

27. The Lord who is beyond measure  
measures out nourishment to all,  
adapting to our eyes the sight of Himself,  
to our hearing His voice,  
His blessing to our appetite,  
His wisdom to our tongue.  
At His gift  
blessings swarm,  
for this is always new in its savor,  
wonderfully fragrant,  
adaptable in its strength,  
resplendent in its colors.
28. Who has ever beheld gatherings of people  
whose sustenance is the giving of praise?  
Their raiment is light,  
their countenance full of radiance;  
as they ruminate  
on the abundance of His gift  
there burst forth from their mouths  
springs of wisdom;  
tranquility reigns over their thought,  
truth over their knowledge,  
reverence over their enquiry,  
and love over their offering of praise.
29. Grant, Lord, that I and those dear to me  
may together there  
find the very last remnants<sup>8</sup>  
of Your gift!  
Just the sight of Your Dear One  
is a fountain of delight;  
whoever is worthy  
to be ravished thereby

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<sup>8</sup>Mark 8:8.

will despise ordinary food;  
all who look upon You  
will be sustained by Your beauty.  
Praises be to Your splendor!

### HYMN X

St Ephrem here contrasts the climate of Paradise, and its cycle of seasons, with that of our earth. The earth's climate, with its unruly storms during the bitterly cold winter months and the torrid heat of the summer, shares in the fallen character of humanity on earth, and so is incompatible with Paradise. In Paradise, by contrast, the months follow a gentle and orderly cycle of seasonal produce, and within each month the waxing and waning of the moon governs the development of plant life, a development which Ephrem compares to the human life cycle (in order to emphasize his theme of rejuvenation, he lists the course of the human cycle in reverse, starting with the aged and ending up with the child as yet unborn).

For penitent sinners living on the slopes below, mere proximity to Paradise has a healing effect. This thought however, makes Ephrem wonder whether he is not overbold in positing such a place in the eschatological Paradise situated "between the Garden and Hell's fire"; but in the final stanza he takes comfort in the thought that, as God's divine cloud hovers over the whole of creation, good and bad alike, so too the dew of his overflowing compassion will reach even to Gehenna in its effects.

1. What mouth  
has ever described Paradise,

what tongue  
has told of its glory,  
what mind has depicted  
its beauty?  
Indeed its hidden recesses  
cannot be scrutinized;  
I can only marvel at what is visible,  
at those things which lie outside Paradise,  
and so I realize how far I remain  
from its hidden secrets.

RESPONSE: Grant us to see Your righteous ones in  
Your Paradise.

2. In the temperate atmosphere  
that surrounds its outer boundary  
the months that pass by there  
are also temperate:  
there dismal February  
resembles radiant May,  
January with its  
icy blasts  
is like August with its fruits;  
June is like April  
and torrid July  
has September's dews.
3. Our feeble months take on Eden's delights\*  
in the atmosphere  
that surrounds Eden,  
for Eden makes them like itself.  
The months blossom with flowers  
all around Paradise  
in order to weave  
throughout every season

- a wreath of blossom  
to embellish the slopes of Paradise,  
being themselves not worthy  
to provide a crown for the summit.
4. Because the months  
are stricken by storms  
they cannot enter Paradise,  
so still in its tranquility.  
If all the months' tempests  
are overcome  
in that atmosphere  
outside Paradise,  
how can they pollute  
the glorious air  
whose heavenly\* breath  
restores humanity to life?
  5. The air of this earth  
is wanton as a prostitute  
with whom the twelve months  
consort:  
each one in turn  
makes her comply with its own whims  
while she produces fruits  
from them all;  
whereas the chaste\* and pure air  
of Paradise  
is unpolluted in its purity  
by the dalliance of the months.
  6. There the abundant flow  
of their produce is ceaseless,  
for each month bears its own fruit,  
its neighbor, flowers.

There the springs of delights  
 open up and flow  
 with wine, milk, honey  
 and cream.  
 Grass flourishes in December,  
 after it January produces wheat;  
 February, divested of its cold and now radiant,  
 bears sheaves in Paradise.

7. The months are divided  
 into four groups:  
 the firstfruits show themselves  
 in the first three months,  
 in the next three  
 come the luscious soft fruits,  
 the seventh to ninth months  
 ripen  
 the late fruits,  
 while at the end, the year's crown,  
 the pregnant buds  
 are bursting forth with joy.

8. The phases of the moon  
 produce variation in the flowers;  
 at the beginning of the months  
 the branches open up their buds\*;  
 at full moon they blossom,  
 ripening in every direction,  
 to subside once again  
 at each month's completion.  
 They sink down as one month ends  
 to sprout forth when the next begins;  
 the month furnishes the key  
 for the opening and closing of their buds.

9. Who has ever beheld  
 flowers with pregnant wombs  
 which each month brings to parags of labor,  
 then, suddenly, to give birth?  
 As the month increases,  
 so do the flowers mirror its progress;  
 at full moon they reach maturity,  
 blossoming out,  
 while as the month advances  
 toward old age  
 the flowers too grow old,  
 only to be rejuvenated as the next is born.

10. Each month's fruits and flowers  
 possess individually  
 their own particular treasures,  
 but when these are cross fertilized, they multiply:  
 when two neighboring flowers,  
 each with its distinctive color  
 are crossed  
 to become one,  
 they produce a new color.  
 When fruits are thus crossed  
 they create a new and beautiful offspring  
 whose foliage is different.

11. In Paradise the life cycle of the trees  
 resembles a necklace:  
 when the fruits of the first  
 are finished and plucked,  
 then the second ones are ready,  
 with a third species following them.  
 Who has ever beheld  
 the autumnal fruits  
 grasping the heels  
 of the first fruits,

- just as Jacob grasped hold  
of his brother's heel?<sup>1</sup>
12. That cornucopia full of fruits  
in all stages of development  
resembles the course  
of human marriage;  
it contains the old,  
young and middle-aged,  
children who have already been born,  
and babies still unborn;  
its fruits follow one another  
and appear  
like the continuous succession  
of humankind.
13. The river of humanity  
consists of people of all ages,  
with old, young,  
children and babes,  
infants in their mothers' arms  
and others still unborn, in the womb.  
Such is the sequence  
of Paradise's fruit:  
firstfruits issued forth  
with the autumn harvest,  
wave upon wave,  
fecund with blossoms and fruit.
14. Blessed the sinner  
who has received mercy there  
and is deemed worthy to be given access  
to the environs of Paradise;

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<sup>1</sup>Gen. 25:26.

- even though he remains outside,  
he may pasture there through grace.  
As I reflected I was fearful again  
because I had presumed  
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.
15. Praise to the Just One  
who rules with His grace;  
He is the Good One who never draws in  
the limits of His goodness;  
even to the wicked  
He stretches forth in His compassion.  
His divine cloud hovers over  
all that is His;  
it drips dew even on that fire of punishment  
so that, of His mercy,  
it enables even the embittered  
to taste of the drops of its refreshment.

## HYMN XI

Paradise can only be described in terrestrial terms, but it is essential to realize that these terms are purely metaphorical; to understand them in a literal sense is to abuse God's great condescension in revealing to us, through Scripture, something of Paradise's beauty and wonders. Yet, although Paradise belongs to a different mode of existence, outside time and space, it is still able to serve as a direct source of well-being for life on earth, a fact that the Genesis narrative expresses by means of the imagery of the fountain which issues forth from Paradise and divides itself up into the four great rivers of the world. Nowhere on earth was the fragrant breath of Paradise more

evident than in the Upper Chamber where the Apostles were assembled at Pentecost.

1. The air of Paradise  
is a fountain of delight  
from which Adam sucked  
when he was young;  
its very breath, like a mother's breast,  
gave him nourishment in his childhood.  
He was young, fair,  
and full of joy,  
but when he spurned the injunction  
he grew old, sad and decrepit;  
he bore old age  
as a burden of woes.

**RESPONSE:** Blessed is He who exalted Adam  
and caused him to return to Paradise.

2. No harmful frost,  
no scorching heat  
is to be found  
in that blessed place of delight;  
it is a harbor of joys,  
a haven of pleasures;  
light and rejoicing  
have their home there;  
gathered there are to be found  
harps and lyres,  
with shouts of Hosanna,  
and the Church crying "Alleluia."
3. The fence which surrounds it  
is the peace which gives peace to all;

its inner and outer walls  
are the concord which reconciles all things;  
the cherub who encircles it  
is radiant to those who are within  
but full of menace to those outside  
who have been cast out.  
All that you hear told  
about this Paradise,  
so pure and holy,  
is pure and spiritual.

4. Let not this description of it  
be judged by one who hears it,  
for descriptions of it  
are not at all subject to judgment,  
since, even though it may appear terrestrial  
because of the terms used,  
it is in its 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.
5. For him who would tell of it  
there is no other means  
but to use the names  
of things that are visible,  
thus depicting for his hearers  
a likeness of things that are hidden.  
For if the Creator  
of the Garden  
has clothed His majesty  
in terms that we can understand,  
how much more can His Garden  
be described with our similes?

6. 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 with which God clothed Himself for his benefit, and he is ungrateful to that Grace which stooped low to the level of his childishness; although it has nothing in common with him, yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness in order to bring him to the likeness of itself.
7. Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names, for Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are akin to you; it is not because it is impoverished that it has put on your imagery; rather, your nature is far too weak to be able to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much diminished by being depicted in the pale colors with which you are familiar.
8. For feeble eyes cannot gaze upon the dazzling sight of its celestial beauties; it has clothed its trees with the names of the trees we know; its figs are called by the same name as our figs, its leaves, which are spiritual, have taken on bodily form;

- they have been changed so that their vesture may resemble ours.
9. More numerous and glorious than the stars in the sky that we behold are the blossoms of that land, and the fragrance which exhales from it through divine Grace is like a physician sent to heal the ills of a land that is under a curse; by its healing breath it cures the sickness that entered in through the serpent.
10. 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. That Garden is the life-breath of this diseased world that has been so long in sickness; that breath proclaims that a saving remedy has been sent to heal our mortality.
11. What need was there that from that land a river should flow forth and divide itself,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gen. 2:10.

- except that the blessing of Paradise should be mingled by means of water as it issues forth  
 to irrigate the world,  
 making clean its fountains  
 that had become polluted by curses  
 —just as that “sickly water”  
 had been made wholesome by the salt.<sup>2</sup>
12. Thus it is with another spring,\*  
 full of perfumes,  
 which issues from Eden  
 and penetrates into the atmosphere  
 as a beneficial breeze  
 by which our souls are stirred;  
 our inhalation is healed  
 by this healing breath  
 from Paradise;  
 springs receive a blessing  
 from that blessed spring  
 which issues forth from there.

13. A vast censer  
 exhaling fragrance  
 impregnates the air  
 with its odoriferous smoke,  
 imparting to all who are near it  
 a whiff from which to benefit.  
 How much the more so  
 with Paradise the glorious:  
 even its fence assists us,  
 modifying somewhat  
 that curse upon the earth  
 by the scent of its aromas.

<sup>2</sup>2 Kings 2:21.

14. When the blessed Apostles  
 were gathered together<sup>3</sup>  
 the place shook  
 and the scent of Paradise,\*  
 having recognized its home,  
 poured forth its perfumes,  
 delighting the heralds  
 by whom  
 the guests are instructed  
 and come to His banquet;  
 eagerly He awaits their arrival  
 for He is the Lover of mankind.
15. Make me worthy through Your grace  
 to attain to Paradise's gift  
 —this treasure of perfumes,  
 this storehouse of scents.  
 My hunger takes delight  
 in the breath of its fragrance,  
 for its scent gives nourishment to all  
 at all times,  
 and whoever inhales it  
 is overjoyed and forgets his earthly bread;  
 this is the table of the Kingdom—<sup>4</sup>  
 blessed is He who prepared it in Eden.

## HYMN XII

Truth can be put to deceptive use: the serpent promised Adam and Eve something that would have been true had they remained obedient to God's commandment, but by presuming to transgress the commandment and to snatch at what was

<sup>3</sup>cf Acts 2:1-4.

<sup>4</sup>Luke 22:30.