

CATASTROPHES AND  
THE APOCALYPTIC  
IN THE MIDDLE AGES  
AND THE RENAISSANCE

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*Edited by*

ROBERT E. BJORK



BREPOLS

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# THE APOCALYPTIC LEGACY OF PSEUDO-EPHRAEM IN RUSSIA: THE *SERMON ON THE ANTICHRIST*

J. EUGENE CLAY

The *Sermon on the Antichrist* [*Slovo o Antikhriste*] attributed to the Syriac Orthodox theologian and poet Ephraem Syrus (ca. 306–373) of Nisibis and Edessa remains to this day one of the most popular eschatological texts among Orthodox Christian Slavs. Found in Slavonic manuscripts as early as the eleventh century, the sermon was copied and recopied in illuminated codices, manuscript books, and personal devotional notebooks. First published in Moscow in February 1647, this homily was reprinted many times during Russia’s imperial period.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, the Orthodox Church undertook a new translation of the sermon into Russian as part of a broader project of patristic publication. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ephraem’s sermon quickly reappeared in Russia in a 1993 reprint edition issued by the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>2</sup> In vivid language, the author, who identifies himself as “sinful Ephraem, full of ignorance,” warns his audience against the blandishments and depredations of the coming Antichrist. Although attributed to Ephraem Syrus, the sermon probably dates to the sixth or seventh century, 200 or 300 years after the Syrian father’s death. Amid his descriptions of future horrors, the anonymous author offers quiet assurance and practical advice for his audience. He describes the persecutions, droughts, famines, and death that will take place once the Antichrist, the “shameless and cunning serpent who will confound the whole world,” seizes power. Despite the bleak future he portrays, the author also offers hope: God will preserve and watch over those faithful who devote themselves to prayer and endless weeping. Over the centuries, Pseudo-Ephraem’s voice has

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<sup>1</sup> Efreim Sirin [Ephraem Syrus], *Poucheniia* (Moscow: Pechatnyi dvor, 1647), fols. 295–305; Francis Thomson, “The Old Bulgarian Translation of the Homilies of Ephraem Syrus,” *Paleobulgarica* 9, no. 1 (1985): 124–30, here 124n2.

<sup>2</sup> Efreim Sirin, *Tvoreniia*, 8 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel’skii otdel Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, 1993–1995), 2:250–60.

provided comfort and counsel to those who saw themselves in a desperate struggle against the Antichrist or his forerunners. The Russian Old Believers, those religious rebels who rejected the liturgical reforms of Patriarch Nikon of Moscow (r. 1652–1658) and broke away from the official Russian Orthodox Church, turned to Pseudo-Ephraem (among other holy fathers) to understand how to respond to Nikon's apostasy. In the nineteenth century, Russian dissenters in remote villages drew on Pseudo-Ephraem's writings, which they regarded as inspired, to defend their eschatological views against the official church.<sup>3</sup> More recently, during the NATO aerial campaign against Serbia in 1999, some Russian Orthodox Christians turned to the saint to prove the apocalyptic significance of American hegemony.<sup>4</sup>

### The Historical Ephraem Syrus and Ephraem Graecus

Born to a Christian family in Nisibis (present-day Nusaybin, Turkey) around 306, Ephraem served under Bishop Jacob (303–338). In his poetry he described himself as a shepherd, and he may have been ordained as a deacon, although he never formally claimed this title.<sup>5</sup> The historical Ephraem was never a monk, but he did live an ascetic life as a single person (*ihadiya* in Syriac) in imitation of Christ, the only begotten (*ibidaya*) Son of God.<sup>6</sup> After Emperor Julian's disastrous campaign against Persia, the Byzantine Empire abandoned Nisibis in 363, and Ephraem had to leave the city along with many other refugees. Ultimately he ended up in Edessa (today's Shanliurfa, Turkey), where he died ten years later, in 373. All Orthodox Christians know his name if only for the moving prayer attributed to him that is recited every day during Great Lent:

O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, despondency, lust for power and idle talk. But give to me Thy servant a spirit of soberness, humility, patience and love. O Lord and King, grant me to see mine own faults and not to condemn my brother: for blessed art Thou to the ages of ages. O God, cleanse me a sinner.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Lukanin, "Bezpopovtsy pomorskago tolka v Okhanskom uезде Permskoi gubernii," *Permskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti* no. 17, neofitsial'nyi otdel (24 April 1868): 277–83.

<sup>4</sup> Oleg Slavin, *Zagovor antikbrista* (Moscow: Russkii vestnik, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Sydney H. Griffith, "Images of Ephraem: The Syrian Holy Man and His Church," *Traditio* 45 (1989–1990): 7–33.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph P. Amar, *The Syriac Vita Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian* (Louvain: Peeters, 2011), XI.

<sup>7</sup> *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978), 69–70. In the Greek, the word *despondency* is replaced by "vain curiosity."



Ephraem wrote extensively in Syriac; because of his eloquent poetry, the Maronite and Jacobite churches call him the “Harp of the Holy Spirit” in their liturgies.<sup>8</sup> He often addressed his harp toward the intangible realities of the afterlife, the end of time, the Last Judgment, the punishment of the damned, and the rewards of the blessed. Against the heresies of Marcion (85–160) and Bar Daysan (154–222), who denigrated matter as something essentially evil, Ephraem celebrated creation with profoundly sensual poetic metaphors.<sup>9</sup> The historical Ephraem Syrus also used vibrant imagery to describe both Paradise and the Last Judgment.<sup>10</sup>

Even before his death in 373, Ephraem’s work began to appear in Greek translation. Writing around 392, Jerome mentioned admiringly a Greek version of a work by Ephraem on the Holy Spirit; unfortunately, neither the original Syriac nor the Greek translation is extant.<sup>11</sup> In the mid-fifth century, the church historian Sozomen (ca. 400–ca. 450) noted that many of Ephraem’s works had been translated from Syriac into Greek and that even more translations were being made.<sup>12</sup> Although Theodoret of Cyrrhus (ca. 393–457) remarked approvingly that Ephraem was “totally untainted” by “Greek learning,” a later hagiographer, probably writing in the sixth century, claimed that God had miraculously granted fluency in Greek to the Syrian saint at the request of St. Basil the Great (330–379).<sup>13</sup> As time passed, more and more Greek works were attributed to Ephraem; the listing of works for “Ephraem Graecus” in the authoritative *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* includes more than 120 different titles.<sup>14</sup>

Ephraem Graecus is a very different figure from the historical Syrian church father. In the Greek works attributed to him, Ephraem appears as a monk or as a hermit living in a cave rather than the urban churchman that he actually was. Although the historical Ephraem Syrus was a celibate deacon, he lived and served

<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Lamy, ed., *Sancti Ephraem Syri hymni et sermons*, 4 vols. (Mechliniae: Dessain, 1882–1902), 1: xxi.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Joseph Morehouse, “Bar Daysan and Mani in Ephraem the Syrian’s Heresiography” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Ephraem Syrus, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990); Sebastian Brock, “Ephrem’s Letter to Publius,” *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 271–305.

<sup>11</sup> Hieronymus [Jerome], *Liber de viris inlustribus*, ed. E.C. Richardson (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1896), 51, cap. CXV.

<sup>12</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Edward Walford (London: Bohn, 1855), 134.

<sup>13</sup> “De Basilio Magno et S. Ephraem Syro,” in Giuseppe Simone Assemani, Petrus Benedictus, and Stefano Evodio Assemani, eds., *Sancti patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine: in sex tomos distributa: ad mss. Codices Vaticanos aliosque castigata, multis aucta, nova interpretatione, praefationibus, notis, variantibus lectionibus illustrata*, 6 vols. (Rome: Ex typographia Vaticana apud Joannem Mariam Henricum Salvioni, 1732–1746), 1:xxxiv–xxxix; Amar, *Syriac Vita Tradition*, xxv.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Geerard, ed., *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, 6 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974–2003), 2:366–467.



Figure 12.1: Johan Sadeler I (1550–1600), *Saint Ephraem*. *The Illustrated Bartsch*. Vol. 70, pt. 2, p.222. Reproduced by the kind permission of Abaris Books.

in the city; he did not withdraw into a cloister or flee into the wilderness. The Greek Ephraem was an anchorite who addressed the concerns of cenobitic monks—those ascetics living communally under a common rule. His *vita* came to include entirely fictional episodes that connected him to both the Egyptian ascetic tradition and the Cappadocian fathers, especially Basil the Great and his brother, Gregory of Nyssa (335–394). In particular, according to his sixth-century hagiographer, Ephraem traveled to Egypt and lived there for several years in a monastery before visiting Basil in Cappadocia.<sup>15</sup> In art in both West and East, Ephraem is pictured as one of the Syriac stylites (as in this sixteenth-century print by the Belgian Johan Stadler, Fig. 12.1). In the Orthodox world, the Dormition of Ephraem can be found in many icons in Meteora and Mount Athos, as in a painting by the sixteenth-century Greek artist Emanuel Tsanfurnari, which resides in the Vatican (Fig. 12.2).

For the Slavic world, Ephraem's most important work, translated into Old Bulgarian by the early tenth century, was the *Paraenesis*, a collection of approximately 100 sermons (the number varies from 99 to 113 in different manuscripts), the first fifty of which were addressed to Egyptian monks about the ascetic life. Only a few of the Greek works seem to be translations of the compositions of the historical

<sup>15</sup> Griffith, "Images," 7–33.



Figure 12.2: Emanuel Tsanfurnari (Zanfurnari), *Burial of the Hermit Ephraem*, sixteenth century. Pinacoteca, Vatican City. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Ephraem Syrus; others have later Syriac prototypes; still others may have been originally composed in Greek, perhaps inspired by Ephraem's corpus. The strong moral tone, poetic language, and exhortations to repentance of the sermons in the *Paraenesis* certainly echo the concerns of the historical Ephraem. By the ninth century, when the Greek brothers Cyril and Methodius began their mission to the Slavs, both Ephraem's genuine works and his extensive pseudepigrapha had become authoritative for both Syriac and Greek Christians. Under the reign of Tsar Simeon (r. 893–927), the scriptoria of Preslav and Ohrid actively translated many important

Christian works, including a Greek prototype (no longer extant) of the *Paraenesis*. The text of all the known Slavonic codices goes back to this early translation.<sup>16</sup>

The many manuscript copies of the *Paraenesis* testify to its enduring popularity among Orthodox Slavs. The earliest witness, eight leaves from a codex that included the *Paraenesis*, is the eleventh-century Macedonian Fragment, copied in Bulgaria's Rila Monastery in the Glagolitic script (the forerunner of the Cyrillic alphabet); the Macedonian Fragment preserves a section of the *Sermon on the Antichrist*.<sup>17</sup> Soon after Prince Vladimir of Kiev was baptized in 988, Christian monks brought the *Paraenesis* to the newly converted land. Old Russian literature abounds with references that testify to the importance of Ephraem's work among the literate Christian elite. Around 1068, Abbot Feodosii of the Kievan Caves Monastery introduced the Studite rule that prescribed the reading of Ephraem's sermons during Great Lent, and the twelfth-century monastery patericon includes a reference to the Syriac father.<sup>18</sup> On Mount Athos, a twelfth-century catalogue of manuscripts in the Xilourgou hermitage of the Theotokos, founded by monks from Kievan Rus', also listed a book by Ephraem.<sup>19</sup> According to his vita, Avraamii of Smolensk (d. 1221) loved to read the saint's homilies; significantly, Avraamii's disciple, the author of the vita, took the name Efrem.<sup>20</sup> Later in the thirteenth century, Prince Vladimir Vasil'kovich of Volhynia (r. 1269–1289) commissioned one of the earliest complete extant copies of the *Paraenesis*, and many other later copies (such as the manuscript in the Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, Fig. 12.3) have survived.<sup>21</sup> Monastery libraries

<sup>16</sup> Horace Lunt, "Contributions to the Study of Old Church Slavonic," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 1–2 (1959): 9–37, here 21.

<sup>17</sup> Grigorii Andreevich Il'inskii, *Makedonskii glagolicheskii listok: otryvok glagolicheskogo teksta Efrema Sirina XI veka* (St. Petersburg: Izd. Otd-niia russkago iazyka i slovesnosti Imp. akademii nauk, 1909); Ivan Goshev, *Rilski glagolicheski listove* (Sofia: Bulgarska akademii na naukite, 1956).

<sup>18</sup> According to the Slavonic translation of the Studite Rule of Patriarch Alexis of Constantinople (r. 1024–1043), preserved in a complete twelfth-century copy in Moscow's State Historical Museum (Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii muzei, Sin. 330), Ephraem's works were to be read during Great Lent until Bright Tuesday (the Tuesday following Easter). See V.P. Vinogradov, *Ustavnye chteniia: propoved' knigi: istoriko-gomileticheskoe izsledovanie*, vol. 1: *Ustavnaia reglamentatsiia chtenii v grecheskoi tserkvi* (Sergiev Posad: Tip. Sv.-Tr. Sergievoi lavry, 1914), 43; and D.S. Likhachev et al., eds., *Pamiatniki literatury drevnei Rusi, XII vek* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), 514.

<sup>19</sup> A.S. Arkhangel'skii, *Tvoreniia otsovo tserkvi v drevne-russkoi pis'mennosti: izvocheniia iz rukopisei i opyty istoriko-literaturnykh izuchenii*, 4 vols. (Kazan: Tipografiia Imperatorskogo universiteta, 1889–1890), 3:1–118.

<sup>20</sup> Efrem, *Die altrussischen hagiographischen Erzählungen und liturgischen Dichtungen über den Heiligen Avraamij von Smolensk* (Munich: Fink, 1970). Although presumably written by Efrem in the thirteenth century shortly after his master's death, the earliest copy of Avraamii's vita dates only from the sixteenth century.

<sup>21</sup> Rossiiskaia natsional'naia biblioteka, Rukopis'nyi otdel, sobranie Pogodina, No. 71a. Arkhangel'skii dated this manuscript to 1492, but Zholobov places it in the late thirteenth century.

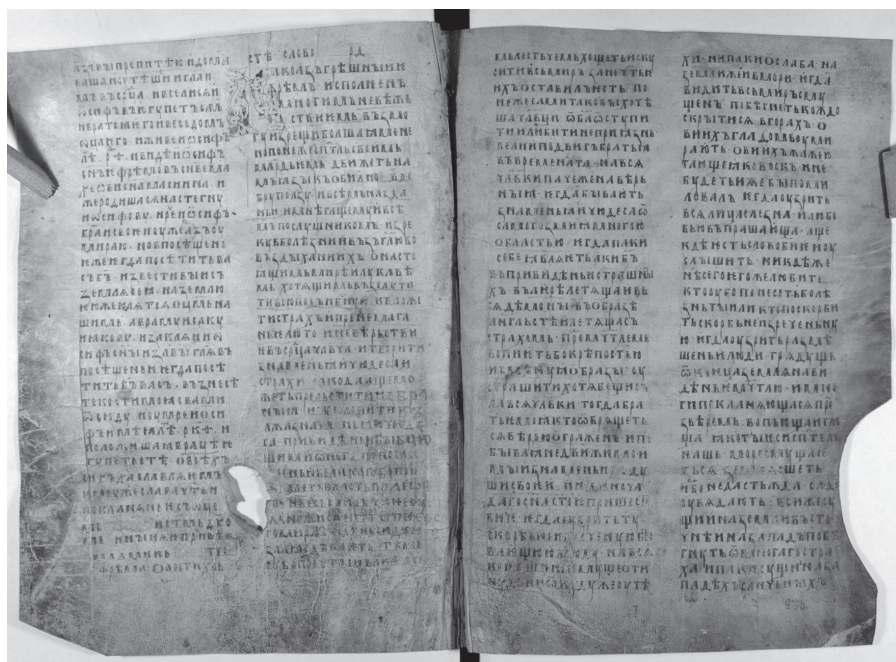


Figure 12.3: Slavonic translation of Pseudo-Ephraem's *Sermon on the Antichrist*. Fourteenth-century manuscript of the Russian State Library, *fond* 304, *opis'* 1, *edimitsa khraneniia* 7, *listy* 229v.–230. Reproduced by the kind permission of the Russian State Library.

often held several editions of the *Paraenesis*, for it provided readings required by the Studite Rule.<sup>22</sup> The vibrant imagery of the homilies and their practical approach to spiritual questions eventually gained the work an audience outside the cloister.<sup>23</sup>

See Arkhangel'skii, *Tvoreniia* 3:36; and Oleg Feofanovich Zholobov, "Korpus drevnerusskikh spiskov Efrema Sirina II: RNB Pogod. 71a," *Russian Linguistics* 33, no. 1 (2009): 37–64. Zholobov has analyzed two other early manuscripts of the *Paraenesis* in his "Korpus drevnerusskikh spiskov Efrema Sirina, I: RGADA, Sin. 38," *Russian Linguistics* 31, no. 1 (2007): 31–59; and "Korpus drevnerusskikh spiskov Paresnisa Efrema Sirina III, 1: BAN 31.7.2," *Russian Linguistics* 35 (2011): 361–80. A partial list of manuscripts is in Thomson, "Old Bulgarian," 124–25.

<sup>22</sup> *Opisi Solovetskogo monastyria XVI veka*, ed. Z.V. Dmitrieva et al. (St. Petersburg: Bulanin, 2003), 34, 46, 76, 115, 158; *Knizhnye tsentry drevnei Rusi: Solovetskii monastyr'* (St. Petersburg: Bulanin, 2001), 146–77; *Knizhnye tsentry drevnei Rusi: Iosifovo-volokolamskii monastyr' kak tsentr knizhnosti*, ed. D.S. Likhachev (Leningrad: Nauka, 1991), 16–23.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the many personal copies of Ephraem's sermons made especially by the Old Believers. T.V. Panich and L.V. Titova, *Opisanie sobraniia rukopisei IIFiF SO AN SSSR* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, Sibirskoe otdelenie, 1991), 27, 77–81, 148, 197–200, 234.

## The Sermon on the Antichrist

The *Sermon on the Antichrist* entered the Slavic world as one of the eschatological sermons near the end of the *Paraenesis*.<sup>24</sup> In most manuscripts, the sermon is numbered 104, 105, or 106, grouped with a small number of homilies with similar themes. Part of the sermon's appeal is the voice of the preacher, who directly addresses his "Christ-loving" and "perfect" brothers several times over the course of the homily. Pseudo-Ephraem's word pictures expand on the vision of the eschaton, going beyond the canonical Scriptures in its imaginative detail. Although translated into Slavonic as prose, part of the Greek version of the text follows a metrical scheme.<sup>25</sup> Rather than simply providing a curriculum vitae of the Antichrist or indicating a set of pre-defined events determined by prophecy, Pseudo-Ephraem encourages his brothers to persevere in cultivating Christian virtues, to repent of their sins, and to remain faithful to their calling in Christ. He also assures them that God will give the faithful the ability to see through Antichrist's wiles; God will also provide a refuge for them during the great tribulation that is to come.<sup>26</sup>

The sermon is divided into an introduction and three additional sections, each of which is marked by a central exhortation. In the introduction the author begins in all humility by admitting that he is only "sinful Ephraem, full of ignorance," who will speak about matters that are beyond his power to express. At the same time, he claims divine inspiration: God himself moves his tongue "for the good and edification of all."<sup>27</sup> Pseudo-Ephraem introduces the main themes of his homily: God will allow the Antichrist, the "shameless and cunning serpent," to come to power "because of the increase of lawlessness everywhere in the world."<sup>28</sup> Through deceitful tricks and false miracles, the Antichrist will fool the whole world, except for those "who are found pleasing to God"; they "will be able to save themselves in the

<sup>24</sup> Irina Ågren, *Paraenesis Efrema Sirina: k istorii slavianskogo perevoda* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1989); Georg Bojkovsky, ed., *Paraenesis. Die altbulgarische Übersetzung von Werken Ephraims des Syrers*, 5 vols. (Freiburg: Weiher, 1984–1990).

<sup>25</sup> D. Hemmerdinger-Iliadou, "Ephrem grec," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: doctrine et histoire*, 10 vols. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1960), vol. 4, cols. 804–5; Wonmo Suh, "From the Syriac Ephrem to the Greek Ephrem: A Case Study of the Influence of Ephrem's Iso-syllabic Sermons (Memre) on Greek-Speaking Christianity" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000), 315; Assemani et al., *Sancti patris nostri Ephraem Syri Opera omnia*, 2:222–30; 3:134–43.

<sup>26</sup> Emmanouela Grypeou, "Ephraem Graecus, 'Sermo In Adventum Domini': A Contribution to the Study of the Transmission of Apocalyptic Motifs in Greek, Latin and Syriac Traditions in Late Antiquity," in *Graeco-Latina et Orientalia: studia in honorem Angeli Urbani heptagenarii*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir and Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (Córdoba: CNERU, 2013), 165–79.

<sup>27</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 295.

<sup>28</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 295v.

mountains and hills and empty places and in much prayer and countless tears.”<sup>29</sup> The reign of the Antichrist will be a time of sorrow, confusion, death, and famine. Pseudo-Ephraem ends the introduction with a call to prayer: “Let us pray diligently with tears day and night in prayers that we might help some people to be saved.”<sup>30</sup>

After the introduction, Pseudo-Ephraem opens the body of the sermon with exhortations to pray for escape from the coming tribulation and for strength to endure it: “Therefore many prayers and tears will be required, beloved, so that we might be found firm against these attacks, for many will be the false visions wrought by the beast.”<sup>31</sup> Anyone who is even the least bit careless will fall captive to the serpent’s deceptions. “Such a person will find no mercy on the day of judgment; it will be revealed that by his own will he believed the tyrant.”<sup>32</sup>

Elaborating on a tradition recorded by Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Ephraem compares the wiles of the Antichrist to those of the wicked biblical prophet Balaam, who secretly advised Balak, the king of the Midianites, about how to defeat the Israelites (Num. 22–25, 31).<sup>33</sup> Following the prophet’s counsel, Balak placed Midianite women on the rooftops in plain view of the Israelite men. To enter the city and fornicate with these “shameless” women, the Israelites had to perform a heathen sacrifice at the city gates; the women asked for no other payment. To catch everyone in their trap, the Midianites provided a suitable temptress for each class of men: princesses for the princes, rich women for the wealthy, and plain women for the commoners. Seduced into violating Mosaic law, the Israelites lost God’s favor: “Wielding fornication, that double-edged sword, the women killed those who came to them with two evil deaths: sacrifice and debauchery.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Antichrist will “begin with the belly” (*ot chreva nachinaet*); he will use hunger, rather than sexual lust, to force everyone to accept his seal.<sup>35</sup> By having his officials purchase all available food, the Antichrist will take advantage of his monopoly to place his mark on the right hand and forehead of anyone who wishes to buy or sell (cf. Rev. 13:16–17). The seal of the serpent is strategically located so that the person who receives the mark will be unable to make the sign of the cross, which can overcome all evil.<sup>36</sup>

Pseudo-Ephraem closes this section of the sermon with a hopeful exhortation to rely on the name of God and the sign of the cross: “If someone signs himself with the sign of Christ, then he will not be taken captive by his false visions, nor again

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<sup>29</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 296v.

<sup>30</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 297.

<sup>31</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 297.

<sup>32</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 297v.

<sup>33</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, bk. 4, chap. 6. The Bible identifies Balak as king of Moab, not of Midian (Num. 22:10).

<sup>34</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 298.

<sup>35</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 298v.

<sup>36</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 298v.

will the Lord abandon such a person, but will enlighten his heart and will draw him to Himself.”<sup>37</sup> The serpent will do all that he can to ensure that Christ’s name is not spoken in these days, for the name of the Savior renders him powerless. In spite of the beast’s efforts, the Lord himself will appear quietly to his true believers to protect them “from the intrigues of the beast.” For their part, Christians must “hold to the true and most pure faith of Christ,” which is able to drive away the power of the enemy.<sup>38</sup>

In the second section of the body of the sermon, Pseudo-Ephraem calls the holy assembly to take up their spiritual weapons, especially the shield of faith, and prepare for the great trial that stands at the doors. Christians need to recognize the Antichrist, who “will take on the form of the true pastor to deceive the sheep of the flock.” Exhorting his audience to study the form that the serpent will take on earth, Ephraem provides a brief biography of the Antichrist. If he could, the “impure and most cunning enemy” would imitate Christ’s second coming and arrive on earth “in bright clouds like terrifying lightning” so as to deceive everyone. He cannot do this, however, for he is an apostate. Instead, the Antichrist must imitate Christ’s first coming. Knowing that Christ became incarnate in the womb of a virgin, the Antichrist will be born of an impure woman, who will serve as his vessel. Pseudo-Ephraem hastens to say that Satan himself will not beget the Antichrist; nevertheless, the Antichrist will be born in the devil’s image as a “most impure thief.”<sup>39</sup> Significantly, in this sermon Pseudo-Ephraem does not claim that the Antichrist will come from the tribe of Dan, a tradition that goes back to Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome—and one that is affirmed in *De fine mundi*, another famous eschatological discourse attributed to Ephraem.<sup>40</sup> Although “the Jews will greatly respect him for they await his arrival,” the Antichrist appears to be a Gentile ruler; initially his officials will come from the nations of Edom, Moab, and Ammon (cf. Dan. 11:41; Jer. 25:21). At the same time, “the barbarous and murderous Jews will begin to respect him and to rejoice at his kingdom,” for he will also respect them and provide a place and a church (*i mesto i tserkov*) for them. Initially, the Antichrist will appear humble and pious, a hater of idolatry and a lover of the downtrodden. Deceptively charming and physically attractive, the Antichrist will win a wide following. Generous, he will demand no gifts; “he will not speak with anger, and he will not appear sad, but always joyful.”<sup>41</sup> Believing the Antichrist to be blessed and righteous, his many supporters will call for him to be crowned king.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 299.

<sup>38</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 299.

<sup>39</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 300.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory C. Jenks, *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1991), 45–53, 77–78.

<sup>41</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 300v.

<sup>42</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 300v–301.





Once in power, however, the Antichrist will reveal his true nature. He will begin his career by killing three great kings in anger—an incident, drawn from the book of Daniel (7:8, 24–25), that informs many other accounts of the End Times. At that time “the serpent will pour out his bitterness.”<sup>43</sup> No longer will he appear to be pious or a lover of the poor, but he will be insolent, angry, irritated, clumsy, terrifying, immoral, hateful, loathsome, uncontrolled, cunning, and shameless. He will perform false miracles and command a mountain to move from one side of the sea to the other. Even though the mountain will in fact remain in place, the crowds of spectators will be fooled by the Antichrist’s deceitful trick. In the same way, he will hoodwink the masses into believing that he has raised a mountain from the floor of the sea. Likewise, he will be able to hunt without effort; simply by extending his arms, he will gather many animals and birds. Miraculously, he will also appear to walk in the air above an abyss as though on dry ground.<sup>44</sup> Deluded by these tricks, many people will begin to worship the Antichrist as God Himself. Pseudo-Ephraem, however, reassures his audience that “the one who keeps God in himself and who has enlightened the eyes of his heart” will recognize the Antichrist for who he really is.<sup>45</sup>

In the concluding section, Pseudo-Ephraem describes the horrors of the Antichrist’s reign and the victory of the returning Christ. The whole world will suffer a famine, but only those who have accepted the tyrant’s seal will be able to purchase the small amount of available food. Entire families will perish from hunger; with no one to bury them, their corpses will rot on the streets and exude an overpowering stench. Gold and silver will lose their value; they will lie on the street, and no one will touch them. Wild animals and venomous reptiles will begin to attack and to feed on humans. The Antichrist’s followers will turn to him in vain and ask for something to eat, but the tyrant will angrily admit his impotence: “O people, where will I find something for you to eat and drink? Heaven does not give rain to the earth, so the earth gives no grain.”<sup>46</sup> In the desperate struggle for survival, physical beauty will fade away, brothers will die in each other’s embrace, and most will find no escape.<sup>47</sup>

Turning from these disasters, Pseudo-Ephraem assures his listeners of God’s mercy. Even before the calamities begin, God will give the world one last chance by sending the famous Old Testament prophet Elijah the Tishbite (1 Kings 17–19) and Enoch, the patriarch who walked with God (Gen. 5:21–24). In keeping with an old tradition, Pseudo-Ephraem identifies these two men with the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11. They will speak “true faith” and “divine reason” to the human race, saying:

<sup>43</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 301.

<sup>44</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 301v.

<sup>45</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 301v.

<sup>46</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 302v.

<sup>47</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 302v–303.

O people, none of you should believe the Unclean One; he is a deceiver. None of you should listen to the tyrant, the enemy of God. Let none of you be afraid, for soon he will be no more. The holy Lord will come from heaven to judge all who have believed in the sign of the Antichrist.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike other exegetes of the end time, Pseudo-Ephraem claims that the two prophets will successfully convert many who listen to their message, for God does not desire the death of sinners but, rather, their repentance. In keeping with his positive description of their mission, Pseudo-Ephraem provides no account of the martyrdom of the two witnesses. Indeed, thanks to the preaching of these two prophets, God will save many latecomers, who will

pour out rivers of tears with sighs toward the Holy God to escape the serpent. And they will flee with great alacrity into the deserts and caves with terror. And they will sprinkle themselves with earth and ashes and with tears they will pray day and night with much humility. And they will be given help from God.<sup>49</sup>

But those who have their minds fixed on the things of this world will be unable to recognize the Antichrist or escape from him.<sup>50</sup>

As the tyrant's reign reaches its apogee, all of creation will lament: "Then the whole earth and the sea and the air will weep. The wild animals and the birds will weep together. The mountains and hills and the trees of the field will weep."<sup>51</sup> The sun, moon, and stars will also weep for the human race, which has turned away from God, rejected the true faith for the Antichrist's deception, and replaced the Savior's cross with the image of the beast. The true church, hidden in remote caverns and hills, will also weep, for the holy liturgy and singing and prayer will have disappeared from the earth.<sup>52</sup>

At this darkest moment, Pseudo-Ephraem turns again toward hope and to a dramatic description of the parousia, the resurrection of the dead, and the final defeat of the tyrant. Like a flash of lightning, Christ will return in glory accompanied by a fiery river of angels and archangels. Lowering their eyes, the cherubim and seraphim will cry out, and the trumpet will sound to announce the resurrection of the dead: "Arise, sleeper, lo, the Bridegroom has come" (cf. Eph. 5:14, Matt. 25:6, 10).<sup>53</sup> "Then the graves will be opened and the rotting dust will hear the great and terrible coming of the Savior. And in the blink of an eye the whole human

<sup>48</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 303v.

<sup>49</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 304.

<sup>50</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 304–304v.

<sup>51</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 304v.

<sup>52</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 304v.

<sup>53</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 305.



race will arise and will see the unspeakable glory of the Bridegroom.”<sup>54</sup> Christ will pronounce his judgment on the tyrant and his demons, who will be bound and cast into the inextinguishable fires of eternal torment. The saints who refused the mark of the beast will finally emerge from the caves and the pits where they had taken refuge, and “they will rejoice with the Bridegroom with unspeakable joy.”<sup>55</sup>

Primarily concerned with encouraging his audience to remain faithful, Pseudo-Ephraem uses his abbreviated account of the End Times as an occasion for exhortation. He gives no sense that the end is near; indeed, he suggests that it is still possible to escape the great tribulation through prayer. He shows little interest in identifying specific historical events that fulfill the prophecies of Revelation, nor does he try to determine the precise time when the Antichrist will come. For Pseudo-Ephraem, an active Christian faith will prove more useful to his Christ-loving brothers than any eschatological speculation, for God himself will give discernment, encouragement, and endurance to the one who holds to the truth. Rather than speculate about the timing of the end, Ephraem urges his audience to remain steadfast.

### The Influence of the Sermon

Translated into Slavonic from Greek, the *Sermon on the Antichrist* became part of the Muscovite apocalyptic heritage, which included many of (Pseudo-)Ephraem’s other homilies as well as important eschatological texts attributed to the biblical patriarchs Enoch and Abraham, the Apostle Paul, and the church fathers Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–ca. 235), Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), and Methodius of Patara (d. 311).<sup>56</sup> Pseudo-Ephraem’s primary contribution to this apocalyptic literature were his vivid depictions—repeated almost verbatim in many of the homilies in the *Paraenesis*—of the Antichrist’s reign and of the Last Judgment. According to the *Tale of Bygone Years* (*Povest’ vremennykh let*), a twelfth-century Kievan chronicle, such poetic and artistic representations of Byzantine eschatology played an important role in the conversion of the Rus’ to Orthodox Christianity; a Greek “philosopher” who visited the Kievan court in 986 impressed Prince Vladimir with his stark verbal description of the Day of Judgment, as well as his canvas (*zapona*) that depicted the end of the world.<sup>57</sup> Some of the eschatological works that were translated into Slavonic and circulated among the eastern Slavs went so far as to give specific indications about the date of Judgment Day. Following an ancient patristic

<sup>54</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 305.

<sup>55</sup> Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 305v.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Alexander Pesenson, “Visions of Terror, Visions of Glory: A Study of Apocalyptic Motifs in Early East Slavic Literature” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2002), 32–63.

<sup>57</sup> *The Povest’ Vremennykh Let: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, ed. Donald Ostrowski and David Birnbaum, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

tradition dating back to the second-century father Irenaeus, several texts, including *Second Enoch* and the *Revelation of Methodios of Patara*, posited that the world would last no longer than seven millennia: just as the world was created in seven days, so it would endure 7,000 years, for “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years” (2 Peter 3:8, cf. Psalm 90:4).<sup>58</sup> This idea seems to have gained some traction among the literate elite of Kievan Rus’: as early as 1136, the Novgorod deacon Kirik, who wrote a treatise on numbers, made a special point of calculating the exact number of years (356) that remained before 7000 Anno Mundi, indicating the significance of that date. In speaking of the future, Kirik piously qualifies his calculations by stating “if God in his mercy preserves the world until that time.”<sup>59</sup> Notably, before the late fifteenth century, East Slavic Orthodox paschal tables, which were used to determine the date of Easter in accordance with church canons, did not continue past the year 7000 AM (1492 AD).<sup>60</sup> Presumably, Christ’s return, which would occur by the end of the seventh millennium, would obviate the need for the calendar.

At the end of the fifteenth century, this entire eschatological corpus came under question when the year 7000 came and went without incident. Even though Pseudo-Ephraem’s *Sermon on the Antichrist* offered no definitive timeline for the end of the age, it also suffered attacks. In the 1490s, the skeptics, who were tarred as “Judaizers” by their detractors, scoffed at the long delay of Christ’s Second Advent and mocked Ephraem in particular for his portrayals of Judgment Day. In order to defend (pseudo-)Ephraem, one anonymous Orthodox heresiologist composed a treatise that cited excerpts from the saint’s apocalyptic descriptions and compared them to the Scriptures and other holy writings. Finding the Syrian father’s eschatological views to be perfectly in accord with the Bible and church tradition, the anonymous author faulted the skeptics for claiming that:

One thousand and one hundred years have passed since St. Ephraem wrote, and the Second Coming of Our Lord has not yet occurred. And if the writings of St. Ephraem were true, then the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ would have happened when St. Ephraem wrote about these things.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.28.3; Grant Macaskill, *The Slavonic Texts of 2 Enoch* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 130; “Otkrovenie Mefodiia Patarskogo,” in *Drevnerusskie apokrifii*, ed. V.V. Mil’kov (St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo Russkogo Khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1999), 652–88.

<sup>59</sup> Kirik Novgorodets, “Uchenie imzhe vedati cheloveku chisla vsekh let,” *Istoriko-matematicheskie issledovaniia* 6 (1953): 174–91; Gerhard Podskalsky, “Principal Aspects and Problems of Theology in Kievan Rus’,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 11, no. 3/4 (December 1987): 270–86.

<sup>60</sup> “Drevnie russkie paskhalii na os’muiu tysiachu let ot sotvoreniia mira,” *Pravoslavnyi sobesednik*, part 3, no. 11 (1860): 331–56. The Byzantine calendar, which was adopted by Kievan Rus’, generally dated Christ’s birth to 5508 AM.

<sup>61</sup> N.A. Kazakova and Ia. S. Lur’e, *Antifeodal’nye ereticheskie dvizheniia na Rusi XIV–nachala XVI veka* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1955), 409.

To counter this view, the Orthodox author tried to demonstrate that Ephraem's teaching was completely consistent with a long line of prophecies stretching back to the patriarch Enoch, the putative author of 2 Enoch:

Five thousand years ago or more, righteous Enoch wrote about these things, and three thousand years ago, the great Moses also spoke of them. Two thousand five hundred years ago, holy David wrote about this, and two thousand or more years ago the holy prophets wrote about these things. One thousand five hundred years have passed since the evangelical and apostolic writings.<sup>62</sup>

According to the anonymous author, the remarkable uniformity of these different descriptions of the end of time, written by different inspired prophets over thousands of years, proved Ephraem's reliability: "Behold, the writings of the prophets and the evangelists and the apostles and St. Ephraem speak of the same things!"<sup>63</sup>

Shortly afterward, Iosif Volotskii (Ivan Ivanovich Sanin, 1439–1515), the abbot and founder of the prominent Volokolamsk monastery, composed his *Enlightener* (*Prosvetitel'*) to refute the so-called "Judaizing" heresy.<sup>64</sup> For his tenth sermon in the *Enlightener*, which defended Ephraem's writings, Iosif relied heavily on the anonymous treatise—which he may have authored himself.<sup>65</sup> Like his predecessor, Iosif cited a handful of dramatic references to the Apocalypse from the *Paraenesis*. He begins with the terrifying ending to the *Sermon on the Departed Fathers*: "Lo, the Lord is standing at the doors to make an end of this vain age."<sup>66</sup> Despite the scoffers, the *Sermon on the Antichrist* remained an authoritative text for Orthodox Christians for many centuries after this crisis.

The *Sermon* became particularly relevant when its readers believed that the Antichrist had already arrived, for the holy father offered practical advice and comfort for the true Christians who found themselves under the rule of the Beast. In seventeenth-century Muscovy, as a newly established patriarchate sought to centralize authority, standardize ecclesiastical practices, strengthen clerical discipline, and correct and publish liturgical texts, it met resistance from local communities, which were often reluctant to acquiesce to the center's new demands.<sup>67</sup> When in 1653 Patriarch Nikon (Nikita Minin) of Moscow reformed the liturgy and abandoned the ancient Russian custom of crossing oneself with two fingers

<sup>62</sup> Kazakova and Lur'e, *Antifeodal'nye*, 413.

<sup>63</sup> Kazakova and Lur'e, *Antifeodal'nye*, 413.

<sup>64</sup> Iosif, *Prosvetitel', ili, oblichenie eresi zhidovstvuiushchikh* (Kazan': Tipografiia Imperatorskogo universiteta, 1882). For the contentious historiography on the "Judaizers," see A.I. Alekseev, *Religioznye dvizheniia na Rusi poslednei treti XIV—nachala XVI v.: strigol'niki i zhidovstvuiushchie* (Moscow: Indrik, 2012), 215–50.

<sup>65</sup> Kazakova and Lur'e, *Antifeodal'nye*, 392–93.

<sup>66</sup> Iosif, *Prosvetitel'*, 247; Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 349v.

<sup>67</sup> Georg Michels, *At War with the Church: Religious Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

(representing the two natures of Christ), many pious Orthodox Christians objected to the changes and accused Nikon of apostatizing from the true faith. Nikon not only engaged in major changes in ritual (largely to make Russian practice conform to that of the Greeks) but also sought to concentrate authority in his office. Moreover, Nikon undertook his reforms at a time of deep social crisis, just a few years after the legal enslavement of the Russian peasantry in 1649. In addition, decades of conflict between Orthodox Moscow and Catholic Poland had taken on apocalyptic dimensions; Orthodox refugees to Muscovy in the early seventeenth century condemned Catholicism in eschatological terms.<sup>68</sup> In the 1640s, the official church printing house published collections of apocalyptic writings, including Pseudo-Ephraem's *Sermon on the Antichrist*.<sup>69</sup> For Nikon's opponents, Pseudo-Ephraem's description of the Antichrist and his context provided one useful lens for understanding their historical moment. Significantly, Nikon had changed the sign of the cross that Pseudo-Ephraem had valued so highly. The new three-fingered cross that Nikon had established was the seal of the beast, as the Archpriest Avvakum Petrov (1620–1682), one of the most prominent leaders of the resistance, explained to a correspondent in the 1670s.<sup>70</sup> The figurative description of Antichrist as a serpent opened new vistas of interpretation. Metaphorically, a serpent might indicate not simply a distinct individual but a spiritual force as well. In the 1670s, an anonymous prisoner in a Siberian monastery wrote a letter entitled "The Antichrist and His Secret Kingdom," in which he contended that the Antichrist had to be understood spiritually, as a malevolent influence operating in the world after Nikon's apostasy.<sup>71</sup>

In the eighteenth century, religious dissenters drew upon Pseudo-Ephraem's *Sermon* to prove that the reforming czar Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) was in fact the Antichrist.<sup>72</sup> Peter's westernizing reforms, which included the creation of a navy and a standing army (and the heavy taxes and military draft needed to support them) imposed substantial burdens on peasants and townsmen. Peter also demanded that the Old Believers register with the state, pay a double tax, and wear distinct clothing so that the authorities could easily identify them. Frequently cit-

<sup>68</sup> Hans Peter Niess, *Kirche in Russland zwischen Tradition und Glaube? Eine Untersuchung der Kirillova kniga und der Kniga o vere aus der 1 Hälfte des 17 Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).

<sup>69</sup> Robert Crummey, *Old Believers in a Changing World* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 183.

<sup>70</sup> N. Iu. Bubnov and N.S. Demkova, "Vnov' naidennoe poslanie iz Moskvyy v Pustozersk," *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* 36 (1981): 127–50.

<sup>71</sup> Petr Semenovich Smirnov, *Vnutrennie voprosy v raskole v XVIII veke: issledovanie iz nachal'noi istorii raskola po vnov' otkrytym pamiatnikam, izdannym i rukopisnym* (St. Petersburg: Tovarishchestvo Pechatnia S.P. Iakovleva, 1898), 019–034.

<sup>72</sup> K.V. Chistov, *Russkie narodnye sotsial'no-utopicheskie legendy XVII–XIX vv.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1967), 91–124.

ing the *Sermon*, one Old Believer unmasked Peter as “the ancient serpent, Satan, the deceiver, who was thrown down for his pride from the heavenly ranks of the angels.”<sup>73</sup> When, at his coronation, Peter kissed the cross to affirm his solemn promise to fulfill his obligations as an Orthodox ruler, he was in fact fulfilling Pseudo-Ephraem’s prophecy: “the deceiver will take the form of a true shepherd.”<sup>74</sup> Peter’s new “soul tax,” a capitation assessment on every male peasant and townsman, provided more proof as to the false czar’s diabolical identity:

What is the soul? The soul is . . . the image of God dressed in flesh. . . . It should bring spiritual tribute to its Creator: true faith, undoubting hope, and sincere love. But this son of perdition has killed the thrice-holy virtues and replaced them with unbelief, hopelessness, and lack of love, just as Ephraem the Syrian testifies, “He will place fear, exhaustion, and fierce unbelief in human hearts.”<sup>75</sup>

“Like a thief with deceptive piety,” Peter boasted of his accomplishments as ruler and appointed agents “to do his will in every place.”<sup>76</sup>

Much later, in the 1860s, a group of Old Believers in the remote Perm’ province drew on Pseudo-Ephraem to prove that Nikon (rather than Peter the Great) was the “cunning and shameless” serpent of the *Sermon on the Antichrist*:

If a serpent stings a person, then the poison will enter his body; that person will swell up and die. So, too, did Nikon put the poison of his heretical teaching into the body of the church of Christ and infected it. Many of the faithful spiritually died an eternal death. He was like the ancient serpent that tempted Adam and Eve and ruined the whole human race, so he is indeed a serpent.<sup>77</sup>

For these Old Believers, Pseudo-Ephraem’s metaphors provided a powerful means for understanding their relationship to the oppressive state church.

Well into the Soviet period, Christians continued to turn to Pseudo-Ephraem to resist government efforts to form cooperatives. In 1918, the Siberian peasant and Old Believer theologian Father Simeon (Safon Iakovlevich Laptev, 1895–1953?) quoted from the *Sermon on the Antichrist* in his circular letter, urging his fellow believers to refuse to join agricultural communes:

“Observe, brothers, the great wickedness of the beast, his evil cunning, for he begins with the belly, and when someone falls in need and has no food, then

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<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, “Sobranie ot sviatogo pisaniia o antikhriste,” in *Petr I v russkoi literature XVIII veka: teksty i komentarii*, ed. S.I. Nikolaev (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2006), 306–13.

<sup>74</sup> Anon., “Sobranie”; Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 299v.

<sup>75</sup> Anon., “Sobranie”; Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 295v.

<sup>76</sup> Anon., “Sobranie”; Efrem, *Poucheniia*, 300, 298v.

<sup>77</sup> Lukanin, “Bezpopovtsy,” 345.

he must accept his [the Antichrist's] seal." St. Ephraem Syrus, who saw this from afar, tells us that in the last days bread and every other thing will be sold through the Antichrist's mark. And we now see this in person.<sup>78</sup>

In an effort to flee from the Antichrist, Simeon helped to organize a hermitage in the remote pine forests of the Kolyvan' region in western Siberia. When even that refuge proved to be too vulnerable, he moved the hermitage to the Enisei River in eastern Siberia. In 1951, the agents of the Beast caught up with Father Simeon: the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) destroyed the hermitage and arrested Simeon and his thirty-two companions. Sentenced to twenty-five years in corrective-labor camps for anti-Soviet activity, Simeon quickly perished, for he refused to eat prison food—the food of the Antichrist.<sup>79</sup>

With its evocative language and poetic metaphors, the *Sermon on the Antichrist* offered readers a wide array of hermeneutical possibilities as they faced persecution, oppression, heresy, and schism. Pointing to the homily's few specific details about the Antichrist, some exegetes argued that its author had envisioned a particular person as the future incarnation of evil. Others, including many of Russia's Old Believers, emphasized the sermon's symbolic expressions and concluded that the Antichrist was a malevolent spiritual power rather than a specific individual; Pseudo-Ephraem identifies the Antichrist as "beast" and "serpent," clearly figures of speech not meant to be taken literally. This interpretive flexibility clearly contributed to the homily's popularity, which could be employed by broad communities engaged in an effort to understand the end of time. The author's calm and hopeful exhortations to rely upon a loving God also proved powerfully attractive to Christians who believed that they were living under Antichrist's reign. God will provide help to those who diligently seek him, Pseudo-Ephraem assures his readers, and ultimately He and they will triumph.



<sup>78</sup> O. Simeon (Safon Iakovlevich Laptev), "Na soiuzy," in *Dukhovnaia literatura staroverov vostoka Rossii XVIII–XX vv.*, ed. N.N. Pokrovskii et al. (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1999), 162.

<sup>79</sup> Pokrovskii et al., *Dukhovnaia literatura*, 676–77.