

R. Aravackal, *The Mystery of the Triple Gradated Church: A Theological Analysis of the Ktaba d-Massqata (Book of Steps) with Particular Reference to the Writings of Aphrahat and John the Solitary*. Vadavathoor, Kottayam, India: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 2018. Pp. xvii + 571; €45.

ROBERT KITCHEN, SANKT IGNATIUS THEOLOGICAL ACADEMY

The Mystery of the Triple Gradated Church issues from the Ph.D. dissertation at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, by Sr. Roselin Aravackal, a member of the monastic community Mar Toma Sahordarikal (Sisters of St. Thomas) in Vidyanagar, Kottayam, Kerala. Her dissertation, defended under her secular name, Sheeba Sebastian, and written under the guidance of Emidio Vergani, is the most in-depth and thorough study to date of the *Liber Graduum/Book of Steps/Ktābā d-Massqātā* or *KM* (as abbreviated throughout the volume), promising to invigorate and enrich research on this important, yet still enigmatic work. Aravackal posits that the *Book of Steps*' author developed a three-tiered system of the Christian life and the Church that permeates the entire work: (1) Uprightness (*kenutā*); (2) Perfection (*gmirutā*); and (3) a level beyond or above Perfection.

Aravackal begins with a detailed review of previous scholarship on the *KM*, accepting the intentional anonymity of the author who was situated somewhere within the area of modern-day Iraq, but offering the plausible hypothesis that the community may have lived on both sides of the vacillating Roman-Persian border. The spectre of Messalianism attributed to the *KM* by some scholars is rejected, especially by the insistence upon ecclesial and sacramental life (*Mēmra* 12), and the denunciation of spiritualization of physical asceticism (*Mēmra* 10). Aravackal opts for a late fourth- or early fifth-century date, based upon the author's use of several key terms found during this period – the occurrence of the term *kristyana*, the absence of the masculine *rīḥa qaddišā*, and the absence of terms such as *dayrāyā*, *dayrā* that reflect institutionalized monasticism.

After dealing with these foundational questions, Aravackal dives into an intensive exegesis of the character of the text, centering not upon the individual *mēmre* and their expositions of various problems, but assembling the pieces of the *KM* author's theological universe. Aravackal's footnotes are overflowing, not only providing a witness of the Syriac texts, but remarkable also for her comments on an expanding secondary literature on the *KM* and related works. One methodological problem is the periodic citation from studies in Italian without translation or summary, and several French and German citations in the same manner. A short summary of their ideas would have clarified how these citations were being utilised in the exposition.

Aravackal's analysis of the "Triple Gradation" of the Church and of the individual Christian, emanating out of *Mēmra* 12, "On the Hidden and Public Ministry of the Church," is a creative and original interpretation. While she observes that beyond the categories of visible, hidden/heart, and heavenly in this *mēmra*, little else is explicitly mentioned along these lines in the *KM*, the author does write about "going beyond or above Perfection" (*Mēmra* 6: "On Those Who are Made Perfect and Continue to Grow"), which certainly can function as a "third gradation." The question is whether this is indeed a third level, or a more developed description of Perfection.

The *KM* author, indeed, leaves a great deal unsaid, perhaps his most significant quality as a spiritual writer. The academic issue with the *KM* is that the author mentions neither time nor place, nor people, except for biblical personalities. Few scholars have speculated whether the order of the 30 *mēmre* is chronological, but in the last six *mēmre* one can sense dramatic movement and change in the community. The author recognizes that the Perfect (*gmire*) have become lax in their discipline and prideful in their status, and that the Upright (*kēne*) are now more faithful and humble – a surprising spiritual development outside his expectations.

Aravackal's reconstruction and depiction of the tripartite anthropology is done with careful precision, presenting the

fundamental character of “the religious person.” The “outer/inner person” needs to be reconciled by the balancing of symbiotic dichotomies – inner/outer, bodily/spiritual, hidden/visible. The Perfect exemplify this balance, living on the earth while looking into heaven, and thus becoming “the meeting of heaven and earth.” The Perfect are still earthly creatures, but are living in a realized eschatological state, and several of their failings which the author points out are a result of not keeping a proper balance.

Aravackal combs the *KM* for theological images that occur regularly, but not systematically. The identity and function of “the robe of glory,” one of the clothing metaphors in early Syriac theology, is described. The author declares that “the robe” did not originally exist as a physical entity, but in the mind of Adam and Eve. Only after their disobedience, when they first put on physical clothes, did they realize that they had been naked.

The concept of “mirror” is thoroughly looked at, not only in the *KM*, but with analogous citations from Simon Taibuteh and John of Dalyatha. The mirror is anything that reflects God’s being, particularly nature. The inner mirror reflects God’s light onto oneself and into others, so that one sees all others in this divine light. Aravackal illustrates how the “luminous eye” as the inner “organ” which perceives spiritual reality is depicted as various kinds of “eyes” in the *KM*.

Aravackal moves to ascetical categories, parsing *msarqūtā* – emptying – as the term for ascetic renunciation, and thus an essential characteristic of *qaddiṣūtā* (holiness, celibacy) and *ihidāyūtā* (solitariness). The infamous ascetical goal of the author to “break one’s mind” receives due attention, as Aravackal understands the verb and function as one of “stripping oneself” of worldly attractions and distractions. While Aravackal retains the verb, she does not perceive the author’s spiritual intention as harshly as the English translation implies. In similar fashion is her understanding of “baptism by fire and Spirit” as a system of ascetical practices to reach Perfection.

Which ascetical practices this system entails is not reported, for the *KM* has distinguished itself for not requiring or mentioning the extreme ascetical regimens infamously described in later Syriac hagiography.

Aravackal's "pedagogical" construction of "the tripartite man" shows insight into the vision of the *KM* author, but has a conceptual problem in the text itself. That is, the Upright and Perfect are amply defined, frequently in reference to one another, but "the third grade" which is beyond Perfection *per se* is not identified or classified specifically by the author. Aravackal's construction fits where the *KM* seems to be heading – the third level of the Church and the Perfect individual is there – but not in the way the author originally saw it happening. Aravackal observes several times that the *KM* is not a work of systematic theology, yet attempting to reconstruct a triple gradation is an act of systematization. In the earlier *memrē*, the author defines the levels of the *kēnē* and *gmīrē*, but the latter *memrē* reveal him *discovering* the nature of spiritual life as it evolves in his awareness and in the experience of his church and disciples. Mention on several occasions, moreover, of those who have fallen from Uprightness should be seen as an unspoken fourth grade. As the *KM* community aged, the author's theological experience and comprehension ran ahead of his original construct.

Aravackal compares John the Solitary of Apamea's fully articulated tripartite structure of *pagranūtā*, *napšanūtā*, and *ruḥānūtā* (the corporeal, psychical, and spiritual state) to those of the *KM*, but she appears to want to fit the later three-level system retroactively onto the *KM*. John the Solitary approximates the *KM* Perfect and Upright in several instances, but then goes beyond the structure of the *KM* elsewhere.

The Book of Steps remains a large, complex and intriguing witness to the emergence of the early Syriac church and theology, to which the labour of Sr. Roselin Aravackal presents an insightful new configuration of what this anonymous author was telling his congregation and us about the spiritual pilgrimage.