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## Christological Implications of Biblical Women in Late Antique Syriac Christianity

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## ABSTRACT

Late antique Syriac Christianity has been noted for the prevalence of nuanced, sympathetic, and overall positive depictions of biblical women, especially in comparison to the depictions in non-Syriac sources. These positive depictions, however, are not written by Syriac authors as ends in and of themselves but because biblical women's stories furnish appropriate vehicles for demonstrating various theological commitments. In this thesis I will argue that biblical women's stories are especially useful to Late Antique Syriac authors as a means to demonstrate one of their foundational christological commitments: the paradoxical coexistence of revelation and hiddenness within the nature of Christ.

To demonstrate the efficacy of narratives of biblical women for illustrating christological commitments, I will analyze the interpretations of three biblical women as they are interpreted by two significant Syriac authors, Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Sarug. I will consider Tamar in Gen 38 as interpreted in Jacob of Sarug's homily "On Tamar," the Samaritan woman of John 4 as she appears in Ephrem's "Hymns on Virginité" 22 and 23, and the virgin Mary as presented in Ephrem's "Hymns on the Nativity" and Jacob's collection of homilies *On the Mother of God*. This study will analyze the imagery, language, and strategies used by Syriac authors to connect the polarities and incongruities of these particular women's stories with similar polarities in the character of Christ. It will observe the ways in which those strategies are specifically gendered and what implications they have for twenty-first century understandings of the

place of women in Syriac-speaking Christian society in Late Antiquity. The primary aim of this thesis, however, is to analyze how these presentations of biblical women demonstrate Syriac Christology, especially with regard to Christ's paradoxical hiddenness and revelation.

Christological Implications of Biblical Women in Late Antique Syriac Christianity

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Ancient and Oriental Christianity

By

Penelope Bidy

May 2022

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Penelope Bidy, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Ancient and Oriental Christianity

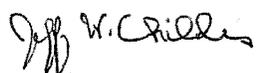


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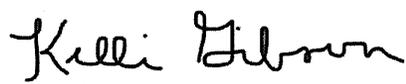
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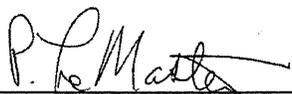
Thesis Committee



Jeff Childers, Chair



Kelli Gibson



Philip LeMasters

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## CHAPTER I

### WOMEN AND CHRISTOLOGY IN SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

Late Antique Christian attitudes towards women in general, and biblical women in particular, can appear by modern standards as ambiguous at best, and at worst, deeply problematic.<sup>1</sup> It has been noted, however, that female biblical characters were often given more attention, and significantly more positive attention, by Late Antique Syriac-speaking Christians than by other patristic authors. Susan Harvey points out that “biblical women in Syriac homiletic and hymnographic literature . . . were often granted by Syriac writers a prominence distinctly lacking in the biblical narratives from which they came, a prominence not necessarily shared in the related traditions of Greek or Latin writers.”<sup>2</sup> Kees den Biesen also notes that in terms of religious thought, the patristic era was “dominated by male gender ideology,” yet in particular the fourth-century Syriac author Ephrem the Syrian “distinguished himself as an author who paid little heed to traditional preconceptions about gender.”<sup>3</sup> As Harvey goes on to explain, Syriac Christian portrayals of women are not merely positive. The depictions of female characters are often

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1. Elizabeth Clark notes that patristic Christian authors are often torn between acknowledging God’s creation of women for good purposes, including procreation and companionship, while also warning against women as sources of sexual temptation and distraction for men. Clark traces this tension in patristic thought through multiple ancient authors, including Augustine and John Chrysostom. For further elaboration of the ambiguities of Christian patristic thought regarding women, see Elizabeth Ann Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), eBook Academic Collection.

2. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 109.

3. Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 59.

unusually well developed, including dialogue, internal thoughts and motivations, and detailed action that frequently far exceeds the details contained in the biblical texts.<sup>4</sup>

The careful, detailed, positive portrayals of biblical women in Syriac patristic writings, especially as they somewhat contrast with other Late Antique Christian works that may offer less positive depictions, raise the question of why these ancient authors wrote about women as they did. Is it an issue of mere taste and style, or do Syriac authors find specific theological significance in accounts of biblical women that they wish to communicate? In the following pages, I will argue that Late Antique Syriac authors utilize narratives of biblical women because these narratives often contain contrasts, tensions, and polarities that make them ideal illustrations for one of the most significant themes of the Syriac Christian worldview: the paradoxically hidden and revealed nature of Christ.

To understand how the tensions and polarities in biblical women's stories are used to illustrate this view of Christ's nature, I will examine portrayals of three rather complex biblical women by two definitive sources for late antique Syriac thought: Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Sarug. I will reflect on the depiction of Tamar in Jacob of Sarug's homily "On Tamar" and the portrayal of the Samaritan woman in Ephrem's "Hymns on Virginity." I will also consider reflections on the virgin Mary in Ephrem's "Hymns on the Nativity" and Jacob's collection of homilies *On the Mother of God*. In each of these works, the authors reflect on significant polarities the women embody within their internal characters and the frequent tensions between their actions and their normally expected role in society. I will analyze these reflections to determine how Ephrem and

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4. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 109.

Jacob use these characters to demonstrate and support their belief that Christ is simultaneously knowable and beyond human knowledge, hidden and revealed. The significance of this topic to early Syriac Christian thought is reflected in the attention paid to it by these influential authors, and they make use of these particular biblical women's stories to explore and illuminate this theme.

### **Theology, Symbol, and Scriptural Interpretation in Syriac Thought**

Since the primary sources for this study come from the works of two significant Syriac authors, Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Sarug, some attention should be given at the outset to important characteristics of these authors' theology and methods of teaching. Ephrem's theological worldview and methods have been heavily studied, and Jacob, born more than a century after Ephrem, is widely regarded as being heavily influenced by his predecessor, sharing essential points of style and perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The polarity between the hidden and the revealed nature of God has been identified as a foundational element of theology for St. Ephrem, who maintains constant awareness of both the insurmountable difference between Creator and creation and the potential of all creation to reveal or depict its Creator in various ways. The perfect encapsulation of this polarity is the incarnation of Jesus, who contains the hiddenness of God while simultaneously being revealed in the physical world.<sup>6</sup> Den Biesen demonstrates that, because the hidden and revealed are united in Christ, "faith and its language contain within themselves the same tension between the hidden and revealed."<sup>7</sup>

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5. Philip Michael Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018), 15.

6. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 22.

7. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 199.

Ephrem is continuously seeking the balance between discerning and proclaiming revelations of Christ and respecting the boundaries of what is hidden beyond human understanding. While he considers attempts to explain or categorize the hidden nature of God to be offensive, “respect for God’s impenetrable majesty should never lead to the opposite attitude of agnostic silence.”<sup>8</sup> Ephrem is therefore in the position of wanting to assert specific and concrete truths about Christ without losing sight of Christ’s perpetual mystery. As we shall see, biblical women’s stories, with their frequent depictions of surprising tensions, polarities, and mystery, can form ideal vehicles for exploring this theme.

Ephrem’s body of literature is not merely theology represented in the form of poetry but actively “develops a theological vision of God, humanity, and the world, that can be called ‘symbolical’ and, even when it is formulated in prose, ‘poetical.’”<sup>9</sup> In fact, Den Biesen argues that Ephrem treats symbols not as mere vehicles of expression but as metaphysically linked to the spiritual realities they symbolize.<sup>10</sup>

Multiple scholars have noted that Syriac authors frequently deploy this symbolic and metaphorical interpretive method as a form of apologetics. According to Den Biesen, Ephrem’s purpose is often not to formulate new understandings of Christ nor to defeat a theological opponent but to persuade his audience to accept what Ephrem considers to be

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8. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 152.

9. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 17.

10. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 37.

orthodox views. Ephrem therefore dedicates great energy to constructing polarities and contrasts in order to highlight the vast difference between orthodoxy and its opposite.<sup>11</sup>

Christine Shepardson also notes Ephrem's use of poetic imagery and symbolism as a type of apologetic teaching tool. She examines this approach in Ephrem's anti-Judaism rhetoric, which she argues serves a specific persuasive function, attempting to strengthen the commitment his audience feels to Nicene Christianity and distance them from all false understandings of the faith, especially Judaism.<sup>12</sup> However, as Shepardson points out, Ephrem is deeply offended by all who seek too specific an understanding of the nature of God, and his rhetoric also serves as an indictment of Arianism.

In fact, Ephrem commonly uses metaphor in order to make extended persuasive points about multiple groups in the guise of attacking one group<sup>13</sup> just as he uses symbolic interpretation to harmonize diverse sections of Scripture into a single, coherent narrative, witnessing to Christ throughout.<sup>14</sup> Shepardson further notes that Ephrem deploys vivid poetic imagery to create his unflattering depiction of the Jewish people, using physical metaphors such as blindness and deafness to criticize their level of spiritual awareness.<sup>15</sup> In short, Shepardson demonstrates that Ephrem utilizes symbol, metaphor, and imagery not merely to craft a memorable sermon or to explore the stated subject of a message but to persuade the audience of the truth and coherency of his

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11. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 64.

12. Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 43.

13. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 116.

14. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 74.

15. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 47.

overall viewpoints, and often, to remind, point to, or persuade his audience of the validity of some point or content other than that which is overtly under discussion at a given point in his presentation.

For all his attention to cohesive argument, Ephrem's style consistently avoids forcing Christ into strict categories. While many patristic theologians attempt to demonstrate through systematic argument precisely how the seemingly contradictory human/divine nature can exist in one person, Ephrem prefers to emphasize the boundless nature of God and God's ability to transcend human boundaries and definitions.<sup>16</sup> Rather than analytically demonstrating the attributes of Christ, Ephrem illustrates those attributes with symbols and imagery. Sebastian Brock describes this method as "joining up the various opposite points, the different paradoxes" to determine "something of the nature and whereabouts" of the center point of the paradox, which is Christ.<sup>17</sup> The aim is not to place Christ's nature and action into a specific category but rather by juxtaposing two contradictory characteristics or actions, to demonstrate the limitlessness of the scope of Christ's being and work.

Philip Michael Forness recognizes that this same style is prevalent in the writings of Jacob of Sarug.<sup>18</sup> Forness notes that Jacob's liturgical christological statements, like Ephrem's, serve as apologetics for what Jacob views as correct doctrine in the midst of competing viewpoints.<sup>19</sup> Though his opponents are different, his strategies are similar to

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16. Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1992), 24.

17. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 24.

18. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*, 9.

19. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*, 21.

Ephrem's. Like his predecessor, Jacob uses typology to demonstrate that his christological views are represented throughout Scripture.<sup>20</sup> Also of particular relevance to this study, Jacob relies on polarities to demonstrate the complexity of Christ against opponents who would oversimplify it.<sup>21</sup> With these similarities in mind, it can be observed that both Jacob and Ephrem devote tremendous energy to persuasively depicting the nature of Christ, using multiple metaphors and images, including other biblical characters, as poetic evidence for their christological priorities.

From this brief overview of Ephrem's and Jacob's christological concerns and teaching styles, we can draw a few conclusions relevant to this study. Rather than attempting to synthesize or smooth out the contradictions between human and divine, powerful and suffering, eternal and temporal, both authors embrace the polarities, asserting Christ as higher than humanity specifically because he holds together tensions that human minds cannot reconcile. They therefore argue the importance of Christ as "both/and" rather than "either/or." With an aim of persuading audiences to embrace an "anded" view of Christ, Ephrem and Jacob repeatedly turn to stories of biblical women to illustrate their arguments.

### **Scholarship on Women in Syriac Christianity**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, modern scholars have observed that Syriac patristic treatments of biblical women tend to be unusually balanced, nuanced, and detailed compared to their contemporary Greek and Latin patristic sources. Harvey<sup>22</sup>

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20. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*, 200.

21. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*, 183.

22. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 109.

and Den Biesen<sup>23</sup> are quoted above to this effect. Similar observations have been made by Sebastian Brock in his analysis of Ephrem's depiction of Sarah in the Abraham story.<sup>24</sup> The less nuanced but somewhat more common ancient approach to women's stories is described by Elizabeth Clark, who explains that the concept of "woman" in patristic writing is frequently built upon "stereotyping, naturalizing, and universalizing" female characters,<sup>25</sup> collapsing distinct characters and personalities into a singular construct that is treated as representative of all, or at least most, feminine activity. This tendency to collapse and reduce biblical femininity to a single stereotype coexists in Syriac Christianity alongside more nuanced interpretations. Even when positive commentary exists, misogynistic constructs are frequently the "elephant in the room" in discussing women in religious history; therefore, these treatments of the more broadly misogynistic veins in Syriac thought are a helpful place to begin examining the existing scholarship on biblical women in Late Antique Syriac Christianity.

Adam Lehto acknowledges the profoundly problematic nature of certain passages in Aphrahat, noting that Aphrahat's sixth demonstration contains a "fairly negative assessment of women."<sup>26</sup> This might be considered an understatement, given that the demonstration Lehto is investigating unambiguously paints women as tools of Satan used to bring about the downfall of numerous righteous men.<sup>27</sup> Aphrahat's comprehensive list

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23. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 59.

24. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 169.

25. Elizabeth Ann Clark, "Ideology, History and the Construction of 'woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 112.

26. Adam Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat: Some Observations," *Hugoye* 4 (2001): 190.

27. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 193.

includes Adam, Samson, Joseph, Moses, and David and each named biblical male is paired with a description of the difficulties women caused for him.<sup>28</sup> Lehto observes that, as stern a tone as Aphrahat takes in this demonstration, he is not decrying women as such but rather warning against the power of sexual temptation and the influence such temptation can give to women over men.<sup>29</sup> As Lehto acknowledges, relegation of women to the role of temptresses is highly problematic even when the target of criticism is really temptation itself,<sup>30</sup> so he goes on to examine other factors that can give a more nuanced understanding of Aphrahat's perspective on women.

Lehto places this demonstration in the larger Greek and Latin patristic context and finds it relatively restrained in its misogyny, compared to some of Aphrahat's contemporaries, on the grounds that Aphrahat largely limits his comments to materials found in Scripture rather than developing "comprehensive misogynistic rhetoric."<sup>31</sup> He goes on to note Aphrahat's various perspectives that present women more positively, grouping these observations into three separate categories. First, Aphrahat's scathing indictment of biblical women functions polemically to make a specific point about the dangers of dedicated ascetics living in close company with the opposite sex.<sup>32</sup> Second, he points out that Aphrahat has some equally critical words to direct at men, particularly men who fail to lead the church properly.<sup>33</sup> And finally, Lehto states that Aphrahat's

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28. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 190.

29. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 192.

30. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 192.

31. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 196.

32. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 202.

33 Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 203.

demonstrations include strong praise for the actions of many biblical women, linking them directly to Christ-likeness.<sup>34</sup>

Corrie Molenberg makes similar points in evaluating Narsai's infamous "Reproof of Eve and Her Daughters."<sup>35</sup> Like Aphrahat, Narsai reduces biblical women to a type, collapsed into a single stereotype—the "Daughters of Eve"—who follow, by nature, in Eve's deceitful and seductive footsteps.<sup>36</sup> Narsai goes even further than Aphrahat in demonizing women, claiming that Satan is informed by Eve on how to overpower humanity, not the other way around!<sup>37</sup> In dealing with this vitriolic text, Molenberg finds similar contextualization to that explored by Lehto, pointing out that much of Narsai's most aggressive demonization is functioning polemically in a particular situation, namely a controversy over asceticism and clergy celibacy. Molenberg indicates that Narsai, like Aphrahat, expends great energy in this condemnation in order to persuade ascetics to avoid the influence of the opposite sex.<sup>38</sup>

Molenberg also draws attention to the ways in which Narsai departs from the trope of universalizing all women into the stereotype of Eve. Narsai somewhat counteracts the collapsing of all women into one problematic character by adding in a second possible destiny for females: following in the footsteps of the virgin Mary by

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34. Lehto, "Women in Aphrahat," 204.

35. Corrie Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof of Eve's Daughters and the Tricks and Devices They Perform," *Le Muséon: Revue D'études Orientales* 106 (1993): 65–87.

36. Molenberg, "Reproof of Eve's Daughters," 67.

37. Molenberg, "Reproof of Eve's Daughters," 82.

38. Molenberg, "Reproof of Eve's Daughters," 73.

eschewing marriage and pursuing a life dedicated to virginity.<sup>39</sup> Molenberg does not attempt to deny the overt and vitriolic stereotyping of women that takes place in Narsai's tirade. She argues, however, that Narsai does not resign all femininity to inescapable participation in Eve's sin. Instead, he uses it to juxtapose the choice all human beings, as agents with free will, must make between unrestrained licentiousness or penitence and chastity; the path of Eve and her evil imitators or the path of Mary and other faithful women of Scripture.<sup>40</sup>

Susan Ashbrook Harvey also builds on the idea that misogynistic notes in Syriac Christianity are not a complete picture of its view on women.<sup>41</sup> Harvey points out that Syriac portrayals of Eve herself are less one-dimensional than is apparent from texts that seek to universalize her as the representative of all feminine humanity.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Harvey develops the idea that, rather than treating all women as stereotypical "daughters of Eve," with deceit and seduction their natural destiny, Syriac authors present femininity as capable of profoundly redemptive acts, exemplified in Mary.<sup>43</sup> In fact, she argues that the profound sinfulness of Eve commonly functions not as a representation of universal female sinfulness but as a point of contrast that emphasizes other, holier actions or potential.<sup>44</sup> As Harvey phrases it, "thus does every believer stand in Eve's place: guilty of

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39. Molenberg, "Reproof of Eve's Daughters," 72.

41. Molenberg, "Reproof of Eve's Daughters," 75.

41. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Encountering Eve in the Syriac Liturgy," in *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syrian Symposium Duke University, 26-29 June 2011* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 13.

42. Harvey, "Encountering Eve," 15.

43. Harvey, "Encountering Eve," 22.

44. Harvey, "Encountering Eve," 21.

having turned away from God, and with penitent heart awaiting the promise of redemption.”<sup>45</sup>

In each of the cases above, modern scholars devote significant energy to demonstrating the possibility of a more positive interpretation for some of the harsher Syriac statements on women. They argue that the patristic authors they examine do not, in fact, construct femininity as a single trope with a uniformly negative role to play in history. While their focus is centered on what patristic authors thought about women, however, Lehto, Molenberg, and Harvey all point out the significant usage of rhetoric about women to make theological points. In these works, the theological functions of biblical women’s stories serve as evidence that women frequently occupy widely various, even contradictory roles in Syriac thought. Next, we will consider the commentary available on the significance of some of those roles.

While Harvey, like other scholars, acknowledges that Syriac authors share in the common patristic tendency to stereotype women, she has also written on the unusual range and development given to female biblical characters within their established types and roles.<sup>46</sup> According to Harvey, biblical women are often the literary characters that give voice to the suffering, grief, and fears of humanity in songs of lament, most of which are not recorded in biblical text, but allow Syriac authors not only to connect the customs of their own culture, which practiced elaborate lamentations for the dead, but also to

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45. Harvey, “Encountering Eve,” 27.

46. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Song and Memory: Biblical Women in the Syriac Tradition* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2010), 44.

imaginatively interject reflections on the human experience, represented in microcosm by individual biblical women into their treatments of biblical texts.<sup>47</sup>

Harvey also points out that female characters not only served as representations of the deep pains and potential joys of human life; they also represented the human side of salvation history, as their laments for the griefs and losses stemming from the sinful choices of humanity could easily turn into penitential laments for sin itself.<sup>48</sup> This personification of Christian penitence is seen somewhat in liturgical representations of Eve,<sup>49</sup> but according to Harvey is most consistently and fully developed in depictions of the sinful woman in Luke 7, whose penitent actions were heavily connected to liturgical actions through symbolic interpretations and who thereby became a model for the mindset and behavior proper to the entire church (both men and women) in worship and devotion.<sup>50</sup>

In a similar vein, patristic authors often interpret biblical women and feminine biblical imagery as symbols of proper attitudes and behavior of individual believers and the Church as a whole through the use of bridal imagery. Sebastian Brock writes about the significance of bridal imagery in Ephrem's thought. Brock demonstrates that Ephrem compares "correct" attitudes toward Christ with the conduct of a virtuous bride, emphasizing fidelity and devoted love as necessary attitudes for Christians,<sup>51</sup> and inner

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47. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 68.

48. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 76.

49. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 76.

50. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 81.

51. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 118–20.

connection with Christ as an important goal of the Christian life.<sup>52</sup> Brock further notes the specific use of the virgin Mary as the ideal symbol of Christian relationship with Christ, representing pure devotion and true union with Christ.<sup>53</sup>

Susan Harvey has written on Jacob of Sarug's use of bridal imagery. She particularly notes that Jacob employs bridal imagery to develop implicit connections between different biblical women's stories.<sup>54</sup> Harvey examines the use of bridal imagery in three separate homilies by Jacob on Jephthah's daughter, Tamar, and the sinful woman, arguing that while each woman represents significant theological points within her own story, Jacob uses poetic imagery along with parallel and contrasting phrasing to form connections between the three women. These similarities in poetic imagery connect the stories, not only with each other but also with the larger tradition of interpreting biblical women as symbols of the bride of Christ—the church.<sup>55</sup> Jacob emphasizes in each story the idealization of total devotion and even bodily sacrifice for Christ, pointing to the necessity of unrestrained love and devotion between Christians and their Savior.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, Harvey asserts that Jacob's approach to bridal imagery in these three homilies constructs the ideal state of the church as “one who stands in perfect witness to her Bridegroom” even through suffering and tragedy.<sup>57</sup>

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52. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 129.

53. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 127.

55. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light: Biblical Women as Images of Church in Jacob of Serug*, vol. #123 of *Analecta Gorgiana*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), 6.

55. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 203.

56. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 203.

57. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 204.

The above examples demonstrate Syriac patristic attention to biblical women as types of the ideal Christian life as well as modern scholarship given to this topic. In these examples it appears that patristic authors did not consider biblical women's stories solely as sources for deriving attitudes and expectations of women. Instead, it is evident that women's stories served broader theological purposes, particularly when writers such as Ephrem and Jacob could employ bridal imagery as an interpretive scheme. Despite its specifically feminine language, bridal imagery does not serve to limit the application of a biblical story to a female audience. Instead, such imagery is used in patristic writings as a metaphor for the church as a whole and the salvific relationship between believers (whether male or female) and Christ. The theological reflections on this imagery, however, while not limited to specifically feminine concerns is still largely focused on specifically human concerns. Although the use of biblical women as exemplars of the church is a broader and more nuanced interpretation than, for instance, biblical women as cautionary tales (as in Aphrahat and Narsai), it does not necessarily demonstrate any specific christological positions. One final theme that has received scholarly attention in the past few years moves us somewhat closer to finding biblical women as vehicles for christological understanding: the unusual boldness attributed to prominent female characters.

As Harvey points out, this boldness is represented first of all by the sheer amount of speech allocated to biblical women, noting Sarah, Mary, and the sinful woman as examples of characters granted extensive speech that far exceeds the words recorded in the scriptural text.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, these women display more strength of character,

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58. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 108.

intelligence, and perseverance than that which writers in the ancient world were usually comfortable attributing to women.<sup>59</sup> Especially striking is the fact that each of these women, according to Harvey, has been drawn by divine action into a socially incongruent position, and the speeches imagined for them by Syriac authors allow them to work through and resolve their conflicting roles.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, Harvey notes that though these women are depicted as acting somewhat outside the social norms, those portrayals are limited by the locations of their speeches and actions.<sup>61</sup> By speaking when they are expected to remain silent or boldly approaching individuals and situations that ought to overawe them, each of these women encounter or give honor to God in profound ways that could not have happened had they not boldly overstepped their normal boundaries. Harvey's analysis of the different characterizations' abilities to convey theological messages is reinforced by her observation that a number of mediating factors within the texts themselves make it clear they are not intended as challenges to societal expectations of women.<sup>62</sup> Given that the primary aim of these texts was not to disrupt the social order but to teach the Christian faith, it is noteworthy the extent to which women embodying contradiction with their words and actions were seen as useful vehicles for teaching theological truths.

Erin Walsh has also developed the theme of boldness in female speech in biblical stories, focusing particularly on the Canaanite woman as depicted by both Narsai and

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59. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 124.

60. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 111.

61. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 125.

62. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 125.

Jacob of Sarug. Walsh notes how both authors' portrayals of the Canaanite woman focus on the persistence of her speech. Her frequently uplifted voice represents her intense and at times disruptive pursuit of Christ, showing how boldness and temerity are required characteristics for those who would fully engage themselves in the Christian life.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, as Walsh explains, both portrayals of the Canaanite woman use details of her physical state to symbolically represent the state of her soul,<sup>64</sup> thus in describing the loudness of her voice, they illustrate the intensity of her faith,<sup>65</sup> while her Canaanite heritage, casting her as an inherent idolator, becomes evidence for the role of free will and choice in the Christian journey.<sup>66</sup> The Canaanite woman in both homilies, therefore, embodies multiple polarities, including idolatry/trust in Christ, outsider status/insider faith, and expressed boldness/societally mandated silence. Each of these polarities provides a medium for the homilist to reflect on theological themes.<sup>67</sup>

The boldness of women in Syriac Christianity is not only represented by their speech but by their action as well. Phil Botha examines Ephrem's praise for the boldness of certain problematic women in Jesus's genealogy, dealing with Ephrem's unapologetically positive statements on the behavior of Tamar and Ruth in *Hymns on Nativity* 9. Botha notes that Ephrem seems to attribute the birth of Christ in part to the

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63. Erin Walsh, "Holy Boldness: Narsai and Jacob of Sarug Preaching the Canaanite Woman," in *Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held at Oxford, 2015* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 96.

64. Walsh, "Holy Boldness," 86.

65. Walsh, "Holy Boldness," 92.

66. Walsh, "Holy Boldness," 94.

67. Walsh, "Holy Boldness," 94.

bold longing and love felt by these women in history<sup>68</sup> and their willingness to chance ill repute and outcast status and possibly even risk their lives in order to continue the ancestral line of Christ.<sup>69</sup> Botha observes that the women in this hymn generate multiple polarities that Ephrem then uses to further describe and engender praise for God. For example, Botha points to Ephrem's use of the virgin Mary to express simultaneous love for Christ and dread of his majesty and power.<sup>70</sup> Ruth and Tamar, on the other hand, represent the antithetical pairing of impurity and holiness, demonstrating Christ's redemptive power in changing both women from one state to the other.<sup>71</sup> Finally, Botha analyzes the various symbols at play in Ephrem's reflections on the women, identifying them as representatives of a dichotomy between symbol and reality.<sup>72</sup>

In these writings, Botha, Walsh, and Harvey all move beyond analyzing appearances of women strictly to discover Syriac attitudes towards women as such. Not only do these scholars consider the relevance of each depiction of women for portraying wider theological points, but they also specifically note that it is frequently the incongruities and polarities of the characters themselves, caused or enhanced by their unusual boldness, that allow ancient authors to use them as a means of making statements about salvation and Christ. There is more to be said on this topic, however, and especially more could be added to the conversation regarding ways in which the tensions and

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68. Phil J. Botha, "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary—the Bold Women in Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn De Nativitate 9," *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 17 (2006): 3.

69. Botha, "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary," 10.

70. Botha, "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary," 10.

71. Botha, "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Mary," 13.

72. Botha, "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Mary," 17.

contradictions of particular female characters serve as apologetic evidence for the tension between Christ's ultimate mysteriousness and continual revelation. In the following chapters, I will analyze the ways in which Mary, Tamar, and the Samaritan woman, function as representatives of christological polarities in a few selected texts.

### **Methodology**

In order to consider the potential power of biblical women's stories to illustrate a christological tension between mystery and revelation, I will analyze specific works by both Ephrem and Jacob of Sarug. The second chapter will consider Jacob's homily "On Tamar,"<sup>73</sup> which recounts the story of Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, in Gen 38. Chapter 3 will analyze Ephrem's 22 and 23 "Hymns on Virginité," edited by Edmund Beck<sup>74</sup> and translated by Kathleen McVey,<sup>75</sup> which reflect on the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. The fourth chapter will consider portrayals of the virgin Mary by both authors: Ephrem's "Hymns on the Nativity", also edited by Beck<sup>76</sup> and translated by McVey,<sup>77</sup> as well as three of Jacob's homilies *On the Mother of God*: "Homily on the Blessed Mother of God, Mary"; "Homily Concerning the Annunciation of the Mother of God"; and "Homily Concerning the Holy Mother of God, Mary, when she went to

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73. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," trans. Sebastian Brock, "Jacob of Serugh's Verse Homily on Tamar (Gen.38)," *Le Muséon*, 115 (2002).

74. Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen de Virginitate [Textus]* vol. 1 of *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 223/SS94* (Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1962).

75. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginité" trans. Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*. Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989).

76. Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen De Nativitate (Epiphania) [Textus]*, vol. 1 of *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 186/SS82* (Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1959).

76. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity" trans. Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*. Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989).

Elizabeth to See the Truth Which Was Told to Her by Gabriel.” These homilies are edited by Paul Bedjan<sup>78</sup> and translated by Mary Hansbury.<sup>79</sup> These particular works provide examples of interpretations of biblical women from both the Old and New testaments as well as allowing for ample reflection on the virgin Mary, who holds special significance to christological thought. Besides representing a range of biblical stories and situations, each of these works allows for a fruitful analysis of the function of polarity and contradiction because in each example the authors offer interpretations or imaginative details that increase the contradictions beyond what is present in the biblical text. In other words, rather than trying to explain away the conflicted and contradictory nature of each woman’s situation, the authors enhance and emphasize the polarities as a method of making theological points.

This study will identify a variety of polarities, complications and contradictions present in each selected work. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will each focus on one of the three selected biblical women. Each chapter will analyze the portrayal of a specific character, considering multiple ways in which contrasts, tensions, and polarities function in these narratives to parallel and emphasize the authors’ view of Christ. These chapters note instances where the authors are responding to material contained in the biblical account as well as original polarities they introduce into their interpretations. They also examine specific assertions that each of the works make about Christ, particularly assertions relating to revelations or the continuing mystery of Christ’s nature and analyze direct and

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78. Paul Bedjan, ed., *S. Martyrii, Qui et Sahdona, Quae Supersunt Omnia* (Paris/Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1902).

79. Jacob of Sarug, *On the Mother of God*. trans. Mary Hansbury (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998).

implied connections between these assertions and the authors' statements on the biblical women under discussion. The concluding chapter notes tensions and polarities that recur through each work. It also discusses inherent connections between these recurrent themes and the feminine identities of the characters and ways in which those feminine identities are key to developing christological arguments. The final chapter also considers the impact of interpreting biblical women through a christological lens, noting the potentially problematic outcomes of such interpretations as well as their possible value to both patristic and modern audiences.

In each of these sources, Jacob and Ephrem expand on tensions present in the biblical texts. Scripture itself portrays these women as living complicated lives, hinting at contrasts between character and reputation. But in Ephrem and Jacob's reflections, those hints become full-fledged stories where the crux of the drama is located in the characters' abilities to hold together contrasting characteristics, including inner righteousness and outward sinfulness, expected silence and voiced boldness, and apparent lowliness and spiritual significance. The authors then use these polarities to parallel and illustrate similarly contrasting polarities in the nature of Christ, who is just and merciful, mighty but appearing lowly, mortal and divine. Above all, these stories convey the message that even the most unlikely stories are symbols revealing the truth about Christ, and the more they reveal, the more apparent they make it that Christ contains a majesty that no symbol, song, or sermon can ever fully convey.

## CHAPTER II

### TAMAR

Jacob of Sarug, in his verse homily “On Tamar,” seeks to interpret Gen 38 in a way that presents the scandalous actions of Tamar and Judah as morally justifiable and even righteous. Jacob approaches this task in a manner that is both characteristic of his own style and theologically consistent with other interpretations of his day. The end result is a homily that is an excellent example of the sort of detailed, nuanced, and sympathetic presentations of biblical women that tend to appear in Syriac literature.

This chapter will consider the relationship between Jacob’s interpretation of Tamar and other prevalent interpretations of his era. It will examine the ways in which Jacob utilizes certain techniques characteristic of his overall writing style to build upon and expand those interpretations of Gen 38. It will also demonstrate that Jacob does not merely use his homily to rehabilitate a problematic biblical character or reflect on God’s unfolding providence. Instead, he uses the narrative as a framework for depicting the ongoing tension between hiddenness and revelation in the nature and action of Christ. I will analyze Jacob’s use of bridal imagery, repetition of language, and juxtapositions of polarities and incongruities in Tamar’s character and explore how they are connected to his assertions about Christ’s hidden and revealed nature.

As we shall see, Jacob uses multiple compositional techniques to give Tamar a sympathetic interpretation that presents her as a heroine rather than a temptress.<sup>1</sup> To accomplish this, he employs a technique common in his homilies, that of creating detailed dialogue as a means of explaining and reflecting on her motivations.<sup>2</sup> In addition to granting unusually well-developed speech to female characters such as Tamar, Jacob also adds his characteristic embellishment and elaboration on the setting and action of the biblical text.<sup>3</sup> This characterization of Tamar allows Jacob to rehabilitate her reputation while also presenting her as a model of the devotion to Christ that the church should practice. Jacob, however, does not merely use these strategies to reflect on Tamar herself. Instead, he uses her story, with its many contrasts, polarities, and surprises, as a vehicle for in-depth reflection on the person of Christ himself. Through the use of repeated words and phrases as well as detailed descriptions of the many tensions and polarities in the narrative, Jacob reinforces connections between Tamar's state of mind and actions and the nature of Christ. Jacob repeatedly demonstrates that Gen 38 is a story about the revelation of hidden things and in so doing also illustrates and prompts reflection on Christ's identity as one who is simultaneously hidden in eternity and revealed in creation.

### **Scriptural Account and Interpretive Issues**

The perplexing story of Tamar and Judah found in Gen 38 recounts how Tamar is married and then widowed by two of Judah's sons in succession, each time without producing offspring. Following her second husband's death, Tamar is sent to her father's

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1. Brock, "Verse Homily on Tamar," 315.

2. Brock, "Verse Homily on Tamar," 306.

3. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 181.

house to wait for Judah's third son to reach maturity on the promise that he will marry her as well. When the promised marriage fails to occur, Tamar sets out, disguised as a prostitute, to seduce Judah himself. She succeeds in her aim and secures three pledges, a ring, a staff, and a scarf belonging to Judah as his guarantee of payment. From this encounter, Tamar conceives twins. When her pregnancy becomes apparent, the people are preparing to burn her, when she sends word to Judah, along with the pledges she took from him at the time of their encounter. Realizing that he himself is Tamar's partner in adultery, Judah admits his own guilt and orders Tamar to be set free.

Ancient Christian and Jewish interpreters alike struggled to come to terms with the inclusion of this story in holy Scripture. Many biblical stories narrate the sinful behavior of their characters. In this instance, however, the scriptural text records no censure or condemnation of the event, despite the severity of the transgression. This lack of reproach became a serious topic of concern, and numerous Jewish and Christian commentators on Scripture sought to explain the story.<sup>4</sup> Some Jewish interpretations added imaginative details to the account to clarify and resolve the moral ambiguity. For example, Kronholm notes that the pseudepigraphic *Book of Jubilees* contains an elaborate confession by Judah in which he emphasized his repentance of his sin.<sup>5</sup> Kronholm also notes that others, including Philo of Alexandria, give the story an entirely allegorical

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4. Sebastian Brock, on 304 of his article "Verse Homily on Tamar," notes the efforts of patristic Christian authors, including Ephrem and Severus in addition to Jacob of Sarug, to explain the inclusion of multiple women known to have committed adultery in the genealogy of Christ. Additionally, Trygve Kronholm gives a thorough account of Jewish traditions surrounding Gen 38, including the writings of Philo, and Pseudo-Philo, as well as pseudo-epigraphic materials. For more on this account, see Trygve Kronholm, "Holy Adultery: The Interpretation of the Story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in the Genuine Hymns of Ephraem Syrus (306-373)," *Orientalia Suecana* XL (1991): 141–63.

5. Kronholm, "Holy Adultery," 156.

reading.<sup>6</sup> Kronholm argues that Christian interpretations that justified Judah's and Tamar's actions as necessary to bring about the birth of Christ were strongly influenced by rabbinical interpretations that attributed those actions to divine intervention, believing that God led both characters to act as they did in order to build up the line of Judah, from whence the house of David would ultimately result.<sup>7</sup>

Ephrem exemplifies the tradition of attributing Judah's and Tamar's actions to the divine plan for bringing about the birth of Christ in "Hymns on the Nativity" 9, where he states: "The adultery of Tamar was chaste, because of you . . . she desired you, pursued you, and became a harlot for your sake."<sup>8</sup> Brock notes that Jacob of Sarug joins in with this tradition by taking the lack of scriptural comment on her behavior as an indication that there is a hidden message to uncover.<sup>9</sup> As Jacob phrases it, "why would he (Moses) have written of a woman who sat like a prostitute / by the crossroads had she not been filled with some mystery?"<sup>10</sup>

### **Tamar as Symbol of the Church**

Jacob follows Ephrem's interpretation in asserting that Tamar acts out of a desire to bring about the birth of Christ. Because she is motivated by deep love of Christ, Jacob develops her story into an extended metaphor in which Tamar becomes a symbol of the church. He plainly states this connection in saying "whom did she (Tamar) resemble as

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6. Kronholm, "Holy Adultery," 157.

7. Kronholm, "Holy Adultery," 159.

8. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 9 (126).

9. Brock, "Verse Homily on Tamar," 304.

10. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 149-50 (296). All English quotations from "On Tamar" follow Sebastian Brock's translation in "Jacob of Serugh's Verse Homily on Tamar (Gen.38)."

she was travelling by the crossroads, / what image did she portray there, sage woman that she was? . . . Tamar trod out the way for the church.”<sup>11</sup> He expands this association between Tamar and the church by showing that not only was Tamar yearning for the Savior as the church should,<sup>12</sup> but that as Judah was captivated by Tamar while on his way to visit his sheep, so “the Son of God, in order to visit the sheep—humankind— / came down from his home, and the Church fell in love with Him, / wanting to be His.”<sup>13</sup> He then explains that the three pledges Tamar took from Judah represent the assurances of salvation the church has from Christ. Jacob explains that “She took as pledges from him . . . faith, baptism, and the Cross of light . . . for by them she will overcome the flames of the great judgment.”<sup>14</sup> Jacob even finds the fire with which Tamar is threatened to symbolize the consequences of rejecting Christ, comparing Tamar’s defeat of the fires planned for her to the Christian’s eventual defeat of the fires of judgment.<sup>15</sup>

Jacob strengthens this comparison by employing feminine imagery for the church, describing it as “The Daughter of the Peoples”<sup>16</sup> and “the Bride of Light.”<sup>17</sup> In using this imagery, Jacob utilizes Tamar’s story as an encouragement to the church to be single-mindedly devoted to Christ as a proper bride should be, turning away from other lovers and faithfully cherishing the three pledges given to her by Christ. As Susan Harvey has

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11. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 371–74 (301).

12. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 373 (301).

13. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 380–85 (301–302).

14. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 385–88 (302).

15. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 416 (302).

16. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 401 (302).

17. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 404 (302).

noted, this use of bridal imagery evokes the need for the church not only to be focused on Christ with mind and soul but to be prepared to surrender the physical body for such love as well. Harvey points out that the potential physical consequences of following Christ included that “the body might be slain in the martyr’s death. It might instead be wholly given to the Heavenly Bridegroom by the consecrated virgin’s vow of renunciation . . . the physicality of love for the Bridegroom was demonstrated in the physical transmission of the messianic lineage and the scandal suffered by its women.”<sup>18</sup> By invoking bridal imagery, Jacob reminds the audience that Christ, who is simultaneously concealed in the spiritual world while revealed in the physical, must be followed in physical, embodied ways as well as loved with the heart. He also applies an expectation that such physical devotion to Christ may lead to physical danger and even scandal, which will be minor in comparison to spiritual danger posed by failing to follow Christ. Furthermore, this connection between Tamar and the bride who gives her body for love of Christ forms a foundation for Jacob’s reframing the sensual or carnal elements of Tamar’s story into indications not of immorality on Tamar’s part but of her surrender to the all-consuming love of Christ which requires total devotion in body as well as soul, a devotion and surrender that he calls the church to emulate.

Jacob depicts Tamar as a representation of the church, but his strategy for doing so rests in his view of Christ. He asserts that she is a model for the church because of her love for Christ and her faith in the eventual coming of Christ, who has not yet been seen in the flesh in her day. The various arguments he employs to support his claims, however, also function as illustrations of the tension between the comprehensible and the

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18. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 203.

incomprehensible, the seen and unseen characteristics of the Messiah. Tamar therefore reveals Christ in both the straightforward and in the surprising aspects of her story. According to Jacob's understanding, people can know and love Christ because he is to an extent revealed and discoverable in the physical world. Because, however, Christ is also in part continually beyond human comprehension, working in mystery and concealment, that love will express itself in unconventional action as humans follow Christ into unknown and unexpected places. Tamar, as an image for the church and as a biblical character, engages with both these aspects of Christ's nature through her desires, choices, and actions.

### **Representations of Christology**

It is evident that Jacob's positive interpretation of Tamar's story comes to fruition through his reimagining her as a model for the church, devotedly seeking Christ and prudently curating the pledges of her faith. An analysis of this homily, however, shows that Jacob's christological understanding plays a significant role in his strategy for reframing Tamar and her exploits as exemplars of righteous devotion. Throughout his homily, Jacob directly and indirectly grounds his interpretation of Gen 38 in his christological understanding through the choice of language and imagery that create poetic parallels between the Savior and Tamar.

As Harvey suggests, "Jacob utilized certain word units, associations or themes because he wanted his congregation to make connections between particular biblical stories."<sup>19</sup> She explains that "the reuse of metrical units or key words allowed Jacob the possibility of nuanced suggestion without reifying the association into a concrete

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19. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 194.

identification.”<sup>20</sup> This strategy can be discerned in “On Tamar,” as certain recurring keywords and concepts weave throughout the narrative in reference to both Tamar and Christ. This strategy allows Jacob to connect Tamar to his depiction of Christ even though he sees her primary symbolic role not as an image of Christ but of the church. Through recurring words and phrases, Jacob’s telling of Tamar’s story becomes a vehicle for him to reflect on the nature of Christ.

A key word choice Jacob uses to build connection between Christ and Tamar is the repetition of the word *ܠܝܣܬܝܐ* (“mystery”). The concept of mystery occurs repeatedly throughout the text. Jacob explains that Christ, the *ܠܝܣܬܝܐ* (“the Only Begotten”), though hidden in the Father,<sup>21</sup> has his likeness *ܠܝܣܬܝܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ* (“transmitted mysteriously over the lineages”).<sup>22</sup> Jacob emphasizes that Christ is represented mysteriously throughout scriptural history. Adam is said to depict the image of Christ *ܠܝܣܬܝܐ* (“in a great mystery”),<sup>23</sup> and likewise Noah is said to be an image of Christ in the ark which *ܠܝܣܬܝܐ* (“performed mysteries”).<sup>24</sup> Tamar, Ruth, Leah, and Rachel are likewise said to be motivated to pursue men by the divine plan, which is the *ܠܝܣܬܝܐ* *ܕܝܘܢܐ* (“mistress of mysteries”).<sup>25</sup>

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20. Harvey, *Bride of Blood, Bride of Light*, 194.

21. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 47 (281).

22. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 50 (281).

23. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 56 (282).

24. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 65 (282).

25. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 99 (283).

The connection between mysterious representation of Christ and Tamar herself is strengthened when Jacob describes scriptural stories relating to Christ as *ܥܬܩ ܕܗܠܝܗ* *ܠܡܫܘܒܝܢ ܕܡܝܢ ܗܘܝܢܐ* (“mystery filled narratives of the Only Begotten”)<sup>26</sup> shortly after declaring that Tamar herself is *ܠܡܘܨܝܢ ܕܗܠܝܗ*, (“filled with mysteries”).<sup>27</sup> In fact, mystery itself, as a name for divine will and action, is treated as an actor in Tamar’s narrative. Not only does mystery move Tamar, as mentioned above, but she, through her prayers, also moves and motivates the *ܠܗܝ ܠܝܩܕܫܐ* (“exalted mystery”) to “bend itself down to great dishonor” in order to act on her behalf.<sup>28</sup> Later, *ܠܡܘܨܝܢ* is once again used to describe divine action, as Jacob states that the Lord causes Tamar’s unborn twins to grow *ܕܡܘܨܝܢ ܕܡܘܨܝܢ* or (“mysteriously and secretly”),<sup>29</sup> thus reminding the audience that the divine mystery that is motivating Tamar is also at work in the success of her cause, represented by the children, ancestors of Christ, whom she now carries hidden in her womb.

Additional images that form connecting threads throughout the homily are the concepts of *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ* (“wealth or riches”) and *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ* (“treasure”) especially as metaphors for Christ. Christ is identified as *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܡܘܨܝܢ ܕܡܘܨܝܢ* (“the great Treasure Store, by whose treasures the poor have become rich”)<sup>30</sup> and, in fact, he brings *ܠܗܝܘܬܐ*

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26. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 137 (284).

27. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l.125 (284).

28. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 178 (285).

29. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 285 (288).

30. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 40 (281).

ܠܠܗܘܬܗ ܗܘܢܐ (‘‘riches for the entire world’’).<sup>31</sup> According to Jacob, it is the promise of those riches (Christ himself) that incites Rachel and Leah to fight over their husband ܘܗܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ (‘‘as if over some treasure’’).<sup>32</sup> The seed of Christ’s lineage is compared to ܘܗܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ (‘‘great riches’’);<sup>33</sup> and when Leah is found to have conceived a child of this lineage it is said that she has also acquired ܘܗܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ (‘‘great riches’’).<sup>34</sup> Finally, Tamar’s plan to seduce Judah as a means of bringing about the eventual birth of the Messiah is named as a resolve to bring out ܘܗܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ (‘‘the treasure that is full of riches’’).<sup>35</sup> Through his repeated employment of the imagery of treasure as a metaphor for Christ, Jacob establishes that not only is Christ mysteriously present throughout all of history but that furthering revelation of Christ is, to those who love him, a treasure to be desired greatly. This view about the value of increasing knowledge and revelation of Christ serves Jacob to argue for the reasonableness of extreme behavior on the part of those who, like Tamar, seek to reveal him further.

Jacob’s repetition of the words for treasure and riches connect Tamar to his Christology even more directly when he also compares Tamar’s story in Scripture to ܘܗܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܨܘܪܐ (‘‘treasure hidden in the books’’)<sup>36</sup> in order that it might ܘܗܘܢܐ (‘‘shine

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31. Jacob of Sarug, ‘‘On Tamar,’’ l. 12 (280).

32. Jacob of Sarug, ‘‘On Tamar,’’ l. 80 (282).

33. Jacob of Sarug, ‘‘On Tamar,’’ l.113 (283).

34. Jacob of Sarug, ‘‘On Tamar,’’ l. 124 (284).

35. Jacob of Sarug, ‘‘On Tamar,’’ l. 219 (286).

36. Jacob of Sarug, ‘‘On Tamar,’’ l.146 (285).



with Jacob's emphasis on **הגיד** ("shining forth") show that ultimately, Jacob's belief in the tension between Christ's hiddenness and revelation is the key to understanding his interpretation of Tamar.

Tamar's apparently strange actions are necessitated by desire to bring to light the hidden treasure of Christ, a treasure so precious that, in Jacob's view, extremely unconventional behavior is justified, in fact, nearly unavoidable, as part of attempts to bring about its fuller revelation. Her behavior seems strange on the surface because it is motivated by what cannot yet be seen directly: the as-yet unrevealed Only Begotten. Action that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable is therefore seen as reasonable when it is evoked in response to the mysterious power and guidance of Christ. These repeated linguistic parallels allow Jacob to treat Tamar as evidentiary of his belief that the tension between Christ's hiddenness and revelation underlies and motivates all action, especially all mysterious or difficult to understand actions, in Scripture and the world.

### **Christological Connections: Tensions and Polarities**

Even as repetition of key words and phrases serve to demonstrate Tamar's participation in the revelation of the hidden Christ, tension between appearances and realities in Tamar's story are interpreted by Jacob as evidence of the work of Christ, who is also more than he appears to be. To indicate the presence of this tension, Jacob juxtaposes multiple opposite pairs or polarities in his description of Christ. For example, in describing Christ's advent and action in the world, Jacob introduces several contrasting

images, including day and night,<sup>40</sup> riches and poverty,<sup>41</sup> woundedness and healing.<sup>42</sup> All of these images are connected with the actions of Christ upon creation, as his saving work is compared to replacing darkness with light, healing and cleansing sick souls, and most significantly, replacing death with life.<sup>43</sup> These polarities indicate Jacob's view that Christ's effect upon the world is characterized by the juxtaposition of opposites.

Jacob also emphasizes the polarities within Christ's own nature by saying of Christ "the height sent you, and the depth received you,"<sup>44</sup> and "you resided in the virgin, and the heaven (remained) full of your glory."<sup>45</sup> Additionally, Jacob reminds his audience that Christ "became an infant"<sup>46</sup> shortly before asserting Christ's power and authority over creation by identifying him as the one in whom "the dead came to life" and "the world, that had become corrupted, was set in order."<sup>47</sup> This juxtaposition serves as a reminder that in taking on the visible form of a vulnerable human child, Christ nonetheless retained his invisible, superhuman authority over the world and that in fact his ultimate victory on behalf of the world was not accomplished until Christ entered the paradoxical state of being simultaneously divine and human. This depiction of Christ as the one who exists in a "both/and" state prepares the audience for understanding that the

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40. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 26 (294).

41. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 40 (294).

42. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 40 (294).

43. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 25–30 (294).

44. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 15 (293).

45. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 18 (293).

46. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 21 (293).

47. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 24 (293).

lives of those who follow Christ may also be characterized by polarity, contradiction, and departure from conventional forms of behavior.

### **Hiddenness, Revelation, and Unconventionality in Biblical Women**

To provide a background for Tamar's narrative, Jacob reflects on other biblical women's stories, specifically Rachel, Leah, and Ruth. Jacob considers the incongruity between the modesty and restraint expected of righteous women and these three matriarchs' overt pursuit of sexual union with men. Jacob clearly wishes to paint their actions as unseemly, saying that they "acted without restraint, showing no shame"<sup>48</sup> and that they "performed an action that was most hateful to chaste women."<sup>49</sup> Yet he hastens to add that it is not common lust that has motivated these women but "yearning for the Son of God's great Epiphany, / and they struggled for the seed of the House of Abraham, / since they had learned that in it the peoples of the earth would be blessed."<sup>50</sup> He attributes their unbecoming behavior to a desire to participate in the lineage of the Messiah. Even as he ascribes this positive motivation, however, he makes it clear how extreme he perceives the breach in their conduct to be, going so far as to compare it to a different moral affront, saying: "someone who wants to get hold of a treasure, if he could, / would perform murder in order to gain the gold he so desired."<sup>51</sup> This somewhat hyperbolic comparison makes it clear that Jacob wishes to place feminine pursuit of sexual relations squarely in the category of serious moral failing. The biblical women

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48. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 83 (295).

49. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 81 (295).

50. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 108–10 (295).

51. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 105–6 (295).

who practice it, therefore, are occupying an inherently ambiguous space. As biblical characters and ancestors of Christ, they should be worthy of unqualified admiration, yet as women who chase after men, they are worthy of condemnation. Jacob resolves this tension by identifying such ambiguities and incongruities of character as evidentiary of the action of Christ. Such contradictory and paradoxical actions appear to him as the handiwork of “the divine plan, mistress of mysteries,”<sup>52</sup> because of, not in spite of, the fact that they conflict with normal expectations. With this description, Jacob indicates his view that the presence of the divine at times adds, rather than diminishes, complexity and incongruity to situations, demonstrating both the value and potential cost of seeking to reveal the hidden treasure that is Christ.

Jacob then identifies Tamar as particularly exemplary of this phenomenon, stating “the wonder she is filled with exceeds that of her companions.”<sup>53</sup> His emphasis on the extremity of mystery in Tamar’s case indicates that he wishes to present her as paradigmatic of the sort of conflicted and ambiguous circumstances that indicate the presence of deeper meaning. In fact, he asserts that the true meaning of her narrative is so hidden that it cannot be discerned at all unless the listener attends to it with love<sup>54</sup> and by a “mind that has faith.”<sup>55</sup> Once again, Jacob ties Tamar’s story to that of Christ through emphasis on its complexity and ambiguity, reminding the audience that it is precisely in being filled with mysteries that only love and faith can comprehend that Tamar’s story

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52. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 99 (295).

53. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 126 (296).

54. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 148 (296).

55. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 141 (296).

and the “mystery filled narratives of the Only-Begotten”<sup>56</sup> are alike. With this point, Jacob delves into the details of the biblical account of Tamar having already established that she is a vessel of Christ’s hidden mystery and that the mysteries of her story will help reveal Christ.

### **Incongruities and Polarities in Tamar’s Narrative**

As Jacob transitions more completely into the telling of Tamar’s story, he continues to work with the tension between hiddenness and revelation. According to Jacob, once Tamar realizes that Judah has no intention of providing her with a third husband from among his sons, she faces a dilemma. If she “were to sit down quietly and in modesty stay at home . . . she would be deprived of her hope.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, by following custom and living the quiet life of a widow in mourning, Tamar will not have a chance to participate in the revelation of the Only Begotten. Her continued concealment could jeopardize the eventual “shining forth” of the savior of the world or at least jeopardize her chance to play a role in it. Tamar’s choice to step out of her concealment and enter the wider world is therefore directly connected to Christ’s eventual step of self-disclosure to the world through the incarnation.

In order to support his case that Tamar is acting admirably on faith despite the immorality of her actions, Jacob goes to lengths to depict the disparity between Tamar’s outward, visible actions and the hidden state of her heart, that is filled with faith. He does this by leveraging multiple contradictions between her actions and her intentions. Rather than attempting to resolve or explain away contradictory behavior and characteristics,

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56. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 137 (296).

57. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 211 (298).

Jacob, seeking to redeem Tamar, finds the very existence of such contradictions to be a sure sign that she is acting in accordance with the divine plan.

Jacob pays careful attention to the contrasts and polarities he sees at work in Tamar. The first polarity he develops is that of her chaste heart concealed in the costume of a prostitute. He explains how, in preparation for her plot, she “stripped off chastity and nobility / and took to the road in the garb of loose women,”<sup>58</sup> and hastens to emphasize that “while from the outside she was clothed with the garb of loose women, / within, she was filled with the beauty of holy chastity.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, according to Jacob, when Tamar encounters Judah, it is this very polarity, how she is “both chaste and loose,”<sup>60</sup> that compels Judah to attend to her in the first place.

Jacob’s vivid depiction of the disparity between Tamar’s appearance and her reality would likely have stirred his audience’s interest in the biblical story. Yet there is more to his development of this polarity between chastity and promiscuity than mere interesting storytelling. This contrast emphasizes the significance of the heart, the hidden, inner reality as the location in which God is most likely to be at work. It indicates that wholehearted pursuit of God may lead those who practice it beyond the boundaries of socially, or even morally acceptable conduct. In this version of the story, God does not merely forgive or accept a lawbreaker. Instead, God inspires lawbreaking and makes it succeed because, unlike human observers who see only the physical action of adultery, God perceives the chaste and faith-filled intentions concealed in her heart. In this way,

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58. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 227–28 (298).

59. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 235–36 (298).

60. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 246 (298).

the polarity between her appearance and reality parallels the nature of Christ, which also holds contradictory characteristics simultaneously. Where divinity is working, Jacob argues, incompatible characteristics coexist, and whether that juxtaposed contrast is between chastity and harlotry or between omnipotent God and weak human flesh, God's presence creates space in which paradoxes hold together.

The contrasts between Tamar's outward and inner realities continue following her encounter with Judah as she now resumes the clothing and lifestyle appropriate to her widowed state. Clothed thus, her outward appearance is no longer in contrast to her virtuous heart. She once again looks and behaves like a widow in mourning for two deceased husbands should. Yet where before Jacob focused on the contradiction between her outward physicality (both in appearance and action) and her inner spirituality, he now draws attention to the incongruity of her lifestyle as a chaste and modest widow, a lifestyle that matches the state of her heart, with her physicality as an unmarried pregnant woman.

Jacob draws repeated attention to this contrast, stating that "Tamar maintained the mourning for her husbands while she was pregnant."<sup>61</sup> Jacob particularly emphasizes this contrast by repeating the juxtaposed polarity three successive times, asserting that "the woman is modest...in her mourning garb / yet (her) womb is with child,"<sup>62</sup> followed by "she sits there in modesty like a widow full of grief, / but the fact is that she is pregnant," and then a third time "the neighbors will testify to her modesty and noble character . . .

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61. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 286 (299).

62. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 301-2 (299).

but Tamar's belly openly testifies that she has seen some man."<sup>63</sup> These statements are separated only by interjections asking what can be said about this strange state of affairs. These repetitions draw attention to a double incongruity between Tamar's reputation and her reality, first, when she is seen as chaste while she is actually pregnant, and second, when she is considered immoral while she is actually, in Jacob's view, fully righteous. The recognition of this dual incongruity serves to emphasize the shocking impact of the biblical narrative. Previously, in repeating his descriptions of Tamar's chaste heart and motives, Jacob seems to soften the scandal by turning attention away from the seemingly immoral act and toward Tamar's faith, which occasions it. Here, for a moment, Jacob returns to the full shocking impact of Tamar's situation, vividly picturing the grief and alarm her pregnancy must cause amongst those who know and respect her.<sup>64</sup>

By giving careful attention to the serious incongruity of an out of wedlock pregnancy in a woman with a strong reputation for modesty, Jacob prevents the tension of the narrative from being too easily smoothed over by his glowing depiction of Tamar's faith. This bringing forward of the shock and scandal attendant on Tamar's story helps ensure that the serious moral breach of adultery is not overlooked in Jacob's effort to rehabilitate Tamar's and Judah's reputations. Furthermore, it indicates that Jacob's strategy for proclaiming Tamar's righteousness is not incumbent on lessening the conflicts or contradictions in her story. Instead, his aim is to identify Christ at work in and through the paradoxes, an aim consistent with Jacob's view that Christ is one whose true nature contains much that is apparently contradictory from a human point of view.

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63. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 305–7 (300).

64. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 310 (300).

Jacob develops another double incongruity in the shifting relationship between Tamar's apparent and true emotional states. While disguised as a prostitute at the crossroads, she is described as "both praying and laughing" because "suffering was in her heart, but with merriment spread over her face."<sup>65</sup> By contrast, when Tamar has returned to her widow's life knowing that she is pregnant, "though she was rejoicing she seemed to be mourning" and her "heart was exultant," in direct contrast to her appearing "like a widow, and one who had lost her children."<sup>66</sup> With these contrasts between emotional states, Jacob establishes the duality of Tamar's nature as a constant feature. Rather than moving from disparity back to congruity as the story unfolds, emotionally Tamar shifts from one incongruity to the next. She sets out in turmoil, fearful that she will fail and earnestly, even desperately, seeking God's favor on her endeavor. In order to pass for a prostitute, however, she must conceal all this and emulate a casual happiness. When she returns home having accomplished her aims, rather than settling into a state of inner and outer happiness, she conceals joy over her pregnancy in order to continue passing as a widow.

Once again, Jacob emphasizes these incongruities for more than just good storytelling. Tamar's conflicting emotional state, as much as her outward actions, are treated as indications of her wholehearted focus on Christ. During her charade as a prostitute, Tamar is not merely suffering from anxiety, sorrow, or even distaste for the action she is taking. Instead, her "soul groaned out to God, her eyes' gaze intent, on her

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65. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 239–40 (298).

66. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 288–90 (299).

tongue every kind of request.”<sup>67</sup> Jacob seems to want to contrast Tamar’s feigned joyfulness not with the weight of her personal sorrows but with the solemnity of her faith. The continuation of incongruity in the next scene also serves to emphasize Tamar’s faith. Jacob uses her widowhood as a foil against which to highlight her joy, and he is clear that her joy stems from her faith in God’s hidden action at work in her. Jacob reminds the audience that Tamar’s joy is occasioned by divine action by saying that “it was the Lord who kept her secret in that whole affair, . . . He fashioned in her / two fair images, causing them to grow in a hidden way.”<sup>68</sup> Jacob uses the tension between Tamar’s apparent emotional state and her true thoughts and feelings to demonstrate that her heart remains steadily focused on Christ throughout her narrative. Her attitude and feelings do not change to match her circumstances. They respond instead to the divine action at work in her inner, hidden reality. This responsiveness to Christ’s work in her inner life not only emphasizes Tamar’s faith but also functions as a further reminder that the purpose and presence of Christ are frequently seen only in part, as represented by Tamar’s outward actions, while the full expression of his being works in hidden spaces.

### **Conclusion**

Jacob’s approach to interpreting Gen 38 in homily form is in some ways far from unique. Expansion on the biblical narrative through the addition of dialogue and vivid imagery is in keeping with Jacob’s usual compositional style. Additionally, absolving Judah and Tamar of blame for their breach with moral conduct by attributing their behavior to the will of God is, as we have seen, a common strategy in Late Antiquity.

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67. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” l. 241 (298).

68. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar,” ll. 283–86 (299).

What is interesting to note in this homily, however, is the consistency with which each seeming incongruity between Tamar's inner and outer realities, whether present in the biblical text or imagined by Jacob for this homily, is used to draw attention to the presence of Christ. After all, if Jacob's only aim were to rescue the reputation of the ancestors of Christ, the homily might just have easily centered on Judah as the main character! Certainly, Judah is presented, no less than Tamar, as motivated to commit adultery as a response to the will of God. The nearly total focus Jacob places on Tamar, however, highlights her unique suitability as a vehicle for the points Jacob wishes to make in this homily.

Unlike Judah, Tamar's role in the biblical narrative encompasses near-continual contrast and ambiguity. It is Tamar who, in order to fulfill the divine plan, must conceal her true state of both mind and body. Tamar is the character who must step out of the place ordained for her by family and culture to fulfill the place ordained for her by God. It is these ambiguities that Jacob expounds upon to discover meaning in this scriptural passage, and that meaning connects closely with Jacob's Christology.

While Jacob presents Tamar as a symbol of the church, it seems clear that he also aims throughout the homily to teach about Christ. Through the repetition of concepts such as "mystery," "treasure," and "revelation," Jacob encourages his audience that, though Christ acts in the world in ways that may be difficult to comprehend, seeking his presence is nevertheless an undertaking of inestimable value. By emphasizing, rather than smoothing over, the polarities in Tamar's character and actions, he reminds the reader that Christ also holds tensions and apparent contradictions within himself. By emphasizing the importance of Tamar's own inner reality, both in her emotions and in

her physical body as a pregnant woman, Jacob depicts inner, hidden places as primary spaces for the action of the divine. Jacob's christological conviction that the Savior is one who is hidden even while being revealed in part, accessible although never fully comprehended, and deeply worthy of love and devotion in the midst of these contrasts, is on full display in this homily.

Tamar's suitability as a vehicle for reflecting on the nature of Christ is not unique among biblical women's narratives. The upcoming chapters will examine two other instances in which the incongruities present in the details of a biblical woman's story form fruitful ground for examining the complexities of Christ's presence in the world. Both the Samaritan woman in John 4 and the virgin Mary share some characteristics in common with Tamar. All three characters present tensions between what they are and what they seem to be, and in all three cases, those tensions arise from disruptions in the societally expected patterns of marriage and motherhood. In Tamar's case, the aspects of her story that parallel Christ largely consist of contrasts between her physical appearance and her spiritual reality. These same types of tensions will appear in the following chapters, but additional categories of incongruity and polarity are also highlighted in the narratives those chapters will consider. "On Tamar" provides an opportunity to carefully consider the function of the physical/spiritual polarity, a significant piece of all three characters' narratives, before delving more deeply into the complexities presented in the upcoming chapters.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

The link between patristic Syriac interpretations of biblical women and christological representation is apparent in St. Ephrem's "Hymns on Virginity" 22 and 23. Just as Jacob of Sarug does with Tamar in his homily, Ephrem develops connections between the protagonist of his work (in this case the Samaritan woman at the well) and Christ. Ephrem employs similar strategies to those Jacob employs, including the use of contrasting polarities to describe the woman and a demonstration of her connection to other significant biblical characters. Ephrem, however, also gives the Samaritan woman's story an interpretation that departs from the traditional understanding. In Ephrem's view, she is not a five-times divorced woman who is cohabitating with a man out of wedlock. Instead, Ephrem argues that the woman has actually been widowed five times and has finally arranged a chaste marriage for the sake of social expedience. The unique ways in which this particular interpretation of the story allows Ephrem to reflect on the tension between Christ's hiddenness and revelation will be the primary focus of this chapter.

I will analyze several ways in which Ephrem's interpretation of the woman at the well illustrates specific things about the tension between hiddenness and revelation in the character of Christ. For example, Ephrem's argument for the woman's innocence reveals his own convictions about proper inquiry into Christ's nature. This chapter also explores the ways Ephrem's explanation of the woman's true situation provides space for reflection on the power of ambiguity in biblical women's lives to serve as vessels for the

revelation of Christ. Additionally, this chapter considers the ways in which Ephrem's presentation of the woman's call to become, through proclamation of the gospel, a revealer of Christ in her own right, emphasizes his perspective that participating in the revelation of Christ is the ultimate purpose of all creation. In addition to analyzing these arguments, this chapter will also pay attention to Ephrem's compositional style as its own form of supporting argument in which repeated linguistic parallels between the Samaritan woman and Christ reinforce the overt details of the story as a method of communicating Christ's nature.

### **Scriptural Account and Ephrem's Reinterpretation**

The fourth chapter of John's Gospel recounts Jesus's encounter with an unnamed woman at Jacob's well in a Samaritan village. When the woman approaches the well to draw water, Jesus asks her for a drink, initiating a conversation during which Jesus reveals his supernatural insight into the woman's personal life and ultimately convinces her that he is the Messiah. In the course of their interview, Jesus's words and behavior catch the woman by surprise in multiple instances. She is caught off guard by his speaking to her in the first place, as she recognizes him as a Jew, who would not normally associate with a Samaritan, a surprise echoed in the thoughts of his disciples when they arrive at the well and find him speaking with the woman. She is further confounded when Jesus offers her "living water," promising that all who drink it will never thirst again. She inquires further about this water, and Jesus makes the dramatic turn of the narrative. When he tells her to go call her husband, she demurs, saying she "has no husband." Jesus then reveals that he is already aware of her situation, perhaps more so than she would have wished. He tells her, "The fact is you have had five

husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband.”<sup>1</sup> This revelation of Jesus’s insight into her personal secrets leads the woman to approach Jesus as a prophet, questioning him closely about proper modes of worship, and ultimately to wonder if he is the Messiah, calling the rest of the village to come and see.

Ephrem chooses to dispute common interpretations of John 4 that assume the woman’s multiple marriages reflect low moral character and that she is living with a man out of wedlock.<sup>2</sup> Kathleen McVey states that “far from being a virtual harlot, as others assume, Ephrem argues that her secret revealed by Jesus is that she is living chastely in her marriage.”<sup>3</sup> Ephrem asserts that the woman has lost five husbands to widowhood, not through divorce, saying of her “you saw that your husbands were dead, and your reproaches were many.”<sup>4</sup> Ephrem further explains that, because of her situation, “other men were afraid to take you [in marriage].”<sup>5</sup> Whether Ephrem has any specific historical precedent in mind for the idea that men fear to marry a woman who has been widowed many times is unclear. It is likely, however, that he has in mind literary precedents,

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1. John 4:18.

2. McVey discusses Ephrem’s interpretation of the Samaritan woman in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 354. She describes Ephrem’s views on the woman as “surprising” and notes that “others assume” the woman is a practitioner of sexual immorality. For an example of the somewhat more common patristic view of the Samaritan woman, see John Chrysostom’s commentary on John 4, translated by Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 1-47*, vol. 33 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC, 2000), 317. Perhaps Ephrem himself gives the best evidence for the unusualness of his claims regarding the woman’s virtue by framing his interpretation of her story as a refutation of slander against her.

3. McVey, *Hymns*, 354.

4. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.4 (356) All English quotations from Ephrem’s hymns follow the translation by Kathleen McVey in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*.

5. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.4 (356).

6. McVey, *Hymns*, 354.

including the story of Sarah and Tobias<sup>6</sup> as well as Judah's fear of giving Tamar in marriage to his third son. With this idea in mind, Ephrem asserts that, rather than live under the shame of being without a husband, the woman "took a pretended and bribed husband / to set aside your reproach but not to approach your body."<sup>7</sup>

Ephrem makes it clear that he is aware of the contrast between his interpretation and other common views of the story. He says to the woman "blessed are you who are slandered by our people" and "we have called you a harlot."<sup>8</sup> In fact, Ephrem builds a lengthy argument for the woman's innocence, finally telling himself to rest from her defense, saying, "Who indeed calls you to become without pay / the advocate of words for the reviled woman?"<sup>9</sup> Ephrem's conscious and emphatic departure from accepted views of the Samaritan woman suggests that his interpretation serves a purpose. This chapter argues that by casting the woman as the possessor of a chaste secret rather than as a public sinner, Ephrem builds a parallel between her and Christ, whose own true identity is concealed at the beginning of their encounter. This parallel is expounded and illustrated throughout "Hymns on Virginitly" 22 and 23 in a variety of ways.

### **Parallels between Christ and the Samaritan Woman**

Ephrem develops a parallel between the identities of the woman and of Christ at the outset of the 22 "Hymn on Virginitly," using a series of contrasts between the physical realities of the woman's life and the spiritual elements of her encounter with Christ. These contrasts are representative of Ephrem's usual compositional style. Den Biesen

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7. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 22.4 (356).

8. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 22.5 (356).

9. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 22.9 (357).

observes, “Like biblical poetry, Ephrem’s poetry is characterized by parallelism, that is, by the rhythmic repetition of words or notions that are similar or opposite in their meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Den Biesen further notes that Ephrem “often makes use of polarities that express a logical kind of opposition, that is, a paradox or apparent contradiction” to express his view of the divine as “simultaneously transcendent and immanent.”<sup>11</sup> The 22 “Hymn on Virginity” sets out several such polar parallels in its opening stanzas. These contrasts prepare the audience for the parallels he will ultimately draw with the tensions between appearance and reality in the woman’s life and similar tensions in Christ’s nature.

When the woman is first introduced, Ephrem calls her a *ܗܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܝܢ ܗܘܪܐ* who turns out to be a *ܗܠܘܬܐ ܕܡܝܢ ܗܘܪܐ* (“drawer of ordinary water / drawer of living water”).<sup>12</sup> He also states that *ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ* (“you left behind your pitcher, but you filled understanding”).<sup>13</sup> Finally and most directly, Ephrem comments *ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ ܗܘܪܐ* (“your husbands are many. Your Messiahs are not many”).<sup>14</sup> These contrasting pairs—the empty pitcher with the full understanding, the many husbands with

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10. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 54.

11. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 54.

12. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.2 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 75; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 355). Several of the quotations in this section refer to both the Syriac text, drawn from Edmund Beck’s work, and English translations by Kathleen McVey. Because the Syriac text and the translations are found in different publications, citation information for both works will appear in the corresponding footnotes.

13. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity” 22.2 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 75; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 355).

14. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity” 22.3 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 75; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 356).

the one Messiah, the ordinary, temporal water with the living, eternal water—each pertain to Ephrem’s view that the physical realities contain signs of spiritual truths.

The 23 “Hymn on Virginity” continues in this characteristic vein with more parallel polarities. Ephrem describes the woman’s *ܠܥܫܐܪܐ* (“discovery”) of Jesus’s true nature as *ܥܘܨܪܐ ܕܠܩܘܕܫܐ* (“Discoverer of the lost”),<sup>15</sup> and later says, “blessed are you Shechem, into which the hungry entered / to buy bread for the Sustainer of all.”<sup>16</sup> These contrasting and complementary pairs once again contrast the temporal and physical realities of the story with the higher, spiritual truths they parallel. These phrases highlight the hidden divine identity and mission of Christ by succinctly contrasting it with the more mundane realities of his human nature. Jesus is at work “discovering the lost” by allowing himself to be discovered by the woman at the well, even as his role as sustainer of all creation is revealed while his disciples have gone to buy him some bread to eat.

Each of the contrasting pairs discussed above indicates a tangible, physical reality that points directly to a spiritual reality. In each case, the physical reality is surpassed by, rather than contradicted by, the spiritual reality to which it points. This is illustrative of Ephrem’s understanding of the manner in which Christ’s hiddenness and revelation interrelate. They demonstrate that revelation of the divine nature in Christ’s incarnation is limited, partial, but not inaccurate. The hidden nature surpasses the revelation with its majesty<sup>17</sup> but does not contradict what has been revealed. These symbols in which the

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15. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 23.1 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 81; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 361).

16. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 23.10 (363).

17. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 199.

physical realities imperfectly represent the spiritual ones without contradicting or opposing them therefore stand in parallel to the revelation of the hidden divine nature in Christ.

These descriptive polarities are similar to the strategy favored by Jacob of Sarug to illustrate christological commitments in his reflections on Tamar. As we saw in the previous chapter, Jacob explores contrasts between Tamar's physical appearance and the spiritual realities with which she is concerned. In this strategy, Jacob appears to be following the style used by Ephrem a century earlier. Whereas in "On Tamar" Jacob makes frequent use of polar contrasts as a means of connecting Tamar's story to Christ, Ephrem's hymns include these polarities as significant elements of their strategy for illustrating ideas of Christ but also make significant use of other strategies, including connection with other biblical characters, social critique, and a creative reinterpretation of the biblical narrative. Each of these strategies serve not only to reflect on the Samaritan woman but also as frameworks for displaying connections between her story and the nature of Christ.

### **Reimagining the Story**

Ephrem's departure from the traditional interpretation of the woman's story is one of the more significant frameworks he uses to reflect on themes of secrecy and revelation, adding an additional layer of mystery to the woman's identity. Ephrem emphatically builds the case for the woman's innocence. He says of her, "blessed are you, who were slandered by our people," and insists that the woman could not have been living an immoral life because, if she were, her "bad reputation would have wafted to him."<sup>18</sup> He

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18. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.5 (357).

further points out that, had the Lord known her for an immoral woman, he would surely not have met her alone, yet he “did not allow at all / even one of his disciples to remain with him.”<sup>19</sup> Ephrem views Jesus’s willingness to engage in a one-on-one conversation with the woman as evidence that she is not a sinner.

He also examines the woman’s behavior to discern that she has a clear conscience, saying, “If you had been a harlot, your silence would have offered tears to the one who gives life to all,”<sup>20</sup> and “If indeed our Lord had revealed her shame to her, / compassion in judgment would be righteous for her / as for the sinful woman who sought forgiveness with her head bowed and her mouth closed.”<sup>21</sup> Ephrem here evokes by way of contrast the sinful woman of Luke 7, a favorite symbol of repentance in Syriac Christianity.<sup>22</sup> The sinful woman’s silent, tearful behavior is contrasted with the Samaritan woman, who speaks boldly to Christ while “her head was high / and her voice was authoritative.”<sup>23</sup>

Ephrem contrasts Christ’s encounters with these two different biblical characters in order to demonstrate that the behavior of the woman at the well does not align with the behavior Ephrem expects to see from a penitent sinner in the presence of her savior. Ephrem appears to regard the tears and silence of the sinful woman as normative penitent behavior. He therefore interprets the Samaritan woman’s emotional composure and candid speech as indicative of a clear conscience. Ephrem therefore views the woman as

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19. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.10 (357).

20. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.5 (356).

21. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.7 (357).

22. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 81.

23. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.7 (357).

a maligned innocent, one who is not sinning but only perceived to be. With this switch, Ephrem shifts the christological message of the story. The more widespread interpretation, by focusing on the sinfulness of the woman, emphasizes Christ's identity as merciful savior and the human need to repent and receive forgiveness. Ephrem's interpretation, however, changes the christological emphasis from Christ's mercy to his insight into and connection with hiddenness.

In the biblical narrative, it appears that the woman prefers not to disclose her marital status to Jesus, hence her deflective, albeit accurate, declaration that she "has no husband." There is no indication though that her situation is unknown among her neighbors or that she is pretending to be other than what she is. Yet in Ephrem's version of the story, her marital status is a secret, and her true state of chastity is unknown to others. This secrecy gives rise to multiple distinct incongruities between what she appears to be and what she actually is. Ephrem uses this heightened sense of secrecy to emphasize that this is a story about the revelation of hidden things.

The first incongruity occurs within the story as Ephrem sees it. He characterizes her as the one who "both had and did not have a husband."<sup>24</sup> She is married in the eyes of the world, but her husband is "pretended and bribed."<sup>25</sup> She is seen by her neighbors as married yet is secretly living chastely. Meanwhile, a second incongruity arises between Ephrem's beliefs about her moral character and the reputation she has acquired among

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24. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.8 (357).

25. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.4 (356).

readers of Scripture. She is viewed by posterity as a virtual harlot, yet in Ephrem's view, she is sufficiently righteous that "it was not necessary for her to petition about her sins."<sup>26</sup>

Although Ephrem seems intent on demonstrating the righteousness of the woman's character, his focus on her secret and its revelation does not serve solely to rehabilitate her reputation. Instead, he focuses on the manner in which Jesus's revelation of her secret reveals his own true identity as the Christ. When Christ reveals his knowledge of her unique marital situation to her, the woman is "astonished and convinced. She was amazed and believed."<sup>27</sup> Christ's revelation of this secret is a prominent theme in the 22 "Hymn on Virginity." Ephrem says, "He revealed to you, and you believed in Him,"<sup>28</sup> and "The Lord revealed the two of them [her secrets] and amazed her,"<sup>29</sup> and yet again "Our Lord revealed this secret to her."<sup>30</sup> When she perceives Christ's knowledge of her own hidden identity, she—and through her, the rest of her village—becomes aware that Jesus is also more than what he appears to be. From the viewpoint of the characters within the story, the revelation of the woman's secret indicates Christ's true nature simply by virtue of the fact that it is a miracle stemming from supernatural knowledge. From Ephrem's viewpoint, however, the revelation of the secret marriage emphasizes Christ's true nature by creating a parallel between the woman and Christ.

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26. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.6 (356).

27. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.8 (357).

28. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.4 (356).

29. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.8 (357).

30. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.12 (358).

The two interlocutors each reveal only a part of their full identities. The focus of the hymn is on the hidden aspects of the woman's life. As has been seen above, however, this hymn makes frequent use of symbolic polarities to tie temporal, physical situations to eternal and spiritual realities. Situated in that context, the characterizations presented in the hymn are easily interpreted as representations of higher truth, and the hiddenness of the woman's life evokes the hidden spiritual nature of Christ. His insight into and revelation of the hidden truth about her life function as reminders that Christ is present in unseen things. When he makes her secret known, it is a powerful reminder that he is conversant with things that are unknown to mortals.

### **Proper Inquiry into the Divine: Reverent Boldness**

Ephrem's interpretation of the story does not just emphasize the fact of Christ's dual nature. It also demonstrates the type of human action required to serve a God who possesses such a nature, actions characterized by patience, responsiveness, and love. These characteristics are especially relevant to Ephrem's views on the proper approach to Christ's hiddenness and revelation in light of a statement made about Christ himself, as "the Truth who freely disclosed Himself."<sup>31</sup> This is a significant statement because it emphasizes that ultimately it is Christ himself who orchestrates his revelation. Den Biesen has noted that Ephrem believes in two contrasting forms of inquiry into Christ, a positive form characterized by boldness and a negative one characterized by audacity.<sup>32</sup> Boldness seeks to acknowledge and proclaim what Christ has revealed whereas audacity seeks to pry into the hidden divine majesty, a subject unfit for human inquiry. According

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31. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.10 (363).

32. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 123.

to Den Biesen, for Ephrem, it is essential to be silent about the unknown parts of Christ's nature while joyfully proclaiming what Christ has revealed of himself.<sup>33</sup>

Shepardson has also noted Ephrem's disapproval of individuals who pry or "search" too far into matters that God has chosen to leave hidden. She demonstrates that Ephrem believes such "searching" results in heretical theologies, including Arianism, which was a significant competing worldview for the Nicene Christianity of which Ephrem was a fierce proponent.<sup>34</sup> According to Shepardson, not only does Ephrem associate the Arian heresy with impudent searching and disputation, but he also frequently connects Arianism with Judaism, allowing his criticism of the behaviors and attitudes of Jewish people to function as critiques of Arianism.<sup>35</sup> Thus when Ephrem praises the Samaritan woman for "not wearying / your Hunter as has the daughter of Sion,"<sup>36</sup> he is demonstrating the superiority of the woman's example on multiple levels. Not only does she surpass the Arians by refraining from prying into Christ's hiddenness; she also surpasses the Jews by acknowledging his revelation.

Ephrem pictures the woman as patiently anticipating the Messiah, whom Ephrem describes as "The Messiah for whom you waited."<sup>37</sup> He also praises her quick recognition of Jesus's power after he reveals her secret, saying "with that small sign he taught and caught you."<sup>38</sup> He further argues that her questioning of Jesus is itself virtuous, saying,

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33. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 198.

34. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 114.

35. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 117.

36. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 23.2 (362).

37. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 23.6 (363).

38. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 23.2 (362).

“Blessed is your perception, that you disputed with your Lord. Your dispute shows that your heart was not contemptible,”<sup>39</sup> and “she answered and spoke as a learned one.”<sup>40</sup> Ephrem does not merely cite her boldness as evidence of innocence but uses it to frame perception and inquisitiveness as her most significant characteristics over and against the traditional interpretation that emphasizes her sinfulness and repentance. By identifying perception and inquiry as significant virtues of the woman’s character, Ephrem frames the story as a reflection on the importance of the proper type of inquiry into Christ’s nature. In Ephrem’s interpretation, the woman diligently seeks knowledge of spiritual matters, but she does not impudently seek knowledge that is not meant for her. Instead, she attentively receives what has been intentionally set before her by Christ himself, carefully negotiating the boundary between responding to revelation and respecting hiddenness.

Furthermore, as Den Biesen has pointed out, Ephrem maintains that pursuit of knowledge of the divine must stem from love.<sup>41</sup> It is this kind of inquiry, motivated by love and seeking to know that which Christ chooses to reveal, which Ephrem attributes to the woman. According to Ephrem, she, like Tamar, hopes to have a role in the revelation of the Messiah.<sup>42</sup> She is not seeking to pry into the parts of his nature that are to remain hidden, not trying to explain or categorize the functionality of his mysterious incarnation. Instead, she is hoping to encounter and share the Messiah out of love and humility.

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39. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitly,” 22.5 (356).

40. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitly,” 22.6 (356).

41. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 147.

42. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitly,” 23.20 (360).

Ephrem says that she “answered as a disputant, yet modestly,” and that she sought for Christ to “teach her reality without contention.”<sup>43</sup> Her motivation for her inquiry is that her “love was zealous / to share your treasure with your city.”<sup>44</sup> Through these statements, Ephrem shows that she is a model of the proper type of inquisitiveness, seeking to better understand Christ out of love for Christ and love for others. She does not contentiously seek to define and explain aspects of Christ that remain hidden. Instead, her aim is to know and make known what Christ chooses to reveal of himself. She thus becomes a symbol, both by what she does and does not say of Ephrem’s assertion that Christ simultaneously reveals what is fit for humans to know while concealing things that are beyond the reach of mortals.

Ephrem’s presentation of the Samaritan woman as a model of appropriate engagement with the revelation of Christ is reified in his reframing of her story. It is one of the most significant arguments Ephrem is able to make by characterizing her as an unfairly maligned woman living chastely in a marriage of convenience. He is able to present her as simultaneously a woman whose secret provides an opportunity for Christ to reveal himself and as a person who has been carefully preparing herself to discern that revelation when it comes. Thus Ephrem situates the entire episode as a reflection on Christ’s intent to reveal himself and the proper ways for humanity to participate in that revelation.

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43. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.6 (356).

44. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 23.1 (361).

## Biblical Women, Deception, and Revelation

In his homily “On Tamar,” Jacob of Sarug connects Tamar to various other biblical women who pursued relations with men for the sake of the revelation of the Messiah. Ephrem also connects the Samaritan woman to other significant biblical women, including Tamar, this time to consider the potential power of human deception to serve as a space of divine revelation. Ephrem’s characterization of the Samaritan woman as a participant in a sham marriage serves as a point of connection to the marital hardships and deceptions of other biblical women. Ephrem views the various charades undertaken by these women with a high degree of sympathy, perceiving the women as somewhat hemmed in by the restrictions of their society. His interest in them, however, does not end with sympathetic ruminations on the hardships of female life but instead moves on to reflect on the ways in which their deceptions function as vehicles for divine revelation.

Ephrem presents his reasoning for why the Samaritan woman, whom he wishes to hold up as a model of virtue, would have been motivated to enter into a false marriage for the sake of appearances. He does this by dwelling in some detail on the suffering caused by the *ܐܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ* (“reproach of barrenness”). He reminds the reader that, “Among the Samaritans and Hebrews, it is a curse / [to be] a widow, or a barren or a divorced woman.”<sup>45</sup> He notes that Elizabeth suffers because of the *ܐܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ* (“reproach of her

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45. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.14 (358).

barrenness”),<sup>46</sup> just as Hannah does in the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> Ephrem reflects on the suffering caused by this attitude, saying *ܣܘܦܪܐ ܚܪܐ ܡܥܐ* (“how harsh the reproach”)<sup>48</sup> particularly for one who is not only barren but also widowed, and therefore rendered unable to lift the reproach. He describes this harsh reproach further, saying “she was called an accursed vine / consumer of blossoms and destroyer of vinedressers / the earth that destroyed the seeds and the sowers.”<sup>49</sup> These descriptions echo Ephrem’s earlier statement to the Samaritan woman: *ܚܘܬܐ ܩܬܠܝܢ ܗܘܬܐ ܬܘܒܐ ܗܘܬܐ* (“your husbands were dead, and your reproaches were many”).<sup>50</sup>

Ephrem displays awareness of the impossible situation in which such women find themselves, unable to undo their reputation as “cursed” without marriage and unable to find a marriage partner precisely because of that reputation. In his view, therefore, the type of relationship he believes the Samaritan woman is in is a logical solution to a difficult situation.

To further defend the compatibility of deception with high moral character under difficult circumstances, Ephrem links the Samaritan woman to the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech as well as to the story of Tamar and Judah. The circumstances are different of course, as Sarah is a married woman who pretends to be single in order to

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46. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitate,” 22.14 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 79; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 358).

47. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitate,” 22.15 (358).

48. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitate,” 22.15 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 79; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 358)

49. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitate,” 22.15 (359).

50. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitate,” 22.4 (ed. Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 75; trans. McVey, *Hymns*, 356.)

protect her husband, and Tamar is a barren widow who masquerades as a prostitute in order to conceive children. For Ephrem, however, the similarity lies in his point that all three women remain righteous while committing deception, or as he phrases it, “Come, let us marvel at the diverse deceits / of respectable women.”<sup>51</sup> Ephrem develops a connection between the Samaritan woman and Sarah, Tamar, Hannah, and Elizabeth as evidence that the cultural taboos surrounding marriage, widowhood, and barrenness place women in complicated positions, forcing incongruity between who they are and who they appear or pretend to be. While Ephrem acknowledges the hardships created by these incongruities, he also maintains that the gaps between who these righteous women are and who they pretend to be serve as spaces in which divine revelation occurs.

Ephrem develops his argument that the “deceptions of respectable women” ultimately reveal the divine hiddenness by comparing the moments of revelation in each of the Old Testament stories to the Samaritan woman’s situation. He states, “just as God / revealed that Sarah was the wife of a husband” so Christ “revealed that this woman was without a husband.”<sup>52</sup> The parallel is furthered by the statement that “as by Sarah / the house of Abimelech believed . . . so the Samaritans believed because of her.”<sup>53</sup> And later, “Tamar’s deceit was revealed for our benefit, / and hers [the Samaritan woman’s] for our advantage.”<sup>54</sup> Just as God’s supernatural revelation of Sarah’s secret elicits faith from the house of Abimelech and Tamar’s deception brings forth the physical lineage of Jesus, so

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51. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitv,” 22.17 (359).

52. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitv,” 22.18 (359).

53. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitv,” 22.18 (359).

54. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitv,” 22.19 (360).

the revelation of the Samaritan woman's secret becomes a sign that calls not only the woman but the people of the surrounding area to faith in Christ.

This list of successive revelations of human secrets that serve to reveal divine hiddenness clarifies Ephrem's aim in assigning the Samaritan woman this doubly incongruous role to play. He demonstrates that Christ's own hidden divine nature is made manifest through the revelation of the secrets of others, particularly of righteous women. When, in an effort to navigate the difficulties of societal expectations, women undertake deception with faith in God in their hearts, rather than adding to their reproach, Ephrem sees God as seizing the opportunity to display divine power.

Through his argument that the Samaritan woman has invented a false marriage as a form of protection, Ephrem is able to see her story not merely as one in which Jesus displays supernatural insight into the life of a stranger but as a moment in which Jesus uncovers a hidden secret and uses it to more fully reveal himself as the Messiah. Through these examples, Ephrem builds his case that not only could the Samaritan woman be viewed as righteous (as opposed to the more widespread view of her as a sexually immoral character) but that it is reasonable to expect Christ to approach a person living in such a conflicted state as a vessel for his further revelation.

### **Revelation as Vocation**

Ephrem's interpretation of the Samaritan woman recasts her from being a sinner in need of repentance to a virtuous seeker after truth. This interpretation also links her to significant biblical women of the past by painting her as a righteous deceiver, an innocent woman who lies for the sake of her survival and whose deceptions become a vessel for divine revelation. The connection Ephrem builds between the woman at the well and

other righteous deceivers of the past, however, takes an interesting turn when he envisions the resolution of the incongruities in her life coming not through a restoration of her marital or maternal status, as was the case for the righteous women of the past, but through continued revelation of Christ.

Ephrem connects the woman with Hannah and Elizabeth to demonstrate the dire sociological straits the woman is in due to her apparent barrenness. A passing familiarity with their stories, however, is enough to confirm that both of these other biblical women were granted children as a divine gift to resolve their painful situations. Ephrem also directly compares the fulfillment of the Samaritan woman's hope for the Messiah with the completion of Tamar's story, pointing out that "Tamar's hope was not extinguished / nor was this woman's expectation in vain / as from her therefore our Lord arose in this town."<sup>55</sup> In this instance, once again the Samaritan woman is compared to a woman whose hopes were granted through conception and childbirth. Ephrem also bestows on her the honor of being compared directly to the virgin Mary, "for she from her womb / in Bethlehem brought forth his body as a child /while you, by your mouth made him manifest / as an adult."<sup>56</sup> It is striking that each of the biblical women with whom Ephrem links the Samaritan woman experiences justification and restoration in a singular way: through childbirth. The other women are granted, in view of their righteousness and faith, the fulfillment of their desire for children, the status and security that comes with motherhood in the ancient world, and in certain cases, even a place in the ancestral line of Christ.

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55. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.20, (360).

56. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.4, (362).

In the case of the Samaritan woman, however, Ephrem envisions a different reward for faith and a different resolution of social incongruity. He indicates that the woman's new role as a follower and proclaimer of Christ replaces her need for even a pretense of marriage. He states that after the woman discovers Jesus is the Messiah, "She left the mortal man and did not seek his protection / for the Living One espoused her."<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, in connection with her earlier biblical counterparts, Ephrem envisions the woman as transformed from barren to fruitful. She becomes fruitful however not by bringing forth children but by revealing Christ's true identity to the world. He addresses the woman, saying, "Blessed are you woman, who brought forth by your mouth / light for those in darkness,"<sup>58</sup> and "You conceived the Son by your hearing . . . and gave drink to the world."<sup>59</sup> He emphasizes her fruitfulness in that "your voice, O woman, first brought forth fruit / Even before the apostles."<sup>60</sup> The metaphor of "fruit bearing" as a descriptor of the woman's proclamation of Christ takes on a deeper significance within the context of Ephrem's earlier juxtapositions between the woman and a series of famously barren biblical women. Viewed against that backdrop, Ephrem's honoring of the Samaritan woman appears not just as an acknowledgment of the woman's faith but as an argument placing dedication to Christ above dedication to family, husband, and children in the hierarchy of Christian virtues.

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57. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitv," 22.12 (358).

58. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitv," 23.4 (362).

59. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitv," 23.5 (362).

60. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitv," 23.7 (363).

This view aligns with one of the significant themes that Ephrem unpacks throughout the “Hymns on Virginity,” namely that full devotion to Christ, demonstrated by consecrated virginity or celibacy, is the most complete evidence of true faith in Christ.<sup>61</sup> According to Ephrem’s argument, the revelation of Christ is not a secondary achievement allotted to one for whom motherhood is not possible. Instead, of the two virtues or blessings, revelation of Christ is the higher and preferable path. The Samaritan woman, who bears fruit without bearing children, effectively represents this ideal.

### **Conclusion**

As in the case of Jacob’s homily “On Tamar,” more is at play in Ephrem’s presentation of his subject than a desire to rehabilitate a significant biblical character. In fact, whereas Jacob’s need to harmonize Tamar’s behavior with scriptural morality is readily apparent, Ephrem appears not to argue from any similar need. Despite the energy Ephrem gives to arguing for the woman’s righteousness, it is not clear that views regarding her as sinful should have posed any particular theological or moral puzzle for Ephrem. The Samaritan woman, under the usual interpretation against which Ephrem argues, appears to be a fine representative of a favorite stock character in Syriac thought: the repentant sinner. Susan Harvey has demonstrated the significance of biblical repentant sinners, particularly female characters, to Syriac Christianity. Harvey notes, for instance, the importance of Eve’s ultimate redemption as a symbol of hope for all humanity<sup>62</sup> as well as the deep significance of the sinful woman in Luke 7, whom she describes as “arguably the single most influential female figure in the ancient Syriac

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61. McVey, *Hymns*, 45.

62. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 89.

Christian imagination.”<sup>63</sup> The importance of penitent sinners, especially women, in Syriac thought extends beyond the biblical context to fill a significant section of hagiography as well.<sup>64</sup> It would seem then, that viewing the Samaritan woman as a harlot would have placed her in good company amongst other exemplary figures in Syriac Christianity. Ephrem’s choice to present her differently therefore serves a particular purpose.

Ephrem’s deliberate move away from the repentant sinner motif and into the theme of incongruities, particularly in the stories of biblical women as methods of revelation of Christ, serve as demonstrations of his christological commitments. Ephrem’s defense of the woman’s reputation does not merely change the type of role the woman plays. It also adds an element of hiddenness to her story. This hiddenness creates a tension between her seen and unseen realities, a tension not present, or at least much less pronounced, in the biblical text. These tensions in the Samaritan woman’s story and the stories of the women Ephrem associates her with reinforce awareness that Christ, who is revealed both in these women’s faith and in the revelation of their secrets, also parallels them in that his nature always contains more than is evident on the surface. Due to the nature of the world in which they live, these women cannot reveal the whole truth of their identities. Likewise, Christ, because of the limited nature of the created world, cannot display the full depth of his unlimited nature to the world.

Certainly, the parallel is imperfect. The Samaritan woman does not conceal her true nature in the same way that Christ conceals his. The woman’s concealment is

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63. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 81.

64. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” 124.

motivated by social expediency and physical needs. Christ's hiddenness is a matter of concealing glory too great for human comprehension. The woman, however, does possess an identity for which the world around her has no space. In this way, however imperfectly, she mirrors the duality of Christ. Ephrem's detailed reinterpretation of the Samaritan woman's story, along with his references to multiple deceiving biblical women, indicates that he is aware of the unique power of the contradictions and tensions in these women's stories to convey the complexities of divine nature.

"Hymns on Virginitv" 22 and 23 contain examples of the same sort of polarities and tensions noted in the homily "On Tamar" in the previous chapter. They also extend beyond those types into a wider array of christological parallels as well as demonstrating the likelihood that the Syriac interest in biblical women's stories has a direct link to Christology. The two excerpts from "Hymns on Virginitv" which have been considered in this chapter, for all their wide array of christological connections, are a relatively small collection of material. This same array of themes as well as additional christological ideas will be considered in the upcoming chapter through reflections on the virgin Mary, about whom there exists a much larger body of writings. These writings on the virgin Mary, likely the most popular female biblical character for consideration in any stream of Christianity, incorporate all the christological parallels examined thus far, and also offer additional connections for consideration, most, if not all of which, are intrinsically connected to the feminine nature of the character.

The christological connections presented in Ephrem's "Hymns on Virginitv" 22 and 23 serve as examples of the varied and complex ways in which the Syriac fascination with the duality of Christ's hidden and revealed nature finds significant expression in

biblical women's stories. If Jacob's homily "On Tamar" effectively demonstrates the value of polarity and contrasting characterization to illustrate the polarities in Christ's nature, then the 22 and 23 "Hymns on Virginity" illustrate that same tension by paralleling Christ's hiddenness with the intentional secretiveness of key biblical women. The story told in these hymns also serves to emphasize the importance of seeking out and participating in Christ's revelation through attentiveness and proclamation. Additionally, they demonstrate that Ephrem is conscious of the frequent presence of incongruities in the stories of biblical women and the particular value of these incongruities for reflecting on the nature of Christ. Ephrem tells the story of a woman with a hidden life. Because her life is also characterized by faith and love of God, her hiddenness becomes the means of Christ's revelation, serving as a demonstration of divine power and a model for all who seek to reveal Christ.

## CHAPTER IV

### MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS

In this chapter we will turn our attention to the role played by the virgin Mary in Syriac Christian thought. Susan Harvey has observed that “in Syriac Christianity as for others, the virgin Mary holds pride of place among biblical women and indeed among female saints.”<sup>1</sup> Mary is the focus of a wide range of hymns and homilies by authors both known and unknown and functions as a symbolic representation of an equally wide range of persons and topics. By turns, she is a representative of the biblical past, a model for the church of the patristic era, and a refutation of claims of various heretic groups who sought to deny the simultaneously human and divine nature of Christ.<sup>2</sup> The magnitude of honor and attention given to Mary makes her an important subject for this study, in part simply because of the large volume of material concerning her. More importantly, however, as the standard to which all other women are compared, statements about Mary provide essential context with which to understand assertions about all other biblical women’s stories.

As noted above, there is a large body of Syriac writings about Mary from Late Antiquity, by authors both well-known and anonymous. This chapter will focus on significant examples of reflection on Mary from both Ephrem and Jacob of Sarug:

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1. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 61.

2. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 57–58.

Ephrem's "Hymns on the Nativity" as well as three of Jacob's homilies from the collection *On the Mother of God*. Following the numbering in Hansbury's translation, these homilies will be referred to throughout this chapter as "Homily I", "Homily II," and "Homily III". This chapter will unpack and analyze the representations of Mary in these works, focusing, as in previous chapters, on the particular ways in which aspects of these representations function as demonstrations of Christology.

Previous chapters have considered instances of poetic parallels and polarities, along with social incongruities as significant illustrations of Christ's hiddenness and revelation. This chapter will observe similar illustrations in Ephrem's and Jacob's depictions of Mary. Additionally, it will observe the notable attention Ephrem and Jacob each pay to the impact of Christ's incarnation on Mary's physical body, viewing it as a paradoxical space. This chapter will argue that Mary is treated by Ephrem and Jacob not only as an individual representation of Christ but as a paradigm of righteous femininity. As such, it will examine the implications of characterizations of Mary for understanding other biblical women as evidence of Christology.

Characterizations of Mary resemble those of Tamar and the Samaritan woman in a number of ways. Presentations of Mary closely parallel the presentation of Tamar's story, for example, by their focus on the contrast between the characters' apparent sexual immorality with their actual status as chaste and righteous. Likewise, Ephrem's reflections on the Samaritan woman, which paint her as simultaneously married and unmarried, find close resonance in statements made about the virgin Mary. As in the case of both Tamar and the Samaritan woman, Mary is portrayed as moving beyond traditional women's roles into bold action and speech as a way of participating in Christ's

revelation. Syriac writings on Mary, however, present exceptionally detailed examples of this phenomenon, examples that strongly resonate with illustrations from the lives of other biblical women while also surpassing those examples in number, depth, and overt connections with Christ himself. Through the resonances between Mary and other biblical women, the power of stories such as those of Tamar and Judah or the Samaritan woman to demonstrate understandings of Christ becomes clearer and more impactful.

Mary differs from other biblical women in that the aspects of her character and actions that are surprising, incongruent, or paradoxical do not merely serve the authors as opportunities to develop explanatory connections between her and Christ. Instead, in Mary's case, the polarities and paradoxes surrounding her are the direct result of her connection with Christ. Put another way, biblical women such as Tamar and the Samaritan woman serve as vehicles for reflecting on Christ because their stories contain paradoxes, secrets, and mysteries. Mary, in Ephrem's and Jacob's views, embodies paradoxes, secrets, and mysteries because she is, both literally and figuratively, a vehicle for Christ. Therefore, the high degree to which writings on Mary reflect on social incongruity, polarity, and paradox indicates the deep connection Syriac authors see between proximity to Christ and traits of paradox and mystery.

In addition to demonstrating the inherent nature of paradox arising from connection to the incarnation, however, the polarities and incongruities connected with Mary manifest in heavily gendered ways, pushing against the boundaries of what it means to be female, particularly in the ancient world. Themes of pregnancy, motherhood, marriage, proper feminine submission, and departure from acceptable social norms—what Harvey calls, “holy boldness”—all come into play in reflections on Mary. This

profound gendering of paradox in Mary's case reveals the notable extent to which femininity, particularly as it functions in the ancient world, serves Syriac authors as a means of considering the paradox of Christ's hidden and revealed nature.

### **Reputation, Reality, and Revelation**

Both Ephrem and Jacob focus on the ways in which seeking to participate in Christ's revelation create incongruities between the reputations and the realities of biblical women. Jacob describes this tension in Tamar, for instance, by saying "while from the outside she was clothed with the garb of loose women, / within, she was filled with the beauty of holy chastity."<sup>3</sup> He finds a similar contradiction in Mary, whom he describes in "Homily II" by saying "she was modest, dignified, and grave; / but she was pregnant, heavy, and conspicuous."<sup>4</sup> In this homily, the contradiction between Mary's appearance and her reality necessitates her marriage to Joseph. Jacob acknowledges that "as soon as it became known that there was a babe in her womb, / the pregnant virgin would have been regarded as an adulteress."<sup>5</sup> Because Mary would have been "slandered, persecuted, and stoned," had she remained unmarried, "the divine providence / had sought for her a just spouse to be her husband."<sup>6</sup> In this instance, Jacob depicts Joseph's role in the incarnation as mitigating social problems arising from the contradictory state Mary enters into upon becoming the mother of Christ.

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3. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 235–36 (298). All English quotations from Jacob's homilies *On the Mother of God* follow the translation given by Mary Hansbury in *Jacob of Serug: On the Mother of God*.

4. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II", 653 (56).

5. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II", 657 (60).

6. Jacob of Serug, "Homily II", 658 (61).

Ephrem also notes the tension between Mary's apparent impropriety and actual chastity. In "Hymns on the Nativity", Mary says to Christ "With your pure conception, / evil men have slandered me."<sup>7</sup> Ephrem connects this tension, and the problems stemming from it, with similar tensions faced by consecrated Virgins in his own time, saying "You dwelt in Mary, but the unclean said falsely / that the fetus was not yours. Since you dwell now / within chaste women, they are slandered / as [if they were] pregnant."<sup>8</sup> In both of these instances, Ephrem acknowledges the appearance of impropriety surrounding Mary's pregnancy and contrasts it with the moral and spiritual excellence of her true chastity. This point is emphasized when Ephrem pictures Mary saying, "I am slandered and oppressed, / but I rejoice. . . . I who am slandered / have conceived and given birth to the true Judge / who will vindicate me."<sup>9</sup> In these statements, Ephrem displays awareness of the potential for women to face profound social struggles attendant upon departures from social norms in their marital or maternal status. He also demonstrates, however, that such departures can be indicative of connection to Christ.

Though in Mary's case, marriage to Joseph partially resolves her social incongruities by providing her with an acceptable explanation for her pregnancy, this resolution creates further paradoxes. For example, Jacob ruminates on the ways in which Mary, by virtue of having miraculously given birth to Christ, defies placement in the common social categories. He wonders about Mary "if anyone ventures, in what order can he describe her" and notes that "she is virgin and mother and wife of a husband yet

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7. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 6.3 (111).

8. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.9 (135).

9. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 15.7-8 (147).

unmated.”<sup>10</sup> Jacob’s question closely mirrors a similar question raised by Ephrem, who says, “Our Lord, no one knows how to address your mother. [If] one calls her ‘virgin’ / her child stands up, and ‘married’/ no one knew her [sexually].”<sup>11</sup> The previous chapter has demonstrated Ephrem’s particular interest in the Samaritan woman as one who “both had and did not have a husband.”<sup>12</sup> His musings on Mary’s contradictory social status provide a parallel to those considerations of the Samaritan woman. In both instances Ephrem demonstrates an expectation that ambiguities in social status, along with contradictions between reality and reputation, are frequently evidentiary of connection to Christ.

In Mary’s case Ephrem’s statements of confoundment are quickly followed by an explanation of the significance Ephrem finds in them. He compares Mary to Christ, saying, “But if your mother is / incomprehensible, who is capable of [comprehending] you?”<sup>13</sup> Jacob also notes the comparative paradoxes of Mary and Christ, saying, “When he [Christ] made haste above the waves of the sea they despised him, / so who would have dared say that a maiden had conceived him?”<sup>14</sup> For both authors, the difficulty of placing Mary into humanly comprehensible categories pales in comparison with the impossibility of understanding the complex nature of Christ. It is Christ’s incomprehensibility that Ephrem and Jacob wish to emphasize for their audience, and this

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10. Jacob of Serug, “Homily I”, 617–18 (21).

11. Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” 11.1 (131).

12. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginitly,” 22.8 (357).

13. Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” 11.1 (131).

14. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily II,” 657 (61).

incomprehensibility is echoed in Mary's circumstances, making polarities in Mary's characterization direct demonstrations of the mysterious nature of the incarnation.

In fact, McVey points out that the statements about Mary's receiving cruel slander in her innocent state and the parallel drawn with the slander received by consecrated virgins are both intended as rebuttals to Jewish criticisms of the virgin birth as well as the Christian emphasis on consecrated celibacy.<sup>15</sup> While Mary embodies paradox effectively in and of herself, her paradoxical situation is of interest to Ephrem and Jacob because defending it is an opportunity to refute individuals who dispute key Christian claims about Christ's divinity and about proper Christian devotion. Both authors, while expounding on the virgin birth with awe and wonder, also hold the event as a relatively minor miracle in comparison with the incarnation itself. In their worldview, refusal to accept the tensions inherent to the existence of a pregnant virgin are symptomatic of insufficient faith to engage the paradox of God's pouring God's full revelation into human form while also keeping God's full majesty hidden beyond mortal perception.

It can be seen that Ephrem and Jacob treat Mary's polarities and incongruities as significant because they are direct evidence of the effect of Christ's overt effect on her life. That Mary, as the mother of Christ, would be reflective of his paradoxical nature is somewhat expected. In certain instances, however, characterizations of Mary have deep and reflective resonances with characterizations of other biblical women. As Harvey points out, biblical women in Syriac thought, especially in connection with the virgin Mary, often serve as types of each other, "tying together all women in their redeemed

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15. McVey, *Hymns*, 133.

identities.”<sup>16</sup> For instance, the text of Gen 38, does not specify that Tamar’s pursuit of pregnancy is motivated by a chaste desire to bring about the incarnation. Ephrem and Jacob, however, as well as other interpreters familiar with Mary’s socially irregular but morally chaste pregnancy, see this as a reasonable interpretation. Nor does Scripture indicate that the Samaritan woman lives in a chaste marriage out of social expediency. That idea is, however, a common traditional assertion made about Mary’s marriage to Joseph. These examples suggest that ideas and interpretations stemming from scriptural and traditional ideas about Mary may be applied to a wide array of biblical women by Syriac authors. In view of this, it appears possible that christological interpretations are given to various biblical women whose lives present incongruities specifically because, through reflections on the virgin Mary, those incongruities have already acquired a christological association in Syriac thought.

### **Proclamation, Explanation, and Hiddenness**

Reflections on Mary also incorporate the themes of the necessity of bold speech and the propriety of reverent inquiry for engaging with Christ’s hiddenness and his revelation. We have already seen these themes play out in the story of the Samaritan woman, whom Ephrem finds praiseworthy because she “spoke as a learned one / as a disputant, yet modestly.”<sup>17</sup> Like the Samaritan woman, Mary is viewed both as carefully seeking to understand the revelation of Christ and as boldly proclaiming what she comes to understand. The Samaritan woman and other biblical women who engage in discernment and proclamation, however, receive relatively brief and episodic

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16. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 83.

17. Ephrem, “Hymns on Virginity,” 22.6 (356).

consideration in Syriac thought compared to Mary. Mary, by contrast, particularly in “Hymns on Nativity” and *On the Mother of God*, becomes for Ephrem and Jacob the paradigm of discernment and proclamation in which other women participate to varying degrees.

Jacob reflects on Mary’s experiences through narrative in which he uses motifs of bewilderment, questioning, and explanation to demonstrate the persistent tension between hiddenness and revelation in Christ. Jacob points out that the mystery of the incarnation is too great to be received without some help, even by the righteous, and in fact, even initially by Mary. Mary, in Jacob’s version of the narrative, receives this help from Elizabeth. Mary requests of her kinswoman, “Speak, old woman, for it is right for you; Speak / and cry out about the conception that confounds me greatly.”<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth then, in place of her mute husband the priest, and her rejoicing, unborn baby John, serves as the proclaimer and explainer of the incarnation to Mary.

Jacob pictures Elizabeth as meditating on the prophecies of Isaiah and explaining to Mary “all which had been said,”<sup>19</sup> giving Mary perspective and context for understanding her pregnancy. Jacob describes Elizabeth’s speech not merely as her own but adds that “she became a mouth for her husband, who was not speaking / and a harp for the sounds of her baby, who was making merry.”<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth is therefore significant not merely because she teaches Mary, but because in doing so she reveals knowledge that would otherwise be hidden by her husband’s muteness or her unborn child’s inability to

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18. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily III,” 677 (80).

19. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily II,” 652 (55).

20. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily II,” 650 (53).

speak. This significance is heightened by the additional detail that Elizabeth's speech is necessitated by the impact of divine action on the males in her family. Both the supernatural revocation of Zachariah's power of speech and her male unborn child's very existence are the results of divine action meant to promote faith in the revelation of Christ.

In Jacob's account of the story, Mary, having been encouraged by Elizabeth, must become the proclaimer and explainer of Christ's revelation. Jacob next notes that "Joseph was troubled by the conception which he did not understand," because "the Word is great, and who can believe in it without revelation?"<sup>21</sup> Mary, having already received the necessary revelation, speaks to him about her child's identity quite boldly. Jacob says, "The virgin also, with loud voice and uncovered face, / spoke with him without a bride's veil."<sup>22</sup> That Mary's direct and forceful explanation makes Joseph wish to believe her but cannot fully persuade him until he is visited by an angel himself<sup>23</sup> indicates the extent of the mystery with which Jacob sees the incarnation surrounded. Even the revealed part of Christ's nature is too marvelous for humans to grasp without significant help.

In "Hymns on the Nativity," Ephrem puts into Mary's mouth not merely a few words of praise, but abundant, even exhaustive speech. In fact, she is the most significant speaker throughout the hymns, with many of them imagined by Ephrem as lullabies sung by Mary to the Christ child.<sup>24</sup> As Harvey points out "Mary's voice carries the weight of

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21. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 654 (57).

22. Jacob of Serug, "Homily II," 654 (57).

23. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 657 (58).

24. McVey, *Hymns*, 29.

explaining the mystery of God's salvific work in the incarnation of his son."<sup>25</sup> Mary sings of the event of her son's incarnation and also of its impact on herself and on humanity. She proclaims the miraculous nature of Christ's conception,<sup>26</sup> considers how his coming fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures,<sup>27</sup> and expresses firsthand suffering over the slander and accusations directed at her by unbelievers.<sup>28</sup>

Mary proclaims and explains the incarnation of her son until Ephrem eventually portrays her as tired from so much talking, saying, "Great nature that cannot be interpreted, permit your mother / to be silent about you, for her mouth is weary. Withhold your gift from your lyre, / that it may rest awhile."<sup>29</sup> She does not only bring general praise, however, but speaks out of the peculiar insight into that Christ she possesses due to her unique involvement in his incarnation. She notes this by saying, "Since I have learned by you / a new way of conceiving, let my mouth learn by you / a new [way of] giving birth to new glory."<sup>30</sup> Mary, by rendering these praises to her son, becomes an example of Ephrem's ideal response to the tension between hiddenness and revelation in Christ. She does not "search out" unrevealed information about Christ (a practice that Ephrem, situated in the midst of Arian and Jewish debates about the incarnation eschews as impudent).<sup>31</sup> Instead, she finds that what God has revealed in the incarnation merits

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25. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 105–6.

26. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 5.19 (108).

27. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 9.4–9.5 (125).

28. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 6.3–6.4 (111).

29. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 19.18–19.19 (170).

30. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 15.5 (146).

31. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 198.

exhaustive proclamation, an argument Ephrem is known to make in various writings.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, even as Jacob notes the hidden and mysterious nature of Christ by emphasizing the work of discernment and explanation necessary to engaging with the incarnation, Ephrem's creation of exuberant praise and proclamation point to Christ's revelation.

### **Gendered Implications of Discernment and Proclamation**

This chapter has argued that Ephrem's and Jacob's choice of Mary, a female character, as a major vehicle for reflecting on Christ's incarnation has significant implications for their view of the efficacy of biblical women in general to serve as such vehicles. It is therefore worth admitting that there are clear reasons Mary serves this function that cannot fairly be projected onto all biblical women. Mary's particular and intimate connection with Christ as his mother obviously grants her a unique position to speak of Christ independent of matters of gender. Yet there are also important ways in which Mary's participation in the incarnation carries broad implications for her entire gender, making Mary simultaneously unique among mortals as the mother of God and a symbolic paradigm of femininity.

Jacob depicts Mary's argument with the angel Gabriel in which she attentively tests his words to see how they might be true. Rather than censuring Mary for failure to offer submission or faith to the angel's words, Jacob states "In that moment it was very necessary to question"<sup>33</sup> how precisely a human virgin could bear a divine being within her body. Jacob's defense of Mary's questioning may in part reflect his awareness of the centrality of such questions to various heated and divisive christological controversies of

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32. Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold*, 198.

33. Jacob of Serug, "Homily I," 629 (32).

his time and the centuries leading up to it. As Harvey points out, the type of investigation Jacob pictures Mary engaging in resonates uncomfortably closely with the sort of investigation Ephrem condemned as heretical.<sup>34</sup> Jacob may have in mind here to differentiate Mary's questioning from heretical definitions, but whatever his reasons for choosing to praise Mary's careful probing, he expresses the necessity of Mary's questions in profoundly gendered terms.

The significance of Mary's discernment for Jacob is not merely that she attentively seeks out Christ's revelation. It is that, in so doing, Mary specifically undoes the great folly of Eve. As Jacob states, "Eve had not questioned the serpent when he led her astray."<sup>35</sup> Thus failure to engage in proper questioning is essentially the sin of Eve, by which all women have been shamed. Ephrem also draws a connection between the sin of Eve and, by extension, the feminine need for redemption. As Ephrem puts it, "Eve looked for him [Christ] for the shame of women was great."<sup>36</sup> Jacob explicitly contrasts not only Mary's and Eve's respective choices but their results, for "as reprehensible as Eve was by her deed, so Mary was glorious. / And as the folly of this one, so that one's wisdom is shown up."<sup>37</sup> Ephrem also directly contrasts Mary's choice with Eve's, crediting Mary with the redemption and restoration of not only Eve but of all women. He says that "in her Virginity, Eve put on / leaves of shame. Your mother put on, / in her Virginity the garment of glory that suffices for all."<sup>38</sup> Eve, as the cause of a shame inherited by all

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34. Harvey, "Spoken Words, Voiced Silence," 119.

35. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 630 (32).

36. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 1.43 (49).

37. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 630 (33).

38. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 17.4 (154).

women, is restored through Mary.<sup>39</sup> Mary's work of discernment is therefore displayed as being not only a valid course for a woman to take but an especially fitting, even necessary one. Women, it seems, stood in need of redemption and Mary demonstrates the course by which this gendered redemption must be achieved: through careful discernment and bold proclamation.

### **Hiddenness, Revelation, and the Female Body**

In addition to tensions between societal expectations and Mary's reputation and speech patterns, paradoxes within Mary's physical body provide evidence of both the event and the nature of Christ's incarnation. Harvey has noted the significance of Ephrem's and Jacob's interest in Mary and the other women included in Jesus's genealogy as evidence of the physicality of Christ's incarnation. According to Harvey this emphasis indicates the full union of humanity and divinity over and against various groups who sought to neglect one side or the other of the incarnation.<sup>40</sup> While Ephrem is concerned with groups such as the Arians and Valentinians, who posed a threat to proper Nicene orthodoxy, similar controversies persisted in Jacob's day in the form of debates surrounding Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Shepardson has demonstrated that such groups were commonly accused by their opponents of having a "Jewish" view of the incarnation, regardless of the actual shape of their beliefs.<sup>41</sup> Against these perceived threats, Ephrem and Jacob each demonstrate a fascination with the impact of Christ's incarnation on

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39. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 61.

40. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 58.

41. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 149.

Mary's physical body as proof of his full humanity and the relationship between this physicality and Christ's hidden divine majesty.

As in the case of her bold, even argumentative, speech with its redemptive power for the entire feminine gender, the paradoxes in Mary's physicality have gendered as well as christological significance. This significance stems from the fact that many of the physical traits that both authors find to be reflective of divine action are inherently female traits. Ephrem observes that through her miraculous conception "Mary acquired by you all the attributes / of married women. Conception within her / without sexual union, Milk in her breasts, / not in the usual way."<sup>42</sup> Jacob says of Mary "behold the glorious one carries tokens of Virginitly and milk . . . while it seems that she is in the company of maidens, / I see her like a handmaid giving milk to the lad."<sup>43</sup> In another homily, Jacob returns to this theme, stating that "conception is in your womb, but Virginitly is in your members; / Milk is in your breasts, but your womb is closed to marital coupling."<sup>44</sup> These contrasts serve to create poetic parallels and polarities similar to the contrasting parallels demonstrated in writings on both Tamar and the Samaritan woman. As in those cases, the presence of paradox serves as evidence that the mystifying divine presence is at work in a given space. In this instance, that space is Mary's body, which acquires contradictory attributes as it bears the literal presence of God.

Beyond this basic assertion of Mary's body as a space for Christ's revelation, Jacob and Ephrem find further theological significance in the physical paradoxes of the

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42. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 11.4, (132).

43. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 617 (20).

44. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily III," 666 (69).

incarnation. Jacob observes this impact when he says that “arms carried you, but for someone to speak of you is audacious; / Breasts have nourished you, yet not to marvel at you is an ingratitude.”<sup>45</sup> Here Jacob notes the contrast between Christ’s majesty and his dependence on Mary during his infancy. Ephrem makes a similar comparison when he pictures Mary as saying, “How shall I open the fount of milk / for you, the Fount? How shall I give / sustenance to you, the All-sustaining, / from your own table?”<sup>46</sup> and when he asserts “he [Christ] gave milk to Mary as God. In turn, he was given suck by her as human.”<sup>47</sup>

These observations on the distinctively female aspects of Mary’s body serve as illustrations of Christ’s acquisition of full humanity at the incarnation. Mary’s womb and milk-filled breasts are significant factors because they represent the humble dependence of Jesus on another person at his infancy, a dependence characteristic of what it means to be human. Jacob and Ephrem therefore make much of these physical signs of Christ’s dependence in order to contrast them with the all-sufficiency that Christ maintains in his divinity even while putting on helplessness at his human birth. This contrast is phrased especially nicely by Jacob when he says: “Blessed is that one who carried . . . God mighty for evermore, by whose hidden power the world is carried.”<sup>48</sup>

Apart from demonstrating the miraculous nature of the incarnation, however, the leveraging of the intensely physical and sensory experience of nursing an infant is also a

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45. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily III,” 662 (66).

46. Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” 5.24 (109).

47. Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” 4.185 (102).

48. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily I,” 638 (41).

notable indication of the fitness of inherently feminine characteristics to serve as evidence of divine action. When Mary acquires physical traits of motherhood, such as milk production, she is not experiencing something unique. Instead, though Mary acquires these traits in a unique way, her transformation into a nursing mother is a widespread feminine experience. These instances therefore demonstrate that, for Ephrem and Jacob, female physical characteristics need not be erased or ignored in order for an individual to demonstrate God's power. In fact, such characteristics may actually be enhanced and emphasized by divine work. Mary's body, not just as a physical body but specifically as a female one, is treated as a valid space for the revelation of Christ.

These observations of contradictions within Mary's body as she embodies both Virginité and motherhood can be read as demonstrations of Ephrem's and Jacob's commitment to the fully human and fully divine nature of Christ. Reflections on female physicality, however, also serve to emphasize the continued tension between Christ's hiddenness and his revelation at the incarnation. As an example of this tension, both Ephrem and Jacob draw comparisons between different spaces of containment, especially the womb and the heavenly realms. Both authors frequently juxtapose these two spaces, building a parallel between the two in order to compare the ways in which both have been filled with Christ's presence. Jacob uses this juxtaposition, saying, "Blessed is she in whose small and barren womb dwelt / the Great One by whom the heavens are filled and are too small for him."<sup>49</sup> And even more directly "heaven and Mary, singly, he chose the both of them. / He made one a throne and the other a mother."<sup>50</sup> Christ's heavenly power

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49. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 638 (41).

50. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily III," 665 (69).

and existence, coexisting with his containment in Mary's womb, is also noted by Ephrem, who says "as again he dwelt in his mother's womb, in his womb dwells all creation."<sup>51</sup> Ephrem also observes that "He had been entirely in the womb while yet he remained entirely everywhere."<sup>52</sup> The theological significance of this parallel between heaven and Mary's womb is concisely expressed when Ephrem says "if anyone seeks your hidden nature, / behold it is in heaven in the great womb / of Divinity. And if anyone seeks / your revealed body, behold it rests and looks out / from the small womb of Mary."<sup>53</sup>

These parallels, that both authors establish between Mary and heaven as the two dwelling places of Christ do not merely highlight the existence or embodiment of dual, human/divine natures in Christ's incarnation. They function specifically to emphasize that the divine/human dichotomy is a manifestation of the ongoing coexistence of divine revelation and hiddenness. Both aspects of Christ's nature continue to coexist through the time of the physical incarnation. Mary's womb is the dwelling place for the revelation of Christ in his humanity while the heavens remain the place of hidden divine majesty.

Also significant is the fact that both authors make a point of explaining that Christ's occupancy of these dual dwelling places is made possible by Christ's own will. Jacob asserts that "Because you so willed, a womb has contained you; Unless you so willed, / all the ages would not suffice you."<sup>54</sup> Ephrem also asserts this, saying of Mary "her arms carried him, for he had lightened his weight, / and her bosom embraced him,

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51. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 4.154 (100).

52. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 4.169 (101).

53. Ephrem, "Hymns on Nativity," 13.7 (138).

54. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily III," 662 (66).

for he made himself small.”<sup>55</sup> By emphasizing divine intentionality in the incarnation, both authors demonstrate not only the awe in which they hold the event but also the appropriateness of reflecting on and proclaiming it. For them, it is as important to notice and reflect on perceptible concrete details of God’s becoming human, such as his choice to contain his majesty in small spaces, as it is necessary to avoid prying into exactly how the divine and human natures are joined, once again maintaining the essential balance between proclaiming the revelation and respecting Christ’s hidden majesty.

Ephrem and Jacob both emphasize Mary’s virginity as a sign of the miraculous nature of the incarnation. This emphasis is not unexpected, but it is noteworthy the extent to which its focus is on chastity not merely as a character trait but as a physical trait. Certainly, they each treat Mary’s sexual purity as an aspect of the surpassing holiness that makes her a suitable vessel to carry Christ. Significant attention is paid, however, to the paradox of the physical states of virginity and pregnancy coexisting in Mary’s body. This physical trait is frequently referred to by both Ephrem<sup>56</sup> and Jacob<sup>57</sup> as being *ܩܘܠܘܢܐ* (sealed) or as possessing the *ܩܘܠܘܢܐ ܕܩܘܠܘܢܐ* (“seal of virginity”). The word *ܩܘܠܘܢܐ* (signet) is also used at times to describe this trait.<sup>58</sup> The use of these terms at different times conveys the sense not only that Mary’s body is “sealed” in the literal sense of being unopened but also that this sealing serves as a sign or representation of divine presence.<sup>59</sup>

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55. Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” 4.186-7 (102).

56. Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate, (Epiphania)* 1, 71.

57. Bedjan, *S. Martyrii, Qui et Sahdona, Quae Supersunt Omnia*, 617.

58. For instances of this in Jacob’s homilies, see Bedjan, *S. Martyrii, Qui et Sahdona, Quae Supersunt Omnia*, 636. For Ephrem, note Beck, *Des Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)* 1, 71.

59. McVey, *Hymns*, 134.

The discussion of physical signs of virginity has important polemic as well as literary impact in Ephrem's and Jacob's writings.

Jacob highlights the paradox presented by Mary's "perfect birth yet sealed womb,"<sup>60</sup> and states that the "Word entered and dwelt in her, within the guarded seals. / Tokens of virginity in her body but conception in her womb."<sup>61</sup> Ephrem declares that in Mary, the "seal of virginity abides"<sup>62</sup> and addresses Christ saying, "Within the seals dwelt your purity."<sup>63</sup> The physical presence of Christ as an unborn baby within Mary's sealed womb serves as yet another polarity by which the mysteriousness of the incarnation is emphasized. Both Ephrem and Jacob use this polarity to compare Mary to a container whose real significance is its contents. In Ephrem's case, this comparison is to a treasure box. For Jacob, it is a letter. Jacob declares that God "sealed her and inscribed her; she was also read although not being opened. / Because the Father revealed in her mysteries more sublime than usual."<sup>64</sup> In a similar vein, Ephrem declares "O to the chest that was empty / and sealed, and while it was secured / from within emerged the great Signet / of the King of Kings."<sup>65</sup> As a letter, Mary is not just a message. She is also a miracle. As a chest, she does not just carry the King, but contains him in a mysterious and impossible way. By emphasizing the sealed and closed nature of Mary's body in

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60. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 617 (20).

61. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 636 (39).

62. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.2 (134).

63. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.4 (134).

64. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 636 (39).

65. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.3 (134).

juxtaposition with the divinity she contains, the authors are able to enhance their communication of the wonder of the incarnation.

Physical evidence of Mary's virginity functions not only poetically but also polemically, once again serving as ammunition against Jews and others who would deny the divinity of Christ. Ephrem compares Mary's intact seals of virginity to the sealed and blocked tomb, saying "the womb that was sealed / conceived you. Sheol that was secured / brought you forth."<sup>66</sup> This comparison highlights the efficacy of both the resurrection and the virgin birth as signs of Christ's divinity in Ephrem's view. He underscores the value of these signs by saying "the virginal womb / and the sealed grave . . . shouted" the truth of Christ's identity.<sup>67</sup> Ephrem is particularly interested in the ways in which doubters of Christ's divinity must overcome the evidence of the virgin birth. On this subject he states that "the seal refutes / one who falsely claims that your mother made false pretenses."<sup>68</sup> He directly connects this idea of the refutation of slander with proofs of virginity found in the Mosaic law,<sup>69</sup> pointing to the inclusion of such customs in ancient law as evidence of the high amount of suspicion and doubt people direct towards chastity. Ephrem's emphasis of Mary's virginity as proof of the divinity of her son indicates not only his concern over unbelievers who doubt the virgin birth, but also his belief that Virginity can be proved and measured as a concrete physical trait, making it an important source of potential evidence for divine action.

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66. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 10.7 (129).

67. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 10.8 (130).

68. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.4 (134).

69. Ephrem, Hymns on Nativity, 14.12 (143).

As in the cases of other aspects of the female body, the attention Ephrem and Jacob pay to the physical evidence of Mary's virginity finds resonance with femininity in general. Ephrem goes so far as to announce that "womankind possessed the evidence of virginity / because of you, to affirm that yours / was a holy conception,"<sup>70</sup> indicating that this physical characteristic was given to femininity for the specific purpose of witnessing to the hidden supernatural presence of the one who dwelt physically within these seals in Mary's body. He goes on to assert that "within the seal you dwell even now / within chaste women,"<sup>71</sup> and that should anyone doubt the chastity of consecrated female virgins, "the seal witnesses to your brides."<sup>72</sup> Thus Ephrem takes an inherently feminine physical trait and insists its presence in women is evidence of Christ's presence within them, as it indicates a wholehearted devotion to Christ that requires supernatural help.

Here it should be noted that in their reflections on the significance of physical evidence of virginity as an indication of the miraculous power of God, Syriac authors share with the composers of Old Testament law a certain naivete about the conclusiveness with which virginity can be physically proved. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the accuracy of ancient authors' understanding of the details of female anatomy is less significant than the points they wish to illustrate by reflecting on them. For Ephrem and Jacob, the possibility of physical proof of chastity, a possibility exclusive to femininity, provides a valuable avenue for illustrating the coexistence of hiddenness and revelation. Measurable indications of virginity in women are received as

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70. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.4 (134).

71. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.5 (134).

72. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12.6 (134–5).

signs of an individual's spiritual connection to the unseen Christ. This juxtaposition therefore highlights a set of definite characteristics by which the physical world reveals and mirrors hidden spiritual realities.

### **Conclusion**

The virgin Mary in Syriac Christianity functions in a wide variety of paradigmatic roles. As we have seen above, her faith and devotion to her Son make her a model not merely of a righteous woman but of a righteous human being. Moreover, reflections about her serve as evidence for a range of christological concerns. In her role as nurturer and physical provider for the Christ child, she demonstrates his full humanity, while in her miraculously chaste conception, she represents his divine power. Beyond these roles, however, Mary serves as a constant reminder of the emphasis Syriac Christianity places on the continual tension between appreciating divine revelation while trusting and honoring hidden divine majesty. The socially incongruous roles she fills are an indication of proximity to the divine mystery. Her balance between the tensions of discernment and proclamation displays the proper path of navigation between the tensions inherent in Christ's nature.

Mary functions as an exceptionally effective representative of the tensions present in Christ's nature. Ephrem's and Jacob's reflections on her, however, also have wider implications. By both subtle and overt association with stories of other biblical women, they highlight the ways in which those biblical women's stories frequently display similar explanatory power. Additionally, the ways in which both authors reflect on Mary's physicality indicate the extent to which they view the female body itself as inherently effective at demonstrating paradox, mystery, and revelation.

In view of Mary's evident function for each of these significant Syriac authors as a demonstration of Christ's complex nature and of her strong connections to other biblical women, it appears likely that the efficacy of stories about biblical women for demonstrating this complexity is a significant reason for the unusually detailed and nuanced attention paid to biblical women in Syriac Christianity. This efficacy is on display in Ephrem's and Jacob's considerations of Tamar and the Samaritan Woman as well as the virgin Mary. The potential impact of this approach to interpreting biblical women's stories will be the subject of the upcoming chapter.

The final chapter of this thesis will examine themes appearing in the interpretations of all three of the biblical women studied thus far. It will unpack some aspects of both biblical text and theological thought that are highlighted through the christological interpretative lens as well as some aspects that may be under-emphasized or obscured by it. It will consider what might be helpful to scholarship and biblical interpretation from such an approach as well as what may be problematic. We have seen how biblical women function as emblematic of one of the major paradoxes crucial to Syriac Christian thought, the revelation and hiddenness of Christ. The final chapter will consider what significance this emblematic role might have for the ongoing work of biblical interpretation and theological development.

## CHAPTER V

### COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS

When Syriac interpretations of Tamar, the Samaritan woman, and Mary are brought into conversation with each other, common themes and patterns emerge. These themes, which are utilized by Ephrem and Jacob to demonstrate christological commitments, are intrinsically connected to the femaleness of the characters under consideration. As a group, these common themes suggest that their authors chose these specific characters to illustrate the paradoxically hidden and revealed nature of Christ not in spite of these gendered implications but because of them. The incongruities of the characters' stories, which Ephrem and Jacob use to display the complexities and tensions in the nature of Christ, arise from the gender identities of the characters.

Because the gendered aspects of these characters are central to their functionality as demonstrations of Christ, reflections on them convey insight into Late Antique Syriac attitudes towards women in general. These attitudes are perhaps only tangentially related to the ancient authors' aim of demonstrating Christology. They have significance, however, for discerning what impact these interpretations may have had on their audiences. An awareness of connections between theological attitudes towards women as demonstrations of Christology and sociological or psychological attitudes towards women in general can help shed light on consequences of using gendered aspects of biblical stories as a lens to interpret Christ. Such consequences, both intentional and unintentional, exist for audiences of late antique Syriac-speaking Christians and for

readers in the twenty-first century alike. Recognition of the secondary attitudes and beliefs contained in each work and their relationship to the primary message allows for more clarity in evaluating the content that the authors intend to convey.

This chapter will address three things. First, it will identify and analyze common themes arising from the female identities of the characters, demonstrating that the gendered aspects of their stories are central to their suitability as vehicles for christological discussion. Second, it will notice and discuss the general construction of gender in the works under consideration, evaluating negative as well as positive aspects of its operation and the potential impact of that construction on reception of patristic Syriac writings. Third and finally, it will focus once more on Ephrem's and Jacob's use of these biblical women as demonstrations of Christ, evaluating and summarizing the ideas that the three characters taken as a group convey about Christ's nature. Throughout, this chapter seeks to consider the potential effects resulting from the interpretative use of biblical women as illustrations of the hidden and revealed nature of Christ.

### **Common Threads: Boldness**

One trait these women share in common is boldness, a willingness to pursue the revelation of Christ despite the risk of societal censure, loss of status, or physical danger. Phil Botha has demonstrated that Ephrem argues in "Hymns on the Nativity" 9 that "Christ's birth was made possible by the visionary and bold love a number of women had for him."<sup>1</sup> Jacob strongly emphasizes this same idea in his writings on both Mary and Tamar, and while Ephrem's interpretation of the Samaritan woman obviously does not

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1. Botha, "Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary," 3.

assign her a role in Christ's birth, he nonetheless demonstrates that her boldness in the form of speech has a role to play in revealing Christ to the world.

Boldness, the willingness to step out of line with societal expectations without regard to personal consequences, is at play in each of these women's stories. Jacob discusses this boldness in the stories of biblical women who acted "without restraint,"<sup>2</sup> ultimately charging that Tamar's pursuit of sexual relations with Judah is characterized by similar boldness, though her case "surpasses that of her companions" in that she "sat out by the crossroads to ensnare a man!"<sup>3</sup> Ephrem notes the boldness with which the Samaritan woman converses with Christ, pointing out that "her head was high . . . and her voice authoritative."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Jacob recognizes the boldness shown by the virgin Mary's outright argument, first with the angel Gabriel<sup>5</sup> and later with her promised husband Joseph,<sup>6</sup> over the plausibility of conceiving a child without intercourse. The actions of each of these women are bold not only because they transgress social norms but because in doing so they incur risk. Mary and Tamar demonstrate boldness in their resolve to bear children out of wedlock in obedience to what they accept as God's plan, though it could easily mean a death sentence, or at least a life of total social marginalization for them. The Samaritan woman continues in boldness by proclaiming

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2. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 83 (295).

3. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 128 (296).

4. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 22.7 (357).

5. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 626 (29).

6. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 654 (57).

Christ to her neighbors without regard for what they will think of her or how her message will be received.

Not only do these three women share boldness as a common trait, but they are characterized as bold in ways that are specifically tied to gender. Their actions are considered bold because they demonstrate more initiative or autonomy than what is “normal” for women in ancient times. One cannot be bold by doing what is expected. Judah is not called bold, nor is Joseph, and no special observation for courageous questioning or proclamation is attributed the males who appear in “Hymns on Virginity” 22 and 23 (for instance, the disciples) as it is to the Samaritan woman. Though male characters in each story are credited as acting in response to Christ, they do not behave in ways that challenge societal expectations of their gender or other defined roles. By intentionally transgressing social boundaries tied to gender, Tamar, the Samaritan woman, and Mary create oddities within their stories that Syriac authors are able to interpret as evidence of the hidden work of Christ in them. Thus not only do the words and actions they accomplish reveal Christ, but their boldness itself becomes a revelation of divine presence.

### **Common Threads: Appearances versus Realities**

As a result of their bold actions, Tamar, the Samaritan woman and Mary each occupy complex social roles characterized by tensions, contradictions and polarities. As we have seen in the previous chapters, Ephrem and Jacob frequently use the coexistence of multiple identities within these female biblical characters’ stories as a device to build parallels between the women and Christ. The tensions that are utilized, however, arise from the characters’ engagement with an inherently feminine dilemma. Despite the

differences in the specifics of their situations, each character is actually navigating the same incongruity: an imbalance in their respective husbands-to-children ratio. Tamar and the Samaritan woman each have multiple marriages with no resulting children, while Mary has the opposite problem. In each case, not only do the women act boldly by flaunting certain restrictions placed on them as women in society, but they are motivated to do so by problems tied to their femaleness. The resulting stories, used by Ephrem and Jacob to illustrate christological paradoxes, are a mix of ambiguities and incongruities that are inherent to female life.

The social vulnerabilities caused by barrenness, persistent widowhood, or sexual irregularity (particularly in the ancient world) are exacerbated in these biblical stories by the lack of autonomy granted to women. Tamar's ability to lawfully remarry and conceive children is in Judah's hands, just as Mary's fate is in Joseph's. Ephrem's interpretation of the Samaritan woman notes the impossibility of a woman functioning without male protection, an impossibility that forces her to make whatever kind of marriage she can, even if it is unconventional. In each story, male control over social structures leaves each woman no choice but to take surprising measures to resolve their situations. The surprising and unusual nature of each character's approach to navigating their unfortunate situations are significant in Ephrem's and Jacob's choice of them as subjects for reflection.

Both authors note the exceptionality of the protagonist's behavior in their interpretations. Jacob recognizes that Tamar's "action would have been wrong had there not been some mystery there."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Jacob devotes a fairly long section of his text

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7. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 153 (296).

(more than 50 lines!) to acknowledging the strangeness of Tamar's choices and indicating the possibility of discovering a righteous motivation for it. Ephrem acknowledges the unusualness of Mary's situation by describing the reluctance of non-Christians to believe the supernatural cause of her pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Jacob notes the danger Mary would have faced had she revealed the truth of her situation to the world since it would have been beyond belief to most people.<sup>9</sup> Again, Ephrem views the Samaritan woman's plight as a demonstration of the generally low levels of societal tolerance for women in unusual marital situations.<sup>10</sup> These considerations indicate that Ephrem and Jacob believed that explanations are needed for these strange situations. Rather than fall back on the idea that each woman simply acts out of poor character, they instead explain the women's socially out-of-sync situations by asserting that the characters are being acted upon by something unseen, and in each case they discern that unseen force as being the power or expectation of the revelation of the hidden Christ.

The details of the tensions and contrasts vary from character to character, but what remains constant is that each author demonstrates that the tensions in the stories they are interpreting stem from the connection between the protagonist of the story and the hiddenness and revelation of Christ. Tamar does in fact engage in irregular sexual activity but does so out of love for the still-unrevealed Christ. By contrast, of course, the virgin Mary is the paragon of physical purity whose appearance of immorality stems directly from the miraculous revelation of Christ in the world. As for the Samaritan

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8. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 12. 9 (135).

9. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 658 (61).

10. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.14 (358).

woman, Ephrem recognizes her pursuit of the truth about Jesus and her responsiveness to his revelation as evidence of the true virtue hidden within her scandalous reputation. It can be seen then that each of these three characters functions well as a vehicle for illustrating the Syriac Christian interest in Christ's hiddenness and revelation because of polarities and incongruities arising directly from the characters' female status. Each author displays a belief that the tensions in these stories, tensions that are intrinsically connected to the protagonist's navigation of gendered limitations and difficulties, are in fact the outward manifestation of the hidden presence of Christ.

### **Common Threads: Female Physicality**

Not only does each character illustrate Christ's revelation by navigating inherently feminine social incongruities, but in each story the female body itself becomes a space for divine revelation. The previous chapter detailed how Mary's womb is viewed as a physical space that reveals Christ by containing through divine will what all of heaven could not contain.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Mary's milk, which nourishes the infant Jesus, is a demonstration of Christ's full humanity<sup>12</sup> while her physically intact Virginitude signals that Christ's conception results from the miraculous intervention of the unseen divine majesty.<sup>13</sup> It is not only Mary's body, however, in which these exclusively feminine traits are received as potential evidences of the hidden/revealed polarity. Tamar's womb is also described by Jacob as a hidden place in which God works.<sup>14</sup> It is only when her hidden

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11. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily III," 663 (66).

12. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 5.24 (109).

13. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 617 (20).

14. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 285 (299).

pregnancy becomes outwardly evident to the world that the entire drama of her situation, which Jacob interprets as a direct effort to participate in revealing the hidden Christ, is in itself revealed to the world.<sup>15</sup> In both characters, wombs and all that mysteriously takes place in them serve as reminders and demonstrations of the unseeable action of God. Simultaneously, the outward revelation of pregnancy, whether in swollen belly or newborn child, serve as parallel for the ways in which evidence of Christ is revealed in the physical world even while all the fullness of his work remains hidden.

The female body serves as a space of revelation for hidden divine majesty not only in what it does (i.e., bear and nourish children) but also in what it does not do. While Mary and Tamar reveal Christ through childbearing, the Samaritan woman's response to Christ takes her down a different path. Instead of carrying fruit within the hiddenness of her womb, she reveals Christ through the "fruitfulness" of her mouth.<sup>16</sup> As discussed in chapter 3, the Samaritan woman's story receives a different resolution from that of the various other biblical women to whom Ephrem directly compares her. Her social incongruity is resolved, not by giving birth to children but by devoting herself to following and proclaiming Christ to the world. It is noteworthy, however, that Ephrem's explanation of the woman's relationship to Christ's hiddenness and revelation is still embodied. Instead of focusing on the womb and what issues from it, Ephrem notices her participation by ear<sup>17</sup> and mouth,<sup>18</sup> reflecting on the impact of her perceptions and words

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15. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 300 (300).

16. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.7 (363).

17. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.5 (362).

18. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.4 (362).

issuing from her physical actions of hearing and speech. Prior to this focus on the woman's ears, mind, mouth, and words, Ephrem—as noted above—has already established her as a participant in certain inherently gendered concerns surrounding marriage and barrenness. Ephrem therefore does not ignore the somewhat more traditional expectation that women participate in Christ's revelation through childbirth. Instead, by intentional shifting the focus of the hymn away from childbirth and towards proclamation, Ephrem demonstrates that the female body participates in the revelation of Christ in both specifically gendered ways and in universal, nongendered ways, by using ears and mind to perceive the incarnation and mouth and words to proclaim it.

Yet even with the shift Ephrem makes towards understanding the Samaritan woman's physical participation in the revelation of Christ in nongendered ways, there are also connections in her story to another gendered indicator of divine presence: the preservation of Virginity as a sign of the presence of Christ. While virginity is itself not an exclusively feminine trait, measurable physical evidence of it, to whatever extent such evidence really exists, is present exclusively in female bodies. Therefore, it is of women's bodies that Ephrem speaks in asserting that the physical trait of virginity exists to witness to the work of Christ within a person. The 22 and 23 "Hymns on Virginity" do not make reference to the seals of virginity that Ephrem in "Hymns on the Nativity" 12 extols as definite outward signs of a person's inner devotion to Christ. Nonetheless, by depicting the Samaritan woman as living chastely within her legal marriage,<sup>19</sup> and later as leaving behind marriage in general to be espoused to the "Living One,"<sup>20</sup> Ephrem uses her story

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19. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.4 (356).

20. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.12 (358).

to reify his belief in the revelatory power of the preservation of physical virginity, or at least continuation of chastity, to his audience.

These common themes — tension arising from social incongruities, physical polarities between external revelation and internal hiddenness, and unexpected boldness — each provide fruitful ground for demonstrating the hidden and revealed nature of Christ, and each derives intrinsically from the characters' female identities. These three characters, therefore, Tamar, the Samaritan woman, and Mary, provide effective illustration for fundamental concepts of Syriac Christianity not in spite of the fact that they are female but because of it. Not only do these characters connect with and reify the concept of Christ's simultaneous hiddenness and revelation, but in telling their stories, the authors frequently refer to and connect each woman with numerous other biblical women, indicating that they perceive those characteristics which are demonstrative of Christology to be relatively widespread feminine traits. From the examples studied here, it is reasonable to conclude that one significant reason for the unusually positive, nuanced, and detailed portrayals of biblical women in Syriac Christianity is the possibilities Syriac authors find in their stories for reflecting on the hiddenness and revelation of Christ.

### **Context of Christological Interpretation**

Given the likelihood that Syriac authors in Late Antiquity viewed biblical women as exceptionally suitable vehicles for illustrating the nature of Christ, it is relevant to consider how those views impacted the lived experiences of Christian women in the churches that received them. Harvey has discussed the ecclesial context in which these works were written, with its ambiguous coexistence of strict prohibitions against women

teaching the doctrine of the faith alongside significant leadership roles reserved for women.<sup>21</sup> She demonstrates that, though not afforded the authority to serve as priests or bishops, women were nonetheless frequently respected and spiritually influential members of the Christian community, serving as deacons, functioning as spiritual advisors, and caring for the poor.<sup>22</sup> One such significant role was filled by the order of consecrated women known as the “daughters of the covenant.” These women formed the very choirs that sang the hymns and liturgical responses that featured detailed and forceful speech from female characters, a practice whose founding is often attributed to Ephrem himself.<sup>23</sup> Thus believers did not merely read the extensive dialogue written for women, but they actually heard it pronounced in female voices. In memorializing Ephrem, Jacob praised and defended this practice, specifically picturing the inclusion of women’s voices in praising God as a necessary reflection of the inclusiveness of salvation, in which all who have been saved should join in vocalizing praise to God.<sup>24</sup> Materials telling the stories of biblical women, though primarily focused on making christological points, nevertheless provided space for fostering the leadership of women in the community.

Furthermore, there are discernible connections between Ephrem’s and Jacob’s interpretations of biblical women and the defense and support of the daughters of the covenant themselves. Ephrem links slander against Mary directly to similar slander

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21. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Women in Syriac Christian Tradition,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 3 (2003): 47.

22. Harvey, “Women in Syriac Christian Tradition,” 54.

23. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” 126.

24. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” 129.

against consecrated virgins in his own time,<sup>25</sup> while Jacob cites Mary as an example to the virgins in his own audience, who should rejoice since Christ “shines forth from them.”<sup>26</sup> Jacob also holds Tamar up as a model for the church as a whole by likening her dedication in guarding the three pledges from Judah to the church’s cherishing of faith, baptism, and the cross.<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy that in so doing he addresses a church context that is accustomed to learning from the example and the conduct of respected women such as the daughters of the covenant despite prohibitions against women teaching the faith in speech.

In particular, Ephrem’s version of the Samaritan woman’s story appears to serve as a demonstration of the value of consecrated virginity. Since the daughters (and sons) of the covenant could consist either of virgins or of individuals practicing chastity within marriage,<sup>28</sup> it is quite plausible that Ephrem’s audience would have connected the Samaritan woman with the daughters of the covenant upon hearing his assertion that her marriage was secretly chaste. Moreover, the resolution of her social predicament, ending not with a new marriage or childbirth but with dedication to Christ and proclamation of the gospel, would likely have emphasized for Ephrem’s audience the validity of the ministries undertaken by unmarried women in the Syriac church.

The significance ascribed to women in the Syriac church as well as the restrictions placed upon them find resonance in interpretations of Tamar, the Samaritan

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25. Ephrem, “Hymns on the Nativity,” 12.9 (135).

26. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily III,” 679 (83).

27. Jacob of Sarug, “On Tamar” l. 405 (302).

28. Harvey, “Women In Syriac Christian Tradition,” 45.

woman, and Mary. Ephrem's and Jacob's reflections on the lives of these biblical women demonstrate not only awareness, but also sympathy for the ongoing difficulties faced by women who function outside of social norms in their own context. They show this awareness especially in the details they contribute to their portrayals, including the lengthy speeches and inner musings ascribed to the women, for example, or narrative details such as the Samaritan woman's surprising chastity or Tamar's intense longing for the Messiah. These inclusions are embellishments on the biblical texts and given the work done by women in the Syriac church, it is hard not to imagine that the faithfulness, boldness, and intelligence displayed by biblical women in the Syriac imagination is in some ways shaped by the characters of the exemplary women that authors such as Ephrem and Jacob might have known within their own churches.

### **Unintended Consequences of Christological Interpretation**

With such sympathy and awareness of the situations of both biblical women and women in the Syriac context on display in their reflections on Tamar, the Samaritan woman, and Mary, it is worth considering what potentially problematic implications may also be contained in the texts. Despite the positive characterization of individual women presented in these interpretations, elements of what Elizabeth Clark has called "strategies of containment" can also be discerned.<sup>29</sup> By emphasizing the extraordinariness of the biblical women they reflect upon, Ephrem and Jacob subtly reinforce the idea that the

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29. Clark discusses "strategies of containment" in "Ideology, History and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity" (see esp. 103, 109, and 112). Clark uses the term, whose origin she attributes to Frederic Jameson, to describe arguments used by patristic authors to demonstrate that silent submission is the correct status for Christian women despite examples of influential women operating within the church in Late Antiquity. One task of these strategies of containment, as Clark uses the term, is to demonstrate the exceptionality of such women, reinforcing the idea that submission to men should be seen as the norm for Christian women.

bold speech and actions of the women they write about should be viewed as exceptions to norms of female behavior which they still wish to uphold. Ephrem's and Jacob's highly christological approach to the material is in itself a factor in the sociological and theological problems in the interpretations of these characters. Their emphasis on the extraordinariness and uniqueness of these women's participation in the revelation of Christ can overshadow the biblical texts potential to speak powerfully to many ordinary, even widespread needs and concerns of women throughout various eras of history.

For example, Ephrem depicts the Samaritan woman as an exemplar of strong character, wisdom, and devotion to God. A cornerstone of his argument, however, is that the Samaritan woman, through multiple instances of widowhood, finds herself in a societally untenable position, one that necessitates her acting with a certain amount of duplicity. Ephrem's justification of the Samaritan woman rests in large part on his stated awareness that women are made to suffer because of marital and procreative status, and that more than one biblical woman has found herself having to lie about her marital status in order to save herself or her family from persecution.<sup>30</sup> While Ephrem's awareness of this widespread problem is refreshing, he unfortunately naturalizes this societally inflicted suffering, engaging it as though it were simply an unavoidable liability of being female.<sup>31</sup> Ephrem attends to the fall-out of such situations, making positive note of the

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30. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.13–17 (358-9).

31. Elizabeth Clark, on page 105 of "Ideology, History and the Construction of 'Woman,'" describes "naturalizing" as a view in which "our society's values have no history. . . . situations that have come about through human construction are . . . legitimated as conforming to timeless truth." Clark uses the term to describe taking an uncritical or overly positive view of circumstances, but whether an individual views circumstances positively—or in the case of Ephrem's assessment of the Samaritan woman's plight—as a tragedy, naturalizing a situation and the factors leading up to it diminishes motivation for bringing about change.

resourceful ways biblical women navigate their struggles,<sup>32</sup> but shows little to no concern for the underlying causes of this situation. His sympathy for the woman's plight does not lead to critique of the ways in which societal expectations of women place them in untenable positions. Ephrem's goal in referencing the difficult lives of biblical women is to demonstrate that feminine suffering serves as space for Christ's self-revelation. This approach, for all the rich christological interpretations it yields, unfortunately treats the oppression of women by society as a given, discerning Christ's self-revelation in the midst of oppression and suffering but failing to question how that oppression itself might be remediated if the followers of Christ saw it as their work to address it.

If Ephrem's take on disenfranchised biblical women misses an opportunity to reflect on justice towards women, Jacob's homily "On Tamar" arguably erases an existing one. Jacob's glowing report of Tamar's faith interprets her dejection over her situation as exclusively motivated by wholehearted longing for the birth of the Messiah.<sup>33</sup> This interpretation, while casting Tamar in an admirable light from Jacob's perspective, unfortunately overshadows important questions of justice raised by the biblical story. Genesis 38, without imputing any christological implications, depicts Judah's actions toward Tamar as unjust, so much so, in fact, that the text indicates Tamar's breach of sexual ethics is a less significant fault than Judah's breach of faith toward her.<sup>34</sup> Admittedly, the biblical witness does not encourage women to follow Tamar as an example, but even if the biblical account is not meant to be a reflection on how women

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32. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.17–22.19 (357).

31. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 210, trans. Brock, "Verse Homily on Tamar," 298.

32. See Gen 38:26.

ought to behave, it certainly provides commentary on how men ought to behave towards women. Themes of promise-honoring and even of the need for males to take responsibility for their sexuality and offspring are far more intrinsic to the text than christological concerns. Reading the story of Tamar exclusively as a crisis in messianic genealogy runs the risk of erasing its implications for justice, and particularly justice toward women.

Biblical women's stories in Syriac Christianity exist in a tension between being embraced and being erased, between being centered and being censured, and this tension is clearly displayed in Jacob's homiletic portrayals of the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth. Jacob, in his description of the visit between the two women, describes them as not trading wisdom about childbirth or the care of newborns but as worshipping God and studying the Scriptures.<sup>35</sup> Jacob's portrayal of women's religious speech, however, is somewhat qualified. Jacob states that Elizabeth speaks not merely out of her own understanding but as "a mouth for her husband who was not speaking."<sup>36</sup> In other words, Elizabeth's religious discourse is not her own, or at least not exclusively. Jacob also emphasizes the uniqueness of the exchange between Mary and Elizabeth in "Homily III" when he characterizes the scene by saying "all sorts of novelties which are usually not done were there."<sup>37</sup>

Jacob further comments on the limits of women's participation in public life by commenting on the importance of Mary's marriage to Joseph. Mary herself (with a little

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33. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 652 (55).

34. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 650 (53).

35. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily III," 680 (83).

help from the angel Gabriel) convinces Joseph of her righteousness through spirited explanation of the scriptural and theological implications of her pregnancy.<sup>38</sup> Despite her boldness and wisdom, however, Jacob emphasizes that Mary could never have made her case publicly without being “slandered, persecuted, and stoned.”<sup>39</sup> Regardless of Mary’s strength or faith, there is no possibility of her navigating life unmarried. In Jacob’s view, Mary’s ability to function in society is conditional and no virtues she possesses will allow her to bypass marriage as the key to societal flourishing.

Harvey has discussed this tendency for Syriac reflections to moderate the impact of the bold female speech patterns contained therein. She notes that Syriac authors are often careful to point out that the socially unconventional behavior of biblical women is restricted to “permissible topics . . . acceptable spaces . . . and stock social problems.”<sup>40</sup> She also notes that any potential equality between men’s and women’s voices is treated as an aspect of the world to come, not to be attempted in the present, earthly kingdom.<sup>41</sup> It is apparent that Syriac Christianity’s acceptance, and even celebration, of women who take on unconventional roles is still muted and mediated by widespread acceptance of the social order. Where Ephrem and Jacob, for example, enthusiastically embrace biblical women’s transgressing of societal boundaries, they do so because they view it as evidence that the women in question are motivated by the hidden divine will at work. The unfortunate downside of this viewpoint is that it tends to reaffirm the strangeness, and

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36. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily II,” 654 (57).

37. Jacob of Sarug, “Homily II,” 658 (61).

38. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” 125

39. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” 130

even the general inappropriateness, of such boundary crossing under normal circumstances rather than critiquing the existence of the boundary itself.

It is evident from these examples that the overall favorable bent of Syriac patristic attitudes towards biblical women is still not free from problematic attitudes towards women in general. This raises the question, however, of whether those problematic attitudes really “matter” for those who study this literature from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. Is it fair to fault an author from the fourth century, for instance, for not displaying more concern over the underlying causes of societal oppression of women or to expect a patristic preacher to give a more robust account of scriptural views on female reproductive autonomy? Are they not, at the end of the day, “products of their time”? Answering this question requires some nuanced thinking.

Ephrem’s and Jacob’s worldview can fairly be called a product of its time. The fact that their writings prioritize answering questions of Christology over discussing the social construction of womanhood reflect the controversies operant in their own era. It should be noted, however, that the problematic themes in their scriptural interpretations cannot fairly be regarded as products of their time, at least unless it be conceded that those themes are also a product of all other times! Stereotyping, naturalizing, and erasure of the concerns and contributions of women happens persistently across time and place, from the ancient Near East to medieval Europe to the American frontier to the present day. Because of the persistence and prevalence of these attitudes, addressing them remains a relevant concern regardless of the compositional era in which they are encountered.

A parallel to this concern can be found in Shepardson's description of the complexities giving rise to Ephrem's extensive use of anti-Jewish rhetoric. She demonstrates that Ephrem's vitriol toward the Jews aligns closely with attitudes common to fourth-century theologians<sup>42</sup> and that they reflect Ephrem's attempt to solve a specific problem (the need to clarify the boundaries of the Christian community over and against various competing or heretical groups).<sup>43</sup> She also notes that Ephrem has a specific goal in mind with this rhetoric: motivating Christians in his context to explicitly align themselves with the Nicene church.<sup>44</sup> It can clearly be seen that the aim of fourth-century anti-Jewish vitriol is not to incite Christians to the violent persecution of the Jews but to emphasize the importance of properly oriented theology and participation in the "correct" church. Yet as Shepardson also notes, the rhetoric that began as self-definition eventually became the justification for persecution.<sup>45</sup> From Shepardson's argument, it is evident that patristic anti-Jewish arguments were "products of their time," yet even as the theological debates of Late Antiquity have faded out of public consciousness, patristic tirades against Judaism have become the seeds of an unfortunate tradition in Christian thought, one that has been used repeatedly to justify marginalization and persecution of Jewish communities by Christians. From this example, it is evident that ancient attitudes can have long lives and strong influence upon the thought processes of readers in multiple different historical eras.

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42. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 62.

43. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 106.

44. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 61.

45. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy*, 30.

The potential for similar damaging impact exists in much Christian literature about women. These works may reify the notions that women must adequately perform certain feminine “types” or must keep silent about their actual lived experiences in order to fulfill their role in God’s kingdom, however “positive” that role may be. The repetition of such attitudes needs to be noticed and considered regardless of the compositional era of the literature in which they occur, so as to minimize the normalizing of any intrinsic connection between the exaltation of God and the oppression of any people group, including women. The point of applying such criticism to the presentation of women in the text considered in this study, therefore, is not to hold Ephrem and Jacob accountable to the values of twenty-first-century scholarship, but to hold twenty-first-century readers accountable for making realistic assessments of the potential impact of the literature.

Due to the persistent problem of marginalization of women, it is not responsible to ignore the attitudes these works convey about women in general. Neither is it appropriate, however, to read them solely with an eye to understanding their assertions regarding gender, when this theme, however fascinating, does not reflect the authors’ aims in composing them. Consciousness of various subtexts should not prevent readers from considering the efficacy and value of the authors’ intended program. Having admitted that these texts include problematic attitudes towards women in their contents, we should also acknowledge that neither Ephrem nor Jacob appears to intend to teach about women but to teach about Christ. With that in mind, we should return our attention now to the aims for which the writings considered in this study were actually composed. By orienting themselves to understand Jacob’s and Ephrem’s aim of discussing christological rather than sociological concerns, readers have the opportunity to receive

and consider Syriac Christian attitudes towards Christ while also holding themselves responsible to study the biblical texts in ways that seek to discern what other important themes may be present and what response to them is indicated by Scripture.

### **Christological Significance of Tamar, the Samaritan Woman, and Mary**

As vehicles for expressing the hiddenness and revelation of Christ, these three female characters serve the authors well. Through them, Ephrem and Jacob are able to demonstrate their view that Christ is made manifest in the human world in a surprising, almost scandalously wide array of persons and situations. Additionally, they draw the reader's attention upward from the vast range of revelations of Christ in the world to the equally vast hidden presence of divine majesty and power. Finally, they instruct as to the implications for how human beings should navigate this revelation filled, mystery shrouded world in which they encounter God.

Taken together, these three characters illustrate Christ's revelation in a dizzying range of spaces. Jacob, in his homily "On Tamar," identifies Christ's influence not only in the scandalous sexual behavior of Judah and Tamar (in and of itself a seemingly unlikely place to encounter divine will), but also in the hearts and the motivations of individuals who lived centuries before the event of the incarnation. Jacob does this by representing the actions of Tamar, along with Rachel, Leah, and Ruth, as motivated not only by divine will but by their own conscious hope for the Messiah.<sup>46</sup> As discussed above, Jacob's assertion that Tamar's actions are motivated by conscious longing for the Messiah contains problematic erasure of some issues of gendered justice. Despite what is lost from the story by this assertion, however, his view of her motives serves as a

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46. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 120-9 (296).

demonstration that, for Jacob, Christ is the true fulfillment of the arc of human history and the true object of human longing in any era. Jacob therefore uses Tamar to demonstrate the revelation of Christ throughout the whole of Scripture and history as well as to assert the surprising claim that Christ is revealed in the various moral irregularities of Judah and Tamar.

Jacob claims Christ is made manifest by Tamar's deceit, and that belief echoes the ideas of Ephrem in "Hymns on Virginity" 22 and 23. Ephrem also claims ambiguous moral territory, including instances of deception or of human suffering and oppression, as spaces where the divine is made known. Ephrem praises God for the woman's deceit because it gives Christ an opportunity to show himself<sup>47</sup> but also celebrates the woman for her faith and love of Christ.<sup>48</sup> Ephrem therefore asserts that Christ is revealed in human virtue as well as in the painful or distasteful details of life. He demonstrates that whether events and practices are, from a human point of view good, bad, or indifferent, Christ can and does show himself in those events.

Mary, for both Ephrem and Jacob, constantly reveals Christ. Their considerations of her show Christ present in conversations between two women in a family home<sup>49</sup> and in the acceptance, devotion, and protection offered in public by a faithful husband.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, in reflecting on Mary, Ephrem<sup>51</sup> and Jacob<sup>52</sup> name the female body as space

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47. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.18 (359).

48. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.1 (361).

49. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 652 (55).

50. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily II," 658 (61).

51. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 4.185 (102).

52. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 617 (20).

in which Christ is revealed, especially through the processes of maternity. It should be reiterated, however, that Ephrem in particular insists that a woman's body can also demonstrate Christ's presence if she chooses not to bear children when her choice stems from devotion to Christ and his Gospel.<sup>53</sup>

The observations made by Ephrem and Jacob regarding the manifestations of Christ's revelation emphasize the extent to which the revealed Christ may be encountered in the world. He is present in history, in the whole witness of Scripture, and in the human body. He is revealed in virtuous action and character and in circumstances stemming from sin and injustice. He is made manifest in the actions of parents and of those who never become parents. In other words Ephrem and Jacob, through their reflections on these three characters, display the universality of Christ's revelation. There are no persons, circumstances, or choices that cannot become spaces of revelation, whether the participants intend them to be or not.

The christological interpretations given in these patristic considerations of biblical women, however, use demonstrations of Christ's revelation to emphasize how great a portion of the divine nature remains beyond human comprehension. As has been noted, Jacob's homily "On Tamar" builds an argument that Tamar's actions are in and of themselves revelatory of Christ. In making this argument, however Jacob makes frequent and repetitive use of the language of mystery, both in regard to Tamar<sup>54</sup> and in regard to Christ himself.<sup>55</sup> Jacob repeatedly states that Tamar's actions stem from the operation not

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53. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.5 (362).

54. See for example Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," ll. 125, 150, 160, (115).

55. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 209 (298).

just of divinity but of divine mystery upon her. In other words, Jacob uses the role Tamar plays in the incarnation of Christ not merely to demonstrate that Christ reveals himself in the world but that Christ's choice to reveal himself in unexpected ways indicates the remaining hidden and unknowable aspects of his character and will.

In a similar vein, "Hymns on Virginity" 22 and 23 actually underscore the hiddenness of the divine nature by discussing moments of revelation. These hymns describe the Samaritan woman's decision to devise tests to discern whether Jesus comes from God.<sup>56</sup> The woman's use of these tests is telling, as it indicates that even in the fullness of the incarnation, Christ's divine nature is not necessarily obvious or easy to comprehend. Instead, it is manifest in hints and glimpses, not in blatant or overpowering evidence. Thus Christ's revelation, even at its most direct, still requires human participation in the form of faith in order to be made known.

Likewise, Mary's embodied revelation of Christ is also used to highlight the mystery and unknowability of Christ in his fullness. Christ's presence in her womb is held to be remarkable not merely because it represents God's sojourn among humanity but because Christ's voluntary containment in a small space is used to draw attention to the fact that no space, even the heavens, is large enough to contain him apart from his specific will.<sup>57</sup> As the mother of God, Mary naturally represents Christ's physical, embodied nature, yet when the bodily revelation of Christ is emphasized, it is held up as remarkable not merely for its own sake but as a contrast to his vast and unsearchable divinity. Not only Mary, therefore, but each of the three biblical women are revelatory of

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56. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 22.12 (358).

57. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily III," 664 (67).

Christ in ways that simultaneously preserve an awareness that much of the divine nature remains hidden. This illustrates the Syriac worldview in which the most significant aspect of Christ is neither his revelation nor his hiddenness but their paradoxical and continuous coexistence within his nature.

Having been used to illuminate such profound depictions of the paradoxical tensions in Christ's nature, each character is then used to demonstrate the variety of actions by which humans can respond appropriately to Christ. Mary<sup>58</sup> and the Samaritan woman<sup>59</sup> respond to news of the presence of the Messiah by questioning, seeking to clarify their own understanding. Their praiseworthy discernment is used to demonstrate the need for individuals to seek what is true about Christ rather than being swept up by any teaching or claim they might encounter. Having accepted that the revelation is true, Mary<sup>60</sup> and the Samaritan woman<sup>61</sup> both become exemplary proclaimers of the truth that has been revealed. Additionally, Tamar and Mary both agree to participate in Christ's revelation at tremendous risk to their reputations and even their physical safety. Tamar in particular shows awareness that she may face death for her actions, and her willingness to do so is specifically held up as a model of Christian devotion.<sup>62</sup> Most significantly, all three women are interpreted by Ephrem and Jacob as acting out of deep love for Christ. Jacob reminds the audience that Tamar was "yearning" for the Savior<sup>63</sup> while, according

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58. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 629 (32).

59. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 22.5 (356).

60. Ephrem, "Hymns on the Nativity," 5.19 (108).

61. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginitly," 23.7 (363).

62. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 380 (301).

63. Jacob of Sarug, "On Tamar," l. 373 (301).

to Ephrem, the Samaritan woman's "love was zealous."<sup>64</sup> Likewise Mary, even before conceiving the Christ child, lets her heart be "poured forth with love in prayer before Him."<sup>65</sup> It is shown in all three cases that this love for Christ is ultimately the holiest and most fitting response to any revelatory glimpse an individual may receive of the hidden mystery of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to present the likelihood that three female biblical characters, as represented by two prolific Syriac authors, function as vehicles for christological reflection. The works considered here, however, make up only a small sample of the use of female biblical characters in Syriac thought. Multiple other biblical women, including Eve, Sarah, Rachel, Leah, Elizabeth, Martha, and Mary of Bethany, feature significantly in Syriac biblical interpretation.<sup>66</sup> The extent to which portrayals of other biblical women reflect Christology as well as what additional theological significance interpretations of their stories might convey would be fruitful topics for further study. Additionally, while Ephrem and Jacob are undeniably significant figures in Syriac thought, they are far from being the only Syriac authors who produced influential biblical interpretations. Considerations of other authors' approaches to biblical women, as found in Narsai, or Aphrahat, for example, or even in numerous anonymous works, would provide helpful context for further understanding of the significance of biblical women in Syriac Christianity.

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64. Ephrem, "Hymns on Virginity," 23.1 (361).

65. Jacob of Sarug, "Homily I," 625 (28).

66. Harvey, *Song and Memory*, 82-86.

One final consideration, in terms of further research is worth highlighting here, which is the need for continued translation efforts. It should be noted that the selection of works studied in this thesis was partially determined by the availability of modern English translations of the primary source material. During the research phase of this project, multiple works that seemed at least potentially relevant based on title had to be passed over due to there being no accessible English editions. Ongoing analysis of the theological content of Syriac materials would be greatly facilitated if such analysis did not so frequently require scholars to have sufficient language skills, or even sufficient time on their hands, to do the dual work of translation and evaluation simultaneously.

Much could be learned from additional study of biblical women in Syriac patristic thought, but the portrayals of Tamar, the Samaritan woman, and Mary offer several important insights to reflect upon. The connection between the characters' femininity and their suitability as illustrations of Christ's nature is striking. Ephrem and Jacob appear to notice that the lives of biblical women are complicated and filled with unexpected twists and turns, and this realization reminds them of their complex and surprising Savior.

Because the gender of the characters is so closely tied to the theological content the authors wish to communicate, the materials cannot help but surface a number of general beliefs about women and the circumstances they face. Many of these beliefs are problematic not because they are reflective of outdated modes of thinking but because they persist and resurface throughout every time and place, including the twenty-first-century Western religious context. It must be admitted though, that the chief source of problematic attitudes towards women in these sources—their tendency to gloss over questions of what it means to be a woman in society—is a direct consequence of the

greatest strength of the materials: their single-minded focus on how Christ is present, both overtly and in unseen ways, to women as well as men, across the whole of history and the physical world.

Taken not as vehicles for social commentary but as demonstrations of christological commitments, the works studied in this thesis have exceptional value for communicating faith and love of God to readers in any era. Because of, not in spite of, the femininity of their main characters and all the various complications and difficulties that entails, Ephrem and Jacob present these biblical women's stories as illustrations of the vast and varied ways that Christ reaches out to make himself known to human beings. Women, while facing troubling sociological limits due to their gender, are shown nevertheless to participate fully in Christ's revelation, and their participation is interpreted as a sign of Christ's work of redeeming the world. Through the inclusion of their stories, Late Antique Syriac Christianity contains reminders that following Christ is often complicated, polarizing, filled with tensions and paradoxes, but each of these complexities can become a space in which humans encounter God. The stories of Tamar, the Samaritan woman, and Mary stand as witness that the endlessly mysterious and unsearchable Savior is also present and revealed in the ambiguities and incongruities of human life.

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