

THE EPHREMIC TRADITION AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE ENVIRONMENT¹

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- [1] The ecological crisis to which western technology has brought the world poses theological problems for religious believers to a degree which did not yet confront theologians in the early ages of Christianity. Yet there are strands of thought in the church fathers, when they reflect on fundamental principles expressed in the Bible, which can prove important and fruitful for us at the end of the twentieth century. This is particularly true of the Syriac Fathers, whose language and culture stood closer to those of the Bible than did most of European, and especially Latin, Christianity. The focus of this paper is on ecology; it may surprise some that my starting-point is the interpretation of statements about human nature in the first chapter of the Bible. But it is precisely issues of interpretation which have led to profoundly different views about how we humans relate to, and are responsible for, our whole environment.

¹ This is a re-worked English version of the writer's paper "L'Homme et la Création: responsabilité, péché et réconciliation," in *Péché et Réconciliation hier et aujourd'hui (Patrimoine Syriaque, Acts du colloque IV)* (Antelias, Lebanon, 1997). I am also indebted to S. Brock's discussion of ecological themes, in *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992²) 164–8, and "Humanity and the natural world in the Syriac tradition," in *Sobornost (incorporating ECR)* 12 (1990): 131–42.

[2] Genesis 1, though not overtly anthropomorphic, still hints at a picture of God as a supremely skilful and beneficent craftsman who creates the entire cosmos and the various beings on earth, bringing each conception to reality by a simple command. All unfolds in a wonderful order; not the order we would ever dream of, but then the account is governed by principles not of successive periods but of ordered worship, leading up to the Sabbath. The sun and the moon are said to have been created so as to make possible the annual liturgical calendar. After all other creatures have been brought into existence, God says “Let us create humankind in our image and likeness,” and (to summarize the next phrases) “let them rule over all other creatures” (Gen 1:26). The next sentence in Hebrew has a poetic structure, which I render very literally:

God created humankind (*adam*) in his image,
 in the image of God he created it,
 male and female he created them (Gen 1:27).

Then God blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the earth, to subdue it and to rule over other creatures (1:28). (We must remember, of course, that *adam* here has its general and collective sense; it does not function as the proper name, “Adam” till later in the paradise story.)

[3] Now the commonest line of interpretation in western Christianity has seen the “image” (Hebrew *selem*) in terms of the “likeness” (*dmut*) to God with which it is paired; and this likeness has been explained in terms of spiritual and intellectual qualities. Doubtless all Christian traditions would agree with this as a theological truth; but in the text as it stands, does “likeness” come in as an explanatory synonym for “image,” or does “image” have its own distinct meaning, explained by the phrase which immediately follows its first occurrence, “and let them rule..”? These semantic subtleties may seem very academic; yet they have led to quite different lines of thought as to where human beings stand in relation to God on the one hand and to other creatures on the other. For the western tradition, dominated by Augustine, the “image” makes human nature so much defined by spirituality and intellect that it was all too easy to view the rest of creation as mere “resources,” which humans are entitled to tame, cultivate and exploit by the power of their spiritual superiority. In contrast, the Syrian traditions which are often classed together as “Antiochene,” including writers in both Greek and Syriac, remained much closer

to the natural sense of the original Hebrew, and their understanding of human nature remained closer to Jewish teaching, with a strong emphasis on the freedom of the will.

- [4] These Antiochene and Syriac writers see the “image” as a metaphor which pictures the human race as standing in the position of God’s viceroys, endowed by God with authority over other creatures, but also, because of our free will, answerable to him for how we treat them. This linking of delegated authority with free will is the basis on which I will try to sketch how these themes were developed by St. Ephrem and the heirs to his teaching, even after those heirs came to be separated by christological disputes. Admittedly, we do not find in any of them an explicit doctrine of human duties relating to the environment and to fellow-creatures. The passages I shall cite from St. Ephrem are comparatively few, yet I believe that these, together with comparable passages in later Syriac authors, form the materials from which such a synthesis can be constructed without doing violence to the texts. It would be pleasant to focus this paper on Ephrem’s vision of the world and everything in it, in their beauty and symbolic potential. But my scope is a more ethical theme, that of human responsibility and duties; I shall therefore quote more from Ephrem’s prose works, regretfully drawing less on his poetry. Poets have often spoken better than theologians about our relationship to creatures; theology has a serious and long-neglected task to undertake in this area.

- [5] In using the term “viceroys” with reference to humanity as bearing God’s image, I made explicit a part of what I believe is the implicit metaphor underlying Genesis 1: God is conceived of as a supremely wise, powerful and good king, who has created the world as an ordered cosmos reflecting his goodness, and finally entrusted this world to a race of creatures, humankind, which can act as his representatives. This metaphor is not pointed out by either Ephrem or his near-contemporary Eusebius of Emesa² in either of their commentaries on Genesis (the two earliest in the

² Preserved in Armenian; V. Hovhannessian (ed.), *Eusèbe d’Émèse*, I. *Commentaire de l’Octateuque* (Venice, 1980). See R.B. ter Haar Romeny, “Eusebius of Emesa’s Commentary on Genesis and the Origins of the Antiochene School,” in J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (eds.), *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 125–41.

Antiochene-Syriac tradition); but the underlying metaphor had already been recognized by Philo, in a passage to be quoted below. Ephrem does refer briefly to kingship in relation to the “image,”³ but soon after him the metaphor was to be explicitly expounded in Greek by Diodore of Tarsus,⁴ followed by Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus and St. John Chrysostom (who says tersely “‘Image’ [*eikon*] refers to authority [*arke*] and nothing else”),⁵ and in Syriac by Narsai and Jacob of Serug, as we shall see below. While emphasizing this link, however, it should be understood that all these fathers also recognize the spiritual qualities which are implicit in the “image.”

- [6] But first let us look at Ephrem. For him, free will and authority are both essential aspects of God’s image in humankind.⁶ Free will is at the same time the condition of love for God and of responsibility regarding creation. This is Ephrem’s comment on Genesis 1:26:

*And God said: Let us make man in our image: that is to say, endowed with authority (shallūt) to the point that if it seems good to him (en neshpar leh) he will obey us. Now what it means that we are in the image of God has been explained by Moses, where he says: and let them have authority (nesblūn) over the fish of the sea and the birds, the cattle and all the earth. Thus it is in the authority (shultānā) that Adam received over the earth and all that is in it, that the likeness (dmūtā) to God consists, to him who has authority over things above and below.*⁷

- [7] Here we must understand that this “authority” is not absolute power. It involves control not only of others but also of oneself. In fact, an important part of the connotation of *šultānā* is free will, and it must sometimes be translated by this, since English hardly has

³ *Prose Refutations*, Eng. tr. pp. xiv and lxxxvi, quoted below.

⁴ Relevant texts of Diodore and his successors are collected in F. Petit (ed.), *La Chaîne Coislinienne sur la Genèse* (CCSG 15; 1986) 57–89, and in Theodoret’s *Quaestiones in Genesim*, PG 80, 104–12. See F. Petit, “La Chaîne grecque sur la Genèse, miroir de l’exégèse ancienne,” in *Stimuli (Festschrift E. Dassmann)* (JAC Ergänzungsband 23; 1996) 243–53.

⁵ CCSG 15, p. 60, excerpt 64.

⁶ See P. Tanius Bou Mansour, *La Pensée symbolique de S. Éphrem le syrien* (Bibliothèque de l’Université Saint-Esprit XVI; Kaslik 1988) 408–29.

⁷ *In Gen.* II, 29; CSCO 152 (Syr. 71), 23; my translation.

one word that combines both notes.⁸ In this breadth of meaning *šultānā* corresponds closely to the Greek *exousia*, which in many contexts can be adequately rendered by “authority” (for example, when people were amazed at Jesus’ show of it [Mk 1:27] or challenged him on it [Mk 11:28]); but in other contexts it means personal freedom to act, as in Paul’s discussion of permitted foods in 1 Cor 8–9.⁹ In his *Prose Refutations* Ephrem discusses human *shultana* in a way which demands awareness of this broader meaning:

If it is by *šultānā* that Adam was the image of God, it is a most praiseworthy thing when a person, by knowledge of the truth and acting with truth, becomes the image of God, for that *šultānā* consists in these also.¹⁰

Later in the same work Ephrem relates *šultānā* clearly both to human freedom and to the image of kingship:

And why does Freewill (*šultānā*) wish to deny its power and profess to be enslaved when the yoke of lordship (*marutā*) is not placed upon it? For it is not of the race of enslaved reptiles, nor of the family of enslaved cattle, but of the race of a King and of the sons of Kings who alone among all creatures were created in the image of God.¹¹

[8] In the *Fourth Discourse* Ephrem refers again to Gen 1:26–28 in terms of authority, discussing those animals which do not serve humans but can overpower them:

⁸ A word such as “entitlement” could be said to combine aspects of authority and freedom, but it would be impossibly clumsy in the contexts referred to here.

⁹ In all these places *exousia* is rendered by *šultānā* or related words.

¹⁰ *Letter to Hypatius*, Syriac in Overbeck (ed.), *S. Ephraemi Syri ... aliorumque opera selecta* (Oxford, 1865) 22; Eng. tr. in Mitchell, *Prose Refutations*, I (London, 1912) iii; German tr. and commentary by E. Beck, *OrChr* 58 (1974): 80–1. The rendering above is my own adaptation of Mitchell’s, leaving *šultānā* untranslated. Mitchell renders it the first time by “Freewill,” the second time by “independence;” Beck both times by “Macht.”

¹¹ Overbeck, p. 39; Mitchell (his version with Syriac words inserted), p. xiv; Beck pp. 100–1.

[Adam] possessed this power (*šulṭānā*) over them before he sinned, but they received this power (*šulṭānā*) against him after he had sinned. Therefore God said, let us make man in our Image, that is in the Image of His authority (*šulṭānā*), so that just as the authority of God rules over all so also the yoke of Adam's lordship (*mārūtā*) had been set over everything.¹²

Thus Ephrem, before the Greek Antiochene fathers, seems to recognize the delegated royal authority which is implicit in Gen 1:26–8. But it was for Theodore of Mopsuestia to develop the theme most influentially, by creating an allegory which was to be repeatedly echoed by the Syriac Fathers.

[9] Theodore compares the Creator to a king who built a great and beautiful city, and finally ordered an image of himself to be set up in the centre of the city, so that the inhabitants should honour it and thereby express their gratitude. This image is man, to whom the other creatures owe homage and service on account of the divine authority symbolized by the image. All creatures, says Theodore, are bound together in a vast unity, in obedience to humankind and in service of its needs, for God has made man the bond (*sundesmos*) and “pledge of friendship” (*philiās enekhurōn*) in the solidarity of creation.¹³

[10] There are clear echoes of Theodore's allegory in the Syriac fathers on both sides of the doctrinal estrangement after Chalcedon. We find the metaphor of the king and his foundation in Narsai (399–502):

Like a palace for the king of kings he built the creation,
and put them [sc. mankind] in it to see the beauty of his
royal house.¹⁴

¹² Mitchell, *Prose Ref.* I, Syr p. 114; tr. (as in last note) p. lxxxvi.

¹³ This summarizes the excerpt from Theodore's lost commentary on Genesis in Theodoret, *Quaest. in Genesim*, PG 80, 109A–C and in the Coislin catena, ed. F. Petit (n. 4 above), pp. 69–70. Theodore again calls man the “pledge of friendship” for all creation in his comment on Romans 8:19, PG 66, 824C. Cf. N. El-Khoury, “Der Mensch als Gleichnis Gottes: eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie des Theodor von Mopsuestia,” *OrChr* 74 (1990): 622–771.

¹⁴ P. Gignoux (ed. and tr.), *Homélies sur la Création* (PO 34; 1968), *Hom.* 2, 361–61 (pp. 578–79); the translation here is mine. The subject is actually the divine *remza*, the efficacious sign of God's creative will; the

And Jacob of Serug, in his *Hexaemeron*:

The Maker willed, in the great palace he had built,
to set up an image (*salma*) to the glory of his creative
power,
so that through it all the beauties of his creation might
be known,
and through it, when he had made it, he might rest
from his creating.
God built a great city full of beauties;
it was right that the king's icon (*yuqna*) be set up there.
The city of the world had been created by God;
it was his pleasure that the image (*slem*) of God should
stand in it.¹⁵

[11] As for Theodore's following point, the solidarity of all creation, this is actually anticipated by Ephrem in his analysis (again in the *Prose Refutations*), of the network of mutual needs which binds humankind and other creatures together. He starts out from Paul's allegory of the body in 1 Cor 12 and Rom 12, but extends it, not only to the whole human race but even to the animals:

For just as in the case of the limbs of the body, their individual needs are fulfilled by one another, so too the inhabitants of the world fill in the common need from the common excess. We should rejoice in this need on the part of us all, for out of it is born harmony (*anyuta*) for us all; for in that people need one another, those in high position stoop to the lowly and are not ashamed, and the insignificant reach out to the powerful and are not afraid. Even in the case of the animals, seeing that we have a need for them, we take care of them. Clearly our need for everything binds us with a love for everything.¹⁶

term is frequently used by both Narsai and Jacob of Serug. See Kh. Alwan, "Le 'Remzo' selon la pensée de Jacques de Saroug," *ParOr* 15 (1988-9): 91-106.

¹⁵ P. Bedjan (ed.), *Homiliae selectae Mar Jacobi Sarugensis* (Leipzig, 1907), *Hom.* "On the Creation of the World, Day 6," in vol. 3, p. 108, 7-14, my translation. Cf. B. Sony, "Hymne sur la création de l'homme de l'hexaméron de Jacques de Saroug," *ParOr* 11 (1983): 167-99 at p. 177.

¹⁶ Syriac in Overbeck (n. 10 above), p. 26; tr. Mitchell, *Pr. Ref.* I, pp. iv-v; Beck (same note) p. 86; the translation here is that of Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (see note 1 above), p. 167.

This analysis is less majestic, more “democratized” than that of Theodore, but the latter’s phrase “pledge of friendship” actually points towards such reflections. It is in the network of needs, obligations and rights that the bearers of the divine image must use their “viceregal” authority. Many church fathers, especially in the West, in their comments on the image of God were dominated by an anthropocentrism which owed too much to Stoicism. Ephrem’s account of interrelationships offers a far better basis for a true environmental theology. Dom Edmund Beck comments on its “astonishing modernity.”¹⁷

- [12] The authority given by God, therefore, excludes all tyranny and exploitation; this is implicit also in the biblical account of how the first human being gave all creatures their names (Gen 2:19–20). Well before either the Antiochenes or Ephrem, Philo saw this act as a display of kingly wisdom:

Moses does well to ascribe the giving of names to the first man, for that is the function of wisdom and royalty, and the first man was wise with a wisdom taught by Wisdom’s own lips; he was also a king, and it belongs to a king to bestow titles on each of his subjects. It was a most high sovereignty that invested that first man, since God had formed him with such care to be worthy of the second place, making him his own viceroy and governor of all others.¹⁸

- [13] Ephrem in his Genesis commentary also notes Adam’s wisdom, but he lays more emphasis on *harmony* before man’s disobedience, as we shall see below.

- [14] Narsai describes the naming scene thus:

He subjected all that came to exist from Him to the authority of his image, Adam.
 “The Lord God created the cattle and the [wild] animals
 and made them pass before Adam so that he might name his possessions.”

¹⁷ Beck, p. 86, n. 23: he finds it “von einer überraschenden Aktualität.”

¹⁸ Philo, *On the Creation of the World*, 148; Greek text and tr. in Loeb Classical Library (LCL), Philo I, pp. 116–17; this translation, slightly abbreviated, is as in R. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992) 100.

His Maker conferred power on him to give names as
 best he could,
 teaching him thereby that He was making him master
 of all that existed...
 All living beings, mute or able to speak, are alike bound
 to him,
 and because of their relationship to him they honour
 him like a king.¹⁹

- [15] But it is Narsai's near contemporary Jacob of Serug, the truest heir of Ephrem's creative imagination, who enlarges the scope of the biblical narrative in the most original way. Before the animals, both domestic and wild, came the whole cosmos, including the heavenly bodies, the sea and land, sea creatures, birds and reptiles, to adore the divine image in Adam. Finally,

As soon as the cosmos saw him it wholly submitted to
 him:
 every kind of cattle and even [wild] animals
 drew near to reverence him, and he sealed them as his
 own.
 He called out names, and by the names he subjected
 them,
 to make them his own, for the Lord had granted him to
 possess them.
 It was right, too, since he was the image of God, for
 him
 to lay his hand on everything that the Lord, his Lord,
 had made;
 he could not actually create, but he gave names
 and became a partner in God's work of creation.²⁰

- [16] Here there is great emphasis on power and possession, but the Syriac fathers never forget the other aspect of delegated authority, responsible freedom. It is typical both of the Antiochene tradition and of its Syriac heirs to insist on free will. This is how Narsai describes human nature:

¹⁹ P. Gignoux (ed. and tr.), *Homélies de Narsai sur la Création* (PO 34; 1968) 614–7: *Hom.* 4, 86–90, 93–4, my translation.

²⁰ Jacob of Serug, *Hom. Sel.* (n. 15 above), 3, p. 118, 9–17, my translation; cf. Sony (*ParOr*, *ibid.*), 187–8.

Man possesses freedom of soul in likeness to [an angel];
 he can sin but also remain righteous, and is able to discern.

The freedom of soul which man has cannot be forced, or led to an act to which he does not consent.
 The nature of man and of the spiritual beings is one; it cannot be mastered, but it masters itself.²¹

[17] If we reflect on all the passages considered so far and realize their converging implications, it becomes clear that they point towards *responsibility*, even though the word is not used explicitly. When a being endowed with the freedom just described is charged with authority, this necessarily entails a relationship of responsibility to the source of the authority, be it a person or an electorate. The more understanding and freedom one has, the more one is responsible for one's actions. Therefore man is answerable to God and under obligation to exercise authority according to God's will; that is, with wisdom, justice and gentleness, as Paul Beauchamp has shown in an important article on Gen 1–2.²²

[18] No doubt this principle underlies those laws in the Pentateuch about care and even compassion for animals, for example the commandment to leave a newborn animal seven days with its mother, and not to slaughter mother and young on the same day (Lev 22:27–8), or to help up a donkey (even one belonging to an enemy) which has fallen under its burden (Ex 23:5).²³ The Torah has less to say about other creatures, but the laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years (Lev 25) regard the well-being of the soil (25:2–6) and hint at God's care for wild animals (25:7). The laws about war limit the destruction of trees: “is a tree a human being, that you should treat it as a besieged enemy?” (Dt 20:19). Philo explains all these as commandments to act with mercy; his exegesis is not allegorical but ethical, praising the enlightened humanity of the

²¹ *On Creation* (n. 19 above), *Hom.* 6, pp. 686–7. “Freedom of soul” is *herut naphsha*, a more explicit way of speaking of the free will which is implicit in *shultana*.

²² P. Beauchamp, “Création et fondation de la loi en Gn 1,1–2,4a,” in F. Blanquart (ed.), *La Création dans l'Orient ancien* (Lectio Divina 127: Paris, Cerf, 1987) 139–82.

²³ Cf. Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant* (n. 18 above), 112–20.

Torah.²⁴ His interpretation is quoted with approval, some eight or nine centuries later, by Isho'dad of Merv.²⁵

[19] However, the Syriac fathers rarely speak of human responsibility to the Creator in the sense of having to answer to him for how we use other creatures. Aphrahat, for example, says much about how Christian “pastors” must render an account to the Supreme Pastor for the souls entrusted to them,²⁶ but he does not talk about the responsibility of actual shepherds to the owners of the flocks and, above them, to God. No doubt the latter was taken for granted in ordinary life, and Christian peasant farmers would understand the religious sense of the laws in the Torah about good farming and respect for animals; we simply do not know whether they reflected theologically about these things.

[20] Before the fall, all creatures and all the elements existed together in harmony, both cosmic, moral and social.²⁷ This is how Ephrem describes the scene of Adam with the animals:

It says “He brought them to Adam” in order to indicate his wisdom, and also the peaceful state which existed between the animals and Adam prior to his transgressing the commandment. For they came to him as to a loving shepherd, passing in front of him without any fear, flock after flock according to their species and varieties. They had no fear of him, nor were they in trepidation of one another; a herd of predators passed

²⁴ *On the Virtues*, 25–31; text and tr. in LCL, Philo VIII, pp. 238–63.

²⁵ C. Van den Eynde (ed. and tr.), *Commentaires sur l'A.T.* II (CSCO 176, Syr. 80); e.g. on Ex. 23:19: Syr. p. 42, tr. pp. 55–6: “les trois significations [sc. discussed by Philo in a passage just quoted by Isho'dad], nous enseignent la miséricorde de Dieu, dont la sollicitude s'étend même aux animaux.”

²⁶ *Demonstration* 7, PS I.1, ed. J. Parisot, col. 357.8–21.

²⁷ This link between the cosmic and moral orders is expressed in Biblical Hebrew semantics. The terms *sedeq/šdaqab* and *mishpat* have a wider reference than has been generally understood. Sometimes they refer to the order of the universe or of nature (e.g. at Ps 72:3 and Isai 32:15) and not merely to the virtue of an exemplary judge or to personal integrity. Cf. H.H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (Tübingen, 1968); Murray (n. 18 above), pp. 176–7, nn. 5, 6.

by, followed fearlessly by a group of the animals upon which they preyed.²⁸

And Jacob, immediately before the passage quoted above, says:

All cattle, all animals and birds
bent their shoulders for him to lay the yoke on them;
as his possessions they came before their master,
herd by herd, flock by flock, line by line, pair by pair,
they came to reverence him, full of peace and love for
him;
and wild beasts bowed their heads in obeisance
to the great image imprinted on Adam by God.²⁹

[21] After the disobedience of the first human pair, the elements, seasons, animals and all nature fell into disorder, desolated by the transgression of the bearers of God's image. Ephrem, in his hymns *Against Heresies* sees the "thorns and thistles" with which Adam was now to have to contend (Gen 3:18) as symbolizing the effects of the abuse of free will:

The sprouting of the thorn
testified to the novel sprouting of wrong actions,
for thorns did not sprout
as long as wrong-doing had not yet burst forth;
but once there had peered out
hidden wrong choices made by free will,
then the visible thorns began to peer out from the
earth.³⁰

And Narsai:

The whole of Creation mourned for Adam's fair image
to which it had been united in love by a bond now
undone by sin.
Like strangers, the spiritual beings turned their faces
away from him
and were no longer willing to move the elements to
sustain his life.

²⁸ *On Genesis* II, 9 (CSCO 152, Syr 71, pp. 30–31), tr. S. Brock in his *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990) 203.

²⁹ *Hom. Sel.* (n. 15 above), III, p. 118.2–8, my translation.

³⁰ *H.c.Haer.* 28,9, tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 165.

Even the animals rebelled against him, reptiles fled and
hid in the earth,
and all his possessions despised him since he had
despised his Master's word.
Freely he became a stranger to the mastery he had been
given,
and things of nought, turned shameless, made nought
of the precious one.³¹

[22] In these passages the vision is poetic, arising from meditation on the judgments of God on the first human pair, for whom all their relationships (with each other and with other creatures) will prove to be disturbed; the earth is to become no longer the garden of delight but a place of toil and frustration (Gen 3:14–9). Ephrem and Narsai could not have dreamed of how far this would lead, as humankind strove more and more to exploit and control rather than to live in harmony with other creatures; but we can see that these fathers had their finger on the fault: irresponsible abuse of freedom.

[23] Just one scene in Ephrem's Genesis commentary pictures a temporary restoration of harmony, granted by God to Noah, the "man of peacefulness" (*gabra danyaha*); every kind of animals and birds converged on the ark and dwelt together in a marvellous peace. As they entered, predators and their usual prey all together, the sinners of that generation watched with amazement and yet were not moved to repentance.³²

[24] After the flood, of course, came the sign of the cosmic covenant of peace, but the reality of broken harmony remained. Only the prophets, especially Isaiah with his joyful vision of paradise restored in the messianic age (Isaiah 11:1–9) could keep alive the hope that paradisaal harmony would return to earth. But for the eyes of Christian faith, thanks to Christ's coming to live and die in solidarity with the human race, his redeeming and reconciling sacrifice, his victory over death and evil and his breathing the breath of new life, the Holy Spirit, into human nature, the restoration of all things has begun. At the climax of Paul's exposition of how those who respond are "justified," that is, brought back into a healed relationship with God, his focus

³¹ *Homilies on Creation* 4, 280–7 (PO 34, pp. 626–9), my translation.

³² This summarises Ephrem *In Gen.* (See n. 7 above), Syr. pp. 59–60.

suddenly widens to take in the whole of creation which has been “groaning” to take part in this restoration (Rom 8:19–23).³³

[25] In this Christian vision Christ has repaired *in principle* the disorder brought about by the abuse of freedom symbolized in the biblical story of “our first parents.” As antitype of the “First Adam,” Christ is the Second. This is principally a Pauline theme; but is it possible that Mark hints at it when he says that Jesus in the desert “was with the wild beasts” (Mk 1:13)? Most modern exegetes prefer another explanation, but for those of more poetic inclination the idea of this scene as the antitype of Adam’s naming the animals has a strong attraction.³⁴ And at least in sixth-century Syria some thought so. In a homily transmitted under the name of Ephrem we read that Jesus

kept company with the (wild) animals, which knelt and worshipped him;³⁵

the last words echo exactly what Jacob of Serug says in connection with the first Adam:

The newly anointed (*mšīḥa*), Adam, who became the image (*surta*) of the Son, stood in the world, and the whole world knelt and worshipped him.³⁶

[26] The sense of the renewal of creation which Christ has inaugurated by his resurrection grows strongest, of course, in the Paschal month of Nisan, which Ephrem celebrates in a series of hymns. A particularly vivid picture can be glimpsed in a stanza which is hard to translate, but the sequence of images seems clear:

After the desolation of winter, the deaf and dumb,
Nisan has thundered;

³³ Many exegetes have floundered here, misled by Origen’s adoption of a Stoic sense of “creation” (*ktisis*) as meaning only humankind, and not realizing that the Hebrew semantic field underlying Paul’s language of “righteousness” and “justification” actually extends to cosmic order. See n. 25 above, and more fully Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant* (n. 18 above), 129–31 and notes, pp. 203–4.

³⁴ Cf. *The Cosmic Covenant*, 127–8, with notes on p. 202.

³⁵ E. Beck (ed.), *Memre for Holy Week* (CSCO 412, Syr. 181) I, 93–4. Beck has argued plausibly for the author’s being a 6th-century Syrian Orthodox, perhaps a disciple of Jacob of Serug.

³⁶ *Hom. Sel.* III, p. 117.12–3; my translation of both these last excerpts.

it is the sound of the universe which he has calmed;
 he has calmed the sea by the voice of oarsmen,
 he has calmed the desert by the voice of flocks,
 the air by the voice of birds.
 In Nisan the desolation of Sheol is calmed,
 for the Living Voice has entered.³⁷

Such a vision of reconciliation and restored harmony cannot be left to merely imaginative enjoyment of its beauty. Ephrem's prose passage quoted earlier, in which he extends the Pauline body image for interrelations within the Church to human relations with other creatures, expresses a challenge to put vision into practice. Yet "where there is no vision the people perish,"³⁸ and it is important that so many saints have exemplified the vision in their lives as a way that can be followed; witness the desert ascetics "from Syria and Egypt to Ireland and Northumbria,"³⁹ and the often-quoted description by the seventh-century Saint Isaac of Nineveh of the effects of true humility:

The humble man approaches wild animals, and the moment they catch sight of him their ferocity is tamed. They come up and cling to him as to their Master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and feet. They scent as coming from him the same fragrance that came from Adam before the transgression, the time when they were gathered together before him and he gave them names in Paradise. This scent was taken away from us, but Christ has renewed it and given it back to us at his coming. It is this which has sweetened the fragrance of humanity.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Hymns on the Resurrection* 5,4 (ed. E. Beck, Syr. in CSCO 248, Syr. 108; German tr. in 249/109); French tr. by G. Rouwhorst, *Les Hymnes pascales d'Ephrem de Nisibe* (Leiden, 1989) II, 104–5. The attempt at translation here is mine. "Calmed" renders *šayyen*, to pacify, tame or cultivate, a denominative verb from *šaynā* (a loanword from Persian), which in contrast to *šlāmā* (interpersonal peace), primarily connotes peace of the land. (Beck rendered *šayyen* by *beleben*, to revive, enliven.)—"oarsmen." lit. "oars and sailors."

³⁸ The long-proverbial old translation of Prov 29:18.

³⁹ Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, 144–8, at p. 146.

⁴⁰ Syriac in P. Bedjan (ed.), *Mar Isaacus Ninivita De Perfectione religiosa* (Leipzig, 1909) 577; tr. S. Brock, in *Heart of Compassion: Daily Readings with St. Isaac of Syria* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989) 41.

[27] This is a saint talking about saints; we know all too well that the restoration of the divine image in humanity is far from completed; it must be realized in every person, and between the human race and other creatures in our shared environment. Gradually people are coming to realize how we have abused the world and its other inhabitants. Whether we are believers in God or not, there is a massive duty of repentance for the harm done, and of renewed purpose to respect and nurture our environment. Saint Isaac's other most famous passage, about compassion for the suffering of all creatures, is so well known that I will not quote it again here; but less often quoted is its contextual framework. St. Isaac says that true compassion is a gift to be won by the practice of repentance, purity of heart and perfection. The fruit of repentance is a contrite heart; that of purity is a heart full of compassion for all creation; the fruit of perfection is depth of humility, embracing voluntary mortification.⁴¹ Of course, this is all Christian ascetical language; but most of it can be translated into more universally understandable ethical terms and applied to the environmental task. "Perfection" is not so easy to retranslate: it can, perhaps, be understood as personal integrity, including that responsibility in use of freedom, so much emphasized by St. Ephrem, which has been a focal point in this article.

⁴¹ Syriac in Bedjan, p. 507; tr. S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987) 250–1.