

SELECTIONS FROM THE HYMNS AND HOMILIES OF EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN, NINETEEN HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST IN THE FLESH

NINETEEN HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST IN THE FLESH.

(Translated, I.-XIII. by Rev. J. B. Morris, M.A., [Oxford Library of the Fathers]; XIV.-XIX. by Rev. A. Edward Johnston, B.D.).

HYMN IV.

This is the month which brings all manner of joy; it is the freedom of the bondsmen, the pride of the free, the crown of the gates, the soothing of the body, that also in its love put purple upon us as upon kings.

This is the month that brings all manner of victories; it frees the spirit; it subdues the body; it brings forth life among mortals; it caused, in its love, Godhead, to dwell in Manhood.

In this day the Lord exchanged glory for shame, as being humble; because Adam changed the truth for unrighteousness as being a rebel: the Good One had mercy on him, justified and set right them that had turned aside.

Let every man chase away his weariness, since that Majesty was not wearied with being in the womb nine months for us, and in being thirty years in Sodom among the madmen.(5)

Because the Good One saw that the race of man was poor and humbled, He made feasts as a treasure-house, and opened them to the slothful, that the feast might stir up the slothful one to rise and be rich. Lo! The First-born has opened unto us His feast as a treasure-house. This one day in the whole year alone opens that treasure-house: come, let us make gain, let us grow rich from it, ere they shut it up.

Blessed be the watchful, that have taken by force(6) from it the spoil of Life. It is a great disgrace, when a man sees his neighbor take and carry out treasure, and himself sits in the treasure-house slumbering, so as to come forth empty.

In this feast, let each one of us crown the gates of his heart. The Holy Spirit longs for the gates thereof, that He may enter in and dwell there, and sanctify it, and He goes round about to all the gates to see where He may enter.

In this feast, the gates are glad before the gates,(7) and the Holy One rejoices in the holy temple, and the voice resounds in the mouth of children, and Christ rejoices in His own feast as a mighty man.

At the Birth of the Son the king was enrolling all men for the tribute-money, that they might be debtors to Him: the King came forth to us Who blotted out our bills,(8) and wrote another bill in His own Name that He might be our debtor. The sun gave longer light, and foreshadowed the mystery by the degrees which it had gone up.(9) It was twelve days since it had gone up, and to-day is the thirteenth day: a type exact of the Son's birth(1) and of His Twelve.

Moses shut up a lamb in the month Nisan on the tenth day; a type this of the Son that came into the womb and shut Himself up therein on the tenth day.(2) He came forth from the womb in this month in which the sun gives longer light.

The darkness was overcome, that it might proclaim that Satan was overcome; and the sun gave longer light, that it might triumph, because the First-born was victorious. Along with the darkness the dark one was overcome, and with the greater light our Light conquered!

Joseph caressed the Son as a Babe; he ministered to Him as God. He rejoiced in Him as in the Good One, and he was awe-struck at Him as the Just One, greatly bewildered.

"Who hath given me the Son of the Most High to be a Son to me? I was jealous of Thy Mother, and I thought to put her away, and I knew not that in her womb was hidden a mighty treasure, that should suddenly enrich my poor estate. David the king sprang of my race, and wore the crown: and I have come to a very low estate, who instead of a king am a carpenter. Yet a crown hath come to me, for in my bosom is the Lord of crowns!"

With rival words Mary burned, yea she lulled Him, [saying,] Who hath given me, the barren, that I should conceive and bring forth this One, that is manifold; a little One, that is great; for that He is wholly with me, and wholly everywhere?

The day that Gabriel came in unto my low estate, he made me free instead of a handmaid, of a sudden: for I was the handmaid of Thy Divine Nature, and am also the Mother of Thy human Nature, O Lord and Son!

Of a sudden the handmaid became the King's daughter in Thee, Thou Son of the King. Lo, the meanest in the house of David, by reason of Thee, Thou Son of David, lo, a daughter of earth hath attained unto Heaven by the Heavenly One!

How am I astonished that there is laid before me a Child, older than all things! His eye is gazing unceasingly upon Heaven. As for the stammering of His mouth, to my seeming it betokens, that with God its silence speaks.

Who ever saw a Child the whole of Whom beholdeth every place? His look is like one that orders all creatures that are above and that are below! His visage is like that Commander that commandeth all.

How shall I open the fountain of milk to Thee, O Fountain? Or how shall I give nourishment to Thee that nourishest all from Thy Table? How shall I bring to swaddling clothes One wrapped round with rays of glory?

My mouth knows not how I shall call Thee, O Thou Child of the Living One: for to venture to call Thee as the Child of Joseph, I tremble, since Thou art not his seed: and I am fearful of denying the name of him to whom they have betrothed me.

While Thou art the Son of One, then should I be calling Thee the Son of many. For ten thousand names would not suffice Thee, since Thou art the Son of God and also the Son of man, yea, David's Son and Mary's Lord.

Who hath made the Lord of mouths to be without a mouth? For my pure conception of Thee wicked men have slandered me. Be, O Thou Holy One, a Speaker for Thy Mother. Show a miracle that they may be persuaded, from Whom it is that I conceived Thee!

For Thy sake too I am hated, Thou Lover of all. Lo! I am persecuted who have conceived and brought forth One House of refuge for men. Adam will rejoice, for Thou art the Key of Paradise.

Lo, the sea raged against Thy mother as against Jonah. Lo, Herod, that raging wave, sought to drown the Lord of the seas. Whither I shall flee Thou shalt teach me, O Lord of Thy Mother.

With Thee I will flee, that I may gain in Thee Life in every place. The prison with Thee is no prison, for in Thee man goes up unto Heaven: the grave with Thee is no grave, for Thou art the Resurrection!(3)

A star of light which was not nature, shone forth suddenly; less than the sun and greater than the sun, less than it in its visible light, but greater than it in its hidden might, by reason of its mystery.

The Morning Star cast its bright beams among the darkneses, and led them as blind men, and they came and received a great light: they gave offerings and received life, and they worshipped and returned.

In the height and the depth two preachers were there to the Son: the bright star shouted above; John also preached below, two preachers, an earthly and a heavenly.

That above showed His Nature to be from the Majesty, and that below too showed his Nature to be from mankind. O great marvel, that His Godhead and His Manhood each was preached by them.

Whoso thought Him earthly, the bright star convinced him that He was heavenly; and whoso thought Him spiritual, John convinced him that He was also corporeal.

In the Holy temple Simeon carried Him, and lulled Him, [saying,] "Thou art come, O Merciful One, showing mercy on my old age, making my bones to go into the grave in peace. In Thee shall I be raised from the grave into Paradise!"

Anna embraced Him, and put her mouth to His lips, and the Spirit dwelt upon her own lips. As when Isaiah's mouth was silent, the coal⁽⁴⁾ which approached his lips opened his mouth; so Anna burned with the Spirit of His mouth, yea, she lulled Him, [saying,] "Son of the Kingdom, Son of the lowliness, that hearest and art still, that seest and art hidden, that knowest and art unknown, God, Son of Man, glory be unto Thy Name."

The barren also heard, ran, and came with their provisions: the Magi came with their treasures, the barren came with their provisions. Provisions and riches were suddenly heaped up in the house of the poor.

The barren woman cried out, as at that which she looked not for, Who hath granted me this sight of thy Babe, O Blessed One, by whom the heaven and earth are filled! Blessed be thy Fruit, which made the barren vine to bear a cluster.

Zacharias came and opened his venerable mouth and cried, "Where is the King, for whose sake I have begotten the Voice that is to preach before His face? Hail, Son of the King, to whom also our Priesthood shall be given up!"

John approached with his parents and worshipped the Son, and He shed glory upon his countenance; and he was not moved as when in the womb! Mighty miracle, that here he was worshipping, there he leaped.

Herod also, that base fox, that stalked about like a lion, as a fox crouched down, and howled, when he heard the roaring of the Lion, who came to sit in the kingdom according to the Scriptures. The fox heard that the Lion was a whelp, and as a suckling; and he sharpened His teeth, that while He was yet a child the fox might lie in wait and devour the Lion ere He had grown up, and the breath of His mouth should destroy him.

The whole creation became mouths to Him, and cried concerning Him. The Magi cried by their offerings! the barren cried with their children, the star of light cried in that air, lo! the Son of the King!

The Heavens were opened, the waters were calmed, the Dove glorified Him, the voice of the Father, louder than thunder, was instant and said, This is my beloved Son. The Angels proclaim Him, the children shout to Him with their Hosannas.

These voices above and below proclaim Him and cry aloud. The slumber of Sion was not dispersed by the voice of the thunders, but she was offended, stood up, and slew Him because He aroused her.