

# St. Ephrem on Genesis

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Please bring your Bible so that you can follow the key passages from Genesis!

St. Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373) is the foremost representative and spokesman for Syriac Christianity and its distinctive poetic theological tradition. Most of Ephrem's works are isosyllabic stanzaic poems with refrain, conventionally called hymns, but properly named *madrāšê*, written in Syriac. His *mêmrê* are longer isosyllabic compositions without refrain. He also composed a complete *Commentary on Genesis*, which sums up, in magisterial fashion, many of his earlier insights expressed in individual poems. The *Commentary* focuses on the unity of God's pedagogy for us in Genesis, and shows extensive familiarity with Jewish and ecclesial traditions that allow us great insight into the sequence and purpose of the Genesis narrative. The fact that Ephrem's explanations fill in much of the gaps and context with tradition should come as no surprise, because Scripture is never meant to be read apart from Holy Tradition. Any time one tells a big, but familiar story, one expands and contracts the level of detail according to need. Genesis leaves much implicit; Ephrem's *Commentary* draws on tradition to make the implicit explicit.

The following numbered selections are some of the most important passages quoted in the lecture. They come mostly from his *Commentary on Genesis* (*tûrgāmâ*),<sup>1</sup> but occasionally from his *madrāšê* on Paradise (*HdP*)<sup>2</sup>, as well as the *mêmrê* on Faith (*SdF*).<sup>3</sup> Though I have sometimes chosen to translate the passages myself, in many cases, they come from Matthews' excellent translation<sup>4</sup> of Ephrem's Genesis Commentary, with occasional modifications as needed to bring out an important detail.

## An Ephremian Outline of Genesis 1-11

The following outline indicates the divisions of the text as Ephrem understood them.<sup>5</sup>

- The Narration of the Seven Days (1.1-2.3)
  - The divine image in man and woman
  - The Rest of the Seventh Day
- The Re-Narration: days 1, 3, and 6 (2.4-3.24)
  - The gift of Paradise to Adam and the commandment to fast
  - Consequences of Losing the Robe of Glory: death and the promise of life
- The Toil of Adam's Family (4.1-5.31)
  - the division into two lines, righteous and wicked
  - the wicked line of Cain
  - the righteous line of Seth

<sup>1</sup> Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*

<sup>2</sup> Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*; Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*

<sup>3</sup> Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones de Fide*; Hayes, *Metrical Discourses on Faith by the Blessed Mar Ephrem: Translated, with Introduction and Notes*

<sup>4</sup> Matthews and Amar, "Commentary on Genesis."

<sup>5</sup> Chapter and verse divisions were introduced into the text much later.

- The mingling of the lines, the *zahyûtâ* of Noah, and the offer of repentance
- The Flood–distancing from Paradise (5.32–11.9)
  - the *šapyûtâ* of Noah
  - the resurgence of sin
  - the generation of the Tower

As Ephrem makes clear at the beginning of his commentary,<sup>6</sup> the period from Creation to the Tower is one major division of Genesis, the other being the period from the Tower to Joseph.

<sup>6</sup> Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, 152–153:1 (Prol.2)

### *Passages Selected for Illustration*

1. Where we are tending is hidden in where we are from.<sup>7</sup>
2. [Christocentric reading:] Being bodiless by nature and existing as the Word, by the love for humanity (*philanthropia*) and goodness of his own Father he appeared to us in a human body for our salvation. [creation–recreation:] As we give an account of this, it is first necessary to speak about the creation of all things and its maker, God, so that one may thus worthily reflect that its renewal (*anakainisin*) was accomplished by the Word who created it in the beginning. For it will appear not at all contradictory if the Father works its salvation in the same one by whom he created it.<sup>8</sup>
3. Irenaeus outlines the sequences or economy of scripture that he takes to be indispensable for apostolic teaching. The great teachers of the church, he reports in a typical passage, proclaim “the one God, omnipotent, the maker of heaven and earth, the creator of man, who brought the deluge, and called Abraham, who led the people from the land of Egypt, spoke with Moses, set forth the Law, sent the prophets, and who has prepared fire for the devil and his angels.” This economy is the sacred outline or table of contents of scripture. The divine economy is the detailed plan by which all the pieces of the mosaic have been placed by God to bring us to see the image of the handsome king. Therefore, this arrangement of world history, this economy, should guide interpretation of scripture. If we follow the divinely coded sequence, then we can properly assess each piece of the mosaic, each moment of biblical history, according to its role in the good order and arrangement ordained by God.<sup>9</sup>
4. All ancient interpretation . . . flowed from the basic conviction that the entire biblical narrative was fundamentally about the economy of Christ. . . . The most significant difference between ancient readers and modern readers is this: they actually believed in the divine economy and that the Bible was a witness to it. We moderns have largely lost confidence in both the divine economy and in the Bible’s ability to witness to it.<sup>10</sup>
5. The essential problem [for modern exegetes] is not method per se; the difficulty rests in the defective and obsolete myth of the divine econ-

<sup>7</sup> Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 137

<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 44a:53 (§ 1)

<sup>9</sup> O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> O’Keefe, “Rejecting One’s Masters,” 260–63

omy. The old Irenean view that there is a Christ-centered structure that organizes all biblical revelation has been replaced by the post-Enlightenment dogma that revelation is embedded in the events of history shaped by sociological, psychological, and generically religious forces. . . . We assume an economy of historical and cultural development that is purely this-worldly. The fathers had faith in a divine economy in which . . . Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection is strangely more real, more interpretively powerful, than our own this-worldly lives and experiences.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 88.

6. The keys of doctrine, which open all the scriptures have opened before my eyes the scripture of creation (*seprâ d-beryâtâ*):  
 . . .  
 the book which, above its companions, by its account, has perceived the Maker, and presented his handiwork has seen all of his adornments (*ṣebtaw[hy]*), and demonstrated his artistry (*taṣbyâtaw[hy]*).<sup>12</sup>
7. The reason for Moses' writing of this book is as follows: the creator was evident to the mind of the first generations, even up to the days of the Tower. Also, that creatures are in fact creatures was proclaimed. And from the Tower to Moses proclaimers of these matters were not lacking among the descendants of Shem. But when the sons of Abram went astray into Egypt, and merited to become godless together with the whole world, and had become estranged from the beautiful commandments which were fixed in our nature, and they posited that entities which had come into being from nothing were self-subsisting and named as gods creatures which had earlier been made, God wanted by means of Moses to set straight what had become confused (*etbalbal*) in the generation of Moses, lest this evil tradition make its way throughout the whole inhabited world.<sup>13</sup>
8. *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.* At this point these comprised the only things that had been made, for there was nothing else created along with heaven and earth. Even the elements that were created on that day had not yet been created. If the elements had been created along with heaven and earth, Moses would have said so. But he did not, lest he give the names of the elements precedence over their substances (*qnômayhôn*). Therefore, it is evident that heaven and earth came to be from nothing, because neither water nor wind had yet been created, nor had fire, light, or darkness been given their natures, for they were younger than heaven and earth.<sup>14</sup>
9. Although Adam was created and was blessed to rule over the earth and over everything that was created and blessed therein, God had indeed made him to dwell within Paradise. God truly manifested his foreknowledge in his blessing and manifested his grace (*ṭaybûtâ*) in the place where he set Adam to dwell. Let it be said that Paradise was not created for [Adam's] sake, [God] set him there in Paradise to dwell. And lest it be said that God did not know that Adam would sin, He blessed him on this earth. And everything with which God blessed Adam preceded the transgression of the commandment, lest by the transgression of him who had been blessed, the blessings of Him who gave the blessings be

<sup>12</sup> Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrerers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum* (*HdP* 6.1)

<sup>13</sup> Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesis et in Exodum Commentarii*, 152-153:1 (Prol.2)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:8-9 (1.2)

withheld and the world be turned back into nothing on account of the folly of that one for whose sake everything had been created.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:24 (1.31)

10. As he was constructing it, he varied its beauties  
such that some levels are more glorious than others  
for just as one level is higher than another  
so also more exalted is its glory compared to the other  
and thus he alots its foot to the lowly  
its slopes to those in between and its height to the exalted.

When the righteous ascend its levels to take their inheritance  
each one according to his toil, justly he makes greater  
by means of the level that is equal to him. By it everyone is measured  
as its levels are sufficient for all  
its ground to the repentant, its middle to the upright  
its height to the triumphant, and its summit to the Presence.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *HdP* 2.10-11; Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*

11. [God] fashioned him with his hands, breathed the soul into him, caused him to rule both Paradise and the region outside it, clothed him in glory, and gave to him his Word and thinking, and caused him to perceive the Majesty.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, 152-153:27-28 (2.4)

12. It was because of the glory with which they were clothed that *they were not ashamed*. It was when this glory was stripped from them after they had transgressed the commandment that they were ashamed because they were naked.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:33 (2.14)

13. See how much the audacity of Adam has been sown among his children  
Adam dared to enter the sanctuary of Paradise; his children have dared to pry into its Lord.  
The Sons of Adam in their investigation supposed that they had seized and bounded God.  
You who have dared to pry into God, look at Adam as at a mirror.  
Whoever thinks he has investigated God succumbs in fact to death.  
...  
Look at Adam, who if he had stayed with the commandment, would have reigned as a king.  
Because in his audacity he transgressed it, his desire was not praiseworthy.  
For when God made him, He made His creature like a god,  
Inasmuch as God had given him freedom, that he might pilot himself as he willed  
but Adam willed like a fool, lusting for what he already possessed.  
Yet because he dared as if by force, even what he had he did not manage to keep.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *SdF* 3.1-38; Hayes, *Metrical Discourses on Faith by the Blessed Mar Ephrem: Translated, with Introduction and Notes*, 4:43-45.

14. This commandment was an easy one, for God gave to Adam all of Paradise and withheld from him only one tree. If a single tree were sufficient to provide nourishment for someone and many were withheld, [that single tree] would offer relief from the torment [of hunger] by providing nourishment for one's hunger. But if God gave Adam many trees instead of a single one which would have been sufficient for him, any transgression would be due not to any constraint (*ûllsânâ*), but to

- negligent disdain (*besyānâ*).<sup>20</sup>
15. If the serpent had been rejected along with sin, Adam and Eve would have eaten from the tree of life and the tree of knowledge would not have been withheld from them; from the one they would have gained infallible knowledge and from the other they would have received immortal life. They would have acquired divinity with their humanity, and if they had acquired infallible knowledge and immortal life, they would have possessed them in those same bodies.<sup>21</sup>
16. [God expelled them] lest this life-giving gift that they would receive through the tree of life become misery, and thus bring worse evil upon them than what they had already obtained from the tree of knowledge. From the latter [tree] they obtained temporal pains, whereas the former [tree] would have made those pains eternal. From the latter they obtained death which would cast off from them the bonds of their pains. The former [tree] however, would have cause them [to live] as if buried alive, leaving them to be tortured eternally by their pains. [God], therefore, withheld from them the tree of life.<sup>22</sup>
17. Abel was very discerning in his choice of offerings, whereas Cain showed no such discernment (*pûršānâ*). Abel selected and offered the choicest of his first born and of his fat ones, while Cain either offered young grains or fruits that are found at the same time as the young grains. Even if his offering had been smaller than that of his brother, it would have been as acceptable as the offering of his brother, had he not brought it with such negligence (*besyānâ*) Abel's offering was accepted, therefore, because of his discernment (*pûršānâ*) whereas that of Cain was despised because of his negligence (*besyānâ*). . . . Abel's offering was accepted, therefore, because of his discrimination (*pārôšûtâ*), whereas that of Cain was despised because of his negligence (*besyānâ*). . . . Cain became angry on account of the fire that in its descent had distinguished (*peršat*) between the offerings. *His face became gloomy* because there was laughter in the eyes of his parents and his sisters when his offering was rejected. They had seen that Cain's offering had been placed in the midst of the fire and yet the fire did not touch it.<sup>23</sup>
18. The wives [of Lamech] saw that the line of their generation would be cut off. They were giving birth not to males but to females only, for [Moses] said that it was when men multiplied on the earth and daughters were born to them. . . . Lamech saw the plight of his generation: that the Sethites refused to intermingle with them because of the reproach of their father Cain, who was still alive, and that the lands would become uncultivated from the lack of ploughmen and their generation would thus come to an end. Lamech, therefore, moved by zeal, killed Cain together with his one son whom he had begotten and who resembled him lest, through this one son who resembled him, the memory of his shame continue through their generations.<sup>24</sup>
19. After Seth begot Enosh, [Moses] wrote *at that time he began to call on the name of the Lord*. Because Seth had separated himself from the house of Cain, the Sethites were called by the name of the Lord, that is, the just people of the Lord. . . . Moses wrote about Enoch who was

<sup>20</sup> Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum Commentarii*, 152-153:30 (2.8)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:39 (3.23)

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:45-46 (2.34)

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:47-48 (3.2-3.3)

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:53 (4.2)

pleasing to God and *was not*. Some say that while Adam was looking at him God transported him to Paradise lest [Adam] think that Enoch was killed as was Abel and so be grieved. This was also so that [Adam] might be comforted by this just son of his and that he might know that for all who were like this one, whether before death or after the resurrection, [Paradise] would be their meeting-place.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:54-55 (5.1-5.2)

20. After recounting the ten generations from Adam to Noah, [Moses] said, *Noah was five hundred years old and begot Shem and Ham and Japhet*. During this entire time Noah was an example to his sons by his splendid purity (*zahyûtâ*), since for five hundred years he kept his virginity among those of whom it was said that *All flesh had corrupted its way*. After he spoke of the virtue of Noah, [Moses] turned to speak about the evil desire (*regtâ bîštâ*) that was working in the children of his generation. . . . [after the flood] [Noah] *took from all the clean flesh and offered an acceptable sacrifice to God and so made the flood pass away from the earth*. The Lord smelled not the smell of the flesh of animals or the smoke of wood, but He looked out and saw the radiant clarity of heart (*šapyûtâ d-lebbâ*) with which [Noah] offered the sacrifice from all and on behalf of all.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:55-62 (6.1-13)

21. *Then the Lord said, My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be one hundred and twenty years*. This generation will not live nine hundred years like the previous generations, for it is flesh and its days are filled with the deeds of the flesh. Therefore, their days will be one hundred and twenty years. If they repent during this time they will be saved from the wrath that is about to come upon them. But if they do not repent, by their deeds they will call down [the wrath] upon themselves. Benevolent Goodness (*taybûtâ*) granted on hundred and twenty years for repentance to a generation that, according to Justice (*kênûtâ*), was not worthy of repentance.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:56 (6.4)

22. That Nature that does not feel regret (*lâ mettwe*) humbled Itself (*êttahî*) to say, *I regret*, so that that rebellious (*marrâhâ*) generation might hear and quake in fear, and so that repentance (*twâtâ*) might be sown in those whose heart rebelled against repentance (*twâtâ*). If there had been any blemish in the works of God, He would have created a new creation and would not have preserved in the ark anything that had caused regret (*âtwî*) to Him who made it. Notice that by saying *I regret*, He shows that He did not regret. If God expressed regret because of the sinners, why would He express regret concerning the beasts and the reptiles and the birds that had committed no sin? And if He were not regretful concerning them, why did He say *I regret* when He did not regret? This repentance (*twâtâ*) which, on account of the offenders, was extended to those who committed no evil vindicates God who said *I regret*, for it was out of love for those sinners who were to perish that he said it and not because He was announcing his ignorance. That they should perish in their deeds was a great sorrow (*haššâ*) to that Benevolence (*taybûtâ*) that had made them, but if they did not perish, future generations would have been corrupted because of them.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:58 (6.7)

23. For what purpose would those who had nothing to fear build a fortified city or a tower that reaches to heaven, since they had a firm covenant

that there would be no flood? They said, *Lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth*. But who else was there, apart from themselves, to scatter them? From the fact that they had said, Let us make a name for ourselves, it is clear that their vainglory (*šabhrānūtā*) and their unity, which build both the city and the tower, were brought to nought because of the division that cam upon them.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 152-153:66 (8.2)

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