

Mystical Theology

Ephrem the Syrian, Evagrius of Ponticus,
Aphrahat the Persian

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Ephrem the Syrian

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- “O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, vain curiosity, lust for power, and idle talk; but give to me your servant a spirit of soberness, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother, for blessed are You to the ages and ages. Amen. O God, cleanse me a sinner.”

- Ephrem (306-373 AD) was born in Nisbis. When that was ceded to Persia, he withdrew to Edessa (Armenia) and founded the Biblical school. Ephrem was a consecrated celibate who had the gift of tears (not of guilt, but of compassion). He is one of the great Syrian theologians.
- He taught that man's likeness to God is revealed in his freedom. Because man contains the image of God within himself, man's thought possesses a kind of omnipresence and is capable of embracing all places.

- The first man was adorned with a robe of glory, heavenly garments, and the bliss and grandeur of man's state before the fall surpass description.
- These were lost through the lust and arrogant disobedience of the first Eve, but they are returned to us through the second Eve, the Virgin Mary.
- Our first paradise is returned to us in the Church. "The sword that pierced Christ removed the sword guarding Paradise."
- The tree of life has been replaced by the Eucharist.

- “Blessed is He who put on Adam and by means of the Wood of the Cross made him leap back into Paradise.”
- “...stripping off His glory and putting on a body...He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, corresponding to Adam’s leaves...He was baptized for Adam’s sin, He was embalmed for Adam’s death...”
- “The soul is Your bride, the body Your bridal chamber. Your guests are the senses and the thoughts. And if a single body is a wedding feast for You, how great is Your banquet for the whole Church.”

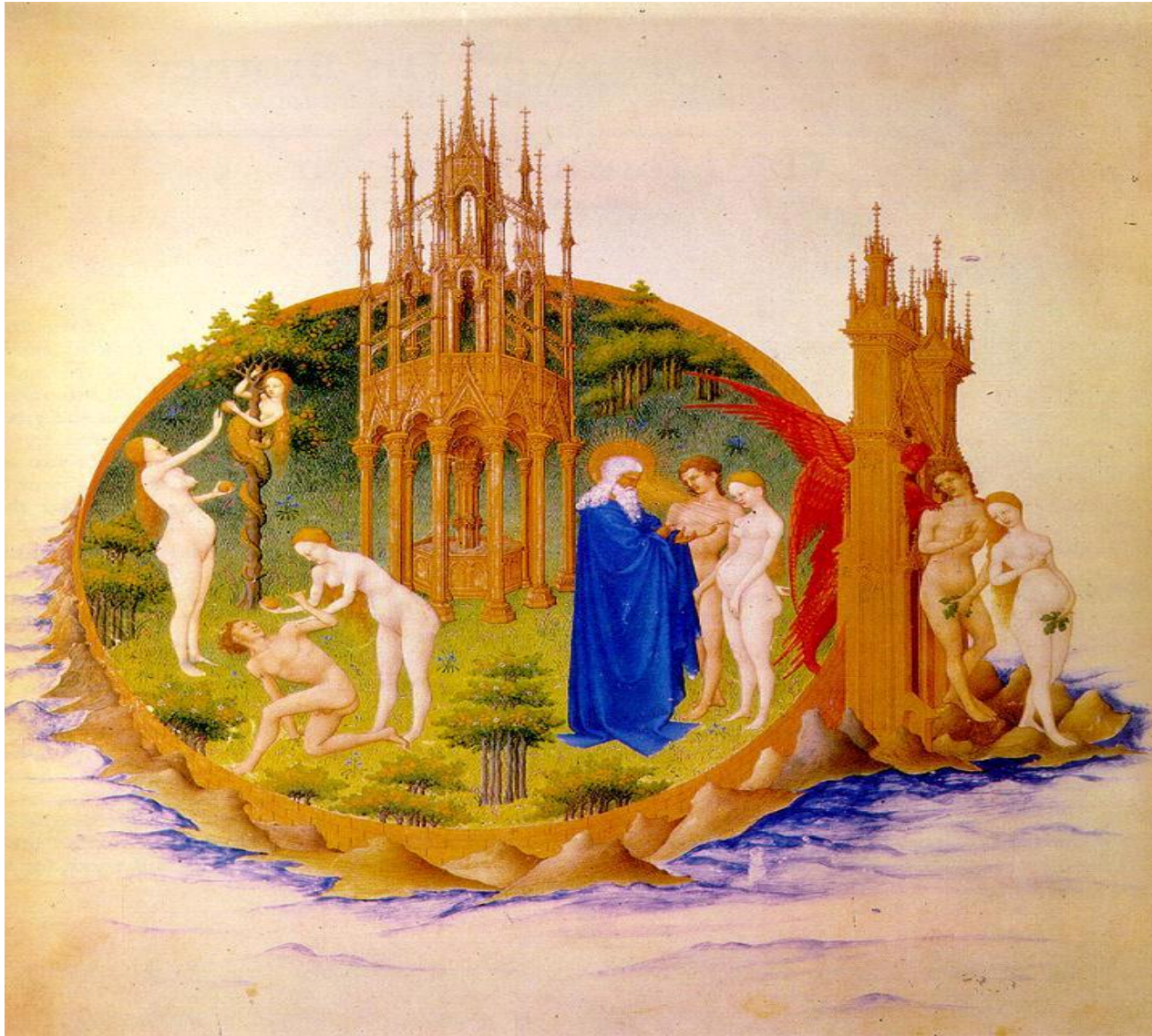
- The world is created by God and “there is nothing on Earth that has not been authorized because the source of everything is God.” Therefore, evil is not from nature or from matter; it is a result of the will.
- All the world (and all of Scripture) is the mystery of God’s presence, summed up in the one great mystery of the Incarnate Word who clothed Himself in our humanity.

- “In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world, so that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator; Nature, through man’s use of it, Scripture, through his reading it; they are the witnesses which reach everywhere, they are to be found at all times, present at every hour, confuting the unbeliever who defames the Creator.”

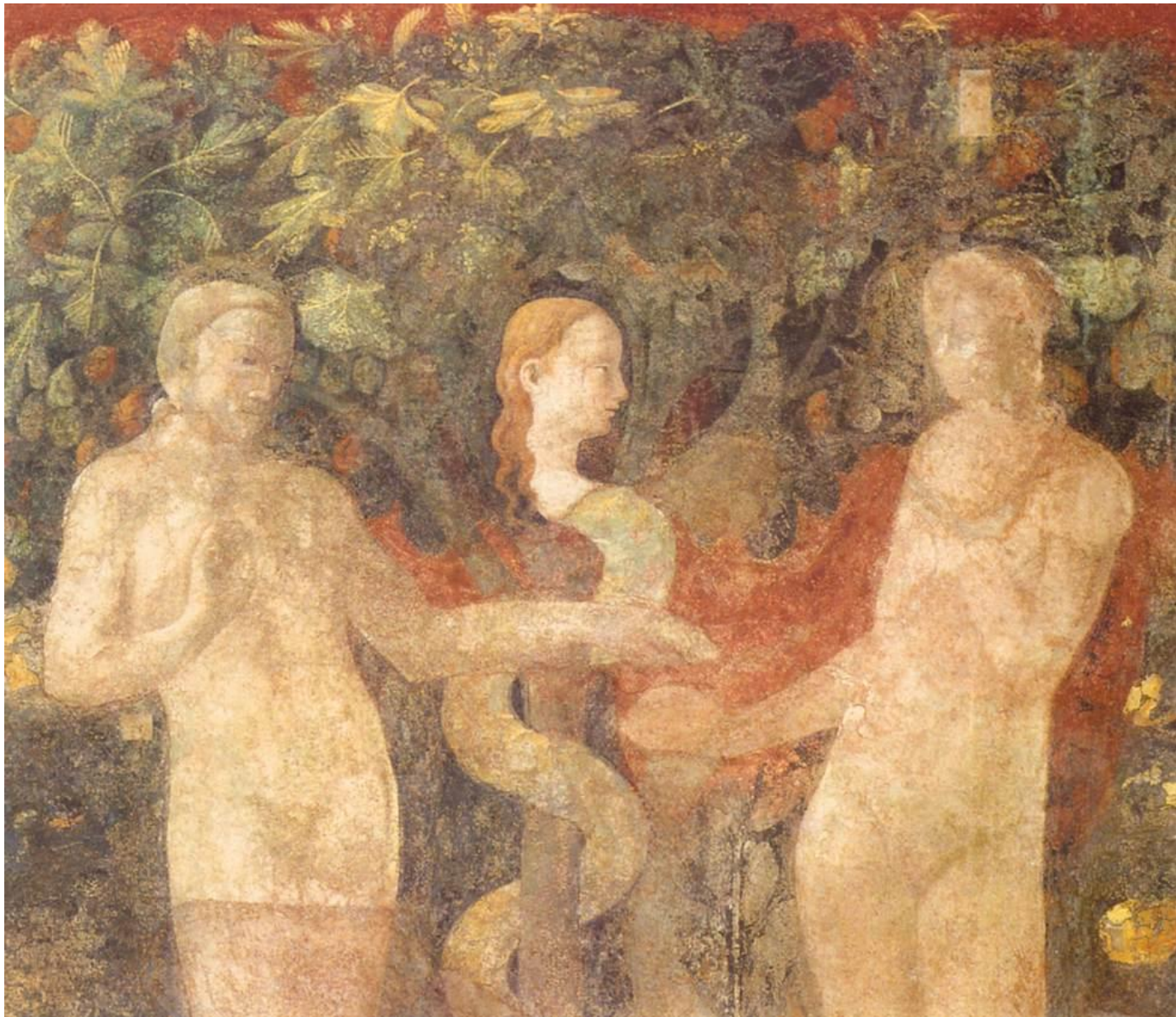
- “If someone concentrates his attention solely on the metaphors used of God’s majesty, he abuses and misrepresents that majesty, and thus errs...Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names, for Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are akin to you...your nature is far too weak to be able to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much diminished by being depicted in the pale colors with which you are familiar.”

- “The keys of doctrine which unlock all of Scripture’s books, have opened up before my eyes the book of Creation, the treasure house of the Ark, the crown of the Law. This is a book which, above its companions, made the Creator perceptible and transmitted His actions; it has envisioned all His craftsmanship, made manifest His works of art.”

- Ephrem presents Eden as both a mountain (Ezek 28:13-14) and a series of concentric circles. Each level represents in turn a different degree of beatitude that corresponds to the Church's division into "penitents," "the just," and the "victorious."
- At the summit is the Tree of Life, the Holy of Holies, the presence of Christ. The Tree of Knowledge is the veil that divides the shrine of the Ark of the Covenant from the Holy Place.



Limbourg brothers The Fall and Expulsion from Paradise
Musée Condé, Chantilly
<http://www.wga.hu>



Paolo Uccello Creation of Eve and Original Sin
Fresco, Green Cloister, Santa Maria Novella , Florence
<http://www.wga.hu>

- Adam's keeping of the commandment to refrain from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge "was to be his censer; then he might enter before the Hidden One into that hidden Tabernacle."
- Adam's fall is a prideful usurpation of the privilege of the high priest to enter beyond the veil into the Holy of Holies (viz King Uzziah in 2 Chr 26).
- Adam "beheld the Glory of the Holy of Holies and trembled...he beheld, too, his own shame and blushed, groaning and lamenting..."

- “These two things belong to our Lord: the time when I was to enter into the created world and when it will be beneficial for me to leave it...”
- “Because I acknowledged You, Lord, do You acknowledge me; have compassion on this sinner who has believed in You, for even if he sins, he still knocks at your door, even if he is sluggish, he still travels on your road.”
- “Instead of with leaves from the trees, He clothed (me) with glory in the water.”

- It is the Cross and His glory (the actuality of the world to come) that inform both the Church and the individual Christian.
- “The body was the veil of your Glory and the bread is the veil of fire that indwells it.”
- “The assembly of saints bears resemblance to Paradise. In it each day is placed the fruit of Him who gave life to all.”
- “Among the saints none is naked, for they have put on glory...for they have found, through our Lord, the robe that belongs to Adam and Eve.”

- “A garden had been planted in Eden for the just by thy Word of the Lord God before the creation of the world, and He made Adam reside there once He had created him.”
- “The Most High knew that Adam wanted to become a god, so he sent His Son who put him on in order to grant him his desire.”
- “Divinity flew down and descended to raise and draw up humanity. The Son has made beautiful the servant’s deformity and he has become a god, just as he desired.”

- “Scripture brought me to the gate of Paradise, and the mind, which is spiritual, stood in amazement and wonder as it entered, the intellect grew dizzy and weak as the senses were no longer able...to describe (it) in words.”
- “More fitting to be told than the glorious account of Paradise are the exploits of the victorious who adorned themselves with the very likeness of Paradise...let us celebrate the inheritors.”

- “At him who has uttered no curse or abuse does Paradise’s blessing rejoice all the more; upon him whose eyes’ glance remained always chaste does Paradise’s beauty gaze the more; in the limbs of him who quelled the venom of his thoughts do its springs of sweetness well up.
- The virgin who rejected the marriage crown that fades now has the radiant marriage chamber that cherishes the children of the light...here angels rejoice, prophets delight, and apostles add splendor.”

- “Fasters, who have chosen Daniel’s meager diet of vegetables...do the trees extol, bowing down in all their beauty and inviting them...to bathe in their dew and rejoice in their fruits.
- Whoever has washed the feet of the saints will himself be cleansed in that dew; to the hand that has stretched out to give the poor will the fruits of the trees themselves stretch out; the very footsteps of him who visited the sick in their affliction do the flowers make haste to crown...(and) see which can be the first to kiss his steps.”

- “The man who abstained, with understanding, from wine...or if any has lived a life of virginity, (the vines of Paradise will rush out to meet).
- Those who have been crowned for our Lord’s sake with the martyr’s death...shine out in glory there with their crowns...Like stars do they blossom in Paradise.”
- The happiness of this place gives joy to the women who labored in the service of the saints.
- They count themselves blessed unendingly for their warfare is over.”

- “Paradise yearns for the man whose goodness makes him beautiful...it splits open and receives him into its inmost parts. But if there is someone it abhors, it removes him and casts him out.”
- “Have pity on me, O Lord of Paradise, and if it is not possible for me to enter Your Paradise, grant that I may graze outside, by its enclosure; within, let there be spread the table for the diligent, but may the fruits within its enclosure drop outside like the crumbs for sinners, so that through Your grace, they may live.”

Evagrius of Ponticus

- Evagrius of Ponticus (died 399 AD) was a disciple of Macarius of Egypt. He is the first monk to have written numerous and comprehensive works of great influence on Christian piety.
- Evagrius was the first ecclesiastical teacher to put his teachings in aphorisms. He is the first literary witness to the doctrine of the eight vices.

- His biblical exegesis follows Origen. (Their Platonism was condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 533 AD.)
- Evagrius is the first to emphasize the ascent is a journey inwards, and the “light of the Trinity” it receives is a gift.
- Evagrius’ book on prayer survived attributed to Nilus of Ancyra. He is quoted without attribution by Rufinus. His instructions on praxis have been influential for monks in both East and West to this day.

- The Liber Graduum (Book of Steps), often attributed to Evagrius, stresses that the vision of God may only come through the ministry of the visible church as it serves as the pattern of the churches of the heart and Heaven.
- “The heavenly church and the spiritual altar will be revealed to us.”
- “...by starting from these visible things, and provided that our bodies become temples and our hearts altars, we might find ourselves in their heavenly counterparts...migrating there and entering in while we are still in this visible church.”

- “If by the grace of God the intellect both turns away from (the passions) and puts off then it will also see its own constitution at the time of prayer, like a sapphire or the color of Heaven, which recalls as well what the Scripture calls ‘the place of God’ seen by the elders on Mount Sinai. For another heaven is imprinted on a pure heart, because within it are beheld so many (things): the meaning of beings and the holy angels who sojourn with the worthy.”

Aphrahat of Persia

- Aphrahat wrote between 337-345 AD. He lived in what is present day Iraq.
- He maintained as did contemporary rabbis that the Levitical holiness code for priestly ministry in the Tabernacle (and later in the Temple) requires the continuous abstention even from the sanctified sexual activity of marriage. The ministry of prayer within the temple of the body, before the presence of God in the heavenly temple, requires the same abstention.

- “(The elder) lives as a normal man, just as any other living man, but he is as well the one whom God has taken and set apart, and who in consequence no longer lives quite the life of the present world. While indeed he walks the Earth, he senses in some sense that his head is in the sky; that he sees Heaven; that he sees God...(He is) the spiritual father who makes God tangible, powerful, living, intense, and true.”

- It is only through the Lord Jesus, the Wisdom and Glory of God, the Eucharistic Presence, the true Tabernacle of worship, the sage discovers his life and vocation, and experiences the eschatological recovery of Paradise.
- It is God's saving acts that make this possible.
- Faith, hope, love, prayer, and humility are the primary qualities of the sage.

- “Who has perceived the place of knowledge? Who has attained to the roots of wisdom? And who has insight into the place of understanding? The latter is with gold. Its treasure is open and permitted to those who ask (for it). Its light is greater than the sun, and its radiance is more comely and beautiful than the moon. The innermost chambers of the intellect may touch it, and the perceptions of thought may attain to it, and fullness of mind may inherit it. Whoever has opened the door of his heart finds it, and whoever unfolds the wings of his intellect possesses it...

- It dwells in the man who is diligent, and is implanted in the heart of the sage, whose nerves are set firmly in their sources, and (so) in it he possesses a hidden treasure. His thought flies to all the heights, and his pondering descends to all depths. (Wisdom) depicts wondrous things in his heart, and the eyes of his perceptions take in the bounds of the seas. All things created are enclosed within his thought, and he becomes vast so as to receive still more. He becomes the great temple of His Creator. Indeed, the King of the Heights enters and dwells in him, and lifts his intellect up to the heights, and causes his thought to fly to His Holy House, and He shows him the treasure of color within...

- His mind is absorbed in the visions, and his heart is rapt in all its perceptions. (The King) shows him a thing that he never knew. He gazes on that place and contemplates it, and his mind is stupefied by everything that it sees: all the watchers hastening to his ministry, the seraphim chanting the thrice-holy to his glory, flying swiftly with their wings, and their vestments white and shining, their faces are covered at his radiance, their courses swifter than the wind; there is the throne of the kingdom established; the Judge makes ready the place of judgment; the chairs for the righteous are set out in order for them to judge the wicked on the Day of Judgment...

- When the sage sees in his mind the place of many treasures, his thought is thenceforth elevated, and his heart conceives and engenders every good thing, and he meditates on everything he had sought. While his form and appearance are on the earth, the senses of his intellect are at once above and below. His thought is swifter than the sun, and its rays fly quicker than the wind, swift as wings in every direction. The sage grows strong in his thought. Though his appearance is small, and (he makes himself) smaller yet, he is still infused and filled with a mighty treasure. The darkness at night is made light, and he sends his thoughts out in all directions. His intellect touches all the foundations and brings him a treasure of knowledge...

- He has seen what his 'ears have not heard', and he has perceived what his 'eyes have not seen.' His interests traverse the seas though he bothers not with their mighty billows, and his intellect is without a ship or a sailor, yet his commerce is great and exceptional. When he gives from what is his, he is no whit the less, and the poor are made wealthy from treasure. There is not limit to his mind, which is gathered up and lodged in his inner being. The place where the King dwells and is ministered to, who could calculate its treasure for you?

- Many are its affairs and expenses, as for a king for whom nothing lacks.”
- Aphrahat reminds us there are four supreme “Princes of the Presence”, the “Watchers” and “Holy Ones who face the throne of God and reflect it, who are praised with the praise of the Shekinah,” and without whom “the Holy One, blessed be He, does nothing in His world without first taking their counsel.” (3 Enoch 28)
- The sage, then, is raised to the status of a Watcher and receive such honor from the angelic Watchers. (cf 1 Enoch 71, 2 Enoch 22)

- Enoch bears the divine Name.
- As early as 1 Kgs 5:9, we hear of the expansion of the mystical adept. The heart of Solomon is “enlarged” by the gift of wisdom to take in the sands of the sea. It is significant the first act of the king with this gift was to begin construction of the Temple.
- The body of Christ includes all creation (Col 1:15-120). The ode in Philippians (2:6-11) reflects these traditions.

- Jewish literature contemporary with Abaraham, reflecting ancient tradition (Gen 5:24), recalls that Enoch flies to the highest Heaven on the “wings of the Shekinah” to “serve the throne of glory” with the fiery company of the highest angels. With this comes “wisdom heaped upon wisdom, understanding upon understanding...more than all the denizens of the heights.” His size was “enlarged and increased in size” until he “matched the world in length and breadth,” the highest angel. (3 Enoch 12)

- Adam is regarded as a heavenly being. In some Midrashim the angels mistake Adam for God himself as a result of his cosmic dimensions and the brilliant light of his body. (Thus the Rabbinic warning about worshipping the first man as divine as well as about worshipping angels...cf Col 2:18 as well as Col 1:15-20.)
- Yet to Aphrahat, the recovery of the image is humility. The sage remains small, earthly, humble, in the imitation of Christ (Phil 2:6-11). It is only the Son of Man who has gone up to Heaven and who has come down (Jo 3:12-13).

- “For God...has shone in our hearts to bring to the light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor 4:6)
- Clothed with the heavenly man at Baptism, possessing the “Son of the King” within through the Eucharist, the Christian is to manifest the Lord’s likeness, to be “conformed to the body of His Glory” (Phil 3:21) and to grow into the “measure of the stature of His fullness” (Eph 4:13).

- “The Steward brought me to the treasury of the King and showed me many good things, and when I saw them, my understanding was rapt by the great treasure. And when I gazed on it, it dazzled my eyes and enraptured my thoughts and bewildered them with many colors. Whoever takes from it becomes rich and makes others rich. To all who seek Him, He is opened up...And when many take away from Him, He is not whit the less, and when they give from what they have taken, that which they have is multiplied.”

- “The treasure does not diminish, since it is the Wisdom of God, and the Steward is our Lord Jesus Christ, as He testified, when He said, ‘Everything is handed over to me from my Father.’ Indeed, He who is the Steward is also the Wisdom, as the Apostle said, ‘Christ is the Power of God and His Wisdom.’ This is the Wisdom which is distributed among many, yet is no whit the less.”

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- Alexander Golitzin, “The Place of the Presence of God: Aprahat of Persia’s Portrait of the Christian Holy Man” may be found at <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom>.