



2. THE HYMNS ON PARADISE

HYMN I

At the outset, St Ephrem emphasizes that the Biblical narrative concerning Paradise in Genesis 2-3 contains much more profound teaching than any literal reading of the text would suggest. Our reading of it should accordingly be accompanied by a sense both of awe and of love; only then will the "inner vision" be enabled to perceive something of the profundity of its meaning.

The second half of the poem concerns the topographical relationship of Paradise to the fallen world—first in the context of Adam and his immediate descendants, and then from an eschatological point of view, based on the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31).

1. Moses, who instructs all men
with his celestial writings,
He, the master* of the Hebrews,
has instructed us in his teaching—
the Law,* which constitutes
a very treasure house of revelations,
wherein is revealed
the tale of the Garden—
described by things visible,
but glorious for what lies hidden,

*See notes at end of translation.

spoken of in few words,
yet wondrous with its many plants.

RESPONSE: Praise to Your righteousness
which exalts those who prove victorious.

2. I took my stand halfway
between awe and love;
a yearning for Paradise
invited me to explore it,
but awe at its majesty
restrained me from my search.
With wisdom, however,
I reconciled the two;
I revered what lay hidden
and meditated on what was revealed.
The aim of my search was to gain profit,
the aim of my silence was to find succor.
3. Joyfully did I embark
on the tale of Paradise—
a tale that is short to read
but rich to explore.
My tongue read the story's
outward narrative,
while my intellect took wing
and soared upward in awe
as it perceived the splendor of Paradise—
not indeed as it really is,
but insofar as humanity
is granted to comprehend it.
4. With the eye of my mind
I gazed upon Paradise;
the summit of every mountain
is lower than its summit,

the crest of the Flood
reached only its foothills;¹
these it kissed with reverence
before turning back
to rise above and subdue the peak
of every hill and mountain.
The foothills of Paradise it kisses,
while every summit it buffets.

5. Not that the ascent to Paradise
is arduous because of its height,
for those who inherit it
experience no toil there.
With its beauty it joyfully
urges on those who ascend.
Amidst glorious rays
it lies resplendent,
all fragrant with its scents;
magnificent clouds
fashion the abodes
of those who are worthy of it.
6. From their abodes
the children of light descend,
they rejoice in the midst of the world
where they had been persecuted;
they dance on the sea's surface
and do not sink,
for Simon, although a "Rock,"
did not sink.²
Blessed is he who has seen,
together with them, his beloved ones,

¹Gen. 7:19.

²Matt. 14:29.

below in their bands of disciples,
and on high in their bridal chambers.*

7. The clouds, their chariots
fly through the air;
each of them has become the leader
of those he has taught;³
his chariot corresponds to his labors,
his glory corresponds to his followers.⁴
Blessed the person who has seen
as they fly
the Prophets with their bands,
the Apostles with their multitudes;
for whoever has both acted and taught
is great in the Kingdom.⁵
8. But because the sight of Paradise
is far removed,
and the eye's range
cannot attain to it,
I have described it over simply,
making bold a little..
Resembling that halo
which surrounds the moon
we should look upon Paradise
as being circular too,
having both sea and dry land
encompassed within it.
9. And because my tongue overflows
as one who has sucked
the sweetness of Paradise,
I will portray it in diverse forms.

³Dan. 12:3.

⁴cf 1 Cor. 3:8.

⁵Matt. 5:19.

- Moses made a crown
for that resplendent altar;⁶
with a wreath entirely of gold
did he crown
the altar in its beauty.
Thus gloriously entwined
is the wreath of Paradise
that encircles the whole of creation.
10. When Adam sinned
God cast him forth from Paradise,
but in His grace He granted him
the low ground beyond it,
settling him in the valley*
below the foothills of Paradise;
but when mankind even there continued to sin
they were blotted out,
and because they were unworthy
to be neighbors of Paradise,
God commanded the Ark
to cast them out on Mount Qardu.*⁷
11. There the families
of the two brothers had separated:
Cain went off by himself
and lived in the land of Nod,⁸
a place lower still
than that of Sheth and Enosh;
but those who lived on higher ground,
who were called
"the children of God,"⁹
left their own region and came down

⁶Exod. 30:3.

⁷Gen. 8:4 (Peshitta).

⁸Gen. 4:16.

⁹Gen. 6:2.

to take wives
from the daughters of Cain down below.

12. The children of light
dwell on the heights of Paradise,
and beyond the Abyss
they espy the rich man;¹⁰
he too, as he raises his eyes,
beholds Lazarus,
and calls out to Abraham
to have pity on him.
But Abraham, that man so full of pity,
who even had pity on Sodom,¹¹
has no pity yonder
for him who showed no pity.
13. The Abyss severs any love
which might act as a mediary,
thus preventing the love of the just
from being bound to the wicked,
so that the good should not be tortured
by the sight, in Gehenna,
of their children or brothers
or family—
a mother,* who had denied Christ,
imploping mercy from her son
or her maid or her daughter,
who all had suffered affliction for the sake of
Christ's teaching.
14. There the persecuted laugh
at their persecutors,

¹⁰Luke 16:26.

¹¹Gen. 8:20.

- the afflicted at those who had caused them affliction,
the slain at those who had put them to death,
the Prophets at those who had stoned them,
the Apostles at those who had crucified them.
The children of light reside
in their lofty abode
and, as they gaze on the wicked
and count their evil actions,
they are amazed to what extent these people
have cut off all hope by committing such iniquity.
15. Woe to him who tries to hide
his shameful deeds in the dark,
who does wrong and then tries to deceive
those who have seen;
having gone in and committed some wrong
he lies so as to deceive those who have heard.
May the wings of Your grace¹²
protect me,
for there the accusing finger
points out
and daily proclaims
the sinner's shame and hidden dealings.
16. What I have told
must suffice my boldness;
but if there is anyone
who dares to go on and say
"As for the dull-witted and simple people,
who have done wrong out of ignorance,
once they have been punished
and paid their debt,
He who is good allows them to dwell
in some remote corner of Paradise

¹²Ps. 16(17):8.

where they can graze on
that blessed food of 'the crumbs' . . .^{13*}

17. This place, despised and spurned
by the denizens of Paradise,
those who burn in Gehenna
hungrily desire;
their torment doubles
at the sight of its fountains,
they quiver violently
as they stand on the opposite side;
the rich man, too, begs for succor,*
but there is no one to wet his tongue,¹⁴
for fire is within them,
while the water is opposite them.

HYMN II

At Judgment the gate to Paradise will sift the good from the bad; its discerning powers allow in all those who, while still on earth, have forged a key to Paradise by the conduct of their lives whereas those who have neglected to do so find themselves excluded: their moral ugliness is incompatible with the spiritual beauties of Paradise. Those who prove worthy of Paradise will be given an abode appropriate to the character of their life on earth; like the Ark and like Mount Sinai at the Lawgiving, Paradise is divided into three different levels.

1. Blessed is he
for whom Paradise yearns.
Yes, Paradise yearns for the man whose goodness
makes him beautiful;

¹³Matt. 15:27 and parallels.

¹⁴Luke 16:24.

it engulfs him at its gateway,
it embraces him in its bosom,
it caresses him in its very womb;
for it splits open and receives him
into its inmost parts.
But if there is someone it abhors,
it removes him and casts him out;
this is the gate of testing
that belongs to Him who loves mankind.¹

RESPONSE: Blessed is He who was pierced
and so removed the sword from the entry to
Paradise.*²

2. Forge here on earth and take
the key* to Paradise;
the Door that welcomes you³
smiles radiantly upon you;
the Door, all discerning,
conforms its measure to those who enter it:
in its wisdom
it shrinks and it grows.
According to the stature and rank
attained by each person,
it shows by its dimensions
whether they are perfect, or lacking in something.
3. When people see
that they have lost everything,
that riches do not endure
and carnal desires no longer exist,

¹cf John 10:7.

²Gen. 3:24; John 19:34.

³cf John 10:9.