

AN ANALYSIS OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN'S VIEWS ON THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST AS EXEMPLIFIED IN HIS HYMN *DE VIRGINITATE XII*

P.J. Botha
(University of Pretoria)

Abstract

Ephrem the Syrian's twelfth hymn in the cycle De Virginitate is translated and analysed. This hymn describes the temptation of Christ by Satan as a contest in which Satan tried to humiliate Christ, but was defeated and humiliated himself. By carefully constructing polarities between Satan and Christ and between Satan and Adam, Ephrem draws the reader's attention to a soteriological polarity that is formed between Christ and Adam. It is concluded that Ephrem's main concern was to highlight the soteriological role of Christ for his audience through this particular explication of the text of Matthew 4.

1. Introduction

This article presents a translation and an analysis of the hymn *De Virginitate XII* by Ephrem the Syrian. Not only does this hymn provide valuable insight into the symbolic mode of interpretation and theology of this Syrian Church Father from the fourth century, but it also displays his strong argumentative inclination. This article thus aims at investigating *what* Ephrem wanted to communicate to the Christian community of his day through this hymn and *how* he went about doing it.

This particular hymn is related only indirectly to the theme of celibacy that is suggested by the title of the collection, *ܩܘܪܬܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ*, or 'Expositions / Hymns / Odes on Virginité'. According to Edmund Beck,¹ this title derives from the subtitle of the first three hymns in the collection and provides a description of only those three hymns.² The twelfth hymn in the cycle, which is described here, seems to have had an earlier existence separate from the collection. This is indicated by its different metre and melody and by the closing formula at the end of the hymn that says: 'Finished is the one hymn on the temptation of the Lord'.³ Hymn 12 was inserted into the collection before hymns 13-14 because of a similarity of theme: These last-mentioned two hymns describe the battle of Christ with Satan after his ascension. As such, it also contains references to the temptation of the Lord. But hymns 13-30 form an obvious unity, the kernel

of the collection that is bound together through the same melody being used in all of them.⁴ An editorial note is also found at the end of hymn 14 that hints at the insertion of hymn 12 into the collection, where it says ‘Finished are the two further hymns on the trial and the disputation of Satan on the melody “Blessed is Ephrata”’.

Two of the thirty stanzas of this hymn unfortunately occur in a damaged part of the manuscript, namely stanzas 28-29. In a number of places elsewhere in the hymn, Beck has also noted that the text is uncertain. However, despite these drawbacks, it is possible to form a good idea of the structure and meaning of this hymn. The first part, comprising stanzas 1-5, describes the inner thoughts and planning of Satan⁵ during the first temptation of Christ, when he suggested to Christ that he should turn stones into bread and eat to still his hunger. The second temptation, the suggestion to Christ that he should jump off the roof of the temple, is treated in stanzas 6-7. In stanzas 8-12 the author then explains that the purpose of the temptations was to see whether Christ was really God and, if he was not, to tempt him to usurp divine rights. The third temptation is described in stanzas 13-14, namely the offer of all the kingdoms of the world if only Christ would be willing to worship Satan. Stanzas 15-18 focus on the contradiction in Satan’s requests. Stanzas 19-21 point out that the reaction to his attempts must have been frustrating to Satan, since his objective was to remain unrecognised and to get to know who Jesus really was, but instead he gained no knowledge while he himself was identified by Christ as ‘Satan’. In stanzas 22-27, Satan reflects on the reasons for his lack of success and decides that it must be because he made Jesus proud by calling him the Son of God during the first temptation. In comparison to the success he had in tempting the first human, Adam, he made a mess of this contest. He decides that it is a mistake ever to use flattery in trying to lead people astray. As he did with Adam, he should have focused on Jesus’ needs. Stanza 30 concludes the hymn by stating that Satan left Christ until the time of the crucifixion, when he killed Christ through the crucifiers, but was paradoxically overcome himself by Christ who also conquered death.

It should be noted that the hymn forms an acrostic. The first word of each and every stanza begins with the letter ‘E (*Ain*). This could have placed constraints on the development of arguments, but such limitations – if they occur at all – are scarcely noticeable in the original. However, this feature does account for the recurrent use of certain words or stems at the beginning of stanzas within the hymn, such as ‘toil / trouble / work /

exhaustion'; 'opportunity / cause / pretext'; 'blind / make blind'; 'on'; 'raise / elevate'; 'remember / recall'; 'enter'; et cetera. All of these begin with an *Ain* in Syriac. A second interesting feature of the hymn is the importance attached to honour and shame as values in the interpretation of the temptation as a contest between Christ and Satan. This forms a parallel to what social-scientific minded exegetes suggest is the really important axis of interpreting Christ's life and death.

In the translation given here, words that form parallels (both synthetic and antithetic parallels and also words forming polarities) are marked through underlining, shading, bolding, and italicising text or by enclosing words with borders.

2. Translation

De Virginitate XII

On the melody: "I want to sing praise, if it is permitted"⁶

1. Our Lord took the trouble upon him and went out to the contest, not to use violence, but to triumph in the conflict.⁷ For he was hungry, but he gave victory through the fast to that one (Adam) who was defeated because of food.⁸

Response: Blessed is he who humbled the pride of Satan.

2. The Evil One saw the opportunity of hunger. He demanded (Christ) to change stones into bread. He (Satan) became a stone among the stones. His heart shuddered when it saw that he (Christ) was the doer of wonders.⁹ And he plunged him into a contest of questions.
3. This idea entered the Evil One: If he is God and he is hungry, why would he then be suspicious of me when I say: "Change the stones into bread and be sustained!" Who wants to carry the burden of his own hunger?
4. The Evil One was blind in his pride and in his request. For, if he (Christ) was God as he (Satan) had said, then it escaped his notice that God does not become hungry. He approached (Christ) to lead (him) astray, but he himself went astray. For he did not understand what he (himself) had said.

5. He recalled that he had questioned the house of Adam. He had given him (Adam) persuasion through his question. From the question he leapt to the explanation. He had asked, he had sought, he had explained, and had **conquered**. Here he inquired and **lost**.
6. He took him (Christ) up and made him stand on the pinnacle¹⁰ (of the temple). That height was like a symbol of the pride and that depth was a type of the fall. By taking him up, he wanted to lift him up to pride; in order to bring him down to a fall when descending.
7. In this he was also blind like in that (first temptation). For if the Psalm is fulfilled in him that says, “With his wings, that he may deliver you”,¹¹ then the one who flies cannot fall, for the air is beneath his wings like (solid) ground.¹²
8. He sought an opportunity for himself so that it would fall out whether he (Christ) was God or only human, so that he would know which way to go; so that, if he were God, he would get to know (it), and if he were human, he (Christ) would be led astray.
9. The problem of our athlete was this, that he could not reveal to him there that he was God. For if he (Satan) realised that he (Christ) was God, he would have fled from him right at the beginning, and so would have spoilt also the end.
10. So wandering (of the mind) came over him, since he wanted to cause wandering. For he was unable to know that he (Christ) was God, and he was also unable to figure out that he was human. For neither was he lifted up¹³ (into the air) like God, nor was he ensnared like a human.
11. He set him on top of the temple to convince him that a human could become a god because of the *house of divinity*, just as he had convinced Adam that a human could become God because of that *tree*.¹⁴
12. He remembered that the first (humans) had listened to him. His counsel caused an injury to (their) simplicity. But now there came astuteness¹⁵ that drove him into straits. To this wisdom that came and humbled him (Satan), it (Satan’s counsel) was like a victor’s crown.

13. He lifted him up and set him upon a mountain. But he did not call him again by the name that would make him proud. He was (now) like someone who was persuaded that he (Christ) was needy.¹⁶ He surprised him by holding out a gift to him, so that this gift would bring him to fall down in adoration.
14. (Christ) blinded the cunning one through cunning stratagems, and instead of being baffled; he remained serene¹⁷ like one who knew him to be false. That only one should be worshipped by all, the Lord of all, he showed, namely him to whom (all) worship is fitting.
15. On this foundation of beginning our Lord built and his victory arose. For while he (Satan) contradicted what he made known, he could not also contradict the truth. The truth shone brightly, the deceit was exposed.
16. For the sides¹⁸ of the contest laughed over him, because he (Satan) made him (Christ) out to be a god at the beginning, but at the end, he made him out to be a human. At the beginning, he made him an object of worship, at the end a worshipper.
17. The evil one remembered that he had asked him about the food, and so came to the opinion that he was needy, since he did not grant (the request). Now he himself offered a gift, and had to see that, like a king, he did not accept. He tried with both and was bitter(ly disappointed).
18. The cunning one was blind in his pride, he who wanted to exchange his possessions for worship. Since he (Satan) thought him (Christ) to be poor, he (Christ) displayed his majesty, (he) whose grace is worth more than the ransom of that one, who wanted to sell everything he had for the price of being worshipped.
19. On top of all this, this also tortured him (Satan) that, instead of his having been able to recognise, someone recognised him. Our Lord called him by his name: Satan! But he did not know how he had to call him (Christ). He was furious that he had come to investigate, and was investigated instead.¹⁹
20. The tiring work that someone has to do, turns into relaxation through discovery. The evil one exhausted himself with his tiring investigation,

and was tormented even more because he could not discover. In discovery (alone) lies rest for one's soul.

21. He exhausted himself with both: he asked from him and gave to him, in order to know whether he was needy or replete. Yet, he (Christ) did not give to him as if he possessed the fullness neither did he take anything from him as if being in need. From his defeat, there came (for Satan) displeasing confusion.

22. He said to himself, "I have made a mess of this by making him proud, by having called him the Son of God. He was unable to act like God but he was also ashamed of sinning like a human."

23. "I should have realised that the first Adam also, if I had made him proud as a Lord, would have despised the honour (offered to him) in his pride, so that it would not seem as if the tree was better than he was. His pride would have been like a guardian to him."

24. "For that reason I extolled the tree so as to belittle man in this way. Since he saw his smallness, he held his shame in contempt, to run like a child and to go to the tree as if to someone that was bigger than he was."

25. "But this one fled (from me) because of the praise that would have subjected the defiant ones without a rod. The wicked one who is praised by an upright person throws the bridle of decency on himself. His pride impedes the running of his course."

26. "This one fled because I made him proud. He was unable to fall, but he also did not have the audacity to sin. I called him 'God' so that he would sin. On that account he fled to the Scriptures."

27. "With praise, shame enters. For when one calls a wretched person excellent, he cannot act excellently at once, but he is ashamed of acting wretchedly any longer. He therefore saw himself obliged to flee shrewdly."

[28-29] Text damaged.

30. The evil one fled from him for a time. At the time of the crucifixion he happened to return and through the crucifiers he killed him. For he (Christ) had to engage in battle with death, so as to conquer Satan and death.

Finished is the one hymn on the temptation of our Lord.

3. The poetic and argumentative features of this hymn

As is the case in the majority of hymns composed by Ephrem, parallelisms, chiasms, antitheses, and merisms are all used to create polarities and to contrast certain elements. Such parallel elements have been marked in the text of the translation to draw attention to connections that are probably more easily visible in the Syriac text. The contrast that is formed through such word-pairs can be viewed as a technique of explanation, since opposites tend to dramatise and exaggerate. The use of opposites seems to suggest that there is no grey area between alternatives, only the extremities themselves.

Ephrem describes the temptation of Christ as a contest with Satan in which Christ outwits and shames the evil one. Christ and Satan therefore form two opposites, and they are shown to be associated with honour and shame respectively, and also with triumph and defeat respectively.²⁰ Christ's victory over Satan is also contrasted with Adam's earlier defeat by Satan. Adam and Christ are consequently also contrasted. Where Adam failed in his encounter with Satan (hidden in the serpent in the garden of Eden)²¹, Christ succeeded. And finally, Christ's divinity and his humanity are also contrasted. Through Satan's own reasoning and Christ's response to his actions and words, the person of Christ becomes an increasingly puzzling enigma for Satan. The harder Satan tries to fathom the person of Christ, the more Christ becomes a mystery to him. This had to be so, Ephrem explains, or else Satan would have fled from Christ at the 'beginning' (of his ministry) and thus have frustrated God's intentions to let Christ conquer Satan, sin and death at the 'end'.

3.1 The polarity Christ versus Satan

The temptation of Christ is described by Ephrem as a contest between Christ and Satan. As such, they form a polarity. The purpose of this contest was not to see who had the greater power, but to identify a winner in terms of challenge and riposte, thus to see who has the greater honour. This is

stated in the first stanza through an antithetic parallelism which is clearly noticeable in the Syriac text, but less so in translation:

ܠܐ ܡܝܢ ܩܘܿܘܿܘܿܢܐ ܕܢܚܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܿܗܐܐܢ ܕܥܘܢܐܢ
ܠܐ ܡܝܢ ܩܘܿܘܿܘܿܢܐ ܕܢܚܢܐ ܕܐܘܪܘܿܗܐܐܢ ܕܥܘܢܐܢ

This was not with violence to interact
but in conflict to be victorious

The parallel between repeated grammatical elements such as the particle *d*, the preposition *b*, a noun, and a verb in the *Ethpa'al*, is strengthened through the similarity in sound between the first and last words of the two lines. The purpose of the contest, from Satan's point of view, was to *lead* Christ *astray*. But in the end he *went astray* himself because he was no match for Christ (stanza 4). Likewise, it is said in stanza 10 that 'wandering of the mind' came over Satan since he wanted to *cause* wandering. Through these passive constructions, the idea is conveyed that God turned Satan's devices against himself. His weapons of deception were turned against himself and he was defeated.

The purpose of this contest between Christ and Satan, it thus seems, was to see who could outwit the other in order to avoid shame and increase honour. To hide his true power and person from Satan, and to experience the temptation of Satan in the same manner as Adam had experienced it, Christ refrains from using his awesome power. The refrain of this hymn defines the actual outcome of the contest, namely that Christ 'humbled' or 'shamed' the pride of Satan. The winner of such a contest increases his honour; the loser is shamed.²² The battle with Satan is described as an ܠܘܠܐܝܢܐ. This word was borrowed from the Greek ἀγών, in the sense of a trial of skill. It is used in stanzas 1, 2 and 16. Stanza 2 describes the competition more clearly as 'a contest of questions', thus a kind of debate.²³ In stanza 16, Ephrem even speaks of the 'sides' of the contest, a reference to the spectators. In this vein he also calls Christ 'our athlete' (stanza 9), using another word borrowed from the Greek.²⁴

The purpose of the confrontation between Christ and Satan thus was to see who would gain honour by shaming the other. Triumph equals honour and to lose a contest²⁵ means to be shamed. Before the contest, Satan had pride (cf. the Response), and twice Ephrem observes that he was *blind* in his pride (stanzas 4, 18). Satan's pride stemmed inter alia from his success in conquering and humbling Adam. Adam was conquered by Satan (stanzas 1,

5), and in this way, Satan humiliated mankind (stanza 24). However, the contest with Christ was another matter altogether. Instead of the simplicity or childishness displayed by Adam and Eve,²⁶ Christ was very astute. His wisdom humbled Satan (stanza 12). Christ conquered Satan through the fast and so gave victory to mankind (stanza 1). Satan's pride made him blind so that he did not notice that God could not become hungry. He became confused (stanza 4), for he had tried a similar technique as the one that he had used successfully on Adam, but it did not work and he lost the first phase of the contest (stanza 5).

Satan's second attempt to humiliate Christ was once again by attempting to elevate his pride. For this purpose, he took him up to the roof of the temple (stanza 6). In the first attempt, he had elevated Jesus' pride by calling him the Son of God (stanza 22). If he could now persuade Jesus to tempt God by jumping from the pinnacle of the temple to see if God would really protect him from injury, he might succeed in humiliating him. By choosing the roof of the temple, he increased the possibility of success (in his view), since he thought that that might help to elevate the status of Jesus even more (stanza 11). However, he lost this phase of the contest also, because he was too blind to realise that the psalm²⁷, which he quoted, had been 'fulfilled' in Christ and that Christ could therefore not be killed by making him jump from the temple (stanza 7).

Satan's real problem therefore was to establish whether Jesus was God or merely a human (stanza 10). He seemed to begin to favour the idea that Jesus was a mere human, someone who was in need, but whose feeling of honour had been increased when he was called the 'Son of God'. Thus he tried to startle Christ by offering him a gift that would tempt a poor and wretched man: If only he was willing to worship Satan, he would receive all the kingdoms of the world (stanza 13; cf. Matt. 4:8). But Jesus reacted in a way that was worthy of his majesty by not accepting the offer (stanzas 14 and 17). This confused Satan even more (stanza 17).

Neither strategy worked for Satan: He had used both options, namely to assume that Jesus was divine at the beginning, and to argue that he was a mere human at the end (stanza 16). This constituted a contradiction that made Satan look ridiculous in the eyes of the spectators (stanza 16). In every instance, Christ reacted in exactly the opposite way of what Satan had expected (stanza 21). He had no success in his investigation, and on top of that, he realised that he himself was being scrutinised and recognised for the deceiver that he is (stanza 19). As is explained in the hymn, Satan had

the intention of deceiving Christ. However, he did not succeed with his deception, and on top of that could not penetrate the true identity of Christ. Deception was a means value to protect one's honour and to bring shame upon the enemy.²⁸ In this regard, the surmise seems correct that the contest was to see who could shame whom.

Satan concluded that his lack of success was the result of his having chosen the wrong strategy. Christ must be a poor human, he thought, but by calling him the Son of God at the beginning of the temptation, he had made Jesus too proud to sin. This did not cause him to become sinless immediately, but he felt too honoured to act in a way that would prove him undeserving of the compliment (stanzas 23-27). As soon as someone is praised, shame comes into effect (stanza 27).

What is remarkable in this description of the confrontation between Satan and Christ is the role accorded to honour and shame. In biblical times, honour was a core value that was vied for in almost all interaction between adult males.²⁹ Honour could be inherited, accorded by someone in a position of authority, or won in a contest.³⁰ Satan's interaction with Adam and Eve and similarly with Christ is described as an endeavour to shame people by enticing them to encroach on the honour of God. Assuming too much honour for oneself is tantamount to haughtiness or pride.³¹ This means that the claim to honour is rejected as false, with resultant public shaming of that person. Satan succeeded in enticing Adam to impinge on God's honour by eating the forbidden fruit.³² He similarly tried to get Jesus to infringe on God's honour, but was publicly shamed when these attempts failed and the paradox of his attempts was recognised by the spectators of the contest (stanza 16). His own pride, which had made him blind and prevented him from recognising Jesus, was exposed. Instead of shaming Jesus, he was shamed and severely frustrated (stanzas 4, 7, 14, 16, 18-19).

3.2 The polarity Adam versus Christ

Adam and Christ, as the two representatives of humanity, are also contrasted. This polarity is expressed through a comparison of the success Satan had in tempting Adam and Eve with his lack of success in trying to get Jesus to sin. In the first stanza, this is expressed through a beautiful parallelism:

'For he was hungry, but he gave victory through the fast to

that one (Adam) who was defeated because of food.

Christ was hungry after forty days and nights without food. This was a fasting of severe proportions. Satan attacked him precisely on this weak point, by suggesting that he turn stones into bread and sustain himself. By declining to misappropriate his power, Jesus won a victory over Satan. Adam, in contrast, had lost a similar but less severe test. He had been tempted to eat the forbidden fruit, which he believed would make him like God. In eating from the forbidden fruit, he succumbed to Satan's temptation and was defeated. But Christ's victory restored mankind to its original state of honour.

The two situations are once again compared in stanza 5. Satan had asked a question to humanity, the 'house of Adam'. From the question, he jumped to an explanation of why the fruit of that tree was forbidden. In doing so, he conquered humanity. In the case of Christ, Satan also 'asked' him to turn stones into bread. But since the request was not granted, he lost to Christ. The second temptation of Christ also provides a parallel with the temptation of Adam. In stanza 11, Ephrem describes how Satan set Jesus 'on top of the temple in order to convince him that a human could become a **god** because of the house of divinity, just as he had convinced Adam that a human could become **God** because of that tree'. The similarities are clearly pointed out and these, together with the differences between Adam and Christ, prove not only Christ's superiority over Satan, but also his superiority over Adam. In stanza 12, this is formulated expressly: Satan remembered that his counsel caused an injury to the simplicity of the first humans. But now he had to contend with the astuteness of Christ. As was noted in the translation above, Ephrem uses a play on the word 'astute' that is used in Genesis 3:1 to describe the cleverness of the serpent. Obviously, the tables are now turned. It is no longer the serpent (or Satan who used him)³³ that is astute, but Christ. It is this wisdom that humbles Satan (stanza 12).

By comparing the situation in the Garden of Eden with the temptation of Christ, Christ's superiority over Adam is displayed.

3.3 The polarity humanity versus divinity in Christ

In stanzas 8, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18, and 21, the conflict in Satan's mind whether Jesus was a mere human or perhaps God is described. From stanza 8 it seems that Satan was only interested in engaging in a contest with Jesus

if he was convinced that he was a human. In stanza 9 it is explained why Christ hid his divinity from Satan. If he made it known at the beginning, Satan would have fled from him. The end, that is, the objective of having Satan crucify Christ, would then have been compromised also.

So, Christ gave no hint to Satan of his real identity. There was no indication that he was divine; he was not ‘lifted up (into the air) like God’, nor was he ‘ensnared like a human’ (stanza 10). The last word of stanza 10 can be translated with ‘to loose one’s footing’, ‘to be ensnared’, ‘to slip’. The contrast is therefore between going up into the air or being bogged down to earth. He made no revealing movement; he could not be caught out. So Satan decided that Christ must be human, someone with human needs and desires (stanza 13). The reason why he did not oblige to turn stones into bread, he decided, must be that he was unable to do such a miracle (stanza 17). He thus offered him a great gift if only he would fall down in adoration before Satan (stanza 13). But once again Christ baffled him by not accepting the offer, thereby showing himself to be like a king (stanza 17-18; 21).

The most important polarities in this hymn can be represented in the following diagram:

Satan ↔ Adam (Satan humiliated Adam) (Stanzas 1, 5, 12, 24)	↔	Satan ↔ Christ (Christ humiliated Satan) (Stanza 1, response, stanzas 12, 15, 17, 19, 21)
↑	↓	↑
	Adam ↔ Christ (Christ gave victory through the fast to Adam who lost through food)	
Satan <i>asked</i> Adam; <i>gave</i> persuasion to him (stanza 5). His counsel injured their <i>simplicity</i> (stanza 12)	↔ Adam’s simplicity forms a contrast to Christ’s astuteness	Satan <i>asked</i> from Christ and <i>gave</i> to him; Christ <i>did not give</i> what was <i>requested</i> and did not <i>take</i> what was <i>offered</i> (stanza 21). Christ’s

		<i>astuteness</i> drove Satan into straits (stanza 12).
Satan <i>convinced</i> Adam that a human could become God because of the tree (stanza 11)	↔ Satan became the one who went astray	Satan <i>was convinced</i> that a human could become a god because of the temple (stanza 11)
Satan extolled the tree so as to belittle man; Adam saw his <i>smallness</i> and thus <i>held his shame in contempt</i> (stanza 24)	↔ Satan could not fathom the true identity of Christ	Satan thought he made a mistake by making Christ <i>proud</i> , by calling him ‘the Son of God’, for he <i>became ashamed</i> to sin like a human (stanza 22)

From these polarities it becomes clear that Ephrem’s main concern is to draw attention to the polarity formed by Adam as the type and Christ as the antitype of mankind.³⁴ The temptation of Christ is interpreted as a parallel to the story of the Garden of Eden. In drawing the attention of his audience to this parallel, Ephrem succeeds in describing the soteriological function of Christ as the restorer of the honour of humanity. Christ’s humanity and his divinity are both emphasised without Ephrem having to enter into a dogmatic definition of the relationship between the two aspects. It becomes clear that he is God, for he is able to withstand the temptation of Satan.³⁵ Nevertheless, he is also a representative of humanity and is therefore able to shame Satan and thus to restore the honour of mankind.

4. Conclusion

From this investigation, it became clear that this hymn can be regarded primarily as an attempt to direct the attention of the audience to the soteriological role of Christ as the restorer of the honour of humanity. As such, Christ is also portrayed as the opposite or antitype of Adam.³⁶ Adam was enticed by Satan to eat of the forbidden fruit. He was convinced that he could become like God and thus gain honour. But in the process he, as the representative of humanity, was defeated and shamed by Satan. Christ, in contrast, was astute, not simple. Because he was able to withstand the temptation of food, even though he had been fasting for a very long time, he could reject the offer to still his hunger. He knew that that would infringe on the honour of God, since it would mean a misappropriation of

his power. In this way, he defeated Satan, shamed him publicly, and restored the honour of humanity.

In explaining this soteriological role of Christ, Ephrem is also commenting on the biblical text of Genesis and Matthew. By making Satan converse with himself, the superiority of Christ over Adam and over Satan is highlighted. Questions which the audience might have had, such as why Satan chose these three temptations to entice Christ and what the most important issue at stake was, are also answered. The audience is also instructed, incidentally, on techniques of conducting a Christian life, of avoiding being humiliated by Satan (such as by fasting,³⁷ by showing deference to God and by keeping in mind that Satan uses pride as a very important weapon to subdue people).

Through the polarities that he identifies from the biblical text and highlights in his work, Ephrem is constantly pointing to the interconnectedness of all aspects of theology. By drawing the attention of the reader to polarities that are built on the foundation of other polarities, he is silently arguing for an all-encompassing coherence in creation and revelation that ultimately points to God as the Mastermind who has coordinated everything and is still busy fulfilling his plan of salvation for mankind. From whatever theological background one comes, when reading the work of Ephrem, one has to admit: this is a superior theological mind at work!

ENDNOTES

- ¹ E. Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen de Virginitate*, übersetzt, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 224, Tomus 95, Louvain (CSCO), 1962, p.i. The text edition of Beck with the same name, Vol. no. 223, Tomus 94, was used to make this translation.
- ² According to Sebastian Brock (S. Brock, *The luminous eye. The spiritual world vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo (Cistercian), 1992, p.18), the *madrashé* were collected together in hymn cycles after Ephrem's death, and these were given their titles from the first group of hymns that each contained.
- ³ Beck, translation (*op. cit.*), p.ii.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ In this regard it is interesting to note that, in his commentary on the Diatessaron, Ephrem also comments on the supposed self-deliberation of

Satan before attempting to test Christ. Cf. his commentary IV.5. The available Syriac text (including the later acquired folios of *Chester Beatty* MS 709) unfortunately still has a lacuna at IV.2-5 (cf. L. Leloir, *Saint Éphrem. Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant. Texte Syriaque* (Manuscrit *Chester Beatty* 709). Folios Additionnels, Peeters (Leuven – Paris), 1990. The translation of Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron. An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, Oxford University Press, 1993, was consulted. At this particular point, McCarthy used the (very literal) Latin translation of Leloir, which he had made from the Armenian version. Cf. McCarthy, *ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

⁶ The title of the melody is usually derived from the first words of a particular *madrasha* that employs the same stanza pattern of syllables and lines as that particular one. Cf. S. Brock, *Saint Ephrem: Hymns on Paradise, introduction and translation*, New York (St Vladimir's), 1990, p.38.

⁷ As Martikainen notes, Ephrem makes this remark to show 'dass Christus sich in jeder Hinsicht unter die Bedingungen der Lage Adams stellt und nicht den Teufel mit der Kraft seiner göttlichen "Natur" überwindigt'. J. Martikainen, *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers. Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*. Publications of the Research Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation, Åbo, 1978, p.79.

⁸ The reference is to Adam who submitted to the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit.

⁹ The Syriac word is ܠܘܕܘܢܐ, translated by Beck (translation, *op. cit.*, p.39) as 'Wundertäter'. In a footnote on the same page he explains that this is based on the use of the same word in the Hymns *Contra Haereses* 5,11,4 where the Creator is described as 'artifex, qui omnia potest'. On those grounds, Beck says, can Rahmani's translation of 'agnovit ipsum mundi esse opificem' be justified. However, Satan was at this stage still battling to get that insight. At best he was only suspecting Christ to have a link with the Creator on the grounds of his ability to do wonders. Ephrem probably argued that Satan knew about Christ's ability to work wonders, since he challenged him to turn the stones into bread. In his commentary on the Diatessaron, Ephrem discusses the temptation of Jesus immediately after the description of his baptism by John. According to the Armenian version, he wrote in IV.5: 'When he saw, from the splendour of the light which appeared on the water, and the voice which came from heaven, that he who fulfils every need had gone down into the water, and that he had not come there to baptism as though he were someone in need, [Satan] reflected and said to himself, "As long as I have not tested him by combat through temptation I will not be able to identify him"'. Translation from Leloir's Latin translation of the Armenian version by McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

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- ¹⁰ The Syriac word for ‘horn’ is used to refer to the pinnacle of the temple. This is the same word Ephrem uses in his commentary on the Diatessaron IV.8a. The Peshitta text has the word ܚܘܦܐ, ‘wing’, ‘arm’, or ‘edge’. This word is, however, also used to refer to a pinnacle; or the side or horn of an altar (cf. J. Payne Smith (ed.), *A compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford (Clarendon), 1976, pp. 218-219.
- ¹¹ Ps 91:12.
- ¹² Ephrem uses exactly the same words in his commentary on the Diatessaron IV.8c. Text consulted from Leloir’s edition (*op. cit.*, p.26). McCarthy (*op. cit.*, p.88) translates: “It is not possible for a bird to fall, for the air beneath its wings is like the earth’.
- ¹³ The Ethpe‘el of this verb can also mean ‘to be crucified’.
- ¹⁴ There is a remarkable similarity between this stanza and paragraph IV.8b of Ephrem’s commentary on the Diatessaron. Almost exactly the same words are used in the two instances, but they are slightly rearranged in the poetic version.
- ¹⁵ There is a play on the word ܚܘܦܐ, ‘astute’, ‘wily’, used to describe the serpent in Genesis 3:1.
- ¹⁶ As McCarthy explains in translating Ephrem’s commentary on the Diatessaron, the word refers to the incomplete or needy condition of humanity and can be paraphrased ‘as though he were a mere human’. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.87 n.9.
- ¹⁷ There is sound-play in the use of the words ‘to be confused’ (ܠܚܘܦܐ) and ‘to be at peace’ (ܠܚܘܦܐ). This establishes the presence of an antithetic parallel beyond doubt.
- ¹⁸ The spectators.
- ¹⁹ There is a remarkable parallel between this stanza and Ephrem’s commentary on the Diatessaron, IV.8b.
- ²⁰ The concept of defeat must be interpreted against the backdrop of honour and shame as important social values in the area of the Mediterranean. The one who defeats someone else, gains or enhances his honour. Defeat in turn ‘means shame pure and simple’. Cf. J.M. Ford, article *s.v.* ‘Defeat’ in Pilch, J.J. & Malina, B.J. (eds.), *Handbook of biblical social values*, Peabody (Hendrickson), 1998, pp.45-48, p.45.
- ²¹ In his Commentary on Genesis, Ephrem speaks of ‘the serpent and that one who was in the serpent’ and he refers to Satan as ‘That one who was in the serpent ... (who spoke) through the serpent’. Cf. his commentary, section 18.4 and 19.1. The translation of the commentary used is that by Mathews & Amar in: K. McVey (ed.), *St. Ephraem the Syrian, selected prose works* (Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on our Lord,

Letter to Publius, translated by E.G. Mathews and J.P. Amar), Washington, (Catholic University of America Press), The Fathers of the Church Vol. 91, 1994, p.110.

22 Cf. Ford, *op. cit.*, p.45.

23 Beck (translation, *op. cit.*, p.39, n.4) notes in his translation that the word ܩܠܩܘܝܬܐ, ‘questions’, here and in stanza 4 (where it occurs in the singular) seems to refer to ‘requests, demands’ (‘Aufforderungen’), while the context in stanza 5 (also a singular form) suggests that it should be translated there with ‘question’. It seems that Ephrem uses the verb *and* the noun from this stem to draw attention to the similarity between Adam and Christ. In the case of Adam and Eve, Satan is described as *asking* them about the trees and their fruit. In the temptation of Christ, Satan makes *demands* or *requests*. But the demands are intended as questions, investigations, since the objective is to find out who and what Christ is and to get him to do sin. Cf. the use of words such as ‘to recognise’, ‘to search out’, ‘to discover’ used in stanzas 19 and 20.

24 This word, ‘athlete’, is often used to describe someone who engages in a battle with Satan. Cf., for instance, Jacob of Serugh’s description of Simeon the Stylite as ‘a triumphant athlete’ in line 6 of his poem on Simeon. Text consulted in C. Brockelmann, *Syrische Grammatik*, (Sechste vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage), Leipzig (Harrassowitz), 1951, Chrestomathie p. 102. Jacob, who died in 521 A.D., was perhaps the finest Syriac poet after Ephrem (cf. S. Brock, *A brief outline of Syriac literature*, Moran Etho 9, St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam, 1997, p.37).

25 Ephrem calls the encounter between Eve and the tempter in his Commentary on Genesis also a ‘momentary battle’ and a ‘brief contest’. Cf. McVey, *op. cit.*, p.110.

26 Adam and Eve, but especially Eve, are described by Ephrem as ‘simple-minded’, ‘infantile’, ‘inexperienced’. Eve was, in his view, a mere infant, because she was just created (cf. his Commentary on Genesis section 36.2-12; cf. also T. Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1-11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, with particular reference to the influence of Jewish exegetical tradition*, Lund (Gleerup), 1978, p. 98.

27 Ps 91:12.

28 Cf. p.43 of the article ‘Deception’ by J.H. Neyrey in Pilch & Malina, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-45.

29 Individual males had to acquire honour in public contests. It had to be claimed, gained, and defended before members of the peer group. Cf. the article ‘Honor/Shame’ by J. Plevnik in Pilch & Malina, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-115, especially p.107 in this regard.

30 As J. Neyrey puts it, ‘Honor comes to someone either by *ascription* by another (birth, adoption, appointment) or by one’s own *achievement*. Achieved honor derives from benefaction (Luke 7:5; Diod. Sic., 6.1.2),

military prowess, success at athletic games, and the like.’ Cf. J Neyrey, *Despising the shame of the cross: Honor and shame in the Johannine passion narrative*. In: *Honour and shame in the world of the Bible*, Semeia 68 (1994), an experimental journal for biblical criticism, pp.113-138, p.115.

³¹ ‘Shame, as the opposite of honor, is a claim to worth that is publicly denied and repudiated.’ Plevnik, article on ‘Honor/Shame’ (*op. cit.*), p. 107.

³² This is clear from quite a number of places in Ephrem’s hymns as Kronholm has conveniently illustrated: Adam ‘wanted to steal the [divine] glory’ (Nat XXI 15.3), ‘he wanted to possess the divine splendour’ (HdF XXXVIII 17.1), ‘he wanted to become greater than his Creator through the tree’ (Eccl XLV 32.1). Cf. T. Kronholm, *op. cit.*, p.103.

³³ In his commentary on Genesis, Ephrem carefully distinguishes between the cunning serpent and Satan who used him. He goes to great lengths to explain that, although the serpent was cleverer than all the animals, it was a fool in comparison to Adam and Eve who were the rulers over the animals. Cf. his commentary 2.15; McVey (*op. cit.*), p.107.

³⁴ As Kathleen McVey puts it, ‘Ephrem shows his true genius by the way he draws out the full significance or the inner sense of the words (of the biblical text) and sets them in their typological context within the rest of the sacred text. The bond that unites the two Testaments is so intimate that there is virtually no incident or detail in one which does not have its typological parallel in the other’. K. McVey (*op. cit.*), p.47. As Kronholm has done, it is probably more correct to speak of an ‘antitypological’ relationship between Adam and Eve on the one hand and Christ on the other. Cf. T. Kronholm, *op. cit.*, p.105.

³⁵ At the same time, Ephrem hints at the ontological difference between Jesus and Satan when he uses the word ܠܥܝܢܐ in stanzas 19 and 20. In his anti-Arian polemics, Ephrem often expresses disgust at any human attempt to ‘investigate’ the nature of God. Cf. Brock, ‘The luminous eye’ (*op. cit.*), p. 26. Satan’s inability to do so thus places him in the same category as the Arians and it reflects on his status as a creature. In his commentary on the Diatessaron, Ephrem notes that God made (ܥܒܕܐ) Satan in the beginning and that he was then ‘in need and a worshipper’ (IV.8b). The translation is quoted from McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.87.

³⁶ As Brock (‘The luminous eye’, *op. cit.*, p.32) puts it, ‘Ephrem perceives a detailed pattern of complementarity between the processes of fall and restoration: all the individual details of the Fall are reversed, so that we are presented with a series of contrasted types, with Adam/Christ and Eve/Mary as protagonists’.

³⁷ In his commentary on the Diatessaron (IV.6), Ephrem states quite clearly at this point that ‘He opened up the path of fasting for us so that we might

conquer [Satan's] wiles through it'. The translation quoted is that of McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.86.