

THE INTERPRETATION OF DANIEL 3 IN THE SYRIAC COMMENTARY ASCRIBED TO EPHREM THE SYRIAN

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Abstract

This paper investigates the exegetical notes on Daniel 3 in the Syriac commentary attributed to Ephrem the Syrian. It is established that the text which the author of the commentary used is most probably that of the Peshitta. The commentary's interpretation of this chapter is compared with the work of Aphrahat and Ephrem. The interpretation of the commentary seems to be straightforward, in contrast to the highly creative and symbolic interpretation of Dan 3 in Ephrem's genuine hymns. Despite this difference, however, peculiar interpretational similarities are found between the commentary, Aphrahat's demonstrations and Ephrem's hymns. One example of this is the idea that the "nature of the fire" in the furnace was changed to keep it from hurting the three friends of Daniel. It is concluded that Ephrem's authorship of the commentary cannot be proven through this investigation, but that it can also not be excluded.

1. Introduction

Ephrem the Syrian, who lived during the fourth century (ca. 306¹-373 C E) first in Nisibis and later in his life also at Edessa, was a prolific writer. Because of a well-deserved reputation as an orthodox theologian, exegete, and poet, many anonymous theological works have been ascribed to him, especially writings which are extant only in Greek and Latin. The commentary on Daniel is one of a number of prose commentaries on books of the Old Testament that is attributed to Ephrem.² This work is extant in Syriac, a factor that definitely increases the chances of its having been written by Ephrem. Nevertheless, the similarities and differences between this commentary and the genuine works of Ephrem have to be investigated in much greater detail before we will be able to decide on this matter.³ A comparison between the notes of this commentary on Daniel 2 and remarks in the genuine hymns of Ephrem on the same chapter has proven to be quite promising. It is in the same vein as this first investigation (hopefully to be published within the next year) that this translation and investigation of the comments on Daniel 3 in the Syriac commentary are undertaken. No definite connection with Ephrem is supposed or accepted, but possible links with the exegesis of Aphrahat and Ephrem will be investigated.⁴ The purpose of this article is to investigate the nature of the biblical text the

author of the commentary had at his disposal; to describe the peculiarities of the author's exposition of Daniel 3; and to compare this with Ephrem's interpretation of the same chapter to the extent that his views on this can be gleaned from his genuine hymns.

Daniel 3 is a rather unique chapter in the book of Daniel. As is well known, the first six chapters of the book are all narratives written in the third person about Daniel and his friends:

Chapter 1:	The introduction of the four young Jews to the court of Nebuchadnezzar.
Chapter 2:	The dream Nebuchadnezzar had of an image which was smashed by a rock and Daniel's explanation of the dream.
Chapter 3:	The story of the three young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace because they would not worship the huge image that Nebuchadnezzar had erected.
Chapter 4:	Nebuchadnezzar's second dream, Daniel's explanation of it, and the king's humiliation and eventual restoration.
Chapter 5:	The story of the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast.
Chapter 6:	The story of how Darius was tricked into being forced to throw Daniel into the lion's den and Daniel's miraculous escape from the lions.

The friends of Daniel are mentioned by name only in the first three chapters. They are introduced in chapter 1, are mentioned as giving support to Daniel and being promoted in chapter 2, and then take centre stage in chapter 3. After this, they "disappear" from the book. Daniel himself is the main character in all six the first chapters with the exception of chapter 3, where he is in turn not even mentioned. This already seems to suggest that the purpose of the story in chapter 3 would have been to show that Daniel's friends were of like mind and conviction and shared in the same faith as he.⁵

Daniel's absence from chapter 3 is provided for when the narrator tells us at the end of chapter 2 that Daniel was made "ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon" (Dan 2:48 ESV). He (consequently) remained at the king's court, while Nebuchadnezzar appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province Babylon (2:49).⁶ The image which the king erected was set up in the plain Dura in this province (3:1). When the king invited (or summoned) all the satraps, prefects, governors, counsellors, treasurers, justices, magistrates, and "all the officials of the provinces" to the dedication ceremony of the image (3:2), it would therefore be understandable that the chief

prefect of the province of Babylon would be attending to matters of state at the court of the king and would not be able to attend the dedication.

In the Syriac commentary on Daniel, parallels between Daniel's show of character in chapter 2 and the steadfastness of his three friends in chapter 3 are pointed out. The commentary glosses over the seemingly tedious repetitions⁷ in the story in the Bible text to focus more on its outcome. The following table gives an outline of the whole story and highlights the verses that are quoted partially in the commentary. This may give an idea of which parts of the story the author of the commentary focuses on:

Verses quoted (in bold type)	Outline of the story
1:	Introduction – the making and erection of the huge, gold-plated image.
2:	The command to gather all the officials for the dedication of the image.
3, 4, 5, 6, 7:	Assembly of the parade and worshipping of the image.
8, 9, 10, 11, 12:	Certain Chaldeans accuse the three Jewish friends of insurrection.
13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18:	The king is furious, but offers the three Jews another opportunity to comply. They reject his offer.
19, 20, 21, 22, 23:	The judgement is executed. The fire of the furnace is made so hot that the executioners are consumed by it.
24, 25, 26, 27:	The king is astonished by the appearance of a fourth figure in the furnace and the fact that the three Jews are unharmed. He calls them out of the fire.
28, 29, 30:	The king praises the God of the three Jews, promotes them, and makes a decree forbidding blasphemy against their God.

Besides the verses from the canonical text highlighted in the table above, the commentary possibly also displays knowledge of the addenda to Daniel 3 in the Peshitta. It seems to refer to Daniel 3:48 where the Syriac of the addendum says that “the fire consumed and destroyed all who were found around the furnace from the Chaldeans and *the accusers*”. The commentary also says: “And the fire went out and consumed *the accusers*”. This could, however, simply reflect the wording of verse 22 in the Peshitta, which also refers to the accusers: “Because the word of the king was so urging and the furnace was extremely hot, the flame of the burning fire killed those men *who had accused*⁸ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego”. The Aramaic of MT in 3:22 in contrast simply refers to the men who “took up” or “carried” the three to the furnace (haph‘el of סלק).

For the purpose of discussing the nature of the commentary, the Syriac text which the author probably consulted, and for comparison with the notes on Daniel 3 found in the genuine hymns of Ephrem, the commentary's full text on chapter 3 is given here in a rather literal English translation:

Nebuchadnezzar made a large image of gold. And he erected it in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon (v.1). I.e., a place that was suitable for the multitude of people that would gather for the feast that he held for the image. And he sent to assemble the military leaders (v.2). I.e., he gathered all the nations that were instructed to exchange their gods with the image or to worship the image with their gods. Then the king commanded strong men and he bound them, Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego (v.20). The friends of Daniel were slandered that they did not worship that image. For he who had (a while ago) said: "Your God is the God of gods" (2:47), now, while threatening the children⁹ that he would cast them in the fire, asked: "Who is your god that he will deliver you from my hands?" (v.15). The friends of Daniel thus trusted that they would be delivered from the sword and the fire as Daniel had trusted that he (God) would reveal to him the dream and its explanation. For as Daniel had asked for time so that he could confidently reveal the meaning to the king, so his friends also said "Our God exists whom we serve. He is able to deliver us from the burning furnace of fire; and from your hands, o king, he will deliver us" (v.17). I.e., because neither through the death of the sword or of other torture he could kill or punish them. I see men that are untied and walking in the fire (v.25). Because the word of the king was so pressing, they bound and threw them (in the fire) (still clothed) in the garments of their decorations. The fire was thus capable of discernment on the command of the fourth one that descended to them: it dissolved the bonds on the surface and it caused them to stand up; not to be terrified and to rush out like frightened people, but to walk calmly up and down in its midst like people who are safe. And the fourth one looks like the son of God (v.25). The fourth one thus who finally appeared to the king. The young men, on the other hand, were seeing him while they were thrown in, for it is he who received them when they were thrown in and he accompanied them when they went out. Before them they found him and there they left him. He

preceded them so that he could alter the burning nature of the fire. And he remained there after them to return the nature of the fire to the earlier order of its nature. And then afterwards he departed. *And the fire went out and consumed the accusers* (v.22? 48?). It consumed those of insignificance, but the peoples who were assembled from them it did not harm. On the inside it guarded the three and on the outside the thousands and ten thousands; but the accusers it had destroyed. *Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who rescued his servants from the flame* (v.28). **I.e.**, because he rescued them who gave their bodies to the fire, who did not give up the worship of their God for the worship of images. *And all who would blaspheme against their God will be dismembered limb by limb* (v.29). **I.e.**, after a miracle such as this which he did, the one who would blaspheme against him that he is not the true God would be dismembered limb by limb.

2. The Syriac text used by the author of the commentary

2.1 The author begins the comments on chapter 3 by quoting part of verse 1 from the Peshitta. The word “king” is left out in the citation. Instead of quoting the dimensions of the image, the commentary simply speaks about a “huge” image. In comparison to MT, it is interesting to note that the numerical adjective “one” was added by the Syriac translator as an indefinite article (Taylor 1994:97-98). The commentary has incorporated this “plus”, suggesting that the author definitely consulted a Peshitta text when he was writing the commentary:

<p>“King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold ... and he erected it in the plain Dura in the province of Babylon”.</p>
<p>ܐܒܢܢܝܢܝܢ ܕܢܒܘܚܕܢܥܘܙܪ</p> <p>ܥܒܕ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܢ ܕܘܪܐ ܕܒܒܝܠܝܢ</p>
<p>“Nebuchadnezzar made a huge image of gold ... and he erected it in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon”</p>
<p>ܐܒܢܢܝܢܝܢ ܕܢܒܘܚܕܢܥܘܙܪ</p> <p>ܥܒܕ ܥܠܡܐ ܥܢ ܕܘܪܐ ܕܒܒܝܠܝܢ</p>

2.2 Four words from the Peshitta text of Daniel 3:2 are quoted next. The only difference between the biblical (Peshitta) text and the citation is the addition of a copulative: “**And** he sent to assemble the military leaders”. In

MT, the first Persian loanword used to describe the officials who are summoned (“satraps” or “guards of the kingdom”¹⁰ – אַחַשְׁדַּרְפְּנִיָּא), is translated in the Peshitta as “chiefs of the army” or “military leaders”. The commentary takes this over, but uses this term as a summary for all the names of the officials:

2 צגז לחבוצה לִצְבֵּי סְלָא
סצגז לחבוצה לִצְבֵּי סְלָא

2.3 The next verse that seems to be commented upon is verse 20. It seems that the author of the commentary in this case consulted the Peshitta (note the similar use of the anticipatory pronoun to indicate the object, something which is not found in MT), but used his own words to rephrase the contents of the verse:

“And men who were powerful, he commanded to bind them, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego...”
20 הַלְיָבִיָּא
הַצְבִּיָּא סְלָא אַבְדִּנְגוֹ וְנִשְׁבָּרִיָּא אַרְמֵא לְעִזְרַיִל מְשַׁחַא וְשַׁדְרָחַא
“Then the king commanded strong men, and he bound them, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego...”
סְלָא חֲמַטְרַא חֲלִיָּבִיָּא סְלָא אַבְדִּנְגוֹ וְנִשְׁבָּרִיָּא אַרְמֵא

2.4 In pointing out the anomaly that king Nebuchadnezzar had declared a short while ago that the God of Daniel and his friends was the “God of gods”, while he now enquires about the identity of the God of Daniel’s friends, the commentary quotes part of 2:48. With the exception of one letter, the insertion of an extra *h* in “your God”, the quotation is exactly the same as the text of the Peshitta:

2:48 אַרְמֵא אַרְמֵא אַרְמֵא אַרְמֵא
אַרְמֵא אַרְמֵא אַרְמֵא אַרְמֵא

2.5 The question of Nebuchadnezzar about the identity of the God of the Jewish youths uses the words of the Peshitta in 3:15, but the word for “your God” is again misspelt with an extra *h*:

“And who is your God that he could rescue you from my hands?”
15 הַחַיִּים אֱלֹהֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים, אֱלֹהֵי
“Who is your God that he could rescue you from my hands?”
הַחַיִּים אֱלֹהֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים,

2.6 Verse 17, the confident answer of the three youths that their God will rescue them, is quoted in the words of the Peshitta, but small changes are made. The Peshitta has: “Our God whom we serve does exist, he who is able to rescue us through (his) power from the furnace of burning fire, and he will, o king, deliver us from your hands.” The commentary has removed the relative particle *d* and has left out the qualification “through (his) power”. The text, however, is clearly that of the Peshitta:

17 הָאֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַשְּׁמַיִתִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים לֹא הָיָה בְּיָדָנוּ לְחַצְּוֵנוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַשְּׁמַיִתִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים יִלְדֵנוּ מִיָּדְךָ
17 הָאֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַשְּׁמַיִתִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים לֹא הָיָה בְּיָדָנוּ לְחַצְּוֵנוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַשְּׁמַיִתִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים יִלְדֵנוּ מִיָּדְךָ

2.7 The commentary quotes a part of verse 25 exactly as the Peshitta has it, but leaves out the exclamatory interjection “Behold!”:

25 וְהָיָה כִּי יִרְאוּ אֶת הַמַּלְאָכִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים וְהָיָה נִיחָא
וְהָיָה כִּי יִרְאוּ אֶת הַמַּלְאָכִים הַשְּׁמַיִתִים וְהָיָה נִיחָא

In comparison with the Masoretic text, the Peshitta has inserted *וְהָיָה* to clarify the temporal nuance (cf. Taylor 1994:100). The Commentary has taken this over. The Peshitta also displays a minus which the commentary has taken over: MT refers to “four men” who were walking in the fire of the furnace, while Syr speaks only of “men”. According to Taylor (1994:102), this must be an accidental omission in the Peshitta, since it later refers to “the appearance of the fourth”.

2.8 Another part of verse 25 is quoted somewhat later. Despite clear similarities, the commentary has made some significant changes to the

Peshitta text in this instance. The words “the appearance of” is left out, while “a son of the gods (= an angel)” is changed to “a/the son of God”. The polytheistic designation “a son of a god” or “a son of the gods” would fit in the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar, while the expression where it occurs in Genesis 6 and Psalm 29:1 (cf. also Ps 82, Deut. 32:8) was interpreted in Jewish and Christian exegesis as “angel(s)”.¹¹ Christian tradition usually identified the “son of God” (as it was translated in the Vulgate)¹² in this verse in Daniel 3 as Christ, although Jerome concluded that the expression referred to an angel here, and that the angel was a typological prefiguration of Christ (Collins 1993:190).

25 ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ
ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ

2.9 Towards the end of the chapter, there are two remarks in the commentary which seem to reflect knowledge of the additions to Daniel 3. The commentary notes that “and the fire went out and consumed (ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ) the accusers”, and a short while later “but the accusers it had destroyed (ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ)”. The Syriac text of the Peshitta says in verse 22: “But those men who accused Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, it killed (ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ) them, the flame of the burning fire”. The reference to the accusers is a significant change in the wording of the MT, which refers only to the men who took up the three to throw them in the furnace. The Peshitta text seems to reflect knowledge in this verse of the addition later in the chapter. The extra-biblical verse 48 in this regards says “and the fire consumed and destroyed (ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ) whoever were found around the furnace from the Chaldeans *and the accusers*”.

22 ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ
48 ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ ܘܢܫܘܢܗܘܢ

2.10 In the case of verse 28, the influence of the Peshitta can once again be seen, despite the fact that some changes have been made. The least

important of these is the dropping of the proleptic pronominal suffix in “their God”. In line with the change in verse 25, where the reference to an angel seems to have been removed from the text quoted, the words “who has sent his angel and” are removed, attributing the deliverance perhaps more directly to God. The words “from the flame” are also inserted at the end:

28 מְבֹרָךְ אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדְרָח מְשַׁח וְאַבְדֵּנֶגוֹ אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדְרָח מְשַׁח וְאַבְדֵּנֶגוֹ אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדְרָח מְשַׁח וְאַבְדֵּנֶגוֹ
28 Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who has sent his angel and delivered his servants.
מְבֹרָךְ אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדְרָח מְשַׁח וְאַבְדֵּנֶגוֹ אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדְרָח מְשַׁח וְאַבְדֵּנֶגוֹ אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדְרָח מְשַׁח וְאַבְדֵּנֶגוֹ
Blessed be the God of Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego who has delivered his servants from the flame.

These changes seem to confirm the surmise that the text is interpreted as a reference to the intervention of “the Son of God” rather than “a son of the gods”, in other words, an angel.

2.11 The last verse quoted in the commentary on chapter 3 involves the threat that all who would blaspheme against the God of the three youths would be cut into pieces. The changes made to the text of the Peshitta are only slight and do not need much further discussion. Where the Peshitta has understood the word *kl* to refer to “all”, the commentary has understood it as “everyone” (similar to the Masoretic text and the Septuagint¹³ where the verb is also singular in form):

29 הָאֵלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ
הָאֵלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר עָבְדוּ

In concluding this section on the text used by the author of the commentary, it seems safe to state that the text the author of the commentary had available and which he consulted, was that of the Peshitta. The fact that the citations agree to a large extent with the Peshitta text, and especially in those instances where the Peshitta has made changes to the Biblical Aramaic text and the text of the commentary follows these, it seems certain that the Peshitta was the text on which he commented.

3. Peculiar features of the comments on Daniel 3 in the Syriac Commentary

In this part of the article, the general trend of the comments on Daniel 3 as well as interesting detail will be tabled for discussion.

3.1 A practical approach

First of all, it seems in order to comment on the practical approach of the author of the commentary. Why would king Nebuchadnezzar have decided to erect the huge statue in the plain of Dura? To this question the commentary gives the practical answer that it was a place large enough to accommodate the “multitude of people” that Nebuchadnezzar would assemble there. Daniel 3:2 mentions only various officials and leaders, but the implication may be that all the ethnic and religious groups of the Babylonian Empire would be represented there in great numbers (cf. Dan 3:7 - כָּל-עַמְמֵיָא).¹⁴ Daniel 3:4 specifically mentions “peoples, nations, and languages”. The ceremony is understood as a dedication feast involving many peoples (ܠܬܘܒܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܝܢ ܕܢܘܒܚܕܢܥܘܙܪ - the commentary speaks in this regard of ܠܬܘܒܝܢ and, later in the same chapter, also uses the word ܠܬܘܒܝܢ, which is often used in Syriac Christianity to describe the nations constituting the church) and speaks of “thousands and ten thousands” of people gathered there.

Commenting on the words “and he assembled the military leaders”, the commentary further notes that the nations were instructed to exchange their gods for the image or to worship the image with their gods. The Aramaic text mentions the god of the statue and the king separately (3:12, 14, 18). But veneration for the statue seems to be taken as a manifestation of loyalty to the king, as when the god represented by the statue would be the principal state god. Refusal to worship the image would then amount to civil insurrection (cf. Van Henten 2001:150). The commentary is thus right in identifying the dilemma of the three youths as one of religious loyalty. While it would be acceptable for polytheists to worship another god with those they already venerate, for Jews it would not be possible.

Another practical matter in which the commentary is interested, is how Nebuchadnezzar, who had a short while ago declared that the God of Daniel is the “God of gods”, could now enquire about the identity of the

God of the three youths who would be able to save them from his hand. In one of his hymns (*Contra Haereses* 12:7), Ephrem also touches on this anomaly. According to him, the Babylonians had forgotten the lesson of chapter 2, therefore the fire from the furnace had to teach them again what God through Daniel had taught them already:

Contra Haereses 12:7¹⁵

The Just One taught the truth through Daniel in Babylon. And since they disregarded him, the flames broke out from the furnace and reminded them. And since they went astray again, the palm of the hand descended and wrote the reminding writing in the palace of false worship.

Ephrem uses the words ܠܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܩܢܐ ܕܢܘܩܢܐ ܕܢܘܩܢܐ to describe the *flame* going out from the furnace, while the commentary refers to the *fire* going out (ܠܗܘܢ ܕܢܘܩܢܐ ܕܢܘܩܢܐ). But it is interesting that both sources noted the discrepancy and both knew the tradition found in the Peshitta about the fire “going out”.

A final example of practicalities which interested the author of the commentary is the note in the biblical text that the three youths were tied up in “their coats, their trousers, their turbans, and their (other) garments” (3:21). For the purpose of the biblical story it is of course important to insert this note, since it is later stated that the fire dissolved their bonds (3:25) without doing any damage to their clothes (3:27). This is probably meant as a kind of symbolic repudiation of the king and his officials who bound innocent people. In cultures where honour and shame are core values, clothing is a means value to indicate honour and status.¹⁶ Undressing someone against his or her will would indicate shame, the same as restraining someone with bonds would signify. The three youths are thus vindicated by God and their honour is restored when the fire removes the bonds, but does no harm to their apparel. The author of the commentary is intrigued by the fact that the condemned officials were thrown into the furnace fully clothed.¹⁷ The reason for this, says the author of the commentary, is that the king was so mad and his command so strict, that there was no time to unclothe them. But the intended implication of the biblical text is not lost on him: he notes that the fourth figure who entered the fire of the furnace before they were thrown in, commanded the fire to distinguish between the bonds that bound the prisoners and their clothing.

The fire thus dissolved the bonds, but did no harm to their clothing, thus vindicating them.

3.2 A predilection for parallels and polar thought patterns

It seems that the author of the commentary has a proclivity for parallels and polarities. For instance, parallels between Daniel and his three friends are seen and highlighted. The friends have the same *trust* in God as Daniel and they *display* their trust in a similar way, since they more or less respectfully oppose the command of the king:

The friends of Daniel thus trusted that they would be delivered from the sword and the fire as Daniel had trusted that he (God) would reveal to him the dream and its explanation. For as Daniel had asked for time so that he could confidently reveal the meaning to the king, so his friends also said “*Our God exists whom we serve. He is able to deliver us from the burning furnace of fire; and from your hands, o king, he will deliver us.*”

Another set of polarities is formed through the appearance of the fourth figure in the furnace: this person changes the nature of the fire, so that the fire is able to make a distinction between the *bonds* of the prisoners and their *clothing*. The fire is also able to distinguish between the *accusers* and the *innocent bystanders* around the furnace, since it singles out the ones who falsely accused the three Jews of insurrection. The youths and their accusers thus also form a polarity, since they, who were thrown *into* the fire, remain *unharméd*, while those who remained *outside*, were *killed*. Those who were saved inside the furnace and those who were spared outside form a parallel: “On the *inside* it guarded the three youths; on the *outside* it guarded the “thousands and ten thousands” of people.” Eventually, the fourth figure changed the nature of the fire back to its previous state after the departure of the three youths, so that the time *before* the *entrance* of the divine figure and the time *after* his *departure* also form a parallel.

4. Similarities and differences between the commentary and remarks in the genuine hymns of Ephrem the Syrian

From the amount of space dedicated to the appearance of the fourth figure in the furnace and the effect he had on the fire, it is apparent that the author

of the commentary regarded this part of Daniel 3 as the most significant. About this figure, he has the following to say:

- He was in the fire before the three were thrown in;
- He preceded them so that he could alter the burning nature of the fire;
- He received the three youths when they were thrown in and they thus saw him from that moment on;
- He appeared to the king only after the youths were thrown in;
- He commanded the fire to be discerning so as to dissolve the bonds with which they were bound; to cause them to stand up and not be terrified, and to feel safe in the middle of the fire;
- He accompanied the three when they went out;
- He remained there after their departure to return the fire “to the earlier order of its nature”;
- After this he departed.

Since the wording of the Peshitta, which clearly describes the *appearance* of the fourth figure as similar to “a son of the gods”, is changed by the author of the commentary to “And the fourth one *resembles* a/the son of God”, it seems that he no longer understands this figure as an angel, but as a person of the Trinity. Two stanzas from one of Ephrem’s hymns on the epiphany may be interpreted as displaying a similar notion:

(*Epiphania* 8:5-6)¹⁸

5. The three triumphant (youths) in Babylon – were baptized in the furnace of fire and went out. – They entered and bathed themselves in the womb of the flame – and revelled in the copious shower of the blaze. – It besprinkled them there – the heavenly dew. – It dissolved from them there – the earthly bonds. – Behold, the three triumphant (youths) – entered and found the fourth one in the furnace.

6. That visible fire, which flamed up there, – pointed towards the fire and the Holy Spirit – that are mixed and hidden in the (baptismal) water. – In the flames he signified baptism. – In this baptism, – come, enter, be baptized, my brothers, – for behold, it loosens the bonds – for in it is hidden and present – the third of God – which was the fourth in the furnace.

Beck has argued (1959b:157, n. 9) that, although it may elsewhere be the case,¹⁹ the expression ܠܡܠܟܝܢ ܡܠܟܝܢܝܢ cannot refer to Christ in this context, since Ephrem was resolute to preserve the Trinitarian order of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁰ It can, however, refer to the Holy Spirit, since Ephrem describes the Name of the Spirit as “the third” (ܠܟܠܝܢܝܢ) in his hymns *De Fide* 23:13.²¹ This interpretation would fit very well in the present context (*Epiphania* 8); since the Holy Spirit is described here as being mixed and hidden in the baptismal water as he was hidden in the fire of the furnace. Ephrem probably found a cue for interpreting this figure in the furnace as the Holy Spirit in Matthew 3:11. John the Baptist is reported as saying in that verse that Christ will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. One should therefore not press this interpretation and deduce from it that it clashes with the view expressed in the commentary. Note that the Spirit is said by him to be “hidden” in the fire of the furnace, while he certainly was aware of the fact that this divine figure was visible to the king according to the biblical text. In this context it suits Ephrem to interpret the figure as the Holy Spirit. But there possibly is a similarity between the commentary and Ephrem’s interpretation of this figure as one of the persons of the Trinity. It may be significant that Daniel 3:25 was read (according to two manuscripts)²² on the night of Epiphany in the Syriac-speaking church. When the author of the commentary describes this figure as *preceding* the three youths and remaining in the fire *after* them, there is a hint at those biblical contexts where YHWH or his angel is described as going out before his people and following after them.²³ Especially the context of Isaiah 52:12 seems relevant, since the author of the commentary notes that the fire caused the three youths to stand up and not to be terrified and to rush out like frightened people. In the Isaiah text, the people of God are exhorted to go out of Babylon, but “not in haste” and “not in flight”, “for YHWH will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.”

Both Ephrem’s interpretation and that of the commentary are noteworthy, since the king himself seems to describe this figure in verse 28 as “the angel” of the God of the three young men. Similarly, the prose addition to Daniel (knowledge of which is reflected in both Ephrem’s hymn and the commentary) clearly states in verse 49 that “the angel of the Lord” went down with the three youths into the furnace. It seems that this angel is not necessarily identified with the figure that appeared in the furnace. The text of the Peshitta speaks of “the angel of the dew” in verse 49. This angel made the inside of the furnace as though a dew-laden breeze were blowing

through it so that the fire did not touch them (v.50). The tradition about the dew “besprinkling” the youths probably helped to establish the link in Ephrem’s interpretation with baptism. The Greek translation of Theodotion – which was from early on preferred above the Old Greek translation (the original LXX version) – rendered the expression “a son of the Gods” with “ὁμοία υἱῷ θεοῦ”, with the result that the Christian tradition “identified the ‘son of God’ here as Christ” (Collins 1993:190). Hippolytus²⁴ wondered in this regard how Nebuchadnezzar recognised Christ and described it as a prefiguration of the recognition of Christ as Son of God by the Gentiles (Montgomery 1927:215; Collins 1993:190). Jewish interpretation obviously had problems with the concept of “a son of God” and taught that God rebuked Nebuchadnezzar for his careless way of speaking, so that after this remark he only referred to an angel (Collins 1993:190 n.131; Koch 2001:299).

In a context where he was speaking about the advantages of the fast, Ephrem extracted also some other lessons from Daniel 3. In his hymn *De Ieiunio* 7, he describes the fire as “fasting” from the “fasting ones”, in other words, abstaining from eating their flesh because they abstained from eating flesh from the table of the king. He compares this to the lions “fasting” and not eating Daniel, since he fasted. In contrast, the fire and the lions were eager to devour those who did not fast, namely the enemies of the Jews who did eat from the table of the king. He describes the friends of Daniel as having “altered their nature” by abstaining from certain food, and that the fire consequently also “altered its nature”. In drawing this parallel, he comes very close to an idea that is expressed in the commentary, namely that the fourth figure in the furnace “altered” the “nature” of the fire so that it would not harm the three youths.

De Ieiunio 7:9²⁵

9. The blessed youths hated and despised – the table of the king and its confectionary. – The fire did not touch their bodies, – since they did not touch his delicacies. – They hated also the bread and ate dry vegetables – and altered their nature (ܐܘܡܝܢܐ ܕܥܡܝܢܐ). – So the fire also altered its nature (ܕܡܝܢ ܕܡܝܢ ܕܡܝܢ): – instead of those within it, it devoured those outside.

In the commentary, the author notes that the fourth figure preceded the young men “to alter the burning nature of the fire...” (ܠܝܗܘܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܢ ܕܢܘܨܘܢ). This can indeed be cited as a mutual tradition between the commentary and Ephrem. The polarity formed by those *within* the furnace who were not consumed and those *outside* who were, also is significant. This contrast is also commented on in the commentary in words very similar to these. Ephrem can, however, adapt his symbolic interpretation to a particular context. In this regard, it is worthwhile to quote also stanzas 10 and 11 of the same hymn (*De Ieiunio* 7):

10. Three thus had fallen into the fire. – They grew in number and became four in its womb. – And this fire devoured the many. – The few increased within its avarice. – The unjust fire, the spoiling one, which from everlasting – never ever gave back capital or deposit, – its avarice was conquered; – for it repaid capital and great interest.

11. The flame symbolically became a field, – which was cultivated and ready for the seed. – The flames were heated sevenfold; – it was ploughed repetitively as if for the seed. – They sowed in it those who had eaten – dry vegetables in their fast.²⁶ – And since they had fasted with vegetables, – They increased like the seed – within the fire through which the many became few.²⁷

In these stanzas, the literary brilliance of Ephrem is amply illustrated. The paradox of three people being thrown into the furnace and, instead of immediately being consumed, four figures appearing in it is described as an unjust money-lender taking capital and then unexpectedly giving back the capital with great interest. The furnace is subsequently also described as a field. The fact that it was heated seven times greater than the normal is described by Ephrem as the equivalent of a field being ploughed over and over so as to increase its yield. Since the three youths ate only vegetables, they were like seed sown in the field of the furnace and increased in number from three to four. Paradoxically, the fire increased their number while decreasing the number of those who did not eat only vegetables. It thus seems that Ephrem could use Daniel 3 as a biblical text to explain what happens in baptism, since the furnace became a symbol of being baptized with fire and with the Holy Spirit. In that instance, the fourth figure in the furnace is interpreted as representing the Holy Spirit. In another context, where he is arguing about the benefits of the fast, Ephrem

could use Daniel 3 to demonstrate how beneficial the fast is – it serves to alter the nature of those who practise it, for the fire similarly altered its nature to accept them and increase their number from three to four, while it remained the same for those who did not fast, and consequently killed them. What is clear from these examples is that Ephrem could adapt his interpretation and symbolism to suit the argumentative requirements. At the same time, there are certain similarities between his notes and the remarks in the commentary which point towards a shared tradition at the least. The interpretation of the commentary is much simpler and less use is made of symbolism and word-play, but the same tendency toward polar thought-patterns and parallels can be detected.

For Aphrahat the Persian Sage,²⁸ the theme of *judgement through burning* was an important aspect of Daniel 3. In his first demonstration, “On Faith”, he describes how the three friends of Daniel erected a stronghold of faith that withstood the fire, while those who ignored the command of God (not to worship images) were punished without mercy by the fire. He then goes on to enumerate other instances of punishment through fire in the Old Testament:²⁹

Let us perceive those three just men, who fell in the midst of the fire, but were not burnt up, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, over whom the fire had no power, since they erected a true building (of faith), and refused the command of king Nebuchadnezzar, and did not worship the image which he made. But those who transgressed the command of God, the fire immediately overpowered and consumed them; and it burned without mercy. For the Sodomites burned like hay and reed and stubble. Nadab and Abihu likewise burned, who transgressed the command of God. Likewise were the 250 men consumed who offered incense. Likewise the two captains and their hundred soldiers burned, because they approached the mountain on which Elijah sat, who was taken up to heaven in the chariot of fire. Likewise were the slanderers consumed, since they dug a pit for righteous men. *Demonstratio* I,12.

The tradition that the accusers were singled out for punishment, found in the Peshitta and also displayed by the Syriac commentary on Daniel and in Ephrem, is found here as well. This seems to be one of two links with the other Syriac sources. The other link is provided by the fact that Aphrahat also displays knowledge of the “nature of the fire” being changed. This is

found in a short reference in his fourth demonstration, “On Prayer”. At the end of paragraph 8 he says: “Further, the prayer of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael conquered the flame, tempered the strength of the fire, and changed (its) burning nature (ܕܠܗܘܐ ܕܠܗܘܐ ܕܠܗܘܐ); and it subdued the rage of the king and saved the righteous men”.

Aphrahat returns to Daniel 3 in his twenty-first demonstration, “On Persecution”. In that context, he draws parallels between the three friends of Daniel and Christ:

19. Hananiah and his brothers were also persecuted, Jesus was persecuted. Hananiah and his brothers were persecuted by Nebuchadnezzar; the people of the Jews persecuted Jesus. Hananiah and his brothers fell into the furnace, but it was cool like dew on them who were just; Jesus descended to the place of darkness and shattered its doors and brought out its prisoners. Hananiah and his brothers came up from the furnace of fire and the flame consumed their accusers; Jesus became alive and came up from the darkness and his accusers and crucifiers are burning in the flame forever.³⁰

When Hananiah and his brothers came up from the furnace, king Nebuchadnezzar shook and trembled;³¹ when Jesus stood up from between the dead, the people who crucified him trembled and shook. Hananiah and his brothers did not venerate the image of the king of Babylon; Jesus prevented the peoples from venerating dead images. Because of Hananiah and his brothers, peoples and tongues praised God who had rescued them from the fire; because of Jesus, the peoples and all tongues praise him who saved his Son, so that he did not see corruption. Over the clothes of Hananiah and his brothers the fire had no power; over the bodies of all the just who believe in Jesus, the fire has no power for ever. *Demonstratio XXI,19.*

In this section of text, there are two strands of the tradition also found in the other Syriac sources. These are the views that the fire of the furnace was as cool as a dew-laden breeze to the youths, and that the flames went out and consumed the accusers.³² The first is found in the addition to Daniel 3 (Dan 3:50) and is thus shared with the Greek world, while the second tradition seems to be peculiar to the Peshitta and the Syriac tradition in general.

5. Conclusion

It has been established in this article that the biblical text used by the author of the Syriac commentary was that of the Peshitta. Despite small alterations that were made to the text of the Peshitta by the commentary, the link between the commentary and the Peshitta seems undeniable in the light of certain pluses and minuses with regard to the proto-Masoretic text which were taken over by the author of the commentary.³³

The nature of the comments made by the author of the commentary seems to be straightforward and practical. This forms a contrast with the interpretation of the chapter by Ephrem in his hymns. Ephrem's interpretation is always highly creative, showing a predilection for polar thought patterns, and is adapted to the particular thematic context. His use of Daniel 3 to persuade the audience that the Holy Spirit is present in the baptismal water or that the friends of Daniel were saved from the fire because they ate only vegetables has no parallel in the commentary.³⁴

Despite this, however, there are certain links between the commentary and Ephrem's hymns. The interpretation of the figure that appeared in the furnace as being a person of the Holy Trinity and the description of the burning nature of the fire being "changed" are two possible examples of such links. As we have seen, this idea is also represented in the demonstrations of Aphrahat. It should be noted that Ephrem's genuine commentaries also differ from the interpretation of the same texts in his hymns. In comparison to the highly symbolic interpretation found in his hymns, his exposition in the commentaries might seem plain and almost drab. On the other hand, the notes on Daniel 3 in the commentary do indeed display a love of polarities and parallels, and it seems that at least one of these parallels is also used by Ephrem in his hymns (the polarity formed by the people inside the furnace being spared and those outside being consumed).

It would not be right to conclude that the commentary was indeed written by Ephrem, but one or two interpretative links or a shared tradition do seem proven, and no evidence has been found to suggest that Ephrem could *not* have written the commentary on this chapter.

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NOTES

¹ The date of his birth is not certain. Some would argue for a date somewhat later, ca. 309. Cf. Amar (1994:25).

² Published by Assemani (1740).

³ Some works ascribed to Ephrem could not be from his hand since they reflect the Syro-Hexaplaric version of the Old Testament in places (Bardenhewer 1962:354). The Syro-Hexapla is a Syriac translation of Origen's revision of the LXX text. Origen's revision was intended to bring the LXX into line with the Hebrew. The Syro-Hexapla itself was made in Alexandria in 615-617 C.E., long after the time of Ephrem (Brock, [1992])

1997). The book of Daniel seems to have been one of the latest to be translated, being produced in January 617 (Parker [1992] 1997).

4 Henze's remark that the works of the *Catena* (of Severus of Edessa, compiled in 861 C.E.), among which is also the commentary on Daniel attributed to Ephrem, "are now widely considered inauthentic", (Henze 1999:157) seems to apply still. Yet Murray (1975:32) once remarked that there is "authentic matter to be vindicated" especially in the material on the Prophets from the *Catena*.

5 Diverging views have been offered on the relationship between Dan 2 and Dan 3. According to Hartman (Hartman & Di Lella 1978:159), this once was an independent story that originally had no connection with the Daniel cycle of stories. It was incorporated by the compiler of the book "because it offered a good object lesson to his coreligionists who were being persecuted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes". Goldingay (1989:68) also describes the story as separate, with Nebuchadnezzar's behaviour and sceptical question being disjunctive with Dan 2. He nevertheless describes Dan 3 as "a sharpened version of Dan 2" and speculates that the final order of the book perhaps implies that the building of a real statue arose from seeing the visionary statue of Chapter 2 and that the king "sought to consolidate the empire that the dream threatened". This is an idea already voiced by Hippolytus (cf. Collins 1993:181). Lacoque (1976:55) also suggested that the difference between the Nebuchadnezzar of Dan 2 and that of Dan 3 is to be attributed to the fact that this story had a life of its own, but that the editor who joined the two stories thought it better for the message to keep the tension. Investigators have shown a parallel between Dan 2 and 7, and likewise between Dan 3 and 6. Lebram (1984:85) argues that Dan 3 convinces the king that the Jews will form the kernel of the Divine Kingdom of the future about which he had dreamt in Dan 2.

6 In Jewish tradition, different explanations were given for his absence from the chapter: Daniel left the king to escape from the honour bestowed upon him; he went to Tiberias where he built a canal; he was commissioned by the king to bring fodder for cattle to Babylonia, and also swine from Alexandria; he was also commanded to worship the image but was excused by the king. According to Hippolytus (commenting on 3:16), Daniel stood at a distance and encouraged his friends (Collins 1993:179 n.1).

7 The extensive use of repetition in this story indicates closeness to Dan 6, the one other court conflict tale and/or confessor legend, and also points towards oral transmission. Cf. Goldingay (1989:68).

8 Taylor (1994:103) misses the point when he describes the insertion in Syr of "accused" (literally "ate the morsels of") as a difference of word choice for "took up" or "carried" in the Masoretic Text. This insertion definitely reflects the tradition found in the addition to MT, that specifically those

people who laid the charge against the Jews were consumed by the fire that “came out of” the oven. The Greek text in this instance (v.22) simply speaks of οἱ ἄνδρες οἱ προχειρισθέντες συμποδίσαντες αὐτοὺς which does not seem to suggest that it was the accusers. In 3:48, the Greek text does refer to the fire breaking out, but notes only that it consumed some of the Chaldeans (= astrologers). The accusers are not singled out.

⁹ The word used is רַב־בֵּן, the singular form of which is described by Payne Smith ([1903] 1976:557) as “an infant, young child, little boy or girl under five years old”.

¹⁰ Koch (2001:245) describes the meaning as “Hüter des Reiches”, “halbautonomen Regenten einer Großprovinz”.
¹¹ Collins (1993:190).

¹² The LXX has here “an angel of God”, following the cue of v.28; A, Σ, Θ have “a son of God” (Lacoque (1976:59).

¹³ It should be kept in mind that the Greek version of Daniel in the Septuagint is the translation of Theodotion: “The Syro-Hexapla is also a rare witness to the genuine LXX text of Daniel, which in almost all Greek manuscripts has been supplanted by Theodotion’s version” (Parker [1992] 1997).

¹⁴ “Several times an exhaustive list of officials is mentioned: these have to worship the statue as representatives of the various ethnic and language groups of the kingdom” Van Henten (2001:150).

¹⁵ Text and translation consulted in Beck (1957).

¹⁶ Cf. Neyrey (1993:22).

¹⁷ Hartman (Hartman & Di Lella 1978:163) also remarks that this is “contrary to the usual practice in ancient times”.

¹⁸ Consulted in Beck (1959a and b).

¹⁹ E.g. in the Hymns *De Virginitate* 17:5.

²⁰ He refers to the Hymns *De Fide* 23:13-14 – “That the Father is the first, cannot be contradicted. That the Son is the second, cannot be doubted, and (similarly) that the name of the Spirit is the third. You would not change the order of the Names, would you? ‘Teach and baptize in the three Names, in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’. The Name of the Son cannot precede the Name of the Father, for there is no confusion there.”

²¹ Consulted in Beck (1955).

²² Peshitta manuscript 6h10 (sixth-century) and MS London, British Library, Additional 14528 (Jenner 2001:628-629).

²³ Cf. Ex 14:19; Is 52:12; and Is 58:8.

²⁴ Koch (2001:299) refers to Hippolytus II, XXXII (Book II of his commentary on Daniel). Hippolytus, who died in 235 C.E., wrote his commentary on Daniel ca. 204 C.E., and this seems to be the “earliest orthodox commentary on any book” (Bruce [1992] 1997; cf. Henten

1999:21). Montgomery (1927:215) also refers to Chrysostom and others (“*al.*”).

25 Consulted in Beck (1964).

26 In the Syriac text, there is beautiful sound-play formed between the words for “sow” and “dry vegetables”, since both derive from the same stem.

27 Another instance of sound-play is created between the stem for “seed”, “sow”, and “vegetables” (ܥܘܘܢ) and the stem for “decrease, become few” (ܥܘܘܢ).

28 For the Syriac text, the edition of Parisot (1894) was used. I gratefully made use of the index in the German translation of Bruns (1991) and also consulted his translation of the demonstrations. Neusner (1971:97-112) also has an English translation of Demonstration XXI.

29 This passage displays the rhetorical technique which Murray (1975:42) calls a “comparison-series” or “a rhythmically formalized kind of *syncrisis*”.

30 Neusner (1970:109) translates this phrase with “Jesus lived and went up from the midst of the darkness, and the people who had accused and crucified him will be burned in the flame at the end”.

31 The Peshitta changes the words “King Nebuchadnezzar was amazed and rose in haste” in verse 24 to “King Nebuchadnezzar was amazed and rose in great fear”. The fact that the three men survived the execution, as well as the presence of the fourth figure and its divine character (recognisable by size or shiny appearance?), convinces the king that his command was against the will of God and this fills him with great fear (Koch 2001:297).

32 The idea of the “accusers” being consumed by the fire is found in a number of places in the work of Aphrahat: I,12; IX,8; XXI,19; XXIII,54.

33 Similar to what Morrison (2004: §4) has found about Aphrahat’s biblical text when he alludes to Daniel, the commentary can be said to follow the Peshitta against the Hebrew text. It also definitely seems that the author has a Peshitta manuscript before him when he quotes the biblical text.

34 It should be noted, however, that Ephrem’s genuine commentaries display similar features. He never gives a continuous exposition of the biblical text, but rather dwells on texts that have a particular theological significance for him. Cf. Mathews (1994:43).