

EPHREM'S IDEAS ON SINGLENES

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INTRODUCTION

- [1] The history of Syriac Christian asceticism has sometimes been harshly criticized. The reasons for such a negative approach might be worth exploring, though this paper is not precisely about that problem. What captivated the minds of various such critics is the unpalatable “enchratic” elements, the exotic and strange forms of its development.¹ Two customary generalizations about the origins of Christian monasticism are the following: the Egyptian desert is seen as the birth-place of monasticism; secondly, hermits come before the cenobitic life. “Monasticism begins with hermits: in the third and fourth centuries in Egypt and in Syria Christians fled from their towns and villages to remote parts of the countryside, to the deserts of Pispir and Nitria, to the mouths of Nile and Euphrates.”² Such a simplistic approach fails to see the pre-fourth century, pre-monastic, proto-monastic and semi-monastic ascetic movements elsewhere among Christians and especially in the Syriac-speaking world. The traditional way of seeing Christianity as

¹ Cf. P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988) 332ff.

² K. Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A Study of Religious Communities in Western Europe 1000–1150* (London, 1984) 7.

either the Latin West or the Greek East at the expense of the Syriac Orient is also partly responsible for the above-mentioned views.³

- [2] Practically all the ancient authors of the Syriac milieu—Orthodox as well as heterodox—before the fifth century were ascetically oriented. We find only one notable exception to this and that is Bar Daisan (154–222). The contribution of Tatian in the development of the Christian ascetical movement should not be forgotten.⁴ He had never been a heretic for the Syriac Christian world of the patristic period. Indeed his theological and spiritual legacy survived through the *Diatessaron* until the early fifth century. Through St. Ephrem's commentary on this harmony of the four Gospels Tatian's legacy continued even afterwards. But above all he was considered as one of the greatest masters of asceticism. "The history of monasticism as a style of the ascetical life in Syria needs renewed scholarly attention. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the hitherto prevailing view rests, at least in part, upon mistaken assumptions from two sources about its origins. One is the traditional, monastic hagiography deriving from the Greco-Syrian milieu itself. The other is the modern scholarly mistake about the date and authorship of certain texts crucial to the case as documentary evidence."⁵

- [3] Church historians such as Theodoret of Cyrillus (*History of the Monks of Syria*), Palladius (*Lausiac History*) and Sozomen (*Church History*) and the monastic hagiographies by fifth and sixth-century Syriac and Greek writers provide a picture entirely different from the history of Syriac ascetical world, as it is understood today. A. Vööbus' *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* is a classic example of a modern version of such monastic historiography.⁶

³ T. Koonammakkal, "Early Christian Monastic Origins: A General Introduction in the Context of the Syriac Orient," *Dialogue* 18 (1991): 14–48; J.C. O'Neill, "The Origins of Monasticism," in R. Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1989) 270–87.

⁴ Shafiq Abou Zayd, *Ibidayutha: A Study of the Life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient: From Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D.* (Oxford, 1993), 9–14; Koonammakkal, "Early Christian Monastic Origins," 33–4.

⁵ S.H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in V.L. Wimbush, R. Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism*, (New York, 1995) 221.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 221f.

The native Syriac ascetical movement underwent a transformation in the second half of the fourth century, partly because of the institutionalization of Egyptian monasticism and partly because of the inner crisis of the Syriac ascetical movement itself. Physical withdrawal (*anachoresis*) from the ordinary Christian community was the characteristic feature of this new situation.

THE CONCEPT OF *IHIDAYUTHA* IN EPHREM'S TIME

[4] More than two decades ago Robert Murray pointed out an important aspect of the Syriac ascetical movement: "...the asceticism we know from early Syriac sources was nothing other than a continuation... of discipleship, taken by some as imitation, of the poor, homeless and celibate Jesus."⁷ This element of continuity with first-century Jewish sectarian movements has been suggested by various scholars. The *Acts of Judas Thomas* is "inspired by a rigorously encratite understanding of Christian discipleship..."⁸ The inspiration of Syriac ascetical movements came from the idea of radical discipleship of Jesus.⁹

[5] The term *ihidayā* is crucial in understanding early Syriac asceticism. Every Syriac scholar knows the long-standing discussions of this particular term in the context of early Syriac Christianity and this paper is not going to offer any new interpretation. It is instead an attempt to point out the relation between *ihidayuthā* in Ephrem's time and the idea of discipleship and the imitation of Christ in Ignatius of Antioch.

[6] *Ihdayā* is the title of Jesus Christ as "the only Son" of God. It translates the Greek term *monogenous* (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 Jn 4:9; Lk 8:42 Lk 7:12, 9:38, etc.). It means one, only one, unique, one without another, etc. Syriac *ihidayā* is the equivalent of *monogenous* and *monachos*. Alfred Adam, Edmund Beck, Gilles Quispel, Antoine Guillaumont and Robert Murray have already explored the various

⁷ R. Murray, "The Features of the Earliest Christian Asceticism," in P. Brooks (ed.), *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp* (London, 1975) 66.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ G. Kretschmar, "Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Ursprung fruehchristliches Askese," *ZThK* 61 (1964): 27–67; P. Nagel, *Die Motivierung der Askese in der alten Kirche und der Ursprung des Moenchtums* (TuU 95; 1966); A. Adam, "Grundbegriffe des Moenchtums in sprachlicher Sicht," *ZKG* 65 (1953–4): 209–39.

shades of meaning in this term. In the first three centuries of the Christian era textual evidence for this term is very scanty, in spite of the fact that the term developed from various biblical passages. But the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat the Persian Sage (died about 345) and the writings of Ephrem (c. 306–73) show that already by the first half of the fourth century *ihidāyā* had become a familiar, traditional technical term denoting both Christ and the baptized ascetic disciple of Christ. Murray has clarified the three senses of *ihidāyā*:¹⁰

1. *Monachos*, or single from wife or family;
2. *Monotropos*, *Monoxonos*, not *dipsuchos*, single in heart, not double-minded;
3. *Monogenous*, Only-Begotten, as well as united to the Only-Begotten.

[7] *Ihidāyā* was first and foremost the title of Christ the Only-Begotten. The same term was applied to every baptized Christian in general and to the ascetic disciple in particular. The ascetic *ihidāye* were living in the midst of society; they were not hermits or solitary ones at all. This is evident from Aphrahat, Ephrem and the *Liber Graduum*. “These ascetics (*ihidāye*) were not solitary in the sense of being isolated from everybody else, but in the sense of being unmarried.”¹¹ The social involvement of the *ihidāye* was a special feature of the Syrian ascetical movement in Ephrem’s time. Physical isolation and withdrawal from the Christian community seems not to have occurred until a later date.

[8] The term *ihidāyā* meant single, celibate, single-minded, a baptized disciple or imitator of Christ the *Ihidāyā*. It is in the second half of the fourth century that it was almost identified with Greek *monachos*, meaning monk or solitary. But the original shades of meaning survived even then. Both *bthule* (virgins, celibates) and *qaddishe* (married ones who had renounced their marital life) formed *ihidāyā* who were consecrated and hence “holy.” The baptized soul as well as the Church itself became the bride of Christ the heavenly Bridegroom. So many baptized disciples who wanted to become close followers and imitators of Christ renounced marriage itself and awaited the arrival of Christ the

¹⁰ R. Murray, “The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows at Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church,” *NTS* 21 (1974–5): 67.

¹¹ A. Baker, “Syriac and the Origins of Monasticism,” *The Downside Review* 86 (1968): 348.

heavenly Bridegroom. The eschatological emphasis of early Christian thought was one of the underlying reasons for this waiting. The imagery of marriage feast and bridal chamber are very common in early Christian literature in Syriac.

- [9] The ideal of the ascetic life as the *angelikos bios* captivated the mind of many Christians. Baptism was a potential re-entry into eschatological paradise. The singleness of God, the singleness of Christ and the singleness of Adam in Paradise¹² were thought of as combined in one ideal goal. "Indeed, to a Syriac speaker, the individual *iḥidāyā* will be to Christ (the *iḥidāyā*) what the individual Christian (*mšihāyā*) is to Christ (*Mšihā*)."¹³ Baptism is "putting on Christ" in the words of St Paul (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14). In baptism the name *Mšihā* is imprinted upon the recipients who thereby become *Mšihāye*.¹⁴ Christian baptism is the counterpart of Christ's incarnation:

The most High knew that Adam wanted to become a
god, So he sent His Son who put him on in order to
grant him his desire.¹⁵

Divinity flew down and descended
to raise and draw up humanity.
The Son has made beautiful the servants deformity,
and he has become a god, just as he desired.¹⁶

Blessed is He who descended
put Adam on and ascended.¹⁷

He gave us divinity,
we gave Him humanity.¹⁸

- [10] The term *iḥidāyā* was applied specifically to the ascetically oriented baptized disciples and followers of Christ. The solemn

¹² S. Brock, *Saint Ephrem: Hymns on Paradise* (New York, 1990) 31–2.

¹³ Ibid., 32; cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, 1992²) 133–41.

¹⁴ HcH 22:3–7; 23:3–10; HdV 4:8–14; HdF 46:4, 51:7, etc.; cf. T. Koonammakkal, "Christ and Christians: An Ecclesiological Theme in Ephrem," *Christian Orient* 15 (1994): 163–9; repr. *The Harp* 8–9 (1995–6): 345–54.

¹⁵ C Nis 69:12 = Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, 73.

¹⁶ HdV 48:17–18 = Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, 73.

¹⁷ HdV 23:13 = Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, 69.

¹⁸ HdF 5:17 = Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*, 74.

invitation and consecration to *ihidāyuthā* was indeed baptism. But it was in response to a special call to discipleship. Single-minded imitation of the heavenly *Ihīdāyā* was the ideal of the earthly *ihidāye*. It was a total commitment, the opposite of being “double-minded” (James 1:8). In the hymns on the Epiphany we read:

Behold the sword of our Lord in the waters,
 which divides sons and fathers;
 for it is a living sword, which makes
 a division between the living and the dead.
 Behold, they are baptized and become virgins and
 consecrated ones
 for they went down, were baptized and put on that one
Ihīdāyā.
 Behold, many have hated, by reason of him,
 even families, even offspring, even wealth.
 For whoever is baptized and put on
 the *Ihīdāyā*, the Lord of the many,
 takes (lit. fills) the place of the many,
 for Christ becomes his great treasure
 For He has become, in the desert, a table of delicacies
 and He has become, at the wedding-feast, the source of
 wines.
 He has become in all things the property of all,
 by means of good offices, healings and promises.¹⁹

Murray has pointed out the significance of this hymn in understanding the sense of *ihidāyā*. It is singleness, in that the *ihidāyā* leaves his family and does not marry; it is single-mindedness; above all it is a special relationship to Christ the *Ihīdāyā*. At baptism the consecrated ascetics “put on” the *Ihīdāyā* in a special manner.²⁰ Ephrem speaks of the “divided heart” in HdC 8:2; HdF 20:15; 66:7; HcH 29:35; etc. Here he is alluding to 1 Cor 7:34 where St. Paul speaks of a married person as “divided.” Aphrahat took this up in *Demonstrations* 18:10, in a comment on Gen 2:24 (“a man shall leave his father and mother”). Gal 3:28 speaks of a state where mankind is neither male nor female.

¹⁹ Epiph. 8: 16–17.

²⁰ R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975) 13, 16; idem, “Exhortation,” 59–80; idem, “The Features of the Earliest Christian Asceticism,” 72f.

[11] The duality of the heart was a concept much discussed in the early centuries of the Christian era.²¹ It means a heart divided between good and evil, day and night, light and darkness, life and death. A baptized ascetic is a unique disciple of the unique Master. He cannot follow Christ with a divided heart. Integrity and undividedness of heart is called for in following and imitating Christ. It is a single-minded discipleship, undivided commitment to Christ, imitation of Christ, suffering and martyrdom, perfect discipleship. This was a common theme in the Apostolic Fathers.²² Ignatius of Antioch longs that Christians should live "with an undivided heart" (*en ameristo*[*ī*] *kardia*[*ī*]).²³ It is the internal unity and integrity of the soul that is understood here, as in the Shepherd of Hermas. The ascetical movements sprouted from the ideal of the whole-hearted imitation of Christ which was already espoused by a few disciples in Apostolic times. *Iḥidāyā* means an undivided disciple of Christ the *Iḥidāyā*.²⁴ "*Iḥidāyā* is a complex term in Syrian literature. Its primary meaning is not a monk, or a hermit, or a solitary; it refers rather to the unity of man with God."²⁵ Following Christ with an undivided commitment was the core of *iḥidāyuthā*. "The *iḥidāyā* is a follower and imitator of Christ the *Iḥidāyā* par excellence; he is single-minded for Christ; his heart is single and not divided; he is single as Adam was single when he was created; he is single in the sense of celibate."²⁶

[12] Ephrem advises the ascetics who anticipate the life of Paradise here on earth: "...and let one who is divided collect himself together and become one before you."²⁷ The term *iḥidāyā* means more than "singleness" or celibacy with a religious intention. It is singleness of purpose or *monotropos*. The *iḥidāyā* is in a special relationship with Christ the *Iḥidāyā*, the only and beloved Son of God (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). According to many Syriac scholars this was the original and primary meaning of the term *iḥidāyā* for the

²¹ Abou Zayd, *Iḥidayutha*, 24, 28, 44, 71, etc.

²² 1 Clem. 23; Barn. 19:2,5; *Shepherd of Hermas* (more than fifty times): *Herm. Man.* 9; *Herm. Vis.* 2:2,4; 3:3,4; 3:4,3; 3:7,1; 4:1,4; 4:2,6 etc.

²³ Phil 6:2; T. Koonammakkal, "Ignatian Vision of Christian Life as Imitation of Christ," *Christian Orient* 17 (1996): 119–27.

²⁴ Abou Zayd, *Iḥidayutha*, 269–80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 139.

²⁷ HdF 20:17.

Syriac theologians of antiquity. It was understood as a special title of Christ in the Syriac-speaking world. Aphrahat and Ephrem “seldom fail to make this connection explicitly” whenever they speak of “singles” in God’s service.²⁸ This connection between human *ihidāyā* and divine *Ihidāyā* is because of baptism. The ascetic *ihidāyā* is only a representative and type of many. This representative role is compared to the divine *Ihidāyā* in putting on humanity at the incarnation. It is a symbolic anticipation of the new man, re-created Adam in a Paradise restored, realized and regained.²⁹ The purpose of putting on the heavenly *Ihidāyā* in a tangible and personal manner was to imitate Christ³⁰ and thereby to become a close follower, a perfect disciple of Christ. “For thus it is proper for the disciples of Christ to imitate Christ, their Lord.”³¹ The ascetic *ihidāyā* stood for Christ on the one hand and for the many on the other. Christ is his “great treasure” at baptism and he does not want to part with it. The Qyama of *ihidāyā* meant their religious covenant, voluntarily undertaken at baptism, and also their resurrection here on earth, their restored paradisiacal status. The *ihidāyā* “have received the likeness of angels”³² and their virginity means a “communion with the watchers of heaven.”³³ Ephrem makes an important comment about bishop Abraham of Nisibis:

Ihidāyā in his daily life, being holy in his body,
Ihidāyā in his house, internally and externally chaste.³⁴

S. Griffith argues that the stand or the station in life the *ihidāyā* take by covenant is much more than just a pact of virginity or celibacy. “For the many they stand for Christ, and for Christ they stand for the many...”³⁵ The *ihidāyā* serve as a type for the whole Christian community. Julian Saba was such a type for his people, as we are told in the biography of him which is attributed to Ephrem:

²⁸ S. Griffith, “Monks, ‘singles,’ and the ‘Sons of the covenant:’ Reflections on Syriac Ascetic Terminology,” *Studia Anselmiana* 110 (1993): 144.

²⁹ Ibid., 144.

³⁰ Ibid., 145.

³¹ Parisot, *Aphrahat’s Demonstrations* I, col. 276.

³² Ibid., col. 248.

³³ Ibid., col. 309.

³⁴ CNis 15:9.

³⁵ Griffith, “Monks, ‘singles,’ and the ‘Sons of the covenant,’” 153.

Jesus was at all times depicted in his life-style,
 and because he saw the glory of the Single One
(ihidāyā),
 he too became a single one *(ihidāyā)*.
 He showed contempt for this dwelling
 which is passing away,
 and he scorned the beauty which is fading.
 He manifested the type (*tupsā*) for the
 sons of his own people in humility.³⁶

Julian the *ihidāyā* imitated Jesus the *Ihidāyā*. So "Jesus used to visit us in you" (Julian).³⁷ "Both you and your brothers are depicted in our Lord. Blessed is the one who puts you on."³⁸ The typological and sacrificial dimensions of the term *ihidāyā* have also been noticed.³⁹

[13] With a short description of Christian life as imitation of Christ we shall conclude this paper. Ignatius was martyred during the reign of Trajan (98–117 AD). About the year 110 he wrote seven epistles in which his zeal for becoming a real and perfect disciple of Christ stands out remarkably. He claims to be an athlete of Christ, a phrase which became widespread in later ascetic and monastic circles.⁴⁰

[14] In all his seven epistles Ignatius introduces himself as *Theophoros*, which means God-bearer.⁴¹ In a third or fourth-century work called *The Martyrdom of Ignatius* we find an interesting elucidation of the concept of *Theophoros*. Ignatius was arrested for his faith and he was questioned by the emperor Trajan: "And who is Theophoros?" Ignatius replied: "He who has Christ within his heart." "Do you then carry within you Him that was crucified?" "Truly so..." The scriptural texts cited or alluded to by Ignatius to

³⁶ S.H. Griffith, "Julian Saba, 'Father of the Monks' of Syria," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 204.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

³⁹ S.H. Griffith, "'Singles' in God's Service: Thoughts on the *Ihidāyā* from the works of Aphrahat and Ephrem the Syrian," *The Harp* 4 (1991): 155.

⁴⁰ Ign. *Pol.* 1:3, 3:1; 2 Tim 2:5; Phil 1:27, 4:3; Heb 10:32f.; V. Saxer, "Athleta Christi," *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* I, 96.

⁴¹ Ign. *Eph.* (Loeb Classical Library edition 24: 172), Ign. *Magn.* (LCL 24: 196), Ign. *Trall.* (LCL 24: 212), Ign. *Rom.* (LCL 24: 224), Ign. *Phld.* (LCL 24: 238), Ign. *Smyrn.* (LCL 24: 250), Ign. *Pol.* (LCL 24: 266).

clarify his title *Theophoros* are 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 1 Cor. 6:19; Lev. 26:11–12; Ex. 37:27. It is unlikely that *Theophoros* was just a baptismal name for Ignatius, rather it was a deliberate theological title which he used to explain his whole Christian existence. The same work speaks of martyrdom as the perfect imitation of Christ, which makes one a perfect disciple of Christ. Origen (c. 185–253) identified perfect discipleship with martyrdom.⁴²

[15]

Christians are “imitators of God,”⁴³ who are described as follows: “You are fellow-travellers, then, and carry with you God, and the Temple, and Christ, and holiness, and are in all ways adorned by the commandments of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ This is not an exact translation of the text. In the original Greek we find *theophoroi* (God-bearers), *naophoroi* (temple-bearers), *Christophoroi* (Christ-bearers) and *hagiophoroi* (bearers of holy things, Holy Spirit—bearers, holiness-bearers). It is in this sense that Ignatius is *Theophoros*; it is in the same sense that the Christians of Ephesus are called *theophoroi*. Every individual Christian has to be a *Theophoros* or *Christophoros* because of his putting on Christ at baptism. Christian life is *theophoric* because of the divine indwelling. Christians are to be *mimetai tou Kurion* (imitators of the Lord).⁴⁵ Integrity, undividedness of heart or single-minded discipleship of Christ can be part of this imitation of Christ. It is a choice between death and life.⁴⁶ It is bearing “the stamp of God the Father in love through Jesus Christ...”⁴⁷ Christians have Christ in themselves⁴⁸ because of their discipleship and baptism. According to Ignatius, Christ’s passion is our resurrection (*to pathos he estin hemon anastasis*).⁴⁹ It is interesting that these ascetical themes reappear in Ephrem’s concept of *ihidāyuthā* in the fourth century. It is also an indication of a link between the fourth-century Syrian ascetical movement and the early second-century concepts of Ignatius.

⁴² R. A. Greer, *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works* (New York, 1979) 48–9, 59; Rom II:1–2; Rom IV–VI.

⁴³ Ign. *Eph.* 1:1 (LCL 24: 172).

⁴⁴ Ign. *Eph.* 9:2 (LCL 24: 182).

⁴⁵ Ign. *Eph.* 10:3 (LCL 24: 184), Ign. *Trall.* 1:2 (LCL 24: 212), Ign. *Phld.* (LCL 24: 246).

⁴⁶ Cf. Ign. *Magn.* 5:1; Barn. 18:1–20:9; Did. 1:1–6:2.

⁴⁷ Ign. *Magn.* 5:2.

⁴⁸ Ign. *Magn.* 12:1.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ign. *Smyrn.* 5:3.