
Book Reviews

The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version, Part IV Fasc. 4 Ezra and Nehemiah, 1, 2 Maccabees

M. Albert and A. Penna (eds.)

Brill, Leiden: 2013; Hard Cover; 203 pages; RRP A\$175; ISBN: 978-9-00-418430-5

The Syriac Peshitta is an important source for understanding Syrian Church history and the texts that were used to shape their particular theology. The similarities between Syriac and Hebrew make these works essential for Biblical and Syrian studies, so this is a welcome addition to the growing corpus. This particular volume contains the full Syriac text of four Old Testament books in a clear font. The work includes an extensive critical apparatus and good introductions. Each part also includes concise but thorough summaries of the manuscript evidence, and clear tables document important differences.

The Maccabean story was an important foundation for Syrian Church understandings of martyrdom and, thus, ascetic practice. The story of the mother and her 7 sons martyred by Antiochus was celebrated as a motivation to imitate their bold and courageous stand. This story also exhibits important Stoic ideas of overcoming the emotions by reason and, thus, is a foretaste of Syrian Stoic emphasis. The righteous stand against Gentile idolatry and leading to martyrdom is also frequently found in deuterocanonical books, which also often show evidence of the influence of Greek philosophy. These works were well known in Syrian circles and display Semitic elements not so current in Greek or Latin tradition. Also of significance is the role of the woman as ‘greatest in faith’, a role reprised by Mary in the Syriac worldview but one that sounded quite peculiar to Greek ears. Thus the Syriac language around this and other stories reveals fascinating insights into Syrian theology and culture.

The Peshitta uses words that capture specifics not always present in the Greek. For example in 2 Macc 7:15 we see the fifth son being “mangled” or “tortured” depending on the English translation. Yet the Syriac has *mangrīn* and *alšīn*, which mean “stretched on a mangonel” and “pressed”, evoking the imagery of specific torture devices. This is somewhat different to the Septuagint version which uses *prosgontes* (from *agon*), which certainly captures the meaning but does not convey the same literal machine imagery. It will be interesting to see what other differences are revealed.

The book is well bound and a separate one page insert explains the various symbols and abbreviations used, though this might have been better included in the text itself. This first academic edition of these important texts is a welcome addition to Brill’s

nearly complete Syriac Old Testament Series, and will be studied with interest by the small but determined band of Syriac scholars.

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The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity

Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.)

Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2012. Hard Cover; 1248 pages; 20+ colour and black and white illustrations, maps; RRP A\$170; ISBN: 978-0-19-533693-1

Handbooks can be pedestrian compendiums of mediocre articles, but this OUP publication is a refreshing contribution to the study of Late Antiquity. Many of the chapters address expected themes, but they are unusually helpful, providing insightful contextual material and discussion of current debates. Packed into a weighty 1248 pages are 36 articles grouped into the four broad categories of 'Geography and Peoples', 'Literary and Philosophical Cultures', 'Religion and Religious Identity', and 'Law, State and Social Structures.' A final section on the wider world adds perspective and connects these themes to the Italian Renaissance. Every article is rich in detail and well presented, clearly articulating major themes and often using intriguing detail. There are extensive endnotes and bibliographies with each article, making this handbook almost encyclopedic in breadth. The topics, of course, cannot cover every people nor every religion, but the ones chosen are vibrant cameos and quite representative.

As well as the typical articles on the barbarians and Western kingdoms, the first section contains great pieces on the Balkans, the Syrians, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Armenia, and the Silk Road. On the Balkans, Caldwell discusses how the geography of Pannonia, Thrace and Dalmatia affected events and even the assassination of emperors. He discusses rainfall, rivers, and city walls, and many other aspects of life in this region, leaving the reader with an appreciation for the difficulties of travel, rule, and commerce. Philip Wood's article on the Syrians focusses on the enormous Syriac literature of Late Antiquity and summarises the recent changes in the historiography of Syriac writing. The Syriac tradition is a vastly understudied field given that it is the legacy of a third of the population of the Church of Late Antiquity. Wood discusses the *Doctrina Addai*, Jewish influence, Jacob of Serugh, the social and political context, and other texts and issues. This is a solid introduction to the field of uniquely Syriac Christian thought.

In the second part of the handbook, we find articles on Greek and Latin Poetry, Education, Travel, and Cosmology among others. Of special note is the piece by Gregory Smith on Physics and Metaphysics, which is unusually clear and insightful when dealing with Greek metaphysics. He discusses several of the main themes of Late Antique metaphysics and how they developed and influenced modern thinking. Smith