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# *Between Liturgy and School: Reassessing the Performative Context of Ephrem's Madrašê*

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JEFFREY WICKES

Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) wrote in a variety of genres—commentaries, verse and prose homilies, and stanzaic songs, called *madrāšê*. The bulk of his corpus consists in *madrāšê*. While these works are generally assumed to have occupied a liturgical context, this assumption is based in large part on a biographical tradition that was written after Ephrem's death, and that has come to be seen as problematic in many ways. Certain of Ephrem's cycles do connote liturgical settings, but others lack any such clues. This paper argues for a reassessment of the performative context of Ephrem's *madrāšê*. It looks, first, at the external literary witness to the liturgical performance of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, and shows how the picture of Ephrem presented in the biographical tradition has come to dominate our view of the *madrāšê*'s performative context. It then turns to Ephrem's *madrāšê* themselves, and argues that they suggest a blurred performative space between liturgy and study circle. It fleshes out this blurred performative space by examining comparative early Christian evidence for the use of songs in educational settings. It concludes by suggesting ways that this re-reading of Ephrem's *madrāšê* contributes to the broader field of early Christian studies.

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## INTRODUCTION

The last century of scholarship on Ephrem has proceeded as an unmaking of his classical portrait.<sup>1</sup> Ephrem himself seems to have been anomalous in the fourth century: celibate, but not quite a monk; an ecclesial author, but neither bishop, priest, nor radical ascetic; a teacher, but in songs composed for women.<sup>2</sup> The Ephrem of fourth-century Nisibis and Edessa has been pieced together deliberately, mosaic-like, over the last sixty years, on the basis of what are now recognized as his authentic works—these discovered primarily through the tireless textual excavations of Edmund Beck, undertaken between the 1940s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

In the years following Ephrem's death in 373, this Syriac poet received a makeover in Greek, Latin, and Syriac sources, as ideals of sanctity shifted and moved from Egypt throughout the rest of the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> Ephrem

1. For the development of the Syriac biographical tradition, see Joseph P. Amar, "Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and Greek Bias in the *Vita* Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," *OCP* 58 (1992): 123–56 and *The Syriac Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian*, ed. Joseph P. Amar, CSCO 629/630 (Louvain: Peeters, 2011).

2. For modern biographies of Ephrem, see Sebastian P. Brock, *St Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 7–75; A. de Halleux, "Saint Éphrem le Syrien," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 14 (1983): 328–55; Christian Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron* (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 13–27; Edward G. Mathews and Joseph P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 12–56; Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 1–48; B. Outier, "Saint Éphrem d'après ses biographies et ses oeuvres," *Parole de l'Orient* 4 (1973): 11–33.

3. Edmund Beck began the process of publishing critical editions of the works of Ephrem, along with German translations, in 1955 with the publication of the *Madrāšê on Faith* (*Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide*, CSCO 154/155, *Scriptores Syri* [SS] 73/74 [Louvain: Peeters, 1955]). He continued his editorial work until 1979, when he published the pseudonymous *Mêmre on Holy Week* (*Ephraem Syrus: Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctam*, CSCO 412/413, SS 181/182 [Louvain: Peeters, 1979]). Generally speaking, he edited the works he took to be authentic first (from 1955 to 1966), and then turned to those works he deemed inauthentic, or only partially authentic (from 1970 to 1979). In the same year that Beck published his edition of the *Madrāšê on Faith*, R. M. Tounneau published his edition, with Latin translation, of the commentaries *On Genesis* and *On Exodus* (*Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Comentarii*, CSCO 152/153, SS 71/72, [Louvain: Peeters, 1955]). For a complete listing of the editions of Ephrem, see Sebastian Brock, "St. Ephrem: A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations," <http://syri.ac/brock/ephrem> and Kees den Biesen, *Annotated Bibliography of Ephrem the Syrian* (self-published, 2011). Beck's versions provide the texts used in this paper. All translations in this paper are my own, unless otherwise noted.

4. See Amar, "Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and Greek Bias," 123–42.

became a recluse, educated only by the Holy Spirit, through the words of the Psalter. He traveled to Egypt and Cappadocia, where he met, and impressed, the towering saints who dwelt there. He learned to speak Greek solely by divine intervention. And, as the story goes, right at the end of his life, and only because occasion demanded it, he wrote a few hymns.<sup>5</sup>

As scholars have used Ephrem's genuine *madrāšê* to brush away these anachronistic layers, they have come increasingly to recognize the importance of the performative context of these *madrāšê*. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. The earliest modern literature on Ephrem generally took for granted the liturgical context of the *madrāšê*, but otherwise paid it little attention. Most simply affirmed that Ephrem's *madrāšê* were sung liturgically by women's choirs, with a soloist on a raised platform—a *bema*—in the center of the church.<sup>6</sup>

In the past twenty-five years, however, scholars have increasingly stressed the public and liturgical setting of the *madrāšê* as a key to their rhetorical function. Following Peter Brown, who called them the “equivalent of the

5. Ephrem's career as hymnist only begins in chapter 30 of the *Syriac Life*.

6. In Edmund Beck's classic study of the *madrāšê*, he mentioned simply that they were sung (“Ephräms des Syrerers Hymnik,” in *Liturgie und Dichtung. Ein interdisziplinäres Kompendium. Gualtero Duerig annum vitae septuagesimum feliciter complenti*, ed. H. Becker and R. Kaczynski, vol. 1 [St Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1983], 345–79). A. de Halleux (“Saint Éphrem le Syrien,” 328), following Jerome's fifth-century report, affirmed that at a certain point the *madrāšê* were introduced into the liturgy. Sebastian Brock added to this that the *madrāšê* were “sung by soloists, while a fixed response was provided by a choir after each stanza” (“Syriac and Greek Hymnography: Problems of Origins,” *SP* 16 [1985]: 78). Robert Murray (*Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study of Early Syriac Tradition*, Reprint Edition [Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004], 30) and Kathleen McVey (“Were the Earliest Madrāšê Songs or Recitations?,” in *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers*, eds. G. J. Reinink and A. C. Klugkist [Louvain: Peeters, 1999], 185) both emphasized that the *madrāšê* were sung by women's choirs. Ute Possekell nuanced this picture slightly, suggesting that the *madrāšê* were “mostly occasional pieces . . . written for a particular festival, to adorn the worship ceremony, or to fight a heretical belief” (*Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* [Louvain: Peeters, 1999], 9). Intriguingly, she also implied that not all the *madrāšê* had liturgical functions: “The *madrāšê*, or at least some of them, had a liturgical function” (emphasis mine). Andrew Palmer has pointed out the role the *bema* played in the performance of the *madrāšê*, based on an allusion in the Armenian *Mêmrê on Nisibis* (“A Single Human Being Divided in Himself: Ephraim the Syrian, the Man in the Middle,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1, no. 2 [1998]: 128–29). Gerhard Rouwhorst has undoubtedly given the most extensive treatment of the liturgical context of the *madrāšê*, but focused only on the *Madrāšê on Pascha* (*Les hymnes pascales d'Éphrem de Nisibe*, vol. 1, Supplements to VC 7 [Leiden: Brill, 1989], esp. 195–203).

urban rhetoric of John Chrysostom,” scholars have presented the *madrāšê* as “public events” designed to “win the allegiance of the Syriac-speaking populations” to the Nicene orthodoxy of the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup> In Christine Shepardson’s interpretation, Ephrem’s decidedly public works crafted an audience that “left his church services each week prepared to see a world” that embraced Nicaea and forbade “Christians to celebrate the Jewish Passover.”<sup>8</sup> This emphasis on the public, liturgical role of Ephrem’s *madrāšê* has rightly emphasized their status as musical and catechetical works, shaped by and responding to their audience, in both their form and their content. But it has also overestimated our ability to infer a performative context from the late antique sources about these *madrāšê*, or from the *madrāšê* themselves, and it has presented the *madrāšê* corpus as more monolithic than it actually is.

This article aims to nuance our understanding of Ephrem’s *madrāšê* as public, liturgical compositions. I begin by asking why scholars have come to identify the audience of the *madrāšê* so closely with a liturgical setting. This question takes me to the late ancient sources for the performance of the *madrāšê*. These sources, reflecting post-Ephremic monastic biases, aim to depict a firm dichotomy between Ephrem’s prose writings for ascetic circles, and his poetic writings for women and the urban population. But the sources also hint at a blurring of the boundaries between the liturgical and the scholastic. I then turn to Ephrem’s *madrāšê*, arguing that the corpus itself suggests its *Sitz im Leben* in what I call a blurred performa-

7. See Sidney H. Griffith, “St. Ephraem, Bar Dayṣān and the Clash of *Madrāšê* in Aram: Readings in St. Ephraem’s *Hymni contra Haereses*,” *The Harp* 21 (2006): 454. For Peter Brown’s comparison of Ephrem to Chrysostom, see *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 329. Regarding the public nature of the *madrāšê*, Joseph Amar says that Ephrem’s “liturgical compositions were public events in the church in his day” (*Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, xii).

8. *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem’s Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 1–2. Shepardson never addresses Ephrem’s performative context outright. But her interpretation assumes that the *madrāšê* shaped the religious horizons of the general population of late antique Nisibis and Edessa. When she speaks specifically of the *Madrāšê on Pascha*, her interpretation make sense, because, as I would argue, they *were* performed liturgically (though we still need to do some work to understand what that liturgical audience might have looked like). At the same time, her monograph draws equally on the *Madrāšê on Faith*, which, I would argue, were, for the most part, *not* performed liturgically. This manner of speaking collapses and makes monolithic the *madrāšê*’s performative context, but ignores the diversity of the *madrāšê* corpus itself and the biases of the biographical tradition that informs us of their performance.

tive space between liturgy and study circle. To flesh out this blurred performative space, I draw on comparative evidence for the use of metered songs in other late antique communities committed to study and prayer. I conclude by suggesting how this re-reading of Ephrem's *madrāšê* can help us better contextualize him within the early Christian world.

## LATE ANCIENT SOURCES FOR EPHREM'S PERFORMATIVE CONTEXT

Between the fourth and sixth centuries, there developed a biographical tradition for Ephrem, first in Latin and Greek, then in Syriac.<sup>9</sup> One reason scholars have come to associate Ephrem's *madrāšê* so singularly with a liturgical context, and to assume a popular, non-monastic audience for that context, is that this perspective seems to be articulated clearly in these earliest sources about Ephrem. This tradition developed a particular picture of Ephrem *as author*, and argued for particular communal contexts for his literary works. This portrait emerges in a number of sources, five of which are especially relevant to our inquiry—Jerome's *On Famous Men*, Palladius's *Lausiaca History*, Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History*, Jacob of Sarug's *Mémorâ on Ephrem*, and the *Syriac Life of Ephrem*.<sup>10</sup> Three aspects of the tradition articulated in these sources are noteworthy. First, the biographical tradition develops the idea that Ephrem wrote *madrāšê* in response to a heretical use of the same genre. Second, the tradition argues that Ephrem performed these *madrāšê* publicly because they were meant to capture the imagination of a non-elite, non-monastic public. Finally, the biographical tradition presents firm boundaries within Ephrem's corpus—between the scriptural commentaries and treatises that he composed for a small, monastic audience, and the *madrāšê* that he composed for a large, popular audience. Yet, as I will argue, in spite of the tradition's construction

9. Because not all Ephrem's biographers addressed his performative context, I do not address certain of these sources, viz., Epiphanius, Theodoret, Pseudo-Amphilocius, and the sayings of Ephrem found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. These sources, and their contribution to the *Syriac Life*, have been ably studied by Joseph Amar (*The Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 630, xvi–xxix).

10. It is Jerome who, only nineteen years after Ephrem's death, in chapter 115 of his *De Viris Illustribus*, first alleges that Ephrem's works were "read publicly after the Scripture reading in some churches." (English translation in *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton, FC 100 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999], 149. The most recent critical edition is Aldo Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Gerolamo: Gli uomini illustri* [Florence: Naldini, 1988].)

of firm boundaries between the monastic and the popular Ephrems, the two Syriac sources—Jacob of Sarug and the *Life*—also point to performative venues that blurred the boundaries between the contexts of monastic study and popular liturgy.

### *Latin and Greek Sources for Ephrem's Life*

Two early sources—Jerome in 392, and Palladius in 420—set the parameters of this biographical tradition. Jerome, in chapter 115 of his *De Viris Illustribus*, first alleges that Ephrem's works were "recited publicly (*publice*) after the scripture reading in some churches."<sup>11</sup> Palladius, about thirty years later, then bifurcates the biographical tradition: he makes no mention of Ephrem's *madrāšê*, or of any liturgical context for his literary life.<sup>12</sup> Rather, Palladius's Ephrem spends the bulk of his life in solitude, quietly contemplating God, only emerging from his "cell" just before his death to provide aid in the midst of a famine in Edessa.

These two Ephrems coalesce in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History*, written sometime in the early- to mid-fifth century, about fifty years after Ephrem's death.<sup>13</sup> It is here, too, that we learn a particular narrative of the origins of Ephrem's hymnody.<sup>14</sup> In *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16.5, Sozomen tells us that, in northern Mesopotamia in the time just before Ephrem, there arose a heretic named Bardaisan. Bardaisan had a son, Harmonios, who immersed himself in "Greek learning" (διὰ τῶν παρ' Ἑλλησι λόγων), and went about voicing his father's heretical teachings in metered, musical works. Some years later, Ephrem found that the citizens of Edessa were

11. Translation slightly altered from Halton, *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men*, 149 (Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Gerolamo*, 216–17). The statement that the writings were recited after the reading of scriptures could imply a homiletic function for the writings, or it could imply that they were read as an antiphonal gloss on scripture, for example, on the Psalms.

12. See Cuthbert Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius: A Critical Discussion Together with Notes on Early Egyptian Monachism*, 2 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), 126–27. On the Syriac version of the *Lausiac History*, see *The Book of Paradise, Being the Histories and Sayings of the Monks and Ascetics of the Egyptian Desert, by Palladius, Hieronymus, and Others*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge, 2 vols. (London: W. Drugulin, 1904). Ephrem's biography is given in English (1:277–79), and in Syriac (2:224–26).

13. For the text of the *Ecclesiastical History*, see Sozomenos *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. Günter Christian Hansen, *Fontes Christiani* 73.1–4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004). English translation adapted from Philip Schaff, ed., *Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories*, NPNF vol. 2 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890).

14. Sozomen first mentions Ephrem in 3.14, but only briefly: in speaking of the Edessan ascetic Julian, he says that Ephrem penned his *Vita*.

devoted to Harmonios's tunes, and feared that, through the melodies, the teachings would embed themselves in their hearers' souls. So, though he had no formal training, he devoted himself to the study of Harmonios's meters, but wrote new, orthodox words for the tunes. These songs the church adopted, and, Sozomen concludes, "from that period the Syrians sang the odes of Ephrem according to the Harmonian meter (κατὰ τὸν νόμον τῆς Ἀρμονίου ᾠδῆς)."

Two aspects of Sozomen's narrative deserve mention. First, Sozomen bifurcates Ephrem's life as an author, and, in so doing, bifurcates the audience for which he performed. While Sozomen begins his narrative by speaking of Ephrem's hymnody, he follows that report with a description of the "monastic" Ephrem. According to Sozomen, Ephrem avoided the sight of women, fasted severely in his monastic cell, and, as in Palladius, emerged only at the end of his life to aid the poor. The monastic Ephrem also wrote very little—only once, to record an encounter that taught him always to stare at the ground in the presence of women. Unlike the later Syriac *Life of Ephrem*, Sozomen makes no attempt to meld these two Ephrems.

Second, the character of Harmonios is undoubtedly fictional.<sup>15</sup> Ephrem's *Madraṣē against Heresies* do make clear that Bardaisan—a third century Syriac speculative philosopher—had a reputation as a hymnist, and that Ephrem was particularly nervous about the popularity of his hymns.<sup>16</sup> But Sozomen's introduction of Harmonios represents simple pro-Hellenistic rhetoric on the author's part: Harmonios's presence demonstrates the Greek origins of a type of non-Greek poetry that, beginning in the fifth century, would come to exert a profound influence on Greek Christian poetry.<sup>17</sup>

In Sozomen we see the development of a particular authorial image of Ephrem: he is, on the one hand, a monk who lives in seclusion and avoids literary activities. On the other hand, he is a public hymnist who writes popular works to counter the popular heresies of his time. This dual portrait of Ephrem will take on canonical status in the sixth-century Syriac

15. See Brock, "Syriac and Greek Hymnography," 77–81. See also Han J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Company, 1966), 180–83.

16. None of Bardaisan's hymnic material is extant. But Ephrem says he wrote 150 psalms in imitation of David, and in *Against Heresies* 55 he quotes fragments of Bardaisan's writings. On Ephrem's critique of Bardaisan, see Griffith, "Clash," 458–72.

17. As Brock succinctly puts it, "Sozomen could hardly deny the fame of Syriac poets such as Ephrem, but this was worrying to a loyal Greek speaker, to whom music and metre were the preserves of hellenic culture. Accordingly, Bardaisan is accredited with this son Harmonios . . . and in this way Sozomen neatly makes poetry in barbaric Syriac . . . the tributary of Greek culture" ("Syriac and Greek Hymnography," 79–80).

*Life of Ephrem*. But before we turn to that source, we should proceed chronologically to a slightly earlier source—the *Mêmârâ on Mar Ephrem* by Jacob of Sarug (ca. 450–521).

### *Jacob of Sarug's Mêmârâ on Mar Ephrem*

Jacob's *Mêmârâ* was probably composed sometime before 494, in connection with the feast of Ephrem, which fell on the first Saturday in Lent.<sup>18</sup> The work does not appear indebted to the developing Greek biographical tradition of Ephrem. From a historical perspective, Jacob's short *Mêmârâ on Ephrem* is astonishing in its placement of women's choirs at the center of Ephrem's communal ministry.<sup>19</sup> Jacob devotes much of the *mêmârâ* to a theological justification of the existence of these women's choirs. His women are "teachers among the congregations" (*malpānyātâ da-knûšâtâ*) (line 42). They "sing praises with their *madrâšê*" (line 46). To the extent that Jacob anchors this hymnic performance in a specific liturgical context, it is that of the Paschal feast (lines 52–114): reflective of the women musicians in Exod 15.20–21, Ephrem's choirs sing at the feast of Pascha to proclaim the new order ushered in by Christ. Aside from noting Ephrem's general institution of women's choirs, and their specific performance in the feast of Pascha, Jacob provides no specific details with which to reconstruct the liturgical use of the *madrâšê*.

Jacob does not divide Ephrem's life among small, monastic and large, non-monastic audiences; all of his teaching operates in a public context. But Jacob does suggest a very basic division between Ephrem's types of teaching: he taught to proclaim the resurrection (lines 52–114), and he taught to defeat heresies (lines 115–125 and 152–184).<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, when Jacob speaks of Ephrem's proclamation of the resurrection, he speci-

18. See *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, ed. Joseph P. Amar, PO 47, no. 209 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 15–18. On this homily, see also Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Woman's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8 (July 2005): 125–49, esp. 132–33.

19. On this aspect of the *mêmârâ*, see Kathleen McVey, "Ephrem the *kitharode* and Proponent of Women: Jacob of Serug's Portrait of a Fourth-Century Churchman for the Sixth-Century Viewer and Its Significance for the Twenty-First-Century Ecumenist," in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology*, ed. S. T. Kimbrough (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 229–53.

20. Lines 115–151 engage in a lengthy discourse to his audience, who appears to become weary at his introduction of Ephrem the heresiologist: "Perhaps you might say, 'Your story has strayed! / Extol Ephrem! Do not enumerate heresies in your homily!'" There follows a lengthy reminder that his audience should embrace learning without growing weary.

fies the liturgical context—that of the Paschal feast. But when he speaks of Ephrem’s anti-heretical activity, he does not specify a liturgical context. Rather, he says that Ephrem “led women down to the doctrinal disputes” (*’aḥet l-neššê l-darrâ d-malḡpânûtâ*, line 152). Jacob provides no more detail about these “doctrinal disputes,” but his language suggests some other performative context than that of the liturgy.

These different traditions develop into a narrative whole in the sixth-century Syriac *Life of Ephrem*. It is also through this document that the neat division of Ephrem’s audience into distinct categories of small, monastic and large, non-monastic becomes canonical.<sup>21</sup> Yet, as with Jacob’s *mêmra*, the *Life* simultaneously suggests a blurring of these same boundaries.

### *The Syriac Life of Ephrem*

Jacob’s portrait stands in contrast to the biographical tradition that was developing in Greek sources. Sometime in the early sixth century, these different strands would be brought together in the Syriac *Life of Ephrem*.<sup>22</sup> Like Sozomen in the fifth century, the Syriac *Life* portrays Ephrem as an author of prose works for consumption by small, monastic audiences, and poetic works for a large, non-monastic public (though performed by consecrated virgins). Yet, unlike in Sozomen’s account, the monastic Ephrem dominates the Syriac *Life*. In the first twenty-nine chapters of the forty-two chapter work, the *Life* confines Ephrem’s literary activities to scriptural commentaries and the occasional anti-heretical tract, written for small, male, monastic circles outside the city of Edessa.

Ephrem’s hymnody is introduced in chapter thirty: after traveling to Egypt to meet Abba Bishoi, and Cappadocia to meet Basil, Ephrem returns to Edessa, only to find it deep in the mire of heresy. Within the *Life*, Ephrem becomes aware of the danger of heresy when he stumbles upon a book of the teachings of Bardaisan and hears the catchy tunes constructed on

21. This process was aided, of course, by the translation of Palladius into Syriac.

22. Joseph Amar suggests that the *Life* came together “soon after the middle of the sixth century” (*Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, v). The Syriac *Life* survives complete in four manuscripts: Vat. Sir. 117 (“V”), Paris Syr. 235 (“P”), BL 9384 (“L”), and BL 4404 (“L1”). It is provided in a redacted form in many more manuscripts; Amar consults seven of the most important of these redactions (see Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, vi–xvi). One of these redactions, Damascus Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate 12/17 (“D”), is of particular importance to this paper: it preserves the lengthiest testimony to the performance of Ephrem’s *madrâšê* by women’s choirs. This manuscript, dated to the twelfth century, is also one of the earliest witnesses to the *Life* of Ephrem (see Amar’s stemma, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, xvi).

their basis. As in Sozomen, the *Life* identifies these tunes as the work of Bardaisan's son Harmonios. The *Life* then states:

Seeing these heresies, and recognizing that their entire doctrine was foul, the blessed one feared that innocent sheep would be captivated by their alluring sounds (*bnāt qālê maḥtaḥtâ*). Aglow with the radiance of the Holy Spirit, he armed himself against them . . . He took the arrangement of the melodies and songs (*nsab leh haw mlahmûtâ d-qālê w-qînâtâ*) and mixed into them the fear of God, and offered to his hearers an antidote at once agreeable and wholesome.<sup>23</sup>

Echoing Jacob's portrait, the *Life* says that Ephrem taught these hymns to the daughters of the covenant, combining choir practice with more general catechesis. These daughters of the covenant, the *Life* continues, would gather in the church each morning and evening to learn the hymns, and would sing them in the liturgy, at martyr shrines, and in funeral processions:

He appointed teachers (*'aqîm b-hên malpānyātâ*) among all the daughters of the covenant who regularly came to the holy, catholic church, and taught them *madrāšê*. Evenings and mornings they would gather in church before the service (*tešmeštâ*). And at the martyrs' shrines (*b-bêt sâhdwātâ*) and in funeral processions (*b-lwayyātâ 'nîdê*) they would sing.<sup>24</sup>

The Syriac *Life* makes three overt claims about the public setting of Ephrem's *madrāšê*. It argues, first, that Ephrem wrote his *madrāšê* only at the end of a long career occupied with more philosophically respectable genres (that is, scriptural commentaries and polemical treatises); second, that Ephrem only wrote hymnody because the songs of his heretical opponents were attracting the devotion of people in Edessa; and third, that Ephrem wrote the commentaries and treatises for monastics, while he wrote the later *madrāšê* primarily for the general public, though to be performed by consecrated virgins.<sup>25</sup> On the whole, this sixth century work has not stood up well to scholarly scrutiny.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, I would suggest that

23. *Life of Ephrem* 31a. This chapter is only attested in two manuscripts, P and D. This quotation is from P. This translation is based on Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 630, 76.

24. *Life of Ephrem* 31a, ms D. This quotation is adapted from Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 630, 77–78.

25. This is articulated especially clearly in D: “. . . the simple folk (*'ammâ pšîttâ*) of the city were being captivated by [the heretics'] alluring sounds . . .” The claim is somewhat mollified, however in P, which says that Ephrem “also [taught] those outside the city and those who were living in the mountains” (Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, 78).

26. Amar, the editor of the Syriac manuscript tradition, has stated the position most bluntly: “The Syriac *Life of Ephrem* preserves virtually no historically reliable

there is serious reason to doubt the accuracy of the first three points—that Ephrem wrote the *madrāšê* late in his life (after already writing commentaries and treatises), that the existence of heretical hymnody compelled him to write his own orthodox songs, and that the audiences for his works can be divided into tidy categories of small, monastic, non-liturgical, on the one hand, and large, non-monastic, liturgical on the other.

The *Life* presents Ephrem as a consummate monk: he writes in monastic genres for monastics, and only turns to the genre of the *madrāšâ* at the end of his life, when absolutely forced to do so by the threat of heresy. In reality, this aspect of the *Life*'s picture contradicts most of what we know of Ephrem's literary life: ninety percent of Ephrem's corpus is in verse, and seventy-five percent of that consists of *madrāšê*. In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Ephrem admits to accepting the task of writing a commentary begrudgingly. In reality, Ephrem excelled at the hymnic genre, and devoted his energies to it. In this respect, the *Life*'s portrait of Ephrem's hymnody seems to reflect an age-old prejudice against newly composed music and hymnody, but which was articulated anew in sixth-century monastic literature.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that Ephrem's corpus arose directly in response to that of Bardaisan (not to mention his fictional son) seems unlikely as well. Ephrem very clearly did see his hymnic project as closely related to, and in competition with, that of Bardaisan's. But nowhere does Ephrem indicate that he wrote *madrāšê* simply because Bardaisan did. Rather, as Brock has shown, Ephrem and Bardaisan both wrote *madrāšê* because, already by the fourth century, it was a respected, even if still inchoate, Aramaic genre.<sup>28</sup>

The *Life* further divides Ephrem's authorial work into neat categories of prose works for small circles, and poetic works for large, popular audiences. This radical division of Ephrem's literary output reflects later religious concerns. As has been well documented, the quasi-monastic

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information about the circumstances of his life or the social and cultural context of his work" (Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, v).

27. Sebastian Brock notes the appearance of this resistance in sixth- and seventh-century Syriac sources (*The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 665). On the reaction among the monastics of Egypt and Sinai, see Stig Simeon Frøyshov, "La réticence à l'hymnographie chez des anachorètes de l'Égypte et du Sinai de 6<sup>e</sup> au 8<sup>e</sup> siècles," in *L'Hymnographie: Conférences Saint-Serge XLVI<sup>e</sup>, Paris 1999* (Rome: Roma Ed. Liturgiche, 2000): 229–45.

28. This is not to deny the fact that Ephrem's *madrāšê* represent something new, but that their sophistication suggests that Ephrem stood within a tradition, one which predated Bardaisan and Mani. See Brock, "Syriac and Greek Hymnography," 78–79.

community of which Ephrem was likely a part represented an urban ascetic movement.<sup>29</sup> These urban ascetics were not cloistered or secluded, but carried out their ascetic commitments in civic contexts. Shortly after Ephrem's death, Syriac ascetics rewrote their tradition in light of particularly Egyptian ascetic values. In light of this rewriting, there developed the ideal of the monk as one who had fled urban society. It is this later ascetic ideal that the *Life* reflects. Ephrem's authorial career is simply mapped onto this later monastic schema. In reality, the neat division between a monastic audience that is small and literarily focused on prose works, and a non-monastic audience that is large and focused on hymnic works misrepresents the communal structure of Ephrem's time.<sup>30</sup>

This latter point brings us to one of the more compelling details of this passage of the *Life*. While the *Life* clearly distinguishes liturgical and non-liturgical literary contexts, it also suggests a blurring of these boundaries, as well as the boundaries between the liturgical and the pedagogical. The *Life* alleges that Ephrem would meet with the daughters of the covenant every morning and evening "before the service" (*tešmeštâ*) to teach them the songs that they would perform in the services. It alleges, further, that Ephrem would appoint "teachers" (*malpānyātâ*) among these women. This offers a different way to imagine the context of the *madrāšê*, in which the division between classroom and liturgy blurs. The Syriac *Life* and Jacob's *mēmrrâ* both point to contexts in which women are taught *madrāšê* as part of a larger project of catechesis. In Jacob's *mēmrrâ*, this is connected to "doctrinal disputes." In the Syriac *Life*, this is identified as pre-liturgical catechesis. Neither of these sources provide specific details about the performative contexts they identify. But these two points cohere with the evidence of Ephrem's actual *madrāšê* corpus, as well as comparative evidence from the Eastern Mediterranean for contexts of liturgy and school.

### EPHREM'S MADRĀŠĒ

The Syriac *Life of Ephrem* strongly demarcates the audiences of Ephrem's scriptural commentaries and liturgical hymns, on the one hand, and the

29. See Sidney Griffith's "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220–48; George Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church," *OCP* 39 (1973): 419–44; Robert Murray, "The Exhortation to Candidates for Ascetical Vows At Baptism in the Ancient Syriac Church," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974): 59–80.

30. Amar, "Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and Greek Bias," 123–126 and *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 630, vii–x. I address this in more detail below.

role those genres played in his literary life, on the other. According to the *Life*, Ephrem wrote the scriptural commentaries for small, male, monastic audiences during the first part of his life, and later in life, in response to heretical hymns, he wrote liturgical hymns for large, liturgical gatherings, to be performed by women's choirs. But the *Life's* dichotomy does not reflect the reality of the fourth-century context Ephrem occupied: he was not a reclusive monk, but neither was he an Edessan Chrysostom. He was no bishop, and so the nature of his authority over the Edessan congregation as a whole is questionable. And his *madrāšê* were not sermons; they were metered, philosophically and theologically subtle songs.

I suggest that we can begin to rethink the performative context of these songs in three general ways. First, we can point to the variety of content manifest in the *madrāšê* and see how this content does or does not map onto liturgical contexts. Second, we can note that many of Ephrem's *madrāšê* lack liturgical cues entirely. Finally, we can resituate the non-liturgical portions of Ephrem's poetic corpus outside the specific context of the liturgy, in the midst of communities involved in lives of prayer and study.

The biographical tradition places Ephrem's *madrāšê* squarely in the context of the liturgy. If we bracket his authentic *madrāšê* from this biographical tradition, what criteria can we establish to identify whether a *madrāšâ* is liturgical? First, and most importantly, a liturgical *madrāšâ* will typically reference a liturgical feast that we know existed in the fourth century. Second, a liturgical *madrāšâ* will draw on scriptural lections connected with a feast.<sup>31</sup> Third, a liturgical *madrāšâ* will repeatedly refer to liturgical rituals, primarily baptism and the Eucharist. While these criteria are by no means foolproof, they do allow us to speak clearly about what we mean when we call a *madrāšâ* "liturgical."<sup>32</sup>

Using these criteria, it immediately becomes apparent that a number of Ephrem's *madrāšê* can indeed be considered "liturgical." The *Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread* consistently refer to a known liturgical feast (Easter) and base themselves on underlying scriptural lections (either a passion

31. Given that scripture would be read in liturgical as well as scholastic settings, a *madrāšâ* that focuses on scripture cannot be considered liturgical based upon that fact alone. Rather, its use of scripture must be combined with some other liturgical element, e.g., festal references, or references to ritual actions.

32. These criteria admittedly do not allow us to locate *madrāšê* within the services of the daily office, but there are not really criteria that would allow us to do so. Perhaps we could trace references to Psalms, or references to times of day, or the lighting of lamps in the evening, but this would leave us on very speculative ground.

narrative, the Passover and exodus narratives from Exodus, or both).<sup>33</sup> All exhibit very simple meters and syntax, and have as one of their core themes a critique of ritual practice.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the *Madrāšê on Nativity* consistently indicate their use in a service for the nativity, and are replete with allusions to scriptural lections.<sup>35</sup> Ephrem even playfully hints that his audience might be hearing *Madrāšâ* 1 while struggling to stay awake during a festal vigil (*Madrāšê on Nativity* 1.63–86). This evidence suggests that these *madrāšê* were written for contexts of festal liturgy.

References to baptismal or eucharistic services are more difficult to chart, because Ephrem came to rely heavily on shared ritual practices in his polemics with subordinationist Christians. He thus references these rituals in *madrāšê* that otherwise appear non-liturgical. For example, in *Madrāšâ on Faith* 39, Ephrem speaks in passing, in only one stanza, against those Christians who have “divided” the baptismal font, and have “strayed from that Greatness . . . into which they were baptized.”<sup>36</sup> Within this poem, however, baptism features tangentially, and so it is difficult to argue on the basis of this single reference that *Madrāšê on Faith* 39 arose in a liturgical context. In a poem such as *Madrāšê on Faith* 10, however, the Eucharist provides the central object of the poet’s reflection. It is thus entirely reasonable to imagine that it functioned within some sort of Eucharist service.

On the basis of this quick survey, we can see that some of Ephrem’s *madrāšê* undoubtedly occupied liturgical contexts. Yet, not all of his *madrāšê* display these same liturgical cues. Unlike the material collected in Ephrem’s *on Pascha* and *on Nativity*, or like the eucharistic or baptismal *madrāšê* scattered through his corpus, many of Ephrem’s *madrāšê* never allude to liturgical celebrations, never reference what appear to be underlying scriptural lections, and do not appear to have accompanied

33. *Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread* 4, 5, 8, 9, 15, 17, 18, 19 evidence an underlying reading from Exodus. *Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread* 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21 evidence an underlying reading from a Gospel account of the passion.

34. That is, these *madrāšê* indicate that members of Ephrem’s congregations were attending Jewish Passover services alongside Christian Paschal services, and seek to dissuade them from doing so. On this aspect of the *Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread*, see Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism*, 1. The meter of *Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread* 1–2 is 5+5 / 5+5 / 5+5. *Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread* 3–21 is 4+4 / 4+4.

35. See, for example, *Madrāšâ on Nativity* 1, which draws on Matthew’s genealogy, and messianic prophesies from the Old Testament.

36. *Madrāšâ on Faith* 39 (Beck, CSCO 154, 129).

eucharistic or baptismal gatherings.<sup>37</sup> This point can be made by focusing closely on a single *madrāšê* cycle—the *Madrāšê on Faith*.

The *Madrāšê on Faith* form Ephrem's largest *madrāšê* collection. They consist of eighty-seven *madrāšê*, comprised of thirteen sub-collections, each of which bears its own meter and melody. These *madrāšê* treat a variety of topics, but a lexical and thematic coherency runs throughout the material. All of them appear to have been written as a Syriac response to the christological controversies that followed Nicaea. Though they never mention Nicaea by name, or any specific thinkers affiliated with the controversies, they clearly reflect the theological controversies that ran through the landscape of the mid- to late fourth century Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the *Madrāšê on Pascha* or *on Nativity*, the *Madrāšê on Faith* rarely deal with liturgical topics in explicit ways. Of the eighty-seven *madrāšê* that make up the collection as a whole, only three focus specifically on liturgical topics—*madrāšê* 10 and 12 both reflect upon the Eucharist, and *madrāšê* 59 reflects on baptism. Another twenty-two *madrāšê* reference liturgical feasts or practices in tangential or ambiguous ways. Of these twenty-two *madrāšê*, twelve of them refer tangentially to baptismal or eucharistic practices as a way of polemicizing against variant christological ideas.<sup>39</sup>

37. Two caveats here. First, I do not mean to imply that these documents lack any references to scripture, but that the references to scripture do not anchor the *madrāšê* as scriptural lections generally do, and as the underlying scriptural lections do in the specific cases of the *Madrāšê on Pascha* and *on Nativity*. Second, the *madrāšê* that I treat here do occasionally reference liturgical practices in a loose way. *Madrāšê against Heresies* 3.13, for example, briefly references the speaker's own baptism: "I have been baptized triply in the name of the Holy Spirit." This reference alone, however, in the absence of any other liturgical cues, provides insufficient evidence for this poem's performance in connection with a baptismal service. Rather, here the poet alludes to baptism tangentially, and simply as a component of the broader communal life in which he and his hearers are both involved.

38. The Nicene context of the *Hymns on Faith* has been argued most recently in three places: Emanuel Fiano, "The Trinitarian Controversies in Fourth-Century Edessa," *Le Muséon* 128, nos. 1–2 (2015): 97–99; Christian Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron*, CSCO 616 (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 146–49; Jeffrey Wickes, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: the Hymns on Faith*, FC 130 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2015), 19–43, in which I point to nine aspects of the *Madrāšê on Faith* that bespeak their Trinitarian concerns. Most importantly, note the *madrāšê*'s knowledge of subordinationist readings of Prov 8.22 and Mark 13.32, their reference to the Arian formula "there was a time when he was not," and their polemical emphasis on the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

39. For example, *Madrāšê on Faith* 22 reflects upon the coherency of the Old and New Testaments, and the equal glory of the divine Father and Son. As one piece of this argument, in 22.7 Ephrem exclaims, "Great is the disgrace to the Three, / If someone

The remaining eight simply embed references to the church, baptism, or the Eucharist in an ambiguous way.<sup>40</sup>

This leaves sixty of the collection's eighty-seven *madrāšê* that never refer to liturgical feasts, rituals, or actions, even in the most tangential or ambiguous of ways. Liturgy simply does not factor into the content of these *madrāšê*. What these *madrāšê* do contain, however, is a preoccupation with topics that suggest contexts of study and discussion.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the *Madrāšê on Faith*, for example, Ephrem concerns himself with debates over philosophical ideas. Ute Possekkel has convincingly shown the extent to which Ephrem's thought was immersed in philosophical concepts, noting his articulation of ideas associated with Stoics, Aristotelians, Platonists, and Pythagoreans.<sup>42</sup> What has not been sufficiently emphasized, however, is the extent to which his articulation of these philosophical ideas appears not only in his prose works, but also in his *madrāšê*.

Within the *Madrāšê on Faith*, Ephrem engages in twisting discussions of the nature of the soul, and reflections on how this relates to human knowledge of God.<sup>43</sup> He assesses what we can and cannot know about the

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is baptized with borrowed names." In this line, Ephrem argues that using a Trinitarian baptismal formula, while denying the equal divinity of the Father and the Son, represents a contradiction. The *madrāšâ* as a whole, though, does not concern itself with baptism, and thus presents little evidence that it was performed in connection with a baptismal service. The majority of these references are to baptism: see *Madrāšê on Faith* 13.2, 5; 23.14; 28.12; 39.4; 41.11; 52.3; 62.13; 65.4; 66.6; 67.10; and 77.22. For a use of the Eucharist for the same polemic, see *Madrāšê on Faith* 6.4 and 54.10.

40. *Madrāšê on Faith* 4 presents itself as a scene of heavenly worship, and twice references the birth of Christ. Andrew Palmer has argued that *Madrāšê on Faith* 4 and 5 "seem to imitate the two parts of the anaphora" of Addai and Mari ("The Fourth-Century Liturgy of Edessa Reflected in Ephraim's *Madroshe* 4 and 5 on Faith," in *The Eucharist in Theology and Philosophy: Issues of Doctrinal History in East and West from the Patristic Age to the Reformation*, eds. István Perczel, Réka Forrai, and György Geréby [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005], 319). *Madrāšê on Faith* 11, 14, and 19 use language that sounds vaguely Eucharistic, but which is difficult to place precisely. *Madrāšê on Faith* 21 and 86 do not use liturgical language, but do present themselves as the unified song of the church. *Madrāšê on Faith* 35 repeatedly uses the language of "font," in a way that means equally to invoke baptism, Eucharist, and scripture. Finally, *Madrāšê on Faith* 82.10 references baptism in a non-polemical way.

41. Here it is helpful to remember the didactic connotations of the term *d-r-š*, from which *madrāšâ* derives. While these overtones are muted in Syriac (*d-r-š* means, most basically, "to tread down," but from there develops the sense of "to dispute"), in Babylonian Aramaic its primary meaning is "to interpret (i.e., scripture)," and in Arabic, "to teach," or "to study."

42. Possekkel (*Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts*) identifies five key areas in which Ephrem reflects Greek philosophical ideas: in his understanding of the elements (chapter four), space (chapter six), incorporeals (chapter seven), and sense perception (chapter eight), and in his rejection of *atmosim* (chapter five).

43. *Madrāšê on Faith* 1.

nature of God, and develops complex metaphors to articulate the shared substance of the Trinity.<sup>44</sup> He articulates a philosophically-indebted cosmology and psychology.<sup>45</sup> In general, rather than reflecting on liturgical feasts and lections, many of the *Madrāšê on Faith* proceed through a speculative reflection on the natural world.<sup>46</sup> Ephrem ends most of these *madrāšê* with doxological exclamations, and ultimately doubts human ability to arrive at a complete understanding of God. Yet, this doxological apophaticism reveals an understanding of debates about metaphysics and epistemology taking place elsewhere in the fourth-century Mediterranean.<sup>47</sup> In spite of his denials, these *madrāšê* betray his community's interest in these issues.

Alongside the *madrāšê*'s concern with philosophical issues, they likewise engage in readings of scriptural passages that were debated in the context of the fourth-century Trinitarian controversies, but which have no clear relationship to the developing lectionary.<sup>48</sup> *Madrāšâ on Faith* 53 focuses specifically on how one should interpret Prov 8.22, and generally on how one should read scripture as a whole. Ephrem engages in a similar anti-subordinationist reading of Mark 13.32 in *Madrāšê on Faith* 77–79. Both Prov 8.22 and Mark 13.32 became, in the course of the fourth century, texts that authors worked through to argue against the Son's inferiority to the Father.<sup>49</sup> Unlike Ephrem's exegesis of the passion narrative in the

44. On the kinds of questions one can ask regarding divine nature, see *Madrāšê on Faith* 9.1, 21.4, 23.15, 27.3, 30.2–4, 33.3–8, 36.19, 40.11, 41.4–6, 43.5, 47.4, 50.1–4, 55.10, 57.4, 59.4, 64.2, 65.12, and 72.14. On Trinitarian metaphors, see especially *Madrāšê on Faith* 41.

45. On the cosmology, see *Madrāšê on Faith* 44.3, and on psychology—specifically, memory—see *Madrāšê on Faith* 57.

46. See *Madrāšê on Faith* 11.5–6, 12.7–18, 20, 21.6–11, 25.1–12, 34.3–6, 38.16, 41, 42.11–13, 48.7–10, 58.10–11, and 74.12.

47. On his apparent knowledge of Eunomian debates about the nature and names of God, see Ute Possek, "Ephrem's Doctrine of God," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. A. B. McGowan et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 195–237, and Jeffrey Wickes, "Mapping the Literary Landscape of Ephrem's Theology of Divine Names," *DOP* 69 (2015): 1–13.

48. For a recent summary of the fourth-century development of the lectionary, see Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 99–102. On the particularities of the Syriac lectionary system, see Willem Baars, *New Syro-Hexaplaric Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1968); Francis Crawford Burkitt, *The Early Syriac Lectionary System* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923); K. D. Jenner, "The Development of Syriac Lectionary Systems: A Discussion of the Opinion of P. Kannookadan," *The Harp* 10, no. 1 (1997): 9–24; Pauly Kannookadan, *The East Syriac Lectionary: An Historico-Liturgical Study* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1991).

49. On the use of the verses in the debates, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 110.

*Madrāšê on Unleavened Bread*, or prophetic passages in the *Madrāšê on Nativity*, here Ephrem works through passages discussed and debated elsewhere in polemical treatises, but does so in musical form. Likewise, in *Madrāšê on Faith* 6, he constructs a dense argument for reading Genesis 1 and 2 as evidence for the Trinity. In these *madrāšê*, Ephrem uses the genre to engage his audience in academic and pedagogical discussions of problematic texts. As with Ephrem's concerns with philosophical ideas, this evidence, combined with the absence of liturgical cues, suggests an environment of debate surrounding philosophical and exegetical ideas.

The "us" to which Ephrem repeatedly refers in these *madrāšê* seems to have been one deeply invested in teaching roles within the community.<sup>50</sup> Often in these non-liturgical *madrāšê*, he reflects on the place of teaching and teachers generally. The root *y-l-p*—"to learn," or, in its Pael form, "to teach"—appears in the *Madrāšê on Faith* approximately seventy-five times. The abstract noun *yûlpānâ*, "teaching," appears thirty times. Using this language, Ephrem constructs teaching as a reified object, granted only by God: "Turn to me your teaching, for I have sought to avert myself, / but I see that I have harmed myself. My soul gains nothing / except through converse with you. Glory to the study of you (*šûbhâ l-hegyānāk*)!"<sup>51</sup> *Madrāšê on Faith* 23.9–10 appears to speak to students who will then compose their own songs to teach others:

Measure your words, O blameless voices (*qālê d-lâ met'adlîn*).  
 Measure and sing songs undisputed,  
 That your song, my son, may be a delight  
 To the servants of your Lord, and your Lord repay you.  
 Do not sing damage to humanity.  
 Do not, through discussion, divide those who are united.  
 Do not place a sword—that is, investigation—  
 Among the simple, who have believed simply.<sup>52</sup>

*Madrāšâ on Faith* 58.7 similarly engages those who are themselves engaged in teaching and debate:

Speak what is profitable and explain the teaching.  
 Interpret what is beneficial and discuss what builds up.  
 Question the deniers and repudiate the crucifiers.  
 Investigate their books and refute their arguments.

50. For a helpful summary of the importance of "teaching" in Ephrem's overall corpus, see Possek, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 33–54.

51. *Madrāšê on Faith* 32.1 (Beck, CSCO 154, 108).

52. *Madrāšê on Faith* 23 (Beck, CSCO 154, 82).

Teach innocence, increase simplicity,  
And bring ignorance to enlightenment.<sup>53</sup>

In both of these examples, Ephrem is concerned that those who teach others not engage them in controversial topics—that the teaching be profitable and beneficial. This points to the likelihood that the *Madrāšê on Faith* are engaged in a process of educating those who will educate others. Beyond that, however, Ephrem’s eschewal of what he calls “investigation” forms one of the most consistent, and one of the most interesting, themes of the *Madrāšê on Faith*. From one perspective, this apparent pessimism about the limits of education seems an odd feature for a work engaged in a program of pedagogy. However, we can read these condemnations not as an attempt to shut down intellectual inquiry, but instead to shape rhetorically the community that hears and sings them. Ephrem encourages his students to engage in an educational process with a full understanding of what can and cannot be known. By marking these limits, he can then guide them through a reading and discussion of the very ideas he, from a certain perspective, demeans.

The *Madrāšê on Faith* connect to the church’s developing liturgical cycle in only the most tangential of ways. Instead, they suggest a blurred space between liturgy and classroom, in which pedagogical songs were used to debate difficult philosophical ideas, engage problematic and controversial biblical passages, and reflect on the role of teaching and teachers. Ephrem’s biographical tradition imagines the *madrāšê* within a liturgical context, but also hints at a blurred space. What might comparative evidence reveal about this blurred space, and how can we situate Ephrem’s *madrāšê*, and the community that heard and sang them, within it?

## LITERARY COMMUNITIES IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

Thus far, we have seen that many of Ephrem’s *madrāšê* are scholastic as well as liturgical. Yet defining the implied setting of a “school” is not straightforward. We must recognize that no formal school, of Edessa or Nisibis, likely existed in Ephrem’s time.<sup>54</sup> In order to reconstruct scholastic aspects of the setting where Ephrem’s *madrāšê* may have been performed,

53. *Madrāšê on Faith* 58.7 (Beck, CSCO 154, 180–81).

54. See Possekkel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 48–54. Her question does not relate to the school *per se*, but to the context within which Ephrem himself was educated. She speculates that it was some sort of circle built around the bishops of Nisibis, along with some sort of secondary school in Nisibis.

we can turn to comparative evidence for literary communities elsewhere in the fourth-century Mediterranean, as well as slightly later evidence for the use of poetry in the School of Nisibis.

Ephrem was likely a member of the unique Mesopotamian ascetic group known as the *bnay/bnāt qyāmā* (“the sons/daughters,” or “children of the covenant”). The most specific discussion of this community comes not from Ephrem, but from his older contemporary, Aphrahat (d. ca. 345).<sup>55</sup> As best we can tell, the “children of the covenant” were a loosely organized ascetic community that developed among Syriac-speaking Christians. These “covenanters” privileged decidedly ascetic behaviors—fasting, sleeplessness and vigilance, poverty, and chastity. The community consisted of men and women, a fact that Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* make clear.<sup>56</sup> As both Aphrahat and Ephrem suggest, the members of the community established their own living arrangements.<sup>57</sup> The evidence of these sources suggests that the social make-up of the community—where and when they met, how they were organized, and who oversaw such things—was not precisely structured. Though Ephrem never specifically identifies himself as a “son of the covenant,” he prizes the same ascetic virtues that Aphrahat hails in his *Demonstrations*.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, if we place the witnesses of Aphrahat and Ephrem within the larger context of third- and fourth-century Syriac literature—the *Book of the Steps*, the homilies of Pseudo-Macarius, the earlier *Acts of Judas Thomas*, and the Pseudo-Clementines—we get the distinct impression that ascetic communities formed a crucial part of the broader make-up of Syriac Christian culture.<sup>59</sup>

55. Aphrahat’s sixth *Demonstration* (“On Covenanters”) speaks to this community most immediately. See Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 169–98.

56. *Demonstration* 6, for example, first addresses men who might be tempted by women, and then turns to advise celibate women not to live with celibate men.

57. Regarding Aphrahat, his tirade against celibate woman and men living together suggests they had some freedom in how to structure their living arrangements. Ephrem similarly suggests the absence of communal living structures in *Madrašē on Paradise* 7.15, where he refers to a widow who lives alone “in a lonely house.”

58. I.e., fasting and vigilance (*On Faith* 6.3), chastity (*Against Heresies* 6.19), poverty (*On Nisibis* 19.15), and virginity (*On Paradise* 7.15, *Against Heresies* 45.9–10, *On Nisibis* 1.9).

59. On the *Book of Steps*, see Kristian S. Heal and Robert A. Kitchen, *Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac “Book of the Steps”* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 1–14. On Pseudo-Macarius, see Columba Stewart, OSB, “Working the Earth of the Heart”: *The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). On the place of the *Acts of Judas Thomas* within early Syriac Christianity, see Han J. W. Drijvers, “Apocryphal Literature in the Cultural Milieu of Osrhoëne,” in *Apocrypha*, Le Champ des Apocryphes vol. 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990), 238–44. On the Pseudo-

Scholars readily acknowledge the ascetic character of early Syriac Christianity, but the trend has been to read Ephrem subtly away from it—to state all the things Ephrem’s community did *not* do: they did not flee the world, take formal vows, wear special clothes, or live in isolated communities.<sup>60</sup> Yet an unintended consequence of reading Ephrem away from later ascetic ideals has been to read him away from the small, ascetic circles within which he undoubtedly operated. In our imagination, his community becomes that of the local parish, and his favorite genre—the *madrāšâ*—a hybrid version of the Sunday hymn or homily. Yet, given Ephrem’s ascetic leanings and the highly sophisticated nature of many of his *madrāšê*, this perspective is unnecessarily restrictive.

There is much about Ephrem’s circle that we do not know. But one of its most obvious characteristics is nevertheless rarely identified: Ephrem’s circle was *literary*. Regarding Aphrahat, Adam Becker has argued that his corpus “must have come from a literate context in which the work of a homilist and the scriptural learning it entailed were not uncommon.”<sup>61</sup> Certainly this can be applied to Ephrem’s circle as well: it was engaged in writing, reading, discussing, teaching, and singing; it was a circle for which he wrote line after line of sophisticated song. Much of this song, as we have seen, dealt with particularly bookish themes: philosophical ideas, dense exegeses of problematic passages, exhortations to value—but know the limits of—learning. Because of the particularly bookish content of many of the *madrāšê*, we can think of this small circle neither as the local parish, nor as some kind of proto-monastery, but as a proto-school, gathered to learn and pray. The small gatherings of *iḥîdāyê* (“single ones”), *qaddîšê* (“holy ones”), and *btûlâtâ* (“virgins”) read, sang, prayed, discussed, and wrote. The ideals of their life were ascetic, but their asceticism was carried out in especially literary ways.

Scholars have speculated that Ephrem’s *Commentary on Genesis* functioned as a school text.<sup>62</sup> The *Commentary on the Diatessaron* attests to this scholastic activity on an even more immediate level; it is a school text,

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Clementines in the context of late antique Syria, see Nicole Kelley, *Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines: Situating the Recognitions in Fourth-Century Syria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 179–212.

60. See, for example, Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 25–36, and Joseph Amar, “Byzantine Ascetic Monachism and Greek Bias,” 123–26.

61. Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 10.

62. Robert Murray remarks, “What the course of studies was like in the fourth century, we can doubtless imagine best from Ephrem’s ‘Exegetical Commentary’ . . . on Genesis” (in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 23).

both in the sense that it was written for a study circle, and it was added to by the students for whom it was written.<sup>63</sup> In this work, we can see Ephrem's study circle in action—reading and discussing his ideas, and amending them in organic ways. We can add to these school texts Ephrem's *Prose Refutations*—a collection of prose *mêmrê* that discuss the ideas of Plato and the Stoics, among others.<sup>64</sup> But the bookish character of Ephrem's writings extends to his songs as well. The christological ideas articulated in the *Madrāšê on Faith* reflect similar ideas being discussed in Antioch during the last decade of Ephrem's life. With the evidence of these works—both the *Prose Refutations* and the *Madrāšê on Faith*—we can see Ephrem's circle as one that communicated with thinkers and writers throughout the Mediterranean, and articulated responses in Syriac prose and song.

Reading Ephrem's *madrāšê* as emerging not only in liturgical services for popular audiences, but also in smaller, ascetic, literary circles renders him a more coherent part of the fabric of Mediterranean religious life in the second half of the fourth century. In communities in Rome, Egypt, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Cappadocia, figures were likewise imagining new patterns of communal life, and using literature as one of the primary modes of articulating this communal identity.<sup>65</sup> We may compare his experimental study-setting to that of Gregory Nazianzen, for whom poetry, study, and liturgy also overlapped. In *On His Own Verses*, Gregory makes clear that in writing Christian verse he aimed to construct entertaining, occasionally musical, poems that would attract the attention of young people:

I wished to present my work  
 To young people—especially those who enjoy literature—  
 As a kind of pleasant medicine,  
 An inducement that might lead them to more useful things,  
 Skillfully sweetening the harshness of the commandments

63. Christian Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron*, CSCO 616 (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 162–63.

64. See especially Ephrem's "Against Bardaisan's 'Domnus,'" in *St. Ephraim's Prose Refutations*, ed. Charles Mitchell, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), 1:1–22 (English) and 2:1–49 (Syriac).

65. Jerome's "Letter to Eustochium" counsels Julia Eustochium to construct her spiritual life through reading (translation in *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, NPNF vol. 6 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 45). In Egypt and Jerusalem, Evagrius's letters depict a community carrying out theological debates through reading and writing (see especially letters 2, 9, 24, 50, and 51, which relate to the Origenist controversy, in Wilhelm Frankenberg *Evagrius Ponticus* [Berlin: Weidmannsche buchhandlung, 1912]). On disputational communities in Antioch, see Richard Lim, *Public Disputation, Power, and Social Order in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), chapter 4.

(For a taut bowstring also needs to be relaxed).  
 Perhaps you are willing to give this a try? If nothing more,  
 These verses can be a substitute for songs and lyre-playing.<sup>66</sup>

Gregory's lines clearly echo Christian justifications for the use of music in liturgy.<sup>67</sup> Yet Gregory is not constructing liturgical songs to compete with pagan songs, but para-liturgical poetry for sophisticated literary circles. On the basis of these lines, both Cecilia Milovanovich-Barham and Frederick Norris have argued that Gregory intended at least some of his verse to be sung—that, as Norris puts it, we have in portions of the *Poemata Arcana* a “poetic, musical catechism.”<sup>68</sup> This interpretation of the purpose and context of Gregory's poetry is similar to, yet importantly different from, the explanation of liturgical hymnody that we have already seen in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History*. According to Sozomen, first Ephrem, and then John Chrysostom, developed orthodox liturgical songs to compete with heretical liturgical songs. But Gregory's poem depicts a musical, didactic literature that exists alongside, and outside of, the church's worship. Here, Gregory is composing para-liturgical verse—poems which embed Christian catechesis, but that are intended to be enjoyed by those who love literature.<sup>69</sup>

Gregory wrote these poems late in his life, after retiring to his Cappadocian estate to live out his own ideal of the Christian life.<sup>70</sup> Throughout Cappadocia during the second half of the fourth century, we see concrete debates about how Christian communities should structure themselves—as circles of intellectual aristocrats (Gregory Nazianzen), as ecclesiastically monitored ascetics (Basil), or as working communities who have rejected the privileges of aristocracy (Macrina, and Eustathios of Antioch).<sup>71</sup> My

66. This translation is altered from Gregory of Nazianzus, *Autobiographical Poems*, ed. Carolinne White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

67. See the material collected in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. 67–120.

68. Celica Milovanovic-Barham, “Gregory of Nazianzus: *Ars Poetica* (*in suos versus*: *Carmen* 2.1.39),” *J ECS* 5, no. 4 (1997): 497–510; Norris, “Gregory Nazianzus' *Poemata Arcana*: A Poetic, Musical Catechism?,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 63, nos. 3–4 (2012): 62–75.

69. On the later incorporation of Gregory's verse into the Byzantine hymnographic corpus, see Peter Karavites, “Gregory Nazianzinos and Byzantine Hymnography,” *JHS* 113 (1993): 81–98.

70. On this period of Gregory's life, see John A. McGuckin, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 371–98.

71. On Basil, Macrina, and Eustathios, see Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 233–69.

concern is not with Cappadocian communities *per se*. Rather, the Cappadocian experiments reveal something instructive about communal life at the time: not only in Mesopotamia, but throughout the Mediterranean, the structures of communal life were up for debate. Scholars have long noted compelling parallels between Ephrem and the Cappadocians.<sup>72</sup> In this case, they all share a tendency to carry out debates about communal life and learning through literature. Gregory Nazianzen constructed his community through poems, Basil through rules and letters, and Gregory of Nyssa through the *Life of Macrina*. These works were not written for the population gathered in basilicas on Sundays, but for experimental communities orienting their daily lives around prayer and study.

Unlike the Cappadocians, Ephrem spent his life working in urban contexts. Moreover, while the Cappadocians' family structures played such a crucial role in the shape of their communities, we know little about Ephrem's family background. But his *madrāšê* engaged in many of the same tasks as the works of his Cappadocian colleagues, and at roughly the same time—a time when the relationship between ecclesiastical structures and ascetic communities were hotly debated, and both scholastic institutions and liturgical services were taking a more concrete shape. Literature played a crucial role in these debates and developing institutions. So, as with emerging Cappadocian communities, we can reimagine Ephrem's *madrāšê* not simply as liturgical songs, but as works of literature written, in part, for small literary-ascetic communities, at a crucial moment in the development of Christian communal identity in the Empire.

In addition to drawing out these scholastic aspects of Ephrem's ascetic context, comparative evidence also shows how it articulated its identity in pedagogical modes, with poetic literary forms. Adam Becker's study of the School of Nisibis compellingly demonstrates the preponderance of such pedagogical modes of thought within Syriac Christian culture. This pedagogical key is sounded out even in the earliest Syriac sources, the Peshitta, which consistently represents Israelite leaders as *teachers* of the people.<sup>73</sup> Becker notes, too, that Ephrem understands salvation and revelation in

72. Paul Russell has compared Ephrem and Gregory Nazianzen (*St. Ephraem the Syrian and St. Gregory the Theologian Confront the Arians* [Kottayam, Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Center, 1994]); Sebastian Brock has compared Ephrem to Gregory of Nyssa (*The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985], 145–48. See more generally, David G. K. Taylor, "St. Ephraim's Influence on the Greeks," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 185–96.

73. Becker, *Fear of God*, 22–26.

primarily pedagogical terms.<sup>74</sup> In the later School of Nisibis, Becker also notes a subtle but persistent blurring of the boundaries between liturgy, poetry, and pedagogy.<sup>75</sup> For example, the eighth Canon of Narsai insists that all students must participate continually in “writing, reading (*hegyānâ*), interpretation . . . and choral reading” (*qeryānâ d-šî‘âtâ*).<sup>76</sup> The perspective given by this canon is that scholastic and liturgical duties overlapped. Becker confirms this in his general discussion of the School: as he notes, the *mpashqānâ*—“exegete”—not only studied and taught scripture, but also led the choir (*šî‘tâ*).<sup>77</sup> This role is spelled out in the *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools*, as it describes the career of Narsai: “[T]hat blessed man led the assembly for a time of twenty years, while daily leading the choir and giving interpretation” (383.11–14).<sup>78</sup> Becker identifies the picture given here as one which witnesses “the conflation of scriptural meaning and liturgical action.”<sup>79</sup> This conflation or blurring was achieved, moreover, at least until the sixth century, through the use of verse forms: it was precisely the verse *mêmrê* that served both a liturgical and an exegetical function. Becker notes that in the course of the sixth century, poetry came to be replaced by prose in the schools, and this dichotomy is also reflected, as we have seen, in the portrait of the *madrāšê* in Ephrem’s *Life*.<sup>80</sup> But in the fifth century, it was the verse *mêmrê* that functioned as the school genre *par excellence*. Ephrem’s *madrāšê* engaged his community in a similar process of prayer and study, song and exegesis. Rather than imagining Ephrem’s *madrāšê* as akin to a homily preached in a large urban basilica, we can think of it as a dynamic text, able to function as a communal, liturgical song in a Paschal feast, but also to engage literary-ascetic communities, immersed in technical theological debates, in a unique form of doxological pedagogy.

## EPHREM’S MADRĀŠÊ IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN WORLD

Ephrem’s *madrāšê* problematize the distinctions we draw between school, liturgy, and monastery in the fourth century. It is in the century after

74. Becker, *Fear of God*, 26–27.

75. Becker, *Fear of God*, 81–97.

76. An English translation is provided in Becker, *Fear of God*, 82–84. Syriac text is provided in *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, ed. Arthur Vööbus (Stockholm: ETSE, 1961).

77. Becker, *Fear of God*, 88.

78. Becker, *Fear of God*, 89 (Text in Mar Barḥadbešabba ‘Arabaya, *Cause de la fondation des écoles*, ed. and trans., A. Scher, PO 4:4 [1908], 383.)

79. Becker, *Fear of God*, 89.

80. Becker, *Fear of God*, 90.

Ephrem's death in 373 that liturgy, school, and monastery come into focus as institutions in their own right.<sup>81</sup> In the fifth and sixth centuries, authors began to inhabit a world in which these institutions were distinct, and so these divisions have been inscribed in the late antique sources we use. The sixth-century *Life of Ephrem* aims to install Ephrem among the ranks of elite monks, and separate him from the urban context in which he lived. Yet, while the *Life* firmly divides pedagogy and liturgy between an elite monasticism and a general public, it also suggests blurred "rehearsal spaces," where Ephrem taught women, and which bled organically into the liturgy. Likewise, as Adam Becker has shown, in the context of the sixth-century Church of the East, school and liturgy still overlapped. In the fourth century, Ephrem's actual *madrāšê* bespeak this blurred context. Some of his *madrāšê* occupied liturgical contexts, but others occupied pedagogical contexts, though they still speak with a voice of prayer and doxology. It is perhaps natural to read our own compartmentalization of liturgy, school, and monastery back into Ephrem's context. But the *madrāšê* problematize such easy distinctions.

How might reimagining the context of Ephrem's *madrāšê* relocate him in the early Christian world? This case for a blurred setting of the *madrāšê* opens up two lines of inquiry. First, their scholastic aspects suggest a new way to look at late antique gender relations and pedagogy. As we have seen, the later Syriac *Life* splits Ephrem's authorial life into discrete social settings in which he composed sophisticated prose works for small groups of men, and popular songs to be rehearsed and performed by members of the *bnat qyāmâ*—the daughters of the covenant. I have problematized this distinction by pointing out that many of the *madrāšê* are themselves sophisticated pedagogical works. Further, they testify unambiguously to being performed by women. Relocating some of Ephrem's *madrāšê* on the margins between liturgy and classroom can thus help us to rethink how women were educated in late antiquity. The *Madrāšê on Faith* voice a perennial concern with teaching others about the importance of teaching. Here, it is compelling to reiterate that the Syriac *Life* attests that Ephrem assigned certain daughters of the covenant the task of teaching. Likewise, we know from other sources that deaconesses in the Syriac churches had

81. On the liturgical developments in this period, see J. F. Baldovin, S.J., "The Empire Baptized," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, eds. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77–126.

the task of ministering to women in spaces where men could not go.<sup>82</sup> It might well be the case that Ephrem's more pedagogical *madrāšê* represent works that he had composed to teach women, so that they could then teach other women in domestic settings.

Second, reading the *madrāšê* as pedagogical works for women and men also presents them as a more intimate part of Ephrem's community. As noted above, there has been a tendency in contemporary scholarship to keep Ephrem apart from any trace of monasticism. Yet, this tendency has had the effect of distancing him from the ascetic communities in which he undoubtedly operated. I would like to suggest that we find new ways of reading Ephrem as a member of an ascetic community, without having to read him (as does the *Life*) through the categories of later monasticism. By reading the *madrāšê* as works produced not just for general liturgical celebration, but as embedded within the life of small, ascetic circles, we can begin to rethink what those small, ascetic circles looked like. More specifically, we can reimagine these Mesopotamian ascetic circles as specifically *literary* circles, akin to others in the Mediterranean.

Ephrem's over 400 *madrāšê* stand as one of the greatest literary achievements of late antiquity. Yet, whether because we imagine Ephrem as representative of a pure, unhellenized, Semitic Christianity, or simply because we lack much contemporary Syriac evidence with which to compare him, we have tended to read these *madrāšê* in a way that abstracts them from the world in which they were born. But Ephrem's *madrāšê* resonate profoundly within the early Christian world, a world of blurred boundaries between liturgical, scholastic, and monastic settings. In Ephrem's lifetime, the Mediterranean world was just beginning to figure out what it might mean to be Christian, how this might structure the lives of individual and communities and shape their literature. Ephrem's *madrāšê* speak to the creativity and permeability of literary and ascetic communities in the fourth century.

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82. See J. G. Davies, "Deacons, Deaconesses, and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period," *JEH* 14, no. 1 (1963): 3–4. This would also mesh well with the portrait Susan Harvey depicts in "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant."