BOOK REVIEW

Robert A. Kitchen and Glenn Peers. *The Bird Who Sang the Trisagion of Isaac of Antioch. Becoming Parrot in a Late Antique Syriac Sermon*. Cham, Switzerland; Palgrave Macmillan. 129 p. ISBN 9783031600760.

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It was bound to happen. Thanks to Robert Kitchen and Glenn Peers, readers have the opportunity to explore the ways modern film (Stanley Kubrick) and cartoons (*The Adventures of Tin Tin*) illumine a fifth-century Syriac poem about a liturgically adept parrot. The Syriac poem is "The Bird Who Sang the Trisagion," about a parrot who echoes Miaphysite Christological views. The Syriac-speaking poet is Isaac of Antioch, who 'parrots' the parrot. Or, as Glenn Peers puts it, he "finds himself falling into a kind of parrot-hood himself" (p. 64). The year 2024 has been surprisingly good for this Syriac-speaking poet, whose identity has long been embroiled in controversy. After all, two English translations of poems attributed to Isaac have been published in this one year alone: Adam Becker's translation of his moral homilies (SBL Press)[1] and this masterful volume by Robert Kitchen and Glenn Peers (Palgrave Macmillan). This slender work may be the first volume in the Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature to feature early Syriac poetry; this in a series that "publishes work that looks, specifically, at the implications of the 'animal turn' for the field of English Studies" (preface).

As the authors point out, Isaac has been a largely understudied poet, perhaps partly because there has been significant debate over which Isaac, among several different individuals, authored the corpus attributed to him. Among several possible contenders, Kitchen identifies the author of this poem, "The Bird Who Sang the Trisagion," as an Isaac who moved to Antioch in the late fifth century and who is thought to have written 183 *memre* and 19 *madrashe* (pp. 4–5). This is the Isaac who

[1] Adam Becker, ed. and trans., *Isaac of Antioch. Homilies on Moral and Monastic Reform* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024).

supported the Patriarch, Peter the Fuller (471–488 CE), in the controversy between Miaphysite and Chalcedonian Christians over Peter's addition of the phrase "who was crucified for us" to the Trisagion, a traditional hymn of divine liturgy in Orthodox and Catholic churches. Notably, the authors of this volume give just enough historical background for the lay reader to place the poem in context without overburdening the reader by detailing the numerous controversies that beset this contentious Patriarch. The focus is clearly on the poem as literature. Overall, the contents of this slim volume are divided into three sections: an introduction, an English translation, and an interpretive essay.

In the introduction, Kitchen provides a history of the poem and an overview of Syriac Christianity and fifth-century Christology, all of which will be helpful for those approaching these topics for the first time. Rather ingeniously titled "A Fowl Theology of the Cross" (pp. 1–24), the introduction does a fine job of introducing the theological and liturgical features of the poem, providing an overview of the difficulties Miaphysites had with perceived Chalcedonian and 'Nestorian' views of the Incarnation. The introduction makes clear how those perceptions lay at the heart of the poem's theological argument (p. 17). Further, Kitchen differs from some other scholars in that he sees the parrot and avian imagery as a more central figure to the poem, not simply as a 'puppet' for the author. The parrot's role in the poem is significant as it serves as a unique vehicle for expressing complex theological ideas. A key takeaway for Kitchen and Peers is that parrot and 'parrotry' take center stage: "Isaac mimics the parrot's crying out 'Holy Holy God'" (p. 16). Kitchen helpfully divides this very long poem into sections and adds interpretive titles to each part. He recognizes that "the memra appears to be a loose collection of literary pieces, but it is a carefully artisaned and balanced work to describe and demonstrate, exhort and challenge, as well as to rebuke, so that the congregation may be inspired and energized to follow the God who was crucified for us" (p. 23).

This is the first English language translation of this work, a very long poem of 1068 lines in 7 by 7 syllabic poetic meter. Robert Kitchen's translation is based on the printed Syriac edition that was published by Paul Bedjan in 1903, though the Syriac text (including variant readings) is not provided here. This English translation takes up nearly forty pages in a fairly small font (pp. 25–62). Throughout this extended poem, Kitchen's extensive experience is evident; he generally manages to capture both the poetic and the theological nuances of the original Syriac text well. When possible, he largely reflects Syriac poetic features, such as alliteration and repetition. For example, in line 346, he translates ܚܕܬ … ܒܚܕܬ as "in a *new* way . . . *new*." Equally important, he does not push the limits and thus mangle his English prose while trying to reflect these nuances in the original language. The translation appears largely free of errors; the few small discrepancies this reviewer noticed may have arisen when the volume was formatted for publication ("I saw *a new*" in line 345 instead of "I saw *anew*"; or the reversal ܪܙܐ ܕܐܠܗܐ for "*remza d-Allaha*" on page 69). The editors seem to have tried to make the 7 by 7 syllabic meter visually clearer by beginning the second half of each line at the center of the page. While this

format may help the reader follow the poetic structure of the poem, it can be disorienting as this format often results in caesura, or spaces, between the two parts of each line. One is tempted to read down when encountering these longer breaks in the line, when they should read across the break. Kitchen is very clear that he is working with Bedjan's 1903 edition of the Syriac text and not trying to create a new edition, and he helpfully provides a list of other manuscripts containing this poem should others be inspired to improve upon the published Syriac text.

Following the translation is an interpretive essay by Glenn Peers. Echoing Patricia Cox Miller, Peers sees Isaac's poem as part of a "zoological imagination," thinking both about and with animals (p. 64). This wide-ranging essay situates Isaac (and his parrot) in very good company, as Peers draws upon writers as diverse as Wittgenstein, Flaubert, Descartes, Queneau, Derrida, Defoe, and even John Locke. Syriacists tend to not to be experts in literary theory, so this essay is eye opening and should assist the reader in understanding the myriad of ways parrots have functioned in literature. Far from being a simple poem about a parrot, Peers suggests that deeper themes are at play: "normal positions are reversed, parrots, assumed to mimic, speak divine truth and humans, repeat after the wise creatures" (p. 65). Or, to put it another way, as a rational human being who parrots a truth-telling parrot for over a thousand lines, Isaac is encouraging his audience to "be like a laborer in the service of God, but also be an instrument, be an animal. Be. Don't just yakkety yakyk." (p. 118). In this light, the volume's subtitle is not so subtle: "Becoming Parrot in a Late Antique Syriac Sermon." Perhaps some of the most thought-provoking sections of this final essay are reflections upon mimicry, pedagogy, and sound (or silence) in society and religion. Peers does not doubt that the poem would have "asked a lot of the audience" (p. 68), and he puts forward some remarkable ideas about how this exceedingly long poem/sermon could have been presented and to whom. The end of the volume includes a helpful, though perhaps too short index; words seem to have been chosen somewhat haphazardly and can be repetitive. Does the reader really need to know where they can find "chirped," as well as "chirping" and "chirps" (p. 125), when neither "Christ" nor "Jesus" are listed in the index (though both terms also appear in the volume)? Also, although a small thing, it would have helped to have included a scriptural index as well, though biblical references are included as footnotes to the translation.

All told, in this slender volume one will find a skillful and lucid English translation of this famous poem attributed to the fifth-century writer Isaac of Antioch. But, just as significant, one will also find a helpful framework for interpreting this poem against the broader historical and literary backdrop of the frequently peculiar human-parrot relationship. It is quite refreshing to see a volume where Syriac poetry is upheld for its literary qualities while it is also studied with an eye toward the broader canon of literary works. One hopes this translation and interpretive essay can spur similar interdisciplinary reflection upon the rich Syriac literary heritage.