

General Conclusions

The close comparison of Ephrem's and Gregory's poems reveals a consistent pattern of similarities and differences. Although the concrete, real bishops and their environments could be very different and varied, the core theological tenets on the episcopal office and the main problems bishops faced are common points between Ephrem and Gregory: the two poets sing of the same subject. On the side of differences are the concerns, the aims and the techniques employed by the two poets. They develop namely the same subject-matter in different directions and with different means.

The deep theological similarities of the two poets can be traced to two main sources: a common Christian tradition and the environment of fourth-century Syria. From the poems emerges a clear and established tradition of the episcopate, which is largely in accordance with canonical documents and previous or contemporary prose works; however, not every element of this tradition is equally highlighted by the poets, and some elements of novelty can be found. I have traced two main facets of the idea of bishop in the poems to a common Christian tradition: language and leadership. As regards language, Ephrem and Gregory are equally vague when distinguishing bishop and priest, and, as was customary in contemporary theorizing on the office of bishop, they rarely use the technical term for the bishop (§2.1.1). Instead, the poets draw on the wealth of titles and images the Bible uses for leaders, mostly in a very traditional way, as is the case for the metaphor of the shepherd (§2.2.1), but without ever excluding the possibility of revitalizing the metaphor to get their point across. In this sense, the Bible is a common heritage between the two poets—otherwise so aesthetically different—who both allude to it, rewrite it, and employ it for the benefit of an audience knowledgeable in the Holy Writ. However, their relationship with the Bible is not straightforward as regards the idea of bishop: if Christian tradition links the institution of the episcopate with New Testament figures as well as with Old Testament ones, our poets decidedly prefer the Old. After all, the terminology and the concrete organization of the communities implied by the New Testament oscillated and were hard to grasp. The model of the apostles, for example, though not totally absent, is not at all prominent; in Gregory, they appear as a counterexample to his model of bishop (§3.1.3.1 and §3.1.3.3), while in Ephrem they tend to be equated with Old Testament prophets (§3.1.1) without particular emphasis on their being the first bishops. Old Testament priesthood, albeit interpreted differently by the two poets, is a much stronger precedent, together with Old Testament leadership in general, in contrast to New Testament mission—an approach clearly demonstrated by the prominence of the shepherd metaphor to the detriment of the fisher metaphor (§2.2.1.1).

Another common element is leadership. The bishop is conceived mainly as the leader of the community and only secondarily as the high priest or the “lover of the poor”. Indeed, the leading role of bishops is the very *raison d'être* of our poems (§3.1; §3.1.3.1). Ephrem and Gregory share this vision with much Christian theorizing on bishops of the same period and earlier; on the contrary, contemporary research has

highlighted the importance of the social and economic role of the bishop as “lover of the poor” in shaping the life of the city and the nature of his own office. Traces of this real-life attitude can be gleaned from Gregory’s polemics against the bishop conceived as a patron (§2.1.3; §3.1.1.3) or from Ephrem’s polemics against a church that amasses riches (§3.1.1.2; §4.1.2), and the reader will notice that both Gregory and Ephrem categorically reject such a model of church leadership. Long before Gibbon, it was the fathers of the church that lamented the intrusion of secular matters in the bishop’s purview. Even within the boundaries of traditionally Christian leadership, Gregory and Ephrem do not insist on the crucial power of administering penance, thereby regulating the access to the community, a responsibility canonical documents are anxious to regulate and direct and which has been the focus of interest of many scholars. Contemporary appeals to mildness find little space in our poems—though they are not completely unheard (§3.1.4, esp. §3.1.4.2 and §3.1.4.3). The poets are much more interested in the doctrinal control of the community and the moral discipline the bishop should administer. It is not a question of breaking with tradition but of different emphases; for example, Gregory’s doctrinal interest (§3.1.3.3) stems from concern about Nectarius and engagement with classical culture. For Ephrem, mildness is less linked to penance and access to the community and more to the identity of the Christian community itself: mildness marks out the Christian congregation from its competitors, such as the Roman Empire, the synagogue, or the memory of the past bishop and the past community.

The leadership of the bishop operates mainly through personal example. This notion was common to previous treatises and already implicit in Paul’s recommendations for the choice of the bishop, but in Ephrem and Gregory it has an unprecedented importance, to such an extent as to justify the importing of images alien to biblical languages to express it: the mirror, the painting, the statue (§2.2.3.1). This is indeed the most extended and significant rhetorical device common to Gregory and Ephrem and independent of biblical culture. Highlighting example as leadership tool allows the poets to either praise (Ephrem) or criticize (Gregory) existing bishops on the basis of their personal merits and vices instead of describing communal dynamics in detail. Moreover, Ephrem refers to the power of example to indict the community without accusing the bishop: if the bishop teaches through personal example, he must not recur to compulsion or direct orders, and he is thus exempted from responsibility for the failures of his community, that should have followed the bishop’s example of its own accord. More important yet is that through the principle of example both poets support their requirement that the bishop be an ascetic.

Here we find a theme common to both Gregory and Ephrem and stemming not from a common Christian tradition but from the practices and ideas of their geographic area, Syria, whose influence in church matters was felt also in Cappadocia. Ephrem and Gregory share the ideal of a clergy composed of ascetics and the same concept of asceticism. In both poets we find a primitive Syrian asceticism clearly expressed (as already described by Brock and other scholars), which does not openly contrast with urban society, as did Egyptian monasticism and later Syrian anchoritism (§3.2). Ascetics consti-

tute the elite of the urban congregation, bound by the vows they have taken at baptism and engaged in key roles of the community, frequently with a deeper theological formation so that they can educate other faithful. It is from the ranks of these Christianly educated ascetics that the clergy should come. Indeed, both Ephrem and Gregory propose a harmonization of clergy and ascetics, with Gregory perhaps reacting to the disorders these urban ascetics have caused in his experience. The main difference between the two is that Gregory superimposes onto this traditional institution an Origenian and mystical interpretation of asceticism (§3.2.2.3), absent from Ephrem's view.

The bishop as ascetic-in-chief, named and described through the literary heritage of the Bible, is common to our poets. The way this model plays out in Gregory's poems is very different from how it plays out in Ephrem's. As I already said, similarities point to an established Christian *koine*, capable of overcoming the linguistic barrier between Greek and Syriac, even when it took regional colourings—in this case, those of fourth-century Syria. A deeper analogy between these two corpora of texts is that they both treat the theme of bishops through poetry, addressing a real-life audience. I demonstrated and explained this fact in chapter 1, pointing to publication and transmission practices shared by both poets (and by most authors of the time). Two elements must be stressed (see §1.2): first, writing and publication was by no means an individual enterprise; second, orality and writing were still mixed in the whole process that brought the poems to us. As for the first point, the poets worked inside and for a social network of people who could appreciate their art; this people might have helped in the compositional process, which happened through dictation, or they might have been the intended audience of the poet and were, in any case, responsible for the dissemination and eventually the transmission of the poems. On the other hand, this whole process had the text passing through oral and written forms multiple times as it was dictated, written, then read aloud to an audience, then eventually copied (possibly through dictation) and sent to new audiences or reread on occasions. Later, someone near the poet may have collected more texts to form the embryos of our tradition. All this demonstrates the public nature of these texts, which are not the private venting of isolated intellectuals, but communicative acts in a tight-knit social network. As regards the choice of poetry, I have highlighted not only its aesthetic value, justifying a special treatment of poetic texts (even if they share themes with prosaic ones, as is our case; see §1.3.1) but also the late antique practice of conducting polemics, especially theological polemics, through poetic texts (§1.3.3). Moreover, both of our poets were interested in the theme of education, and in a world where people began education with Homer, poetry could have an educational role beyond the polemics of the day (§1.3.4).

Yet these common conditions apply to the whole corpus of Gregory's and Ephrem's poetry. Concentrating on the poems on bishops, I have found key differences in the modes and addressees of publication, differences that affect the diverse literary treatment of the figure of the bishop in the poems. Here, geographic and linguistic difference really comes to bear. First, Ephrem writes mainly for his peripheral urban community in Nisibis, whereas Gregory, through Constantinople, writes, at least ideally,

for the whole ecumene. This is demonstrated by the different foci of the poets: while Gregory concentrates on the relationship between bishops, Ephrem discusses primarily the relationship of the bishop with his local community. Second, the Greek language comes with the strings of *paideia* attached—namely, its literary tradition, the teachings of rhetoric, and linguistic Atticism. Therefore, whereas the *Carmina Nisibena* are aimed at the whole Christian congregation, gathered in the liturgy, Gregory addresses his poems to a socially homogeneous group of upper-class readers, possessing the codes of *paideia*. Gregory exceeds Ephrem in geographic range, while Ephrem exceeds Gregory in social range.

There are two nice examples of these different conditions behind Gregory's and Ephrem's poetry. In my survey of the names and titles used for the bishop (§2.1), I have discovered variations in usage between the dactylic poems (II, 1, 10; II, 1, 13, and II, 1, 17) and the iambic one (II, 1, 12). For example, the term ἐπίσκοπος, used in iambs for the bishop according to prosaic usage, in hexameters has another meaning ("warden", "protector"; see §2.1.1). In fact, Gregory abides by the linguistic conventions of Greek literature, prescribing different usages and word choices for the different genres, defined, among other things, by metre. After all, if he failed to abide by these conventions, he would breach a communicative code he shares with his selected audience. Here, *paideia* imposes a variation which has no parallel in Ephrem, where even metre does not constitute an appreciable limit on the word choice of the poet. He, too, however, can turn to his advantage a formal feature of his poems: the refrain appended to each stanza, if collectively performed by a chorus, could serve to enhance and make visible the concord of the community (§3.3.1). Such a feature would be out of place in Gregory's poems, which were not meant for the liturgy in the local community. Thus, conditions of publication influenced the poetic form, and the poets made the best of these constraints for their aims.

In Ephrem, these conditions skew his presentation of the role of the bishop. While it remains true that the bishop is mainly a religious leader, the crucial passage in *CN* 18, 11–12 gives prominence to his role in the liturgy, an attitude that is likely influenced by the fact that the poems were indeed performed during the liturgy (§2.1.3.2). This attitude is bonded with a broader tendency in Ephrem's thought to downplay the importance of speculative theology and, in our poems, with his relative negligence of the more secular tasks of the bishop, such as adjudicating and administering alms (§3.1.1.1; §3.1.3.2). Thus, liturgy motivates his advice to the bishop to delegate theology, judicial matters, and finance to others. These could be the Syrian ascetics, the *bnay qyāmā*, whose presence marked out the life of the local congregation: so local concerns and the occasion of performance let us understand the spin Ephrem gives to the ideal type of the bishop.

Another local concern is the authority crisis of Bishop Valgash, which Ephrem addresses in *CN* 13–16. Indeed, analogous awareness of local dynamics around the bishop is shown in the advice he gives later to the new bishop, Abraham (§3.1.4.3),

whose election must not have been completely undisputed (§3.1.1.1; §3.1.4.4). In the case of Valgash, scholarship up to this point had not yet been able to find out precisely what was the problem between the bishop and the congregation, albeit it has always been clear that Ephrem's aim with these texts was to shift the blame from the prelate to the people. I have attempted a reconstruction, hypothesizing (on the basis of the texts) a division inside the community between Judaizing Christians and rigorists who demanded firm measures against them from the bishop; the bishop would have then adopted a soft approach to Judaizers, lest he galvanize the rigorists and deepen the chasm in the community. Ephrem must defend this approach and decides to throw together Judaizers and rigorists in the same category as people incapable of overcoming the Old Testament to reach a truly neo-testamentary religion.

In order to defend Valgash, the poet also deploys circumstantial arguments, praising him for his ability as a preacher or his past career as an ascetic. Among these arguments, the reference back to Jacob, Valgash's predecessor, occupies CN 13. I closely read the relevant portions of text in §4.3, coming to an innovative reconstruction of Ephrem's poem. Once more, local concerns are of the utmost importance: Valgash may have monumentalized through a baptistery-martyrium the local memory of Bishop Jacob as saviour of Nisibis from the Persian sieges at the same time as the Persian army was again raiding the environs of Nisibis. With this initiative, Valgash also aimed at legitimizing himself in a moment of crisis, stressing his link with Jacob. Ephrem may have had the task of clarifying this program so that it elicited the hoped-for reaction from the congregation, and thus CN 13 may have been where he did so.

The reference to Jacob works as a legitimizing move for his successor only through the concept of *yubbālā*, which I examined in §4.1. This concept animates the whole of Ephrem's poetry on bishops, from the micro level of syntax and word order to the ampler structures of poems and the construction of poetic characters, to the whole theological conception these poems are meant to convey. *Yubbālā* is, essentially, the orderly succession of bishops in time: Ephrem insists continually on this orderly succession, representing the bishops passing their office from one to the other. Indeed, they resemble each other in character and worth, giving a concrete content to the otherwise formal handover of power. The poet goes so far as to represent their ascetic vocation, formally independent from the episcopate, as a relationship between teacher and pupil, with a clear succession of ascetic-masters corresponding to the bishops (§3.2.1). However, more important than similarity is difference: the poet employs the scheme of succession as a way to mitigate the real-life differences between bishops and the confusion in the community that ensues when its members observe these differences. Nisibis was in need of a "hermeneutic of continuity", and Ephrem's *yubbālā* provided precisely this. Simply speaking, the idea was that the succession of bishops was also a succession of historical periods, marked by a progression in the degree of maturity of the community; thus, differences in leadership are providentially motivated and "measured" (Ephrem employs this metaphor) by the different degrees of spiritual development of the congregation.

The concept does not remain a rhetorical move to justify difference but rises to the role of a true structuring principle for the poems: form and matter coincide. Whole stanzas are built as parallel lines—one line describing Jacob, the next Babu, the next Valgash—with variations embedded in a repeating and reassuring structure. Lines are split in half between a “call”, describing the situation in which the community lives, and a “response”, describing, through key characteristics, the bishop reigning in that situation. In this way, the poems perform, through rhythm and repetition, the continuity in difference that they at the same time argue for. Indeed, I contend that this game of parallelism and variation constitutes much of the aesthetic attractiveness that the audience found in these poems as poems. A poet, so it seems from these texts, is one who can organize a clearly rhythmic text, seemingly on the spot, and with copious variations and synonyms—not to mention puns and subtle biblical allusions. Moreover, the same principle of *yubbālā* guides Ephrem in his description of the first three bishops, Jacob, Babu, and Valgash: each is characterized in contrast to the others, in a progression of growing meekness and decreasing rigour. Like the saints in the paintings, sporting fixed and recognizable attributes, each bishop is reduced to a defining virtue or function, all of which would be features of the ideal bishop but are here found separately ascribed to the three historical bishops of Nisibis. Jacob is the rigorous, ascetic one; Babu the one more attentive to the material needs of poor and prisoners of war; Valgash is the meek and educated ascetic. All these characters are then reunited in Abraham in *CN* 17–21, whom Ephrem praises as an ideal bishop (§3.1.5; §4.1.1).

Through *yubbālā*, Ephrem is also able to muster one of the major themes of Syriac theology to his cause: the passage from Old to New Testament, from Israel to the church. As, on the micro level, each bishop gave way to a new one corresponding to a spiritually more mature epoch, so on the macro level the prophets of Israel gave way to the apostles, and these in turn transmitted their mission and authority to bishops, and each time the people of God progressed. The point in common is that the difference of the new epoch does not negate the previous epochs, but fulfils them. Thus, the questions of the local community are linked to a broader interpretation of history. In this context, Ephrem also inserts a parallelism between imperial and episcopal succession and thus expresses his thoughts on the relationship of kingship and priesthood (§4.1.2). Generally, he seems to endorse a clear-cut division of purviews between secular and religious power, although they are both providentially ordered in the succession of epochs. However, the correspondence between emperors and bishops he institutes in *CN* 21 and his praising of Abraham for his resistance to Julian suggest also moments of overlap or at least the hope of a harmonized work between the two.

The reference to the empire demonstrates that *yubbālā* is not an exclusively religious concept. It also claims to explain secular history. Indeed, the poems on bishops are connected through *yubbālā* to the other *Carmina Nisibena* (*CN* 1–12), that are more concerned with the Persian sieges in Nisibis. The sieges had been interpreted as divine retribution for the sins of the Nisibenes. Through the *yubbālā* of bishops this retribution acquires an educative value, because the community is first purified of its sins in

a harsh manner through the sieges and the stern guidance of Jacob, and then, as it progresses to a more neo-testamentary faith, the sieges stop and the meek Valgash becomes bishop. Naturally, the scheme is not simply linear but open to the zigzags of history: the Nisibenes cannot hold to their purified status long—a concept Ephrem summarizes with the expression “ungrateful peace” —so that new educational catastrophes ensue, and the spiral goes on. In this way, Ephrem presents to his community a theology of history capable of giving meaning and hope to the trauma of change and to collective tragedies such as war: an important feature of this poetry, written and performed in the dangerous boundary between two empires.

What differentiates Gregory from Ephrem is the ecumenical reach of his texts and his deeper engagement with Greek culture. Greek culture is not completely absent from Ephrem’s texts; in fact, I have found isolated instances that may hint to his knowledge of Greek texts. They are, however, isolated and hard to interpret, so they could not be developed in a cohesive discourse on Ephrem and Greek literature. The commonalities with the Greek fathers, on the other hand, stem more from a common Christian tradition, expressing itself in Greek and Syriac and serving as a sort of bridge between the two cultures. On the contrary, Gregory engages the Greeks with purpose, even in the structure of the longer poems, imitating the *dispositio* of an oration according to contemporary rhetorical treatises (§1.1.1).

Both these conditions, the Hellenic and the ecumenical, are behind the two main features of Gregory’s poems, one literary, the other politico-theological. The literary device animating Gregory’s poems on bishops is a complex system of related connotations and characteristics, organized in a quadrangular structure. The poet always describes one of the three: the bad bishops; the ideal bishop; himself. At the same time, he addresses a second person, sometimes singular and sometimes plural. The second person is related to the bad bishops because, through the fictive context Gregory alludes to in the poems (§1.1.1), the reader understands that he is addressing those same bad bishops he satirizes. Similarly, generic descriptions of the ideal bishop find their exact counterparts in Gregory’s self-styling. Moreover, the features of Gregory and of the ideal bishops are mirrored and subverted by the features of the bad bishops, who also remind the savvy reader of the profiles of Gregory’s rivals, Nectarius and Maximus.

I have particularly researched Gregory’s construction of his self-portrait (§5.1), a feature almost completely absent from Ephrem’s poems, and I have concluded that this self-portrait is structured according to the procedures of the rhetorical exercise of ῥητοποιία: the speaker of the poems is made to correspond, through autobiographical narrative, to a historical person (in this case, the poet himself) and is fictively located in a certain moment of his life; thus, the poem purports to be the person’s reaction to a real-life situation. Since ῥητοποιία required that words correspond to the character of the person speaking, the texts also suggest a self-portrait of Gregory. In this respect I

have read the poet's frequent declarations that he suffered in his public life and wanted to retire and dissociate himself as far as possible from the other bishops, and I have read similarly his presentation of some poems (II, 1, 12 and II, 1, 13) as venting and of himself as an ἄγποικος. Even his sarcastic and Cynical style of arguing and his concrete, sometimes gross, imagery serves Gregory's self-portrait: the poet constructs a mask of himself as martyr, ascetic, and philosopher. He is a martyr because of the pains of public life he took on for the sake of truth, he is an ascetic because he considers public life painful and not desirable, so much that he is retiring, and he is a philosopher because, thanks to his estrangement from civilized life, he can judge its irrationality and sinfulness. This mask, though it purports to be that of an idiosyncratic outsider, is not the mask of an individual in the modern sense; rather, it attaches itself to archetypes of late antique society and literature, both pagan (the philosopher) and Christian (the martyr), in order to conjure up their authority for Gregory and to propose a model of behaviour for his readers. Since the basis of much of this self-portrait is lamenting his own sufferance and claiming estrangement from society, the operation could not work without poetry: only the poet is authorized to vent his feelings with a sense of authenticity, and the role of punisher of bad habits, before the philosopher, was allotted to the iambographer and the comedigrapher (§1.3.2).

In respect to this complex self-portrait, the other characters of the poems pale. The ideal bishop is, when closely examined, a noncharacter, a bundle of features and actions meant to allude to Gregory himself (§3.1.5). The position of the bad bishops is a little more complex. As I said, they are at the same time described and addressed, although neither as addressees nor as subjects do they get names or a backstory, except for the abusive caricature of their humble professional background in II, 1, 12 (§5.2.1). In this poem, they serve the function of a fictive counterpart in the style of Cynic diatribe, which, although it may contain genuine objections to Gregory's position, is a purely formal device used to move and structure the argument. In II, 1, 13, they are always addressed as a collective, in accordance with the epic nature of this poem, which interprets church history as a war against Satan. Despite their absence as characters, their physical presence is evoked at the beginning of II, 1, 10; II, 1, 12; and II, 1, 13, and it contributes to the fiction of a real-life occasion, while the identity of at least two of them (Maximus, Nectarius) can be gleaned from Gregory's criticisms. As in letter writing, the poet engages in a dialogue with an interlocutor who is present despite his absence. Gregory has deployed this complex literary strategy in order to achieve three aims: first, to defend his ministry in Constantinople and his own credibility; second, to delegitimize and attack his rivals; third, with the broader perspective of using his personal experience, to prove that his proposal for the episcopate is the right one.

Gregory's proposal is the other innovative element of his poems: the ascetic bishop becomes almost a profession. This development is exposed most organically in II, 1, 12, whereas the other poems are less clear about it, with II, 1, 13 being a sort of prologue lamenting the problems that make the proposal necessary. Gregory begins in II, 1, 13 by describing the history of the church as a continuous struggle against Satan (§3.1.4.1;

§3.3.2.2), a continuist scheme similar to Ephrem's. However, in II, 1, 12 Gregory says that his time has elements of novelty, because the spread of heresies requires an educated bishop to confute them, a development absent in Ephrem's view of history (§3.1.3.1). Through the necessity of a specific education for the bishop, Gregory supports his reinterpretation of the model of the ascetic bishop through Origen's theology (§2.1.3.1; §3.1.2; §3.1.3.3; §3.2.2.3), whereby the traditional idea of asceticism as purification needed to celebrate the liturgy, expressed also by Ephrem's *CN* 18, 11–12, is given a mystical meaning. The authentic liturgy is the ascetic's contemplation of God, the authentic sacrificial offering is the souls of his congregation purified and given to God. Souls are purified through imitation of the bishop as the bishop is purified by imitation of God. Asceticism is the bishop's method of purification, contemplation, and imitation of God. Since God reveals himself in Scripture, asceticism should feature Bible study, possibly employing also the writings of previous Christians and covering the principles of Christian doctrine. Thus, Gregory defines the scope of a specifically Christian culture. The preference for ascetic bishops is therefore motivated by the time and effort required to reach contemplation of God through these methods: the reader recognizes here a development of a peculiarly Hellenic model, influenced by Origen, Greek philosophy and late antique notions of *paideia*.

Gregory advances his proposal to an ecumenical audience, coming from different dioceses, meaning that he has a collective of bishops in mind, not a single bishop as did Ephrem. These bishops were also conscious that new prelates were elected through co-optation by themselves; this is much different from Ephrem's traditional representation, where God as first, then the predecessor and the community, have vital roles in the election of a new bishop (§3.3.1). In this context, Gregory's ideal works also as a set of criteria to elect new bishops, so that they may be prepared for their office. The setting of prerequisites for the office is at odds with a charismatic conception of the episcopate, which could draw on New Testament examples and sacramental theology. Gregory reacts to this conception in II, 1, 12 (§3.3.2.1), assuming a series of criticisms against baptism from pagan authors and redirecting them against the election of neophytes: again, the influence of the Greek world proves decisive. Gregory's aim is to radically separate the charisma inherent in the episcopate from the authority of its recipient: the episcopate should be granted only when the recipient is worthy of the received charisma, fulfilling Gregory's criteria. The operation is reflected even in his linguistic usage, as he frequently employs metonymies to identify the episcopate as an office or as a collective (§2.2.4.6; §3.1.4.1). I have analysed this rhetoric in Weberian terms, finding that Gregory proposes a partial move away from charismatic authority towards a certain rationalization of the office of bishop; on the contrary, Ephrem's use of collective acclamations goes in the opposite (and traditional) direction of reinforcing the charismatic component of the bishop's authority (§3.3.1).

Gregory's concern for the selection of bishops is linked with his worries about their politicization. The victory of the Nicene party under Theodosius did not end internal strife, which continued unabated even in absence of clear motivations. Moreover, in the

Council of Constantinople this strife assumed clear geographic characters, contrasting the West and East of the church. I have compared these criticisms of the discord among bishops to Schmitt's definition of the friend-foe category and have thus concluded that Gregory, particularly through the universal narrative of II, 1, 13, seems to note the beginnings of a politicization of conflict (§5.2.5). Furthermore, the poet sees in the election of Nectarius a failure of the episcopate at large, which had to rely on civil authorities to solve an internal conflict, so that both the independence of the church and the neutrality of the state were undermined (§5.2.3). Gregory's proposal of a Christian education as a requirement for the episcopate responds to these challenges. Defining Christian education as composed of asceticism and Bible learning, Gregory delimits a discipline that is at the same time analogous and alien to the code of the imperial elite—namely, classical *paideia*. The ideal bishop is at the same time an outsider to polite society, qua ascetic, and a sophisticated intellectual, qua biblical philosopher. This odd positioning, together with the almost rational character of the bishop's authority (as expert in all things divine), prompts in Gregory the comparison with professionals, who do not belong to the elite but, thanks to their expertise, can influence it. Finally, this definition of Christian education serves to implicitly exclude his direct rivals, Nectarius and Maximus: the first was too mixed up with elite society and lacking ascetic credentials, and the other was too theologically inept, lacking a sophisticated upbringing. Again, the poet carries out criticism, apology, and ideals for reform at the same time.

With this work I hope to have maintained the promise made at the beginning, of giving a guide to understand, if not in every detail at least in their overall working, these texts. The four key points are the public, political character of these poems, the common tradition of the Bible and Syrian asceticism in defining the bishop as ascetic leader, Ephrem's theology of history based on the succession of bishops and epochs, and Gregory's complex strategy of self-defence, rationalization of the episcopate, and criticism against his rivals. It is true that there is no accounting for taste, but I also hope a better understanding may enhance the aesthetic appreciation for these two great Christian poets.