Poetry as Exegesis: St. Ephrem and Ibn ʿArabī on the Representation of Scriptural Exegesis in Poetry

Tareq Moqbel | ORCID: 0000-0003-2007-9513
Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
tareq.moqbel@regents.ox.ac.uk

Received 24 July 2022 | Accepted 24 February 2024 | Published online 20 May 2024

Abstract

This article attempts to shed light on the representation of scriptural exegesis in mystical poetry. Concentrating on the poetry of St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE) and Ibn ʿArabī the Andalusian (d. 638/1240), the article explores how both authors transformed Scripture – the Bible and the Qur’an – into poetry and how they incorporated exegesis into their poems. On the level of exegetical method, the article presents various techniques of exegetical poetry such as typology, juxtaposition, and the creation of thematic links. On the level of intellectual history, the article highlights the common ground between the approaches of St. Ephrem and Ibn ʿArabī to both Scripture and exegetical poetry. More generally, it highlights the parallels between Eastern Christian and Muslim mystical traditions of exegetical poetry.

Keywords

The Bible – The Qur’an – St. Ephrem – Ibn ʿArabī – exegesis – poetry
1 Introduction

Scripture is a polyphonic phenomenon, both intrinsically and through its reception by the communities of reading. The possible senses of Scripture have been investigated in various ways, and reading communities frequently resort to different modes of expression in recognition of its polysemy. Grounded in the notions that poetry is a "special way of imagining the world," that through "fiction and poetry new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality," and that there are parallels between prophets and poets, this article addresses the exegesis of Scripture – exclusively, the Bible and the Qur'an – as it is represented in poetry. It is devoted to two major figures of Eastern Christianity and Islam who have both shown a profound fascination with the intersection of scriptural exegesis and poetry – St. Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) and Ibn 'Arabī the Andalusian (d. 638/1240).

Exegetical poetry – that is, forms of poetry that incorporate Scripture, its interpretation, and exegetical techniques – has been the subject of increasing academic study on Judaism and Christianity. As for Islam, there is a comparably modest body of work, though treatments of this topic could be found in contemporary studies on mystical poetry, as well as medieval works on the

1 Unless stated otherwise, the translations are my own.
2 While acknowledging the oral aspects of scriptural books, and the fact that they can be conceptualised as utterances, this article treats them as books and written statements. That is to say, my objects of analysis are the final canonical products – the Peshitta and the Qur'an as books. For the latter as a written document, see briefly Walid Saleh, "Word," in Twenty-One Words in Islam, ed. Jamal Elias (Oxford: One World Publications, 2010), 356–76, at 359–60. For a broader discussion, see Angelika Neuwirth, The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 66–104.
7 Representatives of this genre include Annemarie Schimmel, As through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Fatemeh Keshavarz, Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina
process of quoting and inserting (*al-iqtibās wa-l-taḍmīn*) the Qur’an in Arabic literature.8

The poetic standing of St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabī is, however, not the same. Especially since the later part of the twentieth century, as Brock notes, the poetic artistry of St. Ephrem has gained recognition. Brock attributes this to the fact that we now have better editions of St. Ephrem’s works, and to the fact that Greek and Latin poetry are no longer the standard for evaluating the aesthetic qualities of Syriac poetry.9 St. Ephrem has thus been described as “the greatest poet in the Syriac language,”10 who possessed a “superb technical skill and literary artistry.”11 In addition to the literary quality of St. Ephrem’s poetry, it did have an influence on later Christian poetry.12 In this connection, and in order to secure authority, the Syriac Vita tradition attaches a claim of divine inspiration to St. Ephrem’s works. The tradition records that St. Ephrem received a heavenly scroll from an angel of God, and that “[t]he day after he received the document he became filled with the Holy Spirit, and began uttering marvelous things, going about preaching and teaching many.”13 In fact, St. Ephrem seems to view poetry as a divine gift, as we learn from the formulaic

---


phrase ܗܒ ܠܝ ܡܪܝ (hab lī mōr) which he employs more than once in his *Hymns on Faith*.15

Ibn ʿArabī’s poetry, on the other hand, did not have an impact on Muslim intellectual history similar to that of St. Ephrem on Eastern Christianity, nor did it receive a similar recognition.16 Ibn ʿArabī is not generally recognised as a leading poet of the Muslim tradition.17 He is mostly known for his prose works in which he excelled, and it was perhaps through these prose works that he was given the title of *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (the Grand Master). Yet, his poetry has had its admirers. In a seminal essay on poetry in Ibn ʿArabī’s thought, Addas described his poetry, in particular his anthology of poems *Dīwān al-Maʿārif*, as a “monument of Arabic mystical poetry.”18 Comparably, the claim to inspiration that we have seen in the Syriac Vita tradition with regards to St. Ephrem is paralleled by a similar claim Ibn ʿArabī relates in one of his visions.19

---

14 I transliterate the Syriac texts to the Latin alphabet according to the West Syriac system. In my transcriptions, I do not indicate spirantization of the *begadkepat* consonants. Also, I disregard silent letters; for example, I have *mōr* for ܡܪܝ rather than *mōr(y)*.


2 Literature Overview

Much has been written about the formal elements – for example, the literary qualities, metre, and rhyme – of St. Ephrem's poetry.\(^{20}\) Even more has been written on the theological significance and themes of St. Ephrem's poetry.\(^{21}\) The interaction of the Bible and St. Ephrem's poetry, however, has been investigated in fewer studies. Among such studies is Maier's doctoral dissertation, in which she stated that “[r]arely have scholars read Ephrem's poetry as an exegetical genre.”\(^{22}\) Another notable exception is Griffith's succinct and perceptive monograph, *Faith Adoring the Mystery.*\(^{23}\) Recently, Wickes' monograph examined how St. Ephrem “used the Bible to build a literary world,” arguing that St. Ephrem’s “interest lies not with the interpretation of particular verses but with the imaginative horizons within which he and his audience interpreted any biblical texts at all.” Wickes' articulation of the relationship between St. Ephrem's poetry and the Bible was motivated by the fact that “[s]cholarship

---


\(^{22}\) Carmen E. Maier, “Poetry as Exegesis: Ephrem the Syrian’s Method of Scriptural Interpretation Especially as seen In His Hymns on Paradise and Hymns on Unleavened Bread” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2012), 109.

on the madrasha as a genre has tended to focus on its formal characteristics and historical origins."\(^{24}\)

Turning to Ibn Ṭarabī, the state of research on the relationship between his poetry and the Qur’an is not better in this respect. More than two decades ago, Addas remarked: “Whatever work has been accomplished has failed to comprehend the eminent place that poetry occupies in Ibn Ṭarabī’s work, and it has been even less successful in understanding the tremendous role that he gives poetry in support of his teachings."\(^{25}\) I think this also holds true with regard to understanding the place of the Qur’an in Ibn Ṭarabī’s poetry. There are exceptions however, one of which is McAuley’s *Ibn Ṭarabī’s Mystical Poetics*.

Although it seems that no study hitherto has attempted a comparison between St. Ephrem and Ibn Ṭarabī, this article joins a host of studies analyzing points of overlap between the intellectual thought of our authors and the corresponding traditions – Islam in the case of St. Ephrem, and Christianity in the case of Ibn Ṭarabī. For instance, Griffith, following a line of previous scholars, studied echoes of St. Ephrem’s eschatological imagery in the Qur’an.\(^{26}\) Along these same comparative lines, DaCrema’s thesis explored points of contact between Ibn Ṭarabī and St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226).\(^{27}\) Much earlier, Father Palacios went as far as arguing – on the basis of the similarities he observed between monasticism and Sufism – that Ibn Ṭarabī’s mysticism was of Eastern Christian origin.\(^{28}\) In any case, the present article does not argue for a direct literary connection between St. Ephrem and Ibn Ṭarabī – I am not aware of any evidence to the effect that Ibn Ṭarabī read St. Ephrem, or that he was conversant in Syriac.

While attentive to the significant differences in their thought, the article pursues the possibility that St. Ephrem and Ibn Ṭarabī find common ground in their concern with scriptural exegesis. In other words, this study is primarily

\[^{24}\text{Jeffrey Wickes, }\text{*Bible and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia Ephrem’s Hymns on Faith* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 1–3.}\]

\[^{25}\text{Addas, ”The Ship of Stone,” }5.\]


\[^{27}\text{Norma J. DaCrema, ”Transcending the Feminine: Negotiating Gender in the Mysticism of Ibn Al-Ṭarabī and Francis of Assisi” (PhD diss., Temple University, 2015).}\]

\[^{28}\text{For a discussion on this point, see Anthony O’Mahony, ”Eastern Christianity and Jesuit Scholarship on Arabic and Islam: Modern History and Contemporary Theological Reflections,” in }\text{Philosophy, Theology and the Jesuit Tradition: The Eye of Love, ed. Anna Abram, Peter Gallagher, and Michael Kirwan (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark), 159–86, at 172–76.}\]
concerned with the affinities between the two authors in terms of *exegetical methodology* rather than *content* and *outcome*. By moving the emphasis from the theology of both authors to their *exegetical activity*, I hope to be able to show how their theologies take them in different paths, but the process of interpretation seems to unite them in manifold ways.

Although the article attempts to demonstrate how exegesis is represented in poetry, it is not my contention that exegesis as it appears in poetry is different from prose exegetical works; in fact, both are similar in various ways. Rather, the point I am making is that poetry is an additional *medium, or vehicle*, for scriptural exegesis, one that is not always appreciated. Another caveat to make is that the article does not claim that authors writing in non-Semitic languages do not use exegetical modes like those applied by St. Ephrem and Ibn Ṭarabî; in fact, they do. However, I have chosen to limit my discussion to these two Semitic authors. Whether or not their languages condition and shape their exegetical approaches is a different question that calls for further research. Finally, I should like to stress the probative rather than the dispositive nature of the article.

The remainder of the article falls into three main parts. First, I will consider how the two authors approach Scripture in general – as understanding their exegetical poetry requires some awareness of their more general scriptural reading practices. Next, I will shed light on why the authors represented Scripture in poetry. Against this backdrop, I will examine the different ways in which our authors interpret Scripture in their poetry.

3 St. Ephrem and Ibn Ṭarabî on Reading Scripture

Scripture occupied a prominent position in the projects of St. Ephrem and Ibn Ṭarabî. Brock says about St. Ephrem’s hymns that they are “soaked in Scripture,” that his “thought and imagery are so deeply rooted in the Bible,” and that his “writings show an intimate familiarity with the Bible.” Griffith avers: “Ephrem is remembered as a teacher, and as an interpreter of the scriptures.” He also notes that in the seventh century, St. Ephrem was given the title

---

of “Interpreter,” مفسر (mpashqōnō). Elsewhere he writes: “Truthfully, one may say that all of St. Ephrem’s works are in some sense commentaries on the scriptures.” Correspondingly, Chodkiewicz made a strong case for the centrality of the Qur’an in Ibn ʿArabī’s oeuvre. As he writes: “It is not incorrect to consider that the work of the Shaykh al-Akbar, as we presently know it, is in its entirety a Qur’ānic commentary.” Another leading Akbarian scholar, Chittick, shares this assessment: “The ‘Meccan Openings,’ like the Shaykh al-Akbar’s other works, are nothing if not commentary upon the Holy Book.”

3.1 The Intrinsic Polysemy of Scripture
St. Ephrem and Ibn ʿArabī both share an appreciation for the multivalent nature of Scripture. That is to say that the Bible and the Qur’an, according to our authors, are infinitely open and comprise multiple meanings. These multiple possibilities seem to derive from two sources: the intrinsic nature of the text and the qualities of the interpreter. The first factor – that the inner structure of the Bible implies infinite meanings – is attested in St. Ephrem’s statement in the commentary on the Diatessaron attributed to him:

If there were [only] one face for the words [of Scripture] (elū ḫad ḫwō parsūphēn d-melē), the first interpreter would find it, and all other listeners would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding. But every word of our Lord has its own image, and each image has many members (ḥadōmē sagīʾē), and each member possesses its own species and form.

The identification of the Qur’an with intrinsic multiple meanings is a recurring motif in Ibn ʿArabī’s works: “The Qur’ān, for Ibn ʿArabī, is a treasure whose

33 Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 6–7.
abundance is truly infinite; and the *ishārāt*, the ‘allusions’ to divine secrets which can be perceived by those who listen to it in a state of perfect ummiyya, are countless.” Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that different meanings can all be valid at the same time. They are all *inherent* in the text, and it is God who premeditatively inserted them into the Qur’an. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that this phenomenon – that God *intends* all the different meanings insofar as they are allowed by the language of revelation – applies to other revealed books too:

> Every sense which is supported by any verse in God’s Speech – whether it is the Criterion, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, or the Scroll – in the view of anyone who knows that language is intended by God in the case of that interpreter. For His knowledge encompasses all senses (*li-‘ilmihī l-iḥāṭiyī Subḥānahū bi-jamī‘ī l-wujūh*).  

In this passage Ibn ‘Arabī uses the word *wujūh*, the plural of *wajh*, literally meaning “face,” in his description of the senses of the Qur’an. Comparatively, we saw that St. Ephrem employed the word *parṣūphēn* – *parṣūpō* with a third-person feminine plural suffix – which includes the meaning of “face” within its semantic range. Thus, both authors describe the senses of Scripture in a similar way – the “faces” of Scripture. This specific comparison can lead us to a broader point – it seems to be common to use the word for “face” to describe the senses of Scripture in the Near East. For instance, the notion of the “seventy faces” is used to speak about the polyvalence of the Torah in Rabbinic Judaism.

### 3.2 Scriptural Polysemy as a Product of Reading Communities

The infinity of Scripture is also a function of the interpreter according to St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabī. This is to say that infinite interpretations are made possible because of an extratextual factor – the reader’s receptivity. The existence of various readers of Scripture has bearings on expanding the orbit of its interpretation. St. Ephrem writes: “Each person hears in accordance with his capacity (*w-nōsh ak d-sōpeq shōma’*), and it is interpreted in accordance with

---

what has been given to him.”

Ibn ‘Arabī agrees. Mirroring St. Ephrem’s notion of capacity and ability, Ibn ‘Arabī writes that the person who has inner insight continually receives new meanings: “The servant whose inner sight is enlightened (al-ʿabd al-munawwar al-baṣīra) ... obtains with each recitation of a verse a new understanding, distinct from that which he had during the preceding recitation and that which he will obtain during the succeeding recitation.”

He also goes as far as saying that every heart has a Qur’an that suits it (fa-li-kulli qalbin Qurʾān). In another formulation, Ibn ‘Arabī says:

A single verse from God’s Book reaches the listener as one entity. One listener understands one thing from it, another listener does not understand that thing but understands something else, while a third understands many things. Therefore each of those who consider this verse cite it in accordance with the diversity of the preparedness of their understandings.

Zargar observes how this notion – for Ibn ‘Arabī – is connected with the concept of ongoing revelation, and then explains:

Some reciters color the Quran that they receive. They recite the Quran, or read the Quran, and encounter it prejudiced by the attributes that they have. It is no surprise, then, that some find in the Quran a manual of war, for their hearts are at war, while others discover a book that legitimizes their lack of metaphysical commitments, for such are their hearts. Hearts that take on divine traits, then, come closer to receiving the Quran as the Quran, so much so that a class of reciters exists who takes on the attributes of the Quran in their recitation, instead of superimposing their own hearts’ traits upon the Quran.

We also note St. Ephrem’s allusion that understanding Scripture is given (metiheb). In a similar manner, Ibn ‘Arabī describes particular

---

44 Ibn ‘Arabī, FM, 8:97.
understandings as being revealed upon the heart (fa-nuzūlu l-qurānī ‘alā l-qalbī bi-hādhā l-fahmi l-khāṣṣ). Moreover, St. Ephrem’s شهامة (shōma’), noted above, alerts us to the idea that the interpreter “hears” Scripture – a common theme in Ibn ‘Arabī too, derived from a cognate Semitic root (shm’ in Syriac, and sm’ in Arabic). For instance, Ibn ‘Arabī writes that those who recite the Qur’an at night, “stand reciting His words, opening their ears (wa-yafaṭhūna asmā’āhum) to what He is saying to them in His words.”

3.3 Nature and Scripture

Another aspect that demonstrates the congruence between St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabī is their perception of the complementarity between Nature and Scripture. According to Brock, St. Ephrem shows an awareness of the “interconnectedness of everything” and appreciates that “[n]ature, the natural world, stands side by side with Scripture as a witness to God.” Or as Griffith puts it, “Ephraem voices the idea that Nature and Scripture are the twin sources of revelation.”

In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world, so that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator; Nature (حَيَّة), through man’s use of it, Scripture (حَرَّة), through his reading of it.

48  Ibn ‘Arabī, FM, 8:99.
49  Ibn ‘Arabī, FM, 2:10. In this context, Mohammed Rustom, Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023), 172, writes: “Sufis have always placed critical importance upon listening to scripture, which is emphasized by such verses as Q 7:204. And when the Quran is recited, hearken unto it, and listen, that haply you may receive Mercy ... The practice of immersed listening to the recited Quran consequently engenders increasingly deeper modes of contemplation among listeners, thus resulting in ever new and more profound understandings upon every aural encounter with the Quran.” Additionally, employing the idea of “hearing” in this context may possibly reflect pre-modern ways of engaging with Scripture. See on this topic William A. Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Susan Niditch, Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature (London: SPCK, 1997).
50  Brock, The Luminous Eye, 164.
51  Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 32.
The connection that St. Ephrem makes between Nature (κύρων) and Scripture (κτόβο) finds its parallel in one of Ibn 'Arabi's central doctrines, which was formulated by later scholars as “the oneness of Being” (waḥdat al-wujūd). Thus, Ibn 'Arabi says that “all existence constitutes words of God” (wa-l-wujūdu kulluhū kalimātu Llāh).53 He also conceives of the cosmos as a book: “Know ... that all of the cosmos is a divine book” (i'lam ... anna l-ʿālama kullahū kitābun maṣṭūr).54 As Chittick explains: “Just as the Koran is God’s book displaying His signs or verses, so also the cosmos is His book.”55 According to Ibn 'Arabi, it is the folk of the Qur’an who recognise God’s habitual signs.56

3.4 Scripture and Symbolism

For St. Ephrem and Ibn 'Arabi, Scripture and nature are vehicles for symbols. Brock notes that St. Ephrem uses different words to describe this phenomenon, but the most common term he uses is ṛōzō (pl. ṛōzē).57 These are defined by Griffith as “the mystic symbols in which God reveals the truth about himself and the truth to human beings.”58 One case in which St. Ephrem applies this concept and describes it as a symbol is found in a group of madrōshē in On Virginity VII where St. Ephrem explores the links between oil and Christ. St. Ephrem says in the fourteenth stanza: ŏf zaytō saḡi ṛōzē-w, “so too the olive’s symbols are manifold.”59 In the Hymns on Faith XLIX, St. Ephrem makes an explicit association between the Bible and symbolism: ṛōzaw bū-rōytō, “His symbols are in the Law.”60 In the same vein, Ibn 'Arabi explains the function of symbols in a cluster of poetic verses prefacing the twenty-sixth chapter of the Futūḥāt, two of which are the following:

alā inna l-rumūza dalilu ṣidqin / alā l-ma’nā l-mughayyabi fi l-fu’ādī
wa-law lā l-lughzu kāna l-qawlū kufran / wa-addā l-ʿālamīna ilā l-ʿinādī

54 Ibn 'Arabi, FM, 9:397.
56 Ibn 'Arabi, FM, 6:95.
57 Brock, The Luminous Eye, 41.
58 Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 30.
Indeed, the symbols are a true indication, of the meaning concealed in the heart.
If not for the riddle, the statement would be a disbelief, and lead the worlds to opposition.61

Following the short poem, Ibn ʿArabī advances that symbols and riddles are not sought for themselves (lay sat murādatan lī-anfusihā); rather they are sought for what they signify. He then states that their places in the Qurʾān are all the verses of reflection (wa-mawādıʿuhā min-a l-qurʾānī āyātū l-līṭibārī kulluhā) and quotes the Qurʾān to this effect, “Such are the comparisons We draw for people” (Q. 29:43).62

3.5 The Literal Sense and the Spiritual Sense

St. Ephrem’s and Ibn ʿArabī’s scriptural hermeneutics also converge in another aspect – the recognition of the literal and the spiritual senses of Scripture; a feature common to many exegetical traditions in Christianity, Islam, and more generally. Griffith observes that St. Ephrem’s exegesis comes in two forms: the literal meaning and the spiritual sense.63 Brock makes the same point in slightly different words. He posits that although St. Ephrem is primarily concerned with uncovering the “interior meaning of Scripture,” he is also interested in the “outward historical meaning.” These two levels, according to Brock, are “intimately intermingled and linked.”64 St. Ephrem states this methodology, in almost explicit terms, in his prose commentary on the Genesis account of Jacob’s blessings for his sons: “Now that we have spoken of the literal meaning ܣܘܥܪܢܐܝܬ (sūʿrōnōʾī) of the blessings of Jacob, let us go back and speak of their spiritual meaning ܪܘܚܢܐܝܬ (rūḥōnōʾī) as well.”65

Correspondingly, Ibn ʿArabī maintains two senses of Scripture; the outward sense (al-ẓāhir) and the inward sense (al-bāṭin). However, and in contrast to St. Ephrem who seems to put more emphasis on the spiritual inward meaning, Ibn ʿArabī gives superiority to the letter; that is, the outward meaning.66

63 Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 32.
64 Brock, The Luminous Eye, 48.
Winkel's book *Islam and the Living Law* has demonstrated, through a series of examples, how Ibn ʿArabī paid close attention to the literal sense of the Qur’ān.67 On the importance of observing both senses, let Ibn ʿArabī express himself directly: “Know that God addressed man in his totality, without giving precedence to his exterior over his interior ... Perfect happiness belongs to those who join the external meaning with the internal meaning.”68 On another occasion – and in a statement that resembles Brock’s point that the literal and spiritual are linked according to St. Ephrem – Ibn ʿArabī describes how the faithful readers of the Qur’an observe the complex relationship between the outward and inward senses:

As for the faithful, the truthful, the possessors of steadfastness among the friends of God, they cross over (fa-ʿabarū), taking the outward sense along with them. They do not cross from the outward sense to the inward sense ... Hence they see things with “two eyes” and, through the light of their faith, witness “the two highways.”69

We notice in this passage, as well as in other places of the *Futūḥāt*, that Ibn ʿArabī describes the process of interpretation as a “crossing over” – ʿabarū is the third-person plural masculine perfect for the root ‘br, meaning to pass, or to cross over.70 Chittick elaborates: “The process of interpretation is a crossing over (ʿubūr), as we have already seen in speaking of the ‘interpretation’ (taʿbūr) of dreams. Once crossing over is made, one ‘gives expression’ (ʿibāra) to the inward sense through outward forms.”71 St. Ephrem employs a similar concept, “crossing,” when he reflects on his reading of Genesis in his *Hymns on Paradise V*. In the fourth stanza, he uses a C-stem third-person singular feminine perfect, ܐܥܒܪܬ (aʿbrat), derived from the root ‘br72 – identical to the Arabic root. The verse reads:

The eye as it read
Transported (ܕܝܚܐ) the mind.

---

71 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 245.
In the fifth stanza, adducing a G-stem first-person common perfect, ܘܥܒܪܬ (w-ʿebret), St. Ephrem writes:

Both the bridge and the gate
of Paradise
did I find in this book.
I crossed over (ܕܝܫܚܐ) and entered.73

This observation gains weight when we consider that St. Ephrem (like Ibn ʿArabī) uses this root in his reflection on the practice of reading Scripture – in the fourth stanza he mentions “reading,” and in the fifth stanza there is a reference to the “Book.”

3.6 River Imagery and Scriptural Authority
St. Ephrem and Ibn ʿArabī both employ river imagery in their discussions of scriptural authority. In the Hymns on Faith XLVIII, and in an attempt to justify the existence of four overlapping Gospels rather than the single Diatessaron, St. Ephrem makes an association between the four rivers of paradise and the four Gospels. In one verse, he describes the Gospel as “pouring forth”:

ܓܚܬ ܒܐܪܙ ܓܝܚܘܢܣܒܪܬܐ ܠܡܫܩܝܘ

The Gospel poured forth, in the symbol of Gihon, to give water.74

Ibn ʿArabī gives a similar description, though in trying to show that the Qurʾan is the origin of all other authoritative scriptural books. In a long pedagogical narrative in Chapter 167 of the Futūḥāt, he relates that a seeker reaches – after a long journey in the heavens – the “Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary” (سلاحؾ)

al-muntahā). Thereupon, he sees a great river from which three rivers burst forth, in addition to a number of rivulets. Upon seeking an explanation, he is told that the great river is the Qur’an; that the three rivers are the Torah, the Psalter, and the Gospel respectively; and that the rivulets are the scriptures of other prophets (hādhā l-nahrū l-aʿẓamu hūwa l-qurʾānu wa-hādhihi l-thalāṭatu l-anhāru hiya l-kutubu l-thalāṭatu l-tawrātu wa-l-zabūru wa-l-injīlu wa-hādhihi l-jadāwīlū hiya l-ṣuḥufu l-munazzalatu ‘alā l-anbiyāʾ). Ibn ʿArabī then adds that they are all true, for they are all the Word of God (wa-kullun ḥaqqun fa-innahū kalāmu Llāh).75

All this creativity contributes to the amorphous nature of St. Ephrem’s and Ibn ʿArabī’s hermeneutics, thus making it difficult to concretize their approach to Scripture. Although some attempts have been made to reduce their exegetical method into laws and to develop, from their works, a general theory of interpretation,76 it remains an open question whether such endeavours can succeed. To this end, Griffith’s observation seems to be correct: “Given the ever suggestive intricacy of his rich imagination, it seems somehow rash to lay down laws for Ephraem’s biblical exegesis.”77 So too is Zamir’s comment concerning Ibn ʿArabī: “it should be made clear that it is hardly possible (if not a vain exercise altogether) to systematically lay out his method of reading and interpreting the Qurʾān.”78

4 Why Express Scripture through Poetry?

St. Ephrem, as Griffith indicates, regarded his liturgical compositions to be at the heart of his exposition of Scripture.79 Griffith gathers this from a remark St. Ephrem makes at the beginning of his Genesis commentary:

---

75 Ibn ʿArabī, FM, 5:495–96.
77 Griffith, Faith Adoring the Mystery, 32.
I had not wanted to write a commentary on the first book of Creation, lest we should now repeat what we had set down in the metrical homilies and hymns. Nevertheless, compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things of which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns.80

But what is it about poetry that made it an apposite medium for carrying the meanings of Scripture? Brock explains that poetry allows St. Ephrem to present a dynamic theology because poetry “shrinks back from any attempt to encapsulate eternal verities and truths in fixed formulae and dogmatic definitions.” In other words, the medium of poetry relieves one from conforming so strictly to “orthodox” notions of methodology and theology.81 In another place, Brock attaches a particular function to each poetic genre employed by St. Ephrem: lyrical poems permit the Biblical characters to break free of the constraints of time and space and hence become contemporary voices; narrative poems allow the retellings of the narratives to be more imaginative; and dialogue poems are based on tensions in the Biblical text.82 One could also add that poetry expands the exegetical possibilities of a text, especially in the case of poems that are performed and recited – as with St. Ephrem’s hymns. Every musical performance of a text constitutes a specific interpretation, allowing each performer an opportunity to show his understanding of the text.83

As for Ibn ʿArabī, Chodkiewicz gives us some reasons why he might have generally opted for poetry: “Easy to memorize even by the unlettered, poems also have the advantage of giving acceptable expression – since it can be imputed to poetic license – to ideas that might appear suspect or even blasphemous if presented in discursive form.”84 Though not particularly addressing why he chose to incorporate the Qur’an in his poetry, Ibn ‘Arabī says that poetry constitutes an important part of his work and that we will find in his poetry what is not in his prose:

Pay close regard to every versification at the beginning of each chapter of this book, for it contains the knowledges of the chapter in the measure that I desired to call attention to it there. You will find in the verses what

---

84 Chodkiewicz, An Ocean without Shore, 14.
is not found in the text of that chapter, and you will increase in knowledge of what the chapter contains through what I have mentioned in the verses.85

St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabi thus join a tradition of mystics who found in poetic symbolism one way to express Divinity – “because there is no other possible way of interpreting mystical experience.”86 In this light, and given that “religious texts are kinds of poetic texts,” as Ricoeur writes,87 it can be said that when Scripture is represented in poetry its effects are significantly amplified.

5 The Representation of Scriptural Exegesis in Poetry

This part of the article addresses the exegetical techniques employed by St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabi in their poetry. Its aim is to catalogue some of the ways in which the Bible and the Qur’an are represented in poetry. Three modes of exegesis will be discussed, without claiming that each category is mutually exclusive. The analysis is based on selections from St. Ephrem’s hymns, and from Ibn ʿArabi’s al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya and his short, yet influential, Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam. To facilitate the comparison between St. Ephrem and Ibn ʿArabi, I have gathered examples that bring the hermeneutic programmes of both authors to a point of convergence. It should be stressed at this juncture that my concern is with the exegetical process rather than the outcome of the process – the ideas our authors are intending to convey through their exegetical activity are beyond my direct remit.

5.1 Explanatory Glosses

The first mode of exegetical poetry is what I propose to describe as explanatory glosses. This is a broad catch phrase under which a number of exegetical techniques are subsumed. These range from providing the meaning of a word or phrase, providing reasons why Scripture employs particular language, solving textual problems, as well as amplifying and adding details to the base text. They all share the common attribute that in such cases the poet-exegete is practising a type of “formal exegesis,” but rather than prose, the medium of expression is poetry.

87 Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” 83.
Our first case involves poetry as a medium to resolve potential textual problems. In the cycle *On Faith XXXI*, St. Ephrem seeks to avoid the idea that God regretted what He did in the past:

\[
\text{ܠܹܡܬܐ ܘܬܘܬ ܢܦܫܐܘܟܕ ܠܝܬ ܒܝܬܘܬܗ ܝܗܝܢ} \\
\text{ܡܛܠ ܡܚܝܠܘܬܢܠܒܫ ܗܘܐ ܫܡܗ}
\]

\text{w-kad layt bī-tūteh} \quad \text{ḥemtō watwōt napshō} \\
\text{lbesh hwō shmōhayhēn} \quad \text{meṭūl mḥīlūtān}

and – although in His true Being there is no wrath or regret – yet He put on their names because of our weakness.\(^8\)

By positing that God speaks in human terms because of the weakness \(mḥīlūtō\) of humans, St. Ephrem is trying to reconcile between two apparently conflicting Biblical verses.\(^8\) On the one hand Genesis 6:6, which posits that God regretted \(ܐܬܬܘܚ\) and grieved \(ܟ݂ܪܝܬ\),\(^9\) and on the other 1 Samuel 15:29; in particular, the Masoretic Text’s phrase \(וְלֹ֣א יִנָּחֵ֑ם\) where the verb means, “He will not regret.” The Peshiṭta’s wording of 1 Samuel 15:29, however, does not seem to be in direct conflict with Genesis 6:6, for it renders the verse as, \(ܘܐܦ ܠܐ ܡܬܡܠキング\), literally meaning, “He does not take advice” (from the root \(ܡܠキング\)).\(^9\) In any case, and irrespective of 1 Samuel 15:29,


\(^9\) In identifying the Biblical verses embedded in St. Ephrem’s poems, I have mostly relied on the very useful margin notes provided by Brock and Kiraz, eds., *Ephrem the Syrian Select Poems*.


\(^9\) If indirect, a link could be made between the Masoretic Text and the Peshiṭta, for taking advice may lead to a change of mind, which, in turn, may amount to regret. Moreover, the Hebrew root \(ܢܢ\) includes, within its range of meanings, the idea of finding consolation.
Genesis 6:6 poses a more general problem concerning anthropomorphism to which St. Ephrem responds.

An explanatory gloss may also consist of qualitative alterations to the Biblical text. This is illustrated in a line of the second stanza of On the Fast III:

\[ \text{w-nakpō da-mdabeq .telēp l-taksētō d-ṣā'reh} \]

the chaste man covering his shame with leaves.\(^{92}\)

St. Ephrem makes three adjustments to Genesis 3:7, which is, according to the Peshiṣṭta, “Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked. They fastened fig leaves and they made themselves loincloths” (ܐܬܪ̈ܝܗܘܢ. ܘܝܕܥܘ ܕܥܪ̈ܛܠܝܝܢ ܐܢܘܢ. ܘܕܒ݁ܩܘ ܛܪ̈ܦܐ ܦܬܚ ܥܝܢܐ ܘܐܬܢܐ. ܘܥܒܕܘ ܠܗܘܢ ܦܪ̈즈ܘܡܐ ܕܬܐ). The first digression from the Biblical text lies in the fact that St. Ephrem concentrates on Adam only. Secondly, ܢܟܦܐ (nakpō) serves the purpose of amplifying Adam’s piety.\(^{93}\) Third, the underlying emotions are spelled out – rather than covering his nakedness, Adam covers his shame ܨܥܪܗ (ṣa’reh). This case illustrates how exegesis can enter the Biblical story under the guise of narration.

Such explanatory glosses – in their different types – are abundant in Ibn ʿArabī’s exegetical poetry. Let us first examine Ibn ʿArabī’s interpretation of the lexeme ʿadhāb (punishment and physical pain) which occurs frequently in the Qur’an; for instance, in Q. 2:10, “and an agonizing torment awaits them for their persistent lying.” In line with his emphasis on God’s mercy, Ibn ʿArabī plays

---


\(^{93}\) It is not unlikely that St. Ephrem is hinting at 1 Timothy 2:14, which excuses Adam and condemns Eve (ܐܕܡ ܠܐ ܛܥܐ ܐܢܬܬܐ ܕܝܢ ܛܥܬ ܘܥܒܪܬ ܥܠ ܦܘܩܕܢܐ). However, St. Ephrem’s prose commentary on Genesis appears to advance that Adam also shares the responsibility – for instance, he writes: “Adam again failed to confess his folly” (ܐܕܡ ܬܘܒ ܐܪܦܝ ܕܢܘܕܐ ܒܣܟܠܘܬܗ). See Tonneau, ed., *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, 42. ET: Mathews and Amar, trans., *St. Ephrem the Syrian Selected Prose Works*, 117.
on the root ‘dh-b, which denotes sweetness,⁹⁴ to argue that the punishment in the hereafter will ultimately turn out to be sweet. He presents this interpretation, which I take to be an explanatory gloss, in the following verse:

\[
yusammā ‘adhāban min ‘udhūbatī ṭā’mihi / wa-dhāka laḥū ka-l-qishri wa-l-qishru šāyin
\]

Suffering is so called because of its taste / this is like a shell, and the shell protects (what is inside).⁹⁵

Our second example that illustrates how Ibn ‘Arabī incorporates an explanatory gloss to an embedded Qur’anic verse concerns Q. 55:2, “He taught the Qur’an.” The verse is regularly understood by the tafsīr tradition to mean that God taught people the Qur’an. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for instance, renders the verse as, “He taught you the Qur’an” (‘allamakum-u 1-qurʾān);⁹⁶ al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) puts it as follows, “God taught the Qur’an to man” (‘allama l-qurʾāna l-insān);⁹⁷ and al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) writes, “He taught man the Qur’an” (‘allama l-insāna l-qurʾān)⁹⁸ – more or less, the same meaning is obtained from these three readings even though the syntax is different. Ibn ‘Arabī’s exegetical poetry, however, represents an innovative interpretation to this verse, one that appears to be distinctively Akbarian:

\[
‘allama l-qurʾāna kayfa yanzilū / fī wujūdī wa-ʿalā man yanzilū
\]

He taught the Qur’an how to descend / in my existence (or: presence), and on whom to descend.

---

⁹⁴ See Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 53981.
⁹⁹ Ibn ʿArabī, FM, 1:27.
Ibn ʿArabī takes the verse to mean that God taught the Qurʾān how to descend—it is not the people who are being taught; rather, the Qurʾān is the object of Divine teaching. Although innovative (and likely to be unprecedented in the tafsīr tradition), this reading is highly literal and grammatically sound, for the word al-qurʾān becomes the first object (al-mafʿūl al-awwal) of the verb ʿallama, and the sentence kayfa yanzilu is treated as a second object (al-mafʿūl al-thānī) of the same verb.

5.2 Juxtaposition
The use of juxtaposition as a hermeneutical key is found in the Bible and in Biblically-related literature as well. Likewise, the tafsīr tradition recognises the exegetical significance of establishing connections between juxtaposed verses, as part of the technique of “interpreting the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān.”

One function of juxtaposition is to reinforce a theme. In the seventeenth stanza of On the Nativity XVII, St. Ephrem skilfully contrasts 2 Kings 5:10, which features Elisha sending a message to Naaman to tell him to wash himself in the Jordan seven times (MT: הָלַךְ וְרָחַצְתָּ שֶׁבַע־פְעָמִים בַיַרְדֵן; P: ܒܢܥܢ ܙܠ ܣܚܝ݁ ܫܒܥ ܙ ܒܝܘܪܕܢܢ), with Luke 8:2 in which seven spirits come out from Mary Magdalene (G: Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή, ἀφ’ ἡς δαιμόνια ἑπτὰ ἐξεληλύθει; P: ܡܪܝܡ ܕܡܬܩܪܝܐ ܡܓܕܠܝܬܐ ܗܝ ܕܫܒܥܐ ܫܐܕܝܢ ܢܦܩܘ ܡܢܗ). St. Ephrem also alludes to two verses in Leviticus concerning the law regarding the purification from infectious diseases. Leviticus 14:6–7 requires the priest to take a number of items, including a hyssop plant (ܙܘܦܐ), and to dip them (ܝܘܨܒܥܘܢܐ ܛܘܦܣܐ) in the blood of a slaughtered bird (ܒܕܡܐ ܕܨܦܪܐ ܕܐܬܢܟ݂ܣܬ). Next, the priest shall sprinkle the blood seven times on the one being purified. The link between 2 Kings 5:10, Luke 8:2, and Leviticus 14:6–7 is the motif of “seven times.” St. Ephrem masterfully blends all of this together, proceeding from the Old Testament, moving on to the New Testament, and returning back to the Old Testament:

---


Elisha’s “seven times” symbolizes the purification of the woman with seven spirits; while the hyssop and blood are powerful types too.\textsuperscript{102}

This oscillation between the Old and New Testaments is also an example of the\textit{ transposition} mode of Biblical paraphrase.\textsuperscript{103} It also deserves to be remarked that St. Ephrem’s method seems to be assuming what Morlet describes as “symphonic exegesis.” This form of exegesis, which finds its roots in the Greek notion of musical harmony (συμφωνεῖν/ξυμφωνεῖν), evolved due to a number of reasons, one of which is to show that the old and new Scriptures are in agreement.\textsuperscript{104}

Juxtaposition could also be adduced to develop a theme; for example, to paint a nuanced picture of a Biblical figure by combining relevant verses. The thirteenth stanza of St. Ephrem’s\textit{ On the Resurrection I} illustrates this very well. St. Ephrem describes Jesus Christ in the following way:

\begin{align*}
\text{žmēnē} & \text{hwō ba-hlūlō} \\
\text{w-men šayōmē} & \text{b-gaw nesyūnō} \\
\text{men shahōrē} & \text{hwō ba-yqūnō} \\
\text{w-malpōnō} & \text{hwō b-bēt qūdshō} \\
\text{brīk tūlmōdeh}
\end{align*}


\textsuperscript{103} On this mode, see Roberts, \textit{Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity}, 127–35.

He was one of the guests at the Wedding Feast,
He was one of the fasters in the Temptation,
He was one of the watchful in Agony,
He was a teacher in the Temple.
Blessed is His instruction!105

St. Ephrem's reference to Jesus as a guest at the Wedding Feast ḥlūlō (ḥlūlō) is an allusion to John 2:2, where Jesus and his disciples are invited to a feast (G: ἐκλήθη δὲ καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ οἱ μαθηταί αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν γάμον; P: ܘܐܦ ܗܘ ܝܫܘܥ ܘܬܠܡܝܕܘܗܝ ܐܬܩܪܝܘ ܠܗ ܠܡܫܬܘܬܐ).106 In the second line St. Ephrem is incorporating Jesus’ temptation narrative as recounted in Matthew 4:1–11. The substantive ṉesyūnō (nesyūnō) that St. Ephrem uses is absent in Matthew 4:1–11. He, however, seems to derives it from the external-passive imperfect Ṉtnasē in 4:1 and the participle Ṉmnasē in 4:3. The Greek loan word ἀγών,107 in the third line, is a reference to the episode of the Agony in the Garden (Matthew 26:36–46), and St. Ephrem’s description of Jesus as a “teacher in the Temple” is a close rendering of Mark 12:35, where Jesus is depicted as “teaching in the Temple” (G: διδάσκων ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ; P: ܟܕ ܡܠܦ ܒܗܝܟܠܐ).108 All these virtues of Jesus smooth the transition to the stanza’s conclusion: “Blessed is His instruction!”

In other cases, St. Ephrem uses juxtaposition to contrast ideas which are in opposition to each other. Through collecting isolated episodes, the polarity between the ideas is highlighted. This technique, the juxtaposition of opposites, is displayed in Nisibene LIII which entails an imaginative dispute between Death and Satan, each claiming that he has greater power over


106 ET: Brock and Kiraz, eds., Ephrem the Syrian Select Poems, 89.

107 Robert Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1879), 126. For a note on the orthography of this word, see Aaron Michael Butts, Language Change in the Wake of Empire: Syriac in Its Greco-Roman Context (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 65.

108 The Old Syriac Gospels (Sinaicus), the Peshiṭta, and the Ḥarklean all have ḫ̣alām while St. Ephrem opts for bēt qiḏshō; see Kiraz, Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels, 2:186. Without ruling out the possibility that St. Ephrem was freely quoting the Bible, or even writing from memory, it appears to me that he chose bēt qiḏshō to preserve the meter; that is, it has the purpose of filling out the syllable count by adding an additional syllable. If I am correct, then this shows that although poetry gives the interpreter a margin of freedom, it could also impose some constraints and force the exegete to make compromises.
humans. This madrōshō also shows St. Ephrem’s impressive knowledge of the Bible. I quote the tenth stanza where Death responds to Satan:

\[
yawsep \text{ da-zkōk \ zkīteh} \quad o \ sōtōnō
\]
\[
b-tawōnō \text{ zkōk wa-b-qabrō} \quad zkīt \text{ wa-rmīteh}
\]

That Joseph who overcame you, Satan, I overcame:
he vanquished you in the inner room,
but I vanquished him when I cast him into the tomb.\(^{109}\)

In the first line of the stanza, Death is referring to Genesis 39:8 in which Joseph was not willing (MT: וַיְמָאֵ֓ן; P: ܐܘ ܨܒ݂ܐ) to submit to his master’s wife, and in this sense overcame Satan. The inner chamber, tawōnō (tawōnō), is likely to be the room in which Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph. Though this lexeme does not occur in the Bible in this particular context, it appears in three places in the Peshitta Pentateuch,\(^{110}\) one of which is Genesis 43:30 – thus, St. Ephrem was probably influenced by Biblical language.\(^{111}\) Next, Death shows its superiority through an allusion to Genesis 50:26 which recounts Joseph’s death (MT: וַיַחַנְטוּ אֹת֔וֹ וַיִישֶם בָאָר֖וֹן בְמִצְרָֽיִם׃).

The coffin dūpnō (dūpnō) in the Biblical text corresponds to the tomb/grave qabrō (qabrō) in the hymn. Nonetheless, even with qabrō (qabrō), St. Ephrem remains within Biblical territory, for the noun qabrō, which derivates from the root מַחֲרָה, occurs twenty-two times in the Syriac Pentateuch.\(^{112}\)

A similar tendency to find parallels between individual verses is found in Ibn ‘Arabī’s exegetical poetry. In the introduction to his edition of Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam, Abū al-ʿAlāʿAfīfī writes: “Many a time he [i.e., Ibn ‘Arabī] merges verses in each other, and explains them in light of each other where there is no apparent connection between them” (kathīran mā yamzuju l-āyāti l-qurāniyyata baʿdahā).

---


bi-ba’din wa-yufassiru ba’dahā bi-ba’din ḥaythu lā tūjadu šilatun zāhiratun baynahā). The following line, from a stanza which Ibn ‘Arabī devotes to Jesus Christ in Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam, can be taken as our first example:

\[
\text{rūḥun min-a Llāhi lā min ghayrihī fa-li-dhā / aḥyā l-mawāta wa-anshā l-ṭayra min ṭinī}
\]

It was a spirit of God not from another, hence / he revived the dead and produced birds out of clay.114

The first hemistich is unmistakably derived from Q. 4:171, “His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him.” Then, a condensed and re-ordered paraphrase of the Qur’anic account of Jesus’ miracles in Q. 3:49,115 “I will make the shape of a bird for you out of clay ... and bring the dead back to life with God's permission,” makes up all of the second hemistich. Ibn ‘Arabī’s adherence to the principle of juxtaposition in the current case seems to be motivated by a desire to point out a causal relationship between the two verses. This is to say that binding the two verses together, by way of the particle fa-li-dhā (i.e., hence), serves the purpose of showing that Jesus’ miracles are made possible by the fact that he is a “spirit of God.” Thus viewed, Q. 3:49 is interpreted in light of Q. 4:171 – a relation of cause and effect is established.

Juxtaposition is used also to explain verses and draw moral conclusions. The following case, which stitches together three Qur’anic verses, is a good example:

\[
\text{man yattaq-i Llāha fī ḍīqin wa-fī saʿatin / fa-rizquhū yaʾtihī min ḥaythu lā yadrī}
\]

\[
\text{rizqu l-maʿānī wa-rizqu l-ḥissi fa-rḍa bi-hī / Rabban idhā jāʾa fī laylin idhā yasrī}
\]

Whoever is mindful of God in distress and in prosperity / his provision will come to him from an unexpected source,

A provision of meaning and a provision of subsistence, so be content with Him / the Lord when He comes at night.

---

113 Introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī, Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam, 19.
115 Or, equally possible, the story as narrated in Q. 5:10.
At the base of the first line are two consecutive verses; the final clause of Q. 65:2 and the first part of Q. 65:3. Together they read: “God will find a way out for those who are mindful of Him, and will provide for them from an unexpected source.” Ibn ‘Arabī amplifies Q. 65:2 by appending the phrase “in distress and in prosperity,” and substitutes min ḥaythu lā yaḥtasib in Q. 65:3 with min ḥaythu lā yadrī. The reason for this substitution could be the preservation of the meter and also in keeping with the end-of-line rhyme (yasrī/yadrī). Additionally, the phrase min ḥaythu lā yadrī could be taken as an exegetical gloss explaining the meaning of min ḥaythu lā yaḥtasib, especially that we find an identical gloss in al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis.117 The second line then elaborates on the types of provisions that God provides – spiritual and material. Consequently, Ibn ‘Arabī beseeches his reader to be content with God’s gifts in whatever form they come. The last three words in the second hemistich of the second line echo Q. 89:4, “By the night when it journeys on” (wa-l-layli idhā yasr).

5.3 Re-application, Typology, and Expanding the Significance of Scripture

Applying Scripture beyond its immediate historical context is what I shall call re-application. Such exegetical operations involve retaining the original context, but also applying it to other contexts that go beyond its historical significance. This broad category includes typology and symbolic exegesis (where a historical detail is made to represent something else), as well as personal exegesis which involves re-applying the scriptural text to oneself. The foundation of this technique is the conviction that Scripture transcends time and place. The notion of re-application proposed in this section sits well with what Hirsch calls the “significance” of a text.118

Our first case where St. Ephrem abstracts details from a Biblical narrative and re-applies them to another theme is found in the opening of his cycle On Paradise V. In the first two lines of the first stanza, St. Ephrem likens the “Word of the Creator” to the rock which Moses struck at Horeb:

\[
\begin{align*}
b-melteh & \text{ d-brōyō} & \text{ hōret w-damītōh} \\
l-kipō & \text{ d-ʿam ʿamō} & \text{ helkat b-gaw da-brō}
\end{align*}
\]

117 Al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwil ṣūrat al-Qurṭān, 23:46.
I considered the Word of the Creator, and likened it,
to the rock that marched with the people of Israel in the wilderness.¹¹⁹

The rock, featured in Exodus 17:6 (MT: בַּֽלַּ֖לֶךְ עַֽל־הַצּוּר֮ בְחֹרֵב֒),
is now a symbol of the “Word of Creation.” The link between both is stated by
St. Ephrem in the sixth line of the stanza. He says that both of them “fashioned
created things out of nothing.” St. Ephrem’s use of the third-person feminine
perfect הֲלָכְת enhances the poetic quality of the verse through the personi-
fication of the rock. Moreover, it is not unlikely that St. Ephrem arrived at
his imagery through 1 Corinthians 10:4, where the rock is identified with the
Messiah (G: ἡ πέτρα δὲ ἦν ὁ Χριστός; P: ܟܐܦܐ ܕܝܢ ܗܝ ܗܘܐ ܡܫܝܚܐ).

St. Ephrem’s handling of Matthew 14:30 in the fifteenth stanza of On Virginity
VII further illustrates this technique and shows his personal meditations on
Scripture. The fifth and sixth lines, cast in the first-person, read:

imar ʿop enō ak shemʿūn / dalōn mōr ak da-l-shemʿūn
hō ʿamlūn rebū galīn / ḥanōnō dlīn l-ḥalōshō

I will say as Simon said: Draw me up, Lord, as you did Simon,
for the innumerable waves have worn me out;
O Compassionate One, draw me out who am so feeble!¹²⁰

In this stanza St. Ephrem cries out to Jesus to rescue him from the waves. He
quotes Saint Peter as he too was calling upon Jesus to save him from sinking
(Matthew 14:28–33). In so doing, St. Ephrem is applying Saint Peter’s supplica-
tion to himself – the historical specificity is removed, and the dialogue between
Jesus and Saint Peter is smoothly transformed into a personal supplication.
Nonetheless, the historical incident and its new application converge in that
they both relate to being saved from sinking in the water.

Here, St. Ephrem replaces the imperative prūqayn, which appears in the
Peshitta and Ḥarklean versions, with the lexeme dalōn; the D-stem singular
masculine imperative from the base root dlō, with the first-person singular suf-
fix. Though it is possible, if not likely, that St. Ephrem was citing from memory,

¹²⁰ Beck, ed., Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate, 28. ET: Brock and Kiraz,
Eds., Ephrem the Syrian Select Poems, 199.
I would like to venture the possibility that St. Ephrem intentionally employed *dalōn* as it seems more suitable for the context which involves water, given that the D-stem root *dalī* is associated with drawing up and rescuing from water.\(^{121}\) If this conjecture stands, then its supports Roberts’ suggestion that when Biblical poets paraphrased the Bible, their desire “was to improve on the Biblical original.” In other words “[e]ach paraphrase can be seen as an attempt to improve, in one way or another, on the biblical text.”\(^{122}\)

It is also of note that St. Ephrem uses the D-stem *dalōn* in the second hemistich of the fifth line, whereas he adduces the G-stem *dlīn* in the second hemistich of the sixth line to arrive at the same meaning. Given that the connotations of these two forms are not very different, the best explanation I can proffer is that St. Ephrem consciously used these forms for metrical purposes – to preserve seven syllables in each hemistich of every line.

Another instance which contributes to our understanding of St. Ephrem’s practical exegesis is the first stanza of *On Faith X*:

```
ܕܦܬܚ ܦܘϻܟ ܘܐܡܠܝܘܗܝ
ܐܢܬ ܡܪܝ ܐܟܬܒܬܗ
ܗܐ ܦܬܝܚ ܠܟ ܦܘϻܗ ܕܥܒܕܟ ʿﺎܡ ܪܥܝܢܗ
ܐܢܬ ܡܠܝܘܗܝ ܡܪܝ ܡܢ ܡܘܗܒܬܟ
```

\(\text{ET: } \text{at mōr aktebtōh }\) \(\text{da-ptaḥ pūmōk we-mlēw}\)
\(\text{hō ptiḥ lōk pūmeh d-ʿabdōk }\) \(\text{ʿam reʿyōneh}\)
\(\text{at mlīw mōr }\) \(\text{men mawḥabtōk}\)

You have had it written, Lord, “Open your mouth and I will fill it”
Look, Your servant’s mouth is open, and his mind as well;
fill it, Lord, with Your Gift.\(^{123}\)

The technique followed by St. Ephrem in this stanza is *not* typical of his exegetical poetry for two reasons: he prefaces his quote of Psalm 81:11 with an explicit citation marker, and, secondly, he quotes the Peshiṭta verbatim. The latter point marks a departure from his usual technique in which his references to the Bible reflect Biblical content rather than being couched in precise Biblical terminology. The practical aspect of this stanza materialises in the fact that St. Ephrem is treating the verse as if God is conversing with him rather than limiting it to the original context in which Israel is

---


being addressed. Put differently, St. Ephrem’s exegetical technique in the present case is to take a Biblical verse and treat it as if it were said to oneself. It is also notable that St. Ephrem expands the meaning of the Biblical verse – not only is the mouth to be filled with food, as is understood from ܦܘܡܟ, but the Lord’s gift now involves nourishing the mind too.

Such attention to the re-application of Scripture is also found in the poetry of Ibn ‘Arabi. His works are replete with instances in which he expands the significance of the Qur’an. This trend is exemplified in the thirty-sixth chapter of the Futūḥāt in which Ibn ‘Arabi discusses the qualities of the Jesus-based individuals (al-ʿisawiyyūn):

\[
kullu man aḥyā ḥaqīqatahū / wa-shafā min ʿillati l-ḥujubī
fa-hwa ʿīsā lā yunāṭu bihī / ‘īdanā shayʿun min-a l-riyābī
\]

Everyone who makes his truth alive / and heals from the sickness of the veils
He is Jesus, not attached to him / for us, any doubt.\textsuperscript{124}

These two lines belong to the symbolic form of re-application. Ibn ‘Arabi advances that any individual can become a “Jesus” if he embodies the qualities of Jesus. In this way, Jesus is presented as an exemplar. The first line is a reconfiguration of the aforecited verse on Jesus’ miracles; bringing the dead back to life and healing the blind (Q. 3:49). Yet, Ibn ‘Arabi is aware that Jesus’ miracles will have to be adjusted in order to make the re-application workable. Thus, the miracle of raising the dead is made a symbol for “making one’s truth alive,” and healing the blind now stands for “healing from the spiritual veils.”

Let us turn to another line of Ibn ‘Arabi’s poetry which testifies to the process of re-application. This time the subject of Ibn ‘Arabi’s line is the Prophet Muhammad:

\[
idhā huyyi’ta li-l-khuluqi l-ʿaẓīmī / fa-dhāka bishāratu l-Rabbi l-karīmī\textsuperscript{125}
\]

If you have been disposed for the great moral character / that is a good tiding from the generous Lord.


\textsuperscript{125} Ibn ‘Arabi, \textit{FM}, 1:1117.
The Qur’anic verse standing behind this line is Q. 68:4, “Truly you have a
great moral character.” By incorporating the second-person passive, huyyi’ta,
and addressing the reader, Ibn ʿArabī is directing his readers to the Prophet’s
“great moral character.” In this way, the verse is not merely a description
of the Prophet’s character, but also serves the purpose of setting a standard to be
followed – it is re-applied in one way or another.

As a final example, let us observe how Ibn ʿArabī expands the application
of Scripture and renders it practically relatable. Urging his reader to ponder upon
Sūrat al-Sharḥ he writes:

\[\text{idhā ḍāqa ʿalayka l-amru} / \text{fakkīr fī a-lam nashraḥ} \]
\[\text{fa-ʿusrun bayna yusraynī} / \text{idhā dhakartahū fa-fraḥ}^{126}\]

When the matter is hard on you / reflect on [the Sūra of] “a-lam nashraḥ”
The difficulty is between two easings / if you remember that, be happy.\(^{127}\)

Three verses are assimilated in this couplet: Q. 94:1, and an abridged amalga-
mation of Q. 94:5–6, “So truly where there is hardship there is also ease; truly
where there is hardship there is also ease.” This belongs to the practical mode
of exegesis given that Ibn ʿArabī is instructing the one in hardship to approach
the Qur’an in order to find solace – Ibn ʿArabī’s attitude, thus, triggers the psy-
chological aspect of Scripture. Inspecting the first hemistich of the second
line, one finds that Ibn ʿArabī is essentially offering an exegesis of Q. 94:5–6
rather than quoting the verses. His gloss – that “two easings encompass one
difficulty” – joins a long tradition of commentary asserting this meaning; a
tradition ultimately founded upon a Prophetic report, “One hardship will not
overcome two easings” (lan yaghliba ʿusrun yusrayn).\(^{128}\)

\(^{126}\) I am grateful to Professor Geert Jan van Gelder for improving my understanding of the
metre (al-hazaj) of these two lines.

\(^{127}\) Ibn ʿArabī, \textit{FM}, 1:348. ET: Shuʿayb E. Winkel, trans., \textit{The Openings Revealed in Makkah
al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah}, Books 1 & 2, Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyīddīn ibn al-ʿArabī (New York:

\(^{128}\) See al-Ṭabarī, \textit{Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān}, 24:495. The view that the verses in
Q. 94:5–6 mean that \textit{two} easies are literally attached to \textit{each} hardship seems to be gram-
matically weak. Thus, the Prophetic gloss is to be understood metaphorically; meaning
that ease will ultimately prevail. For a good discussion of these verses, see al-Ṭāhir Ibn
6 Conclusion

This article has attempted to shed light on the representation of scriptural exegesis in poetry. It concentrated on the poetry of St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabi and attempted to clarify how they transformed the Bible and the Qur’an into poetry and how their exegesis was also incorporated into their poems. Through various examples, it attempted to shed light on the different techniques of exegetical poetry: recasting Scripture, altering verses, adding details, omitting particulars, creating thematic links, typology, and juxtaposition. At the same time, the article has shown the affinities in the approaches of St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabi to Scripture, and the parallels in their exegetical poetry. 129 In other words, it has been found that, notwithstanding their disparate theologies and dissimilar religious commitments, St. Ephrem and Ibn ‘Arabi find common ground in their exegetical methods – not unexpectedly, the Eastern Christian and Muslim intellectual traditions seem to meet in the process of scriptural interpretation.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Prof. Alison G. Salvesen for comments on a previous draft of this paper, and to Prof. Cyrus Ali Zargar and Prof. Alexandre Papas for feedback and suggestions. A word of thanks must also be said to the ܡܠܦܢܐ Prof. David G.K. Taylor for enabling me to access St. Ephrem’s corpus. I am solely responsible for any flaws in the article.