

4 Ephrem's Themes: The Bishop as the March of History Through the Community

4.1 *Yubbālā*

Of all the themes treated by Ephrem, the most important is no doubt *yubbālā*, because it is not merely a topic of discussion among others but is the very ideological grid through which all other themes are seen, to the point that the concept even works as a literary or formal principle in Ephrem's discourse. Therefore, it is essential to the comprehension of CN 13–21. First, I will try to define the concept in relation to the word *yubbālā*, the proper term used to express it, and then I will examine its use in legitimising bishops, making sense of historical changes, and, finally, in structuring the whole of CN 13–21 and connecting this corpus with the other poems written on Nisibis (CN 1–12; *hymn. c. Iulian.*). This way, the present research connects with the latest treatment of *yubbālā* in Ephrem, that of Papoutsakis¹: this was primarily concerned with kingly succession, whereas I will analyse priestly succession in the case of Nisibis; but the two systems of succession are closely linked, as shall be clear at the end of the section.

The term *yubbālā*, used by Ephrem most often to express the succession of bishops, has a wealth of different meanings²: the basic idea is that of an orderly augmentation or succession, as demonstrated by the generic meanings “diffusion”, “series, order,” and “course” (especially of heavenly bodies)³; this idea is particularly productive in the field of blood ties, taking the meanings of “propagation” (of a race, tribe, or family)⁴, “reproduction,” and “descent, family”; for our aims, it is important to note its more abstract usage as “succession”, “handing down,” and “tradition”, a usage strongly associated with priestly succession. After all, the metaphor of genealogy applied to episcopal succession is common in different Christian cultures⁵. Finally, an interesting meaning is that of an “era”,

1 Papoutsakis 2017, 80–93. Papoutsakis' arguments are discussed in the notes to §4.1.2.

2 *yabbel(w) w-'ašlem(w)* (CN 13, 1, 3); *yubbālēn* (CN 13, 7, 1); *yubbāl-ēh* (CN 13, 10, 3); *yubbālā* (CN 13, 13, 5); *ṭakkes ... 'allāhā yubbālā-y* (CN 16, 14, 1–2); *yubbālā w-ṭeksā* (CN 16, 22, 2; note that in Beck 1961a, 45 the points on these words seem to be inverted: *yubbālā* has a point *above* the *waw* instead of below and *ṭeksā* has a point *below* the *kāf* instead of above); *yubbāl-dargay-hōn* (CN 17, 3, 4).

3 Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1549, s.v. ܝܒܒܐܠܐ gives as basic meaning: *ordo, series, successio, consequentia rerum quum alia aliam ordine excipiat*. For the meaning of “course” for the heavenly bodies: Sokoloff 2009, 568, s.v. ܝܒܒܐܠܐ. See also the biblical word *yablā* of the same root (Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1539, s.v. ܝܒܠܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 561, s.v. ܝܒܠܐ).

4 The examples related by Sokoloff 2009, 567, s.v. ܝܒܒܐܠܐ, under the meaning “propagation” (§1), are specified by the terms “tribe” (*šarbtā*), “generation” (*dārā*) and “race” (*gensā*).

5 Priestly succession is the first extra-biblical meaning given by Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1540 s.v. ܝܒܒܐܠܐ, §1.a. For the genealogical metaphor applied to episcopal succession, see, for example: *edant ergo origines ecclesiarum suarum ... Perinde utique et ceterae exhibent quos ab apostolis in episcopatum constitutos apostolici seminis traduces habeant. ... tamen in eadem fide conspirantes non minus apostoli-*

“epoch,” or “period” in history, a usage clearly implying a concept of history as composed of different periods of time in succession⁶. Given this semantic profile, Ephrem uses the word very aptly, not only because it is his specialised word for the episcopal succession but also because of its relationship with terms expressing order and movement in time, such as *ṭeksā* (“order”, Gr. τάξις), *dargā* (“degree”, “rank”) and *zabnā* (“time”, “epoch”). These terms appear sometimes together with *yubbālā*, sometimes in contexts implying episcopal succession (see note 1)⁷: if *yubbālā* expresses the succession in time of the episcopal ministry and the ties of succession, these words express the corresponding movement in time of the community or its hierarchical articulation. Note, however, that these terms are more generic, as they can refer to the “steps” in an ecclesiastical career (e.g., *CN* 15, 7, 1) or to phases of growth in the Nisibene church (e.g., *CN* 16, 10, 1; cf. with the synonymic *b-zabn-eh* in 12, 2; 4) or even to the different components of the diocese (e.g., *ṭakkes* in *CN* 19, 3, 3–4; *ṭukkās-āk* and *darg-eh* in *CN* 21, 10, 4; 8). As we shall see, they describe the same phenomenon under two different points of view, that of the bishop and that of the community.

Scholars of Ephrem’s theology have already recognised the fundamental role of apostolic succession in his ecclesiology, especially as regards the legitimization of church hierarchy. In fact, Ephrem develops his doctrine of apostolic succession precisely as a response to claims on the Christian legacy concurrent with and opposed to those of the great church. As pointed out by Griffith, apostolic succession is one of the “signs of the true church” Ephrem mentions against those he deems heretics; in his confrontation with different communities, and especially those that claimed to possess a secret tradition, parallel to that of the Great Church, Ephrem came to appreciate the institutional and visible character of the church, guaranteed by apostolic succession⁸. This argumentative path closely follows problems and solutions already experienced by the church in the West. Moreover, legitimization by διαδοχή is a recurring theme in different cultural institutions that may have influenced or have been influenced by the Syriac church.

cae deputantur pro consanguinitate doctrinae. (Tert. *praescr.* 32, 1; 3; 6); the Greek equivalent of *yubbālā*, διαδοχή, applies indifferently to genealogical and episcopal successions as per Lampe 1961, 346–347, s.v. διαδοχή 3.b and 7.

⁶ Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1540, s.v. ܕܒܐܠܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 567–568, s.v. ܕܒܐܠܐ. My discussion follows more or less Sokoloff’s entry, which gives more prominence to the meanings related to blood ties (§1–4 of his entry) and conflates the senses of “succession” and “tradition” under §5 of his entry, reserving the more generic meanings for the last entries (§6–9). Payne Smith’s approach is the opposite: he distinguishes the two basic meanings of *successio* (§1) and *traditio* (§2), divided into sub-meanings, so that *successio* is distinguished as “priestly succession” (§a), “chronological order” (§β) and “genealogy” (§γ). Payne Smith gives also the meanings of “translation” (*versio*, *translatio*, §3) and “derivation”, “origin” (§4).

⁷ *ʿašlem* (*CN* 13, 1, 3; *CN* 17, 6, 1; *CN* 19, 6, 6; *CN* 21, 3, 10); *ṭukkās-eh* (*CN* 13, 10, 4); *durrāg-eh* (*CN* 13, 10, 5); *ṭukkāsē* (*CN* 13, 15, 1); *ba-dreg/b-dargā* (*CN* 14, 15, 1; 3; 5; *CN* 16, 10, 1); *b-dargēn dargēn* (*CN* 14, 17, 2); *darg-eh* (*CN* 15, 7, 1); *darg-āh* (*CN* 15, 17, 4); *dargē* (*CN* 15, 20, 3; *CN* 16, 19, 1); *ṭakkes* (*CN* 16, 14, 1); *dargā* (*CN* 16, 17, 1); *ṭeksā* (*CN* 16, 22, 2); *ʿeštammli* (*CN* 17, 2, 8); *dargay-hōn* (*CN* 17, 3, 4).

⁸ The fundamental contribution is Griffith 1999. See also: Murray 2006, 178–187; Bou Mansour 2019, 527–537.

As for other theological themes, the similarities are striking, but it remains difficult to prove a direct influence for lack of material. Anyway, it is worth noting that Ephrem's themes are not an exception but a shared legacy across wide areas of the ancient church and beyond⁹. In the Western sphere, adopting the language of philosophical διαδοχαί, Christians not only shored up doctrinal unity against schismatic attitudes, but they also presented themselves in terms comprehensible to the Greek world, as a philosophical school. The importance of apostolic succession is demonstrated by this: save for one passage¹⁰, in our poems Ephrem treats episcopal consecration (and especially the imposition of hands) not primarily as the conferring of a charisma from God, but as the transmission of a service, charisma, or title already present in the predecessor; hence, as we have already noted (§3.3.1), in poetry Ephrem represents the predecessor as consecrating his successor, although this would be impossible under canonical law¹¹.

4.1.1 *Yubbālā* justifying difference

Yet in our poems the legitimating function of *yubbālā* works differently from this traditional model. Scholars have based their analysis of Ephrem's idea of succession chiefly on the *Poems on Faith* and *Against the Heretics*, in which the poet confronts different religious communities and defends the church as such; but the *CN* have a different audience and function, being addressed to the community and treating internal matters. This different focus is shown also in the fact that most occurrences of *yubbālā* and derivatives (six out of seven) are found in the poems on Valgash (*CN* 13–16), whereas the generic praise of Abraham (*CN* 17–21) is less keen on this theme. In fact, *CN* 13–16 are an apology for Valgash in front of the community for something unexpected and new that the bishop had

⁹ For the Christian concept of Apostolic succession, see: 1Clem. 44:1–2; Iren. *haer.* 3, 2, 2-3; 4, 26, 2; Hegesippus quoted by Eusebius at *h. e.* 4, 22, 2–3; Caspar 1926; Klauser 1974. One of the first Greek authors translated in Syriac, Eusebius of Caesarea, gave pride of place to episcopal lists and successions in his *Church History*, as he himself explains in the preface to the same work: Τὰς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀποστόλων διαδοχὰς (*myabblānwātā* in the Syriac version) σὺν καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς διηγουμένοις χρόνοις κτλ. (*Eus. h. e.* 1, 1, 1). The succession of teachers was crucial to many ancient institutions of learning, beginning with Greek philosophical schools (see Glucker 1978, 306–322, 344–373; Lynch 1972, 49, 63, 177–190) and the Musaeum (e.g., the list of librarians at P. Oxy. 1241), to the School of Nisibis in the Syriac sphere (see Becker 2006, 13–15, 51, 107–110, 218n86): so crucial that later adherents to the ideas often invented uninterrupted successions. A correct succession of witnesses becomes even a scholarly principle for ancient Jewish scholars (see Bickerman 2007) and in the transmission of Muhammad's hadiths (see Burton 1994, 106–156; Dickinson 2001, 53–56, 80–126).

¹⁰ “The gift that was bestowed upon you / from on high descended floating: // do not name it in the name of a man, / nor hang it on to a different power; // since no one can reach its place. / The cunning Satan can convince, // that ’twas men who gave it to you, / but, since that gift is born free, // let only slavery serve men. / **Blessed is he who made his gift descend!**” (*CN* 17, 10). Anyways, divine agency and charisma are never excluded, even when they are not at the forefront of Ephrem's representation (see §3.2.1).

¹¹ See also the discussion on the imposition of hands at Bou Mansour 2019, 365–369.

introduced and that had upset some people in the congregation (see §4.2); in this context, it is understandable that Ephrem wanted to highlight the elements of continuity with the previous bishops. Hence, the poet saw in *yubbālā* a good argument to shore up Valgash's authority *even though* his approach was different from that of his predecessors. As a consequence, the poet does not treat *yubbālā* as something to demonstrate, or even to assert, in the face of those who did not accept it, but rather as an accepted notion useful in building a defence. He explicitly states this in the opening and the closing of Valgash's cycle:

ܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ	ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 1 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ
---	--

ܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 2 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ	ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 2 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ
---	--

ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 3 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ	ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 3 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ
--	--

ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 12 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ	ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 12 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ
---	---

ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 13 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ	ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 13 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ
---	---

ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 14 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ	ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ 14 ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܠܬ ܩܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܕܝܠܝܬܝܢ
---	---

12 “Three priests dazzling / in likeness of the two luminaries, // in shifting transmitted [*yabbel(w) w-’aslem(w)*] one to the next / throne, hand, and diocese. // Great is our mourning of the two, / but the last is truly our comfort. /// He, who created the two luminaries, / chose for himself these three luminaries // and fixed them in the threefold / dusk of the past sieges. // As that couple of luminaries were quenched, / truly the last blazed. /// Three priests, three treasurers, / who steadfast keep // the key of threeness, / three gates opened up for us, // each one of them with his key / opened his gate in his time [*b-zabn-eh*].”

13 “As much [*luqbal*] as she lacked in her need, / to her need came fulfilment: // her parents apt to [*’a(y)k*] her birth / and her teachers apt to her notions, // her nourishment apt to her growth / and her clothing apt to her stature. /// Grace gave all these things / and weighed [*taqlat*] them as on scales [*b-massa’tā*], // put them in comparison [*b-puḥḥāmā*] / that from them help might come, // extended them in succession [*b-yubbālā*] / that from them perfection might come.”

ܘܠܗܝܬܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ	ܘܠܗܝܬܝܢ ܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ¹⁴ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ...	15
ܘܠܗܝܬܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ	ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ	21
ܘܠܗܝܬܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ	ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ ܕܥܡܪܝܢ	22

These passages, especially *CN* 13, 1–3 and *CN* 16, 21–22, seem to work as a frame, encircling the poem cycle on Valgash (*CN* 13–16); that they were meant by Ephrem to function thus cannot be conclusively proved due to the accidents of tradition (see §1.1.2), but some literary elements go in this direction. First, these passages treat the theme of continuity among the three bishops explicitly, thereby founding and justifying the discourse of difference developed by the poet *inside* the cycle: for, without these key passages, Ephrem's highlighting of the difference of the bishops would not work as a reinforcement of their continuity, as it does, but would merely confirm the discontinuity perceived by the community. Second, the passages in *CN* 13 and *CN* 16 share the same lexicon: not only the word *yubbālā* and derivatives, which occur only here and once in *CN* 17 (see note 1), but most importantly, the words expressing a proportionality between bishop and community¹⁶.

From the point of view of content, these passages present a narrative that may be summed up as follows: the three bishops passed their office from one to the other; this happened in accordance with the will of God, who disposed the bishops in time so as to provide the greatest benefit to the growing community of Nisibis, and in this sense

14 “Look then how God / framed my generations [*takkes yubbālā-y*] // through the pastors I had, / and through the teachers he gave me, // and through the fathers he numbered for me. /// For balanced with their times [*tqilīn ‘am zabnay-hōn*] / were the merits of their characters, // through the one who was right [*zādeq*], awe, / through the one who was fit [*phāšeḥ*], consolation, // through the one who was proper [*wālē*], humiliation.”

15 “Blessed is he who, as with a scale [*b-massa’tā*], / weighed [*tqal*] and gave me fathers, // who were my aids according to my ages [*luqbal zabna-y*], / my physicians according [*luqbal*] to my illnesses, // my adornment according to my beauties! /// It is we now, who overthrow/ this beautiful succession and order [*yubbālā w-ṭeksā*], // since in the time [*b-zabnā*] of mildness, / lo!, we are begging toughness, // which may rebuke us as children.”

16 *luqbal* both at *CN* 13, 12, 1 and at *CN* 16, 21, 3–5; *tqal b-massa’tā* both at *CN* 13, 13, 2 and *CN* 16, 21, 1–2; metaphor of weighing and balance both at *CN* 13, 13, 3 and *CN* 16, 15, 1; *zabnā* at *CN* 13, 3, 6 and *CN* 16, 15, 1; 21, 3; 22, 3.

it can be said that the bishops were “proportional” to the community. Therefore, the last bishop is not only legitimate but even appropriate for the current situation (see *CN* 13, 1, 5–6; 2, 5–6). This narration serves to justify the differences between the bishops, as already noted, differences that will be highlighted and elaborated in the rest of the poems. A comparison with the poems on Abraham can corroborate this statement. Even though the word *yubbālā* appears only once and in a doubtful context (see §2.2.1.4), the theme of succession is not at all absent in these poems; however, it is treated in a different manner from *CN* 13–16. Ephrem treats the theme with the literary devices of the iconographical metaphor, of the reference to paradigmatic biblical successions, such as that of Joshua to Moses or Elisha to Elijah. Sometimes, he represents the relationship of predecessor and successor as that of teacher and pupil and assigns to the two prelates virtues that are synonymous¹⁷. As regards biblical models, it is worth noting their different usage in the poems aimed at defending *yubbālā* against the heretics, in particular *hymn. haer.* 22–25: in the poems against heretics, biblical transmissions of power are mentioned as material antecedents of the same transmission of power at work in the church; in the *CN* they have only a paradigmatic function, as a representation of how a transmission of power according to God’s will should look and also as a legitimation by way of analogy (and not of equivalence) of the transmission at work in the particular case of Valgash and Abraham. Anyway, all the aforementioned devices tend to assimilate the successor to his predecessor, and the poet reassures his community that even though the bishop has changed, practically nothing will change. Even when the theme of differences among the bishops emerges, it is limited to the already established narrative of the three bishops Jacob, Babu, and Valgash, whereas Abraham has no distinguishing feature and at most is urged to unite in himself the features of those predecessors¹⁸. This different approach may be due to the fact that Abraham was freshly consecrated, so that he had not yet had the occasion to show any personal trait in office. Yet, even so, Ephrem’s approach in *CN* 17–21 shows that continuity between predecessor and successor and their tendential sameness were the default expectation for a new bishop, with difference being the exception. In this context, the differences highlighted in *CN* 13–16 may be less an artistic choice by Ephrem and more a matter of fact that the poet endeavours to justify because his audience finds it problematic.

Naturally, this does not exclude the possibility that the differences between Jacob, Babu, and Valgash, as they are represented in Ephrem’s poem, were also the result of an artistic elaboration of the facts. As we have already seen (§3.1.4.3; §3.1.5), the three bishops are each characterised by a peculiar virtue, even though all these virtues should be present in an ideal bishop. It is likely that a good deal of stylisation is at work in those passages, because the whole tenure of a bishop will hardly be reduced

¹⁷ Iconographic imagery: *CN* 17, 11–12; *CN* 18, 1–2; §2.2.3.3. Moses and Joshua: *CN* 19, 6; §2.2.1.3; §2.2.4.6 n. 324; §3.3.1.2. Elijah and Elisha: *CN* 17, 2, 6; *CN* 19, 8; *CN* 21, 2; §3.3.1.2. Bishop as pupil of his predecessor: *CN* 17, 1, 8–9; 2, 5. Synonymic virtues: *CN* 18, 1; §3.2.1.

¹⁸ *CN* 17, 11 (but note the lacuna at line 9); *CN* 19, 15–16.

to one achievement or virtue in reality, but Ephrem's simplification must have taken into account shared perceptions and memories of the community. Indeed, the signs of a literary elaboration of personal differences are very clear, since Ephrem does build a discourse on differences with peculiar forms. These forms have already been partly examined in §3.1.4.3, where I have observed the different moral virtues assigned to the three bishops in relation to the stage of development of the community in *CN* 13, 8–9; *CN* 14, 18–19; *CN* 16, 17–19. However, analogous structures are much more widespread in the poems, especially in *CN* 13–16. In essence, they can be described thus: Ephrem exploits the metrical structure of the stanzas, with their parallel *cola*, to create in each stanza an almost tabular comparison of the three bishops in their relationship with the state of the congregation as they ministered to it. This can be seen better in *CN* 13–14, because the stanzas are composed of three lines, each divided into two *cola* of seven syllables each; the odd-numbered *cola* establish the subject—namely, which bishop is meant—always in chronological order, whereas the even-numbered ones predicate something concerning his tenure. Each even-numbered *colon* responds to its odd-numbered one horizontally, and even- and odd-numbered lines are “vertically” parallel: this structure can be observed in my tabularisation of some stanzas at §3.1.4.3. Within the constraints of this rigid structure, the poet carves a space of variation through word choice, showing off a quantity of synonyms for the same word or piling up terms of the same root but different meaning; sometimes, minimal variations of the pattern are introduced, especially in the last lines. It is likely that what was appreciated as “poetry” was indeed this artful preservation of a rhythmic and syntactic pattern with a continuous variation of words. Furthermore, these stanzas, being similarly built, can also be read (especially in their written form) “vertically” as describing each one of the three bishops. This is what I intend to do with the following table:

	Jakob		Babu		Valgash	
	Odd	Even	Odd	Even	Odd	Even
CN 13, 4	<i>b-qadmāyā</i> <i>ptaḥ-wā</i> <i>tar'ā</i>	<i>l-mardūtā</i> <i>d-'etāt 'alay-n</i>	<i>b-meš'āyā</i> <i>ptaḥ-wā tar'ā</i>	<i>l-malkūtā</i> <i>d-neḥtat</i> <i>šēday-n</i>	<i>ba-(')hrāyā</i> <i>ptaḥ-wā tar'ā</i>	<i>la-sbartā</i> <i>d-selqat</i> <i>šēday-n</i>
CN 13, 5	<i>b-qadmāyā</i> <i>tar'ā</i> <i>ptaḥ-wā</i>	<i>la-qrābā</i> <i>d-kenšē tray-</i> <i>hōn</i>	<i>b-meš'āyā</i> <i>tar'ā ptaḥ-wā</i>	<i>l-malkē d-rūḥē</i> <i>tartay-hēn</i>	<i>ba-tlītāyā</i> <i>ptaḥ tar'ā</i>	<i>d-'izgaddē</i> <i>d-gabbē</i> <i>tray-hōn</i>
CN 13, 6	<i>b-qadmāyā</i> <i>ptaḥ tar'ā</i>	<i>la-qrābā meṭṭūl</i> <i>ḥawbē</i>	<i>b-meš'āyā</i> <i>ptaḥ tar'ā</i>	<i>l-malkē meṭṭūl</i> <i>taktūšā</i>	<i>ba-(')hrāyā</i> <i>ptaḥ tar'ā</i>	<i>l-'izgaddē</i> <i>meṭṭūl rahmē</i>
CN 13, 14	<i>b-yawmāt-eh</i> <i>d-haw</i> <i>qadmāyā</i>	<i>saggī šaynā</i> <i>wa-gmar šaynā</i>	<i>b-yawmāt-eh</i> <i>d-haw</i> <i>meš'āyā</i>	<i>nḥet(w) malkē</i> <i>wa-sleq(w)</i> <i>malkē</i>	<i>b-yawmāt-eh</i> <i>dēn da-(')</i> <i>ḥrāyā</i>	<i>tkeb(w) gaysē</i> <i>wa-psaq(w)</i> <i>gaysē</i>

(continued)

	Jakob		Babu		Valgash	
	Odd	Even	Odd	Even	Odd	Even
CN 13, 15	<i>b-qadmāyā</i> 'law ṭukkāsē	'law 'amm-eh wa-npaq(w) 'amm-eh	<i>b-meš'āyā</i> qrab w-'etraḥḥaḳ	<i>tāgā d-ḥaddī</i> 'ēdt-an	<i>ba-(')ḥrāyā</i> dēn da-nḥet la-n	<i>ṭaybūtā d-lā</i> metpar'ā
CN 13, 16	<i>luqbal rugzā</i> <i>qadmāyā</i>	'aqreb 'aml-eh <i>d-qadmāyā</i>	<i>luqbal šawbā</i> <i>da-b-ṭahrā</i>	<i>qām ṭallāl-eh</i> <i>d-meš'āyā</i>	<i>luqbal šaynā</i> <i>ṭalōmā</i>	'asgī ('')ḥrāyā zuhhārā
CN 13, 17	<i>la-ḥbāšā</i> <i>qadmā</i> 'er'-eh	<i>kāhnā qadmā</i> w-naššīḥā	<i>la-ḥbāšā</i> <i>da-trēn</i> 'er'-eh	<i>kāhnā da-trēn</i> <i>raḥmānā</i>	<i>šalwāt-eh dēn</i> <i>da-(')ḥrāyā</i>	<i>sāg tur'āt-an</i> <i>kasyā'īt</i>
CN 14, 2	'amlā ṭābā <i>d-qadmāyā</i>	<i>šamd-āh l-'ar'ā</i> b-'ulšān-āh	<i>laḥm-eh</i> w-ḥamr-eh <i>d-meš'āyā</i>	<i>l-karkā 'ašb-eh</i> <i>ba-tbār-eh</i>	<i>ḥallī mert-an</i> <i>b-'ulšānā</i>	<i>maml-eh</i> <i>ḥalyā da-(')</i> <i>ḥrāyā</i>
CN 14, 3	<i>qadmā plaḥ</i> 'ar'ā b-'amlā	'qar menn-āh <i>ya'rā w-kubbē</i>	<i>meš'āyā</i> 'akrek sāg-āh	<i>ba-prīqē syāgā</i> 'bad l-āh	('a)ḥrāyā <i>ptaḥ 'awšar-</i> <i>mār-eh</i>	<i>wa-zra' b-āh</i> <i>mellay-</i> <i>mār-āh</i>
CN 14, 4	<i>kāhnā</i> <i>qadmā</i> <i>b-yad-šawmā</i>	<i>tar'ē d-pūmē</i> 'eḥad-wā	<i>kāhnā da-trēn</i> <i>ba-šbayyā</i>	<i>pūmē d-kisā</i> <i>ptaḥ-wā</i>	('a)ḥrāyā dēn <i>naqqeb 'ednē</i>	<i>w-'armī</i> <i>b-ḥēn ḥešlat-</i> <i>ḥayyē</i>
CN 14, 15	<i>qadmā</i> <i>ba-dreg-</i> <i>tulmādā</i>	<i>maml-eh</i> <i>l-darg-eh</i> 'etdammī	<i>meš'āyā</i> <i>b-dargā</i> <i>da-trēn</i>	<i>sleq turgām-eh</i> 'al-darg-eh	('a)ḥrāyā <i>b-dargā</i> <i>da-tlātā</i>	'ireb <i>maml-eh</i> 'akwāt-eh
CN 14, 16	<i>qadmāyā</i> <i>ba-pšīṭātā</i>	<i>y(h)ab ḥalbā</i> <i>l-yallūdūt-eh</i>	<i>meš'āyā</i> <i>b-dalīlātā</i>	<i>y(h)ab-wā</i> ṭ'ūmā l- <i>šabrūt-eh</i>	<i>tlītāyā</i> <i>ba-gmīrātā</i>	<i>y(h)ab 'uklā</i> <i>la-gmīrūt-eh</i>
CN 14, 17, 4–6	<i>šabrā hwāt 'am-qadmāyā</i>		<i>pšīṭā hwāt 'am-meš'āyā</i>		'etgamrat ba-tlītāyā	
CN 14, 18	<i>qadmāyā</i> 'a(y)k <i>la-šbartā</i>	<i>mḥabbab-wā</i> <i>wa-mdahḥal-wā</i>	<i>meš'āyā 'a(y)k</i> <i>la-ṭlītā</i>	<i>kā'ē-wā</i> <i>wa-mḥaddē-wā</i>	('a)ḥrāyā 'a(y) <i>k da-l-mallptā</i>	<i>hwā l-āh</i> <i>nyāḥā</i> <i>w-bassīmā</i>
CN 14, 19	'āp rmā šēd <i>ba(r)t-ya'qōb</i>	<i>šedlā w- šabtā</i> <i>l-ṭalyūt-āh</i>	<i>wa-l-ḥuṣpā</i> <i>wa-'laymūt-āh</i>	<i>šawtep saypā</i> <i>w-nāmōsā</i>	<i>w-'a(y)</i> <i>k la-rdītā</i> <i>w-mallptā</i>	'etā l-āh <i>nyāḥā</i> <i>w-bassīmā</i> ^F
CN 14, 20	<i>qadmā</i> <i>d-īled</i> <i>mar'ītā</i>	ṭ'en 'ubbā <i>yallūdūt-āh</i>	<i>meš'āyā pšīḥ-</i> <i>paršōpā</i>	<i>našsar</i> <i>w-'apšar</i> <i>ṭalyūt-āh</i>	('a)ḥrāyā <i>yaqqīr-</i> <i>paršōpā</i>	<i>hā mankep</i> <i>la-'laymūt-āh</i>
CN 14, 21	<i>kāhnā</i> <i>qadmāyā</i> <i>d-īled</i>	<i>y(h)ab ḥalbā</i> <i>l-yallūdūt-āh</i>	<i>kāhnā</i> <i>meš'āyā</i> <i>targem</i>	<i>wa-y(h)</i> <i>ab ṭ'ūmā l-</i> <i>šabrūt-eh</i>	<i>kāhnā</i> <i>da-tlātā tarsī</i>	<i>w-y(h)</i> <i>ab 'uklā</i> <i>la-ḥlīmūt-āh</i>

(continued)

	Jakob		Babu		Valgash	
	Odd	Even	Odd	Even	Odd	Even
CN 14, 22	<i>'abā kaššīrā</i> <i>w-qadmāyā</i>	<i>sām sīmātā</i> <i>l-šabrūt-āh</i>	<i>meš'āyā</i> <i>la-gmīrūt-āh</i>	<i>'asgī zwādē</i> <i>l-mardīt-āh</i>	<i>tlītāyā zaytā</i> <i>hdīrā</i>	<i>'asgī mešhā</i> <i>b-mān-ēh</i>
CN 14, 23	<i>mā da-mṭāt</i> <i>šēd-'attīrā</i>	<i>mḥawwyā</i> <i>gazz-eh</i> <i>d-qadmāyā</i>	<i>mā da-mṭāt</i> <i>šēd-pārōqā</i>	<i>mḥawwyā</i> <i>priqē</i> <i>d-meš'āyā</i>	<i>mā d-nepqat</i> <i>l-'ura'-ḥatnā</i>	<i>mḥawwyā</i> <i>mešhā</i> <i>d-nahhīr-ēh</i>
CN 14, 24	<i>qdām-haw</i> <i>pāra' l-le'yā</i>	<i>mqarreb</i> <i>'aml-eh</i> <i>d-qadmāyā</i>	<i>qdām-haw</i> <i>rāhem-</i> <i>yāhōbē</i>	<i>mqarreb zedqē</i> <i>d-meš'āyā</i>	<i>qdām-</i> <i>haw dā'en</i> <i>yullpānē</i>	<i>mqarreb</i> <i>drāšē da-(')</i> <i>ḥrāyā</i>
CN 16, 16, 2–5	<i>l-ṭalyūt-(y)</i>	<i>'asrah surrādā</i>	<i>'āp la-'laymūt-(y)</i>	<i>duḥḥālā</i>	<i>l-hakkīmūt-(y)</i> <i>wa-l-</i> <i>pārōšūt-(y)</i>	<i>'asrah y(h)ab</i> <i>lāh mukkākā</i>
CN 16, 17–9	<i>b- ḥūspā</i> <i>w-dargā</i> <i>d-ṭalyūtā</i>	<i>mrabbyānā</i> <i>dḥilā hwā l-ī</i>	<i>'abbā 'ḥrēnā y(h)ab</i> <i>la-'laymūt-(y)</i>		<i>kad 'et'allēt</i> <i>men dargē</i>	<i>d-ṭalyūtā</i> <i>wa-'laymūtā</i>
	<i>šabt-eh zagr-an(y)</i>	<i>men šebyā</i>	<i>d-'īt hwā b-ī</i> <i>men ṭalyūtā</i>	<i>'īt hwā b-eh</i> <i>men qašyūtā</i>	<i>'bar surrādā</i>	<i>qadmāyā</i>
	<i>w-men surḥānā</i>	<i>surrād-eh</i>	<i>d-'īt hwā b-ī</i> <i>men saybūtā</i>	<i>'īt hwā b-eh</i> <i>makkikūtā</i>	<i>'bar duḥḥālā</i>	<i>tinyānā</i>
	<i>w-men punnāqā</i>	<i>duḥḥāl-eh</i>			<i>y(h)ab l-ī rā'yā</i>	<i>bassimā</i>
CN 17, 11, 6–8	<i>tehwē l-an šūrā</i>	<i>'a(y)k ya'qōb</i>	<i>wa-mlē-rahmā</i>	<i>'a(y)k babū</i>	<i>w-gazzā d-mellē</i>	<i>'a(y)k</i> <i>walgaš</i>
CN 19, 16	<i>kāhnā ya'qōb</i> <i>naššīḥā/</i> <i>'amm-eh</i> <i>nšaḥt</i> <i>'akwāt-eh</i>	<i>d-šawtep</i> <i>ḥubb-eh</i> <i>la-ṭnān-eh/</i> <i>dehlā w-ḥubbā</i> <i>'et'ṭept</i>	<i>b-babū</i> <i>rāhem-</i> <i>zedqātā</i>	<i>b-kespā praqt</i> <i>l-šebyā</i>	<i>b-walgaš</i> <i>sāper-</i> <i>nāmōsā</i>	<i>lebb-āh ptaḥt</i> <i>la- ktābē</i>

The table makes clear the artful variations of the basic scheme of triple “call” (odd-numbered lines) and “response” (even-numbered lines), with the indication of time period and bishop in the odd-numbered and the predication in the even-numbered lines: the structure is firmly established by CN 13, 4–6, the most regular stanzas, and then reprised and constantly varied until passages like CN 16, 17–19 and CN 19, 16, where the structure is still recognizable but very different. The regular structure of CN 13, 4–6 is enhanced by the similarity of all the odd-numbered lines, employing constantly the same lexical material (*b-qadmāyā/meš'āyā/(a)ḥrāyā; ptaḥ; tar'ā*). The even-numbered lines, though lexically more diverse, are structurally identical, with the exception of CN 13, 4, 2, which

also has sounds similar to those in lines 4 and 6 of the same stanza (*‘etāt* vs. *neḥtat-selqat*; *‘alay-n* vs. *ṣēday-n* x2). Furthermore, the “call and response” structure of the couplets is often enhanced by repetitions (*‘law*, CN 13, 15, 1–2; *qadmāyā*, 16, 1–2; *qadmā*, 17, 1–2; *da-trēn*, 2–3; *ḥallī/ḥalyā*, CN 14, 2, 5–6; *pūmē*, 3, 2; 3, 4; *dargā*, 15, 1–5; *pārōqā/prīqē*, 23, 3–4; *ḥubbā*, CN 19, 16, 3–4). In the following stanzas, either the first couplet or the third tends to deviate from the scheme. This happens already in CN 13, 5, 5, different from 5, 3 and 6, 5 and with the *d-* for *l-* in CN 13, 5, 6. The deviation can be a minor one. Among the varied third repetitions, for example, we find *dēn* instead of *d-haw* at CN 13, 14, 1; 3; 5, and we find a passive verb and the bishop as agent instead of a nominal predicate and the bishop introduced by *‘am* in CN 14, 16, 4–6; *nepqat l-‘ura* is a variation of *māt ṣēd* in CN 14, 23, 1; 3; 5. Among variations in the first iteration are the relative clause instead of participle at the construct state in CN 14, 20, 1; 3; 5 and *sām* instead of *‘asgī* in CN 14, 22, 1; 3; 5. Sometimes, the first or third long line has a completely different structure. Among third iterations, in CN 13, 16, 6, the bishop is the subject and not the specification of another noun as in the other even-numbered lines; in CN 13, 17 the last couplet does away with the vocabulary of the preceding couplets and has the bishop as modifier instead of subject; CN 14, 2, 5–6 inverts the habitual content of the odd- and even-numbered lines; CN 14, 4, 5–6 passes from the “mouths”, *pūmē*, of the previous lines to the “ears”, *‘ednē*, and doubles the predicates of the subject; CN 14, 15, 6 does not repeat the word *dargā* as do the other cases in the same stanza; CN 14, 19, 6 has two adjectives and a copula instead of the two participles each of lines 2 and 4; CN 16, 16 has one line each for Jacob and Babu, whereas Valgash alone has two lines. Among first repetitions, CN 14, 19, 1–2 differ from the other couplets in the number and order of complements; at CN 19, 16, Jacob’s lines are four; and Babu’s and Valgash’s two for each. In one case, Babu, the second bishop, is described with a different structure—namely, one line and two couplets at CN 16, 18—as opposed to the single couplet with three lines of CN 16, 17 and 19. These groupings are created by repeated structures such as *w-men* at CN 16, 17 and *‘it hwā b-... men* of CN 16, 18. Other times the poet compresses the structure from three couplets to three one-liners (CN 14, 17, 4–6; CN 16, 16, 2–5; CN 17, 11, 6–8); otherwise, he can invert the order, placing the predication in the odd-numbered lines and the subject (the bishops) in the even numbered (CN 13, 16–17; CN 14, 23–24). Finally, we must note the repetition of whole lines, deliberately always with a little change (CN 13, 4–6, 1; 3; 5; CN 13, 16, 2 and CN 14, 24, 2; CN 14, 16, 2; 4; 6 and CN 14, 21, 2; 4; 6). The gamut of possible variations is rich and sophisticated.

Besides syntax and metre, another important aesthetic parameter is vocabulary. One obvious device is repetition throughout different stanzas. Jacob is called *qadmāyā* fourteen times (once as *kāhnā qadmāyā*, CN 14, 21, 1) and *qadmā* five (twice *kāhnā qadmā*, CN 13, 17, 2 and CN 14, 4, 1). Babu is *mes’āyā* seventeen times no less (once *kāhnā mes’āyā*, CN 14, 21, 3), and only twice *kāhnā da-trēn*. Valgash, similarly, is (*‘a*) *ḥrāyā* thirteen times, *tlitāyā* four; only once *kāhnā da-tlātā* (CN 14, 21, 5) and *nahhīr-ēh* (CN 14, 23, 6). The greater uniformity of Babu’s names show him to be less significant than Jacob and Valgash. The situation changes in CN 16, where the bishops are either

only hinted at through their features (CN 16, 16: *surrādā*, *duḥḥālā* and *mukkākā*) or identified through unique expressions (CN 16, 17–19: *mrabbyānā dhīlā* for Jacob; *'abbā 'hrēnā* for Babu; *rā'yā bassīmā* for Valgash). Here, the antithesis is clearly between the “dreadful” (*dhīlā*) Jacob and the “sweet” (*bassīmā*) Valgash, whereas Babu finds himself only as “the other one” (*'hrēnā*). Finally, it seems relevant that the bishops are called by their personal names only in the poems on Abraham (CN 17 and 19). This may be due to a change in perspective: whereas in CN 13–16 (and CN 13–14 most of all) the three bishops were mostly seen in their historical succession, in CN 17–21 they are mostly seen as three equally valid models for Abraham, and their being one *after* the other is not thematised as relevant to their being one *different* from the other.

Apart from repetition of the “names” of the bishops, we may distinguish the terms predicated of them—namely, those that define their features and achievements—from the terms signalling the context in which those achievements have matured. Among the latter, a distinction must be drawn between CN 13 and CN 14, 2–4 on one side and the rest of the stanzas on the other, because while the rest of the stanzas put the succession of bishops in relation with the spiritual progress of the community, the first occurrences, and in particular CN 13, relate episcopal activities to the military and political history of Nisibis. Indeed, in CN 13, 4–6 and 14–6 the context of each bishop is very clear: the war for Jacob (*qrābā*, also *marḏūtā*, *ṭukkāsā*, *gmar šaynā*), the coming of the two emperors (the Persian and the Roman) for Babu (*malkūtā*, *malkē*, *tāgā*), and the peace embassies for Valgash (*sbartā*, *'izgaddē*, *psaq(w) gaysē*, *ṭaybūtā*, *šaynā*). In CN 13, 17 and CN 14, 2, instead, the reality of the Persian sieges involves all three bishops: in CN 13, 17, 1 and 3 with the word *ḥbāšā* (cf. also CN 13, 2) and in line 6 with *tar'ā*; in CN 14, 2 *b-'ulšānā* of line 5 answers to *b-'ulšān-āh* of line 2, and the word is varied with *ba-tbār-eh* in line 4. The difference in time is less clear for the terms identifying stages of development in the community. If *yallūdūtā* and related terms are reserved to Jacob, who, after all, “bore” (*īled*) the community, in CN 14, 16, 4, *šabrūtā* seems to describe a more progressed state than *yallūdūtā* (CN 14, 16, 2), but then is applied to Jacob thrice. In CN 14, 18, where Jacob relates to *šbartā*, and in CN 14, 20 with Jacob's *yallūdūtā*, Babu has *ṭlītā/ṭalyūtā*; however, the latter terms are found in relation to Jacob in CN 14, 19; CN 16, 16–17. And in this case Babu's couplet answers with *'laymūtā*. The same contrast, *ṭalyūtā/'laymūtā*, is found in CN 14, 20, this time between Babu and Valgash. With the latter, the terms *gmīrūtā/gmar* are mainly found, although in CN 14, 21, 6 Ephrem employs the synonym *ḥlīmūtā* and in CN 14, 22, 3 *gmīrūtā* accompanies Babu (with no corresponding term for Valgash). Finally, *pšītā* and cognates are repeated twice for Jacob and Babu, though they are not, strictly speaking, terms of age like the others. All these words may well be employed freely by the poet to achieve variety, and yet there seems to be a rule: terms of age form a sequence, whose order may not be inverted (although some terms may be left out). The sequence (from younger to older age) is *yallūdūtā-šabrūtā-ṭalyūtā-'laymūtā-gmīrūtā/ḥlīmūtā*. Ephrem employs the terms only as relatively different, but his use of more than one of them for the same bishop demonstrates that he does not care to create a univocal chronology. The result is that sometimes the community remains always a child (CN 14, 20),

sometimes it is already an adult under Babu (CN 14, 22), and most of the time it remains a child under Jacob and Babu, becoming sage and mature under Valgash (CN 14, 16–19; 21; CN 16, 16). Finally, CN 14, 23–24 represent yet another context, this time an eschatological one: the features of each bishop, acquired by the community in his time, are presented and put in relation with corresponding attributes of Christ in the time of judgement.

A “vertical” reading of Ephrem’s text, therefore, offers three portraits of the three bishops—something I have already sketched at §3.1.4.3. Jacob, for example, emerges as a stern but simple leader, with a strong focus on asceticism (*‘amlā*; see §3.2.1) and discipline enforced through reverence (*surrādā*, *duḥḥālā*). These features are tempered by the love he enjoyed from the community (*hubbā*): this may be connected with the traces of his preaching (*maml-eh*) preserved by Ephrem, a ministry described as simple and rudimentary (*ḥalbā*) but groundbreaking and caring, as expressed by the recurring metaphor of “birthing” (*īled*) the community. On the contrary, Valgash stands out for two main characteristics: first, he is of mild and sweet temper (*ḥalyā*, *nyāḥā*, *bassīmā*, *mukkākā*), and, second, he is a gifted preacher (*maml-eh*, *mellē*), differing from Jacob, in that he is more refined and deep, as symbolised by the metaphor of the whole food (*‘uklā*) as opposed to Jacob’s milk, by the metaphor of precious things (earrings: *ḥešlat-ḥayyē*; oil: *mešḥā*; treasures: *gazzā d-mellē*), and by the vocabulary of learning (*yullpānē*, *drāšē*). Between these two well-defined characters, Bishop Babu tends to fade. His one certain feature is almsgiving (*zedqē*, *zedqātā*), exemplified by his ransoming (*pārōqā*, *prīqē*) of prisoners of war (*šbāyyā*) from the Persians and expressed with words from the root **r-ḥ-m* (see §3.1.1.2). As regards his preaching, the only information available is delivered by Ephrem’s repeated metaphor of weaning (CN 14, 16; 21), where Babu’s teaching is described as *ṭ’ūmā*, as opposed to the “whole food” (*‘uklā*) of Valgash and the “milk” (*ḥalbā*) of Jacob. The term suggests something related to the act of tasting, as if Babu introduced only partially what was to come wholly with Valgash, like a “fore-taste”; however, it could also simply mean “food” or “meal”, without further connotation. In this sense, there would be no contrast with the term *‘uklā*¹⁹. The choice of a translation depends on whether we want to assign semantic significance to a lexical variation like *ṭ’ūmā/‘uklā*, and on which logical structure we see in those stanzas: if *ṭ’ūmā* were just a synonym for *‘uklā*, then Babu’s preaching would be assimilated to Valgash’s and Jacob would stand out, whereas if *ṭ’ūmā* means “foretaste”, then the idea is of a gradual progress from Jacob’s to Valgash’s preaching, with Babu preserving characteristics of both.

The same problem surfaces when we consider descriptors of Babu’s temperament all together. If sometimes the idea of a gradual ascent from Jacob’s methods based on fear to Valgash’s based on love is warranted by a description of Babu incorporating elements of

19 Cf. at Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1496, s.v. ܬܘܡܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 539–540, s.v. ܬܘܡܐ with cognate words such as *ṭa’mā* and *ṭ’amtā* at Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1497–1498; Sokoloff 2009, 543–544 and Payne Smith 1879–1901, 180, s.v. ܬܠܐܡܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 15, s.v. ܬܠܐܡܐ.

both, other times Babu tends to assimilate to one or the other bishop, and in a couple of occurrences the very order from a sterner to a more lenient style of leadership seems to be subverted. The idea of a gradual progress is suggested by expressions such as those at CN 13, 8–9. These can be compared to the following: “Grace . . . extended them in succession / that from them perfection might come” (CN 13, 13, 5–6); “She, too, growing daughter, / step by step ascended” (CN 14, 17, 1–2). Note in particular CN 16, 16–19, where stanza 16 contrasts the *ṭalyūtā* (2) under Jacob and the *ʿlaymūtā* (3) under Babu with *ḥakkīmūtā* and *pārōšūtā* under Valgash (4). In the following stanzas, Babu’s *ʿlaymūtā* (CN 16, 18, 1) entails a part of Jacob’s *ṭalyūtā* (2, cf. CN 16, 17, 1) and a part of old age (*saybūtā*, 4), being the middle step between infancy and Valgash’s maturity, in which both *ṭalyūtā* and *ʿlaymūtā* are overcome (CN 16, 19, 1–2). In these same stanzas, Babu is first described with a word strongly associated to Jacob, *duḥḥālā*, and then with one used for Valgash, *makkīkūtā*. Earlier, in CN 16, 15, 3–5, Babu represented “consolation” (*lubbābā*) after Jacob’s “fear” (*duḥḥālā*) and before Valgash’s “humility” (*mukkākā*). In the simile of the sun in CN 13, 8–9, Babu represents noon, the “strong and harsh”, “hot and harsh” (*ʿazzīzā*, *ḥammīmā*, *qašyā*, CN 13, 8, 4; 9, 3) moment, and so he is associated with midday (*šawbā da-b-ṭahrā*) in CN 13, 16, 3–4, but this time as relieving shade (*ṭallālā*). The most puzzling sequence of attributes, however, is in CN 14, 18–20: in stanza 18, both Jacob and Babu are partly stern and partly sweet (*mḥabbab-wā wa-mdahḥal-wā*, 2; *kāʿē-wā wa-mḥaddē-wā*, 4), and Valgash is completely sweet (*nyāḥā w-bassīmā*, 6); in stanza 19, Jacob is still balanced (*šedlā w- šabṭā*, 2), and Valgash still sweet (*nyāḥā w-bassīmā*, 6), but this time Babu is only stern, giving “sword and law” (*saypā w-nāmōsā*, 4); in stanza 20, Jacob acquires an almost maternal sweetness (1–2), Babu is presented with glad countenance gladdening the church (*pšīḥ-paršōpā / našṣar w-ʿapṣar*, 3–4) and Valgash inspires awe (*yaqqīr-paršōpā / hā mankep*, 5–6).

As we shall see (§4.2), the idea of a growth or evolution of the community, with a corresponding evolution of its leaders’ style, is crucial for Ephrem’s case, so that we would not want to do away with it on the basis of some divergent occurrences. I imagine two alternative solutions to this conundrum: either Ephrem represented more truthfully than has previously been acknowledged the complex personalities of the three bishops, adding shades to his tripartite scheme, or he lacked personal knowledge of Babu and went back and forth in his description. But if Ephrem did not know Babu well, he must have known Jacob even less. If this is the case, his detailed knowledge of Jacob’s features could derive from local traditions, given the importance and fame of this bishop for Nisibis and Syriac Christianity (see §4.3). Yet the choice of one explanation over the other depends on information we do not ultimately possess: first, we would need an alternative source on Babu’s character to compare it with Ephrem’s notions; second, we would need to know how well the memory of these bishops (especially Babu) was preserved in Nisibis, because before all rhetorical constructions and schematisations, Ephrem had to reckon with the shared memory of his community, so as not to contradict it blatantly, but rather subtly rectify or systematise it.

4.1.2 *Yubbālā* as theological history

As has already been said, this prolonged discourse on difference would be damning for Ephrem's case—the defence of Valgash's innovative behaviour—were it not for the framing concept of *yubbālā* and the affirmation of a “proportionality” between bishop and community. In this respect, the meaning of “epoch”, “era”, “time-period” for *yubbālā* comes in handy. The progress of the church, as well as the ebbs and flows of history, requires and therefore legitimises changes in leadership. The progress of the Nisibene community will be treated later (§4.2); here I am chiefly concerned with the relationship of ecclesiastical leadership and secular history; hence the focus will lie on the passages of *CN* 13.

Here, the succession of bishops apparently works as a frame in which military events can be ordered, as the “tabular” stanzas show very well. During Jacob's tenure, Ephrem informs us, there was peace in the beginning (*saggī šaynā*, *CN* 13, 14, 2), but then peace ended (*gmar šaynā*), and the Persian and Roman armies went to war (*qrābā d-kenšē tray-hōn*, *CN* 13, 5, 2; *tukkāsē* / 'law 'amm-eh, *CN* 13, 15, 1–2). More precisely, it was a siege of the city (*ḥbāšā qadmā*, *CN* 13, 17, 1). Luckily, the armies also retreated also under Jacob (*wa-npaq(w) 'amm-eh*, *CN* 13, 15, 2), who seems to have had a part in saving the city (*CN* 13, 16, 1–2; 17, 1; *CN* 14, 2, 2; 4, 1–2). As usual, information on Babu is scanty: Ephrem highlights the presence of the two emperors, Constantius and Shapur II, in Nisibis because of the war (*CN* 13, 4, 4; 5, 4; 6, 4; 14, 4; 15, 4) and a second siege (*CN* 13, 16, 3; 17, 3; *CN* 14, 2, 4). These events probably spurred Babu to ransom the prisoners of war. Valgash was equally witness to a siege (*CN* 13, 17, 5–6; *CN* 14, 2, 5–6) and to raids (*tkeb(w) gaysē*, *CN* 13, 14, 6), but also to the end of the raids (*psaq(w) gaysē*) and, most of all, to embassies for peace between Persians and Romans (*sbartā*, *CN* 13, 4, 6; *izgaddē d-gabbē tray-hōn*, *CN* 13, 5, 6; 6, 6). As can be seen, the three bishops share, each in his time, the experience of the siege, and Ephrem explicitly draws a parallel between the three sieges and the three bishops (*CN* 13, 2)²⁰.

The correspondence between bishops and sieges is not merely a material coincidence but becomes, in Ephrem's poems, the occasion for a reflection on history, whose plot can be read in *CN* 13. Indeed, observing the “column” of Jacob, we see that in *CN* 13, 4, 2 the term “war” (*qrābā*) of *CN* 13, 5, 2 and 6, 2 is paralleled by *mardūtā*, “instruction” but also “chastisement”, in the same metrical position. In *CN* 13, 6, 2, the poet draws a causal connection (*meṭṭūl*) between war and “sins” (*ḥawbē*). Furthermore, the “first siege” (*ḥbāšā qadmā*) of *CN* 13, 17, 1 is paralleled by “the first wrath” (*rugzā qadmāyā*) in *CN* 13, 16, 1²¹. On the other hand, the cause (*meṭṭūl*) of the peace embassies under

²⁰ On the sieges (often with reference to Ephrem and the three bishops): Lightfoot 1981; Burgess 1999; Bundy 2000; Bundy 2002; Russell 2005; Harrell 2016.

²¹ The word *rugzā*, though it can be used for any kind of rage, has a strong connotation of “divine wrath”, “retribution”, hence it is customarily employed for general calamities (Payne Smith 1879–1901, 3808, s.v. 𐤓𐤂𐤗𐤀; Sokoloff 2009, 1444, s.v. 𐤓𐤂𐤗𐤀; see in particular the occurrence at Rom. 2:5).

Valgash is “mercy” (*rahmē*), and “peace” itself (*šaynā*, CN 13, 16, 5) is paralleled by “grace” (*ṭaybūtā*, CN 13, 15, 6). All these terms have a clear religious connotation, implying that the sieges and the wars occurred as a punishment for the sins of the Nisibene congregation and as a form of instruction, so that, when peace returned under Valgash, the event is attributed to God’s mercy and grace. This scheme corresponds to the educational path symbolised by the course of the sun in CN 13, 8–9, where heat and light, even though they tire the fruit, bring it to maturation too, so that the warmth of the setting sun comes as a prize (see §3.1.4.3); similarly, Valgash, the mild and sweet pastor, follows the stern Jacob, when the community is already matured. Yet, though all this is well, it does not end well: as war chastised and purified the community, so the ease of peace may spoil Christians. This is the sense of Ephrem’s references to a “grace without fruits” or an “ungrateful peace” (*ṭaybūtā d-lā metpar’ā*, CN 13, 15, 6; *šaynā ṭalōmā*, CN 13, 16, 5). And indeed, the community has already betrayed the high hopes of peace, when its opposition to Valgash has been punished by the ravages of the year 359 (see §3.3; CN 15, 19–20).

The cycle represented in CN 13 can be schematised thus: sin, chastisement, conversion, mercy, and sin again. The very same cycle, once more connected with episcopal succession, is at work in the poems on Abraham. Clearly, the Nisibene community did not behave itself, Ephrem’s wishes notwithstanding, because in the last years of Valgash and the first of Abraham the threat of Julian and the pressure caused by his Persian campaign came to bear on Nisibis. The events are treated in two sequences of CN 18 and CN 21:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ</p> | <p>ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ 5
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ</p> |
| <p>ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ</p> | <p>ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ 6
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ</p> |
| <p>ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ</p> | <p>ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ 7
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ</p> |

ܚܳܡ ܠܳܐ ܕܳܝ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ	ܕܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ 18
ܠܳܐ ܕܳܝܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ	ܕܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ
ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ	ܕܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ
ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ	ܕܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ
²³ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ	ܕܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܳܝܳܐܳܠܳܐ
(CN 21, 14–18)	

I have already demonstrated (§2.2.2, note 95) how CN 18, 5–8 has imagery similar to that found in the *Poems against Julian*, so that it is safe to presume that these stanzas refer to the apostate emperor²⁴. That the same applies also to CN 21, 14–18 is demonstrated by the word *hanpūtā*, strongly associated to Julian's paganism and present in CN 21, 18, 3 and 7. Furthermore, Ephrem speaks of a “new king” (*malkā ḥatā*) as good news in stanza 14 and describes heathenism as a sickness involving “the whole world” (*‘ālmā kull-eh*, 18, 1): the ecumenical nature of the threat of paganism, together with its rapid disappearance and the celebration of a new king, prompts us to set these lines against the succession of Jovian to Julian. The two passages treat their subject from a slightly different point of view, with CN 18, 5–8 focused on Julian's defeat and the merits of Bishops Valgash and Abraham in resisting the emperor; whereas CN 21, 14–18 reflects in hindsight on Julian's reign and expresses hopes and fears for the accession of Jovian. In the latter passage, the usual script of redemption through punishment is explicitly outlined, and yet it is not quite clear what the moment of punishment should correspond to. CN 21, 18 speaks of the end of paganism, and CN 21, 14 of a new king, but both

23 “Here, the news of a new king / goes thundering through the lands: // for the plundered ’twas a comfort, / and for the plunderer terror. // The vomit of the greedy came, / when they threw up everything swallowed. // There was fright even because of you, / lest between priest and righteous king // the former habits be smothered. / **Blessed is he who was wroth** [*rgez*] **and again merciful** [*rahḥem*]! // There is one who, if he can, dares, / and there is one who resists and curbs his bent; // one is thoughtful of the waiting judgement, / and the other doesn't even think there is one; // there is one who stole and quenched his thirst, / and there is one who stole and thirsted to steal; // stole the rich and stole the poor, / but stole the hungry with moderation, // while the sated stole without measure. / **Blessed is he who tests all designs!** // Yet lately he gave a chance, / and each unveiled his own intent, // how he was and whom resembled / and what he favoured above what. // He removed the trial from everyone, / lest anyone who didn't hate him deny him. // He gave us a chance to consider, / that better than the current authority // humiliation helped, by far. / **Blessed is he who, aiding, rebukes us!** // For not willingly did he impose / his yoke on our neck by force. // He gave us a chance and we boasted, / since, when we resisted and suffered, // we've been loving his light yoke, / we've been preferring his sweet sceptre, // while our pleasure increased our grief, / since by his force comes serenity, // and by his yoke facility. / **Blessed is he whose toil is delight!** // The whole world, like a body, / had fallen to a great disease— // namely, the fever of heathenism [*hanpūtā*]: / it was hot and sick and fell. // The power of mercy touched it, / and its soul was revived through grace. // Heathenism [*hanpūtā*] stopped forthwith, / for there was the cause of the disease. // So with sweat was cleansed anew. / **Glory to the hand that healed it!**”

24 So also Papoutsakis 2017, 124–131, who analyses in detail only CN 18, 5, 8–10, linking it to other anti-Julian passages. The dependence of the lines from 2 Thess. 2:8 and Ps. 68:1–2 seems convincing, Ephrem's knowledge of the Greek patristic trope of Julian as Typhon less so.

in this latter stanza and in the following one the poet describes a situation of disorder, in which everyone was brought to steal or plunder (*bāzōzā*, *CN* 21, 14, 4; *gnab*, *CN* 21, 15, 5–8), either by necessity (*meskēnē*, *CN* 21, 15, 8; *kapnā*, *CN* 21, 15, 9) or by greed and taking advantage of the situation (*CN* 21, 14, 5–6; *CN* 21, 15, 2; 4; 6; 9).

I suppose that this description, connected as it is to Julian's reign, refers to the consequences of the emperor's Persian campaign for the population in Nisibis: the presence of the army must have brought scarcity and an uncertain situation in the city and its countryside, thereby compelling the population (or, at least, a plurality of people) to steal²⁵. If the presence of Julian and his "pagan" army²⁶ meant also unfavourable treatment for Christians (especially the more visible and influential ones), then the poet's censure of rich people stealing and pillaging may refer to rich pagans taking advantage of the situation to strike Christian rivals. For all the hardships Ephrem describes, it is difficult to surmise whether the reality underlying the description was a true persecution: Christian authors were prone to exaggeration on this account, especially as regards Julian's reign. The passage from Julian to Jovian is perhaps better described by the poet's antithesis of "humiliation" (*quppāhā*) and "authority" (*šultānā*) in *CN* 21, 16, 8–9: under Julian, the Christian community likely suffered a loss of standing in the larger civic community, maybe some political and financial handicaps vis-à-vis its pagan counterparts and a broader atmosphere of hostility; Jovian's reign, on the contrary, returned it to the prestigious social position it enjoyed under Constantine and Constantius. In this context, the spiritual battle of the bishop described in *CN* 18, 6 must have been an endeavour to keep Christians inside the community, against the temptation to flow with the tide of apostasy and theft. This is confirmed by the sower imagery of *CN* 18, 8: the conflict between emperor and bishop is a conflict between two preachings, two narrations, so to speak.

The word *quppāhā* expresses not only how the world treated Christians under Julian but also how divine providence ordained Julian's reign in order to correct the church, because this word also means "reproof," "reproach," or "confounding"²⁷. Indeed, the whole stanza 16, as well as the following stanza 17, gives a theological interpretation of the hardships described in the previous stanzas. They are first of all a "chance", or literally, a "space" (*'atrā*, *CN* 21, 16, 1; 7; 17, 3), to show one's true allegiance—whether it is with God or with the world—and to observe a paradoxical phenomenon—namely, that peace had had negative effects for the church, whereas persecution enhanced its moral status (*CN* 21, 16, 7–9; 17). This is another occurrence of the theme of "ungrateful peace", already found in *CN* 13 to explain the sieges and the raids and already anticipated in

25 A similar situation, with the same "greedy" (*ya'nē*) as *CN* 21, 14, 5, is described at *CN* 7, 1, a poem written in consequence of the destruction brought by the Roman army to Nisibis (see *CN* 7, 3; 7, 3–4). There too was a question of "ingratitude" (*CN* 7, 8, 5).

26 Suggested but not stated by: Amm. Marc. 23, 3, 5; Zos. 3, 12, 3–5. In any case, the army led by Sebastianus and Procopius must have been near Nisibis, in Northern Mesopotamia eastward from Harran.

27 Payne Smith 1879–1901, 3690, s.v. ܩܘܦܬܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 1339, s.v. ܩܘܦܬܐ.

Ephrem's evaluation of Julian's reign in the poem [*De Ecclesia*] (stanzas 11–15). Ephrem suggests also in *CN* 18 that Julian's humiliation of Christians was divinely ordained: the poet calls it “violence perfecting heathenism” (*qṭīrā da-mlā ḥanpūtā*), using a verb with religious connotations, *mlā*, employed for the fulfilling of prophecies in another form²⁸.

Moreover, the expression “in its [infancy's] time” (*b-zabn-āh*) looks back at the system of succeeding “times” (*zabnē*), each with its age for the community and with its bishop, which Ephrem established in *CN* 13–16. Note, however that, whereas *CN* 13–16 envisaged a natural growth from infancy to adulthood for the community, thereby underlining the positive role of Valgash as the bishop entrusted with the grown-up community, here Ephrem employs the idea of rejuvenation, Bishop Abraham being still very young at the time. The youth of the prelate, likely raised by the community as a reason for calling into question his qualification for office (§2.1.2.2; §3.1.1.1; §3.1.4.4), was thus justified both by the suggestion of renewal it brought and by the paradox of its triumphing over such a danger as Julian. Furthermore, even if the agency of Julian's apostasy is attributed indirectly, through the biblical examples referring to the devil (*CN* 18, 7, 7–9), the reversal of Julian's plans demonstrates that God allowed things to happen for a higher good. Thus, *CN* 18 adds to the interpretation of Julian's reign as a chastisement—an interpretation presented in *CN* 21—the idea that it was also an occasion for the new bishop to showcase his spiritual strength and for God to demonstrate his power by winning through an unexperienced prelate. Here, the new bishop's succeeding the previous one ties, first, into the passage from peace to proof, and then into the new emperor's succeeding the previous one, hence from proof to new peace.

The correspondence between episcopal and imperial succession is not a coincidence. Indeed, it was already anticipated in the confrontation in *CN* 18, 8 between the “apostate farmer” (*'akkārā d-ʾaḥnep*) and the “righteous farmer” (*'akkārā kēnā*)—namely, Julian the emperor and Abraham the bishop. The common metaphor, apart from its inspiration in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 13:24–25; see §2.2.2), suggests that the authorities of the bishop and of the emperor somehow overlap. Furthermore, in two passages the opposite happens, and Ephrem uses kingly imagery to speak of Bishop

28 On the word *mlā*: Payne Smith 1879–1901, 2117–2118, 2121–2122, s.v. ܡܠܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 769, s.v. ܡܠܐ. Older translations here present a problem: “vis idolatriae” (Bickell 1866, 111); “die von Heidentum erfüllte Übermacht” (Beck 1961b, 58); “la violence du paganisme” (Fhégal/Navarre 1989, 65). Bickell, followed by Fhégal/Navarre, simply ignores the word *da-mlā*, translating as if the line sounded *qṭīrā d-ḥanpūtā*. Beck, on the other side, interprets the sequence *m-l-* as a *mlē*, passive participle, with the agent connected through the construct state. The grammar is sound, but rare (see: Nöldeke 1880, 196–197, §284; no examples under Duval 1881, 316, §331e; 328, §344c; 331, §351) and the clause feels convoluted, all the more so because the same idea might have been expressed writing simply *mlāt* (perfect third-person singular feminine, with subject *ḥanpūtā* and object the relative pronoun *d-*) instead of *mlē*. I took the writing *m-l-* not to be the passive participle *mlē* but the perfect third-person masculine *mlā*, hence with subject *d-* (referring to *qṭīrā*) and object *ḥanpūtā*: it is not paganism that fulfils violence, but violence that completes, perfects paganism. A similar idea is found in the *hymn. c. Julian.*: the paganism of the Apostate is allowed power for it to be rebuked and thwarted (see Forness 2021, 147).

Abraham. In CN 19, 4, 9, he pronounces the following blessing on Abraham: “May be justice [*quštā*] peace [*šlāmā*] for you!,” an allusion to Isaiah’s prophecies concerning King Hezekiah (2Reg. 20:3; 19; Jes. 38:3; 39:8). In CN 17, 2, 7 and CN 19, 2, 4 Abraham’s anointing involves a horn, a detail that, among anointings narrated in the Bible, is found only in kingly anointings²⁹. This overlap may be explained as an undue usurpation of the spiritual tasks of the bishop by the secular power, or it may imply a genuine area of imperial concern, in which Julian did not perform well. Some clarity on the issue is provided by the end of CN 21, in which Ephrem treats precisely the relationship between bishop and emperor, a theme he had anticipated as a cause for concern in CN 21, 14, 7–9:

21 ܐܡܢ ܕܢܝܢ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ	ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܐܡܢ ܕܢܝܢ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ
22 ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ	ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ
23 ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ (CN 21, 21–23)	ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ ܕܝܗܝܐ

29 Cf. the anointing of Aaron at Ex. 28:41 and of Elisha at 1Reg. 19:16 with the anointings of Saul and David at 1Sam. 10:1; 16:13. See §3.3.1.1 n. 321.

30 “Since, like the first priest and king, / who were as if painted one in the other // and as if balanced on scales, / so were Valgash and the king’s son, // who were humble and serene, / then may the last ones resemble each other: // May the priests be luminaries, / and may the kings be lightning, // And may the judges too be flashes. / **Blessed is he who enlightened our souls!** /// From kingship the laws [*nāmōsē*] / and from priesthood the atonements [*hussāyē*]: // That both should incline is hideous, / that both should be stern [*ne’zān*] is harsh [*qašyā*]; // Let one be stern [*te’az*] and one be mild [*tebsam*] / with sense and with discernment, // may fear [*dehlā*] be tempered with love [*rahmē*]: / may our priesthood be mild [*bassimā*], // as our kingship stern [*‘azzizā*]. / **Blessed is he who tempered our aids!** /// Let the priests pray for the kings / that they may be a bulwark for humanity: // On the part of kings, victory, / and from priests faith, // victory to preserve the bodies / and faith to preserve the souls. // May the kings stop the battling, / may priests stop the inquiring: // Let dispute and war cease! / **Blessed is the Offspring of the All-Appearer!** /// Glory be unto thee for thy gift!”

These stanzas are of utmost interest, in that they express a rather precise doctrine of the relationship between secular and spiritual power. The basic idea is that of a difference in functions. It is already apparent in the word choice: Ephrem calls the bishop *kāhnā* throughout, highlighting his religious function at the expense of his leadership (§2.1.3.2), in order to leave space to the emperor; moreover, the contrast between *kāhnā* and *malkā* (“king”, but here referred to the emperor) makes clear that Ephrem is reasoning in theological—that is, biblical—terms. Thus, priests (bishops) and kings (emperors) have a different purview according to stanza 23: kings are concerned with wars (*taktūšā*, *qē'rsā*, 7; 9), and their purpose is to end them through victory (*zākūtā*, 3; 5), so that the physical welfare (*pagrē*, 5) of the people is guaranteed; priests, on the other hand, are concerned with doctrinal disputes (*'uqqābā*, *drāšā*, 8; 9), which they should end through faith (*haymānūtā*, 4; 6), in order to preserve the spiritual welfare (*nepšātā*, 6) of the people. Ephrem's attention to war as kings' field of action can be understood in light of his experience in Nisibis, where imperial protection from the Persians was paramount, most of all for the preservation of the Christian community³¹. However, the purview of kings is not limited to war, for, as stanza 22 shows, kings are also the source of law (*nāmōsē*, 1), whereas the priests provide forgiveness (*hussāyē*, 2). Given these two different functions, bishops and emperors must employ two different leadership styles, respectively love and fear (*rahmē*, *dehlā*, 7). As has already been said (§3.1.4.3), this dialectic between secular and religious power traces the dialectic between old and new covenant, because Ephrem sees the ecclesiastical authority as working in a more spiritual and perfected economy than imperial authority.

Yet for all his distinctions Ephrem still envisages some interference between priesthood and kingship, even beyond the “praying for” kings by priests (23, 1–2). The reference to a “tempering” (*mazzeg*, 22, 7; 10) of the mere power of the state by religious mercy implies first that the two authorities work on the same community with a similar function and, more importantly, that they are complementary. The poet has already expressed the desire for harmony between the two powers after the conflict of Julian's reign (CN 21, 14, 7–9), but stanza 21 of the same poem links emperors and bishops more closely. Lines 1–6 establish a double relationship between these two authorities, on one side describing each emperor as similar to his contemporary bishop, on the other envisaging a similar succession for bishops and emperors. Indeed, the term *yubbālā* is fundamental for Ephrem's thought on kingship too, as demonstrated by Papoutsakis³². There, too, the notion of “order” (*tukkāsā*) and of “transmission” (expressed by the verb *'ašlem*) plays an important role, as well as the provisional nature of the Roman Empire and the Davidic reign in relation to Christ, which is mirrored in the bishop's intermediary nature between the church and Christ (§2.2.1.4; §2.2.4.2–3). From the point of view of content, this literary

³¹ Forness 2021, though cautioning against a rigid interpretation of Ephrem's utterances on emperors, in view of the different concerns of his community in different occasions, still recognises a constant in the poet's idea of the imperial office, namely the protection of the territory and the guarantee of peace for the (especially Christian) inhabitants.

³² Papoutsakis 2017, 80–93.

construction requires some tweaking with history. The most important measure required is the omission of Babu from the sequence³³. Ephrem likely starts from a real coincidence, the death of Constantine and Jacob in the same year (337)³⁴. The two characters had a similar significance for Nisibis. Constantine was the founder of the Christian empire, and Jacob the founder of the Christian Nisibis. Both literally founded basilicas and took part in the Council of Nicaea. Furthermore, both protected Nisibis from the Persians, at least according to tradition (see §4.3). After Constantine and Jacob, the successions of bishops and emperors is not coincidental anymore: Constantius reigns during both Babu's and Valgash's episcopates, and Valgash must have reigned during at least part of Julian's reign (note 20), and Abraham acceded while Julian was still emperor. In order to make all the pieces fall in place, Ephrem simply omits Babu and Julian from the sequence. The omission of Babu is yet another proof of his scarce relevance for Ephrem, whereas the omission of Julian between Constantius and Jovian signals the usurping nature of Julian's reign.

From the point of view of form, it is noteworthy that Ephrem chose the metaphors of painting and the scales to express the similarity between the first bishop of Nisibis and the first emperor; for, as I already said, Ephrem habitually employs the metaphor of painting to express the relationship between old and new bishops (§2.2.3.3), whereas he uses the language of balance and proportionality—of which the metaphor of scales is an example—to express the relationship between a bishop and the period of his tenure (§4.1.1). This means that between bishop and emperor there should be a harmony like that between bishop and community, successor and predecessor. Such a harmony is exemplified by the relationship between Valgash and Constantius, where the emperor takes on the habitual features of the bishop. Valgash and Constantius (“the king's son”) are defined as *makkīn* ... *wa-bhīlīn* (“humble and serene”). This characterisation of Constantius may seem to contrast starkly with the contemporary witness on the emperor's temper, even taking into account a positive bias from some Christian sources after Julian³⁵. However, if it is true that *makkīkā* had already been used for Valgash (CN 16, 16, 5; 20, 3) and that therefore it is a characterising word for the bishop, *bhīlā* appears only here. In sixth-century texts, the word translates Greek γαληνότης, an imperial epithet³⁶. The style is already found in Greek texts of the fifth century, whereas the Latin *serenitas* is attested in the *Codex Theodosianus* for Constantine, Constantius, and Julian, but only from the fifth century in Greek (γαληνότης)³⁷. The coincidence of two adjec-

³³ Less apparent, but much more discussed in the literature, is Ephrem's utterly positive judgement of Constantius, whose Arianism seems not have concerned the poet. Apart from the difficulty of interpreting univocally Constantius' religious politics, all informed by the research of compromise, Ephrem's positive judgement is perfectly understandable in the context of anti-Julianic polemics and of his theological constructions: Papoutsakis 2017, 88; Forness 2021, 146–156.

³⁴ Burgess 1999; §4.3.

³⁵ Elm 2012, 31–32, 339, 367–368, 371–373; Griffith 1987, 251–252.

³⁶ Payne Smith 1879–1901, 457, s.v. ܡܚܠܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 121, s.v. ܡܚܠܐ.

³⁷ Theodt. *ep.* 140, 16; *AConcOec* 1, 1, 7, 129; *Cod. Theod.* 1, 22, 2; 2, 16, 2; 4 (Constantine); 5, 13, 2; 6, 29, 3 (Constantius); 8, 5, 14, *pr.* (Julian).

tives characterising a bishop and an emperor, one adjective being typically ascribed to the bishop and the other coming to be typically ascribed to emperors, strongly suggests that Ephrem took the word *bhīlīn* from the imperial address; if this were true, then CN 21, 21, 5 would establish a parallel between imperial ideology and episcopal features, justifying the likening of Valgash to Constantius. This assertion of their similarity seems to contradict the distinction in leadership style required by stanza 22.

The wish for a similarity of bishops and secular authorities is reiterated also at lines 7–9 of stanza 21, where the three categories of priests, kings, and judges share the same light imagery. In Syriac the categories are called *kāhnē*, *malkē*, *dayyānē* (CN 21, 21, 7–9). If *kāhnē* means “bishops” and *malkē* “emperors”, it is not clear what *dayyānē* may mean. Like *kāhnē* and *malkē*, the category is biblical, sometimes translating Hebr. *šōpəṭīm* or even *‘ēlohīm*. However, it is also used for Roman officials³⁸. Indeed, laws and inscriptions employ the term *iudex* generically for a provincial governor or those he appoints to help him administer justice³⁹. If the word *dayyānē* means “governors”, then Ephrem’s exhortations to the emperor, implicit in his prayers for harmony, may have been concretely addressed to the local governor or imperial representative.

This contradiction between similarity and division of imperial and episcopal tasks can be understood as distinguishing the different targets of stanza 21 and stanzas 22–23. The latter present a general reflection on the distinction between the two authorities, while the former is a meditation and a prayer directed towards the concrete situation of the community. Hence, while stanzas 22–23 are keen on delimiting the areas of purview and numbering the differences, stanza 21 demonstrates that history had a providential course, thereby binding God to continue providing for the community. From this perspective, the painting and scales metaphors signal that in the succession of both emperors and bishops, as well as in their relationship with one another, providence is at work; even the light imagery signals back to the first stanzas of CN 13, where the succession of bishops was ordained “as the luminaries” to help the community in the three sieges⁴⁰. It is at this point that the general reflection on the differences comes in the form of a prayer⁴¹: it serves both to explain how the harmony of stanza 21 may concretely be realised and to exhort bishop and emperor to enact such a behaviour.

38 Payne Smith 1879–1901, 842–843, s.v. ܡܠܟܐ.

39 Slootjes 2006, 32; the same situation Ephrem foresaw for the bishop at CN 18, 11, 1, with the same word *dayyānē*; see §3.1.1.1.

40 cf. “Three priests dazzling [*naṣṣīḥē*] / in likeness of the two luminaries [*naḥḥīrē*]” (CN 13, 1, 1–2); “He, who created the two luminaries [*naḥḥīrē*], / chose for himself this three luminaries [*naḥḥīrē*] // and fixed them in the threefold / dusk [*ḥuškā*] of the past sieges. // As was quenched that couple of luminaries [*naḥḥīrē*] / truly the last blazed [*zallīqā-w*]” (CN 13, 2); with “May the priests be luminaries [*naḥḥīrē*], / and may the kings be lightning [*zallīqē*], // And may the judges too be flashes [*zahrīrē*]. / **Blessed is he who enlightened** [*‘anhar*] **our souls!**” (CN 21, 22, 7–10). If the poems have been arranged by the author, this could be considered a kind of *Ringkomposition*.

41 As signalled by the imperfect tense of the verbs: *ta’ez*, *tebsam* (22, 5), *tetmazzag* (22, 7), *tehwē* (22, 8), *nṣallōn* (23, 1), *nehwōn* (23, 2), *tnaṭṭar* (23, 5), *neṣlōn* (23, 7–8), *netbaṭṭal* (23, 9).

The texts examined amply demonstrate the importance of the theme of *yubbālā* in the poems on bishops. Furthermore, if we put these poems in the wider context of the *CN*, this theme will reveal another point. The chief function of *yubbālā* is to justify differences between bishops by integrating those differences into a more general historical succession of epochs (another meaning of the word *yubbālā*). In order to justify difference in leadership, the poet must distinguish these epochs not by mere dates, but as qualitatively distinct one from the other. This partly explains the necessity to characterise differently the different emperors, who could otherwise have been used as mere names to establish a chronological grid. Two historical schemes seem to emerge from the analysis. One is the incremental progress inspired by and represented as the growth from childhood to maturity. This is prevalent in the poems on Valgash because, interpreted through the lens of supersessionist theology, it explains Valgash's behaviour well (see §4.2). Yet already in these poems, and especially in *CN* 15–16, the other scheme interferes with the idea of growth: it is a cyclical view of history, in which the church repeatedly falls from grace, is punished, is reformed and then favoured by God, only to fall again. The decisive moment of the cycle is what Ephrem calls “ungrateful peace” (*šaynā ʔalōmā*, *CN* 13, 16, 5), a favourable situation which breeds sins, restarting the whole cycle. Such a concept, and the cyclical scheme it implies, is employed frequently by Ephrem in *CN* 1–12 in order to explain the three sieges and the raids Nisibis had to suffer⁴².

Therefore, though apparently divided by two different subject matters, *CN* 1–12 and *CN* 13–21 share not only the same view of history but also its application to events in Nisibis; both cycles of poems propose a Christian reading of current affairs for the same public. It is true that they must have been composed at different times, with *CN* 1–12 being composed at least as early as 359 and *CN* 13–21 being composed as late as 363, and that they can be divided into smaller subcycles; however, they still retain the same overall theme of Nisibis's fall and salvation, expanding on a general theology of history. For this reason, it is tempting to think that the author arranged *CN* 1–21 as a unit, albeit with different chapters, in order to illustrate his thought on history. It is even conceivable that the text as it stands does not faithfully reflect the first performances of these poems in the '50s and '60s of the fourth century, but a later work of collection, revision, and standardisation to produce a more didactic and theologically learned cycle. Against this hypothesis is the exclusion in our tradition of the poems on Julian, which espouse the same view of history and the same focus on Nisibis as *CN* 1–21 and would have been aptly inserted in the collection⁴³.

42 See in particular: “He came to us with hardness / we were afraid for a moment. // He came in gentleness / and we rejoiced for an hour. // He turned and left us for a little / we wandered without end; // like a beast of prey which is trained // by blandishments and by fear, / but if so be that men turn *from it* // rebels and strays and becomes / savage in the midst of peace [*b-šaynā*]” (*CN* 2, 7; trans. Stopford 1898, 169). Also: *CN* 1, 4, 1–2; 5; *CN* 2, 7–9; 11; *CN* 3, 4–5; 8–12; *CN* 4, 13–14; *CN* 5, 9; *CN* 6, 17; *CN* 7, 1; 7, 7; *CN* 9, 18; *CN* 10, 15–18; *CN* 11.

43 On the centrality of Nisibis and the cyclical view of history: Griffith 1987, 248–251, 256–258; on the relation between *CN* and *hymn. c. Julian.*, see Beck 1961a, I.

It is interesting to note that Gregory too employs two historical schemes, one of decadence and the other being the same “biblical” cycle as Ephrem (see §3.1.3.1; §3.1.4.1; §3.3.2.2). In their common historical hermeneutic we see their common fidelity to the Bible, whereas the difference between Gregory’s decadence scheme and Ephrem’s growth scheme witnesses to their different attitude towards culture and the church in the empire: Ephrem joins Constantine and Jacob, thereby contextualising Nisibis’s growth inside the growth of Christianity in the empire; he still has a triumphalist attitude in this regard and sees Julian’s reign or Valgash’s crisis only as an interruption of this growth. Gregory, on the other side, assimilates the very Greek idea of decadence, because his confidence in a triumphant Christian empire is already cracked. One must not forget that he writes not only after his forced resignation but also after Julian, after Valens’s persecutions, after the growing discord inside the Nicene clergy (schism of Antioch, Pneumatomachists, Apollinarius, the conflict between Alexandria and Constantinople), and after the defeat of Adrianople.

Finally, the cyclical scheme of *yubbālā* may be examined in the wider context of early Christianity. Indeed, such a scheme was already the basis of many Greek and Roman reflections on history, especially as regards the changing forms of the states⁴⁴. This must not mean that Ephrem knew those reflections, because he may have simply extracted this scheme from the biblical narrative, which in itself is already organised in cycles of fall and redemption (§3.1.4.1). Origen did something similar, projecting this basic script of the story of Israel onto the metaphysical realm; he too, like Ephrem, pinpointed the initial thrust of the cycle in ungratefulness and laziness⁴⁵. However, Ephrem does not employ this scheme “vertically” to explain the relationship between metaphysical and historical realm as does Origen; rather, he employs it “horizontally” to judge history, in the conviction that the history of the Christian community is the direct continuation of the history of Israel⁴⁶. Moreover, Ephrem’s two schemes (progress and cycle) are always jux-

⁴⁴ See Plat. *resp.* 8–9; Aristot. *pol.* 1301a-1316b; for the story of the theory of *anacyclosis* from Polybius to the Renaissance: Trompf 1979, 4–249.

⁴⁵ On laziness see: *Semper enim similis est finis initiis; et ideo sicut unus omnium finis, ita unum omnium intellegi debet initium* ... [rational creatures] *tunc sunt in beatitudine, cum de sanctitate et sapientia ac de ipsa deitate participant. Si vero ab huiusmodi participatione neglegant atque dissimulent, tunc vitio propriae desidiaie alius citius alius tardius plus alius vel minus, ipse sibi causa sui lapsus vel casus efficitur* (Orig. *princ.* 1, 6, 2); on ingratitude: *possibile enim uidetur ut rationabiles naturae, a quibus numquam aufertur liberi facultas arbitrii, possint iterum aliquibus motibus subiacere, indulgente hoc ipsum deo, ne forte, si immobilem semper teneant statum, ignorent se dei gratia et non sua uirtute in illo fine beatitudinis constitisse* (Orig. *princ.* 2, 3, 3). The theme may have come to Ephrem already applied to history by way of Eusebius: Ὡς δ’ ἐκ τῆς ἐπὶ πλέον ἐλευθερίας (*men sug’ā da-šlāmā*) ἐπὶ χαυνότητι καὶ νωθρίαν τὰ καθ’ ἡμᾶς μετηλλάττετο ... ἡ μὲν δὲ θεία κρίσις, οἷα φίλον αὐτῇ, πεφεισμένως, τῶν ἀθροισμάτων ἐτι συγκροτουμένων, ἥρμα καὶ μετρίως τὴν αὐτῆς ἐπισκοπὴν ἀνεκίνει (Eus. *h. e.* 8, 1, 7).

⁴⁶ On this supersessionist view: §4.2; Yousif 1981; Murray 2006, 243–249. See the continuity between Prophets and Apostles at CN 20, 7 (also §3.1.3.1): “Look to the prophets and the apostles [*ba-nbī’ē w-ba-šlīḥē*], / how much they resemble [*dāmēn*] each other! // ’Twas the Name of God the prophets / gave to God’s people // and ’twas the Name of Christ the apostles / gave to Christ’s church; // even forgers [*zēpānē*] resembled [*dmaw*] each other; / since by their names were called // the churches that whored

taposed: Ephrem does not come to a “spiral” scheme, in which each redemption brings the community to a higher state than it was in before its fall, whereas such a scheme was espoused by Origen⁴⁷. As for other theological themes, Ephrem’s attitude towards history proved influential in Syriac culture. A clear example is provided by the church historian Theodoret, who employs Ephremian concepts to explain his own view of history⁴⁸.

4.2 Valgash

In the previous pages, I have often mentioned a breach in the authority of Bishop Valgash, and I have employed this circumstance as a hermeneutic key to understand Ephrem’s strategies in various passages, especially from the poems *CN* 13–16, written under Valgash’s tenure. Here, I will apply the reverse procedure, trying to consider Valgash’s crisis on the basis of the texts. Such a procedure has clear limits: first, one always runs the risk of speculating in a circle, from the (presumed) meaning of the text to the (presumed) real-life events, then back to the meaning of the text. Moreover, what, in the best occurrence, the procedure extracts from the texts is not the event as it happened, but its biased representation, and the more the texts are allusive and rarefied—as Ephrem’s poems surely are—the less reliable they are for the historian. Therefore, even if the link of this research to history is clear and partly fruitful for history, my analysis is still mainly a literary one, with the aim of determining the content of difficult and cryptic texts.

The existence of the crisis has—to my knowledge—never been doubted. Previous readers of *CN* 13–16 have recognised that the texts hint at a real situation, yet they never described it except in most general terms⁴⁹. In treading this new ground, I must draw a distinction: *CN* 13–14, though clearly linked to the crisis, do not address it directly; these poems defend Valgash with other arguments (see §4.3), whereas *CN* 15–16 are explicitly

with them. / **Blessed is he in whose name we’re sanctified!**”. Ephrem traces even the model of growth to the Bible: “Is it to the daughter of Abraham [=Israel/the synagogue] alone / that these images are applied, // or even unto you, daughter born of vows [Nisibis]?” (*CN* 13, 11, 1–3); “Even for Jacob’s daughter was set/ bait and stick to her childhood...” (*CN* 14, 19, 1–2).

47 Lettieri 2000, 380–381.

48 For Theodoret’s rooting in the Syriac world, see Leppin 2009. E.g.: καὶ αὐτὰ δὲ ἡμᾶς διδάσκει τὰ πράγματα ὡς πλείονα ἡμῖν τῆς εἰρήνης ὁ πόλεμος πορίζει τὴν ὠφέλειαν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἄβρους ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀνειμένους καὶ δευλοὺς ἀπεργάζεται, ὁ δὲ πόλεμος τὰ τε φρονήματα παραθήγει καὶ τῶν παρόντων ὡς ῥεόντων παρασκευάζει καταφρονεῖν (Theodt. *h. e.* 5, 39, 26); οἶμαι δὲ τῶν ὅλων τὸν πρύτανιν, τὴν ἡμετέραν διελέγχοντα πονηρίαν, καὶ δεικνύναι ἡμῖν τὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ τούτων ἡμᾶς πάλιν γυμνοῦν καὶ δ’ ἐκείνου μὲν διδάσκειν ὡς μάλα εὐπετῶς παρέχειν ἃ βούλεται δύναται διὰ δὲ τούτου καὶ διελέγχει ὡς οὐκ ἄξιους τῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν ἀμείνω βίον προτρέπειν (4, 5, 2). Cf. δ’ ἐκείνου μὲν διδάσκειν ὡς μάλα εὐπετῶς παρέχειν ἃ βούλεται δύναται with Ephrem’s “since everything is easy for You” (*CN* 2, 3, 5); “For in that it does things easily it resembles Deity, who easily creates everything” (*ad Hypatium* 1, 18, transl. Mitchell 1912, ix).

49 See Bickell 1866, 105 (Arianism and disobedience as a problem); Beck 1961b, III, 47, 51 (reason of the crisis is “Vologeses’ Sanftmut”); Fiey 1977, 31–32 (the rebels may be Arian heretics); Palmer 1998, 124 (Valgash is “spineless” and Ephrem’s defence is insincere); Bou Mansour 2019, 360.

concerned with this issue and offer all the information available. Furthermore, Beck has recognised an important lacuna of around 7 stanzas between stanzas 8 and 9 of CN 16, in a passage that seems very important for defining the nature of the crisis⁵⁰; hence, the interpreter must also confront this lack of information. Anyway, it is possible to isolate two passages from CN 15 and CN 16 that offer most of the relevant information (parallels found elsewhere will be given in note):

ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 15 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ
ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 16 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ
ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 17 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ
ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 18 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ
ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 19 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ
ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ (CN 15, 1–3; 19–20)	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 20 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ
ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ	ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ 6 ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܐܡܪܐ ܕܐܢܝܢ ܕܐܢܝܢ

⁵⁰ Beck 1961a, 44. See n. 51 in §1.1.2.

⁵¹ "It is us, then, whom the beginnings [*qadmāyē*] chastised, / and then chided us the middle [*meṣ'āyē*]. // The endings [*(a)hrāyē*] increased our sweetness, / but when our taste came, // our loss of flavour was greater. /// Indeed, we came to maturity, / that we may restrain children from sport // to bring them to earnestness. / Yet our old age sorely needed // that we be chided as kids. /// Hence [*badgūn*] the mild resisted patiently / and didn't use compulsion, // so as to honour greatly our old age; / and since our age knew not its degree, // let him be honour'd who knew its time. /// And if one should say that people / are driven only with force and the stick, // well, even fear drives the thief, / and threat the plunderer; // and shame the fool. /// If with the head as first / the limbs had run as second, // they would have led the third, / and all the whole body would have // followed them. /// But the second neglected the first, and the third the second, // the rank were despised one by the other. / It's because the citizens neglected each other // that the strangers too trod them down."

7
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ

8
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ

A 7 stanzas lacuna must be assumed here

9 [lacuna]
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ

10
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ

11
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ

12
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ

13
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ܠܠܡܢܬܐ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ ܕܡܢ
 ...

52 “Never did a mirror compel / with violence its observer; // nor is the mercy that came / upon the justice of the law // compulsory as the law. /// Justice [kēnūtā] was for childhood [ṭalyūtā] / the adorning of compulsion [da-qṭīrā]; // for, since mankind was a child [ṭalyā], / she adorned it through compulsion [ba-qṭīrā], // while not purloining its freedom. /// Bait and stick [šedlā w-šabṭā] had taken / Justice for that childhood [kēnūtā šed ṭalyūtā]: // whenever she struck her, she soothed her; / her stick [šabṭ-āh] curbed the rashness [huṣpā], // her bait [šedl-āh] softened the minds. /// [lacuna] that today it may be adorned, my brethren: // for the new tidings it was an infant, / in the time of greatness of mind // it had no mind. /// For in the degree of maturity, / it descended to infancy, // and that slaves’ law it loved, / which in return for audacity strikes it, // and in return for boldness slaps it. /// No ornament through compulsion / is true, because it is a mockery: // this is important to God, / that man adorns himself by himself; // therefore, he lifted compulsion. /// For, as prudently / as he gave compulsion in its time, // so prudently / he lifted it in the time when // meekness was necessary in its stead; /// for, as much as it is meet for infancy / to be running under the stick, // it is even more hideous that under the stick / wisdom gets enslaved, // so that compulsion becomes her master.”

ܬܠܝܬܐ ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ
ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ
(CN 16, 6–13; 22)

ܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ 22
ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ
⁵³ ܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܬܠܚܝܬܐ

Four linked themes may be isolated from these stanzas: first, the perversion of *yubbālā* by the Nisibenes (CN 15, 15, 4–5; 17, 4; CN 16, 9; 10, 1–2; 22)⁵⁴; second, the relationship between compulsion and freedom (CN 15, 17, 2–3; 18; CN 16, 7–8; 11–13); third—and this is only apparent in the passage from CN 15—the Nisibenes, once matured, were expected to teach others (CN 15, 16; 19–20); fourth, the relationship between Old and New Testament, which is examined most of all in CN 16 (stanzas 6; 9–10)⁵⁵. In the interplay of these four themes, we observe the same rhetorical strategy already examined for the theme of *yubbālā* (§4.1.1): each theme is defined by two opposing groups of concepts, and the opposing groups are then distributed into different time periods, so that analogies are created between concepts belonging to different themes. This texture of analogies and antitheses is then expressed through the skilful variation of words. Here, too, a tabular representation of Ephrem's plot can be useful:

<i>yubbālā</i>	<i>ṭalyē</i> (CN 15, 16, 5; CN 16, 7, 3; 22, 5) <i>ṭalyūtā</i> (CN 16, 7, 1; 13, 1) <i>ḥūspā</i> (CN 16, 8, 4) <i>šabrā</i> (CN 16, 9, 3) <i>yallādūtā</i> (CN 16, 10, 2)	<i>gmīrūtā</i> (CN 15, 16, 1; CN 16, 10, 1) <i>yaqqīrūtā</i> (CN 15, 16, 3) <i>saybūtā</i> (CN 15, 16, 4; 17, 3) <i>ḥakkīmūtā</i> (CN 16, 13, 4) <i>rabbūt re'yānā</i> (CN 16, 9, 4)
theme of compulsion	<i>rdā</i> (CN 15, 15, 1) <i>k'ā</i> (CN 15, 15, 2; 16, 5; CN 16, 22, 5) <i>qṭīrā</i> (CN 15, 17, 2; 18, 2; CN 16, 6, 2; 5; 7, 2; 4; 11, 1; 5; 12, 2; 13, 5) <i>dbar</i> (CN 16, 6, 1) <i>šabṭā</i> (CN 15, 18, 2; CN 16, 8, 1; 4; 13, 2–3) <i>mḥā</i> (CN 16, 8, 3; 10, 4) <i>qappah</i> (CN 16, 10, 5) <i>qašyūtā</i> (CN 16, 22, 4)	<i>bassimā</i> (CN 15, 17, 1) <i>makkikūtā</i> (CN 16, 12, 5) <i>rmīsūtā</i> (CN 16, 22, 3)
theme of law and grace	<i>kēnūtā</i> (CN 16, 6, 4; 7, 1; 8, 2) <i>nāmōsā</i> (CN 16, 6, 4–5) <i>nāmōs-'abdē</i> (CN 16, 10, 3)	<i>ṭaybūtā</i> (CN 16, 6, 3) <i>sbartā</i> (') <i>ḥrētā</i> (CN 16, 9, 3)

⁵³ “It is we now who overthrow / this beautiful succession and order, // since in the time of mildness, / lo!, we are begging toughness, // which may rebuke us as children.”

⁵⁴ See also the following: “Yet even if we, my brethren, / have confused the meters [*mūšḥātā*] // and spoiled the discretion, / and are returned as schoolboys [*yālōpē*] // for the perfection who called us” (CN 15, 10); “he [Valgash] didn’t swerve as we had done” (CN 15, 12, 3); “it’d been fit for us to know our time [*zabn-an*]; / but we ourselves alienated from our time [*zabn-an*], // losing savour in the time [*ba-zban*] of taste” (CN 15, 13, 3–5). Add the use of *dargā* at CN 15, 17, 4 and at CN 16, 10, 1, of *zabnā* at CN 16, 9, 4, of *yubbālā* and *ṭeksā* at CN 16, 22, 2, and compare with the analysis of the language of *yubbālā* at §4.1.

⁵⁵ The link of this theme with that of compulsion has been anticipated at §3.1.4.3, with n. 185 for the biblical passages involved.

The table shows clearly the many similarities between this rhetoric and Ephrem's narrative of the story of Nisibis under the three first bishops, all of which may be summed up with one consideration: Valgash's crisis is incorporated in the ascendent/incremental scheme of *yubbālā* (§4.1.2)⁵⁶. Hence, the apologetic function of that scheme is made clear: Ephrem in *CN* 13–16 insists on the spiritual growth of Nisibis precisely to highlight its failure to live up to that growth, at the same time sparing Valgash's attitude from critiques regardless of its difference from the attitudes of his predecessors.

However, it is noteworthy that the four themes (*yubbālā*, compulsion, teaching others, and the contrast between grace and law) are unevenly distributed between the two poems, so that the two pieces seem to depict two different situations. In *CN* 15, Ephrem says that the Nisibenes failed to behave according to their collective maturity and that *as a consequence* Valgash refused to treat them harshly: the consequential relationship of these two ideas is explicitly stated through the conjunction *badgūn* in 17, 1⁵⁷. The poet then proceeds to defend Valgash's choice. On the contrary, *CN* 16 depicts the community as asking for thoroughness instead of Valgash's mild approach, implying that precisely this request for a stern leadership is the sign of the community's immaturity⁵⁸. Ephrem describes the request in both cases as a regression to infancy (*CN* 16, 10, 1–2; 22, 5), but regression to infancy was precisely the language used at *CN* 15, 16, 4–5 (see also 10, 3) to describe the sin of the community to which Valgash responds only with mildness. I think that, in order to solve this conundrum, it is necessary to interpret the community's "requests" for severity as literal requests, and not as a necessity manifested by their behaviour—as does Bickell—because the text of *CN* 15 implies that it was precisely with these requests of severity that the community agitated against Valgash for his mild behaviour⁵⁹. Take, for example, the beginning of stanza 18, right after the description of Valgash's meekness in response to the Nisibenes: "If one should say [*w-'en 'nāš nēmar*] that people / are driven only with force and stick..." (*CN* 15, 18, 1–2). This beginning clearly introduces a possible objection to Val-

⁵⁶ As regards the definition of the two (at *CN* 15, 15, 1–2 three) periods of the *yubbālā*, Ephrem employs the same terms of age as for the succession of the three bishops: *ṭalye/ṭalyūtā* (cf. *CN* 14, 18, 3; 19, 2; 20, 4); *šabrā* (cf. *CN* 14, 16, 4; 17, 4; 18, 1; 21, 4; 22, 2; *CN* 16, 16, 2; 17, 1; 18, 2; 19, 2); *yallūdūtā* (cf. *CN* 14, 16, 2; 20, 2; 21, 2); *ḥuṣpā* (cf. *CN* 14, 19, 3; *CN* 16, 17, 1); *gmīrūtā* (cf. *CN* 14, 16, 5–6; 17, 6; 22, 3); *saybūtā* (cf. *CN* 16, 18, 4); *ḥakkīmūtā* (cf. *CN* 16, 16, 4). The keyword of sternness *šabtā* is associated with Jacob (*CN* 14, 19, 2=*CN* 16, 8, 1–2; *CN* 16, 17, 3) and *qašyūtā* describes once Babu (*CN* 16, 18, 3). Valgash's characterisation in our stanzas is consistent with the other poems: *bassīmā* (cf. *CN* 14, 18, 6; 19, 6; *CN* 16, 19, 5); *makkikūtā* (cf. *CN* 16, 16, 5). In one case, the word *nāmōsā* had been used by Ephrem to describe Babu's attitude (*CN* 14, 19, 4), but other than that, the Pauline language of Grace and Law is found only in *CN* 16.

⁵⁷ Payne Smith 1879–1901, 682, s.v. ܡܕܥܝܢܐ; Nöldeke 1880, 98, §156; Sokoloff 2009, 118, s.v. ܡܕܥܝܢܐ. Bickell 1866, 105: "itaque"; Stopford 1898, 184: "accordingly"; Beck 1961b, 50: "also"; Féghali/Navarre 1989: "aussi".

⁵⁸ The idea of the community "requiring" or "asking for" severity is conveyed by the verbs *raḥḥem* (*CN* 16, 10, 3) and *bāʾn-an* (*CN* 16, 22, 4).

⁵⁹ Bickell 1866, 106: "in fine denique carminis conqueritur, quod Nisibeni hanc Dei intentionem frusterint, cum per peccata sua Deum ad iteratam castigationem impulerint." From the point of view of language, the expressions *nāmōs 'abdē raḥḥem* (*CN* 16, 10, 3) and *bāʾn-an qašyūtā* (*CN* 16, 22, 4, cf. Sokoloff 2009, 169, s.v. ܡܕܥܝܢܐ) do not pose any problem to this interpretation.

gash's behaviour in order to confute it. Yet if the poet sees fit to introduce and confute such an objection, his public must have thought something similar to that objection; and since the objection is precisely the necessity of compulsion for successful leadership, someone among Ephrem's public must have thought compulsion necessary—something which is confuted anew at *CN* 16, where it is said that the community loved and requested such compulsion. Moreover, if Ephrem accepted that the Nisibenes objectively deserved stern treatment, then his defence of Valgash's meekness would be weakened, although not completely invalidated, for, as Bickell notes, the punishment was imposed by God himself in the end through the raids of 359 (see §4.3): the poet may well have believed that it was not the bishop place to punish the old community, even though they deserved to be punished.

According to Bickell, the clergy disobeyed bishop Valgash, so that his strategy of correction did not work⁶⁰. Bickell says so on the basis of *CN* 15, 19–20 (see §4.3), where Ephrem distinguishes between the “first,” the “second,” and the “third,” taking the “first,” also called *rēšā*, as a reference to the bishop, the second as a reference to the clergy, and the third as a reference to the population at large. This is better than Beck's reconstruction, which interprets the three terms as three different generations⁶¹; the same interpretation, perhaps, should be applied to *CN* 15, 16, where those who grew had to discipline “children”, so that those who grew are ascetics and clergy, and the children are the laypeople. Bickell also says that the clergy had Arian sympathies, on the basis of *CN* 7. However, *CN* 7 does not clearly refer to Arianism. Bou Mansour mentions doctrinal disputes, but on different grounds—namely, the expression “measure of truth” (*mūšhat-qūštā*) in *CN* 15, 11, 1⁶². That Nisibis knew Arianism cannot be doubted, since *CN* 3—probably written in the aftermath of the third siege—begins with a discussion of theological themes normally connected with anti-Arian polemics, and in stanza 4 Ephrem explicitly says that this discussion should put an end to the disputes in the city. Yet it is doubtful that Arianism is relevant in the situation of *CN* 13–16, since the expression “measure of truth” may refer to any other doctrinal problem.

In my view, the problem lies in the double criticism of the community: for its behaviour deserving punishment *and* for its request of punishment. One solution may be to suppose that the community was divided into two parts, with some deserving punishment and others calling on the bishop to act accordingly. However, this hypothesis seems countered by the lack of explicit distinctions in the texts. Here I propose a speculative reconstruction of the situation and of Ephrem's rhetoric: given the allusive language of the texts and the important lacuna of *CN* 16, I do not think research can reach much more than hypothetical interpretations. Assuming that the community was divided between “sinners” and “judges”, Ephrem's language not only confutes both without distinguishing between them but also draws an interesting parallel between the current situation and the relationship of

⁶⁰ Bickell 1866, 105.

⁶¹ Beck 1961b, 50n9.

⁶² Bou Mansour 2019, 360.

the law and the gospel (CN 16, 6–10). It is true that, as I already said (§3.1.4.3), this contrast is a central point of Ephrem's theology and that it is employed to describe the peculiar nature of the church as an association. Yet the regression of the community from the gospel to the law may be interpreted in a literal sense, too: as Shepardson has amply demonstrated, Ephrem's community must have been far from distinct in its Christian identity from the Jewish one⁶³. Therefore, it is well possible that a part of the Nisibene community, even many years after Nicaea, lapsed into Jewish practices. In such a case, as Shepardson's book demonstrates, Ephrem would have normally deployed his most vitriolic rhetoric to rebuke the sinners⁶⁴. But what if the reigning bishop chose to adopt a soft line with the Judaizers?

On one side, it is reasonable that some in the community would have been unsettled by his behaviour and would have desired concrete measures. On the other, if Ephrem wanted to defend his bishop, he could not launch his customary onslaught on the Judaizers. His choice is smarter: he extends the accusation of Judaizing to the critics of the bishop and avoids highlighting the dissent in the community by obliterating the distinction between accused and accusers. This way, he was likely in agreement with the bishop, wanting to preserve the unity of the congregation; he surely made out the bishop to be the only one innocent in the community. Moreover, he can attack Judaism even as he defends a soft line against Judaizers.

There is no way to conclusively demonstrate this reconstruction; however, some poetic choices may point in this direction, if they are evaluated against Ephrem's reflections on Judaism and the passage from the Old to the New Testament. Already the characterisation of the community's beloved law as a "law for slaves" (*nāmōs 'abdē*, CN 16, 10, 3) corresponds to Ephrem's evaluation of the Old Testament law⁶⁵. Similarly, the contrast between justice, represented by the law of Moses, and mercy, coming with Christ, is a fundamental element of the theme of Old and New Testament⁶⁶. Less common but still attested is the idea that the old law was primarily driven by coercion (keyword *qṭīrā*), whereas the church is guided by freedom⁶⁷. All these themes are found in a passage of Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, in which he comments on the "turn the other cheek" (Mt. 5:38–39) saying:

63 Shepardson 2008, 41–46. A literal interpretation of the contrast between Law and Grace was already proposed by Beck 1961b, 52n5, but without connecting it with the other themes.

64 Shepardson 2008, 29–68.

65 E.g.: "The shackles chains and bonds / fashioned for his [of the Jewish people] slavery // propagates to him whom removed them / in the freedom of the love of his Lord" (*serm. fid.* 3, 297–300).

66 See, for example: CN 39, 10–14. On this theme: Martikainen 1981.

67 At *comm. in diatess.* 2, 6 and 10 chastity before Christ was *ba-qṭīrā*, whereas after him it's free; at *hymn. parad.* 4, 1 the specular movement, with Adam being free and treated mildly by God at first, and then being compelled to leave Paradise and live under a sterner law. At CN 16, 7, 1–2, the expression *mšabbtānītā da-qṭīrā* can be interpreted two ways: if we take the genitive as subjective, it means an adorer employing compulsion; if we take it as objective, it means someone who brings ornament to violence. Maybe this ambiguity signals a correspondence between the violence of the first men and the violence that the Law had to adopt. A curious case is that of the word *šabtā*, "stick", "rod", associated at

Once then the times [zabnē] set for a measure [muṣḥat] of growth ended [ʿeštallam], so the whole food [mekūltā ḥlīmā] was announced. For times of restraint were disposed at first, because firstly it was necessary to separate from evil. When justice [kēnūtā] reached its completion [gmīrūt-āh], then mercy [ṭaybūt-āh] too instituted its completion. “An eye for an eye” is the completion of justice, and “To the one who strikes your cheek turn the other cheek” is the perfection [mšallmānūt-āh] of mercy. And since both exist always, they give away their taste through the two testaments. . . . So, one of them was the beginning [šūrāyā], the other the end [šullāmā]. . . . Our Lord came to the world and like unto children [l-šabrē], he incited them through material gifts, but he did not perform any of the blows [mḥawātā] given by those who came before to the People. After he had baited them to come to him. . . . And since he was more perfect [gmīr] than those teachers, that fruit [pērā], which step-by-step [b-mūṣḥān mūṣḥān] was grown by the hand of the predecessors, when he came to it, became perfect [mšallmānā] in its taste [b-ṭaʿm-eh]. . . . Indeed, Moses raised from the degree [dreg] of iniquity [ʿawwālūtā] and established in the degree of justice [ba-dreg-kēnūtā]. . . . Our Lord then raised from the degree of justice and established in the degree of mercy [ba-dreg-ṭaybūtā]. (*comm. in diatess.* 6, 11–12; 14)

Here, we can find not only the themes of mercy and justice and of violence and mildness, already mentioned⁶⁸, but also another important concept for CN 15–16, *yubbālā*. In the passage of the *Commentary*, it is expressed as a double or triple subdivision of “degrees” (*dargē*), “measures” (*muṣḥātā*), or “times” (*zabnē*)—all meaningful words for the theme of *yubbālā*⁶⁹. These words suggest that we should trace their parallels in the whole cycle of CN 13–16, since, as already seen, the theme of *yubbālā* has the same structural function in all these poems. The result of this comparison is that Ephrem employs the same schemes of *yubbālā* for the growth of the Nisibene community from Jacob to Valgash as he employs for the growth of humanity from Israel to the church: the tripartite scheme applies both to the sequence from Adam to Abraham (or from Moses to Christ) and to Jacob–Babu–Valgash. For example, here, at the end (par. 14) we find the three degrees (*dreg*) of ‘*awwālūtā*’ (“iniquity”), of *kēnūtā*, initiated by Moses, and of *ṭaybūtā*, initiated by Christ. Normally, the first degree, corresponding to Noahic law, is seen positively as a time in which human beings followed God’s commandments naturally, whereas the introduction of Moses’s law is explained by Israel’s adoption of idolatrous customs and their hardness of heart. Other times, the initiator of the second period is Abraham⁷⁰.

Dropping the first or the second step of salvation history, one obtains a more antithetical, bipartite scheme, setting justice and mercy in opposition to each other. The

CN 13–16 with a strong government and at *comm. in diatess.* 8, 2 set against *ḥuṭrā* to symbolise the mild government of the Apostles as opposed to Moses’ forceful lead.

⁶⁸ Beside the use of the words *kēnūtā* and *ṭaybūtā* throughout, note that the educators of the time of Justice employed “blows” (*mḥawātā*), a term of the same root as the verb *mḥā*, employed at CN 16, 8, 3; 10, 4, to describe the punishments desired by the Nisibenes.

⁶⁹ See §4.1 for the different terms and §4.1.1 for the language of proportionality and measure.

⁷⁰ See: Yousif 1981–1982, 14–15, 26; Shepardson 2008, 76; Ephr. Syr. *comm. in Gen.* 44, 3; *serm. fid.* 3, 183–187; *hymn. haer.* 26, 4–5; *comm. in diatess.* 4, 14–15; 5, 13. For the three periods in Nisibis’ history see §4.1.1.

bipartite scheme is prevalent in the quoted passage from the *Commentary to the Diatessaron*. Indeed, at its core the motif of the different periods is bipartite, distinguishing a before and an after Christ, in order to justify the retention of the Old Testament in the church and the distinction between Christianity and Judaism. It is likely that the tripartite scheme emerges from an anti-Marcionite intent, to give a positive value to the law of Moses, distinguishing it from pure and simple paganism. Similarly, the core of Ephrem's discourse on bishops is bipartite, with a stern past represented by Jacob and a mild present represented by Valgash: as has already been said (§3.1.1.2; §4.1.2), Babu is sometimes left out since Jacob is emblematic enough of the congregation's beginnings.

In such a scheme, the first step is characterised as the infancy, whereas the second step corresponds to maturity, while important images, like that of the fruit and that of weaning, are shared by the two situations. In fact, the Jews in *comm. in diatess.* are "like children" (*šabrē*), and Jesus is "mature" or "perfect" (*gmīr*) (11–12). The same image is also found for the community of Nisibis in *CN* 14, 16–17; 22. This language is rarely applied to the contrast between Judaism and Christianity, but Ephrem does something similar (albeit more aggressively) when he characterises Jews as foolish and blind⁷¹. The words *šūrāyā* and *šullāmā*, which in the passage of *comm. in diatess.* are used for Moses and Christ, justice and mercy, correspond to the episcopates of Jacob and Valgash in the sun metaphor of *CN* 13, 8–9. In the same *CN* 13, 9, as well as in *CN* 15, 14, the community is compared to a ripening fruit (*pērā*); the same metaphor is found for (presumably) the Jewish people in *comm. in diatess.* 4, 12. Finally, the growth from the Old to the New Testament is described in *comm. in diatess.* 4, 11 as a weaning and a passage to solid food (*mēkūltā ḥlīmā*): the same biblical metaphor is employed for the succession of the three bishops (*CN* 14, 16; 21; §2.2.4.4).

Given this scheme's general import and its similarities with other Christian analyses of the relationship between Testaments, it was probably elaborated as an exegetical tool and applied to the history of Nisibis in *CN* 13–16, rather than being induced from the Nisibene experience and then applied to the interpretation of Old and New Testament. This would mean that the whole cycle of *CN* 13–16 was composed in defence of Valgash (see §3) and framed the episcopal succession of Nisibis through the Pauline contrast between law and grace in order to accuse both the Judaizers of the community and those espousing a hard line against the former. Indeed, Ephrem twice compares the Nisibene community to Israel (or the synagogue) in order to establish this parallel-

⁷¹ For example, at: "his strength perfected (*gmar*) the types ... his persuasion the dumb ('*aṭlē*)" (*hymn. virg.* 8, 8, 1; 5); "O ye Gentiles, may not your mind be childish (*ṭlē*) / like the People, whose intelligence never grew up (*rabbā-wā*)" (*CN* 62, 21); "God's very Wisdom (*ḥekmtā*) / descended among the fools (*saklē*)" (*Azym.* 1, 15, 1–2, cf. *ḥakkīmūtā* at *CN* 16, 13, 4); Shepardson 2008, 47–50.

ism between the changing attitudes of bishops and the passage from Old to New Testament:

ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܠܒܢܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ	ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ 10 ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ
ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ 72 ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ (CN 13, 10–11)	ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ 11 ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ
ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ 73 ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ (CN 14, 19)	ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ 19 ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ ܕܡܨܚܚܐ

CN 13, 11 asks rhetorically whether the images (*demwātā*) mentioned in the previous stanza are applied only to the “daughter of Abraham” (*ba(r)t-eh d-’abrāhām*), clearly meaning Israel or the synagogue, or whether they can be applied also to the “daughter born of vows” (*bartā ba(r)t-nedrē*), meaning the church of Nisibis (see §4.3)⁷⁴. This means that the images of CN 13, 10, even though they are assigned to the “daughter born of vows”, must refer back to a biblical image of Israel, which Ephrem then translates onto his community in stanza 11. I take stanza 10 to hearken back to Cant. 6:10: “Who is she [*man-āy*], who looks like dawn, beautiful [*šapīrā*] as the moon, shining as the sun, fearsome as the greats [*rawrbātā*, v.l. “ten thousand”, *rebbūtā*]⁷⁵. Ephrem interprets the beauties of the woman in the Song of Songs as references to Israel’s story and leadership, employing three important terms for the theme of *yubbālā*—namely, *yubbālā* itself (3), *ṭukkāsā* (4), and *durrāgā* (5). In much the same way, at CN 14, 19, the poet says that Israel (Jacob’s daughter) had followed the same educational path as Nisibis,

72 “Who is she [*man-āy*], daughter born of vows, / enviable by all females, // whose generations flowed thus / and whose ranks increased thus // and whose degrees rose thus, / and whose chiefs [*rabbān-ēh*] shone thus? /// Is it to the daughter of Abraham alone / that these images are applied, // or even unto you, daughter born of vows? / For her ornament corresponds to her beauty [*šupr-āh*], // because her help is like her time, / and her servant is like her help.”

73 “Even for Jacob’s daughter was set / bait and stick to her childhood, // and to her youthful boldness / was given sword and rule, // until, as chastised and learned, / came to her relief and kindness.”

74 On the equivalence of “daughter of Abraham/Jacob” with Israel or the synagogue: Bickell 1866, 99, *ad* stanza 11; 102, *ad* stanza 19; Beck 1961b, 41n8; 46n19.

75 Translation mine from the Peshitta text at <http://cal.huc.edu> (accessed: 30.09.21, 22:29). The two texts have the same beginning (*man-āy*), the same paratactic structure pointed by comparative adverbs (“thus”, *hākan*; “like/as”, *’a(y)k*), they end with words of the same root (*rabbānē* and *rawrbātā*). The envy of the other females (CN 13, 10, 2) may be a reference to the praise of concubines and other girls for the woman of the Song at Cant. 6:9. Both texts are interested in the beauty (*šapīrā/šuprā*) of their feminine subject. On the somewhat problematic stance of the Song of Songs in Syriac literature, see Salvesen 2005.

from sternness to mildness. This parallelism implies (but Ephrem never says it explicitly) that, just as the Jews failed to accept the last step of their education—represented by Christ—so the Nisibenes risk rejecting their new course—represented by Valgash. Ephrem's explicit rebukes of the people are then reserved for CN 15–16.

The hypothesis of a community divided between the Judaizers and their stern censors against the will of bishop Valgash is also productive in interpreting CN 14, 5–14. This is a long digression on Aaron and the Golden Calf:

ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ	ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ 5 ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ	ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ 6 ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ...
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ	ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ 12 ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ
ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ	ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ 13 ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ

(CN 14, 5–6; 12–13)

I chose to highlight only the beginning and the end of the digression because they contain more relevant information for Valgash's defence, as opposed to the development of the theme in stanzas 7–11, already analysed at §1.1.2. Aaron is portrayed at the moment in which he helped create the golden calf (Ex. 32:2–4): it is a very meaningful point in sacred history for Ephrem, because the golden calf is the gravest sin of Israel, sealing its destiny of rejection⁷⁸. In this sense, it is a foundational moment for Jewish identity in Ephrem's eyes. The fact that Aaron is contrasted with Valgash may thus be read as an attack on the Judaizers, who presume to avail themselves of both priest-

76 "Aaron had stripped the ears / of earrings [*qdāšē*], to make a calf, // a dead calf which mysteriously, / once cold, killed the encampment, // those who forged his horns / with his horns ripped up. /// Yet our third priest / pierced the heart's ears // and put earrings [*qdāšē*] forged / from the nails that were fixed // to the Cross where his Lord was crucified, / thereby saving his fellows."

77 "As the babies fought inside the womb, / hurried to spring forth the elder, // but put his hand on the other's heel, / the younger, desiring primogeniture, // and, not getting it through birth, / he got it through pottage. /// In this very manner latter deeds / now are opposing the former // to gain by birth primogeniture. / But let us bring forth the deeds of our fathers, // for truly the Cross's deeds / are the firstborns of creation!"

78 Shepardson 2008, 80–91.

hoods, the corrupt one of Aaron and the life-giving one of Valgash. Even the curious comparison of Ephrem's themes with Esau and Jacob may go in this direction, since the selling of primogeniture was interpreted as a type of the Jews (Esau) being replaced by the church (Jacob); so the comparison would obliquely suggest to Judaizers that the practice of the church supersedes the practice of Judaism.

To sum up, I propose to read *CN* 13–16 as a unified cycle of poems, concerned with the defence of Bishop Valgash to his community. In these poems, the main theme of *yubbālā*, the succession of the first three bishops, is consistently mapped onto the history of Israel, as a progress from a religious attitude founded upon justice and compulsion towards a spontaneous acceptance of God founded on mercy and freedom. Given the inconsistency of *CN* 15 and *CN* 16, accusing the Nisibenes of being at the same time worthy of punishments and of expecting a punishment that does not conform to their mature state, I postulated a rift in the community, dividing a group of Judaizing Christians and a group of strong censors of the Judaizers, with the bishop—possibly in contrast to a sterner attitude of his predecessors—adopting a soft line against the Judaizers and being criticised by the censors. This would explain why Ephrem denounces both the sin deserving punishment and the request for that punishment as a regression in the progress of *yubbālā*. The poet effectively extends the accusation of Judaism to the “hawks” in the community: this way, he avoids representing and thus enabling the division, and he can criticise the Judaizers, albeit more softly than he is used to, without going against the soft line of his bishop. The bishop in this context is the only person without guilt, as the responsibility of the crisis is completely pinned on the community. The mapping of Nisibis's development onto Israel's history serves both to remind Judaizers of the Jews' failure to accept the new epoch ushered by Christ and to implicate the censors in that refusal; at the same time, it expresses—or is in accordance to—a more general theological truth—namely, that the history of Israel is a type of the history of the church, even at its local level.

4.3 Jacob

Verses 19 and 20 of *CN* 13 mention the burial of the first bishop of Nisibis, Jacob, and the beneficial effect it had on the community. This information should arouse the interest of the scholar, and the following discussion will highlight its peculiarity. In order to offer a full picture, I will analyse verses 18–21 of the poem:

ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܝܫܘܥ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	ܒܝ ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	18
ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	
ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	
ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	19
ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	
ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	ܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ	

ܬܠܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܐܠܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ	ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ 20 ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ
ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ	ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ 21 ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ ܕܡܝܬܐ

(CN 13, 18–21)

CN 13 is part of the group of poems concerned with Valgash's episcopate, with CN 15–16 explicitly defending the bishop from critics inside the community (see §4.2) and CN 14 comparing him favourably to Aaron because of his preaching skills. In this context, CN 13 seems like an outlier, because instead of focusing on Valgash, it devotes its final stanzas to Jacob, the first bishop of the community. On the other side, it shares with the other poems the theme of *yubbālā*, upon which it elaborates at length (see §4.1). This clarifies partly why Ephrem focuses on Jacob: through the theme of succession, he can legitimise Valgash by highlighting the authority of his predecessor. This is exactly what happens in CN 13, where Jacob is praised only after the theme of episcopal succession is already well established, so that the authority commanded by Jacob reflects implicitly on Valgash. This, however, prompts the question of why Jacob was so important and why Ephrem chose this particular strategy in CN 13.

First, it is useful to know the date of CN 13. The poem mentions Valgash as if he was still alive—which, if we trust later chronographers, posits a *terminus ante quem* in the year 361/362⁸⁰. Moreover, the poem mentions “marauders” (*gaysē*) in the time of Valgash, but also peace with the Persians, who had besieged Nisibis in the past⁸¹. This means that the marauders are not a full-fledged siege against the city; hence, they must correspond to the Persian raids in the countryside of Nisibis before the siege of Amida in the summer of 359, an event precisely narrated by Ammianus, who was in Nisibis at the time⁸². So, the *terminus post quem* for the poem is the spring/summer of

79 “Nisibis is planted upon waters, / waters hidden and waters apparent: // living springs are inside her, / a proud river outside her; // the outer river cheated on her, / the inner source protected her. /// The first priest, her vintner, / grew her branches to the sky, // and lo! Dead and buried inside her, / he brought fruit inside her bosom; // therefore, when came the hewers, / the fruit inside her protected her. /// The time had come of her hewing, / it came in and took away her vintner; // because he was no more to entreat for her, / she swiftly turned to cunning, // placing in her bosom her vintner / that she might be delivered by her vintner. /// Imitate Nisibis, / O eloquent daughters of Nisibis, // which placed the body inside her, / and it was a wall outside her: // put in yourselves a living body, / which may be a wall for your life.”

80 “Great is our mourning of the two / but the last is truly our comfort.” (CN 13, 1, 5–6); Fiey 1977, 33.

81 “Then, in the days of the last / marauders [*gaysē*] thronged and marauders left.” (CN 13, 14, 5–6); CN 13, 4–6 (in particular, lines 5–6 of each verse).

82 Amm. Marc. 18, 4–19, 9 (see also Harrell 2016, chapter 11). In part.: *Nisibin propere venimus, utilia paraturi, ne dissimulantes obsidium, Persae civitati supervenirent incautae. Dumque intra muros maturanda perurgerentur, fumus micantesque ignes assidue a Tigride per Castra Maurorum et Sisara et colimitia reliqua ad usque civitatem continui perlucebant, solito crebriores, erupisse hostium vastatorias*

359. *CN* 14 mentions damages to the villages surrounding Nisibis⁸³; since the two poems were written likely in the same period of time, due to their using the same metre and treating similar topics, *CN* 13 should be dated near the summer of 359 (*terminus post*) rather than near Valgash's death (*terminus ante*). Moreover, *CN* 15, 19–20 connects the Nisibenes' offence against Valgash with their being "trodden down" (*dāš(w)*) by "outsiders" (*barrāyē*)⁸⁴. Since the antithesis of "insider" and "outsider" (*gawwāyā/barrāyā*) is routinely employed by Ephrem in the poems on the sieges to describe the besieged Nisibenes and the besieging Persians, it is sensible to link this passage to some recent attack from the Persians, which (at this date) can only be the 359 raids⁸⁵: in order for Ephrem to present Persian attacks as retribution for the Nisibenes' disobedience to Valgash, disobedience and attack must have occurred roughly at the same time. Therefore, I propose to date *CN* 13 and 14 to the year following the summer of 359.

The unifying theme of stanzas 18–20 is the comparison of Nisibis to a vine. The word is never explicitly stated, but the constellation of metaphors clearly points to the vine, particularly through the word *pallāhā*, applied to the bishop (*CN* 13, 19, 1; 20, 2; 5–6), a word that, while having also the generic sense of "worker", properly means "vintner"⁸⁶. That Ephrem employs the word in this proper sense, especially when related to a bishop, is demonstrated by stanzas 27–28 of *CN* 31: stanza 27 calls the bishop Vitus a *pallāhā* and represents him treating a "plant" (*neṣbtā*), whereas stanza 28 calls him a 'akkārā, "farmer" or "ploughman" and mentions a "barn" ('awsrā). From the parallelism between these two stanzas, it is clear that *pallāhā* refers to the cultivation of the vine, and 'akkārā to that of grain. Obviously, this metaphor is a staple of biblical language, especially in discourses on the community—its origins, its sins, and its destiny⁸⁷. This is true also for Ephrem and can be seen in the constellation of metaphors: if Nisibis is a vine, her foundations are that which she is "planted upon" (*nṣibat 'al*, *CN* 13, 18, 1); she needs water as nourishment (*CN* 13, 18); she has a vintner in her bishop; her enemies, the Persians, are "hewers" (*pāsōqē*, *CN* 13, 19, 5), and the sieges

manus superato flumine permonstrantes (18, 6, 8–9); *Extemplo igitur equites citi mittuntur ad Cassianum, Mesopotamiae ducem, rectoremque provinciae tunc 1 Euphroniam, compulsuri agrestes cum familiis et pecoribus universis ad tutiora transire, et agiliter deseri Carras, oppidum invalidis circumdatum muris; super his campos omnes incendi, ne pabulorum suppetaret copia. ... ut ad usque Euphraten, ab ipsis marginibus Tigridis, nihil viride cerneretur* (7, 3–4). Ephrem himself testifies these raids: *CN* 5–12.

83 "Three shepherds / had many musterers, // one mother in the citadel / had many daughters in every region: // since wrath ruined her folds, / may peace restore her churches!" (*CN* 14, 1).

84 "If with the head [*rēšā*] as first/ the limbs had run as second, // they would have led the third, / and all the whole body would have/ followed them. /// But the second neglected the first, / and the third the second, // the rank were despised one by the other. / It's because the insiders [*gawwāyē*] neglected each other, // that the outsiders [*barrāyē*] too trod them down." (*CN* 15, 19–20). For other interpretations of this passage, see §4.2.

85 See, for example, *CN* 1, 10–11; *CN* 2, 5, 8–11; 5, 15; *CN* 9, 4–5.

86 Payne Smith 1879–1901, 3151, s.v. ܥܠܝܬܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 1197, s.v. ܥܠܝܬܐ.

87 Murray 2006, 195–199.

are “hewing” (*psāqā*, *CN* 13, 20, 1)⁸⁸; and, finally, she has boughs and brings fruit (*CN* 13, 19, 2; 4–6). Through this metaphor, Ephrem expresses the defining features of collective life in Nisibis: its place near the River Mygdonius, the “living water” which nourishes its spiritual existence; the foundational role of the first bishop, Jacob; and the existential threat of the Persians⁸⁹.

What is especially striking in these stanzas is the attribution of supernatural powers to the body of the dead bishop. This is presented in the terms of the vine metaphor: the former vintner, buried below the vine, brings fruit, almost as a fertilising principle (stanza 19). In Ephrem’s presentation of this belief, we may recognise some features of, or at least some conditions for, a cult of the dead: first, he talks indeed of a dead man (*mīt*, *CN* 13, 19, 3); second, the focus is clearly on the corpse and its burial place, not on the soul or the name of the bishop (*qbīr*, *CN* 13, 19, 3 and also 20, 5); third, the relics are explicitly located *inside* the city walls, contrary to contemporary practice⁹⁰; and finally, the buried corpse is endowed with a protective power, continuing the bishop’s power as

⁸⁸ My translation differs both from recent translators in German and French and from older ones in English and Latin. Beck 1961b, 42 and Feghali/Navarre 1989, 49 translate **p-s-q* with the root of “destroy” (“die Zerstörer”/“Zerstörung” and “les destructeurs”/“la destruction”). Bickell 1866, 100 and Stopford 1898, 181 render the two words as “pruners” and “pruning” (*amputatores/amputatio*). Neither meaning of the root is listed in the lexica, but “to prune” goes in the right direction preserving the plant metaphor of stanzas 18–19. My translation with “hew” retains the metaphor too but is also attested by the lexica and in the Peshitta (cf. *Dtn.* 19:5; 20:19; *Iudc.* 9:48–49; Payne Smith 1879–1901, 3192; Sokoloff 2009, 1212). Moreover, it has a better figurative meaning than “pruning”: while pruning is beneficial for a plant, though arguably painful, and hence God and Jacob may not have wanted the Nisibenes to avoid such a treatment, “hewing” means the utter destruction of the plant, something Nisibis has really risked during the Persian sieges, and avoidance of which was clearly positive. A problem common to all these translations is the scarce attestation of the word “hewers” (*pāsōqē*). The majority of occurrences listed in the lexica is metalinguistic: a *pāsōqā* is a section or a chapter in a longer text, the διάψαλμον in the *Psalms*, a reading from the Gospels, the Hippocratic aphorisms, a punctuation mark, a kind of accent and the indicative mode (Payne Smith 1879–1901, 3196, s.v. ܦܥܣܩܐ; Sokoloff 2009, 1208, s.v. ܦܥܣܩܐ). As an attribute with the word “teeth” (*ṣenē*), it means “incisive”. Three occurrences in the Syriac translation of Origen’s Hexapla are worth mentioning: at *Prov.* 30:14 the jaws of a wicked generation are said to be “knives”; at *Sap.* 5:20 God’s wrath is “unrelentless” (Gr. ἀπότημος); and at *Iudc.* 5:26 Jael grabs with her right hand “javelins of the strikers”. Neither “destroyer” nor “pruner” nor “hewer” is an attested meaning of *pāsōqā*. However, the occurrence of the term at *Iudc.* 5:26, although in a very confused context, suggests that the term can be used as a *nomen agentis*. This is confirmed by its morphology: names formed with *ā* after the first radical and *ō* after the second are normally *nomina agentis* in Syriac (Duval 1881, 217, §232; Nöldeke 1880, 64, §107). Therefore, it is not a long stretch to assume that even here the word can be a *nomen agentis*.

⁸⁹ The metaphor is nicely anticipated by the metaphor of the sun at stanzas 7–9, where the bishops are compared to three phases of the sun and the community to the fruits progressively ripening. Through these stanzas, which function as a hinge, Ephrem transitions from the initial metaphor of the bishops as celestial bodies (stanzas 1–2) to the final metaphor of the community as vine and the bishop as vintner (stanzas 19–20).

⁹⁰ The practice of burying the dead outside the city, derived from the belief of their impurity, is discussed by Brown 1981, 3–10.

intercessor (*ba'āyā*, CN 13, 20, 3) before God, so that the relics are essentially connected with the holy man's *parrhesia* with God. This is, incidentally, a testimony to the importance of intercession as an episcopal function for Ephrem and his community⁹¹.

Besides these features of a cult, however, the text lacks any reference to concrete cultic actions, liturgies, or festivities associated with the corpse, except the act of burying it inside the city. Moreover, contextual considerations may further limit the importance of Ephrem's words. The cult of dead bishops is unattested in this period, and the first hagiographical accounts on bishops, as well as the first witnesses to such a cult, all come from the end of the fourth century onwards⁹². Even admitting such a precocious cult, one could explain it away as something else. For example, Gennadius of Massilia in his short biography of Jacob of Nisibis relates that the bishop had been a confessor during the persecutions of Maximinus Daza, while Theodoret devotes most his biography of the saint to Jacob's ascetic endeavours⁹³. Since martyrs, confessors, and ascetics were the object of cult and hagiography before bishops, one could argue that Jacob was revered primarily as a confessor or ascetic, not as a bishop⁹⁴. However, the accounts of Theodoret and Gennadius were written much later than Ephrem's poem, with Gennadius writing in a totally different context from Syria. It is true that Jacob had the fame of an ascetic or a martyr, since Ephrem seems to characterise him in this way elsewhere in the poems⁹⁵. Yet, even admitting this fact, the text describing the power of his relics does not mention anything of this, and, much to the contrary, it clearly depicts Jacob as

91 On *parrhesia* and the cult of the dead: Brown 1981, 59–66 (we can see a similar projection of earthly links on the patron saint as the senatorial *amicitia* of Paulinus and Felix in Ephrem's self-styling as a disciple of the first three bishops of Nisibis at CN 14, 25–26); on *parrhesia* as an episcopal virtue: Rapp 2005, 267–274; §3.1.1.3; §3.1.2.

92 Brown 1981, 8; Cracco Ruggini 1998, 11–12; Lizzi Testa 2009, 537–538; Soz. 5, 3, 8 writes of a μνείας τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς γενομένων ἱερέων kept at Gaza and Maiuma.

93 *Jacobus cognomento Sapiens Nisibena nobilis Persarum modo civitatis episcopus, unus ex numero sub Maximino persecutore confessorum* (Gennad. vir. ill. 1; PL 58, 1060); εἰς τὴν τῆς ἀρχιερωσύνης ἔλκεται λειτουργίαν καὶ τῆς πατρίδος λαγχάνει τὴν προστασίαν. Ἐναλλάξ δὲ τὴν ὀρειον ἐκείνην διατριβὴν καὶ τὴν ἐν ἄστει διαγωγὴν οὐ κατὰ γνώμην ἐλόμενος, οὔτε τὴν τροφὴν οὔτε τὴν ἀμπεχόνην ἐνήλλαξεν (Theodt. hist. rel. 1, 7; chapters 1–6 are devoted to Jacob's ascetic exploits).

94 On hagiography in particular: Rapp 2005, 294–296. Forms of cult of the martyrs are attested since the second century, as witnessed by the *Martyrdom of saint Polycarpus*.

95 See §3.2.1. Some texts proving this: “Against the first wrath / fought the toil [*amlā*] of the first” (CN 13, 16, 1–2); “The good toil [*amlā*] of the first / bound the land up in her distress” (CN 14, 2, 1–2); “The first tilled the earth with toil [*amlā*]” (CN 14, 3, 1); “The first priest by hand of fasting / had closed the gates of the mouths” (CN 14, 4, 1–2); “Before the One rewarding the wearied, / she [the church of Nisibis] brings the labour [*amlā*] of the first;” (CN 14, 24, 1–2). For the word *amlā* referring to ascetic labour: §3.2.1 n. 230. “To the first siege resisted / the first, triumphant [*naṣṣiṭhā*] priest” (CN 13, 17, 1–2); “Like the triumphant [*naṣṣiṭhā*] priest Jacob, / with him she [the church of Nisibis] triumphed [*naṣṣiṭh*] like him” (CN 19, 16, 1–2). For the word *naṣṣiṭhā* and derivatives: §3.2.1 nn. 231–236.

a bishop, calling him *kāhnā* (CN 13, 19, 1) and positing a supervising relationship with the community of Nisibis through the persistent metaphor of the vintner⁹⁶.

Even if a cult of the dead bishop in this context may seem far-fetched, we can at least produce examples from Ephrem's immediate surroundings which are similar to our case. If on one hand Ephrem criticises the pageantry of funerals, on the other he is well aware and approves of the contemporary cult of the saints, particularly mentioning the cult of Thomas's relics in Edessa⁹⁷. Similar references multiply if we consider poems of doubtful authenticity. A stanza in the poems written in Edessa mentions relics of John the Baptist and of three local martyrs, Gurya, Shamona, and Habbib (CN 33, 13), though Beck suspects this stanza was appended to the poem at a later date⁹⁸. Much more material is extant in the poems on the Edessan ascetics Abraham Kidunaia and Julian Saba, whose relics were believed, at least by Ephrem, to have supernatural powers⁹⁹. These practical examples are often defended, by Ephrem as well as later authors, on the basis of two biblical precedents—namely, Moses bringing the bones of Joseph out of Egypt in contradiction to the biblical interdiction against touching the dead or keeping them inside the city and the miracle of Elisha's bones resurrecting a dead man¹⁰⁰. This biblical argument, as well as the Edessene examples, is markedly Syrian¹⁰¹. It is wholly

⁹⁶ See §2.2.2.

⁹⁷ CN 21, 8 analysed at §3.1.4.4; CN 42–43 are devoted to the cult of Thomas in Edessa.

⁹⁸ “Through the bones of John / some of which are in our region // prophets came to our land / through Gurya and through Shamona // and through their fellow, Habbib / martyrs came to visit us” (CN 33, 13); see Beck 1961b, 98, 100.

⁹⁹ Clear examples at *Iul. Saba* 2, 17 and *Iul. Saba* 4, 1–7.

¹⁰⁰ CN 42, 3; 8, 8; CN 43, 1; 3; 12; *hymn. virg.* 19, 7; *hymn. haer.* 42, 10, 3.

¹⁰¹ The combination of Elisha and Joseph in defence of the cult of relics is found at *Const. apost.* 6, 30, 2–6 (ἀπαρτητήτως δὲ συναθροίζεσθε ἐν τοῖς κοιμητηρίοις ... “Τίμιος” γὰρ “ἐναντίον κυρίου ὁ θάνατος τῶν ὁσίων αὐτοῦ” ... οὐκ οὖν τῶν παρὰ θεῷ ζώντων οὐδὲ τὰ λείψανα ἄτιμα. Καὶ γὰρ Ἐλισσαῖος ὁ προφήτης μετὰ τὸ κοιμηθῆναι αὐτὸν νεκρὸν ἤγειρε πεφονευμένον ὑπὸ πειρατῶν Συρίας: ἐψαυσεν γὰρ τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ τῶν Ἐλισσαίου ὁστέων καὶ ἀναστὰς ἔζησε: οὐκ ἂν δὲ ἐγεγόνει τοῦτο, εἰ μὴ ἦν τὸ σῶμα Ἐλισσαίου ἅγιον. Καὶ Ἰωσήφ ὁ σώφρων περιπλέκετο τῷ Ἰακώβ μετὰ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν ὄντι ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης καὶ Μωσῆς καὶ Ἰησοῦς ὁ τοῦ Ναυῆ ἐπεφέροντο τὰ λείψανα τοῦ Ἰωσήφ, μολυσμὸν οὐχ ἠγούμενοι τοῦτο) and at Hieron. *ep.* 109, 2 (*Si non sunt honorandae reliquiae Martyrum, quomodo legimus: Pretiosa in conspectu Domini mors Sanctorum ejus? Si ossa eorum polluunt contingentes, quomodo Elisaeus mortuus, mortuum suscitavit, et dedit vitam corpus quod juxta Vigilantium jacebat immundum? Ergo omnia castra Israelitici exercitus et populi Dei fuere immunda, quia Joseph et Patriarcharum corpora portabant in solitudine: et ad sanctam Terram, immundos cineres pertulerunt? Joseph quoque, qui in typo praecessit Domini Salvatoris, sceleratus fuit; qui tanta ambitione, Jacob in Hebron ossa portavit; ut immundum patrem, avo et atavo sociaret immundis, et mortuum mortuis copularet?*). Conversely, other Latin texts defending the cult of relics (Ambr. *ep.* 22, Aug. *cur. mort.* and *civ. D.* 22) do not mention these biblical passages, which suggests Jerome drew from oriental sources. John Chrysostom mentions both Joseph's and Elisha's bone, but separately (Elisha: Joh. Chrys. *paneg. Ign.* PG 50, 595; Joseph: *paneg. Bab.* 1. PG 50, 532; *paneg. Dros.* PG 50, 689–690). Among the Greek homilies translated in Leemans/Mayer/Allen/Dehandschutter 2003 only Chrysostom's homily on Babylas mentions Joseph, Elisha is nowhere to be found. The theme of Joseph's bones in particular, and their favourable contrast with the riches of Egypt,

possible that Edessa influenced Nisibis and that the latter felt the need for such a supernatural protection as that of Jacob, in order to differentiate herself from the prestigious Edessa. The model of Edessa, however, does not obliterate the originality of Jacob's cult, which anticipates fifth- and fourth-century developments in two major aspects: first, because it sanctifies a bishop and not a martyr or an apostle, and second, because the saint is conceived mainly as defender of the city, a "wall" (*šūrā*) against her enemies¹⁰². The link between defence and relics began to develop in the fifth century in cities at the border of the Roman Empire, in a time when the *limes* was less safe and manned than it had been in the previous century¹⁰³. Similar conditions may have prompted a similar response in fourth-century Nisibis: the city sustained the hardest pressure from the Persians in the first half of the century, because of its strategic position on the border, which may explain why the Nisibenes developed such an exceptional belief¹⁰⁴. It is true that the three sieges did not conquer Nisibis, but one should not underestimate the stress that such operations put on the populace, both in material and in psychological terms, especially if we suppose that the inhabitants recognised the significance of their position on the border of two hostile empires and thus recognised the strategic importance of their city, which made it the primary target of Persian operations. Ammianus surely understood the significance of this situation, and if it is true that troops were stationed in the citadel at the time, such information would hardly have escaped the notice of the inhabitants¹⁰⁵. For all these reasons, if a full-fledged cult of the dead bishop cannot be

is common to early Syriac writers (Aphraat. *dem.* 8, 8; Ephr. *Syr. comm. in Ex.* 13, 1; *hymn. haer.* 42, 10, 3) and Jewish literature (Sir 49:15; Kugel 1990, 125–155; Goldman 1995, 119–143; Ginzberg 1998, 181–184).

102 "Against the first wrath [*rugzā*] / fought the toil of the first" (CN 13, 16, 1–2); "To the first siege [*hbāšā*] resisted / the first, triumphant priest" (CN 13, 17, 1–2); "therefore, when came the hewers, / the fruit inside her protected her." (CN 13, 19, 5–6); "be for us a wall (*šūrā*) as Jacob" (CN 17, 11, 6). This specialisation continues in later sources on Jacob: Τότε πάντες ικετεύουσι τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ ἀνθρώπων φανῆναί τε ἐπὶ τοῦ τείχους καὶ ἀραιῖς κατατοξεῦσαι τοὺς πολεμίους. Ὁ δὲ ἐπείθετο καὶ ἀνῆει καί, τὰς πολλὰς αὐτῶν θεασάμενος μυριάδας, σκνιφῶν αὐτοῖς καὶ κωνώπων ἐπιπέμψαι νέφος ἰκέτευσεν τὸν θεόν. Καὶ ὁ μὲν ἔλεγεν, ὁ δὲ ἔπεμπε, Μωϋσῇ παραπλησίως πειθόμενος. ... Χρόνου δὲ διελθόντος καὶ τοῦδε τοῦ ἁστεως ὑπὸ τοῦ τηνικάδε κρατοῦντος τῇ περσικῇ βασιλείᾳ παραδοθέντος, ἐξήεσαν μὲν ἅπαντες οἱ τὴν πόλιν οἰκοῦντες, ἔφερον δὲ τοῦ προμάχου τὸ σῶμα, ἀσχάλλοντες μὲν καὶ ὀλοφυρόμενοι τὴν μετοικίαν, ἄδοντες δὲ τοῦ νικηφόρου ἀριστεύς τὴν δύναμιν. Οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐκείνου περιόντος ὑπὸ βαρβάρους ἐγένοντο. (Theodt. *hist. rel.* 1, 7; 11; 14); *Moritur hic vir Constantii temporibus, et juxta praeceptum patris eius Constantini juxta muros Nisibe sepelitur, ob custodiam videlicet civitatis. Nam post multos annos ingressus Julianus Nisiben, et vel gloriae sepulti invidens, vel fidei Constantini, cuius ob id domum persequeretur, jussit efferrī de civitate sacri corporis reliquias. Et post paucos menses consulendae licet causa reipublicae, Jovianus imperator, qui Juliano successerat, tradidit barbaris civitatem, quae usque hodie Persarum ditioni cum suis subiecta servit.* (Gennad. *vir. ill.* 1; PL 58, 1062).

103 Fowden 1999, 45–48.

104 Russell 2005, 214–217; Lightfoot 1981, 106.

105 *Orientis firmissimum claustrum* (Amm. Marc. 25, 8, 14). On the possible presence of a legion in Nisibis: Russell 2005, 215; Dodgeon/Lieu 2002, 399nn35, 38 and 41; Lightfoot 1981, 107–109.

conclusively inferred from Ephrem's text and must remain at best a hypothesis, on the other side text and context clearly point to a local memory or tradition surrounding Jacob's burial. This tradition may in turn be seen as the first seed of a later cult or of a monumentalisation of the same burial by the community. In any case, Ephrem testifies to a unique importance ascribed to the bishop in Nisibis as founder and supernatural defender of the community and the city.

In the constellation of metaphors relating to vine imagery, the metaphor of irrigation and water is explored in stanza 18. I contend that this stanza, with other elements of the poem, alludes to baptism. Stanza 18 is structured by an antithesis concerning two kinds of water. The antithesis can be summarised within a table:

Baptism	River Mygdonius
Hidden (<i>kasyē</i>)	Apparent (<i>galyē</i>)
Springs (<i>neb'ē/mabbu'ā</i>)	River (<i>nahrā</i>)
Living (<i>hayyē</i>)	Proud (<i>ga'yā</i>)
Inside (<i>l-gaw</i>)	Outside (<i>l-bar</i>)
It protected (<i>nṣar</i>)	It betrayed (<i>daggel</i>)

The elements summarised in the righthand column allude to the River Mygdonius (today, the Jaghjagh), which ran on the eastern side of Nisibis, slightly lower than the city, so that it is literally true that Nisibis was “planted *upon* (*'al*)” the Mygdonius's waters (CN 13, 18, 1–2)¹⁰⁶. It is also true metaphorically, since the river was the main source of irrigation for the countryside near the city, whose products in all likelihood fed the inhabitants¹⁰⁷. Moreover, the river ran along but outside (*l-bar*) the walls of the city, as stated by Ephrem in line 4. The idea that the river “betrayed” (*daggel*, 5) Nisibis alludes to the Persians damming the river during their third siege of the city (350) in order to use the mass of water, suddenly released, as a battering ram against the city walls¹⁰⁸. Hence, the indication of the river flowing “outside” (*l-bar*) the city, though perfectly accurate in a literal sense, can be also intended metaphorically, as the river helped the Persian besieger (*barrāyā*) instead of the Nisibene besieged (*gawwāyā*). Yet there is more to this antithesis between “inside” and “outside”, since these two spatial determinations are normally used in Syriac theological language to contrast the rational, immaterial, invisible, or mysterious side of things with their sensorial, material, visible, and obvious features¹⁰⁹. The dictionaries make clear that the opposition of *bar* and *gaw*

¹⁰⁶ But cf. *nṣibin nṣibat 'al mayyā* (CN 13, 18, 1) with *'ilānā da-nṣib 'al 'appā d-mayyā* (Ps. 1:3).

¹⁰⁷ Palermo 2014, 457–458 (with extensive bibliography in the notes); Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2014, 138–139; Russell 2005, 186–188.

¹⁰⁸ On the Persian sieges see: Harrel 2016; on the first siege: Burgess 1999; on the last: Lightfoot 1981.

¹⁰⁹ Payne Smith 1879–1901, 577–578, 667–668; Sokoloff 2009, 188, 214.

has many more meanings: not only besieger/besieged (CN 1, 10–11; CN 2, 5, 8–11; 15) and material/spiritual (CN 9, 4–5; 8, 4–5; CN 11, 14) but also stranger/citizen and pagan/Christian (the church of Edessa and the heretics: CN 26, 2, 3–4). All these oppositions apply to the situation of the sieges in Nisibis, at least according to Ephrem's narration: a community of Christians and Roman citizens is besieged by a host of pagan strangers. Therefore, the river's defection to the Persian side is not only a political/military treason but also an act of apostasy. The same opposition connotes the binomial "hidden"/"apparent" (*kasyā/galyā*) in Ephrem's poetry, so that, when he contrasts the river outside with the hidden and living springs inside, the connotation is that, while the river has only physical uses, such as irrigation and drinking, the water inside the city has a more mystical meaning¹¹⁰.

This mystical meaning should be linked with baptism, because of Ephrem's language: in fact, the idea of "living springs" (*neb'ē ḥayyē*, 3) echoes the language of Joh. 4, the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, especially in the Peshitta version. Jesus's promise of a "living water" (*mayyā ḥayyē*, Joh. 4:10) "springing" (*d-nāb'īn*, Joh. 4:14) for eternity is expressed with the same roots as the living springs of water in CN 13, 18. But we know from other texts, preserving a similar language, that Ephrem interpreted Jesus's promise as a reference to baptism; hence, in employing the same language as the Gospel passage, he may well be hinting at baptism¹¹¹. Moreover, when Ephrem—and indeed writers in the Christian tradition of the first centuries at large—refer to the concept of "living water," and even when they mention the most straightforward references to water in the biblical texts, they ordinarily do so in connection with baptism¹¹². It is true that the metaphor of water is applied in two other relevant contexts by Ephrem—namely, episcopal preaching and the power of relics. In CN 19, 8, 7, Ephrem speaks of a "fountain of words" (*m'īn-mellē*) transmitted from one bishop to his successor¹¹³. CN 43 is particularly interesting because it combines many metaphors

110 Den Biesen 2006, 120–121, 141–142, 198–199; Cerbelaud 2001; Payne Smith 1879–1901, 1779–1780, s.v. *ܡܝܐ*. See *Epiph.* 9, 5, where the water of baptism is its "revealed" (*galyā*) aspect, and its sacramental force its "mystical" (*kasyā*) one, the first perceived by the body and the second by the mind.

111 "He [Jesus] said to her: My water descends from the sky; it is a doctrine from above and it is a celestial drink. Those who drink it will never thirst again: for it is one the baptism [*ma'mōdītā*] for the faithful" (*comm. in diatess.* 12, 17); "whoever drinks the water I will give him / shall not thirst again in eternity: / of this holy baptism [*mādā qaddišā*] / were you thirsty, my beloved; / never again will you thirst / until you reach the last baptism [*mādā*] (*Epiph.* 7, 21); "baptism is a well of life [*b'ērā d-ḥayyē ma'mōdītā*]" (*Epiph.* 12, 5, 1).

112 *Περὶ δὲ τοῦ βαπτίσματος, οὕτω βαπτίσατε, εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐν ὕδατι ζῶντι. Ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἔχης ὕδωρ ζῶν, εἰς ἄλλο ὕδωρ βάπτισον* (*Did.* 7, 1–2); *Quoetienscumque autem aqua sola in Scripturis sanctis nominatur, Baptisma praedicatur* (*Cypr. ep.* 63, 8; cf. Seppälä 2011, 1172).

113 "Because you loved the misery / of your master, the inwardly rich, // May the fountain of his words gush from you, / so that you become the Spirit's lyre, // and he sings to you in you his wills. / **Blessed is he who made you his treasurer!**" (CN 19, 8)

present also in *CN* 13: the relics as a “wall” for the people, the vine metaphor, the idea of “running” (*rhet*) to relics, the metaphor of the source¹¹⁴. However, these passages do not employ such a baptismal expression as “living springs,” they do not insist on water images as much as *CN* 13, 18, and they are written at a later date, during the episcopate of Abraham and when Ephrem was in Edessa, so that they might be inspired by this previous poem. Even if these occurrences were entirely comparable, this would not exclude a reference to baptism in *CN* 13; to the contrary, it might point to a habit of associating relics, bishops, and baptism.

Another reference to baptism appears in stanzas 19 and 20, when Ephrem says that the community buried Jacob “in her bosom” (*b-’ubb-āh*, *CN* 13, 19, 4; 20, 5). At face value, this means that the city has put the relics at its very centre: literally, this echoes the lines with the preposition *b-gaw* (*CN* 13, 19, 3; 19, 6; 21, 3) and confirms that Jacob was buried inside the walls; metaphorically, it could express the high honour in which the relics were held. Yet, and more importantly, the word for “bosom”, or “womb” (*’ubbā*), is used figuratively in Syriac to mean “baptism”¹¹⁵. The tenor of this metaphorical usage is clear: as the womb contains the body of the child before giving birth to it, so the

¹¹⁴ “A wall [*šūrā*] was Joseph / for himself in the country // Moses carried his bones/ that they may be for his encampment // a wall in the desert” (*CN* 43, 1, 1–5); “Moses left the living / and ran [*rhet*] towards the dead. // They were his worker / and closed the breaches [*tur’ātā*] of the people. // The vineyard [*karma*] breached / its pen for the trampers // yet that blest grape [*tōṭitā*] / endured in the midst of the vine” (*CN* 43, 3, 1–8); “amazing is the sickness of the saints // which is a source of healing [*neb’ā d-ḥulmānā*] / for the body of those visiting” (*CN* 43, 9, 7–9). The word *mabbū’ā* instead is found at *Abr. Kid.* 4, 10, 1; *Iul. Saba* 4, 5, 1; 11, 4–5.

¹¹⁵ Payne Smith 1879–1901, 2823, s.v. ܒܥܒܐ. The lexicon quotes Ephrem, *Epiph.* 7, 25, 4 (*’ubbā d-ma’mutā*, “the womb of baptism”; the variant reading of *mayyā* instead of *’ubbā* is clearly *facilior*); 9, 2, 7 (*b-’ubbā d-ma’mutā*); *Crucif.* 3, 8, 5 (*b-’ubbā d-mayyā*); *hymn. eccl.* 36, 3–6. See also *CN* 27, 13, 5–6: “You are sons of the Spirit, / and children born from water (*bnay-mayyā*)”; “I [Mary] am handmaid and daughter// of the blood and the water / through which You purchased and baptised me” (*Nat.* 16, 10). In *hymn. virg.* 7 all this theology of the second birth is particularly clear: “Bodies totally stained / and already hoary, when not destroyed // Sink with their sins like filth / and emerge pure like newborn babies // for baptism [*ma’mutā*] was for them / a new womb [*karsā*] ... It is priesthood [*kāhnutā*] that ministers / this womb (*karsā*) with its promise” (*hymn. virg.* 7, 7, 3–8 and 8, 1–2). Here it is clear how the bishop (*kāhnā*, here with the abstract *kāhnutā*, a customary rhetorical figure in Ephrem), the womb and baptism are linked (see also the typological passage of Maruthas of Maypherkat quoted by Murray 2006, 181). The imagery of womb is widespread in other authors: Nars. *hom.* 21, p. 46–47, 341–342; pp. 52–53, 346–348; 32, p. 166, 148; Joh. Chrys. *comm. in Gal.* 4, 28; in *Joh. hom.* 1–88 26, 1; Theod. Mops. *Catechetical Homilies* 14, p. 55; Procl. *Cpol. hom.* 7, 3, 4; Aug. *serm.* 56, 5; Zeno of Verona 1, 55; 2, 28; Chromat. *serm.* 18, 3; Leo M. *serm.* 24, 3; and especially Pacian. *bapt.* 6, 2 (*Atque ita Christi semen, id est Dei spiritus novum hominem alvo matris agitaturn, et partu fontis exceptum, manibus sacerdotis effundit, fide tamen pronuba*, note the role of the priest in this account). More discussion of this metaphor can be found at Ferguson 2009, *passim*.

water of baptism (*ma'mōdītā*, a feminine) contains the catechumen, who, once he has emerged, is born to a new life. The metaphor can be expanded to include the bishop: if the individual man and the church as a collective represent the newborn and if baptism represents the womb, then the parent is the bishop, by virtue of his role in administering baptism. And this is all the truer—in Ephrem's poetry—of Jacob, because he was the first bishop of the community, or at least the first our poet records¹¹⁶. Not by chance, Ephrem introduces him at stanza 19 as *kāhnā qadmā*, “the first priest”, underlining his foundational role. Yet in this context the father metaphor is not spelled out explicitly as elsewhere; rather, Ephrem keeps the imagery consistent with the vine metaphor and, instead of a father, describes the bishop as a vintner.

If one accepts that stanza 18 and the expression *b-ubbā* in stanzas 19–20 allude to baptism, other expressions can be interpreted in a consistent structure. The last stanza of the poem addresses some “eloquent daughters of Nisibis” (CN 13, 21, 1–2). Taken by itself, the expression “daughters of Nisibis” has nothing special, being a standard Semitic idiom to name the inhabitants of a city¹¹⁷. However, the attribute *mallālātā* is difficult

¹¹⁶ “Of the first [Jacob], who begot the diocese, / his bosom [*ubb-eh*] kept her infancy” (CN 14, 20, 1–2); “The first priest, who begot” (CN 14, 21, 1). Not much is known of Christianity in Nisibis before Jacob, beside the famous inscription of Abercius. However, all witnesses testify that Jacob's tenure represented a foundational moment for Christianity in Nisibis: the bishop ferried the community through the last persecutions to the Constantinian age, took part in the Council of Nicaea, built the first basilica and was in charge as the episcopal seat of Nisibis became also a metropolis (Fiey 1977, 19–25).

¹¹⁷ The idiom, found in Hebrew, is translated identically in the Peshitta, both when it identifies all the inhabitants of a city (Jes. 1:8; 10:32 (*varia lectio*); 16:1; 62:11; Mich. 4:8; 4:10; 4:13; Jer. 6:2; 6:23; Zeph. 3:14; Zach. 9:9; Ps. 9:15 (*varia lectio*); Lament. 1:6; 2:1; 2:4; 4:22) and when it refers only to the women (Jes. 3:16–17; 4:4; 49:22; 60:4; Lament. 3:51; Cant. 1:5; 2:7; 3:5; 3:10–11; 5:8; 8:16; 8:4; Judt. 21:21). The dictionaries do not report this idiom; however, they refer to another idiom shared with the Hebrew, namely *bnāt-* to indicate villages dependent upon a city (Payne Smith 1879–1901, 579, s.v. *بنات*; Sokoloff 2009, 192, s.v. *بنات*). Even in this case, all text passages quoted come from the Bible and reflect a similar Hebrew idiom (Payne Smith: Judc. 11:26 (Hexaplaric); 1Macc. 5:8; 5:65; Sokoloff: Jes. 16:2; Lament. 3:48; Ps. 48:12; Hes. 16:46; 16:48). Now, the first two Hebrew idioms are always rendered in Syriac through the same idiom, but as regards the sense of “village” the Hebrew idiom is often rendered through the word *kaprā*, “village” (Num. 21:25; 21:32; 32:42; Jos. 15:45; 15:47; 17:11; 17:16; Judt. 1:27; 11:26; Jer. 49:2; Neh. 11:25–31; 1Chron. 18:1); this suggests that the first two idioms were understood in Syriac, whereas the third was less acclimatised, prompting sometimes a word-for-word rendition, some other times a true translation. Moreover, the idiom is normally used differently from here, either at the construct state with the name of a region (*Mo'ab*, Jes. 16:2; *Yihūdā*, Ps. 48:12) or after the name of a city with the suffix-pronoun, but never to the construct state governing the name of a city, as is the case for the idiom meaning “inhabitant”. Ephrem's use of *bnātā* at CN 14, 1, 2–3 is not comparable because it is not clear whether the relationship between city and village is implied, or that between metropolitan and suffragan churches and, more importantly, the word “mother” (*emmā*) referred to Nisibis makes clear that here Ephrem is not employing an idiom but literally personifying the city/church (as he does at CN 34, 3).

to interpret in its most usual sense of “endowed with speech”, “speaking”, because it would be redundant¹¹⁸. Considering the context, it is also unlikely that the adjective here has its negative connotation of “garrulous”, “talkative”¹¹⁹. It retains the meaning “eloquent”. In this sense, the attribute defines a particular group inside the community of Nisibis, a group marked by its linguistic qualities. I propose that it refers to a group of women ascetics like the *bnāt qyāmā*, because we know that Ephrem served as their teacher and that part of his teaching consisted in his poems. Hence, eloquence and a certain literary competence were part of the values he intended to transmit them¹²⁰. The outstanding place reserved for the ascetic in the poem is confirmed by the address to Nisibis as the “daughter born of vows” (*bartā ba(r)t-nedrē*) in a previous stanza (CN 13, 10, 1), which refers obliquely to the vows taken on by these ascetics. In early Syriac Christianity, baptism was reserved for the ascetics, and this privileged link between asceticism and baptism continued well into the fourth century¹²¹. The texts examined by Vööbus strongly suggest that the very rite of baptism was preceded by a call to religious vows on the part of the catechumens¹²², and in Ephrem’s poem—albeit in an allusive fashion—one can see the same structure that this rite possesses: at CN 13, 10 the poet refers to the community by way of the many vows it comprehends; at CN 13, 18 he explains how baptism is the foundational element of the community; and finally, at CN 13, 21, he directly exhorts the baptised ascetics to put inside themselves a “living body” (*pagrā hayyā*, 5), probably a reference to the Eucharist. This tripartite structure of vows, baptism, and Eucharist echoes many other sources, suggesting a common litur-

¹¹⁸ The word *mallālā* is normally found in the CN coupled with herd-images, as a kind of oxymoron: “I [Ephrem] am a speaking lamb [*emrā mallālā*]” (CN 17, 12, 7); “you [the bishop] order these speaking sheep [*erbē mallālē*]” (CN 19, 3, 4). In these cases, the denotative meaning of the word is sufficient, because the corresponding noun denotes a creature normally not endowed with the faculty of speech, and the adjective clarifies that the noun has been used metaphorically to mean a human being. However, the connotation of literacy and eloquence could also be present, especially in the case of *emrā mallālā*, which Ephrem refers to himself: in fact, he presents his being a “speaking lamb” as the motivation of his praising poem; therefore, the expression has clearly a meta-poetic connotation.

¹¹⁹ Brockelmann 1895, 387, s.v. *حلال*, on the basis of this occurrence, introduces the meaning of “prudent”. However, there are no other texts witnessing it, normally it is the form *mlilā*, not *mallālā*, which takes the sense of “logical”, “rational”, “reasonable”, whereas *mallālā* means “endowed with speech”, and then “talkative” or “eloquent”, without bearing on the intellectual qualities (see Payne Smith 1879–1901, 2115, s.v. *حلال*): maybe Brockelmann thought that here Ephrem was alluding to the parable of the ten virgins (Mt. 25:1–13). It is preferable to employ a sense attested elsewhere, rather than introducing a new one.

¹²⁰ Wickes 2018, 45–48; Palmer 1998, 133–134. A similar usage at CN 31, 35, 5, where the ascetics are metaphorically named “rational boxwood” (*eškrā’ā mlilē*), though the adjective *mlilā* is more apt for this use than our *mallālā*.

¹²¹ Vööbus 1958, 90; Brock 1973, 7.

¹²² *Epiph.* 8, 16; *Epiph.* 13, 14; Vööbus 1958, 90–95; Murray 1974; Beck 1984; Aydin 2017. Comparison with Jerusalem rite: Day 2007, 60–61, 63.

gical reality underlying all these¹²³. Therefore, the setting the poem implies with its address and its structure is a baptismal rite.

To sum up the results of the textual analysis: *CN* 13 is to be read in the broader group of poems *CN* 13–16, testifying to a crisis in Valgash's leadership, but, differently from the other poems of the same group, the crisis is not thematised explicitly here. *CN* 13 is likely dated to the year 359/360, so that the Persian raids of the summer of 359 are its historical background. In order to defend Valgash in this context, Ephrem concentrates on two themes, *yubbālā* and Jacob. He does so because, as his text makes clear, Jacob's relics were the object of a tradition in Nisibis, and were particularly linked with protection against Persian sieges; therefore, the close link between Valgash and his charismatic and powerful predecessor, guaranteed by the concept of *yubbālā*, was a compelling argument in favour of Valgash's authority, especially in the immediate aftermath of siege that the city had narrowly escaped (359). In light of my analysis, three questions can be asked: first, Which meaning could Jacob's relics take in Ephrem's time, especially for bishop Valgash, and how could this meaning be made evident for the community at large? Second, what is the significance of baptism imagery, so prominent in the last stanzas of the poem? And third, why does Ephrem structure the poem as a baptismal rite and address ascetics?

Lacking more internal clues to answer these questions, I propose to look at external evidence. In doing so, I will base my argument on the most recent scholarship, which, however, is still hypothetical. I consider the analysis of the poem up to this point to be sound, but the links I am going to trace with archaeological data depend upon the interpretations currently given to those data, and since those data are not yet conclusive, the reconstruction must by necessity remain a hypothesis. However, this hypothesis has clear-cut parameters of falsifiability (which I will indicate), so that I am confident that new excavations will shed more light on the question.

The object of inquiry is the building traditionally known as the church of Mor Yakup in Nusaybin. The analysis and identification of this structure is highly problematic, in particular because of the different strata of building activity and uses the structure was subjected to. However, a Greek dedicatory inscription offers important clues as to the origins of the building¹²⁴. The inscription transmits three pieces of information. First,

¹²³ This structure lies at the foundation of Day 2007 and can be traced in Cyrill. Hieros. *catech.* 18, 33: πρῶτον μὲν περὶ τῶν πρὸ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εὐθὺς γενομένων, ἔπειτα δὲ πῶς ἑκαθαρίσθητε τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι, καὶ ὅπως ἱερατικῶς τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ προσηγορίας γεγόνατε κοινωνοὶ καὶ ὅπως ἡ σφραγὶς ὑμῖν ἐδόθη τῆς κοινωνίας τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, καὶ περὶ τῶν ἐν θυσιαστηρίῳ τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης μυστηρίων.

¹²⁴ The complete text was first given in Sarre/Herzfeld 1920, 337: ἀνεγέρθη τὸ βαπτιστήριον τοῦτο καὶ ἐτελέσθη ἔτους αοχ' ἐν χρόνῳ Οὐολαγέσου ἐπισκόπου σπουδῇ Ἀκεψύμα πρεσβυτέρου γενήτε αὐτῶν ἡ μνή[μη . . .] πiónτο[ς . . .] θυ. A slightly different version is published in Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2013, 148, with minor variations by Cyril Mango.

it gives the year of construction, 671 *Anno Graecorum*, which corresponds to the year between autumn of AD 359 and summer 360. Most scholars agree that at least parts of the current building go back to this time, although Gaborit—based on the decorations—advances the hypothesis of a fifth-to-fourth-century date, with the inscription interpreted as the memorial of a previous, today irretrievable, phase¹²⁵. Anyway, this does not invalidate the information transmitted by the inscription. A second, precious piece of information is the expression “in the times of the bishop Valgash, by the care of the priest Akepsyma” (ἐν χρόνῳ Οὐολαγέσου ἐπισκόπου σπουδῇ Ἀκεψύμα πρεσβυτέρου). Such expressions are common in late antique dedicatory inscriptions for churches in the Oriental provinces¹²⁶. The mention of the bishop could be just an indication of time, but it could also mean that the prelate was somehow involved in the project¹²⁷. The mention of the priest Akepsyma as a curator for the project opens up the difficult theme of delegation and responsibility in episcopal expenditures, a theme of which Ephrem was conscious of (§3.1.1.1): on one side, bishops tended to concentrate in their person or office all expenditures in the diocese; on the other side, the growing workload compelled them to delegate management to other figures, mostly members of their clergy. From the text of the inscription, it is impossible to assess if the project was executed by Akepsyma alone and Valgash has been mentioned only as a matter of epigraphic habit, or if the bishop ordered and delegated the work to his priest. However, in view of the centrality of the bishop witnessed by the habit of mentioning him so often in dedicatory inscriptions, it is hard to doubt that the project had a relevance for Valgash’s episcopate. This might be hinted at in the text of the inscription, if the integration of μνή[μη] is to be accepted, since the genitive pronoun of this “memory”, αὐτῶν, is a plural, referring to both Akepsyma and Valgash. The third piece of information disclosed by the inscrip-

125 In favour of fourth-century sections: Sarre/Herzfeld 1920, 342; Falla Castelfranchi 1980, 76; Keser Kayaalp 2021. *Contra*: Gaborit/Thébaud/Oruç 2014, 320–329. Gaborit’s hypothesis would explain some peculiarities of the Greek inscription: (a) the writing is too small and the inscription too high to be easily read (Keser Kayaalp 2021, 35), which, together with its south-facing position, is atypical for dedicatory inscriptions, which are normally over the entrance of the church (Haensch 2017, 539); (b) the word βαπτιστήριον in the Christian sense was employed generally later (Brandt 2011, 1588–1589) and, if the inscription were really from the fourth century, this would be one of the first witnesses to such a usage (Keser Kayaalp 2021, 35); (c) the last words of the inscription, though incomplete, seem to mention ἡ μνήμη, which would agree with a memorial inscription better than with a dedicatory inscription; (d) if it is true that Jacob’s relics were lost or translated after 363, as Theodoret and Gennadius say, Faustus of Byzantium implies (3, 11, 29; he says that his bones were translated to Amida in the time of the wars between Persians and Romans) and Ephrem in 359 cannot yet know, then those who had the memorial inscription made in the fifth/fourth century could have omitted this ceased usage of the building. However, it must be stressed that, in all other respects, this inscription is a perfectly normal dedicatory inscription for this time and geographic space (see Haensch 2017).

126 Haensch 2017, 539, 542.

127 Haensch 2006, 54n55.

tion is the nature of the building, a βαπτιστήριον. The choice of this typology is partly explained by the fact that Nisibis already had a basilica, built by our very bishop Jacob between 313 and 320, and whose groundwork and part of whose pillars have been found northwest of the Mor Yakup building.

There is the possibility that this baptistery enshrined also the relics of Jacob. As regards primary sources, Ephrem, Theodoret, and Gennadius, albeit perhaps not independently from each other, relate that Jacob was buried inside Nisibis until at least 363 and that his burial was the key to Nisibene resistance to the Persians; yet they do not indicate the burial place precisely. A local tradition, attested at least since 1644 as first reported by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, holds that the crypt of the building—used as a church—contains Jacob's relics in a sarcophagus; however, the sarcophagus is presently empty, and local traditions are admittedly not very reliable¹²⁸. In the past, most scholars concluded that the fourth-century baptistery could not also have contained Jacob's relics, on a plurality of grounds, both archaeological and typological¹²⁹. However, the two most recent contributions on Mor Yakup, written after new excavations by Gaborit and Keser Kayaalp, differ from previous scholarship on this point¹³⁰: both offer solid reasons against the arguments excluding an original burial of Jacob inside the baptistery. It must be noted that they have thereby not proved this burial, but only removed current objections against it; Keser Kayaalp admits it as a concrete possibility, and Gaborit accepts it in one of her two hypotheses of reconstruction of the original site¹³¹. The two most plausible burial places are the baptistery and the basilica;

¹²⁸ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Voyages en Perse* II, 4 (1644); see also Gaborit/Thébaut/Oruç 2014, 292.

¹²⁹ Against: Bell 1913; Sarre/Herzfeld 1920; Khatchatrian 1957; Falla Castelfranchi 1980. For: Grabar 1946.

¹³⁰ Until the restoration works of the municipality of Nisibis in 2000–2006, a mound of dirt and rubble covered the southern wall as high as the lintels of the doors (compare the images at Sarre/Herzfeld 1920, 340, fig. 316 and Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2013, 143, fig. 9; see the pictures at Gaborit/Thébaut/Oruç 2014, 291, 294, figg. 1 and 3). This prevented previous scholars from noticing that the building continued with a southern wing closed by an apse on the eastern side, and that the western half of the central (previously southern) wing of the building stood on a higher level than the eastern part. Due to the Kurdish uprisings of 2014–2015, no new excavation or study of the site has been endeavoured or is foreseen since 2006, and the proceedings of the French expedition, as well as Gaborit's monograph on the church, are still due to appear.

¹³¹ Keser Kayaalp 2021, 40; Gaborit/Thébaut/Oruç 2014, 314–319. The arguments against Jacob's presence are: (a) the crypt with the sarcophagus is an addition of the eighth century (Sarre/Herzfeld 1920, 343–344), but the relics could have been stored in another space (Gaborit/Thébaut/Oruç 2014, 308, 314–319) and the latest excavations, discovering a tripartite structure, make necessary that the crypt be contemporary with the oldest extant phase (Keser Kayaalp 2021, 39–40); (b) the coupling of baptistery and martyrium is unheard of in the fourth century according to Sarre/Herzfeld 1920, 344, yet Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2013, 151–152 (also Keser Kayaalp 2021, 40–41) gives ample testimony to the contrary, with theological reasons for the coupling (see also Jensen 2011, 1685–1689; Everett Ferguson 2013, 819–820; Gaborit/Thébaut/Oruç 2014, 318); (c) the inscription does not mention Jacob's relics (Sarre/Herzfeld 1920, 344), but they might have been already disappeared if the inscription were memorial and not dedicatory (Gaborit/Thébaut/Oruç 2013, 328), and in any case the position and writing of the

it is less plausible but possible that the saint was buried somewhere in the vicinity of these two buildings. Extensive excavations of the basilica are yet to be made, and the whole area is still to be closely examined: any sign of Jacob's burial or cult in any place other than the baptistery would thus disprove current hypotheses. Such signs are the test of falsifiability of my argument.

Anyway, based on current scholarship, I dare to advance this hypothetical reconstruction. The very important bishop Jacob died in 337 during the first Persian siege, which failed to conquer the city¹³². Thus, the bishop was buried inside the city walls, and a reverent memory developed around his burial place, because it was believed that he had the power to protect Nisibis from sieges. Such belief was corroborated by two following and failed Persian sieges. In 359 two events coincide: the community and its bishop Valgash are in conflict, and, in the spring/summer, the Persians cross the Tigris, with the Roman command quartered in Nisibis. The Persians cut Roman resources with a scorched-ground strategy in the Nisibene countryside, and the Romans try to do the same. Then, Persians avoid a siege of Nisibis and go on to besiege and conquer Amida, so that at the end of the war season the Nisibene has been raided, but not besieged¹³³. In light of these events, Valgash decides to monumentalise the burial place of his predecessor Jacob, in order to thank him for the avoided siege and to also bolster his own authority before the community. He has a baptistery built, because there is already a cathedral in the city and for its symbolic associations with the dead bishop. The novelty of the belief explains the experimental and unusual nature of the project. The bishop entrusts the task of explaining his program to the learned man of his clergy, Ephrem.

Such a defence was probably carried out on a public occasion, a liturgy, considering Ephrem's kind of poetry; it is conceivable that, to maximise the effect, Ephrem sang during the inaugural liturgy inside the new baptistery, and no other liturgy would better suit the inauguration of a baptistery than a baptism, especially the baptism of the Christian aristocracy, the ascetics. In this context, Ephrem recited *CN* 13: the poem alludes to the structure of the liturgy performed, with its sequence of vows, baptism, and Eucharist; it prepares the defence of Valgash through the theme of *yubbālā*; it showcases the power of Jacob, whom the building honoured, remembering the past sieges and the marauders of the same year; it illustrates the links between baptism and bishop, in particular the first bishop, as, respectively, the mystical and historical beginnings of the community, the forces protecting the city from external threats, and nourishing the inner faith, so that it also justifies Valgash's project. If the fourth-century dating of the

inscription lead one to doubt that this was the only dedicatory inscription on the building, leaving the argument *e silentio* considerably weaker.

¹³² Burgess 1999.

¹³³ Amm. Marc. 18, 4–19, 9; *CN* 5–12 (see also Harrell 2016, chapter 11).

surviving decorations is accurate, there would be yet another link between building and poem: the poet alludes to the otherwise common decoration featuring vine plants and vases sprouting with flowers when he uses the vine metaphor for the Nisibene church and talks of baptism as “sources of life” (*neb’e d-hayyē*), a concept ordinarily represented in art through a vase of flowers¹³⁴.

134 Pictures of the vine-frieze: Gaborit/Thébault/Oruç 2014, 312–313, figg. 29–31; Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2014, 148, fig. 18. Pictures of the vine framing the door: Gaborit/Thébault/Oruç 2014, 311, fig. 27; 313, fig. 31. Cyrill. Hieros. *catech. myst.* 2, 7 connects the vine image with baptism. The other doors are framed by different plant motives (see Gaborit/Thébault/Oruç 2014, 311, figg. 26, 28; Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2013, 147, fig. 15), and the architraves are decorated with spirals of flowers (Gaborit/Thébault/Oruç 2014, 302–303, figg. 14–16; 305, fig. 18; 313, fig. 32; 322, fig. 37; 326, fig. 42; Keser Kayaalp/Erdogan 2013, 147, fig. 15). The westernmost door on the southern facade is framed by pinecones, a symbol of eternal life according to Hall/Puleston 1996, 155, s.v. “Pinecone”. The floral spirals on the lintels are similarly signs of water, eternal life or fertility: Hall/Puleston 1996, 5–6, s.v. “Spiral”. Vase-representations: Gaborit/Thébault/Oruç 2014, 302, fig. 14; 311, figg. 26–28; 312 fig. 30. On the baptismal value of these representations: Gaborit/Thébault/Oruç 2014, 316–317. The river Jordan in the scene of Christ’s baptism was represented with a vase or urn: Hall/Clark 1974, 40, s.v. “Baptism”; the vase or urn as attribute of a river-god: Hall/Clark 1974, 265, s.v. “River”; 316–317, s.v. “Urn”; Hall/Puleston 1996, 93, s.v. “Urn”; 106, s.v. “River”. On the vase as a representation of the womb (see n. 115 for the comparison of baptism to a womb) or a container of “the water of life”, hence a sign of rebirth and life: Hall/Puleston 1996, 93–94, s.v. “Vase”. I would not use these references to read into the artists’ intentions, but only to highlight how these images might have been interpreted by a contemporary such as Ephrem; whether these baptismal associations were also intended by the artist is outside the scope of my research. I am thankful to Dr. A. Varela for suggesting me this possible link between vine-imagery and vine-friezes at Mor Yakup.