

Reseñas



Varghese, Baby, *The Early History of the Syriac Liturgy: Growth, Adaptation and Inculturation*. With English foreword from S. P. Brock and German foreword from M. Tamcke. «Göttinger Orientforschungen, Syriaca» 62. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021). 160 p. ISBN: 978–3–447–11746–3

In his book, V. presents an overview of Syriac liturgy and shows its origins and early history, as well as its development and adaptation in different cultural contexts. The book discusses texts, practices, and religious symbols from late antiquity until the late medieval period. V. demarcates the scope of the book in the preface: “This is an *essay* to trace some aspects of the encounter between the [*sic*] Syriac Christianity and its surrounding world” (13, emphasis original). He does therefore not claim to present a complete synopsis of Syriac liturgy during this time period – which would be a near impossible undertaking. At the same time, the book poses no thesis, but rather traces the general development of Syriac liturgy throughout history. The book consists of nine chapters in which V. discusses Syriac liturgy, more or less chronologically.

After the introductory chapter on the origins of Christianity in Edessa (15–20), V. treats the earliest textual witnesses of Syriac literature and hymnography, such as the *Odes of Solomon*, Manichaean psalms, the works of Bardasian and Mani, and the hymns in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas: The Hymn of the Bride*, the *Hymn of the Pearl*, and the *Song of Praise* in the second chapter. He argues that these early texts have characteristics that closely resemble the style and contents of later Syriac liturgical hymns such as those written by Ephrem. The third (50–64) and fourth (65–74) chapters consist of discussions of Ephrem the Syrian and Jacob of Serugh respectively. Especially the chapter on Ephrem is important because of the great impact he – as one of the earliest Syriac theologians – has had on Syriac Christianity and its hymnography. His so-called *madrashé* (“teaching songs,” 50) are among the earliest known hymns in this style. Chapters five through eight present how the Syriac liturgy was influenced and adapted in different contexts: Chapter five (75–102) discusses the origins and development of the Syriac Orthodox *fenqitho*, the Syriac liturgical books, in which V. shows that these books consisted of hymns from different – especially Greek – cultural backgrounds and of different styles (e.g., *bu’otho*, *qole*, and *quqlium*) as well as prayers, homilies, and *thurgome* (“discourses,” 93). Chapter six (103–110) discusses how the Syriac liturgy adapted elements from Mesopotamian culture. V. here mentions how earlier “pagan” rituals such as festivals were Christianized by Christian hymns instead of traditional non-Christian songs, and also briefly discusses the interaction of Syriac Christianity with early Islam. The seventh chapter (111–120) describes the East Syriac

Church (or “Persian Church,” 111): how it adopted the “western rite” in late Antiquity, and then became more pluralistic as it spread geographically, despite measures from patriarchs Isho‘yabh I and III who tried to standardize East Syriac liturgy. Chapter eight (121–140) presents the later development of the Syriac liturgy in central Asia and China. V. shows first how the Bible and other important texts were translated in local languages (e.g., Chinese, Persian, and Sogdian), and then discusses how these texts and liturgies were adapted and inculturated in these new contexts. He mentions the usage of local religious terminology in translations of Syriac Christian prayers, the adaptation of Christian festivals to fit already existing customs and rituals, and depictions of the cross incorporated in otherwise shamanistic art pieces and ritual objects. The book closes with a brief concluding chapter (141–144), in which V. summarizes the contents of the book.

More care could have gone into proofreading and the preparation of the manuscript before publication: V. sometimes writes “*the* Syriac Christianity” (e.g., 13, emphasis mine; cf. also e.g. 17, where V. speaks of “*the* Orthodox Christianity” and “*the* Edessan Christianity”) which can lead to misinterpretation because of the use of the definite article: it seems like he suggests that Syriac Christianity was a singular monolithic religion, while this certainly cannot be his conviction because he takes care to show the diversity of Syriac Christianity. Some sentences contain typing mistakes. Take for example the following sentence: “Perhaps *madrash*e were sung from a different manuscript, which ay [*sic*] has not come down to us from Turfan” (118). Furthermore, there does not seem to be a consistent system regarding brackets, as both rounded and squared brackets are used, seemingly interchangeable.

Overall, however, the book is successful in doing what V. points out in its preface: It is a general overview of the history of Syriac liturgy, and a good introduction into the theme and material for students and scholars alike who are looking for an outline of the long and complex history of the Syriac churches and their liturgies. At the same time, the work of V. makes clear that there are still many significant gaps in the research of Syriac literature, which shows opportunities for further research and in-depth studies on several topics, such as the interaction of Syriac Christianity and early Islam or the interaction between East and West Syriac liturgy.

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