# On Virginity

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). On Virginity

**ON VIRGINITY.**

A DISCOURSE OF S. EPHRAIM ON VIRGINITY. [p. 170.] I. PUT off, O Body, that Old Man which is altogether hateful, that it may not wear out the newness that thou inhabitest and hast put on ; for the recompense of its interest is contrary with its clothes, in that if thou hast been renewed it will return and wear thee out : O Body, hear my counsels ! Put it off by (good) conduct, that it may not clothe thee in (bad) habits. II. For, lo, our Lord has made thee, O Body, new in water, and the Architect of Life has built thy oldness, in that He formed with His Blood and built for it a shrine for His habitation ; do [P. 171.] not let dwell instead of Him that Old Man in the shrine He has renewed : O Body, if thou dost make God to stay in thy shrine, thou also wilt be a temple of His kingdom and a priest of His sacrifice.

III. For this Old Man is reproved by Nature that teaches and the Book that proclaims, for its wickedness is between two just things, that if it sins in respect of what is without law, its Nature will reprove it, and if it sins in respect of law, the Book will reprove it. Lo, it wounds and they heal; on the track of wickedness they bring in regret, whereby he that sins is healed. IV. Him that rebels they treat with contempt, and him that returns they bind up his wounds; they justify the Judge, they reprove the rebels, they care for and heal those who return : for they know that they will be measured with one Evil one, who hurts everything, who is fresh in every generation, and is a companion to every one, and hurts every hour ; they also are companions to every one, and are fresh in every generation, and are found at every hour.

V. Hearken to Nature and Law declaring his evil corruptions ! For the People (of Israel) who committed adultery under the Law, [P. 172.] and the Peoples who fornicated without Law, changed their Nature and behaved contrary to their Nature ; Nature and Law have appealed against him, whose dispositions the Disturber has corrupted. VI. The humble ones have stolen away from marriage under pretext of discipleship, and when they are halfway he (the 'Old Man') has set behind them the shame of stumbling and in front of them hateful desire ; being ashamed to revert to marriage, they fall and are taken in the snares. VII.

How light are thy wings, O Virginity, that soar and go up to where thy Bridegroom sits at the right hand of the Lord of the Heights ! Flee from the counsel of the deceiver, for he who apportions debt to the inexperienced is wont to cast his whole property for nothing to the loss of the merchants (?).

VIII. He impoverished the treasures of great Adam, who with his money acquired a weight of debt. O Body, do not borrow from him that does not ask back what he has lent, that if thou pay him his silver the debt impoverishes. IX. For accompanying its desires are apprehension and [P. 173.] doubt and contempt with disgrace, and they reject and give pain to the doers of them, and the faces only are open and pure of the chaste ones who have put it (? the 'old man') off ; do not be joined, O Body, with hateful love, of which however much the deed is dead, the anxiety of it lives secretly. X. Subtle and cunning is his (the 'Old Man's') discipleship, in that by all sorts (of means) he will be bestowing his gifts upon the good. The mouth of the poor he stops with his bread ; with his free meals he sells free-men into slavery. The belly he has bribed and it has been corrupted ; (he has bribed) the eye to overlook, and the mouth to keep silence, and the ear to make his hateful reports. His silent wine is talkative in those that drink it; it babbles in their voices instead of its master.

XI. For he is cunning, in that first he puts on the mouth of his. snare food as a bait; his love goes in front of his corruption, like Judas, who kissed and killed. The Pure One kissed the unclean, to teach that his kisses are a poison and death is moulded by them secretly ; this is one who if thou raise him up will recompense thee with a fall, who when he rises lulls to sleep, the desire of whom is deadly. And thy own flesh makes it live and resurrects it (this desire), and when it is alive therein it turns and kills it. O Body, if thou give life to deadness, there will be death also for thy life. XII. Let Fire be a demonstration for thee, that is buried and dead in secret, and the rubbing of wood with wood brings it to life for the destruction of both of them ; but when it (i.e. Fire) has come to life it turns to burn the substance that brought it to life by its companionship. Oh, the evident illustration !— that Wood is made a grave for Fire, and when the one has been resurrected from it, it is destroyed by that one !

XIII. For Freedom is as life and as soul to the desires, and by it they live ; and if from it thou cut and cast them off they become dead. It is given authority that by its will faults stand and by its will sins fall; it is the likeness of the Most High whose Power upholdeth everything, and if He should withdraw it everything would fall. XIV. The Judge is just, in that He does not immediately [P. 175.] a man has sinned requite him. Wherefore regret comes because of two things : that if he repents it will have wiped out his wickedness, and if he rebels it will have taken away from him all excuse ; wherefore in all faults regret is on the watch to carry witness to the court of Justice. XV. Learn, O Body, Repentance and not every-day regret; for Repentance is as a Healer to our wounds, but this regret is a stalk of straw, and it brings a relapse of pains every day.

XVI. The signature is on every tax-collector's bond for him who owes money ; so by the same illustration regret is a tax-collector in its silence for him that is in debt for sins. O Body, if thou hast accustomed thyself to repent and again thou sin, thy regret is the signature of thy

bond. XVII. It is written that if a man have wronged his wife, her parents shall go forth and declare her virginity, because the judges could not see the secret things ; the tokens of virginity on the veil were declaring the truth before the judges. But because thy own Bridegroom is one that seeth secret things, [P. 176.] to thy secret Lord in virginity show the secret things in the flesh ; not in thy veil but in thy body shew injuries, and do notin veils thy own virginity shew to thy Bridegroom. XVIII. In the guise of a lamb the cunning Amnon approached the ewe, and when he had deceived her about what was hers he did what was his ; in that he saw that virginity was rebellious in her nest, the healthy wolf that made himself ill deceitfully made her enter his den and so trapped her ; the invalid that was torpid got up to the contest and snatched away the crown that was for her shame.

XIX. That Athlete who saw that as long as he was standing he did not throw, and he hasted and fell, and so threw off and broke the yoke with cohabitation, and dared even to adultery, and the wicked one who sowed in the chamber his harvest, in his field the sword ruined him, who had ruined virginity, and he who had spotted it with its blood washed in his own blood. They made him drunk and rose up and dragged him away ; and for that he had ill-treated the sheep, vengeance was demanded in the time of sheep-shearing. [P. 177.] XX. If a virgin be ill-treated in the field Moses the Stammerer,the advocate of truth, he is persuaded about her that "the girl cried out and there is no help." For thine own self, O virginity, who is there to persuade, that in the midst of peace art taken captive and art silent ? Do not give thyself to captivity in the midst of peace, that peace may not bind thee in the court of Justice.

XXI. As for the married women and virgins that were in Midian, he killed those which had played the harlot and kept alive those on whom was set the seal of virginity. But if virginity kept alive heathen women, how much more will it keep alive pure ones ? XXII. And lo, in the chamber and lo, in the field they are lying in wait for thee, O Virginity ! Thou didst enter the chamber; the cunning Amnon stole thy wealth ; thou didst go forth into the field, the brigand Shechem robbed thy treasure. Whither wilt thou go, O lonely Dove ? For lo, many in every place are they that hunt for thee ! XXIII. The hunters of thee, O Virginity, that have hunted thee are hunted; by the contrary are they requited. For [P. 178.] Shechem, who met with thee in the field and took thee captive, in his house they slaughtered him ; and Amnon again, who in the chamber lay in wait for thee and took thee captive, in the field they dragged him off. They ruined thee and they were ruined ; and there was drawn in their case an illustration that he who ruins thee is ruined.

XXIV. O Virginity, inexperienced Dove, cunning is thy hunter and thou art innocent, ingenious is thy deceiver and thou art simple ! in that Amnon who under pretence of food was seeking what he was not seeking, and with food for which he was not hungry served the desire of the flesh for which he was hungry. O the Deceiver, who was seeking that which he did not require, that under pretext of it he might be finding thee ! XXV. For he asked her for tarts —alas for the expert in tarts !—she went in and placed (them) for the uplifted at heart: the serpent was clothed in the appearance of sickness that the hand might contemptuously spare him and so he might strike her. He whose desire deceived virginity and polluted it,

wrath deceived the desire and ruined him, XXVI. Tamar rent her tunic, for she saw she had lost her [P. 179.] virginity. She got a tunic instead of that tunic ; her virginity that she had lost was not got again. The rents of her garment workmen sufficed to heal ; but the loss of her virginity for One alone is easy to heal. O Virginity, whose loss is easy for all, and whose reparation for the Creator of all alone is easy !

XXVII. Tamar feared to keep silence and was ashamed to speak ; hut because she could not keep silence nor speak she rent her clothes, that the open rents might be heralds for the secret virginity that was ruined. Ah, the confusion and dismay of the king's daughter, whose pearls that were hanging on her could not console her for the one that was lost ! XXVIII. She was a King's daughter on whose limbs were carried stones and beryls, but the virginity alone surpassed them all ; wherefore the unclean one despised the beryls and chose the pearl, he rejected the coin-ornaments and snatched the tokens of [P. 180.] virginity. The thief knows thy value, O Virginity, but thou didst not perceive how much thou art worth. XXIX. From the royal jewel-house he chose out and stole the pearl, which when he got it left him, that pearl which is lost away from its owner and does not remain in the treasure of the thief !

XXX. Eve the inexperienced found the Serpent, the poisonous one whose words are sweet ; she cherished him with love, and he smote her to destruction. Do not find for thyself also the treasure-trove of Eve. that thou mayest not find for thyself in it regret. For if she had shut the door of her hearing before his speaking, the door of Paradise would not have been shut in her own face ; in that she gave a place within her mind to the word of the Evil One, the pure Garden vomited and cast her out. XXXI. Keep thy bosom in sanctity that the pure bosom of Paradise may receive thee. Do not become dust, the food of the accursed Serpent, for dust is his bread, and thou art chosen salt, which if it go bad cannot afresh become new salt. [P.181] XXXII. Jephthah's Daughter who washed in her blood was baptized and she sent up from herself the pearl that rooted out fear, and to the treasure on high it ascended ; the girl that stretched out her neck to the slaughter of the sword, the pure pearl consoled her that went with her. And she that here destroys virginity, apprehension becomes her companion in the day of remembrance, and in the Resurrection fear becomes her leader before the Judge, though she have greatly repented.

XXXIII. Jephthah's Daughter wished to die, so that the vow of her father might not be made void : do not thou make void with thine eyes the vow of virginity that thy mouth has vowed. Jephthah poured out the blood of his daughter ; but thy own Bridegroom, his holy Blood was shed for thy fault. XXXIV. Lo, therefore the unique Blood bought the virgin blood with which thy door is sealed, in the likeness of doors that [P. 182.] were sealed with the blood sprinkled in the midst of Egypt ; for as often as that same blood was sealed upon the doors outside, life was dwelling within after the type of virginity in peace. XXXV. Oh, the blood that was a wall to the treasure of life, that was within it and by it conquered death ! That is, that as they were a little wearied in sprinkling it and (as) it comforted them much by its

protection, thy perfection and thy virginity are walls that keep and are kept; that inasmuch as they are kept safe for a little they have kept safe much.

XXXVI. The married woman wished to die that adultery might be made void ; the virgin died that the vow might not be made void. If so be therefore that cohabitation, the mother of seed, wished to die that it might not receive stolen seed whose sower is accursed, let not the virgin steal the unclean seed, for a pure embryo is the embryo in the midst of her. XXXVII. Do not leave off, O Body, from the virginity that [P. 183.] by grace has revived our country, and as a sojourner dwells in our land. And if any one persecute her and uproot her nest, because she cannot turn and build it her wing quickly takes up on high the bird of the height, that grows old in one nest and if disturbed she has left it for ever. XXXVIII. And when the friendship of Angels has flown away there enters in its place the Devil's friend Desire, that is the adversary of Virginity. Joseph persecuted her from within his body, that the friendship of Angels might not dwell in it; with the Angels she doth flee to go forth. And who is there who will not weep that instead of that peaceful one there entered in and dwelt in him one full of sores ?

XXXIX. Let youthfulness be afraid of Wine that despoiled the old age of Lot. But if Wine did that which is difficult, that women by him should have stolen pregnancy, how much more forsooth will it do that which is easy, that men by it should steal virginity ? The girls despoiled the treasure of the old man ; keep thou thy treasure-house from those that are young. XL. Be afraid again of Wine in that it disgraced Noah the [P. 184.] precious; and he that had conquered the Deluge of water from a handful of wine was conquered, and him that the Flood which was outside him did not overcome, the wine which was within him in silence did steal. If wine disgraced and cast down Noah, the head of families and tongues, thee forsooth, O lonely one, how it will conquer ! XLI. Do not trust in wine, for it is an impostor and an agitator that surrenders thy fortress, that the captive-taker may come and take captive thy freedom into handmaidenship, that thy love may follow his will.

XLII. And when moreover thou hast lost thy true Bridegroom and got in his stead a false one, when thou hast the consolation that even if thou hast lost but yet thou hast found (what will it profit thee, ?) : because his love is lying and deceitful and alights on everything, it does not cleave to thee, and then the regret will be great. XLIII. When on this side and on that thou art deserted and art orphaned on two sides, the True One will have left thee [P. 185.] because thou hast left him, and the lying companion that thou hast loved will have let go of thee and left thee at the cross-roads ; and whither then will thy gaze wander, a simple Dove that has uprooted her nest and gone forth in her love after a Serpent ? XLIV. Thy Pearl is a pearl that from two thieves flies away to be lost, for it is Merchants who are single that can get it, and if they have become unclean both of them lose it. O Pearl, that is greater than all! And he is the fool, with his hands he presents the Pearl to the Thief !

XLV. It is easier for him that is drunk with wine than for him that is drunk with hateful love, for the counsel and teaching of wide-awake hours are dreams to him, and a beating is like no beating. Strong fetters are weak to him ; despised is the rod, and weak is a stick,

and disregarded is the cane. Admonition [P. 186.] is to him a story, and reproof like a tale passes through his ears ; contemptuous usage is like a treat and spitting in the face like dew. XLVI. For there is not in his heart a path-finder for the words that have beaten upon his ears. The gates of his ears are open, one opposite the other ; the word that goes in into his one ear goes out on the opposite side through the other. The speech that they pour into him is driven outside, it goes forth altogether ; his teacher supposes that the teaching goes in, but he does not perceive that he pours it all out, and it is spilt, because there is no place in his mind to receive.

XLVII. For filled and heaped and choked up are the bosoms of his imaginations from the drop of evil love, that has dropped there and become a great sea ; and lo, arguments plunge and emerge, like sailors whose ships have been wrecked, and lo, the thought there is unclean, like a ship that has no skipper, and when Law like a sailor wishes to bring it into a good harbour [P. 187.] it struggles with its sailor and loves its own loss. XLVIII. O Youthfulness, mistress of (various) courses (of life), do not complete [thy] courses in the maze of desires ; when that which works in thee and takes away thy strength has dismissed and left thee (it will be) that thy Old Age may come to mockery, because a hateful course thou hast kept for shame. XLIX. Lighten, O Youthfulness, thy course in the contest, that a crown may adorn thy Old Age ; for when Old Age has faded and its intelligence diminished, they remember the humility of its Youthfulness, which concentrated its intelligence ; men abhor it seeing the blemishes of its Body, but they cherish it seeing its secret plants of the Spirit.

L. Paint, O Youthfulness, thy victories on thy members, by which thou wilt become precious when thou growest old : paint on thy hands all charitable acts, with the visiting of the sick seal thy footsteps ; paint on thy heart the image of thy Lord. LI. And if the nailed-up Tablets that the carpenter has constructed and the painter painted have become precious, yea, are [P. 188.] revered by reason of the Figure of Royalty, how much more therefore will thy limbs become precious, on which are painted the images of thy King ? LII. Youthfulness is like a branch of fine fruits that is fair in the summer, and when its fruits and its leaves have been stripped off it becomes hateful, and every one turns his face from it, and what was desired of all becomes the despised of all. O inexperience! do not shew thy beauty to those outside, which when it has become hateful and aged those that see despise it.

LIII. O Eye ! let not the beauty of Youthfulness take thee captive, in which are hidden the blemishes of Old Age. For the limbs of youthful vigour, a fair spectacle, carry them, but Old Age convicts them, that a borrowed beauty was dwelling upon them, one that while yet it stays and alights goes off and flies away. LIV. But if there should chance to be a royal captivity, and thy humility should be exposed in the field, the unclean compulsion of the captor argues for thee that thou art holy, as Sarah also [P. 189.] was holy in the unclean bosom of foul Pharaoh, she whose heart with her free-will did not commit adultery; her will was a priest to her bodily frame, and with its hyssop it purged the body that was defiled by force. For as a priest can cleanse the temple in which he serves, so a pure Will can cleanse the Body, the Temple in the midst of which it acts as a priest.

LV. For it is a marvel in Man, that though he is one, he is to himself a Temple, he is to himself a Priest, he is to himself a Pontiff, he is to himself a Sacrifice ; he is the Offering, and he is the Offerer of the Offering : for he is like that Lamb of God, who was to Himself everything. END OF DISCOURSE ON VIRGINITY. 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.

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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.