

Paradise in the Qu'ran and  
Ephrem the Syrian

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The Bible and the Qu'ran

Submitted April 17, 2014

Revised July 12, 2014

## I. Introduction

This paper is about Paradise, or the Garden of Eden, in the Bible and the Qu’ran. I will begin with analysis of Paradise in the Qu’ran, then move backwards to Paradise in the Bible. I will make some mention of the images of heaven in the Bible that do not involve Paradise, but a detailed exploration of the Christian afterlife in all its forms is beyond the scope of this paper. I will then describe the main differences between the Bible and the Qu’ran, and suggest a bridge figure, in the person of St. Ephrem the Syrian, to explain their relationship. Having described Ephrem’s conception of Paradise, I will compare it in turn to the Bible’s and to the Qu’ran’s, before concluding with an analysis of what I think are the reasons for both its differences and similarities.

My hope is to sketch out, in broad strokes, the development of Paradise from its simple description and rather marginal role played in Scripture to the highly developed description and significant role it plays in the Qu’ran.

## II. Paradise in the Qu’ran

Images of Paradise run like a leitmotif through the pages of the Qu’ran. When the author wishes to punctuate an exhortation to have faith and obey God, he has recourse to a description of Paradise (in Arabic, Janna). There is a common formula that tends to introduce these images: Q 20:76 is a good illustration of the pattern:

Gardens of Eden, underneath which<sup>1</sup> rivers flow,  
therein dwelling forever;  
that is the recompense of the self-purified.<sup>2</sup>

First, the gardens are explicitly named “Eden.”<sup>3</sup> Second, the phrase “underneath which rivers

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<sup>1</sup> Rendered “through which” in Alan Jones, *The Qur’ān* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Qu’ran quotations are drawn from Arthur John Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Collier Books, 1955). Versification follows Jones.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Q 18:31; 98:8. I am obliged to L. Gardet, “Djanna,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Ed., vol. 2

flow,” which is so nearly ubiquitous as to begin to resemble part of a mantra.<sup>4</sup> Third, the eternal nature of the gardens and those dwelling therein.<sup>5</sup> And fourth, the idea that the gardens are a type of recompense for those who enter them.<sup>6</sup> A final feature of the garden images is well illustrated by a preceding verse, Q 20:74 –

Whosoever comes unto his Lord a sinner,  
for him awaits Gehenna  
wherein he shall neither die nor live.

As is the case here, nearly everywhere Janna makes an appearance in the Qu’ran, it is immediately preceded or followed by an invocation of hell.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond this formula, different pericopes reveal different attributes of the Qu’ran’s Paradise. So we learn that Janna has gates, and is visited by angels:

and the angels shall enter unto them  
from every gate ...<sup>8</sup>

But most of the descriptions advertise the pleasures awaiting the inhabitants of Paradise: for example, the foods which they will enjoy:

Surely the pious shall drink of a cup  
whose mixture is camphor,  
a fountain whereat drink the servants of God,  
making it to gush forth plenteously....

... and there shall be passed around them vessels of  
silver, and goblets of crystal,  
crystal of silver that they have measured  
very exactly.

And therein they shall be given to drink a cup whose  
mixture is ginger,

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(Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1991), 447–52 and Jones’s helpful index for help navigating the numerous descriptions of Janna in the Qu’ran.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Q 47:15; 66:8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Q 3:15; 9:72, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Q 13:20ff., 24; 69:19, 24;

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also 16:31 beside 29 and 34; 47:15.

<sup>8</sup> Q 13:23; for gates, cf. also Q 38:50; for angels, Q 16:32f.

therein a fountain whose name is called Salsabil.<sup>9</sup>

and the jewelry and fine garments with which they will be adorned:

... therein they shall be adorned with bracelets  
of gold, and they shall be robed in green garments  
of silk and brocade ...<sup>10</sup>

likewise the lavish furnishings and the cushions on which to recline:

... therein uplifted couches  
and goblets set forth  
and cushions arrayed  
and carpets outspread.<sup>11</sup>

nor will Paradise be lacking in servants:

And youths circle them, waiting on them,  
as if they were hidden pearls.<sup>12</sup>

The Qu'ran is also not shy about advertising service of a different kind. Believers are in several places promised the companionship of beautiful women:

therein maidens restraining their glances,  
untouched before them by any man or jinn<sup>13</sup> ...  
lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral ...

therein maidens good and comely ...  
houris, cloistered in cool pavilions ...  
untouched before them by any man or jinn ...  
reclining upon green cushions and lovely druggets—  
O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?<sup>14</sup>

All this prompts the question – where do these images come from? Does the Bible describe the Garden of Eden this way? If not, how did they come about?

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<sup>9</sup> Q 76:5–6, 15–17.

<sup>10</sup> Q 18:31; cf. also Q 35:33.

<sup>11</sup> Q 88:13–16.

<sup>12</sup> Q 52:24, Jones.

<sup>13</sup> Oddly, this line is omitted from Jones.

<sup>14</sup> Q 55:56, 58, 70, 72, 74, 76–77. Note that the identification of *houris* with women has been challenged by Christoph Luxenberg in *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: H. Schiler, 2007). However, his critique seems somewhat less than persuasive in light of passages as explicit as the one quoted above.

### III. Paradise in the Bible

That the Qu'ran names its garden "Eden" makes clear that it is a reference to the Garden of Eden in the beginning chapters of Genesis. We now turn to Genesis to explore how Paradise is introduced and then trace its development through the canon of Scripture.

#### A. *Paradise in the Old Testament*

Paradise enters the stage of Scripture with these words: "And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."<sup>15</sup> Aside from that, the four rivers flowing out of it in Gen 2:10–14, and the cherub guardian in 3:24, the garden is hardly described at all.

It is not until much later that our picture of Eden is fleshed out: as part of his indictment of the King of Tyre, Ezekiel prophesies:

You were in Eden, the garden of God;  
 every precious stone was your covering,  
 carnelian, topaz, and jasper,  
 chrysolite, beryl, and onyx,  
 sapphire, carbuncle, and emerald;  
 and wrought in gold were your settings  
 and your engravings.  
 On the day that you were created  
 they were prepared.  
 With an anointed guardian cherub I placed you;  
 you were on the holy mountain of God;  
 in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.  
 You were blameless in your ways  
 from the day you were created,  
 till iniquity was found in you ...  
 so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,  
 and the guardian cherub drove you out  
 from the midst of the stones of fire.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gen 2:9. Bible quotations are taken from the RSV.

<sup>16</sup> Ezek 28:13–16.

Here, a two important details are added: first, the inhabitant of Paradise is described arrayed in gold and jewels; and second, Eden is now revealed to be on a mountain.

But the passage in Ezekiel is a rhetorical device: Ezekiel portrays the King of Tyre in Eden to dramatize his fall from innocence. It is not a reference to the afterlife. In fact, when the Old Testament describes the afterlife, it does not do so using the image of a garden. For example, when Isaiah describes his “new heavens and a new earth,” the city of Jerusalem is the abode of the people of God.<sup>17</sup> And Ezekiel’s eschatological vision has as its centerpiece a reconstituted Temple, without a garden in sight.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Paradise isn’t mentioned again in the Bible until the New Testament.

### ***B. Paradise in the New Testament***

In the New Testament, “paradise” is named explicitly only three times: in 2 Cor 12:2ff., when Paul tells of a man (perhaps himself) who “was caught up to the third heaven ... into Paradise (*paradeison*),” in Revelation’s letter to the Church of Ephesus,<sup>19</sup> and most notably when Jesus says to the thief crucified beside him, “today you will be with me in Paradise (*paradeiso*).”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, “paradise” refers to a place in the next life, but nowhere is it described in any detail. And it is certainly nowhere equated with the Garden of Eden.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, when the New Testament describes the afterlife, it tends to use the image of a wedding feast, as in the parables in Matt 22:2–14 and 25:1–13; of the bosom of Abraham, as in

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<sup>17</sup> Isa 65:17ff.

<sup>18</sup> Ezek 40ff.

<sup>19</sup> “To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise (*paradeiso*) of God” (Rev 2:7).

<sup>20</sup> Luke 23:43.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek word *paradeisos* merely means “garden.” One might argue that since in the beginning chapters of Genesis, the Septuagint consistently refers to Eden as a *paradeisos*, any use of the *paradeisos* in New Testament is an evocation of the Garden of Eden. But such a claim is not unassailable.

the parable of Luke 16:19–31; or of a heavenly city, as in Hebrews<sup>22</sup> and Revelation.<sup>23</sup> And, at least outside of the book of Revelation, the New Testament tends to be very cautious about describing the afterlife at all. There is the idea that what little can be said about it is only by way of analogy – thus Paul’s highly allusive and mysterious language in his “resurrection chapter,” 1 Cor 15 and John’s awe-filled confession, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”<sup>24</sup>

### *C. The Divide*

Clearly, there is an enormous divide between the Bible’s depiction of Paradise and the Qu’ran’s. The Bible lacks the food,<sup>25</sup> the furnishings, the gates, the attendants, and certainly the *houris*. The Qu’ran lacks Ezekiel’s addition that Paradise is on a mountain.<sup>26</sup> Even the prominence of Paradise is at variance. Whereas in the Bible, Paradise comes up only a handful of times, it is nearly ubiquitous in the Qu’ran. But the most acute dissimilarity between the two is that according to the Qu’ran, the eternal residence of the people of God is the Garden of Eden, whereas in the Bible, there is no clear indication that this is so.

That said, there are numerous commonalities: both images of Paradise include rivers, adornment of some kind, angels (although performing rather different roles), and the garden itself. Clearly, the Qu’ran draws on biblical material in its descriptions of Paradise. But where does it get its extra details? What accounts for the differences?

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<sup>22</sup> Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14; cf. also Gal 4:26.

<sup>23</sup> Mentioned in Rev 3:12 and then described at length in chs. 21f.

<sup>24</sup> 1 John 3:2.

<sup>25</sup> Unless one takes literally Jesus’s image of a wedding feast.

<sup>26</sup> Although Q 69:24 describes “a lofty Garden” and Q 88:10 describes “a high garden” (Jones; Arberry has “sublime”) from which one is able to consider “how the mountains were hoisted” and “how the earth was outstretched” (Q 88:19–20), these phrases are hardly conclusive.

#### IV. The Bridge: Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition

On the question of Paradise, as with many others,<sup>27</sup> the Syriac Church is the bridge between the Bible and the Qu'ran. After years of creative reflection on the Old and New Testaments, the Syriac exegetical tradition developed an image of Paradise that bears a striking resemblance to that found in the Qu'ran. To examine that resemblance, we next turn to the brightest luminary of the Syriac Church, Ephrem the Syrian.

Just as Origen in the Greek Church and St. Augustine in the Latin, Ephrem was the greatest mind of his generation. And like them, he left his mark on all subsequent religious thinkers in his tradition. It is difficult to emphasize enough how prominent a figure Ephrem is in the Syriac Church. Mere decades after his death, his fame had reached the ears of Sozomen (writing in Constantinople in the early 440s) who relates how popular Ephrem's numerous hymns were among the Syrians and how avidly they were being translated into Greek.<sup>28</sup> All this is by way of arguing that for the purposes of this paper, Ephrem and his writings can be taken as representative of the Syriac exegetical tradition.

##### *A. Comparison with Scripture*

Ephrem's Paradise developed out of reflection on Scripture. As such, his Paradise shares all the salient characteristics assigned to Paradise in Scripture: Ephrem's Paradise is a mountain<sup>29</sup> with rivers,<sup>30</sup> guarded by an angel,<sup>31</sup> and in it, believers are depicted as radiantly attired:

Both men and women

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<sup>27</sup> See Joseph Benzion Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives" (Ph.D., Princeton University, 2011): 10–65 for a history of scholarship on the relationship between Syriac Christianity and the Qu'ran.

<sup>28</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.26. Sozomen reports that Ephrem wrote three hundred thousand verses in his lifetime.

<sup>29</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 1.4. For analysis of Ephrem's primary influences (e.g. 1 Enoch), see Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975): 306ff.

<sup>30</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 11.11; *Comm. Gen.* 2.6.

<sup>31</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 4.1.



are clothed in raiment of light;  
the garments provided to cover their nakedness  
are swallowed up in glory ...<sup>32</sup>

Ephrem also develops Scripture's depiction of Paradise: for example, he elaborates the roles of the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: for him, the tree of knowledge is planted halfway up the mountain as a kind of test for Adam to assess his worthiness to ascending to the heights, tree of life is to be found.<sup>33</sup>

But by far Ephrem's most noticeable departure from the Scriptures is the great prominence of Paradise in his thought and his identification the Christian afterlife with the Garden of Eden.<sup>34</sup> These factors of emphasis and identification are absolutely crucial for bridging the gap between the Bible and the Qu'ran.

Next, we will examine the similarities and differences between Ephrem's Paradise and the Qu'ran's Janna.

## ***B. Comparison with the Qu'ran***

### *1. History of Scholarship*

Hubert Grimme was the first to notice the similarities between Ephrem's Paradise and Janna in 1892.<sup>35</sup> A few decades later, Tor Andrae ran with the idea, pointing out a number of parallels between the two accounts.<sup>36</sup> For a full analysis of Andrae's work, including some of its

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<sup>32</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 7.5. Quotations are from Sebastian P. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990). For more on the frequent clothing metaphors in Syriac Christianity, and especially Adam and Eve's "Robe of Glory," see Brock's "Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition," in *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie Bei Den Östlichen Vätern Und Ihren Parallele Im Mittelalter*, ed. Margot Schmidt, vol. 4, Eichstätter Beiträge (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982), 11–40.

<sup>33</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 3.2–3, 13–14.

<sup>34</sup> It is likely that Ephrem and the Syriac thinkers who preceded him were led to this identification by the early Christian theory of atonement by recapitulation, in which Christ, by his death and resurrection, undoes the sin of Adam. It follows from this that there is no longer any obstacle to renewed humanity's reentering Eden.

<sup>35</sup> Hubert Grimme, *Mohammed*, vol. 2 (Münster i.W.: Aschendorff, 1892): 160 n. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam et le Christianisme*, trans. Jules Roche (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1955): 151ff. This is a translation of the German original, which was published as a series of articles in the early 1920s.

deficiencies, see Witztum<sup>37</sup> and Luxenberg.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Similarities

Ephrem's Paradise has several features in common with the Qu'ran's. To begin with, there is a gate,<sup>39</sup> and although there are no youths in attendance as in Janna, Ephrem has the wind itself animate for service.<sup>40</sup> Also, the scale of Paradise is commensurate. Q 3:133 reads:

And vie with one another, hastening to forgiveness  
from your Lord, and to a garden whose breadth  
is as the heavens and earth, prepared  
for the godfearing ...

And in Ephrem, it is described as

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.<sup>41</sup>

Ephrem matches or even exceeds the Qu'ran in his sumptuous descriptions of Paradise. The

Qu'ran describes the fruits provided for believers as follows:

... there are two gardens ...  
With branches ...  
In which there are species of every fruit in pairs ...  
and the freshly gathered fruit of the two gardens is near.<sup>42</sup>

Whenever they are provided with fruit from them,  
they say, 'This is what we were provided with before,'  
and they will be provided with [fruit of] the same quality.<sup>43</sup>

But in Ephrem the fruits are a rhapsody: he describes how the trees themselves scoop people up

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<sup>37</sup> "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran ...," 36ff.

<sup>38</sup> *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran ...*, 258f.

<sup>39</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 1.2; 5.5

<sup>40</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 9.7ff.

<sup>41</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 1.8.

<sup>42</sup> Q 55:46, 48, 52, 54, Jones.

<sup>43</sup> Q 2:25, Jones.

and cup them in flowery boughs soft as cushions.<sup>44</sup> Then they begin to serve up their fruits:

Who has ever beheld such a banquet  
in the very bosom of a tree,  
with fruit of every savor  
ranged for the hand to pluck.  
Each type of fruit in due sequence approaches,  
each awaiting its turn:  
fruit to eat,  
and fruit to quench the thirst;  
to rinse the hands there is dew,  
and leaves to dry them with after ...<sup>45</sup>

And the streams of nourishment described in Ephrem and the Qu'ran are remarkably similar. For example, the Qu'ran writes of Janna,

... therein are rivers of water unstaling  
rivers of milk unchanging in flavour,  
and rivers of wine—a delight  
to the drinkers,  
rivers, too, of honey purified;  
and therein for them is every fruit ...<sup>46</sup>

Compared to what Ephrem writes:

There the springs of delights  
open up and flow  
with wine, milk, honey,  
and cream.<sup>47</sup>

The climates of the two Paradises are likewise described in similar terms. The Qu'ran has:

therein they shall see neither sun nor  
bitter cold ...<sup>48</sup>

And Ephrem writes:

No harmful frost,  
no scorching heat  
is to be found

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<sup>44</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 9.3.

<sup>45</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 9.4.

<sup>46</sup> Q 47:15.

<sup>47</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 10.6.

<sup>48</sup> Q 76:13.

in that blessed place of delight!<sup>49</sup>

There are also certain similarities between the Qu'ran and Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* regarding the subdivision of believers. The Qu'ran describes how in the end, people are separated into three classes:

you shall be three bands—  
Companions of the Right (O Companions of the Right!)  
Companions of the Left (O Companions of the Left!)  
and the Outstrippers: the Outstrippers  
those are they brought nigh the Throne,  
in the Gardens of Delight ...<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, Ephrem divides Paradise into three levels, corresponding to levels in the spiritual life:

... He allots  
the foothills to the most lowly,  
the slopes to those in between,  
and the heights to the exalted.<sup>51</sup>

The Qu'ran describes the final vindication of the inhabitants of Paradise against their persecutors:

Behold, the sinners were laughing at the believers,  
when they passed them by winking at one another,  
and when they returned to their people they returned blithely,  
and when they saw them they said, 'Lo, these men are astray!'  
Yet they were not sent as watchers over them.  
So today the believers are laughing at the unbelievers,  
upon couches gazing.  
Have the unbelievers been rewarded what they were doing?<sup>52</sup>

In the same vein, Ephrem writes,

There the persecuted laugh  
at their persecutors,  
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.

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<sup>49</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 11.2.

<sup>50</sup> Q 56:7–12.

<sup>51</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 2.10; cf. also 2.11ff. I am indebted to Brock's analysis of Ephrem's concept of Paradise in his excellent introduction to *Hymns on Paradise*, especially pp. 49ff.

<sup>52</sup> Q 83:29–36.

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.<sup>53</sup>

In Janna the believer is shown free from grief and weariness:

And they shall say, 'Praise belongs to God  
who has put away all sorrow from us. Surely  
our Lord is All-forgiving, All-thankful,  
who of His bounty has made us to dwell  
in the abode of everlasting life  
wherein no weariness assails us  
neither fatigue.'<sup>54</sup>

In a parallel (or at least consonant) passage, Ephrem writes:

None toil there,  
for none go hungry there;  
none endure shame there,  
for none do wrong there;  
none feel contrition there,  
for there is no cause to repent there.  
Those who run the course  
find rest and quiet ...

They know no worry,  
for they have no suffering;  
they have no fear,  
for no snare awaits them;  
they have no adversary,  
for they have passed through the contest.<sup>55</sup>

Ephrem's depiction on quiet repose also has an analogue in the Qu'ran: Janna is repeatedly described as a peaceful place:

Therein they shall hear no idle talk, no cause of sin,  
only the saying 'Peace, Peace!'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 1.14.

<sup>54</sup> Q 35:34–35.

<sup>55</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 12.22–23.

<sup>56</sup> Q 56:25–26; cf. also 52:23; 78:35.

There is one final similarity between Ephrem and the Qu'ran. In Ephrem's seventh *Hymn on Paradise*,<sup>57</sup> his images of Paradise stand beside images of hell. This will be important to our analysis, below.

### 3. Differences

There are three prominent differences between Ephrem's Paradise and the Qu'ran's. First, Ephrem is even more emphatic than the Scriptures that Paradise is a mountain, but there is no explicit verse in the Qu'ran placing Janna on so much as a hill. It may be that this is solely a matter of surroundings. Nisibis, the home of Ephrem's youth, was right next to Mount Izla, so it is natural to find mountains in his writing. It may be that where the Qu'ran was composed, there was no such mountain present to be imprinted on its author's imagination. The second difference is more substantial: Ephrem will have nothing of the Qu'ran's admission of sex into Paradise. He describes Paradise as the place where

... the fountains of lust,  
are stopped up ...<sup>58</sup>

and repeatedly digresses into praise for virginity.<sup>59</sup> The Christian tradition's strong emphasis on asceticism and Jesus's clear teaching that there would be no marriage in the afterlife<sup>60</sup> are probably adequate to account for this difference. Andrae stirred up some controversy by claiming that in *Hymn. parad.* 7.18, Ephrem promises female companionship to the denizens of Paradise.<sup>61</sup> But Edmund Beck soon showed that he had misunderstood the Syriac.<sup>62</sup> A third

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<sup>57</sup> There is also a description of hell in the ending stanzas of Ephrem's first hymn, but the authenticity of the last three stanzas (15–17) has been called into question: Andrew Palmer, "Nine More Stanzas to Be Banished from Ephraim's Paradise," in *Vom Nil an Die Saale. Festschrift Für Arafat Mustafa Zum 65. Geburtstag Am 28. Februar 2005*, ed. Armenuhi Drost-Abgarjan, Jens Kotjatko-Reeb, and Jürgen Tubach, *Hallesche Beiträge Zur Orientwissenschaft* 42 (Halle (Saale): Orientalisches Inst. der Martin-Luther-Univ., 2008), 301–57.

<sup>58</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 7.5.

<sup>59</sup> E.g. *Hymn. parad.* 6.24; 7:15.

<sup>60</sup> Matt 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34ff.

<sup>61</sup> Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Harper, 1960). 87f. This is a translation of the Swedish original, published in 1930.

difference is that unlike the Qu’ran, Ephrem will occasionally, in an aside, admit that the opulent painting of Paradise that he has composed is only figurative – Paradise itself is far beyond the crude, physical images he uses to describe it:

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....

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.<sup>63</sup>

Next we move on to analyze our findings and suggest some reasons for the differences and similarities we have found among the Bible, Ephrem, and the Qu’ran.

### *C. Analysis*

It is clear that there is chronological development of increasing complexity from the Bible to the Qu’ran through Ephrem. One might try to account for certain similarities in language between Ephrem and the Qu’ran by positing that the Qu’ran’s author had, at one point or another, heard one of Ephrem’s hymns, or spoken to someone who had. But such a claim is not only impossible to prove, but completely unnecessary. In this paper, I am not making the claim that Ephrem had a direct historical influence on the Qu’ran – it suffices to say that since Ephrem was such an enormously popular and influential composer of hymns and religious poetry, the way he

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<sup>62</sup> Edmund Beck, “Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesjungfrauen des Korans?” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 14 (1948): 398-405 and “Les Houris du Coran et Ephrem le Syrien,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicaine des Études Orientales du Caire* 6 (1961): 405–8.

<sup>63</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 11.4–5.

imagined Paradise had an enormous impact on the spiritual imagination of the Middle Eastern world. That means that the images and ideas we find in his hymns were “in the air,” as it were, in late sixth-century Arabia.

And while it is important to point out the way certain images are developed and handed down historically, there is a still better way of accounting for both the differences and the similarities among the three descriptions of Paradise considered in this paper. This decisive factor is *genre*. In large measure, the reason Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise* and the Qu’ran are so similar is that they are *the same kind of literature*. They are both parenetic. They are both exhortations to faith and holiness of living. Ephrem uses Paradise to encourage and spur on his hearers to do good works. For example, he writes,

Weary not, my brethren,  
nor suppose  
that your struggle will last long,  
or that your resurrection is far off ...<sup>64</sup>

and later,

Bear up, O life of mourning,  
so that you may attain to Paradise ...<sup>65</sup>

And later, when Ephrem invokes the image of hell, he urges his hearers toward an attitude of repentance with the words,

... grant me, Lord, to fear You,  
for You are mighty.  
May I feel shame and self-reproach  
before You, for You are gentle.<sup>66</sup>

Both the Qu’ran and Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise* attempt to move their audience. To do so, they both employ the image of Paradise as an incentive and the image of hell as a warning. They

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<sup>64</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 7:2.

<sup>65</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 7:3.

<sup>66</sup> *Hymn. parad.* 7:30.



both, quite naturally, extemporize descriptions of Paradise and hell to capture the moral and spiritual imagination of their hearers. I contend that this is an adequate and defensible explanation for the “rhyming passages” between Ephrem and the Qu’ran that were discussed above.

## V. Conclusion

I have described, compared, and contrasted the descriptions of Paradise in the Qu’ran, the Bible, and Ephrem. I have argued that the Qu’ran does not share so much in common with Ephrem because of any direct influence: there is no evidence, nor would it be possible to prove, that the Qu’ran actually borrowed material from Ephrem’s *Hymns on Paradise*. Rather, I have argued that Ephrem and the Qu’ran wrote in the same genre and shared a common goal in writing, and they both employed vivid, realistic language to make Paradise present and compelling to their hearers. The reason the images in the Qu’ran are so similar to the images in Ephrem is that Ephrem was an extraordinarily influential figure, and his hymns were enormously popular. It is only natural that the author of the Qu’ran, whose imagination was formed on images that were “in the air” in late sixth-century Arabia would extemporaneously describe Paradise the way he (or she) grew up to imagine it.