

THE POET AS PREACHER: ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN'S HYMN *DE VIRGINITATE XXXI* AS A COHERENT, AESTHETIC, AND PERSUASIVE POETIC DISCOURSE¹

Phil J. Botha
(University of Pretoria)

Abstract

This article consists of a translation and poetic analysis of Ephrem the Syrian's teaching song On Virginitate 31. The Syriac text and an English translation are provided and short notes are given on the structure of the hymn. Its rhetorical and persuasive qualities are subsequently investigated with the aim of substantiating the claim that the hymn's rhetorical features such as polarities, metaphors, analogies, parallels, antitheses, allusions to scripture, and direct appeals on the audience must have had a great impact and an enduring effect on Syriac Christianity.

1. Introduction: The hymn *De Virginitate XXXI* in context

This particular hymn is demarcated from its surroundings by its title ('On the birth of our Lord') and by the subscript at the end ('Completed is the one *Madrasha* on the Birthday of our Lord'). The theme of the first stanza is indeed the double birth of Christ, namely his visible birth and his eternal 'birth' from the 'hidden womb.' The hymn itself, however, covers more than Christ's birth.² It describes in metaphoric language the role of Christ in salvation history and in the life of the Church. It polemicizes against Jewish religion and Christian heresy and urges believers to worship God with the proper attitude of humility in all aspects of orthodox doctrine. The first stanza is nevertheless a meaningful introduction to the hymn, since the symbolic language in the hymn proper should be understood as the correct way to meditate on the relationship between the two births of Christ, providing an alternative to a speculative inquiry into the matter such as is denounced in the first stanza.

The melody chosen for this hymn is called 'I am afraid to sing praise,' a melody which was thus first used in a different hymn, but which seems to exemplify Ephrem's modesty, humility and respect for God.³ Perhaps one could be forgiven the irony of choosing this particular hymn for the purpose of illustrating Ephrem's proficiency as a poet and a theologian at the seventeen hundredth celebration of his birth.

The title of the collection, *On Virginit*y, seems to be applicable to only a small group of hymns in the collection and not related to this particular hymn at all.⁴ According to Beck,⁵ Hymns 13–30 in this collection form a relatively close-knit unit around which various smaller groups and individual hymns were clustered. The last four hymns of this kernel group, namely hymns 27–30, have the symbols of the Lord as theme,⁶ and it is because of this that hymns 4–11 (with the same theme) were attached to the beginning of this group. Hymn 12 was probably inserted between 4–11 and 13–30 because of its thematic links with 13–14 (on the temptation of Christ by Satan). Hymns 24–25 are the only ones in the central group on the theme of virginity and because of this, 1–3 (on the same subject) were inserted right at the beginning. On the other side of the kernel group, hymns 31–41 form a loose unity with various connections to the central group. Within this group, 32–37 form a metrical unity. The hymns of this group in general describe the life of Jesus from his childhood onwards. They use important events and especially the names of cities as stations in the story of Jesus, culminating in Jerusalem, its rejection and the election of the Church. Hymn 38 is isolated from the preceding and succeeding songs; it explains why the daughters of Lot decided to conceive from their father without his knowing it. Hymns 39 and 40 (read together) constitute an acrostic hymn on the meaning of Christ, while 41 is a similar but incomplete acrostic. Hymns 42–50 form a group around the theme of Jonah and Nineveh; and 51–52 seem to be the result of an attempt to end the collection in the same way as the hymns *De Ecclesia* in terms of contents and metre.

This exposition of the structure of the collection can be represented schematically as follows:

1–3	Virginity	
4–11	Symbols of the Lord	
12	Temptation of Christ	
13–14	Satan against Christ and Church	13–30 Kernel group with the same melody
15–16	Characters and places in the Gospels	
17–19	Shechem’s role in salvation history	
20–21	The city of Ephraim	
22–23	The Samaritan woman	
24–26	Virginity: Mary, Anna; John etcetera	
27–30	Symbols of the Lord: Harps	
31	Hymn on the significance of Christ (linked to his birth); separate melody	31–41 Loose unity with links to the kernel

32–37	Metrical unity, describing the childhood, life and deeds of Christ	group
38	The daughters of Lot	
39–40	Thanksgiving for Christ (one acrostic hymn)	
41	Similar, incomplete acrostic (Aleph-Zain)	
42–50	Jonah and Nineveh	
51–52	Addendum to establish similarity to the hymns <i>De Ecclesia</i>	

Although there is thus a link between hymn 31 – on the birth of Christ and his meaning for humanity – and the rest of this loose group (about Christ’s childhood, life and deeds in general), it seems sufficiently disconnected from the rest to make it the subject of an individual investigation.

The name of the melody used for this hymn seems to be not clearly readable in the principal manuscript, but Beck made it out to be *dâhel nâ d-’êmar shubhâ*.⁷ The stanzas consist of eleven cola of five syllables each, a pattern also found in the hymns *De Nativitate* 21 and *De Fide* 4–9.⁸

The hymn seems partly to have been meant as a song of praise to God for the birth of Jesus Christ and the blessings he brought to humanity. This is evident from the use of ‘*shubhâ*’ in the name of the melody: ‘I am afraid to sing praise,’ and in the response: ‘Praise be to you, my Lord, and to your Father!’ The hymn does indeed list the beneficent qualities and saving actions of Christ (‘you are...,’ ‘you do...’) and the dominant stylistic device seems to be that of metaphor in which Christ is always the subject which is compared with a positive symbol or element taken from Scripture or human experience. The last two stanzas consequently also respectively end and begin with a rhetorical question about who would be able to ‘pour out’ (thanksgiving, praise) to Christ for everything that he did in his mercy and is doing ‘every day’ and ‘each hour.’

One should not forget, however, the 14 macarisms (‘Blessed is he who...’) found within the hymn. They constitute subtle admonitions not to miss out on the particular soteriological effect for which Christ is praised in each separate case, and play an important role in the hymn. They change the character of the hymn from pure praise into a mixture of praise, admonition, encouragement, and reproach. To this should be added the expository and teaching character of the hymn, an aspect reflected in the name of the

genre (*madrashe*) and in the many allusions to Scripture. It thus seems that one could expect all the ingredients of a good sermon (including the response of the congregation!) in a song such as this one.

2. Translation of the hymn and a note on its structure

DE VIRGINITATE XXXI	
<p>ב לילגה דהוי ב לילגה דהויגל אור דאורי זכור</p>	<p>On the birth of Our Lord, On the melody 'I am afraid to sing praise.'</p>
<p>אסלמח זכור לביגלגה בלגה ח דהויגל בלגה בלגה זכור דהויגל אסלמח זכור לביגלגה בלגה ח דהויגל זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה</p>	<p>¹ You gave life, O Christ, / to creation through your birth, that (birth) that occurred visibly / from the womb of flesh. You have bewildered, O Christ, / knowledge through your birth, that one that shone from eternity / from the hidden womb.⁹ I marvelled at you over both – / that they found life in you, those who erred; and that they erred¹⁰ in you, those who scrutinize.</p>
<p>אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה</p>	<p>Response: Praise be to you, my Lord, and to your Father!</p>
<p>אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה</p>	<p>² You are the good Treasurer / of your merciful Father, in your hand is the key / of the treasure-house of his mercy.¹¹ You open and let enter / the offerings of all people. You open and bring out / atonement for everyone.¹² Blessed is he who brings in / his offering through your hand and takes mercy in its stead!¹³</p>
<p>אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה</p>	<p>³ For through you is served in the holy of holies the Being,¹⁴ you cause the sacrifice to rise / and the libation you sprinkle out. Do not reject our sacrifice / because of the defects that it has. Our prayer is the sacrifice / and our libation the weeping. Blessed is he who lets rise / his sacrifices through your hand and the smell of whose incense is pleasant through you!</p>
<p>אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה אסלמח זכור בלגה זכור בלגה</p>	<p>⁴ Purifying Sprinkling, / atoning Hyssop, that atoned all sins / through the baptism of water.¹⁵ Unable was the sprinklings / of the</p>

<p>ל אצטע אַסעס וואָס פּלען געהערן צו אַסעס פּאַפּוסטן אַסעס אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן</p>	<p>Levites all together to atone the one people / with their weak hyssops. Blessed are the peoples, / for the hyssop became mercy and purified them through compassion.</p>
<p>אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן</p>	<p>5 Desirable Offering / that was offered in our stead, sanctifying Sacrifice / that sacrificed himself, Libation that caused to pass over / the blood of calves and sheep, Lamb that became itself / sacrificing Priest! Blessed is he whose petition / becomes incense and through you offers it to your Father!</p>
<p>אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן</p>	<p>6 The law of the people / rejected defects of what is visible.¹⁶ The mercy that he chose for the peoples / tolerates their defects. The defects are not chosen by him; / for the penitent he accepts (them). Your beauty, my Lord, which is without defect, / does not marry our defects. Blessed is he who cleanses / his blemishes through your hand and becomes completely beautiful completely in you!</p>
<p>אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן</p>	<p>7 Enriching Treasure / that came to the needy ones, abundant Fountain / that flowed to those who thirst, Wise Instruction / that came to the simple ones, Remembrance that chased / false worship / forgetfulness from creation! Blessed is he who knows / who you are, O Christ, and obtains you and is obtained by you!</p>
<p>אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן אַפּאַפּוסטן</p>	<p>8 You are Trust, for on you / despair came to rest, you are the Rock on which / the building of the peoples was built,¹⁷ the Curdled Milk in which was gathered / scattered opinion,¹⁸ the Justifying/acquitting / Wall that rose before the weak ones. Blessed is he who realises / how and how much you have loved him and cries and feels ashamed because</p>

<p>הַבְּנֵי הַיָּמִין הַלְּוִי</p>	<p>he wronged you!</p>
<p>אֵיזֶה לְעוֹלָם הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו מִמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו לְעוֹלָם לֹא מֵסוּבָה כִּלְכֵּל הֵן אֵיזֶה לְפָנָיו לְעוֹלָם לְשׁוֹן אֵין אֲדָמָה, שֶׁמֶט לְמֵוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו לְעוֹלָם, לְעוֹלָם הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו וְהַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו</p>	<p>9 Equalising Gate which is also the Discerning one, for in this world / everybody enters through him to the truth, but in the other world / he allows to enter discerningly to life. Here his mercy makes equal; / there he separates through his judgement¹⁹. Blessed is he who always / remembers his departure and increases the provisions for his journey!</p>
<p>הַיָּמִין הַלְּוִי הַלְּוִי הַלְּוִי הַיָּמִין הַלְּוִי הַלְּוִי הַלְּוִי לֹא וְהַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו לֹא מֵסוּבָה הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו לְעוֹלָם, לְעוֹלָם הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו</p>	<p>10 Reproving Furnace / that does not accept on face value,²⁰ that investigated and tested and distinguished / between the people and the peoples.²¹ The deceit of the people entered / and it was tested and rejected. The truth of the peoples entered / and it was found to be true and was elected. Blessed is he who becomes / his own judge and in you reproves himself!</p>
<p>אֵין לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו וְהַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו לְעוֹלָם, לְעוֹלָם הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו</p>	<p>11 O Yoke that freed / from slavery the subjected freeborn! They are content while they serve / in hidden slavery,²² they only hate the yoke / of visible slavery.²³ They sold their freedom / and bought their slavery. Blessed is he who saves himself / from his captivity with your help and catches his captor through you!</p>
<p>הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו לְעוֹלָם, לְעוֹלָם הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו</p>	<p>12 Clear Mirror / that was set up for the peoples!²⁴ They acquired a secret eye, / approached and looked in it. Because they saw their own detestableness, / they reproached themselves. Their blemishes they washed in it, / their decorations shined in it. Blessed is he who reproaches / his detestableness in your beauty and imprints your image on himself!²⁵</p>
<p>הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו הַמֵּוֹלֵד לְפָנָיו</p>	<p>13 Grape-Cluster of mercy / that was found in the vineyard that had rejected the labour / and had refused to bear fruit!²⁶ To him who gave bitterness to her, / she accorded her sweetness.</p>

<p>אדגז יוד סמכב סק תש ליתכ לבכמ, לך גאג, ת עובת זכמ נל אודל כמ</p>	<p>She was pressed and gave / the medicine of life to the peoples. Blessed is he who drinks / from her sober wine and does not become extravagant se- cretly!²⁷</p>
<p>טב עפז גזכב בל ותר שתר מכב לטר גטר גל גלר לתור מ, זודת לללל גאגשזו כגמ גרל מר כגגל לטר גרל נככ לבכמ, לך גרל ת לטר כגכ גרל כמ לללל</p>	<p>14 Beautiful Ear of Wheat / that grew up between the detestable weeds! She gave the bread of life / without exertion to those who hunger.²⁸ She broke the curse / that bound Adam, Who had to eat in sweat / the bread of pain and thorns. Blessed is he who eats / from his blessed bread and removes from himself the curse!</p>
<p>ללל מרל גור ללל זגז אגל מסק עכמ מר ללל גטר זכב זסק גטר זלל סמ גלל ת מ זגז לללל גלל לבכמ, לך גמ ללל ללל בלל גמ שגלל</p>	<p>15 Skilled Sailor / who has conquered the troubled sea! Your illustrious cross came,²⁹ / it became the rudder of life. Your wind of mercy blew, / it steered the ships away from the troubled sea / to the harbour of peace.³⁰ Blessed is he who becomes / his own sailor and keeps and brings out his treasure!</p>
<p>זקמ גל מלמ גב זכב כזממ גל מלל גלמ מ גב ללל זכב ללל לללל זכב זקמ ללל זכב ללל לללל זכב זקמ ללל זכב זקמ לללל לללל גלל גללל</p>	<p>16 But if we leave everything / that the Good One did in his mercy, let us look at these things / which he does for us every day: so many tasteful things for the mouth, / so many beautiful things for the eye, so many sounds for the ear, / so many scents for smelling! Who is able to pour out / in relation to the mercy of these small things?</p>
<p>זכב מרל גופז זכב סקלל כמל א גלל זכב זכב זכב זקל לל מרל גופז זכב זקל סקל סקל זכב גלל א זכב לללל גב זכב זקל לל זכב זקל זכב זקל זכב זקל</p>	<p>17 Who is able to repay / the myriad of debts per day? even if a great fountain of words / would break loose in him, he would not be able to pour out / in words and sounds the great compensation of each hour ... __³¹ O, Good One who was wronged, / who, while he is deprived (of gratitude) every day does not stop to do good!</p> <p>Completed is the one Madrasa on the Birthday of our Lord.</p>

The structure of the hymn can be summed up as follows:

Stanza	Description of the contents
1	Christ's visible and invisible birth that bring life to some and cause some to err
2–3	Christ the Treasurer who lets offerings enter and brings out mercy and atonement from God's treasure-house
4	Christ the atoning Hyssop that atones sins through baptism, replacing the inefficient hyssop of the Jewish people
5	Christ the Sacrifice, Libation, Lamb, and Priest who came in the place of sacrifices
6	Mercy that replaced the law accepts defects but is not affected by them
7–8	Christ the Treasure, Fountain, Instruction, Remembrance, Trust, Rock, Curdled Milk, and Justifying Wall
9–12	Christ the equalising Gate, reproving Furnace, Yoke that frees, and clear Mirror that distinguishes between the people and the peoples
13–14	Christ the Grape-Cluster of mercy and Ear of Wheat that formed on ungrateful Jewish soil
15	Christ the skilled Sailor who used the cross as a rudder of life and let the wind of mercy blow to bring ships to the harbour of peace
16–17	Thanksgiving for the small mercies of taste, vision, sound, and smell in addition to the acts of salvation

Except for the very first and the last two stanzas, each stanza also contains a macarism. All of these are formulated in terms of an individual ('Blessed is he who...'), except the one in the fourth stanza which is plural in form and praises the 'peoples' who received mercy and compassion instead of hyssop. Stanzas 2–15 can be described as a response to the problem stated in stanza 1 – the only way to describe the relationship between the two births of Christ and his work as mediator is in terms of symbols given in Scripture and in nature. Stanzas 16–17 provide a fitting conclusion, since the 'small mercies' of taste, vision, sound, and smell are also sources of many more symbolic pointers to Christ.³²

3. Polarities, the methods of constructing them and their rhetorical uses

Ephrem's predilection for polarities is well-known and need not be argued.³³ Let me begin by summarising the important polarities in this hymn.

I will then try to analyse the construction of one or two polarities and point out some obvious effects this approach and its rhetorical manifestations must have had on a singing or listening audience.

The one, all-pervading polarity that characterises all Ephrem's work is the opposition *God versus man*. All God's characteristics – his holiness, transcendence, abundance, mercy, love, beauty, and goodness – distinguish and separate him from humanity. Some investigators have referred to this polarity as the ontological gap.³⁴ God as the Creator is different from all creation and every creature, even angels. Christ is on the same side as God of this gap and man should always keep that in mind. Man should always remember that he himself is a creature and should thus display the necessary deference and modesty in whatever he does, even and perhaps especially in making theological pronouncements. It is his consciousness of this gap between God and man that made Ephrem the humble person he was. In this particular hymn, this polarity causes Ephrem to warn his congregation by implication not to probe the hidden, eternal birth of Christ, since to 'scrutinize' Christ is to 'err' (1). But this polarity is also a cause for gratefulness, since only through the mediation of Christ as both God and man can we, with our defects, minister to God, 'the Being,' in the holy of holies. Through Christ's hand our sacrifices of prayer and weeping rise and our incense becomes pleasant (2–3). Only through the hand of Christ can we clean our blemishes and become beautiful (6) and can we share in the richness and abundance that we lack so deeply (7). Stanza 12 also describes our detestableness which becomes visible when viewed in the clear mirror of Christ's beauty and causes us to reproach ourselves and imprint his image on us. In stanza 17 Ephrem uses this polarity to urge the audience to be grateful for God's mercy – our inability to repay the myriad of debts per day urges us to *stop wronging him who *never stops to do good* to us.*

The polarity God versus man is thus used in this hymn to keep members of the congregation from straying into speculation; but also (and more extensively) to point out the mediating role of Christ who bridged the gorge, handing out God's gifts of atonement, grace, compassion and mercy to mankind and sanctifying the human offerings of prayer, petition, and weeping by cleansing the blemishes of the penitent.

Another polarity often found in Ephrem's hymns is that between the two dispensations – that of the *Jewish people in the Old Testament*, characterised by symbols, and that of the *Church from the 'peoples,'* characterised by the truth that appeared in Christ. Where the first polarity would be lo-

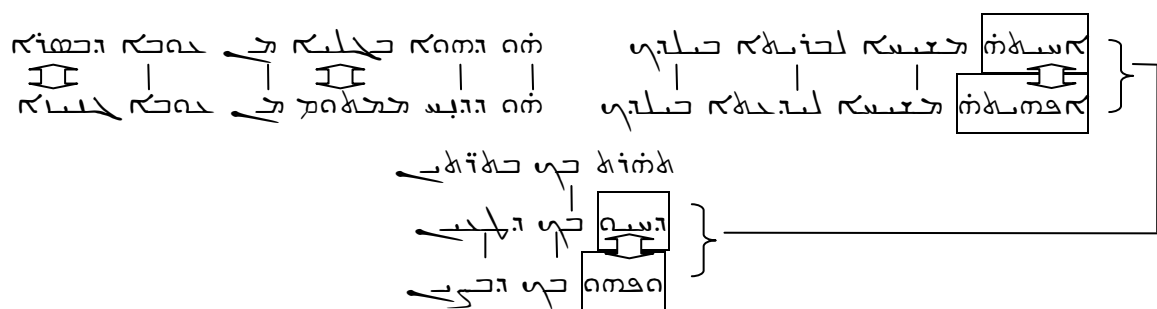
cated on the vertical axis, this one refers to the horizontal one on the road from Eden to Eschatology.³⁵ The presence of this polarity is signalled by the use of ‘the one *people* with their weak hyssops’ in contrast to ‘the *peoples*’ in stanza 4. In stanza 5 Ephrem calls Christ the ‘sanctifying Offering that sacrificed himself, Libation that caused the blood of calves and sheep to pass over, Lamb that became sacrificing Priest itself.’ This refers to the two dispensations, and the objective with this contrast is to engender gratefulness in his Christian audience rather than to vilify the Jews as (we have to acknowledge) is the case in his work sometimes. As he formulates it in stanza 4, ‘the *hyssop* became *mercy*.’ In stanza 6 ‘the *law* of the people’ is similarly contrasted with ‘the *mercy* that he chose for the peoples.’ The same polarity is also present in stanzas 10–14. He contrasts the ‘*deceit*’ of the *people* which was *rejected* by God and the ‘*truth*’ of the *peoples* which was found to be true and was *elected* (10). The Church is described as consisting of those who accepted Christ as the yoke that frees from ‘*hidden* slavery’ and the Jews (by implication) as those who only hated the yoke of ‘*visible* slavery’ and consequently ‘*sold* their *freedom* and *bought* their *slavery*’ (11). The ‘peoples’ saw their own detestableness in Jesus as in a clear mirror, while the (Jewish) people (again by implication) did not acquire the secret eye with which they could see this (12).

In stanzas 13 and 14, the polarity is not primarily between the people and the peoples, but between God’s loving attention to Israel and their rejection of his love. Two biblical contexts are used to describe this: the parable of the vineyard from Isa 5:1–7 (cf. also v. 20), and the parable of the wheat that grew up between the weeds taken from Matt 13:24–30 and parallel passages. It is clear, however, that the polarity between the people and the peoples still plays a role in these two stanzas, since the ‘peoples’ are mentioned explicitly in stanza 13 – the vineyard rejected the labour (of God as the vine-keeper), giving bitterness to the ‘grape-cluster of mercy’ while she (Christ) gave sweetness to the vineyard (Israel). She (the grape-cluster) was subsequently ‘pressed’ and gave the ‘medicine of life to the peoples.’ Since there is a connection between the grape-cluster that gave her ‘wine’ in 13 and the ‘ear of wheat’ that gave ‘bread’ in 14, the ‘detestable weeds’ among which the ear of wheat grew up must be interpreted as the Jewish people, and the implication is that ‘those who hunger’ in stanza 14 must refer to the Christians.

One other polarity should probably be mentioned in passing only, simply to show that almost every stanza in this hymn alludes to or describes one polarity or another. The antithesis between ‘*visible*’ and ‘*hidden*’ in stanzas 1

and 11 refers to another polarity which has implications for the vertical as well as the horizontal theological axes. Stanza 1 refers to Christ's visible birth from the womb of flesh and his 'hidden' birth that 'shone from eternity from the hidden womb.' This seems to refer to Christ's eternal relationship to God the Father, a matter which has 'bewildered' knowledge and caused those who 'scrutinize' to err.³⁶ This probably refers in the first place to the Arians who professed to know everything about the relationship between the Father and the Son. But even orthodox Christians who 'scrutinized,' 'wandered' or 'erred' are implicated.³⁷ In stanza 11, the contrast is between spiritual (hidden) slavery and visible (physical) slavery. Israel detested subjugation under the Egyptians, but (by implication) became slaves (of sin)³⁸ by rejecting their Messiah.³⁹

Although a full discussion is not possible, it is imperative that some attention should be given to the way in which polarities are formed. By way of an example, the polarity formed in the first stanza will be discussed. In this case, the first eight cola are used to form an antithetic parallel – the first four feet are parallel to the second four feet. Morphological sequence, repetition of words and suffixes, and semantic similarity and opposition are used to mark the parallels and antitheses, whereas similarity of sounds (rhyme) in corresponding sections of the parallelism enhances the semantic opposition. The antithetic word pairs are located at the beginning of the parallel and at its end, so that the contrast is highlighted in this way. In the ninth colon there follows then a formula that Ephrem often uses to draw attention to a paradoxical statement: 'I marvelled....'⁴⁰ The paradox is subsequently formulated in a short, antithetic parallel which spells out the consequences of the earlier, longer parallel and forms a secondary parallel to it as well:



The paradox consists therein that those who erred, were given life; while those who scrutinize, erred. Two different words are used for 'err' or 'go astray' – *f'a'* and *pha'* – so that one cannot describe this as circular reasoning (those who scrutinize err, therefore they must live since those who err, were given life), but the meaning of the two verbs are close enough to es-

establish a link between the two lines. The two verbs in the perfect tense in this final parallel, to ‘live’ and to ‘wander,’ are related to the first two parallel words in the stanza (‘you gave life’ and ‘you bewildered’), so that one can deduce that those who ‘live’ are they who were given life because they acknowledged lack of understanding and they who ‘erred’ because they scrutinize, are those who profess to understand the hidden birth of Christ and are consequently bewildered by God. The rhetorical effect of all this is that the two aspects of the polarity are outlined in sharp contrast.⁴¹ A member of the audience would want to be one of those who are given life, thus to acknowledge lack of comprehension rather than to be inquisitive about Christ’s ‘hidden’ birth, and thus to go astray by ‘scrutinizing’ something that is out of bounds.

It seems fair to state in general that antithetic parallels,⁴² repetition, rhyme, sound play, and paradox are the favourite rhetorical devices for constructing polarities. Positive statement and denial,⁴³ positive and negative connotation (which could be juxtaposed in parallel or in chiasmic form),⁴⁴ and active and passive constructions⁴⁵ are also sometimes used to give relief to polarity. Analysis of one other stanza will have to suffice. I choose stanza 11 for this purpose. A literal translation of stanza 11 reads like this:

O yoke that set free the freeborn ones who were subjected!
 They are content while they **serve** in secret slavery,
 they only hate the **yoke** of open slavery.
 They *sold* their **freedom** and *bought* their **slavery**.
 Blessed is he who has rescued (himself) with your help (from)
 his captivity
 and his captor through you has caught!

There are about seven sets of antithetic word pairs in this stanza: ‘set free’ vs. ‘subjected’; ‘are content’ vs. ‘hate’; ‘secret slavery’ vs. ‘open slavery’; ‘sold’ vs. ‘bought’; ‘freedom’ vs. ‘slavery’; ‘rescued’ vs. ‘captivity’; and ‘captor’ vs. ‘caught.’ Sound play and rhyme are created by using the same form of verbs and nouns and by using cognate forms of certain stems.

One of the biblical contexts alluded to, is John 8:32–34 where the words for ‘make free,’ ‘freeborn,’ and ‘slavery’ also occur. Against this background, the stanza seems to refer to the fact that the Jews declined Jesus’ offer to ‘free’ them through his word since they were the offspring of Abraham and had never been enslaved by anyone. They did not realise, however, that they were slaves of sin (cf. John 8:34). A polarity is thus formed between those Jews who were ‘freeborn,’ but were unwittingly

subjected to slavery to sin, and Christians who willingly took up the yoke of Jesus to subject themselves to his authority and with his help freed themselves from slavery to sin. This polarity, constructed with the help of antithetical word pairs, is enhanced by two paradoxical statements or oxymorons.⁴⁶ These are contained in the statements: ‘They *sold* their **freedom** and *bought* their **slavery**,’ and ‘(him who) his **captor** through you has **caught!**’ The mind objects against these statements, since freedom is usually bought, not sold and a captor takes captive, but cannot be taken captive. The purpose of the paradoxical statements is to express disbelief in (and engender ridicule about) the attitude of the Jewish people who declined freedom and embraced slavery. It may contain an allusion to the payment made to have Jesus delivered to the chief priests. Christians, in contrast, ‘arrest’ sin by accepting the yoke of Jesus⁴⁷ who sets them free from their ‘captor.’

4. The use of metaphor

Apart from antithesis and parallelism, the most salient poetic device in this hymn must certainly be the use of metaphor. About 22 different metaphors are used to describe the positive quality and beneficent effect of Christ on the church, and an additional 12 metaphors are used to describe additional circumstances or effects of his work. A number of times the metaphor develops into an extended metaphor, parable, or allegory, describing a process or episode from biblical history. Some of the metaphors originate from the symbolic interpretation of elements in Scripture, but many are taken from common human experience.⁴⁸ The following table presents a summary of the metaphoric comparisons in the hymn:

Stanza	Metaphorical or allegorical comparison
2–3	Christ is the good <i>Treasurer</i> , has the Key of the <i>Treasure-house</i> of mercy, he allows offerings to enter and hands out atonement for everyone; he causes <i>Sacrifice</i> (prayer) and <i>Incense</i> to rise and sprinkles out <i>Libation</i> (our <i>libation</i> is weeping)
4	Christ is the purifying <i>Sprinkling</i> and atoning <i>Hyssop</i> , baptism is such a sprinkling
5	Christ is the desirable <i>Sacrifice</i> , the <i>Libation</i> , the <i>Lamb</i> that became the <i>Priest</i> itself
7	Christ is the enriching <i>Treasure</i> for the needy, the abundant <i>Fountain</i> for the thirsty, the wise <i>Instruction</i> for the simple, <i>Remembrance</i> that banished forgetfulness
8	Christ is <i>Trust</i> , the <i>Rock</i> on which the church is built, the <i>Curdled</i>

	<i>Milk</i> which gathers the distracted mind, the <i>justifying Wall</i> that stood up before the weak ones
9	Christ is the <i>equalising Gate</i> which allows all to enter to truth, but also the <i>discerning</i> one which allows only some to enter into life in the other world
10	Christ is the reproving <i>Furnace</i> which distinguishes between deceit and truth
11	Christ is the <i>Yoke</i> that frees from slavery
12	Christ is the clear <i>Mirror</i> that allows vision of blemishes and detestableness to the secret eye
13	Christ is the <i>Grape-Cluster</i> of mercy in the <i>Vineyard</i> (= Israel); the grapes were pressed and gave the <i>Medicine of life</i> , the sober <i>Wine</i>
14	Christ is the <i>Ear of Wheat</i> that grew between the <i>Weeds</i> (= Israel); the wheat that gave the <i>Bread of Life</i> to those who hunger
15	Christ is the skilled <i>Sailor</i> who conquered the troubled sea, his cross is the <i>Rudder</i> of life, the <i>Wind</i> is his mercy, Christians are <i>Ships</i> that sail to the <i>Harbour</i> of peace

Metaphor is a literary device that serves to entertain,⁴⁹ but also to explain. In Ephrem's hymns, however, one also has to acknowledge the function of metaphors to *hide*: metaphoric language serves to express God's hiddenness. The fact that the metaphors constantly change in this hymn suggests that God in Christ is constantly changing the 'names' with which he clothes himself in order to teach us that 'that is not the likeness of his true being.'⁵⁰ The explanatory function of metaphors in this hymn can be seen from the fact that some of them are compounded metaphors or allegories in which the basis of comparison consists of more than one element⁵¹ (e.g. 'you are the good *Treasurer* of your merciful Father, in your hand is the *Key* of the *Treasure-house of his mercy*, you open...'). Other examples are the *Grape-cluster of mercy*, the *Ear of wheat* that grew up between the detestable weeds, and the *skilled Sailor* whose cross became the '*Rudder of life*,' while his '*Wind of mercy*' brought the ships from the troubled sea into the '*Harbour of peace*.' A metaphor such as '*Wind of mercy*' actually explains the metaphor – the first element provides the *secundum comparationis* (the object with which a comparison is made, namely 'wind'), but the second ('mercy') identifies the *primum comparationis* (the matter which is compared).⁵² '*Harbour of peace*' similarly identifies 'peace' as the harbour to which 'mercy' brings Christians like a wind would guide ships. The use of such metaphors is obviously designed to explain the impact of Christ's work of redemption in aesthetically pleasing⁵³ and memorable language.

A feature of many of the metaphors used in this hymn is the positive connotation given to the *secundum comparationis* by the addition of an attributive adjective. Examples are Christ being referred to as ‘the *good* Treasurer,’ the ‘*desirable* Sacrifice,’ ‘*enriching* Treasure,’ ‘*abundant* Fountain,’ ‘*wise* Instruction,’ ‘*clear* Mirror,’ ‘*beautiful* Ear of wheat,’ ‘*skilled* Sailor, and ‘*illustrious* Cross.’ This hints at the purpose of constructing these metaphors, namely to instil feelings of gratefulness and awe in the audience.⁵⁴ In one instance, a negative qualification is also used to highlight the positive aspect: The wind of mercy steers ships away from the ‘*troubled* Sea’ to the Harbour of *peace*. Attributive participles used in the same way usually describe the positive effect of Christ’s work: ‘*purifying* Sprinkling,’ ‘*atoning* Hyssop,’ ‘*sanctifying* Offering,’ ‘*equalising* (and *discerning*) Gate,’ and ‘*reproving* Furnace’ are examples of this.

Ephrem’s masterful technique of listing such symbolic titles of Christ is illustrated by the way in which he breaks up a series of stanzas in which one or two titles are given, which are then explicated at length (2–6, 9–15) by the insertion of two stanzas that list the titles in staccato succession with only a short explication of each (7–8). This is done not only for the sake of variation,⁵⁵ but the bundling together of admiring titles also enhances a feeling of adoration in the audience. Throughout the whole hymn the author also makes use of foregrounding (by placing the metaphor at the beginning of the line)⁵⁶ to reinforce the idea that the hymn constitutes a list of attributes of Christ that all call for adulation. Only in stanza 11 is the title preceded by the exclamation ‘O!’ which further enhances this feeling. But with reference to the first stanza, where Christ’s hiddenness is hinted at, we have to conclude that the function of bringing together so many metaphors in one hymn is aimed at emphasizing the fact that we know Christ only metaphorically and symbolically.

5. The use of rhetorical questions

In stanzas 16 and 17, Ephrem uses two rhetorical questions to express our inability to repay (thank) God for all his mercies. The long list of blessings given to the Church is concluded very elegantly in these stanzas where Ephrem no longer addresses Christ in the second person, but turns to his audience in order to achieve closure.⁵⁷ God is referred to in the third person when the author calls attention to all the things he ‘does for us every day’: taste, vision, sound, and smell.⁵⁸ He then ends the 16th stanza by asking ‘Who is able to *pour out* in relation to mercy for these small things?’⁵⁹ In

the final stanza, he continues in this vein by beginning with another rhetorical question: ‘Who is able to repay the myriad of debts per day?’ before stating explicitly that no one would be able to ‘*pour out*’ in words and sounds the great compensation of each hour. Chiasmus is established by the repetition of certain words in these two concluding stanzas.⁶⁰ The answer to the two questions is an implied ‘no one,’ leaving the audience with a sense of gratefulness to God for his ‘small’ mercies of every hour and, consequently, a feeling of even greater inadequacy to express gratitude for his ‘big’ mercies.⁶¹

6. Allusions to Scripture

Although Ephrem nowhere in this hymn uses an explicit quotation from Scripture, it contains numerous allusions to texts from the Old and New Testaments. His poetry is steeped in biblical language, giving it an air of authority and truth. It also helps him to demonstrate the inter-connectedness of Scripture and nature in their function of providing us with symbolic pointers to God, and gives a significant exegetical angle to the hymn. Important biblical contexts for this hymn seem to be Heb 9:3–19 (used in the description of Christ as mediator in worship in stanzas 2–6), Isa 5:1–7 and 20 (used in the description of Christ as the grape-cluster of mercy in stanza 13), and Matt 13:24–30 (alluded to in the description of Christ as the beautiful ear of wheat that grew up between the detestable weeds). Other possible allusions have been indicated with footnotes in the translation. To demonstrate aspects of his technique of allusion, stanzas 13 and 14 will be investigated.

In composing stanza 13, Ephrem selected two contexts from Scripture which would allow him to represent the beneficent effects of Christ as it is present in the Eucharist. From the Old Testament he chose Isa 5, the song of the prophet about his friend’s vineyard. This text tells of God’s efforts with his people, represented as a good vine planted in well-prepared soil (the land of Israel), but one that rewarded him with wild grapes, namely unrighteous behaviour. Ephrem then combines this context with New Testament Eucharistic sections to depict Christ as the cluster of good grapes⁶² that was found in the bad vineyard, the wine of which, when it was pressed (when he was crucified),⁶³ produced the ‘medicine of life’ or ‘sober wine’ which she (the cluster of grapes) gave to ‘the peoples.’⁶⁴ Murray identifies the origin of the ‘bitterness’ as the gall offered to Christ on the cross.⁶⁵ In stanza 14, Ephrem then begins with a New Testament context (Matt 13:24–30, the parable of the tares among the wheat) and combines this with an

Old Testament context, namely Gen 3:18–19. The weeds (the same Syriac word is used as that found in the Peshitta of Matt 13) are explained as the Jewish people and Christ is described as the ear of wheat that grew up between them. This ear of wheat produced the ‘bread of life’ (this is parallel to the ‘medicine of life’ in the previous stanza) which she gave (the verb also points to a parallel with the previous stanza) – without their having to toil for it⁶⁶ – to those who hunger (the peoples). This broke the curse of eating ‘in sweat the bread of pain and thorns,’ the words from Genesis 3. However, ‘thorns’ here is not only a reference to Gen 3:18–19, but also to Isa 5:6 where the vineyard is abandoned to overgrow with thorns and weeds, establishing a connection between stanzas 13 and 14.⁶⁷ In the process, Ephrem achieves a number of things – he uses New Testament contexts to interpret texts from the Old Testament, demonstrating the symbolic meaning of those Old Testament contexts and how the symbols were fulfilled in Christ who gave new symbols in the elements of the Eucharist. Christ as the bread of life is interpreted as the removal of the curse on Adam; and Christ as the medicine of life is interpreted as the result of Israel’s rejection of God’s loving care in Jesus and consequently their rejection by God in favour of the Church. Adam was destined to produce ‘bread’ with sweat between thorns and briars; Christ was the grape-cluster and the ear of wheat that grew up among weeds and produced there the bread of life which we can enjoy without need for exertion.

7. The comprehensive worship of the Church alluded to

In connection with the last remark, it should be pointed out that Ephrem involves almost all aspects of Christian worship⁶⁸ in his explanation of the benefits that Christ gave to humanity.⁶⁹ Christ is portrayed as the mediator that distributes God’s mercy and purifies human worship to make it possible for us to serve the ‘Being’ (the Godhead) in the holy of holies (stanza 3; cf. Heb 9:3 and 6). *Prayer* is portrayed as ‘sacrifice,’ and *petition* as ‘incense’ (stanzas 3 and 5). *Weeping* is ‘libation’ (stanza 3), which Jesus sprinkles out. *Baptism* is described as God’s atoning hyssop wielded by Christ, since hyssop became mercy, (stanza 4). The metaphors of Christ as ‘sacrifice’ and ‘sanctifying offering’ in stanza 5 use Eucharistic words.⁷⁰ It is possible that stanza 8 contains a reference to *meditation* when Ephrem says ‘[you are] the curdled milk in which was gathered scattered opinion.’⁷¹ He says this immediately after calling Christ the rock on which the ‘building of the peoples was built’⁷² and subsequently describes him as ‘the justifying (or acquitting) wall that rose up before the weak ones (guarding them).’⁷³ The mentioning of a *wall* in the context of the rock of Matt 7:24–

25 seems to suggest that Ephrem alludes to Christ's role in the Church, founded upon true faith.⁷⁴ The stanza as a whole seems to refer to Christ's role in safeguarding orthodox faith and ecclesiastical unity. In stanza 9, Ephrem calls him blessed 'who always remembers his departure and increases the provision for his journey.' This is a reference to the merit of good deeds, probably the practice of *almsgiving*.⁷⁵ Finally, in stanzas 13 and 14 there is a clear reference to the bread and wine of the *Eucharist*, a matter that has already been discussed above. The effect of this is that Christ's efficacious involvement in all aspects of ecclesiastical life, the whole journey of every believer through a troubled sea to the harbour of peace (stanza 15), is described. It may be significant that the hymn begins with the birth of Christ and that the Eucharist is treated last, just before the image of Christ as the experienced sailor is presented. In Ephrem's thought, there is a marked parallel between the incarnation and the Eucharist, so that the Eucharist can be seen as concluding the circle begun with the incarnation.⁷⁶

8. A note on the argumentative impact of the hymn

Ephrem realised that a hymn such as this one had the potential of becoming a sermon that would be preached many times.⁷⁷ It was clearly not viewed as serving communication between a congregation and the Lord alone, but also as a communication between the author and his audience.⁷⁸ Evidence of this can be found in the use of the first person singular form (stanza 1) and the first person plural forms ('our,' 'we,' 'us' in stanzas 3, 5, 6, and 16). Stylistic techniques of enlivening the dialogue, such as the use of rhetorical questions and the exclamation 'O, Good One who was wronged, who, while he is wronged every day does not stop to do good!' at the end also witness to this function.

The macarisms in the third person, found in all stanzas except the first one and the last two, may be even more important indicators of this communicative function of the hymn. They serve as 'performatives' by which the individual members of the congregation are exhorted to do what is necessary to be considered 'blessed' – to offer prayer, weeping, and petition as a sacrifice to God through Christ; to accept atonement and mercy from God through baptism; to cleanse one's blemishes through Christ in order to become 'completely beautiful completely in [Christ]'; to know who Christ is, to obtain him and be obtained by him; to realise how much Christ loves one and cry and feel ashamed because one had wronged Christ; always to remember one's departure (death) and increase the provision (good deeds)

for the journey; to become one's own judge and reprove oneself in Christ; to acquire the secret eye, see one's own detestableness and reproach oneself and then imprint Christ's image on oneself; to drink from the sober wine of the Eucharist and never become extravagant secretly; to eat from the bread of the Eucharist and remove the curse of Adam from oneself; to become one's own sailor and keep one's treasure, bringing it safely to the harbour of peace.

The rhetorical devices used in the composition of the hymn were therefore not meant simply to please the audience, but also to contribute towards its explanatory and exhortative effectiveness. If the conclusion of this hymn and the macarisms are considered, it seems that the hymn was aimed at instilling feelings of awe, gratefulness, shame, and earnestness in the audience. In the first stanza, the author himself expresses amazement – that those who erred, live in Christ, and that those who scrutinize, erred in him. Just before that, he says that Christ caused bewilderment of knowledge through his eternal birth. His expressing amazement⁷⁹ is probably meant to instil awe for Christ and his relationship to the Father and gratefulness for the privilege of receiving life in Christ without our being able to understand everything about his pre-existence. Other examples of the use of pathos in the hymn are when Ephrem calls him blessed who 'cries and feels ashamed' because he wronged Christ (stanza 8) and also the person who 'reproaches his detestableness' in the beauty of Christ (stanza 12).

His use of derogatory terms when he refers to the Jews can likewise be interpreted as the use of emotion to secure the goodwill of the (Christian) audience – for instance, when he speaks of the 'sprinklings of the Levites *all together*' being unable to 'atone the *one* people with their *weak* hyssops,' or when he contrasts the '*deceit*' of the people with the '*truth*' of the peoples (stanza 10), or when he refers to the Jews as '*detestable* weeds' (stanza 14). Argumentation must be adapted to the audience and must either be based on assumptions accepted by the audience, or must otherwise first aim at reinforcing adherence to points of agreement before attempting to influence the audience.⁸⁰ The use of invective language against the Jews in Ephrem's hymns may indeed be a rhetorical technique to establish solidarity with the audience and secure its goodwill, a basic requirement for achieving success in persuasion⁸¹ rather than a display of hate on his own part.⁸² The objective with constructing and exploiting a polarity between the Jewish *people* and the Church from the *peoples* can likewise be seen as a campaign for a universal – and unified – Church in the East.⁸³

9. Conclusion: *De Virginitate XXXI* as a coherent, aesthetic, and persuasive poetic discourse

Even though only a small portion of this hymn has been analysed in any depth, I feel confident enough about this investigation to state that its aesthetic and poetic qualities cannot be denied. Its persuasive qualities have also been argued. One should keep in mind that ‘argumentation’ is not seen here as the deduction of consequences from given premises, but the increase of adherence of the members of an audience to theses that are presented for their consent.⁸⁴ There is no formal proof, but a network of analogies, parallels, antitheses, polarities, allusions, and appeals are created in an aesthetically pleasing form that must have had a great impact and an enduring effect on the audience.⁸⁵ This hymn can be described as ‘persuasive’ because it implicitly urges members of the audience to accept certain statements, to adopt a certain disposition towards Christ, to refrain from certain actions (such as ‘probing’ the divine nature of Christ or indulging in wine-drinking) and to use the words of this hymn to express gratitude before God. The use of antithetical parallels to establish polarities, the use of metaphor to suggest symbolism, analogy, and the hiddenness of God, the use of allusions to Scripture to imbue the hymn with authority and a sense of mystery, and the wide range of elements from ecclesiastical life referred to seem to me to suggest that this hymn is a persuasive, coherent discourse, but it is more than that – it is written so masterfully that I stand in awe before the Good One who endowed one man with so many talents that he was able to produce masterpieces like this seemingly with the greatest ease.

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NOTES

- ¹ This paper was originally read at the *Colloque International Ephrem Le Syrien* in Ligugé, Poitiers, France, during a conference from 7 to 9 June 2006 which commemorated the birth of Ephrem more or less 1700 years before.
- ² Murray 1979, p.40 remarks that this title probably was only the introduction of the particular codex's scribe to the first stanza.
- ³ Cf., e.g., his remarks on his 'weak tongue' that dared to speak about the richness of the divine majesty in his hymns *De Virginitate* IV, 15–16 (Beck 1962, text, pp.16–17). If his words are pleasant in any way, he says, then that is because of the truth he conveys and not because of his contribution.
- ⁴ McVey 1989, p.259 notes that the principal manuscript has a postscript which adds 'and on the Symbols of the Lord' to the title 'The Hymns on Virginité.'
- ⁵ The following discussion of the structure of the collection is based on the notes of Beck 1962, translation, pp.i–vi.
- ⁶ The harps of respectively the Old Testament, the New Testament, and nature.
- ⁷ Murray 1975, p.40 suggests that it could originally have been 'I fear, my Lord Christ.' This is possible with a slight emendation of the last two words, but seems to me improbable because the name of the melody (even though it was borrowed) would agitate against the contents of the hymn.
- ⁸ *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrsers Hymnen de Virginitate*, Beck 1962, text, p.xii.
- ⁹ For the contrast between what is visible and hidden of God, cf. Romans 1:19–20. Cf. also John 1:18.
- ¹⁰ Den Biesen (2006, p.161 n. 42) describes the use of the verb *phā* here as having both a positive and a negative meaning simultaneously.
- ¹¹ Cf. also the hymns *De Fide* XII, 11 (Beck 1955, text, p.56) and *De Ecclesia* XIII, 5 (Beck, text, p.32). Cf. the discussion of Murray 1975, pp.193–195.
- ¹² Cf. 1 John 2:2.
- ¹³ Initially I translated all the verbs of the macarisms (those that are in the perfect) with past tense forms. I was persuaded by Murray's translation (Murray 1979) to change the majority into present tense forms even though one would then rather

have expected the use of participles. I do think it was Ephrem's intention to encourage believers to act like those whom he proclaimed 'blessed.'

14 Cf. Heb 9:3, 6. The context of Heb 9 is important for stanzas 2–6 as a whole, where allusion is made to 'the Holy of Holies' (v. 3, sta. 3), the 'incense' (v. 4, cf. sta. 3), the action of 'entering / bringing in' (v. 6, sta. 2), bringing 'offerings' (v. 9, sta. 2), 'the blood of calves' (v. 12, sta. 5), Christ who 'offered himself' (v. 14, sta. 5), and the words 'defect(s)' (v. 14, sta. 6), 'hyssop' (v. 19, sta. 4), 'the people' and 'the law' (v. 19, sta. 6), and 'sprinkle/sprinkling' (v. 19, sta. 4) found in the Peshitta of that chapter.

15 Cf. Heb 9:19. Murray (1979, p.45) takes this as an allusion to Lev 14, the ritual of purification of lepers. Heb 9:13ff. and Heb 10:14, to which he also refers, seem to be more pertinent, however.

16 Cf. Lev 21:17 and Heb 9:14.

17 Cf. Matt 7:24.

18 Cf. the occurrence of the image also in the hymns *De Fide* V, 20 and XXV, 20 (Beck 1955, text, pp.23–24; 88). As rennet solidifies and keeps itself together, so Christ preserves the distracted mind. Den Biesen (2006, p.189, n. 134) also refers to the Commentary on the Diatessaron 8:5 where the image is used in an ecclesial sense.

19 Cf. Matt 25:32.

20 Cf. Matt 13:42.

21 The translation of McVey 1989, p.400 mistakenly reads *byt* as 'house.'

22 McVey 1989, p.400 curiously translates this as 'deceased while performing a hidden service.' Knowledge of the biblical context alluded to clarifies the matter. See below.

23 Cf. Matt 11:29; John 8:33; Gal 5:1. Cf. also Lev 26:13.

24 Much has been written on this image often found in early Christianity and also in Manichaeism; see the literature in Murray 1979, p.48. As Murray remarks, in Ephrem's use a human usually sees the perfection of Christ, the demands of the Gospel, and his own ugliness in the mirror, causing him to repent.

25 Cf. *De Nativitate* I, 99 (Beck 1958, text, p.12) where Ephrem says, 'Today the divinity imprinted itself in humanity, so that humanity should also decorate itself with the signet-ring of divinity.'

26 Cf. Isa 5:1–7; 20; Deut 32:32.

27 Cf. the warning against the dangers of drinking in *De Virginitate* I, 10–11 (Beck 1962, text, pp.3–4).

28 Cf. Matt 13:25, John 6:35, 51; Gen 3:18–19.

29 Murray 1979, p.49 reads '*ata*', 'a sign,' rather than '*eta*', 'has come.'

30 The same image is found in the hymn *Abraham Kidunaya* V, 11 where it says of a 'good' person: 'on the troubled sea he earns money, to the harbour he comes through death.' The words for 'troubled sea' and 'harbour' are the same as those used here. Text consulted in Beck 1972, p.13. I argued elsewhere that the first

five hymns of this corpus might be from the hand of Ephrem, but the rest almost certainly not. Cf. Botha 1990, pp.77–98. Cf. also my analysis of the fifth hymn in this cycle, Botha 1997, pp.42–52.

31 One colon is lost, while the preceding one is not perfectly readable. Cf. Beck 1962, text, p.116.

32 Cf. in this regard Murray 1975–1976, pp.1–20.

33 For a description of the poetic features of Ephrem’s hymns in general, cf. Rouwhorst 1989, pp.37–40.

34 Cf. Murray 1975–1976, p.7 and Brock 1992, p.26.

35 Cf. the figure in Murray 1975–1976, p.7.

36 Cf. the parallel to this stanza in the hymns *De Fide* LI, 2–3 and Brock’s translation of (Brock 1992, p.28. Murray (1979, p.44) describes this part of the stanza as referring to Christ’s ‘eternal generation from the Father.’

37 See Murray 1975, p.89 for a discussion of Ephrem’s view of Christians who were misled by the Arians to speculate about the mysteries of the Godhead as being sick, wounded, or amputated members of the body of Christ. By this remark of Ephrem’s he obviously wants to discourage the idea among the orthodox.

38 Cf. John 8:34.

39 The polarity between visible and hidden seems to be present also in stanza 6, where the visible defects which were rejected by the Israelite laws are mentioned in contrast to the mercy that tolerates the (visible) defects of the peoples, presumably because they are ‘penitent’ and thus spiritually perfect. Stanza 12 can also be referred to where it is described how the peoples ‘acquired a secret eye,’ saw their own blemishes, and washed this away so that their decorations shone in it.

40 Cf. the note of Rouwhorst 1989, p.39, on Ephrem’s predilection for paradoxes.

41 Haefeli 1968, p.27 describes antithesis as emphasis by way of pointing out the opposite, thus as one of the rhetorical devices of emphasis.

42 I identified 46 antitheses in this hymn of which 34 consist of two antithetical elements (A:B or -:+ or the like); six involve four elements (XA:YB, ++:-- or similar); three involve six elements (XAA’:XBB’ or AA’A’:BB’B’ or similar); and three even involve eight elements (AA’A’A’’:BB’B’”B’ or similar). In total, 134 words or phrases in this hymn are thus involved in an antithetical construction.

43 Two examples of this are found in stanza 6: ‘The defects are *not chosen* by him; for the penitent he *accepts* them’ and ‘your beauty, my Lord, which is *without defect*, does not marry *our defects*.’

44 Stanzas 7 and 12–15 provide ample illustration of this kind of contrast.

45 The last colon of stanza 7 (‘who *obtains* you and *is obtained* by you’) provides an example.

- 46 According to Watson 1986, p.312 oxymoron is the yoking together of two expressions which are semantically incompatible. It is related to irony (ibid., p.313) and as such in the first of these instances expresses amazement about the incomprehensible actions and attitude of the Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah.
- 47 Cf. Matt 11:29–30.
- 48 One of these, the comparing of Christ with rennet (stanza 8) seems to be distasteful to some people. Cf. Murray's describing this as 'one of Ephrem's homeliest and least dignified thoughts, doubtless the fruit of meditation in the kitchen' (Murray 1979, p.47).
- 49 'Die Metapher hat neben der verdeutlichenden auch eine stark ästhetische Funktion.' Haefeli 1968, p.153.
- 50 Cf. *De Fide* XXXII, 11 and my article on this hymn, Botha 1992, pp.63–79.
- 51 Haefeli 1968, p.154 explains that 'Die zusammengesetzte Metapher ist jene, deren Vergleichsgrund aus mehreren Beziehungen zusammengesetzt ist.' He lists a number of examples from Aphrahat (pp.154–155).
- 52 Cf. Haefeli's discussion of 'der Annexionsvergleich,' (1968, pp.158–159).
- 53 Custer has drawn our attention to an aspect which I might otherwise have missed, namely the abundance of *sight*-directed images in the hymn, 'most strikingly the blemishes and beauty of stanza 6 and the mirror of stanza 12.' He then goes on to list the metaphors relying on the sense of *smell* (smoke of sacrifices and incense), the sense of *taste* (the fountain, grapes, wine, and bread), *sound* (instruction, judgement and wind), and even *touch* (the sprinkling of water and the furnace). Cf. Custer 1996, pp.145–154, especially pp.149–150.
- 54 This intention can also be seen in the antithetic description of Christians as *needy* (in contrast to the enriching Treasure), *thirsty* (for the abundant Fountain), *simple* (and in need of the wise Instruction), subjected to *forgetfulness* (in need of Remembrance), suffering from *distracted minds* (in need of Christ the Rennet), *weak* (in need of the justifying Wall), and blind and full of *blemishes* (in need of the clear Mirror to see this).
- 55 Note also the variation in syntax between stanzas 7 and 8: A list of appreciative titles each with an enhancing adjective and a relative phrase in the following colon (7) switch to nominal sentences with a second person pronoun and a relative phrase in the same colon (8.1–4), and then back again (8.6–8).
- 56 Foregrounding is the exploitation of grammatical deviation for the purpose of emphasis. Cf. Watson 1986, p.265 n. 52.
- 57 By 'closure' is meant the way the poem ends, but also the way in which it effects completeness. Cf. Watson 1986, p.28. This hymn is closed by addressing the audience; by shifting the focus from God's acts of salvation to the more mundane blessings – from what he did in the past to what he does 'every day' and 'each hour'; and by the final exclamation about the mercy of God who is wronged every day, but nevertheless never stops to do good.

- 58 The senses mentioned here are inexhaustible sources of metaphors such as those that are used in this hymn. Custer 1996, p.150 notes that stanza 16 forms an inclusion with the first. Christ's giving life to creation mentioned in stanza 1 introduces the 'mining' of creation in the rest of the hymn to yield images of the senses of Christ's beneficence toward mankind. In stanza 16, 'in retrospect, all the goods of creation are celebrated, not merely as the stuff of metaphor but as actual mirrors of divine mercy.'
- 59 By emphasizing our inability to express thanks for 'small' mercies with the help of a hyperbolic expression ('a great fountain of words'), Ephrem hints at the impossibility of showing proper gratefulness for the 'big' deeds of salvation. This is a form of the argument *a minora ad maiorem*.
- 60 'Every (day),' 'who,' 'to pour out,' 'who,' 'to pour out,' and 'every (hour).'
- 61 The main function of a rhetorical question is that of dramatic effect: it involves the audience directly. Cf. Watson 1986, p.341.
- 62 In Aphrahat's *Dem.* XXIII, 92, the cluster represents Israel and one grape in it represents Jesus. Cf. Murray's translation of this context in Murray 1975, p.58.
- 63 Murray 1975, p.120 notes the occurrence of the phrase 'the cluster which was pressed in the midst of Jerusalem' as a reference to the crucifixion in Ephrem's Commentary on the Diatessaron. I could not locate this in Ephrem's commentary, but have no doubt that it is correct.
- 64 The 'medicine of life' may have an antecedent in Sirach 6:16 ('a faithful friend is the medicine of life – φάρμακον ζωῆς'). However, as Murray (1975, p.120) remarks, the expression 'goes far back in Mesopotamian religious history.'
- 65 Murray 1975, p.121. This connection is indeed made by Ephrem in his hymns *De Crucifixione* V, 9 (Beck 1964, text, p.61). The image also fits in with the 'wild' grapes of Isa 5, however, since the bitterness of this vineyard's clusters is also alluded to in Deut 32:32. Murray 1975 p.97, gives an English translation of the Peshitta of Deut 32:32. Aphrahat also makes a connection between the *wild* grapes of Isa 5 and the *bitterness* mentioned in Deut 32:32 (*Dem.* V, 225.13–232.2). Cf. also Murray's translation of this passage, *ibid.*, 98.
- 66 Cf. the contrast between Adam and Christ and the two types of bread similarly expressed in terms of Eve and Mary in the hymns *De Azymis* 6:7, 'Mary has given us the bread of rest in place of that bread of toil which Eve provided.' The translation is that of Sebastian Brock 1992, p.110.
- 67 Ephrem often made a connection between different scriptural passages through the presence of a common word or motif. Cf. Kim 2000, note 5. According to Murray 1979, p.49 there is also a link to the thorns which the soldiers plaited into a crown for Jesus.
- 68 Rouwhorst 1989, pp.64–66 gives a summary of what we can glean from Ephrem's hymns on Easter about the praxis and liturgy of the Church. It provides interesting points of similarity.

- ⁶⁹ McVey 1989, p.398 considers the whole hymn to be about the superiority of Christian baptism to the Jewish understandings of forgiveness, since baptism is related to the four births of Christ (from the Father, from Mary, in the Jordan, and from Sheol) and encompasses the entire economy of salvation. But many more elements of Christian worship seem to be involved.
- ⁷⁰ Cf. Murray 1975, p.167, n. 4.
- ⁷¹ The image of curdled milk is also found in the hymns *De Fide* V, 20 and XXV, 20. In the first of these, he remarks, ‘In my mind, your faith becomes curdled milk. It collects my distracted mind away from inquiry and wandering.’ In the second context, he notes, ‘the scattering of the milk cannot gather itself without the secret power of the rennet, through the gift [of rennet] the lack of cohesion of the milk is gathered to firmness.’ These two instances seem to suggest that meditation with the correct inclination is alluded to. The remark also seems to be anti-rationalistic and anti-Arian in purpose.
- ⁷² Allusion is made to Matt 7:24, the wise person building his ‘house’ on a ‘rock.’
- ⁷³ The use of the verb *qwm* with the preposition *b’p*’ signifies protection. Cf. J. Payne Smith 1976, p.494.
- ⁷⁴ One context in Ephrem’s hymns that seems to provide a clue to what is meant with the ‘wall,’ is the *Carmina Nisibena* I, 8 (Beck 1961, text, 218). In it, Nisibis is compared to Noah’s ark (the onslaught of water on both is used as tertium comparationis). Nisibis’ wall withstood the onslaught brought about by the Persians because its doctrine was not built on sand but on rock (the Matt 7 context is again referred to). Jericho’s wall crumbled because it was built on ‘sand,’ but Moses in contrast ‘built a wall in the sea, for he had built his meditation and thought on a rock.’ Cf. Murray’s discussion of this imagery in Murray 1975, p.220.
- ⁷⁵ Cf. the use of the same word in the hymns *De Ecclesia* XVII, 6–7 where it is explained as almsgiving; and also the remarks by Murray 1979, p.47. The same word is also used in the hymn *Abraham Kidunaya* V, 2–3 (which is not certainly from Ephrem’s hand) referring to all the good deeds of this priest, Abraham of Kidun and that of Lazarus in the parable about the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Cf. also the hymns *De Paradiso* XIV, 1 (Beck 1957b, text, p.58), and *Contra Haereses* XX, 2. Beck describes it in the last-mentioned context as ‘ein ephrämisches Bild für die durch den Körper erworbenen Verdienste, mit denen die Seele die Reise ins Jenseits antritt.’ Beck 1957a, text, pp.69–70.
- ⁷⁶ Cf. Brock 1992, p.112. This feature, combined with the many aspects of Christian worship alluded to, establishes a kind of merismus – an abbreviated way of expressing totality. Cf. on the function of merismus Watson 1986, p.321.
- ⁷⁷ In his discussion of the melody of this hymn, Murray (1979, p.40) sketches a scene of Ephrem himself playing on the harp and singing, while ‘the audience (led by the ‘Daughters of the Covenant’ or consecrated sisterhood) responded

with the refrain.’ Ephrem’s fame of course ensured the widespread use of his hymns in many churches for a very long time.

78 For a description of the homiletical features of one of Ephrem’s hymns (*Contra Haereses XXV*), see my article (Botha 1991, pp.16–36).

79 Amplified and demonstrated by the insertion of a paradoxical statement.

80 Chaim Perelman said, ‘the orator who builds his discourse on premises not accepted by the audience commits a classical fallacy in argumentation – a *petitio principii*. This is not a mistake in formal logic, since formally any proposition implies itself, but it is a mistake in argumentation, because the orator begs the question by presupposing the existence of an adherence that does not exist and to the obtaining of which his efforts should be directed.’ Perelman 1979, pp.14–15.

81 Cf. Christopher Carey 1994, p.27.

82 Cf. my article (Botha 1989, pp.19–29) for a discussion of the role given to Judaism as antithesis of the Church in order to enhance institutional stability within the Church.

83 Cf. Darling 1987, especially pp.119–121.

84 Perelman 1982, p.9. Cf. also *ibid.*, p.21.

85 Murray 1979, p.50 says that ‘as theology, Ephrem’s exposition could hardly be less systematic or coherent,’ but that one could imagine ‘how phrases and images from such a hymn as this might well stick in the minds of his hearers more forcibly than could be achieved by logical argument.’