Ephrem of Syria – Power, truth, and construction of orthodoxy. Modelling theory and method in critical historiography of the making of religious tradition

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF THEOLOGY

in the subject

NEW TESTAMENT

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: Prof G A van den Heever

February 2020

DECLARATION

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EPHREM OF SYRIA — POWER, TRUTH, AND CONSTRUCTION OF ORTHODOXY. Modelling Theory and Method in Critical Historiography of the Making of Religious Tradition.

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Annelie van der Bank   07 January 2020

ABSTRACT

Hymns can and have functioned as powerful strategic tools to change social and religious landscapes, and to inform and transform people's notions about 'doing church'. A few words about Ephrem the Syrian, which emphasised liturgical *singing* and accentuated the force of *truth*, the *power* of persuasion and socio-religious *transformation* was the starting point and connecting thread, which formed the backbone of this dissertation throughout—a research project that was also guided by some principles of new historicism to view Ephrem as a textual construct, living in a particular context and dealing with specific religious issues in a particular way. His trump card was the female choirs he founded, which became a distinct feature of orthodox Syrian Christianity. Through their singing performances, he 'silenced' the unorthodox voices of—especially Bardaisan—and created a community of believers where each person had a part to fulfil, where women and men would become 'two harps', 'singing one praise'.

KEY TERMS

Ephrem the Syrian, Bardaisan, Jacob of Sarug, Edessa, Nisibis, Roman Empire, Northern Mesopotamia, Early Christianity, music, hymnody, verse homiletics, religion, truth, power, transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

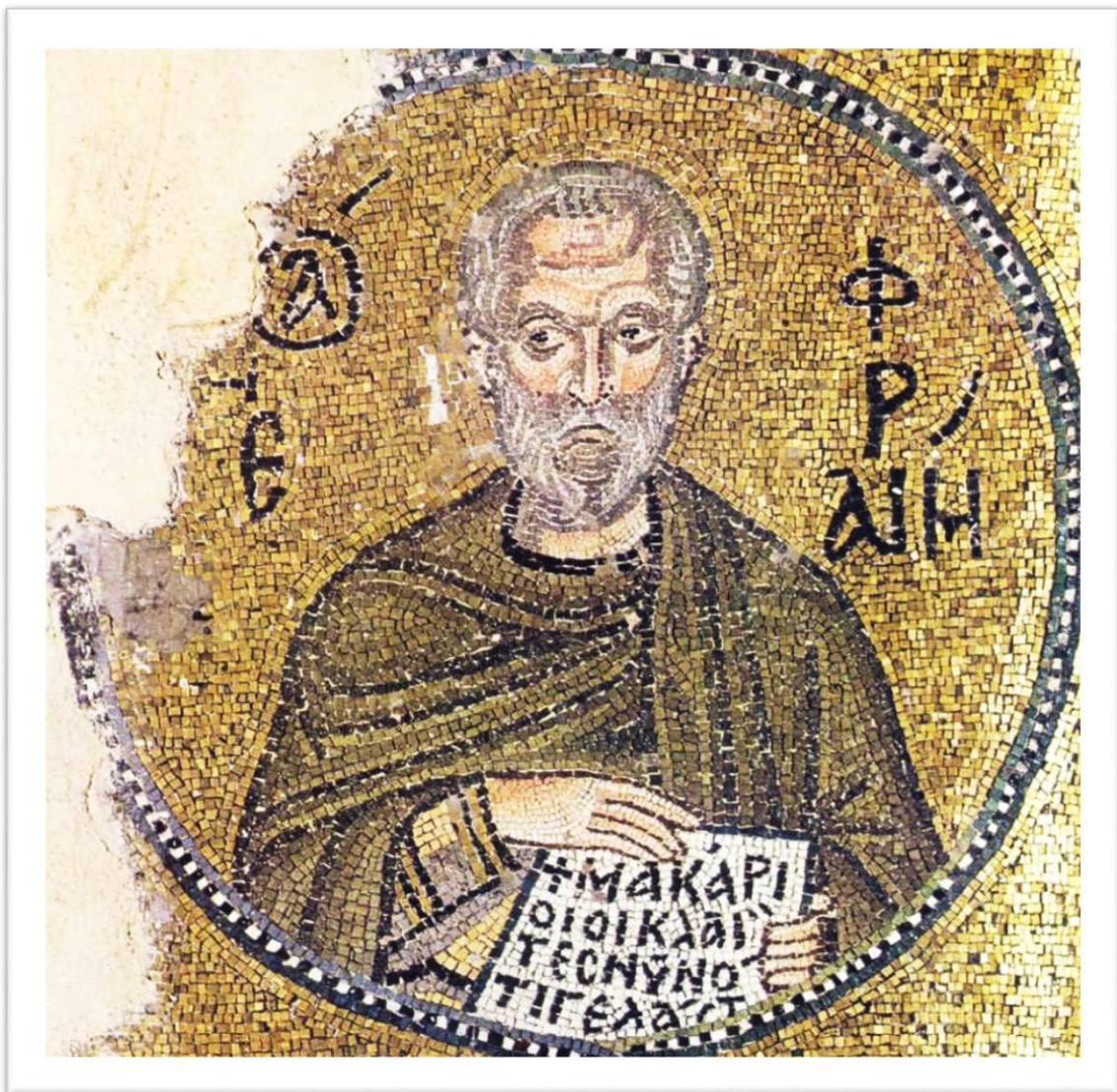To those whose words and actions may continue to unsilence the silent.

Figure 1: Ephrem from Nisibis.[1]

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[1] Image obtained from http://en.abouna.org/en/content/get-know-st-ephrem-%E2%80%9Charp-holy-spirit%E2%80%9D.

Contents

CHAPTER 1 — INTRODUCTION

1.1 A FRAGMENT OF A THOUGHT[2]

> To confute the heresies thus circulated, Ephraim borrowed the tunes
> employed by Harmodius; and his hymns, set to these tunes, soon carried the
> day in favor of orthodoxy, partly by the force of their truth, partly by their
> superior literary power, and partly by the help of a choir formed among the
> nuns whom he employed to sing them, morning and evening, in the
> churches. Thus the rival hymnody of heresy was superseded, and the hymns
> of Ephraim gained the place they have ever since held in the Church,
> wherever Syriac is the ecclesiastical language,—even though it is no longer
> the vernacular.[3]

Now, perhaps more than ever before, we have become aware of the subjectiveness
of our engagement with literary and material evidence. Many contemporary
scholars are seriously focusing on rethinking our notions about historical events
and people.

The above-quoted fragment about Ephrem, the fourth century poet-theologian from
Nisibis was the starting point for this study. It accentuated the force of *truth*; it
underscored the *power* of persuasion; it alluded to socio-religious *transformation*;
and it emphasised liturgical *singing.* It generated its own questions and imaginings
about the past, and especially about the people who lived then and how they
responded to the issues of their world. It confronted me with a challenge for self-
reflection about twenty-first century people and how we think, understand and
imagine our world and theirs, and it made me curious to look beyond the few words
and find a gateway that would yoke our world with the world of which the fragment
spoke, even if it was only to hear one song.

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[2] For the purpose of clarity, it should be stated early that I have not studied Syriac and cannot read
Ephrem of Syria's works in the original language, but since this is not a textual or linguistic study of
his work, use is made of translations in the public domain. While the title features Ephrem of Syria,
actually the thesis focuses on religion as social formation, as cultural project, as mythmaking, as
authority construction, and tradition formation, processes in which hymnody functions as site for the
operationalizing of these processes, both in Late Antiquity and in the present day. Therefore, the
hymnody of Ephrem is a test case, a "for example," for this kind of religio-historical study.
[3] John Gwynn, *Selections from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian, and from the
Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage*. (NPNF[2] 13: 274).

I have a keen interest in music, and especially hymnody, and therefore the connection with Ephrem should be quite obvious. Not only did he write hymns that have outlived him by ages, he also used these as a tool to change the religious landscape in Edessa. His hymns were in effect religion as his particular truth, religion as an instrument of power and religion as a strategy of transformation—three themes that I chose as the thread for this particular exercise to construct a method to study religio-historical events and periods. Therefore, this study's engagement with Ephrem and other ancient writings is not as a textual study, but the development of a particular methodology to make meaning from religio-historical events and periods.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For Coenie J. Calitz,[4] liturgical singing can be therapeutic (music as therapy), or an element that creates the atmosphere necessary for therapy to take place (music in therapy), which means that liturgical singing does much more that merely function as an in-between act to connect the other 'important' acts of worship, such as praying, listening, or giving an offering. It will do us well to consider that hymn singing in itself also has specific functions and purposes, especially since it represents something more than an activity to involve the members in 'doing church', because Calitz have demonstrated that liturgical singing is also an important pastoral function aimed at healing for individuals as well as communities of believers.[5]

According to John Meyendorff, music is the art form that has always been fundamental to liturgical practices, yet it represents the element of early Christian culture, which is the least understood.[6] Therefore, it is quite possible that we may lack the capacity to appreciate the extent of Ephrem's brilliance as those who wrote about him, did:

> As into a flute, the truth breathes the story of Ephrem into me, that
> I may play his spiritual melodies at length.

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[4] Coenie J. Calitz, "Healing Liturgy: The Role of Music and Singing," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–9. Online: https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1628, 4.
[5] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 1.
[6] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions* (New York, NY: St Vladimir Seminary, 1989), 77.

> Not of my own accord did the demand rise to (my) tongue;
> Truth compelled me to lift up my voice for the true one.[7]

Nonetheless, more and more contemporary scholars are interested in exploring the concept of music in relation to religion and/or theology, as will be demonstrated later,[8]—which brings me to the first of three questions relevant to this study.

> Just how important is hymn singing? Is it simply to get the congregation in a good mood or to give the provide time to get ready to take up the offering? Is hymn singing an unnecessary frill?[9]

Few churchgoers consider the intricate structures and strategies that are employed to create a certain expressiveness in hymns, such as strategies to slow down the pace, or speed it up, repetition of specific phrases, contrast in melody and pitch, etc. It may be, because the singing of hymns or songs in church is such an ancient practice that we are unaware of the intricacies in constructing 'good' hymns and therefore neglect the role and meaning of hymns beyond the "praise and worship" aspect of it. Yet, often in our 'heart of hearts' we instinctively accept the "ability of music to lift the hearers above their reality", and that is probably why church groups go to hospitals and homes for the elderly to sing for and with them.[10]

According to Coenie Calitz,

> …we sing because we are human and we sing because we are believers. Singing is part of human communication and part of religious communication and therefore part of the worship service. Music is a gift of God in helping us to deal creatively with God, reality, ourselves and other people.[11]

He also understands liturgical singing as a source of "answers formulated in the course of centuries", as well as a tool that allows congregants to express their own "question, seeking, longing, fear, lament, not-understanding and woundedness",[12] which represent those aspects of life that people struggle to cope with or to comprehend meaningfully. Human beings sing of their experiences, hopes,

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[7] Joseph P. Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug: Critical Edition of the Syriac Text Translation and Introduction* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), 49.
[8] See chapter 1.3 and 1.5.
[9] Harry Eskew, "Hymns in the Church's Teaching Ministry," in *Sing with Understanding*, n. p. [cited 04 October 2018]. Online: http://singwithunderstanding.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/hymns-in-the-church.pdf.
[10] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 1.
[11] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 2.
[12] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 3.

yearnings, and therefore, it is necessary to change the lenses through which we view hymnody, and be aware of the strategies, informative processes, understandings, etc. that can be found in the humble hymn.

Calvin R. Stapert stated that there are two reasons why it is important to attempt to retrieve "the ancestral voices" of the early church. Firstly, "they are the least heard today, at least in the area of music", and secondly, "their thought on music has particular relevance for us today",[13] which introduces the second question that guided the approach of this study:

> Is it genuinely possible for people living at the beginning of the third millennium to comprehend meaningfully the world of the ancient church and its leaders, the church fathers?[14]

Many scholars are keenly aware that we, as twenty-first century researchers, students and readers of writings that were produced in a context vastly different from ours, are not able to see their world as they saw it. Traditional historicists believed that historians were capable of presenting the facts of history in an objective, unbiased manner, but that notion has been rejected. Instead, current notions accept that history is constructed—or composed—by historians and authors who cannot escape their humanness. "The past as it actually was, and the individual historical statements composing its narrative, can never coincide precisely."[15] We view events, people and ideas of the past "through the meanings of our own time and place";[16] which is one reason why there are so many 'truths' to be told.

According to Bernard C. Lategan, "different readers and readers from different times and social locations find themselves at different points of distanciation"[17] from the events or persons described in ancient texts, yet despite the distance, it is the writings of the early church that are the 'stuff' that form the basic building blocks for contemporary notions about Christian theology, religion, identity, etc.

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[13] Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MN: WM. Eerdmans, 2007), 7.

[14] Christopher A. Hall, "Reading Scripture with the Early Church," in *Catalyst Resources*, n. p. [cited 01 July 2018]. Online: http://www.catalystresources.org/.

[15] Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 73.

[16] Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A user-friendly guide* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 272.

[17] Bernard C. Lategan, "Reading from the Margin: Some Thoughts in the De-centred Reader," in *Reading Writing Right: Essays presented in honour of Prof Elna Mouton* (eds. Jeremy Punt and Marius J Nel; Stellenbosch: African Sun, 2018), 44.

The notion of Christianity as a 'solid construct' consisting of 'solid notions' has been replaced by the acceptance that it is actually a phenomenon that is more fluid, more questionable, and interpretable. For some modern Christians, earliest Christianity represents "a purer version of itself, a normative template against which later forms can be judged."[18] For others—usually more secular-minded people—the motive comes from the "desire to believe that the human race is improving with the passage of time."[19] Whichever starting point one departs from, the result is that many contemporary researchers have opted to turn their gaze towards the people who produced the writings or texts of Christianity, to consider their motives, their notions and experiences and the consequences of their words. It allows for a completely new set of questions to be asked, new debates to be engaged, and it allows for a new kind of reading against the grain, or reading "from the margins",[20] which also means the inclusion of sources that have previously been ignored or rejected, and themes that were ignored, which introduces the third question of this current research project:

> What would it mean to conceive of the history of Christianity not as a
> **history of the church**, but rather as a **history of Christians**?[21]

The distance between our world and the world in which early Christians lived is one of the reasons why earlier notions tended to objectify the development of Christianity as an ideology brought to us in the 'voice of history', which neglected to consider that Christianity was in essence a movement of various trajectories driven by flesh-and-blood persons, who had to construct their theology, their religion, their humanness in response to their particular contexts.

Shifting our focus, however, is not without its problems. Contemporary researchers are dependent on the writings of those earlier historians, theologians and authors who deemed it important enough to write about the great figures of the early church, which means that we have no other means to view them than through the

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[18] Josef Lössl, *The Early Church: History and Memory* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 15.
[19] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 272.
[20] Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman, "Introduction: Shifting the Focus of History," in *Late Ancient Christianity* (ed. Virginia Burrus; *Vol 2 of A People's History of Christianity,* ed. Denis R. Janz; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 6.
[21] Burrus and Lyman, "Introduction," 1.

lenses of those who penned their stories.[22] Just like artwork, some earlier personages were represented as more complete sketches. They seem more full-bodied and rounded, whereas others are barely more than hastily sketched line figures. Nonetheless, we know that behind the ideologies of Christianity were persons, even if we can only view them as editorial constructs, "conditioned by context as well as by character".[23]

The idea of focusing on the phenomenon of Christianity as a phenomenon of Christians rather than merely seeing the abstract ideologies as the focus of Christian studies also brings the idea of community into sharper focus. For Koopman, it is in "the interaction with the other, in the communion, in the relationship, I find my essence and being. ... We receive our existence out of the hands of the other and my existence is meaningful because there are others who want to share their existence with me."[24]

Many scholars have become aware of the importance of studying the early Christians within a "framework of identity formation", which "aims to understand the discursive strategies and processes by which early Christians developed notions of themselves as distinct from others within the Mediterranean world ... including the multiple ways in which Christians produced various constructions of what it meant to be Christian."[25]

Earliest Christianity represented a variety of voices, and during the fourth century, despite the attempts of the Roman emperors to consolidate the variety of voices, the church leaders were effectively competing with one another to "persuade the emperor of what version of Christianity should be upheld as orthodoxy",[26] even as they accepted the diversity of practices among the ordinary believers.[27]

Contemporary notions are much more interested in the ordinary people and how they experienced and acted upon their religious convictions. It is often described as

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[22] Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1994), xiv.

[23] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, xvi.

[24] Nico Koopman, "On Leadership in Vulnerability: Honouring Elna Mouton," in *Reading Writing Right: Essays presented in honour of Prof Elna Mouton* (eds. Jeremy Punt and Marius J Nel. US; African Sun, 2018), 253.

[25] Karen L. King, "Which Early Christianity?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (ed. Susan A. Harvey and David G. Hunter; New York, NY: Oxford, 2011), 73.

[26] Burrus and Lyman, "Introduction," 21.

[27] Burrus and Lyman, "Introduction," 22.

a 'from below' approach, which is both exciting and daunting at once, as scholars attempt to find the best strategies, approaches, theories, etc. to determine "how to represent this ever-shifting diversity adequately."[28]

Consequently, if one is to accept Stapert's challenge to retrieve ''the ancestral voices'', especially with reference to "their thought on music", one will have to construct a careful strategy, crossing borders between disciplines and borrowing ideas from other fields of study.

1.3   RESEARCH REVIEW

Contemporary research into the role, purpose and effects of hymn singing in communities, underscores some of the assumptions of this research project. Research ranges from studies into the choice of hymns for worship, to the possibility that hymns can function as tools for identity formation, recruitment of new members, expression of theological beliefs, etc.[29]

A brief description of five, relatively recent theses and dissertations will suffice to demonstrate this study's claim that hymns are more than mere melodies with lyrics, but are worth studying for their use as strategies for identity, community and socio-cultural (trans)formation, and the number of researchers who agree with this view, is increasing.

1.3.1   Searching for the "Good Song"[30]

Tönsing's research focused on the type of hymns that can be described as 'good songs' for singing during the act of communal worship. She acknowledged the conflict regarding the choice of music and worship styles, and attempted to address the issue. Her thesis examined biblical as well as church historical answers to the question of whether Christians should sing during worship, and what they should

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[28] King, "Which Early Christianity?" 66.

[29] Two scholars worth mentioning, despite the fact that the purpose of the Research Review is to demonstrate that an increasing number of students are interested in the subject of music as it relates to early Christianity, is Susan A. Harvey and Sebastian Brock. Both of these scholars are at the forefront of Syriac Studies, and therefore excellent sources for insight into the world of Ephrem, and the legacy of his hymns. Therefore, this study is greatly indebted to their work.

[30] Cf. Johanna Tönsing G., "Searching for the 'Good Song'. Determining the Quality of Christian Songs within the Polarities of Worship" (Ph.D., University of Pretoria, 2013).

sing, how 'songs' function in the context of the worship service and how to maintain a balanced approach to hymn singing.

1.3.2   The Singer in the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy[31]

Ravolainan's focus was on the cantor, or "the order of the singer", a phenomenon of eastern Christianity, for which regulations can be found in the fourth century canons of the Synod of Laodicea and the Apostolic Constitution. Ravolainan's research attempted to answer why such a category was needed, as well as why the order of 'reader' was the lowest ranked in the ecclesial hierarchy, while the order of the 'singer', or cantor had a different ranking. His research was concerned about the external influences that the orthodox Church experienced and demonstrated that orthodox Christianity during the fourth century was not a homogenous phenomenon.

1.3.3   Music and Liturgy in Early Christianity[32]

Yatskaya researched factors that affected music and liturgy formation in early Christianity, specifically the first two centuries. She determined that Christianity did not develop its musical notions in isolation, but also inherited elements from Judaism as well as from Hellenism, as it extended its influence throughout the Roman Empire. She consequently observed that Christian music was not a homogenous phenomenon, but enculturated, and that it often reflected the socio-cultural background of its particular community.

1.3.4   Musical Assemblies[33]

Weimer's research focused on the variety of strategies in which music was incorporated in religious discourses and practices in early Christianity. Weimer argued that music was not merely something Christians did during worship, but helped to shape Christian identity. For her, communal singing was an essential

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[31] Cf. Kaija Ravolainen, "The Singer in the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. The Early History of the Order" (DMus., University of the Arts Helsinki, 2014).
[32] Cf. Svetlana Yatskaya, "Music and Liturgy in Early Christianity" (M.Th., University of South Africa, 2001).
[33] Cf. Jade B. Weimer, "Musical Assemblies: How Early Christian Music Functioned as a Rhetorical Thopos, a Mechanism for Recruitment, and a Fundamental Marker of an Emerging Christian Identity" (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 2016).

element in defining insider-outsider boundaries, and hymns were used as strategies for teaching doctrine, for expressing ideas and for recruiting new members. Her research touched on elements that is also part of this study, namely Ephrem's strategy of introducing female choirs, and using melody and lyrics to renounce 'heresies'—or as she described it, "out-group theologies and practices"—while at the same time using it to recruit new members.

1.3.5   Hymnody and Identity[34]

For Roberts, the aspect that deserved scrutiny was how a church's hymns can function as a reflection of the particular identity of that congregation. His research focused on different congregations who operated in different times, different places and in different cultural contexts, to demonstrate that as communities of believers sing together, they are changed as they develop a particular, communal identity.

1.4   RESEARCH STATEMENT

This study will argue that hymns are more than mere melodies with lyrics, but can be powerful strategic devices to change social and religious landscapes, and to inform and transform people's notions about 'doing church', which means that hymns and hymn-singing can also function as discourses and strategies for identity construction, social formation, invention of tradition, etc. However, for us to have some understanding of the strategic value of hymns, we need to have at least some understanding of the hymnodists as persons in their particular contexts, while not forgetting that our understandings are also conditioned by our contexts,[35] which means that "it would be naïve to assume that there existed an account that was entirely free of prejudice or prior assumptions."[36]

The interconnectedness between the past, present and future, where "subjectivity in production is yoked to subjectivity in reception",[37] resides in our acceptance that there is "more than one 'true and authentic' account of early Christian diversity".[38]

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[34] Cf. Mike A. Roberts , "Hymnody and Identity: Congregational Singing as a Construct of Christian Community Identity" (Ph.D., University of Birmingham, 2014).
[35] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 2.
[36] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 4.
[37] Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 46.
[38] King, "Which Early Christianity?" 81.

The ancient writers may have employed strategies that differed from ours, but just like us, they expected to "find layers of meaning"[39] in the texts that were important in the construction and development of their network of faith-related writings.

One such ancient author was Ephrem the Syrian, a theologian and poet, whose writings, particularly his hymns, functioned as agents of transformation. While they undoubtedly had different presuppositions than we do, we may be surprised by the extent to which their understandings can help liberate us from those biases that are toxic or harmful in the world we live in. Ephrem did not live in a socio-cultural, or religious vacuum, which cannot be ignored in this study's primary function as a construction of a particular theoretical approach to examine religio-historical events and persons.

1.5   RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

> Whatever we do, there is always a motivation for us to do it; something moves us.[40]

The notion of Christianity as a 'solid construct' consisting of 'solid notions' has been replaced by the acceptance that it is actually a phenomenon that is more fluid, more questionable, and interpretable, and that we are unable to read or write without our particular, individualistic lenses, forged in the crucibles of our complex realities. According to Lois Tyson, critical theory's most valuable contribution to academic studies is found in the manner in which it created in us the desire to search for connections where we were previously unaware of their existence.[41] Christopher A. Hall therefore proposed that we should at least make some effort at "conceptual bridge-building".[42] Conceptual bridge-building cannot cover all the blind spots that exist because of the distance between them and us, but it may afford us some "opportunity to compensate for the blind spots inherent in our particular culture".[43]

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[39] Hall, "Reading Scripture with the Early Church."
[40] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 1.
[41] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 398.
[42] Hall, "Reading Scripture with the Early Church."
[43] Hall, "Reading Scripture with the Early Church."

1.5.1 Relevance of emphasising liturgical singing

Just how important can hymn singing be? Does it have any transformative power? During his faculty address at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1978, Harry Eskew introduced his address by stating, "Next to the Bible, the hymnal ranks highest in the ministry of most evangelical congregations."[44] For him, the hymnal can be a powerful "auxiliary textbook" for teaching theology and doctrine.[45] Yet, he believed that hymns are underutilised because the teaching potential of hymns for Christian living is underestimated.

Apparently, Ephrem did not underestimate the value of hymns as "auxiliary textbook" for teaching theology and doctrine. According to Jacob of Sarug:

> The Hebrew women made a joyful sound with their tambourines,
> And now (Syrian) women sing praises with their hymns…
> The daughters of the Hebrews saw deliverance, and clapped (their) hands
> To give praise at the command of Moses to the One who delivered them.
> Chosen Ephrem (did) the same with his teaching;
> By the daughters of the nations, behold, (our) great Deliverer is praised.
> Greater is this glory than that which was there,
> Just as the deliverance, which here is greater than that one.[46]

In an article based on her PhD research, J. G. Tönsing described the characteristics that could define a "good song" in the contemporary church environment.[47] One of the elements she emphasised was how modern understanding of hymns accept the emotive dimension as a necessary element to speak to people's acceptance of the message therein in a manner that should be balanced by the "song's" ability to "proclaim and teach" a theologically sound message. Consequently, Tönsing's 'good song' described the type of hymns, psalms, chants of worship songs that "appeal to the whole person: the will, the emotions and the intellect".[48]

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[44] Eskew, "Hymns in the Church's Teaching Ministry."

[45] Cf. Eskew, "Hymns in the Church's Teaching Ministry.": "What poetry can do for doctrine is to humanize and clothe it with feeling. And it is this handling of doctrine that has made the church hymn book the actual creed of countless thousands of Christians who have never so much as had the historic church confessions in their hands."

[46] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 36.

[47] J. G. Tönsing, C. J. Wepener and C. Vos, "The 'Cognitive' and the 'Emotive' Component in Christian Songs: Tracing the Shifts in Traditional and Contemporary Songs." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 1-14. Online: http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i1.1308.

[48] Tönsing, Wepener, and Vos, " The 'Cognitive' and the 'Emotive' Component in Christian Songs," 4.

Life is not all about celebration. People have to deal with loss, anger, pain, mourning, frustration, struggle, injustice and difficult questions that do not seem to have answers, which begs the question: Can hymns have a role to fulfil when communities are hurting, or suffering? Many of the ancient theologians seemed to have thought so, such as Nicetas of Remesiana, Ambrose, Augustine,[49] and especially Ephrem. Contemporary liturgical singing should consist of more than merely Godly-minded words of praise, because doing church is also concerned with fellowship and therefore, it has been argued by Coenie J. Calitz that the liturgical practices of the worship service should include a reflection on "the realities of life"[50] as reciprocal shaping agents. This means that the liturgy of worship, as a reflection of the congregation's church-life and experience of everyday living, should be reflected in the music and singing as a response and strategy for coping with life. For Calitz, the liturgy of congregational singing can and should act as a liminal space, or the in-between moment between event(s) of suffering or hurt, and healing, where music can function as "catharsis for all the emotions of grief, anger, aggression, depression, disappointment, et cetera."[51] In that sense, the pastoral role of the worship service should not only be viewed as "the service (*diakonia*) of the churchgoers but also the service to the churchgoers, where the churchgoers are built up, taught, admonished, encouraged, comforted, strengthened and healed."[52]

1.5.2 Relevance of emphasising history and subjectivity

Can contemporary people really have a realistic imagining of early Christian realities? The expressiveness of Jacob of Sarug's introduction to his homily on Ephrem somewhat emphasised the problem of creating a true and realistic history for a person you have never met—

> How shall I, an ugly man, depict you, (O) fair one?
> The colours of my discourse are too common for your narrative.
> No simpleton can carry an image of the emperor;

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[49] Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, (trans. E. B. Pusey. London: Watkins, 2006), 262.: "Yet again, when I remember the tears I shed at the Psalmody of Thy church, in the beginning of my recovered faith; and how at this time, I am moved, not with the singing, but with the things sung, when they are sung with a clear voice and modulation most suitable, I acknowledge the great use of this institution."

[50] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 2.

[51] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 8.

[52] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 2.

Nor shall I succeed at singing your story.

My paints are dirty because of my foulness,

And your image requires colours that are all ablaze.

I am stubble and a tangle of thorns; but your story requires

A bright fiery flame to depict your accomplishments.[53]

It is impossible to write history without injecting at least some of our subjectivities into the storyline, and contemporary theologians are increasingly aware of the relationship between culture and religion as expressions of being human—something that has become relevant for how we view religion and its importance for mission.[54]

Of particular relevance to this study, is Marzanna Poplawska's research on Indonesian hymnody, especially with reference to the practice of *langen sekar*, which was created by Pak D. Wignyosaputro for use in Protestant churches in Indonesia.[55] Apparently, Wignyosaputro felt inspired to compose hymns that reflected the local Javanese culture, after he heard a sermon on Psalm 150, which made him realise that Christian worship music did not have to be restricted to organ, or Western accompaniment. His decision to make religion more contextual resulted in his introduction of traditional gamelan,[56] or Javanese music to worship services.[57] At first, Wignyosaputro used the lyrics of the —by then, familiar—standard, local Protestant hymnal, which he set to new melodies that were familiar to Indonesian culture.[58] In due time, his compositions matured and he introduced new lyrics for his new melodies, thereby expressing his theology in his own words. His strategy was not without its problems, and it did not completely replace the

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[53] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 27.

[54] Brian A. de Vries, "Towards a Global Theology: Theological Method and Contextualisation," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 1 (2016): 1–12. Online: http:// dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve. v37i1.1536.

[55] Marzanna Poplawska, "New Christian Music in Indonesia: Inculteration in Transition," in *Resounding Transcendence. Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual* (eds. Jeffers Engelhardt and Phillip V. Bohlman; New York, NY: Oxford University, 2016), 114.

[56] Cf. https://www.britannica.com/art/gamelan — "**Gamelan**, also spelled gamelang or gamelin, the indigenous orchestra type of the islands of Java and Bali in Indonesia, consisting largely of several varieties of gongs and various sets of tuned metal instruments that are struck with mallets. The gongs are either suspended vertically or, as with the knobbed-centre, kettle-shaped gongs of the boning, placed flat... A sustained melody is played either by the bamboo flute (suling) or by a bowed stringed instrument (rebab) or is sung—the last especially when, as often occurs, the gamelan is used to accompany theatrical performances, or wayang. The voice is then part of the orchestral texture. Dominating these two groups of instruments is the drum (kendang), which unites them and acts as leader."

[57] Poplawska, "New Christian Music in Indonesia," 115.

[58] Poplawska, "New Christian Music in Indonesia," 117.

Westernised Christian hymns, which was introduced by the missionaries, for several reasons, one of which was that the local believers have accepted the Westernised singing. Another reason was because churches usually lack the space to accommodate the full gamelan necessary to accompany the singing; and the third was because traditional music appealed more to the older believers, while the younger people have come to prefer contemporary music.[59] Notwithstanding, it is not difficult to see the similarities between Wignyosaputro's strategy and that of Ephrem, ages apart. Both attempted to retain that which was 'good' from history, and connect it with something new, and in our understanding of what Wignyosaputro wanted to achieve, we are also more conscious of Ephrem's strategy to transform Edessene community to reflect the 'correct' approach to Christianity, as he understood it. It does not necessarily mean that we will be able to determine Ephrem's motives faultlessly. Reading ancient texts and evaluating fragmentary artefacts can only give us partial images of the ancient authors and those whom they wrote about as historical, geo-political constructs, which are dependent on socio-cultural contexts and religious notions.[60] Therefore, we will probably not interpret their stories as they may have wanted us to, but at least we will be motivated to find that which link us to their lives, and to discover the shared humanness that actually transcends time and place.

1.5.3   Relevance of emphasising Christianity as the stories of people

Do we have the capacity to understand the history of Christianity in terms of people's stories?

Distance in time and place tend to dehumanise those who are studied and desensitise those who do the studying. History is concerned with people, even if contemporary notions view history as a construct subjected to the personhood and context of the history-writer, and has shifted the focus to be overly conscious that the people we see in history, are constructs, whom we study in terms of the stories of figures, personages, notables, icons, etc. Consequently, Ephrem has become an icon—someone whose personhood is difficult to imagine apart from his role in the

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[59] Poplawska, "New Christian Music in Indonesia," 120.
[60] Pieter J. J. Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective and its Bearing on New Testament and Early Christian Texts and Contexts," *Scriptura* 102, no. 1 (2009): 495–510.

construction and development of a particular type of Christianity. His strategies, teachings and arguments changed countless lives whom we cannot know, because their stories have disappeared. Therefore, if we were to attempt to write about 'the woman down the street' who found new meaning in life because of Ephrem's attitude towards women, we would have to write a fictional novel, because we will have to imagine her—and that is not scientific! Yet, while it may be argued that we have no way of 'seeing' her—a woman, marginalised by the world she lived in, or the others, for whom Ephrem confronted the elite, [61] it is acceptable to imagine them (not as constructs of history, but as persons with real lives) in the marginalised women and suffering poor in our world.

A current shift in focus is slowly grinding the wheels of change in South India. It is driven by the Dalit theology movement, which is concerned with the oppressiveness of the Indian caste system, which came to life as a result of one man's belief that Christianity could provide a "means of transcending the identities they had inherited from centuries of religious and social inequality."[62] The late reverend Appavoo, Dalit composer and activist in the drive for social transformation utilised a medium that was familiar, and perfectly suited for participation and transformation. Appavoo chose it as the basis for his Dalit music, because Tamil folk music is not linked to a composer and therefore performers are "free to re-create" the songs to tell their own stories.[63] Appavoo transformed folk songs into Christian hymns to transmit his Dalit theology,[64] and his aim was to help the oppressed Dalit understand that they were not meant to remain in the oppressive state they were in as a result of age-old social injustice against them; and to realise that they could bring about change, by acting on their belief.[65] His strategy represented a theology from below transmitted in the vernacular of music, and its influence was

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[61] This aspect is discussed comprehensively in chapter 6.4.2.

[62] Zoe C. Sherinian, "Transforming Christian Music, Transforming Social Identity in South India," in *Resounding Transcendence. Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual* (eds. Jeffers Engelhardt and Phillip V. Bohlman; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 126.

[63] Sherinian, "Transforming Christian Music," 129.

[64] Sherinian, "Transforming Christian Music," 136.

[65] Cf. Sherinian, "Transforming Christian Music," 128. The late reverend Appavoo believed that the "re-creative and participatory nature of Tamil folk music makes it an ideal vehicle for the transcendent potential of Dalit liberation theology", because it represented a familiar, enculturated medium that belonged to whomever was singing their story of salvation and healing.

demonstrated in the interviews (in 2002), which Zoe C. Sherinian had with villagers who were taught Appavoo's songs:

> Observing and participating in the process of Appavoo's music powerfully entering the mainstream of Christian culture gave me hope that with time institutional reform, as well as personal transformation and the transcendence of social oppression was possible.[66]

Appavoo's target audience was the oppressed who needed to be liberated from the social injustice they have been suffering for ages as a result of India's caste system. He did not target the oppressors who may not see any advantage in a process of transformation but the sufferers, because he wanted them to understand the wrongfulness of the social injustice they suffer and to become empowered to reject the humiliation and degenerate treatment they were conditioned to accept.

While this study acknowledges that the motivations behind Appavoo and Ephrem's strategies are actually 'worlds apart', it is the similarities that made the comparison relevant. Both focused their effort on the 'sufferers'—the downtrodden and marginalised and both utilised a strategy from below—to empower the sufferers to become active participants in their own liberation, giving meaning to the notion that hymns must not only reflect the theology of the religious tradition, but should also be appropriate to "the many and variable life situations in which believers find themselves"; "encourage corporate worship"; and "encourage growth in discipleship".[67]

1.6   STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 1 introduces the study and explains the specific research questions that guided the dissertation. Included in the chapter, are references to particular academic and practical research projects that are relevant to the growing interest in the relationship between music and theology, as well as a few examples to demonstrate the relevance of this research project.

Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical framework and methodology of the dissertation. Within the scope provided by the principles of new historicism, it has

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[66] Sherinian, "Transforming Christian Music," 138.
[67] —"The Theology and Place of Music in Worship," in *Reformed Church in America*, n. p. [cited 28 June 2018]. Online: https://www.rca. org/ resources/theology-and-place-music-worship.

been recognised that contemporary research had to rethink its methodological horizons. Notions about history, how much we can know from the world of ancient texts, where and by whom the meaning of texts are initiated and constructed, as well as the role of authors—and their personhood as constructs—is discussed as the theoretical framework for this study's claim that hymnody can—and has been— used as a vehicle for socio-religious transformation.

Keeping in mind that the fragment about Ephrem forms the centrepiece for this study, Chapter 3 is concerned with positioning the twenty-first century reader with reference to current notions about religion as truth, power and transformative agents, before approaching Ephrem's context. It is important to understand our subjectiveness as it determines the 'lenses' through which we view the ancient world, as well as create the space for contemporary scholars to be aware of the potential of including liturgical music in their theorising praxis.

This study accepts that the fourth century context cannot be viewed as a picture-perfect postcard, but rather as a painted landscape. Therefore, Chapter 4 is concerned with the broad landscape within which Ephrem lived and operated, namely that of the Roman Empire, where 'truth' was fluid, power was exerted in multiple directions and transformation touched the lives of all. In addition, the power of music was realised by the early Christians, which resulted in formalised restrictions to regulate liturgical singing.

In Chapter 5, the view is shifted to Nisibis and Edessa, the two cities in the northern Mesopotamian province of the Roman Empire, which are the two cities where Ephrem lived and functioned.

Chapter 6 narrows the focus to the Christian community in Edessa, where the religious landscape was pluralistic and where the legacy of the long-deceased poet-philosopher, Bardaisan still held sway, while the influences of other unorthodox groups, such as the Marcionites and Manichaeans were also prominent. The orthodox religion of Ephrem represented a minority, which did not prevent him from attempting to silence the voices of the heretics with his orthodox truth, to unsilence the silent voices of women by creating female choirs to participate in public liturgical singing, and to transform the religious landscape in Edessa to one where each person had a part to fulfil.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with a thematic analysis of one of Ephrem's hymns, *Hymn 24* in the group known as *Ephrem's hymns against heresies*, and some final remarks. I do not read Syriac, and have therefore made use of translations in the public domain. For this particular hymn, a recent translation (2012) by Adam McCollum was used.

CHAPTER 2 — MOULDING A PARTICULAR GATEWAY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1   INTRODUCTION

Understanding is both an art and a science.[1]

If Lategan is correct—and I do not doubt that he is—that understanding is a scientific, creative art, and that interpretation is "perceived to be an ongoing undertaking"[2], then we should agree that writing is not in fact the "presentation of facts, there is only interpretation."[3] This is especially relevant in light of Calvin Stapert's challenge, which provided the thrust behind this study's starting point when he stated that we need to retrieve the voices of early Christians, especially with reference to their "thought on music".[4] How these voices will be interpreted will depend "on the light in which they come to view" and "the place (clearing) in which different lights allow different things to appear".[5]

2.2   RETHINKING METHODOLOGICAL HORIZONS

Religion, I submit, is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal. History, in the sharpest possible contrast, is that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice.[6]

In a world where approaches must be scientific, results must be measureable, solutions must be sustainable, consequences must be reasonable, it almost seems as a contradictory notion to think of a theoretical framework that does not claim

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[1] Bernard C. Lategan, "New Testament Hermeneutics (Part I): Defining Moments in the Development of Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Focusing on the message: New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis and methods* (ed. Andrie du Toit; Pretoria: Protea, 2009), 13.

[2] Lategan, "New Testament I," 58.

[3] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 269.

[4] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 7.

[5] Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, "Doing Theology in Multi-World Contexts," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 2 (2017), 1–10. Online: https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i2.3839.

[6] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 3 (1996): 225—227. Online: https://brill.com/view/journals/mtsr/18/4/article-p392_5.xml.

exactness, but that is exactly what contemporary theological scholars have come to realise. It is not possible to be objective, and therefore studies which focus on early Christianity has experienced an "institutional shift … away from Christian privilege", and the "reorienting of the study of early Christianity away from theological investments".[7] As stated by Towey:

> Different and divergent voices in Theology have always been around, but for centuries, the platform was either clerical or academic. Whether Kierkegaard was pushing for passion over reason and the primacy of the individual over the community, or Nietzsche was arguing the need to rid the world of religion so as to allow humanity to create its own rules, the effect of these surging voices was to recast the question of truth and meaning.[8]

The primary criticism against the earlier Christian-privileged, theological approach to the study of the New Testament and Early Christianity, is that in the past, this type of one-dimensional thinking had "far too frequently produced work that obscures the project of critical historical construction through steady commitments to thinly veiled Christian theological agendas."[9] Current notions have shifted from one-dimensional thinking to the inclusion of a multiplicity of diverse methodologies, approaches, strategies and ideologies that allows for "a conscious enlistment of that which has been operative in the life of the text all along—the engagement of individual experiences, values, commitments, and concerns."[10]

Attempts to understand the world in which ancient religious texts were produced are increasingly being driven from the perspective knowledge that contextualisation is multi-faceted and complex.[11] According to Mack, "the popular notion of religion as personal experience has seldom found it necessary to think about these social conceptions".[12] In contrast, most contemporary scholars have widened their theoretical horizons to accommodate complicated and multi-focal understandings of human nature, or culture—the living experience, faith system, social norms and

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[7] Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig, "Introduction: Drawing Large and Startling Figures: Reimagining Christian Origins by Painting like Picasso," in *Reimagining Christian Origins. A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (eds. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1996), 8.
[8] Anthony Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology.* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 378.
[9] Castelli and Taussig, "Introduction," 7.
[10] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 47.
[11] De Vries, "Towards a Global Theology," 1.
[12] Burton L. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation: A Social Theory of Religion* (London: Equinox, 2008), 218.

ethics, which in essence describes the elements of communities and/or societies that construct and give meaning to their understanding of life. That is probably why so many contemporary scholars view personal faith as "a hindrance to theological inquiry";[13] and insist that the concept of religion should be studied, "not from the perspective of God's revelation, but rather as a by-product of the social need for meaning in life."[14]

Since—especially religious—texts touches people on the levels of "convictions and values", researchers, such as S. Phillip Nolte proposed the development of methodologies and approaches that are conducive to responsible and ethical readings,[15] while at the same time cautioning against the construction of rigid frameworks, because a "framework immediately rules out questions and problems which are part of other frameworks"; and consequently "represents the subjective viewpoint of the interpreter and prematurely determines his or her interpretation."[16]

Contemporary strategies aimed at unearthing meaning from ancient sources cannot operate in one-dimensional spheres anymore—such as those who read history as a victorious progression of Christianity, or those who view history as the steady demise of Christianity by the 'enlightened' hand of secularisation. Our twenty-first century world is complex and multi-dimensional, and history was not transmitted from generation to generation as a bias-free phenomenon. The history of early Christianity is "clouded by both historical distance and theological slant",[17] and because of the contemporary self-conscious reflection on notions such as culture, society, religion, etc. it is doubtful whether anyone will argue against the notion that our methodological horizons have to be broad, fluid, creative, and open, which essentially describes new historicism .

New historicism, according to Gina Hens-Piazza refers to a type of "sensibility or perspective on literature"[18] rather than a theory or method, because of its proclivity to cross boundaries between disciplines. Its principles has threatened the narrow

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[13] Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 10.
[14] Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 358.
[15] S. Phillip Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories: The (Ir)Relevance of Reader-response Criticism for Apocryphal Literature in the Septuagint," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 1–10. Online: http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ hts.v68i1.1092.
[16] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 3.
[17] Castelli and Taussiġ, "Introduction," 13.
[18] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 6.

confines of specialisation, which tended to result in the type of sophistication that is characterised by self-defined parameters, self-constructed questions, a distinctive vocabulary and the creation of its own task forces, but its strategies has opened the doors for those who wanted to study the issues related to the elements of human action and interaction, such as politics, economics, social structures and ethics. It includes the historical texts, as products of the world of the author, as well as the world of the actual reader, and effectively invited scholars to move from a narrow-minded focus to a diversified understanding of knowledge as an exchange between traditions, cultures, notions and ideas.[19] Therefore, it was chosen as the broad framework for this study.

No text has ever been produced in a vacuum devoid of present context, history or notions about the future. Texts were products of the particular times in which they were produced, and when we read these texts, it is from a particular time and place in history that may have very little in common with the world of the author. It is therefore naïve to suppose that history represents a singular narrative. Therefore, new historicists argue that we should accept the existence of a variety of 'histories' or historical narratives, dependent on the context of the reader.[20]

Readers may come from a variety of starting points, and therefore, an important principle found in new historicism, is its insistence on "boundary crossing … not only for economics, politics, and communication, but for ministry, for biblical and theological understandings, and for knowledge itself".[21] It also proposes that the past, present and future should be viewed as an "entanglement",[22] where the researcher, residing and writing in the present, about things that occurred in the past, do so with the notion to add meaning to the future.

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[19] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 21.
[20] Thomas A. Schmitz, *Modern Literary Theory and Ancient Texts. An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 162.
[21] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 21.
[22] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 45.

2.3 RETHINKING HISTORY

> Our subjectivity, then, is a lifelong process of negotiating our way,
> consciously and unconsciously, among the constraints and freedoms offered at
> any given moment in time by the society in which we live.[23]

We cannot escape our contexts, and we cannot escape history, which means that our understanding of history is woven into our thinking, speaking and acting processes. We also cannot change any aspect of the past. Nonetheless, we can rethink our attitude towards the meanings of past events, ideologies, structures and motives, and we can use the insight we gain from our rethinking to decide how we should live in the present.[24]

Few contemporary scholars will argue against the observation that we only have access to the basic facts of history, and that our understanding of what these facts mean and how they fit into the "complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which they occurred" is "strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact".[25]

The notion of Deconstructionism, which emerged as a major approach to the theorising of history during the second half of the twentieth century, was proposed as a strategy to "improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideologies of which we are unaware because they are "built into" our language."[26] One of the awarenesses that could be linked to the notions derived from deconstructionism, was to distinguish between the actual past—which is inaccessible to the modern reader—and history—which is a "literary creation … interpreted through textualised relics which themselves are only to be understood through layers of interpretation as the historian's facts."[27] As far as Kleinberg is concerned:

> The purpose of deconstruction is to expose the binary construct and arbitrary
> nature of the hierarchy at work in a text by revealing how the binary elements
> in fact exchange properties with each other. Furthermore, deconstruction also

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[23] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 270.
[24] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 24.
[25] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 268–269.
[26] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 235.
[27] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 36.

focuses on what is left out of a text, that about which it is silent but on which it also depends.[28]

However, deconstruction as a strategy in theorising history did not gain much of a foothold, because it has been noted that the writing of history is actually a "construction of narratives highlighting events that occurred in an attempt to make them present to the reader or listener."[29] This idea is underscored by Alun Munslow, who views history as that which is concerned with the translation of evidence to narrative, knowing that the evidence existed before the narrative, and that the existence of the evidence is tied to the intentions of the 'archivists', who decided which evidence would be translated to posterity.[30] Consequently, history writing can only be understood when it is not seen as an objective "empiricist enterprise"[31] but as a construct of historians where the narrative also reflects the context of the historian.

Narrative is fundamental to being human,[32] and while one should distinguish between narratives that tell a story and narratives that are 'historical', the basic distinction between stories and histories are found in their content, and in the idea that stories are "constructed" and histories are "found".[33] History writing should not be viewed as an initiative of the past, but rather as a strategic representation that was initiated in the world of the historian whose "most basic function" is to comprehend and rewrite the "connections between events and human intention or agency of the past."[34]

As stated by Nolte:

Human beings participate in constructing their own realities in creative or destructive ways. Literary texts are part of this interaction between people and their different worlds. Texts are not just reflections of reality. Texts

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[28] Ethan Kleinberg, "Haunting History: Deconstruction and the Spirit of Revision," *History and Theory*, 46, no. 4 (2007): 113–143.

[29] Kleinberg, "Haunting History," 115. According to Kleinberg, "the vast majority of historians view deconstruction as they do most ghost stories, with bemused scepticism and guilty fascination. Most have read or heard about it second-hand, and as with most ghost stories this has led to exaggerations, inaccuracies, conflations, recastings."

[30] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 7.

[31] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 3.

[32] Hayden V. White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (1984), 1–33.

[33] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 2.

[34] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 4.

> challenge, deconstruct, inform, confirm and are constitutive in creating reality.[35]

In an earlier article on historicism, history and imagination, Hayden White argued that historical discourses should not be viewed as true reflections of the events they describe. In his argumentation, he followed the thinking of Levi Strauss, for whom history "is never only history of, it is always history for."[36] Included in the "for", are particular ideologies, as well as particular audiences, which means that the task of the historian is to investigate the evidence—the texts and contexts— in order to determine the "most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence."[37]

2.4   A PATHWAY PAVED IN WORDS

> There is no direct entrance to this world — it is reached only through reading.[38]

We are unable to engage the past as it were. It is out of our reach, because the "ancient people" and their "ancient context … have long since turned to silent dust or tattered manuscript fragments";[39] and therefore their world "is continually invented anew for reasons that were, quite literally, previously unthought."[40]

S. Phillip Nolte described the interaction between readers and texts in terms of "virtual realities", or connected spaces where the worlds of the text and the reader connect as a type of constructed reality on "the plane of creative interaction between text and reader."[41] It is a fluid space, and representative of a complex process that is not only determined by macro factors, such as socio-cultural, historical, political,

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[35] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 4.
[36] Hayden V. White, "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination," *History and Theory* 14, no. 4 (1975), 48–67.
[37] White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 2.
[38] Bernard Lategan, "New Testament Hermeneutics (Part II): Mapping the Hermeneutical Process," in *Focusing on the message: New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis and methods* (ed. Andrie du Toit; Pretoria: Protea, 2009), 88.
[39] Russell T. McCutcheon, ""Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?" (Luke 24:5): On the Opacity of the Past and Transparency of the Contemporary," in *Society of Biblical Literature*, 1—17 [cited 09 October 2018]. Online: https://edge.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/ McCutcheon -SBL-2013.pdf.
[40] McCutcheon, ""Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?" 2.
[41] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 5.

religious, or gendered contexts, but also by the personal contexts, such as emotion, life story, sexual orientation, etc."[42]

New historicism as a strategy was initially more closely linked to literary criticism,[43] and probably as a result of its rootedness in the study of literature, contemporary researchers are of the opinion that it is primarily through language that cultural notions and ideologies are passed on, because language, which is "dynamic, ambiguous"[44] is the primary mode for the transmission of ideas and the vehicle to generate different meanings. According to S. Phillip Nolte, the exchange of ideas should be viewed as an "interactive process", subjected to both the readers' and authors' subjectivity, and represents a process that functions as a "virtual space where meaning is generated",[45] as well as a type of "mediation between an ambiguous world and an interested reader".[46] The ambiguousness of the world of the author means that multiple understandings are possible, and that historical reality can only be imagined or constructed.

Constructed realities occur because people do not know everything there is to know about other people, and therefore have to use their own perceptions to fill the void between knowing and perceiving or imagining. Face-to-face interaction allows for more knowing and less imagination, but the distance between the modern reader and the ancient text as artefact does not. "We build structures of assumptions that influence all our listening and reading, whether it is so-called direct communication with other people or reading texts"—where the texts are in fact not realities, but constructions that reflect the "interpretations of authors' perceptions of reality".[47]

Reading occurs for different reasons and from different motives, and can have varied consequences, such as changing or strengthening actions and attitudes, or it can be used as 'proof' to confirm preconceived notions, or we can read with the purpose of

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[42] Cf. Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 5. According to Nolte, "meaning is always a consequence of the particular readings of particular people in particular situations in the world."
[43] Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 30.
[44] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 244.
[45] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 5.
[46] Russell T. McCutcheon, ""Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?" 6.
[47] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 7. This implies that the 'truth' of the narrative, which was produced to reflect a certain reality, "created a world of its own in order to communicate certain values to the community it was intended for."

measuring ourselves against ancient notions, or to allow ourselves to be challenged by rethinking our perceptions, strategies and beliefs.

In addition, reading is always a form of interpretation, and even our best attempts at reading from a critical, scientifically sound approach or strategy, cannot truly "bring one closer to the truth, as it is only a translation from one world into another".[48] It has therefore been argued that texts can be "dangerous devices and constructs … can create the illusion of power and truth … are frequently used to manipulate, marginalise and do harm to people", but they can also be "liberating when used in responsible and ethical ways."[49]

According to Botha, "Writing is never merely writing, it is part of a communicative event, inscribed into a cultural pattern or system."[50] It is impossible for the reader to construct the world of the author without inserting some of his/her own notions and perceptions into the constructed world of the text, and neither is it possible to read the words, without at least knowing that the author inserted some if his/her own notions into the image that is described—or as Lössl aptly stated, "it would be naïve to assume that there existed an account that was entirely free of prejudice or prior assumptions."[51]

A fitting example can be found in McCutcheon's reference to Jonathan Z. Smith's description of the relationship between the world of the text and the real world in which the text was produced, as the difference between a real landscape and a map for that particular landscape. The real world, in which the text was produced should not be confused with the map created in the words of the text, which is nothing other than a representation of a 'place' that we can only imagine, but not know, because it is out of our reach. The map, or text as construct "opens room for interpretation and ambiguity, all of which allows us to think into existence a series of relationships in time and space";[52] while we should remain conscious that the 'place' where the interested reader engages with the world in which the text was produced, is always in the present.

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[48] Meylahn, "Doing Theology in Multi-World Contexts," 2.
[49] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 3.
[50] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 505.
[51] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 4.
[52] McCutcheon, "Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?" 7.

2.5 READERS AS MYTH–MAKERS OR MEANING–MAKERS

The text is always constructed with a specific reader in mind.[53]

Lategan observed that, "different readers and readers from different times and social locations find themselves at different points of distanciation",[54] from the text and its particular context. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that we find such a myriad of strategies that attempt to bridge the distance between the twenty-first century reader and texts that were produced almost two millennia ago. Despite our best efforts to gain entrance into the world of the text, we are always "de-centred readers"[55] and with the passage of time, the distance inadvertently increases and therefore the gap in our understanding of the texts that were produced for others may do so as well.

Inclusion of the reader as an essential component in the act of making meaning is at the heart of reader-response criticism, or as it is also known, reception theory—depending on whether one approach the strategy from a North American, or Anglo-European starting point. Nonetheless, regardless of which term one chooses, both refer to a strategy that focuses on the reader's response to the writing. It is centred on two fundamental beliefs, namely that the role of the reader should be included in our understanding of literature and that readers are not passive consumers of the meaning of the text, but active agents of the process of interpretation of literature or understanding the message of the text.[56] Reception theory provides a meaningful strategy for the study of ancient texts, because it makes "the reader and the relationship between text and reader part of the methodological reflection itself."[57]

The meaning of the message is—to a great extent—dependent on the creative contribution of the reader, whose eyes views the text through particular lenses, or who reads from a particular, subjective context. One of the underlying principles of reception theory is to be conscious that the text was produced with a specific reader in mind—an intended audience, with a specific context, and therefore, the text was

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[53] Lategan, "New Testament I," 49.
[54] Lategan, "Reading from the Margin," 44.
[55] Lategan, "Reading from the Margin," 44.
[56] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 162.
[57] Lategan, "New Testament I," 50.

encoded in language that would speak to the intended reader.[58] Where it concerns ancient writings, it is obvious that the twenty-first century reader was not the intended reader, but instead of viewing this as a problem, current notions about the role of readers in the process of making meaning accept that even if the actual readers are not the intended readers, it is acceptable and legitimate to join in the meaning-making process, "without feeling that they are intruding."[59] Terence Hawkes even took this notion further by arguing that the "critic creates the finished work by his reading of it, and does not remain simply the inert consumer of a 'ready-made' product."[60] This does not mean that reading allows for an 'anything goes' attitude, because a particular reading can be judged as "insufficient or less sufficient than others".[61]

It is problematic when readers of texts cannot divorce themselves from their own preconceived notions and biases, and fail to distinguish between 'this' world and the world in which the text was produced,[62] and therefore, Russel T. McCutcheon is highly critical of those who are guilty of taking "the world-as-it-happens-to-be-now and representing it as the world-as-it-always-was and necessarily-must-be".[63] A 'good' strategy may be to view reading as the 'virtual space' where text, reader and context meet and where meaning is to be found somewhere between the "real author" reaching forward towards the "implied reader" and the "real reader" reaching back towards the "implied author".[64]

One of the developments of recent reading strategies was to "produce new readings in new situations and to widen the circle of readers to include those who were not part of the production process and who at that stage were not even imagined as potential readers."[65] Widening the circle has among others, resulted in the inclusion of the "ordinary reader",[66] but strategies to include the "ordinary reader" in the meaning-making process is not without its complications. Especially when we

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[58] Bernard Lategan, "Reception Theory," in *Focusing on the message: New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis and methods* (ed. Andrie du Toit; Pretoria: Protea, 2009), 459.
[59] Bernard Lategan, "New Testament hermeneutics II," 99.
[60] Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 157.
[61] Tyson, Critical Theory Today, 161.
[62] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 8.
[63] McCutcheon, "Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?" 10.
[64] Lategan, "Reception Theory," 466.
[65] Lategan, "New Testament I," 53.
[66] Lategan, "New Testament I," 53.

consider that the reader has to read 'across time', and even across constructed socio-cultural, geo-political, and gendered contexts—which the ordinary reader is seldom aware of, we find that many "ordinary readers" are overconfident in their abilities to make meaning from texts they merely view as a "storehouse of facts and ideas that we could carry away with us",[67] unaware of the vast differences between 'their' world and 'ours'. Readers may also neglect to consider that individual readers cannot discover the ultimate meaning of the text,[68] because there are many "horizons that are playing a part in the conversation between text and context".[69]

Despite the possible shortcomings of widening the circle of readers, there are also benefits, such as the occurrence that widening the circle of readers has opened windows of opportunity for the silent voices of marginalised and neglected groups that has allowed them to engage with texts from their subjective perspectives—liberated from the shackles of the dominant, ideological voices of the past. In other words, it has resulted in readings, marked by the right to "experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses our attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages us to make judgements",[70] and to "read the narrative from our particular perspective and reflect on how the story can be meaningful for the time we live in."[71]

One particular field that has benefitted from this perspective is gender-related studies.

> The quest for new ways of understanding what it means to be a gendered human being surely also encompass the quest for religious identities, communities and practices of faith that affect scholars of religions no less that those they are studying, and this entails a degree of transparency with regard to the scholar's own religious positioning.[72]

Gender studies may be a latecomer within the field of religious and theological studies, but it has been characterised by growth spurts in different theoretical

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[67] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 165.
[68] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 1.
[69] Meylahn, "Doing Theology in Multi-World Contexts," 3.
[70] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 165.
[71] Nolte, "One Text, Many Stories," 6.
[72] Tina Beattie, "Religious Identity and the Ethics of Representation: The Study of Religion and Gender in the Secular Academy," in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (eds. Ursula King and Tina Beattie; London: Continuum, 2005), 65.

approaches, which includes the shift in perspective from where the "role, image and status of women in different religions" have previously been the object of studies led by male scholars, to the current phenomenon where "women themselves have become the subjects and agents of scholarly analysis."[73] We have moved beyond the time where studies of religion can be done comprehensively without the "incisive, critical application of the category of gender",[74] to a space where it is recognised that gender issues are ingrained in the analysis and thinking about religion—where in fact, both gender and religion "are mutually embedded within each other".[75]

2.6 AUTHORS AND TEXTS AS READING OFFERS

> The "religious" texts we inherited in the course of a long tradition of transmission and effective history are the artefactual remains of social and cultural processes of manufacturing and maintaining social formations and identities. What we encounter in the literature of early Christianity is the material media by means of which identity making projects were conducted and pursued.[76]

Authors, just like readers, cannot divorce themselves from their particular contexts, and therefore, ancient authors were also products of their contexts, and "their views of both current and past events were influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture."[77] Modern authorship is often closely connected with the idea of fame, of being recognised, of creating a certain image or persona, because contemporary notions about authorship understand it in terms of economic elements, such as income, copyright, censorship, printing and distribution as well as sphere of influence determined by readership; and because we tend to view ancient authorship from our perspectives, we tend to

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[73] Ursula King, "Introduction: Gender-Critical Turns in the Study of Religion," in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (eds. Ursula King and Tina Beattie; London: Continuum, 2005), 5.
[74] Cf. King, "Introduction," 7. "The complexity of gender-related religious symbols, teachings and practices requires a gender-inclusive rather than an exclusively woman-centred analysis. … Each religious phenomenon includes at least two narratives and perspectives, not just one."
[75] King, "Introduction," 8.
[76] Gerhard van den Heever, "What Do You Read When You Read a Religious Text? Open Question and Theses towards an Anti-Hermeneutic," *Religion & Theology* 22, no. 1 (2015): 187–218.
[77] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 269.

view ancient authorship also "without historical contextualisation",[78] which is problematic.

Where we understand modern authorship in terms of "categories of knowledge or communication,"[79] ancient authorship also included categories such as that of ''script and record keeping, including 'writer', 'clerk', 'notary' and 'calligrapher'.''[80] In 'our' world, authorship represents an individualised phenomenon, and the particular image that we have of authorship is vastly different from that of ancient authorship—where the author was a "craftsman", a "master of a body of rules, preserved and handed down to him in rhetoric and poetics, for manipulating traditional materials in order to achieve the effects prescribed by the patron (and) or audience to which he owed both his livelihood and social status.''[81]

Bernard Lategan's use of the term "reading offer"[82] is highly descriptive of the transaction between the reader and the writer of a particular text. According to him, a text's existence is dependent on it being read by an interested reader, and therefore only comes into being as a result of the "interaction between the reading instructions and the reader",[83] similar to the notion that a musical score is only 'produced' when its instructions are performed by the musicians.

The text functions as the author's canvas on which (s)he paints a story or a self-portrait—the kind of representation (s)he wants to portray. His/her "presuppositions, convictions, world-view, motivations, attitudes, intentions, skills, knowledge and many others"[84] determine the strokes of his/her brush when the text is a biography, but also the notions and ideologies that will be advanced, and the message of the text is the only way the long-deceased author can communicate how (s)he wants the reader to respond as a result of the message, which the author committed to the paper, vellum, parchment, etc. However, because "the text is the first step away from the author,"[85] it inadvertently means that the actual author loses

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[78] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 496.
[79] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 498.
[80] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 498.
[81] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 506.
[82] Lategan, "New Testament II," 99.
[83] Lategan, "New Testament II," 99.
[84] Andrie du Toit, "New Testament Exegesis in Theory and Practice," in *Focusing on the message: New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis and methods* (ed. Andrie du Toit; Pretoria: Protea, 2009), 115.
[85] Lategan, "New Testament II," 65.

autonomy in the message, or meaning-making act of the text. In essence, the text becomes a participant in the world of the actual, present reader, even as it leaves the actual author behind in his/her world. Despite the ''instructions for its reader''[86] that has been included in the text, the prerogative for determining the message of the text becomes that of the reader and not the author, who is lost in the fragments of time.

According to Vorster, the author we 'see' in the words of his/her text is not the actual author whose text is the 'reading offer' we engage with, but a historical rhetorical construction, who was also the product of the rhetorical strategies that was prevalent in his/her world.[87] In a sense, one may say that the persons[88] whom we envision as the authors of the texts we read are implied authors as multiple constructs—constructed in their own writings, in the biographies written by their contemporaries, and in every writing throughout the ages. For us to position the ancient author—whether (s)he be a poet or prose writer—it is imperative to accept the 'otherness' of their notions, including the "complexities of ancient literacy, orality, tradition and communication".[89] Ancient authors, as persons "should be studied as a sociological problem in order to understand it historically.''[90] Therefore, this study argues that for some understanding of Ephrem's motives, visions and strategies to transform the socio-religious culture in Edessa, one should view him within the context of the broad landscape he lived in, as well as the community where he grew up, the notions—as far as we can discover— that governed his worldview, and from this, imagine what meanings we can make from these conclusions.

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[86] Lategan, "New Testament I," 49.

[87] Johannes Vorster, "Rhetorical Criticism," in *Focusing on the message: New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis and methods* (ed. Andrie du Toit; Pretoria: Protea, 2009), 555.

[88] Cf. Vorster, "Rhetorical Criticism," 555–556. According to Vorster, one should understand personhood as a construct where "a person is not an entity with demarcated properties that can be identified, studied and known. Personhood exists in terms of a variety of roles. ... It is a construction with several dimensions and since it is a construct, power, empowerment and disempowerment functioned in bringing it into existence."

[89] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 505.

[90] Botha, "Authorship in Historical Perspective," 496.

2.7 HYMNODY AS VEHICLE FOR SOCIO–RELIGIOUS (TRANS)FORMATION

> Individuals and their songs always exist in connection with the whole. … As to the music that an individual or the community uses, its essence is what living believers sing.[91]

According to Begbie and Guthrie, from the fourth century until the late Middle Ages, a steady stream of theorising about music and its relationship with different aspects of religion was produced.[92] Earliest Christianity represented a variety of voices, and especially Syrian hymnody—at least since the second century—"had already been employed as a vehicle for theological teaching by Bardaisan and Mani, and at least part of Ephrem's very large output in this medium was specifically intended to counter the influence of these, and other (to him) heretical writers."[93] Even as late as the Enlightenment period, there were a number of philosophers whose thinking also included notions about music and theology, but for some reason, especially during the previous century, the interest have waned and very few theologians seemed interested in the subject of music within the "theological landscape".[94] However, recently it seems as if there are some who are regaining an interest in the fascinating and multi-dimensional subject of music and religion, even if it is highly doubtful that modern theologians would consider it as the medium to express themselves in. I suppose it is because liturgical singing is such an 'ordinary' part of worship that many cannot imagine it as a serious discourse vehicle, which is unfortunate, because of the influential value of music with reference to theology.

Increasingly, scholars have become more interested in the multi-dimensional characteristics of music, hymnody and also liturgical singing. Researchers have observed that music can have a direct influence on the basic emotions of human

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[91] Paul Westermeyer, "Music and Spirituality: Reflections from a Western Christian Perspective," in *Music and Spirituality* (ed. Edward Foley. Basel: MDPI, 2015), 78.

[92] Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, "Introduction," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology* (eds. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 2–3. Although there is some renewed interest in in the relationships between the arts and theology, it is mainly the visual and literary arts that have generated interest.

[93] Sebastian Brock, "The Earliest Syriac Literature," in *The Cambridge history of early Christian literature* (ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 364.

[94] Ibid.

beings, related to "happiness, sadness, anger, fear and disgust"[95] that are linked to creating, developing and maintaining human boundedness, which may be why some people view music as a powerful tool for manipulation, or "moral harm", while others believe the fears are ungrounded.[96] Apparently, music, "like any cultural reality, require explanations at different levels of complexity."[97]".

During the First Australian National Ecumenical Hymn Conference, held in 1999 in Melbourne, Australia, the keynote address was delivered by Colin Gibson,[98] who argued for the "powerful formative influence of repeated hymn singing in matters of faith and practice". In addition, he affirmed that hymns are actually "loaded with cultural and social implications and assumptions",[99] and therefore should function as strategies in the creation of "open windows for the new light and truth to shine in"— especially where it concerned dealing with contemporary issues that are relevant for contemporary people, such as globalisation, intellectual problems, theological issues, genetic engineering, Aids, etc., where the "body of Christian hymnology is spindly and undernourished".[100] He also emphasised that "the Christian sense of history is neither circular nor static, but dynamic and open-ended", and in this ever-changing world, he believed that the continued existence of hymns—as opposed to gospel-songs—depend on how they are used.

According to an article compiled by the Commission on the Reformed Church in America's website, congregational singing should be seen as "a vital part of ministry", and "the art form most suited to expressing the church's unity in the body of Christ','[101] because "people tend to remember the theology they sing more than the theology that is preached", and music "is capable of evoking powerful emotions."[102]

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[95] Jeremy S. Begbie, "Faithful Feelings: Music and Emotion in Worship," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology* (eds. S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 325.

[96] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 323.

[97] Begbie and Guthrie, "Introduction," 8. See also Begbie and Guthrie, "Introduction," 6. — Hymns can be analysed from the same perspectives as other texts, because they also consist of the same elements, which corresponds with conventional literature study patterns — "author/text/reader", namely "music-making/text/music-hearing".

[98] Colin Gibson, "The role of hymns in worship tomorrow," in *Dunedin Methodist,* n.p. [cited 05 October 2018]. Online: http://www.dunedinmethodist.org.nz/archive/wshp/hymns.htm. See Addendum 4 for the complete list of roles Gibson ascribed to the contemporary hymns in worship.

[99] Gibson, "The Role of Hymns in Worship Tomorrow."

[100] Gibson, "The Role of Hymns in Worship Tomorrow."

[101] —"The Theology and Place of Music in Worship."

[102] —"The Theology and Place of Music in Worship."

It underscores the "dynamics of worship",[103] and is therefore, "particularly well-suited to being a vehicle of emotional renewal in worship," as well as a strategy that "illuminates and enriches our theology".[104] According to Robin Gill, hymn singing is "a central feature of worship which cannot readily be replicated in private. It adds texture and emphasis to Christian faith in a way that is distinctive and unique."[105]

Marzanna Poplawska stated, "Christian music has a vast and complex presence in the modern world", because it "resonated with numerous processes of political and social transition, from indigenization to nationalization."[106]

Maybe, we tend to view music too simplistically, while we should be conscious that many hymns, produced in a context vastly different from ours, can still effectively bridge the gap of time and continue to have meaning in 'our world'.[107]

2.8 SUMMARY

"Understanding is both an art and a science." Contemporary studies of early Christianity have experienced an "institutional shift" away from previously held notions, and is currently characterised by a plethora of divergent voices, a multiplicity of methodologies, strategies and ideologies. The confidence of traditional historicism in its ability to view persons, events and motives from an objective perspective, has been replaced with the awareness that no person can act apart from his/her own subjectiveness.

One of the greatest obstacles in establishing how much is knowable of the ancient past is the distance between contemporary readers and ancient authors. As such, new historicism has moved away from a narrow-minded focus to a diversified understanding of religion as inclusive of traditions, cultures, etc. History (and history writing) should not be viewed as a one-directional presentation of facts, but a construct of historians where the narrative also reflects the context of the historian,

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[103] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 353.
[104] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 353. See also Grenz, "Culture and Spirit," 38. Hymn singing is a vital element in the articulation of religion, as it represents the collective expression of self-understanding, and gives a voice to people's hopes and longings, as well as their understanding of the world.
[105] Robin Gill, *Theology shaped by Society: Sociological Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 172.
[106] Poplawska, "New Christian Music in Indonesia," 111.
[107] Begbie and Guthrie, "Introduction," 7.

and therefore effectively represents the "entanglement" between the past, present and future. Another way of understanding this is from the perspective of the existence of "virtual realities" as the connected spaces where the reader and the world of the text meet. Reading is always a form of interpretation, initiated in the world of the reader and subjected to the reader's context, agendas, etc., but the text is also subjected to the context, agendas, etc. of the producer of the text. It should be remembered that the text was produced for a specific reader, and that the contemporary reader is a person whom the ancient author never even could have imagined. Nonetheless, inclusion of the reader in the process of meaning-making is imperative, because as reader-response criticism—or reception theory—have argued, readers are not passive consumers of messages. However, it is problematic when readers neglect to understand that they cannot take "the world-as-it-happens-to-be-now and representing it as the world-as-it-always-was and necessarily-must-be".[108] Another is related to the inclusion of any and all readers, who often overestimate their abilities to allow the text's message to be meaningful in our world.

In addition, one should also realise that the text is also subjected to the subjectivity of the actual author, who was a person whom we can only access as a construct of his/her own time, place and context.

'Good' reading accepts that individual readers cannot discover the ultimate meaning of a text, and therefore readers should accept the possibility of multiple readings, from multiple starting points and considerations.

From the fourth century until at least the late Middle Ages, and to some extent even as late as the Enlightenment period, theologians would also turn their attention to the subjects of music and hymnody in their theorising, but then it seems as if their interest waned, and scholarship fell silent on the subject of music within the "theological landscape". Nonetheless, recently a number of twenty-first century scholars are beginning to see the potential of including liturgical music in their theorising, because of the complexed nuances it presents, as well as the possibilities to generate meaning with reference to the issues of our world.

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[108] McCutcheon, "Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?" 10.

CHAPTER 3 — DRAWING A PARTICULAR SELF-PORTRAIT, FROM WHERE WE STAND

3.1 INTRODUCTION

A piece of art is meaningful, because its image 'speaks' to the observer. A good example is the famous *Mona Lisa*, a small portrait of an ordinary-looking woman, dressed modestly and without any adornment, but probably the most famous piece of artwork in centuries. There are no concrete reasons for its fame, and therefore, one imagines that it may be that for some reason its image resonates with some subjective emotion, yearning, experience, or fantasy within the thousands of spectators who visit the Louvre museum to view it in person.

It has been stated earlier that meaning-making begins with an interested reader and therefore this chapter will begin with the interested reader, living in the twenty-first century and his/her notions about religion relevant to the themes of truth, power and transformation—or stated differently, this chapter represents a positioning of ourselves theoretically with reference to religion, as an artist does when deciding which part of the landscape before him/her, (s)he wants to paint.

3.2 FROM WHERE WE STAND — A TWENTY–FIRST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

> A reimagined portrait of Christian origins cannot offer up a singular image of the past, ornamented with peripheral exotica blithely colonized from the realms of the marginalised and the disenfranchised. It must be a portrait all of whose painters are constantly in apprenticeship to one another, who work out collaboratively (and, perhaps, contentiously) what the new contours of the painted images will be.[1]

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[1] Castelli and Taussig, "Introduction," 16.

It was the fragment from the *Medieval Life of Ephrem* that anchored this study to a particular place in a particular time.[2] It briefly described how Ephrem confuted the heresies—or 'untruthful' teachings— he encountered in Edessa with the hymns he introduced. It spoke about *truth*; it spoke about *power*; it spoke about socio-religious *transformation*; and it spoke about liturgical *singing*. Accepting Calvin Stapert's challenge[3] to attempt to retrieve the voice of Ephrem and his female choir, to 'hear' the harmonious sounds of the two harps,[4] and to add to the conversations that are relevant to our own contexts in the twenty-first century, this study took its cue from these themes. However, before one can approach Ephrem within his particular community, one should scan the landscape, which formed the context for fourth century Christianity; and even before that, one should position oneself.

3.2.1 Positioning ourselves theoretically with reference to religion

> Religion is concretely manifested in a variety of traditions, social structures, forms. Just as there is no colour which is not one of the colours, so there is no religion which is not a particular religion.[5]

Defining religion is almost like handling a prickly pear. There is just no perfect technique and one always end up with at least a few tiny thorns stuck somewhere. Therefore, when it is claimed that religion is concerned with a system of beliefs, or faith in the supernatural, or merely faith for the sake of faith, or a manner of thinking that is concerned with the meaning of life, spirituality and spiritual well-being, or the

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[2] Gwynn, *Selections from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian, and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage.* (NPNF[2] 13: 274). "To confute the heresies thus circulated, Ephraim borrowed the tunes employed by Harmodius; and his hymns, set to these tunes, soon carried the day in favor of orthodoxy, partly by the force of their truth, partly by their superior literary power, and partly by the help of a choir formed among the nuns whom he employed to sing them, morning and evening, in the churches. Thus the rival hymnody of heresy was superseded, and the hymns of Ephraim gained the place they have ever since held in the Church, wherever Syriac is the ecclesiastical language, —even though it is no longer the vernacular."

[3] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 7.

[4] Kathleen McVey, "Jacob of Saruge on Ephrem and the Singing Women," in *American Foundation for Syriac Studies* n. p. [cited 26 January 2019]. Online: http://www.syriacstudies.com/AFSS/Syriac_ Articles_in_English/Entries/2007/10/11_Jacob_of_Saruge_on_Ephrem_and_the_Singing_Women_-_- _Dr._Kathleen_McVey.html.

[5] Ninian Smith, "The Principles and Meaning of the Study of Religion." in *The Study of Religion. A Reader* (eds. John S Harding and Hillary P. Rodrigues; London, Routledge, 2014), 310.

doctrines and liturgical practices of like-minded groups,[6] it merely covers some of the possible definitions and understandings.[7]

"One of the most common ways people study religion is based in their own religious tradition; we can call it the "my religion is true" approach."[8] Another is to view religion as a faith system, where the "beliefs they hold inform and shape their behaviour."[9] A third approach, which is probably more relevant to twenty-first century thinking is to approach religion from a more practical starting point, where the primary consideration is concerned with what "particular function religion might play in society."[10] This is probably also the underlying principle in Burton Mack's arguments for studying religion as a social construct,[11] based on the following:

- First, "markers of a people's religion are public knowledge", and "integral to the patterns of practices that structure living together in a society."[12]
- Second, "individuals may participate in the religious markers of a society in a wide variety of ways."[13]
- Third, myths "expand the view of the world beyond the horizon of the local natural environment", and rituals "provide a lens to concentrate on the details of significant actions".[14]
- Fourth, it is Mack's view that "a combination of the mythic world, the religious markers, and the regular practices of a people create what might be called a mentality characteristic of a people."[15]
- Fifth, "when change takes place within a society and its territory, it is frequently the case that its religious markers also change."[16]
- Sixth, "in situations of major social change, religious markers tend to become enhanced as identity markers."[17] Displaced peoples tends to hold on tightly to their

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[6] Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 4–5.
[7] Cf. Gerhard A. van den Heever, "Introduction. Reflections on the Ampersand: A Manifesto of Sorts, Etc. Etc." *Religion & Theology* 26, no. 1 (2019): 1–39. According to Van den Heever, "religion is itself multiple, a complex set of practices, all of which can also be named and described by a range of descriptive phrases which from the insider perspective will have a different vocabulary, but describe the same kinds of phenomena that the list of redescriptive concepts serves to theorise."
[8] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 6.
[9] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 7.
[10] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 8.
[11] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 46.
[12] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 8.
[13] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 8.
[14] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 8.
[15] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 9.
[16] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 9.
[17] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 10.

religious identity-markers as links to their histories, and occupied peoples tend to view the identity-markers of their oppressors with suspicion and even hostility, especially when the oppressors denigrate the oppressed culture's religious and cultural practices.

In another publication, Burton Mack suggested that a social theory for religion should operate within the demarcated borders of religion as representation of social interest, religion as social structure and religion as a consequence of social interest— which is not the same as his first notion about social interest.[18] The first concept, of religion as representation of social interest is related to the notion of social construction as an "interplay of complex systems of signs, codes, and practices that make possible the formation and maintenance of a human society."[19] The second concept, of religion as social structure is related to his argument that "religion has always been defined as a traffic with transcendence, not a social construct", [20] which has restricted the meaning-making potential. Consequently, he proposed that one should rather study religion with a view to discover, for example— "How does religion function if it does have a special role in the structuring and maintenance of a society?" [21] The third concept, namely religion as consequence of social interest is centred on his belief that the motive for constructing a particular set of beliefs, or myth is to "expand the horizons of the normal sense of time and space".[22]

It is especially his second concept that is particularly meaningful for this dissertation, namely to consider the particular role and function of liturgical practices associated with people's understanding of religion to construct and maintain a particular society—the strategy Ephrem the Syrian used in Edessa. The notion of liturgical practices to form and transform society is also underscored by John P. Burris' argument that theories about religion should preferably be contextual and not "floating transcendent signifiers",[23] that cannot be analysed, evaluated or reviewed,

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[18] Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth. Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 83–84.
[19] Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 86.
[20] Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 89.
[21] Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 91.
[22] Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 91.
[23] John P. Burris, "Text and Context in the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2003): 28–47.

and consequently cannot add meaning to conversations about the implications of that which is / has been done in the name of religion.

> In other words, claims about sui generis religion within an academic discourse function in the same manner as Christian claims of transcendence in a strictly religious discourse. Neither can be challenged on its own stated terms because that to which each points is by definition non-reducible.[24]

According to Stanley Grenz, the "sociological understanding of the connection between religion and culture" provides a meaningful approach in the current meaning-making strategies, which are often sceptical—if not outright hostile—about the earlier, privileged position of westernised Christian thinking that created an "imagined world" about early Christianity, which cannot adequately "address the social issues of modern working societies".[25] However, the notion to consider religion in terms of its existence as a social phenomenon makes it appealing even to those scholars, theologians and researchers who prefer "explanations that do not require belief in the gods, do not start with accounts of personal religious experiences, or assume an order of spiritual reality that transcends the natural and social worlds."[26] Therefore, there is a growing tendency among contemporary scholars to argue against universal application of perspectives, assumptions and interpretations of religion, and to include and emphasise the cultural dimension of religion in practice as well as religion in theorising.[27]

Religious beliefs do not represent unchanging, solid notions, and therefore its relation to culture is fairly obvious. Both are socially rooted, fluid and bound to translate and mutate into new and different forms as time progress, because culture (like religion) is not a solid construct. Culture represents the kind of behavioural knowledge needed to function 'with the grain' of society. Its fluidity is the result of the constantly changing processes of defining and redefining, building and demolishing, designing and redesigning the constructs and notions of societies and communities, but also of individuals in their attempts to make meaning of the world. It affects the society or community, as well as the individual person who lives as a

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[24] Burris, "Text and Context in the Study of Religion," 30.
[25] Stanley J. Grenz, "Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection," *The Ashbury Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (2000): 37–51.
[26] Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth. Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 83.
[27] Cf. Van den Heever, "Introduction. Reflections on the Ampersand," 21, 28.

single entity within that specific society or community, and it provides the framework for people to know how to act, think and speak appropriately,[28] and it is influential in determining the parameters for how we determine religious truth.

3.2.2 Religion and truth

Truth represents something more than "mere sincerity or authenticity."[29] According to Foucault, it is a construct that is "kept in place through a wide range of strategies which support and affirm it and which exclude and counter alternative versions of events."[30] Apparently, our modern concept of truth and falsehood originated in the eighteenth century, when the Western world began to make a judicial distinction between truth and imagination or falsehood.[31]

Truth does not have a universal or abstract meaning. Instead, it represents that which is manufactured and upheld by society "in a complex web of social relations, mechanisms and prohibitions".[32] This means that whatever has been successfully transmitted as truth, will inadvertently be reproduced, transmitted and ingrained in the community / society, which also means that whatever has been successfully represented as false, will not be reproduced and therefore, eventually forgotten.

Partial to the transmission of truth, is the notion of tradition. According to James Alexander, the word tradition is a derivative of the Latin *tradere*, a word that is

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[28] Cf. Robin Gill, *Theology shaped by Society: Sociological theology. Volume 2* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 87. "All of its ideas and notions are socially rooted: the signs and symbols that theology uses have social antecedents and are mediated through specific social contexts; its methods and procedures relate to current and changeable social expectations; and its passing conclusions can have social roles and even effect changes in culture and social structures."

[29] James Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–28.

[30] Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2010), 76. It is a rare privilege for a scholar to remain relevant and heard, even from beyond the grave, so to speak. Michel Foucault is one of the rare voices, whose notions have meaning, which is why one can find recent publications, also in translated form of his works, and why authors, such as Sara Mills would make the effort to author a monograph with Foucault as its subject. As she stated in her introduction (Mills, Michel Foucault, 1):" Michel Foucault (1926–1984) continues to be one of the most important figures in critical theory. His theories have been concerned largely with the concepts of power, knowledge and discourse, and his influence is clear in a great deal of post-structuralist, post-modernist, feminist, post-Marxist and post-colonial theorising. The impact of his work has also been felt across a wide range of disciplinary fields, from sociology and anthropology to English studies and history." Needless to say, his is not the only voice relevant in describing a twenty-first century understanding of religion, truth, power, transformation and liturgical singing.

[31] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 74.

[32] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 74.

associated with the idea of transmitting "something in time",[33] so that it does not become lost.

> In the dictionary sense of the word, tradition constitutes a set of inherited patterns of beliefs and practices that have been transmitted from generation to generation. In another sense, tradition can rest simply on the claim that certain cultural elements are rooted in the past. Claim and documented historical reality need not overlap.[34]

The basic underlying principle of tradition is that it represents continuity, and while traditions themselves are not actions, "they frame action."[35] Alexander identified three types of traditions, namely continuous, canonical and core traditions, of which Christianity represents the ultimate core tradition, because it is not founded merely on a spoken word, or truth, but on truth that is also embodied in Jesus Christ.[36] This is an ideal, and not necessarily a reality, especially where it concerns the checking of alignments and integrities of conduct.

Building on the notions of E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, Hammer and Lewis[37] stated:

> The term 'invented tradition' is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period - a matter of a few years perhaps - and establishing themselves with great rapidity.[38]

They proposed that "invented traditions" could present itself in a variety of practices, such as the creation of pseudepigraphical writings, where later authors construct texts under pretence that they were written by ancient—often important— persons to give authenticity to their claims of truth. Anonymous writings may also be

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[33] Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," 2.
[34] Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis, "Introduction," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (eds. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.
[35] Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," 11.
[36] Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," 20.
[37] Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition* (eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2013), 1. According to the authors, "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past."
[38] Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction," 3.

wrongfully attributed to important writers as a result of later commentators; or even to supposedly important people who never even existed.[39]

According to Olav and Hammer, there may be several possible reasons why individuals or groups may feel compelled to invent a particular tradition for themselves. For one, it

> strengthens cohesion within the group, … provides the doctrines and practices with an aura of plausibility, … and inventing one's history enables religious innovators to shape the tradition of which they are part by ascribing at times radically new ideas to ancient, founding figures. [40]

It can also be a strategy to discredit opponents, either by inventing a tradition for them, or by charging them with the allegation that they invented their tradition(s).[41] In addition, acceptance of invented tradition can have a strong influence on the "doctrinal contents of a religion", because scepticism usually does not come from the insiders of the community, but those who stand outside the particular religious community.[42]

On the other hand, not all variants of truth were/is necessarily invented, but hopefully, more often than not, the natural product of being transmitted from one generation to the next. In the process of transmitting truth from one generation to the next, from one community of believers to the next, it usually becomes enfolded in a tradition that is bound to experience change, or transformation. Consequently, one may argue that traditions can represent moments in time, followed by new moments, when the truth is transmitted anew, in a different context from the previous moment, followed by the next, and the next… until the core truth is no longer recognised in the truth of the moment. [43] According to Harris, we "often do not know what truth is," yet "we do recognize falsehood and have moments of insight about what is needed to

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[39] Cf. Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction," 3. In the chapter they demonstrated their point by their reference to the fictitious sage, Hermes Trismegistus as an example of inventing an authoritative voice to legitimise dubious traditional practices, even after it was proved during the seventeenth century that Hermetic writings were not nearly as ancient as they claimed to be.
[40] Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction,"6
[41] Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction," 7.
[42] Hammer and Lewis, "Introduction," 13.
[43] Cf. Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," 23., for Alexander's observation that "the problem encountered by Christianity or any tradition with a core of truth is how to prevent the tradition from damaging the truth it was designed to preserve."

eradicate that falsehood."[44] Therefore, truth does not represent a result, but rather functions as an "ongoing task … to find and live out truth," without neglecting to "check the alignment of our affections and the integrity of our dispositions."[45]

3.2.3   Religion and power

> The church was an idea, whose power rested ultimately in the force with
> which it was impressed upon people's minds.[46]

Most often, power is viewed from the perspective that those who are powerful dominate those who are powerless; or that those who own power as a possession is able to cling to their power as possession, to prevent those who do not have power, from wrestling it away.[47] However, as Lukes explained, it is less of an actuality than a potentiality, and "indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized."[48] Power is not a possession, but rather an attitude, acceptance, subjectiveness of persons, organisations, communities or societies to persons, organisations, communities or societies who act as if they have a right to dominate. In addition, power is not permanent, and being powerful is not the same as being able to exercise power, because power is also a "capacity, and not the exercise or the vehicle of that capacity."[49] Power exists because we believe in its existence. People are dominated because they believe that the 'other' is more powerful, or have an advantage, but it is not a solid occurrence, nor representative of a one-directional relationship. Contemporary notions about history see power as emanating "in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times. And the vehicle by which power circulates is a never-ending proliferation of exchange: … exchange of material goods … of people … of ideas through the various discourses a culture produces."[50]

No single person can maintain a position of power indefinitely, and (s)he remains powerful only as long as his/her power-wielding is accepted on multiple levels of

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[44] Harriet A. Harris, "On Understanding that the Struggle for Truth is Moral and Spiritual," in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (eds. Ursula King and Tina Beattie. London: Continuum, 2005), 56.
[45] Harris, "On Understanding," 60.
[46] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 225.
[47] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 35.
[48] Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 69.
[49] Lukes, *Power,* 70.
[50] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 270.

societal living, but the internalisation of disempowered identities are seldom complete,[51] and the power of domination has consequences for identity and identity-formation in several ways.[52]

Apparently, Foucault believed that one of the methods of domination was what he called the "production of knowledge".[53] Producing knowledge implies objectifying a person, or group of persons, and Sara Mills used the example of the practice during the pinnacle of British colonialism in the nineteenth century, when an abundance of scholarly works were produced on India and Africa, because the "colonised authorities felt that it was their duty to produce information about the colonised country".[54] The production of knowledge was not for the purpose of familiarity among equals, but rather motivated from the notion that this type of knowledge about 'others' has always been meant to keep disadvantaged groups in subjection. This underscores Foucault's notions about knowledge and power as sources for truth where he believed that the production of knowledge is seldom a quest to discover truth, but instead usually functions as a process to establish something as 'fact', and therefore, nothing other than a strategy to overpower or dominate.[55] The strategy was not 'discovered' by the colonising nations, but seems to be a human phenomenon, practiced everywhere, and at all times when people exist as 'us' and 'them'—which just about describe almost all relationships, including the fourth century context with which this dissertation is concerned.

Nonetheless, people "are never merely victims of an oppressive society, for they can find various ways to oppose authority in their personal and public lives",[56] which is probably why many scholars are seeking for new ways to engage with knowledge as truth, especially to address issues related to marginalised groups, which include the

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[51] Lukes, *Power,* 120.
[52] Lukes, *Power*, 119.
[53] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 69.
[54] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 71. What was especially problematic about the whole endeavour, was not the gaining of knowledge, but some of the by-products of these information-gathering and production, which totally ignored the existing systems of local inhabitants.
[55] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 72. See among others Colin Gordon, ed., P*ower / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. Michel Foucault* (trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper; New York, NY: Pantheon, 1977), 59. "Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it. If it has been possible to constitute a knowledge of the body, this has been by way of an ensemble of military and educational disciplines. It was on the basis of power over the body that a physiological, organic knowledge of it became possible."
[56] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 271.

current emphasis on studies into gender and how it relates to attitudes about religion and power, because religion as cultural construct "is always associated with a struggle for power", and therefore "a site where power and privileges in society are negotiated".[57]

3.2.4 Religion and transformation

> Development is about change—a change that affects people and things in society. … Consequently, development is a process of social change in which gender is a strategic marker and partnership is central to any discussion on the mission of the Church.[58]

Gender-consciousness was first primarily a Western, intellectual movement, but has also become a strategic approach to criticise the imbalanced attitudes against, especially women and other marginalised groups for non-Western women as well.[59] "Gender is a socio-cultural variable", and therefore, gender roles are imagined and enforced by society through various means, such as "education, political and economic systems, legislation, culture and tradition."[60] According to Beattie, there are deeply ingrained differences within the all-encompassing world of Christianity, which have varying degrees of significance in the study of religion as theological and/or socio-cultural phenomenon, particularly where it concerns studies of gender and religion; and despite the phenomenon that the "majority of the world's women are profoundly shaped by religious traditions", contemporary religious studies are still "marginalized by the modern intellectual community".[61]

In the institutionalised imbalanced power relations between men and women, "information is produced about women; … but few about men."[62] People have to be involved in their own development and growth, and be aware that their contexts are neither better nor worse than that of 'others'. In reality, however, there are just too

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[57] Jaco Beyers, "Religion and Culture: Revisiting a Close Relative," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 73, no. 1 (2017): 1–9. Online: https://doi. org/10.4102/hts.v73i1.3864.
[58] Ester Onwunta, and Karel T. August, "(Gender) Partnership as a Transforming Paradigm for Development in the Church and Society," in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2012). Online: http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i2.1065.no.
[59] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 76.
[60] Petria Theron, "Cultural Perspectives on Gender Equality: Preliminary Indicators for the Christian Church in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Living with Dignity. African Perspectives on Gender Equality* (eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen and Thomas Togom. Stellenbosch: SUN, 2015), 54.
[61] Beattie, "Religious Identity and the Ethics of Representation," 67.
[62] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 69.

many agendas interwoven in the dealings people have with one another, and therefore it was Onwunta and August's belief that it is wrong to view development as a neutral concept. It is always a gendered issue, and its starting point should be "from the power in the powerless, from the literacy (and oracy) in the illiteracy, from the ability in disability, from the formal in what the owners of development refer to as non-formal and informal. In other words, it sets out from where people are."[63]

Development cannot be anything other than participatory, and not a one-directional strategy. This was concurred by Koopman, who believes that the way forward is to consciously "reconstruct understanding of being men and women that aims at building mutual partnership for gender justice";[64] or stated differently, transformation is dependent on a "cultural reorientation" where men and women "look at women through the eyes of Jesus."[65]

It is this notion of reconstructing the partnership between men and women, which brought Ephrem into focus, whose strong conviction for a particular truth, compelled him to act against the grain of Edessene society.[66] He did not propose to silence the voices of the men in the community, but rather to 'unsilence' the voices of the women, to ensure that the community in Edessa would represent the full harmony of men and women singing God's praises together.[67] His strategy is reflected in the insistence by Onwunta and August on the necessity of 'partnership' because it means "working together, sharing responsivity, calling forth each other's gifts, caring for the life of the community";[68] because the "gifts of women and men are both necessary if the Church is to be whole and is to be the light of Christ in the world."

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[63] Onwunta and August, "(Gender) Partnership as a Transforming Paradigm."
[64] Nico Koopman, "Men and Women in Church and Society: Equal in dignity? United in diversity?" in *Living with Dignity. African Perspectives on Gender Equality* (eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen and Thomas Togom. Stellenbosch: SUN, 2015), 29.
[65] Theron, "Cultural Perspectives on Gender Equality," 72.
[66] Cf. Sebastian Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise. Introduction and translation by Sebastian Brock* (New York, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1990), 667. Concerning Ephrem, Brock stated: "He did not just teach through the toil of speech, but he manifested in his own person the activity of perfect sainthood. The blessed Ephrem saw that women were silent from praise and in his wisdom he decided it was right that they should sing out…"
[67] See chapter 6.4.3.
[68] Onwunta and August, "(Gender) Partnership as a Transforming Paradigm."

I propose that Ephrem was wise enough to realise that partnership is power, and that truth can only be found in mutuality and equality.[69]

3.2.5 Religion and liturgical singing

> Not only has music been ubiquitous, it also has had a persistent and virtually irrepressible place in the Christian Church, pre-eminently in worship.[70]

During the third quarter of the twentieth century, the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (or DRC) came to the point in their history when an increasing number of voices argued for the inclusion of "simpler, experience-oriented"[71] hymns during worship services. It has even been argued that the continued existence of the DRC was dependent on the renewal and reform of their worship services, which also brought the issue of music as part of the worship service, to the forefront.[72]

The polemic debates included arguments for/against the inclusion of the *Liedboek,* and other songs, appropriate styles and accompaniment, as well as the theological content of the songs, among others. In 2001, in anticipation of the release of the new *Liedboek*, letters were written and questions were asked. There were those who claimed that the time was not ripe for new hymns, and would prefer that the old

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[69] Cf. Onwunta and August, "(Gender) partnership as a transforming paradigm." According to the authors: "What this means is that there can be no freedom for any of us until there is freedom for all of us. Therefore, as long as women are not free to relate with men as equal partners in human enterprise, the freedom and progress that men seek will also remain elusive."

[70] Begbie and Guthrie, "Introduction," 2.

[71] M. Viljoen, "Die Problematiek Rondom die Lied van die N G Kerk: Enkele Bevindings Vanuit 'n Sosiaal-wetenskaplike Invalshoek," *Acta Theologica* 2, no. 1(1992): 55-76. According to Viljoen, "Heelwat lidmate ervaar die tradisionele kleed waarin die gereformeerde musiekerfenis gepresenteer word as verouderd en lewensvreemd, en in die polemiek rondom hierdie saak figureer begrippe soos "verstoktheid", "ingewikkeldheid" en "worstelsang'"… Soortgelyke tiperings laat geen twyfel oor die graad van frustrasie wat die persepsies rondom die kerklied ten gronde lê nie. Ten spyte van hierdie uitgesproke weerstand staan ander lidmate weer koud teenoor "vernuwende" elemente soos die beoefening van lofprysing, die opsteek van hande, en die optree van orkeste." (The passage is in Afrikaans, and therefore I opted to add a loosely translated paraphrase in English—my translation. In essence, the passage referred to the controversy with reference to liturgical singing and stated that many members find the presentation of the reformed music heritage archaic and foreign to contemporary contexts, using terms that are derogatory of the lack of change, while other members oppose the proposal of renewal and transformative practices for worship.)

[72] Cf. Piet Naude, "Constructing a Coherent Theological Discourse: The Main Challenge Facing the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa today," *Scriptura 83, no. 1* (2003): 192–211. For Piet Naude, the DRC (Dutch Reformed Church) has entered a different milieu, one where it must find a balanced "theological interconnectedness that provide a sufficient (though not exclusive) framework within which the DRC can renegotiate her own identity". See also Erika Fourie, "NGK-sinode praat oor sang, musiek in erediens," in *Sabinet,* 1 [cited 13 October 2019]. Online: https://0-reference-sabinet-co-za.oasis.unisa.ac.za/webx/access/ samedia/Image3/200311/33/1620031101.pdf — See addendum 1 for printed copy of full article.

ones, of which the versification and contextual language dated to 1773, should be retained.[73] There were also the voices of those who saw no reason for alarm and who attempted to put the fears at ease. Their letters and articles described the importance of reform, renewal and deepening of spirituality, and the importance of reflecting that in liturgical singing.[74] Their attempts to appease the conflict was only partially successful. The new hymnal became the standard of liturgical singing in the DRC, even if it was accepted grudgingly by many.

A recent journal article by Chinedum Osigwe[75] focused on Nigerian liturgical singing and lamented the occurrence that Nigerian "church music" has been transformed into a westernised form that cannot regain its pre-colonial traditional character, despite the years of independence. When he wrote his article in 2016, he described his native Nigeria as a country "largely populated by people of different religious affiliations"[76] whose primary characteristic is a strong focus on spreading the gospel, especially through the medium of music "as a tool to propagate the personality or symbol that represents the centre or core of their faith and belief system."[77] He wrote his article specifically with reference to the "church music", which includes the singing of hymns. Churches in Nigeria are classed as either "orthodox'' or "unorthodox,"[78] where 'orthodox' refer to mainstream Christian denominations, such as Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, etc., and 'unorthodox' to the African Initiated churches.[79]

After a visit to a concert organised by the Royal School of Church Music in Nigeria, where "church music'' was performed, Osigwe questioned the general acceptance of the western-styled English hymns and European classical works as representative of "Church music tradition in Nigeria.''[80] His critique was aimed especially at the

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[73] Hans Linde, "Waarom 'n Nuwe Liedboek?" in *Sabinet*, 1-2 [cited 13 October 2019]. Online: https://0-reference-sabinet-co-za.oasis.unisa.ac.za/webx/access/samedia/IMAGE2/200114/ 31/1620012091. Pdf. See addendum 2 for printed copy of the full article.

[74] —Liedboek 'sal Sang Hervorm,' in *Sabinet*, 1-2 [cited 13 October 2019]. Online: https://0-reference-sabinet-co-za.oasis.unisa.ac.za/webx/access/samedia/IMAGE2/200114/27/1620012050.pdf. — See addendum 3 for printed copy of the full article.

[75] Chinedum N. Osigwe, "Contemporary Nigeria Church Music: A Search for True Identity and Cultural Relevance," *Music and Performing Arts* 4, no. 2 (2016): 65–71.

[76] Osigwe, "Contemporary Nigeria Church Music," 65.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Osigwe, "Contemporary Nigeria Church Music," 65.

[79] Osigwe, "Contemporary Nigeria Church Music," 70.

[80] Osigwe, "Contemporary Nigeria Church Music," 66.

'orthodox' churches, whose liturgical music still resembled Western-European styled hymns, psalms, chants, etc. For Osigwe, post-independence "church music" in Nigeria is not representative of Nigerian culture. Consequently, he questioned the lack of hymns and other forms of "church music" that should be a reflection of African (Nigerian?) audiences or congregations, which represent the socio-cultural character of Nigerians, as an autonomous nation, whose acts of doing church are supposed to be free from "colonial sentiments".[81]

The problem, as many postcolonial studies have noted, is that it is—more often than not—nearly impossible to distinguish between the original culture of former dominated people and the acquired culture of the former dominating nation, which is usually related to a psychological "inheritance" that results in a diminished self-esteem and alienation from their former cultural practices and beliefs.[82] One of the main reasons for this occurrence seems to be related to the colonial ideology—the notion that was predominant in colonisers' self-esteem where they saw their own cultures as superior and therefore neglected to consider the sophistication in colonised peoples' practices, beliefs and behaviour.[83]

During his keynote address at the First Australian National Ecumenical Hymn Conference held in 1999 in Melbourne, Australia, Colin Gibson[84] stated that because hymn singing is "a major component in worship", it was very successful in displacing, marginalising "local and indigenous distinctiveness" especially "in the field of hymn production and consumption."[85] His presentation was delivered within the context of how the colonisation in New Zealand resulted in transposing an Anglo-European type of Christianity, which included the introduction of hymns that failed to consider the particular kind of spirituality found naturally among the native New Zealanders. Following the Anglo-European colonisation, he proposed that a second 'colonisation' occurred at the end of the twentieth century when Christianity according to the American model flowed over to New Zealand. It resulted in another transformation where doing church changed from European to American-styled music and theology. As part of his introductory remarks, he told about his own experience as a New

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[81] Osigwe, "Contemporary Nigeria Church Music," 71.
[82] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 400.
[83] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 400.
[84] Gibson, "The Role of Hymns in Worship tomorrow."
[85] Gibson, "The Role of Hymns in Worship tomorrow."

Zealander, who visited Oxford in England for academic reasons, and saw there a gorse bush—a native in England— in its natural context, where it was restrained from invading the countryside by its normal environmental conditions, which held it in check.[86] For him it was a surprising sight, when compared with the plant's vicious invasion in New Zealand, where it spread rapidly in an environment that had few elements to restrain its vigorous growth and spread. The plants' presence in New Zealand was as a result of the settlers who replanted them in their new homes when they immigrated there. Gibson viewed the imported gorse bushes as a type of "imperial invader, overwhelming most native plants …", and in its rapid spread he saw a simile of the hymn (English hymn) that has "taken God's advice to Adam and Eve and gone forth and multiplied … wherever Christianity has taken root in the world." Gibson understood this as a sign of the "good health" of hymn singing, "flourishing as vigorously in this country as it does elsewhere in the singing communities of the Christian Church."[87]

Transcultural changes are not necessarily one-directional.[88] Whether this is a 'bad' thing or a 'good' one, will not be expounded in depth, considering that this study is not primarily concerned about colonial studies. However, it is relevant for its demonstration that in the twenty-first century world, where global communication and exchanging ideas is commonplace, transcultural changes are much more visible and critiqued than before, therefore one last story, namely that of Moses Sailo from Mizoram, a state in India.[89] As a result of his travelling abroad for a considerable time because of his involvement with music ministries throughout the world, he was introduced to Westernised Praise and Worship music, which differed considerably from traditional Mizoram music, called "lengkhawm zai'', which is a form of music also used for worship. Lengkhawm zai refers to a form of music characterised by energetic and emotional singing accompanied by dancing to the beat of drums.[90] It is a traditional form of music, but one that have changed with the times, and therefore includes the use of modern instruments such as bass, electric and acoustic guitars,

[86] Gibson, "The role of hymns in worship tomorrow."
[87] Gibson, "The role of hymns in worship tomorrow."
[88] Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 404.
[89] Moses L. Sailo, "Worship Beyond Music: Style vs. Content," 1-6, [cited 10 November 2018]. Online: http://apbyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/WORSHIP-BEYOND-MUSIC.pdf.
[90] Sailo, "Worship Beyond Music," 4.

piano and keyboard. The long absence and Sailo's exposure to global religious ministry through music for a considerable time has changed his personal appreciation for worship music, and as he wrote in his article:

> But the problem I have been facing is that after going back to my home church, I find it difficult to worship in the way the other people worship… I know that being in the Mizo community, I have to be adapted to the way they worship. I am still learning to like it though. However, one thing I learn from this experience is that worship is also a part of culture. And since our culture greatly affects our worship life, the style of worship can obviously change. As I had been adapted to the culture of contemporary praise and worship style, I found myself more comfortable expressing my emotion through praise & worship than in 'lengkhawm zai'.[91]

His predicament is a classic example of the results of inter- and transcultural contact and borrowing, which includes the notion of "negotiation of meaning" where culture is

> not perceived as an organic whole that moves naturally through successive phases of maturation, but rather as human collectives that show an ambiguous character where metaphors of unity and dissolution are kept in tension in the process of identity-seeking, identity- revision and even -subversion.[92]

It also underscores the notion that hymns are more than mere 'church songs', but vehicles to inform, renew and transform religious communities—sometimes for the better, and sometimes not.

3.3 SUMMARY

For us to make meaning from what we see, we need to position ourselves first, because we cannot escape our context and because we tend to project our notions on the world of the early Christians.

Ephrem's strategies were concerned with religion, but as it has been stated earlier, defining religion is a precarious endeavour.

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[91] Sailo, "Worship Beyond Music," 4–5.
[92] Naude, "Constructing a Coherent Theological Discourse," *Scriptura* 83, no. 1 (2003): 196.

As Craig Martin explained, most of the approaches to defining religion, which is concerned with it as a belief system —either personal, or group-oriented—is problematic, because of the biasedness from which it is approached, and therefore, it makes better sense to focus for academic purposes on the social dimension of religion, or what "particular function religion might play in society."[93]

The fragment about Ephrem spoke about truth, power and religious transformation, and therefore this chapter focused on twenty-first century notions about religion as truth as power, and as transformative agent, which is also transformed as it encounters culture.

Truth is not a universal fixed concept, but relative to the community/society who upholds its meaning, and therefore cannot be viewed as a result, but an ongoing task. Power is more complicated than a mere relationship of domination and being dominated, and therefore exerts its sphere of influence in multiple directions, often simultaneously. Transformation is linked to development and people have to be involved in their own development and growth, conscious of their own situatedness.

Music—including hymn-singing—is a prominent element in liturgical practices, and increasingly it is recognised as such. It is also a transformative agent, and should not be neglected when the social dimensions of religion and religious practices are considered.

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[93] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 8.

CHAPTER 4 — PAINTING A PARTICULAR LANDSCAPE IN A PARTICULAR TIME

> What would it mean to conceive of the history of Christianity not as a
> **history of the church**, but rather as a **history of Christians**?[1]

4.1   INTRODUCTION

One of the research questions that guided this dissertation was concerned with the possibility of comprehending meaningfully the world of the ancients. We cannot view the world of the fourth century Christians as a postcard from the past, but rather as painted landscapes, created by artists who wanted to emphasise some areas, recolour others and discard those, which (s)he considered mere clutter. In other words, we should be aware of the complexities in making meaning from the issues they faced, and of translating their solutions to the issues we face.

Ephrem was a Syrian, living in the northern Mesopotamian province of the Roman Empire, that represented a complex structure made up of a variety of cultural identities and whose subjects expressed themselves in symbols that represented both universal and localised notions. In this chapter, the primary aim is to 'paint' the broad landscape within which the narrative occurred, namely that of the Roman Empire during the fourth century.

The first subdivision will consist of an unpacking of a few particular elements with reference to the fourth century milieu within the Roman Empire. The major focus areas will be the concepts of transformation of the Empire and the Church, the notions of power with reference to emperors and bishops and the difficulty in determining truth with relevance to 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy'.

The second subdivision will expand on the idea of 'painting' the picture, conscious of the fact that the finished picture as we will see it, can never be a postcard-representation of the actual landscape we describe, but at best a painting, created as

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[1] Burrus and Lyman, "Introduction," 1.

a product of interpretation-strategies, but hopefully not as a product of over-imagination.

4.2 FROM WHAT WE SEE — FOURTH CENTURY LANDSCAPE FOR CHRISTIANITY

> The thinking of Christian writers in the fourth century quite naturally took its examples and its terms of reference from the experience of living under an emperor—something we tend to forget when reading fourth-century political theory as a kind of patchwork of Christian and pagan elements in need of disentangling by modern scholarship.[2]

There are deeply ingrained differences within the all-encompassing world of Christianity, and these differences have varying degrees of significance in the study of religion as theological and/or socio-cultural phenomenon. Therefore, it is imperative to understand that there are boundaries between our world and theirs, which we are unable to cross and to acknowledge that there are elements related to the "space of otherness" that lie "outside the scholar's understanding, definitions, or tools of analysis."[3] Just like us, the early Christians were products of their particular contexts, and in our viewing of their words, actions and motives, we will always be hampered by the 'otherness' of their world. However, it has also been demonstrated earlier[4] that twenty-first century readers may participate in the act, or process of making meaning, and therefore may involve themselves in the retelling of the history of ancient people—both to understand their contexts better and to apply these understandings to our contexts.

4.2.1 Transformation of Empire and Church

> Christianity is remarkable for the relative ease with which it encounters living cultures. It renders itself as a translatable religion, compatible with all cultures.[5]

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[2] Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1994), 127.
[3] Beattie, "Religious Identity and the Ethics of Representation," 66.
[4] Chapter 2.5.
[5] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York, NY: Orbis, 2009), 56.

Burton Mack proposed that Christianity did not represent a singular, "comprehensive system" because it was interspersed with borrowed features, characteristic of people's attempts to retain their traditional cultural and religious identities.[6] Thus Christianity in the Roman Empire represented a complex network of groups, whose individuals expressed themselves in symbols that were both universal and localised, as well as relative to the particular socio-cultural community of its members.[7]

> This meant that the challenge of identity in relation to other peoples, cults, associations, and the Romans could not be answered in ways that peoples of other traditional cultures were able to employ. … What they did have were loose networks of groups of Jesus people meeting together in various countries.[8]

With reference to northern Mesopotamia—the province which this study is primarily interested in, it has been noted that for centuries—actually millennia—northern Mesopotamia was surrounded by powerful nations, and both Nisibis and Edessa were located on the trade routes between East and West, as well as North and South,[9] and therefore it is not surprising that material evidence for the presence of Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Greek and Parthian speaking peoples have been unearthed in the area.[10] Trade in goods also meant 'trade' in religious notions, which may have accounted for the fact that, especially the urban centres of northern Mesopotamia had long been characterised by religious diversity[11] and consequently did not conform to the Imperial-enforced Christian orthodoxy with the same vigour as many other areas did. It has been argued that Syrian Christianity was actually distinct from both westernised, Imperial Christianity, as well as easternised, Hellenistic Christianity.[12] However, it should be noted that a strong sense of interconnectedness existed among the different churches and therefore the differences between the

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[6] Cf. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 158.

[7] Cf. Grenz, "Culture and Spirit,'' 46.

[8] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 158.

[9] Cornelia Horn; Samuel N. Lieu and Robert R. Phenix (Jr.) "Beyond the Eastern Frontier." in *Early Christianity in Contexts. An Exploration across Cultures and Continents* (ed. William Tabbernee; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 67.

[10] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 69.

[11] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 70.

[12] Cf. Lucas Van Rompay, "The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian* Studies (eds. Susan A. Harvey and David G Hunter; New York, NY: Oxford, 2008), 365. One of the reasons for this argument is founded on the phenomenon that earliest Syrian Christianity did not use the Septuagint as Sacred Scripture, but had their own Old Testament, translated, not from the Greek, but from the Hebrew.

eastern and western churches were probably not too great.[13] Evidence of this has been ascribed to, among others, the letters from the Christians in Vienne and Lyons, (West) which they sent to the Christians in Asia Minor (East); as well as the writings of Irenaeus, from which it was inferred that he had knowledge of heterodox beliefs in areas far from where he found himself.[14]

With reference to the notion that the fourth century represented an important period of transformation for Christianity, this dissertation recalls that it has been demonstrated earlier that Christianity was, and is a "cultural expression" and its notions and self-expressions are, and were "socially rooted", which underlies the idea that it also shares similar characteristics with the broader world of its context. Therefore, the transformation, which marked fourth century Christianity, found resonance in the parallel process of transformation that the Roman Empire underwent during the same period. In a sense, the Empire and the Church were tied together, mutually shaping and transforming one another, and consequently, one should probably study the transformation of fourth century Christianity in tandem with the transformation of the fourth century Roman Empire.

While Constantine is often described as the transforming agent for fourth century Christianity within the context of the Roman Empire, one should not be so narrow-minded as to disregard the fact that he was not the only Roman emperor whose policies were instrumental in the fourth century transformation of Christianity. Another emperor whose policies had a major impact on the directional development of Christianity, was Diocletian. His actions probably represented the growing suspicion with which the emperors viewed the power and authority of the Christian bishops. Apparently, Diocletian wanted to enforce widespread political-religious reforms that made him extremely suspicious of any group that may have been suspected of posing a potential threat to his "new order, such as the Manichaeans and Christians; however, the evidence is not entirely clear".[15] His attempts to reform the Empire included his government-imposed, widespread persecution of Christians

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[13] Mark Humphries, "The West (1): Italy, Gaul and Spain," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies.* (eds. Susan A. Harvey and David G Hunter; New York, NY: Oxford, 2008), 287.
[14] Humphries, "The West (1)," 294. Irenaeus seems to have been conscious of heterodox notions similar to that found in the Nag Hammadi writings.
[15] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 207.

instituted in 303 C.E. that had dramatic consequences for both the church(es) and state.[16]

Traditional, mystery cults and pagan gods did not seem to mind if their followers also worshipped other gods and participated in different religious feasts, but Christian practices were different from that of the localised, traditional cults. [17] Diocletian was not a Christian and therefore probably found the Christian practices unpalatable—especially with reference to their insistence that they could worship only One God, and therefore refused to offer sacrifices on behalf of the emperor—as all 'good' citizens were supposed to do. As a result, Christians who refused to offer sacrifices on behalf of the emperor and thereby receive the certificate for compliance to the imperial edict imposed by local governors and officials, were persecuted. While many escaped death, it did result in the dilemma that those who sacrificed in order to survive, lost their Christian membership, which meant that when the persecutions ended, they had to be admitted back into the church.[18]

While the order to sacrifice was often applied in a lax manner by the political authorities, the re-admission of lapsed Christians back into the church was not. The strictness with which many of the bishops addressed the issue, demonstrated the extent of their power over the socio-religious activities of the respective communities — rivalling that of the governors and officials.[19] This must have caused serious concerns for the Roman Empire, and it seems as if the primary motive behind especially Valerian's anti-Christian legislation was to break the growing power and influence of especially the bishops and other high-ranking Christians.[20] Therefore, the mid-third century persecutions during the reign(s) of Decius, and after him, Valerian, as well as the early-fourth century persecutions during the reign of Diocletian, Galerius and Maximinus, would not only bring changes to the Roman Empire, it would also have drastic consequences for the office of bishop,[21] especially during the fourth century.

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[16] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 206. According to Lössl, "Diocletian's main historical achievement was not his anti-Christian legislation but his reform of the Empire."
[17] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 187.
[18] Lössl, The Early Church, 202.
[19] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 203.
[20] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 203–204.
[21] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 201.

When Diocletian abdicated in 305 C.E.[22] there was some political shuffling and skirmishes among the Augusti from which Constantine emerged as the supreme ruler of the Roman Empire in 320 C.E.,[23] having rid himself of his co-regent of the previous eight years, Licinius. Constantine did not share the same hostility towards Christians, as did Diocletian. According to Licinius, he was tolerant towards Christianity from as early as 306 C.E.,[24] and there are different ideas as to why this may have been. One of the ideas about Constantine's positive attitude towards Christianity may be linked to the much earlier Christian expectant hope that wanted to "link the greatness of Rome to the emerging Christian faith".[25] Another suggests that it is possible that Constantine's only focus with his policy of toleration may have been linked to his ambition to be the sole emperor of the mighty Roman Empire.[26] In order to maintain unity, and to retain his hold on the steer of the massive flotilla that was the Roman Empire, he opted for persuasion, rather than coercion, but he was probably also influenced by the notion that the wellbeing of the empire was dependent on the favour of divinity.[27]

Constantine differed from his predecessors in how he approached the growing Christian phenomenon. While they were mainly passive in their role, Constantine actively involved himself in the "correct functioning"[28] of the Christian churches, and one of the greatest changes with reference to the Christian churches was with reference to how bishops dealt with the internal issues in their churches. Before the reign of Constantine, the different churches were primarily under the guidance of their local bishops, who would only occasionally meet other bishops "to resolve issues of discipline and doctrine",[29] but Constantine expected them to resolve issues collectively, and this represented a big step in transforming Christianity to conform to his ideal of having a state-sanctioned, "religiously neutral public space" where the

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[22] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 208.
[23] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 209.
[24] Lössl, The Early Church, 211.
[25] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 212.
[26] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 213.
[27] Harold A. Drake, "Church and Empire," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (eds. Susan A. Harvey and David G Hunter; New York, NY: Oxford, 2008), 455.
[28] Drake, "Church and Empire," 449.
[29] Drake, "Church and Empire," 447–448.

"Roman state did not need the fine definition that Christian devotion might require",[30] as long as there was some semblance of unity and peace.

Forcing the bishops to conform to a singular idea of 'doing church', meant that the diversities of the churches would not be acceptable any longer, and even if the incidences of conflict between the different views still occurred, it also meant that the process of transformation would not be localised, but would also reach even to the furthest corners of the provinces. This may be the reason why Syrian Christianity gradually became more closely associated with the Imperial Church, despite its earlier independence and distinct character.[31] As time progressed, the earlier religious tolerance in the northern Mesopotamian area was gradually replaced by a growing control—even to the extent of encroaching on the civil rights of its inhabitants, sometimes including "outright persecution waged against heterodox Christians, Jews, and adherents of other religions elsewhere."[32]

Fourth century Christian communities were indistinguishable from the non-Christian inhabitants of the Roman Empire. As this study represents a steady progression towards Ephrem's context and his strategic hymnody, which will be especially apparent in chapter 6, a brief detour at this point in time is necessary. Ephrem had a profound effect on female participation in liturgical singing in Syria, but his sentiments did not reflect Christianity in general. Gillian Clark stated—"The status of women is one of the most interesting examples of Roman culture surviving in the church tradition."[33] Despite the Christian notion that by virtue of baptism, all were equal in Jesus Christ,[34] it does not seem as if this idea was practiced in 'real life'. According to Gillian Clark:

> Christianity did not offer unusual opportunities for status: what it did offer
> was moral and religious teaching, and shared ritual, that extended to women,
> slaves and the poor.[35]

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[30] Drake, "Church and Empire," 454.
[31] Lucas Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 365.
[32] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 70.
[33] Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Key Themes in Ancient History; eds. P. A. Cartledge and P. D. A. Garnsey, Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University, 2008), 29.
[34] Cf. Galatians 3: 26–28.
[35] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 30.

Early Christian women could act as benefactors of the churches, for which they were acknowledged with statues or inscriptions, but that was as far as they could participate in the public sphere. Even if women were viewed as spiritually equal to men by many, those same advocates for their spiritual worth could not imagine women other than within "their traditional social roles", [36] which meant that women were excluded from the hierarchical structure of the Roman Empire. They could not be appointed to public office, nor participate in voting for those who were chosen, even if they did have civic rights.[37] Therefore, one can conclude that especially where it concerned women, slaves and the poor, Christianity did not really change the views held by those who lived under the flag of the Roman Empire.[38]

4.2.2 Power of emperors and bishops

It used to be customary for cities and towns to be self-governing centres, where councils of the property-owning citizens were responsible for the continued existence of their little world. With the move to centralise the government in the Roman Empire, imperial administrators took over the governing responsibilities, and Christian bishops increasingly became involved in the public sphere as representatives of city interests.[39] While the process escalated under Constantine, it actually began before Constantine, as social conditions changed. Bishops gained a certain social status that required of them to have a higher standard of education to be equipped for the increased frequency which necessitated theological debating. As their status increased, so too did their sense of self-importance, and at the end of the fourth century, bishops would not be appointed for small villages anymore, but only to the larger centres. It was below their social standing and sphere of influence to function in roles where an ordinary priest would suffice.[40]

Roman emperors have always claimed responsibility for the correct practice of religious cults in their empire, but Constantine was far more involved than any of his predecessors were. Examples of this was when he chose to act in a decisive manner

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[36] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 29.
[37] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society,* 28.
[38] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society,* 15. "Most people prudently said they were Christian, but went on living much as they had done before."
[39] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 44.
[40] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 42.

during the Arles controversy in 314 C.E., and again with reference to the later Arian controversy, when he summoned the bishops to resolve their issues, funded the travel arrangements from his treasury, and enforcing the decision of the majority.[41]

It is believed that Constantine's primary aim was probably to maintain his position of power as the supreme ruler of the Roman Empire, and therefore his actions were guided by the need to retain peace and unity. Some may argue that Constantine's strategy was to use his position of power to compel the Christians to conform to his ideals, but if Foucault was correct, then it was not as simplistic as that. Foucault rejected the notion that power was/is merely about oppression and control, but rather sees it as a phenomenon that was/is operational in "everyday relations between people and institutions", and can therefore be productive, "giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour."[42]

Consequently, the "massive, uniform and forbidding structures suggested by the *Codex Theodosianus* and the *Notitia Dignitatum* have taken on more jumbled contours as historians have come to accept a model of an intrinsically passive imperial government",[43] and contemporary Christian history studies "increasingly emphasize the sheer effort required by its leadership to assert an identity for their organization (and ensure their own predominance within it) in the face of both traditional practices and the pressures of the wealth and high public profile bequeathed by Constantine."[44]

Even as Imperial Christianity represented a movement, which attempted to consolidate the variety of voices from its ranks of diverse bishops, the relationship of reciprocal influences meant that there were times when the emperors allowed the bishops to 'guide' their actions, just as there were times when the bishops lost the favour of the emperors.[45] Inadvertently, it also paved the way for Christianity to embed itself in the different kingdoms of the rest of the world; thereby giving life to the idea that Constantine's acceptance of Christianity effectively allowed Christianity

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[41] Drake, "Church and Empire," 449–450.
[42] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 33.
[43] McLynn, Ambrose of Milan, xxi.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 218.

to be transformed from persecuted church to privileged church even as the Roman Empire itself was experiencing its own transformation.[46]

4.2.3 Truth in 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' (heterodoxy)

> To the extent that doctrine has to do with religious identity it is ultimately not philosophical or philological principles that matter. Early Christian doctrine did not emerge primarily from an academic study of Scripture. It was manifested of religious practice.[47]

Contemporary religiousness is a reflection of contemporary notions. We are drawn to the novelty of newness and change and often view prolonged continuation of sameness as a representation of faith that is stagnant and unable to move with the times. Therefore, we may not be as conscious of the importance for the earliest Christians to be able to demonstrate their link with the continued traditions of the "Teachings of the Apostles, the Fellowship and the Prayers",[48] as a demonstration of their continuation of the 'true' faith as it was received by the Apostles, and handed down to the elders and their successors in an unbroken line of orthodoxy.

Apparently, the early Christians held strong convictions about "correct belief", and their notions about heresy, or heterodoxy "was a question of everlasting life or everlasting death."[49] However, it has also been noted that orthodoxy did not "refer to a single, undisputed doctrine, but to a range of sometimes competing doctrines."[50] Although the question of heresy was concerned with the defending of correct doctrine,[51] it was also about defending one's position, which presented itself in the ongoing struggle for power among the bishops who acted as church leaders. [52]

During the fourth century, church unity was dependent on decisions made by bishop's councils and endorsed by the Roman emperor, who had the power to

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[46] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 211.
[47] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 156.
[48] Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 195.
[49] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 30.
[50] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 159.
[51] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 32.
[52] Cf. Lössl, *The Early Church*, 195. Irenaeus, Polycarp and other contemporaries, apparently developed the notion that bishops gained their power of authority by way of succession from the apostles. Bishops were in the supreme position with reference to their authority over the religious and doctrinal teachings of the church.

dispose of bishops at will.[53] As the organisational structures developed, churches transformed from being "centres from which new apostolic initiatives were handed down" to "institutions that preserved and protected the original, 'apostolic', teaching of the Gospel".[54] Without a doubt, this had serious consequences, and probably meant that institutional 'truth' was not restricted to defending the theological teachings of the church, or conviction based on Scriptural studies, but also linked to the authority of those who were responsible for maintaining some semblance of peace and prosperity for the Empire, and thereby proved themselves able to exercise authority over communities.[55] Therefore, it was "Canon, Creed and Councils, tradition, theologians and time" that were the modes of expressing "the content of Christian faith",[56] and represented their attempts to construct "'systems of meaning' or 'worldviews' applicable to human life."[57]

One example of the power of "religious authority" to determine truth was the earliest diversities of developing Christianity, especially during the earlier periods. Divergent views were tolerated where church leaders were in similar positions of authority. In effect, one may say some of them 'agreed to disagree', such as Polycarp and Ignatius, who did not allow their divergent theological views to come between them, while Marcion's divergence was not tolerated and he was labelled a heretic,[58] probably because he lacked the support structure to uphold his position of authority.

Another example of the religious authority as determinative for truth is found with reference to Syrian Christianity. Apparently, Syriac was "a Christian language of unusual expressive power",[59] and Syrian Christianity represented a uniqueness in their expression of certain imagery—many of which could only be found in the Syrian Bible, or Peshitta, and for which direct translation is/were not possible. [60] Yet,

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[53] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 46.
[54] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 195.
[55] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 156. According to Josef Lössl, much of early Christian doctrine developed as an "exercise of religious authority".
[56] Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 10.
[57] Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 7.
[58] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 157.
[59] Peter R. L. Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor: Early Christian Monasticism between Syria and Egypt." (Inaugural lecture presented at Georgetown University. Washington, DC. December 04, 2014), 4.
[60] Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Piscataway, NJ: First Gorgias, 2006), 100. See also Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 98. Meyendorff believed that fourth century Syrian Christianity represented a distinctive form of Christian tradition, probably because their greatest theologians, such as Ephrem and Aphrahat could not understand Greek. At least, they never wrote in

Syriac Christianity represented only a minority group, living in a multicultural world, which they also shared with a variety of religions, cults and philosophies.[61] Nonetheless, their smallness—when compared to the distribution of the Greek and Latin churches did not diminish their prominence in the religious landscape of Late Antiquity. One of the probable reasons for the prominence of early 4th century Syrian Christianity may be related to the story of Abgar's conversion and correspondence with Jesus Christ, that represent a legend, which is believed to have originated during the early 4th century as a strategy to gain position in the status-hierarchy of the Christian world, by utilising powerful tools, namely "Jesus' authorship of the letter, the mission of one of the seventy apostles, the prestige of the royal house (which most likely never was Christian), and the renown of the Aramaic language." [62]

4.2.4 Singing God's praises

> Hymns are praises of God accompanied with singing: hymns are songs containing the praise of God. If there be praise, and it be not of God, it is no hymn: if there be praise, and God's praise, and it be not sung, it is no hymn. It must needs then, if it be a hymn, have these three things, both praise, and that of God, and singing.[63]

Hymns did not begin with Christianity. As early as the fifth or fourth century B.C.E., hymns were used as 'songs for gods' by the Greeks. These early forms of 'songs for gods' usually consisted of three parts — invocation, followed by words of praise and closing with prayer or words of appeal. In effect, these ancient hymns were "intended as a beautiful offering consisting of words, music and dance, which aimed to please

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Greek, and the Christian schools in Nisibis and Edessa where Ephrem taught, "stood in the direct tradition of the Jewish synagogal schools."

[61] Susan, A. Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories in Syriac Tradition," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 100, no. 3 (2010): 171–89.

[62] Cf. Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 371. However, one should also note that Ephrem, a prolific writer, never mentioned it, which may be an indication that the story was not endorsed by all Syrian Christians.

[63] Extract from Augustine's commentary on Psalm 73 —see Augustine. *St. Augustin: Exposition on the book of Psalms.* (NPNF[1]: 8: 668).

the deity by means of its artistic qualities, a reciprocal expression of gratitude for the benefits the god provides''.[64]

However, these pagan forms of hymns may have been less influential than what many seems to believe, according to Larry Hurtado, who noted that Christian hymnody was probably more related to Old Testament psalmody than Greek poetic or hymnodic forms.[65] This does not mean that they were not at least fairly knowledgeable about the pagan practice of offering songs during acts of worship, because one of the main issues earliest Christian theologians had with reference to music was linked to their belief that pagan music was dangerous. They believed, it had the power to "wound the soul", and to "impress the mind with images" that could influence behaviour.[66] Their fear of the power of music resulted in many of them fearing that these could "beguile, enchant and form the heart, mind and soul."[67] However, they also believed that these same features, when related to the singing of hymns and Psalms, had the ability to cause "divine form, order, unity and harmony".[68]

According to the historian, Eusebius, who died approximately 340 C.E., there were "many psalms and hymns, written by the faithful brethren from the beginning,''[69] but these hymns "from the beginning" would only be sung during private worship during the first few centuries—and not as part of public worship. Augustine allowed music in his church, but he also wrestled with his fear that music could distract one from spiritual things—a notion he may have taken from Porphyry of Tyre, who instead advocated "silent praise''.[70] However, Augustine also viewed liturgical singing as an endeavour of "orienting the soul toward God is a matter of properly ordered love, to

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[64] Johan C. Thom, "Hymns. III Greco-Roman Antiquity,'' in vol. 12 of *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Edited by Christine Helmer, Steven L. McKenzie, Thomas C. Römer, Jens Schroeter, Barro D. Walfish and Eric Ziolkowski. 30 vols. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 642.

[65] Larry Hurtado, "On "Hymns" in the New Testament: A Suggestion," in *Larry Hurtado's Blog* n. p. [cited 26 October 2019] Online: https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/on-hymns-in-the-new-testament-a-suggestion/.

[66] Carol Harrison, "Enchanting the Soul: The Music of the Psalms," in *Meditations of the Heart: The Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice* (eds. Andreas Andreopoulos, Augustine Casiday and Carol Harrison, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 205–223.

[67] Harrison, "Enchanting the Soul," 218.

[68] Harrison, "Enchanting the Soul," 218.

[69] Eusebius. *Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of* Constantine (NPNF[2] 1: 600). During public worship, it was apparently the practice among the early believers, especially those who were 'orthodox' to sing only Old Testament Psalms and New Testament hymns.

[70] Brian Brennan, "Augustine's De Musica," *Vigiliae Christianae* 42, no. 1 (1988): 267–281.

which all the movements and rhythms of human life are to be directed."[71] His work on music was a mathematically styled philosophical approach, which led him to conclude that "both soul and body have their own rhythms (respectively superior and inferior) and that the soul cannot be acted upon by the body."[72] While Latin Christians were careful at first to introduce hymns, other than those found in the New Testament in their liturgical singing, early Greek, Syrian and Egyptian Christians practiced hymn singing from an early stage, even if it did not gain such ready acceptance in monastic settings, because "many hermits found hymn singing during the liturgy and prayers at the canonical hours to be disruptive."[73] It was however, more commonplace for the unorthodox groups, such as the Arians, to use their own, contemporary hymns as teaching-songs or strategies for provocation—depending on the context, such as the occurrence described in Socrates' Ecclesial History.

> This they did during the greater part of the night: and again in the morning, chanting the same songs which they called responsive, they paraded through the midst of the city, and so passed out of the gates to go to their places of assembly … making use of insulting expressions in relation to the Homoousians.[74]

One such incident that ended in conflict occurred when the nocturnal Arian singers—who had the support from the empress Eudoxia, was emboldened enough to engage the orthodox Christians in a physical attack. In the ensuing conflict, the queen's eunuch, Briso, was wounded, several people died on both sides of the conflict, and the emperor Theodosius II reacted in favour of the orthodox Christians, but against the Arians.[75] Incidents such as these may have been among those responsible for decisions made during the synod of Laodicea, specifically with reference to hymn singing.[76] A short introduction was added by some ancient writer, which was translated as follows:

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[71] John MacInnis, "Augustine's De Musica in the 21st Century Music Classroom," *Religion 6*, no. 1 (2015): 211–220. Hymns had to be directed to God, they had to include praise, and they had to be sung.

[72] MacInnis, "Augustine's De Musica," 213.

[73] Johannes Koder, "Hymns. VI Christianity," in vol. 12 of *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Edited by Christine Helmer, Steven L. McKenzie, Thomas C. Römer, Jens Schroeter, Barro D. Walfish and Eric Ziolkowski. 30 vols. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 652.

[74] Socrates Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*. (NPNF[2] 2: 358).

[75] Socrates Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*. (NPNF[2] 2: 358).

[76] The synod of Laodicea was held in either 363 or 365 C.E. It cannot be confirmed whether Ephrem the Syrian had any knowledge about the contents of the canons of that specific gathering of church

The Canons of the Synod Held in the City of Laodicea, in Phrygia Pacatiana, in which Many Blessed Fathers from diverse Provinces of Asia Were Gathered Together. The holy synod which assembled at Laodicea in Phrygia Pacatiana, from diverse regions of Asia; set forth the ecclesiastical definitions which are hereunder annexed.[77]

Canon XV stated, "No others shall sing in the Church, save only the canonical singers, who go up into the ambo and sing from a book."[78]

Canon LIX stated, "No psalms composed by private individuals nor any uncanonical books may be read [sung] in the church, but only the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments."[79]

However, it was not practiced universally, and hymns produced by acceptable bishops such as Prudentius[80], Clement[81] and Ambrose[82] were often used without objection during worship services, while the unorthodox hymns of others, such as Bardaisan[83], Paul of Samosata[84] and Apollinaris[85] whose teachings were clearly unorthodox, were excluded from the list of acceptable hymns that could be sung. The

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leaders, but the ideas that were voiced and voted on is relevant for an understanding of fourth century notions about ecclesial music, and especially hymnody.

[77] —*The Synod of Laodicea* (NPNF[2] 14: 243).

[78] —*The Synod of Laodicea* (NPNF[2] 14: 261).

[79] —*The Synod of Laodicea* (NPNF[2] 14: 322).

[80] **Prudentius:** Cf. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Prudentius. Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, (348-ca. 405 C.E.), first practiced law, and held two provincial governorships, before he retired from court life (ca. 392 century) and spent his remaining years writing Christian poetry.

[81] **Clement:** Cf. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Clement-of-Alexandria. Titus Flavius Clemens, or Clement of Alexandria, (ca.150-ca.215 C.E.) was a Christian apologist, theologian and leader and teacher of the Catechetical School of Alexandria, who was a prolific writer of theological works, bible commentaries, etc.

[82] **Ambrose**: Cf. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Ambrose. Ambrose, Latin Ambrosius, (339-397 C.E.) was the bishop of Milan, who was a charismatic leader, a staunch defender of orthodoxy and is known for his writer of literary masterpieces, and who was especially renowned for his hymns and for being the teacher who converted Augustine of Hippo.

[83] **Bardaisan**: Cf. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bardesanes. Bardaisan, also called Bardesanes / Bar Daiṣān, (154-222 C.E.) from Edessa, was a prominent and influential representative of Syrian Gnosticism, whose teachings were a mixture of Christianity and Gnosticism. He wrote many of the first Syriac hymns, and whose son, Harmodius continued to promote the teachings of Bardaisan. His hymns were of superior literary value.

[84] **Paul of Samosata**: Cf. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-of-Samosata. Paul of Samosata, a third century bishop of Antioch in Syria. He did not believe in the divine nature of Jesus Christ He did not believe in the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and the only undisputed literary evidence is a letter stating that "he was a worldly cleric of humble origin" who became bishop of Antioch in 260 C.E.

[85] **Apollinaris**: Cf. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Apollinaris-the-Younger. Apollinaris, Latin Apollinarius, (ca. 310-390 C.E.), a fourth century bishop of Laodicea. Together with his father, he rewrote the Old Testament in Homeric and Pindaric poetic style, and the New Testament in the style of Platonic dialogue. He was the founder of Apollinarianism, whereby he "denied the existence in Christ of a rational human soul, a position he took to combat Arianism."

church authorities were conscious that the power of music and poetry had to be harnessed, controlled and shaped to conform to their Christian expectations, which is probably why most of the early Christian writers consistently rejected any form of instrumental accompaniment when psalms or other hymns were sung during worship services, because of their negative connotation with paganism and perhaps also with Judaism as well.[86] Accompaniment would only be introduced later.[87] Of the earliest Christians there were enough voices who opposed any singing during worship services that it prompted Nicetas, a 4th century C.E. bishop of Remesiansa,[88] to write a treatise on music in which he argued for the appropriateness of singing hymns as an act of collective worship.

4.3   THE FINISHED PICTURE: A PICTURESQUE LANDSCAPE, BUT CERTAINLY NOT A POSTCARD

4.3.1   Painting from imagination, or from interpretation?

The modern tendency of interdisciplinary borrowing of strategies and approaches effectively function as multiple lights that has revealed the complexities in the interplay between the various role-players in the period and place that we describe as the "Roman world in which Christianity developed."[89]

People who lived during the fourth century, lived in a context that was constantly being shaped and shifted, and therefore, the development of the different trajectories of Christianity did not occur in a vacuum.

> The thinking of Christian writers in the fourth century quite naturally took its examples and its terms of reference from the experience of living under an emperor—something we tend to forget when reading fourth-century political

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[86] Gillian Clark, "*Psallite Sapienter*: Augustine on Psalmody," in *Meditations of the Heart: The Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice* (eds. Andreas Andreopoulos, Augustine Casiday and Carol Harrison, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 167.

[87] Cf. Clark, "*Psallite Sapienter*," 172. According to Clark, "Even when churches set out to rival the attractions of theatre and festival, offering expert rhetoric and impressive liturgy, light reflected from mosaic and silver, processions and incense, they competed with song, but not with instrumental music."

[88] James McKinnon, "Nicetas of Remesiansa: On the Benefits of Psalmody," in *Musicasacra.com*, n. p. [cited 01 July 2018]. Online: https://media.musicasacra.com/media2/niceta.pdf.

[89] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 14.

theory as a kind of patchwork of Christian and pagan elements in need of disentangling by modern scholarship.[90]

Within the plurality of public religions, which placed certain demands on the people who lived in the Roman Empire, many Christian writers and theologians strove to clothe their teachings in Christian-appropriate garb, even while they did it in the language and classical rhetoric they were schooled in.[91]

Similar to their modern counterparts, early Christians also constructed their texts in the "symbols, languages, beliefs, actions, and attitudes"[92] of their contexts, and many of these texts were transmitted through a number of decades, or centuries without being questioned, such as Eusebius' Ecclesial History, the "most important ancient narrative,"[93] and source for early Christianity that laid down a foundation for understanding Christianity that was not challenged for many ages. His history of Christianity represented "a continuous Christian tradition, exemplified by the transmission of authority from the apostles to a succession of bishops, and growing steadily from the earliest churches and missions."[94]

For him, apparently, the Christian story was a triumphant and steady march 'from rags to riches', where "paganism was a disease, and Christianity was its cure."[95] His notions are often echoed in the thinking of a number of scholars for whom the story of Christianity represented the steady progression of truth, which "prevailed over the outworn or inadequate religions of the Roman world."[96] There are many contemporary voices who do not agree with this view, and are critical of those who are "too credulous of information contained in Christian sources."[97] Some are even

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[90] Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 127.
[91] Cf. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 123. "Christian writers and speakers were able to use ambiguity to make their rhetoric fit the needs of the state; but in addition they claimed the past, not just through the adaptation of history, but characteristically through the writing and reading of Lives—the continual reworking and re-enactment of idealized Christian biography, the pattern of Christian truth in action."
[92] Koopman, "Men and Women in Church and Society," 25.
[93] Mark Humphries, *Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 109.
[94] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 10.
[95] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 10.
[96] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 13.
[97] Humphries, *Early Christianity*, 226. "That is certainly a problem, but then nobody writes without some form of bias. For all the criticisms sometimes levelled against them, however, authors raised in the Christian tradition often have a sympathy for and sensitivity to their material that can be profoundly enlightening. In particular, they seem more alert than agnostic or atheist writers to the existence of beliefs and spiritual passions that can motivate human actions, and are less likely to reduce all actions to practical expediency."

hostile to the extent that they cite Eusebius' representation of Christianity as an example of "human readiness to invent and accept systems of oppression",[98] because it "traded on credulity and fear."[99]

In a recent article, Philip Nel explored the notions of syncretism, hybridity and ambivalence in an article that dealt with the phenomenon of sacred site dynamics in South Africa.[100] According to him, scholars historically used the notion of syncretism to describe the practice "where cultures in contact broaden the scope of their religion or images of gods aligned to the dominant culture or religion."[101] However, due to the critique that syncretism represents a process of corruption, which taints the original, 'pure' version of religion, it was suggested that another concept should be used for the phenomenon, namely hybridity, which "refers to a cross between entities in the natural world," and also functions as a "caption for a critique of cultural imperialism and western superiority."[102] Nonetheless, neither hybridity nor syncretism are adequate as approaches, because neither can be freed from their "linear historical" preconceptions.[103] Therefore, he proposed that:

> the concept of ambivalence as a vehicle to account for the complexity and multiplicity of cultural formations and progressive religious ideas. Ambivalence is semantically defined as the coexistence of opposing ideas or feelings in the mind or in a single context. It refers to the reality in which ideas and practices assumed to be mutually exclusive coexist in a meaningful manner.[104]

Many contemporary studies view Christianity as a construct that developed within the context of the Roman Empire. Both Christianity and the structures and systems of

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[98] Cf. Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 11. There are also those recent historians who viewed Christianity as an occurrence that should be "blamed for diverting financial and human resources from the classical city; for inflicting, as soon as it had the chance, terrible harm on those it classed as Jews, infidels or heretics; and for stamping sexual guilt and repressive morality into the culture that Europeans exported throughout the world."

[99] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 13.

[100] Philip Nel, "Syncretism, Hybridity and Ambivalence: Probing the Concepts in Religious Discourse with Reference to Sacred Site Dynamics in South Africa," *Scriptura* 116, no 1 (2017), 1–12.

[101] Nel, "Syncretism, Hybridity and Ambivalence," 2.

[102] Nel, "Syncretism, Hybridity and Ambivalence," 4.

[103] Nel, "Syncretism, Hybridity and Ambivalence," 6.

[104] Nel, "Syncretism, Hybridity and Ambivalence," 8. Philip Nel constructed his argument from the work of Anne McClintock, and he declared: "The concept would therefore include the dynamics of hybridity, ambiguity, sameness, opposition, conformity and conscious resistance as well as non-dogmatic exploration of belief and practice. Ambivalence thus accentuates the seamlessness as well as the contradictory within the sociocultural and religious formation and expression."

the Roman Empire were diverse, and consequently correspond well with our own world's socio-cultural and religious pluralism,[105] because Christianity has always been able to translate "naturally into the terms of all cultures".[106] Consequently, researchers tend to view Christianity as a complex, multi-faceted and multi-directional phenomenon, that should be studied from perspectives, which include theories, approaches, strategies, notions and assumptions gained from the social sciences, anthropological studies, and where an increasing number of researchers "self-consciously sought to present a less confessional version of the story." Their "less confessional version" focus on allowing the grand narratives to somewhat fade into the background, while the lesser narratives are allowed to come to the fore and where there is "a marked tendency to try to place the rise of Christianity in the context of pagan religiousness and ancient culture".[107]

Can we ever truly paint a picture of early Christianity without at least some imagination? Considering how many and varied the 'true' interpretations of events are, it is doubtful that any researcher—no matter how conscientious or diligent (s)he approach the task of uncovering the actual story—can ever find the picture-perfect history of Christianity. We all construct our finished pictures within the framework of the "symbols, languages, beliefs, actions, and attitudes"[108] of our contexts.

4.3.2 A true and powerful transformation, but who shaped whom?

> Rome had it both ways. Rome established religious limits, but also integrated foreign gods; Rome was both intolerant and tolerant, exclusive and syncretistic.[109]

How did fourth century Christianity influence the Roman Empire? Perhaps that is not the correct question to ask, and one should rather ask—did fourth century Christianity transform the Roman Empire into a Christian world, and if it did, what was the effect on Christianity itself?

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[105] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 14.
[106] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 58.
[107] Humphries, *Early Christianity*, 226.
[108] Koopman, "Men and Women in Church and Society," 25.
[109] Cf. Jeffrey Bingham, "Development and Diversity in Early Christianity," *Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 1 (2006), 45-66. "Questions of orthodoxy and heresy, tolerance and intolerance, exclusivity and syncretism are issues common to both Roman Hellenism and Christianity."

It is perhaps natural to assume that the relationship between Christianity and paganism within the Roman Empire was one of constant conflict and survival, but Averil Cameron believes that it is wrong to view the relationship between Christianity and paganism as one of conflict, or to assume that there existed a great schism between people who were Christians and those who were adherents of the traditional Greco-Roman cults.[110] The translation from "one cultural system into another is not a straight-forward process; it embraces many shades of relation, from outright conflict to near-total accommodation."[111] Before the fourth century, Christians were at risk of suffering under legally imposed persecution, and officials and emperors judged Christianity based on its effects on the social structure and power of the Roman Empire, but after Constantine has changed the lenses with which Christians were viewed, the issues emperors had to consider, also changed, namely to decide "which Christians were orthodox and deserved their support."[112]

Support from the emperors also meant some form of control by them, as well as the expectation of social responsibility by the bishops. Christianity before Constantine had no sacred places for worship, merely places where they could gather for worship. However, it is a mistake to assume that fourth century basilicas were churches in the modern sense of the word. Basilicas:

> represented not only a place for Christians to congregate, but also the civic function of temples in the older models of empire. … With the new arrangement, the reasons for being a bishop shifted from preoccupation with a mythic kingdom of God and toward responsibilities for the order and stability of the kingdoms of this world.[113]

Fourth century basilicas were not churches, but "all-purpose official" buildings, which were "large, rectangular halls with a platform at one end."[114] This means that the basilicas that was constructed by Constantine were multi-functional official buildings — emperors had their courtroom-basilicas, teachers (professors) had their lecture room-basilicas, and bishops had their church-basilicas—and all of them had a high-backed chair as symbol of their respective spheres of authority.

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[110] Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 122.
[111] Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 122.
[112] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 7.
[113] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 185.
[114] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 7.

To a great extent, local church leadership during the fourth century gradually substituted the community functions of the traditional civil cults. In the Roman Empire, cities had their own, localised religious cults,[115] and civil benefactors funded the annual festivities, sacred places and other rituals associated with these local cults, and often acted as priests for the civic cults. The traditional, localised priesthoods were mainly informal, usually requiring nothing more than the annual sacrifice, or with the addition of a few temporary restrictions, but hardly ever was there any reason to change one's lifestyle, and therefore it was often the local benefactors who acted as priests for their local deities.

However, with the legalisation of Christianity, and the eventual decline of the traditional cults, it was the local bishops who acted as the benefactors of their communities. According to Gillian Clark, bishops as church leaders did not only have pastoral responsibilities, but social ones as well, which included "the settlement of legal disputes and negotiation with civic and imperial authorities."[116] This means that church leadership—which in the beginning was merely concerned with the mission of the church—became influential also in "the wider political environment, interacting with imperial officials and taking a public stance on behalf of the institution which they represented, the church."[117] Apparently, Constantine expected that the bishops should preside over any civil disputes where either one of the parties involved requested that the bishop should hear the case.[118] While he apparently "showed great respect for the judgement of bishops in legal cases, [but] he also took it for granted that he could and should intervene in church concerns; that he could summon bishops ... and send them home again."[119]

Understanding Constantine's—and the emperors who would follow—relationship with Christianity has been the subject of much debate, but for Jillian Clark, it is quite possible that Constantine viewed himself in relation to God in the same sense as his predecessor, Diocletian saw himself in relation to Jupiter.[120] Therefore, Constantine's

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[115] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 5.
[116] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 7.
[117] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 204.
[118] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 96.
[119] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 98.
[120] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 101.

concern about the day-to-day functioning of the churches was probably "low on his agenda unless there was a threat to public order."[121]

We are still left with the question: who was shaped by whom? According to Gillian Clark,[122] there was no difference in the occurrence of war and crime, slavery was not abolished, family structures were still a reflection of Roman tradition, and Roman law remained the code of conduct for Christians and non-Christians alike.

Perhaps the following reference will provide an adequate answer— A calendar, dated to 354 C.E. was produced in Rome, which noted "the festivals honouring the gods and the emperor; the date of Easter (according to the Roman calculation) from 312 C.E. for the next fifty years; the bishops of Rome and their places of burial; the calendar of the Roman martyrs; and a Christian chronicle."[123] Perhaps one should answer the question with another question: Does it not seem as if the distinction between Christian and pagan was probably less pronounced in their minds than in ours?

4.3.3 The power of music

Music in worship is emotionally significant, because music is always "part of a perceptual complex that includes a range of non-musical phenomena",[124] which underscores the "dynamics of worship",[125] and for most believers, the primary purpose of worship is to be re-directed and re-oriented towards God and towards one another.[126] Therefore, it has been argued that music is "particularly well-suited to being a vehicle of emotional renewal in worship," as well as a strategy that "illuminates and enriches our theology".[127] Due to the observation that music can influence our basic emotions,[128] there are some people who view music as a powerful tool for manipulation, while others believe these concerns are ungrounded.[129] For

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[121] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 98.
[122] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 106.
[123] Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 116.
[124] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 339.
[125] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 353.
[126] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 335.
[127] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 353.
[128] Cf. Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 326, 325. According to Begbie, music has "an essential role" in influencing the basic emotions of human beings, related to "happiness, sadness, anger, fear and disgust", which are linked to creating, developing and maintaining human bondedness.
[129] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," 323.

example, Augustine was concerned about the effects of music, especially that "the more pleasing the melody, the more it would hold the mind at the level of pleasure rather than enabling the mind to rise to the principles of order."[130]

Ambrose of Milan employed hymnody as a strategy to enforce a particular identity on his congregation with great success when they were confronted by the Arian heresy by means of the "singing of psalms and hymns".[131] While Ambrose's opponents argued that singing together did nothing to change the "actual structures of society nor healed its divisions", it has been observed that Ambrose's strategy, which became associated with Milanese Christianity, acted as a unifying tool that "helped concentrate their attention and drown out background noise".[132]

It is not only modern researchers who argue that music can be used as a strategy to influence people, even the early Christians knew that the human voice had "the power not only to teach and inform the mind, but to enchant, move, delight and persuade the heart and soul, the passions and emotions".[133]

4.4   SUMMARY

One of the research questions was concerned with the possibility of comprehending meaningfully the world of the ancients. One way to approach this question is to begin from a wide angle, or the broad landscape within which the narrative occurred.

One can never lose sight of the fact that there are deeply ingrained differences between our world and theirs, and that any construction of their world will always have to be a painted landscape at best.

Fourth century history represented a period of transformation for Christianity, but also marked changes within the broad landscape of the Roman Empire and Constantine, although prominent in the developmental changes that exemplified the world under his dominion, was not the only agent of influence with reference to the transformation of both the Empire and the Church. Christians did not share a uniform cultural identity, and they were as much the product of their local cultures

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[130] Clark, "*Psallite Sapienter*," 177.
[131] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 225.
[132] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 225.
[133] Harrison, "Enchanting the Soul, 219.

as that of their shared identity as people who lived within the Roman Empire, which means that fourth century Christian communities may not have been as distinct from their non-Christian neighbours as some have imagined.

Roman emperors have always involved themselves in the correct practice of the religious cults in the Roman Empire. Constantine was just more involved than most of his predecessors. Nonetheless, the rule of power was not applied in one direction only, because the relationship within the Roman Empire between the emperors and bishops, as representatives of their respective spheres of influence was complicated. There was some conflict and some accommodation, which meant that at times the emperors exerted their influence over the bishops while at other times, they were influenced in their decisions by the influence of the bishops.

From our, twenty-first century perspective, we easily miss the importance that the early Christians attached to the notion of demonstrating the unbrokenness of their link with the teachings of the apostles as well as the transmission of authority through succession—from apostles to bishops. It often resulted in a shift of focus from the primary concern with the transmission of correct doctrine, to an interpretation of institutional truth as a phenomenon that was probably less concerned with scriptural interpretation than with the authority of the bishops. Where it concerned ordinary people, it must be stated that even as the church proclaimed spiritual equality for all men, women, slaves and the poor, they did not extent this courtesy to the social world in which they functioned. In the world, women, slaves and the poor were still second-classed.

Where it concerned hymnody and music, it is apparent that early Christians were aware of the power of music, and that the human voice could be used as an instrument "to teach and inform", but also to "delight and persuade the heart and soul"—a strategy that would be employed with great success by some of the most prominent theologians, even as others were sceptical about the possible link liturgical singing could have with paganism, which caused some theologians to view liturgical singing with suspicion, and resulted in the formal restriction that were imposed during the fourth century, to regulate the use of music in worship services. While it cannot be known whether Ephrem had any knowledge about the contents of

these canons, it does demonstrate that the church leadership was aware of the powerful impact music and poetry could have in the worship experience.

CHAPTER 5 — SKETCHING PARTICULAR TOWNS IN A LAND BETWEEN GIANTS

> Is it genuinely possible for people living at the beginning of the third
> millennium to comprehend meaningfully the world of the ancient church and
> its leaders, the church fathers?[1]

5.1 INTRODUCTION

A pivotal question for this study was linked to the idea that the history of Christianity should rather be studied as a history of Christians than a history of the church as institution. It has been established in the previous chapter, that religion is not merely a response, relevant to one's understanding of Scripture, but to a great extent represent people's socio-cultural responses to the world they live in, and that this determine their view of God, themselves, others and the created world.

In this chapter, the aim is to narrow the focus concerning the world in which the fourth century Syrian hymnodist, poet and writer, Ephrem lived, hence the notion of 'sketching' the two cities, Nisibis and Edessa. Artists understand the importance of adding human figures to their paintings, because of human interest in the activities of other human beings. However, 'sketching' Ephrem's direct world is problematic for several reasons. Therefore, the first section will discuss some of the challenges we face when attempting to unravel history, the scarcity of material evidence, as well as the problems relevant to literary evidence.

The second section will focus on the events in northern Mesopotamia, especially as it concerns Nisibis and Edessa, which have contextual relevance for the Nisibene Christians, and especially, Ephrem. It includes the political and religious landscape of northern Mesopotamia as a province of the Roman Empire, a description of the loss of Nisibis, the 'Shield of the Empire', which resulted in the exile of its Christian

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[1] Cf. Hall, "Reading Scripture with the Early Church."

inhabitants, as well as a description of Edessa, the city of refuge, where the exiles relocated to.

The third section will link the central theme of the study, namely truth, power and transformation with the experience of the Nisibene exiles, represented by Ephrem, whose writings give some indication of how he—especially— viewed and understood the events.

5.2 'FRAGMENTED MOSAIC'—A HANDFUL OF WORDS TO CONSTRUCT ANOTHER TRUE STORY

> Surely you have heard about Ephraem, the deacon of the church of Edessa. He happens to be one of those worthy to be commemorated by holy men. He had accomplished the journey of the Spirit in a right and worthy manner, never deviating from the straight path, and he was deemed worthy of the gift of natural knowledge.[2]

Contemporary scholarship, especially as it concerns the history of Christianity has become aware that it is the activities of actual human beings that capture our interest. The renowned watercolour artist, Ranulph Bye would often add human figures to his paintings of buildings or landscapes, because a good landscape painting always generate more interest when the artist includes evidence of human activity, especially if there is at least one human figure—even if small and unremarkable, because we, as human beings are interested in the things other humans do.

Ephrem from Nisibis was not unremarkable. He is arguably the most important Syrian writer of early Christianity, and his writings consisted of more than four hundred extant hymns, polemic works and commentaries on the Old Testament, the *Diatessaron* and other New Testament writings. Even from quite early, Ephrem's hymns were translated into Greek and possibly also Latin. [3] He also lived in Nisibis

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[2] Robert T. Meyer, *Palladius: The Lausiac History. Vol. 34 in Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (eds. Edited by Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas C. Lawler; New York, NY: Newman, 1964), 116.

[3] Cf. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 36. See also Saint Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* (trans. Thomas P. Halton; *Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, ed. Thomas P Halton; Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America, 1999), 149. "1. Ephrem, deacon of the church of Edessa, composed many works in Syriac and came to enjoy such prestige that his works are read publicly after Scripture readings in some churches. 2. I read in Greek his work, On the Holy Spirit, which he had translated from the Syriac, and even in translation I could recognise the acuteness if his sublime genius. 3. He died in the reign of the emperor Valens."

for most of his life, until 363 C.E. when the Roman Empire relinquished it to the Persian Kingdom, and this chapter will attempt to make meaning from the events that were probably the reason why he produced such a profusion of writings against the heresies he perceived in Edessa, once he arrived there as an exiled refugee from Nisibis.

5.2.1 The problem with history

> It would require a more experienced hand than mine, to furnish a full description of his character and that of the other illustrious men who, about the same period, had devoted themselves to a life and career of philosophy; and for some things, it would require such a writer as he himself was.[4]

Alun Munslow has argued comprehensively against assumptions that history—as a construct that should be distinguished from the actual events—and historical narratives can ever be free from "ideological contamination".[5] Even if it "claims to represent the complexities and realities of the past," it is just as much a "creation of the historian's imagination";[6] and therefore "best understood as a cultural product existing within society, and as a part of the historical process, rather than an objective methodology and commentary outside of society."[7]

History writing in early Christianity was not an exact science. A case in point to illustrate how fragile our knowledge is and how imaginative history can be, is found in Eusebius' version of early Syrian Christian history. He was aware of Syrian Christianity, because he did mention it briefly. Nonetheless, when compared to his other historical writings about Christianity within the Roman Empire, Eusebius had very little to say about the "third cultural tradition, represented by Syriac Christianity"—the other being Roman and Greek.[8] He did however, include the story of how Edessa became Christian in his *Ecclesial History*, in which he referred to the (legendary) correspondence between Abgar Ukkama, king of Edessa in the time of

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[4] Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen, comprising a history of the church, from A.D. 323 to A.D. 425* (NPNF[2] 2: 651).
[5] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 20.
[6] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 71.
[7] Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 12.
[8] Sebastian Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," in *From Ephrem to Romanos. Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity* (ed. Sebastian Brock; Hampshire: Ashgate, 1999), 212.

Jesus and Jesus Christ, which was kept in the archives of Edessa.[9] It was a story that would become quite popular during later centuries, and it was probably created during the early third century to amplify the importance of Syrian Christianity. [10] However, it may be as a result of ignorance that he mentioned Abgar's letter writing with Jesus Christ, as if he (Eusebius) obtained the information from the Edessene archives, because Sebastian Brock finds it doubtful that the document could have been kept in the city's archives.[11] First of all, it was not mentioned by Ephrem, a prolific writer who spent his last decade in Edessa, and neither was it incorporated into the Chronicle of Edessa, which definitely utilised the city archives.[12]

5.2.2   The problem with material evidence

According to Paul S. Russel, it is a common mistake to assume that ancient neighbouring cities were all the same. Apparently, they were far more individualistic than what we may imagine,[13] which is not problematic for sites where extensive archaeological excavations have been done, such as at Edessa. It is problematic for Nisibis where Ephrem resided most of his life, because unlike Edessa, Nisibis is "essentially untouched by modern archaeology."[14] Very few archaeological excavation projects have occurred in the area,[15] and the ravages of war and natural disasters, such as the devastating earthquake in 717 C.E., have destroyed much of Nisibene architecture and with it material evidence of the city's earlier existence.[16] At least in Edessa, more numerous and extensive excavations have been done in and around the ancient city and the material evidence is far more abundant, even if there are no Christian inscriptions that can be dated to before the fifth century.[17]

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[9] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 371.
[10] Cf. Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 371. It is believed that the purpose of the legend was to link Jesus Christ, and the mission of the seventy disciples He sent out, with the royal house, which Van Rompay doubts if it was even Christian, thereby advancing the status of Edessene Christian origins.
[11] Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," 213.
[12] Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," 226.
[13] Paul S. Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8 no. 1 (2005): 179–235.
[14] Paul S. Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian,"188.
[15] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 72.
[16] Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Nisibis," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, n.p. [cited 19 December 2018]. Online: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nisibis-city-in-northern-mesopotamia.
[17] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 72.

The scarcity of material evidence for Ephrem is problematic, because although it was in Edessa where Ephrem's strategic plans were fulfilled, this dissertation accepts Russel's suggestion that Ephrem is best understood as a 'refugee' from Nisibis,[18] whose understanding of religion, community, society, worldview, etc. was not shaped in Edessa, but in Nisibis. Therefore, it is understandable that one may be excited by every scrap of material that can be linked to the presence of Ephrem, such as the Greek inscription by bishop Vologeses, found in the ruins of the oldest church in Nisibis, namely the Church of St. Jacob. It was excavated in the baptistery, but according to Paul S. Russel, it may either mean something, or not:

> Christians of earlier times were not necessarily more innocent of cultural, social and theological pretensions than their modern brethren. In other words, that inscription may tell us something about the ethnic make-up of the Christian community in Nisibis at that time, or it may not.[19]

5.2.3 The problem with literary evidence

Of the documents produced before the fourth century, there are only some hints and fragments, which is why this chapter is titled "Sketching…"—we cannot produce a high-definition photograph of the period and therefore, have to be satisfied with a mere sketch.

> The roll of very early Christian writings produced in Syriac that survive to our day is not a long one: Sebastian Brock lists three passages in The Chronicle of Edessa, the inscription of Abercius of Hierapolis (died ca. 200), two passages from Julius Africanus, The Book of the Laws of the Countries, the central elements in the martyr acts of Shmona, Guria and Habbib and what Dr. Brock calls "the scant fragments of Bardaisan's works preserved by later polemicists" as forming the earliest stratum of evidence.
> With the exception of the very uncertain Odes of Solomon and some probable, but lost, works lying behind The Acts of Thomas, there is nothing else on which scholars can agree. These seem to be the chief of the surviving pieces from before the arrival on the scene of the two great fourth century contemporaries: Aphrahat and Ephrem. With their activities come the first

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[18] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 184.
[19] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 190.

large bodies of texts that survive to be mined for information on the life and thought of those early Semitic Christians. [20]

It is difficult to determine the exact characteristics of Nisibene culture, because of the scarcity of writings produced by the non-Jewish Aramaic speaking inhabitants of the area, [21] but as others[22] have also concurred, it does not seem as if some people in the Christian community in Nisibis actually could converse in Greek. Ephrem, whom "since the time of Jacob, … has been spoken of as someone who was addressing the average worshipper in the congregation, with the assumption that he, and they, were all part of one Syriac-speaking Christian body"[23] did not write in Greek. As a result, it has been argued convincingly that Ephrem, living in Nisibis for most of his life may not have known Greek well enough to be able to write in that language.[24] It should be stated immediately, however, that evidence about Ephrem's participation in worship and his involvement in the community is primarily restricted to the writings of Jacob of Sarug.[25] This means that sources for 4th century Christianity in northern Mesopotamia is dependent on writings that postdate events sometimes by centuries, and to follow Russel's reasoning, it is difficult to construct a complete mosaic when only a few scattered tesserae have been recovered.[26]

5.3   A TALE OF TWO CITIES IN NORTHERN MESOPOTAMIA[27]

Syriac Christianity refers to the particular Christian-thinking found predominantly in northern Mesopotamia, the area where the Arameans settled as early as the end of the second millennium B.C.E. The area of northern Mesopotamia included the ancient kingdoms of Osrhoene, with Edessa as its most important city, Mygdonia, with

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[20] Cf. Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 180.

[21] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 208.

[22] Cf. Sebastian Brock, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria," in *From Ephrem to Romanos. Interactions between Syriac and Greek in Late Antiquity* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 1999), 157.

[23] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 204.

[24] Brock, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria," 157.

[25] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 204.

[26] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 184.

[27] The famous novel, titled *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens was originally published in 1859. Its events occurred in London and Paris during the French Revolution, and I found it an apt reference for the fate of Nisibis and Edessa in northern Mesopotamia, as they experienced their own drama during the fourth century.

Nisibis as its most important city, and the kingdom of Adiabene,[28] which have no direct relevance for this study, and therefore will not be discussed.

In the development period of early Christianity, northern Mesopotamia functioned as a buffer zone between the Roman and Parthian Empires—at least until the third century C.E., when Rome extended its dominance eastwards, during the period when the Sassanids became dominant as the rulers of the Persian Kingdom. This resulted in the division of the Syrian Christians between these two entities.[29]

5.3.1 Mischiefs of State and Troubles of Churches

> Indeed, whoever shall attentively examine the subject will find that the mischiefs of the state, and the troubles of the church have been inseparably connected; for he will perceive that they have either arisen together, or immediately succeeded one another. [30]

Contemporary scholarship has argued with success that religious practices and identities did not represent clearly constructed boundaries, and that "hybrid identities that straddled competing cultures in the large kingdoms and even vaster empires"[31] were common occurrences. People saw themselves as belonging just as much to the Roman Empire—or the Persian Empire, for that matter— than being members of their local areas and according to researchers, these shared identities were not restricted to their political or civic identities, but included their religious identity as well.[32] Burton Mack stated, "the imagined world of a people provides the

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[28] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 67.

[29] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 366.

[30] Socrates Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* (NPNF[2] 2: 295). In the Introduction to Book V, it was written: "Before we begin the fifth book of our history, we must beg those who may peruse this treatise, not to censure us too hastily because having set out to write a church history we still intermingle with ecclesiastical matters, such an account of the wars, which took place during the period under consideration, as, could be duly authenticated. For this we have done for several reasons: first, in order to lay before our readers an exact statement of facts; but secondly, in order that the minds of the readers might not become satiated with the repetition of the contentious disputes of bishops, and their insidious designs against one another; but more especially that it might be made apparent, that whenever the affairs of the state were disturbed, those of the Church, as if by some vital sympathy, became disordered also."

[31] Kimberly B. Stratton, "Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions* (ed. Barbette Stanley Spaeth; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014), 242.

[32] Cf. Stratton, "Identity," 244. "Religious identity in the ancient world was thus multiform, ambivalent, and contingent. Identity emerged from narratives received and recited throughout one's life, which situated one in a sacred history and geography. Identity was further constructed through public and private performances."

framework for its sense of identity and self-understanding",[33] and therefore, once a set of beliefs has been integrated in a society, its influence becomes visible in how individuals, as well as the group as a whole, acted as a result of their convictions.[34]

Northern Mesopotamia—specifically Edessa and Nisibis—had long been characterised by its distinctly independent character,[35] which may account for the lack of Christian-against-Christian conflicts found elsewhere, as well as the characteristic diversity of its religious and social structures that made it distinct from the rest of the Roman provinces where Constantinian-enforced Christian orthodoxy were dominant. One example of this can be demonstrated in the existence of the Syriac Bible, more specifically the *Peshitta*, or Syriac version of the Old Testament, that has been dated to the second century C.E.[36] The *Peshitta*, or Syriac Version of the Old Testament, was translated from the Hebrew Bible, "written in a form of the language close to the new literary language of the Eddesene Christians."[37] Scholars such as Lucas van Rompay, viewed this as a confirmation of the "close connection between Judaism and Syriac Christianity"[38] even at a time when the gap between Christianity and Judaism widened elsewhere. Another prominent second century text was the *Diatessaron,* but it is not known whether it was originally written in Greek or Syrian.[39]

One can also mention other important religious texts linked to the area, even if it cannot be proved conclusively that these were written in Edessa, such as the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, a text that was an important part of the Edessene religious landscape, and was even accepted by the followers of Mani.[40] Admittedly, it cannot be confirmed to what extent Thomas could be linked with Christianity in Edessa, because of the

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[33] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 121.
[34] Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 122.
[35] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 70.
[36] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 93.
[37] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 367.
[38] Cf. Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 367. "Syriac Christians in the second century shared with Jews the literary tradition of Aramaic, which in the same period, along with Hebrew, began to be used to redact and transmit rabbinic texts, both in Palestine and in Mesopotamia, including the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Targumim."
[39] Cf. Brock, "Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria," 153, 155. Greek was "undoubtedly the language of power in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire," and it seems as if many Syrians were bilingual to varying degrees, even if many prominent figures, quite adept in Greek, preferred to write in Syriac rather than Greek, such as Bardaisan, "friend of Julius Africanus and courtier of king Abgar VIII of Edessa."
[40] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 369.

fragmented nature of the evidence, which means that the conclusion will be speculative at best.[41]

During Ephrem's lifetime towards the middle of the fourth century, northern Mesopotamia experienced political upheavals that changed the landscape dramatically. Especially during the reign of Shapur II, whose campaigning to expand the territory of the Persian Kingdom, both towards the west and the east,[42] there were life-changing consequences for those who lived in the borderlands, such as northern Mesopotamia. Unlike the attempts at unifying Christianity in the Roman Empire, most of the Persian kings at first did not seem to mind the fusion of diverse practices, gained throughout their long history. It was in Persia where Manichaeism developed and flourished, where the Babylonian Talmud of the fifth century compiled Jewish wisdom-writings, where Neoplatonists could find refuge after being banned by the Roman emperor, Justinian I, and where anti-Chalcedonian bishops could find acceptance for their differentness.

> This cultural and religious pluralism, while hardly chosen by the Sasanians, stands as a contrast to the imposed religious and intellectual orthodoxy presided over by the Christian emperors of Rome and Byzantium.[43]

Despite the earlier nonchalance towards the diversities of religions, the attitude of the Sasanians changed correspondingly during the fourth century, coinciding with the growing tendency of the Roman emperors to take interest in the "correct" functioning of the Christian church.[44] It is probable that the "pressures of competition" that was responsible for the shaping of both the Roman Empire and the Persian Kingdom, resulted in the situation where "the constant (albeit often imaginary) threat of "the other" [became] a central justification for centralized imperial, bureaucratic rule in both polities."[45] For Samuel Lieu, the increase in hostility towards Christians where the Persians held sway could be linked to the Persian suspicion that Christians represented "a pro-Roman fifth-column", which

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[41] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 370.

[42] Scott McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran," in *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (eds. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 297.

[43] McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran," 294–295.

[44] McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran," 303.

[45] McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran," 296.

resulted in the persecution of Christians by the Persians and meant that "the war between Rome and Persia acquired a new religious dimension". [46]

The fourth century witnessed not only Roman interference and action against heterodox believers—not necessarily representing the same groups throughout the period—, but also intermittent persecutions under especially Shapur II.[47] However, according to Scott McDonough:

> Ultimately, persecution proved a failure as royal policy, just as in the Roman world. The thirty years of intermittent persecution under Shapur II, related in such lurid detail by the Syriac and Greek Acts of the Persian Martyrs, seem to have presented no permanent disruption to the expansion and organization of the Christian Church in the east. Indeed, as was the case in the Roman west, the very public intransigence of the martyrs proved a compelling advertisement for the truth claims of Christian missionaries. Thus, while generalized royal persecution of Christians played a short, but memorable, role in Sasanian–Christian relations, it seems not to have outlived Shapur II.[48]

Consequently, the general tone returned to what it was and from the end of the fourth century until the mid-fifth century, relations between Rome and Persia was relatively peaceful, and the fluidity of the movement of people and goods between these two entities were resumed, but despite the fluidity on the political level, it seems as if it was not also reflected in the religious landscape. Christians in Persia regained their freedom, albeit in a form where they severed their link with the rest of Christianity, which means that even while Syrian Christianity remained involved in missionary endeavours towards the east,[49] the Persian churches effectively cut their ties with the "mother church" in Antioch.[50] However, none of this was known to Ephrem, because it occurred after his death.

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[46] Cf. Lieu, "Nisibis." As Christians in Persia came to be suspected as a pro-Roman fifth-column and openly persecuted, the war between Rome and Persia acquired a new religious dimension; it was no longer a conflict of Romans versus "barbarians," but of the faithful against persecuting "heathens."
[47] McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran," 303.
[48] McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne: Kings, Elites, and Subjects in Sasanian Iran," 303-304.
[49] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, 97.
[50] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 68.

5.3.2 Nisibis, the 'Shield of the Empire'

> One can only understand the nature of religion when one understands its
> connectedness to ethnicity and culture.[51]

Nisibis was strategically important from its earliest history, due to its geographical location at the crossroads of "three contending spheres of political influence: Rome, Armenia and Parthia."[52] The city was located on an elevation close to the Mygdonius River that was a tributary of the Euphrates, and with the Tigris not far towards the east, which meant that it was located on the important east-west trade routes between Arbela or Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Edessa or Harran, as well as the north-south trade routes between Armenia and the Mesopotamian plain. [53]

The ethnic mixture of Nisibis can only be imagined, but if the name—as some researchers insist—is from Aramean descent, it would position Nisibis within the widespread Aramaic context that reached from the Mediterranean coast to the Persian interior.[54] Despite the progressive increase in its Greek population—a natural consequence of Hellenistic occupation—it has been argued that fourth century Nisibis "was very little Hellenized and that the Syrians in it remained much the most important part of the population." [55] This does not necessarily mean that Greek and its associated cultural influence was not present, because there is evidence of the Greek language that was found in the rural as well as urban centres.[56] It does mean however, that the Syrians retained their distinctness from the Latin and Greek Christianities.

Because of its strategic location, Nisibis was a city that had historically experienced several military sieges, most of which it was able to withstand, such as the 195 C.E.

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[51] Beyers, "Religion and Culture,'' 4.

[52] Lieu, "Nisibis."

[53] Cf Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 186–187. See also pages 214 and 201 of the same source: "It makes sense to assume that business and war brought all sorts of people to Nisibis. It makes sense to assume that Ephrem grew up and lived almost his whole life in a city in which all sorts of religious practices and religious groups were present, at least as they passed through from east to west, north to south, or vice versa. Exactly which groups were present, however, we cannot discover from the materials we have at hand."

[54] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 188.

[55] Cf. Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 189 and 208. Paul Russel based his arguments on the non-existence of literary and material evidence for the presence of Greek games—a prominent feature of all the Hellenised cultures that demonstrated their close association with the Greek culture by doing what the Greeks traditionally did.

[56] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 203.

siege when it was rescued by Septimius Severus, whom it had supported in the civil war with Niger and again two years later, when the Parthians attacked it.[57]

During the reign of Diocletian in the beginning of the fourth century, a treaty was signed that would make Nisibis the only place where diplomatic contact and commercial exchange between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire would take place. As a result, it gave the inhabitants of Nisibis rest from the military manoeuvres between these two entities for the forty year-period between 298-337 C.E., but then Constantine fell ill and died just as he was preparing to respond to the Persian invasion of Armenia during the reign of Shapur II.[58]

While Constantine's three sons were scuffling for thrones and power, Shapur II laid siege to Nisibis. The city's defences were strong enough so that it withstood not only the attack in 337 C.E., but was able to defend itself successfully against two more attempts by Shapur II to gain control of the strategic border post. The second attempt was in 346 C.E. and the third in 350 C.E. It was the city's ability to resist Shapur's attack's that gained for it the title, "Shield of the empire".[59] This is not to say that the city did not suffer hardship during the sieges.[60] Bahu, the bishop who succeeded Jacob, the first bishop of Nisibis, died during the 350 C.E. siege.[61] Nonetheless, the city outlasted the siege and Shapur II retreated, leaving Nisibis, the 'shield of the Empire' to strengthen their defences, while the Roman emperors had their own battles to fight.

Then in 361 C.E., Julian was crowned as the sole emperor of the Roman Empire. He was also "the last direct descendant of the Constantinian dynasty."[62] Julian was brought up as a Christian but apparently abhorred Christianity, because no sooner

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[57] Lieu, "Nisibis."
[58] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 215.
[59] Lieu, "Nisibis."
[60] Cf. Gwynn, *Selections from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian, and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage.* (NPNF[2] 13: 339). Extract from Ephrem's Hym. Nisib. 9.4–7:. "4. Look, O my Lord, on my woods without, how they have been cut down! behold, O my Lord, my breasts within, that they are too weak, for me to bear my beloved ones! 5. With swords they have cut off, my wings that are without; again the fire kindles, in my bosom within, the incense of burnt offering. 6. The sun-worshippers have killed, my sons in the plain: and they that offer to Baal, have sacrificed my bulls in the city, my sheep with my babes. 7. In my fields is lamentation; in my halls wailing; in my vineyards terror; in my streets confusion. Who can suffice for me?"
[61] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 82.
[62] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 216.

was Constantine II deceased, when he introduced measures to "revive a pure and uncorrupt Hellenism".[63]

One of his military manoeuvres was to invade Persia in 363 C.E. Fate favoured the Romans, because according to Socrates Scholasticus, Julian was in the driving seat with reference to the negotiations initiated by Shapur II, the Persian king, who was willing to surrender some of his territory to prevent a Roman invasion. Instead of negotiating, Julian chose to attack the Persians and rode into war without wearing armour, because of his belief that he was invincible, which he was not. He was fatally wounded and died, having been emperor for less than two years.[64]

In the confused aftermath, Jovian was proclaimed emperor by the soldiers. A few rash moves from Julian before his death, left the army in dire conditions and Jovian had little choice but to reverse the negotiations between himself and the Persian commanders, with the consequence that Nisibis, the 'Shield of the empire', together with half of Roman Mesopotamia[65] had to be surrendered to the Persian Kingdom— as it were—on a silver plate. Consequently, the Christian inhabitants had to leave their city and find refuge elsewhere and the *Shield of the Empire* became the *Shield* for the Persian Empire from where operations were launched against the Roman and Byzantine defence forces.[66]

5.3.3 Deserting Nisibis, the "shield"

> The city was the capital of the country of Mesopotamia. The sack-cloth of the blessed one (i.e., Constantius) had preserved it, and it was exalted. The tyrant, with his blasphemy, brought it down, and it was humbled. Who has weighed how great is the dishonour of the city that was the capital of the whole west, which they have made the last heels of the east?[67]

It cannot be confirmed when Christianity was introduced in Nisibis. Unlike Edessa with its famous Addai legends,[68] Nisibis had no clear record of the beginnings of its

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[63] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 216.
[64] Socrates Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*. (NPNF2 2: 226).
[65] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 81.
[66] Lieu, "Nisibis."
[67] Sidney H. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian': Meditations on History and Imperial Power," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41, no. 3 (1987): 238–266 [cited 05 July 2019]. Online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1583993.
[68] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 218.

Christian community. Nonetheless, Christianity must have existed in Nisibis at least before 215 C.E. according to the Abercius burial inscription, which specifically mentioned Nisibis.[69] It clearly had a prosperous Christian community, considering that it could provide the city of Salona with several bishops during the third century.[70]

In Nisibis, which was an important centre of trade that also linked the Roman Empire and Persian Empire, religious plurality would have been commonplace, and it was Russel's belief that Ephrem was probably quite familiar with Manichaean religious practice and doctrines,[71] as well as Zoroastrianism and Mithraism,[72] because of the trans-frontier movements of merchants, missionaries and other people. The religious plurality also included adherents to Judaism, Graeco-Roman cults, as well as traditional Semitic cults. However, although Ephrem mentioned the practice of astrology and incantations, it has been argued that even if the Roman imperial cult was practiced, it was probably not commonly done so.[73]

Paul S. Russel believed that the rivalry between Judaism and Christianity in Mesopotamia might have been the driving force behind the Christian persecution in Persia during the first half of the fourth century,[74] because he believed that the Jewish believers in Nisibis may have had strong ties with Palestinian Jews,[75] and that this may have been the reason why the Christian community was relatively small.[76] The Christians were not killed when Nisibis was relinquished to the Persians, but allowed to leave unhindered.[77] They probably could not take much of their belongings with them, and one can imagine the Nisibene exiles as a bedraggled group, led by their bishop Abraham, the last Roman-instituted bishop of Nisibis, who also ensured that the remains of Jacob, the first bishop of Nisibis was carried with them to Edessa.

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[69] Cf. Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 218. The specific archaeological artefact "seems to have been used as a model by a certain Alexander, son of Antonius, about that time. The funerary stone of Abercius survives in a damaged state in the Vatican collection."
[70] Lieu, "Nisibis."
[71] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 195.
[72] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 198–199.
[73] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 192.
[74] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 195.
[75] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 193.
[76] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 194.
[77] Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions,* 96.

According to Elias of Nisibis, Jacob became the bishop of Nisibis in 308 / 309 C.E. and the first church was built between 313-320 C.E., but history did not paint a complete picture of Jacob, and researchers are frustrated by how few brushstrokes exist from which they have to construct a biography of the first bishop of Nisibis."[78] Nonetheless, Jacob was a prominent figure in the history of the early Syrian church, and mentioned in at least fifty-five texts—in addition to Ephrem's Nisibene hymns. He was the earliest bishop mentioned in sources other than those of his own city, among others, Jerome as well as Theodoret.[79] He took part in the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325 C.E., had Ephrem as his pupil, and was spared the anxieties of the three sieges against Nisibis, because of his early death.[80]

He also appointed Ephrem as deacon and religious teacher,[81] and one can only imagine how much influence Jacob's stature as first bishop, who has sat in the presence of an emperor, may have had on his student, Ephrem, who left Nisibis as an exile.[82] Ephrem's description about his own relationship with—especially the first three—bishops of Nisibis as their "pupil",[83] served as a clear indication that he accepted their ecclesial authority, which meant that Ephrem was firmly ingrained in the traditional orthodox church of imperial Rome, and committed to its functioning within the community of believers, as his Nisibene hymns indicated.[84]

5.3.4 Edessa, city of refuge for Nisibene exiles

> Early Christian religious practices are similar to religious practices in any
> culture and in any age, in that they represent ways in which human beings
> respond to their natural and cultural environment and their individual and
> social conditions.[85]

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[78] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 224. Basically, all that can be stated with certainty is that he was present at the council of Nicaea, that he opposed Arianism, that he died in 337/338 C.E. and that "he served four different regions of the fourth and fifth century as an ideal bishop."

[79] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 221.

[80] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 82.

[81] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 9.

[82] Cf. Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 372. — Apparently, Ephrem accepted the Nicene Creed, believed in the Christian Roman Empire as instituted by God through the reign of Constantine and his successors. In that, he differed from his contemporary, Aphrahat, who believed that Rome was the embodiment of the beast described in the Old Testament book of Daniel (Dan 7: 7).

[83] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 224.

[84] Russel, "Nisibis as the Background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," 225.

[85] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 119.

Edessa still exists as the modern-day city Urfa in south-eastern Turkey. It made sense that many of the exiled refugees from Nisibis, Ephrem among them, would end up in Edessa, the city that was linked to their abandoned hometown. Osrhoene with its capital, Edessa was one in only three northern Mesopotamian Roman provinces that remained unconquered until the seventh century when it came into Arab possession. Shapur II never came close to it in his attacks on the Roman Empire.[86]

Edessa's abundant springs and dependable water[87] and its strategic location ensured that it was always an important city. It is located on a limestone ridge and has a long history of occupation.[88] It also had a state factory for the manufacturing of weaponry and other equipment for the frontier troops, who were stationed in border posts— among others, Nisibis,[89] and merchants and traders passed through Edessa on route to central Asia, the Caucasus and the Mediterranean basin.[90]

Edessa was always cosmopolitan and characterised by a diversity of socio-cultural and religious discourses and traditions as a consequence of its location. Apparently, "the rulers of Edessa spoke a dialect of Arabic but used Syriac as a written language", even while "Greek remained the commercial language that linked this region with the wider Mediterranean world."[91] Syriac is a close relative to Aramaic, and ancient Syriac was the particular dialect of Aramaic spoken in Edessa, which also became the language that was adopted by the early Christians as their literary language.[92]

Christianity was introduced in Edessa some time before the end of the second century, which can be attested from the presence of a church that was destroyed in the flood of approximately 216 C.E.[93] Unlike Nisibis, where the relatively short history of its Christian inhabitants under their four bishops have to be deduced from fragmentary evidence, Christianity in Edessa had stronger claims to fame, recorded in documents such as the *Chronicle of Edessa*, documenting their church-building

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[86] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 85.
[87] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 84.
[88] Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Edessa," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, n.p. [cited 19 December 2018]. Online: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/edessa.
[89] Lieu, "Edessa."
[90] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 83.
[91] Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 70.
[92] Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," 161.
[93] Lieu, "Edessa."

endeavours,[94] the *Letter of Jesus to Abgar*, which Eusebius also mentioned, the *Doctrine of Addai*, and several apocryphal works such as the *Acts of Thomas*.[95]

After the reign of Diocletian, Christianity became the dominant religion in Edessa, but orthodox Christianity in Edessa, when Ephrem arrived there "formed only a small and relatively weak part of Syrian Christianity."[96] This was probably because religiously speaking, Edessa was home to Jewish-Christians, adherents of Judaism, various strains of Gnosticism, 'pagan' Semitic religions for Baal, Nebo and Atargatis, and the cult of the planets, as well as different variants of Christianity, such as Marcionism, Tatianism and Bardaisanism.[97] Its religious plurality could be linked to its long line of Arab rulers who were tolerant of religious plurality.[98] It is not likely that Ephrem would have been surprised at the existence of religious plurality in Edessa. He had encountered it in Nisibis as well and it was well established in northern Mesopotamia.[99] Therefore, one can conclude that he must have had specific reasons for his forceful polemics against the 'heresies' he encountered, especially in Edessa.

5.4 ADDING NUANCES, COLOURS AND SHADING TO THE SKETCH OF TWO CITIES

> Early Christians lived in space and time.[100]

Human beings are predisposed to use the notions from our (their) lived-experience as the "lenses through which the world, ourselves, our relationships, and also our faith come into view and receive shape and significance."[101] Griffith believed that Ephrem's approach was to —

> turn to the scriptures in search of the paradigms which would allow him, through typology and prophecy, to put an acceptable Christian construction upon the events of his own time, and to locate them precisely along the

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94 Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 91.
95 Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 85, 88, 89.
96 Phil J. Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn Contra Haereses I," *Acta Patristica et* Byzantina 15 no. 1 (2004): 57–75.
97 H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (trans. G. E. van Baaren-Pape. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966), 216.
98 Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 93.
99 Horn, Lieu and Phenix, "Beyond the Eastern Frontier," 94.
100 Lössl, *The Early Church*, 119.
101 Koopman, "Men and Women in Church and Society," 25.

intellectual spectrum which for him portrayed God's own economy salvation for all peoples.[102]

The oldest preserved manuscript containing Ephrem's hymns is the *BL add. MS 14 571, ff. 105v-114r.,* dated to 519 C.E.[103] It contains *Ephrem's Hymns Against Julian,* which is especially relevant to the mind-set of the Christians who had to leave Nisibis and make a new home for themselves in Edessa, because Ephrem did not write purely for the sake of creative beauty. Therefore, one can to some extent read Ephrem's works to add colour, shades and nuances to the sketch of the two cities, Nisibis and Edessa in northern Mesopotamia. However, one should also be aware that the twenty-first century reader, so far removed from the realities of living in fourth century northern Mesopotamia, cannot have a complete understanding of the motives of Ephrem when he constructed his poetic works, such as the didactic hymns against Julian.[104]

5.4.1 Linking truth, power and transformation to the tale of two cities

> We had our heart's delight of good things and shade,
> But our mouths became mad and attacked our Creator.
> Wars in the shade we waged by our speculations;
> Now he has withdrawn our shade to let us feel the heat.[105]

For three decades, Nisibis lived with the looming presence of the Persian army on their border, thrice laying siege to them without gaining the upper hand until Julian, the 'apostate', attacked the Persians. Julian, whose reign lasted less than two years, apparently wanted to revive the traditional religions, especially since he became

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[102] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 245–246.

[103] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 238.

[104] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 245. See also Louise M. Rosenblatt, "Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory," (technical Report no 416, New York University, NY. January 1988,), 8. Contemporary scholars, such as Rosenblatt have argued convincingly that the actual reader cannot interact with the ancient author and therefore have to deduce the author's intent from the text (s)he produced—even if the reader may not necessarily agree with the author's intent as it can be deduced from the text.

[105] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 241. — The quoted verses are from the hymn *De Ecclesia*, which preceded the four hymns against Julian, and according to Griffith, it was probably written before Julian's death. According to Griffith (same article, p. 242). "It is clear that by the year 519, when Julian of Edessa copied BL add. MS 14 571, the earliest of all Ephraem manuscripts, the hymn *De Ecclesia*, with its acrostic pattern, was already assigned to Ephraem. Moreover, the title to the four Julian hymns, which follow it, was presumably already to be found in the exemplar from which Julian of Edessa copied his selection of madrase, so he was probably the one who contributed the final notice in the manuscript about the 'five' hymns against Julian the Apostate."

"rooted in Greek literary culture and Greek philosophy and subscribed to a version of monotheistic sun-worship".[106] Despite the fact that it was not Julian who handed Shapur II the key to the city of Nisibis but Jovian, Ephrem did not blame Jovian for the exile of the Christian inhabitants of Nisibis, but Julian for the surrender of Nisibis to the Persians and the exile of its Christian inhabitants.[107] He was not the only person who blamed Julian for Nisibis' dire fate, because Socrates Scholasticus also laid the blame for the predicament Jovian found himself in, at Julian's doorstep, who believed that the whole dilemma was caused by Julian's arrogant lack of judgement and poor military strategy. For Socrates, the truth of the matter was politically-oriented and related to the situation between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire. While the Roman Empire was in a good position to enlarge their territory, the foolishness of Julian resulted in them relinquishing not only Nisibis, but also half of the northern Mesopotamian provinces under Roman control:

> Perceiving himself suddenly left in very difficult circumstances, in the midst of the Persian territory, where his army was in danger of perishing for want of necessaries, he agreed to terminate the war, even on terms by no means honorable to the glory of the Roman name, but rendered necessary by the exigencies of the crisis. Submitting therefore to the loss of the government of Syria, and giving up also Nisibis, a city of Mesopotamia, he withdrew from their territories.[108]

For Ephrem, the truth of the matter was not politically-oriented, but religious. It was not the direct consequence of human error, but divine retribution for the apostasy of the emperor and the people who turned their back on 'true' religion. Ephrem included the Nisibenes in his blame because "paganism was known to be among them"[109] as well as the Jewish inhabitants of Nisibis, whom he blamed for their rejection of Jesus Christ, [110] but he reserved his greatest critique for Julian, truly

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[106] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 216.
[107] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 245.
[108] Socrates Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus* (NPNF² 2: 228).
[109] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 249.
[110] Cf. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 249. "According to Ephraem's way of thinking, Jews were responsible for the city's destruction, because of sinfulness and failure to accept the Messiah. Nisibis surrendered and Jerusalem ruins, therefore, served Ephraem as symbols to proclaim the surrender and ruin of Christianity's principal rivals, paganism and Judaism respectively."

lashing out at Julian's apostasy, by calling him an "evil doer" who was destined to "be shamed". [111]

The sudden death of Julian—according to Ephrem's understanding of the divine appointment of the Roman emperors—would have been a blemish on the institutional establishment of the emperor as guardian of the Empire that included the Christians. Julian's dead body, stripped of life and the power to act as protector, seems to have had a profound effect on Ephrem. It seems as if the sight horrified Ephrem, who apparently had witnessed the spectacle of the corpse, "thrown into the coffin", while the "captor's banner, that was stuck on the tower" proclaimed in no uncertain terms "that the metropolis had become a slave to the masters of that banner." [112]

Ancient, educated authors commonly used "the formal rhetorical device of Greek epideictic oratory",[113] which was specifically used to vilify and injure someone's reputation, but Ephrem's strategy was not as narrow-minded as to merely discredit Emperor Julian.[114] He compared Julian's defeat by the Persian army with the captivity of ancient Jerusalem. Both "ruined Jerusalem, and mother Nisibis, with Persia's pennant flying from her battlements",[115] were probably interpreted by Ephrem as signs that were pointers towards the ultimate victory of Christ.

Ephrem's theological orientation, which guided his approach resulted in his creation of hymns as biblical-oriented "meditations on history, Christianity, imperial power, and the putative eclipse of paganism and Judaism."[116] According to Robert Murray, Ephrem did not view biblical types as "a special, isolated mode of revelation"[117]

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[111] Cf. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 249. "Rather, it was that a pit might be dug for the evil doer, (i.e., Julian) who came down among his diviners to the east. But when he came down and was struck, then it appeared to the discerning that there had been lying in wait for him, the battle in which he would be shamed."

[112] Cf. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 248–249. "There I saw the hideous sight: The captor's banner, That was stuck on the tower; The persecutor's corpse, That was thrown into the coffin. ... The Magian arranged to fix it on the tower, To be the standard to proclaim to the onlookers that the metropolis had become a slave to the masters of that banner."

[113] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 244.

[114] Cf. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 246. "Nothing could be further removed from Ephraem's attitudes. One thinks in this connection of the deacon of Edessa's famous remark, about Greek rhetoric and dialectic, 'Blessed is the one who has never tasted the poison of the wisdom of the Greeks.'"

[115] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 245.

[116] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 244.

[117] Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology" (paper presented at the Seventh International Congress on Patristic Studies. Oxford, September 1975), 5, 6.

because the Bible texts were not representative of a world on its own only, but as narratives that stood in relation to the world in its entirety as well as its history. Even if he accepted more of the biblical narratives as literal than many scholars of today would, he accepted the language and methodology of the Bible as more suited to symbolism than mere literal factuality.

When compared with the fate of the Israelites, whose prophets proclaimed that God used the 'pagan' nations as His instruments of wrath, coupled with Ephrem's sense of scriptural foundation for the events of his world, one can understand that he viewed the loss of Nisibis as the "mirror" that has been set up [by God] as "the city that heralds to the world the shame of its diviners; its shame is perpetual. God has handed it over to be a perpetual herald, who will not tire."[118]

The next chapter will focus on Ephrem and his actions and strategies within the community of the Edessenes, once he arrived there, as an exiled refugee, but for now, it should be noted that according to the medieval biographers, Ephrem did not waste any time in addressing the problems of the believers as he perceived it to be. They stated, "Arrived at Edessa, he engaged at once in the conflict against the multiform heresies of the place, old and new—Manichean and Marcionite, as well as Arian."[119] It is quite possible that he feared that if the Edessenes did not 'repent' from their ways, and return to 'true' worship, i.e. orthodox Christianity, they might suffer the same fate as the Nisibenes, and the Persian Empire at that period in time did not have any tolerance for Christianity.[120]

While many of his Nisibene hymns were meant to reprimand those who did not worship in truth, the Edessene hymns took it to a completely new level of urgency. In fact, he was not merely satisfied to proclaim 'truth'; he even wanted to completely transform the community of believers:

> He made flow a sweet spring of blessed water in our land,
> And from it a chosen forest of faith grew.
> New wine whose colour and fragrance are from Golgotha;

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[118] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 258.
[119] Gwynn, *Selections from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian, and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage*. (NPNF[2] 13: 274).
[120] Cf. Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian'," 260. "So that the Just One will not have to instruct each one who goes astray, He broke the one who went astray, so that in him those who have gone astray might learn their lesson."

He intoxicated with its drink men and women to give praise.[121]
A fountain of melodies which, behold, has been passed down to all mouths.[122]

5.5 SUMMARY

Constructing the events of the fourth century in northern Mesopotamia is difficult. First, history is a construct, tainted by the hands of the historians who wrote as products of their contexts. Second, material evidence is scarce for a number of reasons, such as a lack of archaeological excavation projects, and disasters throughout the centuries. Third, literature is fragmentary and often not historically reliable. A good example of the problems we encounter is found in the writings of Eusebius, who mentioned Syrian Christianity, but whose witness was probably based on hearsay and not personal investigation. As a result, we cannot produce anything reminiscent of high-definition photographs, and therefore have to be satisfied with merely 'sketching' the story of Ephrem in his context.

The story of the events between 363-373 C.E. in northern Mesopotamia can aptly be seen as a 'tale of two cities', because of the political upheaval and how it influenced the area. Northern Mesopotamia was long characterised by its independent character, especially with reference to its religious plurality, which more closely resembled the characteristics of Christianity in the Persian Empire than the Roman Empire. This changed during the fourth century, when it seems as if the example of Rome—to unify religion—also invaded Persian thinking and resulted in an increase in hostility towards Christians in general.

Nisibis was ethnically diverse due to its location as a border post between the Roman and Persian Empires, but also on the trade routes between East and West. Its strategic location made it a coveted city and consequently it had experienced a number of sieges, most of which it withstood without suffering great losses. Its fate changed however, when Jovian effectively handed Shapur II the key of the city in 363 C.E., as well as half the province and all the Christians were exiled.

Socrates Scholasticus blamed Julian the 'apostate' for his poor military judgement that left Jovian in a predicament. Ephrem blamed Julian and the unbelieving

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[121] Cf. Acts 12: 15.
[122] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 31.

Nisibenes for their paganism and apostasy, which he viewed as the reason why the city suffered a fate similar to that of ancient Jerusalem. Many of the displaced Christians relocated to Edessa, among them Ephrem.

Unlike Nisibis, which had a relative short reign of bishops, Edessa had a rich Christian legacy recorded in documents such as the *Chronicle of Edessa*, the *Letter of Jesus to Abgar*, etc., but orthodox Christianity represented a tiny minority, and it is likely that Ephrem feared that unless the Edessenes returned to 'true' worship, i.e. orthodox Christianity, the city would suffer the same fate as the Nisibenes.

CHAPTER 6 — SCULPTING A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY IN A DEAD POET'S SOCIETY

> Just how important is hymn singing? Is it simply to get the congregation in a good mood or to give the provided time to get ready to take up the offering? Is hymn singing an unnecessary frill?[1]

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the purpose is to make meaning of Ephrem's context in Edessa, as it provides the milieu for a particular interpretation for Ephrem's strategies. As stated in an earlier chapter,[2] the notion of *truth, power and transformation* is fundamental to the particular direction this study undertook.

 Therefore, the first segment will describe the fragmentary nature of the sources to understand Ephrem as an actual person, whose actions were guided by his worldview and experiences.

The second segment will consider the religious milieu Ephrem found in Edessa, a city that was characterised by religious plurality, which probably reminded Ephrem about the fate of Nisibis, as he understood it. The 'otherworldly' dichotomies between Syrian asceticism and the rejection of worldly involvement found among the 'elect' followers of Bardaisan, and especially Mani, will also be included in the considerations relevant to the Edessene religious landscape, as well as some remarks on the marginalised—especially women, as the 'silent', who neither produced much—if any—writings, and who were restricted to a ministry of 'women for women' only.

The third segment will focus on Ephrem, as the Nisibene 'knight in shining armour', who utilised hymnody to battle the issues that he perceived. Keeping the thread of the study intact, the first aspect, or battle was the battle for truth, to silence the 'heretics', especially the doctrines of Bardaisan. The second battle was the battle for

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[1] Eskew, "Hymns in the Church's Teaching Ministry."
[2] Cf. Chapter 3.2.

power, to unsilence the Syrian women, specifically as it concerned public participation in liturgical singing. The third battle was the battle for transformation, to create a society where the voices of men and women are 'two harps' to sing 'one praise'.

6.2   EXCAVATING SCULPTURES FROM ANCIENT FRAGMENTS

> In the interaction with the other, in the communion, in the relationship, I find my essence and being. … We receive our existence out of the hands of the other and my existence is meaningful because there are others who want to share their existence with me.[3]

The figure, who stands at the centre of this study, is Ephrem, the Syrian— a deacon, discourse writer, poet and hymnodist, who earned the title "the harp of the Spirit" because of the extensive number of poetic works he produced.[4]

6.2.1   Finding fragments to construct Ephrem— sources

It is difficult to find enough fragments to be able to sketch a true-life portrait of Ephrem. Historians are dependent on the writings of those contemporaries who deemed it important enough to write about the great figures of the early church, which means that we can only view these personages through the lenses of those who penned their stories.[5] Many sources have been lost for a variety of reasons, and many only exist as elements incorporated into later writings, in contexts that had very little in common with the contexts in and for which they were produced.[6] Ironically, the most reliable source for Ephrem seems to have been the one source where Ephrem's life was not its focus, namely the verse homily of Jacob, which was far less concerned with Ephrem's life, than with Ephrem's actions.[7] Therefore, even if it seems as if there is an abundance of sources, it is not the case. Closer scrutiny will

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[3] Koopman, "On Leadership in Vulnerability," 253.
[4] Sebastian Brock, "Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition," in *The Cambridge history of early Christian literature* (eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 363.
[5] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, xiv.
[6] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 371.
[7] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 18. On the other and, the sources that are supposed to be historical are mostly too fragmentary, or over-imaginative

reveal that the textual evidences are sometimes too scarce, sometimes too idealised, and sometimes too imaginative.

6.2.1.1   *Jerome's Illustrious men*

The earliest external mention of Ephrem is by Jerome,[8] nineteen years after Ephrem's death. Jerome described him as a prolific writer, whose writings were read "in some churches after the Scriptural lections."[9]

6.2.1.2   *Syriac biography*

The Syriac biography was written approximately one hundred and fifty years after Ephrem, but scholars do not believe that it is reliable and that it contained much unhistorical material for Ephrem, one of which is the description of his visit to Basil in Cappadocia and Bishoi in Egypt.[10]

6.2.1.3   *Palladius' Lausiac* history

Palladius' *Lausiac History*,[11] written approximately fifty years after the death of Ephrem, relates only a single event, namely Ephrem's role during the debilitating

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[8] Cf. Saint Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* (trans. Thomas P. Halton; Washington, WA, The Catholic University of America, 1999), 149. "1. Ephrem, deacon of the church of Edessa, composed many works in Syriac and came to enjoy such prestige that his works are read publicly after Scripture readings in some churches. 2. I read in Greek his work, On the Holy Spirit, which he had translated from the Syriac, and even in translation I could recognise the acuteness if his sublime genius. 3. He died in the reign of the emperor Valens."

[9] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 12.

[10] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 8.

[11] Cf. Meyer, *Palladius: The Lausiac History*, 116-117. "1. Surely you have heard about Ephraem, the deacon of the church of Edessa. He happens to be one of those worthy to be commemorated by holy men. He had accomplished the journey of the Spirit in a right and worthy manner, never deviating from the straight path, and he was deemed worthy of the gift of natural knowledge. The knowledge of God succeeded this, and finally blessedness. He always practiced the quiet life and edified those whom he met for many years, but finally he left his cell for the following reason:

2. When a great famine befell the city of Edessa he had compassion for the whole countryside, which was being ravaged, and he went to those who were well-to-do and spoke to them: "Why do you not have pity on these people who are perishing, instead of letting your wealth rot for the condemnation of your own souls? They looked about and said: We have no one whom we should trust to care for those suffering from famine, for all of them make it into a business."

He asked: "How do I seem to you?" for he had a great reputation among them, not for evil, but for good.

3. They said: "We know that you are a man of God." ''Why do you not trust me?" he asked. "Look, I will appoint myself your guestmaster." and he took money and divided up the porticoes, and he put about three hundred beds and cared for the famished ones. The dead he buried, and he took care of those who had hope of life, and as a matter of fact he daily provided refreshment and help to all those who came to him each day because of the famine; and this he did with the money allotted to him.

4. When the year was over and prosperity followed and they had all gone back home, he had no more to do. He went back to his cell and died within the month. God had given him this chance for a crown at the very end. He left some writings too, most of which are worthy of attention."

famine that affected the Edessene district, just prior to his death.[12] Palladius portrayed Ephrem as a monk, and this was wrongfully repeated by subsequent writers. Brock finds it highly unlikely that Ephrem could have had any contact with Egyptian monasticism before the very late stages of his life in Edessa, and even less likely that he might have been a member of a monastic community.[13] Ephrem was a member of the *Sons/Daughters of the Covenant*— a peculiar, Syrian ascetic tradition.[14] While Syriac ascetics adhered to lofty ideals, they did not live in isolation, but "in small groups or communes serving the local church in a variety of different ways", "essentially an urban or village phenomenon".[15]

6.2.1.4   *Sozomen's* Ecclesiastical history

Sebastian Brock is critical of Sozomen's portrayal of Ephrem as a monk who shunned women,[16] because it contradicted Ephrem's own writings that did not portray negativity towards women, especially in light of the evidence of Ephrem's hymns, many of which he composed specifically for female choirs.[17] Brock is also of the opinion that the story of his aversion to being appointed to the position of bishop[18] is merely an excuse for explaining away the fact that he remained a deacon throughout his ministering life.[19] Therefore, Sozomen is probably not of much value as a reliable source for Ephrem's life.

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[12] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 19.

[13] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 25.

[14] Cf. Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 374. The *Children of the Covenant*, or *Sons/Daughters of the Covenant* did not live isolated lives, but functioned within their specific communities, and the writings of Ephrem and Aphrahat seem to indicate that their focus were the broad community and not the community of ascetics. They adhered to strict rules, which were not imposed on the general community of believers, while they lived within the community.

[15] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 26.

[16] Cf. Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen* (NPNF[2] 2: 649). "He was so serious and so careful to avoid giving occasion to calumny, that he refrained from the very sight of women."

[17] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 19.

[18] Cf. Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen* (NPNF[2] 2: 650). "He was appointed bishop of some town, and attempts were made to convey him away for the purpose of ordaining him. As soon as he became aware of what was intended, he ran to the market-place, and showed himself as a madman by stepping in a disorderly way, dragging his clothes along, and eating in public. Those who had come to carry him away to be their bishop, on seeing him in this state, believed that he was out of his mind, and departed; and he, meeting with an opportunity for effecting his escape, remained in concealment until another had been ordained in his place."

[19] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 19.

6.2.1.5 *Jacob of Sarug's verse homily*

We are left with the panegyric of Jacob of Sarug, who died in 521 C.E. as the singular most important source about the high regard Ephrem's contemporaries and those who came after him, had for him.[20]

Jacob himself was a renowned man. His epithet spoke of him as the "flute of the Holy Spirit and the harp of the faithful church",[21] and apparently, he was only outshone by Ephrem. He composed hundreds of metrical homilies, especially in honour of the 'beacons of the Syrian church', but of particular importance is the metric homily he wrote on Ephrem, composed to be performed during his annual commemoration, on the first Saturday of the Lenten fast.[22] Its value is not only relative to its subject matter, but also because of the age and completeness of the available examples.

6.2.2 Casting an image for Ephrem, theologian-hymnodist

According to Francis Young, "all literature in the ancient world was meant to persuade".[23]

Poetry featured prominently in Syrian literature, and consequently was an important element in the homilies and scriptural exposition in the Syrian tradition. It was especially dialogue poems and verse homilies that were used as "excellent vehicles for popular catechetical instruction".[24] Ephrem, the fourth century "theologian poet" has been described by several scholars as a prolific writer, whose " writings are extensive even when the large number of works falsely attributed to him is excluded."[25] However, Ephrem did not rely solely on his poetic skills to communicate his theological teachings, but also utilised prose refutations, biblical commentaries and artistic prose.[26] He utilised two types of Syrian metrical forms, namely *memra* and *madrashe*, where *memre*[27] referred to seven-syllable couplets (homilies in verse

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[20] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 22.
[21] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 10.
[22] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 15.
[23] Francis Young, "Classical Genres in Christian Guise; Christian Genres in Classical Guise," in *The Cambridge history of early Christian literature* (ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 256.
[24] Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 81.
[25] Sebastian Brock, "The Earliest Syriac Literature," 363.
[26] Brock, "Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition," 365.
[27] **'mēmrā':** Cf. https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/memra-e731600. "Name of a Syrian poetic form consisting of isosyllabic couplets, usually rendered in a combination of

form), and *madrashe*[28] to poetic stanzas that consisted of a variety of syllables (hymns).[29] He also incorporated more than forty-five stanza patterns in his writings, ranging from simple arrangements to complex ones, but unfortunately for us, only a handful of fifth and sixth century manuscripts preserved Ephrem's more than four hundred hymns unchanged.[30]

According to Joseph P. Amar, the majority of patristic literature, including Syrian writings, had a negative regard for women,[31] which makes Jacob's verse homily especially significant, as it portrayed an image of Ephrem that was quite contrary to the practice of the world in which he lived. Although the Syrian biography of Ephrem mentioned Ephrem's relationship with Syrian women very briefly, it certainly was not in a manner that would create any impression that Ephrem had a burden for women. Nonetheless, many contemporary researchers—reading from different starting points—have come to realise that Ephrem's own authentic writings mirrored the image Jacob created of Ephrem, whose attitude towards women were not typical of his time and place in history.[32]

6.3   A DEAD POET'S SOCIETY — EDESSENE RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES [33]

According to Vincent L. Wimbush, early Christian writings sketched a scenario where the Christian world clearly did *not* represent a "steady, inexorable development toward world-accommodation or "secularization," but instead the constant nuancing

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7 + 7 or 12 + 12 syllables; the former combination is associated with the name of Ephrem the Syrian, the latter with that of Jacob [3] of Sarūḡ. Many mēmrē are homilies in verse form, a genre characteristic of Syrian literature and represented mainly through the 5th- to 6th-cent. AD authors Narsai, Jacob of Sarūḡ and Isaac [2] of Antioch."

[28] **'maḏrāšā'**: Cf. https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/search?s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.brill-s-new-pauly&search-go=&s.q=madrasha. "Name for a Syrian poem form divided up into strophes that uses different patterns of isosyllabic metres (or q ālē, literally 'melodies' according to which they were sung). Madrasha poetry, the greatest representative of which is considered to be Ephraim the Syrian († in AD 373), could have influenced the development of the Kontakion."

[29] Sebastian Brock, "The Earliest Syriac Literature," 363.

[30] Sebastian Brock, "The Earliest Syriac Literature," 364.

[31] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 20.

[32] Cf. Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 20. Apparently, "Jacob's praise of Ephrem's legacy among Syrian women is paralleled only by his pride in Ephrem as a fellow Syrian."

[33] The title was inspired by the 1989 film, *Dead Poet's Society*, directed by Peter Weir and written by Tom Schulman.

and modulating of translations and reifications of otherworldly or transcendental visions and impulses."[34]

Christianity developed as a phenomenon that has always laid claim to being "not of this world",[35] which has led Wimbush to argue that early Christianity should be reimagined as an 'otherworldly' phenomenon that was also "complex, worldly, differentiated"—and where ''institutionalization and [world] accommodation were experienced within a matrix, a frame of reference or worldview, that gave it a different meaning.''[36]

It has been noted in previous chapters that human beings tend to view the world through the lenses of their own contexts, and we are increasingly conscious of some of the complexities related to how people engage with their worlds, and how much 'this material world' people inhabit intrudes into their engagement with 'that ethereal world' they long for. Karen L. King believes that "we are now on the brink of another watershed in the representation of early Christian diversity."[37] Many of the earlier notions have been abandoned, as more and more scholars come to the realisation that the borders of distinction between dichotomies, such as the differentiation between 'heretic' and 'orthodox', or 'pagan' and 'Christian' are not rigid, or even universal.

One such example is Bardaisan, whom Ephrem and other contemporaries described as a heretic par excellence, yet whose writings were sometimes more orthodox than others who were apparently firmly imbedded in mainstream Christianity.[38] Consequently, King believed that it is imperative to be conscious that a multiplicity of factors was responsible for shaping early Christian self-understanding and border-demarcation.[39]

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[34] Vincent L. Wimbush, ""…Not of This World …" Early Christianities as Rhetorical and Social Formation," in *Reimagining Christian Origins. A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (eds. Elizabeth A Castelli and Hal Taussiģ; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1996), 26.
[35] Cf. John 15: 19; 17: 15-16; Romans 12:2, etc.
[36] Wimbush, "…Not of This World …," 29.
[37] King, "Which Early Christianity?" 71.
[38] Ute Possekel, "Bardaisan's Influence on Late Antique Christianity," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 81–125.
[39] King, "Which Early Christianity?" 73.

6.3.1 'Encircled with heresies'— religious plurality and syncretism

> I have stumbled upon weeds, my brothers, disguised in the colour of wheat to choke the good seed. Of these, the farmers have commanded that they should not be removed or uprooted; and even though the farmers did not notice, the seed grew stronger than them; they grew and multiplied until they overpowered and choked them.[40]

Ephrem is one of the major sources for the religious plurality in Edessa, but what the exact ratio between orthodox and other Christianities was, is unknown. Nonetheless, having just arrived as an exiled refugee as a result of—what he believed—Nisibene paganism and the rejection of Christianity by some of the inhabitants, as well as the apostasy of the deceased emperor Julian,[41] it seems as if Ephrem found the religious plurality of the Edessene community especially problematic. It must have really irritated him to find in Edessa such a variety of unorthodox groups whose teachings were a mixture of notions, gained by borrowing indiscriminately from various religious and cultural spiritualities.[42]

One of the groups he criticised was the Arians, and here one should take note of J. Rebecca Lyman's views on Arianism, that it was not primarily representative of a particular type of thinking, but rather an overarching term to identify everyone and anything unorthodox— whatever meaning may have been attached to that concept. Apparently, the notion of Arianism as an identifiable, stable concept have been rejected, for the notion that Arianism was probably used as a type of generic term, which acted as a smokescreen for the "hardening of certain theological alliances and the creation of others."[43] Arianism therefore, represented the "archetypical heresy, which denied the saving divinity of Christ, and therefore essential Christian identity."[44] This meant that a person who opposed mainline orthodoxy—whatever it meant at a given time—was an 'Arian', who stood in opposition of true Christianity. Lyman also noted that Athanasius associated Arianism even with notions outside Christianity, such as Judaism, the philosophies, etc., however not as a stable

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[40] Ephrem, *Hym. Nisib.* 51.1 (NPNF[2] 13: 274; modified). The hymn mentioned, was included in the introduction written by John Gwynn in the same source.
[41] Griffith, "Ephraem the Syrian's Hymns 'Against Julian," 257.
[42] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 165.
[43] J. Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (eds. Susan A. Harvey and David G Hunter; New York, NY: Oxford, 2008), 246.
[44] Lyman, "Arius and Arianism," 238.

description, because "as doctrinal questions and political alliances shifted, so did his categories."[45]

Another group that particularly annoyed Ephrem was the Manichaeans, followers of Mani, whose teachings consisted of "seven Scriptures"[46] that were translated into a number of languages. It was "a strongly dualistic movement" that apparently considered itself "a world religion, based upon revealed Scriptures."[47] Mani borrowed ideas from the New Testament, the writings of Marcion and of Bardaisan,[48] and constructed a myth that represented a system of beliefs where believers were taught that the "love and support of church leaders and friends were needed to nurture a believer to gradually turn to the true faith."[49] Apparently, the third century Mani believed himself to be the "reformer of Christianity."[50] He imitated the apostle Paul, and sent out his missionaries to proclaim the gospel—according to Mani. He took great pains in committing his words to paper, and his endeavours were quite successful, because Manichaeism retained a strong foothold in Edessa and other parts of the known world for many decades.[51] As Samuel Lieu stated, Manichaeism was potentially the most harmful of unorthodox teachings,[52] because the cult could propagate itself almost everywhere, because of the tendency to translate their writings in the local vernacular.

However, the group that truly vexed Ephrem, was the followers of Bardaisan, the 'dead poet', whose songs refused to die and made him the thorn in Ephrem's flesh.

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[45] Lyman, "Arius and Arianism," 247.

[46] Samuel N.C. Lieu, "Manichaeism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (eds. Susan A. Harvey and David G Hunter; New York, NY: Oxford, 2008), 222.

[47] Guy G. Stroumsa, "The End of Sacrifice: Religious Mutations of Late Antiquity," in *The Roman Empire in Contexts* (eds. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 138.

[48] Lieu, "Manichaeism," 228.

[49] Lieu, "Manichaeism," 227.

[50] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 5.

[51] Eusebius. *Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine* (NPNF[2] 1: 818-819). "1. At this time, the madman, named from his demoniacal heresy, armed himself in the perversion of his reason, as the devil, Satan, who himself fights against God, put him forward to the destruction of many. He was a barbarian in life, both in word and deed; and in his nature demoniacal and insane. In consequence of this he sought to pose as Christ, and being puffed up in his madness, he proclaimed himself the Paraclete and the very Holy Spirit; and afterwards, like Christ, he chose twelve disciples as partners of his new doctrine. 2. And he patched together false and godless doctrines collected from a multitude of long-extinct impieties, and swept them, like a deadly poison, from Persia to our part of the world. From him the impious name of the Manicheans is still prevalent among many. Such was the foundation of this "knowledge falsely so-called," which sprang up in those times."

[52] Lieu, "Manichaeism," 221.

Bardaisan, who lived almost two centuries before Ephrem was quite enigmatic. He lived at the royal court of Abgar VIII in Edessa, the capital of the kingdom of Osrhoene, when it was an independent kingdom situated between the Roman and the Parthian Empires, and later writers seemed to have viewed him mostly with grudging admiration for his scholarly intelligence and profound knowledge, his great literary skills, and even his prowess at archery,[53] but it is difficult to construct a proper biography for him. All of the accounts were produced long after Bardaisan, and was probably motivated by the intention to "bring a heretic into a particular relation with orthodoxy, in order that his heresy may be the more clearly evident."[54]

According to Lucas van Rompay, Bardaisan "was a man of the world, not an ascetic or encratite, and his main interest is in the philosophical questions of his day, which he approaches with the tools of the Greek philosophical tradition."[55] It seemed as if Bardaisan was well informed about "astrology, philosophy, ethnology and history, a composer of religious hymns, a discriminating teacher, a courtier who did not despise the luxury of his day, and therefore, an aristocrat in every sense of the word."[56]

It is likely that most of the elite in Edessa were Bardaisanites, who apparently used to gather in caves where they would sing Bardaisan's hymns and discuss his writings.[57] Apparently, Bardaisan focused his writings on those who were socially and intellectually able to follow his particular method for interpretation of the Scriptures—an insider group that were socially above the ordinary people, which may be why Ephrem stated that Bardaisan's words may have seemed "perfectly

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[53] Possekel, "Bardaisan's Influence on Late Antique Christianity," 84.
[54] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa,* 190. See also Eusebius. *Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine* (NPNF[2] 1: 492–494). "1. In the same reign, as heresies were abounding in the region between the rivers, a certain Bardesanes, a most able man and a most skillful disputant in the Syriac tongue, having composed dialogues against Marcion's followers and against certain others who were authors of various opinions, committed them to writing in his own language, together with many other works. His pupils, of whom he had very many (for he was a powerful defender of the faith), translated these productions from the Syriac into Greek. 2. Among them there is also his most able dialogue On Fate, addressed to Antoninus, and other works which they say he wrote on occasion of the persecution which arose at that time. 3. He indeed was at first a follower of Valentinus, but afterward, having rejected his teaching and having refuted most of his fictions, he fancied that he had come over to the more correct opinion. Nevertheless, he did not entirely wash off the filth of the old heresy. About this time, also Soter, bishop of the Church of Rome, departed this life."
[55] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 370.
[56] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 219.
[57] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 162.

reasonable and orthodox, but secretly they were full of madness, full of blasphemous mysteries."[58] For H. J. W. Drijvers, all of Ephrem's comments on the person of Bardaisan reeked with "envy and abhorrence", especially where it concerned Bardaisan's privileged position at the royal court,[59] and consequently proposed that one should understand Ephrem's vehement opposition of Bardaisan's theology in light of the "social and perhaps intellectual difference between Ephrem and his opponent,"[60] who lived almost two ages before Ephrem. Perhaps one may assume that for Ephrem, Bardaisan represented the combined 'evil' of all the religious and cultural 'heresies' he found in Edessa that taught a false theology and stole from the flock of believers.[61]

One should note that Ephrem's arguments against Bardaisan were marginally successful only, because despite his energetic arguments and other strategies to rid Edessa of Bardaisanism, there were still Bardaisanites in the time of Jacob of Edessa—during the seventh century.[62] However, as time progressed, his teachings faded from the memories of people, despite the many writings he apparently produced, and the fact that his ideas remained influential for a few centuries. Later generations just did not copy his works.

6.3.2 'Laying up treasures in heaven'— otherworldly dichotomies

Linked to the missionary activities of Christian believers were groups of monks and missionaries who travelled between villages.

6.3.2.1   'Otherworldly' elect— trading alms for prayers

Followers of Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani characteristically refrained from "worldly involvement",[63] which could be linked to the teachings found in the *Acts of Thomas* that advocated 'otherworldly' living and probably underscored the "assumption that

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[58] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 161.
[59] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 161.
[60] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 127.
[61] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 162.
[62] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 228. See also Possekel, "Bardaisan's Influence on Late Antique Christianity," 95. One should not forget that it was Bardaisan who pioneered the use of *madrasha* as poems—or "teaching-songs"—that were sung, and that these were highly successful and very popular, especially in Edessa, the hometown of Bardaisan.
[63] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 5.

the Syrian ascetic was too isolated and eccentric a person to engage in philanthropic relief."[64]

Recently unearthed writings, discovered in an excavated house in the village of Kellis, located in the Dakhleh Oasis in the western Egyptian desert[65] that was dated to approximately 340 C.E. have shone a bright light on some of the practices and beliefs of especially the followers of Mani. The cache of writings included personal letters between Manichaean 'elect' and their 'hearers'.[66] According to Peter R. L. Brown, the "elect" of Mani saw themselves as set apart from worldly living. Apparently, Manichaeans saw the material world as corrupt, and they attempted to demonstrate their 'otherworldliness' by their peculiar habits, which included practices such as refraining from "unregulated eating", rejecting sexual intercourse that defiled the body, and refraining from manual labour, despite the fact that they expected to be cared for from the labour of others, in an act of almsgiving.[67]

Mani's 'elect' were distinctively different from Egyptian monastics,[68] who did not live off the labour of others, but supported themselves and used the surplus to care for the poor. However, as Peter Brown noted, it was highly unlikely that the 'elect' would go wanting in the Syrian landscape during the fourth century, because of the economic affluence the area afforded its inhabitants, who tolerated these 'begging monks', because of their beliefs that the 'elect' had to be free of "the shame of physical labor", to fulfil their actual labour of the "weightless, etherial toil of prayer, joining their voices with the angels in ceaseless praise of God, their bodies swaying gently, but without violent effort", as they prayed in behalf of their 'hearers'.[69] By supporting the 'elect', the 'hearers'—or followers of the cult—apparently laid up "treasures in heaven".[70] In sharing their material goods (from an evil world) with the

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[64] Jill Gather, "The Concept of Philanthropy in the Early Syrian Fathers," in *Academic Commons*, 72–89 [cited 03 April 2019]. Online: https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/download/fedora.../Sophia Vol2Gather.pdf.
[65] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 9.
[66] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 10.
[67] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 12.
[68] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 16.
[69] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 15.
[70] Cf. Mathew 6: 19.

'elect', it was believed that their gifts were in some way transformed into treasures, which "somehow carried with it the very souls of its donors."[71]

6.3.2.2 *Children of the Covenant— otherworldly and other-centred*

The notion that Ephrem was a monk came from Palladius' *Lausiac History*, which wrongfully created the image of him as a man who shunned society. Ephrem was apparently a member of a particular group, known as *Sons / Daughters of the Covenant* — a type of Syriac asceticism where adherents lived dedicated lives, which began at baptism, when the candidate would take additional vows of consecration that would mark him/her as both a Christian and a *Son / Daughter of the Covenant*, serving Jesus Christ and the church.[72]

According to Sebastian Brock, Syriac asceticism was based on three basic notions, focused on the parable of the ten virgins—five wise and five foolish—found in Mathew 25. The first was centred on the idea of the church as the bride of Christ, whereby the individual members were also included in this relationship, both collectively and as individuals.[73] Second was the idea of watchfulness that was also found in the parable of the ten virgins, which they linked with "the marriageless life of angels as something to be anticipated already on earth."[74] Lastly, they had the notion of "re-entry into Paradise" through baptism,[75] which in a sense, was a reversal of marriage to singleness — a notion found in the *Septuagint* and *Peshitta* where it was believed that Adam and Eve's marriage was only consumed after they were expelled from Paradise. Consequently, most of Syrian ascetism was focused on being "single, celibate, singular, single-minded, follower of Christ the Ihidaya (Only-Begotten)."[76]

> Lifelong virginity (btuluta) or chastity in marriage (qaddishuta); simplicity in food, clothing, and possessions; a life of prayer that included both study of

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[71] Brown, "Wealth, Work and the Holy Poor," 11.

[72] Susan A. Harvey, "Women in the Syriac Tradition," in Syriac Studies, n. p. [cited 01 May 2019]. Online: http://www.syriacstudies.com/2015/08/27/women-in-the-syriac-tradition-susan-ashbrook-harvey-2/.

[73] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 27.

[74] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 30.

[75] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 31.

[76] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 33.

> scripture and care for the poor, sick, and suffering — these were the active
> traits of early Syrian Christian devotion for women and men both.[77]

The ascetics' vows included that of poverty, celibacy and service, and they lived in separate households within the villages and towns where they served under the parish priest or bishop.[78] They differed from the ordinary congregants in their single-minded devotion to Christ, a commitment they made during their baptism ceremony, when they were 'clothed' spiritually in Jesus Christ as their Betrothed Groom and proposed to live 'otherworldly' lives in this world, "to reflect that of the angelic community."[79] They lived in the constant hope of attaining the gloriousness Adam had before the fall in the resurrection, and they believed that their devotional lives incorporated them into the 'body of Jesus Christ', which meant that they received a new identity through the working of the Holy Spirit.

One of the misconceptions created as a result of the inaccuracies portrayed in the biography, has to do with the notion that Ephrem was a monk. Monks lived in isolation, apart from the villages, yet Jacob depicted Ephrem as "someone who was actively involved in the catechetical and pedagogical life of the church on a daily basis."[80] Ephrem, like other *Sons/Daughters of the Covenant*, lived a celibate life, but not isolated from the community of ordinary people. They were "strangers to the world and its many distractions",[81] but they were compelled by their concern for others to minister to them in their need. In a sense, one may say that their 'otherworldliness' did not prevent them from 'other-centeredness' and their lives were marked by their peculiar dedication to Jesus Christ, their Betrothed Groom, while they were also compelled to serve others by their love for suffering humanity. This type of Syrian asceticism would later fade as a result of the popularity and prestige associated with Egyptian monasticism that effectively absorbed "local ascetic tradition, later almost obliterating the memory of them",[82] and with the

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[77] Susan A. Harvey, "Women in the Syriac Tradition."
[78] Harvey, "Women in the Syriac Tradition."
[79] Gather, "The Concept of Philanthropy in the Early Syrian Fathers," 75.
[80] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 19.
[81] Gather, "The Concept of Philanthropy in the Early Syrian Fathers," 82.
[82] Brian, E. Fitzgerald, "God's Self-Revelation as Seen in the Hymns on Paradise," (topical study presented at the St Phillip's Antiochian Orthodox Church, Souderton, PA., November 17 and December 1 and 8, 2002. Online: https://www.st-philip.net/files/Fitzgerald%20Patristic%20series/Ephrem_paradise_hymns.pdf]], 3.

fading of Syriac asceticism by the tenth century, so too did other functions, such as the offices of 'widows and deaconesses'.[83]

6.3.3 Suffering poor and 'silent' women

Social distinction and gender-prejudice existed throughout the known world, and the hardships suffered as a result of plagues, famine, poverty, and prejudice were as much—if not more—realities then as they are now, and these hardships had the same debilitating effects on the health and longevity of its most vulnerable members, namely the poor, orphaned and widowed members of communities. [84] Despite the Christian teaching of proclaiming equality for everyone in the spiritual dimension— or kingdom of God—the reality was that the so-called Christian Empire did not necessarily transform the social structures of the world, especially where it concerned women.[85] In essence, even where they were the objects of writings, women were mostly 'silent', also in producing texts, which is a confirmation of Foucauldian thinking[86] concerning the imbalances of power relations.

The office of 'widow' and 'deaconess' allowed women to participate in worship activities, but only in a limited sense. The role of 'widows' was confined to praying at home or in church; and that of deaconesses was restricted to the social welfare of women, instruction of female catechumens, assisting at their baptism, or stated differently, their ministry was "by women, for women."[87] In addition to the role of 'widows' and 'deaconesses', women could choose a life of asceticism. According to Susan A. Harvey, celibacy provided a way of life, especially for early Christian women that can actually be described as 'freedom'.[88] It provided them with a real alternative

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[83] Susan A. Harvey, "Women's Voices Bearing Witness: Biblical Memories in Ancient Orthodox Liturgy" (lecture presented at Fordham University. Bronx, NY., 26 February 2008), 10.

[84] Cf. Meyer, *Palladius: The Lausiac History*, 116, describing Ephrem's reaction in response to the lack of concern the wealthy had for the poor and destitute who suffered in the severe famine of 372/373 C.E. "When a great famine befell the city of Edessa he had compassion for the whole countryside, which was being ravaged, and he went to those who were well-to-do and spoke to them: "Why do you not have pity on these people who are perishing, instead of letting your wealth rot for the condemnation of your own souls?"

[85] Towey, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 238.

[86] See Chapter 3.2.4 Those in powerful positions determine the kind of information that is produced about those who are in disempowered positions. In effect, they write about the 'others' and also for them.

[87] Susan A. Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women's Choirs and Sacred Songs in Ancient Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 125–149.

[88] Harvey, "Women in the Syriac Tradition."

to being married and thereby avoid the risks and dangers associated with multiple pregnancies.

> This new identity allowed them to share in the Lord's divine sonship; it introduced the possibility of transcending the many limitations of earthly existence and of meeting fellow beings [male and female] as equals. [89]

It also opened "new vistas of activity," allowing them to participate in acts of ministering in the community as persons with purpose and value.[90]

6.4 THE NISIBENE 'KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOUR'—EPHREM'S STRATEGIC JOUSTING

Ephrem was "a theologian in the form of a poet or composer."[91] It is a concept that is foreign to our thinking, because we do not expect contemporary 'great' theologians to express their theological discourses as songs or poems. Brian E. Fitzgerald believes that this sentiment is only foreign to our thinking because we lack the capacity to appreciate the possibilities that can—and was—generated through this profound medium.[92]

6.4.1 Strategy for truth— silencing heretics

> He was an architect who built on the foundation of truth;
> He completed his structures with gold and precious stones…
> A straightforward man who fled from the sophistries in his astuteness,
> So he would not deviate from the Way of the apostles.[93]

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[89] Gather, "The Concept of Philanthropy in the Early Syrian Fathers," 75.

[90] Cf. Harvey, "Women in the Syriac Tradition." "For Syrian Christians, singlehearted devotion to God was demonstrated through service to the Church community, enacted in village or city. Lifelong virginity (btuluta) or chastity in marriage (qaddishuta); simplicity in food, clothing, and possessions; a life of prayer that included both study of scripture and care for the poor, sick, and suffering – these were the active traits of early Syrian Christian devotion for women and men both."

[91] Fitzgerald, "God's Self-Revelation," 4.

[92] Cf. Fitzgerald, "God's Self-Revelation," 4. "The paradoxical nature of God's revelation to man is often more aptly evoked in song than captured in explanations. Spiritual events are often more readily experienced than defined. This is the advantage of the spiritual poet as theologian since he concerns himself more with evoking than defining these realities. For this reason, poetry is an excellent media to address the issue of anthropomorphic language, the use of human words, ideas and imagery to express hidden truths - an issue of which all Christians should be aware."

[93] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 31.

Ephrem was orthodox in body, mind and spirit, and he was proficient in Syriac literary expression, which he used without reserve in his censures against the heresies and paganism that pervaded his world.[94] According to the poetic words of Jacob of Sarug's elegant homily on Ephrem:

> The city of Addai from which (Addai) uprooted foolish idols,
> The evil one entered to renew paganism there.
> (The evil one) encircled it with heresies like traps on all sides,
> To muzzle the mouth of the church with silence by every means.
> On one side, he stirred up the ranks of the followers of Marcion;
> On another side, he marshalled the legions of the Easterners. *[Manichaeans]
> He availed himself of partisans from the followers of Arius and Sabellius,
> And set up ranks among the cunning assemblies of the followers of Bardaisan.[95]

Phil J. Botha's article[96] on the structural techniques Ephrem utilised in his liturgical hymns not only demonstrated the profound literary excellence of Ephrem the poet, but also noted the ingeniousness of Ephrem's strategy to use hymns as his 'best' vehicle to combat the unorthodox teachings of Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani, but especially Bardaisan, possibly because of the efficiency of Bardaisan's strategy to use hymns as "teaching-songs",[97] or doctrinal and theological teaching tools.

According to H. J. W. Drijvers, Ephrem was jealous of the success of Bardaisan and his son, Harmodius, and he attempted to discredit their teachings—and also those of Mani and Marcion— by taking "certain words or concepts of his opponents out of their context,"[98] to refute them from his point of view, which may not have dealt with the actual, intended meaning of Bardaisan, Mani or Marcion. This study does not agree with the notion of jealousy, but rather view Ephrem's response in light of his recent experience in Nisibis, where he interpreted the surrender of Nisibis as an act of divine retribution that was the direct result of Emperor Julian and the inhabitants of Nisibis' apostasy. It is highly unlikely that he would willingly suffer the same fate

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[94] Van Rompay, "The East (3)," 373.
[95] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 55.
[96] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 57–75.
[97] Possekel, "Bardaisan's Influence on Late Antique Christianity," 95.
[98] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 128.

twice, and therefore it makes sense to believe that he probably felt responsible to do everything he could to change the hearts of the Edessenes.

> Error (false worship) among the apostate is a source of injuries.
> — And love would like to be a healer with harsh medicines.
> — He causes pain without anger and suffering without rage.
> For there is no surgeon who would cut in hatred…
> The Jealous One raged greatly and injured humanity.
> — His bitterness (poison) incited him and he wounded all whom he encountered.
> — With rage in his heart, a curse in his mouth,
> — His source and his root are from bitterness (or: are poison).[99]

According to Phil J. Botha, Ephrem had an affinity for polarity—between "false worship and love";[100] between "what is openly visible or revealed, and that which is hidden and concealed by Satan";[101] between "outside and inside";[102] and his carefully constructed themes functioned to demonstrate how Bardaisanism, Marcionism and Manichaeism were the embodiment of Satan's evil works. He compared Bardaisan with a seduced adulteress, committing her acts inside a secret room; Marcion with a snake; and Mani's teaching as stirring up mud.[103]

Unlike prose refutations, which would probably only be meaningful for the "intellectual elite",[104] hymns would also reach the ordinary believers who participated in the worship services: in other words, those who are the embodiment of 'the church'. Ephrem's hymns against heresies effectively equipped the ordinary believers with the weapons they needed to enable them to "attack the Bardaisanites with their own weapons".[105] It was a strategy that did not depend on "complex and in-depth discussions of the doctrines of heretics, but rather a kind of guerrilla attack on what was popularly known or believed about these movements."[106] I cannot help but admire and acknowledge that Ephrem was brilliant when he "borrowed"[107] the

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[99] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 58.
[100] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 63.
[101] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 63.
[102] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 64.
[103] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 67.
[104] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 129.
[105] Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 128.
[106] Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 62-63.
[107] Gwynn, *Selections from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian, and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage* (NPNF[2] 13: 276). "To confute the heresies thus circulated, Ephraim

well-known melodies of Bardaisan's hymns, 'corrected' the untruths in the lyrics, and employed a choir of sweet-voiced 'sisters' to sing the new hymns.

> Therefore, (right) teaching calls you "Strengthener of my head",
> For it was raised up by you to conquer all heresies in dispute…[108]
> It pleased him while standing among the sisters
> To stir the pure women with melodies of praise.
> He was like an eagle perched among doves,
> (as) he taught (them) a new song of praise with a serene sound…[109]
> This man introduced women to doctrinal disputes;
> With (their) soft tones he was victorious in the battle against all heresies.[110]

6.4.2   Strategy for power— unsilencing the women

> Our sisters also were strengthened by you to give praise;
> For women were not allowed to speak in church.
> Your instruction opened the closed mouths of the daughters of Eve;
> And behold, the gatherings of the glorious (church) resound with their melodies.[111]

The female choirs would become a distinct feature of Syriac Christianity after the fourth century, consisting of consecrated virgins, and whose performance during ordinary liturgical services has been standard practice from then until the present age.[112] Their performance of the doctrinal hymns (*madrashe*)[113] was even mandated in church canon since the fifth century. [114]

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borrowed the tunes employed by Harmodius; and his hymns, set to these tunes, soon carried the day in favor of orthodoxy, partly by the force of their truth, partly by their superior literary power, and partly by the help of a choir formed among the nuns whom he employed to sing them, morning and evening, in the churches. Thus the rival hymnody of heresy was superseded, and the hymns of Ephraim gained the place they have ever since held in the Church, wherever Syriac is the ecclesiastical language, —even though it is no longer the vernacular."

[108] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 35.
[109] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 49.
[110] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 65.
[111] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 35.
[112] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 174.
[113] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 175.
[114] Cf. Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 129. Ephrem's female choirs were obviously successful beyond his lifetime. Effectively, the first mention of the 'daughters of the covenant' choirs is found in the fifth century Rabbula Canons. Canon 20 tasked the 'daughters of the covenant' with singing psalms and doctrinal hymns, canon 27 tasked the 'daughters of the covenant' with participation in the daily worship services together with their male counterparts, the 'sons of the covenant' as well as the clergy.

What is especially significant about Jacob's homily is how the greater part of the homily was concerned with Ephrem's relationship with the Syrian women. It demonstrated a particular dimension of Ephrem's unique and courageous strategy to witness to the truth as he believed it to be.[115] Not only was he brave enough to battle the overpowering voices of unorthodox teachings, despite him representing a minority voice, he also did not accept the taboos of his time and place in history. In the Latin and Greek churches, their choirs of nuns were only allowed to sing during services in their own convents, as well as during some important liturgical events— that were the exception and not the rule—,because women were discouraged from even participation in ordinary, congregational singing.[116] This may have been the case in the Syrian churches as well. One merely has to compare him with someone like Romanos, a contemporary of Ephrem who should have been familiar with Syriac hymnody—since he was of Syrian descent—, and who also composed hymns to be performed as "sung sermons".[117] Unlike Ephrem, the hymns of Romanos were performed by a male chanter, interspersed with short responsive singing sung either by the choir, or by the choir and congregation combined, which meant that the male voice of the chanter would actually narrate the complete story, regardless of whether the story would focus on biblical women or men. This was in effect the opposite of how Ephrem's hymns were performed. His hymns were sung by appropriate voices—male voices for male characters, and female voices for female characters,[118] and Jacob of Sarug is probably the most important source for our understanding about how revolutionary Ephrem was in his acting against the grain of society—

> (The church) took comfort in (the cross) when it was delivered, for (idolatry) was overturned;
> And (the church) which had been silenced, clapped (her) hands, to give praise.
> Blessed (Ephrem) observed that women were silent from praise,
> And (this) wise man decided that it was right for them to sing praise.[119]

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[115] Cf. Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn *Contra Haereses* I," 62. "However, the orthodox Christian community that Ephrem represented possibly formed only a small and relatively weak part of Syrian Christianity, so that it called for much courage to stand up for orthodox faith as he saw it."

[116] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 174.

[117] Harvey, "Women's Voices Bearing Witness," 12.

[118] Harvey, "Women's Voices Bearing Witness," 13.

[119] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 49. See also Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 173. "Syriac churches from the fourth century onwards cultivated the liturgical

Syriac hymns and verse homilies often focused on biblical narratives, and included a "surprising number of biblical women as favored exemplars of faith'',[120] in imagined stories that expanded these stories "far beyond the actual biblical texts'', which was common practice in the fourth century northern Mesopotamian world.

For Ephrem female choirs or more specifically, female singing voices represented the story of Redemption from the fall of Eve to the restoration brought about in Mary, because of the belief that in Mary all the shame, blame, insults and hopelessness were turned into hope, joy and life. He orchestrated his hymns to allow the female choir to stand "in Mary's place" and to sing "in Mary's voice.''[121] It is possible that he inspired Jacob of Sarug, for whom the female choirs would come to represent more than a symbol of redeemed humanity, but a link to the power of the sacraments by which everyone can receive equal salvation.[122]

6.4.3 Strategy for transformation— two harps, one praise

A new sight of women uttering proclamation;
And behold, they are called teachers among the congregations.
Your teaching signifies an entirely new world;
For yonder in the kingdom, men and women are equal.
You laboured to devise two harps for two groups;
You treated men and women as one to give praise.[123]

According to Sebastian Brock, Ephrem's poetry was—

profoundly theological in character, expressing his awareness of the
sacramental character of the created world, and of the potential of everything
in the created world to act as a witness and pointer to the Creator.[124]

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participation of women's choirs, which often sang hymns that voiced the stories and the imagined words of biblical women.''
[120] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories,'' 173.
[121] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories,'' 178.
[122] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories,'' 188.
[123] Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug*, 35. See also McVey, "Jacob of Saruge." According to Kathleen McVey, Jacob did not mean that women should be included in the public speaking and preaching in the church, but that through their singing of the hymns that Ephrem composed for them, they were included in the ministry of the material church as prelude to their inclusion in the kingdom of the New Age.
[124] Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 39.

Both Ephrem and Jacob of Sarug's writings demonstrated their understanding of the community of believers as "a living icon of God's kingdom on earth."[125] The members of the congregation were active participants in the liturgical practices, which consisted of ingesting the church's teaching as the Word of God, participating in responsive singing, and performing the actions and gestures associated with worship.[126]

> According to Jacob, then, Ephrem's choirs do more than proclaim that with Christianity a new era has dawned for humanity. They enact that new dispensation by the very fact that they include female as well as male voices.[127]

Jacob's panegyric also demonstrated the typological meaning of Ephrem's strategy. Comparing Ephrem with Moses, Jacob explained that just as Moses (ignoring Miriam's role) included the women in the celebrations after the crossing of the Red Sea, so did Ephrem, when he called upon the women to participate in the acts of public worship.[128]

In addition, Jacob demonstrated the sacramental meaning of Ephrem's strategy, where women were included in the act of salvation by the same means as that afforded the men, namely baptism followed by the Eucharist.[129]

Lastly, Jacob emphasised the soteriological meaning of Ephrem's strategy, in claiming the "opening of the closed door of their tongues", reversing the 'closed mouths' of women as a result of Eve's fall, as a result of the Child of Mary, their 'sister'.[130] However, it was not only female voices that were called upon to sing praises, but all of creation, "because each person and each part had a biblical counterpart in God's divine dispensation",[131] and therefore "there were stories for every gender, age, and social rank."[132] This meant that everyone had a function and purpose to fulfil—every man, woman and child of the worshipping community, the leaders, representing the

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[125] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 187.
[126] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 178.
[127] Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant," 139.
[128] Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant," 140.
[129] Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant," 140.
[130] Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant," 141.
[131] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 182.
[132] Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories," 183.

governing structure, as well as the clergy, the bishops, and the male and female choirs of consecrated persons.

6.5   SUMMARY

The figure at the centre of this study is Ephrem, the theologian-poet, for whom all the sources from which one should construct a biography, were written long after his death. While it seemed as if an abundance of sources exists for him, most are unhistorical. In fact, it seems as if the most reliable source for Ephrem is Jacob of Sarug's verse homily, which was not even concerned primarily with Ephrem's personhood, but rather with his actions.

The religious landscape in Edessa was essentially still dominated by the dead poet Bardaisan's legacy, because Bardaisanism was alive and flourishing when Ephrem arrived there. Ephrem is one of the major sources for the religious plurality that characterised Edessa, and his writings against the heresies of especially the followers of Bardaisan, Mani and Marcion, as well as the Arians demonstrated his zealous attempts to rid the Edessene community of these groups, who brought with them different practices, which Ephrem did not condone.

Linked to the missionary activities of the Christians were travelling monks and missionaries, which highlighted the differences between especially the 'elect' followers of Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani, whose abhorrence of the world resulted in them renouncing many activities, but still expecting to be supported from the labour of others.

Being Christian did not necessarily change the fate of the marginalised groups, but Syrian ascetism at least provided women with an alternative way of living, in a world where women were mostly 'silent' and the power distribution did not favour them at all. Syrian ascetics—male and female—represented a group of dedicated, celibate, single followers of Christ, who lived and laboured among the poor, sick and suffering.

Twenty-first century readers may not be able to appreciate Ephrem's strategy adequately, when he employed hymnody, performed by female choirs to combat the legacy of Bardaisan. Bardaisan's hymns were popular, and Ephrem needed a strong strategy to counter them, because his prose refutations would only reach the ears of

the literate, which was only a small fraction of the inhabitants of Edessa. Hymns, however, would also reach the ordinary people, and Ephrem was revolutionary in his strategies to silence the strong voices of the 'heretical' movements in Edessa.

His trump card was the female choirs he founded, which became a distinct feature of Syriac Christianity. Not only were the hymns he wrote for these singing, consecrated women strategical in refuting the 'heresies' of—especially—Bardaisan, but it resulted in the 'unsilencing' of the silent women, who had hitherto not been allowed to participate in public liturgical singing. However, it was not an act of 'unsilencing' women at the cost of 'silencing' men, but rather a strategy of inclusion whereby women and men would become 'two harps', 'singing one praise' in a world where each person had a part to fulfil.

CHAPTER 7 —APPRAISAL OF A PARTICULAR ARTIST'S WORK

7.1   INTRODUCTION

> One notable thing about hymns is that they last very long…[1]

This dissertation was catapulted onto a particular path by a few words that captured my imagination, which not only gave me a starting point, but guided the direction of this dissertation—beginning from a self-conscious overview of current notions about the social dimensions of religion, before it approached Ephrem, starting with his fourth century Greco-Roman context, and gradually narrowing the focus, first to consider the two cities, Nisibis and Edessa in the northern Mesopotamian province of the Roman Empire, and then the Edessene community, as the milieu where Ephrem's strategy was practiced. It would be an incomplete endeavour, if we do not 'hear' at least one song, before the final curtain is drawn.

For this exercise, a particular hymn of Ephrem was selected that could be used as the 'for example' to read within the scope of truth, power and transformation as a reflection of Ephrem's understanding of orthodoxy. The last song for this dissertation is *Ephrem's hymn against heresy, no 24*, translated by Adam McCollum[2], which will hence forward be referred to merely as *Hymn 24* for the sake of simplicity.

7.2   EPHREM'S HYMN AGAINST HERESIES NO 24[3]

> 1 The deniers have dared to wipe out
> The books, lest they be proven wrong,
> But with one thing they left they have been laid bare.
> This [one thing] is sufficient and plenty so:
> Our Lord preserves it in his book,
> And they have not wiped it out like the others,

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[1] Sailo, "Worship Beyond Music," 2.
[2] For this translation, see Adam McCollum, "Ephrem Syrus, Hymns against Heresies 23 and 24," in *Roger Pearse*, n. p. [cited 26 Oct 19 2019]. Online: https://archive.org/details/EphremSyrusHymns AgainstHeresies23And24.
[3] Henceforth, the hymn discussed, will be referred to as 'Hymn 24'.

And lest they wipe it out now
Our Lord preserves it and me,
So that I do not become a cause against it.
Response: Blessed is the one who preserves my faith!

2 The true one has commanded and warned
That they should have no master.
The apostle who feared was worried
That the flock would be called by his name.
That which the apostle feared,
For that weeds are choked out.
Their cause is authority,
For which everyone strives:
Who might sit on the throne?
Response: Blessed is the one whose cross rebukes us!

3 The master in his knowledge withheld thrones
From the sons of Zebedee,
Lest we in turn take
This precedent from there.
With his questions he turned them aside
From hubris to humility,
That with them [the questions] he might drive back our haughtiness.
Instead of glory, suffering he offered,
As a rebuker of our pride.
Response: Blessed is the high one who stood up at court!

4 O for true bride-brokers,
Who have not changed themselves against the bridegroom,
While the flock says, "I
Belong to Cephas", "to Paul", or "to Apollo"!
O flock that has marked itself
With the names of its companions!
The good servants have feared and have removed
Their names from the flock,
And have marked it with the mark of its Lord.

Response: Blessed is the one who has marked it with his apostles!

5 Now false teachers are
Like bride-brokers of falsehood
That were sent out as true
But changed themselves like deceivers,
For it is they themselves that have betrothed
The bride of Christ.
With the beauty of the bridegroom they have imitated [him],
That they might take the bride captive with his beauty:
They have armed themselves against him with what is his!
Response: Blessed is the one in whose furnace they are laid bare!

6 John, too, was a bride-broker,
Who sensed his Lord's bride,
Who looked at him as at his Lord.
He was revealed as a servant because he was a servant:
He showed his mortal nature, He showed his lower rank;
Glory and humiliation he showed her [the bride],
Because he was not even worthy to untie
The strap of the bridegroom's sandal.
Response: Blessed is the one who taught him to persuade her!

7 Now false teachers
Have brandished at her a borrowed beauty,
The Refinement of their words,
Because whoever wishes to violate
The bride of his glorious Lord
Enhances and adorns himself.
But look! They are ugly, although they have adorned themselves,
Because the humility of Jesus is more comely
Than the beauty of created things!
Response: Blessed is the one even whose shame is praise!

8 The Greeks saw his greatness,
As well as the Persians and the Egyptians.
Their mouth denied their idols
And the names of their gods.
The [once] corrupt repented and denied

The names of their masters,
And they confessed the master of truth.
Look! Weeds are named
Using the names of people who err!
Response: Blessed is the one who brings back the erring!

9 They have soiled the bride of the Son
Among the Greeks, of whom, too,
The disciples name themselves
With the names of their masters.
The bride, whose love has staggered,
Has clothed herself with the names of servants.
The vehement bride-broker is zealous
Lest she stagger and be violated,
And he has cut off those names.
Response: Blessed is the one who has handed over the zealous to her!

10 If the apostle were [here]
Today in a body,
He would wipe out the memories
Of the false [apostles], as in the case of Amalek,
For if he did not allow the name of Simon
To be named over the flock,
How much more would he wipe out the names
Of the thieves who cut off [and] took it [the flock] with them,
And called it by their names!
Response: Blessed is the one who has made it dependent on his praiseworthy name!

11 Marcion, who first blasphemed,
Was unable to flee from his name,
The name that went out from his schism,
The appellation from his division.
Even a thief does not want
People to call him according to his work,
But obligatorily he is named
"Thief" according to his work.
Deeds give us names!

Response: Blessed is the one with whose name we are dressed!

12 The holy church flees
From names of people, my brothers:
Of the Sabellians and Arians,
Together with the rest of those who have separated,
Who do not want to be named
With the names of their masters.
They have plotted cleverly to make themselves beautiful for her [the church],
Because they have sensed her love,
How she is wholly dependent on Christ.
Response: Blessed is the name on which she depends!

13 Have they not read in the apostle, who reproaches
The one that says, "I belong to Cephas",
Another, "to Paul", "to Apollo"?
What a horror, brothers,
That they read, but still dare to set
Their names on the flock!
The readers are not afraid,
The hearers are not ashamed
To be named with the names of people!
Response: Blessed is that name with which we are named!

14 Come, let's see who
Has the teaching of the apostles,
Those who did not call by their names
The bride of the son.
A teacher, therefore, who sets
His name on the flock,
His teaching is far from that of the apostles,
But one who has called it [the flock] by the name of its Lord,
It is with him that the truth is present.
Response: Blessed is the one who has made known with whom [the apostles' teaching is]!

15 The wise Greeks, too,
By the name of this and that one from among them

Their disciples, O my brothers,
Have been and are called.
People have been enslaved to people,
They have been called by their names,
And look! Against the name of Lord and God
They have arrogantly behaved,
For they have set their name on humanity!
Response: Blessed is the one who has set his name on us!

16 One unclean doctrine
They named with the name of an abominable dog.
Those crazy people were not afraid
To be named with the name of "dog",
Just as the Audians were not
Ashamed [to be named] with the name of "owl",
Nor the Arians, nor the Quqites,
And all their abominable names,
Each and every one, O my beloved.
Response: Blessed is that name with which we have been adorned

17 A name of wolves they have spread over the sheep,
 And the doves have put on a name of hawks.
The grains of wheat have abandoned their good name
And have taken a name of thorns.
The apostle reproved the Corinthians,
Before whom their Lord was crucified:
They named themselves with the name of servants,
Of victorious Cephas and Paul.
How much, then, do the deniers elicit anger!
Response: Blessed is that name we confess!

18 They preach many Christs:
One that came in the years of Mani,
Another in the days of Bardaisan,
 [At the time of] Marcion yet another,
And another Christ who came
In the days of the apostles.
Christs who are many contend,
 And if just one among them is divided,

By their own mouth he contends with himself!
Response: Blessed is the one who agrees with himself!

19 The time, too, is abominable, my brothers,
In which these weeds sprang up,
For, look, their times are confused
And their teachings foreign.
If they received from the apostles,
Who, then, among them received?
Arius, who was today,
Or Mani, who sprang up yesterday,
Or Qamṣu, whom the earth belched forth?
Response: Blessed is the one who laughs in heaven!

20 The apostles preached for years,
And then others after them,
And there were not yet the weeds
That came afterward.
Let them tell us by which name
That first teaching is named,
The one Simon taught.
It was not [even] named with the name of Cephas,
Paul and Apollo bearing witness.
Response: Blessed is the one by whose witnesses they are reproved!

21 The church was [already at the beginning] that of the peoples,
And then he laid waste to the temple of the people,
And when he had uprooted the temple of the people,
There the church was built.
Marcion did not serve in it,
Because he was not yet mentioned.
Arius, next, did not enter it,
 Nor Mani and Bardaiṣan.
The prophets handed down [teaching] to the apostles.
Response: Blessed is the Lord of orders.

22 He conveyed it from Adam to Noah,
It extended from Noah to Abraham,

And from Abraham onto Moses,

From Moses to David, And from David to the [Babylonian] captivity,

And from Babylon to our savior.

The people were scattered and they cut off [the progression],

And all his successions came to an end,

And the hand of the apostles conveyed it.

Response: Blessed is the Lord of successions!

23 He who commanded concerning the ark,

It is he who built the temple of the people.

He who brought them over,

He established the holy church.

He who arranges the successions

Of natures and created things,

He arranges, too, the successions

Of prophets and apostles

For ever and ever!

Response: Blessed is the one who began and will bring to completion!

7.3   A STRATEGY FOR TRUTH, POWER AND TRANSFORMATION, AGAIN?

A healing liturgy always includes the major narrative and the smaller narrative. Pastoral liturgical singing does not only praise and worship; it also laments, asks, protests, mourns and keeps silent.[4]

It has been argued,[5] that meaning-making is dependent on the fluidity of particular readings, by particular readers, in their particular moments. Contemporary studies into the issues, concepts, notions, beliefs, imaginings, etc. of early Christians, have moved into a space where 'knowledge' is constructed from any and all angles.[6] This

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[4] Calitz, "Healing Liturgy," 9.

[5] Chapter 2.4.

[6] Cf. Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, 21. According to Gina Hens-Piazza, Biblical studies have moved beyond the confines of a narrow-minded focus on specialisation to a diversified understanding of religious knowledge as an exchange between traditions, cultures, notions and ideas. Exchanging information have become the required practice in a "world where boundary crossing has become requisite not only for economics, politics, and communication, but for ministry, for biblical and theological understandings, and for knowledge itself."

study has argued that human beings can neither escape their subjectivity nor their particular contexts, and that we construct our own realities, which also means that we determine the meaning for a particular narrative—or hymn in this instance—based on our preconceptions, assumptions, agendas, imaginings, contexts, etc.[7]

In an earlier chapter, the notion of "virtual realities"[8] was described as a particular reality that can only exist as a construct in relation to the world of the text and the world of the reader, which means that our realities cannot claim to be factual, and that we should realise that they was, is and always will be subjective constructs. Constructing realities are dependent on our perceptiveness, and therefore, we use our perceptions to attempt to fill the void between knowing and imagining, which is essentially merely another way of saying that it is impossible to read the hymn of Ephrem without inserting at least some of one's own thoughts, beliefs and sense-making views into the message of the text—or hymn, in this case. The notions of truth, power and transformation were the connecting threads that connected the questions in this dissertation. Therefore, the answer to the question posed in the heading is yes, this is another (final) reading with the concepts of truth, power and transformation in mind.

7.3.1 Power by virtue of the Name of Christ

> Appeals to authority are almost universally found in religious traditions.[9]

According to Josef Lössl, the development of Christian doctrine did not represent "an open, purely rational, philosophical discourse. It moved forward through the exercise of religious authority."[10]

In *Hymn 24* it was not only the authoritative power of the bishops, as successors of the apostles that was called upon, but the authority of the Lord and Master of the Christian church, Jesus Christ. In a chapter he wrote on religion with reference to authority and projection,[11] Craig Martin proposed that the practice of calling on the

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[7] Chapter 2.2 & 2.3.
[8] Chapter 2.4.
[9] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 117.
[10] Lössl, *The Early Church*, 156.
[11] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 117–143. See specifically Chapter 6: "How religion Works: Authority."

authority of "*absent* authority figures",[12] such as Jesus Christ, is probably the most important strategy in claiming legitimacy for the particular beliefs held by the group of believers. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to challenge the claims of the speaker, because the authority figure is not present and cannot be contacted by ordinary human means. This principle is also relevant in its application to authoritative texts. The motive for this practice, according to Craig Martin is because "most religious practitioners are nobodies—but their words can be made to carry a great deal of authority if they can successfully put their words into the mouth of an absent authority figure."[13]

Ephrem was not a nobody, even if he belonged to a group who would not allow themselves to be known by the name of their founder(s). The movement, *Sons/Daughters of the Covenant*, originated before the fourth century C.E. but its origins is shrouded in mystery, among others, because the movement was not "marked"[14] with the names of human masters,[15] and they consecrated their lives in imitation of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

7.3.1.1 *The theme of power by virtue of the Name of Christ in* Hymn 24

The issue of allegiance to the Name is the first theme that was sung in *Hymn 24*. Already in stanza 2, the foundation is laid for the argument that the church should have no human masters:

> The true one has commanded and warned that they should have no master.
> Response: Blessed is the one whose cross rebukes us!

In stanza 3, the argument is expanded and the motive for the argument is explained: humans are boastful, and prone to haughtiness, and therefore should be rebuked in order to remain humble:

> Instead of glory, suffering he offered, as a rebuker of our pride.
> Response: Blessed is the high one who stood up at court!

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[12] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 118.
[13] Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 119.
[14] *Hymn 24*, stanza 4.
[15] Cf. Chapter 6.3.2.2.

While stanza 4 is still concerned with the issue of the Name, it also introduced the thought of the "true bride-brokers", or the apostles who remained true to "the bridegroom", already anticipating the theme of the church as the bride of Christ:

> The good servants have feared and have removed their names from the flock,
> And have marked it with the mark of its Lord.
> Response: Blessed is the one who has marked it with his apostles!

In stanza 5, the strong resentment against the false teachers, whose followers were known by the names of the founders effectively oozes from the lyrics:

> Like bride-brokers of falsehood that were sent out as true
> But changed themselves like deceivers, …
> They have armed themselves against him with what is his!
> Response: Blessed is the one in whose furnace they are laid bare!

The hymn breaks away from the theme for an interlude about the bride of Christ, before it takes up the important issue of the "name" again in stanza 11. In effect, one may view this as a symbolic demonstration that the bride is safe when she remains within the two arms of the name of the ''bridegroom'' on one side, and the truth by virtue of succession on the other.

Continuing with the theme, in stanza 11, the hymn accuses Marcion of being the "thief", whose deeds clung to him like tar:

> But obligatorily he is named "Thief" according to his work.
> Deeds give us names!
> Response: Blessed is the one with whose name we are dressed!

In stanza 12, the idea of the bride lingers, even as the hymn returns to the theme of the power that resides in the name of the true Master of the church:

> The holy church flees from names of people, my brothers:
> Response: Blessed is the name on which she depends!

In stanza 13, there is a build-up to the mid-climactic stanza 14[16], where the pure intentions of the apostles of the earliest church are contrasted with the "horror" of the actions of heretics:

> The readers are not afraid, the hearers are not ashamed to be named with the names of people!

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[16] Stanza 1, 14 and 23 is discussed in section7.3.4.

Response: Blessed is that name with which we are named!

In stanza 15, the issue is further developed by introducing the "wise Greeks", whose actions may not have been wise enough to realise that they were "enslaved" by the false teachers:

> People have been enslaved to people, …
> And look! Against the name of Lord and God they have arrogantly behaved,
> for they have set their name on humanity!
> Response: Blessed is the one who has set his name on us!

Stanza 16 continues the "horror" of the false prophets:

> One unclean doctrine … and all their abominable names, each and every one,
> O my beloved.
> Response: Blessed is that name with which we have been adorned

Stanza 17 completes the theme of exposing the actions of the false teachers, reminiscent of the actions of the Corinthian church:[17]

> They named themselves with the name of servants, of victorious Cephas and Paul.
> How much, then, do the deniers elicit anger!
> Response: Blessed is that name we confess!

7.3.2 Transformed into the bride of Christ

Christians lived in two worlds—the one was the everyday world, "populated by peoples and governed by structures held to be much in need of repair and transformation", [18] and the other was the *otherworldly* world of the kingdom of God. Syriac ascetism[19] was centred on three concepts, associated with the parable found in Matthew 25, where it was written that the church was the bride of Christ, that it had to live in anticipation of the heavenly kingdom, and that baptism was a symbol in anticipation of re-entry into Paradise.

With reference to the kingdom of God, or *otherworldly* world, Burton L. Mack believed that the Christians "created institutions and rituals to make it accessible, and formed religious communities to represent, apart from the real world of

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[17] Cf. 1 Corinthians 1: 12–15.
[18] Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 118.
[19] Chapter 6.3.2.

everyday, social orders imagined as fitting for the kingdom of God in the heavens above."[20]

The hymn was clearly composed for responsive singing, which underscores Ephrem's notion that every person—male and female—had a "designated and necessary role to play",[21] and that everyone—men and women—should be included in the notion of the "bride of Christ". [22] For him it was an important element of modelling the religious community with a view towards the future, because "by the harmony and beauty of their performance, the chorus represented the community in its ideal form. Gender was essential to the work of these choruses, since male and female choirs performed these tasks in distinct, differentiated ways."[23]

7.3.2.1　　The theme of being transformed into the bride of Christ in Hymn 24

In *Hymn 24,* one becomes aware of Ephrem's concern for the vulnerability of the church, who fell prey to "bride-brokers of falsehood that were sent out as true, but changed themselves like deceivers, … that they might take the bride captive with his beauty".[24]

In stanza 6, the hymn introduces John the Baptist, as a "bride-broker" who accepted his role to decrease in rank:[25]

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[20] Mack, *The Christian Myth*, 118.

[21] Cf. Harvey, "Singing Women's Stories,'' 178. "The congregation was to receive the church's teachings as the very Word of God. In turn, they offered their prayers, responses sung to the litanies, refrains sung to the hymns of the choir, processions, prostrations, and holy gestures (the sign of the cross, the kiss of peace). Their worship included the active learning of biblical teaching. More than simply learning the stories, this meant taking biblical characters as exemplars for Christian virtues and vices, to be imitated by men and women in the course of their daily lives. It meant understanding biblical stories typologically, as offering models for different forms of the life of faith. It meant believing that their lives, too, were an essential part of salvation history as God had planned it for the redemption of the human race."

[22] Chapter 6.4.3.

[23] Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant," 143, 144. "For the societies of the ancient Mediterranean, religion was the fundamental means of identity and order. In religious rituals, the community could see itself constituted and sustained, renewed and confirmed, time and again."

[24] Cf. *Hymn* 24, stanza 5. See also stanza 9: "The bride, whose love has staggered, has clothed herself with the names of servants. The vehement bride-broker is zealous lest she stagger and be violated."

[25] Cf. John 3: 27-30. "John answered and said, a man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that has the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

He showed his mortal nature, He showed his lower rank; glory and
humiliation he showed her [the bride],
Response: Blessed is the one who taught him to persuade her!

In stanza 7, the hymn turns its focus on the false teachers, whose only purpose is to "violate the bride" of Christ:

But look! They are ugly, although they have adorned themselves,
Because the humility of Jesus is more comely than the beauty of created
things!
Response: Blessed is the one even whose shame is praise!

Stanza 8 can be read as a declaration of the universal inclusiveness of the true church, whose erring members are welcomed back into the fold:

The [once] corrupt repented and denied the names of their masters,
And they confessed the master of truth.
Response: Blessed is the one who brings back the erring!

In stanza 9, the hymn returns to the evil actions of the false teachers, preying on the vulnerability of the bride of Christ. It also introduces the notion of the existence of "zealous" bride-brokers, who will defend the "bride":

The bride, whose love has staggered, has clothed herself with the names of
servants.
The vehement bride-broker is zealous … and he has cut off those names.
Response: Blessed is the one who has handed over the zealous to her!

Stanza 10 strengthens the idea of defending the bride, and gives a hint of the concept of succession that is still to be sung, by referring to "the apostle", probably Paul. It is also the final stanza before the exposure of the false teachers is taken up:

If the apostle were [here] today in a body, he would wipe out the memories of
the false [apostles], as in the case of Amalek,
Response: Blessed is the one who has made it dependent on his praiseworthy
name!

7.3.3 Truth preserved by succession

> Since Christian discourse was based on events perceived to have happened in historical time, it was itself inescapably anchored in time, and furthermore, in a concept of time that united worldly events with the mythic past and future.[26]

It has always been the practice of believers—of whatever religious tradition—that they have "claimed a special power or authority for *their* own beliefs and practices by claiming that they have the *real* or *authentic* ones."[27] As stated in an earlier chapter,[28] orthodoxy during the fourth century was concerned with more than merely the issue of correct or false doctrine. It was also about the authority of the bishops, and the associated power struggles as they defended their positions and honour. Their power struggles were complicated by the occurrence that the earliest Christians had many narratives that circulated among them, some of which were truly imaginative, even while there was no universally accepted corpus of texts that was accepted as Scripture. Therefore, Marcion can be referred to as one good example of a prominent religious leader whose 'Bible' consisted of his version of scriptural documents. He accepted the New Testament book of Luke and ten Pauline letters, but not the Old Testament, also referred to as the Jewish Bible.[29] However, ignoring the Old Testament was not part of Ephrem's strategy, because, as it has been said before,[30] Ephrem's theology was profoundly biblical, and therefore he believed in the biblical narratives as texts that were fundamental to his world—a notion that meant he believed in the unbroken connection that could be traced from Adam to his time and place within the true church.

7.3.3.1 The theme of truth preserved by succession in Hymn 24

The theme of truth preserved by succession comes to the fore only in the last few stanzas of *Hymn 24,* beginning with stanza 18:

> They preach many Christs …by their own mouth he contends with himself!
> Response: Blessed is the one who agrees with himself!

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26 Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 116.
27 Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 148.
28 Chapter 4.2.3.
29 Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 153.
30 Chapter 5.4.1.

In essence, it seems as if the main argument focused on contrasting the varieties of teachings among the unorthodox groups with the unspoken assumption that the true church is universal in its orthodoxy. The notion is taken further in stanza 19:

> For, look, their times are confused and their teachings foreign.
> If they received from the apostles, who, then, among them received?
> Response: Blessed is the one who laughs in heaven!

Stanza 20 begins the steady progression where the purity of the apostles' teachings are emphasised and contrasted with the "abominable" heresies of the unorthodox groups. The key thought is found in the idea that the unorthodox teachers (Arius, Mani and Qamsu) were short-living "weeds", none of whom could claim that they received their teachings from the apostles:

> The apostles preached for years, and then others after them,
> And there were not yet the weeds
> Response: Blessed is the one by whose witnesses they are reproved!

In stanza 21, the hymn proposed that the motive for the destruction of the temple was to build the church, which was already in existence by virtue of the prophets (Old Testament), whereas the "false teachers"— Marcion, Arius, Mani and Bardaisan—had no claim to, or part in the succession of truth, handed down from the apostles, who receive it from the prophets:

> Marcion did not serve in it, because he was not yet mentioned.
> Arius, next, did not enter it, nor Mani and Bardaiṣan.
> The prophets handed down [teaching] to the apostles.
> Response: Blessed is the Lord of orders.

In stanza 22, the notion is further expanded to add substance to the assumption that the church actually began with Adam,[31] and therefore the truthfulness of orthodoxy has been guarded by the patriarchs, the prophets, priests and kings up to Jesus Christ, and afterwards, the apostles:

> He conveyed it from Adam to Noah, …
> And the hand of the apostles conveyed it.

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[31] This stanza has a clear reference to the genealogy of Jesus Christ, found in Mathew 1. Ephrem included Adam, who was not listed in Matthew, and it is my view that he probably did it to lay claim to the notion that the true church (orthodoxy) can trace its lineage back to Adam, representing the beginning of humanity.

Response: Blessed is the Lord of successions!

7.3.4   A beginning, middle and ending

The hymn throughout has a type of ebb-and-flow rhythm which links the themes and ideas, but also the polarities between the various images and metaphors found in the hymn, such as "true bride-brokers" vs. "bride-brokers of falsehood" "good servants" vs. "deceivers".[32] One can also distinguish a particular beginning, middle and ending, namely stanza 1—obviously the beginning, stanza 14—the middle, where all three themes of truth preserved by succession, power by virtue of the Name of Christ, and being transformed into the bride of Christ, are tied together, and stanza 23—the ending.

7.3.4.1   A beginning

From the first few lines of *Hymn 24*, it seems as if the orthodox Christians experienced at least some form of prejudice, if not oppression, which is not really surprising, in light of their experience in Nisibis, and considering that the orthodox tradition in Edessa, when Ephrem arrived there, "formed only a small and relatively weak part of Syrian Christianity".[33] Consequently, it is not surprising that the beginning of the hymn represents a petition to the Lord, that He will preserve the believer's faith, just as He prevented the "deniers" from destroying Scripture, as they had done with the other writings, before it sets out on its polemic ebb-and-flow rhythm right up to its final stanza, which ends with a strong statement that the Lord who began everything, will also bring it to completion—to which the congregation replied:

> Blessed is the one who began and will bring to completion![34]

7.3.4.2   A middle

Stanza 14 is the centrepiece of the hymn. It ties all the themes together in one compact stanza, where it is emphasised that orthodoxy, according to Ephrem is underscored by the idea that the true successors of the apostles would not dare to

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[32] Stanzas 4 & 5.
[33] Phil J. Botha, "The Textual Strategy of Ephrem the Syrian's Hymn Contra Haereses I," 62.
[34] *Hymn 24*, stanza 23.

allow their followers to be named after them, but will accept their roles as servants of the Bridegroom:

> Come, let's see who has the teaching of the apostles,
> Those who did not call by their names the bride of the son.
> A teacher, therefore, who sets his name on the flock,
> His teaching is far from that of the apostles,
> But one who has called it [the flock] by the name of its Lord, it is with him
> that the truth is present.
> Response: Blessed is the one who has made known with whom [the apostles'
> teaching is]!

7.3.4.3   An ending

The final stanza of the hymn ends in a climactic crescendo, which must have filled the hearts of the congregants with thrilling confidence in the truth of orthodoxy:

> He who commanded concerning the ark, …He who brought them over,
> He established the holy church. …
> He arranges, too, the successions of prophets and apostles
> For ever and ever!
> Response: Blessed is the one who began and will bring to completion!

7.4   APPRAISING THE FRESCO

Is it truly possible for a twenty-first century researcher to reach back and understand the mind of a fourth century person? Most certainly not. It will be naïve to assume that Christianity during the fourth century represented the harmonious sounds of a well-trained, four-part-harmony choir. There were just too many divergent musicians, who sang different melodies, in different keys, because Ephrem the Syrian lived during a crossroad period, when Christians represented a multiplicity of voices.

This dissertation was first of all, a personal response to the challenge of Calvin Stapert, to attempt to reach across time, to retrieve an ancient voice. It also represents my subjective endeavour to imagine Ephrem a little more life-like than the mosaic at the beginning of this study could—to 'see' him as a subjective, flesh-and-blood person, whose ordeals shaped his theology, and motivated him to act in particular ways, instead of objectifying him as a producer of prose, poetry and hymns. This study was not a textual study, due to the language barrier of not being

able to read Syriac, but just as contemporary readers engage with their Bibles without concern for the fact that they do not read Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic, for that matter, one may engage with ancient sources at different levels and for different reasons.

This study was not primarily a textual study, but the construct of a method to view religio-historical occurrences with particular objectives in mind, namely to engage with the phenomenon called Christianity, as particular understandings of truth, power and transformation.

Contemporary criticisms have to a great extent, complicated and perhaps also, confused the academic lenses through which Christianity is viewed. Scholars are constantly experimenting with a multiplicity of approaches, strategies, starting points, and methodologies without regard for previous demarcated borders between disciplines. 'Knowable' is not believable anymore, but 'imagination', interpretation and subjective reading has become the new 'truth', and one of our greatest problems is to be able to realise when we overestimate our ability to read across time. Therefore, we have to accept that the story, as we believe it to be, was painted, sketched, drawn, and sculpted as a merger where subjectivity in reading found resonance in subjectivity in production. It can never be anything other than 'another' story, because history is in fact a literary recreation, constructed through layers of interpretations. We should tread carefully among the scattered fragments that are the only remains from which we can construct a story worth telling.

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ADDENDA

ADDENDUM 1[1]

NGK-sinode praat oor sang, musiek in erediens

ERIKA FOURIE

DIE voortbestaan van die NG Kerk hang primêr van sy eredienste af.

Dié siening het 'n gesprek oor musiek in die erediens op die vierde dag van die sitting van die Vrystaatse NG sinode in Bloemfontein gerig.

Die sinodale kommissie vir die erediens (SKE) maak 'n indringende studie van die "kritiese plek" van goeie sang en musiek (ook voorsang) in die erediens.

Luidens die verslag van dié kommissie wat in die sinode gedien het, het navorsing laat blyk dat "sang en musiek die afskeiding van serotonien in die brein aktiveer, wat mense ontvanklik stem vir die ontvangs van die Woord".

'n Kreatiwiteitskonsultant en neuroloog sal betrek word.

'n Gespreksgroep oor verantwoordelike erediensvernuwing word op die been gebring. Ringe sal in 2004 besin oor die verskil tussen byderwetse gereformeerde eredienste en 'n charismatiese erediens.

Die sinode het kennis geneem van die belang van kulturele registers in die oordra van die evangelie, spesifiek in 'n erediens. 'n Beroep is op die verteenwoordigers van "tradisionele" en "kontemporêre" kerkmusiek gedoen om met mekaar oor die beginsels van wedersydse beïnvloeding te praat.

Die Liedboek-sleutel, 'n elektroniese databasis van dié sangbundel, is verwelkom.

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[1] Erika Fourie, "NGK-Sinode Praat oor Sang, Musiek in Erediens," in *Sabinet.* Cited 13 October 2019. Online: https://0-reference-sabinet-co-za.oasis.unisa.ac.za/webx/access/samedia/Image3/200311/ 33/1620031101.pdf.

LIEDBOEK

Hans Linde

Waarom 'n nuwe Liedboek?

NOG één honderd dae en dan word die nuwe *Liedboek* van die Afrikaanse kerke op 28 Oktober in gebruik geneem. Die afwagting en die opgewondenheid neem toe. Dit blyk ook uit die groot getal mense en gemeentes wat vroegtydig bestel om seker te maak dat hulle betyds kry wat hulle nodig het.

Aan die ander kant is daar ook mense wat vra waarom dit alles nodig is. Kan ons nie maar aangaan met wat ons het nie? Waarom moet alles verander? Een só 'n brief kom van 'n meelewende vrouelidmaat wat verskeie redes noem waarom sy en haar gesin nie nou ryp is om na 'n nuwe sangbundel oor te skakel nie. Miskien is daar meer mense wat dieselfde gevoel in hulle het. Daarom is dit goed om die briefskryfster in dié rubriek te antwoord.

Sy vra eerstens waarom 'n nuwe liedboek nodig is. Kan die huidige nie net so behou word nie? In 1978, toe die huidige gesangboek verskyn het, kon daar nie aan die psalmberyming verander word nie, omdat die Gereformeerde Kerke nie wou instem dat daar afgewyk word van die Totius-berymings nie. Totius het in 1937 in 'n groot mate die Nederlandse psalmberyming in Afrikaans verwerk. Die Nederlandse psalmberyming dateer uit 1773. Die taalinkleding en gedagtegang is dus meer as twee eeue oud. Miskien is dít die rede waarom so min psalms nog in eredienste en by huisgodsdiens gesing word.

Daarmee saam het die melodieë van talle psalms baie moeilik gesing. Die Geneefse psalmmelodieë pas goed by die Franse taal, maar in Afrikaans wil dit dikwels nie lekker werk nie. Tel gerus hoeveel van die 150 psalms in julle gemeente en in julle gesin die afgelope jaar gesing is. Ek twyfel of jy by twintig sal kom.

Daarom het die Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk reeds in 1980 besluit dat daar gewerk moet word aan 'n nuwe psalmberyming. Kort daarna het die ander Afrikaanse kerke by die projek ingeskakel. Vir die *Liedboek* is nuwe tekste vir al 150 psalms geskep en vir 13 psalms is daar alternatiewe tekste. Dit is in hedendaagse Afrikaans met vandag se segswyse vir vandag se Afrikaanssprekendes. Die tekste is ontroerend mooi. Dit is eenvoudig en sterk en dra 'n duidelike boodskap. Daarmee saam is die bekende en geliefde melodieë behou en dié wat moeilik gesing het, is vervang met bekende gesangmelodieë en ander nuwe melodieë wat makliker sing en sonder probleme aangeleer kan word.

Dit is miskien die grootste bate van die nuwe *Liedboek*: dat dit die psalms weer vir mense toeganklik sal maak en gemeentes en lidmate sal aanspoor om meer psalms by eredienste en huisgodsdiens te sing.

"Vir diegene wat graag nog die woorde van die huidige psalmberyming wil gebruik, is daar tien van die klassieke tekste van Totius as 'n bylae in die nuwe *Liedboek* gevoeg: Psalms 8, 23, 25, 33, 48, 84, 100, 116, 130 en 146. Dit is min of meer die somtotaal van die psalms wat nog gesing is.

Die geleentheid is ook gebruik om die ander liedere te vernuwe. Twee honderd en twintig van die huidige gesange is behou, die bruikbaarste liedere van die Jeugsangbundels en *Sing onder mekaar* is ingesluit, 'n aantal Hallelujas is bygesit en verder is daar meer as honderd en vyftig splinternuwe liedere opgeneem.

Die vrou vra ook of God dan nie dieselfde bly nie. Waarom moet ons lofliedere dan nou verander word? Ja, Gód bly altyd dieselfde. Maar God laat ook toe dat die lewe gedurig verander en vernuwe. Dit is daarom nodig dat kerksang en geestelike liedere voortdurend vernuwe word. Veral die jeug het behoefte daaraan. Die verskyning van al die kleiner bundels gedurende die afgelope klompie jare is 'n bevestiging van hierdie behoefte.

Sedert die eerste Afrikaanse gesangboek in 1944 verskyn het, het vier en dertig jaar verloop voordat 'n nuwe in 1978 gepubliseer is. En nou het 'n verdere drie en twintig jaar verloop tot by die verskyning van die *Liedboek*. Ek dink nie dit getuig van oorhaastige vervanging van die bestaande nie. Dit bevestig wel dat kerksang en vernuwing in die erediens vir die Afrikaanse kerke van groot belang is en dat groot moeite gedoen word om te verseker dat lidmate die Here in die taal en idioom en musiektradisie van hulle eie tyd loof en prys en hulle hele wese in hulle sang voor Hom kan blootlê.

Daar is altyd ongemak wanneer 'n saak wat 'n mens na aan die hart lê, verander en vernuwe word. So is dit ook met die Afrikaanse kerkliedere. Ek kan goed verstaan dat mense ongemaklik voel. Wanneer hulle egter met die ryke inhoud van die nuwe *Liedboek* kennis maak, sal hulle besef dat dit vir die Afrikaanse kerke 'n skat van groot waarde is wat vir die volgende kwarteeu die eredienste en geestelike sang só sal verryk dat mense binnekort sal saamstem dat hulle nie daarsonder kan of wil wees nie.

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2 Hans Linde, "Waarom 'n Nuwe Liedboek?" in Sabinet. Cited 13 October 2019. Online: https://0-reference-sabinet-co-za.oasis.unisa.ac.za/webx/access/samedia/IMAGE2/200114/ 31/1620012091.

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Liedboek 'sal sang hervorm'

PRETORIA. – "Die *Liedboek* gaan 'n omwenteling in Afrikaanse kerksang bring – tot so 'n mate dat ons inderdaad van 'n 'hervorming' kan praat. En dit gaan ouer en jonger lidmate nader aan mekaar laat beweeg." So het dr Wim Viljoen, voorsitter van die Suid-Afrikaanse Kerkorreliste-vereniging, op die vooraand van die ingebruikneming van die *Liedboek* aan Die Kerkbode gesê. Hy meen mense met voorbehoude is eerder onkundig as negatief.

Dr Viljoen het gesê die wye verskeidenheid liedere, die hartlike samewerking tussen kerke en die grootmoedigheid van die onderskeie medewerkers om verskillende style te akkommodeer, lewer 'n getuienis wat nie aldag te vinde is nie.

Ook prof Cas Vos, ondervoorsitter van die Psalmkommissie en voorsitter van die Gesangekommissie, verwys na die Kerkhervorming wanneer hy oor die *Liedboek* praat. "Hervorming in kerkmusiek gaan oor vernuwing, 'n verdieping en 'n soeke na spiritualiteit gegrond in die verlossende Woord. Deur die verlossende Woord kom die verlossende lied. 'n Mens gaan terug na jou wortels sonder om te verstar."

Volgens ds Cassie Carstens, eindredakteur van die *Liedboek*, is die kenmerk van die Hervorming dat die Woord helder en duidelik na die mense gekom het. "Die *Liedboek* is vol Woord en evangelie wat helder praat. Dit is ook meer as 'n liedboek, dit is 'n gebedeboek, 'n boek om mee stil te word. Ná die Hervorming was dit nie meer net kore en biskoppe wat gesing het nie, maar gewone mense in hulle eie taal. En ai, gaan die *Liedboek* ons lekker laat sing in ons mooie Afrikaans!"

Dr Elsabé Kloppers, verteenwoordiger van die Ned Herv Kerk in beide die Psalm- en Gesangekommissie, meen die waarde van die boek lê daarin dat die samestelling veel meer ekumenies is as in die verlede. "Ons het baie materiaal gebruik wat afkomstig is uit die vroeë kerke met wie ons die Christelike tradisie deel. Dit mag nou klink asof ons 'agteruit' beweeg het,' maar inderwaarheid het ons die kerkliedere uit die verlede geneem wat sinvol deur die kerkmens van die 21ste eeu gebruik kan word.

"Ek is veral opgewonde oor die *Liedboek* omdat dit veel meer vorme van liedere bevat as vorige bundels. Dit sal help dat die verskillende ouderdomsgroepe in 'n erediens betrek kan word. Neem byvoorbeeld die kanons – 'n gemeente kan die lied eenstemmig sing en 'n groep kinders kan die kanongedeelte sing. Dit leer kinders ook om op 'n nuwe manier te sing."

Dr Kloppers meen dat daar onder die gesange in die *Liedboek* genoeg materiaal vir die jonges is. "Ek dink egter die psalms kon 'n nog meer dinamiese beeld uitgestraal het. Ek is bekommerd dat die psalms met hulle baie strofes en lang versreëls sal meebring dat die jonges nie die boek as geheel 'n kans wil gee nie. Gelukkig gaan die proses voort en sal ons voortdurend nuwe skeppings deel van ons liedereskat maak."

Ds Jacques van Rensburg, jeugleraar van die NG Gemeente Stellenberg, het by navraag aan Die Kerkbode gesê hy meen die *Lied-*

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[3] —Liedboek 'sal Sang Hervorm,' in *Sabinet.* Cited 13 October 2019. Online: https://0-reference-sabinet-co-za.oasis.unisa.ac.za/webx/access/samedia/IMAGE2/200114 /27/1620012050.pdf

boek het te laat gekom vir die jonger lidmate. "Die jonges – veral tieners – het 'n weersin in die tradisionele sangbundels opgebou. Hulle kyk dus vanuit die staanspoor negatief na die *Liedboek*. Baie gemeentes het deesdae 'n jeugorkes wat die tieners se sang begelei en hulle verwerk hulle geestelike liedere na rockmusiek. Dit lyk nie vir my of baie van die *Liedboek*-liedere hulle daartoe leen nie."

Ds Carstens het in reaksie hierop gesê daar is 'n paar treffers in die *Liedboek* wat hy hoop die tieners sal ontdek. "Nee, ons vervul nie in al hulle behoeftes nie, maar wel in 'n hele klomp daarvan en ons wil voortgaan met die proses. Die NG Kerk se Algemene Sinode gaan volgende jaar gevra word om ruimte en 'n struktuur te skep sodat nuwe skeppings vinniger deel van die amptelike liedereskat kan word. Een moontlikheid is 'n proefbundel."

Ook prof Vos het bevestig dat die *Liedboek*-projek 'n voortgaande proses sal wees. "Ek dink as ons vyf jaar vroeër met die gesange-deel van die boek begin het, was ons nou vyf jaar verder en sou ons meer tyd gehad het om vir die jonges nog nuwer

liedere in te sluit. Daar was egter 'n magdom materiaal om te verwerk en uiteindelik het die tyd ons ingehaal."

Die *Liedboek* se aanvanklike oplaag het van 300 000 tot 550 000 gegroei. Hiervan is 460 000 reeds bestel, waarvan 35 000 die kleurgebinde weergawe vir tieners is. Volgens ds Hans Linde, besturende direkteur van NG Kerk-Uitgewers, uitgewer van die *Liedboek*, is die verwagting dat die 600 000-kerf voor die einde van die jaar bereik sal word. Sowat 350 gemeentes het ook reeds geregistreer as data- en letterbord-gebruikers en lisensies daarvoor uitgeneem. Die administrasie en kontrole ten opsigte van kopiereg word deur Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) behartig.

● Die *Liedboek* word op 28 Oktober amptelik in gebruik geneem tydens 'n liedfees in die Pretoriase stadsaal. CNW Radio se uitsaaidiens kan ook daardie oggend om 09:00 regstreeks vanuit die Moedergemeente op Wellington oor die senders van Radiosondergrense gehoor word.

● Lees meer oor die *Liedboek* op bl 6, 8, 9 en 14.

ADDENDUM 4

Extract from Colin Gibson's keynote address[4]

During the First Australian National Ecumenical Hymn Conference, held in 1999 in Melbourne, Australia, the keynote address was delivered by Colin Gibson.

At the beginning of his presentation, he reflected on the variety of roles that are being fulfilled by the contemporary hymn—regardless of Christian denomination. What follows is his list of reasons why Christian communities sing hymns—

- Hymn-singing provides a natural vehicle for the primary activity of most worshipping communities: the expression of praise and adoration through the offering of song to God. Our hymns are both our gift and our statement of gratitude to the One we worship.

- The practice of hymn-singing continues and extends the traditions of worship that link the earliest cradle of Jesus's spiritual life, synagogue worship, to the life and practice of modern Christian communities. We sing because our foremothers and forefathers in God also sang in this way.

- Hymn-singing contributes to a necessary variety of behaviour in the act of worship. Singing can be and often is a welcome change from liturgical gestures and bodily actions - standing, sitting, kneeling, processing and so on, or from speaking and listening - to the prayers, the bible readings, the notices (the public administrative business of the congregation), the sermon, the blessings, the creedal affirmations and so on.

- Hymn-singing helps to develop the spirit of unity and solidarity in the singing community, through shared and corporate activity by the community. And it's not just any old kind of corporate activity. It is a relatively simple popular activity in which everyone can participate; one that does not require the performer to have any special abilities or knowledge, or to act in a leadership mode. It is also an activity which requires agreed standards of discipline and self-control: like starting together and keeping in time as a group.

- Hymn-singing strongly teaches and reinforces the faith and practice of the singing Christian community. What we sing we remember and internalise far beyond what we see or read or hear.

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[4] Colin Gibson, "The Role of hymns in Worship Tomorrow," in Dunedin Methodist, n. p. [cited 05 October 2018]. Online: http://www.dunedinmethodist.org.nz/archive/wshp/hymns.htm.

- Hymn-singing allows us to address contemporary issues, both religious and non-religious - supplementing the work of the sermon. Although some kinds of religious song, notably the chorus or praise song, are so rooted in the language and thought forms of the bible as to be virtually an extension of that primary but ancient text, the hymn (certainly the modern hymn) allows for the creation of original (independent) texts, images and thought.

- And since a hymn is usually an original text set to an original composition the very act of hymn-singing helps to endorse and express the creativity and openness to change of members of the community, in turn symbolising the creativity and unlimited life of God in us all. And of course, while the placing of hymns in the liturgy and even the number of hymns used may be set, there is always an element of free choice in the selection of the hymns to be sung on any particular day or occasion.

- Hymn-singing helps us to consolidate and memorise the faith of the community.

- It expresses the universality of Christianity, symbolised by the fact that in most churches musical artefacts (hymns) from any culture and any historic period may be drawn on to contribute to the discourse of contemporary worship.

- As an activity hymn-singing declares the equality of Christians with each other - for (unlike the solo chanting of the priest, or the trained group singing of a choir) everybody gets to sing on an equal footing.

- Hymn-singing provides an outlet for both the rational and emotional capacities of our spiritual nature. The hymns we sing are made to work on our minds or our feelings, and frequently both together.

- Although, at worst, hymn-singing may be managed in such a way as to hypnotise some praise communities into desirable attitudes and states of feeling, at best hymn-singing may act as a mantra, drawing us beyond thought and emotion into a deeper contemplation and experience of God.

- Hymn-singing is there partly to affirm in a religious context (and often sub-consciously) the values and centres of interest of our own culture.

- Finally, we sing hymns to give us something we enjoy doing.