

Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F. G. Parmentier. *The Book of Steps. The Syriac Liber Graduum, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F. G. Parmentier*, Cistercian Studies Series 196, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2004.

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- [1] This volume continues the long-standing Cistercian Studies Series' tradition of translating monastic literature of all periods into English and joins a growing section dedicated to Syriac spirituality. Indeed it is an important contribution, allowing us a glimpse into one lesser known, pre-monastic strand of asceticism on the eastern fringe of the Roman Empire. The late fourth, early fifth century community to which this work was addressed is stratified into different levels of Christian behavior and observance. The anonymous author focuses most of his attention on two of these levels, what the translators have termed "the Perfect" and "the Upright." The Perfect ones have renounced all earthly desires and through following the great commandments (for example, to treat everyone better than oneself, to not judge others, to live free from care, etc.), mortifying their bodies, and practicing absolute poverty in the imitation of Christ, they have attained enlightenment and seek to educate other Christians. The second-tiered Upright have not overcome their struggle with material goods and thus lead a life engaged with worldly pursuits and work to minister to the physical needs of the Perfect. Their spiritual disciplines include attempting to fulfill the moral and cultic rules found in the "inferior commandments" (i.e. the Ten Commandments) and the Golden Rule.
- [2] Kitchen's extensive introduction begins by acquainting the reader with the general origins of Syriac Christianity. Emphasizing its ascetic flavor, he concisely describes the earliest Syriac literature, its use of vivid imagery and symbolism, and the unique practices that make Syriac Christianity distinct from its Mediterranean counterparts.
- [3] After a detailed examination of scholarship throughout the last century pertaining to the *Liber Graduum* (with well-documented footnotes), the introduction proceeds to an overview of the structure of the work (or its lack thereof), brief descriptions of each *mēmra*, and general themes that connect the work together. Highlights of this latter section are the translator's discussions of

the frequently overlooked “fledgling” or intermediate ascetic ranks, such as “the sick and the children,” and consideration of some of the pastoral problems of his community. For instance, tensions exist among the various levels concerning who merits material support, and external charges of elitism must be answered.

- [4] Kitchen rightly downplays the role of the *Liber Graduum* in the Messalian controversy. Although historically several scholars had hoped that this was the missing *Asketikon* of the Messalians, this claim could not be proven through its doctrinal content. The *Liber Graduum* does demonstrate some Messalian tendencies, like the indwelling of demons, but never fully exhibits unorthodox beliefs. From what we know of the surviving descriptions of Messalian beliefs and practices, such as the total efficacy of unceasing prayer in contrast to the spiritual inefficacy of the visible Church and sacraments, these ideas are not supported by our anonymous author.

- [5] The translation has been made from Michael Kmosko’s edition found in *Patrologia Syriaca* 3: Paris, 1926; the enumeration of the *mēmre* and the column numbers inserted into the translation follow this text. Kitchen and Parmentier present a fluid translation that is faithful to the spirit of the work overall, skillfully preserving the frank discussion of how these practices ought to be lived out and what the relationships among various Christians ought to be.

- [6] In addition to the introduction and translation, Kitchen and Parmentier have provided a bibliography of other modern translations of sections of the *Liber Graduum*, several pages of studies covering the history of scholarship on this work, and a few brief listings on Syriac Christianity in general. There is also an index to the extensive scriptural references of the *Liber Graduum* that has been extended to include some post- and extra-canonical writings and an index to proper names and places. A subject index would be desirable for such a lengthy and thematically inter-connected work. But these materials along with the comprehensive introduction provide a solid entry point for anyone interested in Syriac Christianity, and the work as a whole offers scholars a valuable resource for the early development of the ascetic life in Syria.