Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Song and Memory: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010). Pp. 92; $15.

UTE POSSEKEL, GORDON COLLEGE

This volume contains the published version of the 2010 Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, in which the author explores the function within early Syriac Christianity of female choirs and of liturgical poetry featuring female biblical characters. The first section sets the stage, introducing the reader to the various ways in which early Syriac authors reflected on and highlighted biblical women. It also notes at the outset the unique contributions of the Syriac tradition. First, compared with Latin and Greek Christianity, Syriac-speaking Christians gave greater attention to biblical women and usually portrayed them in positive ways. Second, Syriac authors availed themselves of genres, such as dialogue poems, that allowed them to give lively, imagined voices to the female biblical characters. Third, the choirs of women that featured prominently—and still do—in Syriac liturgies, gave "gendered voices" to these biblical women, thereby edifying and instructing the congregation.

The second section of this volume sketches in broad strokes the late antique historical context of the Syriac liturgy. In an environment of rival religious claims and of civic entertainments competing with ecclesiastical meetings, the church's liturgy had to be engaging to the audience. The author paints a vivid picture of how the various ritual components of the liturgy, and their proponents (clergy, choirs, congregation), interacted. Consideration of the liturgical context in which the female choirs were active, and in which the stories of biblical women were told and re-told, is essential, Harvey argues, for it "enhanced the meaning and heightened the importance of every word performed" (25).

The third chapter explores in more detail the main genres of Syriac poetry in which biblical women feature prominently (*madrasha*, *sogita*, and *memra*) and the liturgical setting in which they were performed. Harvey emphasizes the role played by women's choirs in the Syriac tradition. Whereas the female choirs (consisting mostly of nuns) in the Greek and Latin Christian world played a more marginal role, in the Syriac churches women's choirs performed regularly in the liturgies of town and village churches,

and church leaders and ecclesiastical canons regularly stressed their importance. By intoning *madrashe*, doctrinal teaching hymns, women in the Syriac churches were granted a kind of teaching role.

In the fourth and longest section, entitled "Teaching Bible with Women's Voice," the author gives illustrative examples of how biblical women featured in Syriac liturgical poetry, drawing on the *madrashe* of Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug's *memre*, and anonymous *sogyata*. Harvey stresses that the way in which the (usually male) authors cast biblical women in powerful roles does not reflect the social perception of women, but rather serves "the moral edification of the civic community" (45); nevertheless her careful analysis of the texts allows us occasional glimpses into the social reality. As choirs of consecrated virgins sing the words given to Mary in Ephrem's *Nativity Hymns*, it becomes clear how Ephrem's defense of Mary's virginity has implications for the choirs of virgins themselves, whose relatively novel status of consecrated celibacy was not, by the mid-fourth-century, universally appreciated. Harvey then turns to Jacob of Sarug's presentations of Mary, who in his writings becomes a formidable disputant in dialogues with the Angel Gabriel or Joseph. Perhaps the most intriguing section is that on lamenting women. Although in Syriac literature only one lament of Mary is known, lament nevertheless was an important component of liturgical poetry. It served a parenetic role, guiding the audience from mourning to penitence (68). Several examples illustrate the dynamics of lament in Syriac poetry. In Jacob of Sarug's *memre*, Eve grieves not only for Abel, but for both of her sons, thereby articulating an experience of sadness and sorrow which would have resonated which many church members. Other instances of lamenting women include Joseph's sister, Dinah, and Abraham's wife, Sarah, who often appears as the truly faithful heroine in Syriac hymns and homilies on Genesis 22. In the final section, Harvey outlines how biblical women in Syriac liturgical poetry often carried titles such as the Barren Woman, the Humiliated Woman, or the Lamenting Woman, representing various types intended to "instruct the congregation in multiple ways" (87). Ultimately, Harvey argues, these biblical women and the female choirs who sang their stories and intoned their imagined words constituted "a continual enactment of the work of salvation for humankind" (92).

Despite one or two minor editorial oversights, this slim volume has much to recommend it: beautifully written and accessible to the non-specialist, it draws on the author's long scholarly study of the subject to illuminate some of the manifold ways in which biblical women functioned in Syriac liturgical poetry. Harvey masterfully situates the Syriac tradition within the larger Mediterranean context, noting both shared traditions and the unique contribution of Syriac poets to early Christian discourse. At times such a shared heritage is merely stated rather than documented, as for example when we read about Syriac presentation of biblical figures: "Plotlines as well as character types followed similar patterns that appeared in Greek and Roman novels, the Christian apocryphal acts, and Jewish and Christian extracanonical narratives, in addition to mimes and pantomimes performed in late antique theaters" (43). Moreover, it is not always clear exactly how the repeatedly emphasized moral impetus of the biblical women is to be understood. But surely, these omissions are due to the brevity required for this publication, and they make the reader eagerly anticipate Harvey's forthcoming monograph on the subject (7).