

St. Ephrem, *Carmina Nisibena*

Ephrem, the fourth century Syriac poet, tells his own version, mostly as monologues and dialogues of Satan and Death. In Hymn 35 Satan is confused as to whether Jesus is God or man. Jesus appears to be human in suffering, but Satan has no record of him sinning and cannot find in him the corrupt nature that all humans have from Adam and Eve. Despite Satan's ambivalence about killing Jesus, the demons urge him to take action. Hymn 36 picks up after the death of Jesus, and is told from the perspective of Death. The translation is by Gary A. Anderson and is unpublished.

Hymn 36

Suffering of Jesus atones for Adam

1. Our Lord having subdued his strength was seized
That his living death might give life to Adam.
He gave his hands to be fixed by nails
In place of the hand that plucked the fruit. He took a blow to the cheek in the law-court
In place of the mouth that ate in Eden. Since Adam loosened his feet [to approach the tree]
They fixed his feet [to the cross]. Our Lord removed his clothes to make [us] modest;
With gall and vinegar he made sweet
The poison of the snake which he poured into humankind

Response: Blessed is he who overcame me [=Death] and enlivened the dead to his praise.

The triumphs of Death

2. "If you are God, show your strength;
If you are man, test our strength;
If it is Adam that you seek, be gone!
He is bound for his sins here, Neither Cherubim nor Seraphim are able
To repay his debt. There is no mortal among them that can give
Their soul on behalf of him. Who can open the mouth of Sheol
And go down and bring up from there?
Him whom Sheol has smitten and she conceals forever.

3. "It is I who have overcome all the mighty men.
Look, I have amassed them here in the corners of Sheol.
Come, enter, son of Joseph, see the terrors.
The limbs of the mighty men, the great corpse of Samson
And the skeleton of Goliath the tough one, even Og the mighty one,
That one who made a iron bed and reclined on it,
I have swept him from it and brought him low.
That cedar at the gate of Sheol I brought low.

4. "I who alone have overcome the many;
The Only One seeks to overcome me.
Prophets and priests and victorious ones I have led forth;
I overcame kings in their orders and mighty men in their hunts,
The righteous in their virtuous deeds. Streams of corpses

Flow forth into Sheol. But for all that pour into her, she [remains] thirsty.
Whether a man be near or far,
At the end, he is brought to the gate of Sheol

5. “I despised the money of the rich;
Their gifts could not bribe me.
The owner of slaves cannot persuade me at any time
To lead away the slave in place of his master, or the poor in place of the rich,
or the old man in place of the child. The wise who can charm
Wild animals, their charms do not enter my ears.
A hater of persuasion I am called by all men
I do (only) what I am commanded.

Death declares his faithfulness

6. “Who is this or the son of whom is this?
What is the family of this one who has vanquished me?
The book of generations is in my possession;
I have entered labored and read the names from Adam onward;
No man is missing from among the dead, each generation is inscribed
upon my members. On your account, O Jesus
I entered and did a reckoning
To show you that none had escaped my hands.

7. “There are two men—let me not tell a lie
About their names—who escaped from Sheol.
Neither Enoch nor Elijah came to me.
In all of creation I searched for them, even to where Jonah descended
I descended and groped but they weren’t there. Did they enter
paradise and so escape [me] I wondered? But a fearsome Cherub guards it.
As for the ladder which Jacob saw.
perhaps they ascended to heaven on it.

8. “Who could contain the sand of the sea,
And yet cast away two grains of sand?
This harvest in which daily diseases
At this harvest, in which diseases like harvesters,
Cast down [sheaves] every day, I alone bear their sheaves
And pile them up. Others, who rush about making piles,
Drop [some] sheaves. Vintagers forget some clusters
Yet [only] two grapes have escaped me,
during the great vintage which I alone gather.

Death is no respecter of person

9. “It is I who have labored,” said Death
“In the sea and on dry land, over all kinds of prey.
The eagles in the air come to me,
Even the dragons of the deep, the creeping things, the birds and the animals.

The old, the young, the children, all of these will persuade you
O son of Mary, that my sovereignty rules over all things.
Your cross, how can it vanquish me?
For, lo by wood I have shone and overcome from of old.

10. "I would like to speak many things
For I am not lacking in words.
But words are not required
For deeds, close at hand, cry out. I make no promise as you [do]
To the simple ones about hidden things: "there will be a resurrection!"
Whenever will it be? For if you are truly strong[er]
give a pledge for us now
That we may believe your promise that is so far off."

Christ enters Sheol

11. Death finished his speech of derision
The voice of our Lord resounded in Sheol
It cried out and ripped open the graves one by one.
Trembling took hold of Death. Sheol which had never been illumined
Was bright with the shinings of the Watchers who entered and brought forth
The dead to meet that dead one who enlivened all.
The dead went forth and the living were shamed.
That is, those who thought they had vanquished the enliverer of all.

12. "Would that he had given me the day of Moses,"
Said Death, "[that] feast-day he once prepared for me.
For it was the lamb in Egypt which gave me
The first born from every house. Heaps upon heaps of first-born
He piled up for me at the door of Sheol. Yet this festal-lamb
despoiled Sheol. He bound the dead and led them from me.
That [former] lamb filled graves for me,
But this one emptied graves which were full.

Death weeps at his loss

13. "The death of Jesus is a torment for me
I would much prefer his life more than his death.
This is the only mortal whose death is hateful to me.
At the death of each man I rejoiced, but at his death I am worried.
I hope he will revive, for when he was alive, brought to life
three dead men. Now, at his death
The dead—now made alive—trampled me at the gate of Sheol
As I went forth to contain them.

14. "Let me quickly close the gates of Sheol
Before that dead one whose death despoiled me.
Whoever hears shall marvel over my fall.
That from a dead man from without I was beaten. All the dead within seek to leave,

But this one presses to come in. The medicine of life has entered Sheol
And he has enlivened its dead. He brought in and concealed within me
A living light by which the cold and dark womb
of Sheol is warmed.”

15. Death saw the Watchers in Sheol.
The immortal in place of the mortal.
He said “Terror has entered our dwelling.
For in two ways there is pain: That the dead have left Sheol
And that the Watchers who don’t die have entered it. Lo one enters
And sits at the head within his tomb, another beside his feet.
I will seek to persuade him
That he go forth with his pledge and enter his kingdom.

16. “Do not requite me, O Jesus the Good One,
For the words which my pride has spoken before you.
Whoever sees your cross
Would not doubt that you are a man. Whoever saw your power
Would he not believe that you are also God? Behold by these two things
I have learned to confess that you are both man and God.
Since the dead in hell do not repent
go forth, My Lord, to the living and preach repentance.

17. “Jesus, King, receive my petition.
And with the petition take your pledge.
Lead forth Adam, the great pledge,
In whom all the dead are concealed. [It is] just like when I received him,
When all the living were hidden in him. I give you this ancient pledge,
The body of Adam. Go up from here and rule over all.
When I hear your trumpet
I will bring out the dead with my own hands at your coming [again].”

Resurrection

18. Our living King has gone forth and ascended
From Sheol as a Victor.
Woe for the Left-side is doubled:
To the spirits and demons there is grief, to Death and Satan there is anguish;
To Sin and Sheol there is mourning, but to those Right-side there is joy.
Today it has occurred. On this great day
Let us give great glory to him
Who died and lived again that he might give life and resurrection to all.