



Hymns and Homilies of St. Ephraim the Syrian

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Born at Nisibis, then under Roman rule, early in the fourth century; died June, 373. The name of his father is unknown, but he was a pagan and a priest of the goddess Abnil or Abizal. His mother was a native of Amid. Ephraem was instructed in the Christian mysteries by St. James, the famous Bishop of Nisibis, and was baptized at the age of eighteen (or twenty-eight). Thenceforth he became more intimate with the holy bishop, who availed himself of the services of Ephraem to renew the moral life of the citizens of Nisibis, especially during the sieges of 338, 346, and 350. One of his biographers relates that on a certain occasion he cursed from the city walls the Persian hosts, whereupon a cloud of flies and mosquitoes settled on the army of Sapor II and compelled it to withdraw. The adventurous campaign of Julian the Apostate, which for a time menaced Persia, ended, as is well known, in disaster, and his successor, Jovianus, was only too happy to rescue from annihilation some remnant of the great army which his predecessor had led across the Euphrates. To accomplish even so much the emperor had to sign a disadvantageous treaty, by the terms of which Rome lost the Eastern provinces conquered at the end of the third century; among the cities retroceded to Persia was Nisibis (363). To escape the cruel persecution that was then raging in Persia, most of the Christian population abandoned Nisibis en masse. Ephraem went with his people, and settled first at Beit-Garbaya, then at Amid, finally at Edessa, the capital of Osrhoene, where he spent the remaining ten years of his life, a hermit remarkable for his severe asceticism. Nevertheless he took an interest in all matters that closely concerned the population of Edessa. Several ancient writers say that he was a deacon; as such he could well have been authorized to preach in public. At this time some ten heretical sects were active in Edessa; Ephraem contended vigorously with all of them, notably with the disciples of the illustrious philosopher Bardesanes. To this period belongs nearly all his literary work; apart from some poems composed at Nisibis, the rest of his writings-sermons, hymns, exegetical treatises-date from his sojourn at Edessa. It is not improbable that he is one of the chief founders of the theological "School of the Persians", so called because its first students and original masters were Persian Christian refugees of 363. At his death St. Ephraem was borne without pomp to the cemetery "of the foreigners". The Armenian monks of the monastery of St. Sergius at Edessa claim to possess his body.

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