

The library of paradise. A history of contemplative reading in the monasteries of the Church of the East. By David A. Michelson. (Early Christian Studies.) Pp. xxviii + 329 incl. 1 ills and one map. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 978 0 19 883624 7

JEH (75) 2024; doi:10.1017/S0022046924000605

This outstanding book lays the foundation for a history of ascetic reading in East Syrian monasticism comparable to the history of *lectio divina* in medieval Latin monasticism, pioneered by Jean Leclercq in the 1950s and augmented by numerous scholars since. It matches Leclercq's classic *The love of learning and the desire for God* (1957) in the quality of its scholarship, its conceptual and methodological clarity and its originality. Leclercq, however, took his narrative from late antiquity to the thirteenth century, while Michelson concludes in the late seventh century with Dadisho' of Qatar, whose work marks the consolidation of a tradition of contemplative reading in the monastic context. Michelson's book clears the way for him and others to carry the story into the medieval period.

The library of paradise divides into two parts. Part I ('Methodology', consisting of three chapters) frames the study within the questions generated by the wider history of reading, explains how the two key figures in the establishment of Anglophone Syriac studies (William Cureton and William Wright) organised Syriac manuscripts and literature in ways that have obscured the interests of monastic scribes and readers, reviews previous scholarship on spiritual exegesis and other relevant topics in Syriac studies and develops models and definitions for the study of contemplative reading in the Church of the East. Michelson persuasively argues that Syriac ascetic reading should not be conceptualised as a variation of western monasticism's *lectio divina*. Rather, these two traditions developed in parallel from their shared foundation in fourth- and fifth-century Egyptian monasticism. To explore spiritual reading among the Egyptian desert Fathers, Michelson relies primarily on the evidence of the *Apophthegmata patrum* as interpreted by Douglas Burton-Christie in his classic *The word in the desert* of 1993. In the thirty years since that book, historians' confidence in the *Apophthegmata* as a reliable source for early Egyptian monastic practice has eroded considerably. That hardly matters for the story that Michelson seeks to tell, however, because the *Apophthegmata* represents, along with the *Life of Antony* and Palladius' *Lausiac history*, the Egyptian heritage that late ancient Syrian monks received.

As scholarly pioneers must, Michelson proposes a new term for the tradition that he maps. 'Contemplative ascetic reading' includes 'a number of spiritual readings practices found in East Syrian monasticism, including hearing Scripture, recitation of the hours, and psalmody'. These practices were 'rooted in the model of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt' and served as 'contemplative disciplines on the path of Evagrian divine vision'. By the end of the seventh century, contemplative ascetic reading had become 'established as an institution' in the Church of the East (p. 69).

The four chapters of part II ('Narrative') construct the history of contemplative ascetic reading from its origins through that moment of establishment and then look ahead to later centuries and possible new trajectories of study. The story that Michelson tells has three stages. The first (chapter iv) begins with the first

glimmers of ascetic reading in early works like the *Book of steps* and figures like John the Solitary, and it climaxes in the reforms introduced by Abraham of Kashkar (c. 500–88) at Mount Izla, which legislated ascetic reading as part of the monastic regime. Michelson draws on a variety of sources, including and most productively the *Life of Rabban Bar 'Edta*, and he produces convincing evidence for women who engaged in ascetic reading and taught it to others. During the second stage (chapter v), ascetic reading practices gained their theological and spiritual justification and context in Evagrius of Pontus' spiritual programme as found in Syriac translations of his works. Above all, Babai the Great (d. 628) placed ascetic reading in a Syrian Evagrian framework that found its goal in *theōria*, the vision of God. This spiritually transformative mode of reading differed from and came into conflict with the exegetically motivated reading practised in the schools. Michelson gives welcome attention to precisely how Syriac translators and Babai revised Evagrius' thought as found in his works that survive in Greek. The late seventh century saw the third or 'maturation stage' of East Syrian contemplative reading (chapter vi), when the combination of Evagrian spirituality and ascetic reading spread and proved its fruitfulness for monastic formation. 'Enanisho' of Adiabene's publication of his anthology of monastic literature, *Paradise*, was a landmark moment, for it became the canonical collection of nonbiblical works for ascetic reading. It received a popular commentary by Dadisho', who provided monks with a guide to reading it and other literature. Dadisho' urged his readers, in Michelson's words, 'to resist competing forms of reading, such as scholasticism, and even hymnody' and instead to read 'so that they might "depart" to a vision of Paradise' (p. 236). The final chapter recapitulates the book's narrative and its implications, looks forward to authors like Isaac of Nineveh and John of Dalyatha, and proposes lines of further study.

This summary scarcely does justice to the rich detail of Michelson's history, which is meticulously annotated and clearly written. Readers who are not familiar with Syriac literature will find in Michelson an informative guide who is equally at home in institutional history and monastic spirituality. *The library of paradise* is the rare book that can legitimately be called groundbreaking and should interest historians in several fields – monasticism, reading and books, Syriac literature, the Church of the East and others. It will profit contemporary readers with contemplative goals as well as those of us who, with due respect to Dadisho', have more scholastic aims in mind.

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

DAVID BRAKKE

Natural light in medieval churches. By Valadimir Ivanovici and Alice Isabella Sullivan. (East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450.) Pp. xiv + 365 incl. 108 colour and black-and-white ill. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2023. €145.978 90 04 52795 9; 1872 8103
JEH (75) 2024; doi:10.1017/S002204692400054X

Although it was over forty years ago, I still remember vividly a morning eucharist in the church of the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire, where I was studying for ordination to the priesthood. The preacher was my teacher and spiritual director whom I greatly respected. Fr Cedma was elderly, frail and