

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Book of Union of Babai the Great: English Translation with Edited Syriac Text*, ed. Mar Awa III Royel, trans. Michael J. Birnie, Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2024). Pp. xii + 449; \$221.00.

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Despite the considerable stature of the East Syriac writer Babai the Great (c. 550/5–628), his major work *On the Union* (*Liber de unione*) only became known to western scholars around the turn of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Barely a decade after this announcement, the edition of the Belgian priest Arthur Vaschalde appeared in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* along with a translation into Latin (CSCO 79–80). Subsequently, Babai's text received periodic attention, most notably in the various studies of the remarkable German scholar Luise Abramowski. But as recently as 2006, Joel Walker could write that "the field still lacks monograph length studies of even the most prolific East-Syrian writers, such as Babai the Great."<sup>2</sup> That situation has changed remarkably in the past two decades. Happily, this new translation of Babai's most important christological work will further support the growing scholarly attention to the contributions of Babai and other 7th-century East Syriac authors.

The present work is the achievement of two modern scholars for whom Babai is an important ecclesial authority. The Syriac

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<sup>1</sup> Jérôme Labourt, "Un traité inédit de Babai le Grand," *Le Muséon* 7, no. 1–2 (1906): 27–32. Chapters of the text also were printed in the 1898 anthology recently reprinted as *The Book of Crumbs: An Anthology of Syriac Texts* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Joel Thomas Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 6–7.

text was prepared by Mar Awa III Royel, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, and the translation was produced by the Very Reverend Cor-bishop Michael J. Birnie (+2013). Sadly, Birnie's passing prevented him from seeing the fruits of his labors. But with "very minor edits" by Mar Awa III Royel, his translation is now available.

The volume includes a brief foreword, preface, and introduction, followed by a facing-page edition and translation of Babai's *On the Union* and the shorter christological treatise known as the *Tractatus Vaticanus* (Vat. sir. 178, fols. 229v–236v), in which Babai criticizes the use of the body–soul analogy for the relation of divine and human in Christ. The Syriac text is printed in an unvocalized East Syriac script with restrained use of diacritics. After Sebastian Brock's foreword with brief remarks on christological terminology, Mar Awa III Royel frames this work with a discussion of Babai's life and influence and some brief comments on the text and translation. Theresia Hainthaler introduces Babai's life and his christological works, followed by an overview of the contents of the treatises. Appended to the text and translation are an index of biblical citations and a small general index.

This translation is a major achievement. Babai's magnum opus has not been accessible to non-specialists other than in Vaschalde's Latin translation and two small excerpts recently translated into English.<sup>3</sup> The treatise offers valuable material for Syriac scholars, scholars of late antiquity, and historians, as well

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<sup>3</sup> English translations of *On the Union* 3.9 and 4.17 were produced by John Zaleski in Mark DelCogliano, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, vol. 4: *Christ, Chalcedon, and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 427–446. Adam Bremer McCollum also translated selections of *On the Union* 4.17 in Michael Philip Penn et al., eds., *Invitation to Syriac Christianity: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 99–101.

as for contemporary theologians who engage with the writings of early Christianity.

Since this edition and translation will undoubtedly become the primary reference for many scholars who work with Babai's *On the Union*, I want to highlight some notable features of this volume and point out a few issues that are significant for readers.

First, the Syriac edition is not a new text in most respects, but the parts that are new or different offer significant advantages. As the introduction observes, the edition is a correction and expansion of Vaschalde's Syriac text (CSCO 79), "checked" against one important manuscript of *On the Union* in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, Ms. Or. Quart. 1168 (p. xi). In addition to this manuscript, Vaschalde also used two others in his edition (L = BL Or 5441 and A = Hyvernat Syriac 9). Ms. Or. Quart. is significant among the eight surviving manuscripts in that the scribe reports that he consulted three manuscripts, including one that is likely Vaschalde's L. Nevertheless, more recent study suggests that all late manuscripts derive from L.<sup>4</sup> Like CSCO 79, the edition also includes Babai's shorter christological treatise, the *Tractatus Vaticanus* (Vat. sir. 178). Given these connections to Vaschalde, the volume usefully prints the page numbers of CSCO 79 in the margins of the translation for reference, though unfortunately not in the Syriac text.

This edition improves on Vaschalde's text in two significant ways. First, the volume corrects the transposition of folios that Vaschalde himself detected with the help of J. B. Chabot only after the typesetting of his Syriac text.<sup>5</sup> The volume under review thus offers a text of *On the Union* laid out as Vaschalde

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<sup>4</sup> See Alexander Tamrazov, "Newly Found Fragments of the 'Book of Union' by Mar Babai the Great: Review of the Manuscript Heritage of the Monument, Critical Text and Translation of the Fragments" (in Russian), *Библия и христианская древность* 3.15 (2022): 143–147.

<sup>5</sup> See Vaschalde's discussion in CSCO 79: iv–v.

might have chosen himself. Second, this volume includes the text and translation of two new passages of *On the Union* (4.16 and 4.17).<sup>6</sup> All extant manuscripts of Babai's work are missing text in chapters 16 and 17. These lacunae were noted already in 1985 in a colophon of Berlin Ms. Or. Quart. 1168. But Alexander Tamrazov recently discovered that large sections of Babai's treatise are quoted in a work of Simeon the Persecuted (13th c.), also called *On the Union*.<sup>7</sup> These quotations fortunately include the missing passages of Babai's book and have been included in this volume (but are marked only in the translation).

With these advantages, however, one wishes that the preface and introduction would lay out more clearly the text critical decisions of the authors to clarify any differences from Vaschalde. For instance, the East Syriac text is largely unvocalized with various minimal diacritics. But the text includes more diacritics than what one finds in Vaschalde's text, including *rukkākā/quššāyā* marks, dots to distinguish homographs, and more. It would be useful to know to what extent these diacritics reflect Mar Awa III Royel's consultation of Ms. Or. Quart 1168 or are editorial interpretive choices.

Moreover, one can see that the translator and other contributors frequently had recourse to Vaschalde's edition in the course of their work rather than to this volume's text. Because of this, scholars working with the Syriac text will need to have both this volume and CSCO 79 at hand. For instance, one finds footnotes like that on p. 80 (n. 36) which reads, "A footnote gives a ms. variant reading: ܠܡܐ ܕܝܡܐ," without giving a specific siglum (in this case, the reference is to MS A

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<sup>6</sup> The two passages are printed and translated on pp. 230–233 and 242–245. See also the variant on p. 208 from Alexander V. Tamrazov, "Simeon the Persecuted and his *Book on the Union*: A Review of the Manuscript Heritage. Notes Preceding the Critical Edition" (in Russian), *Bible and Christian Antiquity* 2.14 (2022): 179.

<sup>7</sup> Tamrazov, "Newly Found Fragments," 141–157.

[= Hyvernat Syriac 9]; see CSCO 79: 42, n. 1). Similarly, the useful outline of the work by Theresia Hainthaler (pp. 5–6) refers to Vaschalde's Syriac text (CSCO 79) and his Latin translation (CSCO 80) and not to the text of this volume. A second edition might provide fuller manuscript information in the notes and link any internal references to the Birnie/Mar Awa III text. Moreover, since this edition offers the best available Syriac text, it would have been helpful to include line numbers for the Syriac.

Birnie's translation offers a fluent text that is generally reliable. Most notable is Birnie's choice, following Sebastian Brock and others, to keep the terms *qnomā* and *paršopā* untranslated so as to leave open the meaning of these terms in East Syriac thought and to distinguish them from the use of *hypostasis* and *prosōpon* in Chalcedonian or Miaphysite authors. Nevertheless, insofar as these terms often bear a range of meanings in other traditions, there is a good argument for rendering the terms as *hypostasis* and *person* so as to situate Babai within this broader terminological discussion.

Birnie's translation decisions are defensible in the main, though readers should be aware that he often prefers non-technical terms for what can be seen as technical vocabulary. For this reason, those turning to the translation with questions of philosophical or theological theory should exercise some caution. For instance, Birnie translates ܡܢܗܘܬܐ with "make up" (e.g., pp. 47, 53), but elsewhere more precisely as "manner," reflecting the philosophical provenance of this term (e.g., p. 67). Similarly, Birnie renders ܕܡܫܝܚܐ as "in common" in places where a more precise theoretical rendering would be "by participation" or "by sharing" (pp. 147, 211). Both instances of this word occur where Babai has mentioned properties of divinity given to Christ's human nature by participation in the divinity. Babai's distinction between properties held by nature and by participation is significant for his broader argument

