Elena Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions*. Studia Traditionis Theologiae 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). Pp. xix + 357; €70.

J. Edward Walters, Princeton Theological Seminary

In the present volume, Elena Narinskaya offers a comparative study of exegetical and hermeneutical techniques found in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian with those of various Rabbinic texts. Although scholars have long noted similarities in the interpretive strategies of the Rabbis with those of early Syriac patristic authors, there have been remarkably few studies that have offered the kind of close textual analysis that the author undertakes in this work. In this regard, this book highlights an important and understudied area of research for both Syriac patristics and Rabbinic studies. Unfortunately, however, there are some significant problems with this work that detract from what could otherwise be an important scholarly contribution to the field.

Throughout the book, the author seeks to develop a two-pronged thesis about the fourth-century Syriac author, Ephrem the Syrian, and his relationship to Judaism. First, Narinskaya argues that some of Ephrem's writings—specifically his commentary on Exodus—include exegetical techniques and hermeneutical conclusions similar to those found in exegetical Rabbinic works, which leads the author to the conclusion that Ephrem was aware of these interpretive traditions and consciously incorporated them into his own writings. Based on this conclusion, Narinskaya then challenges prior scholarship on Ephrem that identifies him as 'anti-Semitic' or 'anti-Jewish'. This latter portion of the author's argument is based upon the presupposition that Ephrem would not 'borrow' interpretations from Jews if he were 'anti-Jewish'. The author states this presupposition explicitly: "If he was [sic] anti-Judaic, Ephrem would have to reject Judaism entirely along with its theology; instead Ephrem embraces Jewish concepts and methods. This makes Ephrem a pro-Judaic writer working within the framework of the Semitic mindset" (45). This statement reveals a crucial, yet unstated assumption that undergirds the whole argument: the author has completely re-defined the concept of being 'anti-Judaic' to the extent that virtually any patristic author traditionally regarded as 'anti-Judaic' could be considered 'pro-

Judaic' under these terms. In other words, for Narinskaya, 'anti-Judaism' is not defined by the negative things that an author says about Jews (and Ephrem certainly does not shy away from very negative rhetoric); rather, it is defined as an author being aware of Jewish exegetical traditions and rejecting them.

Likewise, Narinskaya also offers an odd account of *adversus Judaeos* rhetoric, which the author claims Ephrem employs as a "literary device, and not as his theological viewpoint" (46). This claim provides another example of the author 'proving' the argument by providing an idiosyncratic definition of an established concept. The reader must pause to ask how Ephrem's "theological viewpoint" can be separated from the rhetoric with which he expresses his theology. This argument about *adversus Judaeos* rhetoric also brings up the author's interaction with prior scholarship on this topic. First, the author engages the work of Christine Shepardson, the only other recent scholar to have treated the topic of Ephrem's anti-Judaism extensively. Yet Narinskaya only relies on two of Shepardson's articles, published in 2001 and 2002, but not her monograph on the topic, which was published in 2008, despite the present work having been published in 2010. This could merely be the result of a long publication process, but it is unfortunate that Shepardson's more in-depth argument is missing. However, the larger problem is that the author rejects Shepardson's argument simply because the author disagrees with the concept of anti-Judaism that provides the foundation of Shepardson's work: that anti-Jewish rhetoric is a crucial feature of Ephrem's task of Christian identity formation. According to Narinskaya, Ephrem's "main goal was not to mock Jews, but to alarm Christians into a greater self-awareness to strengthen their unique identity" (46). What the author fails to mention, however, is that Ephrem's primary method for forming this "unique identity" was using Jews as a negative example for what *not* to do. Moreover, although the author engages the topic of anti-Judaism and Christian identity, Miriam Taylor's monograph on the topic[1]—perhaps the single most important work on this very subject—is apparently unknown to the author, as it appears neither in the footnotes of the book nor in the bibliography. In the opinion of the present reviewer, this is a

[1] Miriam S. Taylor, *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity: A Critique of the Scholarly Consensus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

grave omission, as it is clear that the author's concept of "anti-Judaism" fails to take into account the rhetoric of self-definition as the primary vehicle for anti-Judaism among early Christian authors.

To offer one final critique, the author also offers a comparison of Ephrem's exegetical techniques with those of his near contemporary Theodoret of Cyrus which is supposed to show how Ephrem's 'pro-Judaic' standpoint emerges in contrast with a near contemporary author from a similar tradition. However, the data presented in this chapter does not succeed at proving this point. Throughout chapter 3, the author provides summaries—not the actual texts for comparisons, just summaries—of both Ephrem and Theodoret's exegetical treatments of various passages from Exodus. Then, following these comparisons, the author provides conclusions like "Ephrem relies heavily on the Jewish tradition of Bible exegesis, while Theodoret is indifferent to it" (104). There are multiple problems with both the concept and the execution of this comparison. First, the substitution of the actual texts for the author's summaries of those texts does not allow the reader to see how the author arrived at those conclusions—the reader must take the author's word for it. Thus, for an argument constructed upon the concept of close textual analysis, the reader is reliant upon a secondary interpretation of primary materials. Moreover, the author's arguments rely on unfounded assumptions about Ephrem's motivations for his exegetical techniques, which the author then interprets as his 'positive' use of Jewish tradition. For example, in the illustration of Exod 19:5-6, the author claims that Ephrem "changes the reading of the Peshitta," (103) and bases the entire argument for this illustration on this change, without ever acknowledging the problem of assuming a stable Peshitta text in the fourth century. The author also constructs interpretive distinctions between the two authors that are then used as 'proof' into the pro-/anti-Jewish difference, such as the claim that Theodoret "sees typology of Christ in Moses," while Ephrem "sees Christian symbolism in Moses, but does not restrict his exegesis to it" (103). This is, simply put, a false dichotomy that does not say anything about the different traditions that stand behind the two authors' exegesis or their opinion of Judaism.

The heart of the author's comparative work between Ephrem and the Rabbis appears in chapters 4-6, and the arguments and textual comparisons in these chapters are much stronger than those

of the previous three chapters. The author correctly focuses on "interpretive themes" that appear in the exegetical writings of Ephrem and the Rabbis rather than trying to construct an argument on verbal correspondence alone. And there are very helpful textual comparisons in this chapter that show the development of hermeneutical traditions in Aramaic and Syriac. However, even here the author's conclusions are frequently too vague and broad (such as: "there is a strong likelihood that Ephrem may be perceived as an inheritor of the Jewish tradition of exegesis" [175]). Moreover, the author sets aside differences between Ephrem and the Rabbis by claiming that Ephrem "deliberately ignores" (176) Jewish exegetical tradition when it suits him. However, it is just as likely that Ephrem was simply unaware of the interpretive traditions he supposedly ignores. Indeed, Ephrem may have been relying on interpretive traditions he inherited *from other Christians*, which could also explain some of these supposedly deliberate omissions. Likewise, the author goes to great lengths to explain why Ephrem uses the number seventy in his commentary on Exod 1:5 in accordance with the Masoretic text rather than seventy-five like the Septuagint. The Peshitta follows the Masoretic text and also reads "seventy," but the author argues that Ephrem consciously "chooses" the Masoretic reading over the Septuagint reading because of his reliance on Jewish tradition. Again, this claim simply cannot be substantiated, and it appears that the author's own presuppositions about Ephrem have caused an over-interpretation of a very simple observation: Ephrem uses "seventy" in his commentary because that is the reading of his text of Exodus.

There are other, smaller problems with this book as well, such as a few typos throughout and a few lines of completely illegible Greek text (197), but these problems are truly minor in comparison with those outlined above. As stated at the outset of this review, Narinskaya has ventured into an important and interesting scholarly question. However, the significant problems in both concept and execution throughout this work render it ultimately unsuccessful in its aims. Scholars who work primarily with Ephrem, Rabbinic texts, and early Jewish/Christian hermeneutics will find some engaging material here, but they will also find many problematic arguments and conclusions.