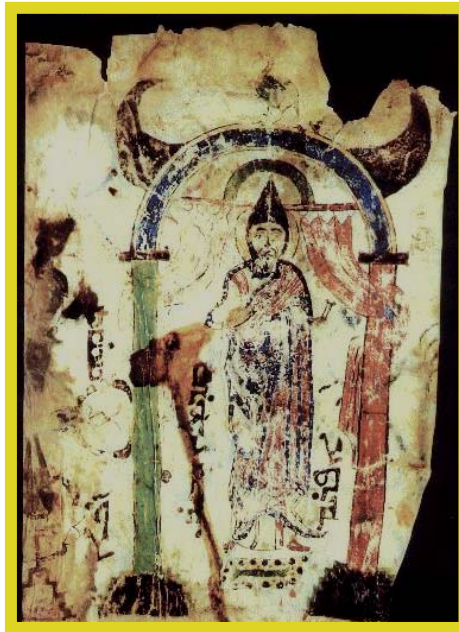


ST. Ephraim the Syrian (Mor Aphrem Suryoyo) (d. 373)

St. Ephraim is unquestionably the master of the Syriac language and the poet par excellence of the Syrians (Arameans). He possessed the innate properties of creativeness, poetic versatility, and the ability to present many meanings in few words. His style is solid, powerful, fluent and eloquent. In poetry he practiced an entirely new doctrine in which he was seldom rivalled. He distinguished himself by his abundant subject matter, fertile imagination and naturalness. In all these he takes palm. Into these poems he incorporated lofty ideas and noble meanings which would inspire his readers to the highest spheres of piety and submissiveness, and worship. St. Ephraim was an example of conscientiousness and religious zeal.

His heart was completely dominated by the love of God. And so this is why he was described as 'The Prophet of the Syrians', 'The Sun of the Syrians', 'The Harp of the Holy Spirit', and the 'Possessor of Wisdom'. Moreover, Christendom professed his leadership while he was still alive and chanted his songs, praising God through them. St. Ephraim was born in the early part of the fourth century into a Christian family, (contrary to some accounts which maintain that he was born of a heathen and was then converted to Christianity in the prime of his life). His upbringing ennobled his character. In the prime of youth



he deserted the world and accompanied St. Jacob, Bishop of Nisbis (Nisibin), who was renowned for his purity and holiness, besides righteousness. Ephraim learned much of what was unique in Syriac literature. He entered the monastic order, was ordained a deacon and taught for thirty eight years at the school of Nisbis, which has been founded by his master. He also worked under his successors, the Bishops Baboy, Walgash and Ibrahim, and composed part of his songs known as the *Songs of Nisbis*. By the year 359 he had achieved wide fame. In the year 363 he left his country as a result of the Persian invasion and moved

to Edessa, settling in its Holy Mountain where he was highly welcomed by its ascetics. He expanded the school of Edessa, which, as a result of his contributions and knowledge, became widely famous. It was at this school that he opened the treasures of his knowledge and commented on the Old and the New Testaments. Furthermore, he wrote many excellent poems and masterpieces of canticles. His poetry had become the model of eloquence. Many studied under him.

He was an abstinent and ascetical person, sober, understanding, serene and original. He was a flaming fire which burned the tare of the misguided heretics, a brilliant master and a faithful soldier, keeping watch on the strongholds of Orthodoxy. He died on the 9th of June 373, nearing seventy years of age. Over his remains a monastery, known as the Lower Monastery, was built in the neighbourhood of Edessa. The Church commemorates him on the first Sabbath of the Great Lent.

An Extract selected by V. Rev. Fr. Boutros Touma Issa, from The First English Translation of "The History of Syriac Literature and Sciences, by Patriarch Ignatius Aphram Barsoum (1887-1957), Syrian Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, translated, edited and with an introduction by Matti Moosa, Passeggiata Press, USA 2000.