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exist, need to be abandoned, and the categorizing of the Jews of antiquity according to rules and boundaries that they did not have, nor recognized, needs to be questioned. Accordingly, it is important that this book will be accessible to any student and scholar.

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Michael Philip Penn, Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, Christine Shepardson, and Charles M. Stang (eds.), *Invitation to Syriac Christianity: An Anthology*, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022, 462 + xxi pages, 3 maps, 16 illustrations, ISBN 9780520299191

Syriac Christianity has its roots in a Semitic milieu, at the crossroads between the Eastern Roman and Persian empires. In this space, it had to adapt to the challenges of constant political changes (from Sassanid domination to Islamic rule, to take into consideration only the first Christian millennium). According to tradition, this branch of Christianity was in direct connection with the message of the Apostles Addai and Mari, who Christianised Edessa, the core of Syro-Aramaic Christianity. Over time, it developed a rich theological heritage, contained in unique pieces of exegesis, and a deep symbolism that was sometimes expressed with the simplicity of poetic words that can capture the imagination of readers from any cultural background. In the hierarchy of the connoisseurs and keepers of this tradition, the most intimate category includes the believers and the clerical body of this form of Eastern Christianity, those who understand it from within through their experience of belonging to this magnificent form of Christianity. Next come the researchers and historians, those who look upon this tradition from the outside, seeking to discover it and get acquainted with its treasures by studying its manuscripts, texts, inscriptions and other sources. Due to their activities, the third category of readers may now interact with it: namely, students and those who are beginning to parse some fragments of the religious history of the Middle East. These students, and other potential readers, have long needed an anthology to explore with pleasure and fascination, to guide them through the innumerable sources that Syriac Christianity has to offer.

Displaying a remarkable vision and anticipation of the increasing interest in Syriac sources in the future, the four well-known editors of this volume, experts in the field active in American universities, have fulfilled a longstanding *desideratum*: the publication of a much-needed work for students and those who want to study a selection of well-chosen texts from sources from the first thirteen centuries of the Syriac tradition.

A particular advantage of this book is that in addition to existing translations (listed in Appendix A, pp. 374–88), the editors partially revised and adapted the translations to new linguistic standards in the field. Appendix B (pp. 389–406) is also important, containing brief biographies of the Syriac authors; as is Appendix C (pp. 407–12), a glossary of important terms for understanding the field of Syriac Christianity. The three double-page maps, and the accompanying illustrations are very useful. These important support tools help the reader to locate geographically the main church centres in this Christian space and decipher their continuous historical heritage through the *longue durée*, and prepare them to discover, page by page, the originality, beauty and breadth of knowledge they can draw from this selection of sources.

The Introduction begins very pragmatically, with a distinction between the Christianity with which Europeans are familiar (including the dismantling of modern clichés in order to allow a better understanding and perspective on Christianity as a compact, clearly defined concept) and local Christians with their particular traditions and identity as rendered through the objective lens of

history. One illustrative example in this regard is the Church of the East (the East Syriac Church) which despite being today a relatively small Church, was once a truly global congregation with active missions as far afield as China.

The Introduction clarifies the image of these Syriac Christians for a modern Christian readership in Europe and the United States, rejecting the common stereotypes that the Christians of the Syriac tradition come from a “wrong” place, ‘having the “wrong” beliefs (that is, being considered heretics by both Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians) and using the “wrong” language’ (p. 2). The editors explain their initiative not as an isolated yet potentially useful project, but as a result of an explosive growth of this scholarly field over the course of the last half-century, owing to a rapid growth of interest in the study of these Christian traditions—not only from the theological and linguistic viewpoint, but also due to the entirety of their “living” heritage. Going forward, Syriac Christianity embodies a “living tradition,” and must come to be known from this living and dynamic perspective. This is what the book, in the nuanced formulation of its editors, ultimately proposes.

As for the structure of the volume, it is organized thematically. The methodology used is fully justified. The selection of particular texts was guided by the extensive experience of the scholars who made the recommendations and supported the selection process. Explaining their choice of the texts, the editors affirm that ‘the goal was to create an invitation, a volume that balanced examples from what many consider the core of the Syriac traditions alongside other, lesser-known works’ (p. 14). I am convinced that anyone familiar with the sheer number of extant Syriac texts will share the opinion that such an anthology inviting the reader to study this broad field could only be compiled by way of fragmentary and repetitive selections, taking into account the fact that Syriac Christianity is one of the most prolific Christian literary traditions. One small disadvantage in the intended systematic orientation of the reader is that throughout the volume certain authors or sources appear multiple times in different sections, whenever a topic that overlaps with the output of the respective author or source is approached (for example, Thomas of Marga). These authors are, therefore, referenced sometimes in several chapters, through different passages or works narrating themes that, taken together, compose a theological jigsaw synthesizing the entire Syriac tradition. However, the recurrence of some seminal Syriac authors also has a positive side, allowing the reader to reflect on the ancient scholars’ prodigious output in a broader context.

Moreover, it is to be appreciated that the editors tried to put forward a gradual presentation of the sources referenced throughout the volume, and include a chronological analysis of the major phases of the development of Syriac Christianity, divided into four stages (pp. 2–24). The first period encompasses the 1st–4th centuries CE (pp. 3–10); the second period covers the 5th–6th centuries (pp. 11–16), while the third period includes the events of the 7th–9th centuries (pp. 16–10) and the fourth period, of the Syriac Renaissance, comprises the 10th–14th centuries (pp. 20–24).

In their selection of the texts, the authors followed the principle of parity between East and West Syriac literary compositions. In the presentation of each new text and author, the reader is first offered a brief introduction, making this volume suitable for lay readership and those without a historical and/or theological background: ‘Each chapter begins with a brief overview of its main theme, including a short list of additional suggested readings; each excerpt has a short introduction’ (p. 24).

The volume is divided into four sections, comprising 12 chapters. Part I (*Foundations*, pp. 31–109) presents the basic doctrinal and poetic tenets (referencing authors such as Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Narsai, Babai the Great, Dionysius Bar Salibi) that caused this Christian tradition to be so particular, and so profound. The second part (*Practices*, pp. 111–98) includes testimonies on the liturgical, ascetic and mystical aspects of Syriac Christianity, while the

third part (*Texts and Textual Transmission*, pp. 199–290) contains a wealth of biblical exegesis and examples of the hagiographic genre, supplemented by translations and an explanation of other aspects of Syriac literary and canonical transmission. The fourth part (*Interreligious Encounters*, pp. 291–374) analyses the Syriac identity and situates this Christian tradition within the complex multi-religious landscape of the Middle East, depicting it in interaction with its monotheistic neighbours, Islam and Judaism, through highly relevant texts, such as chronicles, polemical writings and disputations.

For me as a reader, two chapters in the second section (*Practices*), ‘Asceticism’ (pp. 140–69) and ‘Mysticism and Prayer’ (170–200), were most fascinating. These two chapters elucidate the particular features of this particular type of Christianity. Syriac Christianity, through its two sister confessions, East Syriac and Syriac Orthodox traditions, boasts a remarkable heritage of monastic texts, of which several are included in these two chapters, discussing the beginnings of Syriac symbolism and exegesis through the demonstrations of Aphrahat, and the collection of anonymous *memre* entitled the *Book of Steps*, which charismatically extol the principles of a pre-monastic community in the Syriac area. Not surprisingly, the works of Rabbula, the Bishop from Edessa who defended the faith against those he considered heretics or non-Christians, dedicated to establishing clear norms for monastic communities and consolidating monastic and ecclesiastical discipline, could not be absent from this chapter. Another impressive character contemporary with Severus of Antioch is Philoxenos of Mabbug, a Syriac Orthodox theologian (late 5th century–early 6th century) who defended and promoted Miaphysite Christology within and outside monastic circles. In his letters to monks, resisting the obstacles raised by his Christological opponents (Diophysites and, especially, Chalcedonians), Philoxenos encouraged the former to follow the great Christian martyrs, instructing them to understand the truth of their Church, keep it in their heart and manifest it in public confession. Jacob of Sarug, the most prolific author after Ephrem the Syrian, offers advice for the solitary; this concept is also referenced through excerpts from Isaac of Nineveh about the beauty of solitary life and the way in which this beauty can be discovered and preserved—ferments of theological aesthetics with spiritual benefit for any reader. Prayer, another pillar of Syriac asceticism and mysticism, is also well documented, through selected passages recompositing both what Evagrius of Pontus had to transmit through his *Kephalaia Gnostika* and its reception up to the 9th century, found in other texts of Syriac mystics who developed and furthered the Evagrian heritage, such as Isaac of Niniveh, John of Apamea (on the proper ways to pray), Dadisho’ Qatraya (on the theme of silence) or John of Dalyatha and Joseph Hazzaya (on the state in which the mind is transposed during the process of prayer).

I will not dwell on the other chapters, equally interesting and enticing for the reader, since the scope of this review is too narrow for what these texts truly have to offer. As difficult as it was for the volume’s editors to identify, structure, introduce and select passages from these texts, it is equally difficult for the reviewer to do justice to these seemingly inexhaustible sources. It is, however, to be noted that, to the editors’ credit, the volume’s sections and chapters are easy to read, and the introductions are concise and offer recommendations for further reading.

All in all, who, then, can profit from this book? The volume will serve not only as an invitation, but also as an excellent platform for those who begin to map the history and doctrine of Syriac Christianity. Given the popularity the history of Syriac Christianity has enjoyed over the past decades in western scholarship, this anthology will attract many readers. I congratulate the editors for this promising work that will very likely be greatly appreciated for many decades to come. This volume is warmly recommended to every library that wants to keep history alive and help its

students understand the present and future of an often-forgotten Christianity, through an appeal to the past epitomized in the excellent sources that this book skilfully presents.

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