

The robe of glory

A biblical image in the Syriac tradition

Sebastian Brock

The background

‘THE QUESTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP of the human person to clothing is basically not a moral concern . . . but a metaphysical and theological one.’ This statement, made by the author of a classic article entitled ‘The theology of clothing’,¹ may at first sight seem surprising, but it only needs a few moments’ reflection to recall that there are numerous passages in both Testaments where clothing imagery is employed with reference both to God and to human beings; thus, for example, in the Old Testament God ‘puts on righteousness’ (Isai 59:17), ‘is clothed in light’ (Ps 104:2), and ‘the Spirit of God clothed itself with Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest’ (2 Chr 24:20), while in the New Testament Christ tells the disciples they ‘will be clothed in power from on high’ (Lk 24:49) and the baptized ‘have put on Christ’ (Gal 3:27).

In the biblical literature, and in the ancient Near East in general, clothing is an expression of identity, and nakedness represents the loss of identity.² This is in sharp contrast to the Greek tradition, where nakedness reflects both an aesthetic and a philosophical ideal. Early Christianity was heir to both these traditions, and so not surprisingly both are well represented in the formative period of Christian literature. Writers influenced by Neoplatonism in particular would emphasize the ‘stripping off’ of the soul’s ‘garment’ (whether this be the body, or the passions), while for those who remained closer to the biblical tradition what was important was that the garment should be the proper one. The contrast between these two attitudes can be nicely seen in the exegetical tradition of the biblical narrative of Genesis 3. In what we may for convenience call the Greek approach, the Fall consists in the loss of a state of innocent nakedness and the consequent need for clothing (provided first by Adam and Eve themselves with the fig leaves, and then by God with the garments of skin, Gen 3:7, 21). The biblical (and Semitic) approach, on the other hand, sees the Fall as involving the loss of one garment – the ‘robe of glory’ – and covering up of the resultant naked state by another, inferior, garment. This latter approach is to be found here and there among early Christian authors writing in Greek

and Latin, but it is best witnessed in Syriac literature where we find a highly imaginative use of clothing imagery in the context of theology.³ Indeed, as we shall see, the entire course of salvation history came to be described in terms of taking off and putting on clothing, starting and ending with the 'robe of glory'.

That there was to be a final 'garment of glory' in which the righteous would be clothed was probably a fairly widespread idea by the time of Christ, and it appears most prominently in different parts of the Ethiopic book of Enoch, in particular at 62:15–16, 'the righteous and elect will have risen from the earth . . . and will be clothed with garments of glory'. In the Syriac translation of Daniel it is interesting to find that Daniel's angelic interlocutor is described as wearing 'garments of glory' (10:5, 12:7); in the Hebrew he is just clothed in linen).

The exegetical roots of the tradition

In the Hebrew text of Genesis 3 there is of course no mention of any 'robe of glory' worn by Adam and Eve prior to the Fall, but in an early exegetical tradition, to which later Jewish *midrashim* and Syriac Christian writers were heirs, the verb in Genesis 3:21 was taken as a pluperfect, 'God had . . . clothed them', thus referring, not to the clothing of Adam and Eve *after* the Fall (as it appears in all modern translations), but to their original clothing, *prior* to the Fall. Furthermore, this clothing was understood as being not of 'skin' (Hebrew '*or*') but of light ('*or*'), or of glory (a translation reflected in part of the Targum tradition). It may be that this tradition was already familiar to the Syriac translator of psalm 8, for in verse 6, where the Hebrew (together with Septuagint, Targum and Vulgate) has 'You made him a little less than the angels, in honour and glory did you crown him', the Syriac has altered this to '. . . in honour and glory did you *clothe* him'.

Given this tradition of both a primordial and an eschatological 'robe of glory' (often also described as one 'of light'), Syriac writers imaginatively drew on this theme of the 'robe of glory' to illustrate the different stages in the course of the entire span of salvation history. Since they rarely describe the entire scenario from start to finish, but prefer to allude to particular episodes while presupposing an awareness of the whole, it will be helpful to have in mind from the start the main stages of this drama of salvation, reduced to a schematic outline:

- in their initial state in Paradise Adam and Eve are clothed in the robe of glory;

- their disobedience of God’s commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge results in their loss of the robe of glory;
- a prime aim henceforth of divine providence is to provide human beings with a means by which they can recover the lost robe of glory. At the incarnation the divine Word thus ‘puts on a human body’, and at his baptism he makes the robe of glory available once again to humanity by depositing it in the river Jordan (seen as one of the fountainheads of Christian baptism, along with John 19:34);
- at Christian baptism the baptized put on, in potential, the robe of glory (i.e. when, in Pauline terms, ‘they put on Christ’);
- at the eschaton the robe of glory will be theirs in reality, provided they have preserved it unsullied during their lifetime. As will emerge, this final stage is not just seen as a return to the primordial Paradise, for the eschatological Paradise is far more glorious.

How do Syriac writers describe the course of this drama? In providing an answer, use will be made in particular of the writings of the great fourth-century theologian-poet St Ephrem and of the liturgical texts of the various Syriac Churches.

The primordial robe of glory and its loss

Adam and Eve are understood both as individuals and as representing humanity in general; Adam is thus Everyman, and indeed sometimes not just every man, but every human being. The Genesis narrative is understood as having paradigmatic significance, providing an explanation for the state of flawed humanity in which we find ourselves. At the same time, by describing what was, the Genesis narrative hints at what might be.

Although the Syriac translation of Genesis 3:21, following the standard Hebrew text, has ‘garments of skin’ as the clothing provided by God after the Fall, Ephrem and other Syriac writers were also well aware of the tradition of Adam and Eve being clothed in a ‘robe of glory’ prior to the Fall, despite the fact that they no longer had any awareness of the exegetical origin of this in Genesis 3:21. Thus, commenting on Genesis 2:25, Ephrem writes, reflecting the characteristically Semitic dislike of nakedness:⁴

It says ‘The two of them were naked, but they were not ashamed’. It was not because they were ignorant of what shame was that they were not ashamed . . . It was because of the glory in which they were wrapped that they were not ashamed. Once this had been taken away

from them, after the transgression of the commandment, they were ashamed because they had been stripped of it, and the two of them rushed to the leaves in order to cover not so much their bodies as their shameful members.

Yet, even though they had this raiment of glory, Ephrem goes on to explain that Adam and Eve were nonetheless created in an intermediate state:⁵

Because God had given to Adam everything inside and outside Paradise through Grace, requiring nothing in return, either for his creation or for the glory in which He had clothed him, nevertheless out of Justice God held back one tree from him . . . For when God created Adam, He did not make him mortal, nor did He fashion him immortal; this was so that Adam himself, either through keeping this commandment, or by transgressing it, might acquire from this single tree the outcome he chose of his own free will . . . Even though God had given Adam and Eve everything else out of Grace, He wished to confer on them, out of Justice, the immortal life which is granted through the eating of the Tree of Life.

Allusions to this scenario are to be found frequently in the liturgical poetry of the Syriac Churches. Here a single example, from the Maronite Morning Office for Fridays, must suffice:

At the beginning, before he sinned, Adam had been clothed with radiance and glory . . .
 ‘Do not eat of the tree, otherwise you will taste death and be stripped of your glory . . .
 you will be stripped of that light and glory that I clothed you in if you eat of it.’

The divine commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge was thus given in order to allow Adam and Eve the opportunity to exercise their free will. Had they obeyed this ‘tiny commandment’ (as Ephrem put it) they would have been rewarded by being given access to the Tree of Life. As it was, of course, not only did they not gain access to the fruit of the Tree of Life, but they fell into the state of mortality as well.

The exchange of garments

How does divine providence set out to remedy this situation without impinging in any way on the initial gift to humanity of free will?

Having first of all made himself known to humanity by 'putting on names', allowing himself to be spoken of in human language in the Old Testament, God then sends his Son who 'put on a human body' at the incarnation, the purpose being to provide a means of reclothing humanity in the lost robe of glory.⁶

God's Majesty that had clothed Itself in all sorts of similitudes
 saw that humanity did not want to find salvation through this
 assistance,
 so He sent His Beloved One who, instead of the borrowed similitude
 with which God's Majesty had previously clothed Itself,
 clothed Himself with real limbs, as the First-Born,
 and was mingled with humanity:
 He gave what belonged to Him and took what belonged to us
 so that this intermingling of His might give life to our dead state.

More frequently Ephrem simply uses the phrase 'he put on a body' to describe the incarnation. This phrase was already in regular use by his time among Syriac writers, and in the earliest Syriac translation of the Nicene Creed it is employed to render the Greek *esarkōthē*, 'he became incarnate'. Syriac writers in fact employ a whole variety of different terms in connection with the metaphor: thus at the incarnation the divine Word is described as having put on 'the body of Adam', 'Adam', 'the body of mortal Adam', 'the first human', 'a body from the seed of Adam', 'humanity', 'our humanity', 'our nature', and even 'us'.

Such phrases are frequently to be encountered in the liturgical texts of all the Syriac Churches; the following example is from the prayer following the Sanctus in the oldest of all Christian eucharistic liturgies still in use, the Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari of the Church of the East, with a parallel text preserved in the Maronite Anaphora of St Peter (often known as the '*Sharrar*', from its opening word):

We, Your sinful servants, give thanks to You, for You have caused Your grace to work in us in a way that cannot be repaid, in that You have put on our humanity in order to give us life by Your divinity . . .

Christ's human body may sometimes be described as 'the garment which He borrowed from us to cover Himself',⁷ introducing the idea of an exchange of garments which is already brought out by Ephrem in one of his hymns on the Nativity where he writes 'His mother, whose body He had put on, put on His glory'.⁸ Elsewhere in the same hymn

cycle Ephrem speaks of Mary as having 'woven a garment and clothed Him because He had stripped off His glory'.⁹ More frequently the exchange of clothing is mentioned in the context of Christian baptism, taking as its basis Galatians 3:27; thus in a baptismal hymn we find 'He has put us on, and we have put Him on'.¹⁰ Since the incarnation is seen as being effective for all time, past as well as present and future, Adam himself can also be described as benefiting from this exchange:¹¹

As the Lord put on Adam bodily,
so too did Adam put on the Son spiritually.
Christ put on Adam's body in Mary's womb.
and Adam put on that choice robe of glory.

Eve can equally be described as benefiting:¹²

The daughter gave support to her mother who had fallen,
and because she had clothed herself in fig leaves of shame
her daughter wove and gave to her a garment of glory.

In Mary there has come hope for the female sex:
from the insults they have heard and the shame they have felt
she has given them freedom; they are no longer subject to blame.

The significance of Christ's baptism in the Jordan

The baptism of Christ is seen as playing a central role in the course of salvation history: it constitutes one of the three 'staging posts' in the course of his incarnate life, being one of the three 'wombs' into which the divine Word descended: the womb of Mary, the womb of the Jordan, and the womb of Sheol (the world of the dead).¹³ These three points in historical time are seen as converging together in sacred time, so that Christ's baptism, alongside his death and resurrection, constitutes the fountainhead of Christian baptism. This too can be expressed in terms of the imagery of the robe of glory, as in the following passage from the poet Jacob of Serugh (who died in 521):¹⁴

Christ came to baptism; He went down and placed in the baptismal
water
the robe of glory, to be there for Adam who had lost it.

The same idea is frequently found in liturgical poetry for Epiphany (in the Eastern churches, the feast of the Baptism of Christ); thus in the Syrian Orthodox tradition:¹⁵

He who had no need of it was baptized in the river Jordan,
leaving in it the garment of immortality for the naked
so that they might be covered.

And in that of the Church of the East:¹⁶

Christ the true Light, who gave joy to His Church at His baptism,
has clothed her with the robe of glory which will not get corrupted
seeing that it was woven by the Holy Spirit.

In order to bring out the paradigmatic role of Christ's baptism it is often described as the occasion of the baptism of the personified Church. In an early Epiphany hymn of great beauty the Church speaks in the first person throughout:¹⁷

. . . Because the serpent had stolen
the clothes of Adam, that fair image,
The royal Son brought them back
to reclothe Adam in his adornment.

The serpent let Eve astray,
and stole away from her her crown,
but the Virgin's Son trampled down the serpent
and from the water gave back to Eve her crown.

. . . Jesus is mine and I am His:
He has desired me, he has clothed Himself in me, and I am clothed in
Him.

With the kisses of His mouth has He kissed me
and brought me to His Bridal Chamber on high.

The robe of glory at Christian baptism

While Christ's baptism in the Jordan initiates the possibility for humanity to regain the lost robe of glory, it is at Christian baptism that this possibility can be realized by the individual, since the prayer sanctifying the baptismal water associates the font in sacred time with the Jordan's water in which Christ was baptized. To bring out this relationship the font may sometimes simply be referred to in the Church of the East as 'the Jordan'. Specific reference to the robe of glory can be found in the baptismal services of all the Syriac Churches.¹⁸ In the Syrian Orthodox rite reference to the robe of glory appropriately comes immediately before the baptism proper, following the pre-baptismal anointing of the whole body. Those being baptized are addressed:

In the faith of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are anointed as a spiritual lamb so that you may put on the robe of glory from the water.

At the end of the Church of the East's baptismal service there is a prayer which was once also found in the Syriac Melkite rite:

The new children that You have produced from a spiritual womb in Your holy font give You worship. Perfect Your gift with Your servants, keep back from them all that is shameful, so that they may preserve in purity the robe of glory with which You have clothed them in Your compassion.

In the Maronite rite the baptismal candidates are invited with the words:

Come, beloved children of the Church and of the baptismal font that makes new your old condition and heals your wounds, strip off from yourselves your old state in the water of baptism and put on the robe of glory by means of the Spirit from the water. Blessed are you who have been invited to the wedding feast of the royal Bridegroom.

Mention of the robe of glory is especially common in the liturgical poetry associated with the theme of baptism, either at Epiphany or in the baptismal rite. In the following example Adam is at once the Adam of the Genesis narrative and the representative of humanity in general:¹⁹

That which Adam lost in Paradise
 he went down and found again in the baptismal font:
 he stripped off his glory amid the trees
 and put on glory once again in the waters of baptism.
 The Spirit of God wove a garment – the raiment of glory –
 for Adam who had been made naked.
 Blessed is He who descended and showed Adam the water
 so that by bathing in it his children might be made holy.

In this water is a garment that never wears out,
 for the Spirit of God has woven it.
 . . . Go down and clothe yourselves
 in a raiment of glory that is worthy of the Kingdom.
 From Water, Fire and the Spirit you have discovered your true beauty.

At this point it is important to realize that the Syriac word for 'glory' also means 'praise'.²⁰ Thus, putting on the robe of glory at baptism also signifies taking on the role of giving praise to God, for this is the means of spiritual growth, as Ephrem points out:²¹

I stood in awe, having become aware of You;
I grew, because I magnified You.
Whereas You do not thereby grow,
the person who increases praise of Your greatness
grows in You very greatly.

The wedding garment

In the rich and abundant catechetical literature of the fourth and fifth centuries an aspect that is regularly stressed is that the baptized have to be completely naked, having stripped off everything: this liminal state of nakedness is an essential stage in the transition from the former state of being clothed in 'the old human nature' (to use the Pauline image) to that of putting on 'the new'.²² Here, clothing provided by God (that is, the robe of glory) represents a person's true identity, whereas clothing provided by the self represents a false or imperfect identity. In the baptismal rite, as an outward symbol of the robe of glory which they have put on from the baptismal water, the newly baptized are then clothed in white garments which were once worn for a week after baptism (hence the term 'White Week' for the week after Easter in the Orthodox Churches, baptisms having originally been held on the night of Holy Saturday). The newly baptized are exhorted,²³

Make your garments glisten like snow, brothers and sisters,
make your radiance beautiful, like that of the angels.

But to this is joined a warning 'Be wary of the Evil One, lest he strip you naked again', for the robe of glory received at baptism is provided only in potential, as a pledge, and must be kept clean in readiness for the eschatological Wedding Feast, at the Resurrection, when the upright and just will experience wearing it in reality. The baptismal robe of glory is in fact none other than the wedding garment of the parable in Matthew 22:12, for this garment is understood as having been provided by the Bridegroom for the guests beforehand, and must be kept unsullied in readiness for the eschatological Wedding Feast. Ephrem, pondering on this, laments,²⁴

I saw that place, my brethren,
 and I sat down and wept
 for myself and for those like me,
 at how my days have reached their fill,
 dissipated one by one, faded out,
 stolen away without my noticing;
 remorse seizes hold of me
 because I have lost
 crown, name and glory,
 robe and bridal chamber of light.
 How blessed is the person
 who of that table is held worthy.

Ephrem returns to the same point of reference in another hymn, but provides a different slant:²⁵

The First-born wrapped Himself in a body
 as a veil to hide His glory.
 The immortal Bridegroom shines out in that robe:
 let the guests in their clothing resemble Him in His.
 Let your bodies – which are your clothing –
 shine out, for they bound in fetters
 that man whose body was stained.
 O Lord, make white my stains with Your radiance at that banquet of
 Yours!

Paradise regained

Thanks to the imagery of the robe of glory baptism is often described as a re-entry, in potential, into Paradise. This re-entry is understood as having been made possible through Christ's reversal of various episodes in the narrative of the Fall in Genesis. In this connection a contrast is frequently made between the fig leaves and the robe of glory, as in the following passage:²⁶

When Adam sinned and was stripped of the glory in which he was clothed, he covered his nakedness with fig leaves. Our Saviour came and underwent suffering in order to heal Adam's wounds and provide a garment of glory for his nakedness. He dried up the fig tree (Mt 21:20–21), to show that there would no longer be any need for fig leaves to serve as Adam's garment, since Adam had returned to his former glory, and so no longer had any need for leaves or the garments of skin.

It is important to realize that this is no mere return to the primordial Paradise of the Genesis narrative, for baptism now gives direct access to the Tree of Life, which Adam and Eve never even saw, since this Tree turns out to be none other than Christ himself, and its fruits are available to be plucked at every eucharist, in anticipation of the eschatological Wedding Feast. The Tree of Life is essentially the source of immortality and thus of divinization. Tempted by the serpent, Adam and Eve had tried to grab at this and as a result lost it; but through the incarnation God now grants their wish:²⁷

Free will succeeded in making Adam's beauty ugly,
for he, being human, had sought to become a god.

Grace, however, made beautiful his deformities
and God came and Himself became a human being.

Divinity flew down
to draw humanity up,

for the Son had made beautiful the servant's deformities,
and so he became a god, just as he had desired!

Divinization, or *theosis*, is thus another aspect of the theme of exchange, made possible by the incarnation. St Ephrem put the matter epigrammatically:²⁸

He gave us divinity,
we gave Him humanity.

St Athanasius, who died exactly the same year as St Ephrem (373), said precisely the same thing, in only slightly different words: 'God became human, so that humans might become gods'.

Conclusion

There are many possible ways of doing theology and one of these ways is through the use of images and narrative; for this more symbolic approach poetry is particularly well suited, and among the early Christian literatures it was the Syriac tradition that excelled in its richness and abundance of poetic imagination. By using images of daily life, in this particular case the simple everyday act of putting on and taking off one's clothes, expression is successfully given to profound theological truths. This essentially a-historical approach has little in

common with the academic approach to theology or with historically minded biblical scholarship, but in these cases the different approaches should not be seen as being in conflict; all three are legitimate, just as synchronic and diachronic approaches to a given language are equally legitimate. Each is approaching the subject from a different perspective. But even less does the poetic approach of Ephrem and other Syriac writers have anything in common with the literalist reading of the Bible that is characteristic of a fundamentalist mentality; this is an approach which Ephrem specifically rejects as being totally misguided.²⁹

If someone concentrates his attention
solely on the metaphors used of God's majesty,
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty
by means of those metaphors
with which God has clothed Himself for humanity's own benefit,
and he is ungrateful to that Grace
which has bent down its stature to the level of human childishness,
even though God has nothing in common with it.
He clothed Himself in the likeness of humanity
in order to bring humanity to a likeness of Himself.

One of the advantages of the pictorial language of this poetic mode of doing theology, employing images as the tools of the trade, is that it acts as an *aide-memoire* and at the same time facilitates an awareness of the interconnectedness between all the different stages of salvation history, thus linking in an effective way the Christian of today with the biblical roots of her or his faith. The value of this for catechesis in the modern context should be obvious. The theme of the robe of glory, explored here, is but one of many interlinking images, as anyone who explores the Syriac poetic tradition will readily discover.³⁰

Sebastian Brock is Reader in Syriac Studies at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford. Among his various translations from Syriac are *The Harp of the Spirit: 18 poems of St Ephrem* (1983), with Susan Harvey *Holy women of the Syrian Orient* (1987; reissued 1998), *The Syriac Fathers on prayer and the spiritual life* (1987), *St Ephrem: hymns on paradise* (1990), and *The wisdom of St Isaac the Syrian* (1997).

NOTES

- 1 E. Peterson, 'Theologie des Kleides', *Benediktinische Monatsschrift* 16 (1934), p 347. (An English translation of Peterson's article can be found in *Communio* 20:3 [1993], pp 558–568.)
- 2 For the biblical usage, there are useful studies by E. Haulotte, *Symbolique du vêtement selon la Bible* (Paris, 1966), and T. Podella, *Das Lichtkleid JHWs* (Tübingen, 1996).
- 3 For great detail, see chapter X, 'Clothing metaphors as a means of theological expression in Syriac tradition' in my *Studies in Syriac tradition* (Aldershot, 1992).
- 4 *Commentary on Genesis*, II.14. For available English translations of Ephrem's commentary, see my *The luminous eye: the spiritual world vision of St Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, 1992), where numerous excerpts can be found.
- 5 *Commentary on Genesis*, II.17; the same idea is expressed in his Hymns on Paradise, 12:18.
- 6 *Hymns against heresies*, 32:9.
- 7 John of Dalyatha (eighth century), Letter 37:2 (in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 39).
- 8 *Hymns on the Nativity*, 16:11.
- 9 *Hymns on the Nativity*, 4:188.
- 10 *Fenqitho* (Festal Hymnary), Mosul edition, III, p 274a.
- 11 B. L. van Helmond, *Mas'ud de Tour 'Abdin: un mystique syrien du XVe siècle* (Louvain, 1942), p 7.
- 12 Anonymous, *Hymns on Mary*, 2:9–10 (English translation in my *Bride of light: hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* [St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam, 1994], p 36).
- 13 See my *The luminous eye*, p 92.
- 14 Jacob of Serugh, (ed) P. Bedjan, III, p 593.
- 15 *Fenqitho*, Mosul edition, III, p 569b.
- 16 *Hudra*, Trichur edition, I, p 625.
- 17 Stanzas 11, 12 and 15, edited and translated in *Parole de l'Orient* 15 (1988/9), pp 169–200.
- 18 For editions and translations of these texts, reference may be made to my *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian baptismal tradition* (Syrian Churches Series 9, 1979).
- 19 *Fenqitho*, Pampakuda edition, I, p 339.
- 20 A comparison of the various modern translations of Isaiah 61:3 will highlight a similar situation in Hebrew.
- 21 *Hymns on faith*, 32:5.
- 22 For a fascinating discussion of this aspect see J. Z. Smith, 'The garments of shame', *History of Religions* 5 (1965/6), pp 217–238.
- 23 Hymn used in the Syrian Orthodox baptismal rite.
- 24 *Hymns on paradise*, 7:24.
- 25 *Hymns on Nisibis*, 43:21.
- 26 *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 16:10.
- 27 *Hymns on virginity*, 48:15–18.
- 28 *Hymns on faith*, 5:17.
- 29 *Hymns on paradise*, 11:6.
- 30 Some indications along these lines are given in my 'Syriac liturgical poetry: a resource for today', *The Harp: A Journal of Syriac and Oriental Studies* (Kottayam) 8/9 (1995/6), pp 53–66.