Ephrem the Syrian's hymn *On the Crucifixion* 4

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This article offers a translation of the hymn *De Crucifixione* 4 by Ephrem, the Syrian theologian, which forms part of his cycle of hymns for the celebration of Easter. The symbolic interpretation of particularly the tearing of the temple veil in this hymn – together with the cosmic signs which occurred at the death of Jesus – is investigated. An attempt is made to correlate Ephrem's fierce anti-Jewish polemics with the intentions of the authors of the Synoptic Gospels and with Ephrem's circumstances at the probable time of composition of the hymn.

Introduction

Ephrem the Syrian (*c.* 306–373 CE) was a prolific author of hymns, poems, and sermons in metrical form. In addition to such poetic compositions he wrote theological treatises, polemical tracts and commentaries on Scripture in the form of artistic prose. He was such a gifted composer of *madrashe*, that is, 'doctrinal hymns' or 'teaching songs', and such an influential theologian that he is revered by many denominations as a saint and regarded by many researchers as the most important father of Syriac-speaking Christianity.

Although he was immensely gifted as a poet and theologian, he did not write primarily because he had a creative urge, but because he took issue with theological and political threats against the orthodox Syriac-speaking church of his time and considered hymns to be the best way to propagate and perpetuate the orthodox faith. The many polarities that characterise his poetic as well as his prose writings can be attributed as much to the Semitic literary tradition in which he was trained as to the urge to contrapose symbol and fulfilment, heresy and orthodoxy, falsehood and truth, in order to delineate more clearly what he saw as orthodox belief.

The crucifixion of Jesus was a central issue in Christianity from its inception. The writings of the New Testament portray the passion of Christ, together with his resurrection, as the most important factor in the birth of the church.[1] To the opponents of Jesus, his death on the cross served as proof that he was a false messiah, whilst Christians interpreted it from the perspective of the resurrection as the climax of God's mercy and, consequently, as Jesus's knowing and willing self-sacrifice. Since the resurrection was contradicted by the opponents of Jesus,[2] it could be expected that the followers of Christ would look for 'independent' confirmation already at the moment of Jesus's death that he truly *was* the Son of God. The Synoptic Gospels all participate in meeting this need.[3] They all mention that darkness fell over the whole land[4] from the sixth to the ninth hour[5] and that the temple veil tore from top to bottom.[6] Matthew is the only evangelist who also mentions that 'the earth shook', 'the rocks were split', and that 'the tombs were opened' and that resurrected saints came to Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus.[7] These supernatural happenings were supposed

1.This can *inter alia* be inferred from the fact that the passion narratives contain more detail about the life of Jesus than any other part of the Gospels, even his birth.

2.Cf. Matthew 28:11–15.

3.In the last article ever published by Edmund Beck (Beck 1993), he investigated the notes made in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron* (attributed to Ephrem) on the miracles that happened at the crucifixion. This article was consulted, but the notes in the commentary were not included in this investigation.

4.Since this is (most probably) an allusion to Amos 8:9 (cf. the reference in Nestle & Aland 1971:80), the expression πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν should possibly be understood as 'the whole earth' rather than 'the whole land'. Cf., however, the similar use of σκότος also in Joel 2:2, 31; Zephaniah 1:15; Isaiah 5:30, 8:22 and 60:2.

5.Matthew 27:45, Mark 15:33, and Luke 23:44–45.

6.Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, and Luke 23:45. Matthew and Mark mention this in connection with the death of Jesus, while Luke connects it to the darkness.

7.Matthew 27:51–53. There is textual uncertainty whether to read 'after his resurrection' or 'after their resurrection', and both readings cause dogmatic difficulties; cf. Grundmann (1968:562–563).

to be signs from God, we may infer.[8] The Synoptic Gospels also note that a centurion, who oversaw the crucifixion, gave independent witness that Jesus truly was the Son of God.[9] Matthew alone describes this as the reaction not only of the centurion, but also of the other Roman soldiers who were present at the crucifixion. All of them were gripped by fear when they witnessed an earthquake together with 'what took place', and then made this important confession.[10] According to Mark, the centurion made the confession when he saw how Jesus breathed his last.[11] Luke mentions that the centurion praised God when he saw what had happened and said that Jesus certainly was innocent (δίκαιος).[12] Luke in turn notes that the multitude went away whilst beating their breasts, possibly an indication of their perception that something supernatural had happened.[13] These cosmic events and the reaction of at least some of the spectators can therefore justifiably be interpreted as independent testimony that what had happened was not merely the death of an ordinary human being, but an occurrence of eschatological proportions.

In arguing that Jesus truly was the Messiah who willingly gave his life as atonement for the sins of humanity, Ephrem naturally makes use of the evidence of the Gospels about the response of God and of nature to the crucifixion and death of Jesus. He surpasses the Gospels in his polemics against the Jewish leaders, however, and also uses extra-biblical motifs and traditions to attack them. It seems that he goes out of his way to depict the Jewish religious leaders in negative terms.[14] When he argues that their actions were the cause of the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem in 70 CE, he may still be following the cue provided by the Gospels.[15] But in the fourth hymn of the liturgical collection of *madrashe* on the crucifixion, he interprets the tearing of the veil also as the divine response to the high priest's tearing of his tunic. By tearing his frock without proper justification for such a drastic action, the high priest unwittingly signified the end of the priestly service in the temple. Christ, the 'true priest', had come to 'put on' the priestly service, and the temple thus decommissioned itself justifiably through the tearing of the veil, whilst Christ commissioned his own 'altar', namely, worship in the church. The tearing of the veil was consequently also a lament about the 'final' destruction of the temple (a reference to the devastation in 70 CE), and a signal that the church from the 'peoples' had replaced the one 'people' of God. The darkening of the sun and the earthquake are also interpreted by Ephrem respectively as signs of the gross injustice committed by the Jewish leaders and the consequential rejection of the Jews as the people of God. He justifies this interpretation by alluding to the story of Noah's drunkenness in Genesis 9. The Jewish aristocracy are compared to Ham, the son of Noah, who had no scruples about mocking the nakedness of his father. Ham was cursed by Noah for his lack of respect and the silent implication is that the Jews were cursed by God and therefore deserved to be rejected by God.

The cycle of hymns on Easter and the hymn *De Crucifixione* 4

The cycle of hymns on Easter, which consists of four smaller collections and which was possibly arranged for liturgical purposes in this order by Ephrem himself,[16] can be regarded as genuine works of Ephrem.[17] According to Christian Lange, the hymns on Easter were composed by Ephrem during his early period in Nisibis, thus before 363 CE.[18] Christine Shepardson (2008:237–240) has described the origin and development of the Christian rhetoric about the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. What may be important in the context of Ephrem's work is that a second Christian narrative flowered after Emperor Julian's failed efforts to rebuild the Jewish temple between 361 and 363 CE. The destruction of the temple in 70 CE was interpreted by these 4th century Christian leaders as the permanent destruction of the temple (Shepardson 2008:240). It is thus possible that some of Ephrem's hymns in this cycle coincided with Julian's effort to rebuild the temple and that they could be interpreted as part of the polemic against the rebuilding of the temple. In

8. Luke describes the darkness as a result of 'an eclipse (ἐκλιπόντος) of the sun' (Luke 23:45). In the middle of the day, at a time when the moon is full (at Passover), it could not be a natural eclipse and the failing of the sun's light is therefore meant to be supernatural, thus a message from God through a sign of nature; cf. Rienecker (1982:531). According to Amos 8:9, darkness over the whole earth 'in broad daylight' was to be the apocalyptic sign of the 'day of YHWH'. In Matthew, the death of Jesus triggers a series of occurrences that are all described with the aorist passive, in other words, God is active in each and every one of them; cf. Grundmann (1968:561). Matthew takes recourse to the 'prodigia' or 'portents' at the death of famous people, for example the earthquake at the death of Caesar (Vergil, *Georgica* I.475) and the appearances of dead people prior to the conquest of Alexandria by Vespasian (Dio Cassius LI 17.5); cf. Grundmann (1968:561–562).

9. Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:39, and Luke 23:47.

10. Matthew 27:54. Grundmann (1968:563) notes that the confession of the centurion directly contradicts the earlier theme of the mocking of Jesus (vv. 40 and 43); fear and confession reveal that those who earlier mocked Jesus had experienced conversion, and this serves as a sign of the victory of Jesus. Matthew also mentions another earthquake when 'an angel of the Lord' rolled the stone away which covered the entrance to the grave (Matt 28:2).

11. Mark 15:39.

12. Luke 23:47.

13. Luke 23:48. Luke mentions this reaction immediately after that of the centurion and in both instances it is triggered by the fact that they 'saw what had happened'. Rice (2013:355–376) shows how Luke used rhetorical techniques to amplify the guilt of the Jewish leaders. The two notices Luke adds that the people beat their breasts during the crucifixion were, in his view, intended to show how they declined to participate in the mockery and displayed remorse, thereby highlighting the lack of remorse and compassion on the part of the leaders (Rice 2013:367).

14. Concerning the way in which the passion narrative is reflected in the Easter cycle as a whole, Gerard Rouwhorst writes, 'En traitant de ces scènes, Ephrem fait tout ce qui est possible pour faire apparaître le people juif sous un jour négatif. Il l'accable constamment des accusations et des reproches les plus amers, insistant sur la méchanceté des Juifs et leur responsabilité, responsabilité pour laquelle ils furent sévèrement punis, en étant rejetés par Dieu.' Cf. Rouwhorst (1989a:99).

15. J. Bradley Chance (2007:268–291) has convincingly argued that the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple in Mark 11:12–19 are closely connected to the tearing of the veil in Mark 15:38, so that the tearing of the veil can be seen to be the realisation of Jesus's word of judgement that the temple will be destroyed in Mark.

16. Hints about the liturgical application of such collections are given in *De resurrectione* 2, where Ephrem mentions the contribution of various groups and classes of the congregation to the Easter festivities: the bishop (with the exposition of Scripture), the priests (with their good deeds), the deacons (with lectures), the boys (with psalms), the virgins (with hymns, namely *madrashe* like those of Ephrem), royalty (with their deeds), and ordinary people (with their style of living). Cf. especially strophe 9.

17. The collections are those on fasting (*De ieiunio quadraginta dierum*), the unleavened bread (*De azymis*), the crucifixion (*De crucifixione*), and the resurrection (*De resurrectione*). Beck used as general criterion for authenticity the presence of a collection in the two oldest, dateable Syriac manuscripts, namely Vat. sir. 111 and Br. M. add. 14571. See the preface to the critical edition, Beck (1964a:i). The collection entitled *De ieiunio* was published separately.

18. Lange (2008:39). He substantiates this by referring to various allusions in the hymns on Easter to the attempts of the Persians to conquer Nisibis. The collection must therefore have been in existence before 363 CE, since the city was ceded to the Persians after the death of Julian in June 363.

the hymns *Contra Julianem*, which were probably written shortly after the death of Julian and the cession of Nisibis to the Persians, Ephrem indeed refers to Jewish efforts to aid the rebuilding of the temple.[19]

The hymn *De Crucifixione* 4.1–18

Furthermore (hymns) on the crucifixion. On the melody: 'Bride of the King':

1. My brethren, the slave[20] slapped the cheek of the master who frees the slaves. * O, for the Merciful One who wanted to free even that slave who struck him! * The master of the accursed slave was saddened because this one gave the slap on the cheek and (in doing so) did not accept his emancipation. * A slave who was to be emancipated would take a slap on the cheek.[21] * In this instance, the one who liberates all was struck. Response: Heaven and also earth, these and all that are in them * are too small to give thanks for this!
2. Since they were raving mad, they clothed him: They made him king through royal garments. * Whilst amusing themselves with their Lord as if with a simple fellow, they did obeisance to him symbolically.[22] * Through the crown of thorns, which they put on him, they showed * and witnessed that he took away the curse of Adam.[23] * Through all with which they wanted to falsify his words, * his truth was crowned by the false ones.
3. The covering, namely that of the altar, as we hear, they brought out after having entered (into the temple).[24] *They excavated deep and searched for a reason to accuse him. In order to be able to hang around him the sign of kingship, * they entered and stripped the holy altar, * and clothed him (with it), so that he would die. (Together with) the cover of the sanctuary, he took the royal dignity * like the ephod with which also David clothed himself.[25]
4. An ordinary (person) who approached the altar or its fittings, would certainly die. * 'According to our law', they said, 'he deserves death'.[26] But so that they would not suffer defeat * by the kingdom which had subjected them, * they did not give the other reason[27] why they clothed him.* They were afraid to reveal it. * They cunningly accused him because they were afraid.
5. For they wanted to lay two snares for him who investigates everything. * Yes, they cunningly hung around him the sign of kingship, * and they put on him the garment of glory * so that he would be delivered to death on account of the one or the other. Since they wanted to ensnare him by two things, * he caught them with two things – for he took away the kingship and the priesthood.
6. Subsequently they delivered him to the judge, without noticing that they were themselves being found guilty by him. * The curtain (or veil, ܐܦܪܣ ܬܪܥܐ) proclaimed, with the sound of its tearing (ܩܠܐ ܕܣܕܩܗ), the final devastation (ܠܚܘܪܒܐ ܐܚܪܝܐ).[28] * Since they conquered the conqueror, they were conquered excessively. * Their guilt was the reason for the devastation. * Who has (after all) seen a master whose servant sits in judgement over him * and writes (a title), puts it up and (in doing so) proclaims his kingship!
7. The Caesar, whom the accusers had chosen, uprooted their dwelling-place. * And further, that judge upon whom they called to deliver (him) to them: * The bribe did not blind the righteous one who declared the innocent one innocent * and (thus) became the adversary at law of the scribes. * With water he purified his hands[29] from that living blood * with which the house of Cain had concealed him amongst their race.
8. For they solemnly pledged themselves to one another, all generations, one generation to the other, * for they were afraid because they sensed that that guilt was full of wrath. * But because they were divided, one generation was not willing to let the other escape. * For they are like bands of robbers who vowed to one another, * they resemble murderers who were tried and convicted, * but were not willing to let their comrades escape.
9. And when they shouted against him and scourged him, they did not notice that he requited the scourging * of

19. *Contra Julianem* 1.16 and 2.17; cf. Shepardson (2008:246). Lange (2008:40–41) ascribes the hymns against Emperor Julian to the time after Ephrem had left Nisibis and before he relocated to Edessa. The flight from Nisibis and the temporary stay at Garbaya and Amida, before the relocation to Edessa, are dated in 363 CE; cf. McCarthy (1963:10).

20. The reference to 'slave' is an adaptation of John 18:22. The word ܕܚ̈ܫܐ, 'guardsmen, attendants' used there is adapted. For the action, the Peshitta has ܡܚܝܗ̇، ܥܠ ܦܟܗ, and from this phrase Ephrem omits only the preposition; cf. Beck (1964b:44 n. 2).

21. The Bible only mentions that a slave who refused emancipation had to have (the lobe of) his ear pierced with an awl against the door of his master's house; cf. Deuteronomy 15:17. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:217, n. 2) remarks that in the ancient world a slap on the cheek constituted a rite of emancipation of slaves. The Latin term for this was '*alapa*'.

22. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:218, n. 1) notes that Ephrem, as was his habit, attributes the actions of the praetorian guard to 'the people', a broad term which would include even the heretics of his own time. Cf. in this regard *De crucifixione* 5.10, 11, and 16; cf. also Beck (1964b:44, n. 4).

23. Cf. Genesis 3:18.

24. According to *De azymis* 5.6, and also this strophe, Ephrem is following a tradition which explained that the purple shroud (ܐܪܓܘܢܐ) with which the soldiers mocked Jesus according to Mark 15:17 happened to be the covering of the altar from the temple. The Greek word πορφύρα probably simply refers to the reddish purple cloak of a Roman soldier. From *De azymis* 5.6 it seems that it was believed the priests fetched it and gave it to the soldiers with the purpose of giving more weight to the accusation against Jesus that he claimed to be king.

25. See 2 Samuel 6:14. The occasion was the moving of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

26. John 19:7. Ephrem uses ܚܐܒ ܡܘܬܐ; the Peshitta has ܚܝܒ ܡܘܬܐ.

27. In John 19:7 the reason given why Jesus ought to die is that he had made himself the Son of God. According to strophe 5 in this hymn, the two accusations they brought were that he made himself God and that he made himself king. So the snare which they laid but did not mention, according to Ephrem, was that he had made himself king. Ephrem seems to follow the account of John, namely that the Jewish leaders would not specify what accusation they were bringing against Jesus (cf. Jn 18:29), and that Pilate on his own account asked Jesus whether he was a king (Jn 18:37). Luke 23:2, though, clearly states that the main accusation was that Jesus forbade people to pay tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ, a king.

28. In the Gospels, the tearing of the veil is associated closely with the crying out of Jesus when he died. According to Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:220, n. 2), Ephrem here combines (as also in *De azymis* 13.18–19) the 'heartrending' cry of Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:50) with the tearing of the veil (Matt 27:51). According to Cassingena-Trévedy, in Ephrem's view it is the cry of Jesus that tore the veil of the temple. This strophe, however, clearly speaks of the 'sound of its tearing', so that Ephrem had a second sound, a response to the cry of Christ, in mind. This is stated more or less explicitly in the hymn *De azymis* 13.18–19: 'When he cried out, in response to his voice, the Spirit roused herself tremendously in the temple. When she heard that he inclined the head and cried out, she tore the temple veil as if seized with horror.' Rouwhorst translates this with: '*Et quand il poussa un cri, – la Rucha (l'Esprit), en écho à sa voix, au sanctuaire – cria fort. Quand elle entendit qu'il inclinait – la tête et qu'il criait, elle déchira le rideau, – comme horrifiée*'; cf. Rouwhorst (1989b:26). In the 21st strophe of this hymn (*De azymis* 13.21), Ephrem writes: 'The divine presence (ܫܟܝܢܬܐ) in the temple, as if it were her garment (ܬܟܣܝܬܗ̇), tore apart the temple veil because of her Beloved (ܚܒܝܒܗ̇).'

29. The expression used in Matthew 27:24.

that heir who was injured and went astray in Eden. * O, to you (be glory), the Master who had pity on the servant so that he would not be scourged, * and who held out his son and scourged him in his place! * Heaven and also earth, these and all that are in it are too small to give thanks for this!

10. And at the scourge pillar to which they led him, they showed the symbol of the fall of the people. * For it was not as with Samson, who clutched and pulled down the pillars. * The Lord of Samson himself was the true support * of the holy city and he let go of her and she fell. * The Chaldeans had pulled her down but they erected her again. * Whilst she renounced her pillar, she was overthrown (conclusively).
11. Since they beat him with whips, they formed a symbol of their own sufferings in his suffering. * For he tore out and took away the kingship, and the priesthood and the prophetic calling. * For he tore out and took away the three ribs * from the mouth of the stubborn animal.[30] * Its horns[31] he shattered and he tore out its rib and threw it away.[32] * Her strength he took away from her and shattered it.
12. The veil (ܐܦܝ ܬܪܥܐ) which was torn (became) a voice of mourning (ܩܠܐ ܕܐܒܝܠܐ) against the sanctuary (ܥܠ ܡܩܕܫܐ), * it was a voice of lament (ܩܠ ܐܠܝܐ) that it would be uprooted (ܕܬܬܥܩܪ) and become desolate (ܬܚܪܒ). The temporary priest * tore his frock (ܨܪ ܐܦ ܟܘܬܝܢܗ), a symbol of the priesthood * which the true priest came and put on. * The sanctuary tore its veil (ܦܪܣܗ): It is a symbol, for behold, he clothed (he prepared) * also the holy altar for his service.
13. The earth, which trembled (ܕܙܥܬ), pointed towards the destruction (ܚܘܪܒܐ) of their dwellings. * And that it shook their foot: To displace (them) she rejected them; * it cast them out in the four directions (of heaven), * and made them dispersed ones in wrath. * The people who was dispersed so that the peoples could be assembled; * the temple was uprooted and our sanctuary was built.[33]
14. Even that sun, the lamp of humanity, extinguished (ܕܥܟܝ Aphel) itself. * It took the veil of darkness and spread it out before its face * so that it would not see the shame of the Sun of righteousness,[34] * in whose light the angels of the height also shines. * Creation had staggered, heaven, and inclined itself, * Sheol vomited and disgorged the dead.
15. Even the luminaries served him on the day of suffering. * Together they were full, a symbol of his fullness in which there is no waning. * The sun displayed the symbol of his majesty, * the moon displayed the symbol of his humanity; together these two proclaimed him. * The moon at daybreak saw that it was opposite the sun, * a symbol for the fact that his flock would go to meet him (two translation possibilities of ܩܒܠ in the Aphel).[35]
16. Also the grave, into which they carried him, was new, for it was symbolic of the peoples * who would be baptised, and washed, and cleansed and become new. * And the body and the blood, symbol of the death of the king, * inside their own bodies they mingle in love.[36] * On the third day he rose and left the grave: * his death which in us became life and (that) for ever.
17. The stone of his grave, which the angel from the height rolled away, * is like the servant who opens the door respectfully for his master. * Three angels they saw in front of his grave: that he would be resurrected * on the third day, this the three of them proclaimed.[37] * Mary, who saw him, is the symbol of the church, for the first one * would she be to see the sign of his (second) coming.
18. Even his linen cloths proclaim his way of life, which shines forth brilliantly;[38] * for that darkness was not able to overpower him.[39] * The linen cloths which were in the grave stayed behind, but the body did not stay behind, * so that his body would proclaim the resurrection of the bodies. * The embalming of his body is a symbol of the word of truth, * for it preserves the lives of the souls (from decay).

The general structure and mode of argumentation in this composition

The content of this hymn as a whole is summarised as follows by Beck (1964b):

> Symbolic explication of elements from the passion narrative
> 1: Jesus being struck on the cheek
> 2–5: Crown of thorns and purple cloak
> 6–8: Handing over to Pilate, appeal to Caesar
> 9–11: Scourging and the scourging pole
> 12–15: Torn veil, earthquake, sun and moon at the crucifixion
> 16–18: New grave, the angel that rolled away the stone, the three angels; the linen cloths in the grave; the embalming. (p. 43)

The section that discusses the 'supernatural' and 'cosmic' occurrences at the crucifixion is strophes 12–15. The tearing of the temple curtain is, however, also touched upon in strophe 6 and this will also be taken into consideration.

The argumentative exegesis found in these strophes

This hymn contains examples of the typical features of all the genuine hymns of Ephrem, namely his symbolic interpretation of events in which he often contrasts type and

30. Cf. Daniel 7:5.

31. The second animal from Daniel's vision (the bear) with the ribs between its teeth is thus fused with the fourth animal, which had horns; cf. Daniel 7:5 and 7–8.

32. According to Daniel 7:8, three *horns* were torn out. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:222, n. 1) remarks that Ephrem goes about liberally with the vision recorded in Daniel 7:5 and 7, applying that which is said about the enemies of the Jewish people symbolically to the people itself.

33. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:223, n. 1) remarks that the 'sanctuary' here refers simultaneously to the body of Christ (cf. Jn 2:19) and the church (cf. Eph 2:19–22).

34. Cf. Malachi 3:20.

35. 'To be opposite', or 'to go towards', 'to go to meet'.

36. These lines refer to the Christians whose bodies would be made new through baptism so that they could receive the resurrected 'body of Christ' in the Eucharist shortly afterwards; cf. the explanation of Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:223, n. 7).

37. Ephrem fuses the angel mentioned in Matthew 28:2 with the two angels mentioned in Luke 24:4 and John 20:12 so as to arrive at the symbolic number three; see Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:224, n. 2).

38. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:225, n. 2) notes that Ephrem applies to Christ what is said about the clothes of the angel mentioned in Matthew 28:3, but that he possibly also draws upon the scene of transfiguration in Matthew 17:2.

39. An allusion to John 1:5.

antitype, symbol and truth, in order to argue that the Israelite system of worship was replaced by that of the church.[40] From the prevalence of polarities, one can already deduce that an important function of the hymn was to furnish arguments in a polemical context. This type of argument was not supposed to be logical in the sense of formal logic, but the arguments would be developed by formulating a series of polarities in which the one pole would be linked to negative connotations and associations and the other to positive connotations. This process of 'shaming' would then promote the positive pole. Ephrem formulated such polarities with the help of antithetic parallels, active and passive constructions, which as such often contained two forms of the same verb, antonyms, and other types of semantic opposition.

In the chosen strophes, Ephrem also employs situational irony and paradox to argue that the passion history portrays Christ as the innocent accused who was unjustly rejected and murdered by the Jewish leaders. Because of his innocence and their atrocious attempt to get him convicted and killed, they themselves stand accused. The rejection of the Jewish system of worship and the eventual destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem resulted from their guilt. The tearing of the temple veil and the earthquake were symbolic actions of God which foretold the devastation of the temple, the dispersion of the Jews, and the replacement of the Jews by the church. The one 'people' or 'nation' of God was dispersed, so that the church of the many 'peoples' or 'Gentiles' could be assembled.

The cosmic occurrences of the tearing of the veil, the earthquake and the darkening of the sun also serve to vindicate Christ who is portrayed as suffering unjustly but willingly. These events prove that his death was ordained by God and that Christ willingly subjected himself to the humiliation for which the Jewish religious leaders are nevertheless to be held accountable. These events also prove that creation displayed the compassion and reverence that was totally absent from the Jewish aristocracy at the moment of death of the Creator.

An example of an active/passive type of antithesis (although not of the same verb) is furnished by the note in strophe 6 that the Jewish leaders delivered Christ to the judge (neutral in meaning) without noticing that they themselves were being found guilty (ܐܬܚܝܒܘ) by him (negative connotation). The situational irony (of their not knowing that they were being judged) supposedly serves as an argument that what happened before Pilate resulted in the vindication of Christ and the conviction of the Jewish leaders. This is then described as the direct cause of the devastation of the temple.

Another example of an active/passive antithesis, which also plays on the guilt they incurred, is the subsequent statement that the Jewish leaders 'conquered' (ܙܟܘ) (positive statement) the conqueror (ܙܟܝܐ) (paradoxical statement), which caused them to be conquered (or to be guilty) (ܚܒܘ) excessively (negative connotation).[41]

Ephrem then formulates a paradox at the end of strophe 6 with the introductory question, 'Who has (after all) seen …', and then uses the opposite word-pair master (positive connotation) and servant (negative connotation) to express wonder about the fact that the high priest could sit in judgement over Christ (paradoxical statement) and afterwards ironically (and unwillingly) contribute to the formulation of the reason for his conviction (that he was the king of the Jews), which then in effect served to vindicate him and vilify the leaders of the Jews. The implication is that the devastation of the temple, which was proclaimed by the tearing of the veil, was a just response from God to a ridiculous and preposterous action of the Jewish aristocracy.

The argument in strophe 6, constructed with the help of polarities, runs like this:

1. They delivered him to the judge (negative connotation): unknowingly they were found guilty (negative connotation) (ironic happening, since the opposite of what they had planned, happened).
2. They conquered (positive connotation) : the conqueror (paradox): they were conquered/found guilty severely (negative connotation) (paradox resolved).
3. They accused him (negative connotation) of professing to be king (negative connotation): He eventually was described as their king (dramatic irony, since the opposite of what they intended, resulted).
4. The servant (negative connotation) judged (negative connotation) the master (positive connotation, creating paradox): The master (positive connotation) was vindicated (positive connotation) and the servant (negative connotation) judged (negative connotation) (paradox resolved).
5. Their actions resulted in the devastation of the temple and this was proclaimed already at the moment of Christ's death by the sound of the tearing temple veil.

In strophe 12, Ephrem links the act of the high priest to tear his tunic to the tearing of the temple veil. The high priest's tunic was the symbol of the priesthood, he says. By tearing it, he signified the end of the priesthood. The high priest is then described as 'the temporary priest' (negative connotation) and Christ as the 'true priest' (positive connotation) who 'put on' (positive connotation) the priesthood, which was thrown off (negative connotation) by the high priest. This, Ephrem suggests, is similar to the sanctuary tearing its veil, since this signifies the end of the functioning of the altar in the temple. This can be inferred from the fact that Christ clothed (thus

40. The scale of symbolic interpretation of events at the crucifixion can be seen from the many repetitions of the word for 'symbol' (ܐܪܙܐ) in these strophes, as well as different words for 'proclaim' or 'point towards' (ܩܪܐ ܥܡ, ܐܟܪܙ, ܪܡܙ ܥܠ).

41. The use of the verb ܚܒ, which means to 'be unequal', 'be conquered', or 'be guilty' in the Peal and 'to be found guilty' in the Ethpeel, thus constitutes a play on the fact that they were unequally matched against Christ and became guilty of the attempt to overpower him.

'prepared') the altar for his service.[42] The antitheses between the 'temporary priest' and the 'true priest'; the tearing of the tunic (as a symbol of the priesthood) and the putting on of the 'priesthood'; as well as the parallel formed between the high priest and his tunic with the temple and its veil serve to suggest that the tearing of the tunic and the tearing of the veil are linked, and so are the end of the temple service and the beginning of the worship in the church. Thesis and antithesis are resolved in synthesis; in the construction of these polarities, juxtaposition of a symbolic (temporary) pole and a 'true' contra-pole lead to the conclusion that the Israelite system of worship was replaced by that of the church, and that this happened because of the evil inclination and futile attempt of the Jewish leaders to vilify Christ.

The argument in strophe 12, also constructed with polarities, runs like this:

1. The tearing (A) of the veil (B) was a sound of lament for the uprooting (A) and desolation of the temple (B).[43]
2. The high priest (A) ('temporary' priest, negative connotation) tore [B] his frock [C]; this signified that the priesthood was laid down [D]): The temple (A) tore (B) its veil (C) [this signified the service of worship was decommissioned [D]).
3. The true priest (A') (Christ) put on (B') the priesthood (C') and clothed (D') (thus commissioned) the holy altar for his service.

In strophe 13, the earthquake that occurred at the death of Jesus is interpreted as a symbol that Jerusalem would be destroyed and the Jews dispersed throughout the world. This symbolic interpretation is then linked to two antitheses that are constructed with the opposite word pairs 'dispersed' and 'assembled'; and 'uprooted' and 'built'. The (Jewish) people were dispersed (negative connotation) so that the (church from the) peoples could be assembled (positive connotation); the temple was uprooted (negative connotation) so that the sanctuary of the Christians could be built (positive connotation). The net result is an argument that the Jews were shamed and replaced by the Christians as God's new honourable people.

Strophe 14 is built around the opposite word-pair consisting of the (natural) sun and the 'Sun of righteousness'. The sun is said to have 'extinguished' itself (ܐܕܥܟ ܢܦܫܗ). It took the 'veil of darkness' and spread it out before its face so that it would not see the shame of the Sun of righteousness. From another part of the Easter hymns, it is known that Ephrem is here forming an analogy between the shameful behaviour of Ham, one of the sons of Noah, who dishonoured his father by gazing at him in his naked condition, and the Jews; and another analogy between the reaction of Shem and Japhet, the two respectful sons of Noah, who shied away from this shameful behaviour with nature who could not bear to look at Christ in his shameful state.[44] In *De azymis* 13.1–17, Ephrem says that it was creation that covered its face with darkness as with a garment, since it had nothing else with which to cover its face so as not to see the shame of its pure Lord, and that its action resembled the deed of Shem and Japhet in this regard (since they would not look at their nude father and covered the shame of Noah).

The natural sun (which is described as the 'lamp of humanity') is also contrasted with Christ, the spiritual 'Sun', who is said to provide the light in which the 'angels of the height' also shine. The lamp of humanity thus creates antithesis with the lamp of the angels, and the former is said to cover its face in order not to see the shame of the latter. The effect of this polarity is to emphasise the shameful behaviour of the Jewish leaders, as well as the injustice of what was done by humans to Christ, a pure divine being. The argument *a minora ad maiorem* is thus also employed: In view of the suffering of the 'Sun of righteousness', who served as the lamp of the angels, the natural sun, which was given as the lamp of humanity,[45] refused to illuminate the world at the shaming of the Creator. If the sun, the *lamp* of humanity, reacted in this way, how much more reason was there for humans to cover their eyes in the face of such atrocious indiscretion? How guilty would those responsible for this not be? The implication is that if Ham, who dishonoured his father, was cursed, how much more the Jewish people deserved to be cursed since they dishonoured their Creator.

Finally, strophe 15 refers to both the sun and the moon. The remark in the crucifixion narrative about the sun becoming dark seems to have inspired another symbolic interpretation of the passion narrative. Since Passover takes place at full moon,[46] the sun and the moon must have been directly opposite one another at the morning of Good Friday. The moon, which was full, is interpreted as a symbol of his (full) humanity; the sun which was also 'full', as a symbol of his 'majesty', in other words, his divinity. But they are also symbols of another binary pair: The verb 'to be opposite' (ܩܒܠ Aphel) has two possible meanings, for it can also mean to 'go towards'. This dual meaning is used to interpret the position of the sun and moon at Passover as signifying that Christ's 'flock', his congregation, would 'go to meet him'. This is an instance where not Scripture, but nature served as a source for theological symbolism.

42. Earlier in the hymn, Ephrem uses an apocryphal tradition about the Jewish priests entering the temple to remove the shroud of the altar. According to him, they hung this cloth over the shoulders of Christ to substantiate the accusation of pretending to be king, but, should this attempt fail, to kill him in any case because the shroud would be holy and would kill a normal human being. The purported removal of the covering of the altar by the Jewish priests therefore can also be linked to the tearing of the veil, and the consequence of this was the termination of the priesthood and the commission of the altar of the church for service.

43. As was already noted, the tearing of the veil is described in various places by Ephrem as the reaction of the Spirit to the death of Christ. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:113, n.7) remarks that there is a causal connection between the cry of Christ on the cross and the tearing of the veil, and that it is specifically described as the reaction of the Spirit in *De azymis* 13.19. According to Cassingena-Trévedy, the Spirit is closely connected with the veil in Ephrem's work (e.g. *Hymns on Faith* 18.10) and this is worked out in greater detail in the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 21.4–6. He finds a possible source for this idea in Ezekiel 10:18–19 and 11:22–23 (a description of the departure of the glory of YHWH from the temple); cf. Cassingena-Trévedy (2006:114).

44. For the story about Noah and his sons, cf. Genesis 9:21–27.

45. This is an allusion to Genesis 1:14–16, where the sun is described *inter alia* as a 'light' and a 'sign for seasons'.

46. Passover begins (at dusk) on the eve of the fourteenth day of the lunar month of Nisan, after the March equinox (which normally would be around 20 March). The feast would thus always begin on the night of a full moon early in spring. From the *Demonstrations of Aphrahat*, we know that the exact date of Easter was disputed at more or less the same time when Ephrem lived. Some of the eastern Christian communities continued to celebrate Easter on 14 Nisan, and only grudgingly changed this later to the first Sunday after 14 Nisan. See in this regard Shepardson (2008:233–234).

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The cosmic events were thus interpreted by Ephrem as follows in this hymn:

- The temple curtain proclaimed (with the sound of its tearing) the final devastation of the temple. This happened because of the guilt of the Jews to put Jesus, a divine being, to trial. The sound of the veil tearing was a lament that it would be uprooted and become desolate. The tearing of the veil forms a parallel with the tearing of the high priest's tunic, a symbol of the priesthood. The sanctuary was thus decommissioned through the tearing (as an unclothing); and Christ commissioned ('clothed') the 'altar' of the Christians for his service.
- The earthquake also pointed towards the destruction of Jerusalem. It further proclaimed the dispersion of the Jews, so that the Christian church could be assembled from the Gentile nations. The temple was uprooted so that the church could be built.
- The sun became dark out of respect for the 'Sun of righteousness' because it could not look at the shame of the latter. The sun is the lamp of humans, but Christ was the light of the angels. His death was an atrocity that the sun could not bear to see. This points to the severity of the guilt of the perpetrators.
- The sun and the moon symbolised the divinity and humanity of Christ respectively; but also the coming of Christ's congregation towards him, since the moon was full at Passover. Christ was therefore truly divine, and the rejection of the synagogue in favour of the church was a just response from God.

The context of Ephrem's polemics against the Jews

It is clear that the parallel structures of Jewish and Christian worship and the rivalry between the two religions must have played a major role in the composition of this hymn. Ephrem must have perceived the Jewish celebration of Passover as a threat to Christian worship, otherwise he would not have gone to such lengths to argue that the temple was permanently destroyed, that Christian worship replaced Jewish worship, and that the Jewish people was dispersed so that the church from the peoples could be assembled.[47] He makes use of the cues given by the Gospels to argue that Christ truly was the Son of God but goes beyond their intention to argue that Jewish worship was terminated by God in response to the Jews' rejection of their Messiah.[48] By making use of apocryphal traditions (such as the theory that the Jews fetched the covering of the altar in order to ascertain that Jesus would be killed) and a symbolic interpretation of the story of Noah's shaming by one of his sons, he argues that the Jews incurred an unforgivable guilt through the crucifixion of Christ. Creation itself responded with dread to the crucifixion, but simultaneously it proclaimed the termination of the Jews' elect status and their substitution by the church from the many nations. In view of the threat that the possible rebuilding of the temple and the possible revival of Jewish worship during the reign of Emperor Julian posed to Christianity as the religion which had once and for all replaced Judaism, Ephrem's harsh criticism of the Jews becomes perhaps a little bit more understandable.

Conclusion

In line with the intention of the Gospel writers, Ephrem finds and uses ample evidence in the passion narrative to argue that Christ was vindicated by the reaction of nature at the crucifixion. He goes beyond that purpose, however. He points out how the religious aristocracy of Jerusalem made sure that Christ would be condemned and executed. But, in his view, the exact moment of triumph over their enemy proved that he was the true conqueror. Their evil intentions were exposed and their actions resulted in the abolishment of temple worship in favour of Christian worship.

The temple veil signified with the sound of its tearing the decommission of the temple, the final destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem, and the rejection of the Jewish nation as the people of God. The religious aristocracy were also exposed by the eclipse of the sun as hideously disrespectful and ignorant of their indiscretion, so that their rejection and dispersal would seem the logical consequence of their disrespect towards the Creator. The earthquake at the moment of the death of Christ symbolised, in Ephrem's view, a symbolic rejection and dispersion of the Jews which would serve as a preparation for the gathering of the 'peoples' and the 'building' of the church. In 4th century Mesopotamia, Easter was an occasion to polemicise against Jews and heretics by showing how the passion narrative itself already confirmed the end of the temple and the Jews as the elect people of God, and vindicated Christ as the 'true' priest and divine saviour.

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47.Shepardson (2008:236) has argued on the basis of similar arguments about the invalidity of Jewish celebrations found in the writings of Ephrem, Aphrahat the Persian Sage, and Chrysostom that these Christian authors must have been similarly concerned about the temptation Christians experienced in the 4th century to participate in Jewish festivals.

48.Although Mark portrays the destruction of the temple as something which was prophesied by Jesus (Mk 13:1–4), it is especially the Epistle to the Hebrews which emphasises the end of temple worship and its replacement by Christian worship. See in this regard the remarks by Shepardson (2008:238–239).

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