Robin Darling Young and Monica J. Blanchard, eds., *To Train His Soul in Books: Syriac Asceticism in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011). Pp. xix + 217; $34.95.

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The eclectic contents of this volume, offered in appreciation and thanks for the work and writing of Sidney H. Griffith, match the breadth of topic and technique of the recipient's own work. The nine page introduction by Robin Darling Young, with which the volume opens, recounts in brief the life of Sidney Griffith and makes the Bibliography with which the book concludes easier to understand and appreciate. The resurgence in Syriac and Oriental Christian Studies that has taken place in the last 50 years has been made possible by the work of a few important and prolific scholars located at central points in the academic web. Sidney Griffith has certainly been one of these in the areas of Syriac and Christian Arabic Studies and a volume like this makes a fitting tribute as well as a spur to more labor by his friends, students and admirers.

Joseph Amar begins the process by offering an appropriately beautiful and evocative set of poetic responses to the Psalms for "the feast of the Announcement to the Bearer of God, Mary, which is the second of the Sundays of the Season of the Announcement, the West-Syriac equivalent of Advent" (5). These lines, which have, as Amar says, followed the "characteristic feature of Syriac strophic compositions to overwhelm, and in some cases to displace, the biblical passages and related texts they were intended to accompany" (6), now stand alone as an extended meditation on this pivotal gospel scene.

Francisco Javier Martínez begins his article by recalling how, while he was in Jerusalem, he learned of Sydney Griffith through Kathleen E. McVey. He describes his time with Griffith at the Catholic University of America as among the greatest gifts the Lord has done for him in his life. After thanking Fr. Griffith for introducing him to St. Ephrem, he takes up Ephrem's hymns *De Virginitate* I–III and reviews the manuscripts and editions in which they appear and then describes their strophic structure. Often these hymns have not been understood within their historical context, a problem, Martínez notes, that Griffith has addressed. Martínez

then summarizes Griffith's research on this question. These hymns witness to Ephrem's concern that the churches of Nisibis and Edessa should be in communion with the wider church, what Martínez calls the "Iglesia del imperio." (32) Ephrem wanted to correct Gnostic and encratic notions of marriage with the idea that virginity is a divine gift. Martínez compares Ephrem's notion of virginity with Aphrahat's and suggests that these hymns may have been some of Ephrem's earliest writings. According to Ephrem, virginity is not a "withdrawal to the desert" or an adherence to a particular rule, as if these could guarantee one's "virginity" (34). For Ephrem, the life of a virgin should be a reflection and image of the Lord. Martínez then provides a Spanish translation of *De Virginitate* I–III with detailed and explanatory notes. (I am grateful to Craig Morrison, O.Carm., of the Pontifical Biblical Institute for reading Martínez's Spanish article for me and offering this report.)

Gary Anderson examines the words of the prophet Daniel to King Nebuchadnezzar at Daniel 4:24: "Redeem your sins through almsgiving and your faults through generosity toward the poor." Noting that this has been a bone of contention between Catholic and Protestant exegetes over the years, Anderson examines the verse in light of parallels in Proverbs and the Psalter. The change in "the metaphor of sin as burden…to that of sin as debt" (61) takes place around the close of the First Temple period, Anderson suggests, which makes this way of speaking seem more expected. Pointing out that Syriac-speaking Christianity mirrors this usage and that it finds its way into the Lord's Prayer and some parables of Jesus that describe sinners as debtors, Anderson argues that this is evidence of its roots in "Aramaic idiom" (61, note 9) rather than any characteristic of Judaism, as such.

Alexander Golitzin argues for a monastic milieu, influenced by Evagrius of Pontus, as the likely *locus* for the *Syriac Apocalypse of Daniel*. The yearning of the monastic for the world to come and the fact that "the nature of the monk's calling is less simply to stand in attendance of the eschaton than it is…to seek to embody it" (94) place the *Apocalypse* within the self-understanding of the monastery, he suggests. The fact that it is found in a volume more than two thirds taken up by the works of John of Dalyatha gives Golitzin further confidence that he has found the best explanation for the repeated discussion of the attainment of heavenly things while still in the body. Such passages seem to turn the focus of the work

toward addressing those engaged in living in the world we know rather than those looking toward the world to come.

Michael Hollerich considers the Syriac *Life of Athanasius* that survives in four complete or partial copies. Noting that it is of little value for our knowledge of Athanasius' life, he suggests that examining it may lead us to understand better "the reputation and influence of Athanasius in the Syrian Orient" (100). Pointing out that the work draws mainly on the histories of Socrates and Theodoret, both of which we still have partially in Syriac, Hollerich suggests that Syriac is the most likely language of composition. The interest in fortitude in persecution seems to shed light on the interests of the author and of the purpose of the work. He compares both Byzantine hagiographies and Barḥadbešabba's *History* to the *Syriac Life* and discovers them to be parallel to it in various ways. Hollerich ends with a suggestion of a lesson for the Christians of our own, divided, days: The Syriac *Life of Athanasius* "is thus seen to be embedded in a larger tradition of Athanasian biography, which was fertile and versatile enough to cross linguistic, geographical and confessional lines, being found in Byzantine, Monophysite (Severus of Antioch), and Nestorian (Barḥadbešabba) sources. The tradition's broad and diversified attestation may serve as a reminder of those deeper unities which, despite confessional strife, still linked the separated Christian churches of the Middle East" (121).

Sebastian Brock considers the ascetic term *msarrqûtâ*, especially as found in the *Liber Graduum*, John of Apamea, Philoxenus, and Isaac of Nineveh. The generality of the term allowed it to be used in a "two-stage model" in a commentary on the *Asceticon* of Abba Isaiah, encompassing both *msarrqûtâ* "from possessions, and from evil thoughts" as well as a three-stage model in Dadisho Qatraya as *msarrqûtâ* "from possessions," "from the senses" and "from the passions" (130). Brock ends by pointing out that the use of the same verbal root to translate Philippians 2:7, the famous "he emptied himself" phrase, made all these kinds of renunciations explicitly imitations of Christ by those who undertook them. The added power these practices would gain by the connection is quite clear.

Susan Ashbrook Harvey considers images of housekeeping as metaphors for spiritual practice, especially due to a shift during the fourth century, in some circles at least, "away from a rhetoric

concerned with the cultic conditions of purity and pollution, and a turn instead towards a stress on moral psychology through the ordering (cleaning) of the passions" (135). This mode of expression allowed writers to stress the unending and laborious nature of the ascetical project. She reports: "Most often, I have found housekeeping to be part of a complex of images that serves to strengthen commitment to the continual discipline of ascetic practice." (152) Even more than maintenance cleaning, the image could describe "a thorough, harsh cleaning" that would have "scrubbed the ascetic back to a fit and proper dwelling for divine habitation" (152). The description by Jacob of Sarug of Mary preparing herself to carry the Savior in her womb is a pointed and powerful example of this strain of expression.

Robin Darling Young examines the influence of Evagrius of Pontus on Philoxenus of Mabbug, especially with regard to his treatment of the monastic life as the imitation of Christ. She emphasizes that Evagrius includes both interior and exterior aspects of religious life. Also, the fact that teaching took place in the monastic community kept this endeavor from becoming a purely individualistic project. Indeed, the question of who was fit to offer instruction as a *gnostikos* illuminates this corporate aspect since the teacher served as "a sign of Christ himself by becoming his living image" (163). Philoxenus holds out as the goal of his teaching about ascetical practice the attainment of a state in which "Christ is said to be in [the Christian], and he is said to be in Christ" (166). So, while the ascetic may begin with the exterior level, he hopes to end with his attention on the interior. She ends by discussing Philoxenus' *Letter to Patricius* as a way to consider how he would try to rein in a monastic who seemed in danger of going off the rails of orthodox thought and practice and concludes with the fact that Philoxenus was able to combine a Cyrillian sense of a "taking on of Christ's own nature" (175) and imitating His own development as portrayed in the Gospels with the more interior Evagrian approach to the acquisition of holiness, though he was careful to redirect it toward following "the law of Christ" (173) rather than a too free dependence on grace. Serious spirituality was willing to seek enlightenment from wherever it might be found.

Monica Blanchard discusses six discourses of Beh Isho' Kamulaya, whom Blanchard suggests might be Abba Bishoi, "one of the legendary founders of the Egyptian Wadi Natrun" (198) or

be connected to the village "Mar Bishu…some 40 km. due west of Urmia, and due east of the site of the Old Monastery of Kamul" (179). These treatises survive in a manuscript from "between the late ninth and early twelfth centuries" (177) at Catholic University and in a modern copy (completed November 20, 1900) in the library of the Church of the East in Trichur, Kerala, India. There may also be some of this material in modern codices copied near Urmia in northern Iran. Blanchard provides eight pages of translated selections from this manuscript. The selection from the Fifth Discourse, with its provocative comments on the relationship between the Trinity and the incarnate Son, was particularly intriguing. I hope that Blanchard will publish an edition with translation so we may all see this new entry into the all too thin catalogue of surviving Syriac Christian works.

The volume ends with a *soġītā*, "Ode to Joy," that was written by Shawqi Talia in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Alkosh, north of Mosul in Iraq. The poem was first read publicly at the closing banquet at the Fourth North American Syriac Symposium in Princeton in July 2003 on the occasion of the recognition of Sidney Griffith's 65th birthday. In this volume, we have the full Neo-Aramaic text with an English translation. The 31st couplet seems a fitting conclusion to this review:

> "Your virtuous work is a grace, for us you are righteousness shining,
> May the Holy Spirit guard you, hour unto hour, and upon you the promised land be granting." (201)

This volume, in its quality and breadth, is a fitting gift for its recipient, which is high praise, indeed.