

The Exegesis and Polemical Use of Ps 110 by Ephrem the Syriac-speaking Church Father

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation and polemical use of Ps 110 by Ephrem the Syrian (c.306–373 C.E.) are investigated. It seems that Ephrem was hesitant to speculate about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus on the basis of his exegesis of Ps 110, but that he insisted that Jesus is called "Lord" by David in Ps 110:1 and "Son" by God in Ps 2:7, while both Pss 2:7 and 110:3 are witnesses which prove that the Father was the procreator of the Son. These texts are used to refute Arian allegations that Jesus was a creature, but are also understood as prophecies which should have been enough to prevent the Jewish leaders from rejecting their Messiah. Particulars of the crucifixion of Jesus are interpreted by Ephrem polemically as symbolic pointers to the status of the Jewish people and the Church in the fourth century, and Ps 110:1 provides the key to understanding this symbolism.

A INTRODUCTION¹

In the early period of Christian reflection, Ps 110 played an important role in shaping thought about the messianic status of Jesus, his vindication by God after the resurrection, the eventual subjection of all powers to him, and his work as heavenly priest and intercessor. According to Hay,² in the early period it was especially Ps 110:1 and 4 which were used in this way. These two verses "are among the Jewish scriptural texts most often quoted or alluded to by early Christian writers."³ Thirty-three quotations from and allusions to Ps 110 are

¹ Herrie van Rooy from the North West University in Potchefstroom is one of the leading exponents of Semitic Studies as well as OT Studies in South Africa. He also enjoys considerable international recognition for his contributions in these fields. With this article, which was presented as a short paper at the 2010 conference of the North American Patristic Society, I would like to offer my gratitude and appreciation for Herrie's influence in the study in the Hebrew as well as the Peshitta Psalter. The article presents an analysis of the exegesis and polemical use of Ps 110 by Ephrem, a leading thinker and author of the Syriac-speaking Christian church of the Fourth Century C.E.

² David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 15.

³ The NT use of Ps 110:1 had a precedent in Jewish interpretation from the first century B.C.E. or the first century C.E. In the *T. Job* 33:3, there is an example of an interpretation of Ps 110:1 as exhibiting "the divine exoneration of a pious individual"

found in the NT, while seven more may be found in other Christian writings produced before the middle of the second century.⁴ Especially Ps 110:1 was used in these writings, but v. 4 was also quoted in the letter to the Hebrews, where it served to assert that Jesus was appointed by God as heavenly high priest, that the Levitical priests are inadequate, and that Jesus is superior to them.⁵

In the time after the conclusion of the NT – from the time of Justin Martyr to the Council of Nicaea – Ps 110 became a factor in the debates about the divine nature of Christ.⁶ Psalm 110:3, which was never explicitly cited in the early period, was now also drawn into the discussion, proving that the psalm as a whole remained an important source of information for Christians, and that it was further explored exegetically as the debate about the natures of Christ developed. Justin Martyr (c.100–165)⁷ uses it to speak of Christ’s pre-existence and his human birth.⁸ Hay also refers to Clement of Alexandria (c.155–c.220)⁹ who relates Ps 110:3 to Christ’s eternal being, citing it as a parallel to John 1:1 (*Protr.* 6.3; 84.2). Hippolytus (d. c.236)¹⁰ uses it similarly (*Haer.* 10.33.11), while Tertullian (c.160/170–c.215/220)¹¹ interprets “before the morning star” (in the LXX and Latin versions of MT Ps 110:3) as a prophecy about Christ’s birth from Mary (*Marc.* 5.9; cf. *Prax.* 11).¹²

The next verse of the psalm, Ps 110:4, was used in this later period in a way similar to the example set in Hebrews. Justin Martyr, for example, regards

(Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 22–23), although Job is described in this document as a king.

⁴ Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 15.

⁵ Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 46–47.

⁶ Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 48; see also René Braun in *Tertullien, Contre Marcion: Tome V (Livre V): Texte Critique par Claudio Moreschini; Introduction, Traduction et Commentaire par René Braun* (ed. Claudio Moreschini and René Braun; SC 483; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2004), 199 n.5. Braun also ascribes the origin of such interpretations to Justin. See Braun 199 n.6.

⁷ G. L. Carey, “Justin Martyr,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. James D. Douglas; Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 558.

⁸ Cf. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 49, who refers to *Dial.* 63.3 and 76.7.

⁹ Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 49; G. L. Carey, “Clement of Alexandria,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. James D. Douglas; Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 234.

¹⁰ Peter Toon, “Hippolytus,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. James D. Douglas; Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 472.

¹¹ David F. Wright, “Tertullian,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. James D. Douglas; Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 960–961.

¹² Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 50.

it as proof of Jesus’ eternal priesthood and disproof of the Jewish claim that the psalm as a whole refers to Hezekiah (*Dial.* 33; 118.1–2).¹³

Inspection of the work of Ephrem the Syrian (c.306–373 C.E.) produces the following preliminary observations about his interpretation and polemical use of Ps 110:

- *Ephrem generally remains very sober in his interpretation of Ps 110.* This may be because he was hesitant to speculate about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. He expresses the opinion that one should not say more – or less – than that which is revealed in scripture. The interpretation of Ps 110 may even serve as a means of distinguishing between what is genuinely from Ephrem and the work of later authors ascribed to him. Examples of such spurious allusions to Ps 110 are those found in the *Diatessaron Commentary* 2.11¹⁴ and 20.35;¹⁵ *Carmina Sogyata* 3:28;¹⁶ and *Sermones* 3, 3:336.¹⁷

¹³ Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 50.

¹⁴ Where it is argued that the similar use of “until” in Matt 1:25 (Joseph did not know her *till* she had brought forth her firstborn son) and Ps 110:1 (“sit at my right hand, *till* I make your enemies your footstool”) proves that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus. Similar notions about Mary as *virginitas in partu* in *Carmina Sogyata* 1:2 is described by Beck as proof that it was from a different hand, since it is nowhere expressed in the genuine *Hymni de Nativitate*. Cf. Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)* (CSCO 186/187; ScrS 82/83; Louvain: Peeters, 1958), translation, xi–xii.

¹⁵ It is argued here that the shame of the cross is neutralised by the elevation of Christ as predicted in Ps 110:1. The Jews, on the other hand, remain in shame, since they are not permitted entry into their own city, and the tablets of the law (which Moses threw down in his anger) remain shattered, while Christ was resurrected. It is not sure whether this passage comes from Ephrem or whether it was added to his notes on the *Diatessaron* by his student. It is part of the commentary which is only available in Armenian. Cf. Christian Lange, *Ephraem der Syrer, Kommentar zum Diatessaron* (FChr 54/1 & 2; Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 59.

¹⁶ Where it is argued that “David” in Ps 110:3 was a witness to the pre-existence of Jesus.

¹⁷ Where it is argued that “David” in Ps 110:3 predicted that Jesus’ divinity would be hidden within his humanity. Ephrem usually uses the image of the divinity being “clothed” in Jesus’ humanity. Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones II* (CSCO 311, ScrSTm 134; Louvain: CSCO, 1970), translation, ix–x mentions a number of other reasons why this metrical sermon is most probably not from Ephrem himself, but does not refer to the interpretation of Ps 110:3. The reference to Christ’s birth “from that womb of the Being” (ܠܕܘܡܢ ܪܘܚܡܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܗܘܐ), in line 337 and 341 seems to fit better in the time shortly after the death of Ephrem when it was important to argue that the Son was co-substantial with the Father. But as Lange argues, Ephrem does use the term ܪܘܚܡܐ to distinguish between the being of God

- *Ephrem often asserts that David prophesied that Jesus, the son of David, is his (David's) Lord.*¹⁸ The purpose of this usually is to counter Arian assertions that Jesus is not divine, but also to argue that the Jews would have recognised their Messiah had they believed David's prophecies. Jesus is both the son and the Lord of David, and it is true to say that the king of the (Jewish) people is the servant of the Christians' king.¹⁹ Psalms 2:7 and 110:3 are fused in some of these contexts.²⁰
- *Ps 110:1 provides a key for understanding the symbols formed by the crucifixion.*²¹ Raising Christ on the cross formed a symbol for his glorification at the right hand of God; when those who crucified him, gathered at his feet afterwards, they formed a symbol for their own humiliation as the "footstool" of his feet.
- *"David" prophesied in Ps 110:4 about Jesus' eternal priesthood, but the Jews silenced this voice.*²² The Jewish priesthood was brought to an end because "David" wrote that Jesus will be a priest forever; therefore the apostles became priests in the place of the Levites.²³
- *"Solomon" unwittingly pointed toward the institution of the Eucharist in Prov 30:4. This becomes clear when Ps 110:1 and Matt 22:44 are used as keys to understand that Christ is the Son of God who "held the Spirit/wind in the hollow of his hands."* The bread and wine which Jesus put in the hands of his disciples were understood to contain fire and

and created beings. Cf. Christian Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron* (CSCO 616, SusT 118; Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 101.

¹⁸ *Hymni de Fide* 10:4; 23:11; *Hymni de Virginitate* 10:8–10; *Hymni de Nativitate* 25:8. Ephrem often alludes indirectly to Ps 110:1 via the context of Matt 22:42–45 when he refers to Jesus as "Lord of David and Son of David," e.g. in *Hymni de Nativitate* 5:4. He does this often to create a polarity between the divinity and the humanity of Christ. See the discussion of *Hymni de Nativitate* 5:4 in Paul S. Russell, "The Image of the Infant Jesus in Ephrem the Syrian," *Hugoye* 5/1 (2002): 38–39.

¹⁹ *Hymni de Virginitate* 10:10.

²⁰ Cf. *Hymni de Nativitate* 25:8 and *Hymni de Fide* 23:11. Tertullian (*Prax.* 7,2) similarly combines these two verses. In Latin they sound very similar: "ego hodie genui te" and "ante luciferum genui te." Text consulted in Hermann-Josef Sieben, *Tertullian Adversus Praxean – Gegen Praxeas: Im Anhang: Hippolyt Contra Noëtum – Gegen Noët: Übersetzt und eingeleitet* (FChr 34; Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 124.

²¹ *Hymni de Crucifixione* 8:10.

²² *Hymni de Nativitate* 24:14: "They rejected the trumpet of Isaiah that sounded the pure conception; they stilled the lyre of the psalms that sang about his priesthood; they silenced the kithara of the Spirit that sang of his kingship. Under a great silence they closed in the great birth that made heavenly and earthly beings shout out. Blessed is he who shines forth from within the stillness!"

²³ *Hymni de Virginitate* 8:18–21.

spirit respectively,²⁴ so that "David" and Jesus in effect answered the rhetorical question of "Solomon" in Prov 30:4.

Ephrem's use of Ps 110 can thus be summed up like as follows: He is in line with early Christian authors in using Ps 110 as an important witness about Christ's relationship to the Father as the Son of God. He also follows the line of thinking of Christian authors between the time of the NT and Nicaea, making more use of Ps 110:3 and 4 in his argumentation. But his arguments are, to a great extent, based on the Davidic authorship of Ps 110 and (consequently) the prophetic character²⁵ of David's pronouncements. All the contexts where allusions to Ps 110 are made can be described as polemical and Ephrem makes much use of symbolic and analogical interpretation. This, in combination with his fine poetic and rhetorical craftsmanship, forms the basis of his arguments which were not intended so much as formal arguments that would convince opponents, but as rhetorical devices to sustain orthodox views.²⁶

I propose to demonstrate these observations with the help of a more complete analysis of some contexts where an allusion or reference to Ps 110 is found in his work.

B EPHREM ARGUES THAT TO SIMPLY FOLLOW "DAVID" IN CALLING JESUS "LORD" AND "SON" PROMOTES HARMONY BETWEEN BELIEVERS

In the *Hymni de Fide* 23, Ephrem addresses his own harp, in other words, his own religious compositions, in order to spell out the duties and limitations of songs in the controversy with the Arians and the Jews.²⁷ He calls his harp

²⁴ Or vice versa, see below.

²⁵ Justin Martyr similarly refers to "the prophet David" in quoting Ps 110:1–3 in *I Apol.*, 45, 1. Consulted in Charles Munier, *Justin: Apologie pour les Chrétiens: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes* (SC 507; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2006), 248. The same is true of Ambrose (c.339–397) in *On the Christian Faith* 2.12.102. Cf. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, *Psalms 51–150* (vol. 8 of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 263.

²⁶ Compare in contrast Tertullian's style in arguing that God has revealed himself in Ps 110:3 as Father and Son in *Prax.* 11,1–3 or the style of his exegesis of Ps 110 in *Marc.* 9,6 (text consulted in Braun, 198–202). Paul S. Russell, *St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians* (M'Eth'o 5; Kottayam: SEERI, 1994) compared the style of anti-Arian polemics of Gregory and Ephrem and found much less proof texts in the work of Ephrem. He ascribes this to the "less academic nature of Ephraem's hymns and sermons" (Russell, *St. Ephraem the Syrian*, 70).

²⁷ Lange, *Portrayal of Christ*, 30 considers the polemics against Arians and Jews in the *Sermones de Fide* to be a characteristic of the Nisibene period of writing of Ephrem. The Jews and the Arians dominated the religious scene at Nisibis (Lange, *Portrayal of Christ*, 19). The Arians were, however, also very arrogant and self-confident in Edessa. Cf. Ephrem's remarks in *Hymni de Fide* 60:6, from which it would

"child" (str. 3) and "my son" (str. 9) and warns it that, to speak about that which is prohibited, amounts to blasphemy (str. 1).²⁸ He tells his harp to clear itself from quarrels (str. 5) and to avoid contentious issues (str. 8). He then carries on:

⁹Therefore, weigh the words, melodies which are not reprehensible; weigh and sing songs which will not be censured, so that your singing, my son, will be a delight for the servants of your Lord, and your Lord will reward you.

¹⁰Do not sing anything harmful to humanity. Also do not divide harmonious brothers through controversy! Do not put a sword, namely probing, between guileless people who believe undisturbed.

¹¹Do therefore not sing to (the glory of) God in an inverted way, causing you, instead of glory, to go astray and sing harm. Sing like David to the Son of David, and call him "Lord" (ܠܗܘܐ)²⁹ and "Son" (ܒܢܐ) like David.

¹²Do not dishonour the Father or the Son against each other! Your song to the Father should not be an insult to the Son, so that, inversely, your song to the Son will not constitute a dishonour to the Father (if you say), "He is not the procreator (ܠܗܘܐ)." "

¹³That the Father is the first (ܐܘܪܘܫܝܡܐ), is something which is without controversy. That the Son is the second, is something that knows no doubt, and (similarly) that the name of the Spirit is the third. You would not want to disturb the order of the names, would you?

The pronouncement in str. 11 at first does not seem to be associated with any other proof-text, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that this is an instance in which Ps 2:7 has been combined with Ps 110:3 as a scriptural witness. The argument is that David used his harp to compose songs to honour the Father and the Son. To "David," the Messiah was "Lord" since he refers to him

appear that this collection stems from Ephrem's time in Edessa. Cf. Lange's discussions (*Portrayal of Christ*, 24, 146) of the *Hymni de Fide* as part of the Edessene works of Ephrem. For a description of how Ephrem saw his role as "pastoral minister," see his *Hymni contra Haereses* 56:10 and 11. Sidney H. Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread; Fire in the Wine': The Eucharist as 'Living Medicine' in the Thought of Ephraem the Syrian," *MT* 15/2 (1999); 226, provided us with a beautiful English translation of these strophes, set within the context of a discussion of Ephrem's pastoral ministry.

²⁸ This is one of his typical objections to the Arians' subjecting of the Godhead to "investigation."

²⁹ The manuscript which Beck has used as the basis text reads ܠܗܘܐ, but manuscript D has ܒܢܐ. Cf. Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* (CSCO 154/155, ScrS 106/107; Louvain: Peeters, 1955), text, 82.

C EPHREM READS PSALMS 2:7 AND 110:3 TOGETHER AS WITNESSES BY “DAVID” THAT CHRIST IS THE SON OF GOD, AND HE EVEN FUSES THE TWO TEXTS

The hymn *De Nativitate* 25 contrasts the reaction of “Judah” and the “Church” to the prophetic announcement of the birth of the Messiah. Various texts from the OT are alluded to in order to point out that the coming of the Messiah (and his rejection by the Jewish people) was announced clearly in the OT: Isa 7:14; Mic 5:2; Dan 9:23–26; Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:3. King David is mentioned as one of the prophetic voices which announced the birth of the Messiah. For this purpose, Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:3 are fused into one prophetic announcement:

⁸Blessed are you, O Church, for, with his lyre, King David sings praise in you. Through the Spirit he sang about him: “You are my Son,”³¹ and: “In holy splendour I have begotten you today.”³² Blessed are your ears (O Church), for they were cleansed to hear about his day as about his body!³³ Wake up and proclaim him! Be chastened/instructed by Zion! The festival which she made mournful, make it cheerful because it has also made you cheerful!³⁴

⁹Blessed are you, O Church, since all festivals took flight from Zion and alighted on you. In your midst the weary prophets have found rest from that toil and dishonour (which they experienced) in Judah. Blessed are her scriptures which were unrolled³⁵ in your temples and her festivals which are celebrated in your sanctuaries.³⁶ Zion is desolate,³⁷ and behold, today (ܐܝܡܢܐ) the ages resound³⁸ in your festivals.

³¹ Syriac text ܕܘܪܐ, ܕܘܪܐ; the exact form of the words in Ps 2:7.

³² Syriac text ܕܘܪܐ, ܕܘܪܐ, ܕܘܪܐ. This is a fusion of Ps 2:7 (ܕܘܪܐ, ܕܘܪܐ) and Ps 110:3 (ܕܘܪܐ, ܕܘܪܐ) (so also Beck, *Hymnen de Fide*, translation, 118 n. 15). McVey refers only to Ps 2:7. Cf. Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns: Translated and Introduced by Kathleen E. McVey, Preface by John Meyendorff* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 202 n.565.

³³ Beck, *Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, translation, 118 n.16 explains that “day” is used to refer to “birthday” and “body” to “birth.”

³⁴ McVey, *Hymns*, 202 translates: “Be chastened by Sion who made the festival mournful. Make joyful Him Who made you joyful.”

³⁵ There is sound-play between “scriptures” and “unrolled” which use the same root consonants in a different order.

³⁶ McVey, *Hymns*, 202 n. 567 remarks that the Syriac word for “temples” is of Semitic origin, and that for “sanctuaries” is of Greek origin, but that both refer to the Christian churches.

³⁷ “Zion” and “desolate” are linked through alliteration of two consonants: ܕܘܪܐ, ܕܘܪܐ.

that the way in which the consonantal text was vocalized and slightly adapted, probably by an editor who had scruples about the quasi-mythical language, now speaks of the people of the king in the first half, while it promises to the king in the latter half a kind of miraculous regeneration from the bosom of the dawn. While Zenger insists that the text as it is presently vocalized should be regarded as the biblical text,⁴² he considers it possible that the original version stated “With you there is dignity on the day of your birth (בְּיוֹם הַיְלֻדָּיְךָ). On holy mountains (בְּהַרְרֵי־קֹדֶשׁ), from the bosom of dawn, I gave birth to you (יְלַדְתִּיךָ) like dew.”⁴³

Ephrem in any case has understood the reference to procreation in the Peshitta of Ps 110:3, ܘܠܒܘܬܐ, as an exact parallel to Ps 2:7, ܘܠܒܘܬܐ. Although they are spelled differently, both verbs are a first person perfect Pe‘al with suffix second person masculine singular. This example of Ephrem’s exegesis of Ps 110 shows that he considered “David’s” words prophetic, and that the author of the psalm had spiritual insight about Christ’s birth in “holy splendour.” Through the fusion, the description “holy splendour” is now related to the birth of Christ, and not the procreation of the king as it was originally used in the Peshitta of Ps 110:3 (and most probably the early form of the Hebrew text). Such an interpretation would avoid speculation about the eternal procreation of Christ.⁴⁴

It is noteworthy that Aphrahat, a slightly older contemporary of Ephrem, with whom he does not seem to have had any direct or maybe even indirect contact,⁴⁵ combines the pronouncements in Ps 2:7 and 110:3 in exactly the same way, although he does not fuse the two texts.⁴⁶ In the same paragraph he also refers to Isa 7:14 as a witness to the birth of Christ, and in the following paragraph, Dan 9:26–27 is also referred to as a prophetic witness about the

⁴¹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150* (HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 208.

⁴² Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 200.

⁴³ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 199.

⁴⁴ There are contexts in the hymns of Ephrem in which he seems to interpret Ps 110:3 more clearly as referring to the eternal procreation of Christ. An example of this is found in *De Nativitate* 21:7, where he contrasts the birth of Christ from the womb of Mary with his birth from the womb of “the Great One who begot him” – “of all the wombs that contained him, one womb sufficed – that of the Great One who gave birth to him.” But Ephrem here uses ܠܒܘܬܐ rather than ܠܒܘܬܐ as in Ps 110:3. For a discussion of this stanza, see Russell, “The Image,” § 18.

⁴⁵ Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), 338 says that “there is no evident probability that Ephrem knew the *Demonstrations*,” even though “they have more in common with each other than either has with anyone else.” Cf. also the remarks by Lange, *Portrayal of Christ*, 62.

⁴⁶ Aphrahat, *Demonstrationes* 17.9–10.

destruction of Jerusalem.⁴⁷ This most probably does not suggest that Ephrem had access to Aphrahat's work, but only that Pss 2 and 110 were early on combined in some testimonial list also known to the Syriac Church.

D EPHREM INTERPRETS THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS AS CONTAINING SYMBOLS WHICH WERE ALREADY PREFIGURED IN PSALM 110:1

One of the teaching songs from the Easter cycle, *De Crucifixione* 8, can be presented as an example of Ephrem's symbolic interpretation of Ps 110:1. In *De Crucifixione* 8:9–10 he says the following:

⁹Symbolically, he was crucified between robbers, of which the one blasphemed and the other one confessed. It is a symbol for the fact that, in our day, the People scoff at him, but the (Church of the) peoples confess him. In silence he reprovved the unbeliever, forming a symbol for them, since they are also despised in the world. To the believing one he distributed honour through his word, and behold: those who are likeminded rose to high honour.

¹⁰His cross they put up high on a hill, but they then descended and stood below him. With this they formed a symbol for him who sits on the stool of judgment (ܐܘܢܐ ܨܝܕܢܐ ܡܘܬܐ)⁴⁸ and makes them a footstool for his feet (ܘܡܘܬܐ ܕܘܢܝܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܘܢ).⁴⁹ Calvary is a mirror for his Church which he undertook to build on the height of his truth. Even today the Church itself is founded on Calvary.

It is well-known that Ephrem considered creation and scripture alike as sources of revelation.⁵⁰ God reveals something of his hiddenness in nature and also in scripture. It seems that the actions of biblical characters can also serve as symbols through which God reveals what will happen in future. The report about the crucifixion, read together with Ps 110:1, becomes such a source of symbolism to him.⁵¹ The hymn as a whole can be described as an anti-Jewish

⁴⁷ For a comparison of how the destruction of the temple is used as an anti-Judaizing argument by Aphrahat, Ephrem, and John Chrysostom, see the article by Christine Shephardson, "Paschal Politics: Deploying the Temple's Destruction against Fourth-Century Judaizers," *VC* 62 (2008): 233–260.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ps 110:1 ܐܘܢܐ ܨܝܕܢܐ ܡܘܬܐ.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ps 110:1 ܘܡܘܬܐ ܕܘܢܝܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܘܢ ܕܘܢܝܘܢ.

⁵⁰ See Sebastian Brock's description of Ephrem's symbolic interpretation as "a means of contemplation, a continuous meditation on both the material world and the Bible." Sebastian P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (SCS 13; Poona: Anita Printers, 1988), 54. See also Sidney Griffith's discussion, Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread,'" 227–228.

⁵¹ As Sidney Griffith remarks, while the symbols Ephrem identifies "come from both nature and the scriptures, it is the Bible that provides the horizon for their interpretation." Griffith, "'Spirit in the Bread,'" 227–228.

polemic. In these two strophes, the two robbers who were crucified with Jesus are interpreted as being representative in a symbolic way of the Jewish people and the Church from the peoples, as Ephrem used to describe this opposite pair. The robber who scoffed at Christ is interpreted as symbolizing the Jews, who still scoff at Jesus; the repentant robber symbolizes the Church. Jesus' reaction is also symbolic: He ignored the unbelieving robber, and this symbolizes the abuse the Jews have to suffer in the world, while the Christians "rose to high honour." This is possibly a reference to the privileged position of the Church in the Roman Empire at the time when Ephrem was writing.

But the process of crucifixion itself also contains symbols for Ephrem: the cross was erected "high on a hill" and the crucifiers descended from the cross to stand below Jesus. This symbolized the elevation of Christ to the seat of judgment and the eventual humiliation of those who crucified him, since they are being made into a footstool for his feet. Psalm 110:1 therefore serves as the key for understanding these symbols: The crucifixion of Christ, his glorification, and the humiliation of the Jews are all predicted in that verse. The implication of this symbolic interpretation is that the Jewish people have become the enemies of God in Ephrem's view, while "enemies" in Ps 110:1 was normally understood in the early Church as referring to demonic powers.⁵²

The argument, if one can call it that, is based on the analogical similarities Ephrem sees between Ps 110:1 and the crucifixion, while he uses his view of history and the current position and status of the Church and the Jewish people as confirmation of his symbolic interpretation.⁵³

E ACCORDING TO EPHREM, PROVERBS 30:4, WHEN READ THROUGH THE INSIGHT OF PSALM 110:1, POINTS TOWARD THE INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST BY JESUS AND THE FACT THAT HE IS THE SON OF GOD

In *Hymni de Fide* 10, Ephrem draws a parallel between the humanity of Christ which served as a garment to hide his Spirit and the elements of the Eucharist which serve the same purpose: the bread and wine contain "fire" and "spirit."⁵⁴

⁵² Cf. Wesselschmidt, *Psalms 51–150*, 261, where this view is ascribed to Novatian.

⁵³ It should be stressed that this interpretation of scripture by Ephrem is not a kind of allegory. He knew that the text had a plurality of meanings, a polyvalence which could not be depleted; that it was elusive and ambiguous and he considered its metaphoric possibilities inexhaustible. For a discussion of his attitude towards scripture, see Angela K. Harkins, "Theological Attitudes toward the Scriptural Text: Lessons from the Qumran and Syriac Exegetical Traditions," *TS* 67 (2006): 498–516, esp. 510–516.

⁵⁴ For a description of the symbolic value of fire as a portrayal of divine action in the Syriac tradition, see Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (M'Eth'o 2; Kottayam: SEERI, 1989), 42–44, and for a discussion of the theme in Ephrem's work,

In str. 14–15 Ephrem refers to two impossibilities which were pronounced by "Solomon" in Proverbs, and which have become reality through Christ. The text of *Hymni de Fide* 10:14–15 reads as follows:

¹⁴“Who held the wind (Spirit) in the hollow of his hands?” Come and see, o Solomon, what the Lord of your Father (David) did! Fire and spirit he mixed against nature and poured it into the hollow of the hands of his disciples!

¹⁵“Who bound up water in a towel?”⁵⁵ So he asked inquiringly. Behold! In the cloth, the lap of Mary, the fountain! From the chalice of life, a drop of life! In the towel we, your maidservants,⁵⁶ take it!

As Beck remarks,⁵⁷ the words at the beginning of str. 14 are those from the Peshitta of Prov 30:4, with only the word order changed. The passage reads:

Tell me: Who has ascended to heaven, and descended? And who holds the wind in the hollow of his hands? And who has bound up the waters in a towel? And who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son’s name? – If you know!

When Ephrem refers to the “Father” of Solomon, this can be taken as an allusion to Ps 110:1. Beck refers to Ps 110:1, Matt 22:44 and parallels. In Matt 22:42 Jesus asked the Pharisees: “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” To this, the Pharisees answered: “The son of David.” Jesus then asked them: “Then how does David in the Spirit call him ‘Lord,’ saying, the Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’? If David then calls him ‘Lord,’ how is he his son?” The train of thought is probably as follows: Ephrem is thinking of the Eucharist as the consumption of fire (within the bread) and Spirit (within the wine).⁵⁸ The disciples received these signs in their hands; they thus held Spirit (wind) in their hands. This

see Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (CisSt 124; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, [1985] 1992), 38–39.

⁵⁵ Syriac ܩܘܨܘܢܐ can refer to a veil, also the chalice veil, a napkin, towel, or handkerchief.

⁵⁶ Syriac ܩܘܨܘܢܐ. This may be an example of the fact that Ephrem composed his “teaching songs” for the use of women. Cf. the discussion by Griffith, “Spirit in the Bread,” 227.

⁵⁷ Edmund Beck, *Hymnen de Fide*, translation, 35 n.17.

⁵⁸ In str. 11 he refers to the corporeal food Abraham gave to the spiritual angels, and says that the miracle of the Lord is greater, since he gives fire as food and spirit as drink to corporeal believers. It is possible that the elements are here arranged chiastically, since he states clearly in str. 8 that the Spirit is hidden in the bread and fire is hidden in the wine. But, as Sidney Griffith remarks, crumbs of the Eucharistic bread are often called “embers” or “burning coals” in Syriac texts. It would thus seem that the image was not so rigid in the mind of Ephrem. See Griffith, “Spirit in the Bread,” 232.

offers an answer to "Solomon" who, in Prov 30:4, implied in a rhetorical question that this is not humanly possible – the name of such a person, or that of his son, is not known. It is possible, though, for God, and this is the point of the question in Prov 30:4.⁵⁹ Ephrem thus argues that the name of God's Son is now known, and it is he who held the "Spirit" in his hands and put it in the hands of his disciples. If Solomon understood what his father, "David," meant in Ps 110:1, he would have the answer, the same answer Jesus was hinting at in Matt 22:44. What is more, Jesus has also bound up water in a towel, since he is the source of living water, and he was wrapped in cloths and lay in the lap of Mary. The believers, who partake of the Eucharist, also take in drops of this water of life.⁶⁰

The anti-Arian polemic argument therefore proceeds from Prov 30:4. The rhetorical question about the impossibility for humans to hold wind/spirit in one's hands is answered by telling "Solomon" that Jesus, the Lord of his father (as "David" referred to him in Ps 110:1), made it possible, since the disciples received the bread and wine in their hands, and the bread contained fire and the wine contained Spirit (and vice versa), the body of Christ. It is possible that this exegesis of Prov 30:4 developed since the Arians used this text to argue that Christ cannot be the Son of God.

F CONCLUSION

To Ephrem, it was very important that "David" was the author of both Ps 2 and Ps 110. Because there is a great similarity between Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:3 in the Peshitta, and because "David" was seen as the author of both texts, they were fused into one prophetic pronouncement referring to the day on which Christ would be born. At the same time, Ephrem draws from these two texts the conclusion that scripture clearly states that Christ is the Son of God the Father, and

⁵⁹ According to William McKane, the word "son" in Prov 30:4 possibly refers to a wisdom teacher's pupil. Agur asks whether any wisdom teacher has been to heaven and back or has held the wind in his fists or the waters in his garment (since God's garment is the clouds, cf. Job 26:8a), or has taken part in creation. Agur's point is that no such wisdom teacher exists: "There is an unbridgeable gulf between men and a Being whose dominion is so vast, who collects the wind in his fists, and whose clothing is the clouds." See William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM [1970] 31980), 647.

⁶⁰ The same connection between the Eucharist and Prov 30:4 is also made in *Hymni de Virginitate* 32:2. Ephrem expresses astonishment about the "old priest" (Simeon) being able to carry the One who carries all (see also the parallel in the *Sermo de Domino Nostro*, sec. 51). He then prays to be granted the privilege also to take the Lord in his "bread" into his hand (in the Eucharist), since the Lord made it possible to enclose his sea in the hollow of one's hand and his fire in one's bosom. McVey, *Hymns*, 404 n.500, remarks that Beck interprets this as a sign that the believers received the signs of the Eucharist in their hands in Ephrem's time, and also thinks that this is probable, but cautions that Ephrem might be speaking as a deacon.

that he is called "Lord" by David. One should be careful not to say more than this; but also not less, since either extremity would disturb the balance, turning praise into injury for God and causing dissent within the Church.

Ephrem thus uses Ps 110 to refute the Arian doctrine that Jesus is not divine, but he also uses it almost constantly as the basis of anti-Jewish polemics which assert that the Jews should have recognized their Messiah. "King David" takes his place as a prophetic witness among Isaiah, Micah and Daniel who have all honoured the Church by their predictions about the Messiah. The rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people has resulted in their own rejection and humiliation by God. This was symbolized by the particulars of the crucifixion, and Ps 110:1 provides the key for understanding this.

Finally, Ps 110:1 also serves for Ephrem as a key to understand that Solomon, in Prov 30:4, unknowingly spoke about the institution of the Eucharist, and thus witnessed to the divinity of Christ. The wine the disciples took from Christ contained the Spirit (in Syriac, the same word as "wind"). The answer to "Solomon's" rhetorical question in Prov 30:4, about who held the "Spirit" in his hands, is now known, and the name of his Son is also known. Had Solomon understood to whom his father "David" referred in Ps 110:1, indicating that Christ was elevated to a position of honour in heaven, he would not have needed to ask the question, according to Ephrem.

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