The purpose of this book is to compare key symbols in pre-Muslim Persian (Sassanian) Christianity, especially in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian, with the late-nineteenth century Persian religion of the Bahá’ís, which is post-Islamic and centered in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. The focus of the analysis is on symbols having to do with paradise. The exhaustive approach adopted by the author renders the book also an excellent introduction to early Syriac Christianity and to the Bahá’í tradition both in terms of their histories and main doctrinal symbols.

Methodological issues for doing such a comparative study are carefully analyzed in Chapter One. The author states the hypothesis that grounds his study as follows: "Formal comparison of early Syriac Christianity and the Bábí Faith is constrained by their paradigms (respectively, transformational purity and concentric unity), by which all phenomenological parallels must be interpreted." (p. 33) In outlining the history and beliefs of Syriac Christianity in Ephrem's writings, Buck identifies three dimensions of symbols: Nature, Scripture, and Sacrament. Among these the Syriac view of paradise, as restoration of humanity to its original state before the Fall, is its central feature. "Paradise" is the key symbol into which all others feed — it is the ideal to be achieved. Purity is the means. For Ephrem, Christ was the purifier of all. Purification of the body and its senses is the means for the realization of the beatific vision of paradise. Purity, for Syriac Christianity, was "transformational" and led to an angelic life "that transcends sexuality, in a convenantal betrothal to Christ "in a positive embrace of the body, pressed into the service of Christ and the Church, on the battlefield of free will." (p. 134) Purity, concludes Buck, was the paradigm of the early Syriac Christian worldview in which God, through Christ, would bring humans back to their original state before the Fall and into Paradise.

After a very useful history of the origins of the Bahá’í Faith, the author focuses on "unity" as the key Baha'i symbol of Paradise. Major Bahá’í symbols such as "The Promised One," "The Covenant," "Illumination," "Lover and Beloved," "The Maid of Heaven," and "The Crimson Ark" are all found to be structured around ideals of unity — from a heart-to-world nexus to a unity of thought and purpose in world undertakings. Unlike the fourth-century Syriac otherworldly focus, the nineteenth-century Bahá’í paradigm of concentric unity is "the organizing principle behind almost every glimpse of paradise Bahá'u'lláh offers." (p. 225) Jesus Christ is included in this scenario as having introduced a
saving power not only into individual souls but into civilization itself (as seen in its masterpieces of art, its discoveries of science, etc) — a gradual process in which the advent of Bahá'u'lláh is the crowning event of salvation history.

In both the Syriac and the Bahá'í traditions, says Buck, the devotee, even at the highest level of the mystical vision, will not see God. For both religions, God is inscrutable. Rather, it is the savior figure of Christ or of Bahá'u'lláh with whom one unites at the highest mystical level. In both cases, however, a vision of Paradise predominates. Ephrem's Syriac Christian vision is of a purity (made possible by Christ) that "cures." "It cleanses one's soul of the 'disease' of mortality. It restores primordial immortality. Life in paradise, in both worlds is for the pure. The pure in heart are Christians who are sexually pure and morally stainless." (p. 288) In contrast the Bahá'í texts suggest that Paradise is the ideal of perfection may take hold within the heart of the individual and within a society that has achieved concentric levels of unity. "Paradise is realized in this world by leading an exemplary Bahá'í life and in helping to build a more just and virtuous society. It is also the afterworld of the pious who have first tried to create Paradise on earth. It includes not only pious Bahá'í but also those who followed the rules of conduct as laid down by Jesus." (p. 291)

Paradise symbolism, concludes Buck, "is the heart of the Bahá'í conception of unity, concentrically conceived as widening circles of unity, from self to society, and from one's very soul to the Deity beyond unity." (p. 311) Although this book is clearly written, it is too exhaustive for the undergraduate student or the general reader. However, it is a must for university libraries and for faculty/graduate student readers of the Christian, Islamic and Baha'i traditions. It is a model for careful comparative analysis between religions.