

EPHREM'S USE OF THE ODES OF SOLOMON.

THE contribution which Dr. Wensinck makes in the present number to the interpretation of the *Odes of Solomon* is of the highest value, and the question with which he concludes, as to whether the parallelisms which he notes between Ephrem's *Epiphany Hymns* and the Odes ought not to be treated as a case of literary dependence, is one which can, as I believe, be conclusively answered in the affirmative. In which case it must be clear to every critic who is following the arguments for this or that interpretation of the Odes that we really are making progress with the matter, and that, however thick and obscure the wood may be, we ought to be able, before very long, to see the end of it. In the first place, it has been increasingly evident for some time that there was more light coming on the Odes from the Syriac literature, whatever may have been the original language in which they were composed: and by this I do not mean that there were more illustrations to be found from the Baptismal rituals of the different Eastern Churches, but that apart from ritual parallels (and these are not only Syriac, but Coptic and Ethiopic as well as Latin and Greek), there were literary parallels, which could not be traced to the details of a baptismal service, unless such homilies, exhortations, and hymns were included in the service as might naturally be held to lie outside it; and there were also parallels which could be found in Ephrem's writings quite unconnected with the rite of initiation.

In the next place, the question to be settled, if we are really to succeed in placing and dating the Odes, is precisely this one, which Dr. Wensinck has raised, of their relation to the writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian; and for some time past I have been examining Ephrem's writings with

a view to settle whether Ephrem knew the Odes and used them, or whether the parallels which came to light so frequently in his writings were due simply to a common use of early baptismal symbols. If Ephrem used the Odes, we shall have to allow for their existence in Syriac, at least as far back as the fourth century, and we thus obtain one more proof of the antiquity of the songs and of their wide diffusion in the early Christian Church. It will not be a case of writings only known to Lactantius and the Egyptian Gnostics: when Syria, Egypt and Rome attest a group of documents for the third and fourth centuries, we can hardly allow the compositions to be of late date or of limited circulation.

Starting, then, from Dr. Wensinck's point of view, the significant thing in connexion with the parallels that can be adduced from Ephrem is that they lie thicker in the *Hymns on the Epiphany*, although, as I have shown elsewhere,¹ they exist in the *Nisibene Hymns*, and also in other compositions of his. And as the *Hymns on the Epiphany* are fundamentally and entirely Baptismal Hymns, there can be no escape from the conclusion that the Odes of Solomon are explicable from the point of view of the Baptismal service rather than from any other, unless it can be shown that Ephrem has handled earlier matter in his treatment of the Odes and handled it with what I may call a special Baptismal accentuation. In which last case we must allow for Ephrem's personal equation, and begin the discussion over again with his special accent removed, and from the view-point of an earlier day than his own.

We start, then, with the assumption that the *Hymns of the Epiphany* ascribed to Ephrem are baptismal in character, and that they furnish striking parallels to the Odes.

¹ See EXPOSITOR for November, 1911.

The first point is obvious ; as Lamy says in his preface to the hymns in question :

Observabat diligens lector hos hymnos continuo in baptismum Christi et fidelium dirigi. Hoc exinde provenit quod in Ecclesia Syrorum tunc temporis baptismus in die Epiphaniae solemniter conferebatur. Qui usus adhuc apud Nestorianos perseverat. Praeterea in festum Epiphaniae praesertim in memoriam manifestationis suae in die baptismi sui, . . . institutum erat.

The diligent reader has noted the fact, and has also, with Dr. Wensinck's aid, absorbed the second point that the *Hymns of the Epiphany* furnish striking parallels to the *Odes of Solomon*. What is now needed is a little closer scrutiny than Dr. Wensinck was able to give, in a preliminary investigation, of the inner meaning of the observed parallels.

For example, Dr. Wensinck notes the coincidence (it is his first observation) between the description of the baptized as members of Christ in Ode 3. 11, and 7. 14 and the opening of the ninth *Hymn of the Epiphany*, ("Ye are the children of the Spirit and Christ is your Head ; ye are also to Him the members"). So far no idea is introduced, which was not in the New Testament : but that the parallel is rightly made may be seen as follows : the opening verses of the hymn are thus :

O John ! he saw the Spirit
Which dwelt *on the head* of the Son :
That she (the Spirit) might show that *the head of heaven*
Had descended and been baptized,
And (from the water) had gone up to be *head of earth* :
You have therefore become children of the Holy Spirit :
Christ has become *your head* ;
And you are become his members.

The word-play is on the simple idea of "the head," the motive is in the sentence

The Spirit descended upon the head of Christ.

Now why did Ephrem play upon this word "head" in this detailed manner ?

The answer lies in the opening of the 24th Ode of Solomon,

The Dove fluttered over the Messiah,
Because *he was her head* :

in which we have an allusion to Christ's baptism and an unorthodox doctrine of the subordination of the Holy Spirit to the Divine Son. Ephrem takes up the opening from the baptism and then explains carefully that Christ is the head of heaven (*not* of the Spirit) and becomes the head of earth also, for are not believers His members ? And it is Ephrem's stanza that makes us see what the Odist was doing : he also in his first form was playing with the word "head," and no doubt had, in the Greek form,

The Dove fluttered over (the head of) the Messiah :
For he was her head.

It is so like Ephrem's treatment of a subject that one could almost think Ephrem had written both : the two hymns belong to similar schools of thought, and Ephrem's is the later composition.

In the eleventh hymn Dr. Wensinck notes a parallel (§ 6) between the river seen in the vision of Ezekiel, where

The prophet saw a great mystery,
A torrent which became strong ;

and the famous passage in the sixth Ode of Solomon, where

There went forth a stream
And became a river great and broad.

It must be noticed that Ephrem continues as follows :

On the depth of the torrent he fixed his eyes ;
And instead of seeing himself he saw thy beauty :

this is evidently a case of the water being used as a mirror ; and we naturally compare the thirteenth Ode of Solomon :

Behold! the Lord is our Mirror :
 Open your eyes and see yourselves in Him :
 And learn the manner of your face,
 And tell forth praises to his Spirit :
 And love his holiness :
 And clothe yourselves therewith.

The question at once arises whether Ephrem did not read this Ode in a modified form (which would require very little change in Syriac),

Behold! the water is our mirror :
 Open your eyes and see yourselves in it :

at all events it is a fair suggestion that he thus knew it : and the hypothesis becomes a practical certainty when we find in the ninth hymn (§ 7) such a sentence as this :

The water by its nature is a mirror
 To him who attentively looks therein ;
 * * * * *

Look into the (water of) baptism
 And clothe yourselves with the beauty that is hidden therein.

Compare also the previous stanza :

How fair is (the water of baptism) *to the eyes* of the heart :
 * * * * *

The glory that is (hidden) in the water
Impress it upon your minds.

Surely there can be no doubt that Ephrem has not only alluded to Ezekiel's torrent as in Ode 6, but also to the beautiful thirteenth Ode with its comparison of the Lord to a mirror of the spirit. The only doubtful point is whether Ephrem has changed "the Lord" to "the water," or whether we have to amend the text of the published Ode.

Those who may wish for further confirmation of the use which Ephrem makes of the mirror in the thirteenth Ode may be interested in comparing a passage in the *Hymns on the Church and on Virginity* ascribed to Ephrem in Lamy, tom. iv. 602. I give Lamy's translation without troubling to revise it or translate the Latin :

O speculum purum populis propositum !
 illi acquisierunt oculum internum et
 accedentes intus intuiti sunt : quia
 aspexerunt probra sua seipsos reprehenderunt :
 maculas suas deterserunt : ornamenta
 eorum pulchra apparuerunt ; beatus qui
 probra sua reprehendit videns pulchritudinem
 tuam et in se imprimit imaginem tuam.

Almost every clause in this passage finds its motive in some line or other of the thirteenth Ode. It is purely unnecessary to labour the point further : if the hymns are Ephrem's they betray the same dependence on the Odes that we find in the *Hymns on the Epiphany*.

The same thing comes out when we study the *Nisibene Hymns*, only here the ground of coincidence appears to be the allusions to the Descent into Hades. In a recent number of the EXPOSITOR, I have shown how the parallels from these hymns explain why "Sheol was made sad" (Ode 4. 11) and how "the abysses deprived of food cried to the Lord" (Ode 24). One more instance shall be given on this subject. The 22nd Ode has in one place used the story of the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel, and the question has not yet been answered as to what slaughter and revival was alluded to in the Ode. The answer comes from *Carmina Nisibena* 37.

I saw in the valley that Ezekiel who quickened the dead when he was questioned : and I saw the bones that were in heaps and they moved : there was a tumult of bones in Sheol, bone seeking for his fellow, and joint for her mate. . . . Unquestioned the voice of Jesus, the Master of all creatures, quickened them.

The parallel can easily be made with Ode 22. 8-10 :

Thou didst choose them from the graves and didst separate them from the dead : thou didst take dead bones and didst cover them with bodies ; they were motionless and thou didst give them energy for life.

It would be easy to show other cases of probable dependence of Ephrem upon the Odes : but I think enough has

perhaps been said, and that we may consider this dependence established. The writings of Ephrem now constitute the earliest commentary upon the *Odes of Solomon*, whose antiquity is once more demonstrated.

Every point raised in the discussion raises another point. For example had Ephrem our Syriac translation, or is it possible that he may have had an earlier form antedating even the Greek : for it is not Greek Odes that he is using ? Has he, perhaps, imitated actual metrical Syriac hymns, and not merely the unmetrical prose of a Syriac translation from some Greek form ? These questions become of increasing importance when we remember that Ephrem is not the inventor of Syriac poetry : he has antecedents : when our Odes were first published, I remember that Mrs. Lewis and her sister Mrs. Gibson remarked to me that these Odes look like the models of Ephrem's hymns ; I put the suggestion on one side at the time, but the fact is that Ephrem had models. His models were the hymns with which Bardesan and his son Harmonius had captured the imagination of the people of Edessa. Early models being conceded, ought we to seek for the origin of the Odes among the Christian or Gnostic Schools of Edessa, or would such a suggestion obscure more than it would illuminate ? The direction of our next inquiry should perhaps be among these literary antecedents of St. Ephrem.

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