

Hans Arneson, Emanuel Fiano, Christine Luckritz Marquis, Kyle Richard Smith, eds. and trans., *The History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Priest John of Edessa*. Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 29 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010). Pp. 81; \$35.

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The publication of the Syriac text and English translation of *The History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Priest John of Edessa* is a welcome addition for students and scholars of Christian asceticism, late antique piety, and Syriac Christianity. Scholars of hagiography in particular will enjoy the links of this lively and unique text to other Syriac narratives that memorialized heroes of Edessan Christianity, like the *Man of God* and the *Life of Rabbula*.

The book's text and translation by Emanuel Fiano, Kyle Smith, Christine Luckritz Marquis, and Hans Arneson is the product of a graduate seminar taught by Prof. L. Van Rompay in the Department of Religion at Duke University. The volume is a translation based on three manuscripts from the British Library: BL Add. 14,597 (568 C.E.), Add. 12,160 (6th cent.), and Add. 14,646 (6th cent.). The authors provide an informative explanation about the manuscript tradition and the methodology of their translation. As Smith notes in the introduction, the *Great Deeds of Paul and John* has been largely neglected in Syriac hagiographical studies (6), apart from an article by Sebastian Brock on Syriac monks and manuscripts and their link with Sinai.¹

The story, set in fifth-century Edessa, is particularly vivid in its depiction of the friendships that developed among late ancient Christians who sought the ascetic life. Paul, a bishop of Italy, leaves his see for Edessa to pursue a life of humble anonymity as a day laborer. Having reached Edessa, Paul gives his money to the poor and supports the men and women of Edessa's *xenodocheion*. Paul then meets the other hero of the text who will become his companion: John, an Edessan priest who also desired the ascetic life. A common longing to pursue a life of holiness brings the two men together, and the seal and complexity of that bond is a major theme of the hagiography. Paul works during the day for John, and

¹ "Syriac on Sinai: The Main Connections," in: *Eukosmia: Studi Miscellanei per il 75° di Vincenzo Poggi, S.J.*, ed. V. Ruggieri and L. Pieralli (Soveria Mannelli [Catanzaro]: Rubbettino, 2003), 103-117.

at night Paul escapes to a cave to pray. John and Paul encounter twelve blessed men in a cave near Edessa, but, as the editors note, this section of the hagiography is “rather obscure” (4). Paul and John, bound to each other by an oath, divide their time between visiting their blessed friends of the cave and working at John’s house in Edessa in the winter. The two men are joined in friendship to each other and live a life of prayer and work. The text mingles hagiographic fantasy with the mundane components of everyday life: visits to monks in caves are balanced with caring for the poor and the needs of the civic church.

The story also features a cameo appearance of the Himyarite tribe from Yemen, and the hagiography’s representation of this group raises provocative questions about religious identity, ethnicity, and social boundaries as imagined or idealized in legend. Paul and John meet the Himyarites on a pilgrimage to Sinai where they are captured by an Arabic tribe. Through a series of wondrous events, however, the entire tribe converts to Christianity. Like many missionary legends, the conversion of the tribe culminates in the conversion of the king. The editors highlight the importance of this narrative sequence and its links with other stories: “What is perhaps most interesting about this episode is that it is probably the source for the stories about the spread of Christianity in Yemen found in the extensive *History of the Prophets and Kings* of the Persian historian al-Tabari (d. 923 C.E.)” (9). The editors indicate fascinating parallels between the story of Paul and John and that of Tabari’s “Faymiyun and Salih” and “their respective roles in the legends about the origins of Christianity in Yemen” (9).

The *Great Deeds of Paul and John* offers further evidence of the diversity and imaginative forms of ascetic devotion that were practiced in the Syriac-speaking milieu. After Paul and John’s pilgrimage to Sinai, while on their homeward journey to Edessa, they befriend a dendrite monk standing in a tree, and then they break bread with monks known as “mountain men.” The abbot of the mountain men recognizes Paul’s true episcopal identity, and Paul, for his part, then identifies a hidden female, in the garb of a eunuch, who is living undercover with the male mountain monks. The story is rich in its depiction of hidden identities and relationally complex ascetic families. Later Paul cures a woman who then leaves her husband and children to join a monastery. Her husband

and children, however, follow her example and also pursue the monastic life.

Eventually Paul breaks his bond with John and escapes to Nisibis from Edessa. John, saddened to lose his friend, searches for him in vain. He returns to the blessed ones in the cave and dies within that year. The ending of this story is not disclosed in the manuscripts that the translators used in their edition: "Whether he [Paul] continues his work in Nisibis or moves from city to city is not revealed in any of the manuscripts consulted for this edition. The one manuscript that does tell what happened to Paul is a ninth- or tenth-century manuscript from Deir al-Surian... According to this manuscript, not long after John's death, Paul died, too, and was buried at a monastery within walking distance of Nisibis called Bet Qarman" (15–16). Smith notes that the editors were unable to access this manuscript from the Monastery of the Syrians, but Prof. Van Rompay provided them with a transcription of this variant ending (12, note 30).

What makes this hagiography a gem is the way in which it does not idealize the social issues that troubled late ancient Christians. Rather, it presents a narrative rife with human pathos. This volume, with its felicitous Syriac text alongside the English translation, would be a brilliant source for students or scholars of late antiquity or Syriac Christianity interested in the complex relationships that developed among Christians trying to discover the way to God, be it through the consecrated life, through service as a bishop or priest, through familial devotions, pilgrimage, care of the poor, or missionary activity.

This text also will amuse fans of Syriac hagiography on account of its colorful characters: monks standing in trees, imaginary cave dwellers, transvestite ascetics, and families transformed into monastic communities. The *Great Deeds of Paul and John* sets these themes against the backdrop of the Syriac city and the roads wandered by ascetics on pilgrimage, and the text invites readers to envision the difficulties and poverty of city life, the challenges of the episcopacy and priesthood, and the landscape of Northern Mesopotamia with its unconventional *loci* for communion with the divine. The book presents insights into the narrative imagination of the fifth-century Edessan Christians, and the story also shows inter-textual relationships with other canonized texts of that milieu, like the *Man of God* and *Life of Rabbula*. The editors and translators

of the *Great Deeds of Paul and John* have with their preparation of the Syriac edition and English translation of this text made a welcome addition to the body of Syriac hagiography.