The Self-Enclosing God

*John Chrysostom and Ephrem Syrus*

*on divine self-limitation as gift of love in Genesis 1–3*

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We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot
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Note on References to Primary Sources

The four primary sources for this research are:

1. Ephrem’s *Commentary on Genesis*. In the footnotes, this is referred to throughout as *Comm. Gen.*. For the Syriac source I have used the most recent critical edition, which is Assad, A.S., *The Commentary of Saint Ephrem on Genesis with an Arabic Translation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010). Where quotations are provided in English, unless otherwise indicated they will be taken from Kathleen McVey, (ed.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian – Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord and Letter to Publius*. Translated by Edward J. Mathews Jr. and Joseph P. Amar. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994). A footnote such as *Comm. Gen. I.15.2* refers to Section I, sub-section 15.2 in McVey’s edition.


3. Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Genesis*. In the footnotes, this is referred to throughout as *Hom. Gen.*. For the Greek source I have used Migne, J.P. and Cavallera, F., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus ... Series Graeca, etc. Gr. & Lat.*, 1857, vol.53. Where quotations are provided in English, unless otherwise indicated they will be taken from Robert Hill’s translation unless otherwise indicated: Hill, R.C., *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986). A footnote such as *Hom. Gen. 2.10* refers to Homily 2 Section 10 in Hill’s edition.

4. Chrysostom’s *Sermons on Genesis*. In the footnotes, this is referred to throughout as *Serm. Gen.*. For the Greek source I have used Migne, J.P. and Cavallera, F., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus ... Series Graeca, etc. Gr. & Lat.*, 1857, vol.54. Where quotations are provided in English, unless otherwise indicated they will be taken from Hill, R.C., *Saint John Chrysostom, Eight Sermons on the Book of Genesis*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004). A footnote such as *Serm. Gen. 1 (581, p. 21)* refers to Sermon 1, original section numbering 581, but page 21 in Hill’s edition.

N.B. If I am referring to an editorial comment in a preface rather than a quotation or footnote in the text itself, then the reference will name the editor, e.g. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, xxii, rather than *Hym. Par. Xxii.*
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.
Introduction

In this thesis, I study the writings of two men in fourth century Syria, Ephrem Syrus and John Chrysostom, who read and commented on the accounts of creation and fall in Genesis 1–3. Through a close study of the texts in their original languages, I show that both these authors interpret the creation and fall accounts through the lens of the doctrine that God freely chooses to limit Himself in Word and deed out of His saving love for us. I demonstrate 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. I also argue that the same interpretive lens can be used to great profit, and without loss of hermeneutical integrity, in our own generation.

Ivana Noble defines theology “as a critical reflection on experiences of faith, hope and love, in which traces of the revealing God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, are sought and found.” Noble states that the theologian’s task is three-fold – she must analyse her situation, she must analyse her experience of God and the symbolic language representations of that experience and she must analyse the tradition which gave her that symbolic language “and transformed the experience of the previous generations into an intelligible text, picture, or sound that can be handed down further, allowed to speak, be well or badly interpreted, become a critique of where and who we are.” The aim of this research is to demonstrate that Ephrem and Chrysostom’s belief that God chooses to freely


2 Noble, Tracking God, 26.
limit Himself as a gift of divine love is one such ‘intelligible picture’, a hermeneutic tool or interpretive lens which can speak to us seventeen centuries later and help us to read our Bibles in our own context, as it helped them read their Bibles in theirs.

In this introductory section, I start by explaining why I have chosen to focus on patristic readings of Genesis 1–3, and identifying the particular theological issues which come to the fore in the creation and fall accounts. In this part of the introduction, I provide an overview of the main principles of patristic exegesis, while recognising that such a short section cannot even begin to pay homage to the vast wealth of patristic Biblical writings which we have been privileged to inherit. Ephrem and Chrysostom were almost contemporaries, and both were writing in an era shaped by massive theological forces, so my next section provides an overview of the theological landscape of the 4th century, identifying how the theological issues of the day made themselves felt in the works I am studying. With this context in place, my next section explains why I chose to study Ephrem and Chrysostom in particular out of the fourth century authors on creation and fall. This is followed by a section which provides an overview of what has already been done by other scholars in the field, particularly studies of the doctrine of divine self-limitation. Next, I outline my methodology and research process. The final section of the Introduction provides a structure for the rest of the thesis.

**The Bible in Patristic Exegesis.**

My interest in the patristic exegesis of Genesis grew out of my personal experience as someone with a first degree in Natural Sciences who then went on to study theology for pastoral ministry. I found a dearth of teaching on how to read the creation and fall accounts with integrity, while holding in tension scriptural authority on the one hand and scientific discoveries on the other. As well as their cosmological claims, Genesis 1–3 raise
questions of anthropomorphism, theodicy, creation care, theology of marriage, complementarianism and more. It is perhaps no surprise that Andrew Louth wrote:

“The early chapters of Genesis had arguably a greater influence on the development of Christian theology than did any other part of the Old Testament.”

In this section of the Introduction, I start by examining the particular importance which the creation and fall accounts had for many patristic authors, not least Ephrem and Chrysostom, and then go on to make a few comments about the wider principles of patristic exegesis.

As Louth points out in the quotation above, the first three chapters of the Bible lay the foundations for some key patristic doctrines. Firstly, the Fathers argued that they attest to the creatio ex nihilo of a world which was fundamentally and exceedingly good. Secondly, they describe the creation of humans according to the image and likeness of God, and as I shall draw out in greater detail in part 3 of this research, out of this statement grew the understanding that the ultimate destiny of created humans was theosis, becoming ‘like God’. As well as this major cosmological drama from creation to theosis with its attendant transformation of the whole cosmos, these three chapters also relate the ‘sub-plot’ of the Fall. Moreover, the Church Fathers saw in these early chapters hints of the great reversal of the Fall by the Incarnation. Thus the ‘proper understanding’ of the doctrine of creation was seen as a crucial foundation for a correct grasp of Christian doctrine in general, and in two areas in particular. Firstly, an accurate grasp of man’s status as a beloved creature led to an appropriate way of speaking about God, and also refraining from speaking about Him.

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3 Andrew Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol 1, xxxix.

4 Here as elsewhere in the book ‘man’ is used as a translation of ἄνθρωπος, anthrōpos, which meant both ‘man’ and ‘woman’.
Secondly, it led to a correct soteriology. Both of these issues are discussed in more detail in Part 3 of this book.

Genesis 1–3 therefore serve as a rich theological vein which was mined extensively by the Church Fathers. The fundamental claim of this thesis is that Ephrem Syrus and John Chrysostom used the concept of limit (and in particular divine self-limitation as a gift of love) as a key to their interpretation of the creation and fall narratives in Genesis 1–3.

In order to understand what Ephrem and Chrysostom write about creation and fall, we need to remember that exegesis in the early church was marked by an emphasis on Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical key to both Old and New Testaments. Thus, the Bible was read according to rhetorical practice as having a unity, a single hypothesis, skopos (intent) or dianoia (mind). In order to safeguard correct exegesis, this hypothesis was summarised by Irenaeus in his Rule of Faith (and in other creeds which had been handed down) in order to ensure that each Bible passage was read correctly, with Jesus’ life, passion and resurrection as its hermeneutical key. Then, questions might be asked about each individual book or passage, searching for its overall dianoia. This can be seen clearly in Origen who insisted that every verse or problem be understood in the light of the Bible’s overarching Christological meaning. He does not, however, exclude its variety or deny the problems which arise when the unity of the Bible’s skopos is insisted on; rather he commends those peacemakers who show that what seems like discord in the scriptures can be reconciled with its fundamental harmony. According to Origen, the Spirit both enlightens (by revealing the doctrines about God, His only-begotten Son and the reason for His

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incarnation) but also conceals. It conceals these doctrines in the Biblical narrative which deals with the visible creation, and thus the unity of the hypothesis of scripture is expressed through narratives about the visible world and human history, though the fit is sometimes an uncomfortable one, alerting us to the realities which lie hidden beneath the surface.

We have then the mind or dianoia of Scripture, but we have it expressed or clothed in words and narratives, some of which ‘fit’ better than others.

As in every age, these patristic exegetical principles were tested and crystallised when pressure came to bear on them through one crisis or another. For instance, Young argues that in his argument against Arius, Athanasius employs “what appears an external hermeneutical principle, namely the fundamental otherness of the divine, in order to argue for a reading which is not strictly literal” even though Athanasius himself claims that the principle is a Scriptural one. The point is that the need to justify a priori positions from within a system which only recognised Scripture as supreme authority led to the problematization of the strict literal sense of the Scripture, and the ascription of ‘hidden’ meanings to it. Pressure from the ‘enemies’ of the faith meant that the dianoia of the Scripture sometimes needed to be expressed in extra-scriptural terms such as homoousios at the Council of Nicaea. Like Origen, therefore, Athanasius also distinguishes between the subject matter (the mind of Scripture) and the words used to express it (in this case, extra-Scriptural formulae). Young points out that this is consistent with the standard rhetorical

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7 Young, Biblical Exegesis, 32.

8 See the section entitled ‘The Theological Landscape of the Fourth Century’ for a discussion of Nicaea.
distinction between *ho pragmatikos topos* (the subject matter) and *ho lektikos topos* (the vocabulary and style used to express it).  

Once the decisive step is taken of separating the *dianoia* of the text from the words used to express it, then the question becomes “How does the language represent and convey the deeper meaning?” There are a number of ways in which the patristic authors answer this question, and they are not set in stone. All this is to say that, as Frances Young puts it, “the traditional categories of ‘literal’, ‘typological’ and ‘allegorical’ are quite simply inadequate as descriptive tools, let alone analytical tools.” Of course, all these techniques were utilised in patristic exegesis, but it has long been recognised as an over-simplification to try to characterise a particular author’s exegesis as ‘typological’ over against ‘allegorical’, for example. Jesus Himself used typology when reading the Hebrew Scriptures, for instance referring to Himself as the Son of Man and drawing on imagery from Daniel 7 and perhaps pseudepigraphic writings. The apostolic authors did likewise, searching through their Scriptures for types which they saw Jesus as fulfilling or realizing. And this process continues with the patristic authors as they discuss (for example), at the height of the Arian crisis, the characterisation of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs as a type of Christ. But this was but one of the techniques they employed as they sought to discern the hidden and true meaning of the text. At other times they would use an allegorical interpretation to achieve the same goal. Their struggle is always to respect the surface words of the text while finding an adequate mechanism to look beyond them to discern the deeper meaning which is in tune with the overall unity of Scripture.

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9 Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 35.


In this research I avoid using one or other of the categories typological/allegorical/historico-literal/tropological to characterise the exegesis of Chrysostom and Ephrem. An engagement with the texts suggests that both authors use a variety of approaches to reading the Bible. Sometimes they employ typology, sometimes their reading is allegorical and often it is literal. This will be evident in the chapters that follow. But always, they are concerned with the overarching plot, what Andrew Louth has called the great arch from creation to deification, and the lesser arch from incarnation to redemption. As John O’Keefe puts it,

“Both typology and allegory were techniques used to draw that story out and identify its key themes and features ... Unlike modern biblical interpretation, which attempts to control the meaning of texts by rebuilding historical contexts, ancient interpretation controlled the meaning of texts theologically by trying to conform interpretation to the “rule of faith” ... a set of theological commitments dating back at least to the early second century.”

Thus, they are concerned to demonstrate when reading the creation and fall accounts that any interpretations which do not fit into this overarching dianoia must be incorrect. Sometimes they do this by pointing to a deeper, hidden, meaning beneath the surface of the words, and they can do this by appealing to the fact that God needs to limit Himself to our human language when expressing Himself. This will be particularly evident when I describe how Chrysostom dealt with the anthropomorphising crisis. They are also

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12 For more on these traditional classifications see for instance Grant, Robert McQueen, and David Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. (Fortress Pr, 1984.) For a counterargument see also Frances Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis.” *A history of biblical interpretation* 1 (2003): 334-354.

13 Louth’s greater and lesser arches are seminal ideas which are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5 of this thesis.

concerned to demonstrate the underlying unity of the Bible, and so sometimes they will use events in the creation and fall account as types which point to Christ and his great salvific act. And they are also always concerned to demonstrate God’s great love for us, and so they often interpret events in Genesis 1–3 allegorically, as signs of God’s desire to arrange everything for our salvation, and His willingness to limit Himself according to our capacities.

**The Theological Landscape of the Fourth Century**

The theological landscape of the 4th century is dominated by the Arian controversy. Eusebius tells us that the theological debate which seems to have been sparked initially by Arius, a Libyan presbyter, falling out with his bishop Alexander, had widespread repercussions. The resulting disunity in the Eastern churches even disturbed the Emperor Constantine himself “with much sorrow of heart”, and he wrote a joint letter to Alexander and Arius begging them to be reconciled.15 The letter was to no avail, and a council of bishops which met in spring 325 fell to discussing the controversy, since the local bishops were in dispute over it. A letter from this Council of Antioch records that “the honoured and beloved Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, had excommunicated some of his presbyters, i.e. Arius and his friends, for the blasphemy which they directed against our Saviour.” We can deduce from the letter what the authors wished us to believe this blasphemy to be, because they go on to say that they consider the ‘orthodox’ faith to be as follows:

“to believe in ... one Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son, begotten not from that which is not but from the Father, not as made but as properly an offspring, but begotten in an ineffable indescribable manner, because only the Father who begot and the Son who was begotten know (for no one knows the Father but the Son, nor the Son

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15 New Eusebius, 333.
but the Father), who exists everlastingly and did not at one time not exist ... he alone is
the sole image ... we believe him to be immutable and unchangeable, and that he was
not begotten and did not come to be by volition or by adoption, so as to appear to be
from that which is not ... not according to likeness or nature or commixture with any
of the things which came to be through him, but in a way which passes all
understanding or conception or reasoning we confess him to have been begotten of
the unbegotten Father ... for he is the image ... of his Father's very substance (ὑπόστασις,
hupostasis) ... and we anathematize those who suppose that he is immutable by his
own act of will, just as those who derive his birth from that which is not, and deny
that he is immutable in the way the Father is.”

This extract contains a number of noteworthy features. It emphasises the image, and as we
shall see this is a theological building brick to which both Chrysostom and Ephrem return
again and again, and which was to become a cornerstone of Orthodox theology. It states
that the Son was begotten, and that He was not begotten ex nihilo, and nor was there a time
when He had not been begotten. It rejects His identity “by likeness or nature or
commixture” with the rest of creation. It emphasises His immutability. It also clearly states
that He was begotten in a way which cannot be understood or conceived or grasped by
reason.

The letter from Antioch names the bishops who opposed the position of the Council, and
were “proved to have the same views as Arius, and hold to opposite views to the above
mentioned ones.” These bishops were excommunicated, but the letter notes that they were
to be given another chance to repent at “the great and priestly synod of Ancyra.”

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16 New Eusebius, 334–6.

17 New Eusebius, 336.
end, ostensibly for practical logistical reasons, Constantine moved the synod from Ancyra to Nicaea, where proceedings were solemnly opened by the emperor himself on the 20th May 325. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the Council of Nicaea came up with the formulary that Jesus Christ was

“...the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father ... begotten not made, consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος, homoousios) with the Father... And those who say “There was when he was not,” and “Before his generation he was not,” and “he came to be from nothing” or those who pretend that the Son of God is “Of other hypostasis or substance,” or “created” or “alterable” or “mutable,” the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.”

Once again, what interests us here is not how accurate a record this is of what Arius or his followers believed. Rather, it is the delineation of the enemy camp – the enemies are those who propose that there was a time prior to the Son’s generation, who propose His generation ex nihilo, who oppose His being ὁμοούσιος with the Father and who claim that He is mutable. We have lost the language of the image which was so pre-eminent in the letter from Antioch earlier that year, and there is also no mention in this formulary of the impossibility of grasping the begotten nature of the Son through reason.

As in so many other cases, the Arianism being combatted at Nicaea was not a monolithic, consistent entity based directly on Arius’ beliefs and teachings. In fact, as Rowan Williams

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18 It must be remembered that Eusebius was one of the bishops anathematised by Antioch, and was thus trying to justify himself at Nicaea.

19 A New Eusebius, 345.

20 Elsewhere in his letter, however, Eusebius explains that the term ‘begotten’ (which he ‘admits’) implies a generation whose mode is “ineffable and inexplicable to every originated nature”. (A New Eusebius, 346)
puts it, “‘Arianism’, throughout most of the fourth century, was in fact a loose and uneasy coalition of those hostile to Nicaea in general and the *homoousios* in particular”.\(^{21}\)

Of particular interest to this research is the question of to what extent knowledge of God is possible. Both Nicene and non-Nicene Christians agreed that God did not reveal his essence or *ousia* (*ousia*) directly. Arius himself stated in the *Thalia* that even the Son did not know his own essence, let alone that of the Father;

“To put it briefly, God is inexpressible to the Son.

For he is what he is for himself, that is, unutterable.

So that the Son does not have the understanding that would enable him to give voice to any words expressing comprehension.

For him it is impossible to search out the mysteries of the Father, who exists in himself.

For the Son does not [even] know His own substance…”\(^{22}\)

However, some ‘Arians’, for instance Aetius and Eunomius, argued that to know God as unbegotten is to know His *ousia*, whereas Nicenes such as Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa argued that the Father’s *ousia* was fully communicated to the Son who could grasp it as no creature could.\(^{23}\) Thus, as creatures, you and I can only approach knowing God by participation through faith and obedience in the life of the Son, who knows Him perfectly.\(^{24}\)

This may seem like an abstruse point but it is of direct relevance to this research. Given that Nicenes and non-Nicenes alike agree that God’s essence cannot be fully grasped, where exactly is the limit that cannot be crossed? Arius seems to draw it between the Father and

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\(^{22}\) Taken from Athanasius, *de Synodis* 15, quoted and translated in Williams, *Arius*, 103.

\(^{23}\) Eunomius and his views, as well as Chrysostom’s reaction to them, are discussed further below in chapter three.

the Son, placing the Son on the ‘creaturely’ side with the rest of humanity, able to know the Father according to the Son’s own capacity, as shall be discussed further in the next two chapters. The Nicene position, however, was that the line was drawn between the Son and the rest of creation. This crucial point is emphasised time and again by Ephrem and Chrysostom, as we shall see, and is reflected in their hermeneutical language of ‘boundary’, ‘limit’, ‘proportion’ and **sunkatabasis**. The Son could fully grasp the Father’s essence, whereas we can progress in knowledge of God only through participating in the life of the Son. Through faith and obedience in the Son we are continually growing into One whose depths cannot be exhausted or plumbed by us. This approach is not the apophaticism of a God who is completely inaccessible, as perhaps Arius might have believed. Instead, Nicaea invites us to participate in the God who cannot be fully known through participation in His Son, who does know Him and can embody His activity in the way that a created mediator or redeemer could not.\(^{25}\)

The importance of the Council of Nicaea was not restricted to its pronouncements on Arius and the adoption of the ὁμοούσιος. As Williams puts it, “there is a sense in which Nicaea and its aftermath represent a recognition by the Church at large that theology is not only legitimate but necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate … Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another.”\(^{26}\)

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\(^{25}\) See e.g. Williams, *Arius*, 241.

\(^{26}\) Williams, *Arius*, 236.
In this research I look at how both Ephrem and Chrysostom do their theologizing in the public arena: whether by composing hymns to be sung in public, writing textbooks to train students in defending the orthodox doctrine against the heretics or preaching brilliant sermons which contextualised that doctrine. Each of them is concerned with the issue which Williams raises – bringing out the strangeness and the non-contemporary qualities of the creation and fall accounts so that they could be read truthfully in the fourth century. This meant reading them in a post-Nicene context, where Arianism and neo-Arianism were not the only issues. As I shall show in later chapters, other contemporary issues, and in particular the Bardaisanite school for Ephrem and the anthropomorphising crisis for Chrysostom, also shaped their theological response and the way they read their Bibles.

**Why Ephrem Syrus and John Chrysostom?**

As I outlined in the previous section, the fourth century was a time of great theological upheaval. At the heart of the theological crises lay the question of proper hermeneutics: not just the interpretation of particular verses, but also the proper manner in which to approach the sacred text. The arguments and counter-arguments of those fourth century theologians involved in dealing with the crises give us invaluable insights into their hermeneutic, which itself is not static, but evolves in order to deal with the contemporary crises.

I have chosen two great theologians to provide an insight into fourth century exegesis of Genesis 1–3. I have chosen Ephrem and Chrysostom firstly because each of them is a founding figure in his own Christian tradition and therefore influenced large group of thinkers and authors who came after him. 27 Not only have both left a theological legacy,

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27 Paul Russell has written an interesting paper in which he compares the treatment of Mark 13:32 (which was a key verse in the Arian controversy) by Ephrem and Athanasius. His aim is to understand “the deepest
but both are still known and revered among the faithful for their effect on the liturgy and
the prayer life of the church. Secondly, the two men represent the Eastern and Western
manifestations of the fourth century Syriac church. Each man was at the centre of
theological and ecclesiastical debate in his day. Chrysostom stands in a line of Christian
apologists and teachers who received a classic Hellenistic education and argues his
distinctions with the logical mind of the trained rhetor. He was bishop of Antioch and later
Constantinople, and preached to the great and good of both cities. Ephrem is usually seen
as coming from a more Semitic school, expressing himself in a Semitic language and using a
symbolic theology. Barḥadbšabba tells us that before Theodore of Mopsuesta’s exegesis was
translated into Syriac towards the beginning of the 5th century, it was “Mar Ephrem’s
traditions” in the school which he founded in Edessa which dominated Eastern Syriac
exegesis. I wanted to investigate how the theological crises plaguing the whole church in
the fourth century would play out in the Biblical exegesis of these two men writing in
different languages and trained in different schools.

These then are the types of issues I am considering by choosing to compare the writings of
John Chrysostom and Ephrem Syrus on Genesis 1–3. After the Council of Nicaea, Christian

convictions of those on all sides of this complicated quarrel: both in their exposition of the texts and in the
presuppositions according to which they approach that exposition.” Russell explains that his choice of those
two particular figures gives his work “special usefulness”, because each of them is a founding figure in his
own Christian tradition and therefore influenced large groups of authors who came after them. Moreover,
examining the reaction to the Arian crisis from both Eastern and Western parts of the Syriac church helps to
uncover not only the unspoken shared assumptions of Nicene thinking, but also the differences across the
church between those who saw themselves in the Nicene camp. Finally, Russell argues that comparing the
stance of Athanasius with that of Ephrem helps to raise the profile of the early Syriac-speaking church by
showing that “the Syriac-speaking Church, in the form of its most influential author, was fully engaged in the
same theological concerns that rent the Church farther to the West and shared the same instincts and
thought patterns of its Nicene brethren.” Paul Russell, “Ephraem and Athanasius on the Knowledge of Christ:
van Rompay, who although he studies a slightly later situation, makes the same point: “the separation of the two
great theological and intellectual currents of the Syriac culture runs the risk of making us lose sight of what

28 However, van Rompay argues that the introduction of Theodore’s work did not represent a significant
turning point, because already in the fourth century there were significant similarities in exegesis between
Edessa and Antioch. (Lucas van Rompay, “La Littérature Exégétique Syriaque et le rapprochement des
leaders everywhere were dealing with the consequences of the Council’s pronouncements in their own context. I have chosen to study John Chrysostom who was right at the heart of the post-Constantinian, post-Nicene church in Antioch and then Constantinople. In his series of sermons and homilies on Genesis he was forced to address the issue of how we are to read the Scriptural text faithfully in a post-Nicene context. Chrysostom famously developed his understanding of how God accommodates Himself to our limitations through revealing Himself in human language. He has left us a fascinating record of how he developed his theology on Genesis 1–3 in the public arena through his preaching, as a series of responses to contemporary theological and political crises, rather than as a series of academic treatises.

But the eastern church was not all Greek-speaking. It extended to the very easternmost border of the Roman empire, where Rome and Persia were in battle over the boundaries of power in the fourth century. The church here seemed very different. It spoke Syriac, not Greek, it faced different theological ‘enemies’ and it was removed from the centre of political and theological power. Ephrem Syrus was writing at the easternmost edge of the Roman empire – he too was a Nicene Christian, and he too worked out his theology on Genesis 1–3 in the public arena, as a series of polemical poems and a training manual for future presbyters. He too faced the issue of how to interpret the meaning of the text from the words in which it was expressed, but he, unlike Chrysostom, did not have the classical rhetorical training or the Hellenistic linguistic framework in which to express this issue. My interest in this research is to explore how Ephrem, in his context, developed his own hermeneutic to read Genesis 1–3 faithfully in a post-Nicene context. Did he develop a similar hermeneutic to Chrysostom’s? Do writings on Genesis 1–3 support the claim that, as Paul Russell has put it, the church in the East of Syria “was fully engaged in the same
theological concerns that rent the Church farther to the West and shared the same
instincts and thought patterns of its Nicene brethren”? 29

The fundamental thesis of this research is that both Chrysostom and Ephrem used the
doctrine of divine self-limitation as a gift of love as a hermeneutical lens through which to
read Genesis 1–3, and that therefore this ‘instinct and thought pattern’ at least was in
common between Antioch and Edessa.

The creation and fall accounts were always important to patristic authors, and so it should
not surprise us that both Ephrem and John Chrysostom in 4th century Syria wrote
extensively on the book of Genesis. Chrysostom wrote 67 homilies and nine sermons
expounding the entire book of Genesis. Ephrem wrote a Commentary on Genesis which
consists of a prologue and 44 sections, covering the whole book of Genesis. He also wrote a
cycle of 15 hymns On Paradise, which contain profound theological reflections on the
creation, the fall and the nature of paradise itself. Both these authors wrote shortly after
the Council of Nicaea, and both of them adhere to Nicene doctrine. Perhaps it would be
more accurate to say that both authors were concerned with the practical outworkings of
the decisions of the Council of Nicaea in their own apologetic contexts. They were both
concerned to combat contemporary ‘heresies’, mainly the Arian doctrine on the status of
Christ, the teaching from several sources that God created the universe by ordering pre-
existent matter, and the tendency to anthropomorphise God. I discuss each of these
arguments in the appropriate chapters in this thesis.

29 See footnote 27 above.
Despite all these similarities, the two authors are also profoundly different. As I explain in detail in the next chapter, Ephrem wrote from the margins in a town where Nicene Christians were in a minority. He wrote in Syriac, composing a polemical work on Genesis which was almost certainly intended to train students. He also shied away from definitions, propositions and systematisation in his theology, preferring a symbolic theology couched in images and poetry. Chrysostom, on the other hand, preached from Genesis 1–3 from a pulpit at the centre of power in Antioch. He preached in beautiful Attic Greek, having been trained in rhetoric according to the best classical tradition, and well-schooled in the Antiochene way of reading the Bible. It was exactly this contrast between the two men who were relatively close geographically and historically which was the root of my fascination with their work.

In this research I conduct a close study of the texts in their original languages (Greek and Syriac respectively) in order to identify the role which the concept of divine self-limitation played in the authors’ understanding of the Genesis accounts. This research is original in at least three different ways. As far as I can ascertain, nobody has previously compared the writings on Genesis of Chrysostom and Ephrem at any level beyond the cursory, even though the two writers were near contemporaries and both hugely influential on subsequent generations. This is possibly because of the traditional (and linguistic) divide between Syriac studies and Greek language patristic studies. Secondly, the focus on the concept of limit as an interpretive lens in the writings of Chrysostom and Ephrem is new. Because Ephrem’s writings abound with symbols and types, he has traditionally been seen as coming from a different interpretive school to Chrysostom, who is firmly rooted in the ‘Antiochene school’. There has been no systematic study of patristic use of divine self-
limitation as a hermeneutic tool in reading Genesis. Thus, during the course of my research I have demonstrated that divine self-limitation was key to interpreting Genesis not only for Antiochenes like Chrysostom but for a Syriac Father like Ephrem too. I have been able to explore the words which Ephrem uses to convey his understanding of divine self-limitation at work as a gift of love. Finally, I have also been able to throw some light on the dating of some of Chrysostom’s work and on the development of his trademark term συγκατάβασις (sunkatabasis). My concentration on divine self-limitation as a gift of love in Chrysostom’s work has allowed me to widen the discussion of the idea in his work beyond the single term συγκατάβασις.

Overview of Scholarly Literature

In this section I provide an overview of the relevant literature on divine self-limitation in Chrysostom and Ephrem, and in each case I engage with the arguments more thoroughly in the appropriate section of my thesis. A word is needed about the order in which I engage with the two writers. As we will see in the following chapters, Chrysostom makes extensive use of the word συγκατάβασις in his works. Συγκατάβασις is part of, but by no means exhausts, the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love which I study in this thesis. As συγκατάβασις is, however, a ‘way in’ to the scholarly literature. I discuss the literature on Chrysostom first and then move on to Ephrem. When I approach the texts, I start with Ephrem first. This is because, as shall become evident, Ephrem uses the concept of ‘limit’ in a more immediately accessible fashion than does Chrysostom.

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30 Stephen Benin, The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought (Albany: State University of New York, 1993) provides an overview of various authors’ uses of the idea of divine accommodation right across the historical spectrum of Jewish and Christian thought. His study is very interesting and does mention both Chrysostom and Ephrem, but as is inevitable in such a broad study, he only touches on both authors.
Overview of Scholarly Literature on Divine Self-limitation in Chrysostom

Most studies of fourth century patristic exegesis equate what I am terming divine self-limitation with συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom. Συγκατάβασις has been described as “Chrysostom’s distinctive notion about the Scriptures”, a “great principle ... of deep and wide application”, and Chrysostom’s “most characteristic insight into the nature of Scripture.” The Italian scholar Fabio Fabbi wrote:

“... Chrysostom should be considered as the father of the theory of divine condescension [συγκατάβασις] in Biblical inspiration. To him belongs the merit for having first proposed it in a scientific and systematic way, the merit for having amply developed it and for having defended it with the heat of his eloquence ...”

Considering how frequently Chrysostom uses the term, there have been surprisingly few studies of its meaning in his work. Hill’s seminal 1981 article on the subject mentions two studies done in the 1930s and 1940s. One of these he dismisses (“need not be taken seriously”) and I have not located the article myself. The other is Fabio Fabbi’s 1933 article from which I have quoted above, in which Fabbi lists the main ways in which he considers

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31 I consider Chrysostom first because the body of literature on divine self-limitation in Chrysostom is far more substantial than it is in Ephrem.


38 It is M.H. Flanagan, St John Chrysostom’s Doctrine of Condescension and Accuracy in the Scriptures, (Napier, 1948).
Chrysostom to have employed the theory of συγκατάβασις. Unfortunately, Fabbi’s excellent work on συγκατάβασις seems to have been largely ignored for about half a century. The next major work on the subject seems to have been Hill’s important article on συγκατάβασις. Hill prefers to translate συγκατάβασις as ‘considerateness’, rather than ‘condescension’ as in Fabbi’s ‘condiscendenza’. Like Fabbi, Hill categorises the various ways in which Chrysostom employs the notion of συγκατάβασις, and also shows that Chrysostom’s use of συγκατάβασις is paired with other key words which bring out its meaning. Subsequent to Hill’s article, Francois Dreyfus published an article on ‘divine condescension’ as a hermeneutic principle of the Old Testament in Jewish and Christian tradition. More recently, Mary Tse has briefly examined the role of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom’s hermeneutics, and agreed with Hill that “the most basic idea conveyed by συγκατάβασις is that God has chosen to communicate with man through human language.”

The most comprehensive treatment of συγκατάβασις since Hill’s overview was published is the PhD thesis of David Rylaarsdam. Rylaarsdam draws on the work of Fabbi and Hill but prefers to use the term ‘divine adaptability’ to translate συγκατάβασις. He develops what he terms a taxonomy of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom’s works. Rylaarsdam argues that for Chrysostom God is the divine teacher whose main pedagogical technique is συγκατάβασις. The divine teacher has four main attributes: omniscience, persuasiveness, humility and love, and it is these four attributes which characterise His pedagogical method of

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συγκατάβασις. The divine teacher uses three main pedagogical techniques in His
συγκατάβασις: corporeal signs, variation and progression.

In the second part of this book I engage critically and in more detail with these arguments,
in the light of my close reading of Chrysostom’s *Homilies* and *Sermons* on Genesis 1–3. I
expand the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love beyond the use of συγκατάβασις
and explore how Chrysostom uses the whole doctrine as a hermeneutical lens.

**Overview of Scholarly Literature on Divine Self-limitation in Ephrem**

In Ephrem’s works there is no one Syriac word which plays the same rôle as συγκατάβασις
in Chrysostom’s works, either in prominence or in semantic content. However, the briefest
acquaintance with Ephrem’s *Hymns of Paradise* will show that the concept of limit was a
crucial one in his exegesis. This should not surprise us at all – Ephrem was writing shortly
after the Council of Nicaea, and this council, sometimes referred to as the most important
single council in the ancient Church, came about largely as a result of the Arian crisis,
which as I argue in the Introduction of this book was a crisis over *limits* and *boundaries*: on
which side of the line separating the divine from the human, the begotten from the
unbegotten, does Jesus fall? Where should we draw the line which says: “This is the limit of
human knowledge. To attempt to inquire further would be blasphemy and madness”? These are the issues to which Ephrem returns again and again in his exegesis on Genesis,
and his writings abound with limits, walls, fences and boundaries.
Although a fair amount has been written about Ephrem’s exegesis, very little attention has been paid to this specific aspect of Ephrem’s hermeneutics. This was at least partly due to the traditional scholarly divide between Hellenistic and Semitic schools of thought, for as I show in Part 1 Greek philosophers had paid significant attention to the concept of ‘limit’. However, in recent years, scholarly opinion has begun to entertain the notion that Ephrem was not as hermetically sealed off from Hellenistic influences as has been previously suggested. Thus in chapter 1 I provide an overview of the literature challenging the traditional assumption that Ephrem was ‘Semitic’ and not ‘Hellenistic’ in his thought and writing. Next, in chapter 2, I present detailed evidence (drawing on the work of Ute Possekel and William Schoedel) that Greek philosophical concepts of limit very probably influenced Ephrem’s writings. However, specific attention to the concept of limit in Ephrem’s hermeneutics seems to be missing from the literature.

Therefore, unlike in Chrysostom where the term συγκατάβασις gives us an easy way of spotting the idea of divine self-limitation at work, we need to work harder to ascertain where the idea is present in Ephrem. Several studies have touched on the idea. A notable example is Andrew Hofer’s paper on the concept of the humility of God in Ephrem. Hofer

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43 Ute Possekel, Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian (Lovanii: In Aedibus Peeters, 1999).


links the idea of humility with συγκατάβασις, and then tries to identify the words used by the Syriac writers such as Ephrem to convey the concept of humility, and mentions in particular the root حَمِيٌّ (mkk). Thus the idea of divine humility provides one route into exploring the idea of divine self-limitation as gift in Ephrem. Another route is through exploring the tension between language and silence in Ephrem. This is the route which Paul Russell has taken in his study of Ephrem’s Hymns of Faith and Sermons on Faith. In Part 1 of this research I engage critically and in more detail with these arguments in the light of my own close reading of Ephrem’s Commentary on Genesis and Hymns of Paradise.

Methodology and Research Process

The methodology of the research involved a close reading of the texts in their original languages – Syriac for Ephrem and Greek for Chrysostom. Most of the time I have provided English quotations from scholarly acclaimed translations, but where appropriate I have translated the text myself and indicated that I have done so.

There are three main areas which I have tried to pay close attention to when reading the texts – ‘limit’, συγκατάβασις and ‘divine self-limitation as gift of love’. The first of these areas includes words and phrases which evoke the concept of limit. These include both physical limits (doors, gates, boundaries, fences) and metaphorical limits such as commandments. I have tried to allow the texts to speak for themselves. Thus in each case I have started by noting the occurrence and the context of the words in the text which evoke the concept of limit. This has the advantage of minimising the interpretive framework imposed on the texts, but it has the disadvantage that the picture emerging from the


47 See footnotes 51–54 in this chapter for details of the texts.
relatively small number of texts studied in detail might not be representative of the
author’s corpus as a whole. Thus in each case I have engaged critically in conversation with
wider studies. In particular, for Ephrem, I have engaged with Ute Possekel’s seminal work
on Ephrem’s philosophical heritage⁴⁸, and looked at the occurrence of the concept of limit
in his other works.

Secondly, in Chrysostom, I have paid attention to his use of the word συγκατάβασις and
engaged with David Rylaarsdam’s taxonomy of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom’s works as a
whole.⁴⁹ When conducting the research, I could have followed the lead of most scholars and
started by studying the occurrence of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom. However, I did not want
to draw too rapid an equivalence between the Fathers’ understanding of God expressing His
love through His self-limitation and this one word συγκατάβασις. I therefore explored the
context in which Chrysostom used συγκατάβασις, and realised that συγκατάβασις on its own
is insufficient to characterise Chrysostom’s theological position. I did not want to fall into
the methodological trap described by Louth, where “[o]ne breaks the concept down into its
constituent parts and analyses each of these parts – historically and conceptually – and
then puts it all back together again, but one still seems to have missed the significance that
it holds for those who value it.”⁵⁰ Thus I started to widen my picture of Chrysostom’s
understanding of divine self-limitation as gift of love by noting the other words and
phrases he used in a similar context. I studied the first seventeen of Chrysostom’s Homilies
on Genesis, looking for references to divine self-limitation through the use of συγκατάβασις
and otherwise. Then, I studied Chrysostom’s Sermons on Genesis, where I made the

⁴⁸ Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*.

⁴⁹ Rylaarsdam, “Adaptability”.

⁵⁰ Andrew Louth, “The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology” in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A.
discovery that even though the idea of divine self-limitation is very much present, the term συγκατάβασις is almost entirely absent. Thus, by comparing parallel passages in the Sermons and the Homilies, I could identify the words and concepts which were the building blocks of Chrysostom’s concept of συγκατάβασις.

Having studied the texts from both authors closely, a picture began to emerge of the symbolic and narrative expressions of both authors’ perceptions of the reality underlying the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love. In Part 3 of this book I place the doctrine within its doctrinal context, looking at how it functions both theologically and hermeneutically for Ephrem and Chrysostom, and how we might bridge the hermeneutical gap across the centuries to allow it to speak to us today. In the final section of the book I return to the problem of reading troublesome Biblical texts, which was the original motivation for my research. I take three of the narratives in Genesis (the six days of creation, the creation in the image of God, and the Fall) and ask what task each author is asking the Bible to perform in their interpretation of the narrative. I place their interpretations side by side to allow common themes to emerge from the two different voices. I then provide a suggestion as to how the emerging themes could speak to our reading of Genesis today.

I have now explained how I paid attention to the three areas of ‘limit’, συγκατάβασις and ‘divine self-limitation as gift of love’ in my research. A final word needs to be said about the title “The self-enclosing God”. This is in fact a comment on a philosophical formula contemporary to both Ephrem and Chrysostom: “God encloses but is not enclosed.” As I go on to argue in detail in Chapter 2, Ephrem (as indeed did Chrysostom) spoke of a God who was not enclosed by anything or anyone, but who freely chose to enclose Himself as a divine gift of love.
Structure of the Argument

The thesis is structured as follows. In this introduction, I explain the motivation for my research. I provide an overview of some key issues in patristic exegesis and of some major issues facing the church in the fourth century. I also provide an overview of the literature on συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom and some corresponding ideas in Ephrem - I engage critically and in more depth with the scholarly contributions outlined here later at the appropriate points in my thesis, in the light of my close readings of the indicated texts. In this introductory chapter I also explain my methodology, and I explain why I chose to focus on Chrysostom and Ephrem, and their writings on the creation and fall accounts. The bulk of the thesis is then divided into two parts. Part 1 is devoted to Ephrem Syrus. In it I start (Chapter 1) by describing key features of Ephrem’s cultural, political and theological context in both Nisibis and Edessa. I also discuss the genre of Ephrem’s writings and place them within their context. I end Chapter 1 with a discussion of the route by which the philosophical notion of limit might have been transmitted to Ephrem, particularly in the form of the mantra “God encloses but is not enclosed.” In Chapter 2 I conduct a detailed examination of some of Ephrem’s writings on creation and fall in his Commentary on Genesis\(^\text{51}\) and his Hymns of Paradise\(^\text{52}\). In this chapter I demonstrate the centrality of limit in Ephrem’s


exegesis, and suggest that he uses it in multiple ways in order to convey the multiple facets of his theological interpretation of the self-enclosing, self-emptying, self-limiting God.

Part 2 runs parallel to Part 1 and is devoted to John Chrysostom. In it I start (Chapter 3) by describing key features of Chrysostom’s cultural, political and theological context in Antioch. I also discuss the genre of Chrysostom’s writings and place them within their context. I end chapter 3 with a discussion of the route by which the idea of divine self-limitation might have been transmitted to Chrysostom. In Chapter 4 I conduct a detailed examination of some of Chrysostom’s writings on creation and fall in his Homilies and Sermons on Genesis. In this chapter I demonstrate the centrality of the doctrine of divine self-limitation in Chrysostom’s exegesis, and show how he comes to use the term συγκατάβασις as his ‘trademark term’ for the doctrine. At the same time, I explore the instances in which Chrysostom’s expression of divine self-limitation is not limited to the word συγκατάβασις.

The thesis concludes with Part 3, in which I consider what I have learned from both authors about their understanding of divine self-limitation as a gift of love. In this third and final part of the thesis I do two things. First, in Chapter 5 I seek to place divine self-limitation as a gift of love in its proper theological setting within the wider context of patristic theology. This is not to assume that Ephrem and Chrysostom shared an identical theological outlook.

53 For the English text of the Homilies I have used Robert Hill’s translation unless otherwise indicated: Hill, R.C., Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 1-17, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986). As far as I am aware the most recent Greek edition of Chrysostom’s Homilies on Genesis is still Migne’s 1857 edition. (See editorial comment on p.6 of Hill’s translation - apparently the Corpus Christianorum is working on a Series Graeca but Chrysostom’s Genesis homilies are not available yet.) I have therefore worked with the Migne text which I have been accessing online: Migne, J.P. and Cavallera, F., Patrologiae Cursus Completus ... Series Graeca, etc. Gr. & Lat, 1857, vol.53.

54 As noted above, I have used Migne for the Greek text: Migne, J.P. and Cavallera, F., Patrologiae Cursus Completus ... Series Graeca, etc. Gr. & Lat, 1857, vol.54. For the English text I have used Hill’s translation unless otherwise indicated; Hill, R.C., Saint John Chrysostom, Eight Sermons on the Book of Genesis, (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004).
Rather, it is to say (and to demonstrate from the texts) that they share common doctrinal emphases, and to show how divine self-limitation fits within these emphases. Next, in Chapter 6, I address hermeneutical considerations. First, I sketch an outline of some general principles of patristic hermeneutics, and I show from the texts how both Ephrem and Chrysostom used the idea of limit to develop the deeper, spiritual meaning of Genesis 1–3 in their generation. I then consider how we can cross the hermeneutical bridge from the fourth century context into the present day, so that we can apply the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love to our contemporary context. This prepares the way for the final part of the book, which looks at three specific examples of how we can use fourth century wisdom to address troublesome texts today. The research ends with a conclusion which considers possible ways forward.
Part 1: EPHREM SYRUS

Chapter 1: The Heritage of Ephrem Syrus

Ephrem sees himself standing in a long line of tradition. These are the closing words to his Commentary on Genesis:

“To God, who through his Son, created all creatures from nothing – although they were not written down in the beginning because they were revealed to the understanding of Adam, and every generation handed down to the next [generation] just what it had learned from the previous [generation]. Because all went astray from God and all had forgotten that God was Creator, God had Moses write all this down for the Hebrew people ... In the desert Moses wrote down these things that had been manifested in Adam’s mind while he was in Paradise, [and they were handed down] through the ancient peoples who knew these things without their being written down, through the intermediate peoples who through the Scripture heard and believed them, and through the last peoples who added on to the books of the middle ones, and even through those who stubbornly remained in their resistance and were not convinced – and to His Christ and to His Holy Spirit be glory and honor, now and always, forever and ever. Amen. Amen.”

In this chapter, I paint a picture of Ephrem’s heritage in its widest sense – not just scriptural, but also theological, social, political, cultural, literary and philosophical. I establish where Ephrem stands in these traditions, so that in later chapters I can identify in which ways Ephrem’s heritage, bequeathed to us, can be a living heritage which inspires and informs our practice today.

Introduction

Ephrem, known as the “Harp of the Holy Spirit”, is described by E.J. Mathews as “unquestionably the greatest writer in the history of the Syriac-speaking church”.

He has not always enjoyed such renown in the West, but in recent decades scholars such as Sebastian Brock and Robert Murray have not hesitated to hail him as, for instance, “the greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”

In this chapter, I explore the background to Ephrem’s writings on the creation and fall. I am particularly concerned with what I call Ephrem’s ‘heritage’ – the social, theological, literary and philosophical factors which shaped his mind. Thus in Section 1.1 I discuss the cultural, political and theological context that Ephrem found himself in, first in Nisibis and then in Edessa. In Section 1.2 I take a look at the genres of poetry and commentary, and consider why Ephrem might have chosen to use these genres. Finally, in Section 1.3, I anticipate my discussion of the importance of ‘limit’ in Ephrem’s exegesis by tracing the routes of philosophical heritage through which the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘limit’ might have become key concepts for him.

1.1. Ephrem’s Social and Theological Heritage: the cultural, theological and political contexts of Nisibis and Edessa

Ephrem was born around 309, at or near Nisibis, a city of great strategic importance situated close to the ever-shifting lines of power drawn up between the great empires of Rome and Persia. This section describes the context within which he was living, worshipping, thinking and teaching.

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56 McVey (ed.), Commentary on Genesis, 3.

57 Murray, Symbols, 31.
1.1.1 The Church in Nisibis

Accounts of the Christian church in Nisibis are generally accompanied by wails of despair at the paucity of the evidence, but nonetheless a few reasonable conjectures can be made. In 313, when Ephrem was just a child, Constantine I and Licinius signed the Edict of Milan allowing religious freedom in general, and to the Christians in particular. It seems likely that this change encouraged the establishment of a bishopric at Nisibis, for we know that Jacob, traditionally known as the first bishop of Nisibis, attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 as a member of the anti-Arian lobby.

Jacob’s invitation to this great council immediately raises a question about the nature of the Nisibene church in 325: was Jacob invited because the church was of some importance and renown? Russell suggests that Jacob was invited because Constantine wished...

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59 McVey comments that the Syriac tradition, as exemplified by the *Life of Ephrem*, recounts that Ephrem was born of a Christian mother and a pagan priest father, that he went with Jacob of Nisibis to the Council of Nicaea, that he spent eight years as a monk in Scetis during which time he met the great Abba Bishoi, that he resisted ordination by Basil the Great by feigning madness, that he composed his hymns as an antidote to the hymn-singing proselytisation of the Bardaisanites and that he died shortly after leaving his monastic cell to help out those affected by famine in Edessa. For the Byzantine biographers though, the prototype was an *Enconium*, traditionally attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, which emphasizes his ascetical, monastic, solitary lifestyle. Work during the twentieth century has cast doubts on both sides of this biographical heritage. Scholars now agree that the accounts of the visit to the Council of Nicaea and the meetings with Basil and Bishoi are highly unlikely to have any historical accuracy. Further, word studies by Dom Edmund Beck have made it apparent that the terms used by Ephrem such as *abile* (mourners), *bnay qyama* (sons of the covenant) and *ihidaye* (solitaries) were used not to designate a solitary monastic lifestyle but rather those who were involved in the day to day life of the church, defending it from heterodox groups. Moreover, recent scholarship has also discovered a native Syriac tradition (e.g. a *memra* of Jacob of Sarug) which distances itself from the hagiographical picture of Ephrem as another Anthony and emphasizes instead Ephrem’s work as a bishop and teacher. (McVey, *Commentary*, 15–27)
“to include the Church all the way to the empire’s eastern border in his public embrace [rather than as]... a reflection of the particular size and vibrancy of the Christian community there.”\textsuperscript{60}

However, it does seem reasonable to assume that the Nisibene church community itself antedated the bishopric, and this is attested to by the burial inscription of Abercius which mentions the Christian community (“brothers and sisters”)\textsuperscript{61} at Nisibis, and was itself used as a model in about 215.\textsuperscript{62} Thus we can assume that there had been a Christian community in Nisibis for over a century by the time Ephrem was born. The Nisibene church may have grown slowly, as Nisibis had been a Jewish stronghold for centuries before Ephrem, ever since the students of Rabbi Akiba fled to stay with Rabbi Judah ben Bathyra in Nisibis during the Bar Kokhba war.\textsuperscript{63}

Ephrem would have been baptised as a Christian, but probably at too early a date for him to have enjoyed the splendid surroundings of the still extant baptistry, which bears the inscription:

“This baptistry was erected and completed in the year 671 [= A.D. 359/60] in the time of Bishop Vologeses through the zeal of the priest Akepsimas. May this inscription be a memorial to them.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Russell, “Nisibis”, 129, 220–1.

\textsuperscript{61} See Possekel, \textit{Greek Philosophical Concepts}, 18.

\textsuperscript{62} Russell, “Nisibis”, 218.


\textsuperscript{64} Brock, \textit{Hymns on Paradise}, 11.
The most interesting thing about this inscription is that it is in Greek. The traditional view of Ephrem’s work has been that he was almost entirely untouched by Hellenistic influences and allows us to access a mindset which is purely “Semitic.” Thus, for instance, J.P. Amar argues that

“through the fourth century, this distinctly Semitic expression of Christianity remained largely untouched by the influence of classical philosophy and rhetoric that dominated Christian writing in the West. What this means is that early Syriac tradition represents the only fully articulated expression of Christianity that preserves the Semitic language and worldview of the original teaching of Jesus. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-c. 373) was the most eloquent representative of Syriac Christian tradition in its formative period before it was overtaken by Greco-Roman culture.”

And again, Sebastian Brock writes that

“[Ephrem’s importance] lies in the fact that he is the one major writer who is a representative of Semitic-Asian Christianity in its yet unhellenized-uneuropeanized form.”

This view that Syriac Christianity was essentially ‘Semitic’ is based on three main assumptions. Firstly, scholars seem to have assumed that ‘Semitic’ was a monolithic concept and consequently they have sometimes failed to draw distinctions between language and culture or to allow for degrees of influence. Secondly, scholars have often assumed that Ephrem knew little or nothing of the Greek language and philosophy and that he was actively hostile towards them. Thirdly, scholars have assumed that the church


66 Brock, Luminous Eye, 15.
culture was markedly different from that of its Western counterpart in both theology and liturgical practice.

The first of these assumptions is beyond my remit here, but I will just note in passing that the use of ‘Semitic’ as a monolithic descriptor has been robustly challenged by Possekel and Millar among others. The second assumption has not seemed unreasonable to scholars given some of the things that Ephrem himself wrote. To take a well-known example:

“Blessed is he who has not tasted
The bitterness of the wisdom of the Greeks;”

The unfortunate thing is that such couplets gain a notoriety of their own and are usually quoted out of context. As has been pointed out by others, the context of this polemical remark is the anti-Arian debate, and the target of Ephrem’s hostility is not Greek culture as such but the Arian attempt to apply the “Greek” method of definition, scrutiny and speculation to the mystery of God the Son. Possekel has provided a comprehensive body of evidence to support the thesis that Ephrem drew widely from the Greek philosophical corpus, and in my later chapters on Ephrem’s understanding of divine self-limitation, I provide further evidence for this.

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69 Especially Ute Possekel - see e.g. Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 47, where she also reviews the arguments.

70 Possekel (*Greek Philosophical Concepts*) points out that there is also abundant evidence of Greek influence on early Syriac literature, notably the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, which was probably written by Bardaisan’s disciple Philip, and whose opening paragraph is reminiscent of the beginning of Plato’s *Republic*. This is important for my purposes as Ephrem is engaged in a constant polemic against Bardaisanite views in his *Commentary on Genesis*, and tradition holds that the *Hymns on Paradise* were written to be sung on the streets of Edessa as a weapon in a war of similar tactics being waged by the disciples of Bardaisan. Thus Possekel concludes that in Ephrem’s context, the Greek language was used and Greek notions had become part of the culture, but that it is not possible to know exactly which Greek texts Ephrem himself had access to (p.27). Further, she concludes that Hellenistic thought had penetrated Syriac culture to such an extent that it was no
I shall focus here on the third assumption, namely that the Nisibene church culture was markedly different from that of its more Western counterpart in both theology and liturgical practice. Nisibis did have a Greek name, Antioch of Mygdonia, but Russell notes that it had dropped out of use with the fall of the Seleucids, and by Ephrem’s time the traditional name or one of its variants had been commonly used throughout the Hellenistic period. Russell also notes that there is no record of Greek games, with all that that entails in terms of Greek culture, being held east of the Euphrates. The Euphrates seems to have been the dividing line which cultures struggled to cross. Sebastian Brock has suggested that west of the Euphrates inscriptions tended to be in Greek, whereas east of the river they tended to be found in Syriac. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the baptistery inscription quoted above is in Greek. There may well be cultural, political and theological implications to this language choice. The presence of Greek in a public inscription does not necessarily imply that the congregation spoke and worshipped in Greek but certainly would seem to imply a lack of hostility towards the Hellenized culture of the Western church. A congregation hostile to Antiochene influences and their descendants would be extremely unlikely to choose Greek as the commemorative language for their baptistery. This is entirely consonant with Jacob’s travel to Nicaea and with the Nisibene church’s identification with the Emperor’s party-line on the Arian question.


Russell agrees: “Might it not be possible that … many in the community also thought of themselves as being deeply attached, as Christians, to the Christian Roman Empire? With the Persian Empire on their door-step more and more hostile to Christianity, this does not seem an unreasonable thing to suggest. If so, might not the choice of language for the baptistery inscription be a further manifestation of that desire of the community to cling to their western brethren rather than a sign of their liturgical or “official” language” (Footnote p.211–2). See also Wido van Peursen, “Daniel’s Four Kingdoms in the Syriac Tradition”, *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation: Studies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* edited by van Peursen, W.Th., and Dyk, J.W. Studia Semitica Neerlandica 57 (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 189–208, esp. p. 201. Also, Robert Murray, *Symbols*, 242.
Even though Ephrem probably worshipped in Syriac, it seems then that the theology of his Nisibene church was consciously allied with the Nicene position, and I produce ample evidence of the importance of Nicaean doctrine in Ephrem’s exegesis in my chapter on his Hymns on Paradise. However, we do have evidence that Ephrem produced some innovation in liturgical practice. Jacob of Sarug describes how Ephrem included women in the liturgy:

“The blessed Ephrem saw that the women were silent from praise and in his wisdom he decided that it was right that they should sing out; So just as Moses gave timbrels to the young girls, thus did this discerning man compose hymns for virgins … … and the Church resounded with the lovely sound of chaste women’s voices.”

Of course we have no evidence that Ephrem started this practice in Nisibis rather than in Edessa, but given that he only spent the last ten years of his life in Edessa, “Ephrem’s chorus of inner voices would have been tuned to a Nisibene register rather than an Edessene one.”

1.1.2 The School in Nisibis

Tradition also states that Ephrem was the head or interpreter (mpašqana) of the Christian school at Nisibis, though even the existence of the school at this point has been debated. What is certain is that Ephrem produced several commentaries, which are both didactical and polemical in style, and could easily have been used as textbooks are used today. In this research I study one of these commentaries, the Commentary on Genesis. Again, tradition

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74 Jacob of Serug, quoted in Brock, Hymns, 23.
75 Russell, Nisibis, 181.
76 The seventh century Barhadbsabba dates the school to the time of Bishop Jacob, but the scholarly consensus is that it is unlikely to go back earlier than the fifth century. See for instance McVey, Commentary, 29 and Possekel, Greek Philosophical Concepts, 19.
holds that Ephrem set up a school in Edessa, and that it was during this period that he composed his commentaries (including the one on Genesis), and that the commentaries were then used as the standard syllabus in the school. However, tradition leaves much evidence to be desired.

There may, however, be some evidence that Ephrem did not receive a formal rhetorical and philosophical training as Chrysostom did. For instance (although admittedly his prose is highly hagiographic), Sozomen states that

“He devoted his life to monastic philosophy; and although he received no instruction, he became, contrary to all expectation, so proficient in the learning and language of the Syrians, that he comprehended with ease the most abstruse theorems of philosophy.”

Despite these claims that he did not receive a formal education, he was clearly a learned man, and Possekel suggest that he may have acquired his learning under the Nisibene bishops: Jacob the ascetic, Babu the strong and Vologeses the learned. Ephrem was not a monk but he did live the life of one of the “Sons and Daughters of the Covenant”, a group of celibate Christians who lived a communal life but did not separate themselves off from the wider Christian community.

In 363 Nisibis was ceded to Persia for 120 years, and it seems to be around the time of this decree that Ephrem left for Edessa.

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78 Possekel, *Greek Philosophical Concepts*, 49.


80 McVey, *Commentary*, 31–33.
1.1.3 The Church in Edessa

Rather more is known about Edessa. Like Nisibis, Edessa was located on major trade routes and was a city of great strategic importance.\(^{81}\) It is also a city of great literary importance: it housed a famous archive, and the local Aramaic of the Edessa region became the literary language we now call 'Syriac'. After the end of Seleucid rule in Edessa, this language became the administrative language, the royal language of the Abgarid dynasty and above all a religious language.\(^{82}\) We will see later that Bardaisan (fl. end of second century), one of Edessa’s most famous sons, wrote in Syriac even though he was clearly heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. It is, however, interesting for our purposes in this study to note that there seems to be evidence of a direct Antiochene influence on Edessa in the second and third centuries in the form of funerary floor mosaics in tomb chambers and wall mosaics in villas.\(^{83}\)

When Ephrem arrived there in 363 he would have found a church which, according to Eusebius, traced its origins back to Jesus himself who was said to have written a letter to the king of the city and to have sent Addai to found the Edessan church.\(^{84}\) This letter was said to be kept in the great Edessan archive. The Chronicle of Edessa, which probably dates from the sixth century, gives the following account of events:

“1. In the year 180 kings began to rule in Edessa.


\(^{82}\) For an account of the origins of Syriac in Edessa and its subsequent development see Healey, “Edessan Milieu”.

\(^{83}\) See for instance Ute Possekel, “From Damascus to Edessa - travelogue of a visit to Syria and Turkey”, Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies. 12.1 (2009), 135–165 and also Healey 118.

\(^{84}\) See Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica, 1.13 which records a legend that the church in Edessa had an apostolic foundation and that the archives of Edessa contain a letter to the king of the city from Jesus himself.
2. In the year 266 Augustus Caesar was made emperor.

3. In the year 309 our Lord was born.

4. In the year 400 Abgar the king built a mausoleum for himself.

5. In the year 449 Marcion forsook the Catholic Church.

6. The year 465, in the month Tammuz, on the eleventh day (i.e., July 11th, 154 C.E.),
   Bardesanes (Bardaisan) was born.

7. Lucius Caesar, with his brother, subjugated the Parthians to the Romans in the fifth year
   of his reign.

8. In the year 513, in the reign of Severus, and in the reign of Abgar the king, son of Maano
   the king, in the month Tishrin the latter (i.e., November), the fountain of water which
   proceeds from the great palace of Abgar the great king increased, and it prevailed, and it
   went up according to its former manner, and overflowed and ran out on all sides, so that
   the courts and the porches and the royal houses began to be filled with water ... the waters
   rose like a great sea beyond the walls of the city. And the waters began to come down from
   the apertures of the wall into the city ... they carried away everything that was found before
   them ... and they destroyed the temple of the church of the Christians ...

10. The year 551 Manes (Mani) was born.

11. The year 614, were broken down the walls of Edessa the second time in the days of
    Diocletian the king.

12. In the year 624 (i.e. 312/3), Conon (Qune) the bishop laid the foundations of the Church of
    Edessa; and Sha'ad, the bishop who came after him, built and finished the structure.

13. In the year 635, the cemetery of Edessa was built, in the days of Ethalaha (Aithallaha) the
    bishop, the year before the great synod of Nicea was held.

14. The year 635, Ethalaha became bishop in Edessa; and he constructed the cemetery, and
    the eastern side of the church.

15. And the year after, a synod of three hundred and eighteen bishops was assembled at
    Nicea.
16. The year 639, there was building and enlargement in the church of Edessa.

17. In the year 649, died Mar Jacob, bishop of Nisibis.

23. In the year 672, Mar Abraham, bishop of Edessa, left the world.

24. And in the same year, Vologesh, bishop of Nisibis, departed from this world.

25. And in the same year came Barses, the bishop from Haran to Edessa by command of the king

26. And in the year 674, in the month Haziran (June), Julian went down and made war with the Persians, and died there (this was the time when Ephrem arrived at Edessa)

27. In the year 675, in the month Shebat (February), Valentinian the Great became king, and Valens his brother. ...

29. The year 681, was built the great Beth-ma'amuditho (House of Baptizing) of Edessa.

30. In the year 684, in the month Haziran (June), on the ninth in it, departed from the world Mar Ephraim the wise (Ephrem's death, 372/373 C.E.)

31. And in the month Elul (September) of that year, the people departed from the church of Edessa, through the persecution of the Arians. **85

We can gather from this document that by the end of the second century, when Bardaisan was active, there was some sort**86 of Christianity in Edessa. The great flood of c.200 destroyed “the temple of the church of the Christians”, and the next reference to a church building describes the laying of the foundations of the Edessan church building around 312/3, and the baptistry around 60 years later. This is consistent with the change in religious toleration marked by the Edict of Milan in 313, as already noted above. We also learn that when Ephrem arrived in Edessa in around 363, Edessa had a Nicene bishop (Barses) by imperial order. However, it must not be assumed that the presence of Barses

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85 Chronicle of Edessa, accessed in September 2012 at http://www.monachos.net/content/patristics/patristictexts/331. I added the explanatory notes in italics.

86 Or perhaps more accurately, ‘many sorts of Christianity in Edessa’ – see below.
implied a strong, monolithic Edessan church which was unanimously Nicaean. Almost immediately after Ephrem’s arrival Barses was exiled by Emperor Valens who supported the Arian Edessan Christians. In fact, Ephrem seems to imply that when he arrived in Edessa he was shocked to discover that the Nicene Christians were marginalised to the extent that the title ‘Christian’ had gone to the ‘heretics’ (Marcionites) and the Nicenes had to content themselves with being named after a second century bishop:

“They again call us 'Palūtians,' and this we quite decisively reject and disavow. Cursed be those who let themselves be called by the name Palūt instead of by the name of Christ!”

This tells us that Ephrem arrived in an Edessa in which the Nicene ‘brand’ of Christianity was recognised as the dominant one, and hence to a situation which is not to be compared with the one prevailing in, for example, Antioch at the time when Chrysostom was in power there.

1.1.4 The School in Edessa

Tradition has it that Ephrem wrote his Commentary on Genesis for use in the school which he himself founded at Edessa. Whereas the Greek hagiographical tradition described Ephrem as an ascetic, recent scholarly attention has focused on the native Syriac biographical tradition which knows Ephrem as a teacher rather than a recluse. The sixth century Bar Hadbesabba knows Ephrem only as the teacher who was appointed by Jacob of Nisibis as head of the school there, and who founded another school in Edessa when he fled there following the ceding of Nisibis to the Persians. Bar Hadbesabba tells us that Ephrem’s

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87 Possekel, Greek Philosophical Concepts, 24.
89 See Section 3.1 in Chapter 3 later in this thesis.
commentaries were used in the school until those of Theodore of Mopsuestia were translated into Syriac. Historians of medicine also talk of a fourth century school at Edessa which taught medicine based on Hippocratic principles, and which was associated with the hospital said to have been founded by Ephrem to look after the plague victims in 373. In fact, Healey suggests that even Bardaisan towards the end of the second century was teaching philosophy in an Edessan school. McVey comments that in his sixth century ode on *Mar Ephrem the Teacher*, Jacob of Sarug devotes 289 lines of poetry to Ephrem, in which Ephrem’s teaching activity is explicitly mentioned nearly fifty times but his ascetical practices not even hinted at. McVey writes that

“the picture Jacob paints is clearly of one who is visibly and actively engaged in teaching and preserving the orthodoxy of the lay church community.”

In the spring of 373, Ephrem mediated and supervised the distribution of grain during the famine in Edessa, but the effort seems to have proved too much for him, and on the 9th June 373 he died.

1.1.5 The 'Enemies' in Edessa and the Teachings of Bardaisan

Just as in Nisibis, Ephrem would have been living side-by-side with a sizeable Jewish population in Edessa. Already in the Abgar legend we are told that it is a Jew who hosts Addai when he visits Edessa, and the *Doctrine of Addai* mentions a Jewish colony of silk traders. Ephrem would also have been confronted by communities worshipping pagan

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90 McVey, *Commentary*, 22.


93 McVey, *Commentary*, 23.


divinities, including Bel, Nebo, Sin and Atargatis. It is known that pagan beliefs survived the Constantinisation of Christianity as in the fifth century Bishop Rabbula destroyed four pagan temples, and in the sixth century Jacob of Sarug delivered a speech on the fall of the idols. Thus Ephrem found himself having to hold his own against a large spectrum of Edessan ‘enemies’: Jews, Chaldeans and other pagans, Arians, Marcionites, Manicheans and Bardaisanites.

In this research I show how in his *Hymns on Paradise* and his *Commentary on Genesis* Ephrem develops his doctrine of divine self-limitation as a response to the competing theologies and cosmologies he encounters, particularly those of the Arians and the Bardaisanites. I have provided an overview of the Arian controversy in the introduction to this thesis, but the Bardaisanite cosmology is less well known. In the paragraphs which follow I provide a brief overview of what is known about Bardaisan’s teachings, in order to clarify which theological claims Ephrem would have been refuting and resisting in his exegesis of the Genesis creation accounts.

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97 Kronholm (Tryggye Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, with particular reference to the influence of Jewish exegetical tradition* (CWK Gleerup, Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series: Lund, Sweden, 1978)) identifies six major heresies which Ephrem deals with, namely Arians, Bardaisanites, Chaldeans (astrologers), Jews, Manicheans and Marcionites. Kronholm sees the *De Fide* hymn cycle (and some *Contra Haereses*) to be mainly aimed at the Arians, who are criticised for causing division and for their flawed exegesis. As for Bardaisan, Kronholm restricts his analysis of Ephrem’s arguments against the Bardaisanites to *Contra Haereses* and *Carmina Nisibena*. In this work I show that his *Commentary on Genesis* also contains attempts to refute Bardaisan. Then there were the Marcionites, whom Ephrem understood to have been corrupted by the Greeks into taking over the concept of ὑλή, and who proclaimed two powers. Combining the worst of Marcion and Bardaisan were the Manichaeans. Ephrem uses his punning technique to play on mny/m’ny - the Evil One has clothed himself in Mani as a garment, while Mani has clothed himself in all evil and has become a worn-out garment to his followers. Ephrem argues that the dualistic Manichean mythology leads inexorably to incorrect Biblical interpretation. Finally, Ephrem argues against the views of the Chaldeans (Babylonian astronomers and astrologers who are suspect because of the influence they attribute to heavenly spheres and powers), and of course the Jews. See also Ilaria Ramelli, *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009).
Bardaisan was born around 154 in Edessa and died in 222. Healey describes Bardaisan as a Christian, but one who “walked a tightrope between paganism and Christianity”, attempting to harmonise various aspects of Christianity, Greek philosophy and Semitic culture. In his study on Bardaisan, H.J.W. Drijvers notes that the Greek Fathers “do not breathe a word of any special cosmology of Bardaisan”, and points out that this may either mean that they were unacquainted with his work or that his attacks on Marcion justified him as orthodox in their eyes. However, the rise of Manichaeism in the East meant that Bardaisan’s cosmology did come to the attention of the Syriac theologians. Mani’s heresy was seen to be dependent on his cosmology, which he was believed to have borrowed largely from Bardaisan. Hence Ephrem spends much time and energy refuting the Bardaisanite heresy.

What then did Bardaisan teach? In commenting on Bardaisan’s *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, Dirk Bakker points out that the views of Bardaisan were not always identical with those of his followers. He shows that Bardaisan himself comes across as monotheistic, and far more ‘orthodox’ than Ephrem would lead us to expect. Bakker concludes that “it is now generally assumed that the distance between the two ‘Bardaisans’ is not as big as Ephrem makes it seem, and that the main cause of the conflicting images lies in the fact that Ephrem did not so much attack Bardaisan himself as his followers, whose ideas may have differed considerably from those of their originator. Secondly, since it was Ephrem’s goal to


depict Bardaisan as a heretic, it seems plausible that he deliberately stressed the controversial points in his teachings and ignored the ‘orthodox’ ones.”

Ephrem seems to reserve his harshest criticism for Bardaisan’s cosmology, and yet, as Bakker intimates, it is difficult to establish exactly what Bardaisan himself taught. Drijvers identifies four main traditions which claimed to report Bardaisan’s cosmology. The first three of these are Daisanite schools of thought, and all three rely on the idea of a number of pre-existing elements which either through destiny or chance overcame their ordained limits and became mingled and chaotic. In order to rectify this the All-highest sent his Word of Thought (ܐܬܪܥܝܬ ܡܐܡܪܐ, māmrā dtarīt), variously identified as the Logos (ܡܠܬܐ, meltā) and the Christ (ܡܫܝܚܐ, mšīḥā), to restore order and thus bring forth creation.

The fourth cosmological tradition which Drijvers identifies is that of Ephrem himself. The main sources of Ephrem’s assertions are his 56 Hymns Contra Haereses and his Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan. Later on in this chapter I consider in detail many of the references in these two works which are relevant to my main argument, but here I am just concerned, following Drijvers, to give an overview of what we can deduce Ephrem claimed Bardaisan’s cosmology to be. The main accusation that Ephrem levels at Bardaisan is that he denies the creatio ex nihilo and that instead of teaching the existence of

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101 Bakker, Bardaisan, 15.
102 Drijvers, Bardaisan, 98 ff.
105 Drijvers, Bardaisan, 130–165.
one Being (ܐܝܬܝܐ, ītyā) he teaches the pre-existence of six (God, darkness, fire, water, light and wind) which were re-ordered to form the created world. In particular, I want to note briefly here that Ephrem rejects Bardaisan’s characterisation of space as that which contains and encloses the cosmos: all the elements and everything they constitute, and thus even God Himself, who is one of the six elements or Beings (ܐܝܬܝܐ, ītyā). For Bardaisan, space is merely the limitation of everything, including God, and Ephrem cannot accept this.

1.2 Ephrem’s Literary Heritage: poetry and prose

Ephrem has always been known as a prolific writer, and also for the beauty and divine inspiration of his work:

“When the holy Mar Ephrem was a child he had a dream or vision which he related to people and which he also wrote about in his testament: A vine sprouted on his tongue and grew up, and everything under heaven was filled by it. It bore abundant clusters, and even the birds of the sky came and ate of its fruit. The more they ate, the more its clusters increased.”

Ephrem himself probably wrote only in Syriac but very early on his texts were translated into many languages. The vast Greek corpus of texts attributed to him (second in volume only to those of John Chrysostom) and concentrating on ascetic issues are almost certainly spurious and never existed in the Syriac. Surviving texts in other languages can all be traced back to this Greek pseudonymous corpus. The only exception to this is the large Armenian corpus, and of course the surviving Syriac texts themselves. Starting with the

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106 It is interesting for our purposes to note that in one passage Ephrem speaks of Bardaisan having posited seven (and not six) elements, and Drijvers states that a number of scholars believe that this seventh element is space itself, although he himself does not accept this view. (Drijvers, Bardaisan, 131–2).

107 Drijvers, Bardaisan, 136.

108 From Amar’s rescension of the Syriac Life of Ephrem: see McVey, Commentary, 38.
work of Dom Edmund Beck in 1955, reliable critical texts of all Ephrem’s genuine Syriac works are available.⁹⁹

Ephrem wrote in both poetry and prose. His poetic works are divided into madrašē (hymns which were written in stanza form on a fixed syllabic pattern) and mēmrē (metrical homilies which were written in couplets of 7+7 syllables). Mathews also divides his prose work into two categories: expository prose and rhetorical prose.¹⁰⁰ In this section, I will explore aspects of the poetry and commentary genres in order to understand why Ephrem chose these genres.

1.2.1 Why Did Ephrem Write Poetry?

Ephrem’s poetry is the natural expression of Ephrem’s theology. Ephrem’s understanding of the fundamental otherness of God and his reaction against Arianism led him to reject propositional or systematic theology as an arrogant enterprise doomed to failure. Instead he conducted his theology as a symphony of images, metaphors, paradoxes and tensions. The poetic genre is ideally suited to this type of language and indeed Ephrem is far more famous for his Hymns than for his prose works:

“It is precisely because Ephrem’s theology is not tied to a particular cultural or philosophical background, but rather operates by means of imagery and symbolism which are basic to all human experience, that his theological vision, as expressed in his hymns, has a freshness and immediacy today that few other theological works from the early Christian period can hope to achieve.”¹¹¹

This research studies the two works of Ephrem’s which are explicitly dedicated to the creation account: the Hymns on Paradise and the Commentary on Genesis. Perhaps the best way

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⁹⁹ McVey, Commentary, 40.

¹⁰⁰ McVey, Commentary, 42.

¹¹¹ Brock, Hymns on Paradise, 40.
of exploring Ephrem’s understanding of language is to ask: why did he use poetry rather than prose to convey his ideas about the creation account?

In prose, especially philosophical and theological treatises emanating from the Hellenistic tradition, attention must be paid to the precise definition of terms and the logical connection between adjacent sentences. The emphasis is on the restriction of meaning and on soundness of argument. By contrast, in poetry the emphasis is on image and metaphor. Images defy definition and classification. Instead they summon echoes of past experience and invite the mind to journey further into the mental world they evoke. Hence we shall see in Chapter 3 that the language of bridge and journey is central to the way Ephrem understands the process of reading the creation account. Moreover, the relationship between images is not restricted to logical deduction; paradox and contradiction multiply meaning instead of restricting it. The position of the limits has changed. In deductive prose, the author proceeds by attempting to limit the meaning, probably a fruitless task. How can God be defined and restricted in human language? The idea is blasphemous to Ephrem. In poetry, however, the poet multiplies image and metaphor and the limit on meaning comes from the reader each time the poem is read and the journey is undertaken. In poetry, the poet gifts us with an image which evokes some aspects of God’s nature while repressing others. In the next image we see another facet of His nature, but the first aspect is now absent. And so it carries on. Therefore, a key reason for Ephrem’s use of the verse form was that in the polyvalency of its imagery it reflected

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112 For instance Harvey states that “literary forms in which imagery is the basic mode of operation: metaphors, similes, and imagistic expression are the means whereby the writer’s task is performed. The rules of language are consequently different than those governing theological discourse in the philosophical treatises of contemporary Greek and Latin traditions, because language is in these texts serving a different function (Susan A. Harvey, “Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition”, St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly. 1993. 37: (2–3) 111–139) 113.

his understanding of the complex way in which God chose both to reveal and to hide
Himself within the confines of human language, and this is discussed elsewhere in this
research. Moreover, the echoes and reverberations which each image sets off in the mind
will differ according to the reader’s spiritual state, their past experiences and their desires.
These are the boundaries and limits of which Ephrem speaks; paradoxically they serve a
liberating function as they allow the text to speak in different ways to each reader.

Ephrem’s understanding of language cannot be separated from his theology. Mathews
points out, in a sentence he borrows from Lossky, that

“to the thought of Ephrem any theology which “constitutes itself into a system is always
dangerous. It imprisons in the enclosed sphere of thought the reality to which it must open
thought.””

For Ephrem, the aim of theology is not to produce a systematic understanding of God and
of things divine – the very idea is a blasphemy and a heresy. Instead the aim of theology, of
the contemplation and study of God’s self-revelation in world and Word, is to lead people to
worship their Creator. For Ephrem, poetry was the “least imperfect medium” in which to
do this. Unlike continuous prose, poetry allows the juxtaposition of contradictory ideas,
of opposite poles of a spectrum, without the necessity of an intermediate linking argument.
As already mentioned, different images and metaphors are allowed to multiply, and indeed
they breed in the reader’s mind. This is what Harvey calls metaphor’s “power of
suggestion” in which the metaphor does not limit the content of its sense. Instead, as both
Harvey and Young point out, the metaphor

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115 Mathews, Hymns on Faith, 51.
“functions as a verbal icon: the revelatory efficacy and power of a religious metaphor depend upon its essential participation in the truth to which it points. The image is fundamentally related to its prototype, which is both its source and beyond the capacity of the image to contain. Thus a religious metaphor is meaningful to the extent that it is grounded in its divine prototype, but by its nature it cannot reduce the divine to a simple definition or identity.”

Moreover, for Ephrem, the language of scripture both hides and reveals God, and again this will be discussed and demonstrated at greater length in my close analysis of Ephrem’s writings in Chapter 3. There is a symbolic, sacramental sense in which God indwells His gift of scripture and creation. Just as continuous prose is the most natural medium for a mind-set in which language describes reality as objective or external to language, so poetry is the most natural medium for a mind-set in which language is inhabited by reality. In fact, according to Martin, poetry is the language of God, and the universe is one divine poem. Martin argues that this was Ephrem’s view, and that it entailed for Ephrem a "paradigm of divine-human relations: ... God as creator, man as "creator", and art as mimesis. Ephrem reads God in life and patterns his poem after what he sees. The method is mimetic".

Ephrem’s understanding of language means that the utterance of the word implies communication to the receiver: it is a gift which has the recipient in mind, and is tailored to the recipient. Thus Martin argues that revelation cannot be other than dialogic and involves communion, for

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116 Harvey, Feminine Imagery, 114. For Young see e.g. Biblical Exegesis, 147–8.

"the fact of creation signifies the presence of a receiver, actual or imagined, and any given work is consummated only as it is received. This is a view of creation and the creative process implicit in Ephrem."\textsuperscript{118}

This has two consequences. Firstly, it again reinforces the view that creation and scripture are divine gifts. They are given in order to be received; "the fact of creation signifies the presence of a receiver." Secondly, it is a sacramental view of creation and word; God is present to us in the symbols of Himself. However, the symbol does not contain or define or emanate from God; God is transcendent and His hiddenness or transcendence is as equally revealed in the symbols as His presence. Similarly, Ephrem embodies himself, his logos, in his poetry and demands from us what Martin terms our correspondence or participation:

"So art calls the reader to engage in a process of reflection and self-disclosure corresponding to the poet's own. Reading properly and critically is an act of deep sympathy, a self-emptying, an activity parallel to the process charted by the poem and creative of its own subtext. Struggling with the difficulties of a poem, sharing the poet's burden, the reader can participate in the truth of the artist's existence. Art depends on this. Art looks for this. All genuine art is anticipatory of a life made perfect in love and affirmation."\textsuperscript{119}

A final reason which may have influenced Ephrem's choice of poetry as a medium is that the cadences and melodies of poems make them easy to remember and to transmit, particularly in a context where many people may still have been illiterate and where the

\textsuperscript{118} Martin, “Poetry”, 151.

\textsuperscript{119} Martin, “Poetry”, 177.
oral culture was of the greatest importance. Brock records that Jacob of Serugh (d.521) characterises Ephrem as the women’s poet, “a second Moses for women folk, [who] taught them to sing praise with the sweetest of songs.”\textsuperscript{120}

Theology couched in a memorable verse form constitutes an ideal propaganda weapon in the war against conflicting beliefs. Ephrem’s hymns were almost certainly an apologetic tool, composed to be sung by women choirs on the streets of Edessa as a way of teaching the “orthodox” or Nicene doctrine. Sozomen tells the story thus:

“I am not ignorant that there were some very learned men who formerly flourished in Osroëne, as, for instance, Bardasanes, who devised a heresy designated by his name, and Harmonius, his son. It is related that this latter was deeply versed in Grecian erudition, and was the first to subdue his native tongue to meters and musical laws; these verses he delivered to the choirs, and even now the Syrians frequently sing, not the precise copies by Harmonius, but the same melodies. For as Harmonius was not altogether free from the errors of his father, and entertained various opinions concerning the soul, the generation and destruction of the body, and the regeneration which are taught by the Greek philosophers, he introduced some of these sentiments into the lyrical songs which he composed. When Ephraim perceived that the Syrians were charmed with the elegance of the diction and the rhythm of the melody, he became apprehensive, lest they should imbibe the same opinions; and therefore, although he was ignorant of Grecian learning, he applied himself to the understanding of the metres of Harmonius, and composed similar poems in accordance with the doctrines of the Church, and wrought also in sacred hymns and in the praises of passionless men. From that period the Syrians sang the odes of Ephraim according to the law of the ode established by Harmonius.”\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{120} Brock, \textit{Hymns on Paradise}, 23.

\textsuperscript{121} Sozomen, \textit{Ecclesiastical History}, III.16, accessed online in February 2012 at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26023.htm. While Sozomen was right to see Ephrem’s hymns as an apologetic instrument in the battle against competing cosmologies, he is probably mistaken in attributing the development of Syriac syllabic verse to the Greek influence on Harmonius. Brock points out that Syriac syllabic verse existed before Harmonius did (if indeed he existed at all), and also that the fourth century was too early in
As I have stated above, as well as opposing the Bardaisanites, Ephrem was engaged in opposing the Arian teachings. Burnett argues that

“[a]lthough Eastern Christians have sung hymns in worship since New Testament times, the struggle between Arian and Nicene Christians in the fourth century of the Common Era created a new role for hymnody: it became a "weapon" in that struggle, a weapon that was wielded both polemically to refute opponents' teachings and didactically to promote one's own.”122

1.2.2 Why Did Ephrem Write a Commentary?

This study compares a commentary, some poems, some homilies and some sermons (all on Genesis 1 to 3). The main focus of this study is an emergent picture of how Ephrem and Chrysostom read the creation and fall accounts through the lens of divine self-limitation, and this thesis is not a technical study of genres. However, it is difficult to understand the whole picture without considering why the two authors chose to write in these particular genres. I have just considered Ephrem’s poetry, and later on in the thesis I review the debate over the difference between a sermon and a homily. In this section I am concerned with the commentary genre.

Lucas Van Rompay brings to the table the distinction made by Theodore of Mopsuestia in his preface to the (Syriac) Commentary on John’s Gospel:

“We consider it to be the task of the commentator (mpaššqānā) to comment (da-npaššeq) on the words which are difficult for most people; that of the preacher (mtargmānā), however, is to reflect on words that are clear (b- ‘aylēn d-galyān) and to speak about them.”

This certainly seems consonant with Ephrem’s aim in writing his Commentary; we believe that it was used to educate students in a theological school. However, Van Rompay further argues that biblical commentary is a “highly specific genre” in the Antiochene world, and he suggests that it exists in three different forms. For Van Rompay, all three forms of commentary constitute a “scholarly” activity, and “this seems to be what distinguished it from that of the authors of exegetical homilies, such as John Chrysostom ... Their main objective was one of edification: they wanted to use the Bible as a source of instruction and inspiration for Christian life.”

I am not convinced that this hard and fast distinction is valid for Ephrem’s Commentary. Like Chrysostom, Ephrem’s writing flowed from a desire to worship God and to bring others to Him, precisely by edification. The Bible was no document to be dissected in cold blood; it was indeed a source of instruction and inspiration for Ephrem’s commentary, just as it was for Chrysostom’s preaching. Scholarly it may have been, but it was inspired throughout by a desire to see men and women have a right understanding of their Creator and His love for

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124 In the first, the full commentary, the entire text is quoted and “provided with explanations”. The commentary pays attention to grammar, historical references and linguistic features but it was important to the authors to consider the text as a whole. In the second, the selective commentary, the authors restrict themselves to dealing with a limited number of difficult passages. As Van Rompay points out, this is entirely consonant with Theodore’s definition of the task of the commentator. The third type is the ‘question-and-answer’ commentary which resembles the literary genre of πρόβληματα καὶ λύσεις – problems and solutions. Van Rompay, “Antiochene Biblical Interpretation”, 106 ff.

them. Thus, as we have already seen in the opening lines of this chapter, Ephrem finishes his *Commentary on Genesis* with these words:

“To God, who through his Son, created all creatures from nothing – and to His Christ and to His Holy Spirit be glory and honor, now and always, forever and ever. Amen. Amen.”

Clearly Ephrem sees his *Commentary on Genesis* as being part of a chain of tradition which hands down “these things” truthfully and faithfully, to the glory of God, Father, Son and Spirit.

It is not just Ephrem’s underlying convictions which bring his *Commentary* closer in genre to a homily or sermon. The *Commentary* also has a strongly narrative nature, largely because it is concerned throughout with defending the Nicene faith. Thus in her introduction to a critical edition of the text of Ephrem’s commentary, McVey writes that

“Ephrem’s method of exegesis is not intended to provide a continuous, verse by verse, exposition of the biblical text. Rather, Ephrem dwells on texts that have a particular theological significance for him, or whose orthodox interpretation needs to be reasserted in the face of contemporary heterodox ideas... Ephrem’s entire account of the six days of creation, on the surface a very literal commentary, is a polemic... centred on his position that God is a) the only self-subsistent being and b) the creator of everything else”

This is why a third of the *Commentary* is concerned with the first three chapters of Genesis. Indeed, it seems that Ephrem considered the commentary genre as in some sense inferior to his *Hymns*, because the opening words of the *Commentary* are:

“I had not wanted to write a commentary on the first book of Creation, lest we should now repeat what we had set down in the metrical homilies and hymns. Nevertheless,
compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things of which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns."

1.3 Ephrem’s Philosophical Heritage: space and limit

One of the main contentions of this thesis is that ‘limit’ plays a crucial part in Ephrem’s exegesis of the creation and fall accounts. In this section, I start by investigating the lines of transmission by which Ephrem might have received or developed ideas of space and limit. I then identify certain key passages of Ephrem’s (other than the ones studied in detail in this research) where Ephrem seems to be paying particular attention to ideas connected with space and limit, not necessarily as exegetical tools but rather as philosophical entities.

1.3.1 Tracing Ephrem’s Ideas Back

The idea of God enclosing space, but not Himself being enclosed, was in fact a commonplace amongst Hellenistic thinkers in Ephrem’s time. For example, Possekel has shown that Philo of Alexandria associated God with the attribute of ‘space’. In his De Somniis, Philo writes:

“For, in truth, of all the topics or places in natural philosophy, the most formidable is that in which it is inquired where the living God is, and whether in short he is in any place at all. Since some persons affirm that everything which exists occupies some place or other, and others assign each thing a different place, either in the world or out of the world, in some space between the different bodies of the universe. Others again affirm that the uncreated God resembles no created being whatever, but that he is superior to everything, so that the very swiftest conception is outstripped by him, and confesses that it is very far inferior to the comprehension of him; wherefore it speedily cries out, This is not what I expected,


\[129\] Possekel, Greek Philosophical Concepts, 136.
because the Lord is in the place; for he surrounds everything, but in truth and reason he is not surrounded by anything.”

Here we find a clear statement of the God who encloses (or surrounds) but is not Himself enclosed (or surrounded).

While Philo is the first known author to state that God encloses but is not enclosed, Schoedel has demonstrated that this rapidly became a central Christian theological notion. The Shepherd of Hermas, using the word χωρεῖν in exactly the same way as Philo uses περιέχειν, declares that God “contains all things and is alone uncontained.” The formula was also employed by Valentinian Gnostics, but the obvious problems which arise when the dualistic gnostic system takes on board the infinity of God were exploited by Irenaeus, who in language very similar to that which Ephrem is to use later when refuting Bardaisan writes:

Irenaeus’ Against Heresies

2. For how can there be any other Fullness, or Principle, or Power, or God, above Him, since it is matter of necessity that God, the Pleroma (Fullness) of all these, should contain all things in His immensity, and should be contained by no one ...

3. Now, since there exists, according to them, also something else which they declare to be

Ephrem’s Prose Refutations

P. 130 And first of all he assumes a Space, and how is a Space like God? For one limits and the other is unlimited; and one confines and the other is not confined;

P. 131 For let them be asked concerning that Space, whether half of it is dark and half of it

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130 Philo, De Somniis, XXXII.
131 Schoedel, Enclosing, 77 f.
132 Mandate 1.1.1
133 Against Marcion, references given in text.
outside of the Pleroma, into which they further hold there descended that higher power who went astray, it is in every way necessary that the Pleroma either contains that which is beyond, yet is contained (for otherwise, it will not be beyond the Pleroma; for if there is anything beyond the Pleroma, there will be a Pleroma within this very Pleroma which they declare to be outside of the Pleroma, and the Pleroma will be contained by that which is beyond: and with the Pleroma is understood also the first God); or, again, they must be an infinite distance separated from each other — the Pleroma [I mean], and that which is beyond it. But if they maintain this, there will then be a third kind of existence, which separates by immensity the Pleroma and that which is beyond it. This third kind of existence will therefore bound and contain both the others, and will be greater both than the Pleroma, and than that which is beyond it, inasmuch as it contains both in its bosom. In this way, talk might go on for ever concerning those things which are contained, and those which contain. For if this third existence has its beginning above, and its end beneath, there is an absolute necessity that it be also bounded on the sides, either beginning or ceasing at certain luminous, and whether half of it is good and half of it is evil, and whether its sides which are towards the Good are like the Good, and its gulfs which are towards the Bitter are like the Darkness. If they say that the half of it towards the Good is Good, and the half of it towards the Evil is Evil, this is difficult to accept; for since that Space which confines both of them is one, how is half of it good, and half of it evil? For they cannot make two (separate) Spaces, and suppose a third Space between Space and Space. Concerning the property of this third Space there is a third inquiry as to what it is, and whose it is, and whom it resembles. For of necessity, that Space which confines is one, and many differences and boundaries are found in the midst of it. For boundaries do not bound and limit Space as if it came to an end, but they bound things in the midst of Space, that is to say, either houses or cities or lands or mountains or plains or kingdoms or peoples who are bounded one with another by the sea or dry land.
other points ...\textsuperscript{134}

This argument of two spaces requiring a third space to separate them, and so on \textit{ad infinitum}, has been traced by Schoedel back to the thought of Xenophanes and the Eleatic philosophers, and is used by other Christian theologians in refuting dualistic arguments, although Schoedel does not mention Ephrem in his overview.\textsuperscript{135} We see then that the formula of the “enclosing but unenclosed God” is already being used polemically by the second century.

The idea of the enclosing God also occurs in the work of Theophilus of Antioch. Theophilus was a second century apologist who was also bishop of Antioch. He is mentioned by Eusebius\textsuperscript{136} and Jerome\textsuperscript{137}. Although he is known to have written other works, particularly polemical ones against heresy, his only surviving work is a three volume apology entitled \textit{To Autolycus}.\textsuperscript{138} Possekel notes that \textit{To Autolycus} had become most popular in both east and west by the fourth century, with Eusebius mentioning it as one of Theophilus’ works present in the library of Caesarea in Palestine, so it would not be surprising if Ephrem had access to it. It is probably best known for its Logos theology: written as an apology, especially against the Marcionites, it is “the most radically monotheistic to be found among the Greek Christian apologists”\textsuperscript{139} and describes the universe as having been created by one

\textsuperscript{134} Irenaeus, \textit{Against Heresies}, Book II, Chapter 1, verses 2–5. Accessed online at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library in November 2012 at \url{http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iii.ii.html}.

\textsuperscript{135} Schoedel, \textit{Enclosing}, 79.

\textsuperscript{136} Eusebius, \textit{Eccelesiastical History} 4.24.

\textsuperscript{137} Jerome, \textit{On Illustrious Men} 25, Epistle 121.6.15.


\textsuperscript{139} Grant, \textit{Theophilus}, xiv.
God who used His Logos as the instrument of creation. Grant describes Theophilus’ doctrine of God as Middle Platonic with God being described largely in negative terms.\(^{140}\) We see the idea of the enclosing God clearly present in *Ad Autolycum*:

“For as the pomegranate, with the rind containing it, has within it many cells and compartments which are separated by tissues, and has also many seeds dwelling in it, so the whole creation is contained by the spirit of God, and the containing spirit is along with the creation contained by the hand of God. As, therefore, the seed of the pomegranate, dwelling inside, cannot see what is outside the rind, itself being within; so neither can man, who along with the whole creation is enclosed by the hand of God, behold God.”\(^{141}\)

The idea of the God who is not enclosed is also clearly stated:

“But this is the attribute of God, the Highest and Almighty, and the living God, not only to be everywhere present, but also to see all things and to hear all, and by no means to be confined in a place; for if He were, then the place containing Him would be greater than He; for that which contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is Himself the place of all.”\(^{142}\)

In this quotation we see that for Theophilus, the idea that God is not enclosed leads inexorably to the idea that God is His own space or place.

While the idea of God enclosing yet not being enclosed became a theological commonplace by Ephrem’s time, the same is not true of Ephrem’s statement that God is God’s own space. In fact Possekel states that the only three theologians known to her who develop the idea

\(^{140}\) Grant, *Theophilus*, iv.

\(^{141}\) *Ad Autolycum*, I,5.

\(^{142}\) *Ad Autolycum*, II,3.
of God being God’s own space are Philo, Theophilus of Antioch and Ephrem, and this is why I have focused on these three writers so far.

Philo ascribes three different meanings to the word τόπος (space), the third of which is relevant to our discussion:

“According to our third meaning, God himself is called “space” (τόπος) because he surrounds (περιέχειν) the universe, but is not surrounded by anything at all, and because he is a refuge of everything, and since he is really his own room (χώρα εὰυτοῦ), having made room for himself and being alone contained in himself. Now I am not a place (τόπος), but in a place, and likewise everything. For that which is surrounded is different from that which surrounds, but the divine which is not surrounded by anything necessarily is his own space (ἐστιν αὐτὸ τόπος εὰυτοῦ).”

It is clear from Philo’s exposition quoted above that, as Possekel also points out, his phrases χώρα εὰυτοῦ and τόπος εὰυτοῦ are equivalent to Ephrem’s ܐܬܪܐ ܕܢܦܫܗ. God is God’s own space. However, this idea does not seem to be as widely held in early Christian circles as the idea of God being the one who encloses but is not enclosed. Possekel has suggested that the only other known source of this idea is Theophilus of Antioch, and argues the following quotation from his To Autolycus is dependent on Philo:

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144 It is also significant that the Hebrew word for place (maqōm) is also used as an attribute for God in rabbinical writings. Possekel comments that it is one of the names of God in the Mishna and cites an interesting midrash on Genesis 28:11 (the very passage Philo was commenting on in the quotation above) where Rabbi Isaac argues that the Holy One is called “the Place” because “the Lord is the dwelling-place of His world but His world is not His dwelling-place.” Midrash Rabbah, Genesis, section 68.p, tr. H. Freedman, Midrash Rabbah, third edition, 2 (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 620 ff. Quoted Possekel 135, where she goes on to suggest that this attribute of space for God seems to have originated in Hellenistic-Alexandrian circles and reached Jewish thought via Philo. Of course, in both Nisibis and Edessa, Ephrem would have been in regular contact with Jewish thought and argument.

145 Possekel, Greek Philosophical Concepts, 139.
“But this is the attribute of God, the Highest and Almighty, and the living God, not only to be everywhere present, but also to see all things and to hear all, and by no means to be confined in a place (ἐν τόπω χωρεῖσθαι); for if He were, then the place containing Him would be greater than He; for that which contains is greater than that which is contained. For God is not contained, but is Himself the place of all (αὐτός ἐστιν τόπος τῶν ὅλων)... [God] was his own place (αὐτὸς εἱματός τόπος).”

Here we find the two ideas of the unenclosed God and the God who is coterminous with space and is His own space. Possekel argues, then, that these ideas from Philo reached Ephrem through the works of Theophilus of Antioch. 147

Given that the state of current knowledge leads us to believe that Ephrem is likely to have read and been influenced by Theophilus’ Ad Autolycum, it seems natural to ask whether Ephrem’s ideas on divine self-limitation might not find their origin in the same text. Theophilus develops a Logos theology in which God’s Logos was immanent within God’s own self:

“God, then, having His own Word internal within His own bowels, begat Him, emitting Him along with His own wisdom before all things.” 148

This doctrine comes from Hellenistic Jewish sources via the refinement of Stoic and rhetorical influences. 149 Theophilus’ Middle Platonic apophatic theology needs to be balanced by his commitment to a Jewish and biblical belief in an active creator who provides care and exercises love and kindness. Thus before creation the Logos was already the λόγος ἐνδιάθετος (innate) in God’s bowels or heart, but God uttered the Logos and it

146 Ad Autolycum II,3,10.
147 Possekel, Greek Philosophical Concepts, 141.
148 Ad Autolycum II,10.
149 Grant, Theophilus, xv.
became the λόγος προφόρικος (uttered). Theophilus’ τριας (triad) of God, Word and Wisdom then work together in the act of creation. However, when Theophilus is expounding the Genesis account of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, he anticipates an objection from Autolycus:

“You will say, then, to me: "You said that God ought not to be contained in a place, and how do you now say that He walked in Paradise?" Hear what I say. The God and Father, indeed, of all cannot be contained, and is not found in a place, for there is no place of His rest; but His Word, through whom He made all things, being His power and His wisdom, assuming the person of the Father and Lord of all, went to the garden in the person of God, and conversed with Adam ... the Word, then, being God, and being naturally produced from God, whenever the Father of the universe wills, He sends Him to any place; and He, coming, is both heard and seen, being sent by Him, and is found in a place.”

This allows the uncontainable God to be contained in one place in the λόγος προφόρικος. God who is not enclosed, allows Himself to be enclosed in the Son.

1.3.2 Space and Limit in Ephrem’s Writings

By Ephrem’s day, the concept of space had received much attention in the various Hellenistic schools of thought. The Stoics distinguished between void (κενόν, a place currently unoccupied by body), place (τόπος, a place currently occupied by body) and room (χώρα, a place partly occupied by body). However, different schools of thought used the words differently, and in fact the Epicureans used these words as synonyms. Syriac

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150 Ad Autolycum II, 22.

151 In this Theophilus was influenced by Justin Martyr and himself later was to be referred to in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Novatian, Methodius and Lactantius. His Logos theology later fell into disrepute - when Paul of Samosata, who was also bishop of Antioch, held that the Logos was originally in God, his view was condemned as Jewish. See Grant, Theophilus, xix, xvi.
terminology was less precise: atrā (atrā) was the standard term for space but it also
denoted “place”, “region” or “country”. The word dukā (dukā) meant “place”, “spot” or
“position”. Ephrem uses atrā to cover all three Stoic concepts of τόπος, χώρα and κενόν.

Speaking about space inevitably meant speaking about limit. Was space infinite? If so,
where was God? Did He exist within space or outside it? Was He bounded by space as all
created things are? In order to answer these questions, Ephrem constantly asserted two
things. Firstly, that God was God’s own space. Secondly, that God was not enclosed.

For instance, Ephrem comments:

"And how does space (atrā) resemble God? For one limits (swk) and the other is
unlimited; and one encloses (ḥbš) and the other is not enclosed; and the one has
personality and knowledge and power and wisdom, and in him are grace and freedom, and
the other has none of these things, though concerning the nature of the space there is an
undeniably great discussion."

We gather from Ephrem’s own writings that this was an important apologetic issue, and he
argues with Mani, Bardaisan and Marcion on the issue of space. Ephrem describes Mani as
proposing two sorts of space - one housing the Good divinity and the other housing the Evil
divinity. As we have seen, Ephrem rejects this because it would require the postulation of
yet a third type of space to separate the other two. Indeed, for Ephrem space is unbounded:

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152 Unless otherwise stated, for all lexical definitions for Syriac words I have consulted the Comprehensive
Aramaic Lexicon, http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/, accessed March 2012. This links to entries from the standard lexica of
Brockelmann, Sokoloff and Payne-Smith.


154 All quotations in this section are taken from the “Fifth Discourse to Hypatius” in S. Ephraim’s Prose
Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan, transcribed from the Palimpsest B.M. Add. 14623 by C. W.
Mitchell, 1 (1912). Fifth Discourse to Hypatius against the False Teachings, available online at
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/ephraim1_5_hypatius5.htm (accessed in September 2012). Henceforth Against
Marcion. I use Mitchell’s pagination, and this quote is on p.132.
"For boundaries do not bound and limit space as if it came to an end, but they bound things in the midst of space, that is to say, either houses or cities or lands or mountains or plains or kingdoms or peoples who are bounded one with another by the sea or dry land."

A body in space is limited, for the space which limits it is greater than it is, “but anything which is not in space cannot be limited; there is no space to limit it.”

Thus Ephrem argues that the pre-eminence given to notions of space in philosophical teachings is misplaced, and should instead be given to God, “because He is His own space.”

This is an argument which Ephrem has with Bardaisan. In Ephrem’s view, Bardaisan gives space too much pre-eminence. He takes Bardaisan to task for praising space more than God, thus deeming space “more excellent”. In fact, this attitude towards space is comparable to idolatry, for it “bestow[s] the title of ‘Existence’ on space along with God.” For Ephrem, postulating a space which can limit God is tantamount to postulating a power superior to God:

“for, as He does not command all if He is commanded, so He does not limit all if He is limited.”

Ephrem also challenges Marcion’s views on space. According to Ephrem, Marcion required the pre-existence of Heaven within which God could dwell and Space within which God could exist, as did Mani who “names a space and an Earth along with God as an actual existence.” But Bardaisan chose a middle path, attributing self-existence to space but not to

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155 Against Marcion, p.132.

156 Against Marcion, p.133.

157 Against Marcion, p. 134.
the heavens or the earth. Therefore, says Ephrem, Bardaisan was like Marcion and Mani in that he made God dependent on space. In fact, Mani, Bardaisan and Marcion “have imprisoned their gods within one space” because they themselves “are imprisoned in the midst of one hollow of Creation”. They have created their own world: they “have named empty domains and idle gods who do not exist, and futile stories which have no root.”  

To summarise, therefore, Ephrem conceives of space as unlimited but not self-existent. Anything which exists in space is limited by space, but anything which is not in space is unlimited. God “is His own space” – *atrā d-nefšeh, ܐܬܪܐ ܕܢܦܫܗ*. He is self-existent and unlimited by space. Space itself is also unlimited but rather acts as the entity which limits all corporeal things:

“If Space likewise has a body and substance, it is found that it is not Space but something which is in the midst of Space; so that the truth is … that the Space in which all bodies exist has no body or substance. For if it is a body it is limited somewhere … what is that thing in the midst of which it is placed, so that it is a companion and limiter for it? …necessity compels us to say that Space will not have a body… there are these three classes which are incorporeal, one class of fixed nouns which are given to bodies and substances; and another class of nouns which are given to notions, like these of Space and Time and Number; and another class [consisting of] verbs which are used with reference to anything.”

Space contains all measurements within it, but cannot itself be subject to measurement, just as the concept of “length” can be used to measure the physical length of a body but does not in itself have a body. Thus we see Ephrem reiterating his beliefs that space is unlimited and incorporeal.

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158 Against Marcion. p. 140.

In the sixteenth *Hymn Against Heresies*, Ephrem makes two statements which are highly pertinent to our discussion. The first is in verse 8:

My translation for this is as follows:

The limit of all is bounded by the One
whose own limit is unutterable silence.

The second statement is to be found in verse 11:

I render this as:

If however there were a space wherein they could dwell
then the space would be greater than the Essence
because it would limit It.

Ephrem returns to this concept in the thirty-second of his *Hymns Against Heresies*:

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161 Ephrem, *CH*, 16:11.

162 *They* refers to the divine essences; Ephrem is arguing (against Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani) that there can only be one Divine Essence.
I render this as:

The nature of the Essence never grows or shrinks
for It is not something which was created by combining things,
[a compound] which would be subject to change.

It is the One that doesn’t shrink, the One that doesn’t grow –
Because Its entirety fills everything.

There is no [further] space inside which It could penetrate,
There is no place outside It, beyond which It could go,
Into which It could spread out and grow
Or within, into which It could contract or shrink.

In this text Ephrem contrasts the nature of God with the nature of space. God is self-existent and fills everything. There is no space outside or within Him which He has not already filled. He does not dwell within space because otherwise space would be His limit, and God is unlimited. God is His own space. God’s limit cannot be spoken of: it is “unutterable silence”. Compare this with Ephrem’s comment on the generation of the Son in the Hymns on Paradise:
“may my search not be held blameworthy
by You, concealed from all;
for I have not made bold to speak
of Your generation, hidden from all;
in silence
I have bounded the Word ...
From all who love You
be praise to Your hiddenness!”163

There is only one way to “bound the Word”, to speak of God’s limits, and that is in silence.

In two of his *Hymns on Faith*164, Ephrem returns to the relation of God and space:

“For if [God] dwelt in space,
He would be small in His greatness ... 
[he] dwells without [being] in space and is rich without treasure.

For there is no space which encompasses and encloses [God],
and neither is there an inquiry which suffices to investigate Him.”165

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163 *Hym. Par.*, IV.11.

164 *HdF*, 30, 45.

165 *HdF* 45, 4: 45, 7–8.
Again, we see Ephrem’s insistence on these two fundamental ideas: God is His own space, for “He dwells without being in space”, and God is not enclosed by anything.  

**Summary**

In this chapter I have provided an overview of that aspect of the literature on Ephrem Syrus which most concerns my purposes in this research. I looked at Ephrem’s social and theological heritage: I set Ephrem’s writings in the cultural, political and theological context of their time, both in Nisibis and in Edessa. I then went on to consider Ephrem’s literary heritage: how Ephrem’s theological stance and apologetic needs led him to use poetry as a powerful medium. I also discussed how a need for a more didactic work on Genesis led to his composition of the *Commentary*. Finally, I considered Ephrem’s philosophical heritage. I looked at Theophilus’ Christology and his development of the idea that the God who cannot be limited chooses to limit Himself in His Logos, and showed that Ephrem adopted the twin formulae “God encloses but is not enclosed” and “God is His own space”.

In the next chapter I go on to argue that, in his writings on Genesis 1–3, Ephrem takes a step forward from arguing that “God encloses but is not enclosed” to developing the idea that God is *self-enclosing* – He freely chooses to enclose Himself because of His love for us. Through a close reading of the texts I shall show that divine self-limitation as a gift of love is a key aspect of Ephrem’s hermeneutics.

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166 I am grateful to Flavia Ruani for pointing out to me that just after Ephrem, Narsai also used this formula: “*all is limited by him, because his nature is sufficient for everything, and there is no limit which limits his eternity.*” from *Homélies sur la Création* V, vers 380–414.

167 See Section 2.3.2 above.
Chapter 2: The Rôle of ‘Limit’ in Ephrem’s Exegesis of Genesis 1–3

Introduction

In the previous chapter I showed how in some of his other writing, particularly his apologetics, Ephrem uses the philosophical ideas of God enclosing but not being enclosed, and God being His own space. The ways in which God is, or is not, ‘limited’ informs Ephrem’s apologetics.

In this chapter the focus moves from apologetics to exegesis and hermeneutics. If, as I argued in the previous section, ‘limit’ played such an important role in fourth century thought life, then we would expect to find abundant traces of it in Ephrem’s exegesis and hermeneutics as he reads the Bible as a son of his time. Therefore, as I read the texts, I explore the different words used to convey connotations of limit in Ephrem’s Hymns on Paradise and his Commentary on Genesis. I use a close reading of the texts to show that Ephrem’s meditations on the accounts of creation and fall lead him to employ the concept of limit in three main ways. The first is the idea of limit as boundary. Thus Ephrem interprets Genesis 1–3 as depicting a God who draws boundaries around the kinds of knowledge which it is permitted for humans to have, particularly knowledge of God Himself. Secondly, there is the idea of limit as proportion. For Ephrem, each believer will be able to grasp only as much salvific import from the creation accounts as their purity and intellect permit. God’s self-revelation is available to His creation in proportion to their ability and willingness to grasp it. Finally, there is the idea of the limit of human language. Ephrem is in awe of God’s willingness to express truths about Himself within the poor constraints of our human language in order to communicate His salvific love.

I argue that this recurrence of words and phrases evoking the concept of limit in the Hymns (and to a lesser extent the Commentary) reveals that for Ephrem both the act of creation and
the Genesis account of it are acts of divine self-giving in which God makes a gift of aspects of Himself to His creatures as part of the divine salvation economy. Because of the essential otherness of God, this gift inevitably involves self-limitation on the part of God if He is to communicate with us at all. Thus, for Ephrem, the 'limitedness', or more properly self-limitation, of God is not one which binds but one which frees. Just as there can be no theosis for humans without the kenosis of Christ, so there can be no redemption for God’s children without the gift of divine self-limitation.

Finally, I show that Ephrem uses the concept of limit in a parallel way to describe the way in which he himself engages with the Genesis account. He describes his reading of it as a journey, in which his mind enables him to cross a bridge beyond the limits of what the eye can see to penetrate the deeper meaning of the text. On this journey he needs limits, boundaries, to ensure that he does not go astray. These limits are provided by the orthodox (Nicene) doctrine of the church. Thus Ephrem contrasts the negative binding aspects of our human limitations with the positive freeing from error which the church’s guidance and limitations provide. The last stage is the composition of Ephrem’s own works (Hymns and Commentary) in which as author he must communicate the insights he has gained on his spiritual journey to his readers. Here again he is aware that human language serves to limit what he wishes to communicate.

2.1 Fifteen Hymns and a Commentary

In my study of Ephrem’s reading of Genesis 1–3 I have focused on his Hymns on Paradise and his Commentary on Genesis, which are his two main works on the creation and fall, although he inevitably has occasion to refer to the opening chapters of Genesis elsewhere in his

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168 See also Section 5.2 later in this thesis.
extensive writings.\textsuperscript{169} I paid special attention to the words used by Ephrem to convey connotations of ‘limit’, and to how important this was in his exegesis.

2.1.1 The Hymns on Paradise

The Hymns on Paradise fall into the category of madraše\textsuperscript{170} as do most of Ephrem’s poems. Ephrem’s hymns have come down to us as a number of cycles: e.g. On Faith, Against Heresies, On the Nativity and On Paradise, which is the cycle studied in this chapter. It is a relatively small cycle (15 hymns) compare with e.g. On Faith which contains 87 hymns. The Paradise cycle has been preserved in three sixth century manuscripts, one of which incorrectly states that the cycle finishes at the end of Hymn XII.15. Ephrem uses a variety of syllabic patterns, but the one used in the Paradise cycle is 5+5. 5+5. 5+5. 5+5. 5+5. Rhyme is only rarely used, and the original melody (qala) has been lost.\textsuperscript{171} I have used the critical edition of the Syriac text produced by Edmund Beck. All English translations are quoted from Sebastian Brock (who also worked with Beck’s edition) except for certain passages where I have preferred to use my own translation in order to highlight a particular point. These instances are clearly indicated.\textsuperscript{172}

I will now attempt a brief outline of the shape of the fifteen Hymns on Paradise. In the first Hymn Ephrem speaks about his reverent journey of discovery of the joys of Paradise, likening it to a beautiful mountain and emphasising its separation from the Abyss beyond which the sinful dwell. Next Ephrem considers the process of testing by which the good are welcomed to Paradise and the sinful cast out. He describes the various levels within

\textsuperscript{169} See Section 1.4 above.

\textsuperscript{170} See Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{171} Brock, Hymns on Paradise, 35–8.

\textsuperscript{172} Details of the texts studied are given in the Introduction. At the beginning of this thesis I explain the conventions I use when referencing the texts.
Paradise, where “each is stopped at the level whereof he is worthy.” In Hymn III, Ephrem describes the Trees of Life and of Knowledge, and Adam’s tragic deprivation of the knowledge he could have attained were it not for the fall. Ephrem sees the innermost tabernacle of the temple as a type of the innermost glory of Paradise, and compares Adam with Uzziah. In the next Hymn Ephrem describes another consequence of the fall: the “gentle and pleasant boundary” of God’s words had not been sufficient to prevent Adam from transgressing, so they were replaced by the cherub and the sword. The boundary too has moved: the words surrounded the Tree, but the cherub now excludes Adam from Paradise itself. Here the type of Adam is the leper who cannot enter the camp until he is purified by the priest; in the same way Adam became leprous through contact with the serpent and must be cleaned by the Great High Priest before he can re-enter Paradise. In the fifth Hymn Ephrem describes his encounter with the creation account in the pages of scripture and how it led his mind to dwell on the riches of Paradise. This is followed by an emphasis on the constraints which ensure a correct interpretation of the Biblical account. Ephrem tells us that one of the chief constraints is adherence to orthodox doctrine, and this idea is explored in more detail below. Hymn VII holds out the beauties of Paradise as an encouragement to the believer to resist temptation and persist in the right path. Ephrem follows this by a meditation on the fate of the soul and the body in Paradise, inspired by the Thief on the cross. This meditation continues in Hymn IX, which also contains a call for us to purify our vision so that God can meet us in whatever way he deems appropriate. While Hymn X considers the climate and seasons of Paradise, Hymn XI considers the metaphors or names by which Paradise may be rightly described, and again this is considered in detail later on in this study. Next Ephrem goes on to consider the deceptions of the evil one, and

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173 Hym. Par. II.11.

174 Hym. Par. IV.1.
contrasts the conquered Adam with Jesus the great Athlete who conquers the deceiver. In the thirteenth Hymn the idea of kingship is explored, with parallels and contrasts being drawn between Adam, Nebuchadnezzar, David and Jesus. This Hymn starts an alphabetic acrostic which carries on into Hymn XIV. Hymn XIV also develops the theme of freedom and captivity which was considered at the end of the previous hymn, placing images of confinement and release side by side in the stories of Jeremiah, Daniel, Noah, Moses and Jacob. Ephrem concludes this hymn cycle with a reminder of his constant refrain: the treasures of knowledge must be approached with awe and restraint.

2.1.2 Ephrem’s Commentary on Genesis

The other text I consider in this chapter is Ephrem’s Commentary on Genesis. As already quoted in the previous chapter, Ephrem seems to see this work as inferior to his poetic theology, for he opens the work by commenting:

“I had not wanted to write a commentary (ܦܘܫܩܐ pūšāqā) on the first book of Creation, lest we should now repeat what we had set down in the metrical homilies (ܡܐܡܪܐ memrē) and hymns (ܡܕܪܫܐ madrašē). Nevertheless, compelled by the love of friends, we have written briefly of those things which we wrote at length in the metrical homilies and in the hymns.”

Certainly, the Commentary has attracted far less attention than the Hymns on Paradise. At first sight it reads like a prosaic hexamaeral account, but as various scholars have shown at length, it is a deeply polemical piece. Its purpose is to defend Ephrem’s view of creation ex nihilo by a self-subsistent Creator. This reminds us that if (as seems likely from the quotation above) Ephrem composed his Commentary in the last years of his life in Edessa, he

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176 See McVey, Commentary, 60–63 for an overview of this discussion.
was writing in a context where Marcionites were seen as mainstream Christians and where
the theologies of Mani and Bardaisan held considerable sway, and he is thus at pains to
refute these theologies by emphasizing God’s activity as a creator and not just an arranger of
pre-existent elements.  

The text of the *Commentary* is preserved in a single sixth-century manuscript (MS. Vat. Syr. 110). In 1955 Tonneau produced a new translation of Mubarak’s Latin translation. This
study is based on McVey, Mathews and Amar’s 1994 critical edition and translation of
Ephrem’s *Commentary on Genesis*.

In terms of Mathews’ classification of Ephrem’s works described in the section above, the
*Commentary on Genesis* is counted as expository prose. It is the only commentary to have
been preserved in its entirety in Syriac even though both Syriac and Greek traditions claim
that Ephrem had commented on all books of the Bible. The Syriac *Life of Ephrem* preserves
the tradition that while Ephrem was meditating in his cell on Mount Edessa he received a
heavenly scroll from a choir of angels, and the very next morning Ephrem started writing
his commentaries on Genesis and Exodus.  

As we will see later, Chrysostom tends to undertake a verse by verse exegesis in his
preaching on Genesis 1–3. Ephrem chooses a different path. He concentrates instead on
texts whose orthodox interpretation needs to be reaffirmed in order to refute what Ephrem
perceived as heretical ideas. This is one reason why the two creation accounts plus the

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177 See Chapter 1 of this book for a description of the theological background to Ephrem’s writings.

178 The word used in this source for *commentary* is *pušaqā* but in the manuscripts of the works themselves
*pušaqā* is reserved for the Genesis commentary - the Exodus commentary is called a *turgamā* (*translation or
interpretation*). Mathews suggests that Ephrem probably used the two terms synonymously. McVey,
*Commentary*, 43.
account of the fall occupy a third of the *Commentary on Genesis*. The other reason is that, as I discuss at greater length in Part 3 of this thesis, the creation account was absolutely foundational to patristic theology.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani and their disciples all believed in creation as the ordering of some sort of pre-existent matter and it seems that one of Ephrem’s main aims in his *Commentary on Genesis* was to establish an ‘orthodox’ or Nicene view of creation *ex nihilo* – after all, the *Commentary* is thought to have been used as a textbook in the Edessene school:

> “[Moses] wrote about the substances that were created out of nothing so that [the descendants of Abraham] might know that they were falsely called self-existent beings... heaven, earth, fire, wind and water were created from nothing as Scripture bears witness... it is not possible that a thing which does not exist of itself can precede that thing which is the cause of its existence. That [fire] is in the earth, nature bears witness”.\(^{179}\)

At a more detailed level, Kronholm identifies three main elements in Ephrem’s exegesis of Genesis 1:1–25. The first of these is Ephrem’s emphasis on the unity of the creator, thus rejecting the various dualisms of Bardaisan, Marcion and Mani. The second is the role of the Son of God in creation, where he sets himself up in opposition to the Jews and the Arians. The third is Ephrem’s identification of the wind brooding over the waters with a natural wind, and not the Holy Spirit, against the Marcionite interpretation.\(^{180}\)

\(^{179}\) *Comm. Gen.* Preface 4, 1.14, 1.15.2.

\(^{180}\) Kronholm, *Motifs*, 35.
2.2 Divine Self-Giving as an Act of Divine Self-Limitation: the concept of limit in the 
Hymns on Paradise and the Commentary on Genesis

This section presents the main textual findings of this study. Following a close reading of 
the text, I demonstrate that Ephrem’s meditations on the accounts of creation and fall lead 
him to employ the concept of limit in three main ways; limit as boundary, limit as 
proportion and the idea of the limit of human language. This exploration of how 
‘limit’ plays out theologically, epistemologically and linguistically is just what we would 
expect in a polemical context where the philosophical and theological definition of God’s 
limits was so acutely contested. I have devoted one sub-section to each of these 
representations.

2.2.1 Limit as Boundary

In the Hymns Ephrem uses various Syriac roots (commonly ܐܬܪܐ (ḥdr) meaning “to surround, 
go round”, ܣܝܓܐ (syagā) “fence, wall”181 and ܬܪܥܐ (tar’ā) “gate”) to convey the idea of a 
boundary or barrier. Thus, when creating the world God puts boundaries in place to create 
order:

“Something that is created within something (nothing) possesses, at its creation, all of that 
thing; that is, that thing moves, rises and falls within that thing in which it was created. But 
nothing surrounded the upper waters. Therefore the upper waters were unable either to 

181 Brock points out that the use of ܣܝܓܐ (syagā) “fence, wall” by Ephrem and other Syriac writers derives 
from Ephesians 2:14 which in the Peshitta version reads “Christ ... dismantled the barrier (ܣܝܓܐ (syagā) ) 
which stood the midst, and the enmity, in his flesh; and the law with the commandments.” Brock explains 
that whereas the Greek word for barrier, φραγμος, probably referred to the Law, the Syriac version enabled 
the barrier and the law to be interpreted as two separate things. Thus the prevailing interpretation among 
the early Syriac writers was that the barrier in this verse was linked to the fall. See Brock’s introduction to the 
Hymns, pp 62–66.
turn or to move about because they had nothing in which they might turn or move about.”

In God’s good creation, boundaries and limits abound. They are an intrinsic and good part of the created cosmos. The Tree of Knowledge stands “as a boundary” to the inner region of Paradise, like a gate or the veil of the Tabernacle. Moreover, the words of God commanding Adam and Eve not to eat of its fruit had served as a “gentle and pleasant boundary” round the tree which Adam had “trampled down”. Unfortunately, the fall means that God replaces this gentle fence by a much harsher boundary – a cherub wielding a sharp sword. After Adam’s transgression the boundary keeping Adam out shifted from the borders of the innermost regions of Paradise to the outer limits of Paradise itself. The gate would only be re-opened by Christ himself. Between Paradise and the abode of the unrighteous there is a great Abyss which acts as a boundary. The fence which still surrounds paradise “is the peace which gives peace to all” within but “is full of menace to those outside who have been cast out”.

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182 Comm. Gen. 1.13. This is reminiscent of the philosophical language used by Ephrem in his other works, and quoted extensively in Chapter 1 of this book.

183 (ḥdr).

184 Hym. Par. III.3.

185 (tarʿā).

186 Hym. Par. III.13.

187 (syagā) “fence, wall”.

188 Hym. Par. IV.1.


190 This is the same root ḫdr which conveys the idea of boundary elsewhere.

191 Hym. Par. XI:3.
Here the concept of boundary is a physical and even geographical one. God has put the boundary in place to limit men and women’s access to Paradise, and the effect of the fall is that the exclusion is even more comprehensive. Intimate knowledge of God, while never fully accessible, has become even more limited. Ephrem sees many other examples of God setting boundaries and fences in scripture.

But Ephrem knows, and is at pains for us to know, that the fall cannot disrupt God’s great plan for mankind. Even here in the first chapters of Genesis we can see hints of what is to come, and Ephrem reminds us that it is the Resurrection which destroys the boundaries and restores the access to God:

“Moses who doubted
saw but did not enter
the land of God’s promise;
the Jordan served as a boundary\textsuperscript{192}.

Adam went astray and left
the Garden of Life;
the cherub became a fence\textsuperscript{193}.

Both boundaries\textsuperscript{194} were set
by the hand of our Lord,
but at the Resurrection they both entered:
Moses, into that land,
and Adam into Paradise.”\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{192} \textit{tḥm} from \textit{ṭhm} (\textit{ṭhm}) which has connotations of marking limits, defining, ordering, forbidding, setting something within borders.

\textsuperscript{193} \textit{ṣyq}.

\textsuperscript{194} From \textit{ṯrāʾ} (\textit{ṯrāʾ} (“gate”) again.

\textsuperscript{195} Hym. Par. IV.6.
Ephrem repeats the same idea in his Commentary:

“[God] withheld from Adam a single tree and set death around it, so that if Adam would not keep the law out of love for the One who had set down the law, then at least the fear of death that was set around the tree would frighten him away from overstepping the law ... That fence was a living being who itself marched round to guard the way to the tree of life from any one who dared pluck its fruit, for it would kill, with the edge of its sword, any mortal who came to steal immortal life.”

In other places, the boundary is a metaphorical one, but none the less real for that.

One of Ephrem’s ways of understanding God is as the one who hides truth or knowledge. Just as God hid the glory of Paradise from Adam and Eve, so did He hide from them the knowledge of their nakedness:

“For God had not allowed him
   to see his naked state,
   so that, should he spurn the commandment,
   his ignominy might be shown him.
Nor did he show him the Holy of Holies,
   in order that, if he kept the command,
   he might set eyes upon it and rejoice.
These two things did God conceal,
   as the two recompenses.”

As the sanctuary is hidden beyond the boundary of the temple veil, so God draws a boundary round Adam and Eve’s nakedness and they cannot see it.

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196 Comm. Gen. 2.8.3, 2.36.
197 (ksy), “to hide”.
198 Hym. Par. III.5.6.9.
But God is not only the Hider, he is also the Hidden One (ܟܣܝܐ, kasyā), and Ephrem explicitly attributes this title to God in *Hym. Par.* III.16. God deliberately conceals knowledge about Himself which it is not suitable for humans to acquire. Men and women who seek this forbidden knowledge transgress the boundary and sin. This, for Ephrem, is the blasphemy of the Arians – they have dared to attempt to define the generation of the Son. Ephrem, by contrast, has respected God’s boundaries by bounding his own researches:

“may my search not be held blameworthy
by You, concealed\(^{}^{199}\) from all;
for I have not made bold to speak
of Your generation, hidden from all;
in silence
I have *bounded* the Word ...
From all who love You
be praise to Your hiddenness!”\(^{}^{200}\)

The word which Brock translates here as “bounded” is once again the root ܬܚܡ (tḥm) which as we saw above was used by Ephrem to describe the boundary of the Jordan which God put in place to prevent Moses from entering the Promised Land.

I have shown that Ephrem does see God as limiting those aspects of Himself which He reveals. He does this by placing physical, geographical boundaries, some of which serve as types of the metaphorical boundaries he places round knowledge. Ephrem responds to this limitation with worship and respect: he limits his own investigations within the prescribed bounds so that he does not commit the error of the Arians.

\(^{199}\) Again this is the root ܓܢܙܙ.

\(^{200}\) *Hym. Par.* IV.11.
2.2.2 Limit as Proportion

At the border of Paradise there is a gate or door:

“the Door, all discerning,
conforms its measure to those who enter it:
in its wisdom it shrinks and it grows.

According to the stature and rank
attained by each person,
it shows by its dimensions
whether they are perfect, or lacking in something.” 201

Thus we see that as well as a concept of boundary, Ephrem communicates a concept of proportion. Ephrem sees the measureless God, “that Will for whom everything is easy” 202, as meting Himself out in order to communicate with His children, rationing and constraining Himself according to their spiritual and intellectual readiness:

“The Lord who is beyond measure (ܡܘܫܚܐ)
Measures out nourishment to all, (ܚܕܒܐܠܐܡܘܫܚܐ ; by measure to all)
Adapting to our eyes the sight of Himself, (the sight of himself in proportion to (ܠܦܘܬ) our eyes)
To our hearing His voice,
His blessing to our appetite,
His wisdom to our tongue.” 203

The first word for measure, ܡܘܫܚܐ, from the root mšḥ, has connotations of dimension and precise measurement. One of the variant readings 204 gives ܕܟܠܡܘܫܚܐ (the Lord of all

201 Hym. Par. II.2.
202 Hym. Par. II.9.
203 Hym. Par. IX.27.
204 Cod. Vat. Syr. 112.
measure) here instead of “The Lord who is beyond measure”. This is an interesting variant because it considers this quality of measure to be so essential to God that it becomes one of His names. The second word for measure, from the root kyl, has connotations of measure of oil, grain or wine as well as metaphorical connotations of amount or quantity in, say, teaching.\footnote{J. Payne Smith, \textit{A Compendious Syriac Dictionary} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957) but all quotations in this work taken from the 1999 edition (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1999).} However, it can also refer to literary meter or the form of words.\footnote{\textit{Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon}, \url{http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/}, accessed March 2012.} In the \textit{Commentary}, too, Ephrem reminds us that God, through Moses, had to adapt His revelation to fit it to the understanding of His children:

"He wrote about the true commandments that had become forgotten, while adding those that were necessary for the infantile state of the [Jewish] people."\footnote{Comm. Gen. Prologue:4.}

In every way God’s self-revelation is adapted to the capacities (eyes, voice, appetite and tongue) of His children.\footnote{Possekel (\textit{Greek Philosophical Concepts}) makes an interesting point when she identifies qnomā (qnomā) as a key word in Ephrem’s terminology. She points out that qnomā is used by Ephrem to denote material substance, in the Stoic sense of distinguishing between corporeal things, which exist in qnomā, and incorporeal things which exist in name and meaning only. One of the properties of these corporeal things is that they have measure: dimension, height, length. God - Father, Son and Spirit - also possesses qnomā but a very different one to created things. Thus while having some sort of substantial experience (cf. \textit{hupostasis}) God does not have measure (Possekel 68–76). However in Ephrem here and elsewhere we see God the measureless, the Lord of measure, taking on dimensions and measure in his self-revelation and of course supremely in the incarnation.}

This measure and proportion is an essential part of God’s salvation economy and is evident not just in revelation but also in creation:

"from a single table

does He provide
every day for each creature

all things in due measure."\footnote{209}
And again, this time from the *Commentary on Genesis*:

“for the quantity that a sea requires for nourishment is the measure of the rivers that flow down into it.”

Above all, the renewed creation order in Paradise is perfectly suited to humans:

“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 ...

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 ...

The soul receives sustenance

appropriate to its needs.”

As well as employing order, measure and limit in creating space, Ephrem sees God as ordering time when he ordained the calendar:

“That [God] said “let them be for signs” [refers to] measures of time, and “let them be for seasons” clearly indicates summer and winter. “Let them be for days” are measured by the

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209 *Hym. Par.* XIII. 2. *Measure* here is from the root prš (prš) with its connotations of division, separation, delimitation.

210 *Comm. Gen.* 1.10.2. The word translated as “measure” is lâ which is again from the root kyl, lâ.

211 *Hym. Par.* IX. 3,4,18.
rising and setting of the sun, and "let them be for years" are comprised of the daily cycles of the sun and the monthly cycles of the moon ... Adam and his descendants learned from this year that, henceforth, eleven days were to be added to every year. Clearly then, it was not the Chaldeans who arranged the seasons and the years; these things had been arranged before [the creation of] Adam.”

In fact, in the act of creation itself God limits himself by restricting himself to using certain methods:

“Thus, through light and water the earth brought forth everything. While God is able to bring forth everything from the earth without these things, it was His will to show that there was nothing created on earth that was not created for the purpose of mankind or for His service ... thus [the earth] produced trees, grasses and plants. It was not that God was unable to bring forth everything from the earth in any other way. Rather, it was His will that [the earth] should bring forth by means of water. [God] began the creation [of the vegetation] this way right from the beginning so that this procedure would be perpetuated until the end of time.”

God limits His own power in the creative act, and always does so for the benefit of His children. For instance, Ephrem states that God did not rest on the seventh day because he was weary, but to teach them about true rest by enforcing a temporal rest on them:

“It was not because He rested on [that day] that God, who does not weary, blessed and sanctified the seventh day, nor because He was to give it to that people who did not understand that since they were freed from their servitude, they were to give rest to their servants and maidservants. He gave it to them so that, even if they had to be coerced, they

212 Comm. Gen. I 23.2–3. The word translated here as “measures of time” comes from the root ܙܒܢ which is a single concept here meaning something like a stretch of time or era, but the word “measured” in the phrase “measured by the rising and setting of the sun” is ܡܬܬܟܝܠ from the same root ܟܝܠ, mentioned above.

213 Comm. Gen. I.10.1, 2.3.3.
would rest. For it was given to them in order to depict by a temporal rest, which He gave to a temporal people, the mystery of the true rest which will be given to the eternal people in the eternal world.  

Again, once Adam and Eve have sinned, God tarries and does not come to them straight away in order to give them time to repent. And when He does come, He makes the sound of His feet audible, so that they would have notice of His coming and have further chance to repent. When that is not sufficient, He makes a sound with His lips for the same purpose:

“God tarried in coming down to them for the sole reason that they might admonish each other and so plead for mercy when the judge came to them ... it was not only by the patience He exhibited that God wished to help them. He also wished to benefit them by the sound of His feet... But since they did not come before Him in supplication, neither because of His delay nor because of the sound that was sent before Him, God then made a sound with His lips... understand that the sound of His steps was bestowed for the purpose of a supplication from your lips.”

In all these responses to Adam and Eve’s sin, God imposes human limits on His self-manifestation in order to give Adam and Eve as much chance as possible to repent. He limits Himself in order to accommodate their spiritual limitations. In the same way, He restricts His revelation in proportion to the finite capacities of His children, and furthermore, each child will grasp the revelation in a different measure, in proportion to their capacity:


216 Comm. Gen. II.24. Here Ephrem also alludes to the fact that God accepts the limits of our human language in order to convey something that we can more readily understand – He uses anthropomorphic language. This aspect of the limits of language is discussed further below.
“Upon each according to his capacity", 
He bestows a glimpse 
of the beauty of His hiddenness, 
of the splendour of His majesty. 
He is the radiance who, in His love, 
makes everyone shine 
– the small, with flashes of light from Him, 
the perfect, with rays more intense, 
but only His Child is sufficient 
for the might of His glory."²¹⁸

Our ability to grasp the divine revelation is dependent on the state of our soul. As each believer purifies him or herself, so does each become more able to behold God’s glory; as each believer learns to listen, so each is more able to grasp God’s wisdom:

“Accordingly as each here on earth 
purifies his eye for Him, 
so does he become more able to behold 
His incomparable glory; 
accordingly as each here on earth 
Opens his ear to Him, 
so does he become more able to grasp His wisdom.”²¹⁹

Thus just as Ephrem sees God designing creation to accommodate the physical capacities of His children, so he sees God as meting out His self-revelation in and through scripture

²¹⁷ From the root ܚܝܠ (ḥyl) meaning strength.
²¹⁸ Hym. Par. IX.25.
²¹⁹ Hym. Par. IX.26.
according to their intellectual and spiritual capacities. Out of love and consideration, God limits Himself in His divine self-giving according to His children’s limitations.

Why should Ephrem place such emphasis on proportion in his *Hymns on Paradise*? It may well be possible that Ephrem is here adapting a classic philosophical formula, as we have seen him do in the last chapter with the issue of God’s own space. Arius, in his *Thalia*, states:

“It is in [or ‘by’] the power by which God himself can see, [but] in his own degree (ιδιοὶς μέτροις, idiois metrois),

That the Son endures the vision of the Father, as far as is lawful.”

Arius, in his *Thalia*, states:

“[what the Son ] knows and what he sees he knows and sees in proportion to the measure of his own capacities (ἀναλογῶς ιδιοὶς μέτροις)”.

It seems that Ephrem takes the same language of ‘understanding in proportion to the measure of capacity’ and instead of applying it to the Son, applies it to us humans. This is made quite clear in stanza 25 of the ninth *Hymn on Paradise* already quoted above:

“Upon each according to his capacity,

He bestows a glimpse

of the beauty of His hiddenness,

... but only His Child is sufficient

for the might of His glory.”

As the quote from Athanasius makes clear, the Arian position was held to be that the Son cannot have full knowledge of the Father, but sees Him according to the Son’s own

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220 Arius, *Thalia*, 5.14–15 and Athanasius, *contra Arianos*, I.5 (vii). Both of these texts are quoted in Williams, *Arius*, 210, but whereas William’s interest is in Arius’ concern with the Son’s knowledge of his own ousia, I am more concerned with how Ephrem uses the same language to defend our creaturely limitations.

221 *Hym. Par.* IX.25.
capacity. Ephrem here quite clearly draws the limit in a different place. Humans each receive a glimpse of God’s glory according to their capacity, but the Child is sufficient to grasp the whole might of the Father’s glory. Thus Ephrem takes the Arian formulation of ἰδιοῖς μέτροῖς and uses it to defend a conflicting position. Of course, we cannot know that Ephrem had the Thalia in mind when he wrote these words, but the similarity is striking.

2.2.3 The Limits of Human Language

In the fifth Hymn, Ephrem explores the question of how infinity can be constrained in a finite space. As we have seen, this was a hotly contested philosophical question in his day. This time, the question is prompted by his musing on whether Paradise will be large enough to hold all the righteous. In response, God leads him to meditate on the legion of demons who dwelt in a single man, and he then moves on to consider

“how lamps with thousands of rays
   can exist in a single house,
how ten thousand scents
   can exist in a single blossom ... again, thoughts,
   infinite in number, dwell
even in the small space of the heart.”

Ephrem then explores how God allows His own infinity to be constrained. The prime example of God’s “adapting to our eyes the sight of himself” is of course the incarnation, where Grace, who had “nothing in common with” the human being, “clothed itself in his

\[222\text{ Mark 5:9, Luke 8:30.} \]

\[223\text{ Hym. Par. V.9.} \]
likeness in order to bring him to the likeness of itself.” In the same way, in the Genesis account God clothes himself in names and metaphors which are utterly different from Himself in order to bring men and women to Himself. This saving love is always the motivation behind God’s giving and God’s restraining of Himself – and the restraining is necessary because of our weakness and littleness.

“Do not let your intellect be disturbed by mere names, for Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are akin to you ...

... your nature is far too weak to be able to attain to its greatness, and its beauties are much diminished by being depicted in the pale colours with which you are familiar.”

Frances Young has argued that Ephrem’s understanding of the purpose and nature of God’s names is similar to that of Gregory of Nyssa. For Gregory, no human language is God-given and thus no name for God can be adequate. However the names are not arbitrary but grounded in God’s self-revelation through His actions. The names of God used in scripture cannot be misleading for even though God needs to accommodate himself to the

224 Hym. Par. 11.6. For a discussion of Ephrem’s understanding of the three modes of divine self-revelation in creation, scripture and incarnation see Brock, Luminous Eye, 40 – 42.

225 Hym. Par. XI.7.

226 Young, Biblical Exegesis, e.g. 140 ff. Gregory of Nyssa(c.330–395) also develops a categorisations of infinities as a response to the Arian challenge. As mentioned in Chapter 3 below, Eunomius (d. 394/5) was a neo-Arian who claimed that there was a way for human reason to be able to recognize God perfectly. In response, Gregory of Nyssa distinguished between three types of infinity. The first is an infinity in which limits are absent, the second is God’s infinity which is outside time, and the third is related to humans who do exist in space and time but bear God’s image within themselves. See Ivana Noble, “The Apophatic Way in Gregory of Nyssa” in Petr Pokorny and Jan Roskovec (eds.), Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 323–339.
limitations of our language, he is truth and cannot deceive. However they may need interpretation, such as when the name ‘generation’ is used of both humans and the Son. In the same way, Ephrem writes:

“God has names that are perfect and exact,
And he has names that are borrowed and transient.”

For Young this is a sacramental rather than an allegorical view of language. Without abandoning the referential nature of language, it recognises that the Reality referred to “transcends all possible linguistic expression, and so is explosive of both literalism and conceptual deciphering ...it ultimately validates an ‘expanding’ or open-ended sense of ever more meaning to be discerned, the polyvalence recognised in poetry.”

Young argues that in the fourth century, the very structure of Christian thought “revolved around the notion of a transcendent God choosing to accommodate the divine self to the limitations of the human condition in incarnation and eucharist. Scriptural language, they recognised, belonged to the same fundamental pattern.”

In fact in their tension between revelation and hiddenness, the names of God function as ‘ikons’ in Ephrem’s theology. I have shown above that the concept of hiddenness, usually expressed in words deriving from the Syriac root ܟܣܝ (ksy), is important for Ephrem’s understanding of the nature of God’s self-giving. However, a key element of Ephrem’s theology is that he holds hiddenness in tension with “revealedness”, expressed in words

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227 *HdF*, 44.2.

228 Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 143–4, quotation 144.

229 Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 160.

deriving from the root ܓܠܝ (gly). Ephrem’s use of the root gly in the phrase “outward narrative” is of particular interest:

“My tongue read the story’s
outward narrative,
while my intellect took wing
and soared upward in awe
as it perceived the splendour of Paradise –
not indeed as it really is,
but insofar as humanity
is granted to comprehend it.”

This is an important quotation to which I shall return again, but my point here is that the Syriac phrase which Brock has rendered as “the story’s outward narrative” is šarbē glayē dtaš’iteh. The root šrb here means “story, speech, tractate, question, theme, thing, matter, cause”. The root gly we know carries the meaning of “revelation”. The root š`w means “talk, speech”, but š`w has a specific and common meaning of “history, historical narrative”. The phrase used here by Ephrem therefore means something like “the revealed stories of the history”. Ephrem is making a distinction between what he elsewhere calls the “hidden power” of God’s word and its revealed story. The latter is there, revealed in the Bible, for the tongue to read, but the former must be sought in humility and reverence. The hidden power is far greater than the outward narrative, because in gifting us with the hidden power, God was obliged to clothe that power within the limitation of human language.

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233 Dr Daniel King, Cardiff University, private communication, April 2012.
2.2.4 Limitation as Gift: its purpose being to overcome human limitation

Ephrem understands God as bestowing some of His attributes on Adam. The purpose of this divine self-gift is precisely to overcome Adam’s own limitations, i.e. to make him more divine, more like God. In fact the aim of creation is the acquisition of divinity by Adam and Eve; had they not sinned, "they would have acquired divinity with their humanity, and if they had acquired infallible knowledge and immortal life, they would have possessed them in those same bodies."²³⁴

This is an exploration of what it means to be created in the image of God. Ephrem comments that

"God did indeed give Adam ruling authority, make him a participant in creation, clothe him with glory, and give him a garden ... God in his goodness, had given Adam all that was in Paradise and all that was outside of Paradise, demanding nothing of him, either by reason of his being created or because of the glory with which God had clothed him."²³⁵

In particular, God has given Adam the gift of language, with all the power that naming objects entails. Ephrem reminds us that when God names something, the act of naming confers essence or being (cstdint, ܩܢܘܡܐ): ²³⁶

"neither did the seas exist until that moment when God called the gathering of water "seas". When they received their name they were changed."²³⁶

But, as already quoted above, Adam is a participant in creation, and so God gives Adam the divine power to name the animals:

²³⁴ Comm. Gen. 2.23.1.

²³⁵ Comm. Gen. 2.10.3; 2.17.2.

²³⁶ Comm. Gen. 1.12. The words in italics are a quotation from Genesis 1.9.
"it is possible for someone to bestow many names on many kinds of insects, animals, beasts and birds, but never to name one kind by the name of another belongs either to God or to someone to whom it has been granted by God."\(^{237}\)

Indeed, scholars have noted that Jewish tradition identifies Adam’s ability to name the animals without a single repetition to be a mark of his divine wisdom, and contrasts this with Satan’s inability to name any creatures, for which failure he was cast out of the heavenly court.\(^{238}\)

### 2.3 Ephrem’s Own Reading of Genesis 1–3

In the previous section I showed that Ephrem understood the act of creation and its description in Genesis 1-3 as acts of divine self-giving. I argued that the concept of limit was an important one for Ephrem’s understanding of both the divine gift of creation and the divine gift of its description in the scriptures. In this section I take the argument a stage further and show that Ephrem uses the concept of limit in a parallel way to describe his own engagement with the Genesis account. He describes his reading of it as a journey, in which his mind enables him to cross a bridge beyond the limits of what the eye can see to penetrate the deeper meaning of the text. On this journey he needs limits, boundaries, to ensure that he does not go astray. These limits are provided by the orthodox (Nicene) doctrine of the church. The last stage is the composition of the Hymns in which Ephrem must communicate the insights he has gained on his spiritual journey to his readers. Here again he is aware that human language serves to limit what he wishes to communicate.

\(^{237}\) Comm. Gen. 2.10.2.

\(^{238}\) See for instance Genesis Rabbah 17.4 (e.g. Jacob Neusner, Genesis Rabbah. (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1997) and Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, Paul Radin, and Boaz Cohen, The Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909) 1:63. (These and other references are cited in footnote 103 in Kronholm, Motifs, 80 and McVey, Commentary, 104, footnote 138.)
2.3.1 Limitations of Human Language and the Necessity of the Reader’s Journey

Ephrem has a holistic “whole-body” approach to reading and understanding and interpreting scripture. The eye reads the words, and then the mind carries on where the eye left off:

“The eye and the mind
travelled 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...
My eye indeed remained outside
but my mind entered within.”

There is thus a metaphor of journey in Ephrem’s articulation of his own hermeneutic. His eye, or indeed sometimes his tongue, read the text, but they can only get so far while dwelling on the text’s literal meaning or outward narrative (ܫܪܒܐܓܠܝܐܕܬܫܥܝܬܗ).

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239 Hym. Par., V.4.

reach the true meaning of the text this boundary must be crossed and the mind must take over:

“My tongue read the story’s
outward narrative,
while my intellect took wing
and soared upward in awe
as it perceived the splendour of Paradise –
not indeed as it really is,
but insofar as humanity
is granted to comprehend it.”

As the Living Rock travelled with the Israelites in the wilderness, as Noah travelled forth from the captivity of the ark, as Moses travelled out of slavery in Egypt, as Jacob led his sheep out to his father’s home, so Ephrem’s mind travels in search of Paradise: “[b]lessed is that person who has steered his boat straight into Paradise.”

Why does Ephrem need to undertake this journey? The reason is that human language is pitifully inadequate when portraying the things of God. Ephrem takes comfort from the fact that God Himself did not spurn human language, and he draws on a vast range of adjectives and similes to bring Paradise alive in the minds of his hearers. However, he is well aware that every word which is used to describe the reality falls well short of it, and that the use of language inevitably carries the risk of misinterpretation:

“If someone concentrates his attention solely

\[241\]
\[242\] Hym. Par. 1.3.
\[243\] Hym. Par. V.1, cf. 1 Cor. 10:4.
\[245\] Hym. Par. XIV 4–7.
on the metaphors used of God’s majesty,
he abuses and misrepresents that majesty
and thus errs
by means of those metaphors.”244

After all, these metaphors are but “borrowed names”, and that is in fact exactly the term Ephrem uses which we translate as metaphors. The word for “borrowed” here comes from the root šܐܠ (š’l) with connotations of to ask, to borrow. However, Ephrem is encouraged in his task of describing divine realities by the thought that God Himself chose this limited and risky way of self-revelation, because there is no other available:

“For him who would tell of it [Paradise]
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.
For if the Creator
of the Garden
has clothed His majesty
in terms that we can understand,
how much more can His Garden
be described with our similes?”245

Thus, at this second level, Ephrem takes his understanding of the creation account:

“all this, and similar things

244 Hym. Par. 11.6.
that I have read in the Scriptures,
have helped depict in my mind
that garden of Life.”

and imitates the divine act of giving and self-limitation by lovingly and skilfully clothing the ideas in his mind with a garment of words so that his hearers too might benefit. Just as scripture is a divine gift intended for our salvation, so Ephrem presents his readers with the gift of his *Hymns* in order that they might partake more fully in the divine life.

2.3.2 The Importance of Doctrine as a Limitation on the Reading of Scripture

God limits and constrains His infinity in order to communicate with His creatures. In parallel fashion Ephrem constrains his own intellectual activity because of his right understanding of the incommensurability of God and mankind. When something troubles him and spurs him on to inquire into divine matters, he is troubled and he is “afraid of being importunate”. He writes of the need to “spurn all that is inquisitive, [to] ask only what is useful ... and speak what befits [God], both what is needful and what is necessary.”

He prays:

“may my search not be held blameworthy
by You, concealed from all;
for I have not made bold to speak
of Your generation, hidden from all”

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246 *Hym. Par.* XV.17.

247 *Hym. Par.* XII.1, XIII.1.

248 *Hym. Par.* IV.11. This important verse is referred to several times in this research.
This reference to Arian heresy gives us an important clue. Ephrem’s reading of Genesis springs from a right understanding of his relationship to the Father and the Son, and this understanding in turn comes from an acceptance of right doctrine. Intelligence is important in interpreting the scripture, but it must be kept in check by right beliefs:

"Intelligence is
like a treasurer
who carries on his shoulder
the keys to learning (יולפנא)"

The word translated by Brock as “learning” (יולפנא, yūlpānā) can also mean “doctrine” or “dogma”. I agree with Griffith that “doctrine” would be a better translation for יולפנא here. Griffith argues that Ephrem’s task in the Paradise hymn cycle is to present the teaching of the creation accounts through poetry and song in a way “that evoked a Christian understanding of the scriptural texts within the context of the larger parameters of church teaching, which was itself more a particular way of reading the Bible than it was truly a set of doctrines.” The truth of the scripture could only be unlocked if the exegete adhered to the יולפנא or doctrine, i.e. the orthodox Nicene confession of faith. Griffith points out that Ephrem uses the plural yūlpānē to denote erroneous doctrines; in the singular, יולפנא denotes orthodox doctrine.

In this study I want to argue that Ephrem’s references to doctrine as a key for his hermeneutic may be more widespread than previously recognised by scholars. For instance, Brock’s translation of the very first verse of the Hymns of Paradise reads thus:

249 Hym. Par. XV.6.

250 Griffith, Syriac Antiochene Exegesis, especially pp 46–49.

251 Griffith, Syriac Antiochene Exegesis, 46. Italics are mine.
“Moses, who instructs all men
with his celestial writings,
he, the master of the Hebrews,
has instructed us in his teaching (ܝܘܠܦܢܗ, yulpaneh)
the Law, which constitutes
a very treasure-house (ܣܝܡܬܐ, simtā) of revelations,"

In fact ܝܘܠܦܢܗ, as already discussed above, is often used by Ephrem to denote the Nicene confession of doctrine, and ܣܝܡܬܐ (laying up of treasure) may also have connotations of “canon, that which is laid down, … foundations, … writings”. Payne Smith gives the explicit example of the phrase ܣܝܡܐ ܕܗܝܡܢܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܒܢܝܩܝܬܐ (“the statement of the faith made at Nicaea”).252 Thus it is likely that ܣܝܡܐ (the normal Syriac word for a creed) and ܣܝܡܬܐ (storehouse, depository) are cognate. Treading carefully in order to avoid an etymological fallacy253, it might be suggested that an alternative translation of the first few verses of the hymns could be:

“Moses, teacher of all,
in his heavenly writings,
Master of the Hebrews,
taught us his doctrine,
the Law, being
the depository of revelations.”

Moses explicitly teaches the Law, but his writings convey the orthodox doctrine. They are the depository ensuring that the true faith is kept safe and preserved.

252 Payne Smith, CSD, 375.

253 The two words being cognate does not of course necessarily mean that native speakers connected them.
Having imbibed the foundations of correct doctrine from Moses, Ephrem then uses them to
guide his own exegesis. Again, in I.4, Ephrem introduces his mind’s reflections on Paradise
with the phrase:

“With the eye of the mind/doctrine (ܪܥܝܢܐ; r´ynā
I beheld Paradise,” 254

Brock translates ܪܥܝܢܐ as mind, but it can also mean “way of thinking, opinion, doctrine”.255
There seems to be an implication that the sound doctrine is guiding and guarding the sight
of Ephrem’s mind’s eye, so that his mind will not go astray and mislead his readers on the
journey it undertakes when it soars upwards from the outward narrative of the text.

Another important word for Ephrem here is ܩܠܝܕܐ (qlidā, key), often used in the context of
unlocking a treasure-house256. Carrying the keys of orthodox doctrine on his shoulder,
Ephrem can interpret scripture reliably, for it is

“the keys of doctrine
which unlock all of Scripture’s books,
[they] have opened up before my eyes
the book of creation”. 257

The image of the key is employed several times in the hymns. Ephrem warns us that the
key which unlocks the door to Paradise must be forged here on earth.258 However, he also

254 My translation.
255 ‘Mind’ is the more common translation, but the point I wish to make is that the word carries connotations of doctrine.
256 As already noted, ܣܝܡܬܐ (simtā, treasure) may also have connotations of “canon, that which is laid down, … foundations, … writings” and thus the concept of qlidā is linked with that of orthodox doctrine.
257 Hym. Par. VI.1.
assures us that God’s own Son has come and brought us His keys to open up His treasure store:

“Blessed is he who, with His keys,
Has opened up the Garden of Life.”\textsuperscript{259}

Jesus freely gave these keys to the Thief on the cross so he too could enter into Paradise.\textsuperscript{260} Significantly, the keys are those items which allow us to recognise the truth, unlocking the hidden knowledge. Thus in 2 Kings 6, a voice proved to be a key for Elisha, and the breaking of the bread proved to be a key for the disciples at Emmaus\textsuperscript{261}. The keys of orthodox doctrine function in the same way:

“fitting a key
to each locked door,
opening with ease
even the most difficult –
skilled in what is manifest,
well-instructed in what is hidden,
training souls
and enriching creation.”\textsuperscript{262}

Knowledge is “the gateway to all things” by which the intellect can journey further in, but “where it meets error

\textsuperscript{258}Hym. Par. II. 2.
\textsuperscript{259}Hym. Par. VII. 2.
\textsuperscript{260}Hym. Par. VIII. 2.
\textsuperscript{262}Hym. Par. XV. 4, 6.
in front of it
it comes up against a wall
and is blocked.”

The knowledge must be right, orthodox, yūlpānā, not error. A person attempting to explore the riches of Paradise without the right doctrine would be like the priest entering the sanctuary without the ephod or Adam taking the fruit prematurely:

“The intellect cannot explore
the bosom of those trees
without that fruit,
nor can the priest investigate
that treasury of revelations
without the ephod.”

In fact, for the intellect to grow and penetrate the hidden mysteries it requires “love and instruction, commingled with truth.” Again, the word for “instruction” here is yūlpānā and is perhaps better translated “doctrine”. Love and doctrine – a right heart and a right knowledge – these are the limits which guarantee Ephrem’s reading of Genesis.

Summary
In this chapter I have argued that for Ephrem God’s divine gifts of creation and scripture both necessarily entail the concept of limit – the gift of limit in which the Giver freely consents to be bound so that the recipient may be freed. In creation and scripture God gives Himself, but because of our poor human capabilities and the restrictions of our language He limits His self-disclosure. His essential otherness means that hiddenness is

263 Hym. Par. X, 3.
264 Hym. Par. VI, 25.
part of His self-revelation. Moreover, the consequences of the fall mean that we too have limited the extent to which God can give Himself to us. We have ourselves caused the creation of new boundaries which are only destroyed by God’s ultimate self-gift in Christ.

In this chapter I have also argued that this understanding of Ephrem’s has influenced his reading of Genesis 1–3, as evidenced in his *Hymns on Paradise*. Thus, I have shown that Ephrem frequently uses the language of limit and proportion to describe God’s self-disclosure through creation, Word and incarnation. Ephrem sees sin as a violation of divinely imposed limit, whether it is Adam and Eve’s transgressing the boundary round the tree of knowledge of good and evil or the insistence of the ‘heretics’ of Ephrem’s day on transgressing the boundary round certain aspects of knowledge such as the generation of the Son. Thus he is cautious not to overstep the proper boundaries of knowledge as his mind journeys beyond the restrictions of the written word. However, this is the great gift of the doctrine of divine self-limitation and the corresponding idea of human limits: it allows Ephrem to cross that bridge safely to discover the deeper, spiritual meaning of Genesis 1–3 – the *sensus plenior* for his generation. This will be discussed in greater detail in Part 3 of this thesis.

In the previous chapter we saw that in his other works Ephrem makes explicitly philosophical statements about God being God’s own space, and God enclosing but not being enclosed. In this chapter we have seen Ephrem express these same ideas as poetic, apologetic, symbolic theology. The statement about God being His own space, self-existent, has implications in Ephrem interpreting the creation account as one which teaches *creatio ex nihilo*. The statement about God enclosing yet not being enclosed is expressed in Ephrem’s work on Genesis as the God who lovingly limits Himself in order first to create and then to communicate with His creatures.
We have also seen how Ephrem’s understanding of sin as transgression of limit has caused him to put great value on the “keys” of orthodox doctrine as limits and boundary markers on his journey.

This chapter has shown that ‘limit’ can have both negative and positive connotations for Ephrem. In his interpretation of Genesis 1–3 he sometimes uses ‘limit’ in the commonly received sense of a restricting imposition. Thus our human createdness and sin limit our ability to communicate with God. Sometimes, however, limits can be positive – they can protect us from attempting to access forbidden knowledge about God or go down forbidden paths. We cannot step out of our limitations, and so God freely chooses to limit Himself in word, creation and Word as a divine gift to us. The seeming paradox is that the concept of limit is necessarily entailed by God’s infinite, unstinting, unrestricted love for us. God’s salvific purpose leads Him to reveal Himself to us, and so He must limit Himself, both because of our own restrictions and also because of our sin. In other words, the divine self-limitation is itself a divine gift. Ephrem understood that those, like the Arians, who trespass the divinely ordained limits of knowledge are refusing the divine gift. He took steps to ensure that he himself remained open to the divine gift: by the purity of his life and by the observance of the orthodox Nicene doctrine. Moreover, his works and especially his Hymns – their content and their verse form – were written to help his readers to receive the divine gift of the Genesis account in all the fullness available to them, until they receive the fuller gift in Paradise:

“Grant, Lord, that I and those dear to me
may together there
find the very last remnants
Summary of Part 1

In Part 1 of this thesis I have located Ephrem within his tradition. We have seen from the words with which he finishes his Commentary on Genesis that he is fully aware of this tradition, and of his responsibility to faithfully pass on the message of God’s redeeming love to those who come after him, just as it was faithfully passed on to him. We have seen that part of his heritage was the theological conflict of those who preceded him, and of his contemporaries. Ephrem stands firmly in the Nicene camp, and much of his writing flows from a desire to defend this position. We have seen how Ephrem and his contemporaries understood ‘limit’ of language and knowledge to play a key part in this conflict, even if it was not named per se. In particular, the language of God as enclosing but not enclosed became a way of expressing the ‘orthodox’ philosophical position.

I then went on to say that if ‘limit’ was indeed such a central part of fourth century thought life, I would expect to see it being expressed in hermeneutics and exegesis when Ephrem read his Bible. I therefore conducted a close reading of the texts in which Ephrem expounds Genesis 1–3 and found that the idea does indeed recur again and again, in many different guises and expressed in many different ways. I also showed that Ephrem makes an important move away from the formula ‘God encloses but is not enclosed’. Through his description of the Incarnation of the Son, and the embodiment of God’s revelation in our limited human language, Ephrem develops the doctrine of the ‘self-enclosing God’ – the divine self-limitation as gift of love. This is employed by him as a hermeneutical lens in order to read the sensus plenior of the text; that is, to hear the deeper spiritual meaning

265 Hym. Par. IX. 29.
which God was speaking through the ancient words of Genesis to him and his contemporaries in fourth century Syria.

In Part 2 of this thesis I turn to John Chrysostom. As I did with Ephrem, I start by setting him within his own context and heritage in Chapter 3. Some of that context, such as the post-Nicene setting and the battles with Arianism will be common to that of Ephrem. Some of it, such as his privileged position in the Antiochene church and his writing out of a classical rhetorical education will be quite different. Nonetheless, I would expect to find traces of ‘limit’ and perhaps ‘divine self-limitation’ in Chrysostom’s preaching too.

Therefore, in Chapter 4, I conduct a close reading of the texts of the Homilies and Sermons on Genesis to see whether traces of these approaches are present, and how Chrysostom chooses to express these traces through his words, phrases and arguments.
Part 2: JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Chapter 3: The Heritage of John Chrysostom

Introduction

John Chrysostom, ‘Golden Mouth’, was a skilled preacher, orator and consummate rhetorician. In this chapter I explore the background to the two sermon series which Chrysostom preached specifically on the creation and fall accounts in Genesis. As with Ephrem, I am concerned with Chrysostom’s ‘heritage’ – the social, theological, literary and philosophical factors which shaped his mind. Thus in Section 3.1 I discuss the cultural, theological and political context which Chrysostom found himself in, particularly during his Antioch years, which is when the majority of scholars believe that the Sermons and Homilies on Genesis were written. I pay particular attention to two theological crises which I believe to have been particularly influential on his work on Genesis. The first of these is the Arian threat, which, as I shall show, he refutes both explicitly and implicitly throughout his preaching on Genesis. The second is the anthropomorphising crisis. This came to a head in 401 when John had left Antioch for Constantinople, but I shall show that the underlying issue of how to interpret Biblical passages where God is described as having human qualities was one which Chrysostom tackled in his preaching on Genesis. In particular, in his Homilies (but not in the Sermons) he developed the use of συγκατάβασις as a sort of short-cut to evoke the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love when tackling the questions raised by the ‘heretics’. In Section 3.2 I consider the two sets of compositions – sermons and homilies on Genesis - and discuss why Chrysostom might have produced the two sets of work. Finally, in Section 3.3, I take a deeper look at the scholarly literature on the background and nature of Chrysostom’s word συγκατάβασις and consider the
suggestions in the scholarly literature as to why Chrysostom might have developed the term, and how best to translate it.

I must emphasise again here, as I do elsewhere, that for Chrysostom the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love is not restricted to συγκατάβασις. In the research I pay attention, as I did with Ephrem, to all the ways in which Chrysostom seeks to convey and utilise ‘limit’ and ‘divine self-limitation’ in his exegesis and his hermeneutics. However, because the scholarly literature has been focussed on συγκατάβασις, I naturally pay this term some more attention in the section on Chrysostom’s philosophical heritage.

3.1 Chrysostom’s Social and Theological Heritage: the cultural, theological and political contexts of Antioch

We have more biographical detail on Chrysostom than we do on Ephrem. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch, Syria between 344 and 354 CE, most likely in 349, into a family with a Christian mother, and one which was socially well-placed and comfortably off. John followed the standard educational programme for a boy of his day – reading, writing and arithmetic from the ages of seven to ten, and subsequently a thorough grounding in Greek literature, especially Homer, Euripides, Menander and Demosthenes. At the age of about fourteen John studied rhetoric under the great Libaniōs. There is no doubt that he excelled at his studies: scholars speak of “the classic purity of his Greek


267 Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 3 and footnote 1.

268 For this and the other biographical information in this section see Kelly, Golden Mouth, 4–8, and Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 3–16.

269 Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 4.
diction ... the astonishing elegance of expression ... an almost pure Atticist ... the only prose author of his epoch who can stand comparison with Demosthenes." Indeed, it is commonly reported that when the dying Libanios was asked who should succeed him as chair of rhetoric, he answered “It ought to have been John had not the Christians stolen him from us.”

Fourth century Antioch was at the heart of political events in the Roman empire. In 362/3, when Chrysostom would have been about 13, Julian the Apostate stayed in Antioch, arriving there exactly one month after publishing an edict banning Christians from teaching in schools. From Antioch Julian led an attack on the eastern front, where he was killed on the banks of the Tigris on the 26th June. In order to understand the turmoil caused by Julian’s rule and his death, we need to take a closer look at the theological maelstrom in which the teenage John Chrysostom was growing up.

As with Ephrem, during John’s lifetime Christianity was not yet the dominant religion. Antioch was a city of religious pluralism where Christianity competed with Judaism, the cult of the emperor and other pagan religions. We know that every year at Yom Kippur the Jews took over the marketplace for their celebratory dances, and that a synagogue existed within the walls of Antioch in the quarter known as Kerateion. The cave of Matrona was reputed to contain the bones of the Maccabean martyrs. The city was also renowned for its temples to Apollo and Zeus. In John’s day, the civic calendar in Antioch was marked

271 See for instance Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 8, where it is attributed to Sozomen.
by pagan festivals such as a seven day long festival of banquets and erotic dancing, possibly associated with Apollo, which John refers to in one of his sermons.\textsuperscript{274} Thus, unlike John’s later home in Constantinople where Christianity was the imperially endorsed religion, Antiochene Christianity was obliged to work hard to differentiate itself from other sects and to make an impact on the local religious landscape.

To complicate matters further, the Christianity practised in Antioch was not homogeneous, and different interpretations of the gospel were struggling for dominance and for acceptance as the orthodox interpretation. There were at least two major theological crises during John’s time in Antioch which influenced his thinking, writing and preaching on Genesis. One of the chief theological issues which was concerning the Antiochene church while John was growing up was the relation of the Son to the Father. In 325 CE, only about 25 years before John’s birth, the Council of Nicaea had taken a stand against the Arians and declared that God is of one essence, with the Son being consubstantial with the Father.\textsuperscript{275} However, Kelly argues that by the time John was growing up in Antioch, “the great majority” of Christians there suspected the Nicene position as being a so-called Sabellian stance, i.e. that it implied that God was an undifferentiated entity. Thus, at a council in Constantinople in 360, Constantius II affirmed the Homoean (‘likeness’) position that Jesus is ‘like’ God. This resulted in further disagreement with on the one hand the Arian Eunomios taking the firm line that the Son is ‘unlike’ the Father, being altogether different from him in essence (the Anomoean position) and on the other hand a growth in the

\textsuperscript{274} Mayer and Allen, \textit{Chrysostom}, 14.

\textsuperscript{275} See for instance Eusebius of Caesarea’s letter to his church reporting the decisions of the Council in Stevenson, \textit{New Eusebius}, 345.
number of eastern Nicene Christians who argued that God was three distinct persons but one essence or being. 276

The Antioch in which John grew up was an uneven mirror reflecting and distorting these theological contortions. The ‘Nicene’ bishop of Antioch, Eustathios, was banished less than ten years after the Council of Nicaea, and a succession of Arian bishops installed. When John was born, a minority of Christians in Antioch considered themselves Eustathians. They adhered to the Nicene ‘one essence’ and were led by their hard-line priest Paulinos. The majority of Christians in Antioch at the time did not consider themselves Arian but maintained what Kelly describes as “uneasy communion”277 with the bishops. In the late 350s, however, a new movement emerged. Led by Diodore and Flavian, this movement openly declared the equality of the Son with the Father, and it seems highly likely that John’s family belonged to this movement. We know that Diodore was to become John’s spiritual mentor and guide.

In 360, Meletios was appointed bishop of Antioch and it soon became apparent to his opponents that he was far too ‘Nicene’ for their liking. He was exiled after only a month, and replaced by the Arian Euzoios. In 361, however, Julian became emperor, and the pagan Julian was far less concerned than his predecessors with fostering unity among Christians. Julian declared an edict of general toleration which allowed both Meletios and Paulinos to return to Antioch. Thus, during John’s youth, Antioch had three bishops at the same

276 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 11.

277 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 11.
time: the Arian Euzoios, the hard-line Nicene Paulinos, and Meletios, who argued for the full divinity of the Son but also accepted the ‘one being, three persons’ theory.

There can be no doubt that the bitterness of these disputes coloured John’s beliefs, and gave him the apologetic edge and fervour that come through so strongly in his sermons. Thus for instance, one of John’s first sermon series, De incomprehensibili dei natura, (preached approximately six months after his ordination) was aimed at countering the propaganda of the Anomoeans. Eunomios’ argument had been that ‘ingenerateness’ was an exhaustive definition of God’s being, and since Eunomios operated according to a theory of language in which words fully expressed the essence of the thing denoted, then two things follow. The first is that in grasping God’s ingenerateness, man can have a complete knowledge of God. The second is that the generate Son can bear no resemblance whatever to the Father (‘unlike’). In reply, Chrysostom argued that humans can have knowledge of God, but only of His existence and His actions but not His essence:

“I, too, know many things but I do not know how to explain them. I know that God is everywhere and I know that he is everywhere in his whole being. But I do not know how he is everywhere. I know that he is eternal and has no beginning. But I do not know how. My reason fails to grasp how it is possible for an essence to exist when that essence has received its existence neither from itself nor from another. I know that he begot a Son. But I do not know how. I know that the Spirit is from him. But I do not know how the Spirit is from him. (I eat food but I do not know how it is separated into phlegm, into blood, into juice, into bile.

278 And at one point, four bishops! See Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 3 and Wilken, Chrysostom and the Jews, 10–16.
279 This was already referred to in Chapter 1 with respect to Gregory of Nyssa’s debate with Eunomius. See Noble, Apohatic Way.
We do not even understand the foods which we see and eat every day. Will we be inquisitive, then and meddle with the essence of God?)"

This drawing of the boundaries of the limits of human knowledge is an aspect of Chrysostom’s writing which is central to this thesis, and one which we have already encountered in Ephrem’s work.

On the night before Easter Day 368 John was baptised by Meletios. We learn from Sokrates that John received training at an ascetical school run by the afore-mentioned Diodore, and it has been suggested that it was from Diodore that John learned to prefer a more literal interpretation of scripture over a more allegorical one. We also know that Diodore knew no Hebrew, and neither did his disciple: in his fourth Homily Chrysostom refers to “those who know the language of the Syrians” in a way which implies that he is ruling himself out of that select group of people.

Kelly suggests that John’s ascetical training in this period took the form of

“a close-knit fellowship of dedicated Christians who, while staying in their separate homes and living in the world, accepted self-imposed rules of rigorous self-denial and met together, probably in some private house, to pray, study the bible and hear expositions of it, and be counselled by the master in ascetic withdrawal ... their ideals and practices, it may be suggested, illustrate, in a Greek-speaking milieu, the peculiarly Syrian genre of ascetism practised by the ‘sons of the covenant’ or ‘daughters of the covenant’ (benai

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281 Or 367; see Kelly, Golden Mouth, 17.

282 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 19; Hill, Homilies, 3. Diodore also composed a series of works on Genesis.

283 Hom. Gen. 4.10: “... the Old Testament books were not composed in this language – ours, I mean – but in Hebrew. Now those with a precise knowledge of that language tell us that among the Hebrews the word ‘heaven’ is used in the plural, and those who know the language of the Syrians confirm this. In that language – that is, the language they use – no one would say ‘heaven’, but ‘the heavens’.”
qyama or benat qyama) of whom we hear from fourth- and early fifth-century writers, notably Aphrahat and Rabbula of Edessa.**284

This is particularly interesting in the context of this thesis as it means that John Chrysostom and Ephrem Syrus are likely to have expressed their spirituality in very similar practices.

When John was ordained presbyter in 386, the Meletian faction conducted regular worship services in at least two churches – the Great Church in the new quarter of Antioch, and the Old Church which was thought to date back in one form or another to apostolic times. It seems that as presbyter John normally preached in the Old Church.285 In 371, three years after his baptism, John was ordained as a reader, just below the rank of deacon. If John’s De Sacerdotio is to be believed, there soon followed attempts by the church authorities to forcibly ordain John and his friend Basil into the priesthood.286 John resisted and fled to Mount Silpios where he lived a harsh ascetic life which was to take a serious toll on his health in later years. It seems likely that he spent four years on Mount Silpios, and then switched to an even more demanding programme. Between 376 and 378 John lived an entirely solitary life with little food or sleep, never lying down by night or day and learning the whole of the Old and New Testaments by heart. Eventually, the deterioration of John’s health and the return to Antioch of bishop Meletios combined to create auspicious circumstances for the return of John to Antioch towards the end of 378. John was not yet licensed to preach, and this would remain the case until he was finally ordained priest in...
early 386. Not much is known about the detail of the twelve years (386–397) which John spent as presbyter in Antioch, but as Mayer and Allen put it, “the only fact of which we can be absolutely sure is that, as presbyter, he preached a great deal in addition to pursuing a number of less readily defined activities.”

If the first theological crisis which really impacted John’s preaching was Arianism, the second theological crisis which is likely to have been a significant influence on his writings on Genesis came to a head later. In 401, a group of about fifty Egyptian monks appeared on the streets of Constantinople where John was now archbishop. Twenty years earlier, in 381, the Second Ecumenical Council had declared the ecclesiastical see of Constantinople as second in standing after Rome. Constantinople therefore became a magnet for those who sought influence and favour, and these Egyptian monks took the same route. They were headed up by four particularly tall men, and thus the group became known as the Long Brothers. Despite their reputation for holiness and great courage in enduring for the orthodox faith, their leaders had been hounded out of Alexandria by the patriarch Theophilos, ostensibly on the charge of being Origenists. They, like many educated eastern Christians including Theophilos himself until about a year previously, agreed with Origen that the divine nature is spiritual and incorporeal. However, the majority of uneducated Egyptian monks passionately believed (following a literal interpretation of passages such as Genesis 1:27) that God must have human corporeal attributes – mouth, hands, etc. It seems

287 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 26–34.

288 Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 7.


290 Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 4.
that following a squabble in which Theophilos was accused of greed, the patriarch took his revenge by launching a persecution of the Long Brothers, using their theology as an excuse. In a pastoral letter (since lost) in early 399 he had denounced anthropomorphism, but now he made a radical about turn and declared what Kelly describes as “a holy war on Origenism and its adherents.” Theophilos himself took some government soldiers and a motley rabble and attacked the Long Brothers' settlement one night in early 400, sending the monks on the run, and following them up with a letter to his bishops warning them about the monks. The Long Brothers eventually made their way to Constantinople where they threw themselves on John Chrysostom's mercy. This put John in an extremely awkward position – his relationship with Theophilos was fragile as Theophilos' own nominee for the bishop of the imperial see had been passed over and John appointed in his stead. Therefore, he did not treat the monks to the official hospitality of the bishop's palace but lodged them instead in a hospice. He allowed them to attend public prayers but not to receive communion. He forbade them to talk publicly about their treatment by Theophilos, and he wrote an eirenic letter to Theophilos entreating him to receive the monks back. In the meantime, Theophilos had arranged for a synod to be convened in Cyprus which outlawed Origenism, so John's letter was not well received. It was the beginning of the end for John, as it gave his enemies the opportunity to further the whispering campaign against him which led to his eventual exile and death.

For Fabio Fabbì this so-called anthropomorphising crisis was a key trigger in Chrysostom's developing the notion of συγκατάβασις. Given that Theophilos had denounced anthropomorphism in a pastoral letter in 399, we can conclude that during Chrysostom's last years in Antioch the issue was already a major one. I think therefore that Fabbì is right to argue that resistance of the anthropomorphising tendency without falling into the

291 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 193.
extreme Origenist position was the path which John and other Antiochens were trying to negotiate, and this may apply particularly to Chrysostom’s idea of συγκατάβασις.292 Fabbi therefore states his understanding of the Antiochene school as follows:

“God, writing to humans, lowered Himself to our level, took our smallness into account, accommodated Himself to our ways of speaking, our ordinary language, our words, our figures of speech and even – within certain limits – to our way of feeling and experiencing.”293

However, I would modify Fabbi’s claim by saying that the anthropomorphising crisis perhaps encouraged John to develop συγκατάβασις as a shorthand to denote a whole doctrine of divine self-limitation which had already developed and matured in his work and his thinking. I shall deal with this at greater length in the next chapter, and I shall look further at Fabbi’s comments on συγκατάβασις in Section 3.3.

3.2 Chrysostom’s Literary Heritage – Sermons and Homilies

“For almost twelve years, from 386 to late 397, John stood out as the leading pulpit orator of Antioch, building up an unrivalled reputation.”294

Listening to sermons was a popular Antiochene pursuit, seemingly rivalled only by the horse-races in the hippodrome and the public performances in the theatres, both of which John inveighed against with regular vigour. We have around 150 written records of John

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292 “senza cadere nelle esagerazioni degli Antropomorfi d’Egitto … mettere nella loro vera luce le relazioni tra il divino e l’umano nella S. Scrittura.” – “without falling into the exaggerations of the Egyptian Anthropomorphs … putting the relations between the divine and the human in Holy Scripture into their true light.” Fabbi, “La “Condiscenza” Divina”, 331.

293 “Dio scrivendo agli uomini si è abbassato fino a noi, a tenuto conto della nostro picolezza, è accodiscendio ai nostril modi di dire, al nostro linguaggio ordinario, alle nostre parole, alle nostre figure rettoriche, ed anche – entro certi limiti – al nostro modo di sentire e di concepire.” Fabbi, “La “Condiscenza” Divina”, 332, my translation. I am not sure that ‘feeling’ adequately captures Fabbi’s meaning in ‘sentire’ here – he probably means some sort of sense experience as well, which the English word can convey but does not always do so. Note however that Fabbi is careful to state that he does not believe συγκατάβασις to be an arbitrary theory (teoria arbitaria) developed by Chrysostom to evade difficulty, but rather a theory rooted in Chrysostom’s belief of the divine inspiration of Scripture.

294 Kelly, Golden Mouth, 57.
preaching on Old Testament texts, 75 of which are on Genesis. Of these 75, we have 8 sermons\textsuperscript{295} on Genesis and 67 homilies on Genesis.

It is these 8 Sermons on Genesis and the first 17 of the Homilies of Genesis which form the textual basis for my work on Chrysostom. I have restricted my analysis of the Homilies to the first 17 because these are the ones which cover the creation and fall in some detail, allowing a comparison with Ephrem’s Hymns on Paradise.

As Mayer and Allen write, “[t]here is much debate concerning the issues of composition, publication and editorial control in relation to the homiletic activity of John Chrysostom.”\textsuperscript{296} In particular, for our purposes in this thesis, there is disagreement among scholars as to why we have two extant sets of texts on Genesis, why they have different names (sermons vs. homilies) and why there is sometimes a verbatim relationship between the two. Baur suggests that the Sermons were delivered and the Homilies (which he refers to as the Commentary) never actually preached:

“One would say … that this ‘Sermon’ is nothing but an extract from the ‘Commentary’ – it would be absolutely against the custom and nature of Saint Chrysostom to repeat himself thus virtually word for word in front of the same audience.”\textsuperscript{297}

In his classic 1960 work, Quasten wrote of Chrysostom:

“Most of his voluminous Scriptural expositions do not provide enough clues to determine the time of composition or delivery or even their exact order. Some of them may have been published only in written form without having ever been preached.”\textsuperscript{298}

\textsuperscript{295} Some scholars add a ninth sermon to the series. See Hill, Homilies, 1. This would bring the total to 76.

\textsuperscript{296} Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 30.

At around the same time, Markowicz considered the problem of the relation between the
Sermons and the Homilies and saw no reason to assume with Baur that the one set was
preached and the second written with what Markowicz refers to as ‘stenographic
additions’. Instead, he takes what might be termed a common sense view:

“From the evidence one concludes that the relationship between the Homilies on Genesis and
the Sermons consists in this, that where there is close agreement, or even verbatim
agreement, that portion was taken from the common substratum of Chrysostom’s experience
as a preacher and from the common fund of scriptural interpretation inherited from his
training. The Homilies as a whole are an independent work of Chrysostom’s, somewhat
influenced by a previous work of his own. Partial repetitions triggered by similarity of
circumstance are no surprise to any teacher-preacher of many years.”

In this thesis (Chapter 4) I consider this issue in further detail and make a new contribution
to the debate. Based on a close examination of the texts, I argue that in several instances
Chrysostom expanded, re-wrote, and probably re-preached, key passages from the Sermons,
and in so doing incorporated his term συνκατάβασις. Therefore, the claim of this thesis is
that John preached the Sermons first, and then redeveloped them into his Homilies series on
Genesis once he had started using συνκατάβασις to describe and connote his doctrine of
divine self-limitation as gift of love.

In addition, the majority of scholars agree that both sets of texts come out of Antioch,
rather than John’s later period in the See of Constantinople, which he moved to in 398.

298 Johannes Quasten, “Patrology Vol. 3.” The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature, from the Council of


300 See e.g. Hill, Homilies, 6, and Kelly, Golden Mouth, 58 and 89.
3.3 Chrysostom’s Philosophical and Theological Heritage

Chrysostom is associated in the patristic literature with the introduction of the term συγκατάβασις which has been variously translated by words such as ‘accommodation’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘condescension’. These ideas all imply some notion of divine self-limitation. In the section on Ephrem, I traced the route by which Ephrem might have received and developed the idea of a God who is self-enclosing, by looking at the philosophical formulae ‘God encloses but is not enclosed’ and ‘God is God’s own space’. In this parallel section, I consider the term συγκατάβασις. In this case there is very little evidence that the term was widely used before Chrysostom, but there has been some scholarly attention paid to how and why Chrysostom used it. In this section I provide a review of the scholarly work, in order to prepare the way for my wider study of limit and divine self-limitation in Chrysostom’s preaching on Genesis 1–3.

In his article on συγκατάβασις cited in the Introduction and also in Section 3.1 above, Fabbi lists the main ways in which he considers Chrysostom to have employed the theory of συγκατάβασις. The first of these, as already mentioned, is that Chrysostom uses συγκατάβασις to explain the anthropomorphisms in the Bible, “by which he holds himself equidistant from the Alexandrian excesses on the one hand and those of the Anthropomorphs on the other.” 301 The second is Chrysostom’s use of συγκατάβασις to explain the theophanies in Scripture as “visions of accommodation …and not visions of the naked substance.” 302 The third is Chrysostom’s use of συγκατάβασις to describe the use of figures of speech in scripture. The fourth is his use of συγκατάβασις to explain scriptural


descriptions of physical phenomena, which are “... described by God in a way which conforms to the common conceptions held by mankind.”

Fabbi points out that this is still the explanation we use today to reconcile scriptural descriptions of physical phenomena with our current scientific knowledge – and the same is still true almost a century after Fabbi wrote those words. Yet another use is Chrysostom’s invoking of συγκατάβασις to describe God’s shaping of the scriptural narrative to accommodate mankind’s psychological make-up. He even uses it to justify the obscurity of certain scriptural passages. Fabbi concludes that in order to make sure that συγκατάβασις remains a faithful hermeneutical tool, Chrysostom balances it with “another principle which limits it and circumscribes it ... – ἀκρίβεια [akribeia] ... perfection, precision, exactitude, diligence, absence of error.” This idea has become well-established in scholarly circles where ἀκρίβεια and συγκατάβασις have been seen as two sides of Chrysostom’s hermeneutical coin.

Having reviewed the different ways in which Chrysostom uses the idea of συγκατάβασις, Fabbi then goes on to explore the consequences which flow from this theory. First, Fabbi asserts that Chrysostom believed that given that God has accommodated Himself to us in inspiring the scriptures, “we must find a literal sense, and only one.”

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306 “un altro principio che lo limito e lo circoscriva ... - ἀκρίβεια ... perfezione, precisione, esattezza, diligenza, mancanza di errore.” Fabbi 343, my translation.


exegesis, dismantles the basis for allegorisation\textsuperscript{309}, and provides the authorisation for all to read and understand the scriptures for themselves.\textsuperscript{310} Fabbi concludes his paper by saying:

\begin{quote}

“These and others are the merits of the principle of divine condescension: no wonder therefore that little by little it has prevailed over its opponents, has gained terrain with all the exegetes and has finally been given a triumphant welcome – albeit under a different name or in an equivalent form – in all the schools. So many exegetical absurdities which have been uttered from the year 600 to the present day about the first chapters of Genesis ... could have been avoided if the exegetes had had this principle in mind.”\textsuperscript{311}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately, Fabbi’s excellent work on συγκατάβασις seems to have been largely ignored for about half a century. The next major work on the subject seems to have been Hill’s important article on συγκατάβασις. Hill sees Chrysostom as understanding συγκατάβασις as “always a manifestation of the goodness (philantrōpia) and providential care (kēdemonia, pronoia) of God.”\textsuperscript{312} Perhaps because of this emphasis, Hill prefers to translate συγκατάβασις as ‘considerateness’. He also interprets the use of συγκατάβασις Christologically: “every instance of scriptural sunkatabasis partakes of and is to be referred to the paradigm of the Incarnation.”\textsuperscript{313} Like Fabbi, Hill categorises the various ways in which Chrysostom employs the notion of συγκατάβασις, and again he sees its “general application ... in the sense of...

\textsuperscript{309} Fabbi points out that Chrysostom admits to the Scriptural use of allegory, but only in the limited sense of a simple figure of speech (\textit{ibid.}, 344).

\textsuperscript{310} Fabbi, “La “Condiscenza” Divina”, 345.

\textsuperscript{311} “Questi ed altri sono i meriti del principio della divina condiscendenza: nessuna meraviglia quindi che esso a poco, a poco abbia prevalso sui suoi oppositori, abbia guadagnato terreno presso tutti gli esegeti e sia stato infine accolto trionfalmente – sebbene sotto altro nome o in forma equivalente – in tutte le scuole ... Tante assurdità esegetiche che sono state dette dal ’600 in qua intorno ai primi capi del Genesi ... sarebbero state evitate se gli esegeti avessero avuto di mira il principio in parola.” Fabbi, “La “Condiscenza” Divina”, 346, my translation, author’s own emphasis.

\textsuperscript{312} Hill, “Sunkatabasis”, 5.

\textsuperscript{313} Hill, “Sunkatabasis”, 6.
linguistic considerateness ... in Scripture, God uses simple ways of speech to accommodate our limitations.” Starting, as he puts it, “from below”, συγκατάβασις leads mankind from material things upward to spiritual realities, employing a progressive revelation out of considerateness for our weakness. Such considerateness was particularly evident in the early stages of revelation history because Paul and John had more sophisticated notions than Moses. Further, συγκατάβασις is displayed in God’s direct dealings with the patriarchs. When God appears in person to the patriarchs He shows great considerateness to them, particularly in the regard He shows to them.

Hill shows that Chrysostom’s use of συγκατάβασις is paired with other key words which bring out its meaning. Ασθένεια (astheneia) is used to cover the limitations that are part of the human condition, ταπεινότης (tapeinotēs) is the mundane quality of biblical language which is a consequence of the divine συγκατάβασις, and παχύτης (pachutēs) is applied to both the concreteness of the language and the materialism of the recipient. Subsequent to Hill’s article, Francois Dreyfus published an article on ‘divine condescendence’ as a hermeneutic principle of the Old Testament in Jewish and Christian tradition. Dreyfus provides an overview of the history of ‘divine condescendence’, arguing that Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:5 that divorce was only permitted because the hardness of the Jews’ hearts played a major role in its formulation as a Christian doctrine. Dreyfus states that “the doctrine was also held by the majority of the Church Fathers,

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although the term “condescendence” (synkatabasis) only appears in St. John Chrysostom.”

He illustrates this with examples from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzen (and, in passing, Maimonides), Chrysostom, “the great theologian of Divine condescendence”, and finally Jerome. Dreyfus then goes on to summarise the general characteristics of patristic thought on divine condescendence as often occurring in an anti-Jewish polemical context and being understood as progressive divine pedagogy designed to educate a sinful people. He makes the same point as Fabbi – scriptural anthropomorphisms can be explained by divine transcendence, but they can also be explained by allegorization. Dreyfus characterises these two approaches as Antiochene and Alexandrian respectively.

More recently, Mary Tse has briefly examined the role of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom’s hermeneutics, and agreed with Hill that “the most basic idea conveyed by συγκατάβασις is that God has chosen to communicate with man through human language.”

The most comprehensive treatment of συγκατάβασις since Hill’s overview was published is the PhD thesis of David Rylaarsdam. Rylaarsdam draws on the work of Fabbi and Hill to develop what he terms a taxonomy of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom’s works. He examines the occurrence of the word across the whole corpus of Chrysostom’s writings and states that “adaptability was a prominent concept in ancient rhetoric, moral philosophy, and the theological tradition. The commonplace idea that God adapts his interactions with humans to their limitations was most extensively applied by John Chrysostom. His primary term for

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318 Dreyfus, “Divine Condescendence”, 75.
319 Dreyfus, “Divine Condescendence”, 76.
321 Tse, “συνκατάβασις and ἀκρίβεια”, 2.
divine adaptation, συγκατάβασις, is found as frequently in his corpus as in all other Greek literature combined." \[323\]

Rylaarsdam argues that for Chrysostom God is the divine teacher whose main pedagogical technique is συγκατάβασις. The divine teacher has four main attributes: omniscience, persuasiveness, humility and love, and it is these four attributes which characterise His pedagogical method of συγκατάβασις. The divine teacher uses three main pedagogical techniques in His συγκατάβασις. The first of these is that God uses corporeal signs to communicate with His children. \[324\] These signs include God’s appropriating human forms, language and customs, His revealing Himself through perceptible objects and experiences and His providing models for our imitation. This is in close agreement with Fabbi’s three categories mentioned above. The second pedagogical technique is variation. This is the way in which God adapts His self-revelation according to the mental and spiritual capacities of its recipients. Thus Rylaarsdam quotes Chrysostom:

> “when God reveals himself, he appropriately adapts [συγκαταβαίνων] himself, now in one way, now in another way, to the prophets. He alters the visions in ways appropriate to the circumstances.” \[325\]

The final divine pedagogical technique, according to Rylaarsdam, is progression. God does not reveal His redemptive plan all at once, but progressively on a large scale through human history and on a small scale in each individual:

> “the progressive and timely character of divine adaptation which takes place on the cosmic level of redemptive history also occurs in the life of individuals. The gradual and

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\[323\] Rylaarsdam, "Adaptability", i.

\[324\] Rylaarsdam, "Adaptability", 93 – 108.

timely character of God’s leading humanity as a whole is reflected in his one-on-one tutoring.  

**Summary**

In this chapter I have set Chrysostom in his context, and in particular I have depicted the struggle of the Nicene Christians against Arianism, which was his direct heritage. In some of the passages quoted we have already begun to see how the question of the limits of human knowledge was as important to Chrysostom in this context as it was to Ephrem. I have also outlined the anthropomorphising crisis which was in the end to lead to John’s downfall. This crisis developed in parallel with John’s rise to power, first in Antioch and subsequently in Constantinople, and therefore it served as a furnace in which John had to refine his thinking about the limits of human language. In this too, we see a parallel with Ephrem.

It has also been shown that one thing happened with Chrysostom which never seemed to have happened with Ephrem: he started to use the term συγκατάβασις to denote the doctrine of divine self-limitation through which he read his Bible. I showed that there has been some scholarly attention paid to the notion of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom. Scholars have pointed out the importance of the term in enabling Chrysostom to deal with the anthropomorphisms in the Bible, as well as highlighting the problems involved when God chooses to communicate through our restricted human language. Scholars (especially Hill and Rylaarsdam) have also shown that the idea of God’s revelation being varied and progressive plays an important part in Chrysostom’s hermeneutics. It has been clear from the quotations in this section that there is no consensus on how to translate συγκατάβασις, which has been variously translated as ‘(divine) accommodation’ (e.g. Benin), ‘(divine) condescension’ (e.g. Fabbi), ‘(divine) considerateness’ (e.g. Hill) and ‘(divine) adaptation’

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(e.g. Rylaarsdam). All of these terms attempt to capture the essence of the concept in one word, but the trouble is that the concept contains in itself two distinct ideas. The first of these ideas describes a divine method of acting: God limits Himself in some fashion. This aspect is covered by the translations ‘accommodation’, ‘condescension’ and ‘adaptation’. However, these three terms fail to take into account the other half of the concept: what is the goal, the σκοπός, of this limitation? The goal is entirely soteriological – God limits Himself in order to draw us to Him, to save us. This is His ‘considerateness’, his gift of love; this is the goal of the divine self-limitation.

In this thesis I build on the existing scholarly foundation by widening my scope beyond συγκατάβασις to Chrysostom’s operation through the doctrine of divine self-limitation. I conduct a close reading of some of Chrysostom’s writings on Genesis and note each context in Chrysostom appeals to limit or to divine self-limitation, and the vocabulary he uses to describe it. Often, especially in the Homilies, συγκατάβασις will occur in this context, but this is not always so. I therefore pay careful attention to the vocabulary used when Chrysostom is interpreting passages which contain anthropomorphisms, when the use of human language appears to him to be problematic, and when he perceives passages as reflecting the variable and progressive nature of revelation. I show that divine self-limitation as gift is a key hermeneutic principle in Chrysostom’s work on Genesis and that it is not restricted to συγκατάβασις. In fact, I demonstrate that Chrysostom first started to use the word συγκατάβασις to routinely denote the concept of divine self-limitation at some point between his writing the Sermons and his writing the Homilies.
Chapter 4: Chrysostom’s Own Reading of Genesis 1–3

Introduction

In this chapter I conduct a close examination of Chrysostom’s Homilies and Sermons on Genesis in order to study how Chrysostom reads the creation and fall accounts. From the texts, a narrative structure to Chrysostom’s hermeneutics emerges. First of all, he emphasises that God acts purposefully. The very existence of the creation and fall account, but also their nature and composition, are entirely deliberate and purposeful (Section 4.1). As I shall demonstrate in Section 4.1 below, Chrysostom’s trademark phrase for describing this is that God does not do things “idly or without purpose”. The ultimate purpose of the creation and fall accounts is to reveal that God has a saving plan which is to transform the entire cosmos through the transformation of men and women who are made in the image of God, through the Son who is the Image. Because of the fall God accepts the limitations of the flesh through the Incarnation so that in the Son redemption is offered to all. To achieve this end God works freely and deliberately out of His infinite love.

But as well as revealing this overarching transformative, participatory and soteriological purpose, scripture also has another purpose, and this is to protect us from error (Section 4.2). Scripture puts boundaries and limits in place which keep us on the right path. Linked with this idea of purpose, I show that Chrysostom also expounds an ethic of imitation (Section 4.3). In addition to emphasising God’s purposefulness, he urges us to act wisely and purposefully as he himself endeavours to do. The ontological change effected in us through our participation by faith and baptism in the life, death and resurrection of the Son makes possible this imitation, this mimesis, which transforms us so that we become ‘like God’. Chrysostom emphasises that God’s deliberate and careful acts involve Him limiting and adapting His language in order to communicate most effectively with us. This is evidence of
his συγκατάβασις, sunkatabasis, translated in this chapter as ‘considerateness’ (Section 4.4). Chrysostom uses συγκατάβασις to equip his listeners and readers against the ‘heretics’, particularly the Jews, the Arians, the ‘anthropomorphisers’ and those who did not accept creatio ex nihilo (Section 4.5). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Chrysostom’s use of συγκατάβασις and related terms in the Homilies 1–17 and the Sermons on Genesis.

4.1 Scripture Was Not Written “idly or without purpose”

Like a musical phrase which the composer develops in different ways as it recurs time and again in his piece, so Chrysostom returns again and again to the thought that God does not do things “idly or without purpose”. This phrase occurs, with slight variations, 39 times in the Genesis Homilies, and of those it occurs 20 times in the first 17 Homilies alone. The phrase occurs once in the Sermons and I shall comment on this further in the concluding section of this chapter. It is clear that the idea that God does not do things idly and without purpose plays a significant part in Chrysostom’s understanding of creation and fall. In the second Homily, Chrysostom uses the phrase to introduce a discussion of why the creation account in the scriptures was composed as it was. In the table below, the account from the second Homily is placed side by side with a parallel account from the first Sermon.

| (Hom. Gen. 2.5) | (Serm. Gen. 1 (582, p.25-6)) |
| "In the beginning God made heaven and earth." ... why did this blessed author, born many generations later, put this to us? **Not idly or without reason.** You | On these questions, you see, and on many others God composed an explanation and sent this book to us – though in fact God is not required to |

327 Following Hill, Homilies. In the concluding chapter of this thesis I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the possible ways of translating συγκατάβασις into English.

328 Serm. Gen. 2 (890, p.50).
see, when God formed human beings in the beginning, he used to speak to them personally, in a way that was possible for human beings to understand him. This was the way, for example, that he came to Adam, the way he upbraided Cain, the way he conversed with Noah, the way he accepted Abraham's hospitality. And even when all humankind fell into evil ways, the creator of all did not abandon the human race. Instead, when they then proved unworthy of his converse with them, he wanted to renew his love for them; he sent them letters as you do to people far away from you, and this drew all humankind back again to him. It was God who sent them letters, Moses who delivered them. What do the letters say? "In the beginning God made heaven and earth."

(Hom. Gen. 2.7) See the great extent of the considerateness in this statement: there is provide human beings with an explanation.

At the beginning then, God communicates directly with human beings as far as it is possible for human beings to hear. This is the way He came to Adam, this the way He rebuked Cain, this the way He was entertained by Abraham. But since our nature took a turn for evil, and separated itself by a lengthy exile, as it were, at long last He sent us letters as though we were absent for a long time and He intended to re-establish the former friendship through an epistle.

While it was God who sent the letters, it was

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329 This is a direct quotation from the English translation, so I have retained Hill’s practice of referring to God as ‘he’ (rather than ‘He’) in the Homilies. However, for some reason, Hill uses the upper case ‘He’ to refer to God in his translation of the Sermons, so I have retained this in my quotations. My own preference, as stated earlier (footnote 20), is to refer to God as He.
no mention of unseen powers, nor does it say, In the beginning God made the angels, or the archangels. It was **not idly or without purpose** that he took this line in his teaching. I mean, since he was talking to Jews, people quite wrapped up in the world about them and incapable of forming any spiritual notion, he led them along for the time being from visible realities to the creator of all things, so that from created things they might come to learn the architect of all and adore their maker, not stopping short at creatures. You see, despite the creation of the world, they had not avoided the error of making gods out of creatures, offering worship to the vilest of brutes; so what madness would they have not fallen into if such **considerateness** had not been shown them?

**(Hom. Gen. 2.8)** Don't be surprised, dearly beloved, if Moses followed this procedure speaking as he was at the beginning in the early stages to very down-to-earth Jews, when even Paul in the age of grace, when proclamation of the good news had

Moses who brought them. Well, then, what did the letters say? "In the beginning God made heaven and earth." Why did He not speak to us about the angels, or about the archangels? ... why did He reject the higher way to lead us by the lower? Because He is speaking to Jews, with their rather irrational ways, with their attachment to material things, at that time on their way up out of Egypt where people used to worship crocodiles and dogs and apes.

**(Serm. Gen. 1 (585, p.28))** What is remarkable
advanced so much, was able, in the speech he was on the point of delivering to the Athenians, to base his teaching to them on visible realities ... In addressing his letter to the people of Colossae he did not keep to that approach, but addressed them differently, in these words: "In him were created all things – those in the heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, dominations, principalities, powers – all were created by him and with him in mind." John, the Son of Thunder, by contrast shouted aloud "Everything was made through him, and without him no single thing was made."...

(Hom. Gen. 2.9-10) When Moses, remember, in the beginning took on the instruction of the human race, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage about this being His style of teaching in the Old Testament when even in the New, a time for instruction in higher values, Paul in speaking to the Athenians took this way which Moses had taken in instructing Jews? ...

When he spoke to the Philippians, on the other hand, he did not lead them by this way; instead he leads them to the higher forms of creation, speaking thus, "Because by Him were created everything in heaven and on earth, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through Him and for Him." John, too when he had the more advanced as disciples, mentioned all creation together, saying not heaven and earth and sea but "Everything was made through him, and without was made not one thing that was made," visible or invisible.

(Serm. Gen. 1 (585, p.29)) Just as with teachers, you see, the teacher who receives the child from the mother teaches it the

330 Interestingly, Chrysostom attributes the quote to the letter to the Philippians in the one case, and the letter to the Colossians in the other. He clearly had Col 1:16 in mind, so the attribution to Philippians in the Sermons is a mistake – another argument favouring the Sermons as having been written first?
transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the *considerateness* shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit he was speaking in a manner appropriate to his hearers as he outlined everything."

elements first, whereas the one who receives it from another teacher leads the pupil to a higher level of teaching, so too was it in the case of Moses and Paul and John ..."  

Chrysostom sees the book of Genesis as describing an inexorable degradation in humankind’s spiritual standing. This decline came to mean that communication between God and His children became harder and harder. Once humans had become so sinful that they could no longer hear and understand God’s direct communication, God did not turn His back on them but instead wrote them ‘letters’ – the Bible, through the authorship of Moses, to remind them of the truths about Him and about creation which they had known and have now forgotten. For Chrysostom, then, the scriptures are certainly God’s words, but they share the difficulties inherent to all written communication: the writer and the recipient are separated by time and space and, supremely in this instance, the recipients’ mental and spiritual capacities severely impair their ability to receive the Author’s message.  

This separation will inevitably lead to humans being led astray if they are left to their own devices when attempting to understand the nature and purpose of the universe. Hence the purpose of the Genesis account – God did not write it idly or without purpose, but rather He wrote it as an explanation in the sorts of words which humans could understand. He wrote it freely – he was not obliged to provide an explanation, but he chose to do so. He was careful to phrase the explanation in a manner appropriate to His hearers.  

331 Of course, this reminds us of Ephrem’s understanding of limit as proportion in the language of the scripture and the work of God.
In the *Homilies*, Chrysostom uses the word *συγκατάβασις* (here translated *considerateness* by Hill) as an umbrella term to cover these ideas of God’s free choice to communicate His Word on the hearers’ own terms. Chrysostom is saying – “the scriptures were not written by God idly and for no reason – indeed, the reason for their creation was God’s *συγκατάβασις*. As he puts it:

“Do you see how there is nothing in the Sacred Scripture which is contained there idly or to no purpose? Instead, even the chance word has treasure stored up in it.”

When the parallel passages from the *Sermons* and the *Homilies* are placed side by side as they are in the table above, it is immediately evident that in the passage from the *Homilies* the train of thought is expanded and focused through the addition and repetition of the two key phrases “not idly and to no purpose”, and “considerateness”. It seems very likely that these two phrases were associated in Chrysostom’s mind, and that together they contributed to his understanding of what God was doing when He communicated with us through the Bible.

### 4.2 Scripture Was Written to Protect Us from Error

In his fifth *Homily* Chrysostom comments that

“For the particular purpose of correcting later human folly, sacred Scripture gives us a precise description of everything according to the order of creation so as to offset the absurdities of people speaking idly from their own reasoning in an endeavour to assert that the assistance of the sun is responsible for the germination of the crops.”

Here we see that while God’s reasoning is not idle, people’s own reasoning is indeed idle and can lead to error. Just as Ephrem makes repeated reference to the (Nicene) *doctrine* 

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which is the guarantor of correct exegesis, so Chrysostom makes use of the vocabulary of orthodoxy (canon, doctrine, dogma) in his Homilies on Genesis:

“We, for our part, who have been fortunate enough to benefit from the rays of the sun, should obey the teaching of Sacred Scripture: let us follow its canon, place its wholesome doctrines within the recesses of our mind, and with protection from it take good care of our own welfare, avoiding whatever impairs the health of our soul.”  

As well as scripture itself being created with a specific purpose by God, so also God has gone about the task of creation in a purposeful manner. Therefore, another purpose of the scripture is to protect us from error and to guard orthodox belief about creation:

“You see there was no need to mention: A third day had passed. But see how in the case of each day it speaks in this way: “Evening came, and morning came: a third day” – not idly or to no purpose but to prevent our confusing the order …”

Anyone who depends on his or her own reasoning in theological matters is considered by Chrysostom to be

“a lunatic … we should … subdue our own reasonings, and instead of presuming further we should be content with the knowledge that everything has been produced by a word coming from him and by his loving kindness, and that nothing has been created idly and to no purpose. Even if, through the limitations of our own reasoning, we should be in ignorance of created things, he himself in his own wisdom and thoughtful love produced all things.”

It is our task, therefore, to realise that God’s reasoning and purpose are far superior to our own, and to acknowledge the limits of our own reasoning if we are not to fall into error:

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334 Hom. Gen. 5.15. See also e.g. 8.8, 8.12, 10.8, 12.5, 13.16 and 14.6.


“not overstepping the proper limit nor busying ourselves with matters beyond us; this is the besetting weakness of enemies of the truth, wishing as they do to assign every matter to their own reasoning, and lacking the realization that it is beyond the capacity of human nature to plumb God’s creation.”\textsuperscript{337}

This is the fundamental complaint which both Ephrem and Chrysostom raise against the heretics and especially the Arians: they esteem their own reasoning far too highly. They overstep the limits:

“... the pagans ... fell into error by entrusting everything to their own reasoning and refusing to acknowledge the limitations of their own nature, they let their imagination run riot, exceeded the measure of their own capabilities, and lost the sense of the status they could claim to.”\textsuperscript{338}

Instead, says Chrysostom, they ought to consider how the creation account depicts God as “allotting to each”\textsuperscript{339} its own particular area and establishing limits for each right in the beginning so that they could keep to them permanently without interference ... this fact alone should suffice to oblige people obdurate in their lack of response to come to faith and obedience to the words of Sacred Scripture so as to imitate the order in the elements, respecting as they do their course uninterruptedly, and not overstep their own limitations but rather recognize the extent of their own nature.”\textsuperscript{340}

\textsuperscript{337} Hom. Gen. 2.5. This sentiment is expressed repeatedly by Chrysostom. In 4.7 he dismisses attempts to identify the physical nature of the firmament as “rash” and suggests that his listeners should accept what they were told and “not reach beyond the limits of our own nature by meddling in matters beyond us”.

\textsuperscript{338} Hom. Gen. 7.18. In the next homily (8.8) Chrysostom specifically addresses the Arian heresy, arguing that Genesis 1:26 “deals a mortal blow to those entertaining the position of Arius” because the text depicts God as speaking not “to a subordinate or to one inferior in being, but ... with great deference to an equal.” He also mentions the Arians by name in 8.12.

\textsuperscript{339} Chrysostom is referring to the creation of light and darkness here.

\textsuperscript{340} Hom. Gen. 3.10. This argument crops up elsewhere, and is summarised in 5.10 where Chrysostom states that “for the particular purpose of correcting later human folly, Sacred Scripture gives us a precise description of everything according to the order of creation so as to offset the absurdities of people speaking idly from their own reasoning.”
Far from being idle and to no purpose, therefore, the Genesis account is absolutely necessary for far too often human “reasoning fails and the intellect proves inadequate.”\textsuperscript{341} God, out of his “considerateness (\textgamma\textalpha\kappa\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\varsigma\varsigma)… speak[s] in a manner appropriate to his hearers and at the same time he uproot[s] all the heresies springing up like weeds in the Church by his words”.\textsuperscript{342} God freely chooses to limit Himself in human language and carefully chooses the appropriate language to convey His salvific love to His hearers, in proportion to their wisdom and spiritual standing.

4.3 Scripture Provides an Ethics of Imitation

We have seen that Chrysostom taught that God does nothing idly or without a purpose. In the same way, however, Chrysostom believed that he too should not act idly but in a purposeful way. He says he is willing to “undergo any effort … that we may feel comfortable in more forthright speech seeing that our effort was not in vain or to no purpose.”\textsuperscript{343} His purpose is that his listeners should be led to salvation through Jesus Christ\textsuperscript{344} just as God’s purpose in inspiring Moses to write the creation accounts was the salvation of all mankind. Again and again Chrysostom feels “the need to rehearse these details and repeat them … not idly and to no purpose, but that the listeners may have a stronger basis of belief”.\textsuperscript{345} Chrysostom imitates his Lord in sparing no trouble, making much effort, choosing his language carefully in order to communicate effectively with his listeners so that they will

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{341} Hom. Gen. 7.17.
\textsuperscript{342} Hom. Gen. 2.10.
\textsuperscript{343} Hom. Gen. 4.2.
\textsuperscript{344} Hom. Gen. 5.5.
\textsuperscript{345} Hom. Gen. 9.5. See also 8.1 and 10.19 for similar comments.
\end{footnotesize}
understand what God has done for their salvation, and how He desires to draw them to Himself.346

Indeed, the imitation should not end there. Chrysostom several times urges his readers not to “squander the time idly and to no purpose”347 but use it wisely by thinking about judgement. They should imitate their Lord who does everything purposefully, “so too it is proper that what is done by us not be done idly or to no purpose but for the benefit and advantage of our salvation.”348

This argument springs from the ethics of imitation, which was the ancient pedagogical theory that learning takes place by imitating (μίμησις, mimesis) exemplars349. Indeed Chrysostom urges his readers to imitate all sorts of role models. When addressing those who have heretical views about creation, he writes:

“[Scripture showed] considerateness (συγκατάβασις) for the limitations of our hearing when it said “God saw that the light was good,” and added, “God separated light from darkness; he called the light day, and he called the darkness night,” allotting to each its own particular area and establishing limits for each right from the beginning ... Everyone in his right mind can understand this, how from that time till this the light has not surpassed its limits, nor has darkness exceeded its due order, resulting in confusion and disruption. Really, this fact alone should suffice to oblige people obdurate in their lack of response to come to faith and obedience to the words of Sacred Scripture so as to imitate the order in the elements,

346 See also Mayer and Allen, Chrysostom, 44.

347 Hom. Gen. 4.19.

348 Hom. Gen. 11.6. See also Serm. Gen. 2 (890, p.50) “Make an upright life your deep concern so that we may not have assembled idly and to no purpose.” This is the only occurrence of the phrase “idly and to no purpose” in the Sermons.

 respecting as they do their course uninterruptedly, and not overstep their own limitations but rather recognize the extent of their own nature.”

This passage has a number of most interesting features. Firstly, it contains the familiar idea that God demonstrates συγκατάβασις for our limitations in the choice of language in scripture. Secondly, the passage associates the ideas of limit, boundary and order with right thinking, or orthodoxy, as we have already seen in Ephrem’s writings. Thirdly, it offers up this property of the elements as a model for us to imitate, so that we too can observe our correct boundaries and not overstep our own limitations.

On another occasion Chrysostom extols God’s great act of kenosis in the incarnation, and exhorts us to imitate God and to go to whatever lengths we can to bring our fellow-humans to salvation by rescuing them from error. He paraphrases Jeremiah 15:19 as “Whoever leads his neighbours from error towards truth ... or guides them from wickedness to virtue, imitates me as far as human nature can. God himself, remember, despite his divinity, took to himself our human flesh, and for no other reason than the salvation of the human flesh became man ... If then he, being God and enjoying that ineffable nature, out of unspeakable love accepted all that for us and for our salvation, what would we not be justified in demonstrating in the case of our brethren ... so as to snatch them from the jaws of the devil.”

We see then that Chrysostom is offering us an ethics of imitation on two levels. First of all, Chrysostom himself emulates God’s purposeful action, of which we find an icon in the

350 Hom. Gen. 3.10. For a similar argument see 12.10.

351 Chrysostom quotes this as “The one who brings something noble out of dishonour will be like my own mouth”.

352 Hom. Gen. 3.16. For similar arguments see e.g. 15.17, 16.20.
purposeful structure of scripture. God acts with \( \sigma\nu\gamma\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\varsigma \) towards us and his purpose is our salvation. Similarly, Chrysostom does not choose his words idly or at random but with \( \sigma\nu\gamma\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\varsigma \) to his listeners so that they might be led to a saving encounter with God through Christ. We too, his listeners and readers, are to do the same. We are not to fritter away our time and our opportunities idly and to no purpose, but rather imitate our Lord who took on the limitations of human flesh for our salvation. If that seems too lofty an ideal, then Chrysostom offers us a host of other noble things to emulate, including the order of creation, the structure of scripture and, of course, Chrysostom’s own purposeful activity.

This principle of *mimesis* was a key one for Chrysostom, and Margaret Mitchell\(^{353}\) and others have shown that it grows out of the Greco-Roman tradition of virtue ethics, as well as being greatly influenced by the rhetorical tradition in whose techniques Chrysostom was an acknowledged master. However, Pak-Wah Lai has rightly pointed out that

> “the forms that his exemplar portraits take are also distinctively Christian because they declare powerfully Chrysostom’s soteriological convictions, namely, that Christian salvation is nothing less than the transcendence of one’s human limitations by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that one can participate in Christ’s deified life in the human body and live a life that is not dissimilar to the angels.”\(^{354}\)

We see this time and again in Chrysostom’s preaching, as he founds his exhortations to imitation in the context of our salvation in Christ. Thus Chrysostom ends his 15\(^{th} \) *Homily* with these words:

> “[if we are vigilant] we will be able both to be spurred on to works of virtue and to occupy our tongue in glory and praise of the God of all ... May it be the good favour of us all to enjoy this,

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\(^{353}\) Margaret Mitchell also makes the interesting comment that fourth century Christology was so high that rather than urging his readers to imitate Christ, Chrysostom often urged them to imitate Paul instead as a mimetic intermediary. (Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*, 51). However Lai (see footnote 338) has claimed that Mitchell has misunderstood Chrysostom because she has read his writings through the lens of Protestant soteriology rather than the patristic discourse of deification. (Lai 132).

thanks to the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, power and honour, now and forever, for ages of ages, Amen.”

Indeed, without the ontological change wrought in us by the Spirit through our participation in Christ, our human limits would make such mimesis impossible. This is not the case of simply imitating the virtues of a great man, but rather of the process of becoming ‘like God’. This is why Chrysostom is careful to ground his exhortation to imitation in “the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ”, who limited Himself in the flesh that we might overcome our own limits.

Up to this point in the textual study, I have identified three dominant themes in Chrysostom’s writings on Genesis 1–3: scripture was not written idly or without purpose, it was written to protect us from error and it provides an ethics of imitation. In each case I have drawn out the connections made or implied in the text with questions of ‘limit’. In the next two sections I will go on to look more closely at Chrysostom’s use of συγκατάβασις, and how he uses it in very similar ways to Ephrem to emphasise the limits of human language, and to help in the battle for orthodoxy. In the last section I widen the discussion round συγκατάβασις and consider other words which Chrysostom used to convey ‘limit’ and ‘divine self-limitation’, and trace the development of the usage of συγκατάβασις in Chrysostom’s writings on Genesis.

4.4 Συγκατάβασις: Language and Limit

Chrysostom often uses συγκατάβασις as a hermeneutical tool to overcome difficulties in the exegesis of certain passages. One common way in which he does this is by appealing to the limits of human language. For instance, when God creates light and declares that it was

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555 Hom. Gen. 15.18.
good, Chrysostom anticipates an objection from his listeners: surely, God, unlike a human craftsman, must have known that the light was going to be good before he created it and the declaration was therefore superfluous. Yes, says Chrysostom, but God puts it that way because of his considerateness for the limits of our language:

“What is the point of the remark? ... This blessed author spoke this way out of considerateness (συγκατάβασις) for the way human beings speak. And just as people work on something with great care, and when they bring their efforts to completion they parade what they have made for scrutiny and commendation, so Sacred Scripture speaks in that way, showing considerateness (συγκατάβασις) for the limitations of our hearing ...”  

The same argument is adduced when God declares the firmament to be good, which Chrysostom describes as “the considerateness (συγκατάβασις) of the language to accommodate human limitations.” In fact, in each case God declared His creation to be good although He

“knew the beauty of the created thing before he created it, whereas we are human beings and encompassed with such limitations that we cannot understand it in any other way: accordingly, he directed the tongue of the blessed author to make use of the clumsiness of these words for the instruction of the human race.”

Again, it would have been enough in the interests of narrative economy to describe the whole of creation first and then to declare everything good just the once,

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356 Hom. Gen. 3.10.

357 Hom. Gen. 4.11.
“but knowing the extent of the limitations of our reasoning, he repeats the process each time, to teach us that everything was created with a certain inventive wisdom and ineffable love.”

This considerateness is not condescension; indeed, Chrysostom argues that God “manifested by the down-to-earth quality of the words and expressions the esteem he had for the being about to be created.” The word translated here (by Hill) as “expressions” is παχύτης (pachutēs), and Hill makes the interesting observation that “this is another favourite term of Chrysostom’s, basic to his thinking on scripture and the “considerateness” it exemplifies: pachutēs, the solid, material, down-to-earth, incarnational character of biblical language, employed by divine and human authors in view of our “limitations”.

As Chrysostom puts it,

“Notice how Sacred Scripture narrates everything in human fashion even out of considerateness (συγκατάβασις) to us. I mean, it would not have been possible for us in any other way to understand anything of what was said had not such considerateness been thought fitting.”

God shows His considerateness, His love for us by limiting His use of language to straightforward, solid, material language which we can easily grasp without misunderstandings.

4.5 Συγκατάβασις: The Battle Against the ‘Heretics’

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358 Hom. Gen. 6.18. Elsewhere Chrysostom talks again of “a certain wisdom and ineffable love” on God’s part which led Him to produce all of creation not merely for man’s direct use but also that man might be alerted to God’s existence, power and saving love. (7.13. See also 10.13 where virtually the same phrase (“wisdom and thoughtful love”) is employed.)


360 Hill, Homilies, note 1, p.120. See also Hom. Gen. 12.16 and 15.8 where Chrysostom again uses the same term in referring to Scripture’s “concreteness of expression”.

361 Hom. Gen. 10.16.
As mentioned in chapter 4 above, Chrysostom was preaching at a time when the Arian and anthropomorphising crises were raging. One of the major points of contention was the correct interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27:

“‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps over the earth.’ So God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Chrysostom devoted what seems an inordinate amount of space to expounding these verses – two of the eight Sermons and three of the 17 Homilies which treat creation and fall. In Part 3 of this thesis I explain that Genesis 1:26–27 (which describes humankind being made in God’s image and likeness) formed the mainstay of all patristic theology, and this is attested to by the amount of time which both Ephrem and Chrysostom spend on these verses. Moreover, in his eighth Homily we learn that another reason Chrysostom attributes so much importance to it is that these two verses engage with the teachings of the Jews, the Arians and the anthropomorphisers.

He leaves us in no doubt as to their importance:

“Let us make a human being in our image and likeness.” Let us not rush idly by what is said, dearly beloved; instead let us investigate each expression, get right to the depth of its meaning, and divine the force concealed in these brief phrases. I mean, although the words may be few, immense is the treasure concealed in them; we must remain alert and vigilant and not stop short at the surface.”

362 Translation from the New Revised Standard Version.

363 Hom. Gen., 8.3.
In both the *Sermons* and the *Homilies* Chrysostom first proceeds to refute the Jewish argument that the ‘us’ in the phrase is addressed to an angel, arguing instead for the words being addressed by the Father to the “Only-begotten Son of God.”\(^{364}\) This leads Chrysostom on to argue that “[t]his text also deals a mortal blow to those entertaining the position of Arius”\(^{365}\) because God the Creator is addressing the other person in the ‘us’ as an equal. This equality is reinforced by the phrase “our image”, yet while this refutes the Arians, Chrysostom notes that it causes other heretics to arise who

> “want to speak of the divine in human terms, which is the ultimate example of error, namely to cast in human form him who is without shape, without appearance, without change, and to attribute limbs and forms to the one who has no body.”\(^{366}\)

Or, as he puts it in the *Sermons*:

> “Some other\(^{367}\) people in turn, nevertheless, persist in making the claim to us that God has the same kind of image as we do, taking the term in an improper sense; He did not mean image of being but image of government.”\(^{368}\)

Chrysostom then goes on in both *Sermons* and *Homilies* to argue that since Paul tells the Corinthians that man is the image and glory of God, but woman is but the glory of man, then ‘image’ cannot mean physical likeness since both men and women share a physical likeness.\(^{369}\) Instead, it must mean that the image refers to man’s government, his authority over his wife. He then points out that his readers are now fully equipped to argue the


\(^{365}\) *Hom. Gen.*, 8.8.


\(^{367}\) Hill (*Sermons* 154) suggests that the ‘other people’ here may include Origen with his idea of a pre-cosmic fall and the gnostic writers attributing a creative role to a demiurge. I think it more likely that Chrysostom is referring to the ‘anthropomorphising’ interpretation of this text here.

\(^{368}\) *Serm. Gen.* 2 (589, p.47).

\(^{369}\) 1 Corinthians 11:7.
orthodox interpretation with all comers: with the Jews, by showing the reference to the Son, with the Arians, by proving from the text that the Son is equal to the Father, and “to those imagining the deity has human form” by the words of Paul.  

However, “those imagining the deity has human form” had a stronger case in Genesis 2:7 where the text describes God as shaping the man from the dust of the ground and breathing breath into his nostrils. God’s actions of shaping and breathing seem uncomfortably physical and human. Here Chrysostom employs a two-pronged attack. First, like Ephrem, he argues that only “the eyes of faith” (cf. Ephrem’s ḥaylā kasyā or hidden power) can discern the true meaning of such words. Secondly, he argues again that God uses such words out of His considerateness for our limitations:

“... the words require the eyes of faith, spoken as they are with such great considerateness (συγκατάβασις) and with our limitations in mind. You see, that very remark, “God shaped the human being, and breathed” is properly inapplicable to God: yet, because of us and our limitations Sacred Scripture expresses it in that way, showing considerateness to us, so that, having been thought worthy of the considerateness (συγκατάβασις), we might be enabled to arrive at that sublime level of thought.”

God limits Himself not just in word but in metaphor; He expresses his actions in terms of bodily functions so that our minds can grasp them. We then need the eyes of faith to go beyond their obvious interpretation and grasp the true salvific essence of the text, the sensus plenior. Chrysostom uses συγκατάβασις and the resources in his doctrine of divine self-limitation to help him arrive at this deeper sense.

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371 Both the Septuagint and Chrysostom use πλάσσω, plassō, to form or mould.
Part of this salvific essence is to understand that God esteems men and women more highly than the animals, and for Chrysostom this is another reason for the difference in language used in the creation accounts – the animals were created by a word but humans were “so to speak in a human fashion” shaped by God’s own hands. Like Ephrem, Chrysostom thus points out that metaphor can be part of God’s considerateness in enabling us to understand difficult concepts through our limited human language, but we must not be led astray by the literal words themselves:

“let us follow the direction of Sacred Scripture in the interpretation it gives of itself, provided we don’t get completely absorbed in the concreteness of the words, but realize that our limitations are the reason for the concreteness of the language. Human sense, you see, would never be able to grasp what is said if they had not the benefit of such great considerateness (συγκατάβασις).”

The same argument is adduced by Chrysostom where he expounds the phrase “God took one of his ribs” (Genesis 2:21). Chrysostom exhorts his listeners not to

“take the words in human fashion; rather interpret the concreteness of the expressions from the viewpoint of human limitations ... Let us therefore not remain at the level of the words alone, but let us understand everything in a manner proper to God because applied to God. That phrase, “He took”, after all, and other such are spoken with our limitations in mind.”

The issue of anthropomorphising God also crops up when Chrysostom considers God strolling in the garden after the fall (Genesis 3:8). Again, his listeners are exhorted not to

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375 Hom. Gen.15.8.
“pass heedlessly by the words from Sacred Scripture, nor remain at the level of their expression, but consider that the ordinariness of their expression occurs with our limitations in mind ... No, God doesn’t stroll ... Can he, for whom heaven is his throne and earth his footstool, be confined to the garden?”

The fundamental issue with anthropomorphising God, as indeed with the Arian heresy, is that an emphasis on divine considerateness and divine self-limitation need to be held in balance with the proper emphasis on divine transcendence. Chrysostom does not consider that God renders Himself unknowable. Indeed, he is careful to say that while Paul called God’s judgements, planning and government inscrutable, “he did not say incomprehensible, just inscrutable, so that no one could plot them”. Rather, just like Ephrem, he insists that inquiry must be bounded within appropriate limits. The doctrine of divine self-limitation allows Chrysostom to hold God’s transcendence and God’s immanence in tension, because it is God who freely chooses to limit Himself on His own terms as a gift of love.

As with Ephrem, Chrysostom perceived another threat to orthodoxy from those who taught the existence of matter prior to the moment of creation described in Genesis 1. Thus, a key concern of both Ephrem and Chrysostom is to establish that the “proper” way of reading the Genesis account assumes creatio ex nihilo. Chrysostom argues that the simple opening statement of Genesis is sufficient to establish this position:

“Even if Mani accosts you saying matter pre-existed, or Marcion, or Valentinus, or pagans, tell them directly: “In the beginning God made heaven and earth.”

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376 Hom. Gen. 17.3.
378 Hom. Gen. 2.10.
Indeed, God’s συγκατάβασις was such that even though He could easily have created everything in a brief moment, instead He chose to create the world in a simple sequence which we could understand in order to protect us from heresy:

“accordingly he created things in sequence and provided us with a clear instruction about created things … You see, if there are still those, despite this manner of creation, who say that things get existence from themselves, what would these people not have been rash enough to invent in their anxiety to say and do everything against their own welfare, had not God employed such considerateness and instruction? So recognizing our limitations … let us accept the words as equivalent to speaking about God; let us not reduce the divine to the shape of bodies and the structure of limbs, but understand the whole narrative in a manner appropriate to God”

God reveals His considerateness and self-restraint in the way in which He chose to go about creation.

4.6 Development of the Term Συγκατάβασις

As has been noted above, the Sermons and Homilies on Genesis show notable similarities, and yet their very similarity makes it all the more striking when a notable feature of one is absent from the other. Take for instance the phrase “not idly or without purpose”. As has already been mentioned, this occurs virtually unchanged twenty times in the first seventeen Homilies, but only once in the Sermons. If the phrase were simply a favourite mannerism of Chrysostom’s, perhaps we would expect it to crop up more often in the Sermons. Instead, Chrysostom often conveys the same idea in different words in the Sermons,

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379 Hom. Gen. 3.12.
on one occasion coming very close when he says “far from having no point in saying this, my purpose is to prevent your being already bewildered.”

The same thing happens with the word συγκατάβασις, which as I have shown in Chapter 4 above, is considered in patristic studies as Chrysostom’s ‘trademark’ phrase. Consider again the table below which is an abridged version of the table in Section 6.1 above. It compares similar passages from the second Homily and the first Sermon:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Hom. Gen. 2.5</th>
<th>Serm. Gen. 1 (582, p.25-6)</th>
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<td>&quot;In the beginning God made heaven and earth.&quot; ... why did this blessed author, born many generations later, put this to us? Not idly or without reason. You see, when God formed human beings in the beginning, he used to speak to them personally, in a way that was possible for human beings to understand him. This was the way, for example, that he came to Adam, the way he upbraided Cain, the way he conversed with Noah, the way he accepted Abraham's hospitality. And even when all humankind fell into evil ways, the creator of all did not abandon the human race. Instead, when they then proved unworthy of his converse with them, he wanted to communicate directly with human beings as far as it is possible for human beings to hear. This is the way He came to Adam, this the way He rebuked Cain, this the way He was entertained by Abraham. But since our nature took a turn for evil, and separated itself by a lengthy exile, as it were, at long last He sent us letters as though we were absent for a long time and He intended to re-establish the former friendship through an epistle.</td>
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380 Serm. Gen. 3 (890, p.51).
renew his love for them; he sent them letters as you do to people far away from you, and this drew all humankind back again to him. It was God who sent them letters, Moses who delivered them. What do the letters say? "In the beginning God made heaven and earth."

While it was God who sent the letters, it was Moses who brought them. Well, then, what did the letters say? "In the beginning God made heaven and earth." Why did he not speak to us about the angels, or about the archangels? ...why did he reject the higher way to lead us by the lower? Because he is speaking to Jews, with their rather irrational ways, with their attachment to material things, at that time on their way up out of Egypt where people used to worship crocodiles and dogs and apes.

(Hom. Gen. 2.7) See the great extent of the considerateness (συγκατάβασις) in this statement: there is no mention of unseen powers, nor does it say, In the beginning God made the angels, or the archangels. It was not idly or without purpose that he took this line in his teaching. I mean, since he was talking to Jews, people quite wrapped up in the world about them and incapable of forming any spiritual notion, he led them along for the time being from visible realities to the creator of all things, so that from created things they might come to learn the architect of all and adore their maker, not stopping short at
creatures. You see, despite the creation of the world, they had not avoided the error of making gods out of creatures, offering worship to the vilest of brutes; so what madness would they have not fallen into if such considerateness had not been shown them?

(Hom. Gen. 2.9-10) When Moses, remember, in the beginning took on the instruction of the human race, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the considerateness shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit he was speaking in a manner appropriate to his hearers as he outlined everything."

(Serm. Gen. 1 (585, p.29)) Just as with teachers, you see, the teacher who receives the child from the mother teaches it the elements first, whereas the one who receives it from another teacher leads the pupil to a higher level of teaching, so too was it in the case of Moses and Paul and John ...

In this table we can clearly see that Chrysostom develops the same line of argument when commenting on Genesis 1: 1 in both his Sermons and his Homilies. In both cases he argues
that God arranged for revelation through the scripture to occur in a progressive manner, so that language and ideas were suited to the hearer. This is but one of many instances where corresponding passages in the *Sermons* and *Homilies* use identical phraseology, metaphors and lines of argument. The unusual feature though, as can be clearly seen above, is that in the *Homilies* Chrysostom time and again associates the word συγκατάβασις with the passages where he discusses God’s considerateness, His love, His self-limitation, His condescension, His adaptation to our ways, language and weaknesses. In fact Chrysostom uses συγκατάβασις thirty-five times in these seventeen *Homilies*, either to refer directly to God’s own considerateness, or indirectly to God’s considerateness as revealed through the considerateness of scripture. By contrast, he uses συγκατάβασις just once in the *Sermons*.

The term occurs in a slightly obscure passage where Chrysostom is arguing against the Jews that the ‘us’ who created mankind in ‘our image and likeness’ cannot have been addressed by God to angels. One of the arguments he puts forward in support of this is the description in the book of Isaiah of the seraphim attending God’s throne and covering their faces because they are unable to bear His brilliance. Chrysostom then retorts that it makes no sense to say that angels were consulted at the moment of creation if they could not even bear God’s brilliance “despite experiencing God’s considerateness (συγκατάβασις).”

The absence of the term συγκατάβασις in the *Sermons* is surprising. However, this is not to say that the idea of divine self-limitation and concern for the weakness of humans is absent. On the contrary, it occurs several times. Thus in Sermon 3, Chrysostom attributes the human fear of wild animals to God’s κηδεμονία (kēdemo, solicitude, care):

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381 Isaiah 1:16–18.

382 *Serm. Gen.* 2 (588, p.46).

383 Cf Chrysostom’s *Homily in Ps* CXII where, as Hill points out, Chrysostom “says most of what [he] understands by sunkatabasis without this time using the term.” Instead he here uses the word rhuthmizein, to adjust. (Hill, *Sunkatabasis*, 5).
“If, on the other hand, fear should come on the scene after this event, it too is a sign of God’s solicitude (κηδεμονίας). You see, if the dignity given the human beings by God had remained unaffected when the commandment given them by Him was overturned and set aside, they would not easily have risen ... it is clear that it was out of care (κηδόμενος, kēdomenos) and concern (φροντίζω, phrontizō) for us that God deprived us of government.”

Here the idea of God’s concern for our weakness is conveyed by the root ideas of concern or consideration (φροντίζω) and care (κηδόμενος). It can be seen by the ways in which Hill has translated the terms φροντίζω and κηδόμενος in the passage above and the one below that there is much semantic overlap between them. They both carry connotations of caring for someone. Κήδω is a root meaning to give concern, to trouble, and it has links with words meaning ‘most beloved’ (κήδιστος) and ‘taking care of someone’s funeral expenses’ (κηδεύω), and hence even ‘a funeral’. Φροντίζω carries connotations of ‘thinking, considering and reflecting’, hence ‘to care for something and regard it highly, to be concerned about something or someone.’ Aristophanes called Socrates’ school a φροντιστήριον (phrontistērion) or ‘thinking-shop’. Φροντίζω is used in Titus 3:8 to convey the idea of ‘being careful to engage in good works’ – φροντίζωσιν καλῶν ἐργῶν προιστασθαι (phrontizōsin kalōn ergōn proistasthai). The combined effect of the two words is of a careful, deliberate yet profound love for a person – God’s love for us.

Thus Chrysostom conveys the ideas of God’s freely giving Himself, of His awareness of our weakness and limitations, and of His exerting Himself with deliberate care and precision to

385 Lexicographical information for Greek words here and elsewhere is taken from Liddell and Scott, and Bauer.
communicate with us and save us. We see a similar combination of terms to express the same idea at the end of the same sermon:

“His gift (δοῦναι) of dignity … instilling in us fear of the wild animals, and everything else is characterized by great wisdom, deep concern (κηδεμονίας), much lovingkindness (φιλανθρωπία, philanthrōpia).”\(^{386}\)

Φιλανθρωπία, literally ‘love for humankind’, is used several times in the Sermons as an attribute of both God the Father and Jesus Christ. For instance, when despite Adam’s sin, God allowed him to retain authority over the oxen, the sheep and other useful animals, Chrysostom attributes this to God’s φιλανθρωπία.\(^{387}\) Indeed, it was God’s φιλανθρωπία which had allowed humans to receive the gift of government in the first place – as sheer unmerited gift as soon as they were made,

“while human beings confer honor on their subjects in extreme old age after many hardships and countless dangers ... God is not like that ... what was conferred was not a reward for good behaviour, but on God’s part was gratuitous (χάρις, charis), not due to them ... the result of God’s lovingkindness (φιλανθρωπία) alone.”\(^{388}\)

When woman’s disobedience results in her submission to man, Chrysostom sees God as using his design (εὐμήχανος, eumēchanos) and wisdom (σοφός, sophos) to employ the consequences of our sin to our own advantage – this also is deemed by him to be φιλανθρωπία.\(^{389}\) Εὐμήχανος has connotations of being ‘skilful in devising, inventive, ingenious’,\(^{390}\)

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\(^{386}\) Serm. Gen. 3 (593, p. 60).

\(^{387}\) Sermons, 3 (592, p.59).

\(^{388}\) Sermons, 4: p.62.

\(^{389}\) Sermons 4: p.65. It is interesting to note that in his article on συνκατάβασις, (p.5) Hill provides an extensive quote from Chrysostom’s commentary on Psalm CXII. Hill points out that the passage “says most of what Chrysostom understands by sunkatabasis, without this time using the term ... the divine concern more especially for mankind’s (especially the Jew’s) understanding of himself and his plan rather than for adequate respect for the divinity, the consequent adjustment of language to human limitations, yet the need to rise above
and so we see again the idea of God putting in effort in order to devise the best possible way to communicate with and to save those He loves so dearly.

**Summary**

In a sense then, the presence of the idea of God’s loving self-limitation in the *Sermons* but the absence of the term συνκατάβασις to describe it is a bonus for us. It allows us to examine the other words which Chrysostom uses in his *Sermons* to convey the same idea. We see that these words include δίδωμι and χάρις to convey ‘gift’, κηδόμενος to convey ‘care and practical concern exerted on behalf of a dearly beloved’, φροντίζω and σοφός to convey a’ deliberate, wise and thought-through loving action’, φιλανθρωπία to convey ‘love for humankind’ and εὐμήχανος to convey ‘ingenious, creative and skilful planning’.

As I have shown in the passages quoted extensively throughout this chapter, all the ideas in the last paragraph are conveyed by Chrysostom when he uses the word συνκατάβασις in the *Homilies*. I suggest that between the composition of the *Sermons* and the composition of the *Homilies*, the idea of divine self-limitation as gift of love became so central to Chrysostom’s hermeneutics and exegesis that he started to use συνκατάβασις as a shorthand for it. Perhaps we could say that, using Nida and Louw’s terminology, συγκατάβασις began to acquire a greater degree of markedness. Markedness is “the extent to which various degrees of peripheral meaning need to be specially marked by more and more specific features of the context.”

In the *Homilies* Chrysostom seems to be using συγκατάβασις to sum up and denote situations where he describes God’s divine self-limitation as a free gift of love, and so the term became his shorthand for gift, care and practical concern exerted on behalf of a

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390 Liddell and Scott, 284.

dearly beloved, deliberate, wise and thought-through loving action, love for humankind ingenious, creative and skilful planning. Rather than conveying the general idea of ‘con-
descension’, συνκατάβασις has been marked by this specific meaning for Chrysostom, and for patristic scholars ever since.

A similar thing seems to be happening with Chrysostom’s phrase “not idly or without purpose”. It is as though he expresses this idea through several different expressions in the Sermons, but by the time he comes to write the Homilies he has developed the phrase as a shorthand for the general idea of purposefulness and deliberate, careful, worthwhile action. As we have just seen, this is closely linked to the idea of συγκατάβασις.

My thesis, therefore, is that the idea of divine self-limitation as a free gift of love was central to the hermeneutic and to the exegesis of the Genesis accounts of creation and fall of both Ephrem and Chrysostom. I believe that Chrysostom wrote his Sermons first, and that between composing the Sermons and composing the Homilies he started to use the word συγκατάβασις as a shorthand for the idea which we see him exploring in both sets of texts. Ephrem, however, never seems to have developed a single term for the idea. This may be consistent with his dislike of definitions, and his preference for theology done through the medium of poetry and word-images.

I believe that this research strengthens the case for the Sermons predating the Homilies. The Homilies bear all the marks of a previous work having been expanded and developed in order to allow Chrysostom to give more space and emphasis to this central doctrine of divine self-limitation as free gift of love which had become so important to the way he read the Bible. I do not think that we can draw any specific conclusions, however, as to whether both sets of texts were actually preached, and whether it was Chrysostom himself or a scribe who did the revising and expanding. However, I think we can safely say that the
intention behind the rewriting of the *Sermons* into the *Homilies* was at least partly to give increased prominence to συγκατάβασις as a key hermeneutical principle.

**Summary of Part 2**

In Part 2 of this thesis I have located Chrysostom within his tradition. Like Ephrem, part of his heritage was the theological conflict which preceded and accompanied him. Like Ephrem also, Chrysostom stands firmly in the Nicene camp and is at pains to defend that position.

Therefore, again as with Ephrem, it comes as no surprise that ‘limit’ plays an important role in Chrysostom’s hermeneutics and exegesis of Genesis 1–3. However, the language Chrysostom uses is not usually Ephrem’s concrete language of fences, boundaries, walls and borders. Instead he brings out the idea of ‘limit’ through certain narrative themes running like distinctive threads through his preaching: God has ensured that nothing in scripture is vain or purposeless, and this is part of God’s συγκατάβασις: scripture was written out of God’s συγκατάβασις to make sure that we stay within the proper limits and do not go astray; scripture provides us with an ethic of imitation out of the συγκατάβασις of God. Each time Chrysostom invokes the idea of God’s self-restraint in His actions and communications. Thus we see divine self-limitation operating through God accepting the restraints of human language, and we see limits being drawn which we must not cross if we are to remain on the path towards salvation and sanctification.

Finally, through a close reading of both *Sermons* and *Homilies on Genesis*, we see that Chrysostom expresses this doctrine through a plethora of words and phrases, and not just through the one word συγκατάβασις which has been singled out for scholarly attention.
Indeed, it must be emphasised that συγκατάβασις, δίδωμι, χάρις, κηδόμενος, φροντίζω, σοφός, φιλανθρωπία, εὐμήχανος and all the other words and phrases which Chrysostom uses when evoking divine self-limitation are not just ways of talking about God. They form different facets of a doctrine which is itself rooted in Chrysostom’s understanding of God’s desire to transform all of creation through the participation of humankind in Christ. God’s self-limitation in a human body through Christ is the practical outworking of God’s great salvific plan which arches from creation to the eschaton, and therefore divine self-limitation is a very helpful hermeneutical lens when reading scripture. The doctrine of divine self-limitation as a gift of love arose naturally for Chrysostom when he meditated on mankind being made in the image and likeness of God. It allowed Chrysostom to read beyond the surface words of the Genesis text to uncover a deeper meaning which was consistent with the character and oikonomia\textsuperscript{392} of God. It also allowed him to hold the immanence and transcendence of God in tension, because it is God who freely chooses to limit Himself on His own terms as a gift of love.

These are the topics which I shall now develop further in Part 3.

\textsuperscript{392} See Part 3 for a more detailed exposition of this idea.
Part 3

The thesis of this research has been that Ephrem and Chrysostom’s found ‘traces’ of God’s love and saving activity in references to various forms of ‘limit’ and ‘divine self-limitation’ in Genesis 1–3. In the first two parts of the thesis I showed through a detailed textual analysis how ‘limit’, and in particular ‘divine self-limitation as a gift of love’, were used as a hermeneutical lens by the two authors. In this third and final part of the thesis I do three things. First, in Chapter 5 I seek to place divine self-limitation as a gift of love in its proper theological setting within the wider context of patristic theology. This is not to assume that Ephrem and Chrysostom shared an identical theological outlook. Rather, it is to say (and to demonstrate from the texts) that they share common doctrinal emphases, and to show how divine self-limitation fits within these emphases. Next, in Chapter 6, I address hermeneutical considerations. First, I sketch an outline of general principles of patristic hermeneutics, and I show from the texts how both Ephrem and Chrysostom used the idea of limit to develop the deeper, spiritual meaning of Genesis 1–3 in their generation. I then consider how we can cross the hermeneutical bridge from the fourth century context into the present day, so that we can apply the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love to our contemporary context. This prepares the way for the final part of the thesis, which looks at three specific examples of how we can use fourth century wisdom to address troublesome texts today.
Chapter 5 – Doctrinal Emphases

In chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis I worked closely with the text to identify the ways in which Ephrem and Chrysostom used ‘limit’, and especially divine self-limitation, in their exegesis of Genesis 1–3. The aim of this chapter is to set the doctrine of divine self-limitation within a wider theological context. In the first part of this chapter, I present what have been seen to be some of the main doctrinal emphases in patristic theology, and I turn back to the texts by Ephrem and Chrysostom to find evidence for these emphases in their own theology. In the second part, I then take my conclusions about ‘limit’ and ‘divine self-limitation’ from earlier chapters, and consider where they fit within these doctrinal emphases.

5.1 Made in the Image

We read in Genesis 1 that God made the cosmos good, and once God has created men and women, the climax of his creation, it is even ‘very good’. Humankind is very good, loved by God and destined for blessing. More than that, right from the beginning Ephrem tells us that God intends man’s final destination to be in Paradise:

“Although Adam was created and was blessed to rule over the earth and over everything that was created and blessed therein, God had indeed made him to dwell within Paradise. God truly manifested His foreknowledge in His blessing and manifested His grace in the place where He set Adam to dwell. Lest it be said that Paradise was not created for [Adam’s ] sake, [God] set him there in Paradise to dwell. And lest it be said that God did not know that Adam would sin, He blessed him on this earth. And everything with which God blessed Adam preceded the transgression of the commandment, lest by the transgression of him who had been blessed, the blessings of Him who gave the blessings be withheld and the world be

393 Genesis 1:31.
turned back into nothing on account of the folly of that one for whose sake everything had been created.”

It should be noted that the Fathers’ emphasis on the fall is interesting, because for the Jews “the fall was not and is not a cataclysmic event in the history of humankind; it is but one of many examples of human failure to live within the covenant.” In order to understand the patristic emphasis on the fall, we need to return to the primacy of creation in patristic thinking. As I have shown, both Ephrem and Chrysostom are at pains to point out that God created a very good universe ex nihilo. The high point of this creation was humankind, created in the image and likeness of God. Here is Chrysostom on the importance of human beings in the divine scheme of things:

“Why is it, you ask, that if this creature [i.e. man] is more important than all these [i.e. beasts] it is brought forth after them? A good question. Let me draw a comparison with a king on the point of entering a city on a visit: his bodyguard has to be sent on ahead to have the palace in readiness, and thus the king may enter his palace. Well now, in just the same way in this case the Creator, as though on the point of installing some king and ruler over everything on earth, first created the whole of this scenery, and then brought forth the one destined to preside over it, showing us through the created things themselves what importance he gave to this creature.”

As the pinnacle of creation, humankind has a fundamental role to play in the divine oikovouía (economy or plan) – through human-kind, all of creation is destined to share in the divine life. This plan is what Andrew Louth refers to as the ‘greater arch’, from creation


395 Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, xlvii.

396 Hom. Gen., 8.5.
to deification. This is, always has been, and remains the supreme plan, the divine οἰκονομία.\(^{397}\)

Here is Ephrem contrasting God’s desire to make Adam ‘a second god’ with the empty promises of divinity made by the serpent:

“Where are you Adam?” In the divinity that the serpent promised you? ... Suppose, Adam, that instead of a serpent, the most despicable creature of all, an angel or some other god had come to you? ... Would you have considered evil the one who formed you from nothing and made you a second god over Creation while considering good the one who gave you only a verbal promise of some good?”\(^{398}\)

This doctrine of deification as a process of participation in Christ is even clearer in Ephrem’s Homily on Our Lord, where he writes:

“The Only-Begotten journeyed from the God-head and resided in a virgin, so that through physical birth the Only-Begotten would become a brother to many. And he journeyed from Sheol and resided in the kingdom, to tread a path from Sheol, which cheats everyone, to the kingdom which rewards everyone. For our Lord gave His resurrection as a guarantee to mortals that He would lead them out of Sheol, which takes the departed without discrimination, to the kingdom, which welcomes guests with discrimination ... It is He who went down to Sheol and came up from that [place] which corrupts its lodgers, in order to bring us to that [place] which nurses its inhabitants with blessings ... The Firstborn who was begotten according to His nature, underwent yet another birth outside His nature, so that we too would understand that after our natural birth, we too must undergo another [birth] outside our nature.”\(^{399}\)

\(^{397}\) Louth, *Theosis*, 32-46.


\(^{399}\) Kathleen McVey, (ed.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian – Selected Prose Works: Commentary on Genesis, Commentary on Exodus, Homily on Our Lord and Letter to Publius*. Translated by Edward J. Mathews Jr. and
The key verse justifying the prominence of men and women in the good cosmic order is of course Genesis 1:26, which states that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. This belief is central to the theology of the Greek Fathers: “in that doctrine there converge at once their Christology and theology of the Trinity, their anthropology and psychology, their theology of creation and that of grace, the problem of nature and of the supernatural, the mystery of deification, the theology of the spiritual life and the laws of its development and progress.”

Louth argues that the doctrine of the image provided a hermeneutic bridge for the Greek Fathers between Platonic categories of thought and Biblical teaching on creation. If the doctrine identified the essence of humanity, then it followed that to be in the image was to be rational, *logikos*. Thus to be rational is to participate in the Logos, in Christ. This Logos is the image of God according to which we are fashioned, *κατ’ εἰκόνα*, according to the image, and it is also the image into which we are being transformed. In the Septuagint, Genesis 1:26 reads:

“καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός Ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ’ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν, καὶ ἀρχέτωσαν τῶν ἰχθυῶν τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῶν κτηνῶν καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἑρπετῶν τῶν ἑρπόντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.”

The underlined phrase, *κατ’ εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν*, is usually translated into English as something like “according to our image and our likeness”, but Louth points out

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401 Louth, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, l.
that ὁμοίωσις suggests a *process* of being made to conform to a likeness, rather than the state of likeness. It was the word used by Plato to denote ‘assimilation to God’.  

Thus, you and I are made in the image of God, and are created with the intention and the potentiality of conforming to His likeness. This process of theosis is only possible through His Son, who is the image of God. In his *Homilies on John*, Chrysostom makes this clear:

> “At that time [i.e. the Old Testament time] God said, “let us make for him a helper” but in these times [i.e. after the incarnation] God says no such thing ... How much need of assistance in the future has he who fills out the body of Christ? At that time he made man to the image of God, but now he has united him to God himself.”

Both man and woman were created in the image of God, and therefore for Ephrem the unity of man and woman in marriage symbolises return to the original state:

> “Then Adam said, “Let the man leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife so that they might be joined and the two might become one” without division as they were from the beginning.”

The original state was good, but the final destination is even better; participation in God by transformation through Christ.

It is this overarching story which provides the boundaries, the ‘reading discipline’ for Ephrem and Chrysostom as they interpret the creation and fall accounts. In the next two sections, I consider how the doctrine of divine self-limitation fits within this story.

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404 *Comm. Gen.* II.13.3.
5.2 Ephrem and the role of ‘limit’ in the doctrinal emphases

I showed in Chapter 2 that Ephrem uses various Syriac roots (commonly ḫdr (ḥdr) meaning “to surround, go round”, syagā (ܣܝܓܐ) “fence, wall” and tarā (ܬܪܥܐ) “gate”) to convey the idea of a boundary or barrier. Some of these, like the boundary between the lower waters and the upper waters were present at the original creation in order to preserve order and to bless life, for if they had been allowed to mingle there would be no “sweet water from above” for the earth to drink. In the same way, the Tree of Knowledge was planted in Paradise as a boundary to it.

The limits imposed by God did not cause the fall, but after the fall new limits were required:

“The Just One saw how Adam had become audacious
because He had been lenient,
and He knew that he would overstep again
if He continued thus;
Adam had trampled down
that gentle and pleasant boundary,
So instead God made for him
a boundary guarded by force.
The mere words of the commandment
had been the boundary to the Tree,
but now the cherub and the sharp sword
provided the fence to Paradise.

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407 ḫdr, from the root ḫdr as above.
408 ḫ (ḥ), door.
409 ḫûmā (ḥûmā), border.
RESPONSE: Deem me worthy that through Your grace we may enter Your paradise.”

This verse contains five references to limit if you include ‘overstep’ which includes the idea of limit implicitly, and uses four different words to convey the idea. It begs the question: how did ‘limit’ feature in the patristic understanding of the fall?

In order to understand this, we start with Chrysostom reminding us that the best possible universe is one that depends on “the free obedience of rational beings”:

“Who therefore could bear with those people who insist on saying that the human being had knowledge of good and evil after eating from the tree, that creature who before such eating was liberally endowed with intelligence, and along with intelligence had also been granted the prophetic gift?”

Genesis 3 tells us the story of what happens when rational beings choose to use their freedom for disobedience, to transgress the “gentle and pleasant boundary” put in place by God. This violation of limits imposed by divine Wisdom and Justice has resulted in a damaged cosmos and men and women in whom the divine image is tarnished, a universe marked by corruption and death: “you see, the fact that [Adam] fell under death’s sway on account of the fall is clear …”

Now the limits are more severe, we are further from God than ever. The fence round Paradise has become “a living being who itself marched around to guard the way to the

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410 _SUR (syagā), fence.
411 Hym. Par. IV. 1.
412 Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, xlviii.
413 Hom, Gen., 16.17.
414 Hom, Gen., 16.16.
tree of life from any one who dared try to pluck its fruit, for it would kill, with the edge of its sword, any mortal who came to steal immortal life.”

However, God, in His goodness, does not abandon His creation but has taken our limits upon Himself in the Incarnation. Through His death and resurrection God in Christ has conquered the powers of death and reveals instead the power of life, drawing all humankind into His divine life. This is what Louth refers to as the “lesser arch”. It occurs within the greater cosmic drama, the greater oikouménē of the arch from creation to deification.

There are therefore hints and promises of the Incarnation in the doctrine of humankind being made in the Image. Of course, the Incarnation is the supreme example of God accepting to limit Himself, but whereas the Incarnation is a divine acceptance of human limitation in a very concrete sense, Ephrem and Chrysostom remind us that God shows His great love for us by accepting other limits on Himself too. Not only does He adapt “to our eyes the sight of Himself”, but He never forces His grace on anyone, adapting “to our hearing His voice, His blessing to our appetite, His wisdom to our tongue.” This is the second way in which I have described Ephrem as using the idea of limit: limit as proportion. Tied in with this concept is Ephrem’s understanding of God accepting the limitations of human language to communicate with us out of His great love: “Paradise has simply clothed itself in terms that are akin to you.”

415 Comm. Gen. II. 35.3.
416 Louth, Theosis, 35.
417 Hym. Par. IX.27.
418 Hym. Par. XI.7.
All this is sheer gift: out of His freedom God chooses to accept limitations of boundary, proportion and language in order to fulfil the divine οἰκονομία. Out of His goodness too He gifts us with limits for our human activity and our human reasoning so that we may not stray from communion with Him, from participating in His Son and hence being drawn up into the life of God Himself. As Ephrem puts it,

“Blessed is He who has brought Adam from Sheol and returned him to Paradise in the company of many.”

5.3 Chrysostom and the role of ‘limit’ in the doctrinal emphases.

Whereas Ephrem often has a more physical or literal interpretation of ‘limit’, Chrysostom, as we have seen, tends to theorise the idea more. His arguments, as I have shown in Chapter 4, often spring from the position that Scripture was not written “idly or without purpose”. This, for Chrysostom, is evidence of the συγκατάβασις of God. There is no phrase, no word, in Scripture which is accidental or meaningless. For Chrysostom, God’s συγκατάβασις is evidenced in the way that He has designed the unity of Scripture to reveal God’s salvific purpose through Christ. This is why he constantly emphases that to read the Bible aright we must accept his argument that nothing in it was written idly or without purpose, because “discerning the unitive ‘mind’ (dianoia) of scripture was seen as essential to reaching a proper interpretation.”

Put positively, Chrysostom argued that Scripture was written to protect us from error, as I have shown. Here the commands of Scripture operate for Chrysostom in much the same way as they did for Ephrem, as barriers to keep us from straying on our journey into God

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419 Hym. Par. IX.11.

420 Young, Biblical Exegesis, 29.
through Christ. This too is συνκατάβασις, for God out of his “considerateness
(συνκατάβασις)... speak[s] in a manner appropriate to his hearers and at the same time he
uproot[s] all the heresies springing up like weeds in the Church by his words”. 421

I also demonstrated in Chapter 4 that Chrysostom saw scripture as providing us with an
ethics of imitation. Clearly, Chrysostom is not advocating that humans can emulate God
through their own ethical activities alone. Being made in the image is not sufficient for
salvation; what is required is an ontological change through participation in Christ, who is
the Image of God. To argue otherwise is to transgress our proper limits.

In Chapter 4 I then went on to speak more specifically about Chrysostom’s term
συνκαταβάσις, and I showed that Chrysostom uses the term in two ways in particular. First,
like Ephrem, he uses συνκαταβάσις as a hermeneutical tool to overcome exegetical
difficulties by appealing to the limits of human language. As already shown, he explains
how God “directed the tongue of the blessed author to make use of the clumsiness of these
words for the instruction of the human race.”422 The precision or ἀκρίβεια (akribeia) of the
Biblical language is a gift in ensuring that we interpret God’s meaning correctly, and its
down to earth nature (παχύτης, pachutēs, literally thickness) keeps us from mis-interpreting
it. But in each age, starting from Moses through John to Paul, Chrysostom saw God adapting
the nature and expression of his revelation in words which were appropriate (κατάλληλος,
katallēlos, corresponding; οἰκεῖος, oikeios, fitting). Thus, like Ephrem, Chrysostom sees God as
taking the limits of human language on to Himself.

421 Hom. Gen. 2.10.

422 Hom. Gen. 4.11.
And yet, God transcends human language, and thus language about God cannot be understood in the same way as language about created things can. This latter path leads to heresies, such as the anthropomorphisers who

“want to speak of the divine in human terms, which is the ultimate example of error, namely to cast in human form him who is without shape, without appearance, without change, and to attribute limbs and forms to the one who has no body.”

Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the main doctrinal emphases in Ephrem and Chrysostom, and where ‘limit’ and ‘divine self-limitation as a gift of love’ fit into those emphases. Both authors emphasise the boundaries which exist between God and humans. These limits are of two types. The first type has been imposed by God either as a consequence of the fall or because of His fundamental otherness. It is the human responsibility to respect these limits, and sound doctrine can help us to do so. To overstep these limits is heresy. The second type has arisen out of our weakness and our sin. God has taken steps to overcome these limits out of His great love (φιλανθρωπία, philanthrōpia). In order to do so, He has expressed Himself in ways which are appropriate to, or in proportion to, our limited human ways and human language. He has had to limit Himself. In this study I have shown that Chrysostom started to use a specific term as a sort of ‘shorthand’ for this idea: συγκατάβασις, sunkatabasis. The same thing did not happen with Ephrem, as far as we know.

How then should συγκατάβασις be translated? I have already mentioned that various words are used to convey the idea in English. Some of these convey the restrictive element of

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divine self-limitation: e.g. divine adaptability, accommodation. Perhaps it could be said that such translations are emphasising God’s transcendence. Some of the words convey the loving nature of the act: e.g., considerateness, and perhaps it could be said that in this case it is God’s immanence which is highlighted. Throughout this research I have used the words ‘divine self-limitation as a gift of love’ to convey, albeit clumsily, the two aspects of the notion, and to attempt to maintain that tension between divine transcendence and divine immanence, the paradox of the God who freely chooses to bind Himself so that we might be set free, which seems to me to lie at the heart of the exegesis of both Chrysostom and Ephrem.

It is to be expected that Ephrem and Chrysostom would have much in common. After all, as I mentioned in my introduction, they were near contemporaries living in close geographical proximity. They both vigorously contested the threat of Arianism and other ‘heresies’, and one of the ways in which they resisted the ‘heretical’ reading of the creation and fall accounts in Genesis was by insisting on creatio ex nihilo. They also both responded to the Arian threat by insisting on the drawing of limits round human knowledge and theological speculation. They were both concerned with the limits of human language but both affirmed that God was willing to limit Himself by communicating through it. None of this is news to patristic scholars.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that nobody has previously held Chrysostom and Ephrem’s work on Genesis 1–3 side by side and considered the similarities and differences in their hermeneutics. The employment of συγκατάβασις has been seen as one of Chrysostom’s great achievements, but nobody seems to have searched for the presence of the ideas behind it in the works of Ephrem or other Syriac scholars. This is probably
because of the traditional view that the Hellenistic (Chrysostom) and Semitic (Ephrem) schools of theology were quite distinct and independent. This seems to have erected a barrier between the two areas of patristics which is often reflected at all levels from undergraduate education through to the organisation of conferences. However, the tide is now turning and in the last twenty years or so scholars have paid more attention to the cross-fertilisation between works in the two languages, in particular the evidence that Hellenistic philosophy and theology was available to (and read by) Syriac theologians in the fourth century.

In the next chapter I go on to make some hermeneutical comments.
Chapter 6 – Hermeneutical Considerations

6.1 Ephrem, Chrysostom and the *sensus plenior*

As I have already stated, in many ways the theological maelstrom of the 4th century can be understood as a hermeneutical crisis. Already, with Origen, the idea that the *dianoia* of the Bible needed to be unearthed and considered separately from the words within which it was couched had become a commonplace. In Alexandria, Antioch, Libya, Edessa and elsewhere scholars and presbyters alike developed and used allegorical, literal, moral and typological readings to understand what the Bible had to say. There was a consensus that the Bible was a unity, that it contained a single *hypothesis*, which was fundamentally Christological and soteriological. This *hypothesis*, which was expressed by the Rule of Faith and other creeds, provided a reading discipline, the limits and checks by which the acceptability and orthodoxy of any reading could be assessed. But, as I have shown, other *a priori* assumptions and formulae also guided Scriptural interpretation. Thus we see the formulae ‘God encloses but is not enclosed’ and ‘creatio ex nihilo’, as well as philosophical assumptions about the knowability or otherwise of God, guiding Scriptural interpretations as well as determining outcomes of ecumenical councils.

A close study of Ephrem’s writings on Genesis 1–3 showed that a number of words conveying images of limit, boundary and proportion abound in his writings. Rather than insisting on placing his work in one or other of the allegorical/typological/literal categories, I think it is better to acknowledge that Ephrem was dealing with theological controversies to which ‘limit’ was central in a number of ways. ‘Who can access the knowledge of God’s ousia’? The Nicene school would argue that Jesus could, but that the boundary was drawn between Jesus and the rest of the creatures. Arius might have argued that nobody could, for Jesus did not even know his own ousia. And the neo-Arians might
have argued that we can all know God’s ousia once we acknowledge Him as unbegotten, placing us to some extent on a level with the Son. ‘Where do the limits of human knowledge end?’ ‘Was the Son’s knowledge limited as ours is?’ In answering these questions, Ephrem also used ‘limit’: human language is limited, and thus any Scriptural text which seems to counteract the orthodox doctrine handed down to us through the centuries must have another meaning. And if human language is limited, then God Himself must have accepted limitations to Godself in order to communicate in human language. It is entirely consonant with a God who chooses to limit Himself in human language that He would also choose to limit Himself supremely in the Incarnation (*pace* Arius). Of course, the real question was ‘Who’s in, and who’s out?’.

Thus we see words and phrases hinting at human limitation and divine self-limitation abounding in Ephrem’s work. This is the way of the poet – to oversaturate our minds with picture after picture of limit and boundary while never agreeing to define the undefinable. Chrysostom’s way is very different. In good homiletic style, he brings home to his congregation the purpose of Scripture. It is written for our salvation and none of it is purposeless, it protects us from error, it provides a way of participating in Christ through an ethic of imitation. At first the notion of limit or boundary is not so evident as it is in Ephrem. Instead Chrysostom expands on God’s goodness, insisting that any passages in Scripture which lead us away from a ‘correct’ interpretation do so because of our own limitations, and that God through his goodness has provided help upon help in the passages themselves to keep us on the right track. There is no excuse for those who have crossed the boundary to heresy, for all that is needed for our salvation and the correct reading of the text is there by God’s goodness. And, as we have seen, in time Chrysostom develops a shorthand term to convey all of these ideas, and it is of course *συγκατάβασις*. This word, of
course, is birthed from the idea of God’s self-limitation to our language and our capacities, and so we see that this idea has been central to Chrysostom’s thinking all along. This research, therefore, claims that for both Ephrem and Chrysostom, divine self-limitation was a hermeneutical lens which allowed them to read the creation and fall accounts with integrity, even when their surface meaning seemed to differ from the position suggested by an orthodox Nicene stance. In other words, it provided a mechanism for them to unearth a deeper, hidden sense of the text.

In order to understand this we need to take a closer look at why the Fathers read the Bible. John Breck tells us that the Church’s earliest exegetes read the Bible “to acquire knowledge of God”. According to him, the Fathers’ aim was not to acquire ideas, knowledge and words about God, as though God were an object of academic study. Their aim was to come to know Him better, with all the limitations that our creaturely status places on that activity. Again we can see this in Ephrem, as he puts it:

“...This is a book which, above its companions, has in its narrative made the Creator perceptible and transmitted His actions; It has envisioned all His craftsmanship, made manifest His works of art.”

Breck shows that the Fathers did not see their task as interrogating the Biblical text, but rather as allowing it to address and challenge them. To read the Bible is to enter into a

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426 Breck, *Scripture and Tradition*, 17.
relationship of love, and to allow oneself to be transformed by the treasure of God’s self-revelation. Thus Ephrem again:

“With love and instruction,

commingled with truth,

The intellect can grow

and become rich with new things,

as it meditates with discernment

on the treasure store of hidden mysteries.

For my part, I have loved, and so learned ...”

When undertaking their task of reading the Bible in order to know God better, the Church Fathers came from a specific perspective. As I have already said, they believed that the two Testaments, Old and New, constituted a single, unified witness to Jesus Christ and His salvific work. For instance, Young writes:

“Thus, long before the formation of the canon of two Testaments, Old and New, or the listing of the authorised books that belonged to it, the unity of the Bible and its witness to Christ was the assumption underlying its ‘reception’ by readers and hearers in the ‘public’ assembly of the community.”

Let us hear from Chrysostom this time:

“Don’t worry, dearly beloved, don’t think Sacred Scripture ever contradicts itself, learn instead the truth of what it says, hold fast what it teaches in truth, and close your ears to those who speak against it.”

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427 Hym. Par. VI.25.

428 Breck, Scripture and Tradition, 33.

429 Frances Young, Biblical Exegesis, 19. See also, for instance, Oden and Louth, General Introduction to Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, xxvi and Breck, Scripture in Tradition, 33.

430 Hom. Gen. 4.9.
As the whole of the Bible was understood to witness to Jesus, so every theophany in Israel’s history was considered to be a manifestation of the Son. Ephrem and Chrysostom saw a foreshadowing or a type of the coming, the purpose and the mission throughout the first three chapters of Genesis. Thus Eve makes Adam a garment which is “covered with stains” to clothe his nakedness after the Fall, but through Mary Adam gains another robe. The sword blocks the entry to Paradise after the Fall, but He who was pierced removes the sword from the entry to Paradise. And here is Chrysostom on Genesis 1:26:

“So who is this to whom he says, “Let us make a human being?” Who else is it than the Angel of Great Counsel, Wonderful Counsellor, Figure of Authority, Prince of Peace, Father of the age to come, Only-begotten Son of God, like the Father in being, through whom all things were created?”

This spiritual perspective, which Breck terms theôria, he defines as “an inspired vision or contemplation of divinely revealed Truth, granted both to the apostolic writers and to future interpreters by the Holy Spirit.” The events in Scripture have both a literal and spiritual sense, and the spiritual sense is the Word which God speaks through the written text every time it is read anew in the life of the church. Thus Ephrem can say:

“My tongue read the story’s outward narrative, while my intellect took wing

431 Breck, Scripture in Tradition, 34.
432 For typology in the Fathers see for instance Young, Biblical Exegesis.
433 Hym. Par. IV. 5.
434 Hym. Par. II. 1.
435 Hom. Gen. 8, 8.
436 Breck, Scripture in Tradition, 36.
and soared upward in awe”\textsuperscript{437}
or
“Scripture brought me
to the gate of Paradise,
and the mind which is spiritual,
stood in amazement and wonder as it entered.”\textsuperscript{438}

It is precisely into this \textit{sensus plenior}, the spiritual sense in which the Word speaks afresh in every generation, that the doctrine of divine self-limitation as gift of love operates. It enabled both Ephrem and Chrysostom to take the literal meaning of the text and to ‘listen with their minds’ to God speaking through the words’ ‘outward narrative’ so that this could be re-interpreted afresh for their generation. Thus Chrysostom:

“When Moses, remember, in the beginning took on the instruction of the human race, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the \textit{considerateness} (\textit{συγκατάβασις}) shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit he was speaking in a manner appropriate to his hearers as he outlined everything.”\textsuperscript{439}

The doctrine of divine self-limitation in all its manifestations in both Ephrem and Chrysostom enabled them to discover and expound a deeper, more spiritual sense of the divine Word. Moreover, because, as I have shown, the doctrine was used polemically to

\textsuperscript{437} Hym. Par. 1.3.
\textsuperscript{438} Hym. Par. VI. 2
\textsuperscript{439} Hom. Gen. 2.9-10
defend the Nicene position, the deeper sense which they expounded was one directly relevant to their generation and their context. As Breck put it,

“Flowing out of the literal sense, the *sensus plenior* serves to reactualize at every new historical moment the salvific value of God’s work in the past: among the people of Israel and, supremely, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ ... the Word of God ... must be understood as a *theandric* or divine-human reality ... [and thus] must be interpreted anew in every generation of the Church’s life.”

In this thesis I have shown that in the fourth century Ephrem and Chrysostom used their understanding of divine self-limitation as gift of love as a hermeneutical lens to interpret God’s word anew in their generation. I now go on to consider (briefly) how this understanding might be of value for us today.

### 6.2 Crossing the bridge

As I have already demonstrated, Ephrem and Chrysostom wrote and preached their theology within two specific (and very different) interpretive communities. Their theology did not arise *ex nihilo* – it was affected by their history and the doctrinal tradition they had inherited, the language they expressed it in and therefore the interplay of concepts available in each language as well as the audience they intended it to reach. I have argued throughout this thesis that for both of them, the divine self-limitation as a gift of love played a central part of their theology. The question I want to address now is this: how valid is it to pluck this interpretive lens out of its fourth century context and apply it when I read my Bible in my interpretive community in a Baptist fellowship in 21st century Wales?

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Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote that it is “characteristic of the emergence of the hermeneutical problem that something distant has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now.”\textsuperscript{441} In order to bridge the gap between the fourth century and 21\textsuperscript{st} century interpretive communities in an intellectually rigorous way, it strikes me that the key question is this: what are the constants? Or, alternatively, does anything stay the same over the intervening 1700 years?

I believe that the answer to this question will depend on who is doing the ‘bridging’ across the centuries. The bridging act itself is not neutral, but is carried out by a specific theologian with her own convictions, in this case myself. I come to this bridge not just as an academic but also as a Christian, and therefore I would want to say that three things remain constant over the centuries.

First of all, the character of God and His salvific desire to reach out in love to His children remains the same. This is a prior conviction of mine as I bridge the gap, and one which stems from my identity as a Christian. Therefore, as God’s character is unchanged, Ephrem and Chrysostom’s insights about God’s free choice of self-limitation through the language of the Bible still apply today as a valid hermeneutical tool. We can apply this principle to help us deal with troublesome texts in our own day, just as they did in their day with texts which seemed at first glance to justify the Arian position, or to suggest that matter existed prior to the creative event in Genesis 1, or to imply that God had a body with hands, feet and mouth. I shall be doing exactly that in the last part of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{441} Thiselton, \textit{Two Horizons}, 51.
Secondly, and related to the first point, God’s plan and desire remain unchanged. As part of an orthodox subscription to a partly realised eschatology, I believe that my generation today is included in God’s plan to redeem the cosmos through Jesus Christ just as Ephrem and Chrysostom’s communities were. This means that the purpose of Scriptural exegesis for me, as it was for them, is to contribute to the transformation of those who read it. Oden writes:

“The purpose of exegesis in the patristic period was humbly to seek the revealed truth the Scriptures convey ... In these respects much modern exegesis is entirely different: It does not assume the truth of Scripture, nor does it submit personally to the categorical moral requirement of the revealed text: that it be taken seriously as divine address. Yet we are here dealing with patristic writers who assumed that readers would not even approach an elementary discernment of the meaning of the text if they were not ready to live in terms of its revelation, i.e., to practice it in order to hear it.”

Thus my belonging to an interpretive community which desires to submit to the requirements of Scripture as divine revelation, because it shares the patristic belief that this is part of God’s plan for the salvation and transformation of the cosmos, is another constant which bridges the gap.

Thirdly, both communities ask the Bible to perform a similar function: to perform apologetically in defending the faith against external threats. We have seen again and again how Chrysostom and Ephrem used the idea of divine self-limitation polemically in their battle against the ‘enemies’. Today’s Christian communities also ask the Bible to perform a similar task in the face of perceived challenges from science, atheism and other world religions. This again will be addressed in the last part of this chapter.

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442 Oden and Louth, General Introduction to the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Series, xxvi.
To identify these three constants is not at all to say that we can achieve an objective understanding of what Ephrem and Chrysostom meant when they wrote about divine self-limitation. It is definitely not to say that the fourth century interpretive communities and the 21st century interpretive communities are in any way ‘the same’. Rather, it is that we respect our cultural, historical, theological and linguistic distance, and take the important step of acknowledging the ‘otherness’ of the Fathers. Then, recognising their otherness but also the constants mentioned above, we hold ourselves open in conversation with the fourth century world.\textsuperscript{443} In a hermeneutic spiral, we allow their insights to shape our thinking and our seeing, and then once again we return to their words with new eyes.

In this chapter I have provided a very primitive outline of some of the hermeneutical considerations we need to take into account when reading the works of Ephrem and Chrysostom in the present day. I now go one step further and try to apply their insights about divine self-limitation as gift of love to three concrete examples of troublesome texts today.

6.3 Questions Ephrem and Chrysostom Asked of the Text

Both Ephrem and Chrysostom were writing with strong apologetic motivations, and thus both were asking the Bible to ‘perform’, to deliver answers to pressing questions. In this section I consider what those questions were and I look at the answers they both provide. I then go on to consider whether we are asking similar questions today, and to provide a possible answer to the appropriate contemporary question, informed by the Fathers’ thinking.

6.3.1 In the Beginning God Created the Heavens and the Earth – *creatio ex nihilo*

The first pressing apologetic issue for both Ephrem and Chrysostom was the issue round the origin of creation. As has been shown by Frances Young, in the first four centuries after Christ, Christian thinkers argued against the prevailing culture for *creatio ex nihilo*, and produced a distinctively Christian discourse in the ancient intellectual milieu.⁴⁴⁴ For both Ephrem and Chrysostom, Genesis 1:1 was a statement vindicating *creatio ex nihilo*. This text provided an opportunity to refute contemporary views held by ‘enemies’ such as Bardaisan, Mani and Marcion about creation as essentially consisting of the re-ordering of pre-existent matter. Thus Ephrem:

“[Moses] wrote about the substances that were created out of nothing so that [the descendants of Abraham] might know that they were falsely called self-existent beings... heaven, earth, fire, wind and water were created from nothing as scripture bears witness... it is not possible that a thing which does not exist of itself can precede that thing which is the cause of its existence.”⁴⁴⁵

And Chrysostom:

“Even if Mani accosts you saying matter pre-existed, or Marcion, or Valentinus, or pagans, tell them directly: “In the beginning God made heaven and earth.””⁴⁴⁶

The issue here for both writers was that those who claim the impossibility of something being created from nothing have not understood the fundamental Otherness of God:

Thus Chrysostom:

⁴⁴⁴ Frances Young, *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity*, (Farnham: Ashgate Variorum, 2012). Of course I am not arguing that the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* is indeed present in Genesis 1, but only that Ephrem and Chrysostom believed it to be there.


⁴⁴⁶ *Hom. Gen.* 2.10.
“Who has ever seen the like? Who has ever heard of it? No matter what human beings produce, this could never have happened – whereas when God decides, everything yields to His will and becomes possible. So don’t pry too closely with human reasoning into the works of God: instead let the works lead you to marvel at their maker.”

Human pride in their own capacity had led them astray – thus Ephrem:

“The reason that Moses wrote is as follows: the Creator had been manifest to the mind of the first generations … but when the sons of Abram went astray in Egypt … they too became estranged from those noble commandments that are fixed in our nature and they considered substances, which had come into being out of nothing, to be self-existent beings … Still, God willed to set right once more, through Moses those things that had become confused… He [Moses] wrote about the true commandments that had become forgotten, while adding those that were necessary for the infantile state of the [Jewish] people.”

In other words: the creation account in Genesis 1 was necessary because people in their arrogance, childishness and ignorance had forgotten the truth and begun to claim that they could provide an account of the origins of the universe which did not require God to create the universe out of nothing. The creation account is an accommodation to this human weakness, this tendency to ignore the fundamental otherness of God and the limits of human knowledge.

This is an argument that we could use with conviction today. From the earliest times, humans have tended to overestimate their own capacity to understand everything. Our pride has led us to tell the story that there is no Other, that the universe has come into being of its own accord. The Bible tells us a different story. It tells us a story that is not really strange to us because it is, as Ephrem put it, “fixed into our nature” – that the

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447 *Hom. Gen.* 2.11.

448 *Comm. Gen.* 1.2.
The universe came into being through the initiative of a loving God. However, God was limited in his expression of this truth because He was constrained by the limits of our human language and our human capacity to grasp the revelation. In Ephrem’s words, he had to take into account “the infantile state of the Jewish people”. Later, through John the evangelist and through Paul, God was able to use more sophisticated language. As Chrysostom put it,

“When Moses, remember, in the beginning took on the instruction of the human race, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that later stage transmit more developed notions. Hence we discover the reason for the considerateness shown to date, namely, that under the guidance of the Spirit he was speaking in a manner appropriate to his hearers as he outlined everything.”¹

Thus, the notion of συγκατάβασις, with its sub-notions of variation and progression, allows us to say: the creation account in Genesis 1 is definitive because it conveys the fundamental truth that the universe came into being through the initiative of a loving God. This truth is repeated again using different language in Genesis 2, and then again using very different language by John in his gospel and by the apostle Paul. Were God’s Spirit to speak of it again today, He would repeat the same truth but in different language. The account in Genesis 1 is a divine self-limitation, a gift of love. The doctrine of divine self-limitation allows us to read beyond the surface words of the text to discern the sensus plenior, the message that God is addressing to us through His Spirit in our generation. I think that this would be a starting point for discussion which many 21st century people would find acceptable.

6.3.2 Made in the Image of God – the anthropomorphising crisis

As I have already shown, the texts I have been studying were written during the anthropomorphising crisis, where there was fundamental disagreement about what it
meant for men and women to be created in God’s image. What did Ephrem and Chrysostom understand by the assertion in Genesis 1 that man and woman were made in God’s image? Well, says Ephrem, “according to what has been the rule until now; namely, if it pleases God He will make it known to us.” And God does make it known: we are made in God’s image in the sense that God confers on us dominion over the earth and all that is in it. Thus Ephrem:

“It is the dominion that Adam received over the earth and over all that is in it that constitutes the likeness of God who has dominion over the heavenly things and the earthly things.”

And Chrysostom:

“In the course of that very shaping He manifested by the down-to-earth quality of the words and expressions the esteem he had for the being about to be created ... You learnt what is the meaning of “in our image”, that it is not in the order of being but a similarity of command, that he spoke not in terms of a formal image but in terms of command – hence the postscript, “Let them have control of the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, the wild beasts and the reptiles of the earth.”

In particular, to say that man is made in God’s image is not to commit the anthropomorphising mistake – it does not mean that God looks like we do, and has a body. Similarly, when scripture employs anthropomorphisms to speak of God, they are not to be taken literally. Thus Chrysostom, speaking of God shaping Adam from the dust in Genesis 2:

\[449\] Comm. Gen. 1.29.  
\[450\] Comm. Gen. 1.29. Again, I am not claiming that “to be made in the image of God” necessarily means to exercise dominion, but only that this is how Ephrem and Chrysostom interpreted it. I am more interested here in their rejection of the anthropomorphic view of God.  
“... the words require the eyes of faith, spoken as they are with such great considerateness (συγκατάβασις) and with our limitations in mind. You see, that very remark, “God shaped the human being, and breathed” is properly inapplicable to God: yet, because of us and our limitations Sacred Scripture expresses it in that way, showing considerateness to us, so that, having been thought worthy of the considerateness, we might be enabled to arrive at that sublime level of thought.”

And now Ephrem:

“It is our metaphors that He put on –

though He did not literally do so;

He then took them off – without actually doing so;

when wearing them, He was at the same time stripped of them.

He puts on one when it is beneficial,

then strips it off in exchange for another;

the fact that he strips off

and puts on all sorts of metaphors

tells us that the metaphor
does not apply to His true Being:
because that Being is hidden,

He has depicted it by means of what is visible. 453

Describing God as possessing human characteristics and acting in human ways is “properly inapplicable to God”. God’s συγκατάβασις means that he uses our limited human language to


453 Quoted by Brock in his introduction to Hymns on Paradise, 45–46.
communicate with us, because our understanding is itself limited. He puts on our metaphors.

This is another argument which can be used with conviction today. Some of the texts which people find most difficult are the texts which anthropomorphise God, attributing human emotions and motives to Him. People may no longer ask the question “Does God really have arms and legs?” but they do ask “Does God really get angry or jealous?” Commonly cited ‘troublesome texts’ are those which deal with God’s wrath. As Origen put it so well,

“If you hear of the wrath of God and his anger, do not think that anger and wrath are passions in God. They are accommodations in the use of language (οἰκονομίας κρήσεως λέξεων) in order to correct and improve a child.”

Origen believed that God declares that he is wrathful in order that we might be afraid and change our ways, just as we might pretend to be angry at a small child’s behaviour. I do not think that this argument would be helpful in a contemporary context. However, it might well be helpful to start from the Fathers’ assertion that in the Bible God uses human language to describe His own actions, and so sometimes He is described as having human attributes. For instance, to describe His power, the Bible talks about the strength of His arm, but this does not mean that we should imagine God as having arms. Similarly, when Genesis speaks of Him breathing into Adam’s nostrils or walking in the Garden of Eden, we should not imagine Him as having a mouth, lungs or feet. God is incorporeal, and His true Being is hidden from us, but He clothes Himself in the metaphors of our language in order

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454 Origen, In Jer. 18 (GCS 6. 158-159), translation adapted by Rylaarsdam from Hanson, pp. 226-227.

455 It casts aspersions on the truthfulness of God. See for instance Frances Young’s discussion of the tension between divine accommodation and deception in Gregory’s treatment of the names of God (Young, Biblical Exegesis, 142).
to make Himself visible to us. He does this because He loves us and is so eager to communicate His love and His salvation to us. These metaphors are clothes He has borrowed from our own linguistic wardrobe, and as such they reveal ourselves – our thoughts, our hearts – as well as revealing something of Him. They fit us better than they fit Him.

Frances Young addresses this issue in her comment on Athanasius and ancient literary criticism:

“Ancient literary criticism did not grasp the notion of an anachronistic reading, for it was essentially about reader reception and response. In the case of a text believed to enshrine the truth, indeed the divine accommodation to the limitations of human discourse, the notion of anachronistic reading was the more inconceivable, for the archaic features of the text were merely part of the verbal dress. The discernment of the reality behind the inadequate verbal clothing was the only proper response.”

This idea can help us to be slightly more comfortable with the passages where the Bible speaks of God’s wrath and anger and destruction. It allows us to consider the possibility that our use of words of anger and violence to describe God’s actions stem from the fact that our own actions are characterised by anger and violence. Our language itself is soiled, stained by sin, and yet God in his συγκατάβασις does not hesitate to put on our sin-stained words in His eagerness to communicate His saving love for us. But the language of God Himself, the Logos, the Eternal Word, is unsullied. The unsullied Word clothed Himself in flesh at the incarnation to allow us the possibility of re-imagining life, God and human language. The incarnation is the supreme example of the self-enclosing God, divine self-limitation as gift of love.

456 Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 35.
6.3.3 From the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil You Shall Not Eat – the limits of human knowledge

As I have already discussed, another burning issue in Ephrem and Chryostom’s day was the Arian question. While this presented itself as the question of the divinity of the Son, it raised the related question of where the limits of human investigation and even language about God should properly be drawn. We have seen that both Chrysostom and Ephrem answer that even as He revealed Himself in Christ, some aspects of God’s Being remain permanently hidden to us, His creatures. This is how Ephrem puts it:

“May my search not be held blameworthy
by You, concealed from all;
for I have not made bold to speak
of Your generation, hidden from all;
in silence
I have bounded the Word ... 
From all who love You
be praise to Your hiddenness!”

And Ephrem again:

“Upon each according to his capacity,
He bestows a glimpse
of the beauty of His hiddenness,
of the splendour of His majesty.
He is the radiance who, in his love,
makes everyone shine
– the small, with flashes of light from Him,

457 Hym. Par, IV.11.
And now Chrysostom, in prose but perhaps no less poetic:

“No on this matter, I would address to those rash enough to be inquisitive about the generation of the Son of God ... the following mild enquiry: whence springs the vehemence of your daring, I ask you? What drunken stupor leads you into such extreme folly? After all, if a man of such ability and stature as Paul says God’s judgements – that is, his planning and government – are inscrutable (he did not say incomprehensible, just inscrutable, so that no one could plot them), and God’s ways in his words, are unsearchable, meaning the same thing, referring to his dispositions and commands as ways, how is it that you are rash enough to be inquisitive about the very being of the Only-begotten and to minimize as far as you can the status of the Holy Spirit?”

In the end, God is the Hidden One who Hides, as well as the one who reveals Himself through Jesus Christ and through scripture and nature.

The question about the bounds of human intellectual enquiry has not gone away. Today we would phrase it differently: “Can we prove, or disprove, the existence of God?” To this question, Ephrem and Chrysostom can bring a timeless reply: God is completely Other to the rest of creation. He cannot be investigated as His creation can be. He is utterly self-sufficient and his Being is beyond our comprehension. God reveals aspects of Himself to us through His creation, His word and especially through Jesus Christ, but He also hides aspects of Himself. We can never come to a complete understanding of God. We can never claim to know His thoughts and His ways.

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458 Hym Par. IX.25.

This is the only answer which God gives when Job is looking for an answer to his suffering:

“Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2) Sometimes this is the only answer we can bring to a troublesome text: that we have no answer, for the truth is hidden from us.

Accepting the otherness, the hiddenness, of God can be a positive thing – it can help prevent us from making decisions on His behalf. If we cannot know God completely, who are we to decide whom He does and does not welcome? Jesus’ life shows us that religious people are particularly bad at predicting how God might be at work in their generation.

When we refuse to lay down limits for God, we open ourselves up to the radical possibility of God’s welcome to all who seek Him, regardless of gender, sexuality or race. The self-enclosing God encloses, but cannot be enclosed by us.

**Summary**

In this chapter I started by arguing that it is not helpful to characterise Ephrem’s exegesis as symbolical-typological over and against an Antiochene literal-moral reading as exemplified by Chrysostom. Instead I suggested that both men grounded their exegesis in a *priori* commitment to a unified Christological reading of the Bible which was shaped by the Rule of Faith and the Nicene stance. This inevitably led to situations in which the surface reading of the texts generated problems. I argued that both men retained the integrity of the scriptural text by using the hermeneutical lens of limit, both human limits and divine self-limitation. The two men did this in different ways, but I have shown that the doctrine of divine self-limitation was central to both. This doctrine, particularly when applied to human language, allowed both men to move beyond the literal meaning of the text to the deeper, spiritual meaning for their generation. I then asked which ‘constants’ might allow us to cross a hermeneutical bridge of 17 centuries in order to see whether the doctrine of divine self-limitation is one which might help us to read our Bibles today. Finally, I have
identified questions which Ephrem and Chrysostom asked (or were asked) of three parts of the creation and fall account. These questions were: Was the world really made out of nothing in six days? If we are made in God’s image, does God then have a body as we do? What are the limits of human knowledge? I have argued that reading Genesis 1–3 through the interpretive lens of divine self-limitation can provide some helpful answers to us today. It can highlight the limitations of human language, and remind us that explanatory language needs to be appropriate for its hearer. It can lay down the foundation that we can never fully know God; we can never limit Him. This opens up the horizon for us to be surprised by God and his transformative love.
**Conclusion: The Way Forward**

In this thesis I have studied four fourth century patristic texts based on the creation and fall accounts in Genesis 1–3. I have shown that both the authors, Ephrem Syrus and John Chrysostom, interpret the creation and fall accounts through the lens of the doctrine that God freely chooses to limit Himself in Word and deed out of His saving love for us. I have demonstrated 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. I have argued that the same interpretive lens can be used to great profit, and without loss of hermeneutical integrity, in our own generation.

The research has confirmed the general consensus that the old distinctions between Antioch and Alexandria, allegory and history, are *post hoc* generalisations which cannot be sustained by a close reading of the primary texts.\(^{460}\) It has emphasised the hermeneutical aspect of the fourth century controversies, and shown that limit – where is it to be drawn? who is subject to it? how does God respond to it? – is at the heart of much of the debate. It showed that both Ephrem and Chrysostom insisted that human knowledge of God was beyond the limit. In response to Arius, both wanted to say that the Son alone has full knowledge of the Father, and that it is in participating in the Son that we start to know the Father. But, over against Arius, neither of them accepted that God is completely unknowable. Instead, both specifically state that God freely chooses to limit Himself in human language, revealing aspects of Himself for our salvation. Because we can only access God through participation in Christ, this means that we live lives of faith and obedience in Christ, lives of generosity and charity and solidarity, and although this occurs in both authors, it is particularly emphasised by Chrysostom, as we would expect in a homiletic

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\(^{460}\) See for instance, Young, *Biblical Exegesis* and Miller, *Syriac and Antiochian Exegesis*. 
context. Our Christian discipleship is a direct consequence of God’s self-limitation in the incarnation. The research has therefore shown that at both geographical extremes of the Syrian church, Nicene Christians were using similar hermeneutics to read their Bibles, whether those Bibles were written in Greek or in Syriac.

In all of this we must never forget that divine self-limitation as a gift of love was a doctrine which arose for both Chrysostom and Ephrem out of their understanding of salvation as theosis. We have seen this from the way in which they dwelt on the doctrine of man and woman being made in the Image, and being conformed through participation in Christ to the likeness of God. They also emphasised the unity of Scripture’s witness to Jesus Christ, and a belief that God took on our limitations so that we could fulfil our wholeness in Him. In the classic Athanasian formulation, “He [the Word of God] became human that we might become God; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from humans that we might inherit incorruption.”

God’s divine self-limitation is part and parcel of the doctrine of theosis, which has experienced a recent surge of interest in the West. Hallonsten writes that “theosis, deification, or divinization is no longer a topic limited to Eastern Orthodox thought. It is found almost everywhere: in Luther and Thomas Aquinas, Lancelott Andrewes, and St. John of the Cross.” Hallonsten emphasises that theosis is not just an idea or a theme but “a

461 Quoted in Louth, Theosis, 34.
comprehensive doctrine” encompassing the whole economy of salvation from creation through salvation, sanctification and the eschaton.

This doctrine has not traditionally played a part in British Baptist theology, which has tended to emphasise Louth’s ‘lower arch’ from fall to salvation for the individual through the atoning work of Christ. In the UK, the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s Declaration of Principle states:

“That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws, and that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who ‘died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again on the third day’.”

This declaration of principle does not commit Baptists to a particular soteriology or interpretation of atonement. However, in both the Baptist churches which I have pastored in Wales, most of the congregation would understand salvation as the substitutionary, usual penal, atonement of Christ for an individual believer.

There are signs that this may be changing. In his recent article, Mark Medley studies the work of British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes. As Medley points out, the integrating theme in Fiddes’ work has been ‘participation’, and as part of developing this theme

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463 Available online at http://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx (accessed January 2015). The declaration continues “and that it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.”
Fiddes has drawn on theosis in order to achieve a renewal of Baptist soteriology. Fiddes speaks of the role of God’s Spirit who takes humanity and the whole of creation up into God, transforming them.\footnote{Mark S. Medley, “Participation in God: the appropriation of theosis by contemporary Baptist theologians” in Vladimir Kharlamov (ed.) \textit{Theosis: deification in Christian theology}, Volume 2, Princeton theological Monograph Series 156 (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011) 205–246.}

As more and more Christians become aware of our ecological interdependence with the rest of creation, and begin to move away from an individualist view of salvation, the patristic discourse of theosis may come to be of real interest in our churches in the U.K.. The doctrine of divine self-limitation grows out of that discourse. Paradoxically, it allows Christians to be more confident in their faith because it affirms that there are limits and boundaries to our knowledge of God. It gives us a hermeneutic for reading the difficult passages, reaching beyond their surface words to hear what the Spirit of God is saying through them to our generation.

Thus far I have spoken of the way forward in terms of the churches. However, on the academic front, the research could be developed further. There is more work to be done on why Chrysostom developed the term \textit{συγκατάβασις} when he did. The work on Ephrem has only just begun – it would be most interesting to start to read his other works with an eye and mind which is tuned to the presence of limit as an underlying narrative factor. I would also like to explore the works of other authors writing in the second half of the fourth century through the same lens. Does the idea present itself in works coming from other sources – perhaps in those authors whom Chrysostom and Ephrem deliberately set forth to refute? We have seen hints of this in Athanasius’ quotation from Arius in the Introduction above.
Finally, I would love to spend some more time in hermeneutics, exploring further how the idea could be of help to twenty-first century readers of the Bible. Understanding what the Church Fathers have to say about divine self-limitation as gift of love does help us to read the Bible with greater understanding, but it does not provide a simple algorithm or a failsafe set of guidelines for dealing with every difficult text. In fact, our authors’ constant emphasis on the limits of human knowledge helps us to realise that such an algorithm cannot exist. Instead, when we read the Bible through the narrative lens of divine self-limitation as gift of love, our appreciation of both God’s transcendence and His immanence is deepened and strengthened.

To read the Bible with integrity is to struggle with God as Jacob did at Penuel – it is likely to leave us limping, because we encounter the God who hides Himself and who draws boundaries beyond which we may not step. However, for those who, like Jacob, persist and do not let go, the outcome is one of blessing upon blessing from the God whose nature is love and self-gift.

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465 Genesis 32.
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