ABSTRACT
FIRE IN THE BREAD, LIFE IN THE BODY: THE PNEUMATOLOGY OF
EPHREM THE SYRIAN

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The fourth century debates about the status and personhood of the Son later expanded to reflections on the status and person of the Holy Spirit. In this dissertation I examine the pneumatology of Ephrem the Syrian, who is often over-looked in discussions about fourth century pneumatology. I argue that Ephrem displays a high pneumatology that fits within the broad contours of the pro-Nicene movement. I begin with a discussion of Ephrem’s Syriac heritage and focus on the themes and language surrounding the Holy Spirit in pre-Nicene Syriac texts. Pre-Nicene Syriac authors speak about the Spirit’s role in liturgical practices, often using feminine or maternal language to describe the Spirit’s work. I proceed then to a discussion of the grounding principle of Ephrem’s theology, the concept of true and borrowed names. Ephrem’s focus on divine names shows a clear concern for and response to the theology of Eunomius and Aetius. The logic that Ephrem uses to combat Eunomius’s understanding of divine names bears a marked similarity to Basil’s logic in Contra Eunomium. Next, I assert that Ephrem affirms the unity of divine operations in the Trinity because of his assertion that the Holy Spirit participates in the act of creation. Ephrem does not believe that the Holy Spirit is the “wind/spirit” that hovers over the primordial waters in Gen. 1:2b, because creation does not proceed from those waters. In addition, he does affirm the Spirit’s creative action in the waters of baptism. Because Jesus left the Spirit to his followers after his ascension, Ephrem believes that the locus of the Holy Spirit’s activity is the life of the church. In the sacraments the Holy Spirit forgives sin and creates new believers, thus performing the same actions as the Father and Son. Lastly, in his most vivid image of the Trinity, Ephrem affirms that God is the undiminished giver, who is present to all without suffering loss in God’s self. God’s presence is evident in the life of Christians by the presence of the Holy Spirit who is present everywhere without diminishing. Ephrem’s pneumatology affirms several key pro-Nicene commitments without recourse to the same exegetical traditions. Such an affirmation highlights that the transmission of orthodox theological ideas, based upon the common sources of the Bible and sacraments, integrated into the contexts beyond the traditional Latin and Greek divide.