Serge Ruzer and Aryeh Kofsky, *Syriac Idiosyncrasies. Theology and Hermeneutics in Early Syriac Literature*. Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 11. Leiden: Brill, 2010. viii + 188 pp; hardcover. €86.00/$123.00.

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This book sets out to further the discussion regarding the problem of whether and to what extent early Syriac Christianity may be understood to have an independent identity as a tradition, substantially distinct in character from contemporary Greek Christianity. Recognizing its indigenous Aramaic Christian background and its striking interactions with Judaism, the authors test the thesis that an analysis of trinitarian theology, christology, and hermeneutics in early Syriac texts reveal idiosyncrasies that help clarify the distinctive identity of the tradition. The book relies heavily on the authors' previous researches and publications yet attempts to synthesize those findings in service of the book's thesis, while also incorporating some new research. The discussion turns repeatedly to ancient Syriac authors' handling of the paradise narrative in Genesis, in order to explore their soteriological and anthropological understandings.

After an Introduction that presents the book's goals and methods and outlines its content, Chapter One treats Aphrahat's theology, giving first attention to the question of whether he shows a genuinely trinitarian understanding. Allowing for the ways in which Aphrahat's context and purposes can frustrate attempts to perceive a coherent theological outlook within his writings, the authors' analysis leads them to agree basically with those who read Aphrahat as presuming a somewhat subordinating christology. Though never fully articulated, Aphrahat's christology cannot be classified as Nicene. Yet he is more concerned with the revelatory and soteriological function of the incarnation and should not be read as one who deliberatively speculates on the pre-cosmic, ontological status of the logos. Rather than conducting comparative studies of theological terminology, the authors find it more fruitful to study Aphrahat's handling of elements that were common to discussions of his day yet reveal special emphases and receive distinctive reinterpretations in the *Demonstrations*. Special attention is given to *Demonstration* 17 which, though admittedly

shaped by its apologetic purpose, is seen to amplify what is corroborated elsewhere in Aphrahat: "the Christ-Logos' divine status as subordinated, hierarchic, detached from the act of creation and limited to the soteriological framework, coalescing with the historical appearance of Christ" (39). Aphrahat's emphasis on Christ's humanity need not be understood as polemical, but simply characteristic of an Antiochene or even "proto-Nestorian" christology that distinguishes his local tradition.

Chapter Two deals with Ephrem, especially the anthropological dimensions of his thought that are evident in his handling of the paradise narrative. The authors perceive in Ephrem a sort of "low anthropology," especially in the *Commentary on Genesis and Exodus*, in which humanity shares God's image in terms of receiving dominion over the earth. In contrast to the mythologizing agendas of other interpreters of the Fall narrative—and even to that in his own *Hymns on Paradise*—in the *Commentary* Ephrem is concerned to present Adam and Eve as independent and vulnerable moral agents who exercise free will and bear full responsibility for their actions. God responds to them mercifully but also with a full measure of justice. Although undeniably creative in important ways, Ephrem demonstrates reliance upon rabbinical traditions at many points. In all these areas he is seen to be a participant in and contributor to an identifiably Syriac Christian tradition. The authors are careful to distinguish Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* from the *Commentary* rather than try to harmonize them. Whereas the former present Adam in an elevated way, enjoying royalty and tasked with priesthood, in the *Commentary* Ephrem's intent to counter views like those espoused by Bardaisan lead him to emphasize human responsibility and divine justice and mercy.

Chapter Three discusses the *Liber Graduum* (*LG*), especially its religious anthropology and its treatment of the paradise narrative in *Memra* 21. Sharing with Aphrahat and Ephrem a characteristic Syriac presumption of the centrality of asceticism, and with Ephrem in particular an emphasis on free will, *LG* distinguishes itself by showing little or no interaction with Judaism, conceiving of a dual paradise, and by depicting the Fall as a result of humanity's distraction towards earthly concerns. The incarnation occurs in order to provide humanity with a salvific model of ascetic detachment, concretized especially in Jesus' triumph over Satan in

the wilderness. Thereby accomplishing what Adam failed to do, Christ leads the way in modeling the practices of kenotic humility by which humans may be restored to perfection. It is the author's ascetic agenda that shapes nearly every feature of *LG*'s interpretations. *LG* exploits those elements of the biblical text that reinforce its agenda, while also creatively reinterpreting those that stand in tension to it. It makes unique contributions yet displays clear affiliations to a distinctive Syriac tradition.

The anonymous and complex *Cave of Treasures* is the focus of Chapter Four. Taken to be an original Syriac composition reaching final form in the sixth century, the text is seen to be polemicizing against the rising prestige and influence of the Greek church and tradition. In its retelling of the Fall narrative, Adam's displacement is cast more as "an orderly and peaceful exodus" (89) from paradise, via the primordial Cave of Treasures near Eden and into exile at Jerusalem. Within this sacred topography, the mountain and its cave, which of all places on earth lie closest to heaven and constitute the focus of the religious community's nostalgic longing, is located in Syria. Syriac is upheld as the original language of humanity, whereas the speakers of Hebrew, Latin, and Greek are underscored as the murderers of Christ, as the writing on the crucifixion *titlos* demonstrates. True worship derives from heavenly worship, but this was conveyed to the world through the longstanding cult maintained at the cave on the mountain—in Syria. Without denying the place of Jerusalem in salvation history, every opportunity is taken to emphasize its remoteness and role as a *locus* of exile. The chapter discusses at length the complexities of the hermeneutical moves by which the text establishes this sacred topography and reinforces the Syriac faith tradition in contrast to Judaism and especially Greco-Roman Christianity.

Philoxenus of Mabbug is the focus of Chapter Five. He provides the authors with a "test-case" in that they see him as transitional between the era of genuinely independent Syriac tradition and one mostly dominated by the "Greek patristic hegemony" (121). In many respects, the themes he discusses, his exegeses, and his conclusions are decisively impacted by the agendas of Greek Christian thought. Yet distinctively Syriac influences are detectable within his discussions and his exegetical originality is apparent especially in his reading of select Old Testament passages as reinforcing his miaphysite theology.

Incomprehensible features of the miaphysite doctrine of the incarnation find an excuse in the incomprehensibility of other divine miracles, especially where the miracles entail the unifying of disparate elements in order to accomplish salvific effects. John's Gospel is the Evangelist's attempt to clarify the doctrine of the incarnation where the earlier Evangelists and Paul had left it vague and could therefore be mistakenly read in support of Chalcedonian belief. Although Philoxenus famously argued for certain revisions of the Peshitta New Testament in relation to the Greek, he finds no such problems in the Peshitta Old Testament, on which he also heavily relies.

An Appendix presents some of the results of Ruzer's doctoral dissertation (1996), studying the evidence of the Old Syriac Gospels. Attending particularly to Old Testament citations, the authors conclude that the Old Syriac gives precedence to the Syriac Peshitta Old Testament over the text of the Greek Gospels themselves, offering another piece of evidence in support of an autonomous and confident early Syriac heritage.

The Conclusion summarizes the contents and results of the preceding chapters, offering the following observations: extant early Syriac sources retain very primitive features of Syriac Christianity, including low anthropology and christology. Several of the sources also betray deep and significant interactions with Jewish elements. The sources display "complex attitudes… toward Greek Christianity" (147), at times freely borrowing or even celebrating Greek thought, at times establishing clear distance or even hostility towards it. The author conclude their study by underscoring the plausibility of their thesis that an identifiably early Syriac Christianity existed, one whose interaction with Greek Christianity in Syria eventually resulted in its being eclipsed by the latter. The book includes an extensive bibliography and indices.

Syriacists and others interested in the exegetical traditions of early and late antique Christianity will appreciate the book. The style is clear and readable (though the presentation is marred by a number of typographical errors, far too numerous to list here). The authors rely heavily on existing scholarship and engage it throughout the book. Their analyses of parallel Christian and Jewish exegeses help delineate possible lines of influence and to clarify places where the ancient authors display greatest originality. The book does not often deal with the topic of hermeneutics

directly, but its use of the term in the sub-title is warranted because it regularly focuses on the Syriac authors' biblical interpretations and because it treats them in ways that are sensitive to those authors' circumstances. Each chapter is a worthy contribution not only to the reader's understanding of the scholarship on selected Syriac writers and the texts in question but the book also constructively furthers the related discussions, especially where patristic views on the biblical account of paradise and the Fall are concerned. In particular, the book's proposals regarding the ancient authors' purposes and contexts should be taken into account and will undoubtedly stimulate further discussion.

The book's principal weakness is its disjointed character. Each chapter functions more independently than the introduction and conclusion would appear to suggest. They are nearly stand-alone studies, typically built on the authors' antecedent projects, and the book's thesis often gets lost amidst the detail. The book does not return often enough to its alleged purpose of establishing the plausibility of a distinctive identity for the early Syriac Christian tradition, and as the narrative progresses, the significance of its findings for that larger purpose is not always made clear. Nor do the authors carry on substantial discussion with those who may have argued for or presumed a derivative, rather than independent, early Syriac tradition. Chapter conclusions and even the final Conclusion do not accomplish much in the way of synthesis but mainly summarize and reiterate preceding content. The chapters hold together due to shared themes and parallel content, but much of the work of developing the book's stated thesis remains to be done.

These limitations notwithstanding, the authors' studies are a welcome addition to the expanding scholarship on the rich Syriac component of the early Christian exegetical tradition.