The Wisdom of the Pearlers: An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism, translated, with an Introduction, by Brian E. Colless (Cistercian Studies 216; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2008) xvii + 240 pp; $34.95

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Brian Colless' anthology of Syriac mystical writers is an intriguing and idiosyncratic contribution to the resources available for the study and appreciation of Syriac literature. This observation is not intended to be negative; simply that in the original sense of the word, Colless presents the Syriac tradition and heritage in his own way.

The amount of information he provides is remarkable for a relatively slim volume, although in the organization of the materials in a variety of formats, it does take some time for the reader to be able to coordinate and assimilate what is presented.

Appropriately for a student of the Christian East, Colless entitles the initial section "Orientation," in which he reviews modern scholarship, along with journaling his own involvement and passion in the field since the mid-1960's. The description of his visit to St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai notably marks for him a euphoric peak experience.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the content of this book has an autobiographical agenda, for the authors and books Colless includes are largely those that have captured his imagination from his student years on. As sometimes is the case with studies of mystical writers, Colless does not address directly the definition of mysticism or how mysticism has functioned inside or outside of the particular faith traditions, though he acknowledges that ascetical discipline and spirituality constitute important manifestations of the mystical spirit.

The unifying theme apparent from the title is that the various authors are "pearlers," those who dive for the prized pearl (*margānītā*), the pearl of great price of the Gospel, a persistent image in Syriac literature. The second section, "The Mystic Pearlers," is an introduction to the authors and works included in the anthology, along with a number of non-Syriac authors deemed critical for the development of Eastern thought. The desert ascetics, Evagrios, Makarios, Dionysios are appropriately included and summarized, but since these authors do not have a reading in the anthology some incongruity develops between the purpose of this

introductory section and the corresponding entries in the anthology. At first glance the structure implies a short overview of each reading in the introduction. However, Colless seems more intent to provide a sweeping overview of the Syriac mystical tradition, including its Greek influences and antecedents, than to offer a precise description of the anthology's readings. The introductions are uneven in length, some quite brief, others quite extended.

Colless' system of transliteration of the names of authors and works follows an Eastern/Greek pattern (Evagrios Pontikos, Makarios, Esaias of Sketis, Dionysios, Adelphios) which appears idiosyncratic to those familiar with Syriac scholarship. The *Book of Degrees* (i.e. *Book of Steps*), Joseph the Visionary (Hazzāyā) and John the Venerable (Sabā, of Dalyāthā) catch one off guard at first, but one should remember that Cistercian Publications' series is targeted for a general audience interested in Eastern spirituality, an audience that knows neither the old nor the new names. Colless provides excellent appendices: "Textual Sources" with precise references to the original editions behind the readings in the anthology; an annotated Reference Bibliography to the secondary literature; Scriptural references, a Glossary and Index of technical terms and names.

Colless emphasizes the wandering and itinerancy of Syriac monks in contrast to the stability of the Egyptian monastic tradition. Escorting the reader through the Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the legend of Mar Awgin, he lands in the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, in which is imbedded the "Song of the Pearl," the poem that provides his organizing motif for the anthology. *The Song of the Pearl* is the first text in his anthology and earns his longest analysis. Rejecting the interpretation of the poem as a Gnostic redeemer myth, Colless perceives it as a parable or allegory of the Christian's pilgrimage through life. While indicating the various scriptural, doctrinal and personal allusions in the poem, Colless recognizes that his reading is only one of many possible readings. Indeed, his orthodox Christian interpretations are quite complex and do not always follow sequentially the text, rendering the flow of his argument difficult at times to follow amid a dazzling array and range of images and metaphors. At times, he connects the images in the Song to canonical New Testament and Syriac ascetical symbols with a little too much effort that is not always convincing. He sees the poem structured "analogous to the classical mystical framework of the three stages" of purgation, illumination and unification. It is not surprising, therefore, that

Colless understands the *Song of the Pearl* on a mystical level, similar in details to the teachings of later Syriac mystical writers.

As he proceeds, Colless usually does not stick strictly with the author at hand, but will introduce allied concepts and images from other authors, some not yet formally introduced. One needs to read this Introduction as a whole, which opens to the reader the entire scope of Syriac mysticism and its movements, rather than concise summaries of particular authors, their ideas and biographies.

The *Spiritual Homilies* of Makarios the Great are shown particularly to have had a deep and wide-ranging influence upon much of Eastern and Western spiritual and mystical writing. (Pseudo-) Dionysios the Areopagite is explored at length as much for the influence of his writings as for their content. For a reader not familiar with Eastern Christian and Syriac theology and literature, however, this may be a bewildering section not easy to grasp.

With Aphrahat the Persian, Colless chooses to focus on the Sons of the Covenant whom he characterizes as "monks" and their institution as monasticism. A little more problematic vocabulary is his linking *qyāmā* with "resurrection," although Sebastian Brock has refuted this suggestion since the form for resurrection is *qyāmtā*. His use of "serenity/serene" for *šapyūtā*, however, is a good alternative and addition to the range of translations for this term.

Ephrem the Syrian receives a more impressionistic than detailed introduction, though Colless includes here an elegant translation of Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* 32, in which meditation is symbolized as commerce rendering profit and treasure, that could easily have been placed in the anthology.

The *Book of Degrees* (*Book of Steps*/*Liber Graduum*) receives extensive treatment, a solid and even exposition, mostly attempting to solve the mystery of the anonymous authorship and its relationship to the Messalian controversy. Colless does point to the possible influence on Christian asceticism of Buddhist practices, perhaps mediated through Manichaeism. Focusing primarily on Mēmrā Twelve with its description of the three forms of the Church—the visible Church, the Church of the Heart, and the Hidden/Heavenly Church—Colless comments that such a hierarchical construction is a normal development for established churches.

Colless continues with the thorny issue of authorship, presenting his candidate, Adelphios of Edessa, a disciple of Julian Saba. Adelphios reputedly visited Anthony the Great and on return immersed himself in severely ascetical practices. But according to a

later report of Philoxenos of Mabbug, his ascetical endeavors were without humility and eventually he abandoned discipline and became the founder of Messalianism. Colless embarks on a lengthy discussion of the affinities of the *Book of Degrees* to the alleged traits of Messalianism, and while he does not say absolutely that Adelphios is its author, he proposes to test this hypothesis.

However, in raising hypothetical possibilities Colless nearly converts some of these into actualities, and at several points his logic slips. After listing the four primary precepts of Messalianism, Colless declares, "In my opinion, this (*Book of Degrees*) is essentially a Messalian book." He reiterates that this is not a value judgment and suggests that the four Messalian principles are "distorted versions of ideas that actually appear in the book." He proceeds to offer examples of other works that have been distorted, as well as those works for which two versions are found—one 'heretical,' the other 'cleaned up'—by a subsequent sympathetic editor. Colless suggests that extant copies of the *Book of Degrees* might contain "alterations, omissions, and interpolations" to correct its errant tendencies. In making these suggestions, he is indicating that the *Book of Degrees* is not a Messalian text *per se*. Messalianism, by his own definition, is the distortion of some ideas of the *Book of Degrees* —so if the Book were 'real' Messalianism, how is the historical phenomenon of Messalianism then to be named and interpreted?

Colless' attempt to draw the Book into the second Messalian error—that baptism and other sacraments are inefficient—focuses on the Church of the Heart as the mystical church, a worrisome concept to bishops obviously invested in the earthly and physical institution. The emphasis of the Book on assiduous prayer, à la Jesus groaning in the Garden, is interpreted by Colless in too absolutist a way. If one prays with great effort, devotion and passion, does this practice automatically make one into a Messalian? Every time the "Messalian" author urges prayer, does it necessarily mean that this prayer is superior to and exclusive of all other means of salvation? Colless attempts to paint the Book into a Messalian corner, declaring that "the Messalian stance of attempting to stay within the church is consistent with the position taken by the author of the *Book of Degrees*." If we affirm the earthly institutional church, are we, therefore, half-way to becoming Messalians?

Yet Colless acknowledges that the *Book of Degrees* was handed down in Syriac monasteries and its doctrines influenced subsequent Syriac mystics, but these latter neither cite nor refer to the Book by name. The intention here is not be overly critical, for the issue of

Messalianism's relationship to the *Book of Degrees* is still seeking an answer, and thus Colless' probes are needed—even if this reviewer believes there are flaws in his approach.

An excellent introduction is provided for John the Solitary of Apamea, drawing attention to John's emphasis on the eschatological nature of perfection after resurrection. The efforts of Colless to include the image of the pearl in John's thought and thus a connection to the *Song of the Pearl* is strained, based on a metaphor or image used by the Solitary, not an inclusive symbol. Colless constructs an analogy with first century Buddhist scripture that is helpful for a global picture of the phenomenon of asceticism, but he is not able to demonstrate a real connection between John and the Buddhist authors.

Philoxenus of Mabbug is briefly introduced, centering upon his *Letter to Patriq*, in which links are made to Evagrius and the *Book of Degrees* in the search for a contemplative vision. Stephen bar Sudaili is an unusual choice for an anthology, but it is the *Book of Hierotheos* that Colless wants to investigate, recognizing that this Book did not sustain lasting popularity. In the *Book of Hierotheos* he lifts out examples of Evagrian Origenism, "revealing things that Paul did not dare tell" in Hierotheos' words. Colless describes this book as "eschatological pantheism," in which "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:8). It offers a mystical system of ascent and descent resulting finally in the perfected intellect becoming absorbed in Unity beyond love and beloved, in which there is neither height nor depth, nor God, Christ or Spirit.

Abraham of Nathpar, an early seventh century hermit and ascetic, is another singular choice. His disciple Job translated his writings from Syriac into Persian, but ten works survive under his name in Syriac, mostly taken from earlier writers—Colless wonders whether anything extant is authentic and whether he should have included Abraham in the anthology!

Gregorios the Hermit, a sixth-seventh century hermit who entered a monastery in Cyprus, eventually became its superior, and then returned to Mount Izla. His work "On Holy Contemplation" shows the influence of the concepts of Evagrios and John the Solitary. His goal, like that of Evagrios, is impassibility or *apatheia*.

Sahdona-Martyrios, a seventh century monk who died near Edessa, hounded by the Church of the East for alleged heresy after being a bishop for fifteen years. His most important work is *The Book of Perfection*, showing the influence of Evagrios, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. Martyrios focuses his mysticism on Paul's antithesis between the outer and inner person

(2 Corinthians 4:16). Perfect prayer without blemish is the target, an interior offering of the heart.

Simon Taibutheh, a seventh-century East Syrian monk and physician, wrote a medico-mystical book in which the mystical path involves seven stages and then three ascents, again owing something to Evagrios. Noteworthy for Colless' symbolic talisman, Simon utilizes the symbol of musk rather than that of a pearl.

Isaac of Nineveh not only receives an excellent overview, but Colless also presents brief synopses of several anthology passages. Dadisho Qatraya is briefly summarized, referring to the one extract in the anthology. Joseph the Visionary (Hazzāyā) is also given a good measured introduction, not only to his biography and literary works, but also to the scope of his mystical vision.

By his own admission, John the Venerable (Sābā/Dalyāthā) is Colless' favorite. This eighth century mystic is attributed the most passages in the anthology, to which Colless provides insightful explanations of the key concepts.

Another seldom chosen author is Abraham bar Dashandad, an eighth century teacher at Bashesh in Persia, two of whose better known pupils became patriarchs of the Church of the East - Katholikos Timotheos I (780-823) and Isho' bar Nun (d. 828). His only known text is familiar from Alphonse Mingana's *Woodbrooke Studies*. Colless again works to align Abraham's mystical theology with the narrative of the *Song of the Pearl*, but becomes distracted with the Song, leaving behind Abraham for the most part.

Closing out the introduction and the anthology is Bar Hebraeus. Colless gives a brief summary of Bar Hebraeus' life and work without being exhaustive, proceeding quickly to his mystical system which owes much to previous mystics, especially John the Venerable and John the Solitary. The citation here of sections in the texts becomes a little confusing in order to keep track of the references. One last time, Colless tries to press the pearl imagery, but Bar Hebraeus offers no real opportunity.

Finally, one arrives at the anthology of readings, clearly the best part of the book. The excellent translations capture the poetic and mystical spirit of the writers. Colless keys the readings to an index indicating the precise published source, although the translations are untitled and so leave the reader without a ready context. While it is obvious Colless has collected as many texts around the pearl theme as he could find, the readings do provide a lectionary of spiritual reading for the person interested primarily in the insights of these Syriac authors.

Where I have outlined some concerns, these surround the virtually bifurcated nature and purpose of this volume. On one hand, Colless has provided a very useful anthology of readings for their own sake; but on the other hand, his introduction appears to aspire more to be an overview of Syriac mysticism in general, and only secondarily as a synopsis of the individual authors and readings. In a number of cases the anthology entry is ignored in the introduction, and vice versa, the long exposition on the *Book of Degrees* and its possible author Adelphios of Edessa is illustrated by only a short section from Mēmrā Twelve which has already been translated three times (Murray, Brock, Kitchen & Parmentier).

Nevertheless, the idiosyncrasies of this volume work to highlight its contributions to an understudied aspect of Syriac literature and theology. Hopefully, this is not the last word, for as with all mysticism, one is never able to comprehend the whole picture at once.