

The Library of Paradise: A History of Contemplative Reading in the Monasteries of the Church of the East

David Allen Michelson. *The Library of Paradise: A History of Contemplative Reading in the Monasteries of the Church of the East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 368pp. \$100. Hardcover. 9780198836247.

The book *Library of Paradise* has been recently published in the Oxford Early Christian Studies series, which offers comprehensive studies “covering a wide range of Greek, Latin, and Oriental sources” (ii). In this volume, Michelson investigates the ascetic reading employed by Christian monks of the Church of the East, which he identifies as “a contemplative practice that moved from reading to meditation, to prayer, to the ecstasy of divine encounter” (3). In the Syrian monasteries, reading was performed as a way into heaven, a spiritual practice; the ultimate goal was to develop spirituality and encounter the divine. Reading was a spiritual practice considered “more formative than informative” (277). Michelson’s central task is to demonstrate “how a Syriac tradition of contemplative reading developed in Mesopotamia among the Christian monastic communities of the Church of the East in the sixth and seventh centuries CE” (4). The author also reveals that this type of reading influenced Christians outside the walls of the Syrian Church. Michelson discovers that contemplative reading became “a monastic spiritual institution whose appeal crossed geographic, linguistic, and even confessional boundaries” (257) throughout the centuries.

The book is split into two major sections: Part I (“Methodology”), a shorter section that consists of chapters 1-3, and Part II (“Narrative”), the most extensive section of the volume, which consists of chapters 4-7. Figures of manuscripts allow readers to visualize primary sources that Michelson systematically uses in the book. A few maps—one of the Near East and three diachronic maps of Northern Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Palestine—make it easier for the readers to find additional information about particular places or become familiar with the historical and geographical context. The book also contains a bibliography, an index of scriptural passages, an index of manuscripts, and a general index. Also, the transliteration of Syriac, Arabic, and Greek words with some adaptations, as explained in the section “Text and Romanizations” (xix), helps the non-specialist reader. Each chapter is enriched with endnotes that identify sources, suggest additional readings, and supplement information. The only issue with the book is that it could have more figures and illustrations.

The book’s first part “frames the scope, method, and contribution of the book” (9). In this first part, the author discusses (i) the sources available for the study of Syriac reading; (ii) establishes the overarching questions that guide his study of the Syriac Christian ascetic reading tradition; (iii) lays out the questions with which the research is concerned; (iv) “reviews the scholarly literature on *lectio divina*” (8) to determine what previous scholars had discovered about monastic reading; (v) identifies the gaps in the previous research; (vi) and identifies and discusses the pitfalls of past Syriac scholarship, which resulted in a distorted understanding of the Syriac monastic reading. Therefore, this part also identifies the need that justified new research on Syriac ascetic reading. The author stresses that “so little attention was paid to Syriac monastic readers during the past two centuries of Western scholarship on Syriac texts” (8). Moreover, Michelson explains the book’s original and significant contribution, saying, “The *Library of Paradise* is the first book to trace the origins and establishment of East Syrian contemplative reading as a monastic institution” (8). In sum, this methodological part of the book reveals Michelson’s high level of scholarly research. The reader will also notice that in this section (Part I), the author presents a valuable summary of the second part of the volume, improving the book’s readability.

In the second part of the volume, Michelson traces the development of Syriac contemplative reading “as an ascetic discipline from its origins in the fourth century to its point of maturity in ‘Enanisho’ and Dadisho’ in the seventh century” (257). Michelson divides the history of the development of Syriac contemplative reading into three phases, each described in its own chapter. In chapter four, the author searches for the establishment of the practice of contemplative reading. He starts with a brief but valuable study of the development of Syriac Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, when “Syriac-speaking Christianity developed a rich theology of asceticism” (73), and continues with an examination of the progress of the monastic ascetic reading that resulted from the Abraham of Kashkar’s reform, in the sixth-century, when contemplative reading became a monastic practice. In chapter five, Michelson identifies the second phase of the development of contemplative reading, which occurs primarily with the work of Babai the Great promoting the reception of the ascetic practices of Evagrius into Syriac monasticism. Babai’s work consolidates a Syriac Evagrian view of ascetic reading that becomes “an ascetic discipline with well-defined limits and clear purposes” (185). In this chapter, Michelson combs through available documents to understand “how Evagrian theology served as a theological framework for East Syrian contemplative reading” (135). Chapter six examines the works of ‘Enanisho’ of Adiabene and Dadisho’ of Qatar in the late seventh century, through whom contemplative reading reached its widespread adoption and maturity in the Syrian Church. Chapter 7 summarizes the central findings of the volume and addresses suggestions for future research. The author carefully discusses the avenues for new research. Readers will find this exceptionally valuable as Michelson sparks interest in further research by providing precise and objective directions for researchers.

Library of Paradise is designed primarily to serve the needs and interests of the academic community. The book’s series page states that the volumes “are of interest to theologians, ancient historians, and specialists in the classical and Jewish worlds” (ii). But the book may also reach a broader audience interested in related topics, such as librarians. The volume is an invaluable and comprehensive resource for anyone interested in monastic reading. So, it can be used to introduce the subject to college, university, and seminary students. Still, reading may not be easy for those unfamiliar with Syriac scholarship due to the complexity of the subject and the vast amount of information the volume provides.

Overall, the reader will notice that the book is well-researched, vastly documented, cogently developed, and solidly grounded on the results of Michelson’s precise exegesis of primary sources and critical interaction with Syriac scholarship. The author presents high-quality scholarly research with literary flair and clarity. The book’s readability, organization, cohesion, and proper writing flow facilitate reading. Therefore, *Library of Paradise* is undoubtedly a valuable reference work that profoundly contributes to scholarship, offering a new view on Syriac ascetic reading and inviting further research. It is a must-read for scholars and students interested in ascetic monastic reading and anyone seriously interested in reading history. I highly recommend it for purchase.

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