Roads to Paradise

Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam

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Continuity and Change
The Plurality of Eschatological Representations in the Islamicate World

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CHAPTER 36

St. Ephraem the Syrian, the Quran, and the Grapevines of Paradise: An Essay in Comparative Eschatology

Sidney H. Griffith

1 Syriac and the Arabic Quran

For many years, scholars engaged in the study of the Quran and of Islamic origins have been aware of the fact that works written in pre-Islamic Late Antiquity, in the dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac, offer them one of several sure paths into the religious thought-world of Arabian Christianity. It was into this world that the Arabic Quran appeared of a sudden in the first third of the seventh Christian century. Historically speaking, this is only to be expected; the Arabic-speaking Christian communities in the milieu in which Islam was born, be they from Sinai, Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, lower Mesopotamia, or even southern Arabia, all belonged to communities whose liturgies, doctrines, and ecclesiastical associations were of primarily Aramaic expression.[1] As for Syriac itself, there is an interesting, if not a very compelling, reference to it already in early Islamic tradition to the effect that some Syriac books had come to Muḥammad's attention. According to the report deriving from his well-known secretary, the Prophet is alleged to have said to Zayd b. Thābit, "Do you know Syriac well? Some books have come to my attention. I said, 'No.' He said, 'Learn it.' So I learned it in nineteen days."[2]

Alphonse Mingana, writing in 1927, estimated that seventy percent of the "foreign influences on the style and terminology" of the Quran could be traced to "Syriac (including Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac)."[3] Noting this high incidence of Syriac etymologies for a significant portion of the Quran's 'foreign vocabulary,' Arthur Jeffrey wrote in 1938 that "one fact seems certain, namely that such Christianity as was known among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times was

1 See the helpful survey in Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam*.

2 Ibn al-Ashʿath al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* 6. I am grateful to Prof. David Powers of Cornell University for bringing the passage to my attention.

3 Mingana, Syriac influence.

largely of the Syrian type, whether Jacobite or Nestorian."[4] He noted further that numerous early Islamic texts mention Muḥammad's contacts with both Syrian and Arabian Christians, and this observation prompted Jeffery to conclude that these texts "at least show that there was an early recognition of the fact that Muḥammad was at one time in more or less close contact with Christians associated with the Syrian Church."[5]

More radically, and most recently, Christoph Luxenberg has been exploring what he calls the 'Syro-Aramaic' reading of the Quran.[6] His method involves the use of the Syriac lexicon and the consultation of Syriac grammatical usages to help in the reading of certain passages in the Quran, to explore the possibility that a more historically intelligible reading of hitherto obscure passages might be attained, often found to be congruent with earlier, Aramaean Christian ideas and formulations.[7] Luxenberg's ongoing work has inspired a number of other researchers, who have pushed his ideas further, virtually re-inventing early Islamic history in ways that have evoked considerable controversy.[8] On the one hand, these inquiries have underlined the importance of Syriac for Quranic studies; on the other hand, in the enthusiasm for finding new readings and new interpretations, based on perceived grammatical and lexical possibilities, sometimes too little attention has been paid by these scholars to the usages of classical Syriac literature that underlay the religious idiom of Arabic-speaking Christians in the Quran's milieu. The present writer has undertaken cautious soundings in this area in previous essays[9] and now he approaches it again, this time in the context of the Quran's eschatology, and particularly in connection with Christoph Luxenberg's widely publicized reconstruction and

4 Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 20–1.

5 Ibid., 22.

6 See Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart* (English trans., *Syro-Aramaic reading*, ed. Müke).

7 Luxenberg was preceded in this enterprise by Günter Lüling, who had argued that about a third of the Quran as we now have it is built on the foundation of an earlier Christian, strophic hymnody that was concealed under successive layers of text. According to him, this early Arabic, Christian hymnody, which celebrated an angel-Christology, was at home among the pre-Islamic Arabs and had a place in Christian liturgy in the then-Christian Ka'ba in Mecca. See Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*; Lüling, *Der christliche Kult*; Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad*. For a more personal discussion of his idea and its reception among scholars see Lüling, Preconditions for the scholarly criticism.

8 See, e.g., Ohlig and Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge*; Ohlig (ed.), *Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion*; Ohlig and Gross (eds.), *Schlaglichter*.

9 See Griffith, Syriacisms in the 'Arabic Qur'ān'; Griffith, Christian lore and the Arabic Qur'ān; Griffith, *An-Naṣārā* in the Qur'ān, forthcoming.

reinterpretation of the Quran's thrice repeated phrase *ḥūr ʿīn*[10] to mean 'white, crystal(-clear), (grapes)' instead of the traditional 'wide-eyed/dark-eyed *ḥūrīs*.'[11] In the process, Luxenberg puts some stress on the importance of the proper understanding of a passage in one of Ephraem the Syrian's (c. 306–373) Syriac *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' and it is precisely in connection with these Syriac liturgical poems that the present study unfolds.

2 The Quran and Ephraem the Syrian's *Madrāshê* 'On Paradise': The Views of Modern Scholars

2.1 *Tor Andrae*

The late Swedish scholar Tor Andrae (1885–1947) is undoubtedly the modern researcher who has, to date, most systematically investigated what he considered to be Muḥammad's and the Quran's indebtedness to Christian eschatology in its Syriac expression.[12] In his seminal study, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, he specifically draws attention to the importance in this connection of Ephraem's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' and he spends some time unfolding the connecting themes between these Christian, liturgical compositions and the Quran. What Andrae perceived was not a direct literary connection between Syriac texts and the Quran. Rather, he spoke of "one and the same homiletic scheme," and he offered it as his opinion that "whatever Muhammad received from Christianity, he got from oral preaching and personal contacts."[13] More specifically in regard to the works of Ephraem, and taking his cue from a remark made by Hubert Grimme to the effect that in his descriptions of paradise, Muḥammad "must have benefited much from recalling images used by Ephrem,"[14] Andrae averred that "in fact, on this point, there is a surprising

10 See Q 44:54; 52:20; 56:22.

11 See Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic reading* 247–83.

12 Andrae first published the results of his research on this theme in a series of three long articles: Andrae, Der Ursprung des Islams, in *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 23, 149–206; 24, 213–92; 25, 45–112. Subsequently the articles were collected into the volume, Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams*. This volume has been translated into French in Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam*. In later works Andrae continued to appeal to Syriac sources, most notably in Andrae, *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube* (English trans., *Mohammed: The man and his faith*). See also Andrae, *I Myrtenträdgården* (English trans., *In the garden of myrtles*).

13 Andrae, Der Ursprung des Islams 45–6; Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam* 145–6.

14 Grimme, *Mohammed* ii, 160 note 9.

relationship between Muhammad and the Syrian preacher."[15] And Andrae proceeds to list a number of convergences between the very concrete, even sensual descriptions of the garden of paradise in Ephraem's *madrāshê* and passages in the Arabic Quran. It is at this juncture in his discussion that Tor Andrae made the very controversial observation that in a stanza of one of Ephraem's *madrāshê*, "one can even point out in his words a hidden allusion to Paradise's virgins."[16] Andrae quotes the passage in his own German translation from Ephraem's *madrāshâ* VII:18:

> Wer bis zu seinem Hingang sich des Weines enthalten hat, wird von den Weinstöcken des Paradieses sehnsüchtig erwartet. Jeder von ihnen reckt ihm seine hängende Traube entgegen. Und wenn jemand in Virginität gelebt hat, den empfangen sie (fem.) in ihrem reinen Schoße, weil er als Mönch nicht in dem Bette und Schosse irdischer Liebe fiel'. Von den Weinstöcken, deren Trauben sich herabsenken, sodass sie bequem zu erreichen sind, spricht auch Muhammed (Q 76:14).[17]

In his later publication, *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube*, Andrae expanded on this passage to say:

> To be sure, Afrem occasionally points out that this is only an attempt to give some idea of a joy which no earthly mind is able to grasp. But most of his listeners and readers no doubt remained quite oblivious to his feeble attempts to spiritualize his sensual images. Popular piety certainly

15 Andrae, Der Ursprung des Islams 52; Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam* 151. It is interesting to note that in his later book on Muḥammad, Andrae makes this point more apodictically. He says, "Christians have often pointed out that Mohammed depicts eternal bliss merely as an endless and unrestricted satisfaction of extremely primitive sensual desires. The polemical ardour should be damped by what seems to me to be the irrefutable fact that the Koran's descriptions of Paradise were inspired by the ideas of this Christian Syrian preacher." Andrae, *Mohammed: The man and his faith* 87.

16 "Der Wein, den die Seligen genießen, fehlt auch nicht bei Afrem, selbst eine versteckte Anspielung auf die Paradiesjungfrauen könnte man in seinen Worten hineindeuten," Andrae, Der Ursprung des Islams 54; "Même une allusion caché aux vierges du Paradis pourrait être trouvée dans ses paroles," Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam* 153.

17 Andrae, Der Ursprung des Islams 54; *Les origines de l'islam* 153–4. The Quranic verse quoted speaks of the garden's "low-hanging, pickable [fruit] (*quṭūfuhā*)" (Q 76:14). The Arabic word *qitf* (pl. *quṭūf*) is normally understood to mean a bunch of grapes. See Lane, *An Arabic-English lexicon* viii, 2991. All translations from the Quran are based on Fakhry (trans.), *Interpretation*.

interpreted this daring imagery in a crass and literal sense, and under such circumstances one cannot blame a citizen of pagan Mekka for doing the same thing.[18]

2.2 *Dom Edmund Beck, OSB*

Two modern scholars in particular have contested Tor Andrae's view that Ephraem the Syrian's words can be taken to prefigure in any way the 'wide-eyed/dark-eyed *ḥūrīs*' of Islamic tradition; both the Syriac-scholar, Dom Edmund Beck OSB (1902–91), and Christoph Luxenberg have opposed it. Beck made his critique from the perspective of the proper understanding of Ephraem's stanza in its context in *madrāshâ* VII 'On Paradise.'[19] In particular, he proposed that Andrae had been misled in his interpretation by a faulty reading in the text of the *madrāshâ* as it appears in the *Editio Romana* of Ephraem's complete works.

As it happens, the Syriac word for 'grapevine,' *gupnâ* (pl. *gupnê*), is grammatically feminine, a point that, according to Beck, escaped the attention of both the editor of Ephraem's text of *madrāshâ* VII:18 'On Paradise' in the *Editio Romana* and Tor Andrae. Specifically, in the first half of the stanza, quoted above in Andrae's German version, when the text says of the one who in this life abstained from wine, that he "wird von den Weinstöcken des Paradieses sehnsüchtig erwartet," the Syriac participle translated as 'he is eagerly awaited' by the grapevines was wrongly written in the Roman text in the masculine form, i.e., *sāwḥîn*[20] instead of the correct, feminine form, *sāwḥān*. This error in turn, according to Beck, prompted Andrae to look for an un-expressed, feminine antecedent for the third person feminine plural suffix attached to the term 'bosom'/ '*Schosse*' (*'ûbheyn*) in the second part of the stanza, when the text speaks of the one who had lived in virginity, and characterizes him as the one "den emfangen sie (fem.) in ihrem reinen Schosse." Not recognizing that the grapevines (fem.) were the ones who, according to Ephraem, would then receive such a one into their pure bosom, Andrae was misled to think the text was discreetly speaking of some unmentioned, pure virgins, on the order of the Quran's 'dark-eyed *ḥūrīs*,' who would be awaiting the monk in paradise. Along the way, Beck also corrects what he perceives to be inexact renderings of

18 Andrae, *Mohammed: The man and his faith* 88.

19 See Beck, Eine christliche Parallele; a précis of the article appeared in a French translation in Beck, Les Houris du Coran. See also Beck, *Hymnen über das Paradies* 16–8. Subsequently Beck published a critical edition of Ephraem's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' along with a German translation, in Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*.

20 See the Syriac text translated by Andrae in Mobarak and Assemani, *Opera omnia* iii, 584.

the Syriac in Andrae's version of the stanza, but these are minor matters.[21] The important point for Beck was his satisfaction that he had successfully removed the textual basis for Tor Andrae's suggestion that Ephraem had anticipated the *ḥūrīs*. What is more, Beck also showed that, as in other passages of the *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' so in this one, Ephraem was evoking the imagery of a lush garden and speaking of the over-hanging trees and grapevines of paradise that offer their bunches of grapes to the blessed. As a case in point, he cited the example of *madrāshâ* IX: 3 & 4, where Ephraem uses much the same imagistic language.

Should you wish
    to climb up a tree,
with its lower branches
    it will provide steps before your feet,
eager to make you recline
    in its bosom above,
on the couch of its upper branches.
    So arranged is the surface of these branches,
bent low and cupped
    – while yet dense with flowers –
that they serve as a protective womb
    for whoever rests there.
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
a treasure store which lacks nothing,
    whose Lord is rich in all things.[22]

21 Beck's own version of the stanza is as follows: "Wer des Weines * in Klugheit sich enthielt, – dem eilen freudiger * die Weinstöcke des Paradieses entgegen – und jeder wird seine Trauben * ihm darreichen. – Lebte er auch noch jungfräulich, * dann führen sie ihn ein – in ihren reinen Schoss, * weil er als Asket – nicht gefallen ist in den Schoss * und in das Bett der Ehe." Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso* clxxv, 28, VII:18.

22 Translated by Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 137.

2.3 *Christoph Luxenberg*

Christoph Luxenberg, who paid close attention to Beck's refutation of Tor Andrae's suggestion that the 'dark-eyed *ḥūrīs*' of Islamic tradition were anticipated in Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' argues that in fact there are no such things as *ḥūrīs* in the Quran at all.[23] After a brief review of the standard scholarship, including the view that the notion of the 'virgins of paradise' is due to Persian influence on the later exegetical tradition, Luxenberg, who pledged to proceed on 'purely philological' grounds in his examination of the matter, nevertheless begins his examination with the re-affirmation of his basic, non-philological, and presumed operating principle. He says it is not the case that "the Prophet had misunderstood Christian illustrations of Paradise, but rather that the later Islamic exegesis had misinterpreted the Koranic paraphrase of Christian Syriac hymns." And he goes on at the same place to say: "The Koran takes as its starting point the axiom that the *Scripture* preceding it (the Old and New Testament) has been revealed. Understanding itself as a component of this *Scripture*, to be consistent it derives from this the claim that it itself has been revealed."[24] From this premise, and the corollary that the Quran "takes the *Scripture* as its model," Luxenberg observes that "there would be such an *inconsistency*, if the likes of the *ḥūrīs* . . . were not to be found in the *Scripture*. Then the Koran, against its usual assertion, would have thus produced proof that it had not come from God."[25] But, says Luxenberg, "The Koran is not to blame if, out of ignorance, people have read it so falsely and projected onto it their subjective, all too earthly daydreams."[26] And with this assertion, having on a priori, hermeneutical grounds ruled out any interpretation of the Quran's words and phrases that would admit of any hint of *ḥūrīs*, or any other explicit sexual imagery in its depiction of the joys of paradise, Luxenberg applies his signature philological method not only to the *rasm* of the phrase *ḥūr ʿīn*, but to all the passages in which the Quran's language has been thought to evoke just such imagery.

In the most notable instance of the application of his philological method, which has even attracted the attention of the popular press far and wide, Christoph Luxenberg first of all attended to the enigmatic phrase at the heart of the matter, the canonical Quran's twice repeated utterance, "*wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin ʿīnin*" (Q 44:54 and 52:20). Stripping away the customary vowel markings and diacritical points from the basic Arabic script, and presuming the Arabic scripture's original intention to yield a 'Syro-Aramaic' reading, with

23 See the long discussion in Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic reading* 247–83.

24 Ibid., 249.

25 Ibid., 250.

26 Ibid., 250.

attention to other Quranic passages, and the reminder that "with the supposed *ḥūrīs* the Koran would be contradicting *Scripture*,"[27] Luxenberg delves into the Syriac grammar and lexicon for a likely alternative reading consistent with the prominent imagery of grapes and grapevines. But first, on Arabic lexical and grammatical grounds he argues that the conventional reading is impossible and having thus disposed of the 'imagined *ḥūrīs*,' which, he says, "disappear *ipso facto* into thin air," he says:

> Thus, too, would be removed the related contradictions in the Koran and objectivity would be restored to the Koranic statement cited above to the extent that the claim, documented in the *Scripture*, according to which one is neither *married* nor *given in marriage* in Paradise (Mt 22:30; Mk 12:25; Lk 20:35) is now confirmed.[28]

With the *ḥūrīs* thus removed, Luxenberg then moves to the task of putting what seems to him to be the proper construction upon the Quran's words in the problematic, key phrase under consideration, i.e., *ḥūr ʿīn*. It is at this juncture that he recalls Edmund Beck's rejection of Tor Andrae's suggestion that the *ḥūrīs* might have been adumbrated in Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise'[29] and Beck's further indication of the prominence of the imagery of grapes and grapevines in Ephraem's depiction of the garden. Taking his cue from here, Luxenberg found his interpretive frame of reference for the enigmatic Arabic phrase in the realm of viticulture, and with this insight in mind he explored the orthographic, grammatical, and lexical possibilities of the bare Arabic *rasm*, the un-vowelled, un-pointed, original script. After some detailed grammatical and lexical explorations, and with the image of garden bowers in mind, construed of grapevines, with their over-hanging clusters of grapes, Luxenberg proposed the now famous 'Syro-Aramaic' reading, "We will make you comfortable under white, crystal(-clear) (grapes)."[30]

Against the background of this signal accomplishment, and still deploying his usual philological method, Luxenberg proceeds to re-adjust the understanding of other Quranic passages that have been read in connection with

27 Ibid., 254.

28 Ibid., 256–7.

29 Citing Beck's rejection of Andrae's mistaken understanding of the feminine referent in Ephraem's stanza, Luxenberg makes the curious remark, "In the end it was also this that led the Arabic exegetes of the Koran to this fateful assumption." Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic reading* 259.

30 Ibid., 251.

the *ḥūrīs* or with reference to other women in paradise, so that their hitherto unrecognized evocations of the imagery of grapes and grapevines might come to light. But for the present purpose one might let the review of this 'Syro-Aramaic' re-reading of these Quranic passages rest here for the moment. It remains only to mention that at least one other scholar has sought to further adjust Luxenberg's re-construction of this imagery.

In an interesting review of Christoph Luxenberg's work, along with a number of suggestions of his own for consulting possible early Christian antecedents for a number of other Quranic phrases, Jan M.F. van Reeth suggested an alternative to Luxenberg's reading of the phrase, "*wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin ʿīnin*."[31] Against the background of a deep study of the development of the 'grapes and grapevine' motif in Biblical and patristic sources, which he suggests is lying behind the passages in Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' van Reeth proposed that the Quranic phrase in question might better be read as a calque on the Syriac phrase, *kūrâ dəʿenbên*, attested in the Syriac of *Second Baruch* "which could be rendered into Arabic as *kūr ʿ-n-b* or *khūr ʿ-n-b*: a certain measure of grapes, of wine."[32] In a long footnote in a later edition of his work, Luxenberg rejected van Reeth's suggestion,[33] but the latter's sketch of the early development of the 'grapes and grapevines' motif in early Christian literature nevertheless remains a valuable contribution to the discussion.

On the one hand, while Christoph Luxenberg's philological soundings are impressive in their ingenuity, if not always in their verisimilitude, he neglects finding instances of the actual currency in Syriac literature of phrases like his postulated "white, crystal(-) (grapes),"[34] construed on the basis of grammatical and lexical possibilities alone. And on the other hand, he does not consider the full context of the passages to which he refers in Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' where marital metaphors definitely do appear, as we shall see, along with the 'grapes and grapevines' motif in the author's depiction

31 See van Reeth, Le vignoble du paradis. See also van Reeth, L'Évangile du Prophète.

32 Van Reeth, Le vignoble du paradis 515.

33 See Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic reading* 263 note 324.

34 At one point in defense of his suggestion that the Syriac feminine adjective *ḥewwārtâ* 'white' has been used in Syriac to apply to grapes, Luxenberg cites the authority of R. Payne-Smith's *Thesaurus Syriacus*. But the reference is not in fact to grapes but to a white grapevine, in a Syriac translation of a phrase in the Greek *Geoponica*, viz., η λευκη αμπελος. See Payne-Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, col. 1230. Similarly, the citation from the dictionary of Manna actually refers to a grapevine. See Manna, *Vocabulaire Chaldéen-Arabe* 229a. What is more, the only instance of the appearance of the adjective 'white' (*ḥewwārê*) in Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' is in reference to the "new, white garments" of the just in the garden. See Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, VI:9.6.

of the joys and pleasures of the garden of paradise. What is more, it appears from his own words, quoted above, that it was not philology in the first place, but a pre-conceived line of *scriptural* reasoning, and an idiosyncratic view of the Quran's origins, that first prompted Christoph Luxenberg to reject the *ḥūrīs* of the Islamic exegetical tradition; he then used 'Syro-Aramaic' philology to produce another reading of the Arabic phrases actually appearing in the Quran.

3 Ephraem the Syrian's Syriac *Madrāshê* 'On Paradise'

While they have often been mentioned in the present discussion, in fact not much attention has actually been paid in the studies we have reviewed to Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' and their multiple images of the joys and pleasures of the garden of paradise. The collection of fifteen *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' are preserved in an early sixth-century manuscript, written in the city of Edessa in the year 519 CE by an otherwise unknown scribe named Julian.[35] In the manuscript, they are all presented in the same meter-melody, with the exception that *madrāshê* XIII and XIV appear in a continuous, alphabetical, acrostic pattern of stanzas, a feature that binds these two pieces together, somewhat out of step with the presentation of the other *madrāshê* in the collection. This arrangement suggests that in spite of the fact that they are now presented as separate compositions, numbers XIII and XIV must once have circulated as a single composition. And it is quite possible that they and other parts of the collection were not originally by Ephraem, but were later included in the portfolio.[36]

The Syriac *madrāshâ* is a genre of liturgical poetry set to music. In Ephraem's hands it also became the literary genre of choice for winning and holding the allegiance to Nicene orthodoxy of the Syriac-speaking Christians in Syria/Mesopotamia and the frontier regions between the Roman and Persian empires in the fourth and fifth centuries.[37] It is a 'teaching song,' a distinctive genre in its own right; it is not just hymnody,[38] nor is it simply a poetic

35 See Beck's discussion of British Library Ms. add. 14571 in Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso* clxxiv, 3. Beck's edition and German translation are now standard. The *madrāshê* have been translated into both English and French, in English in Brock, *Hymns on paradise*, and in French in Lavenant and Graffin, *Hymnes sur le paradis*.

36 See Palmer, Restoring the ABC 147–94; Palmer, Nine more stanzas.

37 See Griffith, The clash of *Madrāshê* in Aram.

38 See Lattke, Sind Ephräms *Madrāshê* Hymnen?

recitative. Rather, the *madrāshê* composed by Ephraem the Syrian were poetically metered recitatives set to music.[39] In the Divine Liturgy, they were publicly performed after the solemn reading from the scriptures; they explored the scriptural themes meditatively and they were sung by trained choirs, with congregational responses after each stanza. In all likelihood their tunes were catchy and their words and phrases would have been eminently memorable.

In Ephraem's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' the point of departure seems to have been a passage from the Gospel according to Luke:[40]

> One of the robbers who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39–43)

Ephraem says he heard this passage proclaimed in the liturgy. He put it this way at the beginning of one of the *madrāshê*:

> A statement that delighted me
> shone forth in my ears
> from the text that was read
> about the story of the robber.
> It gave consolation to my soul,
> due to the multitude of her faults,
> that the One pitying the robber
> would lead her
> to the very garden (*gantâ*) whose name
> I had heard and was overjoyed.
> My mind cut loose its reins
> and proceeded to meditate on it.[41]

Ephraem described the manner of his meditation on paradise in other songs in the collection. In the first one, he speaks of his reading about paradise in the Torah, "the treasury of revelations," as he styled it, in which "the story of the

39 See McVey, Songs or recitations.

40 See Griffith, Syriac/Antiochene exegesis.

41 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, VIII:1.

garden is revealed." Here in the Torah, Moses, "who teaches all men his celestial texts, the master of the Hebrews taught us his doctrine." And Ephraem goes on to sing:

> Gladly did I come to
> the story of Paradise,
> which is short to read
> but rich to investigate.
> My tongue read the stories,
> clear in the account of it,
> and my mind flew up to soar
> in awe.
> It searched out its glory,
> not indeed as it is,
> but as it is given,
> to mankind to apprehend.
> In my mind's eye
> I saw Paradise.[42]

In yet another song in the collection, Ephraem very evocatively describes his first-person journey to paradise, led there by the lines of the book of Genesis. With the Quran and later Islamic tradition in mind, one might even think of Ephraem's adventure as a spiritual *miʿrāj* avant le lettre.[43] He says:

> I read the opening of this book
> and was filled with joy,
> for its verses and lines
> spread out their arms to welcome me;
> the first rushed out and kissed me,
> and led me on to its companion;
> and when I reached that verse
> wherein is written
> the story of Paradise,
> it lifted me up and transported me
> from the bosom of the book
> to the very bosom of Paradise.

42 Ibid., 1:1, 3–4.1.

43 On the importance of this event in the development of Islamic theology, see van Ess, *The flowering of Muslim theology* 45–77.

The eye and the mind
  traveled over the lines
as over a bridge, and entered together
  the story of Paradise.
The eye as it read
  transported the mind;
in return the mind, too,
  gave the eye rest
from its reading,
  for when the book had been read
the eye had rest,
  but the mind was engaged.
Both the bridge and the gate
  of Paradise
did I find in this book.
  I crossed over and entered;
my eye indeed remained outside
  but my mind entered within.
I began to wander
  amid things not described.
This is a luminous height,
  clear, lofty and fair:
Scripture named it Eden,
  the summit of all blessings.[44]

As he came down from his mental journey amid the glories and wonders of the garden, Ephraem reflected:

I was in wonder as I crossed
  the borders of Paradise
at how well-being, as though a companion,
  turned round and remained behind.
And when I reached the shore of earth,
  the mother of thorns,
I encountered all kinds
  of pain and suffering.

44 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, v:3–5, in the English translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 103–4.

I learned how, compared to Paradise,
our abode is but a dungeon;
yet the prisoners within it
weep when they leave it.[45]

In the course of his meditation on the story of paradise in the Bible, Ephraem conjures up in his *madrashê* a kaleidoscopic, verbal icon of the joys and pleasures of human destiny in the hereafter. He envisions the scriptural account of the garden of Eden as embodying a typological sketchbook of paradise in the end time. As Dom Edmund Beck put it, in these *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' Ephraem "umfasst das Thema *de Paradiso* 'Primordiologie' und Eschatologie zugleich."[46]

As Tor Andrae and others have mentioned, a notable feature of Ephraem's descriptions of the after-world in the garden of paradise is their appeal to the senses, albeit for him, as one scholar has put it, "The bodily senses become symbols of another kind of perception, namely spiritual perception."[47] However that may be, in the travelogue of his mind's journey into the garden of paradise, Ephraem describes the beauties of Paradise Mountain in terms of vision, taste, and even scent. He speaks of a beauty that "no paints can portray,"[48] where "scented breezes blow with varied force" over a banquet "where those who minister never weary in their service."[49] The trees, with their branches form a bower that invites the blessed to recline in their bosom, and "as the saints recline; below them are blossoms, above them fruit."[50] Ephraem envisions each season as yielding its best produce in paradise and he uses an earthy image to make the point. He says,

45 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, v:13, in the English translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 106–7. Note that Ephraem, like Muḥammad after him, had companionship in paradise, but unlike Gabriel as Muḥammad's guide, Ephraem speaks of "well-being, as though a companion," in Brock's translation. A more literal rendering might be: "The company of the wholesome stayed and turned back." One notices here the counterpoint between the Islamic concreteness and the Syrian Christian abstraction.

46 Beck, *Hymnen über das Paradies* ix.

47 Botha, The significance of the senses 28. See also Botha, Honour and shame.

48 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, iv:9.

49 Ibid., ix:7.

50 Ibid., ix:5.

The air of this earth
  is as wanton as a prostitute
with whom the twelve months
  consort:
each one in turn
  makes her comply with its own whims
while she produces fruits
  from them all;
whereas the chaste and pure air
  of Paradise
is unpolluted in its purity
  by the dalliance of the months.
There the abundant flow
  of their produce is ceaseless,
for each month bears its own fruit,
  its neighbor, flowers.
There the springs of delights
  open up and flow
with wine, milk, honey
  and cream.[51]

Ephraem makes a major point of the fact that not only the souls of the just, but their bodies, too, are destined to enjoy the delights of paradise. He says, "The soul cannot have any perception of Paradise without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre."[52] And so, in a beautiful stanza he envisions the following scenario unfolding:

In the delightful mansions
  on the borders of Paradise
do the souls of the just
  and righteous reside,
awaiting there
  the bodies they love,
so that, at the opening
  of the Garden's gate,

51 Ibid., X:5–6, in the translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 149–50.

52 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, VIII:2, in the translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 132.

both bodies and souls might proclaim,
amidst Hosannas,
"Blessed is He who has brought Adam from Sheol
and returned him to Paradise in the company of many."[53]

In one of the most poignant of the *madrāshê* 'On Paradise,' Ephraem turns his attention to the many classes of people in the church's congregations, who will also be represented among the blessed in paradise, and he describes the conditions of their bliss. He speaks of the 'mourners,' who were a special order of ascetic hermits in the Syriac-speaking communities, the poor, baptized men and women, virgins, youth, married people, children, the elderly, the lame, those who fast, the saints who abstain from wine and from marriage, and finally the martyrs.[54] And as if to recognize that most people in the Christian congregations were married, in one stanza of another *madrāshâ* he likens the perennial fruit of the trees of paradise in the several seasons to the extended human family, and to the perennial productivity of the institution of marriage in human society. He says,

That cornucopia full of fruits
in all stages of development
resembles the course
of human marriage;
it contains the old,
young, and middle-aged,
children who have already been born,
and babies still unborn;
its fruits follow one another
and appear
like the continuous succession
of human kind.[55]

In fact, with this image of marriage in mind, on a broader reading of Ephraem's *madrāshê* it emerges that much of the lush imagery, the grapes and the grapevines, the fruits and the flowers, the trees and the fragrances, all go together in Ephraem's imagination to furnish paradise as a setting for what he calls the

53 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, VIII:11, in the translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 135.

54 See Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, VII:3–19.

55 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, X:12, in the English translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 152.

'bridal chambers' (*gnānê*) of the blessed, bridal chambers "of glory (*shubḥâ*),"[56] "of light (*zaliqâ* and *nuhrâ*),"[57] and even "of joys (*ḥadwāthâ*)."[58] In paradise, Ephraem says that one sees the disciples, "On high in their bridal chambers,"[59] where God also gave Adam "a chaste bridal chamber."[60] Ephraem says further, in paradise, "The virgin who rejected the marriage crown that fades, now has the radiant marriage chamber that cherishes the children of light."[61] And referring in broad strokes to the happiness of the blessed in paradise, Ephraem wrote:

> There all fruit is holy,
> all raiment luminous,
> every crown glorious,
> every rank the most exalted –
> happiness without toil,
> delight that knows no fear,
> a marriage feast (*ḥlūlâ*) which continues
> forever and ever.[62]

From the broader perspective of Syriac literature, it emerges that in terms of the marital imagery of paradise, with its bridal chambers and banquets, Ephraem in fact is reflecting an ancient tradition that dates from at least as early as the early third century and reaches well beyond Ephraem's own time in the liturgies of the Syriac-speaking Christian communities.[63] As "one of the most common terms used as a metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven," Sebastian Brock concludes:

> One could fairly say that the image of the Bridal Chamber permeates Syriac liturgical poetry, serving essentially as a metaphor for the place of union between the divine and the human realms. The eschatological Bridal Chamber of Light/Joys represents the fulfillment of the potential Bridal Chamber of Adam and Eve.[64]

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56 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, XIII:10.

57 Ibid., VII:15 and 24.

58 Beck, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, XXIV:3.

59 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, I:6.

60 Ibid., XIII:3.

61 Ibid., VII:15.

62 Ibid., XIV:8, in the translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 8.

63 See Brock, The bridal chamber.

64 Ibid., 179 and 189.

Brock's mention of "the potential Bridal Chamber of Adam and Eve" refers to the view of Ephraem and other early Syriac-speaking Christians that had they not sinned, Adam and Eve would have been united in a Bridal Chamber in primordial paradise. This view seems to have been elaborated by Christian exegetes in contrast to a view espoused in Jewish circles, according to which "Adam and Eve were united in a Bridal Chamber in Paradise before the fall."[65] In one of his verse homilies 'On Creation,' the Syriac poet Jacob of Serugh (c. 451–521) portrayed the aborted marital consummation vividly. He wrote:

> God made Adam a bridegroom in this great Bridal Chamber that He had decorated,
> He adorned Eve as a virgin bride, and gave her to Adam,
> providing, in her dowry, the sea, dry land and air.
> All the Ages gathered for the great wedding feast He had made,
> the bridal couple were radiant in their crowns and their garments;
> He had covered them with glorious light and splendid radiance.
> He left them on their own among the trees with their fruits,
> having given them as a wedding present every kind of tree and fruit.
> The Garden rejoiced at the beloved bride and groom.
> As for the Tree of Life, He had hidden it in Eden's great Bridal Chamber,
> to be there for the bridal couple of light once they had been fulfilled.
> But the Tree of Knowledge, full of death, stood beautifully outside.
> And so that they would know who was the Lord who had honored them,
> He established the law that they should not eat of the tree.
> He gave the whole Garden to the new children He had acquired;
> He appointed only one tree to test them.
> The mischief-maker barged in and sowed discord in that banquet;
> he stole the bride, he whispered his lie, he deceitfully led her astray.
> The wretched little hawk came to stand among the innocent doves;
> he chased them out of the wide nest of Eden.[66]

One notices the prominence of light, and the related concept of glory, in the passages that speak of the Bridal Chambers of paradise in the Syriac texts, a feature that recalls the importance in the Syriac exegetical tradition of the originally Jewish idea of Adam's 'robe of glory/light' in paradise.[67] This luminous

65 See Brock, The bridal chamber 184. See also Anderson, Celibacy or consummation.

66 De Saroug, *Quatre homélies métriques*, text IV ll. 156–79, in the English translation of Brock, The bridal chamber 185, augmented by the present author.

67 See Brock, Clothing metaphors; Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis*.

dimension of the imagery serves the purpose of reminding the reader that in the view of Ephraem, and of the other Syriac writers in whose works the theme appears, the sensual images of paradise are meant as metaphors. As P.J. Botha put it,

> The reason why Ephrem perceives Paradise in such dazzling colours, scents, sights and delights is that this is a place that is so intimately associated with the presence, and therefore the honour, of God. The 'awe' he experiences for Paradise, is the same 'awe' one should have for God.[68]

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, in the writings of Ephraem the Syrian and the Syriac liturgical tradition in general one does find, contrary to Christoph Luxenberg's views, an abundance of marital and sexual imagery in the descriptions of the joys of the garden of paradise. What relation this lush imagery in Syriac literature might have to the depictions of paradise in the Arabic Quran is another matter.

4 Paradise, Ephraem the Syrian, and the Arabic Quran

The Quran's evocations of the beauties and delights of the garden of paradise are *sui generic*; they stand on their own,[69] yet in many features they are hauntingly familiar to readers of eschatological poetry in Syriac. It is for this reason that Tor Andrae, whose hermeneutical approach to the Quran included a search for what he considered to be the sources of the Arabic scripture, turned to Ephraem the Syrian's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' to look for narrative parallels. He found them in a number of places, but he was particularly drawn to the passage in *madrāshâ* VII:18 that speaks of the clusters of grapes and the grapevines that in paradise would, as it were, stretch out their arms to draw the earthly ascetic into the bosom of their embrace. In the text, as Tor Andrae mistakenly read it, there seemed to him to be no immediate antecedent for the feminine plural pronoun that identified the ones into whose bosom in the garden the celibate ascetic would be enfolded, so, as we have seen, it put Andrae in mind of the Quran's 'dark-eyed *ḥūrīs*,' and he wondered if in this particular passage (i.e., *madrāshâ* VII:18.5) Ephraem might be indirectly alluding to a similar reward in the afterworld for the life-long, sober ascetic in this world. Andrae further opined that most of Ephraem's listeners and readers "no doubt

68 Botha, Honour and shame 54.

69 See Rustomji, *The garden and the fire*.

remained quite oblivious to his feeble attempts to spiritualize his sensual images.... and under such circumstances one cannot blame a citizen of pagan Mecca for doing the same thing."[70] While Dom Edmund Beck rightly pointed out that the pronoun in question actually refers to the preceding 'grapevines' (*gupnê*), feminine in Syriac, and not to some subliminally summoned female companions, who, therefore cannot be the literary ancestors of the *ḥūrīs* of Islamic tradition,[71] he did not call attention to the imagery of the 'bridal chambers of light,' embowered within the garden's canopy of trees and grapevines, with their dangling grape clusters, that awaited the blessed in Ephraem's vision of paradise. So, as we have seen, marital bliss does in fact figure in Ephraem's *madrāshê* as a metaphor for heavenly joy, albeit not in the Quran's vivid and fetching descriptions of the *ḥūrīs*.

But what is one to make of the echoes of Syriac eschatological visions and parallel imagery that so readily seem to the readers of Syriac to shine through the Quran's Arabic diction? It is basically a question about Quranic hermeneutics. And one principle that should certainly apply is that the meaning of the Arabic Quran cannot authentically be reduced to the parameters of its presumed conceptual background in the language of one of its predecessor narratives; it has its own textual integrity and frames of reference.[72] Nevertheless, the Arabic Quran did not come down into a religious or scriptural vacuum. The Arabic scripture clearly presents itself in dialogue with both the canonical and apocryphal scriptures of the earlier communities of Jews and Christians, and with much Jewish and ecclesiastical lore. In all likelihood, Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians were in fact in the Quran's original audience. And in the Christian instance, as one has argued elsewhere, it is becoming increasingly evident that the theological and liturgical heritage of these Arabic-speaking Christians lay in Syriac sources, a situation that in some instances has even left its traces in the 'Syriacisms' to be found in the Quran's evocation of Christian lore and Arabic usage.[73]

But there are no 'Syriacisms,' either linguistic or thematic, in the Quran's eschatology, yet it is still hauntingly familiar. Ephraem's and Jacob of Serugh's Syriac descriptions of the garden of paradise, right down to and including the marital and sexual imagery, are in part from the same thought-world as the descriptions in the Arabic Quran, revealing at the very least the latter's inten-

70 Andrae, *Mohammed: The man and his faith* 88.

71 See Beck, Eine christliche Parallele.

72 See Saleh, The etymological fallacy.

73 See the studies mentioned in note 9 above.

tion to address an audience within that same frame of reference. It is not, as Tor Andrae supposed, a matter of finding in these Syriac texts the sources of Muḥammad's or the Quran's language and imagery. Rather, the coincidence of image and expression bespeaks the Quran's familiarity with the imaginative world of its Arabic-speaking audience, living within the range of the Syriac-speaking churches of Late Antiquity, to whose liturgies and modes of expression Arabic-speaking Christians were manifestly indebted. What is different, and comparative eschatology reveals many differences, is basically the difference between Christianity and Islam. For the Christians, paradise is paradise restored and the just are led into its lush garden by the crucified and risen Messiah, Jesus, Mary's son and son of God, the new Adam, who will have harrowed Hell to lead the old Adam and the blessed, whom the Messiah has redeemed, to their eternal reward, themes that are everywhere in the Christian texts. By way of contrast, for Muslims, whose Quran critiques these Christian beliefs as "going beyond the bounds of religion" (Q 4:171) and "transgressing the bounds of the truth" (Q 5:77), the garden of paradise is for "those who have believed and have done good works" (Q 2:25; 4:57), for "those who are God-fearing (*muttaqīn*)" (Q 3:15; 44:51; 52:17; 78:31), for "the true servants of God" (Q 37:43; 38:49), and for "those who believe in Our signs and are submissive (*muslimīn*)" (Q 43:69).

Furthermore, by comparison with the images of paradise as we find them in Syriac Christian texts written before the time of Islam, and which doubtless circulated at least partially in oral translation in the milieu of the Arabic-speaking Christians of Arabia, there is an enhanced concreteness in the Arabic Quran's descriptive language, not least in the marital imagery. In addition to the "chaste spouses" (Q 3:15; 4:57), for example, there are also in the Quran's garden those described as *ḥūr ʿīn* (Q 44:54; 52:20), for whom, it is true, there are no exact analogues in the earlier scriptural traditions.[74] This is an instance in which the Quran has given further development and specificity to a narrative motif that appeared metaphorically and in a different guise in the Christian imagination, reflecting at the very least a different anthropology, a different view of human bodiliness, and a different conception of ultimate human happiness. Ephraem put it this way:

74 In this connection, Walid Saleh has called attention to the intriguing idea that in addition to earlier scriptural traditions, the Quran might also reflect images found in Hellenic mythology that might also have been current in its milieu, such as the image of Ganymede and of the goddess Hera, the *boōpis*, the 'oxen-eyed.' See Saleh, The etymological fallacy 39–40.

Far more glorious than the body
Is the soul,
And more glorious still than the soul
Is the spirit,
But more hidden than the spirit
Is the Godhead.
At the end
The body will put on
The beauty of the soul,
The soul will put on that of the spirit,
While the spirit shall put on
The very likeness of God's majesty.[75]

In terms of Late Antique depictions of the afterworld, Ephraem's *madrāshê* 'On Paradise' and the Arabic Quran can both be seen to have chosen their colors from virtually the same imagistic palette to portray somewhat different models of ultimate human happiness. Reading the eschatological passages in the Arabic Quran against the background of widely circulated Syriac liturgical texts such as Ephraem's *madrāshê* or Jacob of Serugh's *mêmrê* allows one to bring into focus not only the Quran's close familiarity with the religious discourse of others in its own milieu, but all the better, by way of comparison and contrast, to discern the new, Islamic turn given to earlier eschatological themes. Ephraem's imaginative journey to paradise, led by scripture's verses to contemplation's luminous, divine beauty, stands in contrast to Muḥammad's bodily Night Journey and Ascension into the heavens.

As for the grapes and the grapevines of paradise, it is interesting to observe that according to their respective traditions both Ephraem the Syrian and the Prophet Muḥammad had visions of the heavenly vines with their clusters of grapes, reaching into their daily lives. Envisioning the church, with its daily Eucharistic liturgies, Ephraem wrote:

The assembly of the saints
is the type of Paradise. [cf. Q 89:29–30]
Its fruit, which enlivens all,
is plucked in it every day;
in it, my brothers, there is pressed out,
the clustered grapes [of Paradise], the enlivener of all.[76]

75 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, IX:20, in the translation of Brock, *Hymns on paradise* 143.

76 Beck, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, VI:8.

In the Islamic community, an early prophetic tradition reports Muḥammad's account of his vision of paradise in the context of what is called the Eclipse Prayer. The Prophet said: "I saw the Garden and I reached out for a bunch of grapes from it, and if I had taken it you would have been able to eat from it for as long as this world lasted."[77]

These two passages, with their common imagery of the grape cluster, when read together reveal both the Christian's conception of a realized eschatology, disclosed in the church's sacramental liturgy in this world, and the Muslim's act of envisioning the garden materially and concretely as a defining feature of Islam's own distinctive, eschatological vision,[78] according to which neither lifelong virginity nor celibacy, as in the Christian view, would epitomize or signify human striving for perfection.

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