

TRADITION & TRADITIONS



FEMININE-MATERNAL IMAGES OF THE SPIRIT IN EARLY SYRIAC TRADITION

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The limitations of human language in talking about divine mysteries demands the use of symbols and images. Symbols have the capacity to open up various new realms of meaning. Through visible symbols invisible realities can be made accessible to human understanding. Symbols do not reduce the divine to a simple definition, rather they establish a link between the one who employs the symbols and the One symbolized. Thus, symbols reach up to the source of the reality that surpasses human grasp. They afford us a penetrating insight into the mystery of faith. In fact, this is why the Christian liturgy is permeated with symbolic expression.

The biblical authors often made use of various symbols familiar to their readers. This is especially true with regard to the identity of the Spirit of God. To evoke the presence and activity of the Spirit, they articulated various symbols based on elements of the natural world—wind, breath, water, and fire. Beginning in the pages of Scripture, these symbols became helpful as believers sought to understand the Spirit's function in the divine salvific economy. In theology today, the various symbols of the Spirit continue to serve as a source of inspiration and insight for reflecting on the mystery of God's Holy Spirit.

In this context, we return to the wide and rich symbolic vocabulary of early Syriac pneumatology, or theology of the Spirit. The Syriac writers understood well the communicative power of symbols and they pursued the biblical symbols and images to breathtaking limits. As Sebastian Brock notes, it is in the play of these biblical symbols and images that one can glimpse the heart of Syriac Christianity.¹

Syriac writings such as the early second-century *Odes of Solomon* and the early third-century *Acts of Thomas*, employ common biblical symbols of the Spirit like wind, dove, and oil.² In this article we concentrate on a symbolism that is a

¹ See Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), 11.

² See generally, Emmanuel Kaniyamparampil, *The Spirit of Life: A Study of the Holy Spirit in the Early Syriac Tradition* (Kerla: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India, 2003).

Syriac particularity—the feminine imagery of the Spirit, which is pervasive in the works of early Syriac Christianity.

It is generally accepted in Christian theology that the Godhead is beyond any gender and that the divinity transcends all sexual differentiation. But in the early period of Christianity, especially in Syriac literature, we often find the use of metaphors and similes that attribute female characteristics to God. In the *Odes of Solomon*, for example, God the Father is depicted with two breasts like a female.³ Similarly, St. Ephrem (303–373), describes God as a wet nurse who cares for her baby.⁴

It is also important to consider the fact that this feminine characterization of the divine is more systematically present in the case of the Spirit. What is the origin of this characterization? How does this imagery reveal and contribute towards an understanding of the divine reality of the Holy Spirit?

In the Hebrew language, *ruah* (spirit) is feminine in gender.⁵ The Syriac language retained the feminine gender of the term “spirit” (ܠܚܐ/ܠܚܐ) ⁶ The earliest evidences for this are seen in the translation of the Bible into Syriac. Moreover, applying the term “spirit” to refer specifically to the Holy Spirit of God, the Old Syriac translation of the gospels attributed a feminine gender to the Holy Spirit.⁷ These translations of sacred Scripture influenced later use of feminine imagery to describe the Spirit in Syriac spiritual and theological writings. As we will see, early Syriac writers construed the term Spirit very often as grammatically feminine to describe the action of the Spirit.⁸

3 *Odes of Sol.* 19:3–4. Text in *The Odes of Solomon*, ed. and trans. James H. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973). This passage will be discussed later on in this study.

4 *Hymns on the Church* 25:18. Text in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ecclesia* [The Holy Ephrem of Syria, Hymns on the Church] Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 198/199 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1960).

5 It is interesting to note that while referring to the maternal figure of the Holy Spirit in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, St. Jerome says that the term “spirit” is feminine in Hebrew, masculine in Latin, and neuter in Greek. Jerome then adds that there is no gender in the divinity. See his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Book 11, Chap. 40:9. Text in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentariorum in Esaiam* (Libri I–IX), *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 73 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1963).

6 In fact, in Syriac (ܠܚܐ) (Logos/Word) also was feminine. Later on, in the Syriac translation of Scripture, the *Peshitta*, it was altered to masculine.

7 In the Old Syriac translation of John 14:26, the Spirit is referred to as “she.” But in the *Peshitta* it is changed to “he.” See Francis Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* (London: J. Murray, 1904), 88; Sebastian Brock, “The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature,” in *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Janice Martin Soskice (London: Collins, 1990), 73–88, at 75.

8 See Kaniyamparampil, *The Spirit of Life*, Chapter 1.

The Biblical Roots of Feminine Imagery of the Spirit

As Sebastian Brock explains, the most important Syriac term for describing the action of the Holy Spirit is ܐܠܗܐ/rahhep (to hover over).⁹ This key technical term the Syriacs also traced back to sacred Scripture. In fact, the biblical origin of this Syriac term can be found in Genesis 1:2 and the action of the *ruha* (spirit) over the primordial waters. The *ruha* is here understood as the Spirit of God. At the same time, it seems that this “hovering” activity of the Spirit also bore a connotation of a mother bird hovering over its young ones and protecting them. This idea, too, is scriptural, and originates in Deuteronomy 32:11 where the same verb, *rahhep*, is used to speak of God’s care for the people in the desert. God is compared to an eagle that watches and hovers over its little ones. The verb *rahhep* is not used in Deuteronomy 32:11 in relation to the Spirit as it is in Genesis 1:2. Rather, it is employed for the divine action in general. However, the use of this verb may have facilitated an association between the hovering activity of the Spirit and the mother bird’s hovering over her young ones.

Thus, it seems that the early Syriac tradition understood this act of hovering, employed both in Genesis 1:2 and Deuteronomy 32:11 and expressed through the verb *rahhep*, as a typically feminine-maternal action.¹⁰ This comparison between the actions of the Spirit and the mother-bird may also have been influenced by the connection that early Christian tradition made between Genesis 1:2 and the Spirit-dove’s appearance over the waters of the Jordan at Christ’s baptism.¹¹

9 See Sebastian Brock, “The Ruah Elohim of Gen 1,2 and its Reception History in the Syriac Tradition,” in *Lectures et Relectures de la Bible: festschrift P.-M. Bogaert* [Readings and Second Readings of the Bible in Honor of P.-M. Bogaert], eds. André Wénin, J.-M. Auwers, and Pierre Bogaert, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 144. (Louvain: Louvain University, 1999), 327–349. In fact, for the early Syriac writers, this hovering action of the Spirit of God remained an archetypal image of the Spirit. So even the use of the verb ܐܠܗܐ (to overshadow), coming from Luke 1:35 to indicate the work of the Spirit, is of rather later use compared to ܐܠܗܐ. We do not find ܐܠܗܐ in the sources of our study. See Sebastian Brock, “Passover, Annunciation, and Epiclesis: Some Remarks on the Term Aggen in the Syriac Versions of Lk. 1:35,” *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 222–233; Brock, “What’s in a Word? An Intriguing Choice in the Syriac Diatessaron,” in *Understanding, Studying, and Reading: New Testament Essays in Honor of John Ashton*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 180–187.

10 It is interesting to note that derivatives of ܐܠܗܐ (ܐܠܗܐ: pitiful, compassionate) are used several times to indicate the idea of God’s “compassion” — which designates a feminine-maternal quality both in the Old and the New Testaments. Compare Deut. 33:12; Isa. 63:9; Zech. 12:10 (“a spirit of compassion”); James 5:11. For further details, see Brock, “The Ruah Elohim of Gen 1:2,” 328.

11 The early Christian tradition has seen the Spirit-dove action at the Jordan as a renewal and fulfillment of the action of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2. This is expressed precisely as a symbolic bird over the waters. See Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975), 313.

Another significant influence on the Syriac understanding of the Spirit was the feminine personification of divine “Wisdom” in post-exilic Judaism.¹² The feminine gender of the Hebrew words *ruah* (spirit) and *hokmah* (wisdom) might also have facilitated a close association and even an identification of these words.¹³ Here we cannot ignore that in early gnostic circles the personified figure of wisdom was totally identified with the feminine holy spirit.¹⁴

Thus, there is more than a simple “grammatical” explanation for the use of feminine imagery of the Spirit in the Syriac tradition. Behind this imagery, we also see certain assumptions about the nature of God and God’s care for his people, assumptions derived from a close reading of Scripture—read in light of the early interpretative traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

Turning to the most important monuments of early Syriac literature, we see that the Spirit’s “hovering” action remains a preferred one for describing the activity of the Spirit. The *Acts of Thomas* makes a direct mention of the hovering action of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2. The Persian sage, Aphrahat (270–345), refers to this hover in the context of his explanation on the Spirit’s work in the baptism of believers.¹⁵ And, although, the verb *rahhep* is not used in the *Odes of Solomon*, the fluttering action of the dove in *Odes of Solomon* 24:1 is reminiscent of Genesis 1:2.

In seeking to understand these early texts, it is important to recognize that in later Syriac tradition, a noun form of the verb *rahhep*—ܠܚܗܒܐ/*ruhha* (hovering or brooding)—is mainly employed to indicate the action of the Spirit in the mysteries or the sacraments. Ephrem, for example, employs it principally

12 See generally, Alice M. Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom*, Society for Old Testament Study Monographs (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005). Among the sources of our study, only in the *Acts of Thomas*, Chapter 50 do we see an identification of the Spirit as Wisdom. Hence, it is probable that this was not a prominent idea in the early Syriac literature. See Brock, “The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature,” 81.

13 In the Wisdom of Solomon, the notions “spirit” and “wisdom” are often associated with each other. Compare Wisd. of Sol. 7:7; 9:17. And in Sirach 24:7 we read that Wisdom is seeking a resting place. Besides, according to Sir. 14:22, this Wisdom is a feminine reality and the disciple searches for her as for a woman. See Paul van Imschoot, “Sagesse et Esprit,” [Wisdom and Spirit] in *Revue Biblique* 47 (1938): 23–49; John R. Levison, *The Spirit in First Century Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 178.

14 See Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 314.

15 In fact, Aphrahat uses the verb ܠܚܗܒܐ three times. First, it is used in connection with baptism. See *Demonstrations* 6:14. Text in *Aphrahat Demonstrations*, ed. Kuriakose A. Valavanolickal, Catholic Theological Studies in India 3 (Changanassery: HIRS Publications, 1999); Johannes Parisot, ed., *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae. Demonstrationes* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894). Second, we find it in *Demonstrations* 10:2 where ܠܚܗܒܐ is used with the preposition ܠܐ to mean the protection that Moses, the pastor, had for his children. And in the third case, *Demonstrations* 14:14, it is employed in the same sense of protection—a protection of love. In these last two cases of “protection,” the word ܠܚܗܒܐ suggests a feminine-maternal action.

to describe the Holy Spirit's action in baptism, in the Eucharist, and in the Holy Order.¹⁶

Here it also noteworthy that after 400 C.E. the grammatical feminine gender of the Holy Spirit began to disappear from the *Peshitta*, the Syriac translation of the New Testament¹⁷ and more generally from Syriac literature.¹⁸ From the sixth century on, a masculine gender was used regularly for talking about the Spirit, even

16 First of all, it is important to observe that Ephrem did not identify the spirit in Genesis 1:2 as the Spirit of God. See his *Commentary on Genesis* (1:7). Text in *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Selected Prose Works*, trans. Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, *The Fathers of the Church* 91 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1994). However, he accepted this verb ܥܠܝܐ to speak of the action of the Spirit. This really shows the importance of this verb to designate the action of the Spirit in the early Syriac tradition. Thus, referring to the baptism of Jesus, Ephrem mentions the activity of the Spirit through the word ܠܥܠܝܐ. Compare *Hymns on the Faith* 51:7; 77:20, 22. Text in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers. Hymnen de Fide* [The Holy Ephrem of Syria. Hymns on Faith] *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 154–155 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1955). In his *Hymns on Virginity* 7:8, Ephrem describes the action of the Spirit in Christian baptism by saying that the Holy Spirit hovers over (ܠܥܠܝܐ) the streams of the baptismal water. Text in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers. Hymnen de Virginitate* [The Holy Ephrem of Syria. Hymns on Virginity] *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 223–224 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1962); see also *Hymns on Epiphany* 6:1. Text in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers. Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)* [The Holy Ephrem of Syria. Hymns on the Nativity and Epiphany] *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 186–187 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1959). Again, the same verb is employed for describing the action of the Spirit in the Eucharist (compare *Hymns on the Faith* 10:16) and in the Holy Order. See also *Nisibian Hymns* 19:2; 28:9. Text in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers. Carmina Nisibena I* [The Holy Ephrem of Syria. Nisibian Hymns] *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 218–219 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1962). Narsai of Nisibis (d. 503) also employs this word ܠܥܠܝܐ several times in his exposition on the mysteries. See Homily 17A. Text in Richard Hugh Connolly, trans. *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1909), 6, 17.

17 From the gospels we can present only two instances where the feminine gender is altered to the masculine. They are Luke 12:12 and John 14:26. In other instances, the feminine gender has been preserved and we find it in the present editions of the *Peshitta*. For example, in Matthew 3:16 (and parallels) we read ܠܥܠܝܐ ܕܠܗܐ ܠܥܠܝܐ. Here the feminine form of the verb ܠܥܠܝܐ is used. See also Matt. 10:20; Mark 1:12; Luke 1:35; 2:25; 4:1; John 6:63; 7:39. The *Peshitta* of the New Testament epistles retains the feminine. Thus in Ephesians 4:30 and 1 Thessalonians 4:8 we find the typical feminine form of the Spirit ܠܥܠܝܐ ܕܠܗܐ. Later manuscripts of the New Testament have changed this form to the masculine. For example, ܠܥܠܝܐ ܕܠܗܐ is used in Ephesians 4:30. The feminine gender of the Spirit has, therefore, never disappeared completely from the New Testament *Peshitta* despite alterations. Only the later Philoxenian and the Harklean versions have attempted a consistent alteration of feminine to masculine. See Brock, "The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature," 75–77. See also Brock, "Come, Compassionate Mother . . . Come Holy Spirit: A Forgotten Aspect of Early Eastern Christian Imagery," in *Aram* 3 (1991): 249–257, at 252–253.

18 According to Brock, virtually all Syriac literature before 400 C.E. treated the Spirit grammatically as feminine (one exception is the *Odes of Solomon* where a masculine form of the Spirit is used). From 400 on, the feminine form tends to disappear from Syriac literature. See Brock, "The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature," 74–78.

though feminine features or attributes of the Spirit did not disappear completely.¹⁹ In addition to the endurance of this feminine imagery, there survived even after the sixth century, frequent descriptions of the most characteristic action of the Spirit—namely hovering or brooding.²⁰ Finally, it is interesting to note that we can see a liturgical gesture related to the term *rubhapa* in the eucharistic epiclesis of the Syrian eucharistic liturgy. In the Syro-Antiochene *Qurbana* liturgy, at the epiclesis, the prayer for the Spirit to be sent to change the bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood, the priest gently waves his hands over the eucharistic elements, an action likely intended to recall the hovering action of the Spirit.²¹

The Motherhood of the Spirit

Another feminine image found in the early Syriac tradition is that of the Holy Spirit as mother. Theologically, this image is very significant, as this maternal image is often used to explain the activity of the Spirit in the believer.

The origin of this maternal image for the Spirit can also be traced to the Scriptures and early Christian tradition. For instance, in the Christian apocryphal work, the *Gospel of the Hebrews*,²² we find Jesus speaking of the Spirit as his mother. One such passage is attested to by Origen:

19 From the early fifth century on, it became unacceptable to treat the Spirit as feminine. And in the sixth century it became a norm to treat the Holy Spirit as masculine. The reasons for this change are said to be the Greek influence on the Syriac literature and the misuse of the feminine imagery by some heretical groups. But in the later period also a feminine grammatical form is used for the Spirit side by side with the frequent masculine form in liturgical texts. Examples are seen in the *Hurda* or *Fenqitho*, a collection of liturgical compilations. So a verse text relating to the Epiphany in *Hurda* 1:240 speaks of the Spirit as "She," overshadowing the baptismal font. See Brock, "Come, Compassionate Mother," 254–255; and Brock, "The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature," 75–82. Again, in a prayer for the commemoration of the martyrs, the Holy Spirit is said to be assisting the martyrs like a mother comforting her children. Compare Emmanuel Pataq Siman, *L'expérience de l'Esprit par l'Église d'après la tradition syrienne d'Antioche*, [The Experience of the Spirit in the Church according to the Syrian Tradition of Antioch], *Théologie Historique* 15 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971), 211–212.

20 For example, in *Fenqitho* (3:273) for Epiphany we read: "On this night the Holy Spirit has hovered like a dove, and the springs have surged with water." Another example is seen from the common Maronite and Syrian Orthodox baptismal exorcisms attributed to Timothy. It reads: "The Father rejoices, the Son exalts, the Spirit hovers; the baptismal water is set aflame with fire and the Spirit." These two citations are taken from Sebastian Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, Syrian Church Series 9 (New York: Fordham University, 1979), 8, 12, respectively. Brock also points to the example of the seventh-century monastic writer, Martirius (Sahdona). Martirius speaks of a person found worthy of the hovering of the all-holy Spirit, who, like a mother, hovers over that person as if to give him sanctification. See Brock, "The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature," 82.

21 See also the explanation given in Jessie Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 538.

22 The *Gospel according to the Hebrews* or the *Gospel of the Hebrews* is a Christian apocryphal work extant only in fragments coming from patristic citations. It was considered to have been written in Aramaic (in Hebrew letters) in the early second century or before; it was also thought that the Jewish Christians of Palestine used it as their gospel and that later it was translated

If anyone should lend credence to the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, where the Savior himself says, "My mother, the Holy Spirit, took me just now by one of my hairs and carried me off to the great Mount Tabor," he will have difficulty in explaining how the Holy Spirit can be the mother of Christ.²³

In this same apocryphal work, we read again that the Holy Spirit, who descends upon Jesus at the moment of his baptism in the Jordan, addresses him as "my Son." This passage is quoted by St. Jerome in his fifth-century *Commentary on Isaiah IV*. In fact, Jerome considered this "gospel" to be the work of the Nazarenes, an orthodox Jewish-Christian group. He then writes:

But in the gospel [according to the Hebrews] which is written in Hebrew and which the Nazarenes read, "the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit shall descend upon him." . . . And in the gospel referred to above I find this written: "And it came to pass, as the LORD came up out of the water, the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit descended upon him and rested upon him and said to him, "My Son, in all the prophets I expected that you might come and that I might rest upon you. You are my rest, you are my firstborn Son, who reigns in eternity."²⁴

In these two passages we see the Holy Spirit clearly presented as the mother of Jesus, the firstborn. It shows also that Jewish Christians cherished a mother fig-

into Greek. See Marie Joseph Lagrange, "L'Évangile selon les Hébreux" [The Gospel According to the Hebrews], *Revue Biblique* 31 (1922): 161–181; 321–349; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1992 [1950]): 1:111–112. Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977 [1958]), 34, considered it as one of the most ancient Jewish-Christian works. But recent studies indicate that it was written in Greek before the end of the second century and that it comes from Jewish-Christian circles of Egypt. See James Keith Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (New York: Oxford University, 1993), 4–5; Daniel Alain Bertrand, *Évangile des hébreux: Texte traduit, présenté et annoté* [The Gospel of the Hebrews: Texts Translated, Presented, and Annotated], in *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens 1* [Christian Apocryphal Writings 1], eds. François Bovon and Pierre Geoltrain, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 455–457. See also Simon Claude Mimouni, *Le judéo-christianisme ancien* [Ancient Jewish Christianity] (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 219. Earlier Brock had pleaded for a Semitic language origin for this "gospel." See "A New Testamonium to the 'Gospel According to the Hebrews,'" *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971–1972): 220–222.

- 23 Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Book 2, Chapter 12:87. Text in *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., trans. Ronald E. Heine, The Fathers of the Church 80, 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1989), 1:116; compare Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 9. Origen quotes the same passage in his *Homilies on Jeremiah*, Book 15, Chapter 4. Text in Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah*; *Homily on 1 Kings* 28, trans. John Clark Smith, Fathers of the Church 97 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1998).

- 24 Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 10.

ure of the Holy Spirit. But it is natural to ask, where does this imagery come from and how should one understand this “motherhood” of the Holy Spirit? Regarding its ultimate origin, as we have seen above, this mother figure of the Spirit probably derives from the Semitic feminine gender of the term ‘spirit’ as well as from later Jewish identification of the Spirit with female personified wisdom.

We know that Jewish Christian groups with gnostic affinities also held a similar concept of considering the Spirit as a mother.²⁵ However, according to scholars, the idea of the Spirit as the mother of Jesus in the *Gospel of the Hebrews* is much simpler than the idea as it is elaborated in the complex Gnostic system.²⁶

Instead, the antecedents of this “gospel’s” speculation on the Spirit seem to be scriptural. Specifically, it appears to be based on a reading of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, together with an exegesis of Isaiah 11:1-2, as the passage from Jerome suggests. It also reflects the account of Jesus’ temptation (Matt. 4:1, 8), as the passage from Origen suggests.²⁷ Thus, it is possible to conclude that, in presenting the motherhood of the Spirit, this early writing is trying to convey the scriptural truth that Jesus acts under the power of the Spirit of God. In fact, neither Origen nor Jerome provide us with a more satisfactory explanation on this matter.

25 The Elkesaites, a second-century heterodox Jewish Christian group with gnostic traits, considered the Spirit as feminine. We know more about it from Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235). Elkai, the founder of this group, had a vision of a feminine being called Holy Spirit. The angel, who gave a book to Elkai in his vision, was of great size “and was accompanied by a feminine being whose dimensions were of the same scale. The masculine being was the Son of God, the feminine was called the Holy Spirit.” Quoted in Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 65. For a recent study on the Elkesaites, see Mimouni, *Le judéo-christianisme ancien*, 287–316, esp. 296, note 3.

26 We know more about the gnostic idea of a feminine being called Holy Spirit, mother of all things, from the works of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. See *Against the Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter 5, 2–6; Bk. 18, Chap. 1; Bk. 1, Chap. 30, 1–2. Text in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers; Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004). For a study of the same, see Antonio Orbe, “Spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas. Exegesis gnostica de Gen. 1, 2b” [The Spirit of God Moved Over the Waters: Gnostic Exegesis of Genesis 1:2b], *Gregorianum* 44 (1963): 691–730. In the *Gospel of Philip* we have a gnostic reflection on the implications of the Spirit’s feminine identity. There, in an often cited passage (Gos. Phil. 17) it is remarked that Mary did not conceive of the Spirit because a woman cannot conceive of a woman (that is, the Spirit). Text in *The Gospel of Philip*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Here Mary’s motherhood of Jesus is refused by denying the role for the Spirit in Mary and attributing apparently the motherhood of Jesus to the Spirit. This is a typically gnostic way to exclude the role of the Spirit in Mary. Thus, we may say that although the Jewish Christians and the gnostics had the same categories of thinking on the Spirit, their theology was not the same. While the gnostics took the Spirit as a feminine being, in orthodox Jewish-Christian circles only the *function* or working of the Spirit is identified as maternal. This could well be the case with the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, as well. See Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 316; Daniel Vigne, *Christ au Jourdain: le baptême de Jésus dans la tradition judéo-chrétienne* [Christ in the Jordan: The Baptism of Jesus in Jewish-Christian Tradition], *Études Bibliques* 16 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1992), 224–228.

27 See Bertrand, *Évangile des hébreux*, 459–460.

A further understanding of this maternal imagery can be attempted based on the second citation from the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. There we read that “the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit” descended upon Jesus. This reminds us of fullness of the Spirit that is to rest upon the Messiah according to the prophecy of Isaiah 11:2. Besides, here the Spirit is represented symbolically as “the fountain” or “source.” Thinking in terms of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Spirit, we see here an indication of the eschatological reality of the pouring out of the Spirit like water from above, that is, from God Himself.²⁸ Since Jesus the Messiah is the chosen one, the eschatological fulfillment of the prophecy, it is upon him that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell permanently. Moreover, through mention of the “firstborn Son,” we are reminded that Jesus is the Father’s firstborn (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:6) and his “beloved” (Matt. 3:17), upon whom rests the pleasure of the Father as well as the fullness of the Spirit of the Father.

These passages from the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, then, seem to represent a Jewish-Christian interpretation of the baptismal account of Jesus whereby the interaction between the Spirit and Jesus are represented through a mother figure attributed to the Spirit. The Spirit’s motherhood can be understood as an indication of Jesus’ total docility to the divine Spirit. It can suggest also an image of divine fecundity and the possibility of rebirth for Christians through their own baptism, of which the baptism of Jesus stands as the perfect model or archetype.²⁹

What is also clear from this analysis of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* is that early Jewish-Christian tradition developed an idea of the mother figure of the Spirit and that the early period of Christianity in general was aware of this—as the attestations of Origen and Jerome show.³⁰ The mother imagery of the Spirit

28 The Jewish-Christian tradition interpreted the baptism of Jesus in Old Testament terms—that is, as a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. We can trace back to the Old Testament the presuppositions of such an interpretation. First of all, in the Old Testament, God is symbolically seen as the source of living water or source of life. See Jer. 2:13; 17:13; Ps. 36:9. In Baruch 3:12 we find the expression “fountain of wisdom.” It is also important to notice that the prophetic tradition linked this theme of living water to the Spirit. Compare Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Joel 2:28–29. Thus, in an eschatological context we find that the Spirit-water symbolism is very much prevalent in Old Testament prophecy. In the New Testament, it is also taken up (John 7:37–39; Rev. 22:1). Compare Jean Daniélou, “Le symbolisme de l’eau vive,” [The Symbolism of Flowing Water] in *Revue de Science Religieuse* 32 (1958): 335–346; Frederic Manns, *Le symbole eau-Esprit dans le Judaïsme ancien* [The Water-Spirit Symbol in Ancient Judaism] (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1983).

29 Daniel Vigne has studied all Jewish-Christian and other related texts which present directly or indirectly the idea “Spirit-mother” in relation to Jesus. From his study we observe that it is only in the *Gospel of the Hebrews* that the Spirit is called the “mother” of Jesus directly and explicitly. One finds there, too, more proximity with the canonical Gospel accounts of the presence of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism and hence, probably an application to Christian baptism, too. See *Christ au Jourdain*, 205–232.

30 Brock, “The Holy Spirit as Feminine in Early Syriac Literature,” 81, gives another example of a Trinitarian image from Hippolytus, writing in Greek, who described Isaac as an image of God the Father, his wife Rebecca as an image of the Holy Spirit, and their son Jacob as an image

we find in Syriac sources is comparable to that found in other Jewish-Christian sources in this early period. In fact, according to Jean Daniélou, Syriac-speaking Christians retained certain Jewish-Christian beliefs and ways of thinking.³¹ Robert Murray also takes for granted that the Syriac tradition is heir to the earliest Jewish-Christian speculations on a mother figure of the Spirit.³² Hence, it remains for us to examine in detail the sources in order to verify these connections between the Syriacs and the wider tradition and to come to a better understanding of what this maternal imagery reveals about the Spirit.

The Wings of the Spirit and the Heart of the Believer

We turn first to the *Odes of Solomon* 28, where the Spirit-dove symbol is given a very vivid expression through use of a beautiful mother-bird image to describe the Spirit's work:

As the wings of doves over their nestlings,
And the mouths of their nestlings towards their mouths,
So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.

My heart continually refreshes itself and leaps for joy
Like the babe who leaps for joy in his mother's womb. . . .

And immortal life embraced me,
and kissed me.
And from that (life) is the Spirit which is within me.
And it cannot die because it is life.³³

These lines explain the motherly protection that the Spirit extends to believers, whereby they experience joy and confidence in their Lord. Even though the technical term "hovering" is not employed, "wings of the Spirit" evokes the Spirit as a mother bird caring for her little ones. Indeed, as the ode describes, the Spirit

of Christ or of the Church. Again, Marius Victorinus, a Christian writer of Rome (circa 360), in his anti-Arian work, *Adversus Arium* (1:58) speaks of the Spirit as the mother of Jesus. For further discussion on the male-female imagery of God in the fourth-century Greek patristic tradition, see Verna E. F. Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990): 441–471.

31 See Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 6. Although Mimouni contests a historical link between Jewish-Christian and Syriac tradition, he does not deny a certain conceptual influence or a similarity of theological themes between the two. See Mimouni, "Le judéo-christianisme syriaque: mythe littéraire ou réalité historique" [Syriac Jewish-Christianity: Literary Myth or Historical Reality], in *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992*, ed. René Lavenant, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 247 (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1994), 269–279.

32 Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 312.

33 *Odes of Sol.* 28:1–2, 7–8. Text in Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 108–109.

protects believers and their lives are lived under the motherly direction and help of the Spirit.

This is stressed again by the comparison with the mother bird's nearness to her young in feeding.³⁴ This nearness to the Spirit is further expressed symbolically as a vivifying kiss, by which the Spirit gives life to the believer.³⁵ This results in an experience of deep intimacy and oneness with the Spirit who is associated with the immortal life. Interpreted theologically, this represents the spiritual generation of the believer, which is a rebirth in the Spirit from above (John 3:5–7).

Another point of interest in this ode is the mention of "leaping in joy." This is reminiscent of Luke 1:41, where Elizabeth's unborn child leaps in her womb and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. We have here a scriptural association of the Spirit with the joy of the believer.³⁶ Elsewhere in the *Odes*, the motherly presence of the Spirit enables all the children of God to be continually in a state of joy: "Let all the Lord's babes praise him" (*Odes of Sol.*, 41:1).³⁷ Indeed, this joy of being in the Spirit and of being constantly under the action of the Spirit are marks of Christ (see Luke 10:21; Acts 10:38).

And the *Odes* are well aware that to become like the Lord is the hallmark of Christian life (*Odes of Sol.* 36:5).³⁸ Thus, through this mother-bird image of the Spirit, the ode expresses vividly the interaction and relationship between the Spirit and the new life of the believer.

The imagery in the *Odes* is metaphorical. By contrast, the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat both explicitly call the Spirit a "mother." While Aphrahat mentions this only once, the *Acts* uses the word "mother" several times for the Spirit.³⁹ For instance, the baptismal epiclesis in Chapter 27, invokes the

34 This imagery is reminiscent of the biblical account of the Creator breathing the breath of life into the primordial human (Gen. 2:7), as well as the psalmist's observation that his mouth is wide enough to receive God's commandments (Ps. 119:131). Also, in John 20:22 we see Jesus' mouth close to that of his disciples to impart his breath, the Spirit.

35 Together with the maternal imagery of the Spirit, we can identify here a matrimonial love between the bride and the bridegroom. We are reminded of the kiss of the beloved in *Song of Solomon* 1:2. For the mystics, such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) this kiss is the Holy Spirit itself. See his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 8. Text in: Bernard, *On the Song of Songs*, 4 vols., eds. Kilian J. Walsh, and Irene M. Edmonds, Cistercian Fathers series 4, 7, 31, 40 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian, 1971–1980).

36 According to Luke 1:15, John the Baptist is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it is important to note here that, as we read in Luke 10:21, Jesus also rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. Thus, "joy" is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

37 The Syriac word used here is ܐܪܡܐ, which means "babe" or "infant." In the *Odes*, believers are considered to be babes or infants, as children of the Lord (*Odes of Sol.* 41:2). Compare Matt. 21:16; 1 Cor. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:2. The Spirit's action is thus fittingly presented as motherly.

38 In the *Odes*, the happy consequence of this generation in the Spirit is strong trust and confidence in the Lord as the Messiah (*Odes of Sol.* 29). Thus, the motherly protection of the Spirit leads the believer to an insistent hope in the Lord.

39 It is important to remark that this title "mother" is found mainly in the Greek version of the

Spirit: "Come, mother of seven houses."⁴⁰ The Greek version of this same chapter⁴¹ contains another invocation to the Spirit as "compassionate mother." Similarly, the eucharistic epiclesis in Chapter 50, in its Greek version⁴² invokes the Spirit as such: "Come, hidden mother." Here, we see the maternal title reflecting perhaps a mixture of the gnostic concept of the Spirit as a mother-being as well as more traditional maternal imagery found in the Syriac tradition.

In Chapter 39, the title "mother" for the Spirit also appears, but the Greek and Syriac version differ. The Greek reads:

We praise and glorify you [Jesus] and your invisible Father, and
your Holy Spirit and the mother of all creation.⁴³

The Syriac reads:

We glorify you [Jesus], and we exalt through you your ex-
alted Father, who is not seen, and the Holy Spirit that hovers
(ܐܠܗܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܪܘܗܐ) over all created things.⁴⁴

The Syriac version does not use the term "mother" but employs the verb ܐܠܗܐ/*rahhep* (to hover) together with the typical Syriac feminine form of the Spirit ܪܘܗܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܬܐ /*ruha qaddishta*. The variant Syriac version, then, is entirely in conformity with the orthodox Syriac tradition on the feminine "hovering" activity of the Spirit. The specifically maternal character of the Spirit is only identified in the Greek text. Moreover, the Spirit is only depicted as mother in a general way, without a clear application to the Spirit's role in the Christian life, as we see in *Odes* or in *Aphrahat*.

Passing on the *Aphrahat*, we would like to establish first of all that his baptismal theology attributed a maternal function to the Holy Spirit, in "opening" the heavens and "descending" to "hover over" the baptismal waters. Incidentally, in Syriac, all three of these verbs are feminine in gender.⁴⁵ But *Aphrahat* applies the title "mother" to the Holy Spirit on another occasion. He interprets Genesis 2:24

Acts of Thomas. Apart from the two epicleses discussed above, the word "mother" is used for the Spirit three more times in the *Acts*. The first two instances are seen in Chapter 7 and 133. But it is seen only in the Greek version and the Syriac reads simply, "the Spirit." Text in *The Acts of Thomas*, ed. Albertus F.J. Klijn, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 108 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁴⁰ *Acts Th.*, 7.

⁴¹ *Acts Th.*, 4.

⁴² *Acts Th.*, 7.

⁴³ See Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 464.

⁴⁴ See *Acts Th.*, 86.

⁴⁵ See Kaniyamparampil, *The Spirit of Life*, Chapter 4, for a discussion of *Aphrahat's* teaching on baptism.

("Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.") as more than a simple explanation of the origins of human marriage. He writes:

Who is it who leaves father and mother to take a wife? The meaning is this: as long as a man has not taken a wife, he loves and reveres God his Father and the Holy Spirit his Mother (אֱלֹהִים אָבִי וְרוּחַ קֹדֶשׁ אִמִּי), and he has no other love. But when a man takes a wife, he leaves his (true) Father and Mother.⁴⁶

One should not regard Aphrahat's apparently negative attitude to the question of marriage as definitive.⁴⁷ It must be remembered that Aphrahat speaks here to the "members of the covenant"—the single ones who opted to imitate the single or the Only-Begotten, the Messiah. Indeed, this passage comes from his *Demonstration* entitled "On Virginity and Holiness." His attention is concentrated on the virgin state of life and not on the married state of life. It is also to be remarked that in the Church of Aphrahat, there existed a custom of baptized persons voluntarily committing themselves to a single and ascetical way of life.⁴⁸

Against this background, we believe this mother figure of the Spirit in Aphrahat must be understood in light of the new Christian life one enters at baptism. Through baptism, "a spiritual womb," Christians are reborn to be children of God. In this rebirth the Spirit functions as the mother of the new believer. In this sense, Aphrahat's way of seeing the Spirit as the mother of the one who does not take a wife is very significant because it shows in a metaphorical way the intimate relationship of a single or celibate person to the Spirit.⁴⁹ The Holy Spirit's maternal protection is devoted to helping that person to grow to the stature of the Messiah,

⁴⁶ *Dem.* 18:10.

⁴⁷ In fact, Aphrahat himself says that marriage is created by God and it is very good. See *Dem.* 18:8. For a discussion of Genesis 2:24 in other literatures, see Marie Joseph Pierre, *Aphraate, les Exposés* [Aphraate, Demonstrations], eds. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Sources Chrétiennes 359 (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 359, n. 35.

⁴⁸ On baptism and celibate life in Aphrahat, see Richard Hugh Connolly, "Aphraates and Monasticism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 6 (1905): 522–539.

⁴⁹ In the same *Demonstrations* 18:5 Aphrahat talks about the necessity of preserving one's virginity and sanctity so as to have a close relationship with God. He takes the example of the people of Israel who sanctified themselves during three days (Exod. 19:10) before listening to God. Aphrahat then affirms with certainty that the Spirit of God will dwell with those who live everyday the life of virginity. In *Demonstrations* 18:5, Aphrahat writes about those who consecrate themselves to God and he asks: "God, will he not love them with a predilection? His Spirit will dwell in them, as he said: *I will dwell in them and I will walk in them* [Lev. 26:11–12]." Thus, for Aphrahat, the presence of the Spirit of God is assured to the single ones and it is in the Spirit of God that they are united with God. See also Pierre, *Aphraate, les Exposés*, 103–104.

the ideal of the single life.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as we have shown above, according to Aphrahat, the Spirit is the Spirit of the Messiah, and this title “mother” is not dealt with further.⁵¹

common with Jewish-Christian theological speculation on the Spirit as a mother as seen in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Nevertheless, we observe an important difference too. While the Jewish-Christian “gospel” presents the motherhood of the Holy Spirit directly in relation to Jesus, the *Odes* and Aphrahat deploy maternal imagery only to describe the activity of the Spirit in the Christian life.⁵⁴ Thus, we believe that early Syriac application of a maternal character to the Holy Spirit should be understood as an attempt at describing the important function of the Spirit in Christian life in a symbolic way.

Metaphor and the Majesty of God

At the end of this investigation on the maternal imagery of the Spirit it is legitimate to ask: what is the theological significance of this anthropomorphic image of the Holy Spirit? And, how does this feminine-maternal figure of the Spirit contribute to our understanding of pneumatology, the theology of the Spirit?

At the outset, it must be clearly stated that God is not measured by human existential experiences and human language. That one cannot apply human gender differences to God is clear from Scripture—which states that *God is not a human being* (Num. 23:19).⁵⁵ In fact, in the Syriac tradition, Ephrem emphasizes clearly that the metaphors used for talking about God should not be abused. For him, even though the metaphors and symbols are profitable for God-talk, it is essential to move beyond them. That is, human language cannot limit the transcendent divinity to human modes of thinking. Thus, we read in Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*:

If someone concentrates his attention solely
on the metaphors used of God’s majesty,
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty and thus errs

54 Of course, among the sources of our study, the Greek version of the *Acts of Thomas* stands as an exception with its general attribution of a mother figure to the Spirit. This, as we noted, shows the influence of the gnostic concept of the Spirit as a mother-being or a feminine entity in God. Robert Murray says that the *Odes* and Aphrahat attribute in a straightforward way a maternal character to the Spirit. *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 318.

55 In fact, Israel was surrounded by religions with female deities. But the Bible never speaks of a goddess alongside the one living God. Old Testament theology does not give a place to the maternity of God even though motherly metaphors are frequently used there. See Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols. (New York: Seabury, 1983), 3:155; Jacques Briand, *Dieu dans l’Écriture* [God in Scripture] (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 71–91. Here it is also interesting to mention Origen’s interpretation of Numbers 23:19 (compare Deut. 1:31; 8:5) where it is said that God is like a man. So Origen writes in his *Homilies on Jeremiah* (18:6) that: “When the Scriptures speak theologically about God, such as he is in himself, without regard to the divine Economy and his dealings with human beings, they say that he is not as a man . . . But when the divine Economy and his relationship with humanity is considered, God is said to have the intelligence, the manners, and the language of man.” Text in *Origen, Homilies on Jeremiah; Homily on 1 Kings* 28. St. Gregory of Nazianzus (325–389) also cautions against seeing God as masculine or feminine. Compare *The Five Theological Orations* 31:7. Text in *The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus*, ed. Arthur James Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1899).

by means of those metaphors
 with which God clothed himself for his benefit,
 and he is ungrateful to that Grace
 which stooped low to the level of his childishness;
 although it has nothing in common with him,
 yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness
 in order to bring him to the likeness of itself. (11:6)⁵⁶

Again, in his *Hymns on Faith*, Ephrem is more clear about the use of metaphorical language for God-talk:

It is our metaphors that he put on—
 though he did not literally do so;
 He then took them off—without actually doing so:
 when wearing them, he was at the same time stripped of them.
 He puts on one when it is beneficial,
 then strips it off in exchange for another;
 the fact that he strips off and puts on all sorts of metaphors
 the metaphor does not apply to his true Being:
 because that Being is hidden,
 He has depicted it by means of what is visible. (31:3)⁵⁷

Thus, for Ephrem, the symbols and metaphors do not at all apply to the true Being of God and he is not concerned about it. He concentrates on what God has revealed in the salvific economy. Similarly, we can say that, in the Syriac tradition, the activity of the Spirit described in feminine terms does not intend to indicate that the Spirit is the feminine element in God.⁵⁸

What judgment, then, should we make of this metaphorical way of talking about the Spirit of God? The answer is that the images and metaphors can be taken as a means to reflect further on the deeper reality of God because they are expressive in their own way. They are capable of revealing a theological truth about God—namely about God's salvific activity in favor of humanity. The early Syriac reflections on the maternal imagery of the Spirit indeed make us think more deeply about the action of the Spirit in the divine economy of salvation. It

56 Sebastian Brock, ed., *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1990), 156. See also *Hymns on Paradise* 11:7.

57 Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise*, 46.

58 Against the feminist tendency to "feminize" God, Susan A. Harvey writes: "To understand divine activity as expressive of divine essence is, then, to understand that gender may somehow be an attribute of the essence without being equivalent to it." "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 111–139, at 117.

is, therefore, worth analyzing the theological insights behind this feminine and maternal imagery of the Holy Spirit.

What this maternal imagery communicates first of all is a functional approach to understanding the incomprehensible mystery of God himself in His Spirit. Through symbolic modes of expression, the early Syriac writers, especially Aphrahat, indicate that if Christian baptism is a rebirth, then the Spirit in whom one is reborn must be a mother. Indeed, this is a different approach to the reality of the new birth of baptism than a strictly *theo-logical* thinking. Here the maternal imagery reveals effectively the fact that the divine life is obtained through the Spirit and thereby the Spirit is shown to be intimately and inseparably linked to the Father and the Son in their life-giving or salvific activity.

According to the Syriac tradition, in the beginning the Spirit hovered over the primordial waters to give life to the creation.⁵⁹ And while humanity was cut off from God's life through the fall of Adam and Eve, thanks to the redemptive work of the Messiah, the Spirit once more breaks open the heavens and hovers above the new creation—making it possible for the believer to be reborn in baptism (John 3:5–8).⁶⁰ The Spirit's work is to bestow divine life on human beings.⁶¹

The maternal imagery of the Spirit is thus very much expressive. First, it expresses the divine vitality and fecundity operative in the Spirit through which Christians are elevated to the level of the children of God after the model of the Messiah. Secondly, it expresses the divinity of the Spirit, the source of divine life together with the Father and the Son. Furthermore, we believe that these early Syriac

59 According to patristic witnesses, this life-giving activity of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2 is comparable to that of a mother bird brooding over her eggs. This is a symbolic and intelligent understanding very typical of the Syriac tradition. For example, St. Basil the Great (329–379), who considered the mention of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2 as referring to the Holy Spirit itself, attests that his understanding came from a Syrian who is near to the knowledge of truth. See his *Homilies on the Hexameron*, Homily 2:6. Text in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. 8, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 63. St. Augustine (d. 430) also says that a reading of Genesis 1:2 as a hovering activity of the Spirit comes from a “*docto christian Syro*” (a learned Syrian Christian). See *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book 1, Chapter 18:36. Text in *St. Augustine, The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Vol. 1, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J., *Ancient Christian Writers* 41 (New York: Paulist, 1982), 41.

60 Frederic Manns relates the Spirit-mother idea to John 3:3–8 and writes: “Si l’Esprit permet au baptisé de renaître c’est qu’il est mère. [If the Spirit allows the baptized to be reborn it is because he is a mother.]” “La symbolique animale évoque-t-elle l’Esprit Saint?” [Does Animal Symbolism Evoke the Holy Spirit?] *Lumen Vitae* 54 (1999): 255–267, at 266.

61 Irenaeus attributes to the Spirit the function of giving life. In *Against the Heresies*, Book 4, Chapter 38:3, he writes of “the Father planning everything well and giving his commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit *nourishing and increasing* [what is made].” Text in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers; Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 521–522. Emphasis supplied.

attestations of a maternal imagery shed light on the Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed's formulation on the Holy Spirit as the "Giver of Life."⁶²

As mentioned earlier, although the use of feminine gender images for the Spirit underwent a change in Syriac literature after 400 C.E., these earlier pneumatological intuitions continued into the later period. Syriac mystical authors also employed a maternal imagery of the Spirit and tried to relate it to the life-giving function of the Spirit. For example, John of Dalyatha, writing in eighth-century East Syria, calls the Spirit "mother" (ܐܡܝܬܐ) and "begetter" (ܐܬܝܪܐ).⁶³ For him, in the new world of redemption wrought by the new covenant of Christ, the Holy Spirit is the begetter of Christians.

In fact, the use of maternal imagery of the Spirit is very much present also in the spiritual and theological literatures of modern authors. A. Lemonnyer, for example, compares the role of the Holy Spirit in the upbringing of a Christian to that of a mother. According to him, the Spirit, like a mother to her child, enables a Christian to know God, his Father, and Jesus Christ, his brother.⁶⁴ Again,

62 As John D. Zizioulas notes, the terms which speak of the Spirit in the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381) are not only Scriptural but also are chosen in such a way as to make the doctrine of the Spirit directly related to the life of the human being and of the Church. "The Teaching of the Second Ecumenical Council on the Holy Spirit in Historical and Ecumenical Perspective," in *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum: Atti del Congresso Teologico Internazionale di Pneumatologia I* [I Believe in the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress on Pneumatology], ed. José Saraiva Martins (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), 29–54, at 41.

63 Addressing God, John of Dalyatha writes in his *Letter* 51, 11: "You are also the Father of the rational beings arisen from your Spirit. This one [the Spirit] is called 'the Generator', in the feminine, because he engendered all to this world so that they too might engender children in our world. But he is 'Générateur' (ܐܬܝܪܐ ܐܡܝܬܐ) when he engenders in the world living rational beings who will not engender any more. He is the 'Generator' as well because he nourishes his children and thanks to her they are increased." Text in *La Collection des Lettres de Jean de Dalyatha* [The Collected Letters of John of Dalyatha], ed. Robert Beulay, *Patrologia Orientalis* 39 (Turnhout, Belgique: Brepols, 1978), 478–479. Brock, "Come, Compassionate Mother," 255 remarks that Dalyatha uses the word ܐܡܝܬܐ (mother; one who brings forth; begets or generates) rather than ܐܬܝܪܐ (mother). Thus, it shows that even when a masculine gender is applied to the Holy Spirit, the function of the Holy Spirit is compared to that of a mother and the Spirit is called a "begetter" (ܐܬܝܪܐ). In fact, we can see that the mystics of all time compared the love of the Spirit to that of a mother. St. Catherine of Sienna (d. 1380), for example, in her *Dialogue* 141, writes that the Holy Spirit is like a mother to the one who abandons himself to the providence of God. She writes: "Such a soul has the Holy Spirit as a mother who nurses her at the breast of divine charity." Text in *Catherine of Siena, The Dialogue*, trans. Suzann Noffke, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 292. St. John of the Cross (d. 1591) in *The Dark Night* (Book 1:2), compares the grace of God to a loving mother who regenerates the soul: "God nurtures and caresses the soul . . . like a loving mother. . . . The grace of God acts just as a loving mother by reengendering in the soul new enthusiasm and fervor in the service of God." Text in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tran. Kiernan Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 298.

64 See A. Lemonnyer, *Notre vie divine* (Juvisy: Cerf, 1936), 70–83. Again, we see Jean Corbon writing: "For the Holy Spirit, whose eternal source is the Father, is sent from the beginning of

François-Xavier Durrwell explains that maternal imagery is suitable to the Spirit as it is in the Spirit that God is fecund like a mother, generating the Son and the brothers of the Son, the Christians.⁶⁵

To conclude this discussion on the feminine-maternal imagery of the Spirit, we observe that in the early Syriac literature, the feminine characterization of the Spirit gave way eventually to the attribution of a motherly image to the activity of the Spirit in the life of the Christian. Indeed, this imagery of the Spirit reveals early Syriac-speaking Christianity's theological consciousness of the regenerating and life-giving force of the Holy Spirit whereby a Christian is formed into the full stature of Jesus the Messiah. Moreover, through this vivid picture in human language, the biblical revelation of the Spirit of God as the life of God⁶⁶ is given symbolic expression. Thus, what the Syriac writers emphasized through this maternal imagery is not a femininity of the Spirit, but rather the feminine-maternal function of the Spirit towards Christians, the children of God.⁶⁷ And, we believe that the personality of the Holy Spirit can be grasped more precisely with this imagery of the mother rather than with any other ideas or images of the Spirit.

time together with the Son and for the Son. *He is the maternal envoy of the Father to human beings, sent in order that they may know the Son, be incorporated into him, and to share his life.*" *The Wellspring of Worship* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 65. Emphasis supplied.

65 Compare François-Xavier Durrwell, *L'Esprit Saint de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 165–169. Eng.: *Holy Spirit of God: An Essay in Biblical Theology*, St. Paul Center Studies in Biblical Theology and Spirituality (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books, 2006). It is also interesting to note here a different opinion of Jean Galot who has analyzed the positions of various theologians who have spoken on the motherhood of the Spirit. According to Galot, even though some aspects of the Spirit's actions legitimately suggest a function similar to motherhood, there are other actions of the Spirit that evoke masculine functions. Thus, he is against giving only a maternal quality to the Spirit and thereby "feminizing" the Spirit. However, Galot thinks mostly in terms of the feminist movements and their search for a "feminine" in God; he does not seem as interested, as we are here, with "orthodox" expressions of the Spirit's maternal and feminine qualities. See "L'Esprit Saint et la féminité," [The Holy Spirit and the Feminine] *Gregorianum* 76 (1995): 5–29.

66 See Gen. 1:2; 2:7; John 6:63; 1 Cor. 15:45.

67 Here it is worth mentioning the opinion of Murray that the ecclesiological symbolism of the Church as the mother of Christians is not developed in the early Syriac tradition due to the fact that the Spirit occupies the function of being the mother of the believers. *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 143. Only Aphrahat uses the expression "sons or children of the Church" (ܐܒܝܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ and ܒܠܝܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ). See *Dem.* 14:1, 38; 18:12; 22:25. But Aphrahat has not spoken explicitly of the presence of the Spirit in the Church. We think that, for him, the presence of the Spirit in Christian life, as we saw above, is a sign that the Spirit is in the Church because the Church is the community of all the baptized who are born of the Spirit. In fact, it is the Spirit of Christ who acts behind the motherhood of the Church itself. On this ecclesiastical question, see generally, Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982 [1971]).

