

Syriac Patristics
Ephrem: A Theologian of Hymns
CHTH 6R1050

The Centre for Patristics and Early Christianity
McMaster Divinity College
Winter Semester 2025

Wednesday 4–5:50 pm
Instructor: Dr. Haitham Issak
issakha@mcmaster.ca

Course Description:

Syriac Christianity was essential to developing Christian theology and spirituality in the ancient church, where one can read about many important figures and influential writers. Among them, St. Ephrem, the harp of the Spirit, was a teacher, poet, theologian, and defender of faith against heretics in the fourth century. He was among the most fruitful and productive of the Syriac writers. He wrote in Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic language. He used metrical poetry to express theology; he interpreted it through numerous symbols rendered by the charged Syriac term ܪܙܐ *rōzo*, which originates in the Book of Daniel 2:18–19. This course will discuss St. Ephrem's works and read, discuss and analyze them theologically and spiritually. It helps students to understand the fundamental theological and spiritual themes in Syriac Christianity and provides an overview of Syriac Christianity and its significance in the early church.

Course Objectives:

Knowing ...

- To know the essential works of Ephrem's metrical poetry to express theology and spirituality and the important contribution of Ephrem to the church.

Being ...

- By the end of the course, students will have a large understanding of the fundamental works of one of the essential figures in Syriac Christianity by reading, discussing, and analyzing Ephrem's works theologically and spiritually.

Doing ...

- Develop each student's ability to identify the connection between poetry, theology, and spirituality in Ephrem's writings.

Required Books:

Brock, Sebastian P. *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1992.

Brock, Sebastian, ed. *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1987.

Brock, Sebastian, and Kiraz, George A. *Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000.

McVey, Kathleen E. *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*. New York: Paulist, 1989.

Method:**Instructor's presentation**

The instructor will present the material in each class, which will be based on the material of that class. In each class, it is important for each student to participate in and discuss the reading texts.

Assignments:

- Presentation
Students will make a presentation in class on one of the class materials. The presentation will be an analysis of the material. Students must also prepare two questions for discussion with the rest of the class.
- Two Research papers
 - The first paper is approximately 5–7 pages, and the second is 7–10 pages.
 - In the first paper, write about Ephrem's thoughts on one of the hymns mentioned in the syllabus. This paper is due on February 26.
 - Students must write a research paper on Ephrem's Hymns for the second paper. This paper is due on April 9.
- Class participation
Class participation is important. Students must read the material before class and participate in the class discussion.

Grading:

- Presentation 20%
- The first paper 30%
- The second Paper, 35%
- Participation 15%

Course Schedule:

January 8 ܠܘܬܝܢܐ

- Introduction: Syllabus
Syriac Christianity: Theology and Spirituality

January 15

- Early and Later Authors
Reading: The Syriac Fathers on Prayers and Spiritual Life

January 22

- Introduction to Ephrem: Life and writings
Reading: Ephrem the Syriac: Hymns (pp. 1–48)

January 29

- Ephrem's Theology: Incarnation; Trinity
Readings: The Luminous Eye (pp. 1–84)

February 5 ܡܚܬܐ

- Select Poems (Texts: 1–5)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems (pp. 2–61)
Reading The Luminous Eye (pp. 85–182)

February 12

- Select Poems (Texts: 6–12)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems (pp. 62–133)

February 17–21: Reading Week–No class

February 26

- Select Poems (Texts: 13–20)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems (pp. 134–257)

March 5 ܡܚܬܐ

- Hymns on the Nativity (Hymns: 1–15)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (pp. 63–147)

March 12

- Hymns on the Nativity (Hymns: 16–28); Hymns against Julian (Hymns: 1–4)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (pp. 148–257)

March 19

- Hymns on Virginity (Hymns: 1–17)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (pp. 261–336)

March 26

- Hymns on Virginité (Hymns: 18–35)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (pp. 337–419)

April 2 ربيع الثاني

- Hymns on Virginité (Hymns: 36–52)
Reading: Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (pp. 420–468)

April 9

- Researcher paper due & conclusion

Academic Honesty:

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

A special note about AI: You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you “tidy up” your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Highly Recommended for Online (Asynchronous) Courses

– Presence and Meaningful Participation

Presence and participation in this course are expected. Faculty know from many years of experience that a student's level of presence and participation in the course will impact how well she or he will score in the course. Although there are exceptions to this rule of thumb, low levels of presence and participation tend to translate to low grades; mediocre presence and participation tend to translate to mediocre grades; and high levels of presence and participation tend to translate to higher grades.

A word needs to be said about what constitutes “presence” (attendance) and “participation” in an asynchronous course. Students must establish a record of participation in academically related activities to meet the expected level of attendance and meaningful participation. Be aware that merely logging into the online class is not, by itself, sufficient as a demonstration of attendance and participation by the student. “Academically related activities” certainly includes participation in and completion of the course requirements that are described below. Additionally, just as students are expected to engage with the course content/materials throughout the week outside of the learning management system (A2L), so also students are expected to engage one another in formative dialogue “outside of class.” This is an important part of belonging to and maintaining a community of learning and is a staple ingredient in what constitutes “presence.”

– Online Etiquette

It is critical in any MDC class that students show respect for classmates and the instructor. This is even truer in the online environment because many of the non-verbal cues that we use to interpret what a person is communicating to us are not present online (except, perhaps in video posts). Therefore, it is especially critical that we be mindful of how our words will be interpreted by those who are reading them. As the instructor of the course, it is my responsibility to monitor communications to ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing their views in a respectful manner. Most if not all courses at MDC are devoted to the interpretation of Scripture. Invariably there will be disagreements; these disagreements must be discussed and negotiated in a respectful

manner. This applies to individual and group communications involving the instructor and the others enrolled in the course. The instructor will expect that you will give some thought to your postings. Excessive postings are also frowned upon because these amount to dominating the discussion. Please limit your postings to less than 200 words. Instructors reserve the right to ask students to take a step back to allow others discussion time if she or he feels that an individual is dominating the discussion. In your responses, please try to be clear which point your response refers to. Students who violate these guidelines may be dismissed from class.

Bookstore

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

Note: This syllabus is the instructor's property and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of the class.

For Further Reading:

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

Custer, John S. "Why a Hymn? Form and Content in St Ephrem's Hymns 31 On Virginité." *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1996): 145–54.

Matthews, Edward G., Amar, Joseph P., and McVey, Kathleen E. *Selected Prose Works: Fathers of the Church*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994.

Mathews, Edward G Jr. "St Ephrem, Madrāšê On Faith, 81-85: Hymns on the Pearl, I–V." *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1994): 45–72.

Morris, J. B. *Rhythms of Saint Ephrem the Syrian: Select Works of St. Ephrem the Syrian*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008.

Murray, Robert. *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*. London: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Sebastian, Brock. "The Robe of Glory: A Biblical Image in the Syriac Tradition." *The Way* 39:3 (1999): 247–59.

———. *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990.