

Mary in Syriac Tradition

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For many people the term 'Eastern Christianity' will just mean the Greek and Russian Orthodox traditions; in fact, however, Eastern Christianity comprises much more than these two, for the term also includes the various Middle Eastern Churches, all of which have their own rich liturgical and spiritual traditions, and all of which are today represented in Britain, above all in London. Amongst these different Middle Eastern Churches are several which belong specifically to the Syriac tradition, that is, Churches which have in the past had (and sometimes still in the present have) Syriac as their liturgical language, Syriac being a dialect of Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, and which was the main language of communication in the Middle East for well over a thousand years prior to the advent of Islam and the spread of Arabic.

Before turning to Mary in Syriac tradition we need to ask What exactly is the Syriac tradition? and Who are these Churches which belong to it, and Why are there so many of them? Whereas the writings of the Greek and Latin Fathers will be known to many people, an awareness of the existence of a large body of literature produced by the Syriac Fathers, above all between the fourth and thirteenth centuries, will be largely confined to specialists, even though two names, of St Ephrem and St Isaac may well be familiar to some extent, since certain of their works were translated into Greek (and later, Latin). It was during the course of the fifth to the seventh centuries that Eastern Christianity was torn apart and fragmented as a result of the controversies of that time concerning how best to describe the union of the divinity and the humanity in the incarnate Christ. The results of this fragmentation are still with us today, for while the christological formula approved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 came to be treated as normative by the Greek East and the Latin West, it did not find favour with many Christian communities in the Eastern Roman Empire, and as a result the Syriac tradition was split into three: the Church of the East, the Syrian Orthodox (together with the Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox), and the Melkite and Maronite Churches, both of which accepted the Council. With the Arab invasions these Middle Eastern Churches effectively became cut off from the Byzantine Empire and so were marginalized in the subsequent traditions of the Greek East and Latin West. This in turn led to further divisions from the sixteenth century onwards, with the creation of new Eastern Rite Catholic and various Protestant Churches in both the Middle East and in South India (whose indigenous Churches trace their ancestry back to St Thomas). It has only been in recent decades that ecumenical dialogue has shown that, underlying the surface conflict of terminologies, for all these Churches, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, there is the same underlying understanding of the meaning of the incarnation.

From our point of view today, what is important is to recognize that each of these Christian traditions, the Greek East, the Latin West, and what one might call the Syriac Orient, has its own particular strengths and characteristics, and that are gifts that can enrich the whole of Christian tradition. One of the main characteristics of the earlier Syriac tradition is its predilection for expressing theology through poetry. Consequently, most of what I shall have to say about Mary in Syriac tradition will be based on poetic texts. The greatest exponent of this was the theologian and poet St Ephrem, an exact contemporary of St Athanasius (both men died in 373). Although he also wrote in prose, it was through the medium of poetry that Ephrem preferred to express his wonderfully profound sacramental vision of the relationship between Creator and creation, and of the whole course of salvation history. As his theological tools, he employs paradox and symbol (the Syriac term can also be translated 'mystery'), abhorring any attempt to 'define' the Divinity, since this would involve trying to put a boundary (*fines* in Latin) around the Boundless.¹ Although St Ephrem is often portrayed in icons as a monk, in fact he lived before monasticism (in the form that we know it) had reached his homeland in what is today eastern Turkey; much more historically correct are those icons which depict him as a deacon, which is how St Jerome describes him in his work 'On Famous Men', written in 392, just under two decades after Ephrem's death. One other feature concerning St Ephrem might be mentioned in passing: exceptionally among the Church Fathers, Ephrem shows a great sympathy for women, and he is accredited with the innovation of having choirs of women sing in church.

Ephrem was by no means the only Syriac writer to express his theology in poetry. Living a century and a half later was Jacob, bishop of Serugh (also in today's eastern Turkey). Jacob, who was an older contemporary of the great Greek poet, Romanos, has the distinction of being a saint in both the Maronite Church (Chalcedonian) and the Syrian Orthodox Church (non-Chalcedonian), despite the fact that he lived at a time when the doctrinal controversies were at their fiercest! Most of Jacob's literary output was in the form of sermons composed in verse. These are usually on biblical topics and they give expression to a deep insight into the spiritual meaning of the passages they deal with. Particularly relevant from our point of view here are his various homilies on Mary; these have recently been translated into English by Mary Hansbury.²

Many of the poems from which I shall be quoting, however, are the work of unknown authors, and all that one can say about them is that almost all of them will have belonged to the fifth and sixth centuries.

With this by way of introduction, it is high time to turn to Mary in the Syriac tradition. Needless to say, Mary features recurrently in the liturgical tradition, but what is distinctive is the presence in the liturgical calendars of certain commemorations that are not, or only rarely, found in other traditions. Either on the 26th December, immediately after the Nativity, or on

¹ For St Ephrem's theological approach see especially K. den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); also my *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992).

² Mary Hansbury, *Jacob of Sarug, On the Mother of God* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Pres, 1998).

the first or second Friday after the Nativity, all the different Syriac Churches have a commemoration entitled 'The Praises of Mary'. A second distinctive feature is connected with the agricultural cycle, and commemorations of Mary fall on the 15th of January ('Mary of the Seeds') and the 15th of May ('Mary of the Wheat Blades').

Many, though by no means all, of the passages which I shall be quoting are to be found in the liturgical printed books of the different Syriac Churches, although quite often one needs to go back to the earlier manuscripts to find the poems in their complete form, since in a number of cases poems have been disastrously cut in the printed editions. We shall encounter an amusing example of this in due course.

The cycle of hymns on the Nativity by St Ephrem provides us with an obvious place where to begin. In the following passage, which has been beautifully set to music by Sir John Tavener in his work 'Thunder entered her', Ephrem's use of paradox is very much in evidence. He begins by addressing the infant Christ himself:

Your mother is a cause for wonder: the Lord entered into her
 - and became a servant; He who is the Word entered
 - and became silent within her; Thunder entered her
 - and made no sound; there entered the Shepherd of all
 and in her He became the Lamb, bleating as He comes forth.

Your mother's womb has reversed the roles:
 the Establisher of all entered in His richness
 but came forth poor; the Exalted One entered her
 but came forth meek; the Splendrous One entered her
 but came forth having put on a lowly hue.

The Mighty One entered, and put on insecurity
 from her womb; the Provisioner of all entered
 - and experienced hunger; He who gives drink to all entered
 - and experienced thirst: naked and stripped
 there came forth from her He who clothes all.

(Hymns on the Nativity, XI.6-8).³

In another poem from the same cycle it is Mary who speaks, addressing her Child:

How can I address You Stranger to us,
 yet born of us. Should I call You 'Brother',
 or should it be 'Betrothed',
 or again, 'Lord' who gives to His mother
 a second birth that comes from the water?

I am Your sister - from the House of David
 who is Your second father. Again, I am mother
 in view of Your conception;
 and betrothed, as well, because of Your sanctity.

³ The full cycle of Hymns on the Nativity have been translated into English by K. McVey in her *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989). The translations used here are taken from my *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam: St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994).

Handmaid and daughter, too, by the blood and water,
for You have redeemed and baptized me.

O Son of the Most High
who have come and resided in me
so that I have become Your mother.
As I bore You - Your second birth -
so too You have given birth to me, a second time:
You have put on Your mother's robe, Your body,
whereas I have put on Your glory.
(Hymns on the Nativity, XVI.9-11).

Ephrem, along with other Syriac poets, loves to use the imagery of clothing, of the everyday process of putting on and taking off one's clothes.⁴ One of the earliest Syriac phrases to be translated 'he became incarnate' in the Creed is 'he put on the body'; furthermore, clothing imagery can be used to describe the entire course of salvation history: Adam and Eve (who also represent humanity) were created clothed in a 'garment of glory (or: of praise)', but were stripped of this at the Fall, as a result of their disobedience and misuse of the divine gift of freewill. Henceforth God's whole aim is to give humanity opportunity to recover the lost garment: in the Old Testament he 'puts on' human language, allowing himself to be described in terms which will be meaningful to human beings, and then at the incarnation the Divine Word 'puts on the body'. At his baptism Christ deposits 'the garment of glory' in the Jordan, so that each individual Christian might put it on again in potential at her or his own baptism; this garment is also the wedding garment of the parable of Matthew, and must be kept clean, for only then will a person discover that they are clothed with this garment of glory in reality. In the verses from Ephrem just quoted, the presence of Christ in Mary's womb serves as her baptism—her second birth. On several occasions Ephrem speaks of the three wombs into which Christ entered, Mary's, that of the Jordan, and that of Sheol, the abode of the departed; this parallelism between Mary's womb and the womb of the Jordan helps to explain how Christ's entry into Mary's womb can be seen as her baptism, seeing that his entry into the Jordan is regarded as one of the fountainheads of Christian baptism (the font is sometimes referred to as 'the Jordan'). A further allusion to Mary's own baptism, when she puts on 'the garment of glory', can be found in another of Ephrem's Nativity Hymns; Mary is again speaking, addressing Christ:

In her virginity Eve put on
leaves of shame, but Your mother has put on
in her virginity a garment of glory
that encompasses all, while to Him who covers all
she gives a body as a tiny garment.
(Hymns on the Nativity, XVII.4).

The two wombs, of Mary and of the Jordan, feature again in a poem where Ephrem again contrasts Mary with Eve: Eve and Mary are the two eyes of the body of the world:

⁴ Further details on this can be found in my 'The Robe of Glory': a biblical image in the Syriac tradition', in *Spirituality and Clothing in The Way* 39:3 (1999), 247-59.

Mary and Eve in their symbols
resemble a body, one of whose eyes
is darkened and blind,
while the other is bright and clear,
providing light for the whole.
(Hymns on the Church, XXXVII.4).

According to Ephrem's understanding of optics, the more light that enters the eye, the more the eye is enabled to see. Ephrem then applies this to the interior eye, for which faith takes the place of light: the greater the faith, the more the interior eye is able to see of the spiritual world around it. In the case of Mary, it is Christ who is the light who enters her:

When it is associated with a source of light
an eye becomes clear:
it shines with the light that provisions it,
it gleams with its brightness,
it becomes glorious with its splendour,
adorned by its beauty.

As though on an eye,
the Light settled in Mary,
it polished her mind,
made bright her thought,
and pure her understanding,
causing her virginity to shine.

The river in which He was baptized
conceived Him again symbolically;
the moist womb of the water
conceived Him in purity,
bore Him in chastity,
made Him go up in glory.

In the pure womb of the water
you should recognise the Daughter of Man
who conceived, having known no man,
who gave birth without intercourse,
who brought up, through a gift,
the Lord of that gift. (Hymns on the Church, XXXVI.1-4).

The Old Testament text provided the Syriac poets (along with their counterparts writing in Greek and Latin) with a very large number of types and symbols, all serving as pointers to Mary in one aspect or another. Thus, for example, one anonymous poet exclaims:

On Horeb the rock marked out your type, O Virgin, (Exodus 17:6)
for without having been pierced it gave birth
to provide drink for the Israelite camp
which had fainted and was close to death.
Your symbol attained to the rock and enriched it,
for it was from you that the Drink of heaven shone forth,
and from It, through grace, the world drank and was satisfied.

In a womb of flesh a marriage chamber was set out
in whose midst the heavenly Bridegroom lay reclining,
while the virgin doors were carefully guarded. (Ezekiel 44:2)

When the glorious Bridegroom desired to go forth,
He left the virgin doors sleeping, unaware of His departure
as the angels and Watchers sang out in praise.

(Hymns on Mary, XII.3-4; *Bride of Light*, p.59).

Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1: 10) is the source for the description, not infrequently found, of Mary as a 'Chariot'. In the following poem Mary and Ezekiel's Chariot are just contrasted:

The Chariot of fire carries Him in awe,
yet feeble knees carried Him without getting burnt.
The Wheels of flame escort Him in awe,
yet in the tiny lap of David's daughter He is lovingly clasped!
The Cherubim carry Him and tremble,
the Seraphim cry 'Holy' and shrink back (Isaiah 6:3)
yet Mary embraces Him at her breast.

(Hymns on Mary, XX.1; *Bride of Light*, p.62).

Elsewhere, however, Mary is herself described as a Chariot:

A Chariot of flesh did Mary become,
enabling her to escort the Fiery One in her bosom.
The angel stood amazed at the Daughter of Man
as she carried the Lord of all humanity.

(Hymns on Mary, XVI.1; *Bride of Light*, p.99).

The image of Christ as 'Fire', frequently encountered in Syriac liturgical poetry, is linked in the opening verse of the following poem with the 'Burning Coal' of Isaiah's vision, and for a Syriac reader this would at once be seen as having a eucharistic resonance, the consecrated Host regularly being called 'the Burning Coal'; also of importance in these verses is the emphasis on love as the motive for the incarnation:

I was full of wonder at Mary as she gave suck
to the Provisioner of all races who had become an infant.
He of whom all worlds are full
has resided in a young girl's womb!

The daughter of poor parents has become mother to the Rich One
whose love has thus constrained Him.
He was the Fire in the Virgin's womb,
yet she was not burnt up by His flames.

Lovingly she embraced the Burning Coal,
yet she suffered no harm as she held Him in honour.
Burning Fire has become embodied
and is clasped by Mary's hands!

The great Sun has gathered in His rays
behind a single luminous cloud;
a young girl has become mother
to Him who had given birth to Adam and to the whole world.

As she cuddled Him
she sang lullabies with loving word;
she worshipped her child and said,

“Allow me, dear Lord, to embrace You.

“Since You are my son, I will sing to You;
since I have become Your mother, I will honour You.
I gave birth to You, my Son, yet You are far older than I;
I carry You, the Lord who carries me!

“My mind is distracted in awe at You;
gather my thoughts so that I may praise You.
I am in wonder at how still You are,
for within You lies thunder concealed.”

(*Bride of Light*, pp.75-6).

One of the distinctive features of Syriac liturgical poetry is the dialogue poem where two characters, usually biblical, conduct an argument in alternating verses. The genre can be traced back in the Ancient Near East to the Sumerian and Akkadian formalised dispute literature, of the second and first millennium BC; a few examples are also to be found, and in Jewish Aramaic, and it was later adopted in Arabic and Persian, where it has proved very popular, continuing into modern times when dispute poems in Modern Arabic, employing alternating verses for the speakers and dealing with secular topics, have been collected from the Gulf area. We are thus dealing with an extremely long-lived literary genre that has remained popular for over 4000 years! Some fifty examples of these dialogue disputes are at present known in Syriac, and for the most part they are based on particular points of tension in the biblical narrative, such as the dispute between Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), or between Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). New Testament topics include Zacharias and the Angel (Luke 1), the Two Thieves on the Cross (Luke 23:39-41), as well as four in which Mary is one of the protagonists.

These poems, usually consisting of some 45 to 50 short verses, are usually extremely lively and forthright, and they successfully combine teaching on profound issues combined with humour. Unfortunately they have often suffered in the later liturgical tradition, due to abbreviation, so that in some cases one finds just the verses for only one of the two speakers! It would be good if they could be revived, especially for us with children, in slightly adapted translations; indeed, I know of one or two cases where some of them have already been used in this way with success.

The four dialogue poems in which Mary features⁵ deal with three episodes from the early chapters of Matthew and Luke: Mary and the Angel, Mary and Joseph, Mary and the Magi. The fourth, more surprisingly, concerns the Resurrection; this is thanks to an early tradition, also found occasionally outside Syriac as well, that the Mary who encountered Jesus in the Garden (John 20:11-17) was not Mary Magdalene (so John 20:18), but Mary, his mother.

In the dialogue between Mary and the Angel the focus is on Mary's wise questioning, contrasted with, on the one hand, Eve's unthinking credulity, and on the other, with Zacharias' stubbornness. In order to

⁵ An English translation of all four of these can be found in *Bride of Light*, pp.111-34; also in 'Mary and the Angel, and other Syriac dialogue poems', in *Marianum* 68 (2006), pp.117-51 (where further references can be found).

provide a flavour of the poem it is worth quoting three extracts, each over a number of verses (the poem runs to 54 verses in all). We begin with Gabriel's opening message and Mary's initial reaction:

- Angel: To the Virgin the angel spoke as follows:
'Peace be with you, O mother of my Lord;
blessed are you, child,
and blessed the Fruit that is within you'.
- Mary: 'Who are you, sir?
And what is this that you utter?
What you are saying is remote from me,
and what it means I have no idea'.
- Angel: 'O blessed of women, in you it has pleased
the Most High to dwell: have no fear,
for in you has Grace bent down
to pour mercy upon the whole world'.
- Mary: 'I beg you, sir, do not upset me:
you are clothed in coals of fire - mind you do not burn me!
What you have said is alien to me,
and I am quite unable to grasp what it means'.
(verses 11-14; *Bride of Light*, pp.112-3).

Challenged by the angel, Mary goes on to give her reasons for questioning him:

- Angel: 'It would be amazing in you if you were to answer back,
annulling the message which I have brought to you
concerning the conception of the Most High
whose will it is to dwell in your womb'.
- Mary: 'I am afraid, sir, to accept you,
for when Eve my mother accepted
the serpent who spoke as a friend
she was snatched away from her former glory'.
- Angel: My daughter, he certainly did use deception
on your mother Eve when he gave her the message,
but just as certainly I am not deceiving you,
seeing that it is the True One by whom I have been sent'.
- Mary: 'All this that you say
is most perplexing, so do not find fault with me,
for it is not from a virgin that a son will appear,
nor from that fruit, a divine being!'
- Angel: 'The Father gave me this meeting with you here
to bring you greeting and announce to you
that from your womb His Son will shine forth.
Do not answer back, disputing this'.
- Mary: 'This meeting with you and your presence here is all very fine,
if only the natural order did not stir me
to have doubts at your arrival
about how there can be fruit in a virgin'.

- Angel: 'The angelic hosts quake at His word:
the moment He has commanded, they do not answer back.
How is it that you are not afraid
to query the thing which the Father has willed?'
- Mary: 'I too quake, sir, and am terrified,
yet, though I fear, I find it hard to believe
since nature itself can well convince me
that virgins do not ever give birth'.
- Angel: 'It is the Father's love which has so willed
that in your virginity you should give birth to the Son.
It is appropriate you should keep silence, and have faith too,
for the will of the Father cannot be gainsaid'.
(Verses 17-25).

Mary, however, continues her cross-questioning of the angel, and it is only when the angel eventually mentions the Holy Spirit that Mary accepts his message. In other words, it is the Holy Spirit who is seen as the source of the strong faith that is required in order to transcend the dictates of human reason, which bases itself on the evidence of the external world. Since divine love itself transcends the demands of reason, it too needs to be met by love and faith, which likewise transcend human reason and common sense. Here is the turning point, ending with Mary's '*fiat*':

- Mary: 'All your words quite astonish me;
I beg you, sir, do not blame me,
for a son in a virgin is not to be seen,
and no one has ever slept with me'.
- Angel: 'He will come to you, have no fear;
He will reside in your womb; do not ask how.
O woman full of blessings, sing praise
to Him who is pleased to be seen in you'.
- Mary: 'Sir, no man has ever known me,
nor any ever slept with me.
How can this be, what you have said,
for without such a union there will never be a son'.
- Angel: 'From the Father I was sent
to bring you this message, that His love has compelled Him
so that in your womb His Son should reside,
and over you the Holy Spirit will reside'.
- Mary: 'In that case, O angel, I will not answer back:
if the Holy Spirit shall come to me,
I am His maidservant, and He has authority;
let it be to me, sir, in accordance with your word'.
(Verses 32-36).

Among the other three dialogue poems concerning Mary, it is that between Mary and Joseph which is particularly dramatic, taking as its starting point Matthew 1:18, when Joseph returns to find his fiancée pregnant. His reaction is expressed with considerable realism:

Joseph was dumbfounded at Mary,
seeing her pregnancy, of which he knew nothing.
He began to chide and reproach her,
saying, 'Listen young girl,

Joseph: 'Tell me the secret of what has happened to you:
it is most shocking, what you speak of.
Who has led you astray, virgin?
Who has snatched your treasure, chaste girl?'

Mary: 'I will tell you how it happened,
so listen, Joseph.
A man of fire came down to me;
he gave me a greeting and this took place'.

Joseph: 'That I should believe this is hard:
it is not nice, so don't repeat it.
If you are willing, relate to me
about what took place. Who led you astray?'

Mary: 'How to tell you any more, I do not know,
for I have already told you how it actually happened:
the chief of the angels came down and announced it to me;
I became pregnant without being aware of it'.

Joseph: 'Such words are inappropriate,
Mary, for a virgin, so keep silent:
for falsehood will not stand up.
Speak the truth, if you are willing'.

Mary: 'I repeat the very same words—
I have no others to say.
I remain sealed, as the seals of my virginity,
which have not been loosed, will testify'.

Joseph: 'You shouldn't contradict,
but confess that you have been seduced.
Now you have fallen into two wrongs:
after getting pregnant, now you tell lies'.

Mary: 'You should believe my words,
for you have never seen in me any falsehood:
my chaste and truthful life bears me witness
that I am a virgin and that I have not lied'.
(Verses 4-12; *Bride of Light*, pp.119-20).

Only very gradually does Joseph come to half concede that there is something in Mary's astonishing assertions concerning the origin of her pregnancy:

Joseph: 'There is error in your words, virgin,
so that one is afraid for you after what you have said.
Take the bill of divorce peacefully, and be off.
You may be sure that I will not reveal the secret'.

Mary: 'It is easy for the Child who resides in my womb
to speak on my behalf when I am overcome;
He will reveal the mystery of what has happened with me;

He will explain that ~I have not been false'.

Joseph: 'Listen to what I am saying to you, O wise woman;
though I believe what you say,
I do not dare to touch your pure womb,
for it is filled with fire'.

Mary: 'Your utterance is dear to me, Joseph.
I have no desire for intercourse:
the Child in my womb will persuade you
that I am a virgin and have not played false'.
(Verses 33-36).

It is only when Joseph has reached the point where reason begins to give way to the unlikely claims of faith that verification eventually comes: 'Joseph slept, and the angel arrived, revealing to him how the mystery had taken place' (verse 42; Matthew 1: 20).

The poem very effectively brings out both Joseph's dilemma and Mary's pain at his initial disbelief. At the same time it stresses the great dangers that Mary faces: at one point (verse 40) she exclaims: 'There will be a great uproar concerning me, ... I shall be accounted an adulteress, and if my Son does not look after me, I'll be torn to pieces'. In a traditional society Mary's situation must indeed have been all too frightening: here one has only to think of the so-called 'honour killings' that still sometimes take place today.

For reasons of time and space it is necessary here to leave aside the other two dialogue poems involving Mary.

One further prominent aspect of Mary in Syriac tradition, however, deserves mention, even if only briefly. This concerns the parallelism that many Syriac writers bring out between the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary, resulting in her conception, and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the eucharistic bread and wine, and their resulting consecration.⁶ These two actions of the Holy Spirit serve, as it were, as assured paradigmatic models for the individual Christian who receives Communion; and these models are ones which each individual needs to strive to make her or his own. In a striking image, one anonymous early Syriac author speaks of the three churches that need to function in harmony at each celebration of the Liturgy: the church on earth, the church in heaven, and the internal 'church' of each individual Christian, for whom the heart—the spiritual centre of one's being—is an altar. This internal altar is sometimes described also as a womb, and so providing a link with Mary's birthgiving. The process of spiritual birthgiving, which should be the aim of Communion, is beautifully described in a long prayer for use before Communion by the eighth-century mystic of the Church of the East, Joseph the Seer. The prayer is addressed to Christ:

You have revealed to me Your hiddenness in the Bread and the Wine,
reveal in me Your love, cause a yearning for You to shine out in me,
so that I may receive Your Body in love for You,

⁶ For this, see further my 'Mary and the Eucharist: an oriental perspective', in *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 1:2 (1979), pp.50-59.

and in yearning for You I may drink Your Blood. ...
 May I receive You, not into the stomach which belongs to the body's limbs,
 but into the womb of my mind,
 so that You may be conceived there,
 as in the womb of the Virgin.
 And may You be revealed in me through spiritual works
 and good deeds that are pleasing to Your will.⁷

In the various Eucharistic prayers of the different Eastern Christian traditions, at the Invocation of the Holy Spirit, the priest prays, not only that the Holy Spirit should come upon the Eucharistic Gifts, but also 'upon us'. Whereas the effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Gifts is assured, making them the Body and Blood, the effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit 'upon us' will depend on whether or not the individual communicant accepts the Holy Spirit in the way that Mary did at the Annunciation: if they do, then the ensuing 'birthgiving' takes the form of a life whose sole aim is the imitation of Christ.

By way of conclusion I quote the words of Elizabeth to Mary, as expressed at the end of an anonymous verse homily of considerable beauty:⁸

'Welcome, O Ship whose cargo is God,
 Welcome, O Palace where the King has come down to reside,
 Welcome, O Garden in which is the straight Staff,
 Welcome, most honoured of all women on earth,
 Welcome, lovely Rose, beauty of the earth,
 Welcome, the one invited to give milk to her Lord,
 Welcome, Wheat wherein is Life for the earth,
 Welcome, young girl in whom is the ancient Babe,
 Welcome, the Dove who bears Christ the Eagle,
 Welcome, most chaste of women, who bears her Lord,
 Welcome, Haven in which the world finds rest,
 Welcome, Joseph's betrothed, in whom the King resides,
 Welcome, the Ewe which has given birth to the Lion's Whelp, (Gen.49:9)
 Welcome, the Vine on which is the Grape-cluster of fire, (Is. 65:8)
 Welcome, the Vessel wherein is kneaded the Leaven of life,
 Welcome, fair Lady who gave birth to the Fruit of the Father,
 Welcome, the Embroidery on whom a novel Babe is portrayed,
 Welcome, the Lock wherein is the Key of fire,
 Welcome, High Hill, more exalted than all the heights,
 Welcome, Second Heaven, who has appeared to us, (Is. 65:17)
 Welcome, O Wondrous one who has given birth to Emmanuel'.

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⁷ The prayer is translated in my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, 1987), pp.355-61.

⁸ Translated in *Bride of Light*, pp.135-40.

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For further reading

Translations :

- R. Beshara, *Mary, Ship of Treasures* (Diocese of St Maron, USA, 1988).
 S.P. Brock, *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Moran Etho 6; Kottayam, St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994) [seeri@sancharnet.in]
 [contains translations of 5 poems by St Ephrem (d.373), the Hymns on Mary attributed to him (probably wrongly), and some anonymous dialogue and narrative poems on Mary]
 - , 'Mary and the Angel, and other Syriac dialogue poems', in *Marianum* 68 (2006), 117-51. [Four anonymous dialogue poems].
 M. Hansbury, *Jacob of Serugh. On the Mother of God* (Crestwood NJ, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998). [Four verse homilies by St Jacob of Serugh (d.521)]

Introductory :

- S.P. Brock, 'Mary in Syriac tradition', ESBVM Pamphlet, 1977; reprinted in A. Stacpoole (ed.), *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (Slough, 1982), 182-91.
 - , 'Mary and the Eucharist: an oriental perspective', *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 1:2 (1979), 50-59.
 R. Murray, 'Mary the Second Eve in the early Syriac Fathers', *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1971), 372-84.
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 J. Puthuparampil, *The Mariological Thought of Mar Jacob of Serugh* (Moran Etho 25, Kottayam, 2005. [Includes many excerpts in translation])

The Syriac Churches

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|--------------------------------|---|
| (a) Syrian Orthodox | (one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches) |
| Malankara Orthodox Church | (" " ") |
| (b) Maronite Church | |
| Syrian Catholic Church | In India: Malankara Catholic Church |
| Chaldean Catholic Church | In India: Malabar Catholic Church |
| (c) Ancient Church of the East | |
| Assyrian Church of the East | |

An illustrated introduction, together with three documentaries, can be found in S.P. Brock (ed.), *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage* (3 vols, Rome, 2001). [distributed by Gorgias Press: www.gorgiaspress.com].

For modern theological dialogue: see the chapter 'The Syriac Churches in Ecumenical Dialogue on Christology', in A. O'Mahony (ed.), *Eastern Christianity. Studies in Modern History, Religion and Politics* (London, 2004), 44-65.