

## Ascend to Holiness: The Book of Steps<sup>1</sup> The Syriac *Liber Graduum*

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### Abstract

This article introduces “The Book of Steps” (Liber Graduum), a 4th/5th century Syriac spiritual work, to a wider audience. It highlights the book’s significance as a collection of 30 discourses by an anonymous ascetic, offering insights into early Syriac Christian life and spirituality. Despite being overshadowed by other Syriac literature, it provides a unique perspective on the transition from pre-monastic asceticism to monastic influences, dividing Christians into “Upright” and “Perfect.” The article addresses the controversy surrounding potential Messalian influences, arguing that the book’s emphasis on church order and sacraments refutes such claims. It clarifies the book’s title origin and emphasizes its value as a holistic guide to spiritual growth.

**Keywords:** Liber Graduum, Syriac Asceticism, Spiritual Growth

### Introduction

The present article is an attempt to introduce *The Book of Steps*, The Syriac *Liber Graduum* to the general public who are interested in drawing the rich spiritual and ecclesial wealth contained in this book. I use the text quoted in footnote, *The Book of Steps*, *The Syriac Liber*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum*, translated, with an introduction and notes by Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 49008, USA, 2004. The present study is based on this translation and all references are from this book. My main source of writing this article is the English translation of the book mentioned above.

*Graduum*, translated, with an introduction and notes by Robert A.Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier.

We do not know this book's author nor the author's historical or cultural setting. *The Book of Steps* or *Liber Graduum* is a collection of thirty *memre*/discourses/ sermons/ homilies by an anonymous Syriac ascetic of the fourth or fifth century. It is an important spiritual work of the fourth/fifth century Syriac Church. Unfortunately, the book has not received proper attention as it has been overshadowed by more famous early Syriac spiritual literature. It is understudied and few people knew the value of this spiritual treasure.

The anonymous author who seems to be a good shepherd with the smell of his sheep treats almost all the problems of a local Church of ancient times and writes from his personal experiences. The author presents the spiritual life of a baptised person in terms of his participation in ecclesial life. Christian ascetical life is a highly demanding programme of spiritual growth and maturity. *Liber Graduum* is an important text of the Syriac Church, which is having a rich ascetic and monastic tradition. A casual reading of the text realizes that *Liber Graduum* reflects the transition from pre-monastic Syriac asceticism to the subsequent phase influenced by Egyptian Basilian monasticism. *Liber Graduum* provides a realistic and holistic picture of the spiritual life of the Christians at different levels. The book gives holistic and practical spiritual guidance with adequate insight for the journey towards Perfection. The author divides the Christians into Upright and Perfect. The Upright are perceived as those in whom a demonic presence persists alongside the activity of the Holy Spirit. There are authors who conjure the influence of Messalian controversy on *Liber Graduum*. Messalianism was a Christian sect in Mesopotamia that existed from around C.E. 360 to about the ninth century. Their beliefs and practices were heavily influenced by Eastern mysticism. The basic concept of Messalians was that all one had to do to reach perfection and salvation was to pray unceasingly and the Church and its Sacraments were considered useless in both the long and the short run and they taught a materialistic vision of God. In *Liber Graduum* there is an echo of what had happened into a Messalian theme. Some even considered *Liber Grduum* as the Syriac Messalian book. However, later scholarship understood the great contribution *Liber Graduum* to early Syriac spirituality and ascetical life. "The due importance given to the visible order of the Church, its altar, and the Sacraments in the Book of Steps, refutes the accusation of having Messalianism tendencies and contempt

for the external order and observances in the Church.” (Kollamparampil, 2014, p.271).

The original manuscripts do not give a title to the text and William Wright, in his 1871 *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, referred to the work in several manuscripts as the *Book of Steps*. When Michael Kmosko (1926) edited the text for the series *Patrologia Syriaca* in 1926, he rendered the Latin translation of the Syriac title *Liber Graduum* and thus we have the title *The Book of Steps*. But interestingly the key word to rise up, to ascend, is found only in two *memre*: Nineteen, *On the Discernment of the Way of Perfection*, and Twenty, *On the Difficult Steps that are on the Road of the City of Our Lord*, referring to the succeeding levels that a Christian attains on the climb toward the heavenly city of the kingdom. Uprightness and Perfection are the two central themes of *Liber Graduum*, not forgetting the pastoral and ethical concerns of the anonymous author.

One recent research on the images of the ‘visible Church’, the ‘Church of the heart’, and the ‘Church above’, which is in Heaven in *Liber Graduum* is worth mentioning, which sheds much light on the ecclesiological vision of the anonymous author (Aravackal, 2018). The Church exists on three levels and through the visible Church one must travel to the Church of the Heart and the Hidden, heavenly Church. The triple gradated Church in *Liber Graduum* refers to the spiritual maturity of a tripartite person in experiencing and comprehending the mystery of ‘one’ Church. Another recent detailed study on the *Liber Graduum* (Heal & Kitchen, 2014) contains five parts dealing with ‘The World around the Book of Steps,’ ‘The Text,’ ‘Biblical Exegesis,’ ‘Theological Perspectives,’ and ‘Practices of Asceticism’.

### **Syriac Spirituality**

Edessa, modern Urfa in southeastern Turkey, was the centre of the Syriac literature. “Syriac spirituality was relatively untouched by Greek philosophical ideas in its early period, the latter certainly not providing the basis of Syriac theological language” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.15). Syriac Christianity was an ascetically motivated faith and virginity and holiness were given great importance in Christian living. Another theme of Syriac spirituality is the theme of the Christian as a ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner’, a person who does not belong to this corruptible world. These ideals got institutionalized in a group called the Sons/Daughters of the Covenant by the early fourth century. The Syriac ascetics renounce all aspects of civilized life – fire,

clothing, dwelling – and Simeon the Stylite, who lived forty years atop a pillar, is a typical example of this type of Syriac asceticism. Not all of Syriac spirituality was so extreme, and the “*Liber Graduum* portrays a prime example of a community that summoned Christians to a higher way, but still viewed this life, body, and Church as part of God’s world” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.18).

The *Book of Steps* deals with all grades of spiritual life and provides concrete instruction to all levels of Christians. The author presents a consistent portrait of what constitutes an authentic and Perfect holy person. Three virtues to become Perfect are Renunciation or Self-Emptying, Celibacy and Lowliness or Humility. The renunciation of the world, its possessions and its culture, is the core of Syriac spirituality. Renunciation means self-emptying according to the model of Christ. It is fasting to the world. Practicing celibacy requires tremendous maturity and spiritual development. To achieve Perfection celibacy is a must. “Memra 15, on ‘Adam’s Marital Desire,’ exhibits the author’s frustration as he argues passionately for celibacy, attempting to demonstrate that celibacy is the natural state for a human being, as evidenced by the lustlessness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before Adam sinned” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004).

For the author of the *Book of Steps* sexuality is not natural, and is the consequence of a sinful disobedience; therefore, a Perfect is doing what originally is naturally by not engaging in sexual activities. Therefore, there is a hint to indicate that marriage came about as an inferior institution, grudgingly blessed by God, which may not be acceptable to an Upright.

Third virtue is Lowliness or Humility which consists of a castellation of oft-mentioned characteristics and attitudes. The first is, ‘consider everyone better than yourself’ which means that one has renounced personal power and a sense of superiority over anyone. To love and serve the enemies is the second characteristic and the example is Jesus kissing the feet of Judas, his betrayer. Third character warns that those who are in authority find it difficult to attain Perfection (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.215).

Syriac spirituality is marked by a profoundly symbolic vision through which its writers perceive the natural world as windows onto the mysteries of God. Feminine imagery for God is another singular feature of Syriac spirituality.

## **The Syriac *Liber Graduum*<sup>2</sup>**

In 1926, Michael Kmosko published a critical edition of a collection of thirty Syriac homilies to which he gave the Latin title *Liber Graduum* or *The Book of Steps*. Recent researches have shed more light on the text and context of the composition of *Liber Graduum*. John Corbett has demonstrated how the Deuteronomic ‘Call to Holy War’ (Deuteronomy 20;1-20) provides the structure for the ascetic endeavours of the Perfect ones in *Liber Graduum*. Alexander Golitzin traced the recurrence of the concepts of ‘the Glory of Adam’ and ‘divine light’ in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Aphrahat, Ephrem, Pseudo-Macarius and *Liber Graduum*. For Daniel Caner *Liber Graduum* is one of the literary sources for the wandering monks who challenged the institutional church authority. According to another author, Renato Roux, ‘imitation of Christ’ is the main Christological theme of *Liber Graduum*.

*Liber Graduum* explains the dynamics of spiritual life as a way, a journey in progress, to the Perfection that needs the constant activity of the heart. In *Liber Graduum* one observes a beautiful blending of the work of the hands and work of the heart. The major concern of the thirty homilies of *Liber Graduum* is the eternal vigilance and constant discernment in the journey towards Perfection. These homilies bring to light the unique factors of the early Syriac ascetical views and spiritual theology.<sup>3</sup>

### **Manuscripts**

Ms a: *Codex Bibliothecae Nationale de Paris Syrus 201* from the twelfth century is one of the latest among the fifteen manuscripts available to Kmosko. The last one is the *Ms R: Saint Mark’s Jerusalem Syrus 180*, dating to the seventh or eighth century.

### **Structure**

The *Liber Graduum* provides no apparent schema for the layout of his work’s *memre*. “Although the *Liber Graduum memre* present no systematic theology, there is a consistency to the fabric, particularly noteworthy as no compelling reason can be found to assign any part of the work to more than one author” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.29).

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<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum*, Cf., pp. XXI to XLIX

<sup>3</sup> There are two articles on *Liber Graduum* by Thomas Kollampampil besides the one cited above: *A Holistic Vision to Spirituality in the Syriac Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)*, Third Millennium, XV (2012) 1, January-March, pp. 84-107; *Hidden Work of the Heart in Liber Graduum*, The Harp, Volume: XXII, 2007, pp. 299-309.

The work was written over a period of years in which the circumstances in the community and, correspondingly, the perspective of the author might have changed.

### **Basic Commandments: Memre 1-9**

*Memre* are divided into three basic sections. The first nine *memre* set out the core exposition of the doctrine and purpose of the *Liber Graduum*: the basic Commandments of the Upright and the Perfect.

*Memra* One is untitled and is author's own introduction. *Memra* Two is 'About Those who Want to Become Perfect' and explains the great or major commandments directed to the Perfect. *Memra* Three speaks about the 'Physical and Spiritual Ministry' and it slides into the comparison of Perfect and the Upright. *Memra* Four is 'On the Vegetable for the Sick' and *Memra* Five is 'On the Milk of the Children' which describes the minor commandments for those aspiring at the lowest levels to the way of the Perfect. The 'Sick' are anxious to judge others, while the 'Children' are the inexperienced and immature who are easily influenced away from faith. *Memra* Six is 'On Those Who are Made perfect and Continue to Grow.' *Memra* Seven is 'On the Commandments of the Upright' and focuses on those who choose not to travel the hard road of Perfection. *Memra* Eight is 'On One Gives All He Has to Feed the Poor' which continues the good path of the Upright. *Memra* Nine 'On Uprightness and the Love of the Upright and the Prophets' is the final chapter in this initial section of the *Liber Graduum*. The aim of this *Memra* is to focus the need of a thinker to tie up loose ends regarding the standard of Uprightness/Perfection, and, to illustrate that while the Old Testament is Scripture, the New Testament has superseded it.

### **Advanced Perfetion: Memre 10-24**

*Memre* ten to twenty-four is the second section of *Liber Graduum* and these *Memre* employ a variety of literary forms and the theme is 'advanced Perfection.' *Memra* Ten deals with 'On Fasting and the Humility of Body and Soul.' The purpose of this straight forward sermon is to argue against a spiritualizing or quietistic approach to asceticism. This *Memra* provides a bit of pastoral leaven and caution to enthusiasts on the road to Perfection. *Memra* Eleven 'On the Hearing of Scripture When the Law is Read Before Us' is the first full-fledged example of 'advanced Perfection', discussing the need to be able to discern the major from the minor commandments. *Memra* Twelve, 'On the Hidden and Public Ministry of the Church' describes the three

levels of the Church – Visible, of the Heart, and Heaven – and the author emphatically declares that the Visible Church is the true Church through which one must travel to the Church in the heart as well as to the hidden or higher Church. *Memra* Thirteen, ‘By the same author on the Ways of the Upright’ is the most detailed description of the activities of the Upright. *Memra* Fourteen, ‘On the Upright and the Perfect’, describes the Upright in more concrete terms as avoiding evil actions and emotions; the Perfect are always perceived as transcending these worldly conflicts. *Memra* Fifteen ‘On Adam’s Marital Desire’ is an extended discourse on the origins and consequences of the human sexual drive and the issue of celibacy.

*Memra* Sixteen, Seventeen and Eighteen constitute graduate studies in the ascetical methodology of Perfection. ‘On How a Person May Surpass the Major Commandments’ looks at the next level up for the one already perfected. ‘On the Suffering of Our Lord Who Became Through Them an Example for Us’ the author proposes the imitation of the sufferings of Jesus as the way for those who believe, and contrasts it with the use of signs for those who do not believe in God. ‘On the Tears of Prayer’ urges the necessity of agony and struggle in prayer. *Memra* Nineteen ‘On the Discernment of the Way of Perfection’ offers the most nuanced perspective on the distinction between the Upright and the Perfect. The argument is substantiated with biblical citations. The recurring theme is the universal vision of the Perfect contrasted with the parochial perspective of the Upright.

*Memra* Twenty, ‘On the Difficult Steps that are on the Road of the City of Our Lord’, intensifies the pilgrimage by describing the three most difficult steps. The final step is the uprooting of the very root of the sin that Adam experienced in Eden. *Memra* Twenty-one, ‘On the Tree of Adam’, “develops the biblical-theological picture of how Jesus, the Tree of Life, is the actualization of what Adam was meant to be in the Garden. Perfection as the recapturing of state of Adam and Eve before the Fall is the fundamental motif of the entire *Liber Graduum*, but it is in this *Memra* that the case is most explicitly made” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.35). *Memra* Twenty-Two, ‘On the Judgments that Do Not Save Those Who Observe Them’, clarifies that Uprightness is not simply the application of ‘an eye for an eye’, but rather the following of the Gospel. By *Memra* Twenty-Three, ‘On Satan and Pharaoh and the Israelites’, the author demonstrates how God’s kindness actually brings about the rebellion of evil, just as Jesus’ humility brought out resistance among the Jewish leaders. *Memra*

Twenty-Four, ‘On Repentance’, deals with the need that all below the level of the Upright have for repentance and redemption. The possibility of reaching Perfection is tendered to the Upright.

### **Later Period and Redemption of the Upright: Memre 25-30**

The third section of the *Liber Graduum* completes the text in *Memre* Twenty-Five through Thirty. *Memra* Twenty-Five, ‘On the Voice of God and of Satan’, calls upon both the Upright and the Perfect to discern properly the divine or satanic motives behind their manner of life. Caution is recommended first to the Perfect not to be seduced into adopting the worldly ways of the Upright and thereby abandoning Perfection. Then the Upright are exhorted to terminate their own journey upward to Perfection. *Memra* Twenty-Six, ‘On the Second Law that the Lord Established for Adam’, is a short *Memra* on the law of Uprightness that God gave to Adam after he transgressed the first law. *Memra* Twenty-Seven, bears the non-sensical title, ‘About the History of the Robbers’, in the Kmosko’s edition. Possibly it is an allusion to Luke 23:39-43, yet, even so, it is nowhere to be found in the actual body of the *Memra*. *Memra* Twenty-Eight, ‘On the Fact that the Human Soul is Not Identical with the Blood’, is a theological exposition of the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in the Perfect and the lesser gift of the Holy Spirit to the Upright. *Memra* Twenty-Nine, ‘On the Discipline of the Body’, is a longer sermon directed to all those in the Church, exhorting them to perform their ministry with passion and enthusiasm and not go mechanically. *Memra* Thirty, ‘On the Commandments of Faith and the Love of the Solitaries’, concludes the *Liber Graduum*. “It begins by distinguishing between the commandments of faith and the commandments of love – the latter being an intermediary level of discipleship between the Upright and the Perfect” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.37-28).

### **The Upright and the Perfect**

Although the primary purpose of the *Liber Graduum* is to elaborate the spiritual life, two principal group of Christians – the Upright and the Perfect – recur throughout its descriptions, their duties and pilgrimage. “There are, in fact, six levels of discipleship in the *Liber Graduum* and the first task is to sift out the characteristics, duties and responsibilities of each level” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.38). There are three means to distinguish between the life of the Upright and the Perfect. The first is a general condition where the Upright are assigned the small or minor commandments to fulfill, while the Perfect are to follow the



great or major commandments. God recognizes that all persons are not capable of the same standards and so provides a means of salvation for all. “The second means of distinction is achieved by placing the tasks of and commandments to the Upright and Perfect in virtually adversarial dichotomy.... The third means involves another set of dichotomies, the ‘roads’ of Perfection and the ‘paths’ of Uprightness” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.38-39).

### **Uprightness**

The Upright one is the one who radically lives the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, verses 31 to 40. Wealth is allowable to the Upright only if he/she uses it for the welfare of others and the author insists on the responsibility of the Upright to care for the social needs of the world. Involvement in worldly business, without being of the world, sets up Upright apart from others. The Upright are to avoid traditional vices such as adultery, stealing or cheating. They must fast twice a week, pray three times a day, give alms and pray for others.

### **The Sick and the Children**

It is not clear whether these two groups are part of the Upright. They have not attained the maturity required for a serious pursuit of Perfection and must be fed the minor commandments of Uprightness until they gain the strength and health to commence travel on the difficult, steep and narrow road of Perfection. The problem for both the Sick and the Children lies in their relationship with evil people. The Sick desire to judge, condemn, and at times harm their enemies. “The children, because they are young in the faith, are easily distracted and seduced away from the true faith by idolaters, pagans and heretics” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.41).

### **Perfection**

One can say that the boundary line between Uprightness and Perfection is the renunciation of the world and the requisite celibacy. Incompleteness limits the spiritual advance of the Upright. The Perfect go all the way, renouncing the world and its possession. The Perfect must fulfill the major commandments and fast every day and pray all day. The greatest call of the Upright is to possess unlimited love for their sin ridden companions. The Perfect become strangers and, even dead, to the world, avoiding involvement with commerce and worldly pursuits. The Perfect are like angels as they are attached to our Lord. The primary duty of the Perfect is to direct spiritually those who below them. One who wishes to become Perfect should not hold any authority

as the Perfect teach everyone with humility and are not able to coerce a person as rulers do.

### **Disciples of Love and Faith**

The *Merma* thirty closes with the mentioning of disciples of love (Perfect) and the disciples of faith (Upright). The disciples of faith are synonymous with the Upright while the disciples of love are on an intermediary level between Uprightness and Perfection. The behaviour of the disciples of love is barely distinguishable from that of the Perfect. Between the disciples of love and the disciples of Perfection there is peace.

### **The Graduation from Uprightness to Perfection**

One is able to advance from Uprightness to Perfection by renouncing one's possessions and by becoming celibate and the author stresses the importance of virginity in the process of attaining Perfection.

### **The Social Situation of the *Liber Graduum***

The importance of *Liber Graduum* lies in the historical role it played during the late fourth century transition from the pre-monastic period of early Syriac asceticism to the subsequent era when the image of Egyptian monasticism coloured the lenses through which one is allowed to perceive Syrian monasticism. The *Liber Graduum* might have been written between late fourth century and early fifth century in a region within the Persian Empire. The author is not a superior of a monastery and the vocabulary is not characteristic of later Syriac monasticism. "The author appears to be the spiritual father of the wider community, dealing with those outside the Church as well as with those who have consecrated themselves to a special calling" (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.50). He is a pastor who tends all of his flock, ninety-nine and one.

In *Liber Graduum* one notices different levels of community members: the ordinary laity, wealthy sponsors and non-Christians. The Upright live in the midst of work-a-day world and they are consecrated laity with their own rule and discipline to follow. They create an ascetic lifestyle in the midst of a non-ascetic society. "The Perfect ones are the 'mature' Christians who no longer struggle in the contest against evil. They have, to turn Athanasius' phrase around, made the city into a desert by living in the realized *eschaton* of the original Eden, while Adam 'had not yet sinned'." The Perfect ones do not belong to a stale community and they do not take vows. They wander around and they

transcend the world and their teaching and mediation bring them into continual contact with its conflict and weaknesses. The author is well aware of the violent conflicts experience between the disciples of faith and the disciples of love. The author questions the Messalians and stresses the importance spiritual practices to achieve perfection, as an argument to show that *Liber Graduum* was not influenced by Messalian ideology.

### **Purpose for Writing Liber Graduum**

The author addresses a society where violence was very common, at the hands of non-Christians and jealous fellow - Christians. There was internal struggle for social status and honour, the controversies involving heretical teachings and idolatry, slackening spiritual standards and fervour in the Church, etc. To address this situation, the author sets out in great details the ideals, duties, and theology of Uprightness and Perfection – the way things should be. “The *Liber Graduum* is, therefore, not a mere tranquil treatise on the structures of the spiritual life, but a book in the midst of controversy and conflict, designed to ignite a spiritual reformation” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p. 62).

### **The Use of Bible by the Author of *Liber Graduum***

All the illustrations and allusions are biblical, except *Memra Six*. The primary focus of the author is on narrative units, extended exegeses being numerous on these passages. The author presents the patriarchs and apostles as contemporary models and companions in the journey towards Uprightness and Perfection. There are also a handful of references to non-canonical works, such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Didache*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*. While not denying that the prophets committed some terrible deeds for which they were denied even the status of Uprightness, the author works hard to show that the violent prophets had many redeeming qualities and for the most part pursued Perfection (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.65). The author uses the typology of road and path. While the scriptures are fairly well divided between Gospel and Epistle, with a couple of Old Testament readings, the predilection is a Gospel for the ‘road’ and an Epistle for the ‘path’.

Yet another theme fundamental to the theology of *Liber Graduum* is the description of the events in the Garden of Eden, including the Fall of Adam and Eve. In common with Ephrem the Syrian and Aphrahat, the author idealizes the condition of the original human beings ‘while

Adam had not yet sinned'. In fact, the status of Perfection is perceived as a return to the angelic life before the Fall. Uprightness, by implication, is post-Fall a virtuous, yet limited lifestyle. Perhaps the most compelling characteristic of the Upright and the Perfect is the sense of lowliness and humility that one must exhibit to all, especially to one's enemies. To substantiate this, 'Consider others better than yourself' (Philippians 2:3) is cited numerous times. "In the last few *Msemre* the author becomes increasingly defensive of the worthiness of the Upright status, virtually not mentioning the Perfect. The biblical model for the Upright is taken to be Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8-9), with whose story the author performs a creative *eisegesis* to show that it is not necessary to renounce all one's wealth in order to be saved" (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p. 69).

### **The Pastoral Sense of the Author of the *Liber Graduum***

There is no absolute certainty that the author of the *Liber Graduum* was a pastor of a spiritual community of which he was member. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he wrote with deep pastoral concern for his audience, and in the long run this concern provides the motivation for the writing of the work. "In detailing the characteristics and responsibilities of the Upright and Perfect, the author's primary focus is to ensure the salvation of his spiritual children at a time when maintaining the standards of old is more difficult" (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.71). Rigorous discipline is necessary for beginners and the immature, whom the author frequently dubbed the 'Children' and the 'Sick'. A frequent prohibition directed to the Children is that they should avoid eating with sinners lest they be lured into evil ways. Yet to be a child, physically and spiritually, has its benefits for the pilgrim as he/she matures and the author had in his mind the words of Jesus: 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it' (Luke 18:17).

Demonstrating his balanced view of asceticism and the spiritual life, the author is emphatic in *Memra* Ten that there is no authentic spirituality apart from the body and the spiritual realm, countering the tendency among many ascetics to consider the body evil and irrelevant to the spiritual journey. The fourth century was a time of tremendous change and transition in the still young Christian world, and no Christian community was immune to conflict. One has to take into account the influence of Manichaeism and Gnosticism on Christian religion. Therefore, it is not surprising that the author frequently must

mention the occasions for conflict as well as offer counsel on how to resolve them. One of the most difficult and subtle tasks for any pastor is knowing when and how to advise separation from unrepentant sinners. Doing so without becoming an enemy of the sinner is a recurring concern of the author. “The pastoral instinct of the author becomes clearest in the last six *Memre* in which he moves from idealization of the Perfect to justification and approval of the Upright. He no longer focuses on the inferior achievement and spirituality of the Upright; he encourages them to keep all the commandments and to renounce the world, so that they too will reach Perfection” (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.79). The author concludes by saying that it is better to be a good Upright one than a failed or false Perfect.

The clear message of the author to the community is that the time had arrived for a reform of the hearts of the community. Most interpretations of the *Liber Graduum* have operated with the implicit assumption that the author was primarily a practical theologian, describing the aims and duties of the Upright and Perfect within the ecclesiology of the mid-to-late fourth century Syriac Church. One should acknowledge the fact that it is the concern of the author as a pastor for his spiritual flock that motivates and directs the course of the *Liber Graduum*.

## **Conclusion**

There are lot of literature on *Liber Graduum* for a better understanding of this great treasure of the early Syriac Church. Three points are worth mentioning regarding *Liber Graduum*. The author appropriately depicts the struggle for Perfection as a steep, narrow, and treacherous road. Uprightness is a way of doing; Perfection is beyond doing – It is a way of being. Perfection becomes more attainable, for it is a road travelled by authentic and finite human beings, not floated over by angels. Another point of interest of the author is the theology of the cross for a radical Christian living. Basic demands for becoming a radical follower of Christ include the following: renouncing the world, emptying oneself and becoming a celibate, taking up the daily cross and following Christ. Considering others better than oneself (Phil. 2:3) is another fundamental dimension of Christian living. This exhortation has got a prophetic meaning when one considers one’s own enemies and sinners better than oneself. This radical model is exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ when he washed the feet of Judas Iscariot, his betrayer, before he washed the feet of Simon Peter, his greatest

disciple. By emphasizing the importance of humility, lowliness, and self-emptying, the author wants to present a different model of Christian Church.

The reader will take much gratification in the author's justification of the Upright in the last six *Memre*. The sincere observation of the author compels him to come to the realization that the persistent faithfulness of the Upright – 'worldly Christians' – is to be preferred over a false Perfection and to be celebrated, not denigrated as inadequate. We are once again reminded to look in on the triumphs and struggles of a real, living community of a real, living faith, not just listen to a theoretical idealization of the ascetical life. "The *Liber Graduum* is not written out of a monastery in any traditional sense, but in the midst of a secular community that copes with commerce and the poor, marriage and celibacy, the punishment of the courts and wanton violence" (Kitchen & Parmentier, 2004, p.82). *Liber Graduum* clearly indicates the indigenous elements of the Syriac Monasticism rather than the Syriac Monasticism fully indebted to the Egyptian monasticism. *Liber Graduum* is a link between pre-monastic period and traditional monasticism and the unique legacy of the *Liber Graduum* to the life of the early Syriac Church is unparalleled. *Liber Graduum* is relevant even today as a manual to those who strive for Perfection, a goal which is attainable, and not to be satisfied with Uprightness.

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