Rosemary A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria*. Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2008. 213 pp.

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Rosemary Arthur's doctoral dissertation at King's College, London, under Graham Gould initially seems to wear its thesis on the (jacket) sleeve, but as one would expect with an author as complex and enigmatic as Pseudo-Dionysius (PsD), Arthur's analysis takes on a similar complexity.

Arthur is clear that this monograph is not intended as a thorough overview of the Dionysian Corpus and its doctrine, but as a critical reexamination of PsD's sources and the context in which he was writing. The subtitle, locating the study in "Sixth Century Syria," should draw the attention of *Hugoye* readers as Arthur devotes considerable attention to a number of Syriac writers who alternately reflect and refute PsD's concerns. Arthur targets the conflicted and confusing political/theological atmosphere in which the Miaphysite movement was bemired from the late 520's into the early 530's following the accession of Justinian I and the reestablishment of Chalcedonian primacy, to which PsD wrote as one level of response.

What strikes the reader initially is Arthur's ambivalent attitude towards PsD. In the early chapters, Arthur launches a virtual polemic against this author, challenging his motives, ethics and tactics, as well as the orthodoxy of his doctrines. Eventually, Arthur will deal with PsD with an even historical hand, but in the short conclusion, she is now fully on PsD's side, defending not only his actions in their historical context, but extending approval of his doctrinal decisions as a fitting solution to contemporary theological positions.

The literary genre and shape of the Corpus is of decisive importance for interpreting PsD. Arthur asks whether the Corpus is a summa or a polemical treatise. While there are characteristics of a summa present, she concludes that the frequent inconsistencies and contradictions undermine the cohesiveness typical of systematic treatise.

As the title of this monograph indicates, Arthur perceives PsD's project as a polemical work written in the midst of a period of intense conflict, both within Miaphysite leadership and externally from the Chalcedonian forces recently reestablished under Justinian I as the empire's church. A polemic needs to be directed against someone or some group, and it is here that Arthur centers her argument on the work of the equally enigmatic sixth-century Syriac writer, Stephen bar Sudhaili, the author of *The Book of Holy Hierotheos*. The traditional assessment is that Stephen wrote in response to PsD's Corpus, but Arthur sees it the other way around—PsD wrote in correction of the Origenist trajectories of Stephen which inappropriately legitimized the authority of his personal visions. Typical of Origenist systems, angels in Stephen's perspective were free to ascend and descend to and from heaven and earth, but PsD perceived a more restricted hierarchy and movement that did not give play to individual presumptions.

Arthur is skeptical regarding the loose and imprecise dating of the Corpus to "around 500" and locates the situation in which PsD wrote to be the turbulent years between 527 and 532, starting with the consultation of Miaphysite leaders with Justinian and concluding with the momentous Collatio of Constantinople in 532. It was, in fact, at the Collatio that PsD was unveiled. This was not a safe time to come forward with a distinctive and controversial alternative, so our author guarded carefully his anonymity and would cloak his Origenist tendencies under the pseudonym of a converted first-century pagan with no known extant works to betray him.

Arthur cites an impressive number of Syriac authors in support of or in debate with PsD—John the Solitary of Apamea, Philoxenus of Mabbug, John of Tella, John bar Aphtonia. It is Sergius of Reshaina, a leading Miaphysite bishop during this critical period, and the reputed translator of PsD into Syriac at a very early date, who gains the most attention. Arthur demonstrates the closeness of Sergius' thought and style to PsD, especially in his *On the Spiritual Life*. Not too subtly Arthur hints that Sergius is in fact Pseudo-Dionysius, but only declares this identity outright in an understated manner in her final conclusions.

The entry point into PsD is via angels, which Arthur observes is the key dynamic for understanding the author's polemical agenda. PsD's foundational concept is the unknowability of God,

and his cardinal sin for theologians is that of pride in believing that they have adequately defined the nature of God—Stephen bar Sudhaili's problem. Consequently, he is impatient with the Miaphysite/Chalcedonian/Church of the East Christological controversies plaguing the church for the better part of a century in which over-confident assertions regarding what these protagonists claimed to know about the nature of Christ and of God were epidemic. The way it really works, PsD explains, is that knowledge is given or revealed to a person and it is then the recipient's obligation to pass it down to the next level. This implies a hierarchy, although for human beings the chain is broken when one attempts a direct link to God. This is precisely where angels come in, for these beings are the only ones in direct communication with God. PsD develops an elaborate nine-tiered hierarchy of angels whose first purpose is to communicate knowledge down to the next level. PsD bristles at the declarations, for instance, of monks—several levels down in the ecclesiastical hierarchy—for the only rank worthy to receive divine visions is that of the bishop (the author of *The Book of Steps* would insist upon a contrary evaluation of the spiritual ability of bishops!).

Ironically, in her Conclusion, Arthur seems to push the angels aside as a rhetorical device, barely mentioning their presence in PsD's work. As noted, the provocative identification of Sergius of Reshaina as the alter ego of PsD is mentioned without much fanfare. Convincing as Arthur's argument is, it leans heavily upon circumstantial evidence, similarity of ideas and writing style, rather than a historical unveiling of Sergius' reputed ploy. This is not intended to diminish Arthur's suggestion, for after all, PsD has done an excellent job of maintaining his anonymity for nearly 1500 years.

The strength of Arthur's research is in the inclusion of a number of Syriac theologians, broadening our perspective on PsD and taking seriously the historical context of the Miaphysite struggles during this period. The fact that Arthur is using Syriac sources in generally older English translations hinders her somewhat, but not critically. Part of the problem in using older materials is the awkwardness of non-inclusive language and the persistence of archaic and inappropriate labels, especially Monophysite and Nestorian, which Arthurs employs throughout her work.

In her conclusion Arthur seems to place aside the historical-critical questions and recast PsD as a post-modern, progressive Christian thinker. That is a difficult stretch for any author of Late Antiquity, although undeniably Pseudo-Dionysius' contribution to Christian thought, especially as elucidated by Arthur, still has much value for contemporary thinking.