

# HYMNS ON PARADISE

*St Ephrem*

Introduction and translation

by

SEBASTIAN BROCK

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in wonder at one formed of earth,  
 they gave thanks to his Fashioner.  
 Seeing his virginity  
 they exulted,  
 for it had exalted those below  
 and caused wonder to those above,  
 its contest being on earth,  
 its crown in Paradise.

25. With love and instruction,  
 commingled with truth,  
 the intellect can grow  
 and become rich with new things,  
 as it meditates with discernment  
 on the treasure store of hidden mysteries.  
 For my part, I have loved, and so learned,  
 and become assured  
 that Paradise possesses  
 the haven of the victorious.  
 As I have been held worthy to perceive it,  
 so make me worthy to enter it!

### HYMN VII

Whereas Adam and Eve had just God's commandment, we also have His promise; let this serve as a source of comfort in times of temptation. The examples of the saints, whose fruits are even fairer than those of Paradise, are there too to encourage us; so varied are the lives of the saints that everyone will find some special example among them to rejoice in and to follow. St Ephrem concludes on a characteristic personal note: contemplation of the saints also serves to rebuke him for his own sins and to make him reflect how, in seeking to please our fellow human beings rather than God, we have all too often exchanged freedom for slavery.

1. In times of temptation  
 console yourselves with God's promises,  
 for there is no deceit  
 in the word of Him who repays all,  
 and His treasure house is not so paltry  
 that we should doubt His promise;  
 He has surrendered His own Son for us  
 so that we might believe in Him;  
 His Body is with us,  
 His assurance is with us,  
 He came and gave us His keys,  
 since it is for us that His treasures lie waiting.

RESPONSE: Blessed is He who, with His keys,  
 has opened up the Garden of Life.

2. In the evening the world sleeps,  
 closing its eyes,  
 while in the morning it arises.  
 He who repays is distant  
 as it were but a night's length away;  
 now light dawns and He is coming.  
 Weary not, my brethren,  
 nor suppose  
 that your struggle will last long,  
 or that your resurrection is far off,  
 for our death is already behind us,  
 and our resurrection before us.
3. Bear up, O life of mourning,\*  
 so that you may attain to Paradise;  
 its dew will wash off your squalor,  
 while what it exudes will render you fragrant;  
 its support will afford rest after your toil,  
 its crown will give you comfort,

it will proffer you fruits  
 in your hunger,  
 fruits that purify those who partake of them;  
 in your thirst  
 it will provide for you a celestial draught,  
 one that makes wise those who drink of it.

4. Blessed is the poor man  
 who gazes on that place;  
 riches are poured in profusion  
 outside and around it;  
 chalcedony and other gems<sup>1</sup>  
 lie there cast out  
 to prevent their defiling  
 the glorious earth of Paradise;  
 should someone place there  
 precious stones or beryls,  
 these would appear ugly and dull  
 compared with that dazzling land.
5. Both men and women  
 are clothed in raiment of light;  
 the garments provided to cover their nakedness  
 are swallowed up in glory;  
 all the limbs' vile emotions  
 are silenced,  
 the fountains of lust  
 are stopped up,  
 anger is removed  
 and the soul purified  
 and, like wheat, it flourishes in Eden,  
 unchoked by thorns.
6. There virginity dances  
 because the serpent,

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<sup>1</sup>cf Ezek. 28:13.

who secretly poured venom into her ears,  
 is now destroyed;  
 the fig rushes up to her  
 and full of joy exclaims:  
 "Put away your ignorant  
 childhood—  
 the day when you became naked  
 and hid in my bosom.  
 Praise to Him who has clothed  
 your nakedness with the robe!"

7. There youth exults  
 because of what it has achieved;  
 in Paradise it beholds  
 Joseph who stripped off\*  
 and cast away the lust  
 that flared up among the senseless;<sup>2</sup>  
 it sees too the child who overcame the asp  
 in its hole.<sup>3</sup>  
 Samson overcame a lion,  
 but a viper conquered  
 and smote him, causing him straightway to lose  
 his Nazirite locks.<sup>4</sup>
8. There the married state  
 finds rest after having been anguished  
 by the pangs of giving birth, brought on by the curse,<sup>5</sup>  
 and by the pain of childbearing;  
 now it sees the children  
 whom it had buried amid laments,  
 pasturing like lambs  
 in Eden;

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<sup>2</sup>Gen. 39:10.

<sup>3</sup>Isaiah 11:8.

<sup>4</sup>Judges 14:6, 16:16-19.

<sup>5</sup>Gen. 3:16.

exalted in their ranks,  
 glorious in their splendors,  
 they are like kindred  
 of the spotless angels.

9. Thanks be to the Merciful One  
 who plucked them while still young—  
 the children who are  
 the late fruits  
 to become in Paradise  
 the first fruits\* of all.  
 A novel sight may be seen there:  
 these "fruits" pluck  
 the fruiting produce,  
 the firstlings pluck the firstfruits.  
 In their purity both plucked  
 and plucker are alike.
10. Bind up your thoughts, Old Age,  
 in Paradise  
 whose fragrance makes you young;  
 its wafting scent rejuvenates you,  
 and your stains are swallowed up  
 in the beauty with which it clothes you.  
 In Moses He depicted for you  
 a parable:  
 his cheeks, ashen with age,  
 became shining and fair,<sup>6</sup>  
 a symbol of old age  
 that in Eden again becomes young.
11. No blemish is in them,  
 for they are without wickedness;

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<sup>6</sup>Exod. 34:29.

no anger is in them,  
 for they have no fiery temper;  
 no mocking scorn is in them,  
 for they are without guile.  
 They do not race to do harm—  
 and so themselves be harmed;  
 they show no hatred there,  
 for there they are without envy;  
 they pronounce no judgment there,  
 for there no oppression exists.

12. People behold themselves  
 in glory  
 and wonder at themselves,  
 discovering where they are.  
 The nature of their bodies,  
 once troubled and troublesome,  
 is now tranquil and quiet,  
 resplendent  
 from without in beauty,  
 and from within with purity,  
 the body in evident ways,  
 the soul in hidden ways.
13. In Paradise the cripples,  
 who had never walked, leap around;  
 the deformed, who had never even crawled,  
 fly about through the air;  
 the eyes of the blind and deaf,  
 who had yearned from the womb,  
 hungering for the light  
 which they had failed to see,  
 now rejoice to behold  
 the beauty of Paradise,  
 and the mighty sound of its harps  
 gives comfort to their ears.

14. At him who has uttered  
no curse or abuse  
does Paradise's blessing  
rejoice all the more;  
upon him whose eyes' glance  
remained always chaste  
does Paradise's beauty  
gaze the more;  
in the limbs of him  
who quelled the venom of his thoughts  
do its springs of sweetness  
well up.
15. The virgin who rejected  
the marriage crown that fades  
now has the radiant marriage chamber  
that cherishes the children of light,  
shining out because she rejected  
the works of darkness.  
To her who was alone  
in a lonely house  
the wedding feast now grants tranquility:  
here angels rejoice,  
prophets delight,  
and apostles add splendor.
16. Fasters, who have chosen Daniel's  
meager diet of vegetables<sup>7</sup>  
—and before Daniel kings with their crowns  
bowed down and did reverence—  
fasters like these do the trees,  
not kings, extol,  
bowing down in all their beauty  
and inviting them

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<sup>7</sup>Dan. 1:12.

- to turn aside to the place where they grow,  
and take up their abode amid their boughs,  
bathe in their dew  
and rejoice in their fruits.
17. Whoever has washed the feet of the saints  
will himself be cleansed in that dew;  
to the hand that has stretched out  
to give to the poor  
will the fruits of the trees  
themselves stretch out;  
the very footsteps of him  
who visited the sick in their affliction  
do the flowers make haste  
to crown with blooms,  
jostling to see  
which can be first to kiss his steps.
18. The man who abstained,  
with understanding, from wine,  
will the vines of Paradise  
rush out to meet, all the more joyfully,  
as each one stretches out and proffers him  
its clusters;  
or if any has lived  
a life of virginity,  
him too they welcome into their bosom,  
for the solitary such as he  
has never lain in any bosom  
nor upon any marriage bed.\*
19. Those who have been crowned for our Lord's sake  
with the martyr's death by the sword  
shine out in glory there  
with their crowns

because their bodies despised  
 the persecutors' fire.  
 Like stars<sup>8</sup> do they blossom  
 in Paradise,  
 those seven sons of light\*  
 with their radiant mother,  
 who, in their deaths,  
 spurned the wrath of the impious king.<sup>9</sup>

20. The happiness of this place  
 gives joy to the women who labored  
 in the service of the saints:  
 there they see that widow  
 who took in Elias<sup>10</sup>  
 savor Eden's delights;  
 instead of those two fountains  
 —the jar and the cruse—  
 which gave her her livelihood,  
 now the boughs of the trees  
 provide this in Eden  
 for all women who have given livelihood to the  
 poor.
21. Nothing there in Paradise  
 is useless\*:  
 both grass and roots  
 bring benefit and profit;  
 whoever tastes them is rejuvenated,  
 whoever breathes in their scent grows fair;  
 in the bosom of its blossoms and flowers  
 is hidden

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<sup>8</sup>Dan. 12:3.

<sup>9</sup>2 Macc. 7.

<sup>10</sup>1 Kings 17:14.

a veritable treasure,  
 a gift for those who pluck it;  
 the fruits of Paradise bear rich wealth  
 for those who gather them.

22. None toil there,  
 for none go hungry there;  
 none endure shame there,  
 for none do wrong there;  
 none feel contrition there,  
 for there is no cause to repent there.  
 Those who run the course  
 find rest and quiet.  
 None grow old there,  
 for none die there;  
 none are buried there,  
 for none are born there.
23. They know no worry,  
 for they have no suffering;  
 they have no fear,  
 for no snare awaits them;  
 they have no adversary,  
 for they have passed through the contest.  
 They count themselves  
 blessed  
 unendingly,  
 for their warfare is over;  
 they have taken up their crowns  
 and found rest in their new abode.
24. I saw that place, my brethren,  
 and I sat down and wept,  
 for myself and for those like me,  
 at how my days have reached their fill,

- dissipated one by one, faded out,<sup>11</sup>  
 stolen away without my noticing;  
 remorse seizes hold of me  
 because I have lost  
 crown, name\* and glory,  
 robe and bridal chamber of light.  
 How blessed is the person  
 who of that heavenly table is held worthy!
25. May all the children of light  
 make supplication for me there,  
 that our Lord may grant them  
 the gift of a single soul.  
 Thus would I have renewed occasion  
 to praise Him  
 whose hand is, to be sure,  
 stretched out in readiness.  
 May He who gives  
 both in justice and in grace  
 give to me, in His mercy,  
 of the treasure store of His mercies.
26. And if none who is defiled  
 can enter that place,  
 then allow me to live by its enclosure,  
 residing in its shade.  
 Since Paradise resembles  
 that table,  
 let me, through Your grace,  
 eat of the "crumbs" of its fruit  
 which fall outside,  
 so that I too may join  
 those dogs who had their fill  
 from the crumbs of their masters' tables.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>cf Ps. 89(90):9

<sup>12</sup>Matt. 15:27 and parallels.

27. And may I learn how much I will then have received  
 from that parable of the Rich Man<sup>18</sup>  
 who did not even give to the poor man  
 the leftovers from his banquet;  
 and may I see Lazarus,  
 grazing in Paradise,  
 and look upon the Rich Man,  
 in anguish,  
 so that the might of justice outside  
 may cause me fear,  
 but the breath of grace within  
 may bring me comfort.
28. Allow me to dwell by the enclosure  
 of that Garden, so that I may be  
 a neighbor to those within,  
 envied by those outside.  
 Yet who is able to look, at the same time,  
 on delight and torment,  
 to behold both Gehenna  
 and the Garden?  
 May the crown of those within  
 rebuke me for all my sins;  
 may the punishment of those without  
 teach me how great is Your mercy toward me.
29. Who can endure  
 to look on both sides,  
 whose ears can stand  
 the terrible cries of the wicked,  
 who proclaim, in Gehenna,  
 that the Just One is righteous,  
 while the good utter praise  
 in the Garden?

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<sup>18</sup>Luke 16:19.



The two sides gaze on each other  
in amazement,  
the works of each side, revealed,  
serve to admonish the other.

30. May my sins not be revealed  
to my brethren on that day,  
—yet by this we show  
how contemptible we are, Lord;  
if our sins are revealed to You,  
from whom can we hide them?  
I have made shame  
an idol for myself;  
grant me, Lord, to fear You,  
for You are mighty.  
May I feel shame and self-reproach  
before You, for You are gentle.
31. A man's neighbor has become his god:  
every moment he seeks to please him;  
if he does wrong, he feels shame before him,  
if he does him an injury, he is afraid;  
or if he does him some good,  
then he has spoiled that good by his thirst for  
praise.  
Such a man has become an abject slave  
in all these ways.  
The Good One gave us freedom,  
but we have reduced this to slavery.  
May we exchange, for Your lordship,  
this overlord we have made for ourselves!

## HYMN VIII

St Ephrem takes comfort from the last minute repentance of the Good Thief, but this leads him on to a quandary concerning the relationship of the soul to the body in Paradise. Although he finds himself unable to offer any way out of the problems raised by Christ's words, "this day you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), St Ephrem is quite clear in his mind that the soul cannot enter Paradise without the body, and so the righteous cannot in fact enter Paradise until the final Resurrection, when the body and soul will eventually be reunited; in the meantime the disembodied souls await the Resurrection just outside the boundary of Paradise in a state that other Syriac writers describe as "the sleep of the soul."

1. There came to my ear  
from the Scripture which had been read  
a word that caused me joy  
on the subject of the Thief;<sup>1</sup>  
it gave comfort to my soul  
amidst the multitude of its vices,  
telling how He had compassion on the Thief.  
O may He bring me too  
into that Garden at the sound of whose name  
I am overwhelmed by joy;  
my mind bursts its reins  
as it goes forth to contemplate Him.

RESPONSE: Hold me worthy that we may become  
heirs in Your kingdom.

2. I behold a dwelling there  
and a tabernacle of light,

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 23:39-43.

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