. According to postmodernists, all human thinking is conditioned by our place in culture and history and by language itself. All perspectives, especially that of the bourgeois western male rationalist, are finite and relative. Man is not homo sapiens, the wise or knowing animal, but rather the myth-making animal. Man creates values; man makes himself. Instead of trying to discover our fixed nature, the postmodern tendency is to think in terms of social constructivism.⁷

Vanhoozer thus emphasizes the postmodern realization of human finitude. It is not that all things in reality can be understood and explained objectively and independently of the human subject; on the contrary, what we think of as reality is merely our own subjective conception of the world outside of us.

The philosophical parallel between postmodernism and Christianity

These basic claims of postmodernism are generally parallel to what scripture describes as the human condition after the fall. Four elements, in particular, in postmodernism can be highlighted and examined in light of scripture: lack of a fixed human nature, the imperfection of reason, the absence of objective truth and reality, and the limitation of language.

The lack of a fixed human nature

Postmodernists reject the idea of a divinely created fixed human self. Hence, human nature is not something to be discovered but rather to be created. Michel Foucault emphasizes this idea in his work on human sexuality. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s entry on Foucault explains this in the following way:

Foucault's last two books are an attempt to make a contribution to the task of rethinking ethics, but they are also a continuation of his attempt to rethink the subject. Now the focus is on the forms of understanding that subjects create about themselves and the practices by which they transform their mode of being. In his study of ancient Greek ethics, Foucault continued to pursue his idea that there was no true self that could be deciphered and emancipated, but that the self was something that had been—and must be—created.⁸

⁷ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Theological Anthropology*. An unpublished lecture given at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. 2013. Course: ST5102.

⁸Gutting, Gary and Oksala, Johanna, "Michel Foucault", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed November 20, 2018, <<u>https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/foucault/></u>.

In the above reflection on Genesis 1-11, it was inferred that scripture places great weight on human nature and its relation to man's role in creating civilization. It was precisely because man is created in the image of a triune God, a God whose nature is that of love and of light, that man was then tasked with creating a civilization that reflects God's moral nature. The postmodernists, including Foucault, in their rejection of God are entirely consistent. They understand that without a narrative within which man is created in the image of God a fixed human nature will be lost. Moreover, they understand the radical implications that this loss may have for civilization, culture, and ethics. As Lamech introduced polygamy in recognition that without God human sexuality becomes merely a matter of personal desire, postmodernists also understand that, without a fixed human nature, sexuality is nothing but the unique inclinations of the human subject.

The imperfection of reason

Postmodernists are also deeply aware of the imperfection of human reason. Foucault describes this idea quite radically: "Reason is the ultimate language of madness."⁹Christians should be aware that although reason is a fundamental characteristic of human nature and should be deeply valued, it is not, as modernists assert, the key to all human problems. The Christian understanding is that without God man is depraved, which includes man's faculty of reason. Corrupted by sin, human beings are, thus, deeply limited. As the apostle Paul explains, "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done" (Romans 1:28).

The absence of objective truth and reality

From the recognition that human reason is deeply limited, it follows that truth, as something that is to be understood by reason, is considered to be absent. Reality for postmodernists is a subjective social construction. Philosophers point out that affirming the limitations of reason points to a problem: the denial of the existence of objective truth and reality is in itself a truth claim. In this situation, postmodernists are caught in a contradiction. By denying that it is possible to know anything absolute about truth or reality, postmodernists have already made a truth claim about reality. However, in the denial of the existence of reality, postmodernists are consistent with the biblical diagnosis of man's state after doing away with God. According to the apostles Paul and John, the reality of the world after rejecting God is deeply fake and entirely based on deception. Moreover, the prophets of the Old Testament frequently asserted that truth is absent from the earth. The Bible does not say that there is no truth but that in a world without God truth is absent. And the goal of God's redemptive economy is to regain it. Thus, when postmodernists understand and recognize humanity's inability to access truth in a godless world, they are in agreement with the biblical narrative.

The limitation of language

Following from what has been explained above, it makes sense to discuss postmodernists' understanding of language. The classical structuralist idea of language is that it consists of signifiers and signified; where the signifier is the sound uttered, and the signified is the thing in reality to which the sound uttered is referring. As noted above, the problem for postmodernists is that they do not think we can actually have access to reality. Thus, the signified, which we think we are signifying in reality, is merely our subjective conception of reality. In this view, all that we claim to know about reality is merely a linguistic expression

⁹Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 63.

of our own subjective experience. Vanhoozer explains this in the following way: "Both [Richard] Rorty and [Jacques] Derrida have exposed the irony in metaphysics: the metaphysician sets out to speak about the real but ends up saying something about himself."¹⁰ Postmodernists argue that all claims made about objective reality are actually claims made about the subjective self. It is important however, to note that postmodernists still understand language to be based on signifiers and signified. However, they understand the signified to be in itself another signifier. If all that we can refer to is merely our own subjective experience and that subjective experience translates into language meaning signifiers, then, by attempting to refer to reality, we are merely referring to the linguistic translation of our own subjective experience. The signifier only refers to another signifier, and this chain of signifiers is endless. Vanhoozer explains this as follows:

Nietzsche, the patron saint of postmodernity, prophesized accurately: if God is dead, then it's interpretation "all the way down." Formulation never reaches fact. No one formulation can ever be regarded as final. As in interpretation, so in life: everything becomes undecidable.¹¹

Language is thus highly limited in postmodernists' understanding. What takes place as a result of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) can be interpreted to be compatible with the postmodernist understanding of the limitation of language. God interferes and changes the languages of the men building the tower of Babel, revealing the deepest problem that comes about as a result of this rejection of God: the human condition after declaring the death of God is that of scatterdness and confusion. As explained by the postmodernist, objective reality is lost, and language itself loses its capacity to be a method of communication about such reality. It becomes entirely subjective; and similar to the builders of the tower of Babel, the postmodernists lament their deep sense of loss and disintegration.

Practical advice on how to evangelize postmodernists

Focus on relationality and not just rationality

Although the Christian faith is rational, it is inherently relational. Christian salvation is not the rational acceptance of proved facts about Jesus, but rather it is the acceptance and trusting of Jesus himself as a savior. Therefore, focusing on the beauty of the person of Jesus and on the need of humanity for him is more appealing to postmodernists than rationally proving the facts of the gospel. Recent studies on American university students show that, in the 1960s and 1970s, students were more inclined to accept the gospel because they were intellectually persuaded by it; whereas, starting in the 1990s, they are more likely to report loving the person of Jesus, becoming part of a warm church-like community, and experiencing the joy and liberating effect of encountering Jesus as reasons for accepting the Christian gospel. This represents a shift from believing and then belonging, to belonging and then believing. This does not of course mean that we ought to disregard reason and not attempt to defend the faith rationally; rather, it suggests that we ought to do so only when it is needed. We should always be careful to observe when our audience needs more than just persuasion through reason.

¹⁰Kenvin Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. By Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 75.

¹¹Ibid., 78.

Share the story

Christian evangelists have a great advantage in that Christian truth is revealed in a story and not in arguments or mere abstract propositions. It is of course factual and we can argue rationally and historically for it, yet it is inherently a narrative. The truth about Jesus is provided in a story, and the whole truth about God is presented in a story. Hence, when postmodernists say "don't tell me that you have the truth, just share your story," it is not wise to argue for the objectivity of the Christian truth; rather, it is then better to share the truth of the biblical story in a narrative.

Preach the abundant life, not the lazy afterlife

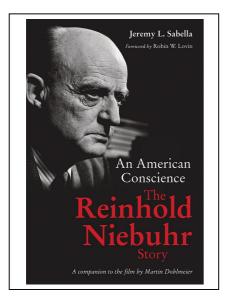
As explained above, postmodernists do not believe in a discoverable fixed human nature and meaning of life. However, it remains true that all human beings deeply desire to discover their unique selves and to live a meaningful life. This is the appeal at the core of the Christian gospel. We preach that the savior, Jesus Christ, takes the sinner on a journey of healing that restores distorted humanity's unactualized uniqueness and lost purpose. We thus ought not reduce the Christian gospel to a free entry ticket into heaven or an insurance policy against hell. This gospel will appeal to postmodernists who emphasize experience. We should not preach about abstract future realities; rather, we should invite postmodernists to experience a life of satisfaction. With this approach, the evangelist can then communicate to postmodernists the kind of joy that he as a subject is experiencing.

Conclusion

In the first part of this essay, I reflected upon Genesis 1-11. In light of this reflection, one first notices that, after the fall, man did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. From Cain to Nimrod, human nature is deeply depraved, and civilization and culture are deeply corrupted. Modernism and postmodernism are no exceptions as they too are just as distorted. However, if modernism is the building of the city and the tower, postmodernism is the recognition of confusion and scatteredness. Postmodernists recognize this confusion through their admittance of the lack of a fixed human nature, the imperfection of reason, the absence of access to objective reality, and finally, the limitation of language. It is precisely because postmodernists admit of these things that they are in fundamental agreement with the biblical diagnosis of man's condition after the fall. The correspondence between scripture and postmodernism creates the opportunity for evangelism. This is why, in spite of all the challenges it presents, postmodernism, in particular, creates an opportunity for evangelism. In order to seize this opportunity, Christian evangelists must adopt an approach suitable to reach a postmodern world.

Maher Samuel

Professional psychiatrist with a Master's degree in Philosophy and Religion from Trinity International University, Illinois, U.S.A.



Book Review An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story

By Jeremy L. Sabella

Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2017, 155 pages

n April 1, 2017, Maryland Public Television showed a documentary on Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), one of America's great theologians. The documentary, produced by Journey Films and directed by Martin Doblmeier, was well researched and included interviews with political leaders Jimmy Carter and Andrew Young; public commentator David Brooks; and a raft of impressive academics, including Cornel West and Stanley Hauerwas. Jeremy L. Sabella, who had recently earned his Ph.D. from Boston College with a dissertation on Niebuhr's Christian realism, wrote the companion book to the documentary of the same name, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*. Sabella, now serving as a professor of religion at Fairfield University, Connecticut, has written a thoughtful, concise, and generally celebratory introduction to Niebuhr's life and thought.

Although a hugely influential academic, the highest degree Niebuhr received was a Master of Arts in Divinity in 1915 from Yale Divinity School. He then served as a pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan, until 1928. For the remainder of his career, until his retirement in 1960, Niebuhr was a professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary, a lofty academic perch from which he produced twenty-one books and over 2,600 articles. His books include some of the most memorable theological texts of the twentieth century: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932);*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Volumes I and II (1941, 1943); *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944); and *The Irony of American History* (1952).

Like Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther, Niebuhr was an occasional theologian, which is to say that he wrote, not in a systematic way, but in response to the pressing issues of his day as they arose. While serving as a pastor in Detroit, he was concerned about matters such as America's entry into World War I, racism, a renascent Ku Klux Klan, and the labor practices of automobile Titan Henry Ford.

It was at Union Theological Seminary, however, that Niebuhr wrote his appraisal of the Social Gospel, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that brought him national renown. Niebuhr's critique of the movement's liberal naïveté and his realist resort to the use of coercion to combat

social evil sent an electric shock through America's Protestant establishment. Sabella writes that "*Moral Man* changed the face of theological discourse in America." Cornel West concurs, lauding it as "the most important text of Christian ethics to this day." *Moral Man* appeared at a moment of crisis in American history, as 1932-33 was the nadir of the Great Depression. Niebuhr's radicalism, then, was understandable in its context. Yet it would have an unexpected and far-reaching influence. Sabella comments that Niebuhr's book "helped lay the groundwork for key aspects of the civil rights movement." For it was upon reading *Moral Man* that a young Martin Luther King Jr. refined his understanding of how nonviolence and civil disobedience could be used as political leverage.

Niebuhr may have been at his best as an iconoclast shattering outmoded but deeply entrenched paradigms. Yet over the course of the next two decades he moved steadily to the center-left of the American political spectrum. By the time he wrote the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* in 1943, Sabella writes, "he had established himself as the country's premier theologian." *Nature and Destiny* was based on Niebuhr's Gifford lectures, given in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1939. During one of the lectures, the sound of German bombs exploding a few miles away may have lent somber corroboration to Niebuhr's argument for humanity's essential fallenness, sinfulness, and tragic nature. Despite all outward appearances, however, Niebuhr concluded that humanity's destiny was not finally to be tragic but transcendent. While in *Moral Man* he arraigned human communities for their inevitable tendency to immorality, in *Nature and Destiny* he asserted their "positive potential of grace in history."

Niebuhr's theological commitments shifted over time from the optimism of the Social Gospel at the outset of his career to the pessimism of *Moral Man* and finally to the Christian realism of *Nature and Destiny*. He would continue to espouse and develop this latter more-balanced view for the remainder of his career. In 1940 he wrote "An End to Illusions," which announced his break with pacifism and socialism. Reentering mainstream politics, he urged America's intervention into World War II and helped to craft President Franklin Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" – a declaration of American principles issued as the nation stood on the threshold of world war. In 1944 he wrote *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, a defense of democracy amid the global struggle against totalitarianism. For Niebuhr, democracy is better than any of the alternatives (namely, Nazism and Communism) because it is based on a Christian view of human nature. It sets interest against interest in a system of checks and balances that, necessarily in a fallen world, modestly seek "proximate solutions to insoluble problems."

Niebuhr's realism was never a simple "political realism" that assumed that nations should only operate on the basis of self-interest and the pursuit of power. Instead, he advocated a "Christian realism" that understood the world of politics on its own self-interested terms but also insisted that political decisions should take into account the ideals of love and justice. Without this, he concluded, politics would never move beyond the balance-of-power strategies of the status quo.

In the postwar years, as America entered the long twilight struggle of the Cold War, Niebuhr helped to found Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), an organization of Democratic political leaders and thinkers who sought to sustain "the vital center" of American politics against the illusions of the left and the ruthlessness of the right.

On March 8, 1948, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary issue, a sure sign that he had arrived as a public theologian. To liberals, he was often taunted as the "establishment theologian." Yet Sabella makes a good argument that this moniker more rightly belongs to Billy Graham than to Niebuhr. After all it was Niebuhr, not Graham, who was the subject of an FBI investigation for potentially subversive activity. Moreover, it was Graham who hobnobbed with presidents while Niebuhr consistently took nuanced and critical stands on government policies. For example, he lamented the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but he later endorsed the nuclear deterrence policy of the government during the Cold War. The ambiguity implicit in Niebuhr's stances on American policy decisions can also be seen in his last great book, *The Irony of American History* (1952), in which he sought to puncture American pretensions to righteousness and innocence while maintaining fealty to America's soaring idealism.

"A foolish consistency," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." Niebuhr was never foolish, and he made a career of exposing philosophical-theological hobgoblins in American politics. Moreover, he never allowed himself to remain shackled to previous positions merely to retain a public image of consistency. In the course of his career, he moved from pacifist to military interventionist, from socialist to New Deal Democrat, from Social Gospeler to Christian Realist, and from a far-left critic of the government to being the so-called "establishment theologian."

Niebuhr recognized the moral ambiguity of the political world. He saw that political choices are often between two evils – sometimes between the unthinkable and the merely vile. Above all he sought to chart a middle course in the political realm between sentimentality and cynicism. Though not well known today by the general public, in 1991 *Time* magazine commended him as "the greatest Protestant theologian in America since Jonathan Edwards." He has been admired and acclaimed by political leaders as discordant as Barack Obama and John McCain, and by theologians as disparate as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel and Protestant ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. Niebuhr's Christian realism is a timeless contribution to political thought, one often claimed both by liberals and conservatives, idealists and realists, neocons and theocons. Though a home-grown twentieth-century American thinker, Niebuhr's Christian interpretation of politics is one that transcends time and nationality. If the reader has not yet encountered this towering theologian of the twentieth century, Sabella's short incisive study may be just the place to make his acquaintance.

Michael Parker Professor of Church History ETSC

A History of Syriac Christianity, Part I

By Heleen Murre-van den Berg



Dr. Murre-van den Berg presented a series of six lectures at ETSC during the period from January 16 to19, 2019. Below is the first of three installments of these lectures, which have been edited for conciseness and clarity. She is professor of Eastern Christianity and director of the Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen.

Introduction

oday we begin a six-part lecture series that will discuss the early Syriac churches. I will begin with the period starting from the second century, which is when Syriac Christianity emerges, and continue through the rise of Islam. And tomorrow we will continue from

there. But before I begin with the early history of the churches, I would like to say a few things about Syriac Studies as an academic field. In the past, most people came to Syriac studies from the field of theology because in the Syriac tradition there are many interesting sources about the history of the Bible, about early Christianity, and much discussion of theology. The Syriac tradition has much to say to all of these fields of study. We will touch on all that in the coming classes.

Syriac studies have also drawn researchers from the field of linguistics, especially those interested in Aramaic. This is a very important language. If we compare Semitic languages, Aramaic is a big language with a long history and with many different branches. So Aramaic is a very important language to study if one wants to study Arabic, Hebrew, and the Ethiopian languages. Syriac, as one of the best documented Aramaic languages, is one of the crucial languages to understand if one wants to study Semitic linguistics.

Syriac Studies: intersection fields

Tradition based

- Biblical Studies
- World Christianity/ intercultural theology/ ecumenical theology. Orthodox studies
- Linguistics and philology: Syriac as part of Semitic studies, within which Aramaic plays an important role Area based
- History
- Religious Studies/Anthropology
- Area Studies Themes: theology, interreligious and interdenominational encounters language, identity and nationalism

Insert 1

The study of the Syriac language and Syriac communities is also important for those interested in studying the history of the Middle East, not only for the period of the early church but also for the modern period that sees the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, historians and anthropologists interested in the Middle East have become interested in Syriac studies. I will try to touch a little on all of this to share some of what I find so exciting about Syriac studies.

Lecture One A History of Early Syriac Christianity A.D. 200 to 700

Let's begin by looking at Syriac Christianity as part of the history of the churches of the Middle East. Some of you will no doubt be very much at home with this material and even find it repetitious, but for others it may be entirely new. When we talk about the churches of the Middle East, we usually organize them in the way that you see in the chart (see insert 2). This shows that there are three main groups: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

We usually divide the Orthodox into two groups: the Eastern Orthodox and what we now call the Oriental Orthodox. The term *Eastern Orthodox* denotes the churches that are related to Constantinople and are the inheritors of the Byzantine tradition. In the Middle East it has three major patriarchates: Antioch, which is the church of Syria and the Levant; Jerusalem, which is very small but, of course, very important; and Alexandria, which is in Egypt but a very small church compared to the Coptic Church (which also emerged out of the patriarchate of Alexandria). As you can see from the chart, there is no independent Syriac church within the

Syriac Christianity as part of the history of the churches of the Middle East

Orthodox

- Eastern Orthodox
 - Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria
- Oriental Orthodox
 - **Syriac**, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean
 - (Assyrian [Nestorian]) Church of the East

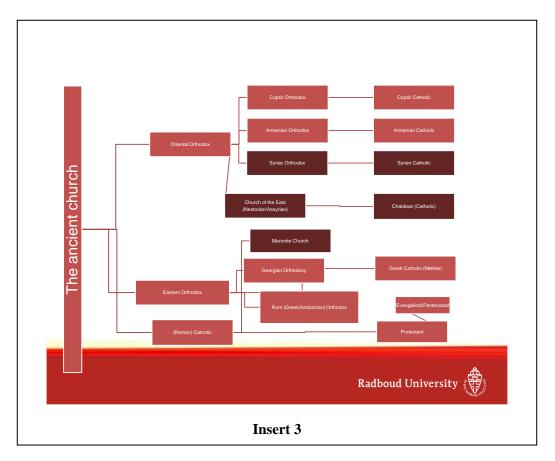
Catholic

- Roman Catholic
- Maronite
- Chaldean
- Syriac Catholic
- Armenian, Coptic, Greek Catholic Protestant
- Evangelical/Pentecostal/Charismatic Insert 2

Eastern Orthodox tradition.

The Syriac Churches mostly appear in the category of the Oriental Churches, and the most important one is the Syriac Orthodox Church. Other groups in this tradition include the Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, and Eritreans. There is also a group that cannot be put into this category very easily. It is what we now call the Assyrian Church of the East, which used to be called the Nestorian Church of the East. We will also return to examine this church in greater detail in a later lecture.

And finally we have the Catholic churches, and among them is the Syriac Catholic churches. We will review all of these in greater detail in a later lecture. For now, let me just make a few comments about them. The most important one is the Maronite Church, which has close links to the Syriac tradition. The Chaldeans are the Catholic counterpart to the Church of the East.



The Syriac Catholics are the Catholic variety of the Syriac Orthodox. And of course there are also Syriac Christians among the Protestants – people who come from the Syriac tradition and have joined a Protestant denomination but, except for a few places, do not have separate churches. I have organized the same churches in another chart (see insert 3), but this time they appear in historical order from left to right. So here we begin with the ancient church that

roughly split into three groups, which we just talked about. Sometime later this breaks down in to a variety of new churches: the Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic Orthodox; the Church of the East; the Maronite and some others; and then in a still later period, the Catholics.

In this class we will do a historical overview of the Syriac churches. We will start with early Christianity and the Byzantine period. In the next class we will talk about the Islamic period – the



Early Christianity: Greek, Roman, non-Greek, non-Roman: within, on and over the borders of the Roman Empire **Insert 4**

Umayyad, Abbasid, and Mongols. Then we'll spend two classes on the Ottoman period as the nineteenth century is very important to an understanding of the transformation of Christianity from old forms to what we see today. During the fifth class, we will examine the twentieth century in the Middle East, and in the last class we will consider these communities as they are spread across the world.

Syriac History: Periodization (& Classes)
Class I
■ Early Christianity (-350)
East Roman/Byzantine (350-661)
Class II
■ Ummayad (661-750), Abbasid (750-
1258), Mongol (1258-137)
■ (Among others: Zara Qoyunlu (1386-
1467)
Class III& IV
• Ottoman $(1512-1923)$ – with special
attention to the 19th c., until 1923
Class V
 Mandates/Interwar period (1923-
1945), 3independent Arab states
(1945-today
(1) 10 today
Class VI
 Contemporary transnational
communities
Insert 5

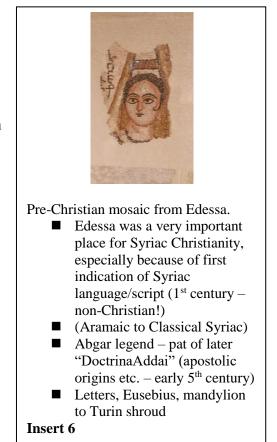
Christian.

Okay. Let's begin. I often use this nap (see insert 4) with my students in the Netherlands because many European tudents are not at all aware that, in the beriod of early Christianity, the bulk of the Christian population was in the Middle East. o that they would not know that, even hough by the second century there were lready Christians in what is now Europe, the najority of Christians would be in the East. And of course the map is not inclusive ecause there were also Christians in Ethiopia and Sudan. Syriac Christianity tarted in the area of Southeastern Turkey, Curkey-Syria, and what is now North Iraq nd Persia.

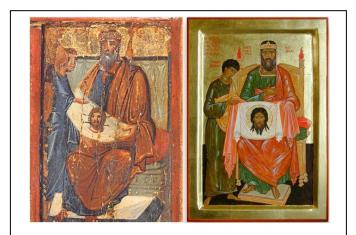
The city of Edessa is where we are sure that Syriac Christianity existed at a very early date. Edessa is known under various names: Osrhoene is one of the names used in Roman sources; in Arabic it is ar-Ruha, in Syriac Urhay, and Urfa (Sanliurfa) is how it appears in Turkish sources and how it is known today. In Edessa we know that for the first time Syriac was written. But it was not yet

What we see here (see insert 6) is a mosaic that is not yet Christian. It is from the grave of a rich woman. On the left you see Syriac writing, which was usually written from top to bottom, especially in inscriptions. We know that in Edessa and its environs people used this kind of writing and this kind of script, but there is nothing specifically Christian about it. Very soon after this, we have Syria sources telling us about the history of Christianity in that place. And after that we do not see Syriac texts that are not Christian. So apparently these groups converted to Christianity and used this language, which increasingly was a written language. It was used as the language of the church and for the type of things that concerned them. It became very popular. At the same time, Christians from the surrounding area, who probably spoke a type of Aramaic similar to that appearing in the mosaic, also started to use Syriac as their written language. One of the most important early texts we have in Syriac, which in its current form is from the early fifth century, is the *Teaching of Addai*, which includes the socalled Abgar legend. A very interesting text about Christianity in Edessa that tries to prove its apostolic credentials, it tells us that the inhabitants of Edessa converted to Christianity in the first century because of an exchange of letters between Jesus and King Abgar. There is no proof of the authenticity of this story, but it suggests that Christianity has ancient roots in this area and that people cherished the story. The fourth-century Church historian Eusebius tells the same story, though in a different version.

One of the interesting things about the legend is that it includes the detail that Jesus' disciples sent an image of Jesus to Edessa. According to the tradition, there are two versions of the image. One is a painted image (by Hannan, the emissary of Abgar), while the other is an impression of his face (see insert 7). Some believed that the latter was necessary since it would not be possible to paint Jesus' image as no artist could capture his features. Since he could not be painted, an impression of his face was made instead. The Image of



Edessa is generally known as the Holy Mandylion (cloth or towel). Some have even suggested a connection to the famous Shroud of Turin, but it is more likely these are in fact two separate stories.



King Abgar of Edessa holding the Holy Mandylion. Left, St. Catherine's Monastery, 10th century; right, a contemporary version **Insert 7**

Another early center of Christianity in the East is Adiabene, whose capital was Arbela, (present-day Erbil in Northern Iraq). What Erbil shows is that from the beginning there was a connection to Judaism. Many of the first converts to Christianity were Jews living in the Roman Empire. It's a very interesting story. In Erbil, in Adiabene, we know the royal house had converted to Judaism in the early first century. Queen Helena in the first century converted to Judaism and moved to Jerusalem, where she was buried and where her grave can still be found. This Palestinian connection may have opened the way for Christianity to be introduced into Erbil about 150

years after her death. Notably, there is a Syriac community in Erbil (Ankawa) even today.



Syrian church fromsixth-century Nusaybin (Nisibis).

- Bilingual Greek/Aramaic communities in the Levant
- Early Aramaic centers in the East Adiabene, Edessa, later also "Persia" (Seleucia Ctesiphon)
- Building upon local Hellenistic/Aramaic & Jewish linguistic cultures
- Early spread to India :Thomas Christians"
- Part of loose network of churches, different theological positions.

Insert 8

A third very important place was Nusaybin, also known by the Greek version of its name, *Nisibis*. It flourished as a Syriac Christian center especially in the late fifth and sixth centuries. It is one of the very few places whose early church building still stands. The one found there (see insert 8) probably dates from the sixth century. Already in the fourth century, Nusaybin housed a medical and theological school which the Syrians had to give up when the Persians captured the city in 363. The school was later moved to Edessa. However, in the late fifth century, Nusaybin once again became a center of learning after the school in Edessa was closed in the aftermath of the Christological discussions. Nusaybin is just on the border of present-day Syria and Turkey.

I have been stressing the Syriac-Aramaic aspect of these churches, but in this early period, Greek would still have been very much part of the cultural world. There would not yet have been a great distinction between these two language groups, and many of these early churches would still be using Greek. Probably ordinary people could only speak Aramaic, but the priests and monks would know some Greek and would be in touch with what was happening in the western part of the Middle East.

An interesting question is, when did Syriac

Christianity spread to India? The answer is that we don't know. But we do know that sometime in the third and fourth centuries there were Syriac-speaking Christians in India. Some of you may know the story of St. Thomas traveling to India to convert Indians. This story, again, is difficult to prove, but it does seem that there were Syriac churches established there quite early that have survived in some form down to the present. Another thing to stress is that the early Syriac church straddled two empires. Parts of the church flourished in the Roman Empire, such as Edessa; but other parts were in the Persian Empire, like Nisibis and Erbil.

Before we continue with this history, let's have a look at inserts 9 and 10, which concern the early production of classical Syriac texts. The texts in slide 9 have been transmitted in the Christian Syriac tradition but were not necessarily conceived within that tradition. Let's look at the first two, the "Hymn of the Pearl" and the "Odes of Salomon." "The Hymn of the Pearl" is part of the Acts of Thomas, but most researchers

Early Syriac Texts/authors

- Hymn of the Pearl (Acts of Thomas)
- Odes of Salomon (2nd c?) (Liturgical? Poetry
- Tatian (c. 120-180) Diatesseron –
- Bardaisan (154-222?) Dialogues, among which: Book of the Law of the Countries, hymns

Insert 9

think that the text is older than that of Acts. Probably neither the "Hymn of the Pearl" nor the "Odes of Salomon" were originally even Christian texts. Though they may have originated in a Jewish or gnostic milieu, they were incorporated later into Christian literature because they fitted so well into Syriac Christianity.

The next text is Tatian's *Diatesseron*, which is the four gospels woven into one story. A very popular Gospel version of the early church, many translations have been made of it, and it has been the subject of numerous commentaries. Later on, the church decided to stop using this text in its liturgy. Today there is no church that uses this version of the gospel story. Ephrem, one of the greatest authors of the period, wrote a commentary on the *Diatesseron*. It is still important to scholars though it was used in the Syriac churches only for a brief period.

Then we have Bardaisan, another early author in Classical Syriac. A special figure in the history of Syriac Christianity, he wrote a very interesting text, *The Book of the Laws of the Countries*, which combines a kind of Gnostic and neo-Platonist spirituality with Christianity. This text is no longer used by any of the Syriac churches for their liturgy or theology, but it's

very helpful to read in order to understand the diversity of early Christianity and also to gain a broader understanding of Greek and Christian philosophy in this early period.

In insert 10 you find a series of texts that have remained part of the Syriac tradition until today. The most

Early Syriac Texts/authors

- Ephrem (Nisibis/Edessa, d 373): commentary, hymns, homilies
- Aphrahat (d. 345, Adiabene): "Demonstrations"
- Peshitta: Syriac Bible translation (2nd-5th Gospel Harmonycentury)
- Early liturgy: "Liturgy of Addai and Mari"
- until today in Church of the East

Insert 10

important author of this early period is St. Ephrem, and we have included some of his work in the readings that you will get. He wrote beautiful poems, and his poems are still read and sung in Syriac churches. The Virgin Mary was a very important theme for these songs. His hymns became very famous and were translated into Greek, Romanian, and Arabic – and possibly Coptic too. Another reason why Ephrem is a favorite among many modern scholars and theologians is that he was very much in favor of having women sing in church. He created separate women's choirs and special songs for these choirs; and right up to the present, women's choirs contribute to worship services in Syriac churches.

Aphrahat is less well known, but he nonetheless wrote very interesting explanations of biblical themes. Better known in the East than the West, his writings are important to read in order to gain an understanding of early Syriac Christianity.

The Peshitta, the Syriac Bible translation, was probably written over a long period of time. No one person translated it; rather, various groups of translators made independent contributions that, when assembled, were eventually received into the Syriac tradition. In some parts of the Old Testament, you can see the influence of Jewish Bible translations. Since this translation predates the schisms in the Syriac church, it is used by all the branches of the Syriac churches today.

Finally this is also when the Syriac liturgy emerged and was put into a written form.

Byzantine Struggles and the Emergence of the Syriac Churches

Now let's discuss the complicated history of the Christological controversies of the fifth century. At this time the church held ecumenical councils in order to resolve the problem and unify the churches around a single theological solution. The result, however, was greater disunity, for the councils contributed to producing the separate churches of the Middle East that we know today.

A good place to start is with Nestorius (386-451), the archbishop of Constantinople from 428 to 431. By his way of thinking, the divine and human natures of Christ should not be seen as merging without any remaining distinctions. Applying this approach to the Virgin Mary, he concluded that it would be inappropriate to refer to her as "Mother of God" since that would imply that the divine would have completely overwhelmed and subsumed Christ's humanity at his birth. He preferred the title "Mother of Christ." The way he put this was for many people too strong. They accused him of separating the human and divine natures of Christ. We don't have much of Nestorius' own writing, so it's difficult to be sure exactly what Nestorius himself thought.



HagiSophia, founded by Emperor Constantius in 360 A.D. Insert 11

The Byzantine church decided that the way he framed these things was not acceptable, and so he was condemned by the first Council of Ephesus in 431. The second Council of Ephesus, in 449, went even further in prioritizing what came to be known as the Miaphysite position, which was espoused by the patriarchate of Alexandria. It stressed the complete union of the human and divine natures of Christ into one unique human-divine nature. Without referring specifically to Nestorius, many Christians found that the Miaphysite position did not do justice to the necessary distinction between Christ's human and divine natures. Therefore, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the emperor sought a compromise position to reconcile the Miaphysite position with

those of the others. However, the final formulations of the Council of Chalcedon were not accepted by the Miaphysites. In the end, the church of Egypt and part of the church of Syria did not accept the Council of Chalcedon and thus the beginning of separate churches can be traced to the mid-fifth century.

The imposing structure of the former Greek Orthodox patriarchal cathedral Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (see insert 11) suggests that the conflict was not only about theology but also about political and ecclesial power. The struggle of the churches of Egypt and Syria with the emperor and church leaders in Constantinople was, at least in part, also about who would make decisions for the imperial church and how the churches all over the Byzantine Empire would develop themselves. On a final note, we should realize that the Church of the East, which was accused of being "Nestorian," was not really involved in these discussions because of the ongoing struggles

between the Persian and Byzantine Empires. This is one of the reasons they did not manage to send representatives to the Council of Chalcedon. Though in hindsight one may conclude that the final formulations of Chalcedon were not so different from those that developed in the Church of the East that followed Nestorius' position, the so-called Nestorians were never rehabilitated by the churches of Rome and Byzantium, let alone by those from the Miaphysite traditions.

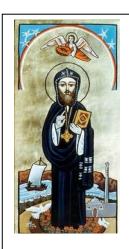
The Syriac Churches

Let us talk a bit more about the early Syriac tradition. One of the most famous patriarchs in the Christological discussions was Severus of Antioch (465-538, patriarch 512-518) (see insert 12). He opposed the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, which made him a controversial



Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora Insert 13

ich made him a controversial figure at the time. He was popular in those parts of Syria that were non-Chalcedonian and unpopular in those



Severus of Antioch Insert 12

favorable to Chalcedon. Today, he is venerated as a saint in the Oriental Orthodox Church and seen as an early patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

The Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527-565) supported the pro-Chalcedonian imperial church, but his wife, Empress Theodora (r. 527-548), supported the non-Chalcedonian Egyptian and Syrian Orthodox churches (see insert 13). The emperor, who was obviously aware of the Egyptian and Syrian churches, tried to keep both at peace as best he could.

Jacob Bard'ono (or Baradeus) was the bishop of Edessa (r. 543/-578) (insert 14). When

the church of Syria started to split from the imperial church, he traveled around the region to consecrate monks, priests, and bishops in order to build up what is now the Syriac Orthodox Church. Jacob of Sarugh (451- 521) was an early poet-theologian of the church. He wrote hymns in the tradition of Ephrem, which became very popular and are sung today even more often than Ehprem's hymns. I included him in your reading list.

Not all Syriac-speaking Christians of the time were part of either the Syriac Orthodox Church or the Church of the East. For a long time the patriarchate of Antioch, though part of the Byzantine ("Greek") Orthodox Church, included many people who spoke Syriac and, during their worship services, sang and prayed in this



Jacob Bard 'ono (Baradeus) (r. 543-578) Insert 14

language. In fact, even in the present day the liturgy of the Church of Antioch (with its see in Damascus) includes a few Syriac songs, though most of the hymns are in Arabic.

Another important group to consider is the Maronite Church. This church probably emerged from a group of Christians in the region around present-day Homs in western Syria. The Maronites wanted to find a compromise between the pro-Chalcedonians and the Miaphysites of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Consequently, they supported Monotheletism, one of the compromises that was promulgated by Emperor Heraclius (610-641). According to this position, Christ had one perfectly united will in which his human and divine natures were completely merged, transcending the differentiation between the human and divine natures as accepted at Chalcedon. This position, however, was not accepted by either side of the divide, and the Maronites themselves later came to accept Chalcedonian theology.

There are quite a few uncertainties about the early history of the Maronites. As far as is known, in the fourth century the Maronites were not yet a separate ethnic group; rather, they were lay and monastic people living in and around a monastery. Their region had one large monastery and many smaller ones nearby. According to tradition, the founder of the Maronite Church is St. Maron (d. 410) – or Mar Maron – who lived in the Taurus Mountains as a hermit monk. It was only after his death that his followers established the Syriac Maronite Church. His followers soon developed into a Christian community of not only monks but also families living in parishes. At some point when the conflict between the pro-Chalcedonians and the Syrian Orthodox grew heated, the nascent Maronites gradually moved into the mountains of Lebanon to be safe from persecution. Then they slowly formed their own church. The first patriarch of what was to become the Maronite Church was John Maron (628-707).



Left, the first three images are traditional icons of Simeon the Sytlite. Far right, ruins of the Church of Saint Simeon, near Allepo. **Insert 15**

Monasticism

Monasticism has long been an important and distinctive feature of Syriac Christianity. One of the most famous of the Eastern Orthodox monks was Simeon the Stylite (390-459), who lived for thirty-seven years atop a stylite (pillar) in the ruins of Telanissa, present-day Taladah near Aleppo. Simeon, himself Syriac-speaking, became an important figure in Syriac asceticism. His form of asceticism was not simply a withdrawal from the world; rather, it was one that was very

interested in people. According to Theodore of Cyrrhus (c. 393-460), who was one of the first to write about him, people from all over the area came to his pillar to hear him preach and in hopes that he would heal them. The picture (see insert 15) shows him receiving a leather pouch with food in it. In its embrace of monasticism, the Eastern Orthodox Church of Byzantium, also called the Melkite Church (from Syriac*16 alka*" of the King/Emperor"), included most of the churches of the East.

Sassanian Empire

While the Church was growing and developing in Syria, the Church of the East was also expanding in the Sassanian Empire – the last Persian empire before the rise of Islam. Already in the year 410, the church had convened its own synod. This was before Chalcedon, so it should be observed that this church emerged as an independent body on its own initiative, not as a breakaway church. From 410 they also started to call their bishop *Catholicos*, seeing him as equal in rank to the five patriarchs in the West. Later they added the term *patriarch* to *catholicos*: hence we have the Catholicos Patriarch of Seleucia Ctesiphon. Under the Sassanid Persians, Christians generally did quite well; however, there were also periods of persecution. The most important ones were those that occurred around the time of the Council of Chalcedon under Shah Yazdegard II (438-457). Because the Persian rulers wanted to make sure that their Christians would not side with the Byzantine Roman Empire, they did what they could to keep them separate from Rome and away from its influence. Nevertheless, Christians were often accused of treason. When things between the Byzantine Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire were peaceful, life was generally easier for Christians.

In the end, the theology of the Christians in the Sassanian Empire was not far from Chalcedon. They both had a Dyophysite theology, one affirming the two natures of Christ. The Church of the East did not base its theology on Nestorius but on Theodore of Mopsuestia, who was made an official teacher in the Church of the East by patriarch Bawai (497-502). Though Bawai also made Nestorius an official teacher of the church and he was honored as a saint by the church, the common theological formulations of the church came mostly from Theodore and Bawai. Until today, the Church of the East refrains from calling Mary "Mother of God," preferring the title "Mother of Christ." Despite the church's emphasis on the two natures of Christ, a distinction it shares with the Byzantine and Western churches, the Church of the East saw the human nature of Christ as being closely connected to the divine nature, not as something separate from it.

One of the Church of the East's most beautiful poems that expresses this idea is also one of its most popular hymns. In describing the life of Jesus, it ends with alternating refrains: "He is truly a human being" and "He is truly God." The use of one or the other depends on what event is being described. When the hymns refer to Jesus Christ's raising Lazarus from the dead, it says, "He is truly God." But when it tells how Jesus Christ was crying, "He is truly a human being" is used. The hymn alternates between these refrains as it relates Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This poem emphasizes that though Christ is human and divine all the time, it depends on a person's perspective if one is seeing God or a human being. It is the same person, but with two aspects. This exemplifies not only how the Church of the East talks about the two natures of Christ but also they, like all Syriac Christians, prefer to talk theologically through their hymns.

The church's theological centers were the schools of Nisibis, Syria, founded in 489; Gondeshapur, Persia, founded in the sixth century; and a center in Seleucia Ctesiphon, near Babylon, founded in 640-652. During the patriarchate of Bawai (497-502), the Church of the East made the Dyophysite theology, mostly via the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuesia, its official teaching. In addition to developing schools, the church also saw a monastic tradition develop, which was similar to how it developed elsewhere in the Middle East – in Sinai, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria.

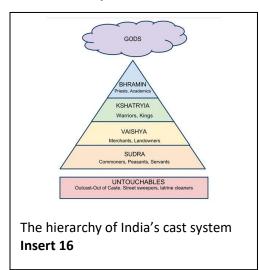
Concluding Points on the Church of the East

In conclusion it should be noted that the Church of the East, together with the Syriac Orthodox Church, was particularly important on the Arabian Peninsula. When we think about the type of Christianity that existed in the place where Islam started, we should think foremost about Syriac Christianity. It is difficult, though, to say whether the Church of the East or the Syrian Orthodox Church was more important.

It is also important to remember the Persian military campaign in Palestine in 614. It was a devastating attack that filled the Palestinian monasteries with the corpses of the monks. It was on this occasion that the Persians obtained what was generally believed to be a piece of the holy cross, previously held and venerated by the Christians of Jerusalem. When the dust of the battle of 614 had settled, a long series of peace negotiations followed. These were concluded by a peace treaty between the Romans and the Persians that stipulated the return of the Holy Cross relic, whose recovery was marked by a procession led by patriarch Ishoyahb of the Church of the East. While peace was restored, the power of the Romans and Persians declined, and the last Persian King, Yazdegard III, is said to have found refuge in a monastery in his last days, though it is not certain that he converted. In the meantime the geopolitical balance of the region changed as it was conquered by Islamic armies, bring to an end to the rule of Romans and Persians.

Syriac Church in India

I have already mentioned India, which was important for the Church of the East but today also for the other Syriac churches. We don't have any firm evidence of the earliest arrival of



Christianity in India. The Acts of Thomas, which was written sometime in the third or fourth century, tells the story of the Apostle Thomas traveling to India, though it seems to refer more to the North than the South of India. The Syriac story suggests that there is a connection between the Syriac Church and India, but it should not be treated as a historical record of conversion. A more historically reliable text is that of the travels of Cosmas in the sixth century, who in the Syriac records is referred to as *Indicopleustes*, which means the person who traveled to India. He traveled through eastern Asia, including India, and made a record of the Christians belonging to the Church of the East. Consequently, scholars are certain that there was a church there at the time. From Roman times through the sixth century and later, there was much contact between the Western world and India. Hence, it is consistent with what we know of the times to imagine Westerns traveling there. There were two ways to travel to India, either overland by way of what was later called the Silk Roads in the north or by the sea route via the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea to the south. Later on, in the eighth and ninth centuries, there is more evidence – such as the famous Copper Plates in India – giving evidence for the existence of Christianity at the time.

Another indication that Christianity in India is rather old is that it is completely incorporated into the caste system. This complex system ranks the people of India in a social hierarchy (see insert 16). In this system, the Syrian Christians are ranked quite high, close to the Brahmins. This is not the case for modern converts to Christianity because the recent conversions of people to Christianity in India have generally been from among those in the lower caste – that is, the untouchables – and conversion did not change that. Indian Christians in ancient times were often traders who lived along both the eastern and western sides of the subcontinent.

While the descendants of the early Syriac Christians from the Middle East are found mostly on the West Coast, in Kerala, on the East Coast there are also traces of the old Christianity. The church in insert 17, though keeping an old Pahlavi stone (with a dove now

painted in white) from the pre-Portuguese times, was rebuilt in Portuguese style after they took over in the sixteenth century. All ancient Christians in the area have become Catholics.

It is on the east coast that the grave of St. Thomas can be found (see inserts 18 and 19). I'm not convinced of its authenticity, but it is an interesting holy shrine to visit. Among Syriac Christians in India – and also among many non-Syriac Christians – Thomas is still highly regarded. These Indian Syriac Christians in ancient times and even in more recent times, as we will see when we discuss the Ottoman period, played an important role in the Middle East – and vice versa.



Indian Catholic church with Syriac/Aramaic Pahlavi inscription **Insert 17**



Modern day image of St. Thomas Insert 18



Shrine of St. Thomas, India Insert 19

Appendix to lecture 1

The Syriac Hymns

"The Odes of Solomon," which I mentioned the other day, are among the oldest texts in Syriac literature and may not have been written as Christian texts. We will see, however, that this type of poetry is often used in the subsequent Syriac tradition and that this particular text added to the Syriac hymnal tradition. Let's look at a portion of the text:

Odes of Solomon¹

11. And the Lord renewed me with his garment, and possessed me by His light.
12. And from above He gave me immortal rest, and I Became like the land that blossoms and rejoices in its fruits.
13. And the Lord is like the sun upon the face of the land.
14. My eyes were enlightened, and my face received the dew;
15. And my breath was refreshed by the pleasant fragrance of the Lord...
16. And he took me to His Paradise, wherein the wealth of the Lord's pleasure.

I beheld blooming and fruit-bearing trees,
And self-grown was their crown.
Their branches were sprouting and their fruits were shining.
From an immortal land were their roots.
And a river of gladness was irrigating them,

And round about them in the land of eternal life.

17. Then I worshipped the Lord because of his magnificence.

There are a couple of things here that we will see appear – and appear in many different ways – in the later Syriac tradition. In the first sentence (verse 11), the way God comes to people is compared to a garment and light. If you read Syriac texts, you will see that these same motifs are applied to Jesus, who is depicted as putting on humanity like a garment and as having the light of God shining in him. But that is not the most important thing about this poem. The reason I selected this one is that in it one can see how Syriac writers used nature to explain the nature of God and goodness and related matters. They did this through nature metaphors: blossoms, the sun upon the land, the dew. In Paradise one sees trees bearing much fruit – a theme often repeated. This paradisiacal imagery is often found in Syriac writers such as Ephrem, and it is found not only among Aramaic writers but also among the writers of the entire region of the Middle East. It is the distinct way that this culture expresses religious ideas.

Now let's look at a hymn by Ephrem the Syrian:

The shepherd, under him who has become head of the flock; who was disciple of the Three, and has become our fourth master A[braham].,

¹Ode 11; for an English translation, see James H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*(Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), also available online: http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/odes.html.

Blessed He Who has made him our comfort!

In one love will I cause them to *shire*, and as a *crown* will I Weave them, the splendid *blossoms*, and the fragrant *Flowers* of the teacher and of his disciples, who remained After him as Elisha; for the horn of his election and he was Consecrated and became head, and he was exalted and Became master A[braham]., Blessed be He Who made him chief. [Italics mine].

He is speaking here about a very important teacher, Abraham of Nisibis. In Ephrem's writing, one finds the same types of nature metaphors that we have seen before: lights, shining, blossoms, a crown, and flowers. This is a small sample, but it is representative of his writing. If you read Ephrem, you will discover much more of this; and you will also find it in the Syriac liturgy.