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Abstract

In this thesis I study four fourth-century patristic texts based on the creation and fall accounts in Genesis 1–3. Two of them are in Syriac, poetry and a commentary by Ephrem Syrus, and two are in Greek, two sets of sermons or homilies by John Chrysostom. I demonstrate through a close engagement with the texts in their original languages that Ephrem and Chrysostom read Genesis 1–3 through the interpretive lens of divine self-limitation in order to arrive at a deeper meaning of the text for their generation. In other words, their understanding that God freely chooses to limit Himself in Word and deed out of His saving love for us was a key factor in how they read their Bibles, understood its message and used it apologetically in their theologically fraught context. The research shows that the two authors, who can be taken as representative of the Eastern and Western Syrian church in the fourth century, used the doctrine of divine self-limitation to help them exegete the creation and fall accounts in a complex way that cannot be easily characterised according to the traditional fault lines of allegorical, typological or literal-historical, while remaining within the discipline of a Nicene orthodoxy. I argue that the same interpretive lens of divine self-limitation can be used to great profit in our own generation by people of faith who want to read and apply the Bible to their lives without compromising their intellectual integrity.