

Paul S. Stevenson, *Stanzaic Syntax in the Madrashe of Ephrem the Syrian*, Monographs of the Peshitta Institute 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Pp. xv + 260; €99.

J. EDWARD WALTERS, ROCHESTER COLLEGE

Anyone who has taken up the task of translating the poetic writings of Ephrem the Syrian is all too familiar with the difficulty of disentangling the rhetorical and grammatical webs that he weaves from word to word, line to line, and stanza to stanza. Beyond the difficulty of translating the elegance and brilliance of Ephrem's wordplays, translators face numerous challenges on the micro level, from linking antecedents to proforms to representing thought and sentence breaks with punctuation. It is precisely these latter, micro-level challenges that Paul Stevenson addresses in this monograph. Through detailed grammatical and rhetorical analysis, Stevenson elucidates linguistic strategies that Ephrem employs in his *madrashe*, providing, in a way, a cipher that may help translators unlock the mysteries of Ephrem's intricate poetic style.

The bulk of Stevenson's book (Chapters 2–3) is an in-depth analysis of two hymns: *madrashe* V and VI from the *Hymns on Paradise* cycle. Stevenson breaks down each hymn stanza by stanza, and then further dissects each stanza by demonstrating the various grammatical techniques that Ephrem employs. The purpose of such a close examination is, as Stevenson states in the Introduction, “to understand something of the linguistic inner workings of Ephrem's most beloved poetic compositions, his *madrašē*” (22). That is, Stevenson's goal is not merely a detailed description of grammatical and syntactical features that Ephrem uses, but rather the discovery of Ephrem's method of composition through such description. Stevenson premises this study upon the assertion that through a careful and comprehensive examination of grammatical features in Ephrem's *madrashe*, “it is possible to begin to understand the nature of the varied tools Ephrem used as he composed” (22). Indeed, based on his analysis of *madrashe* V and VI, Stevenson goes so far as to conclude that Ephrem “consciously used a set of syntactic patterns or templates as the framework for his verses” (192). Thus, this study, while narrow in focus, is ambitious in its aim.

In the introductory chapter, Stevenson briefly surveys both ancient literature that reflects on the composition of Syriac poetry and modern studies of Semitic poetry more broadly. Following this

brief survey, Stevenson discusses his primary method of analysis: discourse perspective. In Stevenson's methodology, the application of discourse perspective/analysis provides the framework for analyzing individual stanzas as text units and for breaking those stanzas down into smaller and smaller grammatical and syntactical units which—Stevenson argues—Ephrem has arranged with great care.

Throughout Chapters 2 and 3, Stevenson applies his methodology with painstaking attention to detail. For each stanza, Stevenson provides: the Syriac text (with eastern pointing), an intentionally "wooden" translation (i.e., aiming for replicating the word order and grammar, not for smooth reading), a visual representation of the "map" of syntactical and grammatical features employed in the stanza (employing a series of symbols that Stevenson explains in Chapter 1), and then a detailed analysis of each section of the stanza (a "section" represents a distinct syntactical element that links a series of words, not complete thoughts or sentences). Frequently these detailed analyses also involve intricate layouts of the Syriac text intended to help the reader visualize particular syntactical features (p. 58 for example). Then, in the fourth and final chapter, Stevenson collects and analyzes this grammatical data from *madrashe* V and VI and analyzes the relative frequency with which Ephrem employs various grammatical and syntactical features. The volume also includes three helpful appendices: a catalog of syntactic devices and two concordances of Syriac words, one for Chapter 2 (*madrashe* V) and one for Chapter 3 (*madrashe* VI).

On the whole, Stevenson's analysis of these Paradise *madrashe* is engaging and informative. Stevenson writes clearly, and he is able to explain relatively difficult grammatical concepts in an accessible manner. The creative use of various visual tools to illustrate the points that Stevenson wishes to make is particularly helpful. Both he and the publisher (Brill) should be commended for what was—in all likelihood—a difficult typesetting job. These visual aids significantly improve the quality of the work because the reader does not constantly have to refer back to the Syriac text to understand Stevenson's complex arguments. The primary audience for this work is likely to be Syriac philologists (or comparative Semitic philologists more broadly). Indeed, Stevenson's careful analysis has much to offer with respect to identifying and labeling syntactical

features and characterizing the relationships between them. In particular, Syriac linguists may be interested in Stevenson's discussion of close-knit verbs (51–52) and his treatment of the hypotactic function of the *dalath* prefix (149–151).

Beyond philologists, the next most likely audience for this work is those who are not linguists by training, but rather historians or theologians interested in reading and translating Ephrem. Stevenson's treatment has much to offer to this audience, though the fruits of his research may not be as accessible to this audience, given the highly technical nature of Stevenson's arguments. For example, Stevenson provides an intentionally wooden translation to accompany his analysis, but there is rarely an explicit discussion of how the grammatical features under examination should affect the task of translation. Indeed, the volume would be significantly more practical if Stevenson had included his own fluid, polished translations of *madrashē* V and VI that demonstrate the ways that his analysis affects translation technique. In his discussion of *madrashā* VI.14, section 2 (pp. 149–151), Stevenson compares the translations of Sebastian Brock, Edmund Beck, René Lavenant, and Andrew Palmer to provide a concrete example of how a particular syntactic element should appear in modern translations. More examples of this nature would have increased the accessibility of Stevenson's work for a broader audience.

As a final note, although I think Stevenson's analysis of these *madrashē* is exemplary, I am hesitant about the overarching thesis that we can use micro-analysis of Ephrem's hymns to postulate a macro-theory about the composition of these hymns. More specifically, I remain skeptical that an analysis of two hymns can be used as proof that Ephrem used "syntactic patterns or templates." And, somewhat oddly, despite stating this thesis explicitly at the beginning of the concluding chapter, it appears that Stevenson backs away from this conclusion at the end of the same chapter: "While I am sure [Ephrem] paused from time to time as he wrote, to consider a turn of phrase or the *mot juste* for a particular concept or construction, on the whole it seems clear that the words generally just flowed from his pen." It seems difficult to reconcile the two pictures of Ephrem presented here, the one who employs templates with the one whose brilliance flows naturally. More importantly, though, a sample size of two *madrashē* is difficult to

accept as the basis for the conclusion that Ephrem consciously employed patterns or templates.

Despite the two drawbacks I have noted above, Stevenson's work in this volume is enriching and engaging. There is much to commend here for both Semitic philologists and readers of Ephrem. Stevenson has provided a significant contribution to the study of the grammar and linguistic art of Syriac poetry, which remains a woefully understudied topic despite the richness of the available material. I share Stevenson's hope that this study "will provide a new path for understanding and appreciating [Ephrem's] skill as a composer of verses" (221), and I hope that all future translations of Ephrem will be improved through engagement with Stevenson's work.