

The Second Rhythm

Ephrem the Syrian

Early Church (pre-Nicene) · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Hymn

STROMATA 195

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INTRODUCTION

A short, urgent poem from Ephrem the Syrian, the fourth-century Syriac deacon and hymn-writer, on the folly of trying to reason your way into the nature of God. Ephrem's method is repetition and image rather than argument: the sea that will drown a curious sailor, the sun whose light you can use without measuring its height, the well you can drink from without plumbing its depth. His refrain throughout is that the Names of Father, Son, and Spirit are boundaries meant to be kept, not doors meant to be forced. This translation comes from John Brande Morris's 1847 Oxford edition, part of the Tractarian project of bringing the Greek and Syriac fathers into English, expect the register to be formal and a little breathless, closer to sermon than to systematic theology.

The Second Rhythm

1 . I would fain approach, and yet I fear, lest I should be far off, since the bold man that approacheth prying, removeth himself very far off'. But he that approacheth in measure, him doth not equity reject. Let us not approach, lest we be far off, neither let us stay far off, lest we perish! Let us temper with moderation our approach to the Essence that cannot be measured! Since long speaking is not becoming, let us speak briefly!

'2. How can vile dust tell of its Framer? Goodness framed the dust to be an image of its Maker; let then Justice also Genesis 1, terrify it from being bold against its Creator. The Creator gave knowledge to the vessel, in order that it might know itself.

The thing framed striveth about Him that framed it; by jurying it driveth away Goodness. Let us give hearing in [due] weight to him that learneth in measure! Let us put a balance in the midst, and weigh and take and give; let us take therewith from the teachers, and give it therewith unto the learners!

- Thou hast heard that God is God, know thyself that thou art man: thou hast heard that God is the Maker. How being clay dost thou pry into Him? Thou hast heard of God, that He is Father; by His Fatherhood, know His Begotten. For if the Father begetteth, the Son that is from Him did He beget from Himself. That One Offspring which is the Only-begotten Son, let not thy questionings sunder! thou hast heard of the Brightness of the Son; do not thou insult Him by thy questioning! Thou hast heard of the Spirit, that He is the Holy Spirit; surname Him by the Name that they

have called Him. Thou hast heard His Name; praise [Him] by His Name: to pry into His Nature is not allowed. Thou hast heard of the Father and the Son and the Spirit; by the Names hold the Realities". These Names are not blended' together: the Three are in truth blended together.

- If thou confessest Their Names, and confessest not Their Subsistencies, thou art in name a worshipper, in deed an unbeliever. Where there is nothing in subsistency, the name which intervenes is an empty one; whatsoever hath no subsistency, of that the appellation also is void: the word subsistency teacheth us that it is some reality. That then it has this, we know, in what way it has it, we comprehend not. Because thou knowest that it exists, thou dost not therefore comprehend in what mode it exists: neither again do thou deny that it exists, because thou canst not define it. For both are a blasphemy, either for thee to recede [from Him], or for thee to scrutinize^. That mighty sea, if thou shouldest pry into it, the weight of the waves thereof would bewilder thee. A single wave might weigh thee down, and might dash thee against a rock. It sufficeth for thee, O feeble man, to traffick in a vessel; better is faith' for thee than a ship in the sea. As for a ship, oars propel it, yet the billows sink it: thy faith will not sink, if thy will doth not consent.
- Who can make the sea come to the sailor's will? the sailor intendeth one thing; the billow doeth another. Our Lord alone rebuked the sea, and it calmed, and made itself silent. He gave even unto thee also to rebuke the sea like as He did, and to quiet it. Greater is disputatiousness than the sea, and strifes than the billows: scrutinizing hath troubled thy mind; rebuke it, and still its billows. The whirlwind wrestles with the sea; prying wrestles with thy mind. Our Lord rebuked, and the wind broke off', and the ship went down in quiet to the shore. Rebuke prying, and bridle it; let thy faith make itself calm. Let the creatures then convince thee, the properties whereof thou knowest; when thou canst not reach the fountain, the draught from it thou dost not refuse nor think, and yet because thou hast drunk from it, that thou hast comprehended it. Neither art thou able to reach the sun, and yet thou art not bereaved of the light thereof; nor because he cometh down to thee, dost thou fly to mount up to his height. Though the air be too great for thee, yet the breath from it is that which keepeth thee alive; and though a handsel of it be by thee, yet how large the measure of it is thou skillest not. Thou takest from the creatures that little that befits thy convenience, and thou leavest in the storehouses thereof much that is not comprehended; the little needed thou dost not refuse, and with what is much thou dost not quarrel. Lo, the creatures of the Creator teach thee touching the Creator, to be earnest after His assistance, and keep thyself far off from scrutinizing Him! Receive life from that Majesty, and forbear to pry into the Majesty. Embrace the goodness of the Father, and make no scrutiny concerning His Essence; love and embrace the goodness of the Son, and make no scrutiny concerning His Generation; love the brooding of the Holy Spirit, and approach not to pry into Him.
- The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, by Their Names are comprehended; be not curious about Their Subsistencies, dwell thoughtfully upon Their Names. If thou wilt pry into the Subsistency, thou shalt perish; and if thou wilt believe upon the Name, thou shalt live. Let the Name of the Father be a boundary to thee; pass not over to pry into His Nature! Let the Name of the Son be a wall unto thee; pass not over to pry into His Generation I Let the Name of the Spirit

be a hedge to thee; go not within it to pry into Him! Let the Names be boundaries to thee; with the Names bridle questionings!

- Since thou hast heard of the Names and the Reality, then turn thee to the commandment; since thou hast heard the law and the commandments, turn then to the conversation therein; since thou art perfect in the commandments, then turn thee to the promises. Do not thou make of none effect that which is commanded, and let thyself run wild in what is not written. Thou hast heard the truth in what is revealed; go not astray upon what is concealed. Simon spake things revealed; the Truth he gave, and a blessing he received. See how with one word Simon spake; do not thou go astray in many [words]! The Truth is written in concise expressions; do not thou make long investigations! That there is a Father, every man knoweth: in what mode He is so, no man knoweth. That there is a Son, we all confess; the manner and degree He is so, we cannot define. That there is a Holy Ghost, every man confesseth; for prying into Him, no man sufficeth. That there is a Father then, confess; that He can be defined, do not thou confess! Again, believe that there is a Son; that He can be scrutinized, by no means believe! That there is a Holy Ghost, assert; that He may be pried into, assert not! That They are One, believe and assert; and that They are Three, be not doubtful!
- That the Father is the First, believe; that the Son is the Second, assert; that the Holy Ghost also is the Third, doubt not! The First-born never at any time commanded the Father, for He it is who commandeth. Never at any time did the Spirit send the Son, for that the Son is the Sender thereof'. The Son that sitteth on the Right Hand snatcheth not' at the place of the Father, neither doth the Spirit, which is sent from Him, snatch at the order of the Son. The Son rejoiceth that the Begetter of Him is mighty, and the Holy Ghost that His Well-beloved is mighty. Joy is there there and concord, and intermingling along with order. The Father knoweth the Generation of the Son; the Son knoweth the design of the Father; the Father designeth, and the Son knoweth, and the works are done by the Spirit, There is no division intervening, because there is but One Will to intervene. There is no confusion in the intermingling, since there is a perfect order there. For suppose not, because They are blended, that there is any confusion neither, because They are distinct, fancy to thyself that there is any division. They are blended, though not confounded; and distinct, though not divided. Their reciprocity is not confounded, and Their distinctness is not divided. What blendeth Their distinctness? what distinguisheth Their blended estate? They alone themselves know! Flee unto silence, feeble [man]!

Source: Translated by John Brande Morris, in *Select Works of S. Ephrem the Syrian* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847), *Library of the Fathers* vol. 41.

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