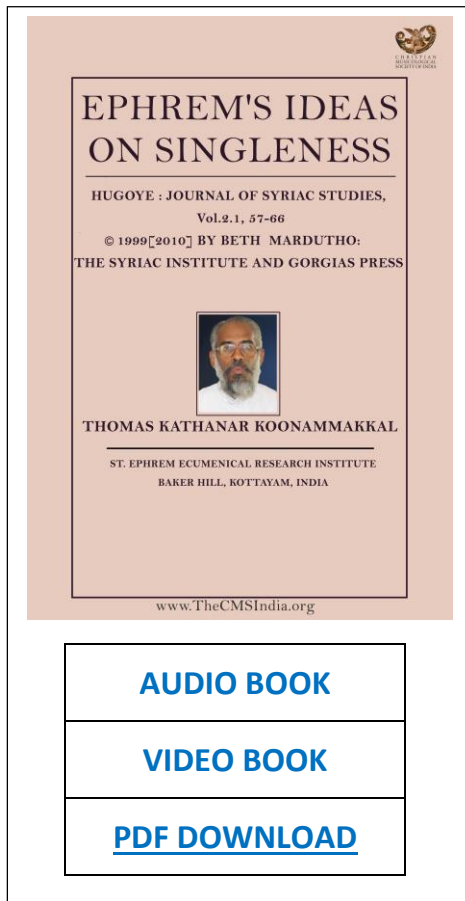


Ephrem's ideas on singleness



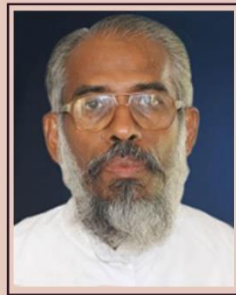
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EPHREM'S IDEAS ON SINGLENES

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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.

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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 *ihidāyā* 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 *ihidāyuthā* in Ephrem's time and the idea of discipleship and the imitation of Christ in Ignatius of Antioch.

[6] *Ihidāyā* 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 *ihidāyā* 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.

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