Why the Dispute Poem? Death, Satan, and Freedom in the *Nisibene Hymns*

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Introduction

Some of the best-known features of the writings of Ephrem the Syrian are the dramatic and often-entertaining disputes and dialogues between Death and Satan (and occasionally other characters), found in the hymn collection entitled *Nisibene Hymns.*[1] Among these are the earliest attestations in Syriac of the ancient literary form (dating back to Sumerian literature) which scholars have labeled "precedence disputes," poetic debates in which personifications square off for superiority in alternating stanzas.[2] For scholars of Syriac Christianity, these disputes are of particular interest, because they provide us with arguably the clearest example of a literary context in all of Ephrem's corpus.[3]

The stylistic features and content of the disputes and dialogues in Syriac literature have been very aptly described elsewhere. My purpose in this essay is not to correct previous studies of Ephrem's precedence disputes, but rather to *complicate* the way that these texts are understood, with particular attention to their possible purposes for Ephrem's audiences. Sebastian Brock has given some consideration to Syriac dialogue poems as "vehicles of

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[1] Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena,* Vol. 2, CSCO 240-241, Scr. Syr. 102-3 (Louvain: Peeters, 1961).

[2] For more on Mesopotamian dispute poems, see J.J.A Van Dijk, *La Sagesse Suméro-accadienne* (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 39ff., and H.L.J. Vanstiphout, "The Mesopotamian Debate Poems: A General Presentation, Part I," *Sumerologica* 12 (1990): 271–318. Van Dijk seems to have been the first to outline the common structure of the Ancient Near Eastern precedence disputes, with additions and refinement by Vanstiphout. Robert Murray offers a helpful summary of this structure in his "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute-Poems and Their Connections," in *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and Approaches*, ed. M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield, and M.P. Weitzman, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] The vast majority of the precedence disputes in Ephrem's extant corpus are found in the *Nisibene Hymns*. Other examples can be found in the likely-authentic collection in Armenian translation (*Armenian Hymns* 4-5). L. Mariès and C. Mercier, ed. *Hymnes de Saint Ephrem conservées en version arménniene*, PO 30, fasc. 1. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1961). The more stylized dispute preserved between "Reason" and "Love" (*Hymns on the Church* 9) could also be considered an example of a precedence dispute.

theology,"[4] focusing on how dialogues often explore ambiguities or paradoxes in the Christian message, or problematic passages from Scripture. For Brock, the dialogue poem was an ideal medium for Syriac authors to explore what he calls "the state of disjunction between God and the world".[5]

Yet the disputes in Ephrem's *Nisibene Hymns* are of a different sort than the dialogue poems described by Brock. In these disputes, we have no clear theological ambiguity or moment of tension in the biblical narrative (a feature of dialogue poems that has been explored by Kristi Upson-Saia[6]) upon which to center. We are left with the question: *why did Ephrem write these disputes*?[7] Or more properly, *what do the disputes reveal about Ephrem's intentions for his audience?* The audience component is essential; these particular hymns vividly testify to their public, liturgical contexts.[8]

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[4] Karel Van Der Toorn uses the language of "vehicle of reflection" in reference to prose dialogues in Karel Van Der Toorn, "The Ancient Near Eastern Literary Dialogue as a Vehicle of Critical Reflection," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues*. Sebastian Brock uses this same phrase "the hymns as vehicles of theology" in his article: "Dialogue hymns of the Syriac Churches" *Sobornost* 5.2 (1983): 35-45, 41.

[5] Brock, "Dialogue Hymns of the Syriac Churches," 42. Throughout his career and voluminous record of publications, Professor Brock has shown a particular interest in disputes and dialogues in the Syriac tradition, producing a number of editions, translations, and studies of these texts. Of particular value is his five-part classification system of disputes and dialogues, to which he refers in a number of his works. See Sebastian P. Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229 (Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 135–47. 136-8. Type 1 is the classic precedence dispute in alternating stanzas, and appears only in *madrāšê* (and their sub-genre, *sūgyātâ*). Type 2 is what Brock calls a "transitional form… where the two parties no longer speak in alternating stanzas, but are allocated uneven blocks of speech." Both *madrāšê* and *mēmrê* of this sort are extant. Type 3 comprises dialogue *madrāšê* with a narrative framework and no alternating pattern of speech. Types 4 and 5 are represented in narrative *mēmrê* which make the narrative framework the forefront.

[6] Kristi Upson-Saia, "Caught in a Compromising Position: The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syriac Dialogue Hymns," *Hugoye* 9, no. 2 (2006): 189–211.

[7] I recognize that posing such a question risks making assumptions about the author and his writings which the text does not warrant. However, I have reason to believe that the text in fact *does* reveal some explicit details about the author's purpose, at least insofar as he shared them with his audience.

[8] I am drawing upon the notion that these are fundamentally *performed* texts. As liturgical poetry, we may helpfully conceive of them as oriented toward three "vectors": God, Scripture, and audience. This study is focused on the latter of these. I have borrowed this notion of the three vectors of the *madrāšê* from the work of Jeffrey Wickes and Tzvi Novick, scholar of Jewish liturgical poetry. See Jeffrey T. Wickes, "Out of Books, a World: The Scriptural Poetics of Ephrem's Hymns on Faith" (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2013), 3. M. Tzvi Novick, "The Poetics of Yannai's Sixth: Between Scripture, God, and Congregation," in *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Wout Van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 69–81.

Fortunately, "framing elements," stylized introductions and conclusions to individual disputes, are a key component of the structure of precedence disputes, both in classical Mesopotamian literature and in many of the disputes in the *Nisibene Hymns*. In these rhetorical addresses to his hearers, Ephrem gives us the clearest understanding of what he sought to communicate to his audience through these disputes. Therefore, this essay will draw primarily upon the "framing elements" of the precedence disputes found in *Nis*. 52-59.[9]

Ultimately, I will contend that Ephrem's major stated intention for his audience in these disputes is an exhortation to the wise exercise of human freedom. In a broader context, this essay will complicate the oft-mentioned characterization of the second half of the *Nisibene Hymns* as "eschatological" or "theological," with these dispute poems as a prime example of the complexity of the themes which come to the fore in the various sub-sections of the collection.

Precedence Disputes and the *Nisibene Hymns*

As J.J.A. Van Dijk first demonstrated, precedence disputes from the Ancient Near East followed a classical pattern. In Syriac studies, scholars – beginning with Pierre Grelot,[10] and including Robert Murray[11] and Sebastian Brock[12] – have aptly shown how Syriac disputes tend to follow the same basic structure. In both ancient Mesopotamian and later Syriac examples, the dispute proper generally opens with an introduction of the characters and the subject matter of their dispute, contains alternating stanzas of disputation between the characters, and ends with a conclusion which declares the result or verdict of the dispute.

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[9] The two disputes between Death and Humanity in *Nis*. 65 and 68 have no framing elements.

[10] The French scholar Pierre Grelot was the first to observe the common literary structure and characteristics between these hymns of Ephrem and ancient Sumerian and Akkadian dispute poems. Pierre Grelot, "Un Poème de Saint Ephrem: Satan et La Mort," *Orient Syrien* 3 (1958): 443–452.

[11] Murray, "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute-Poems and Their Connections," 172-80, looks briefly at the structures and contents of the dispute poems in Ephrem's Death-Satan cycle (CNis 52-68), the Armenian translations of the disputes between Virginity and Consecrated Marriage (HArm 4-5, 9), and the dialogue between "Reason" and "Love" (HEcc 9). Murray follows up with a fuller study of this dialogue in: Robert Murray, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love (HEccl 9)," *Sobornost: Eastern Churches Quarterly* 2 (1980): 26–40.

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Within the *Nisibene Hymns,* hymns 52-68 form a sub-group sharing the melody *'â mawtâ lâ teštālê*. Of these, a general thematic unity prevails in hymns 52-59, in which we find proper precedence disputes (*Nis.* 52-54), as well as disputes with more uneven blocks of dialogue (*Nis.* 55-59) – Brock's types 1 and 2.[13] Hymns 60-68 are primarily monologues by Death, punctuated with two disputes between Death and Humanity over the resurrection. We thus have a total of ten dispute poems within the *Nisibene Hymns.* Hymns 52-54 have traditionally been of the greatest interest for scholars because of their near-perfect resemblance to ancient Mesopotamian examples. Yet, *Nis.* 55-59 should not be ignored, because Ephrem continues to work with similar themes and motifs in these hymns, giving us no indication that he felt constrained by whatever rules might have existed for the genre.

In regard to content, the disputes in the *Nisibene Hymns* tend to follow the traditional model, with both speakers using every opportunity to boast in their own power and cast aspersions on the other.[14] The disputes are extremely repetitive, highlighting – I believe – the public contexts of these texts. At times, the substance of the debate becomes almost like an extended session of Bible trivia, with the two figures citing Scripture and biblical characters as *testimonia* to their claims of superiority.[15] In other places, the disputants employ natural phenomena as their witnesses, or boast in their own merits (a feature which Murray labels "anti-aretology").[16] These hymns (particularly 52-59) appear to reflect intentional editorial arrangement, showing a loose sort of narrative movement culminating in *Nis.* 59, where Death

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[13] Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems," 136.

[14] The precedence dispute between Death and Satan seems to have been a popular subject in later Syriac literature as well. Two other anonymous disputes have survived, one in a West Syrian liturgical manuscript, and another in an East Syrian. The latter dispute has been published, with German translation, by Reinink: G.J. Reinink, "Ein Syrisches Streitgespräch Zwischen Tod Und Satan," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, ed. G.J. Reinink and H.L.J. Vanstiphout (Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1991), 135–152.

[15] For an excellent example of this, see *Nis.* 53.

[16] Murray, "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute-Poems and Their Connections," 175.

acts as an advocate for humanity against the true Enemy, Satan. While it cannot be known whether or not Ephrem was involved in the compilation of the *Nisibene Hymns,* the editorial arrangement of *Nis.* 52-59 accentuates my view that sin and freedom are the main themes in this sub-group.

In order to judge Ephrem's apparent intentions, we must turn to examples from the disputes themselves in which he seems to show his hand, so to speak. As I noted above, I will draw primarily upon the "framing elements" of the disputes, in which the audience is often directly addressed with a way of understanding the dispute they are about to witness or have just witnessed. Perhaps the most significant example of this for our purposes comes from the introduction to *Nis.* 54, where Ephrem provides his audience with what I believe to be his most vivid explanation of the intended purpose of the dispute:

> Listen, Freedom, to the dispute[17] of the two slaves,[18]
> As they are admonished by one another – that they are weak!
> Thus, if the Evil One has conquered you, your shame is great!
> His colleague Death admonishes him – that he is weak!
> And if Death also reproaches you, what an insult!
> For his colleague the Evil One refutes him – that he is like a shadow!
> Their dispute for you is a mirror, in which can be seen
> That both of them are like chaff before your breeze.[19]
> And also the Prophets and the Apostles in their counsels
> Teach you that like flowers, at your rising, they wither.[20]

This citation reveals two closely-connected themes which run throughout the disputes between Death and Satan in Hymns 52-59: *the ultimate powerlessness of the characters* and *the*

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[17] Syr. *meṣṣûtâ*; for the terms used by Ephrem for a "dispute," see Ibid, 174, fn. 73 and 74.
[18] Or "things-made"
[19] Lit. "breathing", "blowing" (*mepûḥîtâ*)
[20] *Nis.* 54.1-5 (Beck, *CNis* II, 78):

ܣܡܥ ܚܐܪܘܬܐ ܘܓܘ ܕܐܗܐ ܕܬܪܝܢ ܚܬܝ
ܕܟ ܡܣܬܗܘܡܝܢ ܡܢ ܚܕܕܐ ܕܡܚܝܠܝܢ ܐܢܘܢ
ܐܢ ܗܟܠ ܢܚܒܟ ܒܝܫܐ ܪܒ ܗܘ ܒܗܬܟ ܐܝܟ
ܡܟܣ ܠܗ ܚܒܪܗ ܡܘܬܐ ܕܗܘ ܡܚܝܠܐ ܗܘܐ
ܘܐܢ ܬܘܒ ܡܣܕܝܟ ܡܘܬܐ ܠܟ ܐܝܟܐ ܨܥܪܐ
ܡܟܣ ܠܗ ܚܒܪܗ ܒܝܫܐ ܕܐܝܟ ܗܘ ܛܠܢܝܬܐ
ܕܪܚܗܘܢ ܠܟ ܐܝܟܐ ܡܚܙܝܬܐ ܕܒܗ ܡܬܚܙܝܐ
ܘܐܦ ܢܒܝܐ ܘܫܠܝܚܐ ܒܡܠܟܝܗܘܢ
ܡܠܦܝܢ ܠܟ ܕܐܝܟ ܗܒܒܐ ܩܕܡ ܣܬܝ

significance of human freedom. Ephrem intends that the dispute will be a "mirror" for Freedom (i.e. his audience) that will reveal to it both its own strength and the weakness of Death and Satan, its enemies. While the ultimate end of Death and the Evil One at the resurrection is of course important here, Ephrem's aims in these disputes appear to be more concerned with shaping the human response in the here and now. The mythic setting of these disputes allows the struggles of congregants to be lifted up into a much larger context. Thus, while the second part of the *Nisibene Hymns* has been often characterized as "eschatological", the themes prominent in the disputes between Death and the Evil One offer more a *response to eschatology* than a presentation of Ephrem's views of *eschatological issues*; as a result, our picture of these debates –and of the Nisibene cycle more broadly – may be helpfully complicated.

Powerlessness of the Characters

The framing elements to the dispute poems in the *Nisibene Hymns* regularly revel in the irony of the dispute itself, a contest for power that reveals powerlessness. Ephrem has a tendency to introduce Death and Satan's power (sometimes in the introductory statements), only to reverse it for his audience (often at the conclusion). Note, for example, the introduction to Hymn 52, the first of the disputes in the *Nisibene Hymns*; here, Ephrem highlights the power of the two characters, introducing their disputing[21] as a contest for strength between two powerful figures:

> I heard Death and Satan as they were disputing
> Which is stronger than the other[22] among humanity.
> Death has shown his authority, that he conquers all,
> Satan has shown his deceitfulness, that he makes all sin.[23]

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[21] Syr. *nāṣîn*
[22] Lit. "his companion" (*ḥabreh*)
[23] Nis 52.2 (Beck, *CNis* II, 73):
ܠܡܘܬܐ ܘܣܛܢܐ ܫܡܥܬ ܕܟܕ ܢܨܝܢ ܗܘܘ
ܕܐܝܢܐ ܡܢܗܘܢ ܚܝܠܬܢ ܒܝܬ ܐܢܫܐ
ܡܘܬܐ ܗܘ, ܚܘܝ ܫܘܠܛܢܗ ܕܠܟܠ ܐܢܫ
ܣܛܢܐ ܗܘ, ܢܣܒ ܢܟܠܗ ܕܠܟܠ ܡܚܛܐ

Yet in the conclusion to the same hymn, Ephrem turns that "power" on its head, ending the dispute with a vivid depiction of the disputants' ultimate fates.[24] Grelot and Murray have both suggested that the final stanzas suggest that an exhortation for laughter.[25] Even if we do not accept the call for a congregational response as laughter per se, Ephrem still frames the response to the dispute as one with eschatological ramifications, as a "pledge" or "down-payment"[26] toward the laughter which the two disputants will face when they are finally defeated at the resurrection.

This response testifies to the ways in which Ephrem seems to be attempting to bring this mythic dispute into the ordinary lives of his hearers. Their response to these figures (of death and evil) *now* is of great significance in the eschatological perspective. Consider also the introduction to Hymn 53:

> Come let us listen as they struggle[27] for victory,
> The guilty ones who have never conquered, nor will they conquer![28]

In a single strophe, Ephrem sets up the irony of the dispute: the quest for victory and the lack of conquest. Exhorting his audience to "listen,"[29] a feature which appears in several of these disputes, the debate is introduced as if the hearers are in on a secret to which the disputants themselves are not privy, that any so-called "victory" of the disputants will never be an ultimate victory. While the content of the disputes may cover a wide range of topics, it seems that the appearance of these two characters is rooted in the traditional early Christian portfolio of the

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[24] See Beck, *CNis* II, 75.

[25] Brock even translated it this way, though the text does not explicitly warrant it. The present "down-payment" that the text mentions seems to imply that the future "looking upon" Death and the Evil One in mockery is echoed in the present, and this certainly could imply an audience response.

[26] Syr. *rahbûnâ*

[27] *Ktaš* has a strong "fighting" or "struggling" valence. It appears in the Pesh. of Lk. 13:24 to translate *agonizesthe*.

[28] *Nis* 53.1 (Beck, *CNis* II, 75)

ܗܘ ܢܥܒܕ ܕܪ ܕܚܕܚܕܝܢ ܚܠ ܙܚܘܢܐ

ܣܢܬܟܐ ܕܠܟ ܙܚܗ ܡܢ ܚܘܦܘܡ ܟܗܕ ܠܐ ܙܚܝ

[29] Brock mentions this in: Sebastian P. Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems: Marginalia to a Recent Edition," *Le Muséon* 97 (1984): 29–58, 58.

enemies defeated by Christ's death and resurrection: "sin, death, and the devil". Personifying

these enemies and bringing them into the liturgical setting does not merely present the doctrines

about Christ and salvation, but brings the congregation into the mythic setting of the drama of

salvation as participants. With the power of the Evil One and Death still so clearly evident in the

world, Ephrem seems to be trying to further explain the consequences of Christ's victory over

these enemies. He writes in the conclusion to hymn 58:

> Our Lord brought both of them to an end on both sides:
> The Evil One will be brought to an end here, and Death there.[30]

The implication seems to be that Christ has made it possible that the power of the Evil

One can be overcome in the *harkâ,* while victory over Death awaits the *tammān* – the

resurrection (the subject of most of *Nis.* 60-77). Since the victory over Death is a matter of future

hope, it is Satan who emerges as the true enemy in these disputes, as the latter ones (*Nis.* 57-59)

in particular make clear; there, the tone shifts to a more one-sided attack on the Evil One by

Death, with the audience members as grateful spectators.

> Look! Death takes vengeance on Satan for us:
> Come, let us listen to his shame and rejoice, for he has rejoiced in our shame.[31]

As can be seen here, the audience is often encouraged to rejoicing and praise in response

to the undoing of these enemies, giving the disputes a triumphalist cast:

> Let us shout Hosannas, my brothers, in the likeness of Gideon:
> for when he shouted, the oppressors fell on one another![32]

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[30] *Nis.* 58.24 (Beck, *CNis* II, 89):
ܗܢ ܦܠ̈ܓ ܠܬܪ̈ܝܗܘܢ ܚܕܬ ܚܬܡ
ܒܝܫܐ ܢܬܒܛܠ ܗܪܟܐ ܘܡܘܬܐ ܠܬܡܢ
[31] *Nis.* 59.1 (Beck, *CNis* II, 89):
ܗܐ ܡܘܬܐ ܗܐ ܡܬܦܪܥ ܡܢ ܣܛܢܐ ܚܠܦܝܢ
ܬܘ ܢܫܡܥ ܟܘܚܕܗ ܘܢܚܕܐ ܕܗܘ ܚܕܝ
[32] *Nis.* 59.18 (Beck, *CNis* II, 91):
ܢܩܥܐ ܐܘܫܥ̈ܢܐ ܐܚ̈ܝ ܒܕܡܘܬ ܓܕܥܘܢ
ܕܟܕ ܗܘ ܩܥܐ ܢܦܠܘ ܐܠܘ̈ܨܐ ܚܕ ܥܠ ܚܒܪܗ

In the light of the theme of the powerlessness of the disputants, the disputes' appeal to "Freedom" takes on added significance.

The Power of Freedom

"Freedom" (ܚܐܪܘܬܐ) is of course a major theological concept throughout Ephrem's corpus. In the disputes between Death and the Evil One in the *Nisibene Hymns,* the prominence of "freedom" in several instances emphasizes a theme that Ephrem obviously intended to be front and center in these disputes. One should recall the lengthy introduction to Hymn 54 cited above, which Ephrem frames as an exhortation to "Freedom". The direct address to freedom clues us in to a direct address to the audience, as Murray has noted.[33] For "Freedom," or the human mind/will/heart, the dispute of the two adversaries is first of all intended to expose those adversaries' weakness. The dispute reveals that the Evil One is ultimately powerless, and that Death's power is temporary at best. However, the dispute also points in another direction, serving as a "mirror," (a very common image in Ephrem) in which the hearer of the dispute will see that weakness and respond to it with freedom. In imagining a mirror here, I believe we should keep the ancient context in mind; the metallic mirror requires polishing and scouring for the reflection to be clearly seen. The hearer must be vigilant in polishing his freedom, so to speak.[34] The drama of the dispute draws in the hearers to consider the weaknesses of sin and death, as well as their own weakness, and to polish their mirror so that they might see clearly and exercise freedom.

Hymn 55 is the rare dispute in this series without a proper conclusion, yet its final strophes shift from a debate to a monologue by the Evil One describing his persistence,

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[33] Murray, "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute-Poems and Their Connections," 175.

[34] The imagery calls to mind *HdF* 2.18: "Blessed is the one who has polished his investigation like a mirror/ For those lacking in faith, so that with it they might wipe clean their spots." (Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, For more on Ephrem's use of the metaphor of the mirror, see Edmund Beck, "Das Bild vom Spiegel bei Ephrem," *OCP* 19 (1953): 5-24, and Sebastian Brock, *Luminous Eye*, 74-77.

seemingly designed as a warning to the audience. Satan is not quick to action, he explains, but slow and deliberate, like raindrops eroding a mountain.[35] Thus, over time, his diversions can turn even human freedom into a vehicle for his devices. As an illustration, he employs the image of how even a lion can be tamed by continual training; it is "habit" (ܥܝܳܕܐ) that can bring even that most fearsome animal to bear.[36] Habit can tame freedom and weaken it, and can bind or catch it with a snare, but if freedom "roars", then what chance does even habit have?[37]

Hymn 56, too, addresses the role the power that human Freedom possesses to oppose the Evil One. In a lengthy introduction, Ephrem addresses the Evil One, pointing to the role of Freedom as his nemesis:

> Your struggle is with Freedom, Evil One.
> It can place a muzzle on you if it pleases.[38]

The aforementioned shift in the tone of the disputes is thus already underway by the end of *Nis.* 55 and beginning of 56. The real struggle (ܐܓܘܢܐ) facing the Evil One is against Freedom. Death increasingly begins to expose the weaknesses in Satan's entire program of temptation and sin, predicting a dire fate for the Evil One as a consequence of his actions.[39] The triumphalist vision of Satan's ultimate fate could be seen as encouragement to the hearers, possessors of Freedom. As the disputes expose the ultimate weakness both of Satan and Death, that very weakness reveals the power of freedom, as Ephrem points out at the beginning of the final dispute between Death and Satan:

> Look, Death and the Evil One have proclaimed your mightiness, [Freedom],

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[35] See *Nis.* 55.25 (Beck, *CNis* II, 82)

[36] *Nis.* 55.26 (Beck, *CNis* II, 82). Satan elsewhere claims the ability to "capture" free will. See his boast to Death in *Nis* 52.10 (Beck, *CNis* II, 74).

[37] See *Nis.* 55.29 (Beck, *CNis* II, 82).

[38] *Nis.* 56.1 (Beck, *CNis* II, 82):
ܗܐ ܚܺܐܪܘܬܐ ܐܓܘܢܟ ܥܡ ܚܺܐܪܘܬܐ ܐܝܬ ܠܗ ܚܶܝܠܐ
ܕܬܣܝܡ ܦܓܘܕܬܐ ܒܟ ܐܢ ܨܒܳܬ݂

[39] See, in particular, *Nis.* 57, in which Death goes through a litany of punishments which Satan will face at the Judgment, corresponding to the ways in which he brought suffering upon biblical characters.

And the Evil One has recalled your faith!
If then these who are opposed to you should be for you
[how] great this is that the persecutors have become heralds![40]

By exposing one another's weaknesses, Death and Satan thus herald the power of Freedom. From this and other similar passages, I believe we can observe what we might call a real ethical thrust, particularly in the "framing elements" of the disputes.

The interwoven themes of the power of freedom and the powerlessness of the disputants seem to be used by Ephrem as opportunities for his own audience. The disputes are "mirrors" that reveal the strength of congregants' freedom when oriented toward good: even Satan can be resisted! In composing precedence disputes, Ephrem seems, I would argue, to be attempting to guide how his audience thinks about issues, to reinforce their Christian identity and shape their moral choices.[41] We miss the point, I believe, if we read these texts as primarily theological in the sense that they served primarily to convey information about doctrines. The goal of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, as Kees den Biesen helpfully describes it, "was not to provide information but initiation."[42]

The Disputes between Death and Satan and the *Nisibene Hymns*

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[40] *Nis.* 56.4-5 (Beck, *CNis* II, 83):

ܗܘ ܐܝܟ ܐܗܘ ܗ ܐܢܐ ܘܐܪܟܣ ܐܝܢ ܝܢܘܪܘܗܐ
ܐܗ ܐܘܪܟܣ ܠ ܕܪܟ ܐܟܣܚ ܡܗ ܒܗ ܟܐ
ܪܒܠܣܚ ܝܩܘܗܘ ܡܡܗ ܪܠܚܡܘܠܕ ܘܗ ܢܗ ܝܐ
ܐܗ ܐܢ ܐܪܒܐ ܡ ܝ̇ ܗ ܡ ܘܗ ܢܐܝܘ̈ܪ

[41] Averil Cameron's description of "Christian rhetoric" in the non-technical sense provides us with a helpful model, especially in her assessment of late ancient Christian homiletics, for how we might interpret Ephrem's *madrāšê*. She situates Christian liturgical preaching along with other characteristic forms of public life well-known to Late Antique scholars: panegyric, ritual acclamations, competing slogans, etc. In other words, like these "secular" forms of public rhetoric, Christian discourse relied heavily upon repetition and performance to reinforce Christian identity. We might view Ephrem's aims here in this sense: as more about shaping Christian identity than teaching doctrine. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, 79.

[42] Kees Den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006), 90.

This brief examination of a small subset of the *Nisibene Hymns* bears consequence for how we are to understand the *Nisibene Hymns* as a whole. Long before Beck published his edition of the *Carmina Nisibena* – beginning with Bickell's *editio princeps*[43] – some scholars have played up the "eschatological" or "theological" character of the second half of the *Nisibene* cycle, to be contrasted with the "historical" character of the first.[44] For Beck himself, the "*Verschiedenheit des Inhaltes*" warranted the publication of his edition in two separate volumes.[45] At the other end of the spectrum, A.S. Rodrigues Pereira[46] and Jouko Martikainen have argued that the Nisibene cycle should be understood as a unified whole, and the descent to Sheol motif should be understood as operative for the entire collection.[47] Martikainen went so far as to situate these hymns "during the stay of Christ in Sheol."[48] Though bold, such a thesis must be tempered to do justice to the complexity of the *Nisibene Hymns* as a collection. While there are the stylistic similarities between *Nis.* 35-42 (which do appear to be set in Sheol, and involve a dramatic retelling of Christ's descent), and *Nis.* 52-68 which might prompt us to connect these two subsections of the *Nisibene Hymn,* the fact of the presence of Death and Satan as characters does not imply that hymns 52-68 have much to do with the descent to Sheol motif prominent in *Nis.* 35-42. In fact, the temporal setting of these latter hymns is not at all clear; we should be

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[43] Gustav Bickell, ed., *S. Ephraemi Syri Carmina Nisibena additis prolegomenis et supplemento lexicorum syriacorum, primus ediditt, vertit, explicavit Dr. Gustavus Bickell* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866).

[44] A fairly typical example of this can be seen in the introduction to Dominique Cerbelaud's French translation of the *Nisibene Hymns.* See

[45] Beck, "Introduction", *Carmina Nisibena* Vol. 1, ii. Beck characterized the first part as "historical" and the second as "didactic poetry" (*lehrhaft dichterischen*), a dichotomy helpfully problematized in a recent essay by Muehlberger: Ellen Muehlberger, "Negotiations with Death: Ephrem's Control of Death in Dialogue," in *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, and Edward Jay Watts (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012), 23–34.

[46] A.S. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry (c. 100 BCE- C. 600 CE): Selected Jewish, Christian and Samaritan Poems*, Studia Semitica Neerlandica 34 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997), 113.

[47] See Ibid, 113.

[48] Jouko Martikainen, "Some Remarks about the Carmina Nisibena as a Literary and a Theological Source," in *Symposium Syriacum, 1972: Célebré Dans Les Jours 26-31 Octobre 1972 À l'Institut Pontifical Oriental de Rome*, ed. Ignatius Ortiz de Urbina, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 197 (Rome: Pontifical Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1974), 345–352; 350.

cautious about applying a cohesive chronology to these hymns, as Gary Anderson reminds us.[49]

If there is a sense in which the descent to Sheol motif plays into these disputes, it is in the

identity of the two characters themselves – enemies defeated by Christ as the result of his descent

to Sheol. However, their appearance here does not direct us to a particular narrative setting, such

as during the descent itself.

The apparent aims of these particular dispute poems in the *Nisibene Hymns* as outlined

above should caution us from making generalizations about the collection as a whole. As we

have seen, though the precedence disputes between Death and Satan in the *Nisibene Hymns*

involve personifications of "eschatological" figures, which Ephrem uses to remind his hearers of

the future hope of the resurrection and the judgment, the "eschatology" of these dispute hymns is

much more oriented toward human experience. Eschatological themes and characters elevate the

struggle of human beings against sin onto a mythic plane, in which the hymn-writer seeks to spur

them to orient their freedom toward repentance.

This essay has attempted to contribute to our understanding of the contexts of Ephrem's

madrāšê; though we know almost nothing for certain, audience-centric components such as the

framing elements examined in this study are present in the texts. From further incorporating the

hymns' relations with their audiences, we may discern some insights into how Ephrem shaped

his rhetoric and the various stylistic forms he used to communicate in the *madrāšê*. Though it is

clear that "dramatic" hymns such as the precedence disputes never developed into anything like

medieval western liturgical drama,[50] the liturgical setting of these hymns does warrant additional

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[49] In an article comparing Ephrem and John Milton's accounts of the fall of Satan, Anderson draws his Ephremic source material predominately from *Nis.* 35-42. See Gary A. Anderson, "The Fall of Satan in the Thought of St. Ephrem and John Milton," *Hugoye* 3, no. 1 (2000): 3–27, 21.

[50] See Averil Cameron, "Disputations, Polemical Literature, and the Formation of Opinion in the Early Byzantine Period," in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, ed. G.J. Reinink and H.L.J. Vanstiphout (Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1991), 91–108, 98, and Brock, "Syriac Dialogue Poems: Marginalia to a Recent Edition."

consideration; as has been noted elsewhere,[51] a good deal of potential may lie in applying

performative language theory to interpreting Ephrem's *madrāšê*, much as Laura Lieber has so

skillfully applied it to the study of the *piyyutim*.[52]

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[51] See Wickes, "Out of Books, a World: The Scriptural Poetics of Ephrem's Hymns on Faith", 51.

[52] See Laura Lieber, "The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry," *Journal of Religion* 90 (2010): 119–47.

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