Jeffrey Wickes, *Bible and Poetry in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Ephrem's Hymns on Faith* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). Pp. xiv + 209; $95.

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In this book Jeffrey Wickes sets out to "make an argument about how the Bible functioned in Ephrem's hymns" (xiii). This is not, however, a contribution to the history of exegesis, nor is it a comprehensive study of Ephrem's use of the Bible. Rather, Wickes examines how, in composing the *Madrashe on Faith*, Ephrem the Syrian "used the Bible to build a literary world" (1). The book is, then, based on a close reading of a single collection of Ephrem's hymns. Yet, despite limiting the scope of his inquiry to the *Madrashe on Faith*, Wickes offers arguments both about Ephrem and "about the relationship between exegesis and literature in the world of late antiquity" (1). Thus, Ephrem does not stand alone in this book, but is treated as a participant "in a broader late antique Mediterranean culture, which, as it relates to Ephrem, can be identified as 'Greco-Syriac'" (12).

Wickes is more interested in the generative capacity of the Bible in Ephrem, or in Ephrem's "literarily productive reading [of the Bible]—one that seeks to create new literary works rather than simply draw out the meaning of older ones" (4). Wickes argues that "Ephrem reflected on his own world through the lens of the Bible" (2). Ephrem's literary formation is practically unrecoverable. However, Wickes is right to see the Bible at the heart of his education and his imagination. Ephrem seems to have been raised in a culture steeped in the Bible, a culture that could and would "quote it, allude to it, imitate it, and recycle it" (2). Thus, for Ephrem, the Bible is a storehouse, a lens, a governing narrative, and the basis of early

Syriac poetics. "Whatever he is speaking about, Ephrem uses the Bible as a tool to aid his processing and presentation of the world that he and his audience occupy" (3).

Wickes proceeds by thinking more carefully about the genre of the madrasha. How we categorize Syriac poetry is an increasingly important and interesting question. There is, as Wickes rightly observes, a need to avoid "too easily reading our own literary categories into a Syriac literary context" (xiii). Thus, Wickes eschews the popular translation of hymn, lyric poem, song, or teaching-song and prefers to transliterate the Syriac term "madrasha" throughout the volume. Wickes is not interested simply in the genre problem in terms of modern translations equivalents, however, but wants to think more about how this genre functioned in late antique Mesopotamia. "The material found within [Ephrem's *Madrashe on Faith*] manifests a unique Syriac literary idiom but also suggests a poet thoroughly immersed in the late antique world" (14).

A major contribution of the first chapter is Wickes's portrayal of the discursive world of the *Madrashe on Faith*. He turns to the larger corpus of madrashe and makes an argument that while many of the madrashe can be placed in a liturgical context with reasonable confidence because of their distinctive vocabulary and liturgical themes, the *Madrashe on Faith* "developed primarily for contexts of study" (14). This usefully extends that aspect of the genre of the madrashe that is best captured by "teaching song" to educational spaces outside of the church. Thus, Wickes argues for the madrashe's connection not simply to worship, but also "to an environment of philosophical and exegetical debate" (18). In this extensive collection, Ephrem seems preoccupied with "topics that suggest contexts of study and discussion." Specifically, Ephrem concerns himself "with debates over philosophical ideas. He engages in twisting discussions of the nature of the soul and re-

flections on how this relates to human knowledge of God. He assesses what we can and cannot know about the nature of God and develops complex metaphors to articulate the shared substance of the Trinity. He articulates a philosophically indebted cosmology and psychology" (18). Wickes concludes that, "The poems in the *Madrashe on Faith* … suggest a blurred space between liturgy and classroom, in which pedagogical songs were used to debate difficult philosophical ideas, engage problematic and controversial biblical passages, and reflect on the role of teaching and teachers. Within this context, the Bible formed the primary lens through which Ephrem engaged his audience" (19). As promised, Wickes then places this newly described genre within a late antique literary context (20–23).

Anyone who has read the *Madrashe on Faith* cannot help but notice that "the primary theological idea that lends the poems … their unity [is] the idea that God cannot be understood by human interrogation" (24). Wickes explores this theme in his second chapter, with an interest primarily in the way Ephrem's poetry "filtered the world through the lens of the Bible" (24). Thus, Wickes discusses the theological context of the *Madrashe on Faith*, not simply against "the intellectual landscape of Antioch and Mesopotamia of the 360s," but primarily to show that Ephrem "takes the language and theological ideas that he uses to respond to Aetius and Eunomius from the Bible" (24). It is the Bible, he argues, that gives rhetorical power and authority to Ephrem's language and his denunciation of heretical investigation. "Ephrem's polemic against investigation reflected the theological culture of fourth-century Antioch, but Ephrem articulated and poeticized his mistrust by constructing a specific lexicon that emerged from the Bible" (31). Ephrem rarely engages in specific or intensive exegesis of biblical episodes or passages, rather he invokes the authority of allusivity, what Wickes calls "a relationship of likeness be-

tween the Bible and his madrashe" (34). The Bible thus offers the epistemological and hermeneutical frame for Ephrem's refutation of heretical investigation. Instead of a philosophically motivated inquiry, "through allusion, quotation, and expansion, Ephrem builds his own rhetorical presentation of investigation out of that found in the Bible" (36).

In the third chapter, Wickes seeks to "uncover Ephrem's Bible—not the physical text upon which he drew, but the text as he imagined it and wove it into his literary body" (43). Ephrem imagined a Bible that was at once clear but also opaque, but not just clear to the believers and opaque to the heretics. Rather, "In addressing his opponents, Ephrem insisted that the Bible was simple, but they missed its meaning. In addressing his allies, he insisted that the Bible was cryptic, because it truly represented the God who transcended human understanding" (45). The Bible offers the language and terms of all theological investigation and articulation. For example, "insofar as someone names Christ using terms from outside the Bible, that person risks destroying the Bible's way of speaking about Christ" (46). Ephrem's opponents failed to either use the Bible to construct their theology or misunderstood the Bible when they did use it. In tracing these failures, Ephrem offers a "genealogy of misreading" (51). Wickes explores Ephrem's theology of names and symbols and concludes that Ephrem was not simply doing exegetical work but continues the work of God in the Bible itself, "bringing forth ever new meanings, ever new reflections of God" (58). Ephrem's vision of the Bible was of a text that was simultaneously generative, polyvalent, and destabilizing, while at the same time "true" (59). As Wickes puts it, what emerges from a close analysis of Ephrem's use of the Bible "is a biblical poetics that parallels the mechanisms he finds at play in the Bible's composition." In other words, "While the Bible's words and narratives form

metaphors that God has arranged for the sake of an audience, the poet reshapes these same metaphors for the sake of yet another audience, rendering them parables whose new morals are manifest in the context of Ephrem's own community" (62). This is an example of the fusion of the Bible and Ephrem's world that is one of many valuable arguments that Wickes makes in this volume.

In the final three chapters, Wickes explores "the three primary ways in which Ephrem reshapes the Bible in the *Madrashe on Faith:* to represent himself, his audience, and Christ" (62). In the fourth chapter, Wickes offers a very nice analysis of selected texts from the *Madrashe on Faith* that show how Ephrem constructs a scriptural self. This is not a self that is achieved through considering biblical exemplarity. Rather, this is the scriptural poetic self, relating specifically to the use of biblical language to create Ephrem's image of himself as poet and thinker. This is what Wickes calls the poet's "I." The result is not simply a self-conception, but also "a way of placing his poetic self within the biblical text" (75). By placing himself within the text mimetically, the poet is establishing his relationship with Christ. Instead of probing from the outside, the poet petitions from within, and like the figures he discusses, he is blessed and healed.

In the fifth chapter, Wickes discusses the recreation of Ephrem's audience as scriptural selves. Ephrem repeatedly presents his audience with biblical figures and episodes and encourages them to see themselves in these texts. This is not a facile activity in which the audience identifies with the textual heroes and boos off the villains. Rather, "Ephrem consistently locates his audience between these overt heroes and villains" (90). Elsewhere, Ephrem's metaphors and rhetoric are intended to inspire awe and wonder rather than identity. For Ephrem, awe is the appropriate stance to take towards God. As

Wickes puts it, "For the most part, however, the audience stands outside the drama of the text. The biblical scenes are vividly depicted for them to behold with awe rather than scenes in which they can participate" (99). Ephrem is carefully constructing a biblically inflected moral inventory for his audience. He is not afraid for the audience to see their own flaws in the mirror of the scriptural text. Rather, Ephrem is anxiously engaged in using the Bible "to create an imaginative world upon which his audience can look and through which it can contemplate itself" (103). In fact, in many cases, "Ephrem's concern is not with the Bible's meaning in and of itself, but with how the narrative can be used to help the audience contemplate its own moral horizons" (103).

In the final chapter, Wickes seeks to show that "Ephrem used the Bible to present Christ as beyond investigation and, thus, of the same order as the Father" (104). This is not an unproblematic task. There is an assumption of consistency at play when Ephrem "constructs this divine Christ through the dramatic representation and weaving together of the narrative scenes of the Gospels" (105). But a certain creativity is required to make the Bible logically and narratively consistent. Ephrem is happy to weave together "diverse and disjointed scenes from the Gospels to depict a unified and obviously divine Christ." However, "Whereas the details of [Christ's] life in those writings are contradictory and difficult to interpret, Ephrem erases the texts' gaps and ambiguities and melds together Gospel scenes to create a clear picture of Christ as the unambiguous Son of the heavenly Father who comes to earth as its rightful caretaker" (105). It seems that even for Ephrem, the Bible needs a little help to live up to its role as the standard of faith for the fourth century church. Thus, although Ephrem wants to create a biblically informed theology, he is sometimes forced to use "the lexicon and thought world of the madrasha

to represent the biblical scenes rather than taking their language into his literary form" (113). The objective is unity, and sometimes this required that Ephrem "rewrites the text so that both poem and Bible speak together in … a unified voice" (118). Thus, "Ephrem's madrashe demonstrate yet another of the ways late antique authors negotiated New Testament material" (123).

Wickes has given us a sophisticated study of the Bible in Ephrem's *Madrashe on Faith*. The book is short, but dense, and the chapters are filled with careful readings of the madrashe. This makes the absence of an index of citations unfortunate (an oversight that is remedied in the appendix to this review). The book is an interesting and largely successful answer to the question that the author set out to tackle. At the end of the book, the reader has a thick and sophisticated sense of several ways that the Bible is used by Ephrem in the *Madrashe on Faith*. Not unreasonably, the book presupposes that the reader has first read the collection, with a good introduction to it, which is readily available in Wickes previously published book (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 130). Together, these two books make an important contribution to our understanding of Ephrem, the *Madrashe on Faith*, and the ways that the Bible fueled Ephrem's intellectual formation and imagination. *Bible and Poetry* is by no means a definitive study of either the *Madrashe on Faith* or Ephrem's use of the Bible. It was not written as such. Rather it constitutes a lively and provocative voice in an ongoing conversation in Ephrem studies.

APPENDIX: INDEX OF CITATIONS TO THE WORKS OF EPHREM THE SYRIAN

References in parentheses refer to the page in the main body of the book to which the endnote is connected.