

# Introduction

This book examines a collection of Syriac poetry—the *Madrashe on Faith* (*madrashe d-ʿal haymānūtā*)—that emerged in response to the controversies surrounding the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.). It examines how the author of these poems, Ephrem the Syrian, used the Bible to build a literary world. I argue that the meanings Ephrem drew from the Bible were irrevocably entangled with the poetic self he presented, the audience for whom he presented them, and the divine Christ about whom he sang. Rather than using this body of poetry to uncover what Ephrem thought the Bible meant and thus trace a diachronic history of exegesis, I use the poems’ biblical allusions as a vantage point from which to survey a late antique literary imagination at work. Though this book proceeds as a close reading of a single collection of poetry, it aims to bring Ephrem into broader conversations about the relationship between exegesis and literature in the world of late antiquity.

Ephrem the Syrian was born in the East Roman city of Nisibis sometime in the first decade of the fourth century and died in Edessa in 373.<sup>1</sup> Today his birthplace stands on the border of Turkey and Syria, its inhabitants speakers of Arabic and, in some cases, modern dialects of Aramaic. In the days of Ephrem’s birth, it stood on the border of Rome and Persia, and its inhabitants spoke Syriac.<sup>2</sup> Ephrem was a voluminous author, but we do not know exactly where or how he was educated. Besides the Bible, we do not know what he read. Even with the Bible, we do not know precisely how he learned to read it.<sup>3</sup>

In Syriac literature prior to Ephrem, there is nothing quite like the corpus he would produce.<sup>4</sup> This corpus consists of more than four hundred *madrashe* exhibiting forty-five different metrical patterns. Ephrem also wrote metrical homilies (*memre*)—on Faith, on Nicomedia, on Reproof—and three extant biblical commentaries (*tūrgāmê* and *pūššāqê*, on Genesis, Exodus, and the Diatessaron).<sup>5</sup> But it is the hymns—the *madrashe*—for which he has come to be

known. We know little about where he learned to write them, but we do know this: they bear a close relationship to the Bible. They quote it, allude to it, imitate it, and recycle it.

Within these hymns, Ephrem reflected on his own world through the lens of the Bible. His was a world immersed in religious diversity and conflict.<sup>6</sup> In his works, Ephrem debated the ideas of “Manichees,” “Marcionites,” “Daysanites,” and “Jews.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the ideas that most attracted his attention were those related to the subordinationist Christologies that emerged after the Council of Nicaea.<sup>8</sup> At the time of that council, Ephrem was about twenty years old, living in Nisibis, roughly 800 miles southeast of Nicaea. His bishop, Jacob, attended the council and, we can only assume, brought its ideas back with him to the northern Mesopotamian plateau.<sup>9</sup> We do not know what Ephrem or his Syriac Christian neighbors made of these ideas in the immediate aftermath of Nicaea. At least according to our surviving evidence, neither he nor anyone else commented upon them until about twenty-five years later. It was not until the 350s, when Ephrem began to deliver his *Madrashē* and *Memre on Faith*, that a Syriac response to these controversies came into full view.<sup>10</sup>

This book focuses on the *Madrashē on Faith*, which Ephrem and his community sang in response to the theological controversies that emerged in the wake of Nicaea. Rather than examining these poems to reconstruct Ephrem’s Trinitarian theology or to trace the reception of Nicaea among Syriac-speaking Christians, I take the occasion of the Council of Nicaea and the particular controversies that followed in its wake as providing a context through which we can examine the inner workings of this particular set of late antique poems.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, exegesis stood at the center of the Trinitarian debates.<sup>12</sup> Yet, I argue that, for the most part, Ephrem’s interest lies not with the interpretation of particular verses but with the imaginative horizons within which he and his audience interpreted any biblical texts at all.<sup>13</sup> It is the task of the *madrashē* to establish these horizons.

## THE BIBLE AND THE MADRASHE

Trying to articulate the relationship between exegesis and the genre of Ephrem’s *madrashā* is not a simple task, and the *madrashā*’s formal relationship to the Bible—the question of whether the *madrashā* is at its heart an exegetical genre—is not easy to determine. The Syriac term *madrashā* (plural, *madrashē*) derives from the verb *draš*. In Babylonian Aramaic, this verb carries the primary meaning “to interpret” or, more precisely, “to interpret scripture.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, an interpreter of the Bible is called a *daršan*, and an exegetical school, a *bêt madrašā*—a house in which the Bible is studied.<sup>15</sup> In Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, the term *midrash* refers specifically to an exegetical homily.<sup>16</sup> Yet in Syriac, the term *draš* is less obviously connected to exegesis on a lexical level. In its most basic sense, *draš* means “to tread down,” as in “to clear a place.”<sup>17</sup> On a secondary level, it acquires the meaning of “to dispute,” specifically, in the case of Ephrem, to dispute false teachings.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the late antique accounts of the origins of Ephrem’s *madrashē* focus on this element of disputation

rather than exegesis.<sup>19</sup> So, on a purely lexical level, the Syriac *draš* does not carry overt exegetical implications. Nevertheless, within Ephrem's *madrasha*, biblical material appears on almost every page. If the goal of the *madrasha* is to dispute contested teachings, the Bible forms the primary tool through which the genre carries out this activity. Understanding Ephrem's *madrasha* as a genre demands an assessment of how it draws upon biblical material; the *madrasha*'s interaction with the Bible forms an essential component of its poetics.

Scholarship on the *madrasha* as a genre has tended to focus on its formal characteristics and historical origins.<sup>20</sup> But the *madrasha*'s relationship to the Bible is as crucial as these formal characteristics. Ephrem's *madrasha* addressed a wide variety of themes—fasting, paradise and the afterlife, virginity, Christmas, Holy Week, and Easter.<sup>21</sup> Throughout these works, the Bible provided the basic narrative through which Ephrem presented these themes, places, and events. In a cycle such as the *Madrasha Against Julian*, which sought to find meaning in the brief reign of Julian “the Apostate” (d. 363), the Bible provided the means by which Ephrem made sense of and represented these events. As Sidney Griffith has argued:

[T]here is the dominant idea, taken for granted by [Ephrem], that one can only understand the phenomenon of Julian the Apostate by reference to the Christian Bible. . . . For it was [Ephrem's] constant practice to turn to the scriptures in search of the paradigms which would allow him, through typology and prophecy, to put an acceptable Christian construction upon the events of his own time.<sup>22</sup>

The process Griffith identifies here—understanding historical phenomena through the Bible's narratives—can be applied to most of the themes that Ephrem addresses in his *madrasha*. Whatever he is speaking about, Ephrem uses the Bible as a tool to aid his processing and presentation of the world that he and his audience occupy. Within the *Madrasha on Faith*, that world, as perceived by Ephrem and presented to his audience, was one caught up in the theological and political issues spurred by the Council of Nicaea.

As Griffith noted, Ephrem connected the Bible and the world through typology.<sup>23</sup> But typology here should not be understood in terms of a clearly defined, explicitly Christological, and solely textual relationship between type and anti-type. Ephrem has a famously rich vocabulary for expressing the relationship of likeness between different things—*rāzā* (“secret,” “mystery,” or “symbol”), *tūpsā* (“type”), *dmūtā* (“image”), *ṣūrtā* (“type, depiction, form”), *remzā* (“gesture,” “sign”), *nišā* (“sign,” but also “guiding principle”), and *tabā* (“impress”).<sup>24</sup> Though this vocabulary is extensive, Ephrem does not use it systematically. In this book, following Ephrem's own example, I use a range of terms and metaphors to signify the symbolic character he sees present in the Bible and the world. At the same time, the term “typology,” or “figuration,” conveys something especially true of Ephrem's representation of the Bible and the world, even if it is not a term Ephrem privileges over any other. In classical Greek, *typos*, like the Latin *figura*, is an impress—one thing that has been pressed with another so as to assume its shape, while remaining a distinct thing.<sup>25</sup> This better conveys the way Ephrem uses the Bible in his poems—pressing

biblical images onto the stuff of his world and pressing the stuff of his world back onto the Bible.<sup>26</sup>

#### LITERARY CREATION AND PERFORMANCE

The goal of this book is to think through the *madrasha's* use of the Bible in terms of literary creation and performance. Rather than viewing the Bible as a stable entity from which Ephrem drew meaning, I aim to observe the Bible as it came into being through Ephrem's performance of it in the *madrasha*.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, I aim to observe the *madrasha's* poetic self and audience as they came into being in dialogue with the literary world of the Bible. But first I would like to address how I understand "literary creation" and "performance."

The idea of a literarily productive reading—one that seeks to create new literary works rather than simply draw out the meaning of older ones—is helpfully articulated by Robert Alter. In *Canon and Creativity*, a study of the use of the Bible in three modern authors, Alter shows how the Bible, both as a series of texts and as a singular symbolic entity, functions for postbiblical authors as "a value-laden, imaginatively energizing body of texts," which helps to "make possible the novels and poems they write."<sup>28</sup> The goal, Alter suggests, is neither to exegete the Bible nor even, in many cases, engage with it on an overt level. Rather, as a body of literature that hums in the background of an author's own literary corpus, it enables the author to make particular meanings and shape the semantic horizons of their own literary worlds.

As an example of this phenomenon, Alter points to the biblical echoes at work in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Its title alludes to a narrative from 2 Samuel 13–18, which tells of the rebellion of David's son Absalom against his father. More generally, the story represents the tension of sons toward fathers, the enduring compassion of a father for his son, and the gradual diminishment of a lineage.<sup>29</sup> Beyond the title, Faulkner makes no obvious allusion to the biblical narrative, but the novel's relationship to the Bible is signaled through Faulkner's use of a series of terms derived from the King James Bible that are out of sync with his primarily Greco-Latinate lexicon.<sup>30</sup> The title, coupled with the Jacobean language, subtly signals Faulkner's relationship to the King James Bible and guides readers to see the haunting tale of Thomas Sutpen through the broader lens of the rise and fall of David, and the curse on his lineage. Using these biblical resonances, Faulkner casts his novel as an epic of the tragedy of history in the American South.

Faulkner's use of the King James Bible in the genre of the novel can help us think through Ephrem's poetic use of the Syriac Bible. Rather than speaking in terms of influence or exegesis, Alter describes the relationship between the Bible and the novel as one of "imaginative texture." The Bible provides Faulkner with a way to reimagine historical reality and, at the same time, invests his retelling of that reality with meanings that transcend historical particularity.<sup>31</sup> If it is the case that the Bible provided Faulkner with an imaginative texture to shape his literary world, this is even more the case with Ephrem's poetry. Ephrem depicts the Bible as an inspired

document, divinely dictated to humans and revelatory of divinity.<sup>32</sup> Yet, this does not mean he finds in the Bible “a timeless inscription of fixed meanings.” Ephrem presents the Bible as a flexible and dynamic collection of texts that always strives to convey a reality that is ultimately beyond language. Ephrem exploits this flexibility, expanding its meaning in one direction while narrowing it in another. The Bible provides an “energizing body of texts” from which Ephrem takes meanings and vocabulary, which, in turn, trigger new insights into the situations represented in his poems.

Alter emphasizes the way that literary creation emerges from an engagement with the literature of the past, and he helps us think about how to understand exegesis in terms of literary construction. Another way to look at this phenomenon, and one which inches us closer to Ephrem’s own authorial context, is from the perspective of “performativity.”<sup>33</sup> The field of performance studies has grown dramatically over the last thirty years, and the term “performance” can now signify a whole host of different concepts.<sup>34</sup> In this book, when I speak of Ephrem’s relationship to the Bible in terms of performance, I intend to convey two basic ideas. First, Ephrem is always bringing the realities of which he speaks—the Bible, his authorial self, an audience, and a Nicene Christ—into being through speaking about them.<sup>35</sup> These are not realities that he simply finds “in the world,” but things that he constructs through presenting them in his *madrashe*.

Second, this act of “bringing into being” happened in a context that was quite literally performative—Ephrem’s songs were sung before and with an audience. In the following chapter, I argue for the particularities of the performative context in which Ephrem’s *madrashe* arose, a context that was not always liturgical but also connected to smaller, ascetic study circles. Here, I want to emphasize the importance of this performative context by drawing on the ideas of ritual theorist Catherine Bell.<sup>36</sup> Bell argues that when texts are performed, whether theatrically or ritually, the texts are “framed” to indicate their distinction from the realm of routine life. This “framing” signifies itself to the audience through a range of acts that operate on “multiple sensory levels, usually involving high visual imagery, dramatic sounds, and sometimes even tactile, olfactory, and gustatory stimulation.”<sup>37</sup> In the case of Ephrem’s *madrashe*, certain of these framing techniques are lost to us, but the *madrashe* still betray their presence. All the *madrashe* that I study in this book bear melodies, showing that they were sung. They are all metered and divided into stanzaic form, clearly setting them apart from everyday speech. They each have refrains, showing that the audience participated in their performance.<sup>38</sup> The poet also interacted with his audience in strong, emotional language. Occasionally, the *madrashe* reference ritual acts such as partaking of the Eucharist and baptism, and were likely accompanied by the uses of water, bread, and wine. Bell suggests that by distancing a performed text from the everyday world, that text could then represent the world to its audience in ways that both confirmed their expectations of the world but also transformed it.

From this perspective, to say that Ephrem’s *Madrashe on Faith* used the Bible to bring a literary world into being is simply to say that Ephrem’s *madrashe* acted per-

formatively. Ephrem's *Madrashe on Faith* took the stuff of different worlds—of the Bible, on the one hand, and of a fractured fourth-century post-Nicene world, on the other hand—and performed an imaginative world in which the two spoke to one another in coherent, meaningful ways.<sup>39</sup> The performative world of the *Madrashe on Faith* was one in which the Bible found its meaning, particularly in dialogue with Ephrem's own audience and community. In turn, that audience and community found their meaning in dialogue with the *madrashe*.

### THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This book explores the relationship between the Bible and Ephrem's *Madrashe on Faith*, and is divided into two parts. In part one, I lay the groundwork for the chapters that follow by establishing the broad late antique context within which the *Madrashe on Faith* emerged. In part two, I examine the way Ephrem constructed a symbolic world in the *madrashe*, out of the Bible.

Chapter 1 situates Ephrem's *Madrashe on Faith* within its late antique context. I address the collection itself, its relationship to Greco-Roman culture broadly, and the performative context it manifests. Chapter 2 traces the idea that binds the content of the *Madrashe on Faith*, namely, the poems' repeated condemnation of "investigation." This chapter further places Ephrem in his late antique context by showing how his understanding of "investigation" reflected debates occurring elsewhere in the fourth-century Mediterranean. At the same time, by connecting Ephrem's reception of late antique theological ideas to his reading of the biblical text, this chapter also begins to articulate Ephrem's biblical poetics.

Chapter 3 examines how Ephrem conceived of the Bible in view of his poetic use of it. As I argue throughout the book, Ephrem used the Bible to shape the world that he and his audience occupied. But he also presented the Bible in a way that excluded his opponents' reading of it and made his own creative use imitative of the Bible's own inner workings. This chapter connects Ephrem's biblical poetics to one of the primary arenas of modern scholarly treatment of him, namely, his symbolic theology. But here I take his well-known love of symbols and connect this to his creative use of the Bible. In his poems, by developing a polemic against the biblical practices of his opponents, on the one hand, and a theory of signs that destabilized the Bible's apparent meaning, on the other, Ephrem represented the Bible as a book always mediated through a particular community and set of reading practices.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 detail distinct ways in which Ephrem used the Bible to shape himself and his world. In Chapter 4, I examine Ephrem's construction of a poetic self through the words and images of the Bible. By using the biblical metaphor of the lyre, tracing a range of biblically based economic vocabulary, and presenting the occasion of his poetry through the lens of the wedding at Cana, Ephrem defended his role as a public theological speaker. He presented himself as reticent in his speech and as an instrument of the divine—an instrument anchored in the biblical text. At the same time, he presented his poetic self through the lens of sinful or marginal biblical characters to craft a rhetoric of humility.

Chapter 5 articulates the way Ephrem connected his audience and the characters of the Bible in the single world of the *madrasha*. This mimesis between audience and Bible emerged primarily in a series of biblical pastiches, in which Ephrem wove together a range of biblical terms around a single rhetorical argument. Chapter 6 analyzes Ephrem's rewriting of Gospel narratives to depict Christ as unambiguously divine. By focusing on the theophanic scenes of the New Testament, Ephrem posited the name "Son" as revelatory of Christ's divine status. By weaving together New Testament accounts of Christ's miracles and his condescension, Ephrem presented them as the single acts of the one divine Son.