The Interpretive Methods of St. Ephrem the Syrian  
the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and 3.

By Richard Jizba  
Theology 700, Fall 2008

Ephrem was born around 306 A.D. in Nisibis in Mesopotamia. He spent most of his life there, but moved to Edessa when the Romans lost the city to Persia in 363 A.D. He was a deacon who worked closely and faithfully with his bishops. He died in 373 while he was caring for the sick during an outbreak of the plague. He is considered one of the great hymn writers of Christianity and his hymns were appreciated by all the Churches in the east and even Jerome noted his fame in the Latin Church. Since Ephrem wrote in Syriac most people must read him in translation. He also wrote prose commentary on Genesis, Exodus and the Diatessaron.¹

The exegetical method used by the Syriac writers, including Ephrem, was more closely aligned with the methods of Antioch than with Alexandria. They did not read and interpret the scriptures using a philosophical system or by employing allegory, but instead used a more literal, but never-the-less imaginative, method. To use a more familiar analogy, Ephrem’s method seems more attuned to Lectio Divina with its pattern of reading, meditating, praying and contemplating. Certainly the sense of this is captured in the reflection on the eye and the mind in these lines from hymn five of the Hymns of Paradise:²

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ read the opening of this book} & \quad \text{As over a bridge, and entered together} \\
\quad \text{And was filled with joy,} & \quad \text{The story of Paradise.} \\
\quad \text{For its verses and lines} & \\
\quad \text{Spread out their arms to welcome me} & \\
\quad : & \\
\quad \text{The eye and the mind} & \\
\quad \text{Traveled over the lines} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

¹ Most translations of Ephrem’s (Ephraem) works include a thorough discussion of his life because the early biographical writings contained many serious errors. More recent scholars have completely revised his biography. All the works cited here provide a modern description of his life.  
From his own writings we know the Ephrem was involved in countering various heresies including Gnostics, Manicheans, Arians, and others. Brock sees this as one of the motivations for the Syriac Church to emphasize the hidden nature of God, and warn against reading scripture in the hopes of achieving a greater understanding of God. If the heretics maintained that the Logos was created, then Logos might be fully understood by man who was also created.

Perhaps it is also this concern for orthodoxy that is the reason for his brief remark on the Trinity during a discussion of Adam: “Even though by saying, ‘He has be become like one of us,’ He symbolically reveals the Trinity, the point is rather that God was mocking Adam in that Adam had previously been told ‘You will become like God knowing good and evil.’” Since the first Council of Nicea occurred in 325, when Ephrem was a young man of eighteen or nineteen, the Christological controversy was certainly a current issue for him and his community.

In the *Hymns on Faith*, Ephrem wrote the following verses which warn his listeners that they are doomed to failure if they attempt to understand or scrutinize God:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Let us not allow ourselves to go astray and to study our God.} \\
&\text{And as for our knowledge, let us know how small it is, and too contemptible to scrutinize the Knower of all.}
\end{align*}
\]

In the same collection, Ephrem makes it clear that the descriptions of God in scripture are only provided to aid our understanding. Although they do provide us with an understanding of the very general nature of God (Ephrem says in one verse that *in His true being there is no wrath or regret*), they in no way provide a full sense or understanding of God.

---

4 Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*. p. 44
Let us give thanks to God who clothed Himself in the names of the body's various parts: Scriptures refers to His "ears" to teach us that he listens to us; it speaks of His "eyes," to show that He sees us. It was just the names of things that He put on, and - although in His true being there is no wrath or regret -- yet He put on these names because of our weakness.

We should realize that, had He not put on the names of such things, it would not have been possible for Him to speak to humans. It is our metaphors that He put on -- though He did not literally do so; The fact that He strips off and puts on all sorts of metaphors tell us that the metaphor does not apply to His true Being.  

If man was not capable of understanding God, what was the point of pondering the scriptures? For Ephrem the scriptures were God’s way of teaching man how to live proper and faithful lives. The scriptures are for our instruction:

In the Torah Moses trod the Way of the ‘mystic symbols’ before that People who used to wander every which way. But our Lord, in his testaments, definitively established the path of Truth for Peoples who came to the Way of Life.

Turning to his commentary on Genesis, we can see how Ephrem used these assumptions in his analysis.

That mankind was God’s special creation is obvious in Genesis, but Ephrem understands this special love of God for Adam more imaginatively than a simple reading of the text provides. Yet his ‘filling out’ of the story is not based on any particular philosophical pattern, but would seem to come from his deep meditation on scripture. In particular, he emphasizes God’s gift of reason to Adam:

God still gave honor to Adam in many ways: first in that it was said “God formed him with His own hands and breathed life into him,” God then set him as ruler over

---

7 Brock, Hymns on Paradise, p 46  
Paradise and over all that is outside of Paradise; God clothed Adam in glory and God gave him reason and thought so that he might perceive the majesty of God.9

Continuing on, Ephrem contrasts the description of the serpent10 with that of Adam:

Although the serpent was cunning, it was only more cunning than the dumb animals that were governed by Adam; it is not true that because the serpent surpassed the level of animals in cleverness, it was immediately raised up to the level of mankind. ... Therefore, it is evident that in cunning also Adam was infinitely greater than the serpent. ... Although the serpent was more clever than all the animals, before Adam and Eve, who were the rulers of the animals, it was a fool.11

But Ephrem’s comments on Adam and Eve’s superiority over the serpent are preparing his listeners to understand the nature of their fall. He wants to leave no doubt that the fall came through their own fault and not through persuasion or deceit. He even makes a point that Satan, speaking through the serpent, was not the true cause of the fall:

Satan spoke through it (the serpent) ... The words of the tempter would not have caused those two to be tempted to sin if their avarice had not been so helpful to the tempter. ... Their avarice then was the reason that they followed the counsel of the serpent. The avarice of Adam and Eve was far more injurious to them than the counsel of the serpent.12

That the breaking of God’s commandment was their own fault, not that of any outside influence, Ephrem emphasizes in his description of the serpent, which “albeit cunning, was utterly despicable and hideous”13 and should have been easy to resist. In any case, he continues

It was not so much the serpent’s counsel that entered her ear and provoked her to eat from the tree as it was her gaze, which she directed toward the tree, that lured her to pluck and eat of its fruit.14

---

9 Matthews & Amar, St. Ephrem the Syrian, p. 99 (Commentary on Genesis, section II, part 4, paragraph 1)
10 Genesis 3:1 “Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the Lord God had made.”
11 Matthews & Amar, St. Ephrem the Syrian, p. 107 (Com. Gen. II, 15, 1-2)
12 Matthews & Amar, St. Ephrem the Syrian, p. 108 (Com. Gen. II, 16, 1)
13 Ibid p. 109 (II, 18, 1)
14 Ibid p. 112 (II, 20, 2)
If the scriptures are for our instruction, so that we may walk “the path of Truth” and find “the Way of Life”, Ephrem clearly wants to establish that the problem which needs correcting, which needs the instruction of scripture, is deep within us and from nowhere else.

That scripture is for our instruction becomes clear in his interpretation of what happened after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. He sees the anthropomorphic actions of God in these passages as telling us nothing insightful about God other than the fact that God used them simply to offer Adam and Eve a chance at contrition and repentance:

*If Adam and Eve had sought to repent after they had transgressed the commandment, even though they would not have regained that which they possessed before their transgression of the commandment, they would have escaped from the curses that were decreed on the earth and upon them. God tarried in coming down to them for the sole reason that they might admonish each other and so plead for mercy when the judge came to them.* \(^{15}\)

*It was not only by the patience He exhibited that God wished to help them, He also wished to benefit them by the sound of His feet. God endowed his silent footsteps with sound so that Adam and Eve might be prepared, at that sound, to make supplication before Him who made the sound. ... God then made a sound with His lips, just as He had made a sound for His footsteps and said “Where are you, Adam?”* \(^{16}\)

The delay, the footsteps, the spoken words that we encounter in these scriptures tell us only of God’s concern for Adam and Eve. We who hear these words, or so hopes Ephrem, would learn from the error of Adam and Eve and repent; confessing our wrongs that we might receive mercy and forgiveness.

Besides this view that Scripture is God’s revelation for our instruction, what else do we see in Ephrem’s method? Like all ancient interpreters Ephrem assumed Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. He also shared that common assumption that the scriptures were without error. Both points are obvious from the following line in which he addresses the reason for what appear

\(^{15}\) Ibid p. 114-15 [II,23,2]  
\(^{16}\) Ibid p. 115 [II,24,1]
to be two separate creation stories in Genesis: “Moses returned to tell the story of the beginning of creation even after the days of creation had been finished.” It was obvious to Ephrem that Moses was, in part, going back to fill in details and would advance the story from there. Ephrem was concerned enough about the different ordering of the events of creation in the two creation stories that he briefly discussed the fact that in chapter two vegetation came into being after Adam was created -- but before his creation in chapter one. Yet the discussion of the vegetation occupies only a few paragraphs and he doesn’t go on to address all the other inconsistencies. The consistency issue is one he acknowledged, but it didn’t seem to be a critical issue for him.

An odd feature of Ephrem’s works are his “far-fetched typologies”. An example of this is found in his conception of Paradise. Commenting on Genesis 2:10 -- A river rises in Eden to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches. He writes:

> Although the places from which they (the four rivers) flow are known, the source of the spring is not known. Because Paradise is set on a great height, the rivers are swallowed up again and they go down to the sea as if through a tall water duct, and so pass through the earth which is under the sea into this land. The earth then spits out each one of them.

Ephrem shared a view that found among some Jewish and early Christian traditions that paradise was a mountain, which may have drawn on Old Testament passages from Ezekiel 28:13-14, Psalm 48:1-2, Isaiah 2. This conception of Paradise is quite clear in his poetry:

---

17 Ibid p. 97 [II,2,1]
18 Michael C. Legaspi, “Hearing the Scriptures with St. Ephrem: Notes on a Non-Western Biblical Interpreter” (presented at Intl. Theological Conf. on St. John Chrysostom, Bucharest, Romania, 12-14 November 2006.)
19 Ibid p. 101 [II, 6, 4]
20 Brock, Hymns on Paradise. p. 49
21 In Eden, the garden of God, you were, … With the Cherub I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God, walking among the fiery stones. (New American Bible)
22 Great is the LORD and highly praised in the city of our God: The holy mountain, fairest of heights, the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, the heights of Zaphon, the city of the great king. (NAB)
23 In days to come, The mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it; In days to come, The mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it; (NAB)
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.

Hymn I, sect 4

Oddities like this, while of interest to the historian and delightful to anyone with a taste for poetic mysticism, may offer little to the modern exegete or homilist. But we can take away several lessons from Ephrem’s methods.

Ephrem reminds us that scripture contains instruction about how we should live the life God has given us, even if we may not agree that such instruction is it’s only purpose. People today, bombarded by so many philosophies of life which contradict the message of scripture, need our instruction and encouragement. Like Ephrem we need to read the scriptures with our eyes, and then rest with it in our minds and our imaginations so that through prayer and meditation we can be good homilists and teachers.

His acceptance and promotion of mystical imagery such as his vision of paradise seem less helpful, but on the other hand, a writer as current as C.S. Lewis consistently depicted heaven as a mountain. If using our imagination helps us foster a greater love for God among the people we serve, then Ephrem is certainly, if not a model for today, at least an inspiration.

Perhaps the most obvious lesson from Ephrem which was mentioned briefly at the beginning, but which is ubiquitous in any study of his works, is his skill with language. In this too, he is more of an inspiration than a model: anyone who writes or speaks on the scriptures, should do so with care and whatever artistry he possesses. Craftsmanship in communication is important in every age, and we need to share the beauty, not just the meaning of scripture.

---

24 Ibid p. 78-79.
25 Two that come readily to mind are The Great Divorce, and The Last Battle (The seventh and final book in the The Chronicles of Narnia series)