

J. Edward Walters, ed., *Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 30 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012). Pp. xiii + 103; \$48.82.

**CHRISTINE SHEPARDSON, UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
(KNOXVILLE)**

Gorgias Press continues to make the field of Syriac studies more accessible to students and scholars of all levels, and Walters' translation of the "Hymns on the Unleavened Bread" by the fourth-century Syriac author Ephrem is no exception. This hymn cycle is of critical importance to scholars' understanding of the relationship in Ephrem's community between practices, places, and people that we sometimes too easily label simply "Christian" or "Jewish." The hymns demonstrate Ephrem's strong desire to draw a sharp distinction between the Jewish Passover and the Christian Pascha, and the superiority of the latter over the former, and hence of Christianity over Judaism and "the peoples" over "the [Jewish] people." The anti-Judaism of these hymns is couched in Ephrem's famously beautiful alliterative poetry, but the symbolism carries a weighty message about Jesus' fulfillment of earlier promises, his sacrifice's replacement of Levitical practices, and the blindness and potential violence of the Jews. Beyond a theological supersessionism, however, Ephrem's warning in Hymn 19, for example, that his audience flee and remove themselves from the dangers associated with the Jewish Passover, the synagogue, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread suggests that these hymns also attempt to clarify "correct" Christian praxis to an audience who did not yet share Ephrem's definition of Christian orthopraxy. Anyone interested in Christian-Jewish relations, Syriac Christianity, Ephrem, fourth-century Christian praxis, or ongoing accusations of Christian "Judaizing" will find these hymns to be a treasure-trove.

This publication consists of a brief introduction, followed by Walters' English translation of the hymns with Edmund Beck's 1964 critical edition of the Syriac (CSCO 248 / Syr. 108) on facing pages. Although Walters' work has many strengths, my enthusiasm for seeing this hymn cycle translated into English for the first time is tempered by some of the unfortunate weaknesses of the publication. The number of copy-editing errors in the seven-page introduction is surprising, ranging from a missing word in the first sentence (1) to the misspelling of Beck's translation and critical

edition that is the foundation of Walters' work (2, 3), to a spelling mistake in a direct quotation from another author (6). On page 2, a list of three items is enumerated with numerals, but on page 3, only the first of three "following reasons" is signaled with a numeral, leaving readers to distinguish on their own where the second and third reasons begin. Numerous footnotes throughout the book are missing their final period, and a brief excerpt from Hymn 4 in the book's introduction is riddled with errors and does not match the translation later in the book (4).

The introduction also raises some more substantive issues. Walters sometimes refers to the competing religious holidays as "the Jewish Passover" and "the Christian Passover" (3, 5), and other times as "the Jewish Passover" and "the Christian Pascha" (3, 4). While an argument could be made for reading these hymns in light of a tradition about a "Christian Passover," Walters does not offer such an argument or any other explanation for the changing English terminology, and in the absence of more discussion, readers may rightly expect to see some distinction between the terms to acknowledge that the Jewish and Christian holidays differed in their focus. Although Walters cites some of the relevant scholarship on Ephrem and these hymns, his introduction is very brief and skims over complex topics quickly, often without the nuance that scholars might wish.

Fortunately, the translation of the full hymn cycle is more carefully edited. Fr. Elie Joseph Bali's addition of West Syriac vocalization and Walters' more complete index of biblical references will make this version more user-friendly than Beck's earlier edition. Walters describes that he "attempted to strike a balance between the literal and the free translation" (7), and of course with Syriac poetry there is always a range of acceptable English translations. Many of Walters' translations follow the Syriac text well, and make these texts accessible to an English-speaking audience. It is not difficult, though, to find places where Walters' translation is looser than will be helpful for some scholars. He sometimes translates a perfect verb followed by the past tense of the verb "to be" simply as the perfect (e.g., Hymn 1.18, 3.6, 19.3) in cases that weaken Ephrem's sharp distinction between times, covenants, and appropriate behavior. He also frequently translates the demonstrative pronoun as a definite article (e.g., Hymn 3.15; 4.16–17; 19.16, 25) in instances when I would prefer the former, and he has made

different choices than I would make in translating many nouns in the construct state as part of adjectival rather than genitive phrases (e.g., Hymn 3.6–7, 10; 19.1, 9), so that his “paschal lamb” and “lamb of life” (Hymn 3.10–11) lose in English the parallel construction that they have in the Syriac. Nevertheless, casual readers will have little reason to object to these translation choices. The fact that the Syriac text occasionally places the first letter of “Satan” above rather than beside the second letter may raise a few eyebrows (Hymn 1.11, 13; 3.15, 16, 18; 4.2, 5, 9), but should not impede anyone’s reading of the text.

While it is easy to suggest some changes to the book, it is nevertheless invaluable to have this hymn cycle available. Walters’ quite readable English translation will make these important and interesting hymns accessible to a much wider audience; the vocalized text will aid those who are learning Syriac; and the facing Syriac text makes it possible for readers who know the language to check the translation as they go. This book is a significant contribution to the study of Syriac Christianity, Christianity in late antiquity, and the complex relations between those we call “Jews” and “Christians.” These hymns deserve a great deal more study than they have yet received, and it is my hope that Walters’ publication will make this possible.