Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom, A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, revised edition, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2004, Pp. xvi + 395. Paperback, $60.00

REVIEWED BY ROBERT A. KITCHEN, KNOX-METROPOLITAN UNITED CHURCH

[1] Many of us grew up with this book in its first incarnation, and are indebted to the way Fr. Robert Murray has shaped our thinking and constructed our categories about things Syriac. For many a topic in Syriac patristics, one needed to go back to *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* in order to see what Murray had thought.

[2] A lot has happened and changed in the 30 years since the Cambridge University Press first edition, and Murray takes pains to note the progress. The body of the text remains largely intact, while the introduction is where Murray's and Syriac scholarship's development is reflected. New bibliographical references since 1975 abound, being marked by #.

[3] This being the first book on Syriac patristics that I read in the mid-1970's, I approached reading it again "as if for the first time." That did not turn out to be such an easy task, for just as when one rereads a classic of world literature, like *Don Quixote or Moby Dick*, it is revealing and humbling to see how little you then knew and how little you remember.

[4] Murray amends the original paragraph of his "Introduction" by noting that Syriac scholarship has advanced greatly since 1974, yet there are still miles to go. The scope of the book remains the Syriac literature and historical developments prior to the fifth-century schism, focusing primarily upon the works and imagery of Aphrahat and Ephrem. Above all, the environment in which Murray does his investigations is the Biblical imagery and exposition of the Syriac tradition.

[5] Numerous scholars have essayed short introductions to the history, culture, and literature of the Syriac-speaking church, and Murray's contribution retains its position as one of the most lucid, as well as most comprehensive. One area he recognizes needing revision is the problematic origins of Christianity in Syriac-speaking areas. Whether Edessa is "the main cradle of Christianity in the whole Syriac language area" remains the first question. Murray has rewritten this section, noting the subsequent contributions of Sebastian Brock, Hans Drijvers, J. B. Segal, and Michael Weitzman.

[6] In his first edition, Murray had adopted the hypothesis that Adiabene was the first cradle. However, the lack of any extant Christian Syriac other than Edessene, as well the force of Weitzman's conclusions on the origins and the development of research on the Syriac Old Testament have led Murray back to Edessa.

[7] Adiabene was favoured in some circles because of the witness of the disputed *Chronicle of Arbela*. Summarizing the back and forth debate, especially J. Assfalg's and J. M. Fiey's rejections of its authenticity, Murray is generally convinced by P. Kawerau's new edition and verification of the text.

[8] Murray recognizes significant adjustments must also be made with regards to the status of the Syriac Old Testament, now escorted into a new era by the Leiden Peshitta Institute. Turning away from the so-called "targumic" theories regarding the provenance of the Peshitta, Murray asserts the influence of Michael Weitzman's work. Weitzman believes that Jews initially translated the Syriac Old Testament for Jews, in which the translation reflects a gradual moving away from cultic and ritualistic emphases to those grounded in prayer, faith and charity. This move perhaps opened the door towards Christianity. Weitzman believes that the argument for Edessa as the place of origin is stronger than for any other locale. Nevertheless, the possibility of a "double origin" is still there; but for the time being, Edessa is the place to start.

[9] The study of encratism and other forms of sexual asceticism has not remained static since the first edition. Murray amends slightly his perspective on the forerunners of Syriac asceticism: Bardaisan, Quq and Tatian. Likewise, his treatment of the *bnay qyāmā* ("sons of the covenant") benefits from further research, including his own, into this important, but enigmatic ascetical institution.

[10] Murray turns to the previous debate regarding the liturgical elements surviving in Aphrahat's seventh demonstration. Aphrahat's baptismal ceremony is "a call to holy war," leading to focus on the senses and functions of the *Qyāmā* and the *īḥīdāyē* ("solitary ones"). He finds support in the recently edited Cambridge Genizah targum fragment that interprets Joshua's second circumcision in a similar fashion to Aphrahat.

[11] The early relationship between Judaism and the Church in the Syriac regions is rehearsed. Anti-Judaism polemics in Aphrahat and

Ephrem derive from concerns about Christians reverting back to Judaism. This leads back to the place of the Bible, particularly the composition of the Syriac Bible, the Peshitta, and then the Diatessaron as the Bible of his primary authors.

[12] The increase in the study of Syriac liturgy likewise is such that Murray can do little more than summarize. Key to the discussion are the multivalent uses of the word *rāzā* ("mystery"), which is Murray's title word, also rendered "symbols."

[13] The important role of the various Christian schools is reviewed: first Nisibis, then Edessa, and finally back to Nisibis. The hierarchy and life of these schools, Murray observes, were not far removed from the structures and patterns of contemporary Jewish academies.

[14] The third section of the introduction, "The Literature and the Writers," is limited to the works and authors Murray will treat in the main part of his book. Still, that gives the reader an excellent overview on the important literary works of the early classical period.

[15] Murray begins with a fuller perspective on the *Odes of Solomon*, informed now by the critical edition of M. Latke, the French translation of M.-J. Pierre, and numerous new studies on the *Odes*, their nature and their provenance. He is now willing to concede a bilingual (Syriac/Greek) origin in the Syro-Palestinian region, but is sticking by the conclusion that the *Odes* are not gnostic, and may be an early Christian wisdom collection.

[16] Murray has rewritten his introduction to Ephrem, adjusting and amending subtly his prior observations. In particular, he offers kudos to Sebastian Brock's monograph, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, MI, 1985), for its contributions to Ephrem's use of *rāzā*/symbols in his theological method, Ephrem's "spiritual world vision." Murray too has added a significant article—"The Theory of Symbolism in Saint Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6-7 (1975-76). Murray has not withdrawn his earlier praise of Ephrem as the greatest poet of the patristic age, even standing alongside Dante as a theologian-poet.

[17] Murray recognizes that some works, while not written by their ascribed author, nevertheless contribute important language and symbolism to his project. His focus is not upon an author, but the milieu and the period, i.e., the *Mēmrē on the Blessing of the Table*, and

the anti-Marcionite *Explanation of the Gospel*. Other authors and works are noted—Cyrillona, Marutha of Maipherqat, the *History of Nicaea*, and the *Liber Graduum* (The Book of Steps). Murray's comments on the latter text remain a seminal analysis of the importance, place, and spirit of the enigmatic text.

[18] The book is divided into three units: (1) the introduction to the Syriac Church and the literature focused upon in this study; (2) seven chapters describing in detail the recurrent symbolic and typological themes found in the Biblical interpretation and imagery of Aphrahat, Ephrem and other authors and texts; (3) a long concluding essay, "In Search of the Sources" (Part II), that traces the traditions and roots of the Syriac exegesis and imagery he has described.

[19] The second and third units are largely unchanged from the first edition, although Murray appends to each chapter and to Part II additional notes that are primarily supplemental bibliography.

[20] Murray treats each theme in a narrative style imitative of much of Syriac exegesis itself. He describes the theme, then weaves citations and discussions of the principal and other relevant authors throughout the chapter. The discussion is not linear as much as it is circular, going around and around, witnessing to the variety of ways the topic is approached. There is a dizzying amount of material to be absorbed, but one of Murray's best tools is his set of three tables in the Appendices on "Testimonia that the Gentiles have Replaced the 'Nation'," "Christ the Stone or Rock," and "Titles of Christ" (pp. 350-363).

[21] One almost takes for granted the graceful efficiency of Murray's innumerable translations of Aphrahat, Ephrem, and so many others, rendering vividly the poetry of these types and symbols. Following is a summary of the central chapters surveying these wide ranging types and symbols.

[22] Chapter 1, "The Nation and the Nations," follows the typological employment of the Church (the Nations) becoming the successor and replacement of Israel (the Nation) in salvation history. Aphrahat and Ephrem are the primary writers, with Isaac of Antioch contributing several important passages. Murray finds it regretful that Ephrem expresses open enmity towards the Jews, though Aphrahat still understands himself in dialogue with the synagogue.

[23] Chapter 2, "The Body of Christ," switches to the symbolic appropriation of the human body of Jesus to express the development of the Church. Searching for a sense of a "corporate personality" uniting the Church, Murray is disappointed that Aphrahat and Ephrem never seem to perceive such a self-awareness. The paucity of discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church is of concern as well. The typology of Christ as the Second Adam is the most striking, found primarily in Ephrem's *Commentary on the Diatessaron.*

[24] Chapter 3, "The Vineyard, the Grape and the Tree of Life." Linking the symbolism of Christ as the Vine of John 15 with Isaiah's vineyard imagery, early Syriac authors played heavily, yet ambivalently on words. Especially was this the case with the Diatessaronic choice of *karmā*, "vineyard," that enabled our primary authors and Cyrillona to demonstrate both the rejection of Israel, as well as the continuity of the Church through Christ, the grape in the cluster.

[25] Chapter 4, "The Church, Bride and Mother," draws together familiar themes at play throughout Biblical and patristic literature, that is, the Church as the Bride of Christ, the Bridegroom, and images extending from it. Feminine typology is very evident in Syriac literature, as witnessed in Ephrem's depiction of Mary as the Second Eve, the fusing of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene as proclaimers of the resurrection, and the Church as Mother in Aphrahat and especially in the *Liber Graduum.* A personal typology is attached to the bishop as the spouse or bridegroom of the Church in the stead of Christ.

[26] Again, there are things that Murray does not see adequately represented in these symbols. Despite the emphasis upon feminine roles, a full understanding of marriage is not really there, though Murray allows for the reticence towards the institution in a church so invested in sexual asceticism.

[27] Chapter 5, "Titles Shared by Christ and other Apostles or Bishops." Of the titles of Christ there is seemingly no end. Murray's 10-page table lists over 130 titles and names, utilizing *The Acts of Judas Thomas* as the base for the list. Reiterating that his intention is to correlate the names and titles of Christ to the function of the Church, Murray places many other examples aside for another study. Befitting such a large field of examples, Murray offers the broadest and most in depth survey of the book. Ephrem,

Aphrahat, Cyrillona, Marutha, the Macarian Homilies only begin the census.

[28] Searching for a cohesive Syriac ecclesiology amidst all the names is an elusive quest, for these are employed largely in devotional and liturgical modes, rather than theological. Moreover, Murray keeps pointing out that the multiplication of these names almost certainly owes its legacy to Babylonian, even Sumerian, traditions, as well as Jewish midrashic sources.

[29] Chapter 6, "The Rock and the House on the Rock." As with the singularity of *karmā* in Chapter 3, here *kēphā*, "rock," is the Syriac word that ties together the Church, Christ and the Apostles. Syriac authors did not limit themselves to Matthew 16:18 for symbolism, drawing upon a number of Peshitta Old Testament texts that utilized *kēphā*.

[30] *Kēphā* became a functional title for Peter in Aphrahat and Ephrem similar to the way certain passages emphasized the Hebrew roots of the name Jesus (Joshua) to mean "Saviour."

[31] The House on the Rock (Matthew 7:24-25) is the other primary symbol/typology for Christ and the Church. Christ is the Architect, a title originally denoting God, now shared with Christ and the Apostles. Ephrem contrasts the Church with the Tower of Babel, eventually transforming the Church into the Tower that really leads to heaven.

[32] Chapter 7, "The 'Pilgrim Church' and Its Fulfilment." The term "pilgrim church" is adopted by Murray from the Second Vatican Council to refer to the Church's eschatological vocation, a theme comfortable to early Syriac Christianity. Indeed, concern over the Last Things consumes so much energy that seldom is the Church in this world and time mentioned. Murray spends significant energy on the 12th *mēmrā* of the *Liber Graduum* because of its unique depiction of the relationship between the visible, earthly church and the heavenly church. The 12th *mēmrā* is translated in full, the first translation into English of any part of the *Liber Graduum* until recently.

[33] A point of tension and conflict for the fourth- and fifth-century Church lay in the individualistic asceticism of the Sons of the Covenant (*bnay qyāmā*) that rarely saw or expressed itself as active in the visible Church. The focus of these ascetics was upon reentering the eschatological paradise, rather than being involved in the concerns of the local church.

[34] The third section of the work, "In Search of the Sources," is Murray's most significant. After identifying and describing the symbols and types utilized in early Syriac literature, Murray labours here to excavate one level deeper to the literary sources behind the *rāzē*. Jewish midrashic and targumic traditions are noted first, while the contributions of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Great Church are searched for antecedents and common perspectives. Frequently, Aphrahat and Ephrem witness to universally held ideas, though it is apparent that these were independently conceived. The opportunities for our Syriac writers to have directly borrowed from their western contemporaries are minimal, if not doubtful. Nevertheless, Murray is quick to observe the cases in which the Syriac writers took a different path along the way. The more problematic realms of Gnostic and nebulous Judeo-Christian perspectives, along with assorted apocryphal writings, are scoured for origins and allusions.

[35] Although the narrative of this book flows gracefully, this is not a quick read. Murray deals with complex layers of tradition and a variety of hermeneutics that tempt him—by his own admission—to lead the investigation from time to time a little far afield. His discussion of the images and exegesis of many authors needs to be digested slowly. Sometimes one has to neglect the larger picture in order to absorb the witness of a particular author or text.

[36] There are no pretensions to a definitive completeness. In his own words, Murray is "sitting lightly" for others to add more evidence and potentially reinterpret the many facets of this study. Gratitude is due to Gorgias Press for providing the opportunity to reissue and renew this work. Unfortunately, technical constraints prevented a thorough updating of the book, so despite the new material Murray has added to the text and bibliography, many readers will know of an additional article or book treating the topic at hand. Hopefully, eventually, someone will revisit these themes and provide us with a new "Murray." That will be no mean accomplishment.