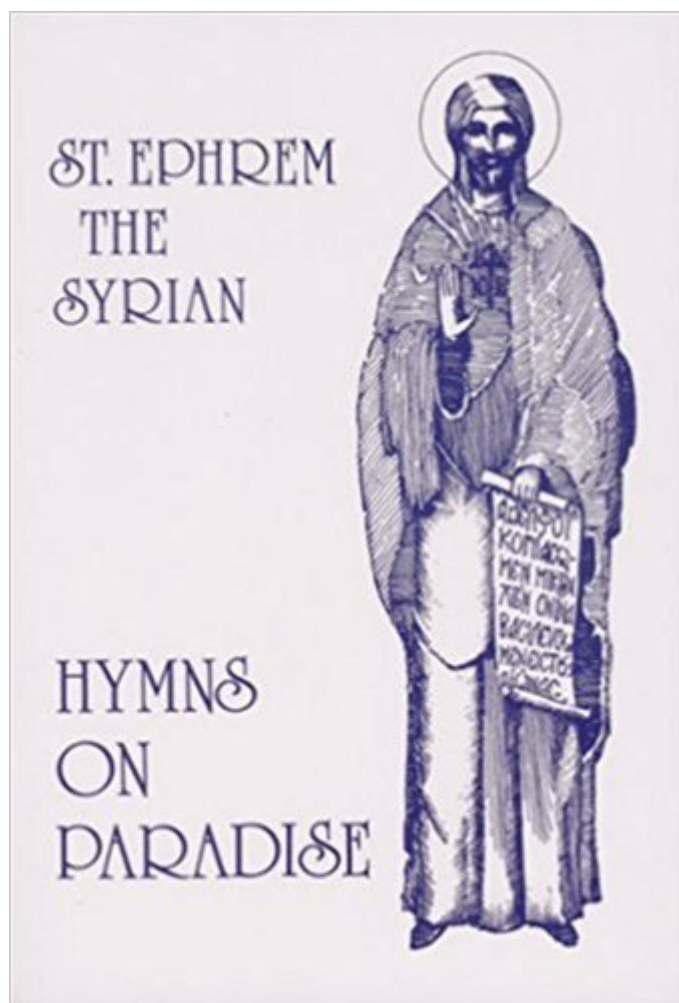


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St. Ephrem The Syrian: Hymns On Paradise



Synopsis

St Ephrem the Syrian's cycle of 15 Hymns on Paradise offers a fine example of Christian poetry, in which the author weaves a profound theological synthesis around a particular Biblical narrative. Centered on Genesis 2 and 3, he expresses his awareness of the sacramental character of the created world, and of the potential of everything in the created world to act as a witness and pointer to the creator. God's two witnesses, says Ephrem, are: 'Nature, through man's use of it, [and] Scripture, through his reading it.' In his writing, Ephrem posits an inherent link between the material and spiritual worlds. St Ephrem's mode of theological discussion is essentially Biblical and Semitic in character. He uses types and symbols to express connections or relationships to 'reveal' something that is otherwise 'hidden,' particularly expressing meanings between the Old Testament and the New, between this world and the heavenly, between the New Testament and the sacraments, and between the sacraments and the eschaton. Because his theology is not tied to a particular cultural or philosophical background, but operates by means of imagery and symbolism basic to all human experience, his theological vision expressed in his hymns has a freshness and immediacy today that few other theological works from the early Christian period can hope to achieve. the Holy Mountain. Hymns on Paradise is part of the POPULAR PATRISTIC SERIES.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation)

Lucid and enlightening -- a admirable introduction not just to Ephrem but to Syriac theological ways of thinking.

Fantastic!

"The garden of life" has been opened for us with the "keys" that He gave us. So opens Hymn VII of these collected hymns by St. Ephrem the Syrian (+373, age unknown but speculation identifies his birth between AD 300 and 310). Hymn VII resembles all 15 Hymns of Paradise collected. Translated by Sebastian Brock of Oxford University (year of publication: 1998), Hymn VII resembles the other hymns in emphasis of Nature metaphors drawn from part of the creation and sequel texts of Genesis in chapters 2 and 3. There is seldom a moral goad to sinners in these Hymns as one discovers in Dante, another Christian allegorist centuries later. Rather, if a goad exists at all in Hymns of Paradise, it is desire and delight to shed the cloak of slavery and return to freedom. Disobedience has led to slavery; obedience returns one to freedom. Thereby, obedient "people behold themselves in glory and wonder at themselves...; " Blessed is He who, with His keys, has opened up the Garden of Life" (Hymn VII, v. 12 and Response). Shedding a moral cloak may be impossible for some Greek/Slavonic or Latin-Christian descendants to digest. However, for this Syriac saint of the fourth Christian century, every aspect of his life interpreted the "Nature" that inspired his hymns from the Genesis texts. To say, therefore, that Ephrem breathed and ate Genesis would reflect his experience of air and sustenance. Hebraic meter is obtuse in translation. Certainly any translation of the Psalms faces a similar struggle. Brock rose to the challenge far better than most anyone might expect. Brock's translation is excellent in my opinion. But translation alone was not the only gift of this publication. In addition, Brock added a treasure trove to discover in his Introduction of 69 pages length (total pages of text: 227 plus bibliography and references; translated Hymns consist of 111 pages). These Hymns of Paradise ought to be read aloud, memorized, set in memorable tunes or chants, and digested slowly in obedience to the vision of paradise. Brock's translation is approachable alone in reading, but even better appreciated in harmony with other created beings. For "blessed is He who came and invited both worlds to His Paradise" (Response of Book XV). Finally, my last allusion may strike you as stretching on my part. I ask you to compare the Response of Book XV to John Donne's metaphoric link of the "first" Adam in Genesis to the "second" Adam, who is Christ: "Look, Lord, and see both Adams met in me..." ("Hymn to God my God in my Sickness"). Your effort in comparison may yield rewards by keeping the vision of Eden before you. It does so for me.

Sebastian Brock is justly famous for his skill at translating the beautiful, symbol-laden poetry of St. Ephrem into clear, flowing English. This book is an excellent showcase of the master at his craft. The introduction is very interesting and helpful. The part I found most helpful to my own understanding was the explanation of St. Ephrem's view of the geography of Paradise. It is a conical mountain that sits above the earth. However, it is clear that Ephrem did not take this in a literal, physical sense. Rather, as Brock puts it, "he is deliberately drawing our attention to the distinction between sacred space (and time) and ordinary space (and time)." Further, "Ephrem was deliberately going against some much more literalist views of Paradise that were current in the early Christian period..." The felicitous result of this is that "precisely because he locates Paradise outside geographical space, his views are left unaffected by modern advances in scientific knowledge." (All quotes from pp. 54-55.) Take a plunge into a very different, but very biblically based, world by reading this lucid translation of one of the most skilled exponents it has ever had: Deacon Ephrem of Nisibis.

In "Hymns on Paradise" Sebastian Brock has skillfully introduced and translated a selection of writings by Saint Ephrem, the greatest of the early Syrian fathers of the church - including fifteen of Ephrem's Hymns on paradise and Ephrem's commentary on the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. Since Saint Ephrem came from the Syriac Christian tradition, his style and way of expressing himself are very different from the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church. In spite of the differences, his poetic and less philosophical approach beautifully compliments other patristic writers. Above all, Saint Ephrem's holistic method of interpreting the Bible is very refreshing, deeply insightful and thoroughly enjoyable. In this book, Sebastian Brock has also provided a very detailed introduction and excellent explanatory notes, making it enjoyable both for those new to Saint Ephrem and those already familiar with him. I would highly recommend this book. Learn why this Deacon of Edessa became known as the Harp of the Spirit and was proclaimed by Pope Benedict XV as a Doctor of the Church.

A fragrant gem inculcating the hope of redemption for fallen humanity.

Although a mandatory book for class, it was an easy and enjoyable read. I would recommend to others to read.

A classic.

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