

# Memra of Ephrem the Syrian of Jonah and the Repentance of the Ninevites

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One of the most brilliant theologians of the old church was Ephrem the Syrian, a great poet and melodist. Numerous reports from the hagiography that portray a variety of stories from his life are mostly unreliable. The time and place of his birth are not known<sup>1</sup>. It is usually assumed that he was born in 306. Ephrem was not an ascetic or a monk as the later monastic tradition presented him. He belonged to a special circle of Syrian Christianity known as *the children of the covenant*. They were a special group of Christians, men and women<sup>2</sup>, who served the community and took special care of the poor and powerless. Much of his life, Mar Ephrem spent in Nisibis, where he received his theological education. The last ten years he lived in Edessa. In both cities he was a teacher in the exegetical schools. Ephrem was a man of great reputation, a versatile and engaged theologian. The Scripture was his preoccupation and the source of his theology. Even in antiquity it was noted that he was a great connoisseur and interpreter of Scripture: “Having studied the entire Old and New Scriptures, and like no other descending into the depth of what is within them, he interpreted correctly, word for word, the entire Scripture”<sup>3</sup>. Ephrem wrote in Syriac. Greek he did not know<sup>4</sup>. Howe-

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1. S. P. BROCK, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, Kottayam/India 1997, 22.

2. In Syriac called *b'nai q'yâmâ*, and *b'nath q'yâmâ*, that is, *the sons of the covenant and the daughters of the covenant*.

3. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De Vita S. Patris Ephraem Syri*, PG 46, 820.

4. There are assumptions that he knew some Greek. In fact, he lived in a city which was important to Roman Empire at the time, so Greek could have been well represented in that city. Secondly, Ephrem was an educated man and engaged in a social sense. All this indicates that he could some degree of knowledge of Greek. However, him knowing Greek in the sense that he could use it for theological speculation can almost certainly be ruled out

ver, his works were soon translated into Greek<sup>5</sup>. There are a large number of texts that are attributed to the Greek Ephrem (*Ephrem Graecus*), which science has not yet sufficiently explored.

In addition to other Old Testament texts, Ephrem dealt with the book of Jonah. Ephrem's text *Of Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites* is the first known Christian text that deals with this book thematically. It is not a classical commentary, but unlike earlier shorter and theologically concretely profiled reviews of Jonah, Ephrem devotes the entire text to the topic explicitly present in the Book. Admittedly, he is not interested in the first part of the text, but rather directs his attention to Jonah's stay in Nineveh. It is, in fact, an oration (a *mēmṛā*) on the part of the book which talks about Jonah and the repentance of the inhabitants of Nineveh. Ephrem's text quickly became very popular, so it has been translated into Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopian, and a little later into Latin. The text is read in the context of worship, which is indicated by the surviving liturgical manuscripts<sup>6</sup>. The oration of Jonah and the repentance of the people of Nineveh was eventually adopted in liturgical practice of the Church of the East, as well as in the Syrian Orthodox Church during pre-fasting period known as *the Prayer of the Ninevites*<sup>7</sup>. Of the fact that Ephrem's writings were read in the Church, testifies blessed Jerome, who says that Ephrem: "became so distinguished that his writings are repeated publicly in some churches, after the reading of the Scriptures"<sup>8</sup>.

Ephrem interpreted Scripture in several literary forms. In addition to the *Mēmṛē*, it is known that he interpreted some books in the form of *pūsāqe*

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(cf. U. POSSEKEL, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* [CSCO 580], Peeters, Lovanii, 1999, 33.52-53).

5. Church historian Sozomen testifies that many of Epraim's works were translated into Greek in the 5<sup>th</sup> century (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 16, 4).

6. S. P. BROCK, *Ephrem's verse homily on Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh*. Notes on the textual tradition, From Ephrem to Romanos V, 71-86.

7. The origin of this fast goes as far back as late 6th century. It was a three day fast practiced by the Churches of the Syrian liturgical tradition, held from Monday to Wednesday, falling eighteen days before the Great Lent. It originated in 6th century out of fear of epidemic, based on the 40 days long fast of the Ninevites after which they were spared (cf. J. M. FIEY, *Assyrie chretienne III*, Beyrouth 1986, 20-21).

8. *De viris illustribus* 115 (PL 23, 115).

and *tūrgāmē*<sup>9</sup>, and wrote poems with Biblical themes, known as *madrāšē*<sup>10</sup>. These are specific literary forms, characteristic to the Syrian literary culture and the near eastern Semitic mentality in general. The oration of *Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites* is composed in the form of *mēmṛā*. According to the general definition, a *mēmṛā* is a highly stylized metric oration in poetic form. It was composed without rhymes and included elements of narration<sup>11</sup>. It is an oration in verse which was not sung, but recited. From the stylistic point of view, it is one of the models of the Syrian rhetoric, adorned by strings of repetitions and continuing parallelisms<sup>12</sup>. The form of *mēmṛā* is based on the number of syllables and not their length or breaks. Long vowels are not distinguished from the short ones. All the verses within a work have the same number of syllables which gives the text a rhythm. A *mēmṛā* has no stanzas, but pairs of verses which can be five and five syllables, six and six, twelve and twelve. Ephrem's *mēmṛā* is composed of seven syllable long verses (7+7). Poetically, it's a masterpiece – at the level of the best world's classics<sup>13</sup>. Because of his outstanding poetic gift,

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9. These are Ephrem's comments on the Book of Genesis and the Book of Exodus. Ephrem himself calls the commentary on the Book of Genesis *pūsāqā*, which means explanation, exposition. The word *tūrgāmā*, he uses for the commentary on the Book of Exodus. The meaning is similar to the Aramaic *targumim* – translation, interpretation. They are characterized by literal interpretation which often turns into paraphrases of a text.

10. *Madrāšā* represents a series of verses divided into stanzas, written mostly without rhyme. They are partly similar to old Greek odes. *Madrāšā* is a song which was sung, possibly with the lyre. The manuscripts of the *Madrāšā* include instructions on how to sing them. Before each stanza there is a certain melody, so called *qālā*. However, since the stave was not used to record *qālā*, the melodies to the songs were forever lost. Each stanza was followed by a refrain which was, as Ephrem informs, sung by a female choir. *Madrāšā* are not Ephrem's invention. Bardaisan used that poetic form, as do other poets before him. *Madrāšā* originally comes from Syrian melodic chants (cf. E. Beck, *Ephrāms des Syrers Hymnik*, in: *Liturgie und Dichtung I* [ed. H. Becker/R. Kaszynski] St. Ottilien 1983, 345-379).

11. Cf. S. P. BROCK, *A Syriac Verse Homily on Elijah and the Widow of Serepta* (LM 102), 1989, 93ff.

12. W. CARMER, «Frohbotschaft des Erbarmens» *Die Jonaerzählung in der Rezeption des Syrers Ephrām* (AOAT 294), Münster 2003, 95.

13. An interesting and illustrative commentary on Ephrem's poetic gift is given by R. Murray, a well-known researcher of the Syrian theological tradition. In one instance, he says that Ephrem is: "the greatest poet of the patristic period and maybe the only theologian-poet equal to Dante" (*Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, T&T Clark International, 2006, 32).

even in antiquity he was called “the harp of the Holy Spirit”. This text is characterized by the wealth of images and metaphors, wordplay and multitude of Biblical associations. Ephrem brought a strong pathos with an unusual wealth of theological ideas and breadth of poetic expression. *mēmra* is designed to produce strong effects on its listeners. Deep theological-existential insights and elements of lyricism make it equally an artistic and a theological work.

Ephrem belonged to the Semitic culture and tradition which was in many ways different from the Hellenic culture. Philosophical notions and dogmatic formulations, typical for a Hellenic mind, were foreign to him. Theology was poetry to him. He shaped into poetic forms and pictures both doxologies and theologically delicate themes. This discourse was familiar to the biblical writers as well. The very beginning of *The Oration* sounds impressive. A powerful prophet comes, from the sea, into a sinful city:

Behold, Jonah preached in Nineveh,  
A Jew among the wicked.  
That mighty one ascended to the city;  
And disturbed it with words of terror.  
The heathen city was made sorrowful  
By means of the Hebrew preacher,  
And became tumultuous like the ocean  
Through Jonah, who came up from the sea.  
Yea, tempests beat upon it,  
Like waves in the midst of the deep<sup>14</sup>.

Ephrem depicts the prophet’s arrival in Nineveh with strong poetic images and alludes to his previous stay at the sea. He speaks of Jonah running away from God and coming to people who are turning away from piety. In their meeting, justice is fulfilled: “Justice placed them in fetters, Yea, both of them, like criminals”<sup>15</sup>. Jonah’s preaching is accepted by the Ninevites with appreciation. There is an all-out repentance – everyone repents. Ephrem, through his poetic adaptation of the Biblical text, evokes the atmosphere of repentance:

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14. *Prologue* 1-8 (English translation: H. Burgess, *The Repentance of Nineveh, a metrical homily on the mission of Jonah*, by Ephraem Syrus, London 1853).

15. *Prologue*, 23-24.

Instead of robes they clothed themselves with sackcloth;  
Venerable old men heard him,  
And covered their heads with ashes;  
Rich men heard him and laid open  
Their treasures before the poor;  
Those heard him who had lent to others,  
And gave their bills as alms;  
Debtors heard him and became just,  
So as not to deny their obligation;  
Borrowers returned what they owed;  
Creditors' became forgiving;  
Every man, respecting his salvation,  
Became righteously solicitous<sup>16</sup>.

The social element of repentance is pronounced. There are references to the poor, the rich, to charity and debtors. The children are aware of the punishment that is coming. Ephrem poignantly illustrates the fear of the children and the grief of the parents. He compared the Ninevites to Abraham who cannot tell Isaac what awaits him, while preparing to sacrifice him (Gen 22)<sup>17</sup>. Thus, he shows a depth of understanding of the human being as well as an unusual openness to compare the Ninevites with the forefather Abraham. People are only people, composed of identical feelings, weaknesses and fears. The Ninevites were now feeling what once Abraham would have felt.

Ephrem also expands the Biblical text when it comes to the ruler who bitterly repented. The powerful eastern monarch is described as a biblical character, ready to repent. Although there are no direct allusions to King David, the depth of repentance is equal to David's (cf. 2Sam 12 13ff). Ephrem's anthropology is biblical – a man is able to repent and turn away from the wrong path. The king shows repentance through his example and bids his people to take the same path:

And sweetened his disposition by fasting.  
In place of the chariot of his majesty,

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16. 1, 16-28.

17. 2, 74-113.

He visited the city on foot;  
 He called on all his people,  
 That he might awaken them to repentance.  
 The King wandered in a private manner,  
 That he might purge them from impurity;  
 He walked about in humility,  
 That he might establish the agitated city;  
 In places of low resort,  
 He sowed tranquillity among the streets<sup>18</sup>.  
 The monarch also calls the army to repent and enter into a special spiritual  
 battle. The powerful conqueror stood helplessly before the prophet:  
 We have overthrown many cities,  
 But in our own city he vanquishes us.  
 Nineveh, the mother of heroes,  
 Is afraid of a solitary feeble one.  
 The lioness in her lair,  
 Trembles at the Hebrew.

...

Behold! The race of Nimrod – the mighty one – Is altogether brought low<sup>19</sup>.

The upcoming punishment is compared to the flood<sup>20</sup>, or to the destruction of Job's sons<sup>21</sup>. He interprets the text through the frame of the entire Scripture. The Old Testament motifs and associations are frequent in the *mēmṛā*. A more explicit connection with any New Testament text is completely lacking. Jonah's sermon achieves a great success, of which the Book also tells. At the end of six weeks<sup>22</sup>, the Ninevites prepare for the terrible judgment:

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18. 5, 66-76.

19. 3, 80-85.88-89.

20. 3, 155-189.

21. 4, 146-167.

22. Ephrem repeatedly mentions six weeks as the time left to the Ninevites to repent (6, 5; 7, 7.42.122). It is not clear if he uses *six weeks* for poetic reasons or because he read a particular manuscript using this measure. Septuagint mentions three days, but it is certain that he did not read it. Jewish text mentions forty days and Syriac translation follows it.

As soon as the days were accomplished,  
They stood together at the gates of death,  
Embracing one another.  
The day had arrived which cut off hope,  
In which wrath should be consummated<sup>23</sup>.

Interestingly, Ephrem tells nothing about the possible contents of the sermon. It is one of the specific elements in his *Oration*. He expands and amends many other scenes from the Book, or introduces new elements, absent in the Biblical text, to his *Oration*. However, he did not thematize the content of the sermon. In addition to the content of the repentance, he directs attention to the main character, Jonah, whose prophecy was not fulfilled:

Jonah saw this, and wonder seized him,  
He blushed for the children of his own people.  
He saw the Ninevites were victorious,  
And he wept for the seed of Abraham;  
He saw the seed of Canaan in sound mind,  
While the seed of Jacob was infatuated;  
He saw the uncircumcised cut to the heart,  
While the circumcised had hardened it<sup>24</sup>.

Ephrem speaks about the inner drama of the prophet: Why wasn't the prophecy fulfilled? Is repentance that which caused God to change his decision? On this issue, the Biblical text is explicit: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened" (3 10). Ephrem follows that line of thought, pointing to dialectic: the wicked prophet – the merciful God:

Who made known to the Ninevites,  
These hidden divine mysteries?  
That fasting was able to remit,  
The stern decree of God?  
Jonah did not give them this information,

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23. 7, 1-5.

24. 5, 77-84.

For he feared lest they should be pardoned;  
 Jonah had proclaimed to the Ninevites,  
 That the stern decree was true.  
 The Ninevites believed Jonah's words,  
 But made his sentence of no effect;  
 For they recognized a distinction,  
 Between God and man;  
 That man was but as man,  
 Whereas God was gracious.  
 They saw that the prophet was severe,  
 They concluded that God was gentle.  
 They argued not against him who was severe,  
 But they sought the favour of the Gracious<sup>25</sup>.

Justice belongs to the merciful God who accepts repentance and changes his original intention. Hereby, Ephrem shows that man's salvation depends on him – on his free will. He clearly speaks of it somewhat earlier: "For the malady was one of sin, of the free will and not of necessity"<sup>26</sup>. With this position, Ephrem opposed the gnostic Bardaisan who denied free will. Freedom is a gift given to man by God. The Ninevites have, in liberty, renounced sin and this justified them before God. From this point of view, Ephrem's God is the God of the Old Testament, a free God whose justice and mercy save the city:

Justice heard their groaning, and Grace redeemed their city<sup>27</sup>.

Salvation is entirely in God's hands, but it also depends on the person who is able, in its own liberty, to turn to God. A man can free himself from bondage to sin, as is demonstrated in the example of the Ninevites. Repentance is a personal and free act of faith.

Ephrem continues with a description of Jonah's concern and disbelief because the earthquake threatening the city had stopped: "Jonah stood afar off, and feared lest he should be a deceiver, for the earthquake and the trembling ceased"<sup>28</sup>. Jonah's prophecy was not fulfilled. Later on, Ephrem refers to the occasion with the gourd, only to pose a rhetorically sharp

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25. 5, 108-125.

26. 1, 99-100.

27. 5, 156-157.

28. 7, 28-30.

question at the end of the section: “Thou wouldst preserve the despicable gourd, but throw down the corner stone. Where is thy justice, O Jonah?”<sup>29</sup>. Hereby, he reinforces the notion present in the text. In addition to the poetic treatment, he completely follows the intent of the text and enriches the scene with presence of the Ninevites as the observers.

Artistically creative and with a keen theological sense, Ephrem introduces new elements which are not present in the Book. The Ninevites are open to Jonah; they are surprised with his displeasure. Instead of rejoicing about salvation of men, Jonah is confused and dissatisfied. Using the voices of the rescued the Ninevites, Ephrem brings Jonah’s behavior to absurdity:

What would it have profited thee, O Hebrew,  
If all of us had perished?  
How wouldst thou have been the better, O preacher,  
If we had all been slain?  
What wouldst thou have gained, O son of Mathai,  
If we had been put to silence in the grave?  
Why shouldst thou thus be afflicted,  
Who hast become renowned by our repentance?  
Why should it grieve thee, that thou hast healed us,  
...  
Let this suffice for thy happiness,  
That thou hast gladdened the angels on high.  
It becomes thee to rejoice on earth,  
For God rejoices in heaven<sup>30</sup>.

Through strong contrast and twisted perspective, Ephrem points to the absurdity of a wrongly founded faith. The Ninevites give Jonah a lesson in Biblical faith in the merciful God who created every man in his image. Ephrem emphasized this thought earlier in *The Oration*:

God is good and gracious,  
And will not destroy the image he hath made.  
A painter who designs a picture,  
Preserveth it with care;

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29. 7, 178-180.

30. 7, 90-98.106-109.

How much rather will the Good protect,  
His living and rational image!<sup>31</sup>

In the previously describes scenes, Jonah is a deluded religious fanatic. He does not understand God's relationship with man. It seems quite obvious that Jonah serves to portray a negative paradigm depicting many Christians who Ephrem apostrophized in this way.

Ephrem tries to resolve the issue of unfulfilled prophecy several times. Based on the biblical text, one could conclude that Jonah pre-supposed that the city would be saved: "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4 2). The author of the book suggests that Jonah sensed that God would not destroy Nineveh if the city repented. These insights reveal Jonah finding himself in a tragic, but quite realistic position in which man can find himself if he opposes God. Ephrem develops the biblical thought, emphasizing the importance of sincere repentance. God's omnipotence and mercy have overcome human weakness and ignorance:

For Grace on this condition,  
Had commissioned the Prophet-  
Not that the city should be destroyed,  
But should be saved when penitent<sup>32</sup>.

The Holy Ghost who by his mouth was reasoning with him against himself<sup>33</sup>.

Although unwillingly he justified them. God had made his words of no effect<sup>34</sup>.

Jonah was an unconscious, and thus unwilling, tool of the Holy Spirit. This, of course, raises the question of freedom and providence. Ephrem addresses it in the spirit of the writer of the Book, as well as many other Old Testament narratives. It is enough to recall the tale of Joseph. After reconciliation with the brothers who sold him into slavery, he himself con-

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31. 2, 118-123.

32. 1, 83-86.

33. 7, 136-137.

34. 8, 8-9.

cludes: “it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God...” (Gen 45 5-8). Joseph’s departure to Egypt was planned by God. The book of Job points to man’s inability to understand the mystery of God and existence. The prophet Isaiah is explicit in this point: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”. (55 8). The idea of God’s providence and the human inability to understand it is originally Biblical. Ephrem, in this regard, understands the prophet in all his human conditioning.

In *mēmṛā*, narration does not end with question which God poses to Jonah (cf. 4 11). Ephrem, in the spirit of the Midrash, expands the Biblical narrative and creatively designs further course of events<sup>35</sup>. In continuation, the Ninevites pay great respect to Jonah, bring him into the city and place him on the throne. Ephrem compares this peculiar position of acclaimed and exalted Jonah to his stay in the belly of the fish. The monarch sends him back to his land with gifts and escort. When he reached his land, he was in trouble once again:

For he feared lest they should see,  
The idolatry of his countrymen;  
And lest the penitent, entering among them,  
Should be corrupted by the ungodly;  
And lest, coming from the heathen,  
They should learn iniquity from his people<sup>36</sup>.  
The Ninevites wish to enter the Promised Land in order to be inspired by faith and justice. Jonah finds a way to talk them out of going any further:  
There is a great feast, he said,  
in our country,  
And a stranger may not enter it;  
It is a festival of the children of the land,

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35. The main feature of haggadic Midrashim is the interpretation of the Biblical text through additional narratives. This was achieved by expansion of the Biblical narratives, adding many episodes to them. This can be seen in the Midrashim on Jonah (cf. G. STEMBERGER, *Einleitung im Talmud und Midrasch*, München 2011, 257-396).

36. 9, 5-10.

And there is no part in it for the heathen;  
 It is a great feast of the circumcised,  
 And the uncircumcised may not walk there.  
 For although ye are penitent,  
 Ye have not yet been circumcised<sup>37</sup>.

After Jonah had dissuaded them from going with him to the Promised Land, the Ninevites decided to climb a high mountain from where they could see the land of Israel. The described scene is partially reminiscent of Moses' climb on Pisgah, where God showed him the Promised Land (Deut 34 1). Unlike Moses who looks on the land which Israelites ought to enter, the Ninevites see Israel filled with sin in the Promised Land. Before them appears a horrific scene. Instead of harmony and devotion, they saw:

For there were altars upon the hills,  
 And images upon the high places.  
 Among the groves there was idolatry,  
 Among the oaks there was uncleanness.  
 Carved images were near their doors,  
 And as they entered they worshipped them.  
 Their idols' were without number,  
 And their vices could not be reckoned.  
 By their fountains there were purifications,  
 And washings by their streams  
 Upon the housetops there were their statues  
 And their whoredoms in the gardens;  
 Soothsayers walked the streets,  
 And enchanters filled the ways<sup>38</sup>.

In this part of the text, Ephrem lists almost all of the Old Testament reports that talk about the sin of Israel. The country is filled with all sorts of sin, similar to ones described by the prophets. There, among other things, one can see how knowledgeable of the Scripture Ephrem was. The Ninevites, shocked and filled with terror by the sight, ask each other:

Is this the land of promise,  
 Or are we contemplating Sodom?

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37. 9, 125-133.

38. 10, 8-21.

Is this the race of Abraham,  
Or are we looking upon devils?  
Are these we see men,  
Or unsubstantial shadows.

...

The altars which we pulled down  
Have obtained wings and fled hither!<sup>39</sup>

The terrified Ninevites return to their country. They express deep respect for Jonah and call him “the blessed prophet”. Jonah is actually a positive character in the eyes of the the Ninevites, not only at the end of the *mēmra*, but throughout it. Ephrem skillfully weaves this idea throughout the text. The monarch speaks of him as of a brave, prudent, incorruptible and truth-loving man<sup>40</sup>. He often calls Jonah a physician<sup>41</sup> whose intervention, although painful, removes the illness- sin. He is presented, similarly to Elijah or Moses, persisting in the forty-day fast. Jonah’s profile is illuminated by using other Old Testament characters. He is the messenger of God’s judgment and a great champion of God’s justice. By this, Ephrem shows the power of repentance and faith and raises the Ninevites to the Gospel’s ideal of purity: “To the pure, all things are pure” (Tit 1 15).

In this spirit, Ephrem leads *The Oration* to an end. The Ninevites sing a song of thanksgiving to God in which they invite all people and all social strata to celebrate Him. It is a magnificent hymn to a righteous God who supports life and joy. The end is, like in many Psalms, a doxology to God:

Both rational and brute creatures praised Him,  
The children of men and the beasts of the field;  
Instead of sackcloth they had white garments;  
They were reformed in newness of heart.  
Blessed be He who loves the righteous,  
Who multiplied penitents in Asshur!

By idealizing the Ninevites, Ephrem makes a contrast between what Christians ought to be and what they are in reality. This further emphasizes the importance of justice and renders the established formalism, which was

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39. 10, 80-85.90-91.

40. Cf. 4, 1-84.

41. Cf. 1, 114.140-161; 4, 85.107; 5, 92.

certainly present in his community, meaningless. Ephrem breaks the rigid and confined concepts of God and the Church. It was one of his major theological-exegetical motifs.

Although there are no reliable testimonies about when and whom the oration was addressed, text itself leads one to conclusion that it was addressed to the Christian community to which Ephrem himself belonged. Time of origin is impossible to ascertain, although broader context points that it was written in a Church-liturgical cycle which focused primarily on repentance. It is most logical to assume that it originated during Great Lent. Ephrem invites the community to repent and calls for openness to the Gentiles. Christian community in Nisibis was in a peculiar situation. In addition to Judaic synagogue and other Christian factions, the majority was made up by the Gentiles from the East – former Assyrians. *The Oration* serves as a screen for the attitude of the Christians to the Gentiles. Ephrem, inviting them to repent, criticizes his own community for its hardened heart, hypocrisy, lack of understanding for others and so on. At the very beginning, Ephrem compares the repentance of the Christians to the repentance of the the Ninevites:

When compared with that repentance  
 This of ours is like a dream;  
 In the presence of that supplication,  
 This of ours is but a shadow;  
 Compared with that humiliation,  
 This of ours is but the outward form?  
 For they were generous to forgive  
 Their debts in that fast.  
 The Ninevites gave alms,  
 Let us desist from oppressions;  
 The Ninevites set their slaves at liberty,  
 Do you have pity on freemen<sup>42</sup>.  
 The same thought is repeated at the end:  
 Compared with the repentance of the Ninevites,  
 I have called ours but a shadow<sup>43</sup>.

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42. 1, 61-72.

43. *Epilogue*, 1-2.

In the spirit of a biblical writer, Ephrem shows unworthiness of his own community and openness of the word of God to the Gentiles on the example of the Ninevites. This is also clear on the basis of “we-form” in which he refers<sup>44</sup>. Ephrem actualizes the meaning of the Book, emphasizing several key points: *a*) the need for sincere repentance, *b*) Gentiles who repent, *c*) an absence of sincere repentance in one’s own community *d*) God’s justice which is above human measure. Main characters of *The Oration* are Jewish prophet Jonah and the Gentiles Ninevites, that is, his community of orthodox Christians and the Gentiles that are outside. Through many descriptions and antithetic parallelisms, Ephrem critically reflects the situation in his own community. The Ninevites have renounced sin that manifests itself in different domains and have turned to virtue and fellowship. This is why Ephrem says of them: “When Jonah looked on Nineveh, she gathered her sons together as a Church”<sup>45</sup>. The people on the outside have a more authentic experience of the Church than those within its walls. It is an inner critique based on Biblical ideals.

In *mēmṛā*, Ephrem approaches the narratives of the Patriarchs in which the Pharaoh (Gen 12 10-20) and Abimelech (Gen 20 1-18; 26 1-11) are represented as honorable men, as well as the story of Ruth the Moabite, the example of compassionate love and morality. One of the most honorable characters in the Old Testament is Uriah the Hittite, an officer in the army of King David, sent to his death by trickery of king David in order to take his wife (2Sam 11 2-17). The idea that Yahweh God of all peoples was especially emphasized in the period that came after enslavement of Israel. In addition to the narrative of the prophet Jonah, the universalistic prophecies of the prophet Isaiah are a good examples (56 1-8; 60 1-5; 66 18-24). Ephrem reaches the essence of the truths of faith, developing the idea that every man and every nation is called to salvation. Like the writer of Acts of the Apostles, he emphasizes that God’s message is directed to every man:  $\psi$ God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right“(Acts 10 34-35). Ephrem shows this through critique of the Christian community and calls for repentance and metanoia. Repentance and metanoia are dynamic realities that are built

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44. W. CARMER, *op. cit.*, 96.

45. 6, 64-65.

everyday through struggle with one's own egoism. A Christian life is not something to be taken for granted, something received which becomes a vested property, but a task – ideal which is pursued.

The literary genre in which he wrote was suitable for highlighting such ideas. *Mēmra* was a widely accepted form of interpreting the Biblical text. In this case, its function is to give the Book which has an educational character an enhanced meaning. Ephrem utilized dramatic staging through which he accentuated and reinforced the basic theological motives. In this way, he emphasized the important aspects of a text in which he finds the inspiration for the message he is addressing his own community with. He extends the Biblical narrative by introducing additions by which he stressed out a thought and achieved the desired result. The aforementioned Jewish Midrashim to Jonah were similarly shaped. They also recount many events that cannot be found in the Book<sup>46</sup>. It is possible that these and similar stories circulated in Christian communities and that they were a part of the oral tradition, created with the intent to complement and clarify the Biblical narrative. Ephrem could connect them with the text of the Book making a coherent unity with a clear theological intent. Such an approach is otherwise a characteristic of that cultural region. Even the Book itself provokes such an approach - On one hand, because of lack of information regarding Jonah's preaching and stay in Nineveh; and on the other, because the Book ends with an open question. The Book itself leaves room for further theological speculation and provokes such exegetical inflows. This dimension of the text was noticed by one modern Biblical scholar, who says, among other things, that the end of the Book: "precisely with Yahweh's final question inspires further thought process and additional narrative in a

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46. In the mentioned Midrash of *Pirke De-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 10) events about Jonah which are not in the Book are recounted. Events are related to the Biblical text and represent a Midrash interpretation of the Book. Midrash mentions Jonah prophesizing before and that his prophecies regarding Jeroboam (Israel) and Jerusalem did not come true. He, among other reasons, does not want to preach in Nineveh for this reason. Events that happen to him at sea, and especially the swallowing of him by the fish and his stay in its belly, then the appearance of the Leviathan and eventual arrival to Nineveh represent an exegetical attempt to understand a text by complementing its narrative and reassessing it. Cf. A. Wünsche, *Aus Israels Lehrhallen*. Kleine Midraschim zur späteren Legendarischen Literatur des Alten Testaments (II), Leipzig 1907, 43ff.

reader<sup>47</sup>. The Book of Jonah is, as contemporary literary theorists would say, an open work – a dynamic text which opens up space for further literary upgrades. One form of such an upgrade is Ephrem’s *mēmṛā*.

It is especially noticeable that Ephrem shapes his interpretation into an existing literary form and thus allows a better understanding of the message of the text. He uses a valid communicological code, which is a necessary prerequisite for understanding a text. Such a method of metric interpretation was known in Syria particularly through the heretic Bardaisan. According to Theodoret of Cyrus, Ephrem responded in kind: “Harmonius the son of Bardaisan had once composed certain songs and by mixing sweetness of melody with his impiety beguiled the hearers, and led them to their destruction. Ephraim adopted the music of the songs, but set them to piety, and so gave the hearers at once great delight and a healing medicine<sup>48</sup>. Ephrem, much like Bardaisan, used the Syrian metric as a convenient and efficient form of transmitting of the Biblical message. Theological-philosophical treatise on the same subject or Hellenic allegoresis in such a cultural environment would achieve almost no effect. Such theological undertakings were alien to Ephrem and the community which he was addressing. Thought paths and forms of expression which Ephrem was navigating differ from the conceptual-logical reasoning which is a characteristic of the Hellenic cultural tradition.

Ephrem was the expression of his culture. One could rightly say that he was its highest theological and artistic achievement. He did not operate within philosophical-conceptual categories, but this certainly does not mean he did not reach the highest theological levels. Ephrem reached them within the framework he was navigating. An authentic religious experience and theological thinking are possible in every culture. Ephrem was an engaged and authentic theologian whose works have left a deep mark in the life of the Church. Ephrem plunged into the Biblical text and contemplated theologically from it, which can be seen in the example of the *mēmṛā Of Jonah and the repentance of the Ninevites*. A prerequisite to all of this is an existential character of an interpretation. Ephrem starts with concrete

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47. P. WEIMAR, *Eine Geschichte, die mit einer Frage endet*. Die literarische Eigenart der Jonaerzählung I (BiLi 73), 2000, 55.

48. *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4, 26.

questions that were appearing before him and his community. He approaches the text with a certain theological preconception, looking for an answer to posed questions. The text caused such questions to arise because it bears them within itself. Ephrem does not interpret the text from an “objective perspective”, attempting to discover its original meaning. He understands and interprets the text in a given situation with the intention to achieve an appropriate effect; to understand it himself and convey its message. In this sense, Ephrem is like the biblical writers, whose task during the preparation of the Biblical texts was primarily the same. In his *mēmṛā*, he followed the basic intent of the text, highlighting those moments which he deemed important in that context. There, one can see the how contextual his theology and exegesis is – as is any other.