Against Marcion 3

Ephrem the Syrian (c. AD 306–373)

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S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan. Transcribed from the Palimpsest B.M. Add. 14623 by the late C. W. MITCHELL, M.A., C.F., volume 2 (1921). Against Marcion III.

AGAINST MARCION III.

ANOTHER DISCOURSE AGAINST MARCION. [P. 117.] IF the organs 1 of the body suffice for the gifts of the Good (God), O Marcion, that is to say, the eye for His light, and the ear for His voice, why then does the body not live at the last ? But if the body does not suffice for these good things at the last, no[thing] else in this world suffices for them. Therefore neither is the heart sufficient for knowledge of the Stranger, nor hearing for the study (lit. reading) of Him. Moreover, as to the fact that the souls do not sin in the Kingdom, is it because of their nature, which is good, that they do not sin ? And how then did the evil body change the good nature ? But if the Stranger changes them there, though they are evil, what sin did the body commit [P. 118.] so as to be deprived of this desirable change ? But if the souls are good there, is it because they enter that region that they are good, or are they good from the point where they stripped off their bodies ? If this desirable state be due to the place, let the body also enter into it, and likewise all men [in whom] are sins. . . .

[P. 119, l.5] ... [And as] Fire is not [separated from Heat, so Evil is not constituted apart from its power. But how and wherefore does that which is hot retain its natural heat, when that which is cold did not remain in its natural state ? If therefore it is an Existence and an Entity, they are [not] changed in nature. But if that creative power has made out of nothing something good, it [can] be changed in character. For this ye have learnt, (namely) that they are created from nothing, because a thing which is created from nothing can be changed into |lv anything. And if it is not created, it is always 'bound' by its essential nature ; for, (in the case of) a thing which can be changed into anything, its change bears witness concerning it that it [does not come] from an unchangeable Existence. But if it is possible for the souls to strip off their bodies, they (i.e. the souls) are purged of all evils. Why did he who came come ? Was it to bring life to the body which [P. 120. [was] without life, or to

come and change the soul which was (already) alive ? . . . And henceforth they are dragged again [l. 17. from struggle to struggle, and therefore also weapons and crucifixion are necessary to them (? in the Kingdom. And if not, for what reason are the souls which are very evil here not evil there ?

For if this is due to the place then also their Creator is able to bring them up to a place which is raised above and higher than HULE. And if they say that they (i.e. the souls) cannot conquer even there, (I reply that) if it be the fact that the Stranger constrains us to conquer in the region of Evil and (in) the body of Sin, how much more will the Maker give us the victory in a place which is raised above Evil and also above the body of Sin ! But if even thus it (the soul) cannot conquer, it is then unjust in the Stranger to demand of us victory in a [P. 121] region where there is no possibility of our being victorious. But if, when the souls have stripped off the body of Sin and are lifted up again to a region which is raised above Sin, the souls are still polluted even there, how do they say that in that region of the Good they are purged ? And why then do they blame the body by asserting that 'it causes the soul to sin,' when in reality, in all this interval of time, the nature of the soul is found to be evil ? And how at the present time do the souls become good in the Kingdom ? For if the Stranger creates a new mode of existence (lit.

another creation) for them there, if He is able to change the mode of existence of the soul, it may be that He can change the soul's nature. But if the nature is changed by creative power, then the evil was not in the essence (of the soul) but in the creative power, and hence the Maker can change |lvi the nature according to His will, as also other created beings testify who serve according to the will of their Creator. And therefore when Isu came to us, He ought to have made use of [P. 122. creative power and not of preaching, for creative power changes natures, whereas preaching does not; and this is proved to thee by craftsmen, that is to say, even by potters and smiths.

But if when our Lord came He did not wish to change the natures, was it as a kind and wise Being that He did not wish to change the natures ? Was it as a kind and wise Being that He did not wish to destroy that which was well adjusted ? Or was it as an evil and envious Being that He did not wish to adjust that which was badly constructed ? But if it was because our Lord saw it to be rightly fashioned that He did not even adjust any part of it, how do they say that the Maker repented of the work to which our Lord Himself testified that it was rightly fashioned ? Or how again, when our Lord praises it, do they find fault with it ? But know that by the fact that He praised the latter one it is seen that He agrees with the former one, and by the fact that they find fault they themselves are seen to disagree with the latter (and) also with the former. But in which (respect) is our Lord seen to have praised the work of the Maker ? Is it not by the fact that [they find fault, but He was] [P. 123.] one who repaired the normal arrangement ? 2 For it was not

abnormal eyes, alien to nature, that our Lord gave to the blind man, but eyes in accordance with nature. [If He were] a Stranger, it would be reasonable that just as He gave us laws which were alien to the Maker in like manner He should give us also physical organs which are alien to the Maker. But if He changed laws but did not wish to change physical organs, it is seen that the organs are (works) of God, and our Lord, who changed the laws from generation to generation, did not change the organs in any generation.

But they say, 'The sole reason of His not changing (them) was that they might not think concerning Him that He was a Stranger, and (so) persecute Him.' The laws therefore which He changed, did He change them in order that they might |lvii think concerning Him that He was not a Stranger ? In which of the two circumstances, then, was strangeness most powerfully to be seen, in the change of laws or in the change of organs ? For even a feeble human being can change laws, but (only) a powerful Maker can change organs. Would that He had changed [the] mind and had not changed the law, so that [a man] might see its excellence and not its difficulty ! For when new creations came to pass [in] men more strangeness [P. 124.] [would arise] . . . . For just as by the fact that He [changed] the laws He shewed [l. 22.] strangeness, [so] by the fact that He did not change the bodily organs He annulled the strangeness. But if our Lord [made] the two of them one — for He gave to the hearers additional interpretations which were not in the Law, but He did not give to those who were to be healed additional organs which were not in nature, (it was) in order that when contumacious persons treat Him as a stranger because He abrogated laws they may be convicted of error by the fact that He maintained the normal arrangement of nature. Again, He gave new laws and maintained primeval nature, in order that when He is treated as a stranger on account of the new laws primeval nature may come forward and prove concerning Him that He is not the son of a [P. 125] stranger.

But if He is a stranger, as they assert concerning Him, then this thing which He did was exceeding foolish ; for He abrogated the former commandments and maintained the former nature. For, as I have already said, He ought, as a strange law-giver, to have created on that account a strange nature also, so that, just as His law was seen to be something more than the former law, in like manner His creation also might be seen to be something more than the creation of the Creator. But if "in His law our Lord was a stranger, but in His action one of the household," this is (a description of) the foolish Marcion, who is partly inside and partly outside. And they ought therefore, if they are lovers of true things, to remain in doubt ; for if they called Him a stranger on account of the new sayings which He uttered, then |lviii because He did not create a strange creation the bold preaching ought to have been buried in silence (lit. confined within silence). For the Marcionites preach two things concerning our Lord which are at variance with each other, for "He abrogated the former laws and healed injured organs." But here this man, [P. 126.]

whoever he may be, is seen to be alien to the creation in virtue of his teaching and akin to it in virtue of his activity.4 But let us see which is the true 'strangeness,' that which consists in sayings or that which consists in deeds. If that which consist in sayings is true, their contentious doctrine is true, but if that which consists in deeds is true our faith has received the crown.

Let us know therefore who was a stranger to the world— Ho who instituted in it new laws, or He who created in it strange creatures ? For He who institutes in the world new laws is not a stranger to the world, since in that world new laws have been issued from generation to generation ; but He who created strange creatures was perhaps considered to be a stranger, since no strange creature has (ever) appeared in the world. If therefore the Marcionites proclaim that our Lord gave eyes to the blind, it is a good thing that from their own mouth their condemnation is proclaimed. For instead of bestowing strange eyes, that it might be known that He was a stranger, He restored to health these former ones, that it might be known that He is that (Being) who existed in former times. But this thing, which they proclaim to others, is to themselves a thing unheard of ; for their hearing [P. 127. is at variance with their tongue, just as their intention is at variance with their Maker. For the Creator and Lawgiver abolished the former laws and gave other laws, but He did not abolish the former sun and create another sun ; again He replaced the Old Covenant (διαθήκη) by a New Covenant, but He did not abolish the old heaven and create another heaven.

With regard therefore to Him who creates natures and gives laws, just as it was easy for Him to change laws so it would have been easy for Him to change natures. But wherefore He who changed laws did not wish to change the creation thou mayest hear from us abundantly, if there is not with thee that contentiousness which is wont to resist abundant (proofs), which, though it is |lix supposed that with its labour it really acquires them, does not [know] that it is driving away from beside itself an acquisition without labour. For the contention of the hearer is [an impediment to] the gifts that come forth from the mouth of the speaker.

Hear therefore why it was that He who abolished the former laws did not abolish the former creatures ! He created the creatures in accordance with His own perfection, but He gave [P. 128.] many laws in account of our imperfection. For if we had abided perfectly by the law which He has written on the heart—(the law) which was followed by Abel and by Enoch who did not taste death—laws varying from nation to nation would not even be required. Thus where the creatures (are concerned, permanence of species is due to) the perfection of the Creator, who in all respects is perfect; and where laws (are concerned, the diversity is due to) the imperfection of man, who in all respects is audacious. God, therefore, did not abolish the former creatures, lest we should think that He had actually received advice or had been taught to create creatures superior to the former creatures ;

but He gave many laws, that in many (ways) He might restrain the audacity which did not abide by the former law which was written on the heart.

But man, on account of his imperfection, when he does something, is taught by his experience of former things to do something more than (those) former things ; whereas the Creator, since He is perfect in His Wisdom, even before He creates, each separate thing that He wishes to do is completely visible to Him: But perhaps thou wilt say, 'Lo, creatures were transformed in Egypt!' They were transformed in Egypt on [P. 129.] account of the tyranny of Pharaoh, but they did not undergo transformation on account of 5 . . .

[P.130. l.29][For the Will that bound the course of Nature 6 (is able to alter it) and we learn that He who relaxed the Laws was Himself the |lx [l. 38. establisher of the Laws. For a composite nature cannot remain in its composite state without the . . . power of its Creator, and a law cannot be annulled without the good will of its Maker ; [P. 131. for where there is power to make there is also wisdom which directs the things that are made, and where there is Justice which punishes sins there is also Grace. . . . For consider that One who is good cannot shew mercy save to those who have transgressed His just law, for if He has compassion with regard to the law of another He has deflected from goodness and also ignored justice, so as to incline altogether towards iniquity. For that Stranger who becomes the pardoner of debtors necessarily wrongs the creditor. "But," it is said, "He paid our debt by His death. But know that we owed a real debt: if therefore He died in reality, He also paid our debt in reality ; but if it was in appearance that He died, that debt of ours also was paid in by a fraud. Yet know that the Good One also was pleased by this deception, that He should come and pay our debt by a fraud.

Yet He who is just and mighty is not mocked, for in virtue of His justice He does not act wrongly and in virtue of His might He is not mocked. For the Just One would not act [P. 132. wrongly so as to come, when our debt has been paid, and demand the paid debt afresh, nor again would the Mighty One be mocked, so to allow His real possessions to be snatched from Him, without receiving anything real in exchange for His real possessions. "But," it is said, "though the Just One is mighty, the Good One is nevertheless mightier than He. If therefore He overcame Him by might, how 7 do they bring in the term 'purchase'? [Call] Him therefore a doer of violence and not a purchaser. But if He made a real purchase, as one who acted humbly, how was 'might' involved in the affair ? For either let them choose for themselves that He purchased as a humble and true (Being), or else let them choose for themselves that He did violence, as one who is mighty and tyrannical.

But since the followers of Marcion were ashamed to be sponsors for the term 'violent robbery' (as applicable) in the case of the Stranger, they have used with reference to Him the term 'purchase in humble fashion,' and because they are refuted in |lxi the matter of the purchase, they have used with reference to Him the

term ’might,’ so that when it is asserted against them that He did violence they say that He merely purchased, and when again it is asserted against them that the Maker did not wish to sell his possessions they say that He (i.e. the Stranger) is mightier than He (i.e. the Maker). Each of the (two) assertions [P. 133.] therefore annuls the other. For if it is a ’purchase in humble fashion,’ consent (lit. will) and not compulsion is involved, but if the purchaser overcomes by force he does not really purchase but seizes by violence. If therefore they introduce (the mention of) His might, which is a plausible term, (the notion of) violent robbery comes in with it . . .

[P.134, l.26] let them learn that it is a doctrine (artificially) constructed and . . ., which has no foundation (lit. root); for the poets likewise construct fables out of bare names, their fables being devoid of foundation, for the poets make use of names . . .

[P.135, l. 21. On that account He gave that which is His own in order that He may take that which is not His own. And again, if there is no affinity between the purchaser and the seller, in their mutual action, they cannot give to one another or receive from one another. For that which they give is profitable to both, and again that which they receive is pleasing and profitable to both. But if they have heard only the word ’purchase’ and hence have introduced the mention of ’strangeness’ (lit. and from it have named strangeness), they ought to have made mention of ’strangeness’ from the days of Isaiah onwards, who said 8 ”For nought have ye been sold,” and thenceforward it would have been a purchase in reality, that the People was sold, that it should serve its masters. But if there is no strangeness in [P. 136. a real purchase, how can there be strangeness in a fraudulent |lxii purchase ? But if they say that the Just One did not perceive the Good One, (I reply) ’And how was it that that Good and Humble One came to purchase something which its owner did not wish to sell—something which it did not even enter His mind to sell ?’ But if they say something that pleases them they must hear something that does not please them. For it pleases them to say this, that this Just One did not perceive that Good One ;

but it does not please them that some man should say concerning that Good One that He robs with violence. But this (statement) which does not please them is derived from that (statement) which pleases them. For if the Just One did not perceive the Good One, He therefore did not even contemplate the selling of His possessions to Him, for lo, He did not even perceive that He (i.e. the Good One) existed ! But if He did not perceive Him and moreover did not contemplate the selling (of anything) to Him, it necessarily follows that if He sold (anything) He was compelled by force to sell that which He did not [P. 137. wish to sell. But perhaps they may say that even if the Good One compelled the Just One by force it was only for our salvation that He compelled Him by force. Know that in this

respect He was on a level with all robbers. For he also who goes forth to take by robbery a possession that is not his own puts pressure on the possessor by reason of his love for the possession ; and, in a word, all those who take away things from their owners; it is because of the love which they have for the things themselves that they grieve the heart of their possessors. But they say, ”Even if the Good One put pressure on the Just One by snatching us from Him, He only took us to Himself in a loving manner.

(But this is no argument), for what thief is there who will steal a precious pearl from his neighbour and will not keep it lovingly and carefully after taking it away ? And on this supposition all evil-doers are found to be acting, not in an evil manner, but mercifully and kindly. For what robber is there who goes forth to take away or to filch something hateful and [undesirable] in his own eyes ? Why therefore have the [P. 138. Marcionites adorned with fair titles One who in His conduct is not different from evil-doers ? But far be it from us to speak thus concerning our Lord ! But it is only on account of them (i.e. |lxiii the Marcionites) that we are obliged to say these things for their refutation, so that if they are convinced these things will not be reckoned to us to our detriment, on account of the advantage (which accrues) to them, and if they are not convinced they will pay the penalty for it, that their confusion (of mind) led us to use words that are not seemly. But even if we utter the blasphemy (only) with our lips, and not in our heart, nevertheless who is there who wishes to taste, even with his lips (only), the deadly poison ? For as to that which is not seemly, would that it had never in our life (? entered our mind !

But nevertheless let us return to our former subject, which we abandoned for a while on account of the pretext of ’purchase.’ If therefore before the coming of Isu this [convention] 9 existed, O Marcion, that is to say, that though laws were changed from generation to generation the order of nature 10 was fixed and . continued (lit. came) through all generations, we see that if our [P. 139. Lord came and diverged from this [convention] 9 of the Maker it is evident that He was ’strange’ to the Maker. But if He proceeded in accordance with this order it is manifest that this beseemed the Son that His steps should hasten in the footprints of Him that begat Him, for He also . . . But the Son [1. 17. also preserved by His healing the normal arrangement of the former body, that He might testify, as their Father did, that the creatures were created aright from the Beginning. Our Lord therefore is not found to resemble a destroyer, nor a stranger, for He did not injure healthy organs . . . nor, again, when He healed did He bestow abnormal organs, nor, again, did He [make it [1. 33. appear] to them by His creative power that He was alien to the Maker, but He preserved organs that were healthy, and cured organs that were hurt. But (?

He who preserves healthy organs, in order that they may not be hurt, plainly testifies concerning Him who created them that He is perfect and (that) it is not right

that His arrangement should be hurt. But He who [P. 140. sets in order organs that have been hurt testifies concerning |lxiv a creative power (shared) in common, (namely) that He is a fellow-workman to Him who set them in order from the Beginning ; and it is evident that it was a love (shared) in common which constrains Him to set in order by a common mode of workmanship the common work. For when the work of a craftsman is injured it cannot be set right save by him who made it, or by a fellow-workman to him who made it. These are two things from which the Marcionites have deflected, for they are not willing to call our Lord 'the Maker,' nor (do they admit) that He was (sent) by the Maker. But His active power itself deprives those who deprive Him of active power, especially because that active power of His was repairing the work of the Creator. But it is clearly seen that this is a thing learnt from Him, (I mean) that primeval Teacher who is the Architect of the creation. But this active power was sent as to the first of creatures,11 in order that it might be known that by this same active power the creatures had been created.

For the repair of a work can only be wrought by means of that workmanship which set it in order.

[p. 141.] But when this perfect Disciple of that perfect Architect came, not that He was a learner, nor was His Teacher instructed, in virtue of that workmanship which (proceeded) from Himself (and) in which the normal arrangements were included from the Beginning—when He came, therefore, He ordered aright the hands which He had made, that they might give alms to those who lacked health, whereas He found them (such) that, instead of giving alms from that which was their own, they committed thefts from that which was not their own. But because the hands did not perform that service on account of which He created them He was empowered, as a just Maker, to command that the hands should wither up. But instead of this He commanded that hand which was withered to be stretched forth ; for He knew the effrontery of the Marcionites, that if when He was restoring and repairing the corruption of the natures they call Him 'strange' to Nature, if His deed had been contrary to Nature how much more would they have considered Him 'strange' ? But because they are perverse, perhaps if our Lord [P. 142.] had done contrary to Nature they would not have considered |lxv Him 'strange!' But even if they had been as it were able to learn perversely, yet for the upright Teacher it was not seemly that because of the perverse ones He also should teach perversity,

[P.113 1. 16.] a rent worse than the former one 13 . . . ' unless' they were willing to learn. For if in the [straight] way the followers of Marcion are not [able to walk, in slippery places how] can they [direct] their goings ? 14 END OF DISCOURSE AGAINST MARCION. Note from Vol. 1 Introduction, p. (10): [Short lacunae are indicated in the translation by dots, and longer gaps by asterisks, but in neither case is the number of the dots or asterisks intended to bear any exact relation

to the number of the missing words. In respect to this an approximately correct inference may be drawn by consulting the Syriac text. Double inverted commas mark quotations where the original has [Syriac] Single inverted commas are used in numerous cases where the words seem to be quotations or to belong to a special terminology. Words in italics inside square brackets are to be regarded as conjectural translations or paraphrases.

In a few passages, where the text has suffered great mutilation, italics indicate an attempt to summarise the argument from suggestions in the fragments.] [P.101] indicates page 101 of the accompanying Syriac. [l.2] means line 2 of the current page of the accompanying Syriac. [RP] FOOTNOTES I have moved the footnotes to the end. Those consisting of "Read [syriac] for [syriac]" or similar have been omitted, as it has not been possible to transcribe the fragments of Syriac. The pages are numbered with Roman numerals. Arabic numbers and line numbers relate to the Syriac text printed at the back of the paper volume. Greek text is rendered using the Scholars Press SPIonic font, free from here. 1. For this translation of haddame, generally rendered 'limbs,' see p. xxi, 1.] 1, where Ephraim says "by thy haddame, that is, by thy senses." 2. P. 122, ll. 44, 45, are obscure, but the sense seems to be as above.

3. This is evidently quoted as a Marcionite saying. 4. The same word as is translated 'creative power,' pp. lv (last line), lxiii f. 5. Here follows a very illegible page, containing an allusion to Hezekiah and the Sundial (Isaiah xxxviii 8), p. 129, 11. 15-22. 6. Not quite the same phrase as James iii 6. 7. Lit. "How do they name purchase in the midst ? " 8. Isaiah lii 3. 9. The word [Syriac], which occurs twice in this context, is legible in the Palimpsest. It is probably a distortion of some foreign word, e.g. τὸ εὐάρεστον or the Latin orbita. 10. Lit. 'natures,' i.e. the various distinct species. 11. Cf. Colossians i 15. 12. Luke vi 10. 13. Luke v 36 (Matt, ix 16). 14. The concluding sentence is mostly illegible, but the reference to the ' rent' is clear. [...] This text was transcribed by Roger Pearse, 12th September 2002. All material on this page is in the public domain - copy freely.

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Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.