

**Sapiential *Theōsis*: A New Reading of
Ephrem the Syrian's *Hymns on Paradise***

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Précis: A fresh reading of the *Hymns on Paradise* discloses how Ephrem the Syrian, who was quite possibly the greatest Christian poet of Late Antiquity, reworked soteriological presuppositions and thought-forms current in fourth-century Syria to effect a transformation of the doctrine of *theōsis* (deification), freeing it from its substantive categories, to lay emphasis on divinization at the sapiential level. While the form of the doctrine with its anthropological considerations was kept intact, the manner of Ephrem's affirmation of *theōsis* was tantamount to its sophistication, in what amounted to a reformulation of the doctrine itself. In Ephrem's eschatological scheme—which exalts form over substance—body, soul and spirit are rarefied beyond physicality, while corporeality is maintained. Even the argument for the body's afterlife existence—the instrumentality of the senses being required for the soul's ability to perceive—is effectively undermined by the obviation or precluding of the senses in the soul's immediate cognition of the delights of Paradise. This innovation lent Ephrem's doctrine of *theōsis* a greater potential for realization, in which eschatological Paradise came to enjoy a more edifying immediacy among the faithful. Ephrem's poetic articulation of sapiential *theōsis* struck a balance between the Bardaisanite rejection of corporeal resurrection and the more earth-bound, Irano¹-Semitic notions of disgorgement of the dead and the pairing of bodies with disembodied souls for requital at the *eschaton*. At the same time, Ephrem's symbolic transformation of Paradise reflexively served as an allegory for the Church. An unanticipated consequence for modern Christianity, according to Brock, is that “precisely because he locates Paradise outside

¹ For possible Persian influences on Syriac afterlife concepts, see Morton Smith, “Persian Elements in the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, II, 200–203 and the literature cited. See also Geo Widengren, “The Fate of the Soul after Death,” *Orientalia Suecana* 9 (1960): 102–106.

geographical space,” Ephrem’s “views are left unaffected by modern advances in scientific knowledge.”²

Introduction: Called “the greatest poet of the patristic era” and “a privileged witness of the tradition of the primitive church of Persia,”³ Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373 C.E.)⁴ composed the *Hymns on Paradise* in his native Nisibis (pre-363) before his twilight years in Edessa.⁵ These hymns, considered by Mathews to have been “perhaps Ephrem’s most beautiful hymns,”⁶ are of the genre called *madrāšê*, composed in syllabic metres. Clearly, as the name implies, such odes often performed *midrash*, or commentary, on scripture, for the edification of the faithful. An original and imaginative commentary on the account of Eden in the Book of Genesis (Chapters 2 and 3), the *Hymns on Paradise* is a liturgical cycle of fifteen hymns, depicting the primordial Paradise of Adam to be the future (and possibly the present, with respect to an ante-Paradise) abode of the righteous. Documenting Ephrem’s cosmogony, anthropology and soteriology, these hymns penetrate deep within the ethos of early Syriac Christianity.⁷ Ephrem has painted a visionary landscape from a

² Sebastian Brock, “Introduction,” in his magnificent translation of *Saint Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990): 55.

³ F. Rilliet, “Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*. Edited by Angelo Di Berardino (Oxford, 1992): I, 276. On the beginnings of Persian Christianity, see William Scott Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact* (Ph.D. diss.: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1990) and the literature cited.

⁴ On the historical context of Ephrem’s life, with a critical review of the primary sources, see Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “General Introduction,” in St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*. Translated by Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar. Edited by Kathleen McVey. *The Fathers of the Church* series, vol. 91 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994): 12–45, and the literature cited.

⁵ There is yet some question over whether Edessa or Antioch was the centre of West Syriac culture in the fourth century .

⁶ Edward G. Mathews, Jr., “St. Ephrem, *Madrāšê* on Faith, 81–85: Hymns on the Pearl, I–V,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 38.1 (1994): 45–72 [47, n. 10].

⁷ This is not to say that there was no Hellenic influence on Ephrem, for we know from his *Prose Refutations* that he had read a work on *asōmata* by the second century Middle-Platonist Albinus (c. 150 A.D.). See C. Molenberg, “An Invincible Weapon. Names in the Christological Passages in Ephrem’s

palette of symbols of immanent transcendence. That the Paradise depicted in the *Hymns* is clothed in metaphor, as Ephrem tells us, raises some questions as to how transcendent these symbols are and how immanent they may be at the same time. In other words, if Paradise is described in metaphor, could Paradise itself be a metaphor?

Ephrem's poetry was not recited, but sung. Choirs of virgins intoned these hymns in melodies already familiar to the congregation. Under such circumstances, we could easily picture how these lyrics, drawing on the Genesis narrative, could be so effective in performing exegesis for the benefit of lay Christians. This liturgical medium did not diminish or detract from the subtlety and allusive depth of Ephrem's interpretations, but some metaphorical competence on the part of the listener was surely required to follow such a hymn in all its interpretive details. Perhaps some of the finer points of Ephrem's exegesis might have been lost on the listener, but his hymns were popular just the same, having gained a reputation throughout the non-Assyrian Christian world as well, a growing acclaim that evidently began within Ephrem's own lifetime. Far more effective than any tome of theology, the *Hymns* had a formative impact in structuring the religious consciousness of those singing and of those who listened. The scriptures were expounded in a most memorable way. These hymns are rich and vivid; they must have inspired contemplation. The *Hymns on Paradise* must have captured the imagination of Ephrem's congregation, whom he served as deacon. The theme of Paradise must have been of especial interest.

Visionary texts purport to give us a glimpse of the afterworld, of Heaven and Hell, and of intermediate states, if any, in between. Ephrem tells us that in a vision, induced while reading scripture, he was suddenly transported to Paradise, a place which he begins to describe in some

'Hymns on Faith' XLIX–LXV," in *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (ed. R. Lavenant; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1990):135–142 [136]. H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1966): 163–164, notes that Ephrem had read a work of Albinus entitled, *Of The Incorporeal*, and agreed with the Platonic distinction (one also pressed by Stoics) between the corporeal (*sōmata*): and incorporeal (*asōmata*). Ephrem was likewise familiar with Aristotelian categories. See E. Beck, *Die Theologie des heiligen Ephraem in seinen Hymnen über den Glauben* (Rome: C. D. Vaticano, 1949): 33–37; and idem, *Ephräms des Syrers Psychologies und Erkenntnislehre* (CSCO 419; Louvain 1980): 105–117.

detail. Typically, in apocalyptic texts, such a mystic transport or rapture involves a “heavenly journey”—usually made possible by the assistance of a celestial being. Not so in the case of Ephrem, who hardly exceeds scripture in his own portrayal of Paradise. This seems to be the case with other Syriac Christian texts as well, in that “no Syriac apocalypse belongs to the type identified [...as...] apocalypses with a heavenly journey (with or without interest in history). The heavenly journey motif seems to be foreign to Syriac apocalyptic.”⁸ Not through a purely mystical vision, but rather on the basis of scripture enhanced by poetic license, the heavenly scenes Ephrem paints are for pastoral purposes.

The *Hymns on Paradise* are edifying in their dramatization and vivifying of details disclosed or implied by scripture. Though the *Hymns* ostensibly focus on the afterlife (both prior to and after Resurrection), much of the imagery idealizes Christian life and community here on earth. The moral truths of these hymns are not merely couched in the metaphorical “lie” for poetic effect. There was something real about Paradise that Ephrem had to explain in a surreal way. Could Ephrem’s portrayal of Paradise have served as an allegory for a realized eschatology here on earth? In reading Ephrem, we must bear in mind that Syriac Christianity expressed its truths in a symbolic rather than philosophical fashion.⁹ Ephrem’s hymns are not systematic expositions. Despite modern literary notions of the authorial fallacy, Ephrem’s intentions are not difficult to divine. In composing the *Hymns*, Ephrem had Christians in mind. When the hymns were sung, thoughts turned heavenward. In his own Church, Paradise was the mirror on the intellectual ceiling. It reflected back.

The poet was poetically transported to Paradise, so that Paradise might be transported to the reader. This study will argue that Ephrem has inverted worlds of correspondences. In an arc of descent, Paradise is

⁸ F. Martinez, “The Apocalyptic Genre in Syriac: The World of Pseudo-Methodius,” in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature* (ed. H. Drijvers *et al*; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1987): 337–352 [339].

⁹ Cf. S. Brock, “Jacob of Serugh on the Veil of Moses,” *Sobornost* 3 (1981): 70–85 [70].

a metaphor for the ideal Christian community. The “victorious” martyrs, for instance, are said to sometimes reside in this world: “From their abodes / the children of light descend, / they rejoice in the midst of the world / where they had been persecuted; / ... Blessed is he who has seen / together with them, his beloved ones, / below in their bands of disciples, and on high in their bridal chambers.”¹⁰ Which means, for Ephrem’s listeners, that the souls of the beloved martyrs descend to local Nisibis; and, also, to Edessa. One might argue that the martyrs, as depicted here, descend to an *eschatological* earth, the inheritance of the leonine meek. But Ephrem does not exclude the present time frame, and so this event has a potential immediacy.

It is as if the souls of the martyrs themselves, from the realm of sacred time to the sundial shadows of Roman and Persian Syria, had a charismatic role to play in this world as well. If read in this light, such a stanza must certainly have inspired and consolidated the emerging Palutian congregation in which Ephrem ministered as deacon. In an arc of ascent, Paradise is the symbol of a reality to which the faithful aspire and in which reality of which they already mystically participate. Here, the active principle of mystical experience is divinization at the level of sacrament, and good works at the level of praxis.

The Hymns on Paradise as Liturgy: The manuscript tradition of Ephrem’s hymns has been conveniently summarized by Kronholm.¹¹ The *Hymns on Paradise* are genuinely Ephremic, of uncontested authenticity. Ephrem’s hymns were orders of public worship. As mentioned earlier, the hymns were performed liturgically. They were sung by choirs of virgins, affectionately known as the “Daughters of the Covenant” (*bnat qyāmâ*),¹²

¹⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns of Paradise* I.6; tr. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 79–80. Syriac text in Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 174, Scriptorum Syri 78 (Louvain, 1957): 2. Cf. Beck, *Ephraems Hymnen über das Paradies: Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Studia Anselmiana 26; Rome, 1951).

¹¹ Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem*, 17–19.

¹² Because he had studied in Edessa and later became bishop of nearby Sarug, a town less than twenty-five miles south of Edessa, Jacob of Sarug’s panegyric *mēmra* is of particular value. The expression “Daughters of the

according to a Syriac *Life of Ephrem*.¹³ As *madrāšê*, the *Hymns on Paradise* were meant to be sung, as distinct from the *mēm̄rê*, poetic homilies composed in verses of seven syllables, intended for reading. The *Hymns* consist of unrhymed stanzas comprised by a stanzaic pattern of syllables in the following pattern: 5 + 5 / 5 + 5 / 5 + 5 / 7 / 5 + 5 / 5 + 5.

More than worship, these litanies lit candles of doctrine in the minds of the faithful, within the stained glass and gathered silence of

Covenant” for virgins deserves notice here. It is not Ephrem’s turn of phrase here, but rather that of his biographer (*infra*). The concept of “Covenant” nevertheless permeated Ephrem’s thought world. In speaking of the hagiography of the Edessan martyrs, Susan Ashbrook Harvey summarizes the meaning and importance of the concept:

The simplicity of these narratives is belied by their strongly nuanced Syriac vocabulary, for the dialogues abound with the use of the terminology derived from the root *qwm*, “to stand”. Christianity is repeatedly described here as a belief in which one “stands”; and further, as a form of life and set of practices in which one “stands”. The constant use of the root *qwm* for designating basic Christian life keeps us mindful of the place of asceticism in early Syriac Christianity. The term used here for the “stance” of the Christian life is *qyāmâ*, also carrying the sense of “covenant”, as used for the *Bnay* and *Bnat Qyāmâ*. In the early fourth century, the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant were still an ambiguously defined part of the church, but the *Acts of Shmona and Guria* refer to the *Bnay* and *Bnat Qyāmâ* as suffering particular abuse in these persecutions. The language of these *Acts* plays intentionally on *qyāmâ*, “covenant,” as another derivative from *qwm*: the “covenant” of the consecrated life is not different from the “stance” or covenant the lay Christian has taken by the commitment of faith.

[S. Ashbrook Harvey, “The Edessan Martyrs and the Ascetic Tradition,” in *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (ed. R. Lavenant; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1990):195–206 (199)].

The same kind of word play holds true for the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* (*ibid.*), a fact already noted in an unpublished paper by Prof. John Corbett of the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto. Another meaning of the term *qyāmâ* that directly concerns the present study is that of “resurrection.” P. Nagel, *Die Motivierung der Askese in der alten Kirche und der Ursprung des Mönchtums* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966): 43f. suggests that the term *qyāmâ* means “standing” in the sense of *anastasis* (“resurrection”). The ascetics anticipated thus the *vita angelica* as “sons and daughters of the Resurrection.” M. Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Standing in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1985): 90, n. 37, in reference to Nagel’s study, states that “the Syriac *bnay qyāmâ* / *bnat qyāmâ* tradition is another example of the development of the Jewish theme of ‘standing before the Lord’ (and assimilation to the condition of angels):.” See also A. Vööbus, “The Institution of the *benai qeiama* and *benat qeiama* in the Ancient Syrian Church,” *Church History* 30 (1961): 19–27; and G. Nedungatt, “The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973): 191–215, 419–444.

¹³ R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1975): 30, n. 1.

contemplation beneath the angelic galaxy of the fourth-century Christian Syria. In Christian domain, accessible to the illiterate, not restricted to the intellectual elite, these *Hymns* valorized religious truths and so became a shaping influence on local Christians. For the modern study of early Christianity, these hymns tell us much about the form and content of popular and not just of official religiosity, where the act of praise became part of the text. In any study of fourth-century Christian Syria, liturgy cannot be marginalized. Of Ephrem's hymns, as liturgical rites, it could rightly be said: "A demand is made on actors enacting the rite to preserve a tacit management of paradox and ambiguity to realize its theological basis in a credible manner."¹⁴

Were the *Hymns on Paradise* meant to induce a realized eschatology? This is a question of the relationship between content and intent. Just what was being realized, if anything, in the *Hymns on Paradise*, and what were the probability structures that could sustain such a realization? This much may be hazarded: the *Hymns on Paradise*, as mirror of the holy, were rites of contemplative passage into Paradise, mystic transports to the empyrean realms on high, visions of the celestial to inspire those on earth treading the spiritual path leading to heaven.

In a realized state, Paradise is where the heart is: "In the bridal chamber of such a person's heart, the Creator resides."¹⁵ According to Semitic anthropology, the heart is the seat of the intellect as well as that of the emotions.¹⁶ Of the immanence of Paradise in this world, Ephrem assures: "The breath that wafts / from some blessed corner of Paradise / gives sweetness / to the bitterness of this region, / it tempers the curse / on this earth of ours."¹⁷ Paradise is a presence, a fragrance that wafts from the realm above to the sanctuary below. But can it be realized? To approach such a question, Ephrem begins by teaching the Christian what

¹⁴ K. Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy: Representations of the Holy* (Houndmills, England: Macmillan Academic, 1991): 13.

¹⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* XLIV.20; tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 104.

¹⁶ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 192.

¹⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XI.10; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 157.

Paradise is not. In Ephrem's *Hymns*, Paradise is real, but not always literally so.

The Mirror of Scripture: Ephrem's Letter to Publius may be said to be the prosaic counterpart of *Hymns on Paradise*, the former attesting the eschatology of the latter in several important respects. Ephrem states that, in scripture, "there Paradise is visible."¹⁸ In his *Letter*, Ephrem speaks of the Gospel as "a figure" for the beauty of the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁹ Through the Gospel looking-glass, this realm is visible to "the luminous eye." "There," Ephrem writes, "Paradise is visible, joyous with its flowers."²⁰ "The Scriptures are placed there like a mirror," the poet explains, "and he whose eye is luminous beholds there the image of reality."²¹

Ephrem uses a metaphorical²² visionary form to express an eschatological reality. Gazing into "the mirror of the Gospel," Ephrem writes: "I saw there beautiful people, and I was desirous of their beauty; and I saw the place of the good where they were standing, and I was eager for their position. I saw their bridal chamber, which no one who has not a lamp may enter; I saw their joy, and I myself sat down in mourning, not possessing works worthy of that bridal chamber. I saw them clothed with the 'robe of light,' and I was grieved that I had prepared no virtuous raiment."²³

¹⁸ Ephrem, *Letter to Publius* 2, tr. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 58.

¹⁹ On Ephrem's use of typology, see M. Schmidt, "Ältestamentliche Typologien in den Paradieshymnen von Ephräm den Syrer," in *Paradeigmata: Literarische Typologie des Älten Testament* (Berlin: Ducker und Humblot, 1989): 55–82.

²⁰ Ephrem, *Letter to Publius* 2; tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 58.

²¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* LXVII.8, tr. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World of St Ephrem* (Kerala, India: Mar Mathews Press, 1985): 57 and 32 (alternate tr.).

²² See, generally, P. Yousif, "Approaches to Divine Realities in the Thought of St Ephrem of Nisibis," in *The Church I Love. A Tribute to Rev. Placid J. Podipara CMI* (ed. J. Madey and G. Kaniarakath; Kottayam, 1984): 54–69.

²³ S. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976): 216–305, apud *idem*, "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie bei den östlichen Vätern und ihren Parallelen im Mittelalter* (ed. M. Schmidt and C. Geyer: Regensburg, 1982): 11–40 [19].

Metaphors of the Incomparable: As the title of this paper suggests, there exists tension between metaphorical and realized descriptions of Paradise. It is an unusual move for a poet to explicate his own poetry, but Ephrem took preceptive measures against any temptation on the part of audience to take his metaphors literally. Ephrem is quite clear about the figurative nature of his descriptions: "If someone concentrates his attention solely / on the metaphors used of God's majesty, / he abuses and misrepresents that majesty / and thus errs / by means of those metaphors ... / Do not let your intellect/ be disturbed by mere names, / for Paradise has simply clothed itself / in terms that are akin to you ...".²⁴ Brock characterizes Ephrem's idea of God's "putting on metaphors" as a virtual reality, a second form of incarnation.²⁵ In fact, Ephrem uses several technical terms to highlight divine metaphoricity in Scripture and in Nature as well: symbol (*râzâ*); metaphor (*dmûtâ*); allegory (*pelêtâ*); and type (*tupsâ*), are among some of them.

The Anthropology of the Hymns on Paradise: Ephrem plays on the ambiguity of metaphor and exploits the polyvalence of symbol so as to present Paradise in ecclesial as well as in otherworldly terms. In this sense, the hymns, once intoned, may be considered conceptually theurgic, in what Brock terms an "engagement"²⁶ with the metaphors. In this tension between the metaphoric and the realized, realization is achieved through accepting some of Ephrem's metaphorical correspondences between Paradise and parish. Brock resolves the tension through making a crucial distinction between "historical" and "sacred" time. He writes: "Because the paradisiacal life of the *eschaton* belongs to sacred time, it is possible for it to be experienced, in varying degrees, by individuals already in historical time on earth."²⁷ If Paradise may be partly realized on earth, how is it experienced in heaven? With physical or spiritual senses?

²⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XI.6–7, tr. Brock, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 156.

²⁵ Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 48.

²⁶ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 29.

²⁷ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 17.

With body or mind, or both? To understand the modality of being a dweller in Paradise, a description of Ephrem's anthropology is required.

Trichotomy vs. Dichotomy: One must beware of relying too heavily on any single analysis of Ephrem's thought. A case in point surrounds the issue of anthropological trichotomy vs. dichotomy. In his effort to situate Ephrem within the School of Antioch, Khoury opted for the latter: "Ephrem, typically Antiochene, espouses a dichotomous idea of man as the only created being capable of reconciling that old dualistic pair, matter and spirit."²⁸ This association suggests, in the present writer's opinion, an urban Ephrem tinged with Hellenism, though this is incommensurable with the fact that Syrians rarely spoke Greek.²⁹ For Brock, Murray and Kronholm, Ephrem is more Semitic than he is Antiochene.³⁰

Spirit, according to Khoury, is not problematic for maintaining an Ephremic body-soul duality. Spirit (*rūḥâ*) is "the spiritual principle of the body" which Ephrem describes as grains on a stalk of wheat.³¹ Unfortunately, Khoury does not elaborate on the relationship of spirit to soul, or whether the two are synonymous or not. Kronholm reminds us that Ephrem's views on the soul, as with his anthropology in general, are not uniform. "It is, however, indisputable" concludes Kronholm, "that Ephrem's anthropological conception is *fundamentally* trichotomic."³²

²⁸ N. El-Khoury, "Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch," in *Studia Patristica* XVII. Ed. E. Livingston (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982): 1359–1365 [1361].

²⁹ A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture In the Near East* III (CSCO 500, Subsidia 81; Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1988): 196. Vööbus cites the instance of Ephrem's contemporary John Chrysostom, who complains that folk from the countryside could not understand his preaching in Greek since they knew only Syriac as their mother tongue (ibid., n. 7).

³⁰ See, especially, Kronholm, *Motifs*, 25–28.

³¹ *Hymns on Faith* XLII.10, cited by Khoury, "Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch," 1364. Khoury adduces *Hymns on Faith* LVII as descriptive of "how knowledge, memory and spirit are inextricably bound up in the heart and soul," yet, in the passage cited, no mention of spirit is made.

³² T. Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian with particular reference to the influence of Jewish exegetical tradition* (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1978): 58.

Yousif feels that trichotomy is “perhaps too strong a term.”³³ Notwithstanding, Ephrem’s triune conception of man is explicitly set forth in the *Hymns*: “Far more glorious than the body (*gūšmâ*) / is the soul (*nāfšâ*), / and more glorious (*šebih*) still than the soul / is the spirit (*tar^cirâ*), / but more hidden than the spirit / is the Godhead.”³⁴

“Man,” states Ephrem, “is perfected as triune: spirit, and soul, and the body as the third.”³⁵ Technical terms for this trichotomy greatly vary.³⁶ “The three Names are sown in three ways,” states Ephrem in another hymn, “in the spirit, the soul, and the body, mysteriously.” Further: “If the spirit suffers, it is entirely imprinted by the Father; / if the soul suffers, it is wholly mingled with the Son; / and if the body is burnt in martyrdom, / then its communion with the Holy Spirit is complete.”³⁷ The “imprinted” spirit refers to its being divinized.³⁸ It is in the nature of the spirit to be imprinted, that is, to take on the nature of that to which it aspires. In this passage is seen a total divinization of the complete, triadic person. In a distinction maintained to this day by Persian Christians,³⁹ “spirit” refers to the spiritual principle in man, just as the

³³ P. Yousif, “St Ephrem on Symbols in Nature: Faith, the Trinity and the Cross (*Hymns on Faith*, No. 18),” *Eastern Churches Review* 10 (1978): 52–60 [55 n. 7].

³⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.20, tr. Brock in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, 143 and 53. Elsewhere, Ephrem speaks of “the three shapes of man” and that “man was constructed triunely” (*Hymns Against Heresies* LII.1).

³⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Fasting*, tr. Kronholm, *Motifs*, 59.

³⁶ Cf. Kronholm, *Motifs*, 59 for various trichotomous and dichotomous configurations in Ephrem.

³⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* XVIII.5; tr. P. Yousif, “St Ephrem on Symbols in Nature,” 53. C. Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431* (Oxford University Press, 1991): 195, n. 124, translates: If the spirit suffers, then it is entirely sealed with the Father; if the soul suffers, it is entirely united (*mzīgâ*) with the Son; and if the body confesses and burns, it communes entirely with the Holy Spirit.” This same idea is compressed in one line in *Hymns on Faith* XIII.3: “though our spirit suffer, our soul be separated, our body burnt ...” (op. cit., 56):.

³⁸ The Syriac verb for “imprinted” is *tb*², which belongs to the context of coinage, seals and signets. See McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 74, n. 66.

³⁹ For instance, the 21 March 1992 broadcast of the evangelical program

“body” represents the physical being. The spirit can incline either way, in recrudescence to a feral state or in heliotropic inclination towards the spiritual sky.

The uniquely individual “soul” is mediate; it exists in both “worlds”. Like the Father, one’s own “spirit” transcends the physical world which it is crudely said to inhabit. Like the Son, one’s “soul” is spirit incarnate, so to speak. Like the Holy Spirit, one’s “body” is the locus on earth of the divinizing effects of the Holy Spirit. (The latter had scarcely crystallized in Ephrem’s writings as a divine Person until the Arian crisis, which prompted the beleaguered poet to compose his *Hymns on Faith*, when Arianism had insinuated itself in Edessa.)⁴⁰ Since the spiritual realm corresponds only to the physical realm in form if not then in metaphor, the internal logic of such a view would dictate that, at some eschatological point, the body must transcend its own physicality in order to “live” in the spiritual realm of Paradise. According to Kronholm, Khoury is “mistaken in regarding the dichotomy as fundamental.”⁴¹ Yet Kronholm does not state what role the spirit plays in Ephrem. It is clear from the passage above, however, that the spirit is more instinct with power, more rarefied, more subtle than the soul.

Scripture may have been determinative of these categories. St. Paul speaks of the Christian’s “spirit, soul, and body” (1 Thess 5:25). According to Špidlik, this trichotomic formula became traditional in the East.⁴² Ephrem drew an explicit analogy between the Trinity and the constituent elements in man. The analogy is more than poetic—it is noetic. The spirit links man to God through the Holy Spirit. There is a sympathetic connexion between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit. This charismatism is crucial to salvation, the transcendence of the animal condition, the transition from feral anarchism to true freedom. The vehicle of the spirit

“*Mojdeh*” on Vision TV, where this distinction was explained (in Persian) in a discussion relating to witchcraft.

⁴⁰ *Vide* P. Bruns, “Arius hellenizans?—Ephräm der Syrer und die neoarianischen Kontroversen seiner Zeit,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 101 (1989): 283–316.

⁴¹ Kronholm, *Motifs*, 162 n. 24, and 58, n. 33.

⁴² T. Špidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*

is the soul, just as the vehicle of the soul is the body. Without soul, the body is lifeless; without spirit, the soul is lifeless. As intermediary, the soul can incline either way.

The Dichotomy of Trichotomy: The substances of man are two: spirit and matter. What really matters is the “gray matter,” so to speak, in between! The soul can incline in either direction. This much has been said: if the soul gravitates towards the mundane, it becomes carnal, taking on the amoral properties of carnality in the moral sense. It may also be that the soul, in so doing, retains, as it were, the physicality of carnality itself, in plastic commensurability with the low estate of its consciousness. The soul that turns towards spirit, becomes spiritual not only in a moral sense, but takes on the properties of the spirit, and is physically translated in the process. The soul, nonetheless, stands in need of a vehicle, according to all formulas of *theōsis*.

The resurrection body is not the body of the Fall. The resurrection body is the primordial body in which the potential for immortality resided. The earthly body must therefore be transformed into a resurrection body adapted to a spiritual state. After death, the earthly body does not persist in substance at least in its original density, but rather in form and function. One thing is for certain: in the body/soul dualism, the soul has preëminence.⁴³ In forcing Ephrem's texts to conform to an Antiochene body/soul paradigm, Khoury appeals to *Hymns on Paradise* IX.20 to assert the priority of the soul over the body, yet makes no reference whatsoever to the priority of the spirit over the soul!⁴⁴

Spirit: The immortality of the soul depends on the spirit, the divine principle in the soul. The soul was not born by choice; it is *reborn* by choice. Its rebirth consists of its union with a spiritual family of Father (God), Mother (the Holy Spirit), and Brother (Christ), the latter identification conceptually implicit in the idea of adoptive sonship.⁴⁵ Explicit

(Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1986): 29.

⁴³ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Church* XXX.2.

⁴⁴ Khoury, “Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch,” 1362.

⁴⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* LII.1: “Let us learn about God from God himself: Just as he can be apprehended by means of his names as being God and the

mention of Christ as Brother is found in *Hymns on the Nativity* XVI.1 in Mary's song to her infant: "Be God to the one who confesses You, and be Lord / to the one who serves You, and be brother / to the one who loves You so that You might save all."⁴⁶ Jacob of Serug is more forthright in asserting: "Baptism makes us children so that we become brothers of the Only-Begotten."⁴⁷

This assimilation of divinity was considered re-creative. Immortality is one thing; level of consciousness quite another. Even the wicked had an afterlife. Consciousness-bound to carnality, such souls could scarcely be said to have "eternal" life in the strict etymological sense of the word: life "outside of time." The spirit in them is part of their essential anthropology; its dormancy is death in a relative sense. Even in primordial time there was what Ephrem refers to as a "hidden death."⁴⁸

The Soul: The soul is "invisible." Ephrem is careful to distinguish the soul from the body's shadow, though idea of soul and shade seem to be antitypically analogous. The soul, moreover, is "great and perfect," yet is "altogether dependent on the Body."⁴⁹ Ephrem describes the soul, Syriac *nāfšâ*, as the "bride of man."⁵⁰ The soul is likewise the bride of Christ: "The soul is Your bride, the body Your bridal chamber. / Your guests are the senses and the thoughts. / And if a single body is a wedding feast for You, / how great is Your banquet for the whole Church!"⁵¹

Righteous (One) and also the Good (One), so his (other) name 'Father' shows that he is a genitor. For the very name of fatherhood bears witness to (the existence of): his Son. And although he is the Father of one, through his love he is (the Father): of many." Tr. Molenberg, "An Invincible Weapon," 139. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 54, terms this new kinship with Christ as "brother" *parrhesia*, variously translated as "freedom" (to address God as "Father"), "confidence" and the like.

⁴⁶ Tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 149.

⁴⁷ Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 55.

⁴⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Crucifixion* VIII.13; tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 20.

⁴⁹ Ephrem, Fifth Discourse to Hypatius, in *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan* (London: Text and Translation Society, 1912): I, civ.

⁵⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Church* XXXVIII.8; *Hymns on Faith* XVIII.10), cited by Khoury, "Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch," 1363.

⁵¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* XIV.5, tr. Brock in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*

The soul has three qualities: reason, (potential) immortality, and invisibility.⁵² Though invisible, the works of the soul are quite visible and indicate its spiritual state. Though death is necessarily the separation of the soul from the body, it seems that the body physically dies but not the soul. The soul of course can be spiritually “dead”, that is, carnal and thus inert. It can, so to speak, “die”—through spiritual insensitivity—prior to physical death. Though the soul is not existentially dead in the afterlife, it is not fully alive. The soul in some sense is self-existent, but when deprived of the instrumentality of the bodily senses, “it lacks true existence.”⁵³ It seems that Ephrem’s teachings on the soul stand midway between Tatian’s categorical denial of the immortality of the (unsaved) soul (*Oratio ad Graecos* XIII.1) and Bardaisan’s affirmation to the contrary.

The “Soul of our Soul”: As reflexive evidence, an expression found in a post-Ephremic Syriac writer might prove illustrative. In his homily on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Philoxenus speaks of the Holy Spirit whom we receive from God” at baptism as “the soul of our soul.”⁵⁴ Unless purely metaphorical or an innovative post-Ephremic development, such an expression might suggest that, as the soul gives life to the body, the Spirit gives life to the soul. The Holy Spirit, in the first order of the trichotomic mingling, energizes the human spirit through the spirit of faith. The spirit is intimately bound up with the soul, more intimately than the soul is bound up with the body. As there is no separation imaginable in the spirit/soul fusion, the soteriological challenge is to eschatologically place the head back on the fabled headless horseman. It appears that, for Ephrem, the soul can subsist without the body, but it cannot subsist without the spirit. It is as if the relationship of spirit to soul to body is like that of a spark to flame to wick.

The Body as Vehicle for the Soul: Ephrem’s world is a hierarchy of mirrors within a kaleidoscope of symbols. Even if Khoury were right in

on *Paradise*, 28. See also S. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem* (Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983): 19.

⁵² Khoury, “Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch,” 1363.

⁵³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VIII.5; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 133.

⁵⁴ Cited by S. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*. The

holding Ephrem to a body-soul dichotomy, it would still be truer to speak in terms of a body-soul unity, for “they are a mirror of one another.”⁵⁵ For Ephrem, the body is personalized, of value to the soul. The body is the soul’s organ of perception and expression. The wholeness of a human being is predicated on it. Death, by definition, is the separation of body and soul. Life, conversely, is the uniting of body and soul. They need to be, as it were, remarried. But the conditions of their remarriage should be looked at very closely, as use of the word “body” may prove more context-dependent than a surface reading of Ephrem might otherwise suggest.

Christ, in overcoming death, brings life. The death of the righteous is overcome by the divinization effected through uncompromised salvation. The dying process is reversed, as the body is reunited with the soul at the Last Judgment. During the interval between, Syriac Christianity paints a picture of the soul as a sleeping ghost,⁵⁶ though Ephrem limns out a more positive picture in that the righteous wait their rewards in mansions reserved for them in the foothills just outside the Paradise (*Hymns on Paradise* VIII.11). No gnostic liberation from the body is conceived by Ephrem, although the body of the righteous in Paradise will be liberated from the disease of mortality.

Rather than the soul being a spark of light trapped in the darkness of materiality, the soul is a spark of light shining in a lamp. The body is the lamp. At death, the lamp is broken. At the *eschaton*, the lamp is not merely reassembled; rather, it is recreated. Its once-opaque glass is recast as pure crystal.

There is some evidence to suggest that an individual is not in all respects materially equatable with his/her physical body. Were this to be so, the body would be resurrected in its gross state. We know that Ephrem held the resurrection body to be of a different, higher order than the material body. The former is incorruptible, the latter is not. Paradise

Syrian Churches Series, vol. 9 (Poona: Anita Printers, 1979): 47.

⁵⁵ Ephrem, Fifth Discourse to Hypatius, cv.

⁵⁶ See F. Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul in the Early Syriac Church,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 40 (1920): 103–20.

is comprised of a spiritual substance, as Kronholm points out: “The Paradisiacal world is to him [Ephrem] neither earthly/ corporeally material, nor spiritually immaterial, but of a particular spiritual substance.”⁵⁷ If the substance of Paradise is spiritual, so must be the substance of the glorified body. For purposes of edification, it should be noted, this distinction was not pressed very hard. Otherwise, Ephrem would have to have accounted more for the discontinuity rather than the continuity envisaged in the somatic moment of the *eschaton*.

Ostensibly, the purpose of salvation in the fourth century was a purity worthy of immortality. This statement is perhaps too wooden, but it does broadly reflect a contemporary Christian yearning. Augustine himself goes so far as to say that “there was no other reason for the coming of Christ” apart from the resurrection of the body.⁵⁸ This goal of immortality is effected by an alchemy of the body, soul and spirit into a new alloy, with the divinity of Christ as the elixir or potency.

Not viewed as the origin of sin, the body is rather the victim of sin. The mystery of the Eucharist is that a transubstantiation of body and soul is effected through a special immanence of the divine. Through the sacraments, divinity is said to “mingle” (*mzag*) with the believer’s physical being in a kind of transformative fusion. Sanctification of the body—and not just of the soul—is the work of a divine Physician, administering the medicines of salvation, sacramentally communicated in the “wheat, olive and grape.”⁵⁹ Flesh, however, is not coterminous with the body, as examination of the following anthropological terms will bear out:

^c*Āfrâ*: “Dust” here is used in a purely earthly context, in regard to the material composition of the body. *Qauma*, or *qaumta*: “Height” or “size” in the sense of “stature” can refer to the human form and the humanness

⁵⁷ Kronholm, *Motifs*, 69.

⁵⁸ “Take away death, the last enemy,” Augustine preached, “and my own flesh will be my dear friend throughout eternity.” Cited by G. Lawless, “Augustine and Human Embodiment,” in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T.J. Van Bavel* (ed. B. Bruning *et al* (Leuven University Press, 1990): 167–186 [184].

⁵⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* XXXVII.3; tr. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 77.

predicated of its upright posture. *Besrâ*: “Flesh” can signify a human being, composed of flesh and blood. Some sense of “sinfulness” is attached to its Christian usage. As in the Hebrew, *besrâ* can also mean “anyone” or “everyone.”⁶⁰ *Pagrâ*: There is a conflict among leading scholars of Syriac over the Greek equivalent of this term. Beck equates *pagrâ* with *sōma*,⁶¹ while Khoury holds that the term generally corresponds to the Pauline usage of *sarx*.⁶² Used as an anatomical term or for any corporate entity, *pagrâ* anthropologically means “body” in contradistinction to the mind. *Gūšmā*: It is evident that *pagrâ* and *gušmâ* are synonyms, as Ephrem suggests in this parallelism: “Glory to that Voice (*qālâ*) that became a body (*gušmâ*) / and to the lofty Word (*melltâ*) that became flesh (*pagrâ*).”⁶³ According to Khoury, the former is generally considered to be the Syriac counterpart to the Pauline concept of *sōma*. The term *gušmâ* indeed refers to a corporeal “body”, but “emphasizes its role as the vessel of the soul.” Matter, in this sense, is that which has been formed by the spirit. The spirit, in turn, is informed by the senses.⁶⁴

Asceticism and the Transformation of the Body: The importance of asceticism in early Syriac Christianity cannot be overrated. Passion for the ascetic ideal was part and parcel of a peculiarly Syrian “order of rapture.”⁶⁵ “The searing lava of mortification...,” writes Vööbus, “virtually scalds the works in which such accounts are recorded.”⁶⁶ There is no

⁶⁰ N. El-Khoury, “Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch,” in *Studia Patristica XVII*. Ed. E. Livingstone (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982): 1359–1365 [1362].

⁶¹ Edmund Beck, *Besrâ (sarx) und pagrâ (sōma) bei Ephräm dem Syrer*,” *Oriens Christianus* 70 (1986): 1–22 [8].

⁶² Khoury, “Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch,” 1362.

⁶³ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* IV.14; tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 100; cf. Beck, op. cit., 19.

⁶⁴ Khoury, “Anthropological Concepts in the School of Antioch,” 1362–1363.

⁶⁵ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 194.

⁶⁶ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 195.

Ephremic *Asceticon*, as it were. Rather, the “monastic witness” of Ephrem himself is “one of a pre-monastic life of evangelical chastity.”⁶⁷

In the absence of contemporary sources, a document from the school of Ephrem may have some reflexive value in reconstructing the ascetical dimension of Ephrem's teachings in terms of principles though not of practices. Though Vööbus is incorrect⁶⁸ as to its authenticity, the first part⁶⁹ of pseudo-Ephrem's “Letter to the Mountaineers”⁷⁰ is a valuable post-Ephremic source for our knowledge of Syrian asceticism in Late Antiquity. This document describes monasticism in its primitive form, which Vööbus terms “eremitism”—a kind of pre-monasticism.⁷¹

The “mountaineers” (*tūrāyê*) are ascetics of whom pseudo-Ephrem speaks highly: “You see, my brothers, how great an army (lies) on the mountain.”⁷² Also spoken of as *pārūšâ* (“prudent”)—employed in the monastic meaning of “separated ones”—pseudo-Ephrem addresses these anchorites with veneration as “brother mountaineers”⁷³ situating them thereby on the mountains of either Nisibis or Edessa or both.

Suffering (*ʿūlsānâ/ħaşâ*), according to pseudo-Ephrem, is the force that transforms the spiritual being. It is the hallmark of the ascetic ideal. Through mortification, the body is crucified. It is for this purpose Christ came, as an exemplar, that mendicants might experience his passion and its transformative effects: “Jesus died to the world in order that

⁶⁷ E. Mathews, “‘On Solitaries’: Ephrem or Isaac [?],” *Le Muséon* 103 (1990): 91–110 [101].

⁶⁸ See now Mathews, “‘On Solitaries’: Ephrem or Isaac [?],” 91–2.

⁶⁹ The second part at least had been ruled by Vööbus as an “alien body” or interpolation. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 35.

⁷⁰ A. Vööbus, “A Letter of Ephrem to the Mountaineers. A literary-critical contribution to Syriac patristic literature” in *Contributions of the Baltic University* 25 (Hamburg-Pinneberg, 1947), *apud* Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, *passim*. Overruling Beck, Vööbus appeals to the Letter's inclusion in I. Ortiz de Urbina, *Patrologia Syriaca* (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1965): 68–69, where it is *not* classified as among the *opera dubia*.

⁷¹ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 31.

⁷² Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 35.

⁷³ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 35.

no one should walk sensuously by it. He died to our world in his body in order that he might make (us) alive by his body to his world. And he mortified the life of the body in order that we may not live carnally by the flesh. He was made the master, a teacher not in tribulations of others but by his own suffering. And he himself first tasted bitterness and (thereby) showed us that no one could become his disciple by name but only through suffering.⁷⁴

In this context, pseudo-Ephrem expresses the teleology of asceticism in a new way: ascetics, in the context of their contests of faith against the beasts of instinct urged on by the gladiators of demonic temptation, are represented as true martyrs, “martyrs of hiddenness.”⁷⁵ This is akin to Origen’s “martyrdom of conscience” (*Exhortation to Martyrdom* XXI).⁷⁶

Asceticism, generally speaking, may be regarded as a movement which grew up in the aftermath of martyrdom. From this vantage, asceticism may be regarded as a continuation of the martyr tradition. Certain key terms used to describe martyrs, such as “athlete”, “contest” and the like, are transferred to ascetics, and as such a strong indicators of affinities with the martyr ideal.⁷⁷ Very likely this represents the phenomenon of non-sanguinary renunciation under new historical circumstances, when persecutions ceased. Ascetics, although they may be shunners of society, play an important role in society, according to pseudo-Ephrem. Their intercessory prayer sustains the rest of the world, a idea which Vööbus depicts as “a favorite thought of ’Aphrēm.”⁷⁸

Of relevance to the present study is the concept of the gradual *theōsis* of the body of the ascetic, in which is exemplified a theology of activity. Suffering, in the *Letter to the Mountaineers*, transforms the physical be-

⁷⁴ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 32.

⁷⁵ Ephrem, A Mēmṛā on the Solitaries and Mourners, tr. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 45–6.

⁷⁶ Cited by Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 76.

⁷⁷ See S. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 1–19 [2].

⁷⁸ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 39.

ing into that of an angel and produces God's image in man.⁷⁹ Have angels, then, bodies? Earth angels in the Syrian desert did. Ascetics came to be regarded as incarnating, so to speak, an *angelicos bios*. The difference is of course subtle.

Paradise Lost: The story of the Fall is so familiar that its retelling may seem superfluous. There are, however, certain elements and motifs in Syriac lore that are not Occidental commonplaces. One might think of the Paradise narrative in its Syriac reading as something like the fable of the Emperor's new clothes. Pre-Fall Adam was King of Paradise. Both in the fable and in the Genesis account, the King is robed in splendor, but through vanity (in Adam's case, the wish to become a god) both ended up shamefully naked. Ephrem symbolically condensed the primordial episode of the Fall in the idea of the stole of glory, the "robe of light". This garment is the golden fleece of Syriac Christian soteriology. Its recovery was the odyssey of Christ. Its investiture was the cherished hope of every Christian. Indeed, the very idea of clothing is the most frequently recurring imagery found throughout the various hymn cycles.⁸⁰

As in early Zoroastrianism, the key concept in Ephrem's anthropology is choice. In the interplay between free will and the will of God, Adam's Fall was the result of his own volition and miscalculation. The serpent is not to blame, but is culpable as an accomplice. Adam mirrors forth the human predicament. His free will is the crux of spiritual capacity. Its optative exercise alone is determinative. As such, God predetermined neither Adam's mortality or immortality.

With Adam's disobedience of God came the loss of godliness, one aspect of which is immortality. Adam was stripped of his radiance, the "Robe of Glory," less frequently referred to as his "Robe of Light". The Bible intimately links sin with death. It was to be expected that Ephrem understood *Paradise Lost* in the very same terms. Salvation makes it possible for the Fall to be reversed. It is up to every true Christian to reverse the Fall.

⁷⁹ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 45.

⁸⁰ Cf. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 25.

The pre-Fall figure of Adam serves as an inverse eschatological paradigm of what it is possible for the righteous to become. Adam's investiture as King of Paradise, Priest, and Prophet⁸¹ (the so-called *tria munera* which becomes the triple office of Christ)—heightens the extent of the Fall and sharpens the contrast between saved and unsaved. It was Christ, strictly speaking, as the agent of creation, who fashioned Adam of dust, breathed into Adam his soul (is the soul therefore the breath of God?), and invested him with glory (*šwbh*). The “Glory” of the Robe may have something to do with the charisma of God's presence, the Hebrew notion of *kabod ha-shem*, the “Glory of God” which Ezekiel beheld, but this must remain only a suggestion as a review of the literature discloses very little in this connection. In any event, Adam was in every respect the “image of God”, and it is this original-image relation that Christ restored. The vaunted “Robe of Glory”—invisible to the naked eye—may be restored through baptism.⁸²

*Paradise Regained*⁸³—*Baptism as Re-Entry into Paradise*: To recapitulate Ephrem's conception of salvation history, the Robe of Glory is lost but may be won back once more. The mythology surrounding the Robe rationalizes the efficacy of the Sacraments according to the following soteriological drama:

The Drama of Salvation—Act One: Primordial Robes of Glory: In Paradise, Adam and Eve were clothed in “Robes of Glory” or “Robes of Light.” Act Two: *Disrobed in disgrace*: After the Fall, Adam and Eve were

⁸¹ Kronholm, *Motifs*, 64 n. 58, cites *Die Schnatzhöhle*: “And the angels and the [heavenly] powers heard the voice of God, saying: ‘O Adam, lo, I have made thee the king, the priest, the prophet, the lord, the head, and the ruler of all the created works and beings.’” Although certain midrashic traditions treat the deep sleep God causes to fall upon Adam as the “torpor of prophecy,” the picture of Adam as Prophet is most developed in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and *Recognitions*, corresponding with patristic notices of the same doctrine reportedly held by the Ebionites. See H.-J. Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969). Islamic and Bahā'ī prophetologies stood to inherit this tradition.

⁸² The Robe, presumably, is visible in Paradise. Ephrem reminds us in the opening verse of *Hymns on Paradise* that Paradise is invisible to the mortal eye: in scripture Paradise is “described in visibilities, praised for invisibilities” (*Hymns on Paradise* I.1, tr. Kronholm, *Motifs*, 67):.

⁸³ Brock, *The Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 51 uses Dante's expression.

stripped of their “robes of glory/light.” Act Three: *Christ places Robe in Jordan*: God “puts on Adam” or “a body” in order to “re clothe mankind in the robe of glory.” In the course of his descent into the waters of the Jordan at baptism, Christ deposits the “robe of glory/ light” into the water, sanctifying for all time all baptismal water. Act Four: *Robe regained at Baptism*: The invocation of the Holy Spirit at baptism consecrates the baptismal font, effectively transforming it, in sacred time and space, into the waters of the Jordan. The “robe of glory” which Adam lost in the Fall is recovered by the Christian at baptism.⁸⁴

Paradise to Come: In *Nisibene Hymns* XXXVI.7, Death is personified. In one of its speeches, Death confesses: “There are two men—I must not deceive—whose names are missing for me in Sheol: Enoch and Elijah did not come to me; ... they might have entered Paradise and escaped [from Sheol] ...”.⁸⁵ The figure of unsaved Eve provided a typological exemplar. Eve resides not in Paradise but in Sheol.⁸⁶ This picture of all deceased humanity in Sheol partly conflicts with another scenario described by Ephrem in *Hymns on Paradise*, that of the resting-place for the righteous, awaiting the Resurrection. Furthermore, Paradise “is full of spiritual beings”⁸⁷ who banquet, in what appears to be a reference to the present and not to future bliss: “There, manifest and fair / to the eye of the mind, / are coveted banquets of the just / who summon us / to be their companions and brothers ...”.⁸⁸

The bones of the righteous remain in Sheol while the souls of the righteous tarry in the outskirts or environs of Paradise.⁸⁹ As in the passage above, Ephrem drops some hints to the effect that the souls of the

⁸⁴ Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 12.

⁸⁵ Tr. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit*, 42.

⁸⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* XIII.2; tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 137.

⁸⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* V.9; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 105.

⁸⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.16; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 114.

⁸⁹ This is partly indicated by Ephrem’s eschatological vision, in which “no bone will remain in Sheol” (*Hymns on Virginity* XXXVI.10, tr. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 78).

righteous are not really asleep after all. Apart from the Semitic question of the bones, Ephrem depicts a resort for the righteous deceased until the time of the Resurrection: “Thus in the delightful mansions / on the borders of Paradise / do the souls of the just / and righteous reside, / awaiting there / the bodies they love ...”⁹⁰

This ante-Paradise is definitely not Sheol. The problem is that, though the soul is self-existent,⁹¹ the disincarnate righteous are in a state of deficient sensation and consciousness⁹² since the body is instrumental to perception, without which the soul “lacks true existence.”⁹³ The soul cannot die at death; for otherwise the sacraments would be devoid of efficacy. Nor does its preservation seem to be entirely insentient. Ephrem speaks of death, but not of the death of souls in terms of subsistence.

At death, the soul takes flight (*Hymns on Paradise* IX.16). The body remains interred until trumpets summon. The Resurrection, however conceived, is a definite event in the writings of Ephrem. This climax of salvation history cannot be spiritualized away. It is open to conceptual reconsideration. Elsewhere, Ephrem does speak of the disgorgement of the dead by Sheol at Christ’s harrowing,⁹⁴ though whether or not this was understood at a purely literal level is perhaps open to question.

Paradise Realized: Heaven on Earth: According to Brock, though Ephrem is “at a considerable remove from his contemporaries St. Athanasius, St. Basil and the two Sts. Gregory” in thought pattern and expression, yet they are “essentially at one” in their conceptions of the mystery of the Trinity and the Incarnation.⁹⁵ “The Syriac Fathers, no less

⁹⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VIII.11; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 135.

⁹¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VIII.5; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 133.

⁹² Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VIII.7; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 133.

⁹³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VIII.7; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 133.

⁹⁴ R. Darling, “The ‘Church from the Nations’ in the Exegesis of Ephrem,” in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature* (ed. H. Drijvers *et al*; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1987): 111–121 [119].

⁹⁵ S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 3.

than the Greek," concludes Brock, "see the *theōsis* or divinization of man as the end purpose of the inhumanization of God."⁹⁶

Earthly Body and the Resurrected Body: There is a fundamental problem of identity and difference between the earthly body and the resurrected body. There had been a long-standing debate within and without early Christianity over the vexed question of the resurrection of the body. The pagan philosopher Porphyry (d. c. 301) had attacked Christianity for its monstrous and ridiculous belief in physical resurrection. Around the year 177 C.E., Celsus summarized pagan objections to Christianity, calling it "the hope of worms." After all, who in his right mind would desire a body that had rotted? "The resurrection is both revolting and impossible," Celsus concluded.⁹⁷ This problem will repay a moment's consideration.

Virginity and the Angelic Life: For Ephrem, true to the Christian Orient and East alike, the goal of existence is full and perfect deification, the life of lived dogma, the translation of body and soul into the realm of the spirit. Does teleology condition views of salvation or does the reverse? Towards this end, the life of the ascetics was considered exemplary, useful to the soul. As a church within a church, the ascetics enriched a sense of spirituality generally, like a spiritual leaven. Virgins were the jewel or "beryl" of the Church. Taken together, the solitaries and virgins could be seen as "a peacock of the spirit."⁹⁸ The deeds of solitaries were to be appreciated but not always to be imitated. The lay life was also holy. Celibacy was not a precondition for baptism in Ephrem's churches, even though it optimized "single-mindedness." The ascetic ideal notwithstanding, that school of love called marriage was considered lawful and holy, in the context of praxis and contemplation.

"The Angels," wrote Ephrem, "have received the gift of virginity without effort but you on the contrary on the basis of battle."⁹⁹ The idea

⁹⁶ Brock, "Clothing Metaphors," 20.

⁹⁷ Celsus, *apud* L. Barnard, "The Authenticity of Athenagoras' *De Resurrectione*," in *Studia Patristica* 15. Ed. E. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984): 39–49 [44].

⁹⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns Against Heretics* XLII.10; tr. Murray, *Symbols*, 75.

⁹⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* XV.4, tr. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the*

here, to put it crudely, is that since there was no sex in primordial Paradise nor is there marriage in heaven, angels are virgins in a world in which sex has no place. Angels are undifferentiated as to gender. In a world in which sex is instinct with power to tempt, virginity represents the ascetic ideal to become angelic.¹⁰⁰ In the process, one has the potential to become superior to angels.

Realized Paradise: The Robe of Glory originates in primordial time. It is reinvested in eschatological time. It is acquired in historical time, in its coincidence with what Brock calls “sacred time,” drawing the inevitable conclusion: “The life of the baptized Christian should accordingly be that of a realized eschatology ...”.¹⁰¹ In a hymn attributed to Ephrem, but of doubtful authenticity, the “eschatology is certainly ‘realized’,” according to Murray:

See, you are reclining at the wedding–feast
which is the Holy Church,
and you are eating the living body
and drinking His pure blood.¹⁰²

The Problem of Post-Baptismal Sin: Salvation notwithstanding, it is possible to forfeit’s one’s lot in Paradise: “Sins before baptism / by simple work are able to be atoned. / And if the imprint of scars sullies [the Christian], / baptism whitens and wipes them clean. / But sins after baptism / with double works are able to be overturned.”¹⁰³ Does this indicate

Syrian Orient III, 29. Cf. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns* (tr. K. McVey; Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989): 327, where, upon comparison, Vööbus’ rendering here seems truer to ascetic warrior imagery than does McVey’s. In McVey’s version, the gift of virginity is given, not received: “Without effort the Watchers gave the gift, but by struggle you gave it.” On earlier Syriac Christian warrior imagery, see Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 7–9.

¹⁰⁰ For a critique of this ideal from a feminist perspective, see E. Castelli, “Virginity and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 61–88.

¹⁰¹ Brock, “Clothing Metaphors,” 19.

¹⁰² Tr. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 257.

¹⁰³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* XLVI.24–26; tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 450–451. Brock, *The Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 63, renders this passage so:

loss of immortality at the substantial level or at the sapiential level? Here, soteriology stands or falls on its supporting anthropology.

The Substances of Man's Creation: The Syriac term for "substance" is *qnūmâ*, which varies according to the nature (*kyānâ*) of a thing. Ephrem states that the Creator "infused into the powdered dust a manifold spring."¹⁰⁴ This spring, a metaphor for the soul, gives life to the dust. Conversely, in Paradise, "springs of wisdom" are said to burst forth from the mouths of its dwellers.¹⁰⁵ This indicates that the substance of Paradise is considerably different from that of earth; the constitution of Paradise is of a separate order altogether. In both earthly and celestial realms the soul is said to abide. The body, however, will have to undergo such transformation at the *eschaton* that the differences in many respects likely outweigh the similarities.

The Substance of Paradise: Paradise, in Ephrem's vision of it, is, to a great extent, informed by Jewish concepts.¹⁰⁶ But it is not wholly informed by them. Paradise is mountain, towering above all earthly mountains, its underside said to be circular, overarching land and sea¹⁰⁷ like a dome. Paradise is, above all, a cosmic mountain, a non-physical yet nonetheless a sacrosanct environ, at a metaphorical level at least. One of the challenges of reading Ephrem is having the metaphorical competence to decode Ephrem wherever this may be warranted, and to accept the rest at face value.

Kronholm notes on the basis of Beck's analysis that "Paradise in Ephrem's view is not 'eine rein geistige Grösse' ... nor is it corporeally/

Sin committed before baptism
 can be absolved easily, in baptism,
 And even if the mark of the sin's wounds is deep,
 yet baptism will whiten and wipe them away;
 But post-baptismal sins can only
 be reversed by means of double labours.

¹⁰⁴ Ephrem, *Carmina Nisibena* XLIX.3; tr. Kronholm, *Motifs*, 57.

¹⁰⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.8.

¹⁰⁶ Vide N. Séd, "Les Hymns sur le Paradis de Saint Éphrem et les Traditions Juives," *Le Muséon* 81 (1968): 455–501.

¹⁰⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* I.8.

terrestrially material, as is seen in *Hymns on Paradise* XI.¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere, the Swedish scholar states categorically: “The Paradisiacal world is neither corporeally material, nor spiritually immaterial, but it is constituted of a *spiritual substance*, in Ephrem’s view.”¹⁰⁹ This is obvious from *Hymns on Paradise* XI.4: “Let not this description of it [Paradise] / be judged by one who hears it, / for descriptions of it / are not at all subject to judgment, / since, even though it might appear terrestrial / because of the terms used, / it is in reality / spiritual and pure. / Even though the name of “spirit” / is applied to two kinds of beings, / yet the unclean spirit is quite separate / from the one that is sanctified.”¹¹⁰ This passage is interesting in that it is quite clear that some kind of translation of the physical being must take place, for Paradise is too rarefied for gross matter. Elsewhere, Ephrem likens Paradise to the wind, which has “no outer array or substance at all.”¹¹¹

What is the Robe of Glory and its Substance? Mary, in effect, was the first to be baptized by Christ, to receive the transforming touch of divinity: “The Son of the Most High came and dwelt in me, / and I became His mother. As I gave birth to Him/ —His second birth—so too He gave birth to me / a second time. He put on His mother’s robe / — His body; I put on His glory.”¹¹² What is “glory”? Of what substance is it? Glory is light; this is a metaphorical tautology of course. The Robe of Glory is often called the Robe of Light. Both are references to divinity. Glory and light represent the Holy Spirit. Hence: “John whitened the stain of sins with ordinary water, so that the bodies might be rendered suitable for the robe of the Spirit that is given through our Lord. Because the Spirit was with the Son, the Son came to John in order to receive baptism from him,

¹⁰⁸ Kronholm, *Motifs*, 69 n. 78.

¹⁰⁹ Kronholm, *Motifs*, 163 n. 27, citing E. Beck, *Ephräms Hymnen über das Paradies. Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Rome, 1951): 78–95; and I. Ortiz de Urbina, “Le Paradis eschatologique d’après Saint Éphrem,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 21 (1955): 467–472.

¹¹⁰ Tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 155.

¹¹¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XV.1; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 182.

¹¹² Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* XVI.11; tr. S. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit*, 15.

so that He [Jesus] might mix with the visible water the Spirit who cannot be seen, so that those whose bodies perceive the wetness of the water might perceive in their minds the gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹³ The Robe of Glory thus is bestowed in the waters of baptism. It is the equivalent of the Pauline metaphor of “putting on Christ.”¹¹⁴ What effects, then, does this Robe of Glory have?

Problems inherent in Ephrem's Soteriology: Often compared to Athanasius's formula that God became man that man might become God (*On the Incarnation* LIV.3), Ephrem gives an epitome of salvation in *Hymns on the Nativity* I.97, 99): “The Lord of natures today was transformed contrary to His nature; / ... Today the Deity imprinted Itself on humanity, / so that humanity might also be cut into the seal of Deity.”¹¹⁵ Patristic doctrines of *theōsis* taken together, Wiles explains that when speaking in terms of divinization, “the Fathers did not intend the parallelism to be taken with full seriousness.” “The Word,” moreover, “who was fully God, did not become fully man that he might make us full men becoming fully God. In speaking of man's divinization the Fathers intended to convey that men should become gods only in a secondary sense—‘gods by grace’ (Jeoī kata carin) ... ; it was never believed that they would become what the Word was—namely, ‘God by nature’ (*theos kata phusin*).”¹¹⁶ C. Strange states that Wiles has “questioned the need for a fully divine saviour when the salvation men receive is of grace and not of nature. As he observed, men become gods only in a secondary sense; they do not become what the Word is. Why should the saviour have to possess a divinity any different from the one he bestows?”¹¹⁷

Wiles' criticism does not seem to have occurred to the ancient critics of Christianity, such as Celsus and Porphyry, as the question is Christian

¹¹³ Ephrem, Discourse on Our Lord LV; tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 72–73.

¹¹⁵ Tr. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 74. In n. 66, McVey suggests a parallel with Athanasius.

¹¹⁶ M. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1967): 107–108. Cited by C. Strange (*infra*): 342–343.

¹¹⁷ C. Strange, “Athanasius on Divinization,” in *Studia Patristica* 16. Ed. E.

and not pagan. Wiles may be right, but this does not make Ephrem among the fraternity of Fathers and solitaries wrong. There may be a soteriological loophole here, the eye of a theological needle through which the camel of a bedouin Muslim can enter. As to Paradise, perhaps only Christians populated this once Zoroastrian concept. Paradise, a loan word from the Persian, relegated Sheol to temporality. But persecution of Christians at the hands of a Zoroastrian state effectively rendered irrelevant any question over the fate of a good Zoroastrian non-Christian.

In any event, the Eucharist is an elixir performing an alchemy of body and soul. The wafer is, as it were, the alchemist's "orange egg" and immortality is won. In the ancient concept of the soul being handicapped if left, literally, senseless, the spiritualization of the inner man was co-terminous with that of the outer man through a spiritual agency. If spirit has the power to form matter, by the very same logic, spirit has the power to transform matter.

In this respect, the transformation is complete. Matter is no longer matter, for Matter no longer matters. As Ephrem states: "And if these things which are to come are more subtle than the Body in accordance with the places (in which they are), so it (i.e., the Body) will undergo change. For that Will which made it gross for the gross purpose which is here present, made it for that Spiritual abode which is yonder."¹¹⁸ At best, its form and functions persist, and even that may in some sense be metaphorical, bound by the constraints of our language to explain the ineffable. The following examples will suffice to show that Ephrem, contrary to his assertion that the soul's perceptions are tied to the instrumentality of the body, is able to speak of its relative irrelevance:

Obviating Taste: The *Hymns on Paradise* possess their own "grammar of images", so to speak, with gridded ambiguities of images that interlock, giving rise to different levels of interpretation.¹¹⁹ In Paradise, for

Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985): 342–346 [343].

¹¹⁸ Ephrem, Fifth Discourse to Hypatius, cv.

¹¹⁹ On this kind of analysis, more appropriate to the interpretation of art but nonetheless applicable to literary images, see H. Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987): 42. Reviewed by E. Farrugia in *Orientalia*

instance, the body has no other function than to act as an instrument of perception, as the locus of the senses. Even so, we can eliminate taste from the necessary instruments of perception, as the rarefied body in Paradise does not eat: “but yonder it is souls, instead of bodies, that crave food.”¹²⁰ Rather, the soul is sustained by “joy” (*Hymns on Paradise* IX.23). One of the senses, therefore, is no longer needed: that of taste. In Paradise, there is neither material food nor drink (IX.9), as the repast, of an utterly different order, is spiritual and sapiential. “The teeth do not weary,”¹²¹ presumably because they do not chew! Of Paradise, Ephrem states that “the senses were no longer able / to contain its treasures / so magnificent they were— / or to discern its savors.”¹²²

Obviating the Olfactory Sense: What, then, of the sense of smell? Paradise is perfumed with fragrances, to be sure, “its scents most wonderful.”¹²³ It may be that it is “adapted” to perceive “wisdom”: “That Garden is / the life-breath / of this diseased world.”¹²⁴ Like Divinity perhaps, Paradise is both transcendent and immanent. Paradise transcends the senses, but its vivifying breezes waft into the congregations of the faithful here on earth. By simple elimination, if the sense of smell cannot perceive these breezes, a spiritual organ is the only faculty of perception that can.

Obviating Physical Sight: To achieve beatific vision, physical sight is not necessary. Not sight *per se*, but insight is required. Hence Ephrem says: “With the eye of my mind (*b-^caynâ d-re^cyānâ*) / I gazed upon Paradise.”¹²⁵ And, further: “... the sight of Paradise / is far removed, / and the

Christiana Periodica 56 (1990): 201–203.

¹²⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.20; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 142.

¹²¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.9; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 139.

¹²² Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.2; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 109.

¹²³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IV.7; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 100.

¹²⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XI.10, tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 157.

¹²⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* I.4; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 78 and 38–39. The concept of the “eye of the mind” will be treated later in this paper in relation to the notion of spiritual senses.

eye's range / cannot attain to it."¹²⁶ The pre-millennial denizens of Sheol, who presumably live in a discarnate state, are able to gaze on Paradise from across the "Abyss" (*Hymns on Paradise* II.12), as was the case with the rich man and Lazarus at Luke 16:26, as Ephrem is careful to point out. Presumably this visual acuity has nothing to do with a carnal cornea and retina, as this state is prior to the Resurrection. At best, the organs of the senses may be transformed into organs of the soul at the *eschaton*.

There are doubts about even this, if we take into consideration the various descriptions of perception in the afterworld that Ephrem paints. Physical organs of perception, certainly, cannot enjoy the beatitude of Paradise, as there "carnal desires no longer exist"¹²⁷ not due to resistance to temptation but rather to its irrelevance to a non-physical domain of satiety. "For what mind," avers Ephrem, gazing on Paradise from without, "has ...the faculties to explore it?"¹²⁸ "For feeble eyes," continues Ephrem in the same vein, "cannot gaze upon / the dazzling sight / of its celestial beauties."¹²⁹ And yet, it was with the mind's eye, and not the physical eye, that Ephrem was able to gaze on Paradise, in the wake of his mystic transport while reading Scripture: "The eye and the mind / traveled over the lines / as over a bridge, and entered together / the story of Paradise. / The eye as it read / transported the mind; / in return the mind, too, / gave the eye rest / from its reading, / for when the book had been read / the eye had rest, / but the mind was engaged."¹³⁰ Ephrem's rationale for the resurrection of the body is that the soul depends upon the body, as the locus of the senses, for perception. Yet the physical senses of ocular vision, taste and smell are, as demonstrated above, eschatologically obviated. The eschatological relevance of the senses, on the one hand, is affirmed by Ephrem but, on the other hand, such senses are

¹²⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* I.8; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 80.

¹²⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* II.3; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 85.

¹²⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* III.1; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 90.

¹²⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XI.8; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 156.

¹³⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* V.4; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 103.

circumscribed: “My eye indeed remained outside, but my mind entered within.”¹³¹

One does not see in Ephrem any dependence upon his elder contemporary Aphrahaṭ. Otherwise, we might have seen in Ephrem a more pronounced concept of what the Persian Sage variously referred to, in the chart below, as:

Syriac Terms for the Spiritual Senses

“spiritual senses of the mind”	<i>regšay hawnā rūḥānê</i>
“senses of the mind”	<i>regšay hawnā</i>
“senses of thought”	<i>regšay maḥšabrā</i>
“senses of the intelligence”	<i>regšay tar^cirā</i>
“senses of the intellect”	<i>regšay re^cyānā</i>
“senses of meditations”	<i>regšay hemsayhōn</i>
“eyes of the senses”	<i>^caynay regšê</i>
[invisible] “organs within”	<i>hadāmê d-lgaw</i>
“organs of the soul”	<i>hadāmê d-nafšā</i>
“senses of the soul”	<i>regšay d-nafšā</i> ¹³²

Aphrahaṭ, in *Demonstration XIV*, in describing the wonders of creation, speaks of what can be accepted as the Syriac counterpart to the Greek idea of the spiritual senses: “The wings of understanding are spread out, / and the wings of thought are unfolded, / and the senses of the intellect are exploring, / and the eyes of the conscience are contemplating / and the pupils [of its eyes] roam to and fro / so that the investigation may be known to sight and to knowledge / while not comprehending their limits.”¹³³ This concept contextualizes the Syriac *Liber Graduum* when it speaks of the “organs within” or talks of the “organs of the soul” (*vide supra*), and thus we find Ephrem speaking of the “inner senses of thoughts” in *Hymns on Faith IV.6*.¹³⁴ If Ephrem concedes the existence and functionality of such senses, why not their relative autonomy? This

¹³¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise V.5*; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 104.

¹³² These terms (not in tabular form): and their references in Aphrahaṭ and in the *Liber Graduum* are given in Stewart, ‘Working the Earth of the Heart’, 165–166.

¹³³ Tr. Stewart, ‘Working the Earth of the Heart’, 165.

¹³⁴ Noted by Stewart, ‘Working the Earth of the Heart’, 166, n. 234.

is a problem that arises in any attempt to systematize Ephrem's anthropology and the eschatology upon which it is predicated. The present study proposes one solution: The *Hymns on Paradise* are crafted in such a way as to appeal to the more mundane conceptions of afterlife requital more readily accessible to the common lay Christian, whereas, at a more abstract level of reading, the Hymns may be read as professedly metaphorical, both in terms of Paradise itself and in its allegorical inversion to describe the status and profundity of the Christian communal life on earth.

It should come as no surprise therefore when Kronholm concludes that Ephrem's views on the soul "are not uniform."¹³⁵ The soul, in contradistinction to the beast, is endowed with speech (*Carmina Nisibena* XLIV.1). The soul, moreover, has the ability, through the agency of speech, "to express wisdom."¹³⁶ It is this sapiential ability that is of such anthropological importance in the process of *theōsis*.

Bodily, Not Physical, Resurrection: Hymn VIII of the *Paradise* cycle makes it abundantly clear that the soul cannot function adequately without its companion, the body. Ephrem's Paradise is not incorporeal. (That may, however, be immaterial.) There is reason to believe, however, that the resurrection body and its disports in Paradise are rather of a different order altogether. One clue is the nature of Paradise itself. Assuming the resurrection body will be adapted to its celestial environs, we may infer that it would not differ fundamentally from the constitution of the leaves of Paradise. The leaves of Paradise, we are told, "are spiritual" yet "have taken on bodily form."¹³⁷ This indicates that the Resurrection is corporeal in form, but not so in terms of flesh.

If this is an inaccurate assessment, it could at least be said that the bodily resurrection that Ephrem envisions is substantially different from physical resurrection. Not only is the sight of Paradise achieved by insight, the mind's eye, but the entire resurrection body itself is likened by Ephrem to the mind: "A hundred times finer / and more subtle / are the bodies of the righteous / when they are risen, at the Resurrection: /

¹³⁵ Kronholm, *Motifs*, 58.

¹³⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VIII.8; tr. Kronholm, *Motifs*, 58.

they resemble the mind ...".¹³⁸ The rarefication of which Ephrem speaks is of such subtlety that the "spiritual beings" (*rūḥānê*)¹³⁹ are described as "so refined in substance that even thoughts cannot touch them!"¹⁴⁰ Elsewhere Ephrem relates: "Bodies, / with their flow of blood, / receive refinement there / after the manner of souls; / the soul that is heavy / has its wings refined/ so that they resemble/ resplendent thought / For bodies shall be raised / to the level of souls, / and the soul / to that of the spirit, / while the spirit will be raised / to the height of God's majesty."¹⁴¹

The Resurrection, therefore, in Ephrem's conception of it, is not simply an "arising" in the sense of revivification. It is an "arising" in the sense of a spiritual ascent, in which the whole tripartite being of man is "raised" to new life and to new heights. In what manner may we conceive of this? In this present life, in what really amounts to a realized eschatology for Ephrem, "the mind ... is spiritual"¹⁴² and it is the mind in mystic transport, and, at the *eschaton*, something like the mind into which the resurrection body is transformed, that can attain the environs of Paradise and, by the blessing of its Creator, enter into its Garden. There is in fact the suggestion that the metaphors Ephrem employs for his portrayal of Paradise may be decoded. From *Hymns on Paradise* VI.6 and elsewhere, we may thus infer:

Symbols of Paradise

Symbol	Referent
Bud	Heart
Produce	Rational Speech
Fruit	Words (Deeds, VI.11)
Plants	Truth
Sweet Scents	Love
Blossoms	Chastity (VI.12)
Beauty	Mind (VI.13)

¹³⁷ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XI.8; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 156.

¹³⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* V.8; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 105.

¹³⁹ Cf. Beck, "Besrā (*sarx*): und pagrā (*sōma*)," 21.

¹⁴⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* V.10; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 106.

¹⁴¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.19, 21; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 143.

¹⁴² Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.2; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 109.

Flowers	Virtuous Life (VI.13)
Garden	Free Will (VI.13)
Earth	Human Thought (VI.13)
Trees	“Victors” (VI.14)
Treasure Store	Hidden Mysteries (VI.25)

Asōmata, Eidic Vision, and “Mixing”: Evidently, Ephrem’s anthropology shares certain features with that of Bardaiṣan, the “Aramaic philosopher” as Ephrem calls him.¹⁴³ In one respect, there may be this affinity: body and soul are separable, but not soul and spirit, which is hidden in the soul.¹⁴⁴ The following table represents the topography of Paradise, with the various levels of its environs and its denizens ranked according to their respective degrees of holiness, accompanied by an analogue to the trichotomy of the human person:

TOPOGRAPHY OF PARADISE
(*Pardaysâ*)

Environs	Dwelling	Church	Individual
Summit	Divine Majesty (<i>Rabbūtâ</i>)		
GARDEN	Tree of Life Holy of Holies	Christ (<i>Rishâ</i>)	Divinity (<i>Alâhūtâ</i>)
Heights (<i>Rawmê d-tūrîn</i>)	Tree/Knowledge The Glorious (<i>Naṣṣîhê</i>)	Prophets Apostles Martyrs	Spirit (<i>tar‘îrâ</i>)
PARADISE		Ascetics	
Slopes (<i>Gabbê</i>)	The Just (<i>Zaddîqê</i>)	Virgins Widows	Soul (<i>nafšâ</i>)
Fence (<i>Syāgâ</i>)	The Cherub with Sword		
Lower Slopes (<i>Sṗulê</i>)		Married	Body (<i>gūšmâ</i>)
FOOTHILLS (<i>rāmārâ</i>) ENCLOSURE		The Penitent (<i>Tayyābê</i>)	Lapsed Christians?

Environs betwixt Garden and Fire
Ante-Paradise The Righteous awaiting Resurrection.

¹⁴³ Drijvers, *Bardaiṣan*, 165.

¹⁴⁴ On Bardaiṣan’s trichotomy, see P. Skjśrvh, “Bardesanes,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 780–785 [782].

Sinners awaiting chastisement & forgiveness.

The Abyss Hell

THE GREAT SEA

EARTH

The levels of Paradise correspond with degrees of spiritual development and perfection. There, the human encounter with things divine is vivid and immediate. One gets the impression, *inter alia*, that although the necessity of the body is formally recognized by Ephrem, in practice the body is an appendage that must be radically rehabilitated to adapt itself to the clime of the sublime. In the heights of Paradise, the soul is sustained, as it were, intravenously. Its apprehension is direct, in what can best be metaphorically understood as an implicit, Origenistic duplication of the external senses to describe the operation of faculties of cognition in the inner recesses of the soul. These faculties may be arrested in an aborted embryonic state in the unsaved person. With no debt to Origen intended, Ephrem's eschatological anthropology may be described as eidetic and transfigural.

"The assembly of saints," writes Ephrem, "bears resemblance to Paradise."¹⁴⁵ Of greater moment, by contrast, is the resemblance of Paradise to the Church, where the metaphors of Paradise are inverted, serving as an allegory for the Church. Ecclesiastically, the zigguratic ascents of the cosmic Mountain refer primarily not to the terraced levels the Paradise itself, but rather to the Church: "The mystery of the levels / of that Garden of Life / He prefigured in the Ark / and at Mount Sinai. / Symbols of Paradise / and its disposition he has depicted for us; / established, fair and desirable in every way, / in its height and its beauty, / in its fragrance and variety. / It is the haven of all riches; / in it the Church is symbolized."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.8; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 111.

¹⁴⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* II.13; tr. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 258.

Conclusions: The *Hymns on Paradise* purport to give an other-worldly glimpse into the afterlife. These hymns, however, belong more properly to exegesis than to the genre of apocalypse. No supernatural agency for this vision served as intermediary. Rather, Ephrem was mystically “transported” to Paradise during his reading of Scripture.

Nature, of course, everywhere spoke to Ephrem of the hidden God, the revealed Christ, and of the sanctifying Spirit; but Scripture informed him of eschatological matters more directly. Ephrem’s *Paradise* is informed by his views on human nature, and this is where anthropology may be seen to structure eschatology. The edifying intent of the hymns is quite apart from these concerns. Rather, it is Ephrem’s ecclesiological vision that the *Hymns on Paradise* was meant to inspire.

The trichotomy fundamental to Ephrem’s anthropology allowed for Syriac mysticism to speak of progress along somatic, psychic and pneumatic stages.¹⁴⁷ The doctrine of *theōsis* may be seen as a controlling principle here. Indeed, this soteriology—so prevalent in the fourth century—clearly structures, but does not control, Ephrem’s teachings on the work of Christ.

Deification was effected through chrism, baptism and the Eucharist. The poet wrote extensively on the efficacy of these mysteries. But salvation was no guarantor of spirituality. For this, free will took precedence, as it was possible to forfeit one’s place in Paradise as a consequence of post-baptismal sin. The eschatological wedding garment stood in danger of being stained. It was ethical vigilance that maintained eschatological preparedness.

As we would expect, Christ’s divinity did not minimize his humanity in Ephrem’s view. This is an important consideration in conserving the ethical teachings which came to characterize Ephrem’s system which was in ethical competition with that of Bardaisan. To do so would be so weaken the effective basis of the divine “economy”—the effective means of salvation.

It was the purpose of this paper to argue for a shift in emphasis in Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise* from the belief in physical resurrection to a

¹⁴⁷ Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* III, 329.

doctrine of what might be termed sapiential *theōsis*. The argument presented in this study was difficult and methodologically involved, and had to be unpacked in a cumulative way. The concept of sapiential *theōsis* is not an attempt to split cumin seeds, as the Romans would say, but rather an effort to demonstrate the subtle ways in which Ephrem speaks in a traditionally Semitic vein, yet innovates on the tradition of “the sleep of the soul” in which the body and soul repose in Sheol until the Resurrection Day. Ephrem pays lip service to this doctrine, but does not consistently support it.

Ephrem departs from the Syriac tradition of the Sleep of the Soul in two significant respects: In the hymns, Ephrem indulges in speculation in which the righteous, awaiting the Resurrection, reside in mansions outside the environs of Paradise (*Hymns on Paradise* VIII.11; cf. V.15). A further innovation by Ephrem is the idea that sinners (presumably, those who are repentant) may receive chastisement and forgiveness in a kind of purgatory situate between the Fire and the Garden (*Hymns on Paradise* X.14; cf. I.16–17).

Controversy over the immortality of the soul impacts on the soteriology of *theōsis*. If it is conceded that the soul is immortal, there is then no need for divinization. The power of baptism and the sacraments to confer immortality is seriously undermined if divested of their elixiric effect in the alchemy of body and soul. But it seems that Ephrem's soteriology was not entirely predicated on *theōsis*. He does not set out to prove it, nor is he at pains to defend it, though he refers to it frequently. In so doing, Ephrem simply elaborates on its eschatological consequences.

Divinization in terms of “substance” is one thing, but becoming godly is quite another. The doctrine of *theōsis* was a fourth-century given. For Ephrem, immortality was not so much at issue. Christ had assured the rewards of Paradise. Ephrem was concerned to present Paradise in a homiletic light. Rather than drawing on Nature as a point of departure for homily, as so often happens in medieval preaching, Paradise serves as the natural setting of matters spiritual, upon which a homily may be constructed. Aphrahat's description of the wise man, in *Demonstrations* 14, the realized eschatology of which is patent, could easily fit the scheme of Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*: “He is a great palace for his Maker: / the

King of the heights comes and dwells in him, / raises his mind to the heights / and makes his thoughts soar to the sanctuary, / revealing to him treasures of all kinds ... / The Watchers hasten to serve him / and the Seraphs cry 'holy' to his glory, / flying with their swift wings, / their garments white and resplendent, / veiling their faces from his splendour, / rushing swifter than the wind ... / His form and appearance are on earth / but his mental senses are above and below. / His thought is swifter than the sun, / his insights flash faster than the wind, / swift as on wings in every direction."¹⁴⁸ On this passage, Murray concludes that Aphrahat "does not spell out what his words imply" and that "it is only towards the end of the passage that its relevance becomes clear": to wit, "Aphrahat is holding up cosmic order as a model for order in the Church."¹⁴⁹ The same thing may be said of Ephrem's intent in the *Hymns on Paradise*.

Ephrem's teachings on the afterlife stands midway between the underdeveloped Jewish concept of Sheol and Bardaisan's refutation of bodily resurrection. Against Gavin's dichotomous picture of soul-sleep and resurrection with only suspended animation in between, Ephrem has created a hiatus in eschatological time where in the souls of the righteous enjoy proximity to Paradise and are, evidently, conscious. (As said before, this appears to be an Ephremic innovation.)¹⁵⁰ External witness for this concept may be found in Theodoret of Cyrrihus, in his description of the ascetic who was a namesake of Aphrahat: "May I enjoy it even now, since I believe him to be alive, to belong to the choir of angels, and to possess familiar access to God even more than before; ... now that he has shed

¹⁴⁸ Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* XIV, tr. R. Murray, "Some Themes and Problems of Early Syriac Angelology," in *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (ed. R. Lavenant; Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1990): 143–153 [150, 151].

¹⁴⁹ Murray, "Some Themes and Problems of Early Syriac Angelology," 151.

¹⁵⁰ That this might well have been a doctrinal innovation is indicated by Ephrem's reservations over indulgence in such speculation: "As I reflected I was fearful again / to suppose that there might be / between the Garden and the fire / a place where those who have found mercy / can receive chastisement and forgiveness." Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* X.14; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 153.

the burden of the passions, he enjoys, as a victorious athlete, familiar access to the Umpire.”¹⁵¹

To free this single witness from its splendid isolation, the testimony of the pilgrim Egeria may also be adduced. During her pilgrimage (c. 381–384?) just a few years after Ephrem gave up the body, Egeria visited Edessa in the course of her itinerary, and was shown a portrait of King Abgar (a mosaic portrait of whom has recently been discovered).¹⁵² Of this monarch who embraced the Christian faith, the bishop of Edessa is recorded by Egeria as saying: “The look on Abgar’s face showed me, as I looked straight at it, what a wise and noble man he had been, and the holy bishop told me, ‘That is King Abgar. *Before he saw the Lord*, he believed in him as the true Son of God’.”¹⁵³ If this statement accurately reflects the Christian Orient in the fourth century, we see that between soul-sleep and body-rising is the conscious spirit enjoying beatific vision.

The consequences of this testimony are far-reaching. Prior afterlife concepts and Christian preoccupation with *theōsis* largely determined the form and overt content of Ephrem’s soteriology. While basically faithful to the soul sleep/resurrection scenario, Ephrem does not deprive the righteous of Paradise of even a single eschatological moment, be it realized or actual. By means of this apparent innovation, the shift in emphasis in Ephrem’s towards more ethical and sapiential considerations is seen. Christianity can then be presented as progressive sanctification within a traditional scheme of *theōsis*. The body, literally, becomes lost in thought!

Ephrem is conditioned but not constrained by a propositionally-controlled system of belief. A distinction obtains between theological and mystical formulas of faith. Church policy was established by successive synods of bishops. To be sure, Nicea held sway over Ephrem, the Council

¹⁵¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria* (tr. R. Price; Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1985): 79.

¹⁵² H. J. W. Drijvers, “A Tomb for the Life of a King: A Recently Discovered Edessene Mosaic with a Portrait of King Abgar the Great,” *Le Musèon* 95 (1982): 167–189. Some doubts on the identification of this king were registered by J. B. Segal, “A Note on a Mosaic from Edessa,” *Syria* 60 (1983): 107–110.

which he refers to as the “excellent synod” (*Hymns Against Heresies* XXII).¹⁵⁴ In terms of Christology, McVey shares the observations of several of her peers in noting that Ephrem’s language of “mixing” of divine and human natures in Christ “would be problematic for post-Chalcedonian Christology.”¹⁵⁵

Paradise shares the same role as Nature for homiletic purposes. The Syrian poet deftly transferred Paradise imagery to earth and set up the Church as a rival to Paradise! The comparison is explicit; conceptually, nothing is lost in translation here: “More fitting to be told / than the glorious account / of Paradise / are the exploits of the victorious / who adorned themselves / with the very likeness of Paradise; / in them is depicted / the beauty of the Garden. / Let us take leave of the trees / and tell of the victors, / instead of the inheritance / let us celebrate the inheritors.”¹⁵⁶ This is more than homily; it is realized eschatology. Ephrem’s very vision of Paradise attests to its susceptibility to realization, to which “both worlds” (refrain, *Hymns on Paradise* XV) are invited. For Ephrem, the irreducible physicality of the body is not its bones, but rather its *form*. Ephrem’s Paradise resurrects the form of the body but not its gross substance, and predicates Paradise-worthiness on an ethical advancement that would rival that of any Bardaisanite. In this respect, Ephrem recalls Origen who, in affirming the Resurrection, states that the “initial substratum [of the body] will not rise”¹⁵⁷ and that the continuity of the body is to be seen in its essence, considered to be its form (*eidos*). The fact that “not a bone will remain in Sheol”¹⁵⁸ need not present a problem here. Where bone turns into stone, fossilization preserves

¹⁵³ Tr. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971): 115–116.

¹⁵⁴ Noted by Stewart, ‘Working the Earth of the Heart’, 17.

¹⁵⁵ McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 149, n. 356.

¹⁵⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.14; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 113–114.

¹⁵⁷ Origen, *Commentary on Psalm I.5*; tr. J. Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity: Epiphanius of Cyprus and the Legacy of Origen* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Pennsylvania, 1975): 347.

¹⁵⁸ Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* XXXVI.10; tr. McVey in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, 423.

the skeletal form. Resurrection, in Ephrem's portrayal of it, is not committed to recalcification.

The *Hymns on Paradise* cycle is, in effect, a double allegory. Like the Qurʾān, as Beck's earlier studies¹⁵⁹ have shown, Ephrem paints Paradise in vivid earthly terms, where the most delectable delights of the natural world provide all the elements for an extended metaphorical transference to the celestial realm. In turn, the delights of Paradise are transformed by Ephrem into an allegory for the spiritual life on earth such that the holy life, and not Paradise itself, becomes the most cherished reward of the saint. "Paradise," writes Ephrem, "lauded the intellect" and "the flowers [of Paradise] gave praise to virtuous life," while the "fruits of the righteous were more pleasing to the Knower of all."¹⁶⁰ The atmosphere, as one ascends the mountain of Paradise, becomes more and more rarefied, such that: "Bodies, / with their flow of blood, / receive refinement there / after the manner of souls; / the soul that is heavy / has its wings refined / so that they resemble / resplendent thought."¹⁶¹ And, further: "... but if it be joy / which inebriates and sustains, / how greatly will the soul be sustained / on the waves of this joy / as its faculties suck / the breast of all wisdom."¹⁶²

In the Banquet of Paradise, which is the subject of Hymn IX, the "breast of all wisdom" sustains the "faculties of the soul"—this is sapiential *theōsis*. If "we are what we eat"—as the adage goes—when Ephrem tells us that God shall impart "His wisdom to our tongue,"¹⁶³ on which "gift" the inhabitants of Paradise are said to "ruminate," the whole being is here pictured in sapiential terms. "From their mouths," says Ephrem of the denizens of heaven, "there burst forth ... springs of wis-

¹⁵⁹ E. Beck, "Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesesjungfrauen des Korans?" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 14 (1948): 398–405.; *et idem*, "Les houris du Coran et Éphrem le Syrien," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire* 6 (1959–61): 405–8; reprint: *Der Koran* (ed. R. Paret; Darmstadt, 1975): 183–187.

¹⁶⁰ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* VI.13; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 113.

¹⁶¹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.19; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 143.

¹⁶² Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.23; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 144.

¹⁶³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.27; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 146.

dom.”¹⁶⁴ Here, in language that Ephrem in Hymn XI stresses is metaphorical, “springs” is the image. “Wisdom” is the reality.

In Hymn VIII, Ephrem, in no uncertain terms, reaffirms the eschatology of Resurrection. The body is said to be necessary for the soul’s perception. But the more Paradise is described further on in the hymn cycle, the more it becomes clear that the body is increasingly irrelevant, even to the point of being marginalized. The “faculties of the soul” begin to take over, as the bodily senses are in every way obviated. It is as if the doctrine of corporeal resurrection was itself transitional, beyond which a higher reality obtains. Body is rarefied to the level of soul; the body becomes sapiential. The body is, when all is said and done, a chrysalis. The butterfly emerges in the last half of the Hymns on Paradise.

A distinction obtains between form and reality. Consider the leaf of Paradise, as a “bodily” object. Its essence is “spiritual” though it has assumed “bodily form”. These celestial leaves “have been changed,” Ephrem continues, “so that their vesture may resemble ours.”¹⁶⁵ Where “yonder it is souls, / instead of bodies, that crave food” (IX.18), where “the soul receives sustenance / appropriate to its needs” (IX.18), where soul food, as it were, “is the very fragrance of Paradise” (IX.17), in which, in any event, “bodies shall be raised / to the level of souls” (IX.21),¹⁶⁶ the pinnacle of spiritual experience is beatific vision, imparted “with flashes of light” for “the small” and “with rays more intense” for “the perfect” (IX.25).¹⁶⁷ In Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise* is found a hierarchy of mirrors, metaphors turned heavenward but refracting earthward. One must be careful not to confuse the image with the reality that, in any event, inspires a picture with a thousand edifying Syriac words.

Ecclesial Exegesis: To the extent that Ephrem’s interpretation of Paradise was directed towards the Church, the *Hymns on Paradise* as

¹⁶⁴ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* IX.28; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 146.

¹⁶⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* XI.8; tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 156–157.

¹⁶⁶ Tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 142–143.

¹⁶⁷ Tr. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 145.

exegesis seem to follow, in an unspoken way, a view of interpretation akin to the Rules of Tyconius. The Rules of Tyconius, which was the first hermeneutical treatise in the Latin West, *Rules of Tyconius* professedly serve as “pathways of light” guiding one through “vast forest of prophecy.”¹⁶⁸ This treatise impressed Augustine deeply. In adopting the *Rules of Tyconius* as a model and standard for Christian interpretation, Augustine said of the seven rules: “All of these rules except one, which is called ‘Of Promises and Law,’ cause one thing to be understood from another, a situation proper to figurative locutions (*On Christian Doctrine* III.37).¹⁶⁹ Though written by a Donatist who wrote in North Africa during the second half of the fourth century, the text stands on its own merits as an ingenious interpretive system that kept the church at the heart of all exegetical activity under its influence. Remarkably, the *Rules of Tyconius* are not Christological. Rather, they are ecclesiological.

Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* is a commentary on the Eden narrative in Genesis. It was read in an ecclesial light. Soteriologically, Ephrem exalts form over substance in his descriptions of the glorified, resurrected body. Bardaisan had denied the resurrection of the body, but not of the soul. Perhaps in response to Bardaisan, and the philosophical speculation that he so successfully popularized, Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* struck a compromise between incorporeal and corporeal doctrines of resurrection. For Ephrem, the irreducible physicality of the body was not so much its bones, but rather its form. Each in his own way, both Bardaisan and Ephrem rejected the impurity of gross physicality. Bardaisan denied the resurrection of the body; Ephrem transforms the resurrection body and practically divests it of its physicality.

In treating Paradise as an allegory of the Church, Ephrem has, in effect, created a “paratext.” The idea that, in certain cases, “exegesis becomes part of the text itself”¹⁷⁰ lies behind the neologism, “paratext.”

¹⁶⁸ Tyconius, *The Book of Rules* (tr. W. Babcock; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989): 3. Cf. P. Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius: Its Purpose and Inner Logic* (University of Notre Dame, 1988).

¹⁶⁹ Cited by Hamilton, “Augustine's Method of Biblical Interpretation,” 111.

¹⁷⁰ J. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. G. Hartman and S. Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): 77–103

Here, use of the modern formative “para-” should be fairly self-evident: the “paratext” of exegesis is the paraphrasable interpretation mentally read alongside or with the text. In an overarching way, in Ephrem’s meditations on the Eden narrative, the major paratext of Paradise is the Church.

Paradise and Paradigm: Images and ideas are the twin hemispheres of the religious mind. The bicameral interaction of the imaginal and the abstract focus the believer on the archetypes of belief. To give a more complete description of any religious worldview, concepts should be complemented by conceits. In Ephrem, the Church is imagistically conceived of as Paradise. Since it is an extended metaphor, its imagery is extensible. Individually and collectively, paradise imagery can represent different facets of church life and experience. The phrase from the Lord’s Prayer—“on earth, as it is in Heaven”—perfectly expresses both imagistically and ideologically the Ephrem’s artifice at work in the *Hymns on Paradise*.

Ephrem’s Paradise is at once ecclesiastical and eschatological. Its imagery expresses a paradigm of purity. This is a purity that “cures.” It cleanses the soul of the “disease” of mortality. It restores primordial immortality. Life in Paradise, in both worlds, is for the pure. The pure in heart are Christians who are sexually pure and morally stainless. On this point, perhaps Ephrem and Bardaiṣan might agree. In a quote from Theodore bar Koni, Bardaiṣan, in one of his lost songs, taught: “And lo, the natures, all of them—with created things they hastened, to purify themselves and remove what was mingled with the nature of evil.”¹⁷¹ Although Ephrem rejects Bardaiṣan’s creation myth, the pursuit of ethical purity in both systems is, in non-ascetic terms, comparable. In fine, Syriac Christianity’s response to Late Antiquity is the quest for purity, in which chrism, baptism and the Eucharist become the ointment, fountain, and elixir of immortality, while the imagery of Paradise ennoble the sanctified soul.

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¹⁷¹ Segal, *Edessa*, 38.