

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

## HYMN 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 III.

Blessed be that first day of thine, Lord, wherewith this day of Thy Feast is stamped I  
Thy day is like Thee, in that it shows mercy unto men, in that it is handed down and  
comes with all generations.

This is the day that ends with the aged, and returns that it may begin with the young! a  
day that by its love refreshes itself, that it may refresh by its might us decayed  
creatures. Thy day when it had visited us and passed, and gone away, in its mercy  
returned and visited us again: for it knows that human nature needs it; in all things like  
unto Thee as seeking us.

The world is in want of its fountain; and for it, Lord, as for Thee, all therein are athirst.  
This is the day that rules over the seasons! the dominion of Thy day is like Thine, which  
stretches over generations that have come, and are to come! Thy day is like unto Thee,  
because when it is one, it buds and multiplies itself, that it may be like Thee!

In this Thy day, Lord, which is near unto us, we see Thy Birth that is far off! Like to Thee  
be Thy day to us, Lord; let it be a mediator and a warranter of peace.

Thy day reconciled Heaven and earth, because therein the Highest came down to the  
lowest.

Thy day was able to reconcile the Just One, who was wroth at our sins; Thy day forgave  
thousands of sins, for in its bowels of mercy shone forth upon the guilty!

Great, Lord, is Thy day; let it not be small upon us, let it show mercy according as it  
used to do, upon us transgressors!

And if every day, Lord, Thy forgiveness wells forth, how exceeding great should it be  
upon this day! All the days from the Treasure of Thy bright day gain blessings. All the

feasts from the stores of this feast have their fairness and their ornaments. Thy bowels of mercy upon Thy day make Thou to abound unto us, O Lord! Make us to distinguish Thy day from all days! for great is the treasure-house of the day of Thy Birth; let it be the ransom of debtors! Great is this day above all days, for in it came forth mercy to sinners. A store of medicines is this Thy great day, because on it shone forth the Medicine of Life to the wounded! A treasure of helpful graces is this day, for that on it Light gleamed forth upon our blindness! Yea, it also brought a sheaf unto us; and it came, that from it might flow plenty upon our hunger. This day is that forerunning Cluster, in which the cup of salvation was concealed! This day is the first-born feast, which, being born the first, overcomes all feasts. In the winter which strips the fruit of the branches off from the barren vine, Fruit sprang up(1) unto us; in the cold that bares all the trees, a shoot was green for us of the house of Jesse. In December(2) when the seed is hidden in the earth, there sprouted forth from the Womb the Ear of Life. In March(3) when the seed was sprouting in the air, a Sheaf(4) sowed itself in the earth. The harvest thereof, Death devoured it in Hell; which the Medicine of life that is hidden therein did yet burst open! In March when the lambs bleat in the wilderness, into the Womb the Paschal Lamb entered! Out of the stream whence the fishers came up,(5) He was baptized and came up Who incloses all things in his net; out of the stream the fish whereof Simon took, out of it the Fisher of men came up, and took him. With the Cross which catches all robbers, He caught up unto life that robber!(6) The Living by His death emptied Hell, He unloosed it and let fly away from it entire multitudes! The publicans and harlots, the impure snares, the snares of the deceitful fowler the Holy One seized! The sinful woman, who was a snare for men, He made a mirror for penitent women! The fig that cast its fruit, that refused fruit,(7) offered Zacchaeus as fruit; the fruit of its own nature it gave not, but it yielded one reasonable fruit! The Lord spread His thirst over the well, and caught her that was thirsty with the water that He asked of her. He caught one soul at the well, and again caught with her the whole city:(8) twelve fishers the Holy One caught, and again caught with them the whole world. As for Iscariot, that escaped from His nets, the strangling halter fell upon his neck! His all-quickening net catches the living,(9) and he that escapes from it escapes from the living.

And who is able, Lord, to tell me up the several succours that are hid in Thee? How shall the parched mouth be able to drink from the Fountain of the Godhead! Answer today the voice of our petition; let our prayer which is in words take effect in deeds. Heal us, O my Master; every time that we see Thy Feast, may it cause rumours that we have heard to pass away. Our mind wanders amid these voices. O Voice of the Father, still [other] voices; the world is noisy, in Thee let it gain itself quiet; for by Thee the sea was stilled from its storms. The devils rejoiced when they heard the voice of blasphemy: let the Watchers rejoice in us as they are wont.(1) From amongst Thy fold there is the voice of sorrowfulness; O Thou that makest all rejoice,(2) let Thy flock rejoice! as for our murmur, O my Master, in it reject us not: our mouth murmurs since it is sinful. Let Thy

day, O Lord, give us all manner of joy, with the flowers(3) of peace, let us keep Thy passover. In the day of Thy Ascension we are lifted up:(4) with the new Bread shall be the memorial thereof. O Lord, increase our peace, that we may keep three feasts of the Godhead. Great is Thy day, Lord, let us not be despised. All men honour the day of Thy birth. Thou righteous One, keep Thou the glory of Thy birth; for even Herod honoured the day of His birth! The dances of the impure one pleased the tyrant; to Thee, Lord, let the voice of chaste women be sweet! Thee, Lord, let the voice of chaste women please, whose bodies Thou guardest holily. The day of Herod was like him: Thy day too is like Thee! The day of the troubled one was troubled with sin; and fair as Thou art is Thy fair day! The feast of the tyrant killed the preacher; in Thy feast every man preaches glory. On the day of the murderer, the Voice(5) was put to silence; but on Thy day are the voices of the feast. The foul one in his feast put out the Light, that darkness might cover the adulterers. The season of the Holy One trims lamps, that darkness may flee with the hidden things thereof. The day of that fox(6) stank like himself; but holy is the feast of the True Lamb.(7) The day of the transgressor passed(8) away like himself; Thy day like Thyself abideth for ever. The day of the tyrant raged like himself, because with his chain it put to silence the righteous Voice. The feast of the Meek One is tranquil like Himself, because His sun shines upon His persecutors. The tyrant was conscious that He was not a king, therefore to the King of kings he gave place. The whole day, Lord, suffices me not to balance Thy praise with his blame. May Thy Gracious day cause my sin to pass away, seeing that it is with the day of the impure one, that I have weighed Thy day! For great is Thy day beyond comparison! nor can it be compared with our days. The day of man is as of the earthy: the day of God is as of God! Thy day, Lord, is greater than those of the prophets,(9) and I have taken and set it beside that of the murderer! Thou knowest, O Lord, as knowing all things, how to hear the comparison that my tongue hath made. Let Thy day grant our requests for life, since his day granted the request for death. The needy king swore on his feast that half his kingdom should be the reward of the dance! Let Thy feast then, O Thou that enrichest all, shed down in mercy a crumb of fine wheat flour! From the dry land gushed the Fountain, which sufficed to satisfy the thirst of the Gentiles! From the Virgin's womb as from a strong rock sprouted up the seed, whence was much fruit! Barns without number did Joseph fill;(1) and they were emptied and failed in the years of the famine. One true Sheaf gave bread; the bread of Heaven, whereof there is no stint. The bread which the First-born brake in the wilderness,(2) failed and passed away though very good. He returned again and broke the New Bread(3) which ages and generations shall not waste away! The seven loaves also that He brake failed,(4) and the five loaves too that He multiplied were consumed;(5) the Bread that He brake exceeded the world's needs, for the more it was divided, the more it multiplied exceedingly. With much wine also He filled the waterpots; they drew it out, yet it failed though it was abundant: of the Cup that He gave though the draught was small, very great was its strength, so that there is no stint

thereto. A Cup is He(6) that contains all strong wines, and also a Mystery in the midst of which He Himself is! The one Bread that He brake has no bound, and the one Cup that He mingled has no stint!(7) The Wheat that was sown,(8) on the third day came up and filled the Garner of Life.(9) The spiritual Bread, as the Giver of it, quickens the spiritual spiritually, and he that receives it carnally, receives it rashly to no profit. This Bread of grace let the spirit receive discerningly, as the medicine of Life. If the dead sacrifices in the name of devils were offered,(1) yea eaten, not without a mystery; at the holy thing of the offering, how much more does it behove us that this mystery be circumspectly administered by us. He that eateth of the sacrifice in the name of devils, becomes devilish without all contradiction. He that eateth the Heavenly Bread, becomes Heavenly without doubt! Wine teaches us, in that it makes him that is familiar therewith like itself: for it hates much him that is fond of it, and is intoxicating and maddening, and a mocker(2) to him! Light teaches us, in that it makes like unto itself the eye the daughter of the sun: the eye by the light saw the nakedness, and ran and chastely hid the chaste man.(3) As for that nakedness it was wine that made it, which even to the chaste skills not to show mercy!

With the weapon of the deceiver the First-born clad Himself, that with the weapon that killed, He might restore to life again! With the tree wherewith he slew us, He delivered us. With the wine which maddened us, with it we were made chaste! With the rib that was drawn out of Adam, the wicked one drew out the heart of Adam. There rose from the Rib(4) a hidden power, which cut off Satan as Dagon: for in that Ark a book was hidden that cried and proclaimed concerning the Conqueror! There was then a mystery revealed, in that Dagon was brought low in his own place of refuge!(5) The accomplishment came after the type, in that the wicked one was brought low in the place in which he trusted! Blessed be He Who came and in Him were accomplished the mysteries of the left hand, and the right hand.(6) Fulfilled was the mystery that was in the Lamb, and fulfilled was the type that was in Dagon. Blessed is He Who by the True Lamb redeemed us, and destroyed our destroyer as He did Dagon! In December when the nights are long, rose unto us the Day, of Whom there is no bound! In winter when all the world is gloomy, forth came the Fair One Who cheered all in the world! In winter that makes the earth barren, virginity learned to bring forth. In December, that causes the travails of the earth to cease, in it were the travails of virginity. The early lamb no one ever used to see before the shepherds: and as for the true Lamb, in the season of His birth, the tidings of Him too hastened unto the shepherds. That old wolf saw the sucking Lamb, and he trembled before Him, though He had concealed himself; for because the wolf had put on sheep's clothing, the **Shepherd** of all became a Lamb in the flocks, in order that when the greedy one had been bold against the Meek, the Mighty One might rend that Eater.(7) The Holy One dwelt bodily in the womb; and He dwelt spiritually in the mind. Mary that conceived Him abhorred the marriage bed; let not that soul commit whoredom in the which He dwelleth. Because Mary perceived Him, she left her

betrothed: He dwelleth in chaste virgins, if they perceive Him.(8) The deaf perceive not the mighty thunder, neither does the heady man the sound of the commandment. For the deaf is bewildered in the time of the thunderclap, the heady man is bewildered also at the voice of instruction; if fearful thunder terrifies the deaf, then would fearful wrath stir the unclean! That the deaf hears not is no blame to him; but whoso tramples [on the commandments] it is headiness. From time to time there is thunder: but the voice of the law thunders every day. Let us not close our ears when their openings, as being opened and not closed against it, accuse us; and the door of hearing is open by nature, that it might reproach us for our headiness against our will. The door of the voice and the door of the mouth our will can open or close. Let us see what the Good One has given us; and let us hear the mighty Voice, and let not the doors of our ears be closed.

Glory to that Voice Which became Body, and to the Word of the High One Which became Flesh! Hear Him also, O ears, and see Him, O eyes, and feel Him, O hands, and eat Him, O mouth! Ye members and senses give praise unto Him, that came and quickened the whole body! Mary bare the silent Babe, while in Him were hidden all tongues! Joseph bare Him, and in Him was hidden a nature more ancient than aught that is old! The High One became as a little child, and in Him was hidden a treasure of wisdom sufficing for all! Though Most High, yet He sucked the milk of Mary, and of His goodness all creatures suck! He is the Breast of Life, and the Breath of Life; the dead suck from His life and revive. Without the breath of the air no man lives, without the Might of the Son no man subsists. On His living breath that quickeneth all, depend the spirits that are above and that are beneath. When He sucked the milk of Mary, He was suckling all with Life. While He was lying on His Mother's bosom, in His bosom were all creatures lying. He was silent as a Babe, and yet He was making His creatures execute all His commands. For without the First-born no man can approach unto the Essence, to which He is equal. The thirty years He was in the earth, Who was ordering all creatures, Who was receiving all the offerings of praise from those above and those below. He was wholly in the depths and wholly in the highest! He was wholly with all things and wholly with each. While His body was forming within the womb, His power was fashioning all members! While the Conception of the Son was fashioning in the womb, He Himself was fashioning babes in the womb. Yet not as His body was weak in the womb, was His power weak in the womb! So too not as His body was feeble by the Cross, was His might also feeble by the Cross. For when on the Cross He quickened the dead, His Body quickened them, yea, rather His Will; just as when He was dwelling wholly in the womb, His hidden Will was visiting all! For see how, when He was wholly hanging upon the Cross, His Power was yet making all creatures move! For He darkened the sun and made the earth quake; He rent the graves and brought forth the dead! See how when He was wholly on the Cross, yet again He was wholly everywhere! Thus was He entirely in the womb, while He was again wholly in everything! While on the Cross He quickened the dead, so while a Babe He was fashioning babes. While He

was slain, He opened the graves; while He was in the womb, He opened wombs. Come hearken, my brethren, concerning the Son of the Secret One that was revealed in His Body, while His Power was concealed! For the Power of the Son is a free Power; the womb did not bind it up, as it did the Body! For while His Power was dwelling in the womb, He was fashioning infants in the womb! His Power compassed her, that compassed Him. For if He drew in His Power, all things would fall; His Power upholds all things; while He was within the womb, He left not His hold of all. He in His own Person shaped an Image in the womb, and was shaping in all wombs all countenances. Whilst He was increasing in stature among the poor, from an abundant treasury He was nourishing all! While she that anointed Him was anointing Him, with His dew and His rain He was anointing all! The Magi brought myrrh and gold, while in Him was hidden a treasure of riches. The myrrh and spices which He had prepared and created, did the Magi bring Him of His own. It was by Power from Him that Mary was able to bear in Her bosom Him that bears up all things! It was from the great storehouse of all creatures, Mary gave Him all which she did give Him! She gave Him milk from Himself that prepared it, she gave Him food from Himself that made it! He gave milk unto Mary as God: again He sucked it from her, as the Son of Man. Her hands bare Him in that He had emptied. His strength; and her arm embraced Him, in that He had made Himself small. The measure of His Majesty who has measured? He caused His measures to shrink into a Raiment. She wove for Him and clothed Him because He had put off His glory. She measured Him and wove for Him, since He had made Himself little.

The sea when it bore Him was still and calmed, and how came the lap of Joseph to bear Him? The womb of hell conceived Him and was burst open, and how did the womb of Mary contain Him? The stone that was over the grave He broke open by His might, and how could Mary's arm contain Him? Thou camest to a low estate, that Thou mightest raise all to life! Glory be unto Thee from all that are quickened by Thee! Who is able to speak of the Son of the Hidden One who came down and clothed Himself with a Body in the womb? He came forth and sucked milk as a child, and among little children the Son of the Lord of all crept about. They saw Him as a little Child in the street, while there was dwelling in Him the Love of all. Visibly children surrounded Him in the street; secretly Angels surrounded Him in fear. Cheerful was He with the little ones as a child; awful was He with the Angels as a Commander: He was awful to John for him to loose His shoe's latchet: He was gentle to sinners that kissed His feet! The Angels as Angels saw Him; according to the measure of his knowledge each man beheld Him: according to the measure of each man's discernment, thus he perceived Him that is greater than all. The Father and Himself alone are a full measure of knowledge so as know Him as He is! For every creature whether above or below obtains each his measure of knowledge; He the Lord of all gives all to us. He that enriches all, requires usury of all. He gives to all things as wanting nothing, and yet requires usury of all as if needy. He gave us herds and flocks as Creator, and yet asked sacrifices as though in need. He

made the water wine as Maker: and yet he drank of it as a poor man. Of His own He mingled [wine] in the marriage feast, His wine He mingled and gave to drink when He was a guest. In His love He multiplied [the days of] the aged Simeon; that he, a mortal, might present Him who quickeneth all. By power from Him did Simeon carry Him; he that presented Him, was by Him presented [to God]. He gave imposition of hands to Moses in the Mount,(4) and received it in the midst of the river from John. In the power of His gifts John was enabled to baptize, though earthy, the heavenly. By power from Him the earth supported Him: it was nigh to being dissolved, and His might strengthened it. Martha gave Him to eat: viands which He had created she placed before Him. Of His own all that give have made their vows: of His own treasures they placed upon His table.