1

Introduction

> Rabbi Yonatan of Bet Guvrin said: "There are four languages useful in the world: Greek for song, Latin for war, Syriac for mourning, and Hebrew for speech."
>
> *y. Soṭa* 7.2

> May the Angel of Death arrive only
> When your life is complete
> And you have brought every given gift
> To the threshold where its infinity can shine.
>
> John O'Donohue (A Blessing of Angels)

On June 30, 1715, Yūsuf ibn Shim'ūn as-Sim'ānī, a Maronite priest, left Rome to set out on a lengthy and perilous journey.[1] It was far from the first he had undertaken in the course of his young life. Not yet ten years old, as-Sim'ānī – or Josephus Simonius Assemani, as the Western world would come to remember him – had been dispatched from his native Lebanon to Italy, to study at Rome's Maronite College. In doing so, he

[1] For biographical resources, the recent issue of *Parole de l'Orient* dedicated to printing the *acta* of the conference celebrating the 300th anniversary of the publication of Josephus Simonius Assemni's *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, and particularly Herman G. B. Teule's contribution thereto are unparalleled resources. See Teule, "Josephus Simonius Assemani: A General Introduction," in Zeljko Paša, ed., "Actes du Congrès 'L'Orient chrétien dans l'Occident latin': 300^{e} anniversaire de la *Bibliotheca Orientalis* d'Assémani (1719–2019)," vol. 1, *Parole de l'Orient* 47 (2021): 121–36. In addition, see Karam Rizk, "Assémani, Joseph-Simon," in *Encyclopédie Maronite*, vol. 1 (Kaslik, Lebanon: Université Saint Esprit, 1992), 440–44; Nasser Gemayel, *Les échanges culturels entre les Maronites et l'Europe*, vol. 1 (Beirut: self-published, 1984), 420–34, 489–504; Giorgio Levi Della Vida, "Assemani, G. S.," *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 4 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1962), 437–40.

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had followed in the footsteps of older members of his prominent ecclesiastical family and had paved the way for others who would come after him. Upon his graduation as doctor of philosophy and theology in 1710, he was pressed by Pope Clement XI into service in the Vatican Library as scriptor for Syriac and Arabic. Five years later, the same pope sent him on a mission to scour the libraries of the Near East for witnesses to Christianity's earliest history and to bring the fruits of his labors back with him to the Vatican.

For the next two years, Assemani visited churches and monastic communities from Jerusalem to Aleppo, and from Alexandria to the Monastery of Our Lady of the Syrians in Nitria, in search of manuscript treasure. In this, too, others had gone before him. His cousin, Elia Assemani, had suffered shipwreck on the Nile a decade prior during his own papally commissioned journey. Later accounts describe his distress at witnessing his traveling companion perish in the waves – and at watching a number of recently obtained codices bobbing in the water.[2] What Clement's scavengers carried with them upon their return to Rome was nevertheless priceless. They included the raw materials from which Josephus Simonius Assemani would go on to craft the *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, a monumental effort to introduce Western readers to the Syriac Christian tradition. They also contained the seeds for yet another of Assemani's contributions to the study of Syriac Christianity: the great "Roman" edition of the writings of Ephrem, arguably the tradition's most accomplished and, thanks in part to Assemani's efforts, most famous poet.

The edition encompassed six volumes: three on Ephrem's Greek writings, edited and translated into Latin by Assemani himself; and three containing his Syriac corpus, edited by Assemani's collaborator, the Maronite priest Buṭros Mubārak ("Petrus Benedictus"). These publications were not the first forays of Ephrem's writings into the West. The Dutch theologian Gerardus Vossius, for example, had already in the

[2] Assemani's nephew, Stephanus Evodius, in his introductory remarks to the sixth and final volume of the Roman edition accordingly mourns the state of the manuscripts in the aftermath of the incident: "Quo casu abrepti Codices prae Niliaci luti tenacitate tam foede corrupti atque vitiate sunt, ut alias ne legere quid, alias vero aegre admodum ac difficulter interpretari potuerimus" (Stephanus Evodius Assemani, *Sancti patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine, in sex tomos distributa*, vol. 3 [Rome: Vatican, 1743], xii). Thomas Joseph Lamy provides a rather more dramatic rendering of the episode in "Studies in Oriental Patrology: St. Ephrem," *Dublin Review* 14 (1885): 20–44, at 25.

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sixteenth century published a number of these, mostly in translation from the Greek.[3] Ephrem's name and a selection of his work, moreover, had been known to Latin-speaking audiences since at least the fifth century.[4] In both scope and circulation, Assemani's edition nevertheless served as a gateway to a new era for Ephrem in the West, with his writings becoming the subject of both intense scholarly engagement and popular devotion.[5]

Like the rest of Assemani's publications, his and Mubārak's edition has drawn decidedly mixed reactions from readers and scholars, ranging from adulation to outright vilification.[6] In recent decades in particular, critiques have centered on what modern scholars have judged to be the editors' insufficiently critical stance toward their source material. They, in short, seem to have treated their manuscripts' attributions as reliable: where manuscripts ascribed the same text to different authors, they noted the divergence, albeit without arbitrating between the options presented.[7] This approach, for obvious reasons, has proved unsatisfactory to contemporary

[3] Gerardus Vossius, *Sancti Ephraem Syri, patris et scriptoris ecclesiae antiquissimi et dignissimi, Opera omnia, quotquot in insignioribus Italiae bibliothecis, praecipuè Romanis Graece inveniri potuerunt*, 3 vols. (Cologne: Arnoldum Quentelium, 1589, 1593, 1598).

[4] For an impressively thorough discussion of the manuscript evidence for "Ephrem Latinus," see Charles D. Wright, "Ephraem Latinus," Sources of Old English and Anglo-Latin Literary Culture, 2021, https://msucommons-dev.org/deposits/item/hc:38667 (accessed May 17, 2022). For a survey of early printed editions dating back as far as the fifteenth century, see also Thomas Smith Pattie, "The Early Printed Editions of Ephraem Latinus and Their Relationship to the Manuscripts," in Elizabeth A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica* 20 (Louvain: Peeters, 1989), 50–53.

[5] Indeed, the impact of Assemani's edition could be felt well beyond the Latin realm. As Matti Moosa observes in his 2003 introduction to his translation of Aphram Barsoum's *Scattered Pearls*, "the study of Syriac literature ... originated in the East, but was brought to its fullest development by Western writers. As Assemani, an Easterner by birth and tradition, used his important knowledge to shape Western ideas on Syriac literature, so today it is the Westerners following his lead who have formulated the views generally accepted in the East" ("Translator's Introduction," in Ignatius Aphram I. Barsoum and Matti Moosa, trans. and eds., *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences*, 2nd rev. ed. [Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003], viii).

[6] For a survey of such critiques, albeit focused on the *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, see Teule, "Josephus Simonius Assemani," 122–23.

[7] Such is the case, for example, in the instance of the case of *madrāshê* 29 ("In funere peregrinorum"), which appears in the *necrosima* as Ephrem's work (Assemani 279–82). In his *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, published some years earlier, however, Josephus Simonius Assemani notes both its attribution to Ephrem in *Vat. Nit.* 17 (= *Vat. Syr.* 93), and, conversely, its ascription to Isaac (of Antioch) in the earlier of the two *necrosima* manuscripts, *Vat. Nit.* 16 (= *Vat. Syr.* 92) (*Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, vol. 1 [Rome, 1719], 137).

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scholars of Syriac literature.[8] The "Roman" edition nevertheless quickly became and for several centuries remained the starting point for efforts to engage with Ephrem and with Syriac literature more broadly – not least of all since a number of the texts contained therein have never merited the attentions of another editor.

This is the case for the collection of hymns at the center of this book. It appears in the last Syriac volume of the edition, alongside some of Ephrem's most famous writings, including the *Hymns on Paradise* and the *Sermons against the Jews*. Presented by its editors as *Necrosima seu funebres Canones* LXXXV, from the Greek term for a funerary hymn (νεκρώσιμον),[9] the work indeed includes, as the title suggests, 85 *madrāshê* ("hymns") designed to accompany the burial of Christians in Syriac-speaking communities.[10] They emerge from two manuscripts, both preserved at the Monastery of St. Mary in Nitria, and purchased and brought into the West by Assemani's cousin, the aforementioned Elia: *Vat. Syr.* 92, stemming from 823 CE, and *Vat. Syr.* 93, an undated, presumably twelfth-century manuscript, covering much of the same material. Taken together, these hymns constitute the oldest and most extensive collection of funerary poetry in Syriac literature – a compilation remarkable for its diversity in both form and choice of subjects.

[8] This is particularly the case for Ephrem in light of scholarly trends in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a topic addressed in greater depth below.

[9] Entry #47318, "νεκρώσιμος" (τὸ -ον *Totengesang*), in Erich Trapp, ed., *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität: besonders des 9.-12. Jahrhunderts*, http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lbg/#eid=47318 (accessed October 15, 2022).

[10] Assemani, *Sancti patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera omnia*, vol. 3, 225–359. The translation of *madrāshā* as "hymn," while time honored and going back at least to Assemani's rendering of the latter as "hymnus," is nevertheless problematic. As Sydney H. Griffith has recently reminded audiences, "[g]iven the fact that [the *madrāshâ*] is a distinct genre in its own right, one should avoid thinking of it simply as hymnody, although it has often been discussed in the scholarly literature under this heading" ("'Denominationalism' in Fourth-Century Syria: Readings in Saint Ephraem's *Hymns against Heresies, Madrāshê* 22–24," in Georgia Frank, Susan R. Holman, and Andrew S. Jacobs, eds., *The Garb of Being: Embodiment and the Pursuit of Holiness in Late Ancient Christianity* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2020], 82). See also Michael Lattke, "Sind Ephraems Madrāšê Hymnen?," *Oriens Christianus* 73 (1989): 38–43. Griffiths instead favors Andrew Palmer's term "teaching song" ("The Merchant of Nisibis: Saint Ephraem and His Faithful Quest for Union in Numbers," in Jan den Boeft and Antonius Hilhorst, eds., *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays* [Leiden: Brill, 1993], 167–233). Considering the *necrosima*'s distinct liturgical setting, throughout this book, I have here nevertheless opted to treat the *madrāshê* in question as "funerary hymns," albeit with the understanding that their aim was very much one of instructing their audience – a *topos* that appears prominently throughout the book.

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The poems included therein accordingly differ from one another in syllabic meter as well as in length, with the shortest of them occupying less than half a column in Assemani's edition, and the longest filling hundreds of lines. In a similar vein, they include chants designed to address the deaths of individuals of all ages, genders, socioeconomic status, and ecclesiastical identities, with parts of the collection dedicated to the commemoration of bishops, clergy, and ascetics of various stripes, householders and women, youths and children, victims of natural disaster, and those who had died as migrants, remote from their families and communities. From them emerge visions not only of the deaths but of the lives of the deceased and their loved ones: the father anxious for the well-being of his children, now orphaned; the Church, personified as a widow, fretting over the death of her episcopal "spouse"; the mother, grieved both by abandoning her family and by the choices that have led her to be part of that family in the first place; the community of "sisters" eager to have their departed member intercede on their behalf; the survivors of plague, fearful of following their diseased neighbors into the pit; the clergyman, deprived in death of both voice and song, yet eager to recover both in the resurrection.

In their original context, many of these writings would have accompanied the burial processions of the deceased. In the context of the "Roman" edition, by contrast, they became part of Ephrem's poetic patrimony, offered up to the Latin-speaking West with the imprimatur of then-pope Benedict XIV as a testimony to the deep roots of the Church and those roots' wholesale coherence with the Catholic faith. In the decades following their publication, the *necrosima* enjoyed a handful of moments in the sun; the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, by contrast, have visited largely neglect upon these sources. It is the aim of this book to examine, frequently for the first time, both the particularities of some of the most striking writings included therein, and to consider them as part of a larger whole – both that of Syriac literature of the first millennium and of the cultural context to which they witness. Before setting out the project in greater detail, however, we must attend to two interlocking strata that will set the scene for such a reconsideration: the person, work, and legacy of Ephrem the Syrian, the ascriptional author of these writings, on the one hand; and the *necrosima*'s reception history in Western scholarship since the eighteenth century, on the other.

EPHREM AND HIS LEGACY

Little is known with confidence about the life and times of Ephrem the Syrian – a fate he shares with many, if not most, of the literary greats of late

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antiquity.[11] Even the alleged year of his birth, 306 CE, emerges from no more reliable a source than the *Vita S. Ephraemi*, a text postdating Ephrem's own lifetime by more than a century, and more invested in constructing a hagiographically appealing than a historically grounded biography.[12] Similarly

[11] Given Ephrem's status as the most revered Syriac author of all time, writing a biographical sketch is a matter of bringing owls to Athens. A reader desirous of a concise introduction could still scarcely do better than Edmund Beck's entry on "Ephraem Syus," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1962), 520–31. For a seminal introduction of greater heft, see Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Rome: Center for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies, 1985). I here note merely some of the more prominent contributions to the field of Ephrem studies in the current century, limiting myself to only monograph-length treatments, and excluding the many excellent translations, editions, and anthologies that have been published in this period: Yifat Monnickendam, *Jewish Law and Early Christian Identity: Betrothal, Marriage, and Infidelity in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Sebastian P. Brock, *Singer of the Word of God: Ephrem the Syrian and His Significance in Late Antiquity* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020); Jeffrey Wickes, *Bible and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Ephrem's Hymns on Faith* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Thomas Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names in the Genuine Works of Ephrem* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 2015); Thomas Kremer, *Mundus primus. Die Geschichte der Welt und des Menschen von Adam bis Noach im Genesiskommentar Ephräms des Syrers* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012); Elena Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a "Jewish" Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); Christine C. Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008); Kees den Biesen, *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought*, 2nd ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); Lange, *The Portrayal of Christ* in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatessaron (Leuven: Peeters, 2005); Thomas Buchan, *"Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol": Christ's Descent to the Dead in the Theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004); Aho Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of Saint Ephrem* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002); Mathew Paikatt, *Life, Glory and Salvation in the Writings of Mar Aprem of Nisibis* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 2001); Joseph Naduvilezham, *The Theology of the Paschal Lamb in Ephrem of Nisibis* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 2000); Ute Possekel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Louvain: Peeters, 1999).

[12] In the words of Joseph P. Amar, "the Syriac Life of Ephrem preserves virtually no historically reliable information about the circumstances of his life or the social and cultural context of his work" (Joseph P. Amar, trans., *The Syriac* Vita *Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian* [CSCO 630; Louvain: Peeters, 2011], v). For the approximate date, historical context, and sources of the *vita*, see Amar, *Syriac* Vita *Tradition*, v–xxix. Sidney H. Griffith has named the Ephrem emerging from this text and other writings of this period "Ephrem Byzantinus" ("Images of Ephraem: The Syrian Holy Man and his Church," *Traditio* 45 [1989–90]: 7–33.) The legacy of the latter continues to linger, as, for example, in Barsoum's assertion (*pace* contemporary critics who denigrate Ephrem's status as theologian) that "his *mēmrē* gained fame and popularity on account of his holiness (*Scattered Pearls*, 235).

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obscure are the date and circumstances of his baptism: Born to a Christian mother and raised in the faith,[13] Ephrem's discussion of baptism merely suggests that he, like his contemporaries, was old enough to invoke the trinitarian formula.[14]

His ecclesiastical career places readers on somewhat surer ground, owing in large part to his exposition in the *Carmina Nisibena* 13–21, which narrate the history of Nisibis' Christian community during the first half of the fourth century.[15] Ephrem depicts himself as entering the church of Nisibis under the leadership of Jacob, the city's bishop from circa 308 to 338 CE – a period during which, the *Hymns* suggest, Christianity was still young and orthodoxy far from established in the city.[16] He continued his service as a herdsman (ܪܥܝܐ) of God – an assistant shepherd guided by the city's chief shepherds – under the next three bishops, across a period of roughly forty years.[17]

Given Nisibis' location at the border between two empires, that of Rome and that of the Sassanids, the longest-lasting ruling dynasty of the Persian Empire, the city's life and Ephrem's ministry unfolded in contested territory. In 363 CE, Nisibis accordingly changed hands from Roman to Persian control, in the wake of the Emperor Julian's defeat and his short-lived successor's costly peace accord with the Sassanids. Ephrem, along with much of Nisibis' Christian population, fled to Edessa. There he remained – and was ordained to the deaconate – during the final decade of his life, dying on June 9, 373 CE, according to the *Chronicle of Edessa*.[18]

The particulars of Ephrem's ecclesiastical service are nevertheless more opaque than modern scholars would prefer. Most biographical sources

[13] See Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate* 37.10 (CSCO 223; Louvain: Peeters, 1962), 135.

[14] See Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses* 3.3 (CSCO 169; Louvain: Peeters, 1957), 11.

[15] See Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena*, vol. 1 (CSCO 218; Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1961), 34–59.

[16] Compare, for example, *Carmina Nisibena* 14.20, depicting Jacob as having given birth to the Church, and, according to *Carmina Nisibena* 14.3, having had to work the spiritual field of the city with great effort, and needing to "pull weed and thorns" from its midst (Beck, *Carmina Nisibena*, vol. 1, 37). For a discussion of the evidence concerning the life of Jacob of Nisibis, see David Bundy, "Jacob of Nisibis as a Model for the Episcopacy," *Le Muséon* 104 (1991), 235–49; Paul Krüger, "Jakob von Nisibis in syrischer und armenischer Überlieferung," *Le Muséon* 81 (1968), 161–79.

[17] *Carmina Nisibena* 14.25 (Beck, *Carmina* Nisibena, vol. 1, 40).

[18] Ignazio Guidi, *Chronica Minora*, vol. 1 (CSCO 1; Paris: Bibliopola, 1903), 5.

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make much of his late-in-life ordination, hinting at a sense of embarrassment that a luminary of Ephrem's caliber had not risen further in the Church's ranks.[19] His own writings suggest an affinity for and leadership among the so-called Covenanters, an ascetic office unique to Syriac Christianity, with ties to the local churches. What is clear, however, is the fact that Ephrem's primary ministry throughout his life was that of the hymnographer and homiletician. Among his metrical discourses the reader encounters writings celebrating festal days,[20] confronting threats to the life of the Church,[21] extolling heroes of the faith,[22] elucidating Christian practices,[23] and expounding theological discourses – all ready to educate, challenge, encourage, and inspire his audience.

Ephrem's prodigious literary output – according to the fifth-century historiographer Sozomen, he was said to have written 300,000 verses – won him fame well beyond the Syriac-speaking realm.[24] Both Greek and Latin writers count him among their "outstanding men" and express amazement at his gifts.[25] Sozomen reports that already during Ephrem's lifetime his works were being translated into Greek – and Jerome indeed claims to have read one of Ephrem's books in that language.[26] Where the

[19] Different versions of his Syriac *vita*, for example, have Ephrem's grave transferred from the burial place of strangers to "the cave where the bishops of the city were buried," or indeed to a grave underneath the church of Edessa (Amar, *Syriac* Vita *Tradition*, 109).

[20] See, for example, Ephrem's *Hymns on the Nativity* (Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate* [Epiphania] [CSCO vols. 186–87; Louvain: Secretariat de CorpusSCO, 1959]).

[21] See, for example, Ephrem's *Hymns against Julian* (Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso and Contra Iulianum* [CSCO vols. 174–75; Louvain: Secretariat de CorpusSCO, 1957], 71–91 [Syr], 64–86 [Ger]).

[22] See, for example, the *Hymns on the Confessors* (for Hymns 1–6, see Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymni de Confessoribus* [CSCO vol. 363–64; Louvain: Secretariat de CorpusSCO, 1975]).

[23] See, for example Ephrem's Hymns on the Fast (Edmund Beck, ed. and trans., *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Ieiunio* [CSCO vols. 247–48; Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1964]).

[24] Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, in Günther C. Hansen, ed., *Sozomenus Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1995), 127–31.

[25] See, for example, Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 40, ed. Butler 126–27; Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 115, ed. Bernoulli 52. This vision of Ephrem as a "solitary" appears also in Sozomen, who, in his *Ecclesiastical History* 3.16, labels him as a deacon but portrays him as dwelling in a solitary cell, refraining even laying eyes on women, and, in *Ecclesiastical History* 6.34, discusses him among the "most celebrated philosophers of the Syrians and Persians" (τῶν τότε ἐπισήμως φιλοσοφούντων ἀνά τε Σύρους καὶ Πέρσας; Hansen, *Kirchengeschichte*, 127–31; 290). The *topos* also recurs in the Syriac *Vita S. Ephraemi*, esp. ch. 23 (Amar, *Syriac* Vita *Tradition*, vol. 1, 46).

[26] *De viris illustribus* 115; PL 23.745–48.

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appreciation of his Greek contemporaries did not burst forth *sua sponte*, hagiographers strove to create it instead: A number of Syriac sources, for example, attest to a (wholly apocryphal) meeting between Ephrem and Basil of Caesarea, each tradition's master-preacher extolling the other's virtues. *Vitae* focused on Ephrem's own achievements flourished alongside these works, each laboring to mold him in ways congenial to their aims. The image of the historical Ephrem thus recedes against the visions of Ephrem the quasi-anchorite, as depicted in the Syriac *vita*, and Ephrem the chorister (and champion of women choirs), in Jacob of Serugh's sixth-century *Mēmrā on Holy Mar Ephrem*.

The confluence of these two interrelated facets of Ephrem's legacy – his widespread celebration as holy man and the equally widespread recognition of his literary productivity – also shaped his reception. For centuries to come, authors from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds wrote in Ephrem's name or, *nolens volens*, had their works transmitted as part of his ever-growing oeuvre. Most famous among these and commanding the most expansive literary corpus is the composite figure of "Ephrem Graecus," the Greek Ephrem. The latter's body of works, composed chiefly of metrical homilies and hymns, ranks second only to John Chrysostom's in the number of pages it commands in the *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*. No other language group produced so extensive a corpus. The manuscript record, however, also reflects Latin, Slavonic, Arabic, Armenian, and Coptic versions of Ephrem.

While some of these are the product of translations of Ephrem's writings, by far the greater part of these corpora includes texts that, as early as the sixth century, bear no traces of a Syriac original. Nor, for that matter, are Syriac writings transmitted under Ephrem's name necessarily traceable to his own pen – a fact that, more than the proliferation of Ephrem in other languages, has troubled and challenged readers. As one scholar of Ephrem recently noted, the corpus attributed to him is "littered with texts of questionable and dubious authenticity."[27] As a result, one of the most important pursuits of Syriac studies in the twentieth century has been the quest for the "historical Ephrem" and his "genuine writings." Scholarly lists of Ephrem's works from this period tend to categorize them

[27] See Blake Hartung, "The Authorship and Dating of the Syriac Corpus Attributed to Ephrem of Nisibis: A Reassessment," *Zeitschrift für Antike und Christentum* 22.2 (2018): 297. Ortiz de Urbina similarly opined that "Opera [Ephraemi] sunt hodiedum 'mare magnum' cuius ripas non facile est definire" (*Patrologia Syriaca* [Rome: Poet. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1958], 55).

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as either "authentic," "contested," or "falsely attributed," with each grouping subdivided further in keeping with each author's aims and interests.[28]

The content of these categories, however, quite naturally depends on the criteria applied for arriving at the corresponding judgements. While different authors have followed and indeed continue to follow different models, over the course of the twentieth century three figures have emerged as paradigmatic: F. C. Burkitt; Arthur Vööbus; and Edmund Beck.[29] By far the earliest of these three, Burkitt's interest did not rest primarily with determining which of Ephrem's works ought to be considered "authentic." Indeed, as he notes with perhaps a measure of asperity, "[t]he only reason that these questions of authorship have not been settled long ago is that very few people trouble themselves whether a certain metrical Homily be the work of Ephraim of Edessa or of some other Syriac writer whose name is even more unfamiliar."[30] His quest for genuinely Ephremic works rather thrived on the desire to establish the

[28] See, for example, F. Crawford Burkitt ("genuine," "doubtful," "spurious;" "less well attested"; "rejected"; *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901]); Ephrem Barsoum ("known," "attributed"; Barsoum and Moosa, *Scattered Pearls*, 233–35); Ignatius Ortiz de Urbina (authentic, "Opera Dubia"; *Patrologia Syriaca*, 55–77); Arthur Vööbus ("genuine Ephrem," "no solid attestation," "with precaution and criticism"; *Literary, Critical and Historical Studies in Ephrem the Syrian* [Stockholm: Etse, 1958], 11–16); Joseph Melki ("Oeuvres d'authenticité certaine," "Oeuvres d'authenticité probable," "Oeuvres contestées," "Oeuvres apocryphes"; "Saint Ephrem le Syrien, un bilan de l'édition critique," *Parole de l'Orient* 11 [1983], 49–88); Christian Lange (authentic, "Writings in Doubt," "Writings Wrongly attributed to Ephrem"; *The Portrayal of Christ in the Syriac Commentary on the Diatesseron* [Leuven: Peeters, 2005], 28–35).

[29] In selecting these particular interlocutors, I follow Melki's expansive and learned discussion ("Saint Ephrem le Syrien"). The three selected are not, of course, the only scholars to have developed criteria for establishing the authenticity (or lack thereof) of different Ephremic writings. See, for example, Ignatius Ortiz de Urbina's test, which centers, first, on ancient and orthodox witnesses; second, on attestation in ancient manuscripts, especially from the fifth through seventh centuries; third, with greater ambivalence, the presence of a source in ancient liturgical witnesses, with a focus on shared by both East and West Syrians (*nestorianos et iaeobitas*); and fourth, the version of scripture used therein. While less overtly critical than other interpreters, Ortiz de Urbina both confessed to considerable doubts concerning the authenticity of much of Ephrem's oeuvre and hopes that further scholarship would allay these: "Profundum examen critico-litterarium horum scriptorum, uti sperare licet, Plura dubia removere adhuc poterit" (Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca*, 68).

[30] F. Crawford Burkitt, *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), 21.

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version of the gospels used therein, and, by extension, to determine the date of the New Testament Peshitta, the "Syriac Vulgate."[31]

In arbitrating between Ephrem's real and misattributed writings, Burkitt used two interlocking criteria: the age of the manuscripts by which a particular text was attested, and the version of the New Testament used. He thus began by excluding all witnesses dating to the period after the rise of Islam;[32] and, upon establishing to his satisfaction that the Peshitta postdated Ephrem, granted his seal of approval exclusively to those writings that made use of the Diatesseron, the older Syriac gospel-harmony.[33] Burkitt's approach proved prescient: Manuscript date and version used continued to shape conversations about Ephrem's "genuine writings" throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Arthur Vööbus, writing more than half a century after Burkitt, by contrast, was less successful, if no less influential, in his approach. Like Burkitt, authenticity was merely a secondary goal – if that – for Vööbus, whose aim was to mine the Ephremic corpus for witnesses to early Syriac asceticism. Vööbus's commitment to finding both anchoritic and coenobitic manifestations thereof in fourth-century Syria shaped his editorial choices; his criteria for selecting "authentic" texts are accordingly rather fuzzier than Burkitt's, although he, too, relied on age and volume of attestation, as well as the fit a particular piece or passage made with what he took to be genuinely Ephremic.[34] The resulting selection of texts has been rejected almost unanimously by later scholars; Vööbus's focus on an Ephremic gestalt in the writings he examined nevertheless also resonates with the method of our third and, for purposes of Syriac scholarship, climactic voice: that of Edmund Beck.

The latter, unlike his notable predecessors, dedicated much of his life to the study of Ephrem-*qua*-Ephrem. His critical editions of the Syriac corpus, each accompanied by a careful translation into German, continue

[31] Burkitt, *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel*, v.

[32] Burkitt, *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel*, 23.

[33] Burkitt's methods and results proved influential for other luminaries of the Syriac academic world. Anton Baumstark accordingly both cites and echoes Burkitt's assessment (*Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte* [Bonn: A. Marcus and E. Webers Verlag, 1922], 35).

[34] Here, too, Vööbus's instincts proved problematic. Compare, for example, "Ephrem the Syrian," 18 (judging the character of Ephrem's eschatology to be essentially "full of ruthless self-criticism, fear, and trembling") with Beck's pointed exclusion of such texts from his list of authentic writings. See, for example, the edition of the *Mēmrē on Correction* (Beck, trans., *Sermones* I, CSCO 306, xi–xvii).

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to form the basis for scholarship in the field.[35] Strikingly, Beck's editions include as many – or indeed more! – "inauthentic" works as those he judged to be genuine. Each translation accordingly includes a meticulous discussion of the merits of the pieces selected, resulting in by far the most critical assessment and briefest list of "authentic" writings.[36] Beck's transparency notwithstanding, he nowhere produces a list of his criteria – owing in part, no doubt, to the evolution of his approach across the more than twenty-five years of his editorial activity. Manuscript attestation no later than the seventh century; coherence with known aspects of Ephrem's biography; theological stances; exegetical choices; and attestation by early and reliable witnesses, including Philoxenus of Mabbug, nevertheless loom large.[37]

It is to Beck's credit that, to the present day, scholars have largely accepted his judgements and those interested in "rehabilitating" the authenticity of a work judged to be among the *dubia* or *spuria* have had to do so within the confines of the arguments laid out by him. Further forays into the quest for the authentic Ephrem in recent decades have instead sought to redefine the scope of the texts under consideration, either by examining potential interpolations into otherwise genuine writings, or by disaggregating the hymn cycles that have traditionally structured assessments of his work.[38]

These efforts, much like those of Beck and his predecessors, are of vital importance to the study of Ephrem and the field of Syriac Studies more

[35] For a complete list of the editions, see Sebastian P. Brock, "St. Ephrem: A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations," (Section II. CSCO and other Modern Editions; http://syri.ac/brock/ephrem, accessed May 15, 2022).

[36] The latter includes Ephrem's *Hymni de Nativitate*, *Hymni de Paradiso*, *Hymni contra Julianum*, *Hymni contra Haereses*, *Hymns de Ecclesia*, *Hymni de Fide*, and *Hymni de Virginitate*. Among Ephrem's other works, his *Commentary on the Diatesseron* enjoys the soupçon of authenticity, as argued recently by Christian Lange in a monograph-length study (Lange, *Portrayal of Christ*).

[37] For a similar summary of Beck's principles, most of which echo the approaches taken by Burkitt and Vööbus, see Hartung, "Authorship and Dating," 301–302. If Beck's analysis can be faulted, it is for his emphasis on authorial consistency across the duration of Ephrem's life and his various rhetorical positionalities.

[38] See, for example, Andrew Hayes, *Icons of the Heavenly Merchant: Ephrem and Pseudo-Ephrem in the Madrashe in Praise of Abraham of Qidun* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016) (on the hymns on Abraham Qîdûnāyâ); Lange, *Portrayal of Christ* (defending the Commentary on the Diatesseron as Ephremic); Phil J. Botha, "Orthodox Ventriloquism in the Pseudo-Ephremic Sermon on Palm Sunday," *Journal of Early Christian History* 3, no. 2 (2013): 21–33 (seeking to rehabilitate the Ephremic nature of a sermon by eliminating later interpolations); Hartung, "Authorship and Dating" (arguing for a more fine-grained approach to determining whether parts of a hymn cycle are, indeed, Ephremic).

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broadly. First, as Sebastian P. Brock has recently argued, they create the conditions for understanding Ephrem – as an author, hymnographer, and theologian – in his own right, unadulterated by the flotsam and jetsam of his later reception and emulation.[39] Ephrem's literary corpus, though diminished by decades of critical engagement, moreover constitutes by far the most expansive textual resource for understanding Western Syriac Christian history and identity in the fourth century. Clarity concerning the differences between Ephrem and "Ephrem" thus provides readers with reliable glimpses into the life of Christian communities in Nisibis and Edessa; the shape of asceticism during these decades and its relationship to the churches; and the tradition's relationship with its Western – and Eastern – neighbors, to name only a few salient *topoi*.

To celebrate the ongoing study and delineation of the "authentic" Ephrem does not, however, diminish the value of attending to other aspects of the Syriac Christian patrimony, including those that were, however falsely, transmitted as part of his oeuvre. It is the aim of this book to draw attention to one such group of texts, aforementioned *necrosima* – a collection whose history of scholarship (and lack thereof) is bound up with the quest for Ephrem's genuine writings. The following section provides an introduction to the origins of the corpus, its reception, and, in general terms, its contents, before turning to a preliminary defense of its value for students of early Christianity in general and the Syriac tradition in particular.

THE *NECROSIMA*

The opening of this chapter introduced Josephus Simonius Assemani as the *force majeure* behind the Roman edition, and by extension behind the *necrosima*'s publication. This portrayal, while not wholly misleading, nevertheless obscures the complexities of the progress. Assemani had indeed had charge of the three Greek/Latin volumes of the Roman edition. Their Syriac/Latin counterparts, moreover, had been originally the province of his collaborator, the Maronite priest Butros Mubārak, known as "Petrus Benedictus." The latter, however, more than twenty years

[39] Brock, "Some Reflections on the Wider Significance of St Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition," in *Singer of the Word of God*, 2. Brock's emphasis on establishing Ephrem as a theologian as well as a poet echoes charges ascribed to "some contemporary critics," in Barsoum's work, according to whom "St. Ephraim was more of a moralistic writer and preacher than theologian," (*Scattered Pearls*, 235).

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Assemani's senior, died in 1742, before the Syriac trilogy could be completed. The final volume, and with it the *necrosima*, accordingly fell under the purview of Assemani's nephew, Istifān 'Awād.[40] 'Awād had arrived in Rome in 1720 and had taken the Assemani name – a somewhat incongruous choice, given his own patronym, albeit one that attested both to the familial tie between the scholars and to the senior Assemani's reputation in Rome's Maronite circles. He had embarked on a course of scholarship largely reminiscent of his uncle's. Trained at the Maronite College, Stephanus Evodius Assemani joined the Vatican Library in 1731, replacing his uncle as *scriptor* for Arabic and Syriac, and in the process allowing the elder Assemani to assume the post of the library's Second Custodian. The following year witnessed the publication of the edition's first, Greek volume, followed in short succession by the first two Syriac ones. The third Syriac volume followed in 1943: "*post obitum Petri Benedicti*," as its frontispiece informs the reader, Stephanus Evodius had undertaken the completion of both the edition and its translation into Latin.[41]

The younger Assemani's ascent through the hierarchies of Rome was less rapid than his uncle's. Toward the end of his life, his continued scholarly activity would nevertheless lead him, as had been the case for Josephus Simonius, to the position of First Custodian of the Vatican Library. The writings of Ephrem which the "Roman" edition had launched into the Latin-speaking world, by contrast, went on to enjoy swift and frequently enthusiastic attention. The poems Assemani had called "necrosima" were no exception. Assemani had commended them to his readers as the fruit of Ephrem's grief as well as his orthodoxy. The great Syrian had been spurred to write these hymns – evidently all eighty-five of them! – both by the deaths of his friends and in recollection of the Last Judgement.[42] In particular, Assemani suggested, it was the heresy of Aerius, allegedly a disciple of Eusthatius', and his rejection of funerary

[40] For a concise biography, see Eugène Tisserant, "Notes pour server à la biographie d'Étienne Évode Assémani," *Oriens Christianus* 3, no. 7 (1932): 264–76. See also Rizk, "Assémani, Étienne-Évode (1711–1782)," in *Encyclopédie Maronite*, vol. 1, 447–39.

[41] The same frontispiece also makes mention of an early honor bestowed on the younger Assemani, namely his elevation to the titular office of Archbishop of Apamea by the Maronite Patriarch at only twenty-five years old. See Tisserant, "Biographie d'Étienne Évode Assémani," 270.

[42] *Condidit ille hos Canones excitus amicorum non minus morte, quorum laudes Versuum varietate texuit, quam extremi Judicii recordatione, cujus acerbitas semper ipsi ante oculos obversabatur* (Assemani, *Opera Omnia*, xx).

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tributes that had stirred Ephrem to hymnic action.[43] Even in these most intimate writings, Ephrem, in the judgement of his later custodians, retained his anti-heresiological credentials to the very last.[44]

Later commentators and translations occasionally reiterated Assemani's claims.[45] Throughout the nineteenth century, however, most of the considerable amount of attention directed at the *necrosima* focused chiefly on extolling its poetic virtues. The text enjoyed its first re-edition in 1833, as part of Marie-Nicolas-Silvestre Guillon and Armand Benjamin Caillau's "Collectio selecta S. Ecclesiae Patrum."[46] The latter, an ambitious program brought to premature conclusion by the planned publication of Migne's *Patrologia*, ranked Ephrem among the "most tenacious theorists of the faith and most chaste interpreters of the gospel," including five volumes of his writings alongside those of other fourth-century writers like Basil of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ambrose of Milan.[47] Strikingly, Ephrem was the only Syriac author included – and this evidently owing to Assemani's Latin translation. The edition, including its rendering of the *necrosima*, appearing here in sub-part six of Ephrem's work, titled "De Morte," reproduces the Roman edition verbatim, in block-text, without Syriac counterparts or footnotes.[48]

[43] Assemani adduces the writings of Epiphanius (*haer.* 75) and Augustine (*haer.* 53) as witnesses for this concededly obscure heresiarch (*Opera Omnia*, xx). Assemani here overwhelmingly echoes the description of these hymns published by his uncle in the first volume of his *Bibliotheca Orientalis* nearly twenty-five years earlier in 1719 (*Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. 1, 132–33).

[44] A similar phenomenon appears already in the Syriac *vita* tradition, in which Ephrem writes, first and foremost, against the heresies of Bardaisan. See Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, CSCO 629, 68–74.

[45] Henry Burgess, for example, renders it nearly verbatim, however misreading Aerius for the (concededly better-known) Aetius, and critiquing Assemani for, with this explanation, having "allowed his zeal for the rites of his own Church to blind his judgment" (*Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies of Ephraem Syrus* [London: Blackadder and Low, 1853], lxxii). Somewhat ironically, Burgess, who strongly opposed the "papist" practice of praying for the dead, allowed his own zeal to cloud his reading of the text, arguing that the latter did not *truly* endorse this custom.

[46] Marie-Nicolas-Silvestre Guillon and Armand Benjamin Caillau, eds., S. P. N. *Ephraem Syri Operum*, vol. 5 (Paris: Méquignon-Havard, 1833), 40–216.

[47] *Collectio Selecta SS. Ecclesiae Patrum, Complectens Exquisitissima Opera Tum Dogmatica Et Moralia, Tum Apologetica Et Oratoria* (Paris: Ex Typographeo Cosson, Via vulgo dieta Saint-Germain-des-Prés, no. 9, [1829]), 1, 6 ("Programma").

[48] The series had been designed to disseminate and popularize patristic sources, and economic considerations evidently loomed large in its publication. See Eugène Mangenot, "Caillau, Armand-Benjamin," in Alfred Vacant and Eugène Mangenot, eds., *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol. 2 (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1905), 1304–6.

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It was not until nearly twenty years later that another author would set out both to critique Guillon and Caillau's efforts and to attempt to improve upon Assemani's own. In 1851, the Italian Semiticist Angelo (né Mordecai) Paggi and his student, Fausto Lasinio, produced the first modern-language translation of the text.[49] The study of Ephrem's writings – a corpus that held first place "among the most precious monuments which remain from the sacred literature of the Syrians" – had been regrettably neglected among their Italian contemporaries, they intimated.[50] To remedy this omission, Paggi and Lasinio proposed to translate "those among the works of the Saint that are best suited to give an example of his astounding style of writing and worthy of sensible imitation" – that is to say: the *necrosima*.[51] The latter had thus far benefited only from a Latin translation – "which ought to be more suitably called a paraphrase" – in the context of Assemani's edition. Guillon, too, had merely followed that defective rendering, the translators lamented, "instead of the truth of the Syriac witness."[52] Their goal, by contrast, was to publish a faithful, even literal, rendering of the latter, in the hopes, their introduction suggests, that the hymns would contribute to the public tenor of the intellectual and spiritual discourse of their age.[53]

Their efforts received a less than glowing review by the great Semiticist Pius Zingerle.[54] His judgement, however, did not discourage others from following into Paggi and Lasinio's footsteps. Just two years later, Henry Burgess, a British clergyman with a passion for poetry and patristics – he would go on to translate Athanasius' festal letters for the *Oxford Library of the Fathers* – would produce what is still the only, albeit partial English version of the *necrosima*.[55] Burgess's work falls into two parts: a sizable

[49] Angelo Paggi and Fausto Lasinio, *Inni funebri di S. Efrem Siro* (Florence, 1851).

[50] "Al Lettore," in Paggi and Lasinio, *Inni funebri*.

[51] "Al Lettore," in Paggi and Lasinio, *Inni funebri*.

[52] "Al Lettore," in Paggi and Lasinio, *Inni funebri*.

[53] "Al Lettore," in Paggi and Lasinio, *Inni funebri*.

[54] Pius Zingerle, "*Inni funebri di S. Efrem Siro* by Angelo Paggi, Fausto Lasinio," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 11, no. 2 (1857): 354–58. Zingerle lamented the absence of versification or exposition of Syriac poetic elements. The translation – "kurz und einfach gehalten, grösstentheils auch richtig" – fared somewhat better, even though Zingerle found errors or infelicities in every hymn he consulted ("*Inni funebri*," 355).

[55] Henry Burgess, *Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies*, 1–63. Burgess in this project declared himself inspired by one of the *necrosima*'s other early exponents: August Hahn and Friedrich Ludwig Sieffert, whose 1825 *Chrestomathia Syriaca sive S. Ephraemi Carmina Selecta* (Leipzig: *sumptibus* F. C. G. Vogelii, 1825) contained six of its hymns (13, 15, 31, 32, 34, 35). The latter work, obtained by Burgess "by mere

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introduction, in which he listed and provided examples for the various syllabic meters he had discerned in Ephrem's writings; and a section of translations, including thirty-five "metrical hymns" and nine "metrical homilies." Among the former, the *necrosima* is quite dramatically overrepresented, furnishing twenty-three of Burgess's texts, for reasons that Burgess frankly admitted involved pandering to his audience. The poems "will be most interesting to the mass of readers, on account of their hold on human sympathies, and their easy and natural exhibition of the mode of thinking on practical religious matters in the days of Ephraem."[56] Economy of space also factored into Burgess's choices: While some of these hymns were concededly lengthy, "there are very many as brief as those we have translated, and quite as interesting."[57] Concise, theologically palatable, and appealing to his British audience, the *necrosima* furnished an ideal showcase for the poetic pluriformity Burgess thought to have recognized in Ephrem.

Burgess, like Paggi, had studied the *Bibliotheca Orientalis* alongside the Roman edition, treating the *necrosima* as having been crafted by Ephrem for Syriac liturgical use, and judging the collection equally suited to the needs of their respective constituencies.[58] The first year of the twentieth century furnished one further, final translation project. A Russian version of the *necrosima*, titled "Prayers at the Grave" or "Funerary Homilies" (надгробные песнопения), appears in the fourth (of eight) volumes of Ephrem's works published by the Moscow Theological Academy.[59] Thereafter, neither the twentieth nor the

accident," "excited [in Burgess] an eager desire to become acquainted with the Syrian metrical church literature in all its parts" and led him to acquire a copy of the *Bibliotheca Orientalis* as well (Burgess, *Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies*, xii–xiii).

[56] Burgess, *Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies*, lxxvi.

[57] Burgess, *Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies*, lxxvi.

[58] Burgess, *Select Metrical Hymns and Homilies*, lxxvi–lxxvii; compare Paggi and Lasinio, "Al Lettore," in *Inni funebri*.

[59] надгробные песнопения, in Ефрем Сирин, прп. Творения, vol. 4 (Sergiyev Posad: E. I. Snegirev, 1900), 366–533. A digitized version of this volume can be found at www.odinblago.ru/sirin_tom4 (accessed May 15, 2022). Interestingly, the Russian translation, unlike those of Paggi/Lasinio and Burgess, takes contextualizing liberties with some of the hymns titles. Hymn 19, marked as "In funere clericorum" in Assemani's translation, and dedicated to Covenanters – the *bnay qyāmā* – in the Syriac, here appears as "Fraternal consolation to a cleric who has parted with his soul" (Братское утешение клирику, с душо разлуча емуся) (надгробные песнопения, 417). Interest in Ephrem, including the *necrosima*, in Russian-speaking contexts, however, predated even this edition. For a recent glimpse at the Role of Ephrem in Russian Orthodox spirituality, see J. Eugene Clay, "The Apocalyptic Legacy of Pseudo-Ephraem in Russia: *The Sermon on the*

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twenty-first century witness to additional attempts to render the hymns accessible to modern audiences. Other efforts at celebrating the collection fall silent as well. As late as 1877, Camille Ferry had published a sustained analysis of the collection, including a French translation of excerpts from the hymns,[60] marveling at its diversity in the face of the uniformity of his subject, death: "The artist who does not change his tone can transform his chords, nuance the inflections of his voice, vary in some way even monotony itself. Ephrem had this gift. His funerary poetics are all in the elegiac tone, but within that, what rich variety of chords and of nuances!"[61] By contrast, with few exceptions, scholars of the past century have had little to say about these hymns – and this despite sustained interest in Ephrem and in Syriac literature more broadly.[62]

This neglect, perhaps unsurprisingly, coincides with the quest for the "historical Ephrem," already discussed in the preceding section, and the concomitant increase in scrutiny for works ascribed to him. The *necrosima*, long celebrated for its beauty and even paradigmatically Ephremic character, fared poorly in this context. Already Burkitt in 1901 dismissed the hymns from his study of Ephrem's corpus: "I have not tried to trace out the MS sources of these Funeral Hymns. Many of those that are genuine are excerpts arranged for liturgical use … They contain no quotations which imply the use of the Peshitta."[63] Barsoum, in keeping

Antichrist," in Robert Bjork, ed., *Catastrophes and the Apocalyptic in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 179–96.

[60] See, for example, Ferry's rendering of *madrāshê* 31 (*Saint Éphrem, poète* [Paris: Librairie A. Durand & Pedone Lauriel, 1877], 245–46).

[61] Ferry, *Saint Éphrem, poète*, 237. Even in the nineteenth century, Ephrem's oeuvre was not received wholly with adulation. See, for example, Abel-François Villemain's complaints concerning the tiresome uniformity of Christian funerary hymnody (*Tableau de l'éloquence chrétienne au IVe siècle* [Paris: Didier, Librarie-Éditeur, 1851], 147).

[62] A notable exception to this trend is Hermann Möller's 1965 dissertation, "Jenseitsglaube und Totenkult im altchristlichen Syrien, nach den Schriften unter dem Name Afrems des Syrers." As already Möller's title suggests, he, somewhat uncharacteristically for his era, seems relatively disinterested in the quest for the historical Ephrem. His work treats the *necrosima* alongside sources now deemed authentically Ephremic, including the *Carmina Nisibena* and the *Hymns on Paradise*, and others of problematic origin, including martyr literature and the *Testament of Ephrem*, as the centerpieces of his argument. While Möller thus acknowledges the likelihood that these hymns attest more to Ephrem's reception than to his work *per se*, he nevertheless treats the collection as a witness to Syriac Christianity of Ephrem's era ("Jenseitsglaube und Totenkult," xii). The work, while exceedingly valuable in many ways, nevertheless ranges in rather undifferentiated fashion across texts from at least the fourth through sixth centuries, all in the quest of identifying Ephrem's – or at least "Ephremic" – views on death and afterlife.

[63] Burkitt, *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel*, 9.

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with his general reluctance to exclude traditionally attributed writings, still ranks them among Ephrem's "known *mēmrē*"; two years later, by contrast, Ortiz de Urbina included them among the "Opera Dubia,"[64] while Melki roundly assigned them to the category of "Oeuvres Apocryphes."[65]

These judgements – as well as Beck's failure to include them among his editions – proved damning. The *necrosima* disappeared from discussions of Ephrem's writings, including those invested in "rehabilitating" aspects of his corpus.[66] Recent publications make no mention of them, and even experts on the Syriac Ephrem at times confess to, at best, hazy awareness of their existence. Such omissions are wholly intelligible in light of the emphasis placed on Ephrem's "genuine writings" over the past century. The hymns, by and large, lack the traits favored by Beck & Co. to separate the wheat from the chaff: Neither of the manuscripts on which Assemani based his edition predate the rise of Islam; Philoxenus' excerpts make no mention of them; the vocabulary and, arguably, aspects of their theological vision harken to a distinctively post-Ephremic era;[67] and their liturgical character, while treated as a mark of distinction in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings, often renders texts suspect to contemporary historians.

Assemani's treatment of his sources has done further disservice to the collection. The paraphrastic character of the Latin translation has long been noted. The edition itself, however, is not without obvious flaws, combining under the label of "*madrāshê*" a range of different literary formats, including *mēmrē* (verse homilies), *qōlê* (chants), and *ṣelūtê* (prayers), and presenting a far more coherent and well-structured format – including the assignation of titles to otherwise untitled hymns and their arrangement according to Assemani's sense of hierarchy – than the manuscript record sustains. It is not my aim to harshly criticize either of the Assemanis: Much ink has been spilled on this topic already, even as the field of Syriac studies continues to acknowledge its debt to their labors. Nor is the *necrosima* wholly devoid of traits that might commend it to those committed to the study of Ephrem-*qua*-historical Ephrem. The classification of Ephrem's hymns by tone in ms. *Sinai syr.* 10, for example,

[64] *Patrologia Syriaca*, 69. [65] "Saint Ephrem le Syrien," 83.

[66] See, for example, Lange, who points to Ortiz de Urbina and Melki for a full list of the "Writings wrongly attributed to Ephrem" (*Portrayal of Christ*, 35).

[67] Nevertheless, the *necrosima*'s most recent exponent, Hermann Möllers, has argued that "die Jenseitsvorstellung dieser Madrasche mit den Grundgedanken der Lehre Afrems durchaus übereinstimmt" (*Jenseitsglaube und Totenkult*, 157).

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includes references to Ephrem's authorship of a "book of the dead" – even if its inclusion of a second book "of Confessors and of the dead" somewhat confuses the matter.[68] A small number of the hymns included in the *necrosima*, moreover, are of demonstrably Ephremic vintage, albeit truncated to fit the collection's liturgical format.[69]

This book nevertheless does not aspire to the rehabilitation of the *necrosima* as the product of Ephrem's pen. It proceeds, rather, from the premise that, false attribution notwithstanding, works transmitted in his name are worthy of study under aspects other than their witness to the great Syrian himself. This modest proposal calls for a principled defense;[70] the particularities of the *necrosima*, however, suggest a number of motives in their own right.

I here note only four interlocking reasons supporting such a study, in the expectation that this book will do justice to them only in piecemeal fashion, and in the hopes that others will rise to fill the inevitable lacunae.

First and foremost, the hymns collected in the *necrosima* attest to the earliest extant stratum of burial practice in Syriac Christian sources. That is not to say that the manuscripts on which the collection is based are themselves the most ancient witnesses. MK III 45, an eighth- or ninth-century service book ("*Penqita*") discovered at Turfan and recently edited and translated by Erica C. D. Hunter and Jeff F. Coakley, likely predates even *Vat. Syr.* 92, the older of the two manuscripts that formed the basis of the *necrosima*.[71] The latter nevertheless, in Hunter and Coakley's words, provides readers with "a glimpse into the pre-history of the

[68] See, André de Halleux, "Une clé pour les hymnes d'Éphrem dans le MS Sinaï Syr. 10," *Le muséon* 85 (1972): 44–45.

[69] See, for example, *Carmina Nisibena* 52:1–2; 53:1; 68:1, and 52:3–6, in *madrāshê* 58; *Hymns on Julian Saba* 3:2, 1; 4:1, 1–4; 1:2, 1, 3; 2:2; 4:13, in *madrāshê* 5.

[70] An initial, compelling foray into providing such a defense for other aspects of the "Pseudo-Ephremic" corpus emerges from Jeff Wickes, "Performance, Relic, Poem: Ephrem's Hymns on Saints," in Niki Tsironi, ed., *Performance in Late Antiquity and Byzantium* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies/Harvard University Press, in press).

[71] Ms. MIK III 45, fols. 40v–43v ("[burial] orders for lay people") in Erica C. D. Hunter and Jeff F. Coakley, *A Syriac Service-Book from Turfan: Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin MS MIK III 45* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 140–46, trans. 242–47. The *Penqita* stems from the late eight or early ninth century; Hunter and Coakley, on the basis of radiocarbon dating, propose a window between 771 and 994 CE (*Service-Book from Turfan*, 11). The manuscript seems to have been composed outside of Turfan; Hunter and Coakley suggest a place of origin "somewhere in the heartland of the Church of the East, in Mesopotamia or western Persia" (*Syriac Service-Book from Turfan*, 15). This would make the Turfan manuscript at least fifty years younger than *Vat. sir.* 92 and 93, and certainly more Eastern in origin.

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service," inasmuch as the two manuscripts depend on a common source.[72] The funerary *qale* preserved in MK III 45 in particular retain the numbering of *qale* extant in *Vat. Syr.* 92 – and thus in the *necrosima*. *Qale* 1–18 – most of which appear in Assemani's edition[73] – thus correspond in both content and numbering to *qale* 1–18 in MK III 45.[74] In a similar vein, one of the *mēmrē* preserved in the *necrosima*, numbered *madrāshâ* 10 in Assemani, also appears in MK III 45, with two additional ones appearing in *Vat. Syr.* 92 as well.

The scribe responsible for the creation of the Turfan *Penqita* appears to have undertaken considerable editorial liberties vis-à-vis his *Vorlage*: The hymns include different verses, culled or transposed stanzas, and, especially in the case of the *mēmrē*, severe truncation vis-à-vis the text extant in the *necrosima*. These differences point to the manifest fluidity of liturgical texts rather than the superior antiquity of one or the other of these versions in their own right. Yet the *necrosima*'s nature as a repository of hymns without further structure suggests it, as Hunter and Coakley have observed, as "the relic of a time before there was a fixed order for the service specifying particular hymns and readings."[75] In the process of the *Penqita*'s creation, the ascription of different hymns to Ephrem – or indeed other authors – disappeared.[76] The *necrosima* nevertheless witnesses to a vibrant period of literary and ritual activity, whose fruits would go on to provide the basis for the liturgical structures surrounding death and burial in later centuries.

In this vein, second, the *necrosima* also provides readers with a glimpse into the public lives of the sources that have justifiably preoccupied scholars' engagement with Syriac literature. The hymns, in other words, digest the writings of the literary greats of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, re-presenting them to their audiences in bite-sized, but no less impactful portions.[77] At times, this takes the form of a hymn's appropriating excerpts from an author's known and celebrated work. *Madrāshâ*

[72] Hunter and Coakley, *Syriac Service-Book from Turfan*, 52.

[73] The *qale* in question appear as *madrāshê* 66, 67, 68, 70, 72, 76, 77, 78, and 79 in the *necrosima*. Compare also Hunter and Coakley's tabulation of incipits corresponding both to *Vat. Syr.* 92 and Assemani's numbering in Hunter and Coakley, *Syriac Service-Book from Turfan*, 303.

[74] In addition, *qala*, 40v, corresponds to *qala* 30 in *Vat. Syr.* 92/*madrāshê* 84 in the *necrosima*.

[75] Hunter and Coakley, *Syriac Service-Book from Turfan*, 52.

[76] Hunter and Coakley, *Syriac Service-Book from Turfan*, 54.

[77] For a discussion of this phenomenon, and epitomizing function of funerary hymnography more broadly, see Chapter 3.

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58, for example, famously combines selections from three of Ephrem's *Carmina Nisibena*, weaving them into a narrative about Death's and Satan's battling alongside one another, in a terrible – but ultimately doomed – effort to imperil humanity's salvation. In a similar vein, *Madrāshâ* 51 reflects an excerpt from Narsai's homily on the ten virgins, trimmed and curated for liturgical use.[78]

Other parts of the *necrosima* are less transparent about their sources, while nevertheless drawing on key theological ideas and exegetical motifs reflected in other Syriac sources. Rare is the reader of Ephrem's hymn cycles or Jacob's *mēmrē* who has not wondered on occasion – perhaps spurred by their students' incredulity – about late antique audiences' ability to follow the intricately woven arguments or to attend to what must have been lengthy and demanding performances. The pervasive echoes of these writings discernible in the *necrosima* suggest additional avenues along which Christians encountered their traditions' literary and doctrinal patrimony – an aspect of "reception history" both uniquely efficacious and commonly neglected in scholarship.

A third, equally significant reason for studying these sources involves their witness to Syriac Christians' historical context. Given death's ubiquity and communities' evident commitment to commemorating members in their socioeconomic particularity, many of the hymns center persons that are otherwise absent from or, at best, marginal to the literary record. These include, in addition to the well-represented voices of clergy and ascetics, those of women and householders, children and youths, and migrants and victims of natural disaster. The *necrosima*'s frequent use of *eidolopoeia* – the rhetorical practice of making the dead speak "in their own right" in these hymns – notwithstanding, we must, of course, resist the temptation of treating these accounts as reflective of the real, lived experiences of the individuals or groups in question. They nevertheless map, for readers' benefit, common discourses and indicators of the social imagination surrounding such persons.

At times, the resulting data is impressively clear, as in the case of *madrāshâ* 16's description of the steps by which a departed member of the clergy would be commemorated and have his corpse conveyed to the grave.[79] Much of the time, however, the information conveyed in these hymns is more suggestive, and more in need of interpretation. How ought we to understand, for example, the role of women in the community, in

[78] For a discussion of this see, Chapter 3.

[79] For a discussion of this text, see Chapter 5.

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light of wives' and mothers' portrayal as essential to sustaining the household? What are we to make of the agential calculus – the balance of divine and human responsibility – inherent in the hymns' presentation of pandemic? What might we infer about the clerical structures and forms of asceticism prevalent in the community, considering the plethora of hymns commemorating Covenanters, or about the perceived relationship between such ascetics and the faith community at large? To these questions and others like them, we will attend in the following chapters.

Last but certainly not least, the hymns function as signposts for mapping an "emotional community" – a social group invested in a shared system of feelings – among the churches who used them to commemorate their dead, witnessing to emotions they were prepared to valorize as beneficial or harmful, the affective bonds they recognized among their members, and the modes of emotional expression they considered acceptable or desirable.[80] In the process, the *necrosima* attests to complex patterns of attachment between members of a monastic community, between parents and children, even between bodies and souls, with the latter grieving over their inevitable if temporary abandonment of their corporeal companions.

Particularly striking, however, are the range and pluriformity of responses to death, including one's own mortality, that appear as tolerable, even emulable, throughout these writings. The hymns point to a culture of affect that could sustain conflicting emotional reactions and tensive patterns of feelings, at times portraying death as the starting point of an arduous journey, as a well-deserved rest, or a terrifying space in which to meditate on one's sins. In a similar vein, mourning a loved one's passing appears at times justified and commendable, at others reflective of a fundamental theological misunderstanding. Different *madrāshê* present audiences with different models for dying and mourning. Both in the *necrosima* and in their ritual performance, these nevertheless co-existed with one another, creating layered emotional pedagogies for learning to die and to live amidst bereavement.

It is the aspiration of this monograph to trace all three lineages – that of the *necrosima*'s relationship with the Syriac literature of the first millennium; that of its witness to social, ritual, and exegetical practices; and that of its role in shaping the emotional landscape of Syriac Christianity. The

[80] I take my definition of "emotional communities" from the work of Barbara H. Rosenwein. See, for example, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002): 821–45.

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following, final section of this Introduction provides an overview both of subsequent chapters and of the book's strategies for addressing the broader interlocking questions that have shaped this project.

OUTLINE AND CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 ("Translating Eve: Women and Performance in the *Necrosima*") focuses on hymns designed to accompany the burial of wives and mothers, identified by Assemani variously as "In funere mulierum" (On women's burial, *madrāshâ* 32) and "In funere matrisfamilias" (On the burial of a female householder, *madrāshâ* 31). Their collection as part of Assemani's "family section," a segment of the *necrosima* addressing the burial of married men, women, children, and youths, provides insight into the construction of feminine identity at the intersection of social strictures and biblical models. The chapter also reflects an initial foray into the question of the hymns' function in their original setting as part of funerary processions, including their performance by women's choirs who voiced both the part of the deceased and that of her community. In these contexts, the hymns could serve as pedagogical performances, remapping the Syrian city with an eye toward both protological and eschatological realities.

While the *necrosima* boasts only a couple of hymns explicitly addressing the funerals of mothers, *madrāshê* on children's and youths' burials account for, by Assemani's reckoning, eleven hymns – more than the number allotted to bishops, priests and deacons, or monastics. A closer examination of both the hymns themselves and Assemani's manuscript source suggests a reduction of that number to a mere five: four for children, and one for youths. The latter, discussed in Chapter 3 ("'Short Days They Lived on Earth …': The Death of Children in the *Necrosima*"), nevertheless comprise an impressive and impressively diverse body of reflections on the death of those who had failed to reach adulthood, narrating the anticipated fate of the departed, the experience of bereavement for families and communities, and suggesting a range of pious postures by which they ought to encounter loss. These hymns also provide a site for examining the intersection between the *necrosima* and Syriac literature more broadly. The *madrāshê* accordingly reflect themes prominent in the writings of Syriac's most celebrated authors, including Jacob of Serugh and Ephrem's genuine writings, and translate these authors' theological reflections into concise, personalized hymnic epitomes.

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Chapter 4 ("Men and Means: Wealth and Poverty in the *Necrosima*") addresses the vestiges of moneyed laymen in the *necrosima*. The latter are, perhaps not unexpectedly, both ubiquitous and largely invisible in this collection. The *necrosima* includes one hymn specifically addressing the death of a husband and father: *madrāshâ* 30 ("In funere patrisfamilias" [On the burial of a male householder]). By contrast, the majority of the *necrosima*'s forty "generic" hymns contemplates a male lay Christian subject, mourned by his children, anxious about abandoning his family, and plagued by anticipation of the harsh judgement he might receive. These hymns become a site for working out the *necrosima*'s theology of possessions – a topic that appears explicitly in some of the collection's most paraenetically focused hymns, including, for example, *madrāshâ* 28 ("In funere principum, & Divitis cuiusque" [On the burial of a prince or some kind of rich man]), but is a prominent theme in much of the corpus. This chapter accordingly examines anxieties about wealth and poverty, and the ethical pedagogy inherent in the *necrosima*, including its emphasis on charity.

Chapter 5 ("Becoming Patriarchs: Bishops in the *Necrosima*") turns from Christian laypersons to the spiritual elites both serving and governing the communities in question. The *necrosima* opens with an extensive section on clergy, most prominently hymns designed to accompany the burial of a city's bishop. The latter's deaths posed particular challenges for communities, inasmuch as episcopal transitions provided openings for intra-Christian conflict, schism, or simply extended leadership vacuums. The hymns thematize these anxieties, frequently featuring an anthropomorphized version of the church mourning on behalf of herself and her children, the Christian community, who had been left orphaned by their bishop's demise. Strikingly, these hymns also showcase an aspect of the *necrosima*'s approach to biblical exegesis. While a smattering of texts – the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the "dry bones" of Ezekiel 37, and Jesus' resurrection of various gospel characters – thus figure prominently in many of the *madrāshê*, the lives of departed bishops are read through the lens of biblical types, becoming identified in immediate and personal ways with the patriarchs of the Old Testament. This chapter explores the *necrosima*'s engagement with Scripture to narrate both death and the deceased themselves through a range of exegetical lenses.

Chapter 6 ("Reaching across the Threshold: Covenanters in the *Necrosima*") turns to a different, but equally well represented, group of Christian elites: the so-called Sons and Daughters of the Covenant. These

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communities of male and female ascetics assumed responsibility for the practical and liturgical functioning of the churches, including, most prominently, the task of chanting psalms and hymns at ecclesiastical gatherings, including funerary processions. The *necrosima* contains a number of *madrāshê* designated for the burial of male Covenanters – as well as, this chapter suggests, one addressing the death of their female counterparts. The hymns provide readers with an intimate glimpse at the grief and anxiety that attended these community's loss of one of their members, as well as insight into the strategies by which the bereaved sought to maintain ties "across the threshold." This chapter accordingly examines the ways in which expectations of mutual prayer – by the bereaved on behalf of the dead, and by the dead on behalf of their surviving brothers and sisters – could serve to construct visions of continuity and hopes for eventual reunion.

Thus far, the texts discussed in these chapters contemplate the deaths of Christians under roughly ordinary circumstances. Yet late antiquity, like all eras of history, also provided much occasion for extra-ordinary deaths, including those precipitated by war and natural disaster. In addition to hymns addressing the deaths and burials of individual members of the community, the *necrosima* also features a number of poems that address instances of mass death due to pandemic and pestilence. Assemani identifies three such *madrāshê* (63, 64, and 69, "In tempore pestis" [In time of pestilence]); on text-internal grounds, Chapter 7 ("The Churches Are Empty, the Priests Are Silent: Rewriting Ritual in Pandemic Times") argues *madrāshê* 75 should be included in this grouping as well. In both form and context of preservation, these hymns were manifestly part of their communities' ritual repertoire. At the same time, however, they witness to periods in which ordinary ritual pathways had broken down. In the midst of sickness and bereavement, the hymns suggest, churches stood empty, clergy mourned the loss of their brothers, even burials had ceased in light of death's relentless onslaught. This chapter examines the *madrāshê* in question as spaces for reconfiguring communities' ritual practices. The *necrosima*'s pandemic hymns and other, roughly contemporaneous liturgical sources thus point to communities' embrace of lament, petition, and penance as models for engaging the divine.

The book's conclusion ("Beyond the Threshold"), finally, draws together the hymns and themes addressed in previous chapters to reflect synthetically on the visions of death and the afterlife that emerge from them. It examines their affective, social, and theological resonances in conversation with other early Christian traditions.

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Throughout these chapters, the attentive reader may observe a narrative thread winding its way through the book. While, in other words, individual chapters are designed to be read largely independently of one another, they nevertheless address interlocking strata of Syriac funerary liturgies and the ritual, intellectual, and affective discourses surrounding them. For reasons that have already become apparent, it is difficult to speak of the *necrosima* as a unified corpus – to say nothing of a coherent whole. Nor do the *madrāshê* examined closely in this book constitute more than a mere sample of the collection's broader resources. Connected by scribal practice and authorial ascription, these hymns nevertheless represent a lens through which to engage some of the central questions that preoccupy students of Syriac Christianity. Chapters 2 and 7 accordingly address matters of performativity, considering the mechanics of ritual both in the context of ordinary deaths and in that of natural disaster and the concomitant practical and liturgical exigencies. Chapters 3 and 5, by contrast, consider the resources from which these rituals are constructed, including both Scripture and the patrimony of the greater literary tradition. Chapters 4 and 6, finally, consider in depth two of the *necrosima*'s central pedagogical *topoi*: the role of worldly good in the lives of Christians – and that of prayer in constituting communities that transcended the present life.

The following pages will, I fear, barely scratch the surface of this complex and fascinating set of texts. The aim of this book is, then, to begin a conversation rather than to arrive at an all-encompassing conclusion, and to invite rather than foreclose further inquiry. To this end, we turn first to the heart of the Christian household: the mother and her biblical analogue – the mother of life and death.

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