Thomas Kremer, *Mundus Primus. Die Geschichte der Welt und des Menschen von Adam bis Noach im Genesiskommentar Ephräms des Syrers*, CSCO 641 / Subsidia 128 (Louvain: Peeters, 2012). Pp. lvi + 534; €120.

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According to Ephrem and other early Syriac authors, the world we presently inhabit is the "second world," which was inaugurated by God's covenant with Noah (narrated in Gen. 9:1–17). Distinct from it in time and place is the "first world" (*ʿālmā qadmāyā, mundus primus*), which existed until the flood and the departure of Noah and his family from the region surrounding Paradise. The author argues that in Ephrem's view the biblical narrative about the "first world" constitutes a more or less independent unit deserving separate treatment (see esp. his comments on pp. 406–11). The first half of Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* (ed. R. M. Tonneau) deals with the "first world" (63 pages in the edition, out of a total of 121) and discusses the creation, humanity's sin in Paradise, the expulsion from Paradise, and the life of the antediluvian generations. It is this part of the *Commentary* that is the subject of this very substantial, richly documented, and well-written monograph.

The core of the book is Chapter III (pp. 171–411), which offers a detailed analysis of the successive episodes and the main themes of Ephrem's *Commentary*, consisting of a discussion of Ephrem's views, the provenance of these views, and parallel passages in Syriac and Greek authors. Chapter I (pp. 1–95) first introduces Ephrem's theological opponents (Marcion, Bardaisan, and Mani) and then gives an overview of the most relevant works dealing with Genesis, in Syriac and Greek, prior to ca. 400 AD, followed by brief presentations of the Targumim, *Midrash Genesis Rabba*, and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*. Chapter II (pp. 97–170) provides a general introduction to the *Commentary*, including historical questions, the state of research, formal and structural aspects, and leading themes. Chapter IV (pp. 413–491) deals with questions of hermeneutics and reception history. A useful summary at the end, presented in the form of ten statements (pp. 493–500), brings together the main findings.

While it is impossible to do full justice to this voluminous and extremely rich work, the focus of my review will be on its most

innovative aspects as well as on some issues that, despite the thorough discussion in the book, in my view still need some further reflection. It should first be noted that a full German translation of Ephrem's *Commentary*, by the same author, is forthcoming in the series *SOPHIA – Quellen östlicher Theologie* (Trier). This will turn out to be a necessary companion volume to the present book, in which the author does not provide many quotations (either in Syriac or in German). Chapter III, the author's 250-page commentary on Ephrem's (much more concise!) *Commentary*, does not primarily follow the Syriac text, but is organized around themes and topics, whereby selections are made, certain passages are foregrounded and others passed over in silence. While fully respecting the author's organizational decisions, one has the impression that Ephrem's *Commentary* itself somewhat recedes behind the author's erudition.

In Chapter I, one may at first sight be surprised to find, among Ephrem's opponents, such a lengthy discussion of Bardaisan (pp. 18–66), whereas Marcion and Mani only receive a few pages each. The author argues that much of Ephrem's understanding of the creation is a polemical response to Bardaisan. In this he follows the lead of earlier scholars, among whom T. Jansma should be singled out. In the ongoing scholarly debate about the measure of Bardaisan's Hellenism, however, he claims that the Edessene philosopher should be seen primarily as a representative of the Parthian, or "Median-Persian" world of thought, whereby "Greek Hellenistic thought" constitutes only the "external conceptual framework" (p. 44: "äusseres Rahmenkonzept"). Elsewhere in the volume he asserts that it is precisely these "Iranian" aspects of Bardaisan's cosmology and anthropology that are the target of Ephrem's comments or attacks. Ephrem himself, therefore, should be seen as interacting with the Persian world to a greater extent than recent scholarship has acknowledged, since in the author's view most scholars have been inclined to overemphasize Ephrem's involvement in the Greco-Roman world (on p. 151 he, unfairly, blames U. Possekel for forcing Ephrem into the "corset" of Stoic philosophy which "distorts the contours of his own position"; see also p. 9). Examples of themes and arguments in Ephrem that should be understood as addressing Iranian aspects of Bardaisan's thought include the discussion of space (pp. 46, 60, 165), the role of the wind in creation (pp. 53, 159, 184), the de-emphasizing

("Depotenzierung" and "Degradierung") of light and darkness (p. 188–89), the polemic against dualism (pp. 60, 207–8, 494–95), and the insistence on free will against Bardaisan's doctrine of fate (pp. 60–61, 495). Partly grounded in observations by earlier scholars (such as G. Widengren), the author's insistence on Bardaisan's and Ephrem's Persian contexts adds a valuable insight to our understanding of early Syriac Christianity. Rather than a paradigm shift, however, I would like to see this as a shift of emphasis, as any study of "originär edessenische Philosophie" (p. 41) will have to take into account the proximity of, and the interaction with, both the Greco-Roman and the Persian worlds.

One of the striking characteristics of Ephrem's *Commentary* is the scarcity of typologies and references to the New Testament, as compared to their abundance in Ephrem's poetry. Throughout the present study the author adopts a holistic approach to Ephrem and uses Ephrem's poetry to illuminate the *Commentary*. He plays down the contrast between the prose *Commentary* and the poetry, and reduces it to a question of tactics, as "the christological perspective is present in the *Commentary* as well, even though it is only rarely exploited, in order to allow it to be even more efficiently deployed in the context of his entire theology" (p. 460)—or, put differently, it is a matter of "exegetical and rhetorical method in the sense of *reculer pour mieux sauter*" (p. 459). This seems a rather superficial solution, which ignores the real problem and eschews the issue of different functions and different audiences for the poetry and the prose *Commentary*, topics the author treats in a different context (e.g., p. 102).

If one sees Ephrem's narration of the "first world" as a separate unit within the *Commentary*, deserving to be read in its own right, the question arises as to how in Ephrem's view the two human catastrophes—the sin of Paradise followed by the first couple's expulsion and the sin of the pre-flood generations followed by their destruction and the transfer of the remnant of humanity to our present world—relate to each other. Both are acts of human free will committed in stubbornness against God's will. Is the second misfortune (discussed by Ephrem in so much detail) a repetition and confirmation of the first? Does this repetition put the original sin in a different perspective, adding justification to God's decision first to expel humanity from Paradise and then to remove humans from the paradisiac region altogether—as if the

first sin itself had still not definitively sealed humanity's fate? More than the author seems to be willing to do, I would suggest that Ephrem's creative use of the interplay of divine justice and grace forces us to read the history between the expulsion from Paradise and the flood, despite the grave impact of sin, as a period of continued blessing for humanity living "at the foothills" of Paradise. Humanity's physical proximity to Paradise still had its salvific effect, which came to an end only with the removal of Noah and his family to a different world. But even then God ensured that the blessings of Paradise would not become extinct completely. Through the ingenious design of subterranean channels God extended the course of the rivers of Paradise into our inhabited world. In addition, God bestowed his blessings on Noah, the founding father of the "second world." These blessings passed to Noah's son Shem, known as Melchizedek (an identification discussed at length in the *Commentary*), and to Abraham (Gen. 14:18–20). The author thinks that Ephrem's discussion of the rivers of Paradise and of the subterranean channels to our world (nearly one full page of Syriac text!) is inconsequential (p. 328, with note 643), and he does not even mention Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham. He, therefore, seems to have missed these notes which Ephrem injects as positive and indelible signs of hope and blessing into the narrative of human history, which is otherwise marked by human inability (p. 328: "Geringfügigkeit") and need of salvation (p. 331: "Erlösungsbedürftigkeit").

This brings us to the author's view of the sin of Paradise in Ephrem's understanding, which he discusses in great detail and with much insight (esp. pp. 279–320). One part of his description, however, I would be reluctant to accept. On p. 270 he explains that the human couple's sin resulted not only in their mortality (from an earlier state between immortality and mortality), but also in the loss of the robe of glory and the image of God ("… den Verlust seines Ehrenkleides und seiner Gottebenbildlichkeit"); see also pp. 308, 317, 328, 330, even though on p. 307 the image of God is not included among the losses caused by sin. I do not think that any of the passages to which he refers, from the *Commentary* or the *mēmrē* and *madrāshē*, specifically mentions the loss of humanity's image of God as a result of sin. It is true that according to Ephrem the image of God was presented to man as a dynamic project to be realized in full in the future (e.g., *Hymns on Paradise* 12.18), in the process of

"obtaining divinity in (their) humanity" (*Commentary* II, 23, ed. p. 39,11–12), but the image of God, implanted in human nature at its creation and consisting, in a technical sense, in his free will and in his dominion over the earth (*Commentary* I, 29, ed. p. 23,24–30), was *not* lost through sin. God did not disavow his image! Rather than man's "Sehnsucht nach seiner Gottebenbildlichkeit" (p. 326–27), it is the "Gottebenbildlichkeit" itself that was preserved in post-paradisiac humanity. Here again, therefore, Ephrem's anthropology may be slightly more optimistic than would appear from the author's analysis.

In his effort to illuminate the literary, religious, and cultural contexts of Ephrem's *Commentary*, the author uses a great number of ancient sources and parallel texts. His comments on Jewish sources are very valuable and, by paying attention to both content and hermeneutical approach, this work moves beyond comparisons and contrasts laid out by previous scholars (among whom S. Hidal and T. Kronholm should be singled out) and allows for the possibility that Ephrem and other Syriac authors developed their own *haggadot*, thus creating a Christian counterpart to Jewish midrash (pp. 360 and 494). The author's references to pre-Rabbinic midrashic procedure (e.g., p. 427, note 51), however, would justify a closer look into such works as *Genesis Apocryphon* and the *Life of Adam and Eve*, which are not included in the bibliography. Particularly intriguing are the relatively high number of references to Philo of Alexandria, some of which (such as the concept of "God being his own space") suggest that Ephrem was familiar with some Philonic interpretative trajectories, mediated perhaps by Theophilus of Antioch (pp. 174–75, see also pp. 9–10). As for the Greek sources, it is unfortunate that some outdated editions have been used, such as the *Patrologia Graeca* edition for the fragments of Theodore of Mopsuestia and J. Deconinck's edition for the fragments of Diodore of Tarsus. The recent editions of the Catena on Genesis and *Collectio Coisliniana* by F. Petit should have been used instead. Eusebius of Emesa does not receive the attention he deserves and the author's claim that Eusebius did not have a lasting impact on the exegetical tradition (p. 185) is infelicitous.

Throughout the monograph Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* emerges as a unique literary work, reflecting the creative power of its author as well as the complex cultural world of early Syriac Christianity. The author successfully explores Ephrem's proximity

to the Persian world and his indebtedness to Jewish tradition. He focuses on Ephrem's powerful defense of the unity of the Christian God as revealed in both the Old and New Testaments, of human free will against any type of fatalistic doctrine, and of the ideals of asceticism (as an effective means to combat evil) which he reads into biblical history. Ephrem's work will always evoke many more questions than we will be able to answer, but Thomas Kremer has given us a remarkable study that will further inform and nourish our interest in, and fascination with, the *Commentary*. He deserves our profound gratitude.